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## What Goes Around Comes Around: The Circulation of Proverbs in Contemporary Life

Kimberly J. Lau

Peter Tokofsky

Stephen D. Winick

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### Recommended Citation

Lau, K. J., Tokofsky, P., Winick, S. D., & Mieder, W. (2004). What goes around comes around: The circulation of proverbs in contemporary life. Logan: Utah State University Press.

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What Goes Around Comes Around



# What Goes Around Comes Around

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The Circulation of Proverbs in Contemporary Life

Edited by

Kimberly J. Lau

Peter Tokofsky

Stephen D. Winick

Utah State University Press  
Logan, Utah

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Utah State University Press  
Logan, Utah 84322-7800

Manufactured in the United States of America  
Printed on acid-free paper

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

What goes around comes around : the circulation of proverbs in contemporary life / edited by Kimberly J. Lau, Peter Tokofsky, and Stephen D. Winick.

p. cm.

Essays in honor of Wolfgang Mieder.

ISBN 0-87421-592-7 (pbk. : alk. paper) -- ISBN 0-87421-596-X (hard-cover) ISBN 0-87421-512-9 (e-book)

1. Proverbs--History and criticism. I. Lau, Kimberly J. II. Tokofsky, Peter, 1963- III. Winick, Stephen D., 1968- IV. Mieder, Wolfgang.

PN6401.W48 2004

398.9'09--dc22

2004016467

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## Essays in Honor of Wolfgang Mieder



# What Goes Around Comes Around

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## The Circulation of Proverbs in Contemporary Life

Kimberly J. Lau, Peter I. Tokofsky, and Stephen D. Winick

### Introduction

When it comes to proverb scholarship, we have all been taught by the same master, Wolfgang Mieder, without question one of the greatest paremiologists of all time. His body of work on proverbs is so extensive as to make it nearly impossible to say anything new, but we nonetheless dedicate our efforts in this collection to that very purpose as a way of thanking him for his brilliant leadership in the field of international proverb scholarship, his unsurpassed intellectual generosity, and his incredible humor, kindness, and spirit. We only hope that the essays in this volume do justice to the ever-increasing ways he has inspired us to think about proverbs in all their various contexts and manifestations. Thus, the title of our book, *What Goes Around Comes Around*, is meant first to honor Wolfgang Mieder, to convey our deep appreciation not only for his intellectual influence on our work but also for his wonderful presence in all of our lives.

The circulation of proverbs in our everyday lives reminds us that folklore is, indeed, a truly dynamic process. The vitality of proverbs—the constant emergence of new proverbs, together with their continual expression in new contexts—captures the ways in which folklore draws together our gravest concerns and our strongest commitments, our most precious values and our wisest perspectives, at times even our coarsest humor and our basest beliefs, thereby structuring the world around us. In this collection, we look specifically at proverbs as they go out into the world beyond their usual contexts (“what goes around”) as well as the

ways in which the world beyond traditional folklore comes into being through the creation and recontextualization of new proverbs (“what comes around”). The diverse perspectives and analyses in these essays raise the question of what, precisely, is meant by *proverb*. Thus, we begin by reviewing the long tradition of scholarship that endeavors to define this dynamic genre of folklore.

### Proverbs: What They Are and What They Do

One of the great paradoxes of the proverb is that it is generally understood to epitomize simplicity and common sense, but it turns out to be both complex and hard to define. Although most people can list many examples of proverbs, few can accurately define what makes them proverbial. Scholars have discussed proverbs for hundreds of years, and hundreds of different definitions have been advanced, making it impossible to provide even a cursory summary of them. Instead, we offer a brief overview of some of the classic scholarship on proverbs, and then touch briefly on recent and more unconventional definitions.

Because proverbs are both linguistic items (possessing concrete elements of verbal and logical structure) and behaviors (possessing motives, strategies, and outcomes), it is imperative to discuss not only what they are in linguistic and structural senses but also what they do in social and behavioral ones. Proverbs are, first of all, messages passed between and among people. They are principally expressed in speech, though they can also be transmitted through writing, visual arts, and electronic communication. In their verbal form, they are brief and pithy, wise and witty, rhetorically forceful but discreetly indirect. They include old sayings like “A rolling stone gathers no moss,” as well as recent ones such as “You snooze, you lose.” They can be as short as two words (“Money talks”), or they can be thirty times as long (“For want of a nail, the shoe was lost; for want of a shoe, the horse was lost; for want of a horse, the rider was lost; for want of a rider, the message was lost; for want of a message, the battle was lost; for want of the battle, the war was lost; and all for the want of horseshoe nail”).

But aside from memorizing lists of proverbs, how can we tell if any given utterance can be considered a proverb? In some cultures and situations, we are lucky that proverbs are preceded by a framing device: “You know what they say”; “As someone once said”; or, in some locales, “We have a proverb for that.” In most

cases, though, we need to look for other clues. Sometimes proverbial messages are metaphorical so that, for example, being circumspect in signing a mortgage can be described as “looking before you leap.” Sometimes proverbs are poetic, featuring rhyme (“No pain, no gain”; “Early to bed and early to rise makes a man healthy, wealthy, and wise”), near rhyme (“Honesty is the best policy”; “A stitch in time saves nine”), regular meter (“There’s many a slip twixt the cup and the lip”; “A bird in the hand is worth two in the bush”), or alliteration (“Where there’s a will, there’s a way”; “Love laughs at locksmiths”). Sometimes they use unusual or archaic syntax (“He who hesitates is lost”; “Here today, gone tomorrow”; “It’s an ill wind that blows nobody good”). Although all of these attributes apply to many proverbs, none of them is present in every one. How, then, is it possible to determine what constitutes proverbiality?

This problem has been discussed since ancient times; philosophers like Plato and Aristotle had much to say about proverbs, though they were not always referring to the same kinds of expressions we call proverbs today. For instance, Aristotle calls the phrase “an Attic neighbor” a proverb, though today it would be considered an idiom at best. Still, classical and medieval definitions of the proverb do include statements of intuitive and descriptive power, such as Michael Apostolius of Byzantium’s dictum:

A proverb is a statement which conceals the clear in the unclear, or which through concrete images indicates intellectual concepts, or which makes clear the truth in furtive fashion. And further in this fashion, a proverb is . . . a trite phrase constantly used in popular speech . . . or a saying that has become thoroughly habitual in our daily customs and life. (Apostolius, quoted in Whiting 1994, 65)

Two American scholars, writing in the 1930s, ushered in the modern era of proverb study by summarizing and evaluating the centuries of scholarship before them. The first, Archer Taylor, rejected out of hand the possibility of creating a strict and orderly definition in a famous passage from his book *The Proverb*:

The definition of the proverb is too difficult to repay the undertaking; and should we fortunately combine within a single definition all the essential elements and give each its proper emphasis, even then we would not have a touchstone. An incommunicable

quality tells us this sentence is proverbial and that one is not. Hence no definition will enable us to identify positively a sentence as proverbial. . . . Let us be content with saying that a proverb is a saying current among the folk. At least so much of a definition is indisputable. . . . (Taylor 1985, 3)

Taylor's influence on other definitions began almost immediately. Spurred to action by his colleague's statement, B. J. Whiting published "The Nature of the Proverb" in 1932. Whiting's article draws ideas about proverbs from classical authors, medieval writers, and a whole host of English men of letters. Out of these varied ingredients, Whiting constructs his own definition of the proverb, which stands today as an often-quoted and much-admired statement about the nature of proverbiality:

A proverb is an expression which, owing its birth to the people, testifies to its origin in form and phrase. It expresses an apparently fundamental truth—that is, a truism—in homely language, often adorned, however, with alliteration and rhyme. It is usually short, but need not be; it is usually true, but need not be. Some proverbs have both a literal and a figurative meaning. . . . A proverb must . . . bear the sign of antiquity, and, since such signs may be counterfeited by a clever literary man, it should be attested in different places at different times. (Whiting 1994, 80)

Both passages proceed from an intelligent recognition of the difficulties inherent in the nature of proverbs, but both also have their weaknesses. Taylor uses the vague term "saying" to describe the type of expression that may be a proverb but never explains what he means by it. The lack of a more precise description of proverbs boils Taylor's definition down to one feature: "currency" among "the folk," but even that is problematic; the concept of "the folk" is not elucidated, either. Currency, in Taylor's sense, apparently means that the proverb is repeated frequently—though just how often it must be repeated is again undefined.

Whiting's passage, while it is more thorough, can be reduced to a similar result: Where Taylor uses "saying," Whiting calls the proverb an "expression," but what exactly does he mean? Surely every utterance owes its birth to people; what does he mean by "the people"? All the concrete characteristics Whiting mentions (rhyme, alliteration, brevity, truth, and double meaning) are optional, not present in every proverb. Every point of this

definition is therefore either very vague or so specific it applies only to some proverbs. The only easily defined characteristic Whiting claims proverbs must unequivocally have is age, and the proper test of age, he tells us, is repetition.

Like Taylor, then, Whiting finds that belonging to a cultural canon of repeated sayings is the most essential quality defining proverbiality. While Taylor uses currency to express this idea, Whiting uses age. For both scholars, the test of this feature is the same: If the proverb can be found in multiple places, it is likely to have both age enough for Whiting and currency enough for Taylor. In this, Taylor and Whiting were following an old tradition in English-language scholarship; the first definition of the proverb in English seems to be that of Thomas More, who in 1528 called it simply “an old said saw” or a saying long said (Whiting 1994, 69).

Whiting also contributes one more crucial idea to our understanding of proverbs: The proverb, he tells us, “expresses an apparently fundamental truth.” This characteristic, combined with age and currency, is essentially the basis of many, if not most, proverb definitions. One of the world’s finest proverb scholars, Wolfgang Mieder, for example, follows his own teacher Stuart Gallacher (1959, 47) and adapts that scholar’s definition to “a Proverb is a concise statement of an apparent truth that has [had, or will have] some currency among the people” (Mieder 1993, 14). This then, at its basic level, is what the proverb is: a saying encapsulating a culturally recognized truth, repeated until it is recognized as traditional.

However, most scholars are not satisfied with this level of description, and many have tried to provide a more concrete or rigorous definition. In particular, citing logical and structural composition has become an important means of defining proverbs. This has resulted in a rich literature, but also a broad and disparate one, with such ideas as “analogic structure” (Crépeau 1975), “topic-comment structure” (Dundes 1981), and “quadripartite structure” (Milner 1969a), all advanced as possible definitional models. (For other structural possibilities, see Seitel 1981; Priebe 1971; Milner 1969b; Barley 1972; Permiakov 1979; Cram 1994; Grzybek 1994). Because proverbs exhibit such a variety of structures on the surface, and because there are many kinds of structures (e.g., syntactic, logical, conceptual, etc.), scholars must resort

to analyzing deep structures. These they derive themselves from the proverbs they analyze, interpreting them as they see fit. This leaves a lot of room for other scholars to disagree, and, predictably, their work has not led to widely accepted definitions.

Some scholars have approached the problem from a different angle, asking, "Is there some other way we recognize the traditional nature of the proverb, besides by having heard it before?" Shirley Arora (1994) found that among Spanish speakers poetic features such as rhyme were as important as a previous hearing in people's decisions about what a proverb was. But poetic features, as already explained, are not present in every proverb, and thus it is difficult to define a proverb by their presence or absence.

Since proverbs cannot easily be defined by what they are, scholars have also tried to define them by what they do. Instead of analyzing the linguistic or logical structure, these students of the proverb analyze its rhetorical and social functions. This approach also has a long history. Hermogenes of Tarsus, a Sophistic rhetorician of the second century C.E., wrote that "a proverb is a summary saying, in a statement of general application, dissuading from something or persuading toward something, or showing what is the nature of each" (Hermogenes, quoted in Whiting 1994, 59). This essentially rhetorical definition still describes many instances of proverbial speech today, making it one of the earliest proverb definitions still recognizable in the modern world.

Hermogenes' definition does not account for every proverbial utterance, however. Proverbs can persuade and dissuade, but they can also accomplish many other rhetorical goals: They can express deference or confidence or worry, instill fear or respect, or even mock the listener. Recognizing this, modern proverb scholars tend to follow philosopher of language Kenneth Burke, who describes proverbs as "strategies for dealing with situations" (Burke 1957, 296).

Burke points out that proverbs name and sum up certain recurrent social situations. For example, a man is taking a long time to make up his mind, and we think he needs to act more quickly. This is a commonly recurring situation, and we have many proverbs to deal with it. We can say, "He who hesitates is lost," or "When opportunity knocks, answer the door," or "Strike while the iron is hot," or "Shit or get off the pot," or even "You snooze, you lose." All these send the same message: Act now.

As Burke's theory suggests, proverbial speech is a complex process. First, we recognize a situation in our life as a special instance of a social situation or context that recurs. Then we realize that there is a proverb for that recurrent situation. We speak the proverb in an attempt to contribute to the conversation. Our goal is to recast the specific, unique situation as a version of the general, recurrent one, and if we are successful, our hearer will understand the implied advice. Burke's approach to proverbs, first published in 1941, has been very influential and informs the work of such scholars as Abrahams (1968, 1972), Seitel (1981), Kirshenblatt-Gimblett (1981), Briggs (1994), Yankah (1989), Prahlad (1996), and Winick (1998, 2003), all of whom have contributed to our understanding of proverbs as rhetorical strategies and devices of communication.

Ideally, a successful proverb definition would answer both of our initial questions: What are proverbs (how they are internally constructed?), and what do they do (how do they communicate or make meaning?)? A few, like Crépeau's definition of the proverb as "a sentence with analogic structure and normative function" (1975, 303), touch on both questions, but more often proverb definitions address only one of the two.

In one of the more interesting definitions that does discuss both what proverbs are and what they do, Richard P. Honeck (1997) describes proverbs as "a discourse deviant, relatively concrete, present (nonpast) tense statement that uses characteristic linguistic markers to arouse cognitive ideals that serve to categorize topics in order to make a pragmatic point about them" (p. 18). In pointing out that "characteristic linguistic markers" are part of the way proverbs function, Honeck makes such markers part of the definition. Thus, rhyme, meter, alliteration, metaphor, and other poetic features are re-incorporated into this modern proverb definition. At the same time, Honeck also includes the fact that a proverb categorizes topics and makes points about them, clearly a derivation of Burke's theory.

Honeck's point that the proverb "uses characteristic linguistic markers to arouse cognitive ideals" suggests an important aspect of "proverbial markers," such as rhyme, alliteration, and meter. These are not only part of what proverbs are but also part of what they do; they are not only physical features of the proverb but also serve a rhetorical function.

Winick (1998, 2003) also combines poetic, structural, and functional approaches, together with entextualization theory and intertextual theories of genre, to define the proverb:

Proverbs are brief (sentence-length) entextualized utterances, which derive a sense of wisdom, wit and authority from explicit and intentional intertextual reference to a tradition of previous similar wisdom utterances. This intertextual reference may take many forms, including replication (i.e., repetition of the text from previous contexts), imitation (i.e., modeling a new utterance after a previous utterance), or the use of features (rhyme, alliteration, meter, ascription to the elders, etc.) associated with previous wisdom sayings. Finally, proverbs address recurrent social situations in a strategic way. (Winick 2003, 595)

Like Honeck's definition, this one addresses what proverbs are (short utterances with features that act as intertextual references) and what they do (address social situations).

Where does this exploration get us? How do these disparate definitions relate to each other? Most scholars agree on certain features of the proverb: its brevity, its ability to sum up social situations and encapsulate principles held true and important by the culture that speaks them. Most also believe that sentences require another ingredient to make them proverbial. Taylor, Whiting, and Mieder call for age or currency. Some scholars instead look for characteristic structures (e.g., Dundes), linguistic markers (e.g., Honeck), or forms of intertextual reference (e.g., Winick).

What all of these scholars are trying to describe is the proverb's relationship to tradition. For Mieder, Whiting, and Taylor, *tradition* is the process of handing down the item from person to person and perhaps generation to generation. For structuralists like Dundes, certain structures are traditionally associated with proverbs, while for scholars like Arora, Honeck, and Winick, certain poetic features are. These traditional associations are important to the transmission and reception of proverbs. Although their theories of tradition are quite different, these scholars would all agree on at least the following: Proverbs are short, traditional utterances that encapsulate cultural truths and sum up recurrent social situations. This, then, becomes our working definition of what proverbs are and what they do.



## The Circulation of Proverbs in(to) Contemporary Culture

The circulation of proverbs and proverbial speech into and out of popular culture—to and from vernacular oral tradition—has reached a fevered pitch over the past decade. Indeed, the present age is one in which the proverb has reasserted itself as a basic form of expression (cf. Jolles 1930), rather than one in decline. Consider, for example, the following list of popular (proverbial) phrases:

Where's the beef?  
 You're off the island.  
 Is that your final answer?  
 It takes a village.  
 No soup for you.  
 You're fired!  
 If you build it, they will come.  
 I've fallen, and I can't get up.

This list contains items which originated in commercial media and then entered vernacular speech, as well as items imported into popular culture from living vernacular (both American and foreign), which then migrated back into active oral usage with new connotations and associations. The list includes phrases associated with popular movies, television broadcasts, advertisements, and best-selling books. Most notably, all of the items in the list appear so frequently in various discursive contexts that they are certainly part of American vernacular speech. The generation and circulation of such phrases have become so much a part of contemporary life that a current series of television commercials for Burger King depicts a group of employees debating the possibility of spontaneously coining a “catchphrase” to describe a new burger—a metaproverbial advertisement, so to speak.

We do not offer this set of examples to ignite debate over the ultimate source of any individual phrase, nor do we wish to demonstrate a static borrowing among domains of creativity, nor even the priority of one medium over another in terms of significance or precedence. Rather, we wish to demonstrate that, although many of the phrases vary in their usage, they have all become traditional utterances that, for their speakers, encapsulate cultural truths and sum up recurrent social situations. Moreover, the dynamism of form and fluidity in the creative domains exhibited by these examples verify the ongoing negotiation of meaning to which

speakers subject popular phrases. We hope this list, and the following descriptions of how some of the items have been used, affirms the necessity of the contemporary paremiologist remaining attuned to the comings and goings of proverbial speech. We live in an era “after the great divide” (Huyssen 1986), when gaps between high and low—elite, popular, and folk—no longer define the flow of cultural and discursive practices. Indeed, as Winick (1998) argues in his dissertation, *The Proverb Process: Intertextuality and Proverbial Innovation in Popular Culture*, it is precisely in this intertextual gap between domains that we can frequently locate the meaning of proverbial utterances.

Several of the items in our list are most readily associated with the recent crop of “reality” television shows. “You’re off the island”—meaning “you’re out” or “you’re eliminated”—references *Survivor*, one of the first successes in this broadcast genre. The phrase quickly spread beyond the confines of the television set. For instance, one UCLA folklore student reports the phrase being used in his dorm room in spring 2000: Following the annoying intrusion by an unpopular hallmate into a private conversation among several students, one of the members in the group remarked, “I wish we could just kick his ass off the island and be done with him!” The folklore student goes on to comment that the speaker “used the phrase to mean that [the unpopular resident’s] presence was no longer desired within our group, and he should be barred from returning, just as if we were contestants on *Survivor*, voting him off the show.” Completing the circular flow, the comings and goings, the student adds that he has seen the phrase on the Web site [www.espn.com](http://www.espn.com), where a poll asked, “If these eight athletes were on *Survivor Island*, who would be the first to be kicked off the island?”

A contrasting example of the phrase appeared in an advertisement the United Way of Greater Los Angeles placed in the *Los Angeles Times* (21 August 2000). The copy inverts the saying in its headline, “None of These People Will Be Voted off the Island.” Below this banner, presumably intended to draw attention to the work of the United Way in an unexpected fashion, the full-page ad lists all donors who contributed a thousand dollars or more to the organization.

Two other recent catchphrases associated with television programs also rapidly found their way into other media as well

as popular usage. Both “Is that your final answer?” and “You’re fired!” existed in American vernacular prior to their fifteen minutes of fame in the mass media, but at this writing, most Americans associate them with Regis Philbin, host of the game show *Who Wants to Be a Millionaire?*, and Donald Trump, host of *The Apprentice*. The former is a quiz show where contestants attempt to answer a series of increasingly difficult multiple-choice questions leading up to the ultimate million-dollar question. To unnerve contestants, Philbin occasionally urges them to reconsider their tentative response: “Is that your final answer?” On 31 May 2000, a two-inch headline across the front page of the *Los Angeles Times* sports section declared, “That’s no final answer.” Immediately above this banner, readers could see that it referred to the score in game five of the western conference finals of the National Basketball Association: Portland 96, Lakers 88. Just as the United Way advertisement attracts attention by invoking a popular television show, this headline achieves much of its effect through its intertextual reference to Philbin’s phrase, even though the two phenomena have no apparent relationship.

On the recently completed first season of *The Apprentice*, a group of aspiring businesspeople competed to convince entrepreneur Donald Trump that he should hire them into a management position with a six-figure salary. Each week Trump put the contestants through various tasks designed to demonstrate their suitability for the prize, and at the end of the hour, he told one of them, “You’re fired!” While Trump did not, of course, invent this phrase, he did bring it to proverbial status, inspiring an upsurge in its use in various contexts beyond employment. Indeed, Trump is reportedly even attempting to obtain a trademark on it (ABC NewsOnline, 3 March 2004), providing perhaps the ultimate evidence of the phrase’s widespread circulation.

Another instance of proverbial speech circulating among media and the vernacular appears in a *Los Angeles Times* headline over a story about football players who endorsed Campbell’s Chunky Soup having bad luck (either injuries or slumps): “Curses . . . No Soup for You!” (*Los Angeles Times*, 8 December 2002). There was no need for this column even to mention the television show *Seinfeld*. By the time the story appeared, the phrase was circulating independently and with new, metaphorical meanings. Indeed, the humor of the newspaper story and the headline derived

from this circulation. What began as a literal admonishment by a chef to the character Elaine in the notorious “Soup Nazi” episode of *Seinfeld* became a locution for denial in popular speech. By re-connecting the phrase to a story about soup, the columnist uses its intertextual resonances to suggest humorously that football players should focus on the sport rather than endorsements. “Already, the Chunky Soup curse is part of NFL folklore,” the story reports as it ponders why the soup is “nowhere to be found on the league’s list of banned substances.”

As our final two examples, we take phrases associated with a movie and an advertisement. In *The Proverb Process*, Winick treats cinematic proverbial speech in depth, particularly phrases associated with *Forrest Gump*. One film not mentioned by Winick is *Field of Dreams*, starring Kevin Costner. In the film, Costner’s character gets the notion that he must construct a baseball field on his farmland. The message mysteriously reaches him in the words, “If you build it, they will come.” In the years since the release of the film, the phrase has become part of political discourse during the past two presidential administrations, as well as an element of other discursive domains. To cite some timely examples from the many available, it is ironic that during President Clinton’s second term of office, national security advisor Sandy Berger employed the phrase to declare that if then-Iraqi leader Saddam Hussein rebuilt the nuclear reactor destroyed in an Israel air strike, the U.S. would intervene: “If he rebuilds it, we will come.” Even though Saddam did not rebuild it, the United States still came.

Although Clinton’s vice president, Al Gore, did not take office as a result of the 2000 election, the phrase still found its way into the next administration. In 2001, political cartoonist Margulies depicted the current president (identified by a W on his baseball cap) surrounded by an array of incoming missiles. A grinning Bush reads from a document entitled “Missile Defense” and declares, “Build it and they WON’T come. . . .” Margulies reveals his commentary in the caption: “Shield of Dreams.”

The baseball-field metaphor rose to the level of national political debates, but commentators also found it useful to describe local controversies. For instance, a radio commentator in Los Angeles summed up his opinion about expanding the freeway interchange between the San Diego and Ventura Freeways (Interstates

405 and 101) with the remark, “If they build it, traffic will flow.” The phrase lent itself to a Los Angeles debate over a different mode of transportation as well. In a 26 May 2002 article reviewing the merits of utilizing smaller regional airports (a potential alternative to expansion of Los Angeles International Airport), *Los Angeles Times* travel columnist Jane Engle summarized, “If you build it, they won’t come. If they come, you had better build it.”

A less lofty example of the circulation of proverbial speech comes from a low-budget television commercial for an emergency communication device. The advertisement promotes the necessity of the device by depicting an elderly woman who has fallen outside her home. She retrieves the device and tells the helpful voice which responds that “I’ve fallen, and I can’t get up.” Like the other examples, this one has experienced a healthy second life in the vernacular. The graphic image of a floundering body has made the phrase attractive to sportswriters:

“The St. Louis Rams have fallen, and there’s no telling when they’ll get up” (*Los Angeles Times*, 24 September 2002).

“Twins Are Falling and Can’t Get Up” (*Los Angeles Times*, 16 August 2001).

“I’ve Fallen—and I Can’t Get Up” (caption on a photo of a speed skater whooshing by a fallen opponent in the Canadian Olympic trials; *Los Angeles Times*, 12 December 2001).

In a delightful proverbial twist, this last example comes from a regular feature in the *Times* sports section entitled “1,000 Words’ Worth,” which features unusual and compelling sports photos. Ironically, the photos frequently require substantial captions to clarify what they depict to readers.

A number of folklore students have also documented this phrase in contexts unrelated to sports. One describes throwing her pencil to the ground in frustration during a calculus study group and telling her peers that she has fallen and can’t get up, meaning she cannot solve the practice problems. In another instance, which suggests the wide appeal of the phrase, a male student reported to class that he employed it in a sexual situation. Notably, this vocal student went on to become a professional football player and made a name for himself by *not* falling down when catching a desperation “fourth and twenty-six” pass from Donovan McNabb in a recent NFL playoff game.

This somewhat haphazard set of examples clearly indicates the comings and goings of proverbial speech in our contemporary discourse. These phrases circulate in diverse domains of popular media, folk speech, and political debate. They appear in various incarnations, shifting, as proverbs do, to account for the immediate context but retaining textual and contextual features, which endow them with proverbiality. Reporters, headline writers, and admen can assume a wide familiarity with these popular phrases among their readers, and politicians, comedians, commentators, and ordinary conversationalists can evoke the intertextual relationships contained in these phrases to enhance communication in culturally resonant ways.

#### What Goes Around Comes Around

The following essays explore the wide-ranging comings and goings of proverbs in(to) and out of contemporary culture through close historical, literary, and sociocultural analyses of diverse proverbs, proverb (re)usage, and proverbial speech. We open our collection with Charles Doyle's "In Aqua Scribere': The Evolution of a Current Proverb." Doyle reminds us that proverbs come into literary expression with the same frequency that literary quotations go into proverbial use. While many English speakers probably identify the phrase "written in/on water" with the poet John Keats, Doyle finds references to the phrase in early Greek and Latin writings and offers strong evidence to suggest that these references indicate fairly wide vernacular use. Thus, "written in/on water" moves from ancient proverb into classic literature, then from classic literature into nineteenth-century literary circles (though through much more vernacular expression in Keats's spoken desire that his epitaph read, "Here lies one whose name was writ in water"), and eventually from literary circles back into vernacular expression as proverbial speech.

The process of evolving into proverbs occurs in numerous contexts and often represents the particular interests and motivations, the needs and desires, the passions and anxieties of the people whose cultural practices give rise to such innovative linguistic expressions. In their essay, "'From One Act of Charity, the World Is Saved': Creative Selection of Proverbs in Sephardic Narrative," Isaac Jack Lévy and Rosemary Lévy Zumwalt demonstrate the ways in which Sephardic storytellers employ

traditional proverbs as a rhetorically powerful means of ordering their narrative performances. Lévy and Lévy Zumwalt detail the strategic choice of proverbs in structuring and commenting on traditional narratives, thereby allowing the storyteller to render indisputable any potential ambiguity in the narrative's meaning in the immediate context of its telling. In these cases, then, the intended meaning of the narratives evolves into proverbial expression through the use of proverbs in titles, introductions, and conclusions and closes the possibility of alternative meanings through the proverb's power to signify uncontested cultural wisdom.

Shirley Arora's "Baseball as (Pan)America: A Sampling of Baseball-Related Metaphors in Spanish" and Stephen Winick's "'You Can't Kill Shit': Occupational Proverb and Metaphorical System among Young Medical Professionals" both offer excellent examples of how specific cultural (and subcultural) drives find their way into proverbial expression over time. Arora details the innumerable ways in which common baseball referents and images have given rise to figurative proverbs and proverbial speech in a diversity of Latin American countries. Here, then, baseball achieves proverbial expression as a sign of the widespread passion for the sport, and new proverbs and folk expressions drawing on its jargon and imagery capture baseball's centrality in Latin American cultures, not only as a sport but as a way of thinking and a way of making meaning.

Similarly, Winick focuses on the medical proverb, "You can't kill shit," the related acronym SHPOS (subhuman piece of shit), and other medical folk speech to show how the demands of medical culture, particularly the stress and anxiety that young doctors experience as they realize the impossibility of controlling all aspects of the hospital environment, find expression through occupational proverbs and group folk speech. Winick's extensive analysis of both of these proverbial expressions, as well as the previous scholarship on medical subcultures, foregrounds the boundaries of medical folk expressions like "You can't kill shit" within the immediate contexts of their use while simultaneously drawing attention to their flexibility within the unarticulated (perhaps subconscious) logical system of the young doctors.

While these essays reveal the ways cultural meanings, practices, beliefs and worldviews evolve into expressive existence



through (often new) proverbs and proverbial speech, and the motivations driving the use of these expressions, the remaining essays examine the movement of proverbs into new contexts. In his essay, “‘Cheaters Never Prosper’ and Other Lies Adults Tell Kids: Proverbs and the Culture Wars over Character,” Jay Mechling follows proverbs as they move from traditional, vernacular contexts into the rarified realms of “cultural literacy” (a concept fully entrenched in an elitist view of what constitutes education) and neoconservative attempts to help children build character. Here, proverbs are no longer folk expressions of cultural wisdom invoked in specific performative contexts which create their meanings, but rather become concrete adages expressing unchanging and unquestioned “truths” and values. As such, hundreds of proverbs find themselves on lists children are encouraged to memorize as a character-building exercise devoid of the classical rhetorical skill of situating and manipulating proverbial speech.

In addition to pointing out the absurdity of considering proverbs out of their everyday, oral contexts, Mechling emphasizes the fact that proverbs are rarely used by children in their own folklore (though they do, sometimes, parody them) and, consequently, are likely to be ineffective as character-building devices. These new uses to which proverbs are put, however, do tell us something about the adults who continually enlist tradition in their attempts to address the supposed crisis in character among children, especially boys, and Mechling does a superb job of laying bare their rhetoric as well as their neoconservative motivations.

Just as proverbs are put to work by neoconservative traditionalists, so, too, are they mobilized in advertising campaigns for an extensive range of products, services, lifestyles, and ultimately to promote American hegemonic ideals, as Anand Prahlad demonstrates in his essay, “The Proverb and Fetishism in American Advertisements.” Prahlad does far more than identify proverbs and their strategic placement in magazine advertisements; he also suggests that the deep entanglements of proverb and advertisement produce an altogether new cultural form, what he calls the “ad/altar,” at the heart of which is the altered proverb itself. Through close readings of several proverb ad/altars, Prahlad begins to build a new theory of the fetishized proverb in American advertising (itself something of a fetish), a theory that emerges



from the proverb's movement (and incorporation) into new contexts and cultural configurations.

At the same time, however, traditional proverbs in traditional contexts also find innovative ends. Jan Brunvand's essay, "The Early Bird Is Worth Two in the Bush': Captain Jack Aubrey's Fractured Proverbs," is an incredible survey of the intentionally fractured proverbs invented by novelist Patrick O'Brian in creating the quirky, though entirely believable, character of Captain Jack Aubrey, hero of O'Brian's vastly popular series of maritime novels set during the Napoleonic War. In keeping with the spirit of much of Mieder's own work, Brunvand has combed O'Brian's full series to compile a list of fractured proverbs and misspoken proverbial expressions attributed to Aubrey and some of the other characters in the series who either intentionally or accidentally offer versions of fractured proverbs, Wellerisms, or clever puns and witticisms. Most impressive, perhaps, is Brunvand's ability not only to recognize various proverbs and proverbial expressions but also to trace them to their origins and offer correct versions.

We close our collection of essays on proverbial circulation with Alan Dundes's "As the Crow Flies: A Straightforward Study of Lineal Worldview in American Folk Speech." Dundes assembles a seemingly infinite number of proverbs and examples of proverbial speech, folk metaphors, and traditional expressions that detail the American cultural preference for the linear over the circular. As Dundes demonstrates, a vast range of proverbs and folk expressions come into existence—into articulation—as reflections of an American cultural ideology and worldview rooted in the lineal. While our own emphasis on circularity both in proverb scholarship and circulation may seem to fly in the face of the straight-minded crow in Dundes's title, we should also reiterate that the proverb in our title is also very frequently used to comment negatively on another's behavior (as in "He'll get his") and, thus, is fully consistent with Dundes's masterful *delineation* of a lineal worldview in American folk speech. In his essay, Dundes shows that at the broadest level, we arrive at proverbs and proverbial speech from the cultural expanse that gives meaning not only to specific performative utterances but to our entire mental map of the world around us.

As these essays collectively argue so persuasively, proverbs may come, and proverbs may go, but the roles they play and the tendencies they reveal about the people who employ them are

hardly insignificant. Just as we are certain that proverb usage will continue to engage and fascinate, we know, too, that the name Wolfgang Mieder shall never be writ in water.

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# “In Aqua Scribere”

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## The Evolution of a Current Proverb

Charles Clay Doyle

The name Wolfgang Mieder is not written in water. Like the names Archer Taylor and B. J. Whiting, it will long endure wherever paremiologists labor—if not chiseled in granite or cast in bronze, then firmly inked on high-quality acid-free paper. However, if Wolfgang Mieder did assert, with unmerited modesty, that his name might prove to be “written in water,” what would be the implications, proverbially speaking?

The old expression is much alive at the beginning of the twenty-first century. A well-read portion of English speakers may associate the phrase specifically with the poet John Keats, who is reported to have asked, on his early deathbed in 1821, that his epitaph read, “Here lies one whose name was writ in water.” Even as a literary aphorism, however, the expression has been subject to the variability that tends to characterize proverbs and anecdotes. For instance, references to the epitaph often give the form “writ *on* water”—a small variation indeed; yet the difference between the two prepositions can suggest a fundamental difference in the imagery. With the preposition *on*, we imagine Keats’s name being inscribed on the surface of a pool or stream. With the preposition *in*, the expression can be interpreted that same way, but “writ *in* water” also permits us to imagine the name being written on paper with a pen dipped in water instead of ink. Either way, of course, “writ in water,” like “writ on water,” signifies invisibility or (symbolically) oblivion for the name and fame of the individual whose appellation is so scripted.

Keats’s wish was carried out. Carved in the stone over his anonymous grave in the Protestant Cemetery in Rome appears

this inscription: "Here lies One/Whose Name was writ in Water" (a legible photograph appears in Rogers 1957, facing 33). The story of the poet's deathbed utterance depends on a letter of 14 February 1821—Keats died February 23—from his friend Joseph Severn to Charles Armitage Brown; the two of them oversaw the design and placement of the stone (Brown 1937, 85; see also Brown 1966, 91).

There persists some question as to whether Keats actually requested "writ in water" and not "writ on water"—both of these forms, with "writ" often modernized to "written," are still current in writing and in oral tradition. Prior to the carving of the gravestone, Keats's friend and publisher John Taylor reported the poet's request in the form, "Here lies one whose Name was writ on Water" (Blunden 1940, 88). A fragment of poetry by Keats's confidant Shelley, possibly intended for some version of the elegy "Adonais," bears the title, "On Keats who desired that on his tomb should be inscribed 'Here lieth one whose name was writ on water'"; it appeared in Mary Shelley's posthumous edition of her husband's verse (1969, 82), sent to the publisher in 1823, prior to the erection of Keats's gravestone.

Innovator of expressive images though he was, Keats hardly invented the conceit of writing in (or on) water. In English, the expression was prevalent in Elizabethan times, while Latin and Greek versions extend back to antiquity.

Pivotal between those two ages was the great polymath Erasmus of Rotterdam, whose *Adagia* transported (and translated) so much of ancient learning to the culture of a newer Europe. Following the procedure used throughout his magisterial compilation, Erasmus gave the adage in Latin—whether or not it was current in that form at the end of the Middle Ages—followed by one or more versions from the Greek.

In 1500 he included the proverb "In aqua scribes" in the first of the many expanding editions of his *Adagia* (Erasmus 1993–, 1:450; my English translations are based on Erasmus 1974–, 1:359). The Latin translates καθ' ὕδατος γράφεις or (alternatively) εἰς ὕδωρ γράφεις. Next, Erasmus quoted and translated (into Latin) a Greek analog from Lucian: "Are you joking, Charon, or are you, as they say, writing on water . . . ?" [. . . *in aqua, quod aiunt, scribes*]; one from Plato: "Will he not then write these things carefully on black water, sowing with his pen?" [. . . *in aqua scribet*

*nigra seminana calamo*]; one from “the Greek maxims” [*sententias Graecas*], of Menander: “You should write the oaths of wicked men on water” [Hominum improborum inscribe iusiurandum aquae]; a version “misquoted” [*deprauat*] by Xenarchas, which Erasmus added in the edition of 1517–18: “. . . a woman’s oath is written with wine” [Inscribo vino si qua iurat foemina]; Erasmus may have been unaware that Xenarchas was parodying a line in a fragment by Sophocles, which gives the normative “water” version (Sophocles 1994–96, 3:362–63); and finally an occurrence in the Latin of Catullus, added in the 1520 edition: “What a woman says to her ardent lover should be written on the wind and running water” [*in vento et rapida scribere oportet aqua*].

Not included by Erasmus were some other early versions (cited by Lahr [1972–73, 17–18] and corrected by Woodman [1975, 12–13]; both of those Keats scholars were apparently unaware of the central role Erasmus would have played in transmitting the proverb to educated English speakers): In the Greek prose of Philostratus, “. . . this is no dream, nor are you writing this love of ours in water” (Philostratus 1921, 160–61); and in the Latin of St. Augustine’s *The City of God*, purporting to translate the Greek of Porphyry, who consulted Apollo regarding the means to convert his previously Christianized wife back to paganism—the oracle declares, “You may perchance more easily write in lasting letters on water [*in aqua impressis litteris scribere*], or spread light pinions and fly like a bird through the air” (Augustine 1957–72, 6:214–15).

Versions of the Greek adage can also be found in the second-century collection of the Greek paremiographer Diogenianus (adages 2.59 and 5.83), in a group of sayings ascribed to Plutarch (adage 5), among the “paroimiai” of Macarius (adages 4.95 and 5.50), among the proverbs of Mantissa (adage 1.74), and in the tenth-century lexicon associated with the name Suīdas (adages 3283 and 327); the adage also appeared among the late-fifteenth-century *Apothegmata* of Michael Apostolius (adages 6.56 and 6.80) (Leutsch and Schneidewin [1839–87] 1958–65, 1:344, 2:27, 176, 184, 267, 379, 387, 756; Suīdas [1928–38] 1967–71, 2:431, 543). Erasmus had access to at least some of those compilations. (A few other early versions are cited by Boissonade [1829–33] 1962, 1:5, 96, 394.)

Erasmus interpreted the adage “In aqua scribes” [You write on water] to mean “You are wasting your time” or, more literally, “You

are doing nothing” [*nihil agis*]. However, some of the examples that he (and I) have quoted pretty clearly carry the more recent sense of “Your utterance, your resolve, or your reputation is transitory, ephemeral,” an application that Erasmus acknowledged when he glossed the same proverb in another place: “*de re euanida*” [of something that will vanish] (Erasmus 1993–, 2:128). Other quotations illustrate the meaning, “Your words are unreliable, not to be credited.” St. Augustine used the proverb as a paraphrastic expression of impossibility—like numbering the stars or counting the sands of the beach.

Regarding the ambiguity of the English wording “writ in water”: No such ambiguity exists in Latin. With the Latin preposition *in*—as in Erasmus’s main entry, “In aqua scribis”—the phrase means “You write *on* water.” With the noun *aqua* alone, the ablative case (or, less commonly, the dative *aquae*) signifies “by means of”—that is, without the preposition, “Aqua scribis” means “You write with water (instead of ink).” As the quotations show, both versions—both images, presumably—occurred in antiquity.

The disparate imagery appeared again when Elizabethan Englishmen adopted or adapted the old saying. The two earliest known instances in English both appear in publications from 1580. Austin Saker, in *Narbonus: The Laberynth of Libertie*, obviously thought of water as a substitute for the ink that a document would ordinarily be written *with*: “. . . my warrante shall bee written with water, and sealed with sauce: put into the Paper of obliuion, and deliuered with the hande of forgetfulnesse” (Saker 1580, 119). In the same year, 1580, the proverb appeared with the other sense in John Lyly’s *Euphues and His England*: “. . . the care that I haue had of thee . . . hath beene tried by the counsaile I haue always giuen thee, which if thou haue forgotten, I meane no more to write in water[:] if thou remember imprint it still” (Lyly 1902, 2:187; cited by Tilley 1950, W114). The edition of 1597 alters (corrects?) the last phrase to read “imprint it in steele” (Lyly 1916, 412); this more concrete antithesis clarifies that water is the medium written *on*. Whether he intended “still” or “in steele,” Lyly contrasts remembrance with the forgetfulness of writing on water.

In 1598 Nicolas Ling, in *Politeuphuia: Wits Common Wealth*, gave—in the category of aphorisms concerning oaths—“Wicked mens oaths are written in water” ([Ling] 1598, fol. 146<sup>v</sup>; Tilley



[1950, W114] cited the 1597 edition, which does not contain the saying—nor is Tilley’s attribution of the book to John Bodenham to be credited).

Dating sixteenth and seventeenth century proverbs can be problematic. The composition of a book, which would be the date of the actual use of a proverb, could precede the publication date by some years. For plays, the situation is more complicated still, since early performances would probably have omitted matter that appears in the texts that were eventually published. Be that as it may, the next datable instance of our proverb occurs in an epilog, “To the Reader,” after Ben Jonson’s *Poetaster*, published in 1616 (Jonson 1981–82, 2:226; cited by Dent 1984, W114):

. . . I could stamp  
 Their foreheads with those deep and public brands  
 That the whole company of barber-surgeons  
 Should not take off, with all their art, and plasters.  
 And these my prints should last, still to be read  
 In their pale fronts: when, what they write ‘gainst me,  
 Shall like a figure, drawn in water, fleet,  
 And the poor wretched papers be employed  
 To cloth[e] tobacco. . . .

In this passage, the fleeting “figure” can be interpreted according to either reading of “in water.”

In some lines traditionally ascribed to the poet and musician Thomas Campion (an attribution that Campion’s modern editor deems “doubtful”), first published about 1623, a lovelorn singer laments, “My object now must be the aire, /To write in water words of fire, /And teach sad thoughts how to despaire” (Campion 1969, 455). With a probable pun on “aire” (in the sense of “song”), the poet embellishes the proverb with further elemental imagery to create the paradox of writing “in water” (in the sense of “on water,” most likely) “words of fire”—suggesting not only the invisibility of his professed passion but also its inevitable cooling.

In Beaumont and Fletcher’s tragedy *Philaster*, published in 1620, the title character exclaims, “Your memory shall be as foule behind you /As you are living: all your better deeds / Shall be in water writ, but this in Marble” (Beaumont and Fletcher 1966–96, 1:469); the parallelism suggests that *in* means *on*. A similar sentiment occurs in *Henry VIII* by Shakespeare, probably in collaboration



with Fletcher, first printed in the 1623 folio of Shakespeare's plays: "Mens euill manners, liue in Brasse, their Vertues / We write in Water" (Shakespeare 1968, 579; cited by Dent 1981, W114). In 1630 appeared another version of the proverb with the "water"/"brass" antithesis; John Taylor (nicknamed the "water poet") paid tribute to King James I in a "funerall elegie": "His anger written on weak water was,/His Patience and his Loue were grau'd in Brasse" (Taylor 1630, 324 [2nd series of pagination], sig. Iii [1st such signing] 2").

A year earlier, in 1629, an English poem loosely adapting or paraphrasing a long epigram from *The Greek Anthology* (epigram 9.359, where the adage itself does not appear) was published in Thomas Farnaby's *Florilegium epigrammatum Graecorum*; the lines have been attributed to Francis Bacon: "The world's a bubble. . . / Who then to fraile mortality shall trust, / But limmes the water, or but writes in dust" (Farnaby 1629, sig. A5<sup>v</sup>). To make a connection with Keats's circle of acquaintances: Mary Shelley employed the quoted couplet as the epigraph to volume 1, chapter 10 of her novel *Lodore* in 1835 (1996, 6:54).

The same connection between inscribing water and the equally futile attempt to write on another substance occurs in Philip Massinger's play *The Maid of Honour*, published in 1632: "but all that I had done,/My benefits, in sand or water written,/As they had never been, no more remember'd!" (Massinger 1813, 4:101). Separate instances of the proverbial phrase "to write in sand" have been recorded; both Tilley (1950, W114) and Dent (1981, W114; 1984, W114) consider it the same proverb as "to write on water." Another paralleling of images occurs in a poem titled "The Expostulation," which has been attributed to both John Donne and Ben Jonson, first published in 1633; like the Roman Catullus—behind whom stood Xenarchus and Sophocles—it focuses on female fickleness: "Are vowes so cheape with women, or the matter / Whereof they're made, that they are writ in water, / And blowne away with wind?" (Donne 1965, 94). Catullus had likewise linked the images of wind and water. Still another proverbial association occurred in 1635 in John Reynolds's *The Triumphs of Gods Revenge*: "But this is to write upon the water, and to build Castles of vaine hopes in the ayre" (Reynolds 1635, 364). In 1638, Henry Adamson's *The Muses Threnodie* said of nations, "Yet time hath overturn'd them, and their names / Are past, as Letters written

on the streames,/To tell us, here we have no constant biding” (Adamson 1638, 84).

The traditional antifeminist application of the proverb is reversed in *Argalus and Parthenia* by Henry Glapthorne, published in 1639, where a female character decries male infidelity: “And let their words, oaths, teares, vowes, passe,/As words in water writ, or slippery glasse” (Glapthorne 1639, 35; cited by Tilley 1950, W114). Those lines are quoted (with attribution) as one of the “Formulae Majores. Or, Common Places” in Thomas Blount’s *The Academy of Eloquence*, 1654 (115–16). In a play of doubtful authorship, *The False One*, which first appeared in the 1647 folio of Beaumont and Fletcher, a character employs the “wine” variant anticipated by Xenarchus’s parody of Sophocles: “And though I had killd my Father, give me gold,/I’le make men swear I have done a pious Sacrifice/ . . . /And my brave deed shall be writ in wine, for virtuous” (Beaumont and Fletcher 1966–96, 8:149). In a play published in 1654, *Revenge for Honour*, doubtfully attributed to George Chapman, we return to the antifeminist use of our proverb (this time spoken by a female character): “Of what frail temper is a woman’s weakness!/Words writ in waters have more lasting essence/Than our determinations” (Chapman 1961, 2:726).

By 1658 the proverb was demonstrably familiar enough to be adapted in a wittily allusive way: “Write in water” is used to mean “paint in watercolors,” as an anonymous poet (in a commendatory poem) praises a treatise on painting by Sir William Sanderson, in the process explicitly identifying the expression as a proverb and recording one of its applications, one that specifically anticipates Keats’s epitaph on the meaninglessness of a writer’s life: “Your fame shall (spite of *Proverbs*) make it plain, To write in Water’s not to write in vain” (Sanderson 1658, sig. b1<sup>v</sup>). In 1659 Henry More’s treatise *The Immortality of the Soul* gave an innovative twist to the old “water”/“wind” pairing: “For when a man is so fugitive and unsettled, that he will not stand to the verdict of his own Faculties, one can no more fasten any thing upon him, then he can write in the water, or tye knots of the wind” (More 1987, 24). In 1692 Richard Hollingsworth, paying belated tribute to King Charles I (beheaded in 1649), echoed the “limming” version of the proverb in the 1629 epigram attributed to Bacon; during his trial, the king had “minded them of what he had done . . . and wherein can it justly be blam’d? Especially considering

all he had done, was but a kind of Limming the Water, to them” (Hollingsworth 1692, 73).

Between the seventeenth century and the death of Keats in 1821, I can find no record of the proverb, except as it appeared in translations of Catullus or in *The Restauration* by George Villiers, second Duke of Buckingham, first published in 1715 (though Villiers had died in 1687); Buckingham’s play, however, is nothing but an adaptation of Beaumont and Fletcher’s *Philaster* (Villiers 1715, 1:64). This seeming absence may result, partly, at least, from three factors: 1) compilers of proverb dictionaries have more assiduously searched medieval and Renaissance works for English proverbs than works from the eighteenth century; 2) the invaluable online databases of full-text documents represent the nineteenth and twentieth centuries more abundantly than earlier periods; 3) my own literary expertise lies in the literature of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. To be sure, nineteenth-century men of letters were well read in literature of earlier times, and they could have revived an archaic or dormant saying. However, the prevalence of the proverb—apparently independent of Keats’s influence—in nineteenth-century records suggests that it had remained in oral tradition, if not much in literary use, during the interim.

Although I know of no interesting examples of the proverb from 1700 to 1821, I have on file some fifty instances from the remaining decades of the nineteenth century, the majority of them American—a predominance, again, which may result from the bias of the available databases or scholars’ sampling procedures—even though the saying has no entry in Archer Taylor’s 1958 *Dictionary of American Proverbs and Proverbial Phrases, 1820–1880*. About a third of the nineteenth-century mentions make direct reference to the death or the grave of Keats or allude to Keats in some other obvious manner. The remainder suggest that the proverb was going along its own way, as if in uninterrupted popularity.

In 1829 Sarah Josepha Buell Hale, like several of her early predecessors—but unlike Keats in 1821—used the proverb in an antithesis: “But it should be remembered that though the human heart is like water when we would write thereon lessons of virtue, it is like the rock to retain the impressions of vice” (Hale 1829, 55). Other nineteenth-century writers vary the terms of the antithesis:

. . . The figures, the motions, the words of the beloved object are not like other images written in water, but, as Plutarch said, “enamelled in fire.” (1841—Ralph Waldo Emerson 1971–, 2:102)

[Of the “Negro” race:] Our slightest faults are engraven on stone, and our brightest virtues written on water. (J. H. Perkins 1849, fol. 1’)

“Crowns and sceptres,” says one, “do not secure us from the inconsistency of changes; and we may better trust unto the wind, or to letters written upon water, than unto human felicity.” (Rev. J. Leonard Corning 1857, 156)

The angels are so near us in our infancy, that the troubles of the world, which are afterward engraved in marble, are then only written in water. (William Henry Holcombe 1870, 19)

Woman’s love is writ in water!  
Woman’s faith is traced on sand!  
(William Edmonstoune Aytoun circa 1870, 140)

The men who group around Leicester square are the exiles without a fame, . . . the men who come like shadows, and so depart; the men whose names are writ in water, even though their life-paths may have been marked in blood. (Justin McCarthy 1872, 202)

The name of the man who so beautified and enriched this city [Paris] that he loved is writ in water, while that of the great scourge of his country is carved in the hearts of his people. (Helen B. Mathews 1877, 63)

One lesson the rubric of conflict has taught her [the city of Boston]:  
Though parted awhile by war’s earth-rending shock,  
The lives that divide us are written in water  
The love that unites us cut deep in the rock.  
(1880—Oliver Wendell Holmes 1892–1908, 13:230)

In 1833 Theodore Fay seems to have playfully literalized the proverb’s metaphor to suggest impossibility: “A person standing on the brink of a running stream on a cold day, seriously employed in ‘writing his name in water,’ would be accounted insane—the attempt to write munificence and generosity on the coachman’s mind is equally futile” (Fay 1833, 2:147). Like Fay, other nineteenth-century writers enclosed some version of our expression in

quotation marks, presumably thus marking it as either proverbial or allusive: for example,

She loved—he deserted her—she followed him to a great city and died there. That was all the father could tell. But her name was not "written in water," so far as he was concerned. (William H. Bushnell 1867, 15)

. . . The good men who labored to give us equitable laws and happy homes[:] . . . Let not our children search for their names and find them "writ in water." (J. Ross Browne 1875, 347)

There are those to whom the work might well be one of love . . . telling us something also of the men whose names were "writ in water"—in the most shifting, quickly-running stream that flows. (E. L. Burlingame 1877, 406)

Again like Theodore Fay in 1833, several nineteenth-century writers ironically made the image in the proverb somewhat literal, as if assuming the readers' familiarity with the expression in its standard, figurative sense:

[Explaining a whaler's ability to "track" his prey:] . . . This hunter's wondrous skill, the proverbial evanescence of a thing writ in water, a wake, is to all desired purposes well nigh as reliable as the steadfast land. (1851—Herman Melville 1967, 453–54)

A stream or a fountain survives many successive buildings, and a local superstition attached to either has the best chance of permanence. A tradition, to be lasting, must be writ on water. (William George Clark 1858, 286)

[When the stalwart Warwick has dissolved in a none-too-manly fit of weeping:] He yielded to it, letting the merciful magic of tears quench the fire, wash the first bitterness away, and leave reproaches only writ in water." (1864—Louisa May Alcott 1991, 131)

And mark how full of grace and ease the running water is. . . . The motion of the brook, indeed, is music written in water. (N. H. Chamberlain 1865, 209)

In most of these quotations, whether in the form "on water" or "in water" ("in" construed in either sense), the proverb—like

Keats's epitaph—expresses impermanence or oblivion. So do other instances:

That race upon whose sepulchre we rear  
Our temples and our hearth-stones, and whose names  
Written in water, still as Time rolls on  
Are deep ingulphed within the rushing stream,  
Whose sweep is onward to Eternity.  
(Gretta 1849, 291)

. . . Men's lives for the most part have been written in water, and that of the muddiest. (Samuel Phillips 1852, 19)

. . . Those grand ideas . . . are small beside the simple Bible truths . . . that shall stand for ages, while others will prove to have been written in water. (Mary A. Denison 1863, 72)

. . . This little waif makes me feel that the story of human life and hope is writ in water. (Theodore Tilton 1874, 264)

A kindness shown seems written in water. (Thomas Dunn English 1894, 637)

It is more than conceivable that important discoveries in experimental physics were made by men whose names and works were written on water. (Rev. George McDermot 1900, 392)

One particular sense of the proverb, which became increasingly prevalent in the twentieth century, was anticipated by early uses in reference to the promises of lovers or of "wicked men": An insincere vow or resolve—or an unenforceable command or rule—consists of words "written in water":

. . . There will come a time in these colonies when the king's commands will be as if written in water, and the king's threats will make no man tremble. (Mary A. Denison 1860, 145)

His sudden impulse, his enthusiastic vow, were not as words written in water. ("A Son of the Crusaders" 1873, 434)

. . . let the glorious name be said,  
Lest mine oath in the water be written, and I wake up, vile and betrayed,

In the arms of the faint-heart dastard. . . .  
(1876—William Morris 1910–15, 211)

. . . But these pledges as we know were writ in water. (James D. Phelan 1896, 108)

The popular currency of the saying has continued through the twentieth century and into the twenty-first, although it failed to gain entry into Whiting’s *Modern Proverbs and Proverbial Sayings* (1989). With the more extensive availability of searchable full-text databases (articles in newspapers and popular magazines, law-review articles, judicial decisions, scholarly articles, literary works) and the World Wide Web itself, I have collected more than a hundred “modern” examples, about a third of them (again) making some fairly clear allusion to Keats. Among the remainder, a few uses of the phrase “write on water” that were formerly rare seem to have gained prominence—although the *Oxford English Dictionary*’s assertion that it can mean “to spend money” (2d ed., s.v. “water,” sb. 1f) has never been exemplified at all, as far as I can ascertain.

Frequently encountered is the concept that the words one writes, literally—not just one’s name or reputation—will prove especially ephemeral because of the genre in which the writer works. In the first of these, the metaphor is oddly mixed:

The [newspaper] editor, no matter how distinguished, writes in water; his page is a palimpsest on which he expends all his talents, wit, learning and judgment for the day alone, to be erased with the next sun. (Allan Nevins 1928, v)

. . . Like all the words of man, our own words [those of historians] will be writ on water. (J. H. Hexter 1954, 221)

“I used to say reporters write on water, but now I see that we write on paper. Which crumbles.” (Richard Stout, quoted in Kernan 1978, B1)

“My efforts with Hollywood are like things written in water,” she said. (Brian D. Johnson 1992, 66)

As someone once said, theater is written on water. (Jackie Campbell 1994, 26D)

Potter dedicated himself to the medium at a time when to write for television was to write in water. (Allison Pearson 1995, 15)

Even more prevalent—accounting for about a fourth of all the non-Keatsian references—is the use of the proverb to suggest the unenforceability or disregard of a rule, law, agreement, or other written promise—adapting the conceit which extends back to antiquity (and taking more literally the image of writing) that a lover’s vow is like words written in water:

The trial has often been made[,] and the agreements which have been elaborated, signed, ratified, seem to have been written in water. (James Brown Scott 1908, 128–29)

If the Court does not abide by its Rules, how can it expect the bar to do so? Standards must be enforced to be respected. If they are merely left as something on paper, they might as well be written on water. (Felix Frankfurter 1957, 352 U.S. 521)

No one would want a presidential decision written in water. Yet must it be carved in stone? (“Adrift from Sea Law” 1982, 24).

Gramm-Rudman deficit-reduction requirements were written on water and are about to be relaxed. (George Will 1987, 82)

It allows for flexibility, precisely because arrangements are “written on water” rather than in stone. (Rachel Kelly 1994, 43)

Unless the Constitution is “fixed,” its limits are writ on water. (Raoul Berger 1997, 524)

His pronouncements [Buffalo’s mayor’s] are written on water, not carved in stone. He’s got a preservation policy nobody follows, a residency policy everybody ignores. . . . (“Pick a Mayor” 2002, B1)

In reference to the arid American West, “written in water” (or “with water,” but not “on water”) has acquired a distinctive new meaning, figurative in a wholly different way: It means “determined by (or in regard to) the availability (or absence) of water.” About 1940 the Colorado poet Thomas Hornsby Ferril wrote, “Here is a land where life is written in water”—a line now engraved on a plaque in the Colorado state capitol (a photograph can be seen at



<http://www.archives.state.co.us/cap/murals.htm>). In 1995 The Newsletter of the Colorado Water Resources Research Institute published an article with the punning title, "Agreements Written with Water: Prospects for Integrated Watershed Management in the Cache Le Poudre Basin" (Graf and Williams 1995, 17). A newspaper report from Oregon in June 2002 notes, "The history of the American West is written in water, and no federal agency has had a greater role in writing it than the US Bureau of Reclamation" (Brad Knickerbocker 2002, O2).

So the dying poet Keats spoke a proverb in a particular verbal and situational context, and such were the pathos and power of his request that the proverb has often clung to Keats, in ironic contradiction to the prophecy and wish expressed by him. Perhaps Keats's reported inclusion of the already-archaic verb form helped perpetuate the frequent occurrence of the word "writ" in the phrase even today. However, in that version and others, the proverb—already old when Keats uttered it—has continued to function in a variety of changing contexts.

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# “From One Act of Charity, the World Is Saved”

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## Creative Selection of Proverbs in Sephardic Narrative

Isaac Jack Lévy and Rosemary Lévy Zumwalt

Proverbs are used to speak the message in Sephardic narratives, and they do so with “the authority of generations” (Mieder and Mieder 1981, 310). The tale-tellers weave proverbs into their stories with creative selection in a variety of ways. They may choose a proverb as the opening or closing frame and link it in the telling to the heart of the message; they can cement the appeal to the past of the narrative, which begins “many years ago”<sup>1</sup> and ends with the wisdom of the ages; and, in literary fashion, they can even title their narrative with a proverb. Through the creative use of proverbs, the listeners join in active dialogue, indeed in some instances even in dispute, with the narrator. The power then in the use of proverbs in Sephardic narratives lies in the combination of the authority of the past as spoken in proverbs to summarize a moral message and the narrator’s ability to craft the message creatively by choosing just the right proverb.

In his essay, “Proverb Speaking as a Creative Process: The Akan of Ghana,” Kwesi Yankah emphasizes the need to focus on the “situated uses of proverbs”; this approach includes “a close study of the proverb in interaction situations” and a critique of “the view that proverb use is essentially an exercise in quotation” (1986, 195, 196). Yankah emphasizes the dynamic possibilities of the proverb, for as he says, the proverb “is subject to *creative deformation* during performance, even as the proverb retains its historical identity.” He remarks on the importance of tradition and history “in lending acceptability to the proverb,” and he continues,

“for knowledge of history and tradition is, in several cultures, a privilege that may be used to key and heighten performance, authenticate, validate, as well as confer power and authority; and it is to the performer’s advantage to invoke this knowledge to augment his word.” However, for Yankah the appeal to tradition and history is not a static hold, a weight of ages past, but rather a gift to the narrator to reshape and reinterpret by creatively changing and elaborating on the summation of wisdom in the form of the proverb. “Creativity,” Yankah says, “. . . may be interpreted in three senses: 1) the creation of novel proverbs, 2) the timely invocation of an effective proverb in a fitting rhetorical context, and 3) the adaptation and manipulation of existing proverbs” (p. 197).

Our emphasis will be on *creative selection* of proverbs, rather than Yankah’s “creative deformation.” We agree with Yankah’s position that the use of proverbs is much more than “an exercise in quotation” (p. 196). While our work is informed by Arewa’s and Dundes’s article, “Proverbs and the Ethnography of Speaking Folklore,” we differ in our emphasis on creative selection of proverbs. Arewa and Dundes write that the one using the proverb “is but the instrument through which the proverb speaks to the audience” (1964, 70). We will see that the Sephardic audience is not so passive in receiving the wisdom of the tale in proverb form. In many instances, not only does the narrator choose a specific proverb to summarize the tale but the audience actively critiques his choice. There is nothing static or uncontested about the appeal to tradition through the use of a proverb, for there are a variety of appeals that can be made and a plurality of proverbs from which to draw. The process of narration and proverb use is, in sum, a creative, dynamic process. As Barre Toelken writes,

All folklore participates in a distinctive, dynamic process. Constant change, variation within a tradition, whether intentional or inadvertent, is viewed here simply as a central fact of life for folklore, and rather than presenting it in opposed terms of conscious artistic manipulation or forgetfulness, I have sought to accept it as a defining feature that grows out of context, performance, attitude, [and] cultural tastes. (1979, 10)

The Sephardic *konsejas* (folktales) are drawn from those collected by Isaac Jack Lévy over a period of forty years (1960–2000) from his grandmother, Sarota Amato Musafir; his mother, Caden

Lévy Israel; his father, Baruch Israel;<sup>2</sup> and other relatives and close family friends. All of these people originated in Turkey and Rhodes (Greece). They all shared in the rich traditions of Sephardic life. The language of the home was Judeo-Spanish, and the chief entertainment in the evenings was the telling of *konsejas*. Isaac remembers such storytelling sessions from his childhood in Rhodes:

I recall that on wintry rainy evenings, men and women gathered in a neighbor's house, shared a meal, and told one story after another until they had to retire for the night. The telling of stories was also popular during the cool summer evenings when people gathered in the patios, seated among the blooming flower pots and under the lattice with its hanging vines. . . . There was no stopping once the narration of tales began. Time was of no consequence, especially when the master tellers took the floor. Many a time, I recall how the stories mesmerized those present. In our family circle, the narratives began with serious—didactic, moral, religious—themes and as the night advanced, they took a lighter vein. All present were ready for some laughter, and the stories dealing with Djuha, marital affairs, and the frivolous, were welcomed. There was humor in the air. In this atmosphere of gaiety, when everyone was oblivious of the daily problems, men and women would join with their tales, hilarious jokes, even with obscene stories. Of course, by now all the children were asleep. (Lévy 1989, 69–70)

Years later, when as a college student, Isaac began to collect all manner of Sephardic folklore, his family members were doubly willing to share with him. Ballads, proverbs, folktales, folk beliefs were all a natural part of their daily lives. They responded to Isaac's keen interest in collecting the folklore with a somewhat shocked and appreciative wonder as if to say, "Why should anyone—and especially our Isaac who is studying in college—be interested in such things?" As our mother, Caden Lévy Israel, remarked when both Rosemary and Isaac together collected materials from her, "I can't say anything, but they write it down!" The transcribed and translated texts of the *konsejas* show clearly the comfort of family members—father, mother, and grandmother—in sharing their stories with their son and grandson; and sharing more than stories, for in these texts are lessons in wisdom, clearly conveyed in the wise words of proverbs.

In his classic work *The Proverb*, Archer Taylor discusses the relationship between proverbs and narrative. Taylor particularly



focuses on the origin of proverbs—whether this be the proverb deriving from a narrative, or a narrative giving story to a proverb. While the question of origins is a hapless and frustrating enterprise that we eschew, we find provocative Taylor’s comments on the connection between the proverb and the fable:

There may perhaps be certain classes of stories which yield proverbs more readily than others. The Aesopic fable, for example, stands godfather to many a proverb: *Sour grapes*; *A dog in the manger*; *Don’t kill the goose that lays the golden eggs*; *Don’t count your chickens before they are hatched*. . . . I am not sure that the Latin proverb *We lose the certain things, while we seek the uncertain ones* . . . alludes to the fable of the dog which lost its meat by snapping at the reflection in the water. (1962, 28)

As if continuing a conversation with Taylor on the link between fable and proverb, Ruth Finnegan observes in “Proverbs in Africa,” “A moralizing story may end with, or imply, a proverb to drive home its point” (1981, 12). She notes the “close connection between proverbs and other forms of oral literature” and specifically refers to the work by H. Chatelain among the Kimbundu of Angola in the latter part of the nineteenth century: “Proverbs are closely related to anecdotes, so much so that anecdotes are sometimes just illustrations of a proverb, while a proverb is frequently an anecdote in a nutshell” (p. 12).<sup>3</sup>

For the Sephardim, *proverbio* comes from the same Latin root as the English word “proverb”: “*prô-* forth + *verbum* word, (originally) a speaking, speech” (Barnhart 1974, 2:1661), an etymology which places the emphasis squarely on the *process* of speaking. Additionally, a proverb may be referred to as *refran*, or *reflan*, meaning “adage, saying, proverb, maxim” (Nehama 1977, 469).<sup>4</sup> Joseph Nehama, in his *Dictionnaire du Judéo-Espagnol*, even quotes a proverb about proverbs—or a metaproverb—“*Refran mentirozo no ay*” (*There is no lying [false] proverb*) (p. 469).

In *Prolegomena to the Study of the Refranero Sefardi* (1969), Lévy notes the lack of a specific term for proverb in medieval Spain. “Instead, an author quite regularly used a formula, a word, or an adjective when quoting a common or classical phrase adopted by the people. In the *exempla* and other philosophical and didactic works, when the authority of a sage was desired, the author preceded the saying by a formula, *Los antiguos dicen* [The



ancestors say], or *Como dize el sabio* [As the wise one says]" (p. 18).

Still, a range of terms often replaced the formulaic opening. Included among these was *retraire*, *retrayre* or *retraere*, in common usage from 1250, "which means to go back, to repeat, to tell, to think or to recall an old story or teaching worthy of remembrance" (Lévy 1969, 19). There were also other terms—"brocardi[c]o, castigo, conseja, dicho, escritura, exemplo, . . . sentencia, verbo, verso, . . . and vulgar"—which all "imply a lesson or judgment derived from a fable" or a folktale (Lévy 1969, 18). One of the most important terms which Lévy identifies, *fabla*, was also glossed as "*fabiella, fabilla, fabriella, fabrilla,*" and most interestingly, as *habla* (language, talk), which again emphasizes the importance of speaking (p. 18). Lévy continues, "These terms, found as early as 1200, denote not only a *fábula* but also the lesson obtained from it, and in time the reference condensed into a proverb: 'Esta *fabla* compuesta de Yosete sacada (*Libro de buen amor*, Qtr. 96)" (Lévy 1969, 18–19).<sup>5</sup>

The Judeo-Spanish folktale—known as *kuento* or *konseja*, the latter derived from *konsejar*, to advise, to teach—may itself be framed by proverbs as Isaac's mother did in her narration of "Marido, maredo" [Husband, Log].<sup>6</sup> She began, "Ken kon peros se echa kon pulgas se alvanta [He who goes to bed with dogs wakes up with fleas]"; and she closed, "Ansi es ke 'Antes ke te kazes, mira lo ke azes'" [Thus it is that 'Before you get married, see what you are doing']. The tale opens with Simha, a widow, drinking Turkish coffee with her friend Rebeka: "When Simha mentioned the name of Avraam, the deceased, Rebeka, as was customary, said, 'May he rest in peace. May we be among the living.' But Simha jumped and said [of her husband], 'El guerko se lo yevo i el guerko ke se lo guadre!' [The devil took him and may the devil keep him!]."

There ensues a discussion about the worth of husbands, with Simha saying they are all worthless, and Rebeka saying hers is an "*alma del Dyo*" [a saint]. Simha says,

"Look, let's play a trick. I'm going to give you a potion that is going to make you as if you are dead. When your dear one comes home, I'm going to talk to him, and you listen to the conversation." . . . When [Rebeka's husband] came home and saw that his wife was

lying in bed, all white and lifeless, he started . . . to cry big tears. Simha took his hand . . . and told him that before dying, Rebeka begged her not to leave him alone [but] to [marry] Avram. Avram replies with great sighing, “And she said it to me, and she said it to me.” At that moment, Rebeka opened her eyes and [yelled at her husband], “Son of a jackass, when did I tell you that?” Thus it is that “Antes ke te kazes mira lo ke azes” [Before you get married, see what you are doing.]

The same proverb that begins this story concludes the story of “La media ermana” [The Half Sister]:

One day, the son of Djuha comes to see his father. He says, “Papa, I have found the most beautiful girl, and I am going to marry her.” Djuha asks, “Who is she?” And his son replies, “She is the daughter of the butcher.” Djuha says, “You can’t marry her; she is your half sister.”

Each time that the son comes to the father to tell about meeting a young woman he wishes to marry, Djuha tells him that he can’t because she is his half sister. Finally, the mother asks her son why he is so sad. He says, “Each time that I talk with my father and I say who I am going to marry, he tells me that I can’t because she is my half sister. I don’t know what I’m going to do!” The mother says to him, “Son, you can marry anyone you choose. Djuha isn’t even your father.”

The narrator concludes the story, “See how Djuha ‘se echo kon pers i se levanto kon pulgas’ [Djuha ‘lay down with dogs and got up with fleas’]. That is to say that Djuha lay down with other women without knowing that his own wife was also having her own affairs.”<sup>7</sup>

The narrator may elect to open the narrative with a formulaic phrase, which serves to alert the listener that a story is to follow, end with a proverb, and sandwich a proverb in the midst of the narration. Isaac’s father, Baruch Israel, did just that in his story of “The Anti-Semite.”<sup>8</sup> He began, “In the time of old Russia, there was a Jew who was a peddler. . . . He used to go to all the villages to sell [clothes]. There was a village at a distance where everyone was an anti-Semite, and they were against the Jews. He was afraid of that village.” The peddler met a man who encouraged him to come to his village, the one of the anti-Semites. “When a week passed, two, the business was going poorly. This Jew remembered that person who told him to go to the village. Even

though he knew that 'Di lus malus nu se aspera dinguna bondad' [From evil people no one expects any goodness], even so he took a little chance." The peddler had "to earn a living [so] he decided to go to the village of the anti-Semitic people."

Isaac's father continued with the story, but pointedly asked him if he understood:

Well! When he went to that village, the people already saw that he was a Jew. Do you understand? [Directed to Isaac] They took him, they grabbed him, they accused him. The man says, "What have I done?" "Oh, you," he says, "are the one who killed Christ," he says. "I?" he says. "I don't have any news about it; I was not he." "No?" he says. "You're not Jewish?" "Yes," he says, "I'm Jewish, but—" "You are the one who did the killing," he says.

The villagers took him before a tribunal, and the verdict was that "the Jew killed Christ. So. 'You who are a Jew, you are of the same race, and the guilt falls on you.'" The man engaged a lawyer who "instead of helping him, told him, 'They're right . . . because you are of that race, and you must pay for the sin that they have committed.'" The peddler saw that there was no remedy and asked for one last wish. "He says, 'I want to go to church.'"

When he entered the church, he went to the Christ, and he spoke to him in his ear. Everyone is looking at him. "Is he crazy, this one? What is it?" He spoke in the ear, [and] then he put his own ear to the Christ so that [Christ] may speak to him. When he finished speaking to Christ, he started to laugh. He started to laugh, he came down [from the crucifix], [and] says, "All right. Let's go now," he says. "Now I'm happy," he says. They say, "What is happening that you are happy now?" He says, "That is for me to know." "No," they say. "You must tell it to us."

"The truth is that I spoke with Christ; he told me, 'What they are doing to you,' he says, 'they did to me also, to me,' he says. 'When I was alive, nobody loved me. Everyone wanted to kill me. They are going to kill you,' he says. 'They are going to hang you, and then they are going to ask for forgiveness. They, their children, their grandchildren—they are all going to ask you to forgive them, and they are going to throw themselves at your feet.'" "Ah!" [the people] say, "That's what you want to do, eh? It's not enough that we already got duped by one," they say, "and now we are going to be duped by another," they say. "To the street. Throw out this bastard." And they took him and they threw him into the street, and the man saved himself.

Isaac's father concludes, "This proves that 'Kun il djidio ni el guerku la kita' [With the Jew, not even the devil succeeds]." And then he turned to Isaac and said, "Do you know, 'Para un dimzis si keru un kademsis' [For a bastard, you need a son of a bitch]. That's how the good Jew saved himself." And Isaac's mother, who was listening, added, "Kon el djenio se salva del fuego" [With ingenuity, one saves oneself from the fire (trouble)].<sup>9</sup>

In some instances, the narrator used a proverb as a way of summarizing the wisdom of the tale. Isaac's mother began the story of "El Hap" [The Pill]:

I'm going to tell you about a very unhappy marriage in which every time that the husband came home from a hard day's work, he would hear his wife complain without end. This poor man didn't know what else to do. Every day that God created, he would listen to his companion of many years speak evil of one thing or another. She always complained of her unfortunate destiny. Tired of life, he tells her that it was time to see the chief rabbi of the city about giving him a divorce.<sup>10</sup>

Together the husband and wife petitioned the rabbi for a divorce. After listening to their complaints, the rabbi spoke to each one separately. "To the wife, he gives some pills and tells her to take one half an hour before the arrival of her husband." These, he said, would make her happier and allow her to tolerate her husband for another month, "but he warns her that if she would open her mouth before one hour had passed after she had taken the pill, she would die because the pill had poison inside."

For thirty days, the man came home from his work and sat in his armchair with a *meze*, an appetizer, resting after a long day at work. Meanwhile, the wife did not say a word and continued cooking for her husband. She, frightened of dying, did not open her mouth at all. In such a manner, the thirty days passed, but neither one nor the other fought.

At the end of the month, neither wanted a divorce. The rabbi explained to the wife that the pills had not been poison but were just made of sugar water. It was necessary, he said, for her to give her husband thirty minutes to rest after his day at work.

Isaac's mother concluded the narrative, "The two thanked the rabbi for his good advice and understood that in life each person must have a little solitude in order to rest and to think and that this does not mean that one does not love his wife." And then she

remarked directly to Isaac, "The *konseja* tells us that in a marriage, as in everything one does in life, we have to give our dear ones a moment to breathe and that paying 'Muncha atension i posesion atabafa al ombre'" [Too much attention and possession suffocates an individual]. When her daughter concluded the story, Isaac's grandmother turned to him and said, "Muncho avlar, mucho yerrar [The more one speaks, the more one errs], and she added, "For this reason, the human being has to guard against what he says and when he says it."<sup>11</sup> At another telling, Isaac's mother concluded the story with the following proverb: "El mucho avlar arrebuelve" [A lot of talk agitates]. When Isaac asked his father what *arrebuelve* meant, he explained it with another proverb, "El mucho avlar dezrepoza" [A lot of talk upsets]. The third time Isaac collected this story, the narrator concluded, "Ken mucho avla poko el repoza" [He who talks much, rests little], and then immediately explained this with the proverb, "Poko avlar, salud para el kuerpo" [Little talk is healthy for the body]. Thus, each time this *konseja* was told to Isaac, the narrator encapsulated the moral as he or she saw it by voicing a different proverb.

In the story about "The Rabbi and the Sinner," Isaac's father concluded on one occasion with a single proverb, and on another, with four. The *konseja* begins,

There was once a much-sainted rabbi who was highly respected both by Jews and Turks. There was nothing in the world that he would not do for God's children. He spent every hour of the day helping his flock and reading the Law of Moses. His fame was so well known throughout the lands. This rabbi had only one constant concern. For several nights, he dreamt that upon dying, they buried him at the foot of the city butcher, who was an evil person, a shameless person, a thief, a liar. He could never understand the reason for the dream and why the Master of the Universe paid him back with this dishonor.<sup>12</sup>

The rabbi went to the butcher and asked him to tell his life story. The butcher said that "there was nothing to tell and, as everyone already knew, he had no friend." As he represented himself, he was an evil person with one purpose in life: "to make a lot of money." Persistently, the rabbi questioned the butcher and begged him not to leave out a single incident.

As Isaac's father recounted,

The butcher continued with his *darshar* (narration).<sup>13</sup> Finally, he tells the rabbi that one Friday . . . he was passing through a wood where he saw some thieves who were trying to abuse a young girl. He felt so upset for the poor thing that he begged them to let [her] go and that he would give them all the money that he had on him in order for them not to touch her. The thieves, seeing that this rich Jew was carrying so much money, agreed to what he said; they took the moneybag and ran away. The rabbi did not want to hear any more. He got up, kissed the hand of the butcher, and told him with great emotion, “You, my son, are blessed by the Holy God. God knows what he does. For me, it is a great honor to be buried at your feet.”

Isaac’s father concluded, “This teaches us that man, no matter how evil he may always be, he can be redeemed. Among all the evil that he may cause, if he does one action to save his fellowman, the Master of the World takes this action as *kapara* (sacrifice), a substitute, and forgives all his sins. Thus it is, ‘*Azi lo bueno i toparas lo bueno*’ [Do good, and good will come to you]. Isaac’s mother, who was listening to the story, clearly desired to make a more literal connection between a proverb and the tale. She remarked, “This proverb is not correct. It should be, ‘*Aun al malo, el Dyo lo rihme*’” [Even to the evil person, God redeems].

Three years later, in March 1972, Isaac asked his father to tell the tale once again. Isaac’s father concluded the story with the same proverb, “*Azi lo bueno i toparas lo bueno*” [Do good and good will come to you], and then explained, “*Es ansi ke ‘Azi bien i no mires a ken’ porke ‘Por un zahut, por una sola mizva, se salva el mundo’*” [It is thus that ‘Do good and don’t pay attention to whom you do it’ because ‘For one good deed, for a single mizva, the world is saved’]. In the latter proverb, Isaac’s father combined two proverbs with the same meaning: “*Por un zahut se salva el mundo*” [For a good deed, the world is saved] and “*Por una [sola] mizva, se salva el mundo*” [From one act of charity, the world is saved]. Thus, Isaac’s father ended the tale with one proverb, encapsulated the meaning of the narrative with another, and explained its meaning with two other proverbs.

Isaac’s mother began the following story by saying, “I’m going to tell you the story of ‘*Sfuegra, ni di baru buena*’” [Mother-in-Law, Not Even of Clay Is Good]. Then she anchored it in the authority of the family: “This is a story my mother told to me.” She continued,

A daughter-in-law did not care for the mother-in-law and spoke badly about her to a neighbor. This neighbor did not have a mother-in-law, and she, to see, would say, "All [women] have mothers-in-law, and I shouldn't have one!" What did she do? She took clay and made a mother-in-law and placed her in a corner. Every time she passed, walked, she bumped into it. She would remove it from this place; she would place it in another. She would pass by there, and by there would bump herself. Finally, she got angry, took [it], and threw it into the river. When she threw it into the river, she said, "The river splashed me and soiled me all over with clay." And at the end, she said, "Sfuegra, ni di baru buena [Mother-in-law, not even of clay [is] good]. Even though I threw her into the river, she still caused me harm."<sup>14</sup>

Isaac's mother concluded, "This means that no one wants a mother-in-law."

As was his custom when collecting narratives, Isaac asked his mother to repeat this story half an hour later. This time she prefaced her story with, "This is the proverbial hate for a mother-in-law," showing her conscious link between the proverb and the moral of the story. The narrative was almost precisely the same, save for the ending, in which Isaac's mother intensified the harm caused by the mother-in-law: "When she threw her into the river, the sand splashed her and dirtied her all over with clay. She finally said, "Mother-in-law, not even of clay is good. Even though I threw her into the river, she harmed me. Even though I threw her into the sea, she still hurt me." She concluded in the same fashion as the first time: "This means that no one wants a mother-in-law."

In his article on the Judeo-Spanish proverb, Jesús Cantera Ortiz de Urbina remarks, "Of the various interpretations that were given in order to explain the proverb, Suegra, ni de barro buena, the most credible . . . is the one that tells, . . ." and here Cantera proceeds to recount in truncated form what must be another version of the previous narratives. A married man had a clay statue as a memento of his mother, and when it broke, "the delighted daughter-in-law exclaimed, 'Mother-in-law, not even of clay is good'" (Cantera 1997, 154). Tracing this proverb back to the Spanish Middle Ages, Cantera attributes it to the Marqués de Santillana's *Refranes que dicen las viejas tras el fuego* and to several medieval authors. Cantera also lists the following rhyming variation

of the proverb: “Suegra, ni de azúcar buena; nuera, ni de barro ni de cera” [Mother-in-law, not even of sugar good; daughter-in-law, not even of clay nor of wax].

Cantera continues, “Moreover there is another magnificent one” from the work of Gonzalo Correas, *Vocabulario de refranes y frases proverbiales*. “It says, Suegra, ninguna buena; hicela de azúcar, y amargóme; hicela de barro, y descalabróme (Mother-in-law, none good; I made her of sugar, and she made me bitter; I made her of clay, and she cracked my skull).” Cantera continues quoting Correas:

A married woman without a mother-in-law, writes Correas, heard it said that mothers-in-law were evil. Not believing it, she desired to try out a mother-in-law. Her husband told her that she was better off without one. To satisfy her craving, she made one of sugar. The husband in the dark [secretly] coated it with aloe [a bitter substance]. The daughter-in-law embraced it and kissed it, and found it bitter. She said, “This one did not come out good. I want another one of clay.” She made another and stood it up; she wanted to embrace her. And as the statue was heavy, it fell on her, and cracked her skull. And she remained disillusioned with mothers-in-law. (Cantera 1997, 154)

Right after his mother had finished telling him the story of “Mother-in-law, Not Even of Clay Is Good,” Isaac asked her to tell the tale of the hazelnut. His mother began the story, “The same way, another daughter-in-law did not care for her mother-in-law.” She continued,

One day, the mother-in-law got up and began to toast some hazelnuts in the oven. To see if they were well toasted, she placed one in her mouth. The poor woman, since she could not eat [did not have any teeth], she moved it from one side [of her mouth] to the other. In the evening, when her son arrived, he asked his wife, “And my mother, what is she doing?” The daughter-in-law said of her mother-in-law, “All day long she is eating and chewing.” When the son asked her, “Mother, what are you eating?” the mother replies, “My son,” she said, “I do not have any teeth. From the morning, when I placed a hazelnut in my mouth, I have moved it from one side to the other, and I am not able to eat it.” And this is what the unfortunate mother-in-law is eating, and the daughter-in-law cannot see it. She did not care for her. And this is proof that ‘Una madri es para mil



ijos i mil ijós para una madri no" [A mother for a thousand sons, and a thousand sons not for one mother].

Isaac's mother ended the story with a variant of the following proverb, which is better known and which she used frequently to remark on a mother's devotion to her children and, concomitantly, on children's neglect of their mother: "Una madri para sien ijós i no sien ijós para una madri" [A mother for one hundred children, but not one hundred children for one mother]. On another telling, Isaac's mother ended the tale with the proverb, "Ilmuera, dolor di muela" [Daughter-in-law, pain in the molar].<sup>15</sup>

In still another tale, it is the child who teaches the parents how they should care for their parents. As well as his father, several Sephardim told this tale to Isaac. Its power lies in its parallel to specific situations in life, for at least two individuals told Isaac that they had known of such cases of neglect, and Isaac recalls one from Rhodes in the late 1930s.

An old man lived with his son and daughter-in-law. This woman could not stand her father-in-law. She always treated him badly. She fed him in a corner of the kitchen and spoke to him as if he were a donkey. The husband was hurt to see how his wife treated his father but did not say anything because he was afraid of her.

One day, when the son and his wife came home, they saw their son seated on a small bench with a knife in his hand, cutting a piece of wood. They asked him, "What are you doing?" The child replied, "I am making a fork and a spoon for you when you are old." The father asked him, "Why are you doing this?" The child replied, "I love you a lot and because of it, I am preparing a fork and a spoon for when you will get old. I want you to have the same as grandfather has."

The husband looked at his wife and said, "'Look what you are doing. Our future will be such as my father's.' From that day on, the life of the old man changed as if it were a miracle. From this moment on, they treated him as a *balabay* (the master of the home). They set him at the head of the table; they gave him the best to eat." Isaac's father concluded, "The proverb says that 'Uno tiene ke tratar a otros komo kere ke lo traten a el mizmo'" [One has to treat others as he wants to be treated].<sup>16</sup>

Proverbs are employed in another way to frame narratives: as the title of the story. At first, this seemed the perfect example of

an opening frame, a proverb that named the narrative to follow. We, however, came to realize that this, itself, was a literary influence. Written stories are given titles, and so the literate person would give a title to the story. Perhaps even more to the point, we often entitled the narrative with the proverb at the end of the tale. Our own desire for classification in written form led almost intuitively to using proverbs for the title. There is, of course, nothing wrong with giving narratives a title. Our good friend and colleague, Matilda Koen-Sarano, as she told us, also gives proverbs as titles to the narratives she publishes so prolifically.<sup>17</sup> However, for us in this work, the pitfall lies in assuming that the people themselves did that. Indeed, it helps to return to the words of the people. In telling a story, a narrator would say, “Lis vo a kontar la konseja de . . .” [I am going to tell you the story about . . . ], and the listener would ask the narrator to “Kontime/Kontimos la konseja de . . .” [Tell me/Tell us the story about . . .]. Thus, both the narrator and the listener placed the emphasis on the act of narration.<sup>18</sup>

So well did the Sephardim know the proverbs, they didn’t even have to complete them. The narrator telling the story, “Los chapines apretados” [The Tight Shoes], of a father who no longer complained about his tight shoes after seeing a man without legs ended in elliptical fashion:<sup>19</sup> “The father realized that ‘La persona ke no se kontenta kon lo suyo . . .’ [The person who is not happy with what he has . . .]. In similar fashion, Kwesi Yankah observes, “The proverb’s already condensed form is subjected to further abbreviation on the assumption that both speaker and listener share the same socio-cultural history and do not require the use of elaborated codes for mutual understanding” (1986, 210).<sup>20</sup>

Proverb use in Sephardic narratives is the essence of creativity. When Isaac asked Shaul Angel Malahi if tales always ended with a proverb, he responded, “Generally it ends with a proverb; if there is no proverb, I invent one!”<sup>21</sup> This remark followed Malahi’s personal narrative about his grandmother catching him smoking cigars in the outhouse when he was young and convincing him never to smoke again by telling him something “very beautiful.” The grandmother took a branch from a fig tree and told Malahi to make it stand straight. He said to her, “How can I make it stand straight when it has been crooked for so many years?” Then she showed him a pine tree and told him to bend it down. He responded, “The pine tree has grown straight, and no one can make

it bend down." His grandmother concluded, "Thus it is with a person: 'Kuando krese tuguerto, grande no se puede enderechar' [When one grows up twisted, once grown, one cannot straighten up]. Now promise me to smoke no more; thus, [be] like the pine tree. No one can do you harm, no one. Because as the Bible says, 'La persona es komo el arvol del kampo'" [The person is like the tree of the field].

While Malahi's remark about inventing proverbs was more likely in the spirit of humor, still he pointed to the flexible use of proverbs, the choice and selectivity of making the proverb fit the way one chooses with the spirit of the narrative as one wishes to interpret it. Kwesi Yankah remarks specifically on this:

The speaker's creative genius may be measured on the basis of his discreet *choice* of a proper mode of proverb use in a fitting argument or discourse. Creativity here is defined in terms of propriety of proverb choice, or rather proverb congruence in an appropriate context. But creativity in proverb use also consists in the conscious embellishment and manipulation of proverb form and meaning. (1986, 203)

This creative pairing of the proverb with the narrative shows the integral link between what folklorists designate as two separate genres. For the Sephardim, there are no rigid categories for narrative genres: The emphasis is on the process of narrating, the process of speaking the proverb, the process of telling the tale. While they would recognize the distinction between a *konseja* and a *proverbio* or *refran*, they would see using proverbs in narrative as simply a way to drive home the message, and quite explicitly so. Isaac was told two versions of the story about the father who was teaching his foolish son to behave by having him imitate everything he did.

One night, he saw that his father went to bed with his mother, and he went to bed with his grandmother. On seeing this, the father grew upset about not being able to do anything with his son; he called him, and, full of fury, he commanded him not to do this again. The son couldn't understand the words of the father and seeing his red face, he said, "Well! Look at my father. He goes to bed every night with my mother, and I don't say a word. I go to bed one night with his mother, and he is burning up."

The narrator ended, “You know that in this world, ‘Ken hamor nase, hamor muere’” [He who is born a jackass, dies a jackass].

Years later, Isaac’s father told him the same story and ended, “You who already know about proverbs must know, ‘Palo tuerto nunca se enderecha’” [A crooked branch will never grow straight].<sup>22</sup> His father, of course, was directly referring to Isaac’s work on proverbs—“You who already know about proverbs.”

This assumption of shared knowledge was not singled out for Isaac alone. Following Richard Bauman’s remarks on performance, we can say that the Sephardim form a “speech community” and that they draw on “a structured set of distinctive communicative means . . . in . . . culture-specific ways to key the performance frame,” and thus set off as performance all “that takes place within that frame” (1984, 16). Also referring to shared knowledge, Gregory Bateson observes that “the quality and characteristics of metacommunication” between individuals depend on the degree to which they know each other and the extent to which they are mutually aware of “each other’s perceptions” (1987, 209–10). Our focus on the creative use of proverbs in narratives and the way in which the tellers select the proverbs to communicate the message as pointedly as the pine tree that has grown straight is not in our view metanarration, as Bateson defines it and others discuss it. There is nothing *meta* or above or outside of the narrative process in the conjoining of proverbs and narratives. The proverbs are an integral part of the performance. The essence of the *konseja* and the proverb is on the conveying of wisdom and making wise the foolish.

## Notes

1. The Judeo-Spanish orthography differs from modern Spanish. Several phrases were used to begin the narrative: “*Andi avia di ser*” [Once upon a time/There was once]; “*Al tiempo*” [In the past]; “*Aze antanyos*” or “*Antanyo*” [Many years ago/In ancient times]; “*Un dia de los dias*” [Once upon a time]; “*Savesh komo un dia [. . . una vez]*” [Do you know how some time ago/ . . . once]; “*Segun nuestros padres [. . . dezian nuestros padres]*” [According to our ancestors/As our ancestors said]; “*Les vo a kontar. . .*” [I am going to tell you . . .].

There were several phrases to end the narrative. For happy occasions: "Eyos tengan bien i mozotros tambien" [May they have good fortune, and we also]; "I bivieron alegres toda la vida" [And they lived happily all their life]; "Eyos dukados, mozotros salvados" [They (should receive) ducats, and we be saved]. For sad occasions: "Leshos de mozotros" [May it be far from us/It should not happen to us]; "Eyos ayi, mozotros aki" [They (should remain) there, and we here]. See Crews 1935.

2. Isaac's grandmother, Sarota Amato Musafir, was born circa 1889 in Milas, Turkey; she died in 1970 in Atlanta, Georgia. His mother, Caden Lévy Israel, born in Milas in 1905, moved with her mother, who was widowed at the age of eighteen, to Rhodes, then Turkey, circa 1920. Widowed with two sons at the age of twenty-five, Caden Lévy left Rhodes with her son, Isaac, her mother, her father-in-law, and other family members to go as refugees to Tangier, Morocco, in 1939; and from there to Atlanta, Georgia, in February 1945. In 1947, she remarried Baruch Israel, who was born in Rhodes circa 1900 and had immigrated to New York City in 1910. Baruch Israel died in Atlanta in 1978, and Isaac's mother died in Atlanta in 2000.
3. As Finnegan writes,

This is sometimes apparent in the local terminology, for proverbs are not always distinguished by a special term from other categories of verbal art. The Nyanja *mwambi*, for instance, refers to story, riddle, or proverb, the Ganda *olugero* means, among other things, a saying, a story, a proverb, and a parable, and Mongo *bokolo* is used of all poetic expression including fable, proverb, poetry, and allegory . . . the Limba *mboro* refers to story, riddle, and parable as well as to sayings which we might term proverbs, while the Fulani *tindol* can mean not only a popular moral story but also a proverb or maxim. (1981, 12)

4. Translated from the French by the authors.
5. For a fuller discussion of the terms for proverb, see Chapter 1, "The Spanish Proverb: The Semantic History of the Term," in Lévy 1969, 15–32. See also O'Kane 1950.
6. Told to Lévy by his mother, Caden Lévy Israel, in Atlanta, Georgia, in March 1968. AT 1350, "The Loving Wife" (Thompson 1973, 400–401); see also Haboucha 1992, 555–56.
7. Told to Lévy by his mother, Caden Lévy Israel, in Columbia, South Carolina, in April 1974. In the fall of 2002, at the American Folklore Society, a fellow folklorist told us the following variant of this story, which had been told to her in April 1998 by a relative. On 10 January 2001, the colleague sent it to us by e-mail:

One Sunday morning, Chelsea burst into the living quarters at the White House and said, "Dad! Mom! I have some great news for you. I am getting married to the greatest hunk in Washington. He lives in Georgetown, and his name is Matt." After dinner, the president took Chelsea aside. "Honey, I have to talk with you. Your mother and I have been married a long time. She's a wonderful wife, but she's never offered much excitement in the bedroom, so I used to fool around with women a lot. Matt is actually your half brother, and I'm afraid you can't marry him."

Chelsea was heartbroken. After eight months, she eventually started dating again. A year later, she came home and very proudly announced, "Robert asked me to marry him. We're getting married in June." Again her father insisted on another private conversation and broke the sad news, "Robert is your half brother, too, honey. I'm awfully sorry about this." Chelsea was furious. She finally decided to go to her mother with the news. "Dad has done so much harm. I guess I'm never going to get married," she complained. "Every time I fall in love, Dad tells me the guy is my half brother." Hillary just shook her head. "Don't pay any attention to what he says, dear. He's not really your father."

8. Told to Lévy by his father, Baruch Israel, in Atlanta, Georgia, in January 1965.
9. *Estar en fuego*: "to be in the middle of fire/to be in trouble."
10. Told to Lévy by his mother, Caden Lévy Israel, on several occasions over a period of years. The quoted passages are from the version told on 15 April 1984.
11. For the importance of the use of words, see the chapter on "The Power of Speech," in Lévy and Zumwalt 2002, 74–93.
12. Told to Lévy by his father, Baruch Israel, in Atlanta, Georgia, in August 1969.
13. *Darshar*, Arabic: "to preach"; *darsar*, Hebrew: "to deliver a sermon."
14. For a different version, see "Suegra" in Saporta y Beja 1978, 180; AT 903C (Thompson 1973, 312). For a superb, scholarly annotation of this tale type, see Haboucha, "Not Even in Pictures" (1992, 379–80).
15. Told to Lévy by his mother, Caden Lévy Israel, in Atlanta, Georgia, in 1965. See also Nehama 1977, 386; Perahya et al. 1994, 127.
16. Told to Lévy by his father, Baruch Israel, in Atlanta Georgia, in December 1972. AT 980A, "The Half Carpet." "A man gives his old father half a carpet to keep him warm. The child keeps the other half and tells his father that he is keeping it for him when he grows old" (Thompson 1973, 344). See Haboucha for other Judeo-Spanish variants (1992, 492–94). In a similar vein, but

without chagrin, the father could see himself reflected in his son.

Elijah was old. One day, the son went with his father to the mosque in order to see where he was going to bury him. The son showed the father the corner where he was going to place him. The father told him to choose another corner because he already placed his own father in the first spot. It is already known that they both are the same. As the proverb says, "Tal padre, tal ijo" [Like father, like son].

Told to Lévy and Zumwalt in Ramat Gan, Israel, in May 1990 at Bet Avot Recanati.

For more narratives, see Alexander and Noy 1989; Crews 1935; Koen-Sarano 1986, 1991, 1994, 1995, 1999, 2003; Kolonomos 1978; and Molho 1960, 118–33.

18. The proverb, "No mires lo ke te dizen, azi lo ke mejor saves" [Don't pay attention to what they say; do what you know best], which was used to title one of our narratives, is rendered in similar fashion by Don Juan Manuel in *El Conde Lucanor* for the folktale entitled, "Lo que aconteció a un buen hombre con su hijo" [What Happened to an Honest Man with his Son]. The proverb is, "Por miedo de las críticas, no dejéis de hacer lo que más conveniente pareciere ser" [For fear of criticism, don't fail to do that which would seem to be the most convenient] (1945, 17).
19. Told to Lévy by Regina Levy, originally from Antalya, Turkey, in 1951 in the Bronx, New York. For a different version, "Todo es relativo" [All Is Relative], see Koen-Sarano 1995, 148.
20. Here are some other elliptical sayings: "Una madre para sien ijos . . . (i no sien ijos para una madre)" [A mother for a hundred children . . . (and not a hundred children for a mother)], "Aharva kulo . . . (ke no pedo)" [Strike the ass . . . (that did not fart)], "Kemar en la shorva (for 'ken se kema en la shorva') ashopla en el yogurt" [He who gets burned by the soup blows on the yogurt], "A gota a gota . . . (se inche la bota)" [Drop by drop . . . (the barrel gets full)].
21. Told to Lévy and Zumwalt by Shaul Angel Malahi in Jerusalem, in July 1985.
22. Told to Lévy by a resident of the Sephardic Old Age home in Brooklyn, New York, in 1968, and by his father, Baruch Israel, in 1972 in Atlanta, Georgia. This proverb is a variation of the one used by Malahi's grandmother: "Kuando krese tuguerto, grande no se puede enderechar" [When one grows up twisted, once grown, one cannot straighten up]. A popular saying used as sarcasm was, "direchu komu il kuerno" [straight as the horn].



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# Baseball as (Pan)America

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## A Sampling of Baseball-Related Metaphors in Spanish

Shirley L. Arora

**B**aseball as America is the title of major exhibition of baseball-related memorabilia organized by the Baseball Hall of Fame and Museum in Cooperstown, New York, and currently touring the United States, with stops at ten cities around the country. The exhibition, which opened in New York City in March 2002 and will end in Houston, Texas, in August 2005, offers an unprecedented opportunity to view some five hundred artifacts that until now could only be seen by people who could visit Cooperstown. The official web site of the exhibition stresses the close links between baseball and the cultural history of the United States, including the broad claim that “nearly all Americans participate in our National Pastime [*sic*] . . . often without knowing it.” To back up that statement, there is mention of certain baseball-related expressions (e.g., “ballpark estimate,” “Three strikes, and you’re out”) that are commonly used in everyday discourse, often by persons who have no particular interest in or familiarity with the sport itself.<sup>1</sup>

Many other examples come to mind: the assertion that certain individuals will “never get to first base” with a proposed undertaking, or that they are “way off base” in their claims or suggestions; complaints by one person that someone else “threw him a curve,” or that he—the speaker—“had two strikes against him” at the outset, and so on. It is only natural, given the position of baseball as “our national pastime,” that its popularity and influence should be manifested in our everyday speech. What is perhaps less expected is the extent to which baseball has become a source of

popular metaphors in the Spanish speech of the Americas, a sign that the game itself is no longer to be regarded as simply “American” but is indeed “Pan-American.”<sup>2</sup>

A detailed account of the origin of baseball and its subsequent spread to other countries of the Western Hemisphere is not relevant to my purpose, which is to examine the linguistic result, not the process, of its increasing popularity. A few benchmarks will be useful, however. It was long held that baseball as we know it was originated by Abner Doubleday, a respected Civil War veteran, in Cooperstown in 1839, but further investigation has determined that the rules governing the modern game were first drawn up in 1845 and that the following year saw the first organized game played under those rules. By 1856 baseball was being referred to as our national pastime, and in 1869 the Cincinnati Reds became the first “professional” baseball team.

Baseball is also the “national game” of Cuba; its introduction and development in that country followed fairly soon after its establishment in the United States and remained unaffected by political considerations. According to Roberto González Echevarría, the first baseball bat and ball arrived in Cuba in the luggage of one of a trio of young men returning to Havana after six years of study at Springhill College, Alabama (González Echevarría 1999, 90). The year was 1864, the American Civil War was drawing to a close, and Cuba was still a colony of Spain. What is generally (though inaccurately) recognized as the first organized baseball game in Cuba was played ten years later in the city of Matanzas between a team from that city and one that had traveled there from Havana (pp. 75–77). By the mid-1890s, the game had evolved from largely amateur to predominantly professional and had become deeply rooted in Cuban popular culture (p. 105). As González Echevarría observes, while noting the sporadic popularity of soccer (formerly in disfavor because of its association with Spain), “. . . on the whole, growing up Cuban meant growing up with baseball as an integral part of one’s life. Baseball was played since the beginning of the nation; hence it was part of the nation” (p. 110). It is not surprising, then, that—as we shall see—by far the richest repertoire of baseball-derived metaphors and sayings in Spanish is found in Cuban popular speech.

Cubans were also involved in spreading baseball throughout the Caribbean area, whether as visiting teams or members of local

clubs, to whom they passed on their skills as well as their knowledge of the rules and finer points of the game. According to Alan M. Klein, two Cuban brothers named Aloma introduced the game to the Dominican Republic in 1891, and it was already being played in Puerto Rico and Panama (1991, 16). Klein, who titles his history of Dominican baseball *Sugarball*, observes that in Cuba, Puerto Rico, and the Dominican Republic, baseball “grew up” in the sugar refineries (p. 6), and González Echevarría offers a fascinating description of “sugarmill baseball” in Cuba in the first half of the twentieth century (1999, 192–200). In some instances, U.S. naval or military presence or U.S. commercial interests also contributed to the establishment of the game.

Although Róger Matus Lazo, in his study of the use of baseball-derived metaphors in Nicaragua, does not provide specifics about the history of the game in his country, he refers to the “enormous preference” for the sport there and maintains that metaphorical language drawn from baseball “is in essence the speech of the people, or rather its soul” (my translation) (Matus Lazo 1998, 9). According to Tito Rondón, baseball in Nicaragua was given its start in the 1880s by American businessman Albert Addlesberg in Bluefields, the capital of the Atlantic coastal region, then under British occupation. Addlesberg imported the necessary equipment from New Orleans and persuaded two cricket teams (cricket being the dominant sport in the British-controlled area) to switch to baseball.

In Venezuela, as in Cuba, baseball owed its inception to the enthusiasm of young men returning from their studies in the United States, though the introduction took place in the early 1890s, considerably later than in Cuba. By 1895 Caracas had a Baseball Club, started by four brothers and their socially upper-class friends, and the first official game was played in May of that year. The Baseball Club fielded both teams, and they included three Cubans who were living in Caracas. “Baseball talk,” consisting of the essential terminology of the game, became something of a fad and was soon picked up by the local press. In 1912 the sport received an important boost from an American department-store owner in Maracaibo, William H. Phelps, who imported baseball equipment only to find that it remained unsold because apparently no one there knew how to play. He then set about organizing three teams, and by 1920 there were at least ten ballparks in the city.<sup>3</sup>

The introduction of baseball into Panama coincided with the hiring of the first workers on the Panama Canal project early in the twentieth century, and there is even speculation that some, at least, were hired for their baseball skills in recognition of the importance of providing recreation for the large population of workers. Baseball remains today the most popular sport in Panama, Nicaragua, Venezuela, the Dominican Republic, Puerto Rico, and of course Cuba. Elsewhere in Latin America, soccer—*fútbol* in Spanish—dominates by a wide margin, although baseball is also played.<sup>4</sup>

As can be seen, baseball's popularity is greatest in the Caribbean area, and strong links have developed between major league baseball in the United States and teams of various Caribbean countries. In the years before the integration of the major leagues, the Negro Leagues in the United States were an important source of opportunity and experience for Latin American players, many of whom are of mixed African descent. Klein, in his study of Dominican baseball, asserts that

to any of the tens of thousands of gifted players in the Dominican Republic, *pelota* (baseball) is an opportunity to escape a life of poverty; while to the major league franchises there, the country is a seemingly endless source of cheap and genuine talent. . . . There is nothing comparable to it in the United States, nothing as dearly held as baseball is for Dominicans. Americans may love the game of baseball as much as Dominicans do, but they do not need it as much (1991,1).

The same observation may apply, though not necessarily to the same degree, to the other nations linked geographically to the United States by proximity and the waters of the Caribbean. Indeed, approximately 30 percent of current major league players in the United States are Latinos, most of them foreign born.<sup>5</sup> The list of outstanding Latino players includes Hall of Famers Roberto Clemente (Puerto Rico), Martín Dihigo (Cuba), Juan Marichal (Dominican Republic), Luis Aparicio (Venezuela), Rod Carew (Panama), Orlando Cepeda (Puerto Rico), and Tony Pérez (Cuba). Home-run record breaker Sammy Sosa, no doubt a future Hall of Famer, is from the Dominican Republic.

The extent to which baseball has had an impact on everyday Spanish speech is no doubt affected by such factors as the general

popularity of the sport in the particular country; the length of time the game has been part of the national culture; and the influence of various media, such as sports journalism and television and radio broadcasts. That impact is not easy to assess. Relatively few examples of baseball-related expressions can be found in dictionaries of “regional speech,” and even fewer studies have devoted specific attention to them. (Cuba is, of course, the great exception.) Nor do we have much information on who uses such expressions, whether they are employed primarily by young people, or by men and boys rather than by women, or in urban environments as opposed to the countryside.

Initially, of course, baseball terminology in Spanish was strictly utilitarian, enabling sportswriters, broadcasters, and announcers, as well as fans, to describe and discuss the action of the game. In a study published in 1954, Seymour Menton identifies three ways in which baseball vocabulary has been incorporated into Mexican Spanish: adopted directly from English and written with English spelling, e.g., “fly”; written phonetically so that the Spanish pronunciation replicates or at least approximates the English word (*flai*); and translated using existing Spanish words (*elevado*, an “elevated” hit). In some cases, all three processes may be applied to the same term, as in the example just given, although one or more of the three may eventually fall into disuse. Menton points out that the process by which English words are Hispanized is an oral one, based on the way a particular term sounds to the speaker of Spanish; the written form of the word does not enter into the process (1954, 478–79). His observation is well illustrated by a term such as the Cuban *ampaya*, which at first glance seems undecipherable but which, when read with Spanish pronunciation, achieves a fairly close approximation to its English equivalent, “umpire.” Occasionally new terms are created in Spanish to translate some of the less common elements of the game, e.g., *tira-tira* [literally, a “throw-throw”], a “rundown,” when a runner is trapped between bases by two opposing players who toss the ball back and forth as the runner tries to reach the safety of a base (pp. 478–79).

I shall not concern myself with the literal vocabulary of baseball in Spanish but with the figurative use of certain baseball terms and particularly with their incorporation into proverbial phrases and proverbs. This article is, as the subtitle indicates,

merely a sampling of baseball-related expressions in popular speech and represents a portion of a longer study on which I have been working for some time. The expressions fall into four general categories: 1) single words (mostly verbs) that have acquired a figurative meaning in addition to their literal use in relation to baseball; 2) baseball-related phrases that have become part of everyday speech; 3) full-fledged proverbs; and 4) proverb parodies that may or may not be used in actual discourse. For the annotations, I have used primarily published sources, with a few references to the Internet and items recorded in the field, and I have included multiple annotations when these come from different authors or regions, since such references indicate the popularity of the expression. The sources vary from the abundant publications of José Sánchez-Boudy, a Cuban now residing in the United States, and Samuel Feijóo of the Universidad Central de Las Villas in Cuba—both of whom devote specific attention to baseball-related expressions—to more typical compilations of regionalisms or Anglicisms from various Spanish-speaking countries that include only a scattering of baseball terms or metaphors that have become part of popular speech. Sánchez-Boudy's collections of *cubanismos* are especially interesting because he frequently makes a point of identifying expressions that have emerged in the community of exiled Cubans in the United States, thus providing a useful time frame; and he specifically identifies expressions as derived from baseball, a helpful practice in cases that involve certain non-specific terms such as *bola* and *pelota* (both of which mean “ball” but not necessarily a baseball) or that refer to less familiar aspects of the game. Feijóo's work, based in Cuba itself, covers a wide variety of verbal folklore and includes material collected, at Feijóo's request, by a number of other individuals in various localities. Feijóo was also the editor of the folklore journal *Signos* (1969–89), in which a number of items included here were published.

The following list of sayings is arranged by keyword, using the principal word specifically related to baseball. Thus, *batear trescientos*, “to bat .300,” is under *batear*; *coger a alguien fuera de base*, “to catch someone off base,” under *base*; and *jugar en grandes ligas*, “to play in the big leagues” (to be very intelligent), under *liga*. Although a good many collections list proverbial phrases in the infinitive form, I have chosen to use inflected verbs to provide a better sense of how the phrase actually sounds. For each entry, I

have provided first a literal translation and then a figurative interpretation. Some expressions, such as *estar en tres y dos* (to be at three and two, i.e., in a difficult position) presuppose a familiarity with at least the basic rules of baseball; others do not. However, in Spanish as in English, once an expression has become firmly established in popular speech, it can be used and understood by speakers and listeners regardless of their knowledge of its background. Proverb parodies, on the other hand, can be fully appreciated only by those who are familiar with the original proverb. I have included in the annotated list a number of parodies quoted by Sánchez-Boudy from the exile periodical *Zig-Zag Libre*, published in Miami, Florida. Their precise status in Cuban popular speech is not clear, although Sánchez-Boudy indicates that he has heard them used within the exile community in Florida.<sup>6</sup>

### Annotated List

#### ABANICAR (v.), to fan, strike out

1. Nunca abaniques la brisa aunque sea con majagua [Never fan the breeze (strike out) even with a bat made of majagua (wood)]. Don't ever fail. Majagua is a hardwood used for baseball bats in Cuba; the word often refers to the bat itself. Cuba: Sánchez-Boudy 2000, 81.
2. Prisa abanica la brisa [Haste fans the breeze]. Haste causes failure. Compare to the English proverb, "Haste makes waste." Cuba: Sánchez-Boudy 2000, 80.

#### ALUMINIO (n.), aluminum

Partió el aluminio [He split the aluminum (i.e., the bat)]. Said of someone who has performed any kind of task exceedingly well. Although more appropriate to bats made of wood, the phrase has carried over to modern metal bats. Cuba: Sánchez-Boudy 1993, 103.

#### AMPAYA (n.), umpire

Muerto el ampaya, se acabó el "strike" [Once the umpire is dead, there are no more (called) strikes]. Once the cause is eliminated, the effect ceases also. A parody proverb modeled on the widely used "Muerto el perro, se acabó la rabia," [Once the dog is dead, the rabies is over with]. The Anglicism "strike" is often Hispanized as *estrai* or *estraitk*. Cuba: Sánchez-Boudy 1993, 52

#### Ao/AUT (n.), out

1. Es un aut vestido de pelotero [He's an out dressed as a ballplayer]. He's a failure. Cuba: Sánchez-Boudy 1978, 269.



2. No es un ao fácil [He's not an easy out.] Said of someone difficult to deceive. Dominican Republic: Cruz Brache 1978, 198.
3. No te atrevas, que eres aut [Don't dare (run), or you'll be out]. Don't take the risk because you'll fail. The expression images an attempt to steal a base without being caught by the pitcher's throw. Cuba: Sánchez-Boudy 1978, 426.

#### ÁRBITRO (n.), umpire

El que a buen árbitro se arrima, buena decisión le cobija. [He who gets close to a good umpire is covered/sheltered by a good decision]. A parody of the well-known Spanish proverb, "El que a buen árbol se arrima, buena sombra le cobija" [He who gets close to a good tree is sheltered by a good shade]. *Árbitro* is the standard term for someone officiating at a game (not necessarily baseball). Cuba: Sánchez-Boudy 1993, 52.

#### BASE (n.), base

1. A veces hay que pasar a alguien con tres en base antes de que te batee un "jonrón" [Sometimes you have to walk someone with three men on base, rather than have him hit a home run off you]. Sometimes one has to accept an unfortunate situation to avoid a worse one (in this case, it is better to walk in a run rather than risk a four-run "grand slam"). Cuba: Sánchez-Boudy 1993, 68. Sánchez-Boudy describes this saying as "very popular."
2. En base, y próximos [*sic*] a home [On base, and close to home]. Said of a woman in an advanced state of pregnancy. Mexico: Gómez Maganda 1963, 2:120. The plural form used by the collector appears to refer back to the term *estados grávidos* (pregnant conditions) in the preceding sentence. See also the next entry.
3. Hay seis hijos y uno en tercera base—con un jit sale [There are six children and one on third base—a hit will bring him home]. He has six children and another due any time now. A runner on third is in scoring position and likely to reach home plate on any single. Mexico: field.
4. Lo cogieron/agarraron fuera de base [They caught him off base]. Said of someone caught redhanded in some kind of wrongdoing. If a runner takes a lead off a base, ready to run to the next one, and the pitcher throws the ball to the player covering that base so that the runner is tagged before he can get back to the base, the runner is out. Cuba: Sánchez-Boudy 1993, 78; Espina Pérez 1972, 17; Oraá 1973, 94. Dominican Republic: Cruz Brache 1978, 36. Puerto Rico: Núñez de Ortega and Delgado de Laborde 1999, 40; García Santos 1997, 2297. Venezuela: Rosenblat 1960, 59; Núñez and Pérez 1994, 58.

5. Tiene las bases llenas [He has the bases full]. A) He has a large family. Mexico: Jiménez 1970, 161. B) She already has plenty of suitors. Venezuela: Rosenblat 1960, 59.
6. Tú no llegas ni a primera base [You won't even get to first base]. A prediction that the person addressed will fail in a proposed project. Puerto Rico: Núñez de Ortega and Delgado de Laborde 1999, 127; García Santos 1997, 1275.

**BATAZO** (n.), a powerful hit

1. ¡Qué batazo! [What a huge hit!] Said when someone tells a big lie or a fantastic story. Panama: field.
2. Dió un batazo [He hit the ball hard]. He was/achieved a big success. Cuba: Sánchez-Boudy 1978:52. Venezuela: Núñez and Pérez 1994, 59. See also *jonrón*.
3. Ése da batazos como los de Ted Williams en los buenos tiempos [That fellow hits the ball hard like Ted Williams in the good old days]. He achieves one success after another in anything he undertakes. The late Hall of Famer Ted Williams of the Boston Red Sox was considered one of baseball's greatest hitters. Cuba: Sánchez-Boudy 1978, 52. See also the previous entry.

**BATE** (n.), bat

1. A ése le gusta dar con el bate [He likes to hit with the bat]. Said of someone who likes to eat or drink at the expense of others. Nicaragua: Matus Lazo 1998, 19. The verb *cachar* (to catch) and the noun *ca[t]cher* are used in a similar fashion.
2. Bate de fungo no sirve para batear [A fungo bat is no good for hitting (in a game)]. Every activity or situation has its own specific needs or equipment. A fungo bat is a soft bat used to hit balls for fielding practice. Cuba: Sánchez-Boudy 1993, 23.
3. El que va al bate con tres en base puede tocar planchita aunque sea "eslóger" [He who comes to bat with three men on base may bunt even though he's a "slugger"]. Always be prepared for the unexpected. Cuba: Sánchez-Boudy 1993, 66.
4. Es el dueño del bate, del guante, y de la pelota [He's the owner of the bat, the glove, and the ball]. He's the chief, the one in command. The order of *bate* and *guante* may be reversed. In baseball games among neighborhood children, the one who owns the equipment is the boss. Cuba: Sánchez-Boudy 1978, 52, 189.
5. Ése es un cuarto bate [He's a fourth batter, i.e., a cleanup hitter]. He is extraordinary in any activity: working, studying, eating, etc. The fourth batter in the lineup is typically a strong hitter who—it is hoped—can clear the bases of any of his three predecessors who may be there. Puerto Rico: Núñez de Ortega and Delgado de Laborde

- 1999, 52. Cuba: Santiesteban 1997, 126. Venezuela: Núñez and Pérez 1994, 60. See also item 8.
6. Partió el bate [He split the bat]. He performed exceedingly well. Cuba: Sánchez-Boudy 1978, 103. See also *aluminio*.
  7. ¡Qué piernas! A la verdad Marquetti con ese par de bates . . . [What legs! Truly, Marquetti with that pair of bats . . .]. A *piropo* or “street compliment” voiced when an attractive woman passes by. The ellipsis leaves to the hearer’s imagination what Marquetti would do. Cuba: Feijóo 1973, 47. Agustín Marquetti was an exceptionally strong hitter and a star member of the Havana team in the late 1960s and 1970s (González Echevarría 1999, 373).
  8. Se siente el cuarto bate [He thinks he’s the fourth batter, i.e., the cleanup hitter]. He is vain or self-important; he thinks he’s indispensable. Mexico: Jiménez 1970, 163. See also item 5.

#### BATEADOR (n.), batter

1. Es bateador de largo metraje [He’s a long-distance hitter]. He has a lot of children. Cuba: Sánchez-Boudy 1978, 53.
2. Es bateador designado [He’s the designated batter]. He’s the official replacement for someone else (in a meeting, business appointment, etc.). In the American League, the pitcher, who is seldom a strong batter, is replaced by a designated hitter, who bats in his place in the lineup. In the National League, the pitcher bats for himself. Nicaragua: Matus Lazo 1998, 19.
3. Es bateador emergente [He’s a pinch hitter]. He’s substituting, especially on short notice, for someone else in any kind of situation: work, social relationship, etc. Cuba: Santiesteban 1997, 57. Nicaragua: Matus Lazo 1998, 19. Panama: field (Estoy bateando de emergente [I’m pinch hitting]).

#### BATEAR (v.), to bat, hit

1. Batea cuatrocientos en la liga de los pesados [He bats .400 in the league of the disagreeable]. He’s a most unpleasant person. This batting average (.400), which represents the proportion of hits to the number of times at bat is exceptional. Cuba: Sánchez-Boudy 1978, 119.
2. Batea lo mismo en el Almendares que en el Habana [He hits the same on the Almendares team as on the Habana team]. He’s very knowledgeable; he has a wide range of skills. Almendares and Habana were two leading teams and perpetual rivals throughout the history of Cuban baseball. Cuba: Sánchez-Boudy 1986, 76.
3. Batea sobre trescientos [He hits over .300]. He eats a great deal. A batting average of more than .300 is considered very good. Cuba: Espina Pérez 1972, 17; Sánchez-Boudy 1978, 53.

4. Bateó una y perdió el juego [He hit once and lost the game]. He did something correctly but committed lots of errors. Cuba: Sánchez-Boudy 1978, 53.
5. Cuando el mal es de batear, no valen bases por bolas [When the problem is batting, bases on balls don't count]. When a player is in a batting slump, getting on base because of a walk doesn't improve the situation. A parody of a well-known Cuban proverb, "Cuando el mal es de cagar, no valen guayabas verdes" [When the illness affects the bowels, green guavas don't help]. Green guavas have a constipating effect. Cuba: Sánchez-Boudy 1993, 52.
6. El que sabe batea solo [He who knows how bats alone]. He who is really skilled or knowledgeable needs no assistance from others. Attributed to a Havana bus driver known for his use of proverbs. Cuba: Sánchez-Boudy 1993, 75.
7. Está bateando/en el bate [He's at bat]. He is triumphing, in power. Dominican Republic: Cruz Brache 1978, 109. He's performing well. Venezuela: Núñez and Pérez 1994, 60.
8. No hay por donde batear [There's no place to hit the ball, i.e., no place where an opposing player can't get it]. There's no solution to the problem at hand. Cuba: Sánchez-Boudy 1978, 53.

**BOLA** (n.), ball (both the object that is thrown and the pitch that is not within the strike zone)

1. Al que tiene buena vista no le tires bola mala [Don't throw a bad pitch to someone who has a "good eye" (for judging pitches)]. If your opponent is an expert, don't try to deceive him. Cuba: Sánchez-Boudy 2000, 82.
2. Botó la bola [He "booted" the ball]. He made an error in some kind of enterprise. Nicaragua: Matus Lazo 1998, 21. Note the contrasting meaning given to this phrase in Puerto Rico (next two entries). See also *pelota*.
3. Botó la bola [He hit the ball hard (walloped it)]. He was successful in his undertaking. Puerto Rico: Núñez de Ortega and Delgado de Laborde 1999, 31; García Santos 1997, 2375. Dominican Republic: Cruz Brache 1978, 27. See also *pelota*.
4. Botó la bola y rompió el bate [He hit (creamed, walloped) the ball and broke the bat]. He was extraordinarily successful; an intensified version of the previous entry. Puerto Rico: Núñez de Ortega and Delgado de Laborde 1999, 31.
5. Cantó la bola bien cantada [He called (literally, "sang") the pitches clearly]. He spoke the plain truth; he was outspoken. Cuba: Sánchez-Boudy 1978, 60.

6. Dió a la bola en la costura [He hit the ball right on the seam]. He did things extremely well. Cuba: Sánchez-Boudy 1978, 61.
7. En el béisbol la bola es redonda, cualquier cosa puede suceder [In baseball, the ball is round; anything can happen]. An observation on the uncertainties of life in general. Puerto Rico: García Santos 1997, 1271.
8. Es una bola de humo [He's a fastball (literally, "smoke ball")]. A) He's very intelligent. B) You can't trust him. Cuba: Sánchez-Boudy 1978, 62. C) A difficult question in a contest, exam, etc. Dominican Republic: Cruz Brache 1978, 27.
9. La bola se va . . . , se va . . . , se va . . . , y se fue! [The ball is going, going, going, gone!] An indirect way of saying that someone is guilty of a blatant falsehood. The words mimic the way in which a radio or television announcer often describes a home run. *Bola*, a general term for "ball," is widely used with the figurative meaning of "rumor" or "false story" (Real Academia Española 1956, under *bola*). The metaphor generates the image of a *bola* of major proportions, "out of the ballpark." Panama: field.
10. Le pasó una bola de humo [He pitched a fastball (smoke ball) right past him]. He took him by surprise. Cuba: Sánchez-Boudy 1978, 62.
11. Le tiró a / Se fue con la bola mala [He swung at/went for a bad pitch]. He made a bad mistake; he was a failure. Cuba: Feijóo 1984, 121; Sánchez-Boudy 1978, 62, 346.
12. No tiene nada en la bola [He has nothing on the ball]. He is not intelligent; he has no influence. Nicaragua: Matus Lazo 1998, 20. Cuba: Sánchez-Boudy 1978, 61; 1986, 13.
13. Para el que tiene vista no hay bola rápida [For someone who has a good eye (for perceiving the pitch), there's no fastball]. If one has the proper abilities for what he wants to do, he cannot be defeated. Cuba: Sánchez-Boudy 1993, 12.
14. Se llevó la bola y el bate [He took away with him the ball and the bat]. Refers to someone who fails at a certain activity but will not allow others to continue. The imagery is from neighborhood games where the equipment is often the property of one of the players. Puerto Rico: Núñez de Ortega and Delgado de Laborde 1999, 231.
15. Tiene mucho en la bola [He has a lot on the ball]. He is very talented, very intelligent. Literally, the expression refers to a pitcher who can make the ball behave so it deceives the batter and prevents him from getting a hit. Cuba: Sánchez-Boudy 1986, 13.
16. Tocó la bola y se embasó [He bunted the ball and got on base]. He took his opponent by surprise and defeated him. Cuba: Sánchez-Boudy 1978, 62.

**BOMBO/BOMBITO (n.)**, a fly ball that is easy to catch, a “pop fly” or “pop-up”

Fue un bombo/bombito al pitcher [It was a pop fly to the pitcher]. Said of something, e.g., an exam, that was extremely easy. Puerto Rico: Claudio de la Torre 1989, 32; Deliz Hernández 1998, 325; García Santos 1997, 2664. Claudio de la Torre also gives “bombo al catcher” with the same meaning.

**BRAZO (n.)**, throwing or pitching arm

1. Cuidado con el que no tiene brazo que a lo mejor batea [Beware of the one who does not have a good (throwing) arm; he is probably a strong batter]. If someone has a weakness in one area, he may have strengths in another. Cuba: Sánchez-Boudy 1993, 124.
2. Hace rato que estoy calentando el brazo [I've been warming up my arm for some time now]. I've been preparing to take action. Cuba: Batista Moreno 1973, 103.

**BULL PEN (n.)**, bull pen (area where relief pitchers warm up before going into the game)

Hay movimiento en el bull pen [There's movement/action in the bull pen]. Something (unknown but potentially important) is happening. Action in the bull pen typically means that the current pitcher will be replaced by a relief pitcher. Cuba: Sánchez-Boudy 1978, 241.

**CÁ(T)CHER, QUÉCHER (n.)**, catcher

1. Ése es cácher [He's a catcher]. He eats and drinks at the expense of others but never pays the bill himself. A catcher receives the balls thrown by the pitcher, hence the metaphorical meaning. Nicaragua: Matus Lazo 1998, 23. Venezuela: Rosenblat 1960, 60 (un tronco de quécher [a great catcher]). See also pícher.
2. Es cácher, pitcher, y fielder [He's a catcher, pitcher, and fielder]. He can do everything; he's a one-man team. Mexico: Gómez Maganda 1963, 1:208.

**CANTAR (v.)**, to call (said of the umpire); literally, “to sing”

Estoy cantándolas como las veo [I'm calling them as I see them]. I'm giving my true opinion of the situation. The pronoun *las* refers to *bolas* or pitches. Puerto Rico: García Santos 1997, 2033. The same phrase is used in English.

**CARGABATES (n.)**, bat carrier, batboy

1. En esa novena yo voy de cargabates [On that team, I'm just a

batboy]. In that group/company, I occupy a very lowly position. Cuba: Batista Moreno 1973, 103.

2. Es un cargabates [He's a batboy]. He's second rate, not worth anything. Cuba: Sánchez-Boudy 1986, 85.

#### CERO (n.), zero

1. Cero y van dos [Zero (balls) and two (strikes)]. A warning that someone has made two mistakes, told two lies, had two narrow escapes, etc., and is one strike away from being out. Panama: field.
2. A mí nadie me da nueve ceros [No one gives me nine zeros]. No one is going to defeat me. Nine zeros would indicate that throughout the nine innings of the game, the individual has remained scoreless; in other words, he has suffered a humiliating defeat. Cuba: Sánchez-Boudy 1978, 114.

#### COGIDA (n.), catch

Es como la cogida de Sagüita [It's like Sagüita's catch]. It's an extraordinary accomplishment. Alberto "Sagüita" Hernández was a player with the Havana ball club in the 1940s. According to Sánchez-Boudy, he was known for making an important catch that gave his team the championship. Cuba: Sánchez-Boudy 1978, 400. In this country, a 1954 World Series catch made by Willie Mays of the New York (now San Francisco) Giants is similarly famous.

#### CURVA (n.), curve (ball)

Esas curvas no la[s] resiste nadie [No one can resist (swinging at) those curves]. A statement about the effectiveness of curveballs thrown by a pitcher is transformed here into a *piropo*, a street compliment, aimed at a young woman with an attractive figure. Cuba: Batista Moreno 1973, 103.

#### EMBASARSE (v.), to get on base

1. Dile a tus puros [padres] que yo me embaso rápido [Tell your parents I'll get on base quickly]. Tell your parents I'm prepared to marry you right away. As given by the collector, this serves as a *piropo*, or street compliment, to an attractive female passerby. Feijóo 1973, 47.
2. Está embasado [He's on base]. He's in a stable job or relationship. Nicaragua: Matus Lazo 1998, 25.

#### ERROR (n.), an error, a misplay

1. Detrás del error viene el hit [After the error comes the hit]. A mistake is often followed by success. Puerto Rico: "500 dichos" 1997, under baseball.

2. Cero error, cero carrera [No errors, no runs]. Nothing important has been happening. Venezuela: Núñez and Pérez 1994, 122. See also *jit*.

ESTRAI(K), ESTRIKE (n.), strike (a ball pitched within the strike zone and not hit by the batter)

1. Le pasó un estraik [He threw a strike past him]. He deceived him/did something unexpected. Cuba: Sánchez-Boudy 1978, 309. Venezuela: Rosenblat 1960, 60.
2. Le tiraba sólo estraiks [He threw only strikes to him]. He controlled him, would not let him advance. Sánchez-Boudy 1986, 29.
3. Se lo dije en estraik sin bola [I told him with a strike and no balls]. I told him straight out, straightforwardly. Panama: field.

FAO (n.), foul ball, a ball hit outside the base lines

1. El que da mucho “fao” batea jonrón [The one who hits a lot of fouls can hit a home run]. The person who persists in trying will eventually succeed. Cuba: Sánchez-Boudy 1993, 124.
2. El que da mucho fao, se poncha o batea “jonrón” [The one who hits a lot of fouls either strikes out or hits a home run]. A variation on the previous entry. A batter who hits a lot of fouls has shown that he can hit the ball hard, and one day he’ll hit it straight for a homer. Cuba: Sánchez-Boudy 1993, 12.
3. Ése me resultó un fao [That fellow turned out to be a foul ball]. He turned out to be a disappointment (e.g., on a blind date). May be applied also to events. Venezuela: Rosenblat 1960, 60; Núñez and Pérez 1994, 226.

FILDEAR (v.), to catch, to field

Se lo fildeó la pelona [Death caught/fielded him]. He died. *La pelona*, literally, “the bald one,” is a common slang term for death, often depicted graphically as a skeleton. Mexico: Jiménez 1970, 163.

FILDEO (n.), the act of fielding

Hay buenos en el fildeo y malos en el bateo [There are some who are good at fielding and bad at hitting]. An individual who is good at one activity may not be good at another; we all have our strengths and weaknesses. Cuba: Sánchez-Boudy 2000, 79.

FLAI (n.), a fly ball, a ball hit into the air

1. Cayó de flai [He fell (on us) like a fly ball]. He appeared unexpectedly. Cuba: Sánchez-Boudy 1978, 173.
2. El que no echa una llanta no coge un flai [The one who doesn’t move



- fast doesn't catch a fly ball]. You have to be on your toes to succeed. Cuba: Sánchez-Boudy 1993, 76.
3. Me la tiró de flai [He hit me a fly ball]. He tried to deceive me. Cuba: Sánchez-Boudy 1986, 99.
  4. Me tiró un flaycito [He hit me a little fly ball]. He asked me an easy question (e.g., on an exam). Nicaragua: Matus Lazo 1998, 26. Venezuela: Núñez and Pérez 1994, 230.
  5. Se tiró otro flai [He hit another fly ball]. He broke wind again. Nicaragua: Matus Lazo 1998, 26.
  6. Si el flai es fácil no lo fildees difícil [If the fly is an easy one, don't make a difficulty out of catching it]. If a problem is easily solved, don't turn it into a major obstacle. Cuba: Sánchez-Boudy 2000, 80.
  7. Yo no voy en ese flai [I'm not going with that fly ball]. I'm not joining in that nonsense. Cuba: Sánchez-Boudy 1986, 30.

#### GOMA (n.), home plate

1. Está/Viene por la goma [He is/is coming right across the plate]. He's performing admirably. Originally referring to a pitcher's ability to throw strikes, its use has been broadened to include virtually any activity. In the Dominican Republic, it is applied to someone who is very strict, even severe in his actions. Cuba: Oraá 1973, 94; Sánchez-Boudy 1978, 185. Dominican Republic: Cruz Brache 1978, 119. Puerto Rico: Núñez de Ortega and Delgado de Laborde 1999, 87.
2. Partiste la goma [You split the plate in half]. Your performance was excellent. Cuba: Batista Moreno 1973, 103.

#### GORRA (n.), cap.

Botó la gorra [He threw down his cap]. He lost his composure. Nicaragua: Matus Lazo 1998, 26. Matus Lazo adds that the adjective *gorrudo* refers to someone who makes a habit of this gesture.

#### GUANTE (n.), glove

1. Colgó el guante [He hung up his glove]. He retired/left his job. Nicaragua: Matus Lazo 1998, 26.
2. Le dio el guante y la pelota [He gave him the glove and the ball]. He let someone else have a turn. The image suggests the pitcher handing over the ball and glove to the relief pitcher who is about to take his place, but the phrase can be applied to any situation in which power or responsibility passes from one person to another, whether temporarily or permanently. Cuba: Sánchez-Boudy 1978, 408.

3. Guante sin grasa/Guante que no se engrasa no coge bola [A glove that is not greased will not catch the ball]. Any job requires appropriate equipment, and the equipment must be properly maintained. Cuba: Sánchez-Boudy 2000, 80. Elsewhere Sánchez-Boudy identifies castor oil as the substance used to grease the glove and make it supple (1993, 67).
4. Si no la coge no es el guante sino el pelotero [If he doesn't catch it, it's not the fault of the glove but of the ballplayer]. If someone doesn't succeed at doing something, he should not blame the equipment or tools but himself. Cuba: Sánchez-Boudy 2000, 80.
5. Tiró el guante [He threw down his glove]. He lost his temper. A player may sometimes be ejected from the game for throwing equipment. Nicaragua: Matus Lazo 1998, 26.

HOME (n.), see JON

HUELGA (a surname)

1. Niña, estás como Huelga, encendida! [Baby, you're like Huelga, really hot!] A *piropo*, or street compliment, directed at an attractive female passerby. Cuba: Feijóo 1973, 46. José A. Huelga was a brilliant young pitcher in postrevolutionary Cuban baseball. He died in an automobile accident in 1974 at the age of twenty-six (González Echevarría 1999, 374).
2. Si te coge Huelga, te acaba [If Huelga catches you (leading off first base), he'll finish you off]. A warning not to take chances. Cuba: Batista Moreno 1973, 103. See the previous entry.

JIT (n.), hit

1. Cero jit, cero carrera [No hits, no runs]. Nothing happened. Dominican Republic: Cruz Brache 1978, 35. See also *error*.
2. Dió un jit / La metió de jit [He got a hit]. He was a great success at the conference, meeting, etc. Nicaragua: Mántica 1973, 64. Venezuela: Rosenblat 1960, 59.
3. Dio un jit de dos/tres bases [He got a two-base/three-base hit]. He became the father of twins/triplets. Mexico: Jiménez 1970, 161.

JON, JOM (n.), home, home plate

1. ¡A morir a jon, Reñazco! [Home (plate) or die, Reñazco!] Try as hard as possible; hang in there until the end. Reñazco is presumably a Nicaraguan ballplayer, but the collector does not identify him. Nicaragua: Peña Hernández 1968, 305.
2. El que se tira siempre en jon a la larga se cuela [He who always slides into home will eventually score]. Persistence will win out in the end. Cuba: Sánchez-Boudy 1993, 124.

3. No pisa el jon [He doesn't step on the home plate]. He consistently has bad luck; he never succeeds. Cuba: Sánchez-Boudy 1978, 279.
4. Pasó a jom [He advanced to home plate]. He died. Venezuela: Núñez and Pérez 1994, 288.
5. Pícher que repite punta [de] jon le dan jonrón [A pitcher who repeatedly pitches over a corner of the plate will get hit for a home run]. A pitch on the corner may fool the batter once or even twice, but if repeated too often, it may be hit hard. Cuba: Sánchez-Boudy 2000, 82.

#### JONRÓN (n.), home run

1. Bateó de/pegó un jonrón [He hit a home run]. He was a great success at the party, meeting, etc. Cuba: Sánchez-Boudy 1978, 206. Venezuela: Rosenblat 1960, 59; Núñez and Pérez 1994, 288.
2. Bateó de jonrón con las bases llenas [He hit a home run with the bases loaded]. He was a total success. A home run with three runners on base—a grand slam—is the ultimate scoring success in baseball. Nicaragua: Matus Lazo 1998, 28. Venezuela: Núñez and Pérez 1994, 288.
3. Tres líneas de ron no batea jonrón. [A glass of rum won't hit a home run]. One who drinks a lot of alcohol won't be able to perform well. Tres líneas (three lines) is a measure used by bartenders. The saying involves a play on the words *ron* 'rum' and *ron* 'run' (as in home run). Spanish pronunciation does not distinguish between final *m* and *n*. Cuba: Sánchez-Boudy 1993, 37.

#### JUEGO (n.), game

1. Este juego lo picheo yo a la blandita [I'm pitching this game like softball]. I'm proceeding carefully and gently in this matter. Cuba: Batista Moreno 1973, 103.
2. Ha realizado un juego perfecto (cero jits, cero carreras, cero errores) [She has achieved a perfect game: no hits, no runs, no errors]. Said of a virtuous woman who has passed marriageable age without accomplishing anything good. Mexico: Jiménez 1970, 165.
3. Hicieron un doble juego/jugada [They made a double play, i.e., two outs on a single hit]. Said of any situation in which two objectives are achieved simultaneously. In a typical double play, the player who is on first base is put out when he is forced to run to second, and the batter is put out at first. Mexico: Gómez Maganda 1963, 2:164.

#### JUGADOR (n.), player

Está como el mal jugador: ni pitcha, ni catcha, ni deja batear [He's like the bad ballplayer: He doesn't pitch, nor catch, nor let anyone

bat]. Said of someone who does nothing himself and keeps others from accomplishing anything, either. The pattern is the widely known Spanish proverb, “Como el perro del hortelano, ni come (las berzas) ni (las) deja comer” [Like the vegetable farmer’s dog, he doesn’t eat (cabbages) and won’t let anyone else eat (them)]. In current usage, it is usually shortened by omitting the words in parentheses. Mexico: Jiménez 1970, 163 (second part only); field (also with *ni deja cachar* [nor let anyone catch]).

**JUGAR (v.), to play**

Dime con quién juegas y te diré si pierdes [Tell me with whom you play, and I’ll tell you whether you’ll lose]. A parody of one of the commonest proverbs in Spanish, “Dime con quién andas y te diré quién eres” [Tell with whom you go around, and I’ll tell you who you are]. Although the wording is generalized (*jugar* can apply to any game), the collector groups it with other parodies that almost all refer specifically to baseball. Cuba: Sánchez-Boudy 1993, 53.

**LANZADOR (n.), pitcher**

Ven con nosotros; José está de lanzador [Come with us; José is pitching]. Come along, José is buying the drinks. Nicaragua: Matus Lazo 1998, 28. *Lanzador* (thrower) from the verb *lanzar* (to throw) is the Spanish term often used instead of the Anglicism *pitcher* or *pícher*. Cf. the use of *catcher* noted earlier.

**LIGA (n.), league**

1. Ese juega en grandes ligas [That fellow plays in the big leagues]. He is very intelligent. Cuba: Sánchez-Boudy 1978, 24.
2. Está quemando la liga [He’s burning up the league]. Said of someone who is triumphing in any sort of endeavor. Dominican Republic: Cruz Brache 1978, 119.
3. No batea en liga fu [He doesn’t bat in a bad league]. He’s a good person. Cuba: Sánchez-Boudy 1978, 397.
4. Quiere batear en la liga grande [He wants to bat in the big league]. He wants to be a star in whatever he does. Cuba: Sánchez-Boudy 1986, 106.
5. Ese es de grandes ligas [He’s a big leaguer]. He’s outstanding. Puerto Rico: Núñez de Ortega and Delgado de Laborde 1999, 52.

**MAJAGUA (n.), baseball bat (made of majagua wood)**

Me dejó con la majagua al hombro [He left me with the bat on my shoulder (waiting for the pitch)]. He left me waiting and never showed up. Cuba: Batista Moreno 1973, 103.

## NOKOLBOL (n.), knuckleball, a type of pitch

1. El libro es bueno pero aprende a darle a la «nokolbol» [A book is good but learn to hit the knuckleball]. A book can provide helpful information, but practical experience is necessary also. The knuckleball is a difficult pitch to hit. Cuba: Sánchez-Boudy 2000, 81.
2. El que tira «Nokel bol» [sic] siempre se embasa [He who hits the knuckleball always gets on base]. He who goes slowly will succeed. The knuckleball is a slow pitch. Sánchez-Boudy considers this to be the equivalent of “El que va despacio va lejos” [He who goes slowly, goes far]. Sánchez-Boudy 2000, 81.

## NOVENA (n.), team (of nine players)

1. Batean/juegan en la misma novena [They bat/play on the same team]. They are much alike, have the same defects, share the same opinions. Cuba: Pérez López 1968, [27]; Oraá 1973, 95; Sánchez-Boudy 1978, 247.
2. Ése batea/juega en las dos novenas [That fellow bats/plays on both teams]. Said of someone who is bisexual. Cuba: Sánchez-Boudy 1978, 53; Paz 1996, 96.
3. Ése juega en dos novenas al mismo tiempo [He plays on two teams at the same time]. He doesn't take sides; he doesn't compromise himself. Cuba: Sánchez-Boudy 1978, 248.
4. Está jugando contra una novena que tiene diecisiete files y la cerca corrida [He's playing against a team that has seventeen fielders and the fence moved farther out]. He's playing against impossible odds; he can do nothing. Cuba: Sánchez-Boudy 1978, 248.
5. No juego en esa novena [I don't play on that team]. I don't agree with those individuals. Cuba: Sánchez-Boudy 1978, 248.
6. Están poniendo una novena con deiciocho fielders [They're putting up a team with eighteen fielders.] They're making it impossible to win, to achieve anything. Cuba: Sánchez-Boudy 1978, 172.

## PALOMÓN (n.), a pop-up, an easily caught fly ball

Ése tipo es un palomón al cuadro [That fellow is an infield fly]. He is easily deceived or defeated. If applied to a situation, something is easily achieved. Cuba: Sánchez-Boudy 1986, 115.

## PELOTA (n.), ball; baseball; ball game

1. Ahí sí es verdad que dan a la pelota [There they really hit the ball]. They really know how to do things right. Sánchez-Boudy 1978, 25.
2. Botó la pelota [He hit the ball (hard)]. A) He made a mistake (cf., in English, “he booted the ball”) or he told a big lie. B) He did something extraordinary or unexpected. The two contrasting meanings

- coexist; context is the determining factor. Cuba: Pérez López 1968, [7]; Batista Moreno 1973, 103; Oraá 1973, 94; Sánchez-Boudy 1978, 269. Venezuela: Núñez and Pérez 1994, 383.
3. Botó la pelota y estilló el bate [He hit the ball hard and shattered the bat]. He performed extremely well. Puerto Rico: "500 dichos" 1997, under baseball.
  4. El que sabe tirar pelotas no necesita que nadie le caliente el brazo [He who really knows how to throw the ball doesn't need anyone to warm up his arm]. The expert in any field performs well without assistance from anyone. Before entering the game, a pitcher normally warms up by throwing balls to a teammate. Cuba: Sánchez-Boudy 1993, 75.
  5. Esa pelota ni la viste [You didn't even see that ball]. You didn't anticipate what was going to happen. Cuba: Batista Moreno 1973, 103.
  6. Ése juega con pelota de poli [That fellow plays with a hardball]. The situation is serious; he doesn't fool around. Cuba: Sánchez-Boudy 1978, 269.
  7. La pelota es redonda y viene en caja cuadrada [The ball is round and comes in a square box]. Anyone may experience a setback. *Pelota* is a general term for "ball," and the proverb may or may not have been derived from baseball. Sánchez-Boudy, however, includes it among baseball-related sayings. Cuba: Feijoó 1984, 82; Sánchez-Boudy 2000, 80. Puerto Rico: Fernández 1991, 2204.
  8. Le puso la pelota para que la bateara [He pitched the ball to him so that he could hit it]. He treated him gently. Cuba: Sánchez-Boudy 1984, 74.
  9. Más vale pelota en mano que árbitro cantando [Better a ball in the hand than an umpire calling (literally, "singing")]. A parody of the widely known Spanish proverb, "Más vale pájaro en mano que cien volando [Better a bird in the hand than one hundred flying]. Compare to the English version, "A bird in the hand is worth two in the bush." Cuba: Sánchez-Boudy 2000, 79.
  10. No ataja la pelota [He can't stop/cut off the ball]. He can't do his work properly, carry out his assigned task. Mexico: Jiménez 1970, 163.
  11. Pelota que no has de coger, déjala correr [If you aren't going to catch the ball, let it roll]. A parody of the well-known proverb, "Agua que no has de beber, déjala correr [If you aren't going to drink the water, let it flow], often used to mean "If you aren't going to use something, let someone else enjoy it" or "If you're not serious about the girl, let her alone." Cuba: Sánchez-Boudy 1993, 52.

## PICHAR, PICHEAR (v.), to pitch

1. Pichea flojito [Pitch a slow/soft one]. Take it easy on me. Cuba: Sánchez-Boudy 1978, 120.
2. ¿Quién va a pichear esta noche? [Who's pitching tonight?] Who is paying (e.g., for drinks or food) tonight? Venezuela: Rosenblat 1960, 60.
3. Pichea y cachea al mismo tiempo [He pitches and catches at the same time]. He is bisexual. Cuba: Sánchez-Boudy 1986, 50.

## PÍCHER (n.), pitcher

1. Al pícher que tira rectas siempre le batean la pelota [The pitcher who always throws straight will have his pitches hit regularly]. If one always does things the same way, opponents will soon catch on. Cuba: Sánchez-Boudy 1993, 12.
2. Con pícher que batea duro ándate con disimulo [With a pitcher who hits hard, proceed cautiously]. Be careful when you are facing a highly qualified opponent. As a general rule, a pitcher is not a strong hitter, but there are exceptions. Cuba: Sánchez-Boudy 1993, 12.
3. Cuando el pícher se vira, en vez de correr es mejor volver a base [When the pitcher whirls (toward first base), instead of running, it's better to return to the base]. Don't take unnecessary or unwise risks. The runner on first base typically takes as much lead toward second as he dares, and the pitcher may turn quickly and throw the ball to put him out. The runner must dive for the base to reach it before the ball does. If the runner continues to second, he runs the risk of being tagged out or caught in a rundown between two opposing players. Cuba: Sánchez-Boudy 1993, 66.
4. El que es pícher no necesita que por él tiren pelotas [He who is a pitcher doesn't need anyone to throw the ball for him]. A person who is qualified for his work doesn't need anyone to do it for him. Cuba: Sánchez-Boudy 1993, 75.
5. Pícher que mucho se vira sorprende [A pitcher who often whirls (to throw to first) will (eventually) take the runner by surprise]. Perseverance wins. Cuba: Sánchez-Boudy 1993, 23.
6. Si el pícher no se descuida, ni el venado se le escapa [If the pitcher is not careless, even a deer won't get away from him]. If you keep an eye on your enemies, they won't take you by surprise. Cuba: Sánchez-Boudy 1993, 12.
7. Son pitcher y cácher [They are (like) pitcher and catcher]. Said of two people who aid or support one another. Puerto Rico: Núñez de Ortega and Delgado de Laborde 1999, 237.

PISAR (n.), to touch base

Pisa y corre [He touches base and runs]. Said of someone who is in a great hurry. Panama: field.

PLANCHITA (n.), a bunt (a short, downward hit that touches the ground not far from the batter)

El que toca planchita también batea [The one who bunts also hits the ball hard]. One can never fully know another person's capabilities; therefore, one should always be alert. Cuba: Sánchez-Boudy 1993, 22.

PONCHAR(SE) (v.), to strike out, be struck out

1. Ahí te ponchaste tú [That's where you struck out]. That's where you failed/made your mistake. Dominican Republic: Cruz Brache 1978, 6. Venezuela: Rosenblat 1960, 60. Rosenblat considers the term *ponchar(se)* to have reached Venezuela via Cuba.
2. Combinando lanzamientos se poncha el bateador [By combining pitches, you strike out the batter]. The person who uses various strategies to get ahead will always win out. Cuba: Sánchez-Boudy 2000, 83.
3. Cuidado con el que se poncha pero le tira duro a la bola [Be careful of the one who strikes out but swings hard at the ball]. Be careful of the one who makes mistakes but is also capable of great success. Cuba: Sánchez-Boudy 1993, 68.
4. Está ponchado en el trabajo [He has struck out at work]. He has been fired or laid off. Nicaragua: Matus Lazo 1998, 30.
5. Está ponchando en casa de la novia [He is striking out in his girlfriend's house]. He's making a poor impression with his girlfriend's family. Puerto Rico: García Santos 1997, 2030.
6. El que se va con la mala se poncha [The one who goes after a bad pitch will strike out]. The one who goes after something false will end up a failure. Cuba: Sánchez-Boudy 1993, 81.

POSICIÓN (n.), position

Está en posición anotadora [He is in scoring position]. He is on the verge of a triumph (e.g., in his career). A runner on second or third base is said to be in scoring position because a hit can bring him home. Cuba: Sánchez-Boudy 1986, 122.

PRIMERA (n.), first base; first baseman

1. Ése no llega ni a primera [That fellow won't even get to first base]. He will have no success in what he is attempting to do. Puerto Rico:



Núñez de Ortega and Delgado de Laborde 1999, 127; “500 dichos” 1997, under baseball. Cuba: Sánchez-Boudy 1978, 286.

2. La primera que no se estira no coge bola [The first baseman who doesn’t stretch (exert himself) doesn’t catch the ball]. You get out of anything (e.g., a task or job) what you put into it. The person who doesn’t do his best doesn’t succeed. Cuba: Sánchez-Boudy 1993, 67.
3. Lo cogieron entre primera y segunda [They caught him between first and second]. They took him by surprise. Cuba: Sánchez-Boudy 1978, 286. See “Lo cogieron fuera de base” under BASE.
4. Lo importante es llegar a primera base [The important thing is to reach first base]. Initial success is necessary for further accomplishments. Puerto Rico: García Santos 1997, 758.
5. Tira a primera base a ver cómo te sale [Throw to first and see what happens]. Try a certain strategy and see whether you succeed or not. Instead of pitching to the batter, the pitcher may throw to first base to try to put out a runner who has taken a big lead. Cuba: Batista Moreno 1973, 103.

RILÍ (n.), release (from a contract)

Ella le dio su rilí [She gave him his release]. She (his wife, girlfriend) left him. Also used to refer to someone who has been fired from his job. Dominican Republic: Cruz Brache 1978, 58.

SEGUNDA (n.), second base

1. El que roba la segunda lo agarran fácil en tercera [He who steals second is easily caught on third]. The person who takes a risk and succeeds will be watched more closely from then on. Cuba: Sánchez-Boudy 1993, 12.
2. Político que roba segunda te tumba [The politician who steals second will deceive you]. The politician who is underhanded will defraud the public. Stealing second (running from first to second when the ball has not been hit) is perfectly legal in baseball but entails a certain amount of deception as well as the ability to run fast and a willingness to take risks. Cuba: Sánchez-Boudy 1993, 25.
3. Si no corres como un venado, no robes la segunda [If you can’t run like a deer, don’t steal second]. Don’t try to do something for which you do not have the necessary qualifications. Cuba: Sánchez-Boudy 1993, 12.

TRES Y DOS (adv.), three and two (i.e., three balls and two strikes)

1. El que está en tres y dos puede tocar planchita [He who is at three and two may bunt]. The person who is in a difficult situation may

do something unexpected. A batter who has reached a count of three balls and two strikes will walk with one more ball or be out with one more strike. A bunt (a very short hit that lands close to home plate) is an unexpected, but not unheard of, strategy in such a situation. Cuba: Sánchez-Boudy 1993, 66.

2. Está en tres y dos [He is at three and two]. He's in a difficult situation, at a crucial point. Cuba: Pérez López 1968, 37; Sánchez-Boudy 1978, 324. Dominican Republic: Cruz Brache 1978, 116. Nicaragua: Matus Lazo 1998, 33. Puerto Rico: Núñez de Ortega and Delgado de Laborde 1999, 166. Venezuela: Núñez and Pérez 1994, 467.

WILSON (adj.), Wilson, a brand of baseballs considered superior to others

1. Ése es Wilson [or] Wilson Wilson [He's a Wilson]. He's the best. Puerto Rico: Claudio de la Torre 1989, 235; Núñez de Ortega and Delgado de Laborde 1999, 164.
2. Ése es Wilson Wilson Willie May[s]. (See previous entry.) He is absolutely the best. A superlative created by combining the Wilson brand of baseball with a reference to Hall of Famer Willie Mays of the Giants, considered by many to be one of the finest players in the history of baseball. Puerto Rico: Núñez de Ortega and Delgado de Laborde 1999, 164.

## Notes

1. See the exhibition Web site [www.baseballasamerica.org](http://www.baseballasamerica.org), in particular the section entitled Sharing a Common Culture. A book designed to accompany the exhibition, bearing the same title and subtitled *Seeing Ourselves Through Our National Game*, was published by National Geographic in 2002. A number of other Web sites describe or comment on the exhibition, such as the one mounted by the Field Museum of Natural History in Chicago, the venue of the exhibit from February to July 2003.
2. The term *americano* is often applied by speakers of Spanish to residents of the Americas as a whole, the more specific term for a citizen of the United States being *norteamericano*, "North American." Baseball can therefore be described as *un deporte americano* in Spanish, but to convey its popularity in the Spanish-speaking Americas, speakers of English need to resort to a term such as "Pan-American."

3. A summary of the history of Venezuelan baseball can be found on the Web site [iml.jou.ufl.edu/projects/Fall02/Landino/ThePast.html](http://iml.jou.ufl.edu/projects/Fall02/Landino/ThePast.html). George Chevalier, the author of a series of reminiscences of early days in the Canal Zone, includes in his "When the Canal Zone Played Baseball" some brief references to the history of the game in that region ([www.pancanalsociety.org/Articles/GC/Chevalier131.html](http://www.pancanalsociety.org/Articles/GC/Chevalier131.html)).
4. The Web site [www.internationalbaseball.org/southamerica.htm](http://www.internationalbaseball.org/southamerica.htm) includes Argentina, Bolivia, Brazil, Colombia, El Salvador, Peru, and Venezuela as regions where the game is played, at least on an amateur and in most cases very-limited basis.
5. [www.zonalatina.com/Zldata230.htm](http://www.zonalatina.com/Zldata230.htm). The Web site includes a list of Latino players and their salaries, which surely appear astronomical to most Latin American readers. According to another Web site, among slightly more than 14,000 major league players over the years, 340 have been born in the Dominican Republic, 206 in Puerto Rico, 148 in Cuba, 140 in Venezuela, 90 in Mexico, 43 in Panama, 8 in Nicaragua, and 7 in Colombia ([www.baseball-reference.com/bio](http://www.baseball-reference.com/bio)). At the beginning of the season in 2000, there were 170 major league players from Latin America: 71 from the Dominican Republic, 33 from Puerto Rico, 31 from Venezuela, 14 from Mexico, 9 from Cuba, 8 from Panama, 3 from Colombia, and 1 from Nicaragua ([www.latinosportslegends.com/LatinsinMLB\\_2000.htm](http://www.latinosportslegends.com/LatinsinMLB_2000.htm)).
6. A number of parodies attributed specifically to the humorist Membrillo, published in *Zig-Zag Libre* in April 1982, appear in Sánchez-Boudy 1993, 52–53. They are also included, without attribution, with numerous other examples of "baseball proverbs" in a separate section of the same author's recent *Diccionario de refranes populares cubanos* (Sánchez-Boudy 2000, 79–85). I have incorporated some sample parodies into the annotated list.

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# “You Can’t Kill Shit”

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## Occupational Proverb and Metaphorical System among Young Medical Professionals

Stephen D. Winick

### Introduction

During the 1990s, I observed several folklore forms at work among young medical professionals in New York City and Philadelphia. Among them were the proverb “You can’t kill shit,” and its variants “Shit never dies” and “Scum never dies.” These proverbs proved fascinating not only in themselves but as a theoretical window into the workings of occupational proverbs, both as a subset of the proverb genre and a subset of occupational folk culture. On the one hand, the existence of such proverbs suggested that mainstream proverb theory needed some refinement. On the other, the specific meanings of these proverbs, and their situation within a system of metaphorical folk speech, indicated that the prevailing understanding of medical folklore also required some revision.<sup>1</sup>

### “You Can’t Kill Shit,” Occupational Proverbs, and Proverb Theory

At the time I first encountered “You can’t kill shit,” occupational proverbs were sadly neglected within the field of proverb studies; only recently (e.g., Dundes, Streiff, and Dundes 1999) have proverbs restricted to an occupational community been widely studied.<sup>2</sup> Indeed, until quite recently, the prevailing definition of proverbs, and its attendant methodology, precluded the existence of specifically occupational examples. Archer Taylor (1985, 15), writing in 1931, concluded that “the trades and mercantile

pursuits have coined almost no proverbs," and the reason for this conclusion lies in his assumptions about what constitutes a proverb in the first place. Proverb scholars of Taylor's era insisted that a saying be generally disseminated among the population before they called it a proverb. Most proverb scholars were students of literature and looked there first for the evidence of an expression's proverbiality; compilers of the generally accepted proverb dictionaries used literary references as their foremost means of confirming proverbiality. But occupational proverbs are often too esoteric to migrate into the general population. They are unlikely to be found in literature (at least the literature proverb scholars usually read) and therefore were rarely represented in the dictionaries Taylor perused as he wrote his classic text. This explains his impression that very few occupational proverbs existed.

How much has modern proverb scholarship changed since Taylor? On the one hand, as I have indicated, scholars have begun to recognize occupational proverbs as an important category. On the other hand, many modern proverb scholars still insist on a certain degree of "age and currency" for any text to be considered a proverb and in practice, therefore, still restrict their analyses to proverbs that they can find in many different places and times. Reading through general literature, advertising, newspapers and other sources, they compile dictionaries of proverbs that have occurred frequently in writing (e.g., Whiting 1989), or they use survey data that solicits proverb texts from a broad sample of the population (e.g., Mieder, Kingsbury, and Harder 1992). They then use these dictionaries as guidelines to decide which expressions are proverbs and which are not. These methods of defining the proverb will always fail to apprehend a good proportion of proverbial speech, namely whatever is not found in "general" readings or known to the "general" public.

Why do scholars insist on age and currency as characteristics of the proverb? Wolfgang Mieder (1993, 42) writes that "any proverb must 'prove' a certain traditionality and frequency to be considered verbal folklore," suggesting that this view of proverbiality relies on a definition of folklore as traditional material repeated from the past. But as a discipline, folklore has moved away from variant-distribution models and toward a paradigm of analyzing emergent verbal performances. Since the 1970s, the discipline has for the most part rejected definitions of folklore based on age

or currency, and the notion of tradition has expanded to include much more than repetition from the past.<sup>3</sup> Therefore, few folklorists today would claim that the only way for a segment of discourse to be considered folklore is for it to be repeated many times.

The restriction of proverbs to generally known sayings also begs another question: Which population must know and use the proverb? It was long ago established that any complex society is divided into innumerable overlapping social groups, each of which uses folklorically patterned communication. These groups were dubbed “folk groups” by Dundes (1980, 8) and include families, occupational groups, hobbyists, church or religious groups, ethnic or national groups, and many other potential congregations.

Do small folk groups have proverbs? Indeed, it is surprising to me how many friends have spontaneously shared proverbs known only to their families, hobby groups, or professions. Among single-lens reflex photographers, for example, it is customary to note that “If you saw it, you missed it.”<sup>4</sup> Among medical doctors, a common admonition runs, “When you hear hoofbeats, think horses, not zebras.”<sup>5</sup> There are even proverbs restricted to students writing doctoral dissertations, including “The only good dissertation is a done dissertation.”<sup>6</sup> The medical proverbs I introduced at the beginning of this article fall into precisely this category.

Because of the small numbers in these folk groups, and because the efficacy of these statements is restricted to these groups, it is unlikely that any of these esoteric proverbs will be widely cited in the literature searched by proverb scholars. But they share the forms and functions of proverbs and thus are, by almost any definition, proverbs among the relatively small communities which use them. Taylor’s statement about the absence of proverbs originating in certain occupational groups therefore stands as an example of the inadequacy of a variant-distribution model, or a model based on age and currency that uses a list of many citations as its primary form of evidence. This is simply too limiting to encompass the multiplicity of proverbs that are spoken in the innumerable folk groups of the world. I have elsewhere suggested another possible model for defining proverbs, removing the age and currency requirements retained by such scholars as Mieder (Winick 2003); however, models other than mine that better account for occupational and other groups’ proverbs are also



certainly possible, and this is an important direction for proverb studies to take. Considering proverbs like "You can't kill shit," then, can prove important in advancing proverb scholarship into new areas of theory and practice.

### "You Can't Kill Shit" in a System of Medical Filth Metaphors

I first encountered the proverb "You can't kill shit" in the context of other medical metaphors. Describing an experience he had had in the hospital, a friend whom I will call Dr. X mentioned the acronym *SHPOS* (pronounced *shpoz*, to rhyme with the plural of "spa"), which he said stood for "subhuman piece of shit." (Dr. X and others also used *SHPOS* as a plural; following them, I will use the same acronym in this article for the singular and plural forms.) Describing his experience with a patient that he referred to as "a real *SHPOS*," he summed up his attitude toward the encounter with the statement that "You can't kill shit."

As a folklorist with a keen interest in proverbs, I was intrigued by the appearance of what was clearly a proverb restricted to a small occupational group, whose meaning was not immediately obvious. This drew me into researching the use of proverbs and other metaphorical speech among doctors.<sup>7</sup>

It is generally accepted that folklore pervades the world of modern professional medicine. Among others, David Hufford (1989), Anne Burson-Tolpin (1990), and Kathleen Odean (1995) have noted mnemonics, proverbs, photocopy lore, jargon and pseudojargon, euphemisms, practical jokes, dramas, songs, legends, and slang collected from medical practitioners. Among these, the genre that has probably received the most attention is doctors' derogatory slang terms for their patients—for example, *SHPOS*. Folklorists, linguists, and sociologists have all examined these expressions of hostility, and scholars have informally collected terms of abuse (e.g., George and Dundes 1978; Scheiner 1978; Monteiro 1980; Taller 1981; Gordon 1983; Liederman and Grisso 1985; Burson-Tolpin 1990; Odean 1995).

Among these terms, the single word *gomer* has been studied more than any other. In concentrating on this word, scholars have neglected an important aspect of medical slang, one which connects slang terms to medical proverbs. This neglected area is the crucial place of filth in the metaphorical system of doctors. Terms such as "dirt", "shit" and "scum" appear repeatedly in the

metaphorical speech of young doctors, showing their proverbs to be deeply connected to a wide-ranging system of metaphor and belief about filth and pollution.

Indeed, *gomer* seems to be a brief and anomalous exception to an otherwise common rule: The most insulting medical slang terms employ filth metaphors. In a personal communication with Anne Burson-Tolpin (1990), Renée Fox, an expert in the sociology of medical students and young doctors, expressed the opinion that *gomer* was merely the latest in a series of derisive terms. It had replaced *crock* as “the ultimate expression of hostility toward the patient” (p. 50 n. 9). *Crock*, according to almost all the relevant ethnographers as well as nonfiction authors like Melvin Konner (1987, 382) and all of my informants, is short for “*crock of shit*,” although that full phrase is never voiced in the hospital. After *gomer* replaced *crock*, Burson-Tolpin believes that it was in turn replaced by *dirtball*, which, along with its variant, *dirtbag*, I myself encountered among medical students and doctors during both formal interviews and informal socializing. Since that time, SHPOS appears to have gained the dubious honor of “most hostile epithet.”<sup>8</sup> This reveals a clear pattern: Among the four terms that have probably held sway between the 1960s and the late 1990s—*gomer*, *crock*, *dirtball*, and SHPOS, *gomer* is anomalous because it does not compare the patient to dirt or filth.<sup>9</sup> Thus, by concentrating on *gomer*, scholars have missed the importance of filth in medical folklore.<sup>10</sup>

Mary Douglas, Barbara Babcock, and Victor Turner have contributed to our understanding of filth as a symbol, and their work has important implications for this article. Douglas points out that our general societal ideas about dirt predate the discovery of pathogenic organisms. In modern hospitals, however, the consciousness of the pathogenic theory of disease is higher than it is anywhere else, and the pathogen is included within the pollution system of the culture. Indeed, the pathogenic organism is forcefully stamped out and therefore by all rights should not even be present in the hospital. Rooms, instruments, and personnel must be sterile to avoid spreading infection. Doctors’ ideas of dirt are often bound up with infectious diseases. Thus, doctors speak of the *dirty case*, one in which a serious infection has occurred, and the *dirty room*, a hospital room that has housed seriously infected patients and must be thoroughly sterilized (Monteiro 1980, 56).

This equation of dirt with potential infection is a serious side of the symbolic system of filth addressed in this article. It helps explain why dirt and filth are such powerful symbols among the community of medical professionals.

However, it is clearly not only the fear of the infectious that dominates this symbolic system. If it were, the most infectious patients would be the ones to whom filth metaphors were assigned. In fact, this is not the case. To get to the root of hospital rules of filth, we, like Douglas, must go beyond the pathogenic model of disease.

According to Douglas (1966), dirt, filth, and pollution (including exudations of the human body such as excrement) are to be understood symbolically as the contravention of a system of order. Thus, those items that do not fall within the categories prescribed by society, items that exist but violate the rules of order in a culture, are frequently tabooed, labeled abominations, and avoided. Douglas's theories, as outlined in her book *Purity and Danger*, apply to what she calls "primitive societies," in which ideas about dirt are highly structured. Although the modern hospital is not a primitive society in Douglas's sense, some of her insights also relate to hospitals.

The connection between dirt and the "shit" of "You can't kill shit" may itself not be obvious, for dirt and feces are not the same thing. Douglas explains this as a symbolic connection. Dirt, she says, is "a kind of omnibus compendium which includes all the rejected elements of ordered systems. . . . In short, our pollution behavior is the reaction which condemns any object or idea likely to confuse or contradict cherished classifications" (1966, 35-36).

Dirt, seen in this light, is metonymically linked to feces and any bodily exudation by its quality of anomaly or ambiguity. Feces, blood, mucus, and other bodily products, at once part of the body and removed from it, "of and not of the self" (Babcock-Abrahams 1975, 174), are profoundly ambiguous, anomalous phenomena that are practically always subject to taboo, or, as in our culture, considered "disgusting."

Given that dirt and filth are such negative concepts, is it likely that people would be compared to filth simply because they evaded easy categorization? Indeed, according to Turner (1967, 97), this is a widespread, cross-cultural phenomenon. People in the transitional, liminal phase of rites of passage, whose "condition

is one of ambiguity and paradox, a confusion of all customary categories,” are “nearly always and everywhere . . . regarded as polluting.” Because of this, he points out, they are often forced to go literally filthy and symbolically compared to dirt, decay, and such bodily exudations as menstrual blood (p. 96). In other words, these people are treated much like the *crock* and SHPOS in the modern hospital.

As a demonstration of the way in which Douglas and Turner’s ideas may apply to our medical proverbs and phrases, let us look first at the term *crock*, short for the metaphorical or proverbial phrase “crock of shit.”<sup>11</sup> Most scholars who have analyzed this term have found it has the following consistent meanings: “a patient who complains continually of multiple symptoms, many of which are either imaginary or of psychic origin” (Monteiro 1980, 56); “has no organic disease, but has constant physical complaints” (Gordon 1983, 175); or, more succinctly, “patient with nothing physically wrong” (Konner 1987, 382). Dr. X defined *crock* similarly: “If somebody comes in, complaining of abdominal pains, and comes to the emergency room every other night, and they get the full work-up, and it’s always negative . . . they may have something, or it may totally be psychiatric; who knows? But eventually someone says, oh, he’s just a *crock*. . . .” (tape-recorded interview by the author, 1995).

What we see here is that the *crock* or “crock of shit” is a patient who has symptoms, or who claims to have symptoms, but who cannot be diagnosed by his physician. Diagnosis is itself the most important way in which doctors categorize their patients. As Burson-Tolpin (1990, 100) notes, “Diagnosis can be viewed as a process of imposing order on disorder.” There is nothing natural or acultural about diagnosis; indeed, Burson-Tolpin stresses “the order-imposing aspects of the diagnostic process and its socially constructed nature” (p.102). Like the taxonomies of Douglas’s primitive societies, diagnoses are socially constructed ways of categorizing the chaos of experience. Using diagnoses, medical professionals neatly categorize their patients and thus reduce the chaos in the hospital environment. Those who do not fit into this scheme, i.e., those for whom doctors cannot find any organic cause of symptoms, are assigned to the category of *crock*.

As a clue to how *crock* fits into this environment, it is interesting to note that the diagnosis, converted to a noun, often becomes

the name for the category of patient. Patients with stab wounds are frequently referred to as "stabs," those who overdose are referred to as "O.D.s," etc. Thus, in conversational speech, the term *croak* fills the same syntagmatic slot as the diagnosis. Indeed, two of my informants used the term "diagnosis" to describe the term *croak*.<sup>12</sup> Even if not a diagnosis, *croak* is certainly a category that, like an individual diagnosis, preserves the integrity of the diagnostic system as a whole; patients who seem to have symptoms but no diagnosis, thus those who threaten the system, are called *croaks*.

Like "dirt" in Mary Douglas's analysis, then, *croak* (of shit) is "a residual category" that contains those outcast and ambiguous elements "rejected from our normal scheme of classification" (1966, 36). Indeed, one fascinating facet of the term *croak* is that its lexical meaning mirrors its social function. As a residual category, it is a container for the filth that might otherwise pervade and destroy the system. Like a literal "croak of shit," a *croak* keeps the pollution inside, containing it and rendering it harmless to the outside environment.

It can be argued that the metaphorical phrase "croak of shit" is simply borrowed from nonmedical folklore, where its meaning is "a lie." Indeed, it is likely that that is the ultimate source of the expression. However, two things indicate that the medical community has adapted this term and applied it in a new way. First, while the nonmedical usage of "croak of shit" refers to an utterance, as in "That's a croak of shit," the medical use refers to the person who makes the complaint, not the complaint itself. Also *croak* does not necessarily express an intent to deceive or a lie. As Dr. X points out in the interview quoted earlier, "They may have something . . . who knows?" It is the inability of the doctor to find the problem, the uncertainty of "who knows?," that is the root of the term *croak*.<sup>13</sup>

Some doctors use *pot* as a synonym for *croak*. It is tempting to explain this merely as the extension of *croak* to "Crock-Pot," but this overlooks the fact that *pot* is sometimes used as a synonym for toilet. (This could easily have originated with the chamber pot and been transferred to the toilet. Indeed, a "croak of shit" most plausibly refers literally to a chamber pot.) This metaphor is extended when *croaks* are said to have "high serum porcelain" (Taller 1983, 39). The word "porcelain" in American folklore is often

a code word for toilet, as in “worshipping the porcelain God” and “driving the porcelain bus,” both of which refer to throwing up in the toilet. Thus the crock (of shit) has become the basis of an extended metaphorical system referring ultimately to containers that prevent the spread of bodily filth.

Having demonstrated that crock is a case of a filth metaphor being applied to a patient who “breaks the rules” of classification, let me pause to examine more filth metaphors, using the work of David Paul Gordon, who provides us with succinct definitions of several of the terms, consistently using his definition of *gomer* as a point of reference. This definition (quoted almost verbatim from George and Dundes’s earlier article (1978)) is “an alcoholic or derelict with extremely poor personal hygiene and a record of multiple admissions to the hospital. Symptoms are predictable, and illness is often feigned. When sick, shows lack of interest in recovery; is often disoriented or hostile” (Gordon 1983, 175).

Most of the terms in Gordon’s sample comparable to his use of *gomer* are filth or pollution metaphors. A *blivet* is “ten pounds of shit in a five-pound bag (=a *gomer*),” a *dirtball* is “much worse than a *gomer*,” and a *SHPOS* is a “subhuman piece of shit; a *gomer*.” Also intriguing is the term *grume*, which is here defined as “patient dirtier and in worse condition than usual *gomer*. (See *dirtball*)” (Gordon 1983, 175–76). The *grume* was first noted by George and Dundes and is descended from the Latin term *grumus*, meaning “little heap.” In medical terms, this usually refers to a blood clot, a bodily exudation and therefore a profound ambiguity in Douglas’s sense. Furthermore, blood clots occur most often when blood gets where it does not belong, i.e., when, in Douglas’s analysis, blood itself becomes a pollutant (1966, 35–36). According to George and Dundes (1978, 572), the only other common usage of *grumus* is as part of the expression “*grumus merdae*,” or “pile of shit.” Thus, in either of its common uses, it refers to a by-product of the body removed from the body, a powerful form of pollution.

Why is the type of patient in question so frequently referred to by a filth metaphor? A definition of *SHPOS* given by Dr. X is “slimy, skanky, drug-abusing, nasty personalities who come into the hospital and then don’t let you do anything” (interview, 1995). In this hostile but almost poetically vivid description, several dimensions to *SHPOS* are apparent. First of all, they are called

slimy and skanky. This refers to their physical state: They are dirty, smelly, and practice poor hygiene. Thus, the first level at which these patients are ascribed filth is a literal one; they are really filthy and so are metaphorically compared to a piece of filth.

SHPOS also demonstrate the conceptual link between pathogenic infection and dirt that I mentioned earlier. These patients are almost always infected with something, and the most common treatment for them is antibiotics. Thus, just like the dirty case and the dirty room, the SHPOS is either the known or the suspected carrier of infection.

After the SHPOS's literal filthiness, Dr. X also mentions their unwillingness to undergo treatment or to follow the doctor's orders. It is in this sense that they "don't let you do anything." Typically, they refuse to allow blood samples to be taken or antibiotics to be administered. Contrasting SHPOS with other patients, Dr. X states, "Other people have genuine problems, and they come in, and you fix 'em, and they try and keep 'em fixed, and they try and stay out of the hospital, whereas . . . SHPOS don't care. You know, if they end up back in the hospital, what the heck? It's a nice warm bed and free meals." On the other hand, if a visit to the clinic is suggested by the doctor, Dr. C tells me that "the SHPOS never come back because they go back out on the street and shoot up again. . . . it becomes a joke even giving them an appointment" (tape-recorded interview by the author, 1995).

The unwillingness of the SHPOS to fulfill what doctors see as their part in the doctor-patient role relationship is also a defining characteristic, at least for some doctors. Dr. X states, "Even the drug abusers who come in with pneumonia . . . and say, 'Been coughing up this green stuff; help me out,' and you say, 'Okay, you're going to need IV antibiotics, and I'm going to have to draw cultures,' and they say, 'Okay, doc, go ahead. . . .' That's not SHPOS."

Another characteristic for which SHPOS are reviled is that, while other patients are the victims of circumstances beyond their control, the SHPOS's illness is entirely self-inflicted. The typical diagnosis for a SHPOS, according to several of my informants, is "drug overdoses complicated by infections." While normal patients suffer from accidents or violence or illness through no fault of their own, SHPOS are usually responsible for their own conditions. One clear indication of this is that, no matter



how dirty or grimy, no matter even if their condition is technically self-inflicted, children, who are usually considered too young to be responsible, are never called SHPOS. “There’s really no such thing,” Dr. W told me, “as pediatric SHPOS” (tape-recorded interview by the author, 1995).

It is important to note that the “shit” of the proverb “You can’t kill shit” and the metaphorical phrase/acronym, “subhuman piece of shit/SHPOS,” refer to the same patients. The proverb also emphasizes the self-abusive nature of this type of patient and his or her unwillingness to comply with the doctor’s recommendations. Asked to give me a sample context in which this proverb may be used, Dr. C reports,

These real hard-core drug abusers come in . . . when you’re trying to treat ‘em, a lot of times you’re nervous when you’re just starting out as an intern: ‘Since he’s not letting me draw any blood cultures, what if I hang the wrong antibiotic? What if I do this, what if I do that?’ and the response from the more senior residents who have dealt with this before is always, ‘Don’t worry; there’s nothing you can do to these people that they haven’t done worse to themselves already.’ And that’s basically the meaning of [‘You can’t kill shit’]. They’ve abused themselves so badly they’re indestructible! (interview, 1995)

The unwillingness of the patient to allow cultures, the description as “hard-core drug abusers,” and the suggestion that they have done “worse to themselves already” are all characteristic of all of my informants’ descriptions of SHPOS, and part of most explanations of “You can’t kill shit” and “Shit never dies.”

For some doctors, frequent visits to the hospital are also a defining characteristic of SHPOS. Scheiner (1978), in fact, notes two acronyms, POS for “piece of shit” and SHPOS for “subhuman piece of shit.” The former refers to “patients medically ill because of their failure to care for themselves” and the latter to “a chronic POS. A patient who, after intensive medical care and rehabilitation, fails to follow medical instructions, and is readmitted to the hospital in his previous critical condition” (p. 69).

While I never encountered POS on its own in my research since 1993, most informants agreed that the SHPOS was a repeat visitor to the hospital. As Dr. J noted, “Your goal when you treat them is that you want to get them out and not have them come back”



(tape-recorded interview by the author, 1995). SHPOS continually thwart this attempt. Thus, while there are more literal levels at which these patients are worthy of filth metaphors, it seems that two of the most important are responsibility for their own illnesses and an unwillingness to get better.<sup>14</sup>

The SHPOS and his ilk can be considered the worst violators of the hospital's classification system. Dr. X, when confronted in 1994 with an older doctor's dislike of terms like dirtball and SHPOS, commented that for the older physician, anyone who comes into the hospital for treatment automatically earns the title of "patient." For many of the younger staff members, however, dirtballs and SHPOS never achieve that honor; they are only referred to as patients when senior staff members are present.

For about half of my informants, SHPOS and dirtball were 100 percent synonymous. The others expressed a sense of gradation, with dirtbags or dirtballs being slightly less repugnant than SHPOS. But the basic features of the two groups were always the same. Dirtballs and SHPOS, then, are self-destructive people with no concern for getting better. They defy the very category of patient, which to these doctors means a sick person who wants to get better. These are the most antistructural people in the hospital because it is unclear whether they should be considered patients at all. At this deep level, then, the dirtbag and SHPOS (and, I expect, the grume and blivet as well) disrupt the categorization attempts of the hospital in the severest way possible.

Contrasting dirty case and crock with the more caustic dirtball and SHPOS, we find a number of interesting differences. First let us note that crock and dirty case, while both metaphors of pollution, are mitigated by their wording. Crock, by eliminating the overtly filthy part of the metaphor, suggests filth without saying it outright. Dirty case, while mentioning dirt directly, connects it with the case rather than the patient, a subtle difference but one that any medical practitioner will appreciate; a "difficult case" is by no means the same as a "difficult patient," as my informants readily confirmed. Furthermore, while crock and dirty case are straightforward terms relating to a fairly simple type of patient, SHPOS and dirtball are defined by much more complex clusters of physical and behavioral characteristics.

It has become clear that the metaphors of filth in the case of the more severe terms are overdetermined, meaningful on more

than one level; they are appropriate because of the patients' literal filthiness, because of their penchant for infection, and because they seriously violate the rules of order that govern patient behavior. Any one of these characteristics would be enough to earn them a filth metaphor, as crock and dirty case demonstrate. All three characteristics make a filth metaphor almost inevitable.

### Filth Metaphors in Medicine: Function and Meaning

The observation that filth metaphors apply mainly to anti-structural patients who violate the system of order in the hospital environment suggests certain refinements to the accepted wisdom about such language. One reason often given for the existence of such derogatory metaphors is the young intern's and resident's position near the bottom of the hospital hierarchy. This unenviable position, it is argued, causes this group to seek in-group cohesion as well as direct hostility down to the patients, the only people lower than themselves in the hierarchy. Because the hostility is frequently expressed in scatological terms, Odean (1995, 149) calls this the "shit rolls downhill" model. This theory is certainly valid and does explain to some extent why patient-directed pejoratives, including proverbs such as "Shit never dies," exist. However, it overlooks the fact that not all patients are the objects of hostility. In fact, many of the young doctors I know try their best to empathize with patients and reserve their hostility for a chosen few. This explanation thus fails to account for a significant feature of hospital life: the selectivity with which epithets and pejorative proverbs are deployed.

Like the "shit rolls downhill" model, the generally accepted "stress-relief model" of medical folklore also doesn't account for this selectivity. It observes that the hospital is a very high-pressure environment and produces a lot of stress, particularly among the younger doctors. It offers this stress as the primary reason for the existence of hostile patient-directed pejoratives. In one of the first analyses of doctors' slang for patients, for example, Victoria George and Alan Dundes (1978) argue that the derogatory term *gomer* is used by doctors and nurses to refer to patients whose "personal hygiene and habits . . . are so repugnant and distasteful as to prove offensive even to the most hardened and dispassionate staff member." In explaining this phenomenon, the authors foreground anxiety and stress as the factors that cause doctors

to become frustrated with certain patients: "The inevitable stress in any doctor-patient relationship resulting from the anxiety which accompanies illness is greatly exacerbated by the wretched and foul conditions of the *gomer*." This frustration, they believe, causes the doctors to retaliate by using derogatory slang. "The greater the stress," they argue, "the greater the need for folklore to relieve the pressures created by that stress" (p. 580). In George and Dundes's estimation, these factors all contribute to giving *gomer* "pre-eminence as a term" of abuse (p. 572).

I agree with George and Dundes that the stress of being responsible for the lives of others—and the extra pressure created by "professional patients" like the *gomers* they describe—is certainly one overarching reason for the existence of medical professionals' derogatory speech about patients. This is supported by my fieldwork; my older informants, who cited their own common-sense version of the stress-relief model when discussing their younger colleagues' behavior, all pointed out certain facts: Stress tends to be greatest when doctors first begin to take responsibility on themselves, that is, during internship and residency, a liminal period when doctors are qualified to practice medicine but not yet considered fully functioning specialists.<sup>15</sup> During these years, doctors typically make the first life-and-death decisions of their careers. They work long, grueling hours, often skipping meals and missing sleep. They are, quite simply, under constant pressure and stress. It is during these years that doctors are most often observed using pejorative epithets and proverbs. Furthermore, the younger doctors with whom I spoke also used the stress-relief model as an explanation and justification for their own behavior.

However, like the "shit rolls downhill" model, the stress-relief theory does not account for all the evidence. As David Paul Gordon (1983) was the first to point out, George and Dundes's logic—that the stress experienced by doctors making life-and-death decisions is the cause of medical slang—would lead us to the conclusion that the patients who are the most severely ill, and thus cause the doctors the most stress, get tagged with these derisive nicknames. In fact, that proves not to be the case. Furthermore, as Odean (1995, 144) has noted, and my informants confirmed in interviews, the use of these expressions is often fundamentally against the young doctor's principles but encouraged by peer pressure. This suggests that the use of these terms is the *cause*

of anxiety and stress. Indeed, both Odean's informants and my own reported urban legends about doctors being sued for writing SHPOS or dirtball on a patient's medical chart (see Odean 1995, 144). Urban legends most frequently express a group's anxieties, and this legend suggests that these slang terms are the source of worries as well as an outlet for them. Gordon thus rejects stress as an explanation and points to empathy. He states that patients with whom it is difficult to empathize are the ones who receive pejorative nicknames: "For patients likely to produce empathy, slang terms will be rare; for those with whom it is difficult to empathize, slang is more likely" (1983, 177).

Gordon's argument against George and Dundes's explanation appears convincing, and his empathy model appears to hold true in many cases. Indeed, the empathy model provides another reason why SHPOS and dirtballs have earned themselves metaphors of filth. However, although these strongest pejoratives are reserved for the most unpleasant patients, not all filth metaphors are restricted to patients with whom doctors cannot empathize. My informants often expressed empathy for their crocks, whom they believed to be experiencing real pain and symptoms, even if only psychosomatic ones. Indeed, some were convinced that crocks were sometimes suffering from genuinely unknown syndromes, but they still used the term crock without any apparent resentment. Thus, empathy alone, I think, is not the answer.

The solution, I believe, is that a certain kind of stress causes filth metaphors to be applied to patients; George and Dundes are quite correct that stress is the major force behind these terms, but they fail to specify what type of stress. The stress of caring for a critically ill patient who urgently needs help does not cause doctors to use filth metaphors. Doctors' medical training has prepared them to deal with this stress; that is the whole point of being a doctor.

It is the stress that results from a loss of control that ultimately translates into filth metaphors. The dirty case and dirty room represent a failure to keep the hospital antiseptic and thus to control infection. The crock, dirtball, and SHPOS, similarly, represent violations of the system of categorization through which doctors control their environment. This can result in feelings of powerlessness and futility. The crock makes doctors powerless by taking away their ability to diagnose, their ability to assign people to meaningful categories and thus order the universe neatly; their

ability to heal the patient is likewise hampered by the crock. The dirtbag, dirtball, grume, or SHPOS makes doctors powerless by directly or indirectly thwarting their efforts and by being a non-patient, a person who has no desire to be helped by the doctor in the first place. All of these types of patients cause stress by being outside the doctors’ control and thus thwarting the doctors’ attempts to be doctors.

Only now does it become clear how filth metaphors help to relieve some stresses, even as they create others. Doctors do not generally feel good about calling patients SHPOS or commenting that “Scum never dies.” As already stated, their fears of getting caught and their own moral squeamishness cause them unease that surfaces in contemporary legends and rumors in which doctors are punished for using these terms. Nevertheless, the stress of disorder in the basic system of categorization that defines hospital life, and from the resulting powerlessness of doctors to do their job, is much greater. Through proverbs, proverbial phrases, and epithets, doctors can create new categories to hold their uncategorizable patients—patients who “may have something . . . who knows?” (crock). They can also express their outrage at those who are not even patients and “don’t let you do anything” (dirtbag, SHPOS, “You can’t kill shit”), and who, like the infection in a dirty room, do not belong in the hospital at all. Because it reorders the hospital environment, this form of stress relief is greater than the residual anxiety caused by the terms themselves and the fear of being caught using them.

This structural argument takes away some of the sting of the filth metaphors themselves, for these emerge, at least in part, as a common cross-cultural way of handling anomaly. Still, one issue raised by this metaphorical system is essentially ethical: Is it unethical or otherwise inappropriate for doctors, charged with the care of patients, to think and speak of them in these terms? Among many older physicians, the answer is often yes; stories abound of older physicians chastising younger ones for using these terms. The urban legends already alluded to suggest that younger doctors, too, worry about the ethics of stating that “Scum never dies” in reference to their patients. Although they feel some shame and certainly worry about getting caught, however, they do not generally think of themselves as unethical even though they clearly know their statements are derogatory.

It is on the subject of ethics that David Gordon's article makes the strongest argument. Gordon asserts that "hospital slang for patients principally expresses frustration and irritation at having to provide care when it is not felt to be needed or useful" (1983, 179). Based on my own experience with doctors, I agree with Gordon. In the case of crocks, the time and resources spent testing the patient are not justified by any results, and although the patient cannot be considered culpable, the doctor's frustration is understandable. In the case of those considered dirtbags, dirtballs, or SHPOS, the doctors believe the patients to be the unethical ones, consuming precious hospital resources until they are well enough to leave, then returning again and again, never attempting to get better. Dr. W, recounting a story in which a SHPOS was competing for his attention with a severely injured but very cooperative woman whose frightened child was outside waiting for her, shook his head in anger and said, "They just suck up medicine, take up space, and tire you out with annoying whining while you have real patients to treat" (interview, 1995).

In this sense, as in the societies described by Mary Douglas and Victor Turner, the ambiguous or anomalous item is credited not only with pollution but with danger. By sapping the hospital's resources and the doctors' strength, the dirtball and SHPOS threaten to wreak havoc. From the doctors' point of view, then, the use of these insults takes on a quality of righteous indignation against dangerous invaders, rather than unfair deprecation of sick people.

Gordon even implies that, far from being unethical, the derogatory slang employed by doctors reinforces their strong sense of ethics. For the doctors, "Frustration over giving care to patients who do not need it implies concern for other patients . . . and a wish to care for the most needy" (1983, 179). Again, I agree with this conclusion. My own informants' stories of the competition between SHPOS and "real patients," like the one already quoted, make it clear that their concern is not only for themselves but also for their genuinely sick patients.

An alternate meaning for one of the proverb's variants is interesting in this regard. Ms. L, the only registered nurse among my informants, revealed that "Scum never dies" or "Shit never dies" can be used in two different contexts. On the one hand is the situation already described, namely the inexperienced doctor who

worries he will harm the patient. “Don’t worry, shit never dies,” the resident may say. On the other hand, the proverb can also be used to express regret or exasperation when a genuine patient, a good patient, dies, but a SHPOS recovers. In these cases, “Scum never dies” or “Shit never dies” is used almost with regret and carries a connotation of injustice: “Why do good patients die when shit never dies”? In this sense, the proverb points us directly to the issue of compassion for one’s other patients.

The proverb “You can’t kill shit” has thus led us into a fascinating and complexly organized system of metaphors. Phrases like “crock of shit,” “piece of shit,” “pile of shit,” and just plain shit, grume, dirtball, scum, and dirtbag, and their related observations that “You can’t kill shit” and “Scum never dies,” are not randomly applied to patients, nor are they assigned according to who creates the most stress. Although they are hostile, and perhaps hurtful, they are not unethical. Instead, they can be seen as both the underbelly of a highly developed system of categorization that seeks to impose order on the frequently chaotic world of the hospital, and as the product of a code of ethical behavior by which physicians attempt to heal themselves as well as others.

## Notes

1. Among other lessons, Wolfgang Mieder taught me to build upon the solid work of previous generations of scholars. I offer this paper in that spirit and dedicate it to him.
2. It has long been common to speak of Medical Proverbs and Legal Proverbs. However, these are not disseminated mostly within occupational communities. They are, rather, proverbs dealing with medical or legal knowledge disseminated among the general population.
3. For a famous definition of folklore utilizing this new paradigm, see Ben Amos 1972. For a discussion of new meanings for tradition, see Ben Amos 1985. For analysis of these ideas and their impact on the definition of proverbs, see Winick 1998, 44–55; 2003.
4. This proverb refers to the fact that while the film is being exposed to light, the camera’s shutter interrupts the photographer’s view of his subject. Therefore, anything that the photographer actually sees through the lens, he fails to capture on film, and vice versa. The metaphorical or extended meaning is that in the profession,



- nothing can be taken for granted until the film is developed and examined. This proverb was pointed out to me by Jeff Benton.
5. I first heard this proverb from my brother, Jonathan Winick, who is a neurologist; it has also been noted by Dundes, Streiff, and Dundes (1999). It means that when confronted with a set of symptoms, a doctor should consider the more likely or common causes first.
  6. Clearly, this is a variation on the older proverb, "The only good Indian is a dead Indian" (see Mieder 1997). It was pointed out to me by folklorist Xan Griswold.
  7. My primary source data includes formal interviews and informal conversations with both young and older doctors—i.e., fourth-year medical students, interns, residents, established professionals, and retirees. Formal interviews were conducted with students and younger professionals (those who use these proverbs and metaphors), and more informal checking was undertaken with older physicians, who were asked either to remember such expressions from their younger days or give their reactions to them. The most formal parts of my fieldwork consisted of a series of interviews conducted with seven main informants: three fourth-year medical students, three young M.D.s, and one registered nurse. Five were resident in Philadelphia, the others in New York. None wish to be identified by name.
  8. These terms were not necessarily new when they rose to prominence. SHPOS was noted at least as early as 1978, the same year that George and Dundes announced gomer's preeminence.
  9. Although most scholars reject the folk etymology that gomer is an acronym for "get out of my emergency room" or "grand old man of the emergency room," a satisfactory alternative has yet to be found; certainly there is no reason to think filth enters into gomer's etymology, however.
  10. It would also be possible, of course, to treat SHPOS and crock as instances of specifically anal folklore, another realm pioneered by Alan Dundes in such works as *Life Is Like a Chicken Coop Ladder*. Such an approach has been taken by Odean (1995). Her approach and mine do not preclude each other; it is certainly possible for the meanings of these terms to be multiple, at once part of a system of anal folklore and another system of filth folklore. Since SHPOS and dirtball mean the same thing, and since "Shit never dies" and "Scum never dies" mean the same thing—in other words, since both nonanal and anal filth metaphors can be used in identical situations—I consider these examples of filth folklore rather than anal folklore.
  11. While "crock of shit" itself must be classified as a metaphorical phrase or idiom, "to be a crock of shit" qualifies by most definitions



- as a proverbial phrase. This shows, among other things, how difficult it is to distinguish between such categories as traditional metaphor, idiom, proverbial phrase, cliché, etc.
12. One informant, Dr. M, was equally explicit in saying that crock was "not a real diagnosis, just a general description."
  13. Interestingly, although some commentators have considered crock a term of hostility, my informants did not think of it that way. To them, a sweet old lady whose disease could not be diagnosed would, if she persisted in her complaints, be called a crock.
  14. Gordon (1983, 177) noted that "patients who demand more attention than warranted by physical condition" were often the recipients of pejorative epithets. Perhaps this should be expanded to "patients who take up time and resources unnecessarily"; although the infections themselves may warrant serious attention, because they are self-inflicted, it can be argued that patients are unnecessarily making themselves sick.
  15. It is the residency that prepares a doctor for specialization. The internship generally precedes it. Both together are liminal for the doctor who intends to specialize.

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# “Cheaters Never Prosper” and Other Lies Adults Tell Kids

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Proverbs and the Culture Wars over Character

Jay Mechling

We rarely think of proverbs as “fighting words,” but the neo-conservative camp in the “culture wars” that began brewing in the 1980s has appropriated proverbs and their folklore cousins—moral maxims—as ammunition in the very public rhetoric aimed at bringing morality and “common sense” back into American life. Folklorists know all too well the sorry history of the political uses of folklore in totalitarian regimes, but who would suppose that in the early twenty-first century, proverbs would be taken up as a weapon to promote an ideological cause in the United States? Writers of advertising copy, certainly, have used proverbs for decades in their attempts to associate certain commodities with the common sense of the folk (e.g., Mieder 1993), so perhaps it is not so strange that the persuasive powers of proverbs should be tapped in ideological campaigns.

In a departure from the usual scholarly approach, I intend to focus on the ideological use of proverbs in the current culture wars. The usual scholarly gambit is to show how people use proverbs strategically in their communication with others who are presumed to understand their meanings. People usually trot out proverbs in response to a social situation, such as a criticism of someone’s behavior (e.g., “A fool and his money are soon parted”). As Abrahams (1968) points out, the great value of folklore, especially genres like proverbs and jokes, is that they are impersonal, which means that they can assume a strategy of indirection when a direct communication would seem so personal as to threaten

the social solidarity of the group. Even using proverbs in forms other than the usual oral communication—in advertising or literature or cartoons, for example—follows these principles. The hucksters and authors and cartoonists (Gary Larson, especially) choose a traditional proverb or some variant proverbial form to invoke folk ideas, knowledge, and wisdom in making meaning.

I depart from this usual approach because I am not examining the contextual uses of individual proverbs but the very idea that adults want to teach children proverbs as an element in their character education. This remarkable development demonstrates a misunderstanding of both proverbs and children’s cultures, as I shall show. This inquiry actually will bring me full circle to make a point about proverbs in context.

First, I need to provide some background on the culture wars that seem so salient in our public life and on a particular issue in those wars, the putative “character crisis” in American culture and, especially, in the socialization of our children. Next, I examine the particular idea and strategy of teaching folklore (including proverbs) to children to increase their cultural literacy and uplift their characters. That strategy contains some highly problematic ideas about culture and individual behavior. Finally, I show what this all means when you take the child’s point of view, as do children’s folklorists who actually study children’s folk cultures in their natural, everyday settings.

### The Culture Wars and the Crisis in Character

The phrase “culture wars” crept into public discourse in the United States sometime in the 1980s during the Reagan era. Neo-conservatives, especially those who grounded their defense of traditional values in religious faith, embraced the term because they felt that they were involved in a holy war against the forces that were deserting and denigrating traditional values. These people saw feminism, multiculturalism, gay rights, and related ideas and social movements as sources of threats to traditional American values and institutions. The other side, usually labeled “liberals,” also had a sense that they were in a culture war against right-wing forces of the 1980s. These culture wars have continued into the first years of the twenty-first century and show no sign of abating.

In a series of thoughtful books, sociologist James Davison Hunter (1991, 1994, 2000) has mapped the contours of these

wars. Hunter rightfully points to shifting ideas about knowledge and truth as key elements in the differences between the “orthodox” camp, as he calls the neoconservatives, and the “progressive” camp, as he calls the cultural left. For the orthodox, moral authority relies on a transcendent source of truth (usually God), whereas for progressives (even among the religious progressives) moral authority is emergent, conditional, tentative, and relative. This distinction perhaps summarizes too neatly Hunter’s much longer and nuanced analysis of the worldviews of the two sides, but this issue of the sources and nature of moral authority lies at the heart of the matter, especially when I consider the campaign to teach children proverbs.

Hunter looks at the actual skirmishes in the culture wars that take place in politics, in the schools, in courtrooms, and in the mass media. Those defending “traditional values” see public schooling as an especially important arena for fighting the culture wars, seeing in feminism, multiculturalism, pluralism, gay rights, and assorted experiments in “progressive education” a conspiracy to capture the hearts and minds of America’s children and convince them that morals are relative and the measure of all things is individual satisfaction. When psychology replaces religion as the cultural foundation for everyday behavior, reason these critics, then the therapeutic sensibility elevates a “real self” or “authentic self” apart from social roles and norms and mistakes individual liberation from social responsibilities and obligations for political freedom. In the minds of the orthodox camp, the public culture visible in the mass media aimed at children only serves to reinforce progressive schooling’s message that there are no absolutes in matters of right and wrong.

The result of this progressive control over the socialization of children, argue the orthodox, is that people in the United States face a profound character crisis. Those who claim that children face a character crisis point to a string of school shootings, the most dramatic of which was the slaughter at Columbine High School in 1999. But even beyond the most extraordinary outbreaks of violence, the orthodox see everyday evidence of the loss of values and morality in the ways young people dress, talk, pierce and tattoo themselves, and engage in premarital sex.

The orthodox antidote to this infection is the “character-education” movement in the schools and the parallel curriculum of youth organizations outside of school. Thomas Linkona, a

developmental psychologist and professor of education, for example, created the Center for the Fourth and Fifth Rs (respect and responsibility) at the State University of New York at Cortland, and the Josephson Institute of Ethics, based in Marina del Ray, California, has organized a Character Counts! coalition of organizations and educators with training programs based on the “six pillars” of character—namely, trustworthiness, respect, responsibility, fairness, caring, and citizenship ([www.josephsoninstitute.org](http://www.josephsoninstitute.org)). Even the Boy Scouts of America, while not an official member of the Character Counts! coalition, has used the movement’s name in some of its materials and on its Web site.

Some figures in the character-education movement advocate the use of folklore and mythology in building curricula to teach children traditional morals and values. A notable example is Arthur J. Schwartz, who earned an Ed.D. from Harvard and who is a vice president at the John Templeton Foundation, a nonprofit organization with a mission “to pursue the insights at the boundary between theology and science through a rigorous, open-minded and empirically focused methodology” ([www.templeton.org](http://www.templeton.org)). Schwartz directs the foundation’s character-development programs, and in an essay he contributed to a volume on the “new era” in character education, he makes an explicit case for using folklore in teaching children right from wrong. Schwartz sees in the grassroots efforts by parents in numerous school districts evidence that the question for debate no longer is “Whose values?” but “How should educators transmit these core values to our children?” (2002, 1). One way, argues Schwartz, is to teach our children “maxims to live by.” “For the past several years,” he writes,

I have asked literally hundreds of people of all ages to share with me a maxim or “wise saying” that has been passed on to them. For example, my best friend told me that as he grew up his father said to him repeatedly, “A job worth doing is a job worth doing well.” To this day, my friend still hears the voice of his dad as he approaches an important project. (Schwartz 2002, 5)

Schwartz defines a maxim as “a concise formulation of a fundamental principle or rule of conduct” (2002, 6), and it is clear from his examples that what he has in mind is a class of proverbs. These maxims are “civilization’s ‘memory bank,’” he says, and he notes (correctly) that children tend to hear and learn a maxim in

some specific context, often within a communication act aimed by an adult at the child. His example is a mother citing “Two wrongs do not make a right” when a child defends hitting a sibling with “he hit me first” (2002, 6–7). Schwartz approvingly cites Anand Prahlad’s *African-American Proverbs in Context* (1996) to show both how proverbs work in context and the universality of proverbs as means for the everyday moral education of children (2002, 8–9).

Recognizing that maxims live in oral performance, Schwartz proposes traditional memorization strategies—oral recitation and writing in a copybook—for transmitting them to children (2002, 9). “Drill and practice are essential components of a successful performance,” he notes, and such rote practice is the necessary foundation before the teacher can help the children connect a particular maxim to “their own experiences, feelings, and motivations” (2002, 9). Schwartz is eager to make it clear that the pedagogy he recommends is not “indoctrination” but an interactive strategy that can be employed once the kids can recite the maxims. He then goes on to show how high schools with honor codes experience less student cheating than schools without them (a point to which I shall return later).

Now, folklorists have recommended using folklore in the classroom for a long time, so Schwartz’s recommendations may seem welcome news. In fact, the most thoughtful and authoritative proverb scholar in the United States—Wolfgang Mieder—himself participated in a project aimed at teaching proverbs to fourth graders (Mieder and Holmes 2000), and I’ll also discuss that project. My concern is that all these efforts somehow miss the actual, living folk cultures of children, especially children out of the surveillance of parents and teachers. Before I get to that critique, however, we should look briefly at proverbs and why they are such an attractive folk genre for the character-education movement.

### “Common” Sense in Proverbs

For educators like Schwartz, the attraction of proverbs and maxims lies in the seeming universality of folklore. People think of folklore as common sense, a form of understanding that is “common” in its everyday nature but also “common” because it is shared widely in the society. If proverbs really express common sense, they offer promise as a body of knowledge (folk knowledge) and everyday, folk morality agreed to by “everyone.”

Recall that the orthodox camp in the culture wars is reacting against cultural diversity and its ideology, “multiculturalism.” The orthodox dispute the claims by progressives that reality is plural and value systems, including moral systems, are relative. Because the progressives do not believe we have access to an absolute reality, they are forced to see beliefs and values as culturally specific, and some progressives would add that even within specific cultural systems, behavior may be very contextual.

However, progressive philosophers like Rorty (1989) and West (1989) and social scientists who work in the postpositivist tradition are the first to explain that the “everything goes” sort of relativism attributed to them by the orthodox camp is not the relativism progressives espouse. Progressives acknowledge that there may be widespread social agreement on some matters of value and morality, but anthropology holds little promise for those seeking a human consensus to replace the religious source the orthodox camp relies upon for distinguishing right from wrong. Human common sense agrees on few absolutes, if you ask the anthropologists, so progressives are stuck trying to sort out how to “do the right thing” when what seems absolutely true to two groups leads each to behavior that appalls or disgusts the other. Schweder (2003), for example, attempts to sort out the dispute over female genital circumcision in the United States, where one group (including progressive feminist women) finds immoral a custom practiced by another group (in this case, African women from some cultures).

In the chaos of this plural messyness, some of the orthodox have realized that an appeal to religious values may not work as the best available strategy for reinvigorating American society with an agreed-upon set of moral principles for governing everyday lives. While plenty in the orthodox camp still cling to the Judeo-Christian tradition as the source of the common morality system in American culture, others claim that there really is a basic, core, agreed-upon (hence, common, shared) set of beliefs and values in the United States, even if most of them remain unspoken.

Articulating shared values and beliefs, therefore, becomes for the orthodox (but also for some progressives) an important task in restoring morality to everyday lives. One of the most famous early statements in the culture wars was Hirsch’s 1987 book,



*Cultural Literacy: What Every American Needs to Know*. In that book, Hirsch simultaneously bemoaned the loss of a common cultural knowledge in the United States and claimed to be able to specify what elements in that common cultural knowledge needed to be relearned to bring us back to some halcyon days (never specified, but one suspects it was the 1950s) when everyone understood everyone else because we had a common body of knowledge (expressed in English, to be sure).

Part of the orthodox camp’s complaint is that we used to be able to count on the schools to provide children with a common body of knowledge. Part of the “Americanization” of immigrant children was their compulsory schooling in English and a curriculum aimed at teaching them the common body of knowledge. “Progressive” ideas in education, feminism, multiculturalism, teachers’ unions, and a host of other developments destroyed this important function of public schooling, argue the orthodox, resulting in the loss of common knowledge Hirsch and others claim to chronicle. If schools can’t or won’t do the job, reason Hirsch and his colleagues, then we need to put into the hands of parents, willing teachers, youth workers, and even children themselves the road map and tools for acquiring cultural literacy. Hirsch and his coauthors followed up *Cultural Literacy* with *The Dictionary of Cultural Literacy* (Hirsch, Kett, and Trefil, 1988), with updated editions, and *A First Dictionary of Cultural Literacy: What Our Children Need to Know* (Hirsch, Rowland, and Stanford, 1989).

Progressives often ridicule the efforts by Hirsch and others, saying they treat knowledge as if it is preparation for a game of Trivial Pursuit, a board game that became widely popular in the 1980s. It is tempting to implicate this trivia approach to knowledge in the distressing trend toward “teaching for the test” rather than teaching critical thinking in schools, but in any case by the 1990s, it became clear that the orthodox camp had mounted an effective counteroffensive against so-called progressive education. Hirsch’s notion of cultural literacy fit well the “back to basics” movement in education, and although these battles are still being fought in the first years of the twenty-first century, the tendency of state governments to link school funding to scores on standardized tests means that, at least for a while, the cultural literacy approach to knowledge will remain dominant.

Here, finally, is where we get to folklore and, specifically, to proverbs as indispensable expressions of common cultural knowledge. In their Introduction to the 1988 first edition of *The Dictionary of Cultural Literacy*, Hirsch and his colleagues explain the basic premise of the project, namely, that,

although it is true that no two humans know exactly the same things, they have a great deal of knowledge in common. To a large extent this common knowledge or collective memory allows people to communicate, to work together, and to live together. It forms the basis for communities, and if it is shared by enough people, it is a distinguishing characteristic of a national culture. The form and content of this common knowledge constitute one of the elements that makes each national culture unique. (p. ix)

This remarkable opening paragraph begins simply enough with the idea, familiar to folklorists, that a group with a great deal of “common knowledge” and “collective memory” has (though they don’t use this phrase) “high context,” making their communication highly connotative. It is when the authors attempt to argue that the nation/state can be seen as a high-context folk group that progressives begin to worry.

I must pause here briefly to clarify the ways the orthodox and progressive camps in the culture wars are talking past each other about such fundamental concepts as “culture” and “shared.” (These incommensurable positions, by the way, seem to contradict claims that the society enjoys a reasonably high level of common knowledge.) Long ago anthropologist Anthony F. C. Wallace (1961) noted that there are two broad approaches to culture, approaches he called “the replication of uniformity” and the “organization of diversity.” The first represents an approach Wallace and others have discredited because it posits an unrealistic view of socialization as a process that reproduces the same set of values and beliefs in all its members. Even by the time Wallace was writing about this, the discovery of considerable variation in beliefs and behavior within seemingly homogeneous groups meant that anthropologists could no longer talk about culture as something shared among individual minds as if there were some sort of uniform national character that led to a common culture. By the 1960s, there was plenty of evidence that Americans (to keep to this example) did not share the same set of beliefs, values,

motives, and customs, even though it was in the interests of those in power to believe that everyone saw the world as they did.

Given the strong evidence of intracultural diversity, Wallace and others preferred instead to view culture as a mechanism for the “organization of diversity,” recognizing that social systems do manage to hang together somehow because systems can work without the participants’ sharing internal attitudes and values; participants merely need to know what is expected of them in social interactions. In fact, Wallace argued, large, complex social systems, like that of the United States, probably actually *require* that not everyone share the same set of experiences, values, beliefs, and motives. Such sharing is quite impossible, but what the members of the society can share is an understanding of the system (a sort of “cognitive map” of the “mazeway,” as Wallace put it) and the competence needed to negotiate the system. It is in this special sense that Wallace and others say Americans share a common culture.

Note that from Wallace’s perspective it is not necessary that people in the society share a body of common knowledge defined by content, though in a society with large-scale public schooling and mass media there may be some relatively common knowledge. This is why the orthodox camp targets schools and the mass media as the realms needing reform, needing to return to important content as the measure of common knowledge.

Enter Hirsch and like-minded intellectuals who seek to restore the content of our common knowledge, if not through the school curriculum (though they are trying), then through the influence parents and other custodians have on children. The explicit aim is to create “cultural literacy” in the citizenry of the United States, beginning with the children. Hirsch’s dictionaries attempt to put into writing the minimum body of knowledge that Americans *should* have. “It is this shifting body of information,” write the editors, admitting that things do shift, “that our culture has found useful, and therefore worth preserving. . . . This shared information is the foundation of our public discourse” (Hirsch, Kett, and Trefil 1988, ix). In choosing this information, the editors were guided by three principles: 1) that the information lie between the overly general and the overly specialized, 2) that the knowledge be widely known (as measured by its appearance in national periodicals), and 3) that the information have some lasting

significance (Hirsch 1988, ix–x). Hirsch sees the *Dictionary* as a first, tentative, unfinished attempt to chart this knowledge.

In a separate introduction, entitled “The Theory behind the Dictionary: Cultural Literacy and Education,” written by Hirsch alone, it becomes clear that he sees this body of common knowledge as essential for reading and learning. Without shared background knowledge, argues Hirsch, people cannot understand what they read and hear. Like classic liberals, Hirsch sees the ability to read and understand public discourse as the foundation of a democratic, prosperous society. He excoriates “multi-cultural antielitism” as an ironically paternalistic practice bound to continue the suffering of disadvantaged students who need to acquire cultural literacy to work their way out of their disadvantaged state (Hirsch, Kett, and Trefil 1988, xiv–xv). Here emerges the concept of “cultural capital” introduced by Bordieu (1984) and others, though Hirsch would not be caught uttering the ideas of so radical an intellectual. Still, the concept is the same; people need cultural capital to become socially mobile.

Most remarkable from the folklorist’s point of view is Hirsch’s creating sections of “Mythology and Folklore” and “Proverbs” (finally to the topic of this essay) early in the *Dictionary*, just following “The Bible.” By “Mythology and Folklore,” Hirsch means, it seems, stories of lasting significance. “For purposes of communication and solidarity in a culture,” writes Hirsch in the paragraph introducing this section, “myths are just as important as history” (1988, 27). He continues, “The myths that are shared by literate Americans are worldwide in their origins, and embrace both ancient and modern cultures” (p. 27). The mythological characters and stories in this section come from Greek, Roman, and British sources, with only “John Henry” and “Washington and the Cherry Tree” representing American folklore. For someone worried about the survival of American culture, Hirsch’s massive neglect of American materials (to say nothing of the odd choices of John Henry and the Parson Weems story) seems to contradict his announced intentions.

In an insightful chapter on “the problem of tradition” in American culture, particularly the “politics of tradition,” Bronner (1998, 67–68) notes how efforts like Hirsch’s lead inevitably to battles over “whose tradition?”—despite Schwartz’s confident claim that this question has been settled. The reader of Hirsch’s dictionaries of

literacy and Bennett’s (1993, 1995) books of “virtue” notes quite quickly the almost exclusively Western sources of the folklore reproduced for its universal wisdom. The reasoning seems to be (notwithstanding expressions, like Schwartz’s, for example, of appreciation for African American proverbs) that, since proverbs and the “old stories” express a universal wisdom, then we may as well use a body of folklore from Anglo-American traditions as our access.

The American folklorist is tempted to offer a catalogue of what characters and stories Hirsch *could have* included in this section of the *Dictionary*, many of which well might have bolstered the larger claims and intentions of the project, but let’s move on to the section in the *Dictionary* on “Proverbs,” since my article means to examine and extend Mieder’s and other folklorists’ careful research on the texts, textures, and contexts of people’s uses of proverbs to manage their social relations, allay anxiety, and persuade others to take some action.

“Proverbs represent the accumulated wisdom, prejudices, and superstitions of the human race,” writes Hirsch in the paragraph introducing the “Proverbs” section (1988, 46). He notes that the folk ideas expressed by proverbs “are often common to many nations” (he quotes the German version of “many hands make light work”), that part of the power of proverbs lies in the poetry of their expression (e.g., the proverb rhymes in German, “Viele Haende/Bringt’s gleich zu Ende”), and that the appropriateness of a proverb is wholly contextual, so that “Many hands make light work” speaks to some situations, while “Too many cooks spoil the broth” speaks to others. Hirsch argues that Americans need to know this body of common proverbs because people often say or write truncated versions, and the meaning will be unclear if the reader or listener does not know the full proverb. Hirsch also warns against necessarily believing proverbs (e.g., “Boys will be boys”); he just wants “to give everybody the chance to be an insider in American literate culture” (1988, 46).

Again, the folklorist reading these entries wonders why Hirsch and his fellow editors chose some proverbs and excluded others. The proverbs in *A First Dictionary of Cultural Literacy: What Our Children Need to Know* (1989), written for children, has an even shorter list of proverbs (of “lasting significance,” one presumes). There is no point in offering an extended list of proverbs he could have included, but let me make two points. First, given the goal of

uplifting the morality of America's children, why did Hirsch omit "Cheaters never prosper [or win]," a proverb I have something to say about later?

Second, I note that he misses completely one quality of proverbs that Geertz (1975, 26) says characterizes everyday knowledge—namely, its "earthiness," its sometimes-obscene quality, which helps pack its power. My mother was raised by her Scots-Irish grandmother in western Pennsylvania, and I remember from my childhood numerous proverbs my mother learned from Granny and used when appropriate. "Shit or get off the pot" was an all-purpose proverb meant to criticize indecision and urge action. There are many of these. One lovely example came from one of my university students in a folklore class. She recalled her father warning her just before dates that "A hard prick has no conscience," a proverb that made a powerful impression on her. Her adolescent boyfriend's father or friends might have offered him some advice from the other angle: "If she's old enough to bleed [i.e., menstruate], then she's old enough to breed [get pregnant]." In other words, avoid intercourse or use a condom.

You won't find these common proverbs in *The Dictionary of Cultural Literacy*. Hirsch gives us the Disneyfied version of proverbs, just as Disney gives us the Disneyfied version of European and American fairy tales and folktales. This is important to understand because whether or not the *Dictionary* has its intended influence depends a lot on how children and even adults acquire and use proverbs (or mythology and folklore, for that matter).

Because Hirsch, Bennett, and others put so much importance on the home and the school as sites where children and adolescents acquire the cultural literacy they need to participate knowledgeably in public discourse, to be comfortable "insiders" in American culture, it is worth asking this question: How do children actually acquire cultural competence in folklore and mythology? Narrowing this question even more to the genre of proverbs, is there any reason to believe that children acquire competence in using proverbs by reading dictionary entries on proverbs, writing the proverbs in copybooks, memorizing the proverbs, and showing adults that they can recite the proverbs from memory ("by heart," as the interesting vernacular phrase has it)? The children's folklorist's answer to this question leads, I think, to some bad news for Hirsch, Schwartz, and their colleagues.

“If at First You Don’t Succeed, Give Up . . .”

When, as a children’s folklorist, I look at the existing scholarship on proverbs, I am amazed to notice for the first time that proverbs really are not a children’s genre of everyday communication. Folklorists working on proverbs gather their materials from adults and printed or electronic sources created by and for adults. Some adolescent uses appear now and then (see the earlier proverbial advice about hard pricks and menstruating women), but judging by scholarship, proverbs seem exclusively adult in their uses and appeal.

Getting at this from the other direction, the scholarship by children’s folklorists leads one to draw the same conclusion. Look in vain in the usual places—e.g., Opie and Opie (1959), Bronner (1988), Sutton-Smith et al. (1999)—for children’s uses of proverbs. The only example I could find in Opie and Opie (1959, 137) was “finders keepers/losers weepers,” but (like some examples drawn from fieldwork later) such a proverbial sort of rhyme seems much more like an aggressive, combative claim—a taunt, really—than an offered bit of wisdom.

Moreover, children’s acquisition of competence in expressing oral and customary lore often depends on developmental forces and schedules. Young children, for example, are incompetent storytellers, jokers, and riddlers until they reach certain developmental stages, at which point they can perform competently, which is to say that they can perform like adults. Learning to play with language—a requisite skill for telling jokes and riddles competently—is an important developmental achievement. Similarly, the metaphorical elements of stories provide practice in moving competently between literal and figurative uses of language.

Psychologists and sociolinguists recognize these same elements in proverbs, observing how developmental stages coincide with the child’s ability to understand their metaphorical quality. Mieder points to that research in the book he and Deborah Holmes (2000) wrote describing their experiment in teaching proverbs to fourth graders. Mieder and Holmes developed their project in response to a Call for Proposals (CFP) from the John Templeton Foundation for projects that would “increase scholarly and pedagogical understanding of an approach to character education which involves the learning and employing of practical moral principles encapsulated in the form of maxims, proverbs,



aphorisms, and wise sayings” (Templeton Foundation CFP, quoted in Mieder and Holmes 2000, 7). Awarded a grant, Mieder and Holmes executed their thoughtfully designed experiment. Mieder provided the scholarly expertise on proverbs, chose the proverbs to be incorporated into the curriculum, and about twice monthly visited Holmes’s fourth-grade class, where he introduced some new proverbs, showed how they were used in oral settings, literature, and mass media (cartoons, advertising, etc.), and had, by his report, genuinely lively and fun conversations with these nine-year-olds about proverbs. Holmes and Mieder designed a series of classroom activities around proverbs, including having the students keep journals, write stories, draw illustrations, create puppet plays, design illustrative posters, and more.

Classroom experiments, of course, require some assessments of the “added value” of the educational exercises, and the authors used a range of qualitative and quantitative measurements (standardized tests) to see how many of the proverbs were now part of the children’s familiar knowledge and what the children thought was the result of the project. The authors were quite satisfied with the experiment and published their book to encourage other teachers to incorporate proverbs into their instruction.

Mieder seems well aware of the pitfalls of this approach. In an earlier essay (1994), he explores the notion that in any given society there may be a “minimum” body of proverbs familiar to a large portion of the population. In reviewing the limited research on the familiarity of proverbs to American students, he finds pretty discouraging results, and he calls for broader, interdisciplinary cooperation in establishing questionnaires and sampling procedures that will help establish empirically the minimum body of widely shared proverbs in a society. Meanwhile, Mieder (1994, 308–9) notes that the “cultural literacy” project of Hirsch and his colleagues seems to be getting at the same notion of a minimum shared knowledge members of a society need to have. He comments that the *Cultural Literacy* (1987) book “added a controversial appendix,” providing an early, tentative list of “What Literate Americans Know,” a list later expanded into the *Dictionary of Cultural Literacy* (1988). Mieder is troubled by Hirsch’s failure to explain how he arrived at his list of “265 essential proverbs” and his lack of any evidence about how frequently these proverbs have appeared. Mieder faces Hirsch’s problem in his own scholarship,



he acknowledges, whenever he creates lists of proverbs for dictionaries or other uses, as in the educational experiment he launched with Holmes. Mieder (1994, 312) holds out hope that “scientific demographic research” will answer, finally, the question both he and Hirsch are posing—namely, can we identify the minimum body of proverbs that we think Americans should know?

While I think the matter of common knowledge is a plenty interesting question, one worth asking in relation to Wallace’s ideas about what it means to share culture, for example, the troubling complication I bring to this discussion arises out of the fact that I have done extensive fieldwork with preadolescent and adolescent boys in the natural setting of their summer encampments as a Boy Scout troop (Mechling 2001). Amazingly, we do not have a lot of ethnographic studies of children’s folklore in these natural settings, but what scholarship exists suggests strongly that kids do not use proverbs and proverblike expressions in their everyday lives. In my twenty-five years of fieldwork with the troop I studied, I *never once* heard a boy (ages eleven to seventeen) use a proverb. It might have happened out of my hearing, but I doubt it. The scoutmaster and other adults, for that matter, used proverbs and proverbial sayings only sparingly, and in any case the kids did not seem to add those proverbs to their repertoire of folk speech. Bronner (1988 and personal communications) has not found children using proverbs, nor do proverbs come up in the standard collection of essays on children’s folklore (Sutton-Smith et al. 1999). Nor did the ethnographers Fine (1987) and Goodwin (1990) discover any proverbs in their fieldwork with kids. Look as I may, I simply cannot find in these standard ethnographies of children’s folk cultures any examples of children’s spontaneous uses of proverbs. Just about every other genre is represented except proverbs.

So why do children eagerly appropriate the genres of stories, riddles, jokes, puns, and other wordplay and still not show much interest in proverbs? The answer, I think, lies in the authority of the proverb. Children’s folklore resists adult power. Children use their folklore to manage their own psychological anxieties and social relations within the friendship group, including power relations. But children also use folklore to undermine adult power, very often in the form of parody. Mieder notes that “proverbs often are too rigorous in their moral or ethical message” and that they

have been “quoted too often as ultimate wisdom,” which gives rise to parodic versions of proverbs, “twisted wisdom” and “antiproverbs,” as Mieder and Litovkina (1999) call them. Some of these joke forms of proverbs—like “Wellerisms”—require wordplay that is probably beyond most children’s and even adolescents’ abilities. Other joke forms of the proverb—such as changing just a letter or word (Mieder 1996, 600) may be easier for young people to understand.

Thus, I suspect but cannot prove that kids as young as eleven or twelve probably can understand and appreciate joke versions of proverbs, such as “If at first you don’t succeed, give up. There’s no sense being a fool about it” (a parody version of “If at first you don’t succeed, try, try again”), and I have seen Boy Scout patrols create long skits with a parody of a proverb as their punch lines, such as “People who live in grass houses shouldn’t stow thrones” (a parody of the proverb, “People who live in glass houses shouldn’t throw stones”). Even early adolescents enjoy this sort of punning and wordplay. But recognizing that adults sometimes pontificate with proverbs does not mean that children actually believe and acquire the proverbs as part of their strategic repertoire for communicating with their peers.

Hirsch is right that kids would not understand the humor of the parodies and joke versions if they did not have some previous experience with the original proverbs. But what is gained for “character education” if the kids learn to recognize the proverbs and immediately make fun of them, thereby draining them of their power as moral advice?

So Hirsch, Schwartz, and other like-minded teachers and parents who want a curriculum explicitly teaching proverbs, maxims, and other folklore genres for the character development of children have things wrong in two ways. First, divorcing proverbs from their everyday, performance contexts robs them of any meaning. As Mieder observes, “Proverbs in collections are almost meaningless or dead” (1996, 597); they need to be acquired in living performance. The project he and Holmes designed tried to provide kids with experiences in living performance, but the problem I see is that the children’s performances were always for adults. I have no doubt that the children in Holmes’s class thoroughly enjoyed the curriculum built around proverbs, but we still lack evidence (apart from self-report, notoriously unreliable in such cases) that

the children actually acquired a living repertoire of proverbs that they used in their everyday lives. I think these children performed well and wisely to please the adults, but I am still skeptical about what happened away from that classroom context.

Second, even when kids do acquire proverbs, they tend to use them in parody or joke forms and not the ways adults want them to. In this regard, proverbs resemble the Pledge of Allegiance and other formulas that adults take very seriously. Until they are developmentally ready to understand the words and meanings of the phrases, children merely memorize the pledge and often get things wrong. Once they are old enough to actually understand the words, they create parody versions they recite to each other (usually out of the earshot of adults). Children’s folklorists find parody versions of many “sacred” texts, from “The Battle Hymn of the Republic” to the “The Star-Spangled Banner.” The moral seriousness of proverbs, as Mieder says, puts them in this class of texts that adults take seriously and children parody to take at least a little power away from the adults.

If those advocating character education through the memorization of moral maxims are willing to take recall and recognition as a sign of good character—an educational strategy not unlike teaching for the standardized tests in schools—then I suppose they have improved some children’s characters in this narrow sense. If, rather, we consider good character to mean more than the mere recitation of moral maxims, to mean that a child or adolescent makes wise choices when confronted with a complex moral dilemma, then I believe we have to look elsewhere for the ways children actually acquire everyday morality for living.

### “Cheaters Never Prosper”

There is one other problem with treating proverbs as the cache of cultural knowledge and wisdom—sometimes they lie. Conspicuously absent from Hirsch’s dictionaries of cultural literacy, both the dictionary for adults and the one for children, is the well-known “Cheaters never prosper” (also “Cheaters never win”). This proverb and a very few others—“Sticks and stone may break my bones/But words will never hurt me” and “finders keepers/losers weepers,” for example—are the exception to my earlier generalization that children don’t use proverbs in their own folk groups except in their parody and joking forms. Children do use proverbs

like “Cheaters never win,” but the contexts do not suggest that the children view these proverbs as folk wisdom. Quite the contrary, children use these proverbs like charms meant to ward off a bad eventuality or taunts to make another child unhappy. One child telling another in a midst of a game that “Cheaters never prosper” is not uttering a truth but an almost desperate hope in the face of reality: cheaters actually prosper quite nicely in the world, judging from most evidence. Similarly, the child who responds to hurtful words with “Sticks and stones . . .” is really hurt and merely trying to undermine the satisfaction the hateful kid is enjoying.

Children do acquire a moral or ethical system to use in everyday life, but they don’t learn such a system by memorizing the Ten Commandments or twelve points of the Scout Law or a list of proverbs. Those who have engaged in fieldwork actually studying the everyday behavior of children in their natural settings find that their ethical behavior is very situational. Most children come to understand that circumstances and contexts affect how one follows a general principle to always tell the truth, for example, despite the moral of the Parson Weems fanciful story about George Washington and the cheery tree. Making children memorize proverbs like “Cheaters never prosper” or “Cheaters only hurt themselves” invites cynicism. Surveys of student cheating regularly find little difference in cheating rates between religious and secular schools (Mechling 1988), and a series of cheating scandals at the United States service academies—the army’s at West Point, the navy’s at Annapolis, and the air force’s at Colorado Springs—reveals that even the most rigid and traditional of school honor codes are not much defense against highly motivated cheaters.

So, as I said at the outset of this inquiry, advocates of character training who want to enlist traditional folklore, like proverbs, in the project seem ignorant about the nature of children’s folk cultures. These cultures are very rich (even if short on proverbs), and they got that way not because adults provided them with traditional folklore and customs but because they are dynamic, creative systems that appropriate materials from everywhere. No symptom in children that adults see as evidence of a crisis in character—from the most horrible events like the Columbine shootings to the most mundane gestures like a dirty joke told to shock parents—will be addressed by character education created by adults for children. Even if there is a character crisis among

America’s children—a claim I doubt very much—a better approach would be modeling good character in our own adult lives. That we cannot even agree as adults about what constitutes good character possibly makes us poor preachers to children. Maybe the best course is to heed the wisdom of a traditional American proverb: Leave well enough alone.

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# The Proverb and Fetishism in American Advertisements

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Anand Prahlad

In 1977, Mieder and Mieder called our attention to the uses of proverbs in American advertisements. Undoubtedly, many of the same observations they make about proverbs are still applicable twenty years later. For example, they note that proverbs are “the most popular folklore item used by Madison Avenue” (1977, 309). A perusal of contemporary magazine advertising reveals this is still the case. The Mieders also mention some of the reasons for this, including the brevity of the genre, the poetic qualities of proverbs that draw attention to them and make them stick in the reader’s mind, and their ability to inspire “trustworthiness in the advertised product by awakening positive traditional feelings in the consumer” (p. 309). They discuss further the “particular love for changing proverbs” (p. 310) that heightens the appeal of the advertisement. For example, the proverb, “Different strokes for different folks,” becomes in a Volkswagen advertisement, “Different Folks for different folks.” Just as exciting as the insights provided by Mieder and Mieder’s article are the possibilities that their study invites for more theoretical analysis of proverbs in advertising.

A focus on folklore in the world of advertising takes one immediately into an interdisciplinary realm, where elements of popular culture, economics, politics, gender, and race become as important to our understanding of how the traditional items function as the folklore itself. Furthermore, an actual survey of proverbs in magazine advertisements leads to some general observations that, in turn, suggest specific analytical directions. It becomes apparent, for instance, that some theorizing about the nature and content of advertisements is necessary to frame a

discussion of proverbs within this particular context. For instance, what is the relationship between advertisements and the economic system out of which they arise? What societal values and social issues are reflected in advertisements, and what commentaries on these issues are offered? As for proverbs, what roles do they play in these commentaries, and what further insights can be gained into the relationship between elements of traditional and commercial culture through a study of proverbs in advertisements?

I would like to advance the idea that American advertising operates as a system of signs reflecting what can be called the “religion of capitalism.” I am using the term *religion* loosely to refer to a system of beliefs, rituals, and dogma that guides behavior, offers answers to the most profound philosophical questions of life, and provides a structure in time and space that helps to order existence on both cosmic and day-to-day levels. Within this religion, the god is capital, and the focus is ardently this-worldly. There is an extreme emphasis on material wealth, accumulation of objects, and an ongoing demonstration of power.

Tenets of this system, in many cases, are antithetical to those of Christianity, the proclaimed religion of American society. For example, material wealth takes priority over matters of the soul, and objects are worshipped as passionately as the heavenly Judeo-Christian God. This is evidenced by the amount of time devoted to acquiring objects in comparison to the time devoted to ensuring a seat in heaven. Rather than extolling humility, this system celebrates displays of power and self-aggrandizement. Hence, fame and being in the limelight become almost as important as being wealthy, and those who have “made it”—meaning, basically, have become wealthy, but also including connotations of being coldhearted, ruthless, and single-minded—are celebrated as heroes (e.g., Donald Trump).

Ultimately, popular culture feeds off of the public’s seemingly insatiable obsession with stars and stardom. In spite of the public protest sparked by John Lennon’s comment that the Beatles were more popular than Jesus, one must acknowledge it contains an element of truth. It is interesting that lately such icons are offered roles closer to that of priests with power to induct initiates into the inner circles of their domain (e.g., the recent reality television series, *The Apprentice*). But just as major religions have historically



felt compelled to signal their conquest of territories by literally or ideologically flying their flags and banners, so, too, does the system of capitalism seem obligated to exhibit its dominance constantly.

Advertising is one among many other forms of exhibition. The most fundamental reason for advertisements is to generate sales, to get consumers to spend their money; however, their function extends beyond the behavioral realm and reaches into the region of beliefs and values. Those invested in the buying habits of consumers are not just interested in their behaviors; they are equally determined to influence their value system because the consumer who reasons that he/she needs a new car because the old one is no longer functional is nowhere near as desirable as the person who is convinced that he/she needs a new car because it will somehow magically transform him/her into someone else.

Drawing on the idea of a capitalist religion, I consider advertisements as *ad/altars*. The terminology suggests a number of important points. First, it proposes that advertisements sell not just the commodities depicted but also a complete system of values. Furthermore, the term forwards the notion that as visual displays, advertisements provide us with inventories of those objects that are most valued within the society and have the greatest symbolic meaning within the capitalist system. Additionally, the term recognizes the religious overtones characterizing the way in which consumers relate to commodity culture. In other words, there is a kind of reverence not just for specific commodities but also for the system that places such an emphasis on buying power and an endless acquisition of objects. There is also a disquieting passion among American consumers that often mirrors what one expects to find among religious devotees. Hence, advertisements can be read as paying homage to revered objects, persons, and ideas, as visual displays of icons and power objects. Finally, the term signifies the complexity of relationships between the specific items within an advertisement and their potential to reflect the dynamics among groups and social forces operating within American society.

### The Fetish: From Freud to Marx to Advertising

It is at this juncture that the concept of the fetish becomes useful, and I can begin to explore the roles of proverbs within the

context of advertisements. The term *fetish* here encompasses the core elements of this phenomenon from a number of diverse discourses, including psychoanalysis, cultural studies, gender and Marxist theory, and anthropological writings. Elements common to all of these are summarized by McClintock, who writes, “Fetishes can be seen as the displacement onto an object (or person) of contradictions that the individual cannot resolve at a personal level. . . . By displacing power onto the fetish, then manipulating the fetish, the individual gains symbolic control over what might otherwise be terrifying ambiguities” (1995, 184). Thus, “fetishes can be any object under the sun,” including objects from the natural or manufactured worlds, items from private or public spheres—for instance, a locket, photograph, etc., or nationalistic and religious signs like flags, crowns, maps, crosses, etc. (p. 185). The idea of a fetish as a “power object” is common to most uses of the term, whatever the particulars may be. But perhaps more important are the reasons that make the fetish necessary or that influence the choice of this particular object over others.

Fetishism can be viewed as a response to trauma, particularly one that presents incongruities that are difficult to rationalize or resolve. In Freudian theory, the young man is traumatized by the discovery that his mother does not have a penis—by the overwhelming presence of her biological difference—and thus seizes upon an object as a substitute for the female genitalia. The particulars of Freud’s scenario aside, the essential points are 1) the fetish functions as a symbolic signifier of what is desired but too overwhelming to confront or interact with directly (thus, the fetish negotiates between the imagined and the real, enabling the fetishizer to have a sense of control over that which terrifies him); and 2) At the core of fetishistic impulse are both trauma and a potentially disabling sense of loss. The fetish object is thus compensatory. This is best seen by comparing an alternate mechanism, *melancholia*, which is also a response to trauma. In the case of melancholia, the individual suffers a paralyzing ennui, whereas fetishists continue to be high-performance individuals with no noticeable signs of social dysfunction. For this reason, some scholars have lauded the merits of the fetish impulse, considering it a creative solution to potentially crippling events as well as a critical means for understanding the modern age. One author suggests that “fetishism is at the heart of modernity” (McCallum

1999, xi) and that “fetishism is a form of subject-object relation that informs us about basic strategies of defining, desiring, and knowing subjects and objects in Western culture” (pp. xi–xii).

Even the term “commodity fetish” from Marxist theory relies upon the same basic notions. The disjunction or irresolute elements from the Marxist perspective are the use value of objects versus their market values. While the use value is determined simply by factors such as the cost of production, the market value depends on a diverse set of social factors. The use value of a music CD may be fifty cents; however, its market value may be twenty-five dollars. Factors such as the celebrity status of the singer, the age of the CD, and the reviews it garners influence its market value as along with specific group-determined values. For instance, it may be fashionable among particular groups to wear certain articles of clothing, and doing so may be critical to one’s status within these groups. Hence, the inflated market value of these articles of clothing bears little relation to the use value. Although Marxist theorists deemphasize the psychological level, the intersection between this approach and the perspectives already discussed is apparent. For example, capitalist societies have obsessions with particular objects—commodity fetishes. These objects are invested with “magical” power; they negotiate between disparate realities and, arguably, function as signifiers for what is desired but also feared.

As confounding as the concept of the fetish may seem, and in spite of the diverse nuances ascribed to the term by differing fields of study, a fetish comes down to a power object, an object with which an individual or group is obsessed and one that becomes a symbolic Band-Aid for an extreme emotional wound. Although the stereotypical image of fetishes is sexually related, the concept extends far beyond the sexual realm. Stereotypically, we may imagine someone who cannot achieve sexual function without the presence of a particular object, for instance, a hairbrush. The hairbrush then becomes simultaneously a sign of the man’s inability to confront the overwhelming and terrifying difference of the female body and his method for negotiating this terror to have at least some kind of interaction and experience a degree of sexual pleasure. In the case of proverbs, a shy and introverted child may become fixated on a particular proverb spoken by a parent and use the proverb as a method for interacting with

peers. At the point when the child can only interact with peers if he/she uses the proverb, it can be considered fetishistic. As with the man and his hairbrush, the child uses the proverb as a tool to negotiate between his fear and his desire to be close to peers. The proverb becomes a power object for the child, something that he/she relishes and holds closely and obsessively to traverse dangerous emotional territory. Similarly, at the point when someone, hypothetically, can *only* fly on an airplane if he/she has brought a lucky nickel, or can *only* socialize with others if he/she is wearing a crucifix, then these objects have become fetishistic. Fetishes console and empower; they make their bearers fertile and virile, and without them the fetishist is impotent, inarticulate, and disempowered by an overwhelming sense of inadequacy and even confusion about personal identity relative to others.

My contention, then, is that to the extent that ad/altars contain inventories of objects with which Americans are obsessed as well as provide insights into the relationships among these items, they offer abundant glimpses into common American fetishes. As William Pietz notes, objects carry meaning far beyond their pragmatic uses: "In postmodern society (so it is said), it is no longer the material use of products that is the object of our consumption so much as their commodified meanings" (1993, 124). In fact, if one of our goals in looking at proverbs in advertisements is to understand better the diverse elements present in ads, I cannot think of a more appropriate theoretical model for looking at these proverbs than through the lens of fetishism.

Because proverbs occur in contexts I have identified as fetishistic ad/altars, this essay will investigate the relationship between proverbs and these other elements. I will endeavor to show that the fetishistic display of ad/altars typically reveals anxieties and power issues relating to the dominant, white, male relationship with women, nature, and minorities, and to explore ways in which proverbs play roles in conveying messages about these issues and relationships. Through my analysis, I hope to demonstrate that proverbs are far more than simply whimsical, charming catchphrases that attract attention and invite humorous and familial responses from consumers. While they do do these things, proverbs also function on a less apparent level as ad/altars to reflect ongoing struggles with gender, class, and race.

A number of elements immediately become apparent from a survey of magazine advertisements that include proverbs. One is the extent to which women's bodies are fetishized. As consumers, we are so accustomed to the sexualized images of women as integral components of advertising that we practically take them for granted. As the proverbial adage says, "Sex sells." But a close inspection of advertisements reveals some of the more specific elements of this commercial truism. It is apparent that young, seemingly available, white women are one of the dominant fetishes in American advertisements. This suggests a sense of impotence in the absence of such women, and their role in the white, male imagination as objects that negotiate between fears and desires. What then may some of those fears and desires be? Some possible fears include an inability to enjoy intimacy and connection with women, men, nature, and "othered" groups, nationally and internationally; and the desires are to actually have such relationships. Hence, another fetish revealed in advertisements is the image of women, rather than a real woman. There is an overlap between advertisements and pornography as an idealized fantasy, embodied in photographic images; both become the means of obtaining satisfaction. As such, advertising becomes a gateway to dreams, two of the most pervasive, popular fantasies being wealth and sexual pleasure (Williams 1991, 221).

But beyond the idea that sexualized images of women constitute a pervasive fetish in American advertising, it's clear that ads also contain a plethora of specific, commonly identified male fetishes. Fetishized female body parts include legs, feet, hair, lips, breasts, necks, ears, backs, shoulders, navels, bellies, and buttocks. In addition to body parts, fetishized articles of clothing and materials are common (e.g., jewelry, shoes, silks, furs, undergarments, and gloves). Although I have found no instances of corsets in advertisements—an item that has been described as "one of the most important fetish fashions" (Steele 1996, 58)—the popular aesthetic of the small waist that dominates images of women in American mass culture appears to allude to this fetish.

While my argument is not that every man who views or creates advertisements, is in the literal sense, a fetishist, I am suggesting that objects commonly known to be obsessions of extreme fetishists are key elements in ads. Furthermore, I am proposing that, although these objects may not be necessary for consumers

to achieve sexual satisfaction, they are absolutely required to give them a kind of psychological pleasure. This pleasure derives from possessing these objects and the wealth, social status, and other signifiers of upper-class membership (either through fantasy or symbolically) that accrues to those purchasing the objects. As Steele notes, “Although fetishism narrowly defined appears to be distinctly a minority practice, a *degree* of fetishism appears to be extremely common among men—normative, in other words, if not ‘normal’” (1996, 12). Hence, it seems safe to assert that advertising is largely a male medium.

### Proverbs and Ad/Altars

Having discussed some of the common fetishes in ad/altars, as well as the ways they reveal psychological and social issues, I turn now to uses of proverbs in advertising. Overall, proverbs reinforce the messages communicated by the advertisements, which seems obvious, given that the major reason for the advertisement is to sell particular commodities and values. In the Mieder and Mieder (1977) essay referred to earlier, a number of reasons are given for why proverbs are effective tools in advertising (e.g., their brevity, familiarity, and association with tradition and wisdom), but they are also successful because they rhetorically negotiate between the real and the imagined. Abrahams (1968) describes this characteristic of proverbs by saying they address a current conflict by presenting a hypothetical resolution. Thus, the ad/altar is a negotiation site. As I have mentioned, one negotiation is between the fetishist’s fears and his desires. Another is between the fetishist and the consumer, and this happens on a number of levels. For example, the advertiser/fetishist is attempting to entice the consumer to enter the gateway of dreams, to adopt the advertiser’s values and, at least symbolically, to share in the wealth and lifestyle of those at the top of the food chain. He is trying to convince consumers that what they *could* have is better than what they *do* have, that who they *could* be is preferable to who they *are*.

Given the prevailing context for American advertising, one predominant function of ad/altars is to negotiate between capitalist and Christian value systems, and the proverb is a key element in this mediation. While advertisers are driven by capitalist values, they understand that effective advertising must be careful not to

appear dismissive or critical of Christian ideals. The negotiation is a tricky one. Advertisers must anticipate the extent to which extolling capitalist values is permitted by an audience that at least publicly subordinates that value system to Christianity. The need for coded signifiers is great, both for those who nod toward traditional, conservative values and those who proselytize capitalism. When we consider what some of the values of capitalism are, the tension between these two systems becomes abundantly clear. Within the capitalist system, for instance, making money is the most important value. Thus, humanitarian values typically associated with religion, religious mandates drawn from such sources as the Ten Commandments, notions about goodness, fairness, and oneness, and more culture-specific notions that emerged out of American's puritanical roots are all dismissed in the interest of amassing and exhibiting wealth. The proverb is one of the most reliable and persistent markers of traditional, conservative values and a humanitarian and Christian attitude appearing in American advertising. At the same time, it must assist the advertiser's most important mission—the perpetuation of the capitalist system.

While many ad/altars offer abundant material for extended analysis of proverbs in advertisements, I would like to consider initially a few that demonstrate simply the close connection between proverbs and fetishes. One such ad consists almost completely of a woman's feet. She is apparently sitting down, wearing fishnet stockings, with one shoe on and the other shoe off. Beside her feet is a picture of an American Express card, and across one foot is the expression, "Two is better than one." The central theme of foot, shoe, and stocking fetishes is quite evident here. Another example contains a full-body photo of a woman in high heels, wearing low-cut blue jeans and a shirt that leaves her stomach area bare. Her hand is on her hip, which is jutting out provocatively to the side. Beside the woman in huge red letters are the words, "WAIST NOT," followed by a paragraph of smaller print and a picture of a Triple Lean diet-formula container. The ad clearly draws our attention again to the shoe/foot fetish, as well as to fetishes of bellies/navels, large breasts, and small waists that evoke practices of corsetry. A Cointreau liquor ad consists of a full body shot of a woman holding liquor bottles in both hands, dressed in an orange peel that covers only her breasts and pubic area. The proverbial text is contained in the line, "Be Cointreauversial to



the beat of a different drummer,” and the fetishes are the same as the ones in the previous example, with the exception of legs and feet. Examples of ad/altars coupling proverbs and fetishes are undeniably commonplace, but what are some of the more complex meanings in these advertisements?

One advertisement appears in *Penthouse*, a men’s skin magazine that probably ranks next to *Playboy* in its efforts to appeal to a highly educated, professional, male readership. Hence, the magazine features fiction, essays, and interviews by (and with) acclaimed authors, artists, and others of note. The advertisement under discussion consists of a side view of a woman lying on her back, her hips and buttocks raised by her hands, with her legs in the air. She is lying on a white sheepskin, wearing silver stilettos and her pink underpants, which are presumably in the process of being removed (they are almost through one foot and near the ankle of the other). She wears red lipstick and has red nails; pearl earrings, bracelet, and necklace; and a purple silk robe that covers only her shoulder. Her face is turned toward the camera, and her eyes are closed and her mouth open, suggesting that she is uttering sounds that may accompany sexual activity. On the left top of the page, against the black background that covers the entire page, in large, capital letters and the same pink color as the woman’s underwear is the phrase, “PENTHOUSE BENDS OVER BACKWARDS.” Below this phrase in white lettering is a blurb touting the wonderful things about the magazine, and a box to fill in basic information if one desires to subscribe.

A number of fetishes coalesce in this ad to convey multiple meanings. For example, all the articles of dress, as well as each of the woman’s body parts, are common American fetishes. The proverbial expression is connected most obviously to the underwear fetish by its lettering sharing the identical pink color. The positioning on the page encourages the eye to move at an angle downward from the proverb to the underwear, and down the woman’s leg to her bottom, making the proverb meaning difficult to miss. The reader is invited to take his pick of fetishes because the ad conveys the message that the magazine offers fetishes for all tastes. As a literary counterpart to the panties, the proverb conveys to the reader that, true to the values of the capitalist system, traditional culture is also commodified, eroticized, and as willingly at the disposal of the male voyeur as is the naked



woman. These messages about the proverb are reinforced in the accompanying text through such language as “*hard-hitting* investigative journalism that *gets to the truth*”; “fiction that *absorbs the mind*”; “fashion that reflects a unique sense of style”; “satire that *bites*”; and “women that *inspire the imagination to run wild*.”

Through these descriptions, the reader is depicted as an intellectual male who has a fashion sense and a proper reverence for tradition, and is sexually aggressive and entitled to “cut loose” through leisurely exhibitions of dominance over women and nature. Interestingly, the image invoked does not vary too greatly from that of a colonial explorer. In a clever twist, the magazine identifies itself as someone submissive, who “bends over backwards,” an allusion that verbally conjures up a servant and visually evokes notions of a *derrière*. In either case, the proverb helps create the sense that the reader is in charge while the magazine is, like the woman depicted, at his service. “Being a man,” “taking charge,” or “taking” the woman become equated with spending money, with subscribing to the magazine. The proverb works in tandem with the visual image to entice the reader to enter the gates of the dream.

Many other ad/altars routinely include these same messages, and the proverbs in them function in much the same fashion. A Liz Claiborne ad depicts a blonde woman sitting on a beach with a crystal blue ocean in the background. She wears a short-sleeved shirt and a pair of shorts, both on the conservative side, and her head is turned as if she is looking out to sea, her neck open and exposed. The sand where she sits looks more like a sheepskin than real sand. There are white clouds in the sky behind her, with one small patch of blue, and a white sandbar. At the very bottom of the page are the words, “Live for the moments: LIZ CLAI-BORNE.” While the ad/altar plays down sexualized messages, it does not avoid them. The message conveyed is that women need not flaunt their sexual appeal; in fact, even in the midst of the most sexualized contexts, they should maintain a measure of modesty. Hence, the voyeur is invited to be more refined, to focus on fetishes such as the neck, arms, and bare feet and remember that “she,” the white woman, remains an angelic character in the master narrative.

As Dyer writes, this representation is consistent with the use of light and whiteness in ancient European and American visual art:

The angelically glowing white woman is an extreme representation, precisely because it is an idealization. It reached its apogee towards the end of the nineteenth century and especially in three situations of heightened perceived threat to the hegemony of whiteness. British ideological investment in race categories increased in response to spectacular resistance to its Empire. . . . The white woman as angel was in these contexts both the symbol of what virtuousness and the last word in the claim that what made whites special as a race was their non-physical, spiritual, indeed ethereal qualities (1997, 127).

Through the image of the pristine seaside, the messages of white, and upper-class, privilege are conveyed. The proverb, which is a form of command, invites the working class and nonwhite consumer to experience the peace and calmness depicted and reminds the consumer for whom the image is already a reality to revel in her privilege. More present here than in the preceding example is the suggestion that a beachside image can function as fetishistically as the image of a white woman. Just as the scene becomes a fetishized reflection of anxieties arising from a nostalgic longing for not just a place but also a time removed from the pressures and horrors of modern life, the traditionalness of the proverb becomes an element in this fantasy.

A third altar also alludes to leisure-time play and carries many of the same meanings. In this ad/altar for Jantzen, a tall white woman in a bathing suit poses against the background of a lush waterfall. She is perhaps thirty-five and wears a pink head wrap, a one-piece bathing suit with bright pink flowers and green leaves and pink slippers, and holds a towel or beachwear of the same material as her bathing suit. At the bottom of the altar is a black box with the words "SHAPE insurance," the two words separated by what seems to be the shape of a woman's body with a classic, hourglass figure. The small waist is exaggerated in the logo figure, recalling some of the extreme instances of corsetry in the annals of fetishism. Below the logo are the words, "When the suit fits, wear it." This altar offers a third variation on the common theme. The woman here is more sexualized than in the second example, but less than in the first. The focus is on her very long legs, which are positioned the way models in fashion shows stand, with one leg in front of the other, slightly bent. Also like fashion models,

she has her hand on her hip, one shoulder turned slightly toward the camera, emphasizing her shoulders and neck.

The proverb on this altar can be read in a number of ways. The most obvious is that if a woman is lucky enough to fit one of Jantzen's suits, she should flaunt it (the suit and her body). But this message is complicated by other elements encoded into the altar, for metaphorically, the suit includes whiteness, a thin figure, and class privilege. Hence, the proverb takes on the commanding tone of the previous example, giving women the imperative to flaunt their literal and metaphorical attributes. In other words, one should not feel guilty or bashful about having a body that inspires voyeurs and fetishists, nor should one hesitate to exhibit one's political, racial, and economic advantage over less-fortunate groups of people. At the same time, the proverb conveys a strong message that women should accept their roles as fetishized objects—*suit*, in this case, being equated to *role* within the power system.

Two additional ad/altars advertising diamonds further illustrate these points. In addition to the fetishistic aspects of proverbs in the previous examples, the ones in these two ad/altars more specifically negotiate between capitalist and Christian values. In the first example, a tall woman leans provocatively against a giant perfume bottle, her hands on her hips, again in the exaggerated pose of a fashion model. She is wearing an elegant black dress that reveals her legs and her chest, arms, and shoulders; she also has on long black gloves and black stilettos that tie around her ankles. Around her wrist is a diamond bracelet, and an enormously thick diamond necklace (reminiscent of the necklaces worn by women in certain African tribes to stretch their necks) adorns her neck; in addition, she is holding what seems to be another jeweled necklace in her hand. She stares directly into the camera, and beside her head is written, "Woman cannot live by diamonds alone." At the bottom of the page, below the perfume bottle is "BILL BLASS, PERFUME FOR WOMEN: at the Ultima II counter."

The juxtaposition of the original proverb (which suggests the importance of attending to one's spiritual life as well as one's material needs) and the version here (which emphasizes material extravagance) captures diametrically opposed perspectives. However, through the creative manipulation of the proverb and

its proximity to the visual image, the consumer is more apt to be lulled by the familiar ring of the expression into the fantasy world of the altar than be disturbed by its message. Upon further scrutiny, however, one must ask, "What can possibly be equated to spiritual riches if diamonds are merely 'bread'?" The answer supplied by the ad—perfume—elevates the sensory world of scents to the level of spiritual rapture. The ostentatious celebration of material wealth here is particularly disturbing when we consider the source of the diamonds and the colonial context in which the Western world came to own most of the diamonds that it has. Diamonds are inherently exoticized, not only because of their innate natural qualities but because they are colored by the social and political contexts out of which they become our property—they are literally extracted from the bowels of the earth by dark and sweaty hands. One may read the proverb as, "A white woman cannot live solely on the appropriated riches of colonized people—diamonds; she must also have those things that are derived from the white man's ingenuity and refined taste—perfume."

The second ad/altar advertises diamonds by Friedman's and consists of a close-up photo of a white woman's face, drawing special attention to her eyes and lips. Her skin has a soft, filtered glow and appears more olive colored than white. She has dark eyebrows and eyeliner and an inviting, romantic smile. In the foreground are three fingers of her hand, lighted to make them whiter. On one of the fingers is a large diamond ring. Across one of her cheeks, just below her eyes, is the phrase, "You have to see it to believe it," and at the bottom of the page in larger print: "The Lovecut Diamond: Twice the size, four times the sparkle, half the price."

The question that the proverb invites here is "What is *it*?" for certainly this altar, like the others, is advertising more than just the commodity. The woman becomes as much or more the object of the gaze and focus of the advertisement than the diamond, and she is no less a fetish than the Aunt Jemima on the cereal box (see Deck, 2001). One clear subject here is the hidden "jewel" of white womanhood that is teasingly alluded to in the proverb and the descriptive text that follows. Both the diamond and the proverb are cast as fetishes negotiating between this irresistible jewel and the fetishist's relentless desire for it. The ad/altar furthermore comments on the institution of marriage, and as such,

implicitly involves Christianity. Here the sacredness of the marriage bond—depicted through the placement of the diamond ring—is juxtaposed with the extravagant display of material wealth. The ad seems to be conveying the message that marriage is about the material symbols, whether those symbols are read literally as the diamond or metaphorically as the jewel of white womanhood.

Another kind of ad/altar where the commodity by its very nature seems to conflict with Christian values is liquor advertising. Liquor falls, by some standards, automatically into the realm of sin and evokes images of sexuality that run counter to conservative Christian values. Liquor ads, which are among the most male-oriented types, promote partying and glorify male privilege. Two such ads emphasize the idea that men should ritualistically celebrate their hedonistic impulses, which generally involves rites that reinforce the objectification and commodification of women. A José Cuervo tequila ad/altar illustrates these points. The altar contains a large image of the upper half of a smiling, young blonde woman's body against a white background. She is dressed in a shirt that exposes her arms, parts of her chest, and her neck. At the bottom of the ad is a sea of yellow liquid (tequila), a bottle of tequila, and the words in large letters, "Viva Cuervo." The proverb is written in yellow, like the tequila, across the chest and arms of the young woman. It reads, "All work and no play is totally missing the point."

This revised proverb offers important insights into the capitalist system being celebrated. What, one may ask, is meant by "work" and "play" within this ideological context? The restricted definition of work being alluded to involves man's obligatory service as a labor drone in the capitalist hive. It is this labor that certifies one's claim to manhood. Play refers specifically to activities that may be grouped under the heading "partying." Thus, the ad/altar positions the advertiser as someone who believes that enjoying life, rather than making money, is "the point" of it all. More specifically, partying with a young, sexy blonde woman is the point. This message is driven home by the pastiche of fetish imagery—the angelic, sexy, eager-to-please, young white woman and the bottle of tequila. The proverb gives a nod to the Christian work ethic by suggesting that work is, in fact, important and one should engage in it most of the time. At the same time, the proverb gives license for one to step outside of that ethic and do so

by engaging in behaviors condemned by Christian conservatives: drinking and casual sex.

A second liquor ad/altar positions the bottle in exactly the same spot on the page, at the bottom, right corner. Against a red background is a black-and-white photograph on the left-hand side of the page. In the photograph, a blonde woman in a black thong is jumping out of a cake while a group of men smile broadly and cheer. One gets the impression that this may be a bachelor party, an occasion when this ritual is often enacted. There are eight men; one is African American, and the other seven are white. One of the smiling men in front is holding a garter presumably thrown by the woman. Surrounding the photograph are very large, oversized letters that read, "A PICTURE IS WORTH A THOUSAND WORDS, AND THESE GUYS WILL DENY EVERY SINGLE ONE." The proverb operates on a number of levels. First, it validates the idea that the men are engaged in a secretive, male-centered ritual. The ritual is one where men are willing to publicly expose their sexual fantasies through the fetish object of the stripper. As is often the case with such rituals, the possibility exists that the ritual mediates homoerotic desires by focusing the male gaze and aroused desire on the female fetish object.

The proverb, then, is not only a signifier of the "beast" in men that may only surface in secretive rituals but submerged homoerotic desire as well. The beast spoken of here is one that leads men to give in to their sexual urges, even if it involves broken promises and infidelity. The whisky bottle, the stripper, and the proverb are all testimonies to white male entitlement that makes savoring the fruits of the empire more important than rhetorical admonitions against such behavior—those found in religious texts. The proverb, in particular, mediates between a Christian value system that scorns these men's behavior and the capitalistic encouragement to act this way. In this context, the proverb promotes secretiveness and dishonesty as ways to evade the system of Christian norms, rewards, and punishments. The multiple fetishes conjoin to undermine the supposed sanctity of the soon-to-be consummated marital union by recognizing the man's inability to experience the profound intimacy expected of marriage partners. This impotence is confirmed by the importance of gaining "real" pleasure through fetishistic representations. The ad/altar furthermore attests to the primacy of the prospective

groom's relationship with his male friends and his fetishes over his relationship with his fiancée: "Real Friends. Real bourbon." The most fundamental vows that will govern his life, then, are silence and loyalty to his male friends and their world of vice rather than commitment to his partner. The proverb can thus be completed, "A picture is worth a thousand words. Good thing she'll never see any of them."

Aesthetics of whiteness seem to be the explicit focus of some altars, so much so that the visual image could easily be part of a museum exhibit on white female beauty. One such altar consists simply of a black-and-white, close-up photo of a young woman looking directly at the camera. Her hair is long and blowing around her face. Above the photo are the words, "What hair care goes above and beyond?" The altar is advertising Aveda shampoo, and the printed text emphasizes its natural ingredients—hence, the more "natural" (black-and-white) photo. However, the altar is also, like any art, an advertisement of aesthetics.

Another altar is almost entirely filled by a photograph of a woman's neck, shoulders, upper chest, and most of the side of her face. The only disruption in the display of her body is a black dress on which are two large, decorative (diamond) broaches. She is wearing elegant earrings and dark glossy lipstick. Right above her shoulder and beside her exposed neck is written, "The more things change, the more they stay MONET." But what are "things?" What are the changes mentioned, and what does Monet signify? May "things" refer to the continued domination of a Eurocentric aesthetic? May the altar be reaffirming the empire's criteria for beauty, purity, and that which is presumably the ultimate object of desire? And may one of the things that have remained Monet be the submissive posture of women and their continued subordination within the structure of this empire?

The allusion to European aesthetics is also central to an altar devoted to Caswell-Massey's Beauty Nectar. In contrast to the visual images in most altars, this one consists of a painting, "Beautiful Awakening," by American artist Skip Liepke. The painting is rendered in the style of European nudes of the Renaissance period. A redheaded young woman is sitting on a bed, or in a chair, her lower torso draped in a colorful towel or blanket. She looks to be just arising but captured in a moment of contemplation. She is leaning forward, an elbow on her leg, a hand under her



chin, and her eyes are closed. The viewer's eyes are drawn to her unclothed back, shoulders, and arm. If the viewer does not make the association between the painting and European civilization, the text advertising the product makes it clear. Written in poetic form, the text reads, "The indulgence for all over skin beauty/ Overflowing with moisturizers./Enriched. . . ./With three alpha-hydroxy fruit acids./ Healing Vitamin E./Encased in *apothecary* glass/For once-upon-a-time luxury, style, beauty." Across the top of the altar, beginning in the woman's hair, is the proverb: "To be beautiful or not to be, is no longer the question . . ." The remolded Shakespearean lines make an obvious link to European aesthetics and further suggest that the question of beauty, of aesthetics has been answered once and for all: Are you beautiful?—"you" being the woman in the painting and those she symbolizes.

When we consider this ad/altar in the larger context of American society, the question takes on greater significance, for one must ask why the question exists in the first place. Who questions the Eurocentric standard of beauty? Can the message here, this reaffirmation of what has historically been the dominant aesthetic for beauty, be motivated by a period of social movements, e.g., multiculturalism, which are seen by some as assaults on the single, dominating standard of beauty in American society? The phrase, "For once-upon-a-time luxury, style, beauty," certainly suggests a reactionary reclamation of a fairy-tale-like world, peopled by white princes and princesses.

A number of other altars also address this tension, providing reassurance that the white standard of beauty is secure. An Olay altar depicts a white woman's face, shoulder, and part of her neck. She is giving herself a facial, and the ad is for facial cleansers. In the lower right-hand corner of the altar is the Olay logo (a circle with a woman's face inside), the word "Olay" in large letters, and the proverblike phrase, "Love the skin you're in." Although not a traditional proverb, the phrase is formulaically similar to "Love the one you're with" and is designed to function proverbially here.

As much as anything else, the ad encourages white women to love their whiteness. As with the Caswell-Massey altar, I propose that this one is in dialogue with social movements and tensions arising from challenges to the dominant standard of beauty in late-twentieth-century America. This tension results not only



from declarations of pride and arguments for diverse standards of beauty emerging from people of color but from movements such as multiculturalism—and to some extent, feminism—that erode hegemonic values by insisting on diversity and relativity in the standards by which people are measured. The rising incidence of biracial children and more widespread acceptance of interracial relationships are additional social factors that threaten to undermine ideologies of white supremacy. We may imagine the messages in these advertisements as responses to assaults on white, male fetishes, as commands and pleas to white women to remain loyal to the system from which these values spring.

A Bulova altar separates the page into two halves. The top half has a blue background, two pictures of watches, a list of upper-echelon stores that carry the watches, the word “Bulova” in huge letters, and below it, “Keeping America’s time for generations.” The bottom half is divided into two sides—one with a photograph of an older woman, the other with a photograph of a younger woman. Both are dressed conservatively with little effort to sexualize them. Beside the older woman is written, “Foaming Cleanser/Handwritten Letters/String Quartets/Bulova.” Beside the younger woman is “Kiwi Mudmask/E-mail/String Bikinis/Bulova.” And at the top of the photograph, across both, is “Like Mother, like Daughter.”

While on one level, the altar is advertising the watches, it also comments on the idea of racial purity. The daughter may be more adventurous than her mother (string bikinis) and may live in a world that is more technological, but just as the watch signifies the perpetuity of Eurocentric, upper-class values and aesthetics, so does the proverb. The daughter is, like her mother, white, blonde, conservative, and “beautiful”—read “uncontaminated by othered influences.” One can read the altar against the background of social changes that find young, white women depicted often in the media as sexually provocative and culturally hybrid. The proverb then ends with a sigh of relief, uttered by a middle-aged, upper-class, white male who is thankful that his family remains racially/culturally pure. In contrast to most of the altars we have considered, the images here imply that the commodity is equally important—if not more so—than the women. The watch as fetish leads us to the world of business, and this, coupled with the absence of sexualized images, ironically reinforces the role of

women as accessories. The altered proverb reverberates with the nuances of the original, in which we imagine a son who “follows in his father’s footsteps” by superficially engaging elements of popular “alternative” culture but ultimately maintaining his grounding in upper-class values.

The understated fears of cultural contamination in the last few examples are addressed more directly in several other advertisements. Some time ago, Grand Marnier ran a series of full-page ads that consisted of boxed collages of images, all related to some folklore motif. One page has these images in separate boxes: Eve offering the apple to Adam; Cinderella’s slipper; and the birds and the bees. The middle row of boxes has first, a butterfly with the proverb, “What love unites, let no one divide”; second, a white woman’s face with dark lipstick, lips open, about to kiss the ear of a darker-skinned man; and third, a visual depiction of the proverb “two ships passing in the night.”

The two proverbs here can be read as commenting on the possible interracial tryst depicted in the middle picture, posing two conflicting outcomes and points of view. One suggests an acceptance of interracial unions and accords them the same sacredness that any union held together by true love deserves. The other proverbial allusion suggests the impossibility for such unions to work out. Although negative, the second proverb allusion identifies the source of difficulty not as racism, but rather the difficulty for two persons from differing backgrounds to find the common ground necessary to make such a union last. Positioning the racially explicit part of the ad in the center invites the consumer to reflect on the difficulties of love from an interracial perspective. For instance, how does this perspective cast a different light on such deeply embedded American motifs as Adam and Eve, Cinderella, and the birds and the bees? What if the prince were black? The idea of tragedy in love comes across most strongly in the picture of someone failing to place a wedding band on another’s finger; in this case, the finger joint is so greatly enlarged that there is no possible way for the ring to go on. Contrary to the preceding example, Grand Marnier’s ad/altar celebrates the tension created by social changes and therefore promotes an image that its product is for those who enjoy change and even danger.

A Hard Candy altar has a close-up of a white woman’s face, gazing up as if she is daydreaming. Her lips have dark red lipstick,

and the blurred surrounding background beside her face is red-ened as well. Her face is freckled, and she wears sparkling blue eye shadow. On her bottom lip is a miniature spoon, and beside her lip is a cup and saucer; the saucer is filled with coffee. Above the cup is a miniature coffeepot held by normal-sized fingers, out of which the coffee pours into the cup. The proverbial message at the bottom of the page is “Wake up and smell the lipstick,” and a variety of coffee-inspired names for this lipstick are listed: “Cappuccino—badge brown,” “Cafe o Lip—Neutral Caramel,” and “Latte Lip—Golden Vanilla.”

The ad focuses our attention on color, employing words and phrases that have often been used in the context of race and even mixed ancestry; in fact, using food-related language to signify black people is long established, e.g., chocolate, brown sugar, coffee, cocoa, caramel, etc. Moreover, the ad depicts a very young, “hip” woman lying down, in a less than fully conscious state. As with the previous proverb, a hint of danger is suggested. “Wake up and smell the coffee” is a cautionary alarm to someone who is on the verge of misfortune. Here, the alarm is being sounded so that the woman can appreciate what is about to happen, rather than so she can avoid it. If we read such phrases as “Caution: Caffeine Lipstick may be addictive, apply and re-apply as needed,” along with the list of colors mentioned earlier, as signifiers of interracial mixing, then the altar becomes an endorsement of such social changes. The visual image supports this reading. The woman’s mouth is open, invitingly, as if she is willingly receiving the liquid that will be poured into it, not to mention her heavily freckled face. The ad serves as an invitation for the woman to consume the symbolic “other,” to mark herself with it. Although the altar offers a very different image of woman than many others, it still relies on fetishism to convey its message. In this case, however, the fetishized woman is marked with influences from othered groups.

A VISA advertisement also departs from the image of whiteness in most altars. At the top of the ad in a purple rectangle is a list of expressions: “It’s dog eat dog,” “It’s survival of fittest,” “It’s them or you,” “You know, a shoe sale.” At the bottom of the page in a yellow rectangle are the phrases, “From kickboxing classes to strappy sandals,” and “It’s everywhere you want to be,” along with the VISA logo. In the middle is a large rectangle containing the visual texts. A young, casually but professionally dressed, Asian

American woman is seated on the bench of a shoe store. She has on a black miniskirt and white blouse and has long, flowing, straight black hair. Prominent in the photo are her legs and feet—she has high heels on both feet, but the shoes come from different pairs. A number of shoes and opened boxes are on the floor, and she is leaning over looking at one foot. On the walls behind and around her are shelves of boots and shoes. The two elements that are most striking in this altar are that the woman is Asian—this is the only ad that I have come across where the woman is not white—and there is an extreme portrayal of shoe fetishism.

The proverbs address the issue of “making it” and “coming out ahead” in a competitive world (perhaps the business world is the intended reference). But centering these messages on an Asian American woman changes the implications considerably, for it seems to recognize the extra difficulties encountered by a non-white woman in making it professionally. The woman’s character is further developed by the phrase alluding to kickboxing, suggesting that she has taken martial-arts classes and is capable of the kind of aggressiveness necessary to succeed in the business world. VISA initially comes across as supportive of minorities and their efforts to compete and integrate into the mainstream.

At the same time, however, the message also contains many of the elements found in other ads. For example, the woman is a fetish along with the other fetishes, contained within the sphere of corporate reality. This is visually symbolized by designing the page as the enlarged replica of a VISA card—purple stripe at the top, gold stripe at the bottom, and a lighter color in the middle. By visually surrounding the Asian American woman with boots and shoes, the ad/altar inseparably conflates the two dominant fetishes presented—shoes and Asian women. However, because it is generally accepted that most, if not all, shoe fetishists are masochists (Steele 1996, 102), the messages conveyed by the altar are complicated. At the same time that the altar seems to sympathize with the Asian American woman’s struggle to succeed, it takes a voyeuristic delight in the prospect of watching her fight. The proverbs, in combination with the reference to kickboxing—which conjures images of martial arts and intensifies the fetish by enhancing the woman’s Asian-ness—and “strappy sandals,” contribute to the sense that the observer is goading the woman on, the way one encourages a player in competitive sports. And, while on

the one hand, the woman is confined and captured, some of the pleasure gained from her confinement includes her inflicting pain on the voyeur, on those who have ultimate power over her. This is consistent with the historical fetishization of Asian women, which includes an alleged sexual submissiveness and subservience that are heightened because of the dangers they may be hiding (e.g., the Dragon Lady caricature or rumors of female Viet Cong soldiers and Vietnamese prostitutes who supposedly put cut glass or other sharp objects in their vaginas to castrate American GIs).

A final example underlines some of the anxieties I have been suggesting as negotiated by the ad/altars and the proverbs contained within them. In an ad for Silvertab Levi's, two black men stand next to each other, facing—and almost challenging—the camera. It is night, and other than a car light shining behind them and some blurred, muted lights off to the right-hand side of the page, the background is completely dark. One man wears jeans and a jacket that approximates military camouflage gear, along with heavy black shoes or boots. He gazes menacingly at the camera, one hand beside his face, the other crossed under his elbow. The second man wears jeans and jacket as well, with brown boots and dark glasses. Written in large letters across the two is the phrase, "Be careful what you wish for."

One interpretation of the message is that it alludes to the fantasies of white women who desire interactions with black men. It captures the white impulse that yearns for the exoticized flavor of blackness even as it is simultaneously terrified of the actual presence of the black, male body. Certainly the ad capitalizes on stereotypical ideas about black men to endow the jeans by association with hypersexual, rough, mysterious, and dangerous qualities. The picture evokes the worlds of rap music, gangsterism, and black militancy, and these are all signifiers of extreme black-male sexuality. Thus, the proverb, if directed to a white audience, can be read as a cautionary admonition against frivolously wishing for encounters with black masculinity. "Black men are dangerous, and you may get more than you bargained for," the altar seems to suggest. If directed to a black audience, and especially a male one, the message may be to be careful how you wish for a more "thuggish" kind of masculinity. As with the previous few advertisements, this one captures the paradoxical impulses of those in power. Although it seems to warn against miscegenation, it relies

on images of racial mixing that may be conjured in the minds of the consumer and encourages a fetishistic fascination with those images.

### Conclusion

In this essay, I have suggested that proverbs are often coupled with fetishes in American advertisements, and that along with the fetishized, visual objects displayed in these ads, proverbs help to negotiate between fears and desires. These fears and desires are often connected to issues of race, gender, and class and reflect social currents within the society. I have argued, furthermore, that advertisements can be viewed as the equivalent of altars in a religion of capitalism and that the consumer relationship with the fetishized objects in ads often mirrors that of religious devotees. Hence, the proverbs occur in an arena of highly charged social and political discourse. As such, one of their functions is to mediate between opposing ideologies. Of course, in this context, the proverb's ultimate goal is to persuade the consumer to choose the capitalist value and purchase the commodity. By no means has my discussion covered the full range of ad/altars or kinds of commodities that exist in American advertising; nor do I claim that my analysis applies to every kind of advertisement containing proverbs. However, as my discussion has shown, proverbial structures are not only prevalent in the fetishistic displays of contemporary advertisers but play significant roles. Because of this, they offer insights into cultural discussions focused on important social issues and attest to the continued relevance of proverbs and their study in contemporary American society.

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# “The Early Bird Is Worth Two in the Bush”

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Captain Jack Aubrey’s Fractured Proverbs

Jan Harold Brunvand

The English author known as Patrick O’Brian (1914–2000) was prolific and accomplished in many literary genres. (His real name was Richard Patrick Russ, and he invented his “Irish” background.) “O’Brian” wrote short stories, novels, poetry, biographies (including a notable one of Pablo Picasso), and reviews; he edited anthologies, and he made numerous English translations of French works. But Patrick O’Brian’s masterpiece, a series of twenty maritime novels set during the Napoleonic War,<sup>1</sup> published from 1969 to 1999, is what earned him the enthusiastic praise of critics along with legions of devoted readers around the world (e.g., Prial 1998, Lapham 2000). The novels’ complex and historically accurate action occurs from 1800 to 1815 with some allusions to earlier events.<sup>2</sup> The setting is on ships of the British Royal Navy in oceans and ports around the globe (with occasional returns to England), and the two main characters who link the series are the nautical odd couple Captain Jack Aubrey and ship’s surgeon Stephen Maturin.

Captain Aubrey is a huge, hearty, and ruggedly handsome man who has spent most of his life at sea; a brilliant navigator, commander, and naval tactician; and an officer who lives his dangerous life with gusto and optimism, despite suffering many setbacks to his career and injuries to his person. Dr. Maturin, in contrast, is a plain, even rather ugly, unkempt, but vastly learned, man; a naturalist (or “natural philosopher”) boundlessly curious about the world around him, an enthusiastic collector of botanical



and animal specimens, as well as a physician; and a covert British intelligence agent who does not hesitate to eliminate in cold blood enemies of the empire who stand in his way. Stephen Maturin, of mixed Irish and Catalan background, speaks several languages, including fluent Latin and Greek, but is often grumpy or even pessimistic and remains woefully ignorant of the customs and jargon of the sea. He learns—and often unlearns—much navy lore in the course of his many voyages with Aubrey, but he remains awkward—even dangerous to himself and others—when around any kind of waterborne vessel. The sailors on Jack's ships take elaborate care of The Doctor as he moves about the moorings, deck, and rigging.

Different as the two men are in looks, talents, and personalities, Aubrey and Maturin are close friends and share the same general background of classical and scientific education of the time. They are united in their hatred of Napoleon and their love of music, which they often enjoy during evenings at sea in The Captain's cabin, Jack playing violin, Stephen 'cello (O'Brian always wrote the word with an apostrophe). Indeed, the two characters meet on the first page of the first novel, *Master and Commander*, at a concert in the governor's house at Port Mahon on the island of Minorca in the Mediterranean Sea, listening to four Italian musicians performing "Locatelli's C major quartet."<sup>3</sup>

Patrick O'Brian's stylistic control in the Aubrey-Maturin series of period speech patterns, class dialects (including profanity and obscenity), regional and ethnic expressions, foreign-language quotations and allusions, technical naval terms and slang, and even the dense bureaucratic prose of the British Admiralty Office is remarkable. Especially interesting to the folklorist is his use of proverbs and proverbial speech. Merely a collection of these proverbial items could constitute a substantial article, or a small book, in itself,<sup>4</sup> but something more than a simple dictionary (which I will compile eventually) should be even more interesting.

O'Brian was well aware of the proverb as a traditional form of expression; he (as the books' narrator) refers to the genre by name, as well as by other terms like "saying" (or "wise saying"), "adage" (or "old adage"), "expression," "saw," "figure," "tag," and "epigram." In one passage, he lists the usual range of shipboard conversation as "flights of naval wit, flabby puns, traditional

jokes, proverbs, [and] saws" (FW, 95). In another book, he quotes a captain, speaking to his wife, who begins to use the expression, "There is a tide in the affairs of men . . ." but, after being interrupted, then attempts to complete and explain the saying: ". . . what the proverb means is that you must make hay while the sun shines but not force things. The minute your luck begins to turn sullen you must strike your topgallantmasts down on deck directly, and take a reef in your topsails, and prepare to batten down your hatches and lie to under a storm staysail if it gets worse" (RM, 12).

In studying O'Brian's use of proverbs, one is tempted to follow the lead of the conversation during one dinner-table scene and look for English national character as revealed in their proverbs. The observation one navy officer makes over dinner is this:

There is very little good in the French: it is said that you can learn a great deal about a nation from its proverbial expressions, and when the French wish to describe anything mighty foul they say, "sale comme un peigne" [i.e., "dirty as a comb"], which gives you a pretty idea of their personal cleanliness. When they have other things to occupy their mind, they say they have other cats to whip, a most inhuman thing to do. And when they are going to put a ship about, the order is "à-Dieu-va," or "we must chance it and trust in God," which gives you some notion of their seamanship (LM, 30).

Dr. Maturin himself encouraged studying English national character in proverbs in another passage when he meditated upon "the stream of small merriment, long-established jokes, proverbial sayings and more or less droll allusions that made up so large a part of his shipmates' daily intercourse." Maturin believed such light conversation to be "a particularly English characteristic [which] he often found wearisome," although he did concede that this sort of traditional speech "had a value as a protection against morosity and that it encouraged fortitude" (DI, 5). But we are warned away from seeking clues to national character in O'Brian's English proverbs by the well-known comment of B. J. Whiting:

The "national" proverbs do not offer problems which we can safely attack with our present knowledge. We cannot hope to discover the characteristics of the Englishman, the Frenchman, or the German

by making a collection of proverbs, for here the danger of permitting a preconceived idea to determine our methods of collecting is too difficult to overcome. (Whiting 1994, 106)

Wolfgang Mieder issued a similar warning, explaining to an interviewer that "paroemiologists following that road [i.e., searching for national character in proverbs] have hit a dead end," and declaring by way of example, "I could put together a bunch of proverbs that show Americans are materialistic, and I could put together another collection showing that Americans really value friendship and love" (Wolkomir 1992, 118).

There is an obvious and attractive alternative topic for study in these fine novels, namely, Captain Jack Aubrey's constant comical misuse of everyday expressions, allusions, quotations, and especially traditional proverbs. This endearing personality trait—so opposite to the captain's superb command of his professional skills—is a major factor in humanizing and rendering believable the heroic (if somewhat overweight) figure of this beribboned and often gloriously uniformed British naval officer. Who cannot love a character who says things like "'Tis an ill wind that spoils the broth, you know" (DI, 35), or "Any stick will do to hang a wicked dog" (FW, 157), or "Never count the bear's skin before it is hatched" (SM, 232), or "There's a good deal to be said for making hay while the iron is hot" (TH, 331)?

O'Brian seems to have developed the idea gradually, while the novels were under way, of having The Captain misuse common expressions.<sup>5</sup> Except for the misquotation "Alas poor Borwick" (i.e., Yorick)<sup>6</sup> in the first volume (M&C, 146), Jack utters no fractured proverb until well into the second volume, when we read this: "'You must make your bed and lie on it.' He paused, with a feeling that this was not quite the epigram that he had wished" (PC, 243); this is followed in that same volume by The Captain's slightly off-kilter observation that Stephen Maturin has, in his opinion, "a singular genius for hiding [his] talent under a bushel" (PC, 410). (The Biblical injunction mentions hiding a candle, although some quote it as a light or a lamp.) By the third volume in the series, and constantly thereafter, Captain Aubrey says things like "A bird in the hand is worth any amount of beating about the bush" (HMS, 157), and "They have chosen their cake and must lie in it" (HMS, 191). At this last remark, Stephen asks, "You mean,

they cannot have their bed and eat it?" This then becomes the first in a series of incidents where The Doctor playfully corrects or questions The Captain's attempted witticisms.

Jack Aubrey seems to have particular problems with proverbs that mention birds. Besides the one just quoted, he also says, "There you have two birds in one bush" (HMS, 307). He refers to "birds tarred with the same feathers" (HMS, 317) and speaks of "beating two birds with one bush . . . or even three" (TMC, 67), as well as killing "three birds at one blow" (SM, 165), and he is quoted by Stephen Maturin as saying, "A bird in the hand waits for no man" (DI, 61). Yet again struggling with the "killing bird" proverb, Jack is later quoted, "'This would be killing both birds . . .' He paused, frowned, muttered 'over one stile', and went on, 'Well, never mind . . .'" (FSW, 236).

Many of Captain Aubrey's confused quotations and sayings reveal simple errors of mishearing or disremembering an original word, as in the "Alas poor Borwick" comment, and there is often a certain logic in these errors. For example, when he speaks of a "palm in Gilead" (HMS 50), or Napoleon "killing the golden calf" (FW, 214), or Solomon having a thousand porcupines (TGS, 9), or ironically refers to Stephen as "a true Job's muffler" (TGS, 156), or compares himself, when briefly wealthy, as having "Crocus [for] my second name" (COM, 6), or when he twice says that he feels "as proud as Pompous Pilate" (COM, 207; YA, 117), or mentions "Damon and Pythagoras" (PC, 406), he is merely reaching for and slightly missing the terms or names: balm, golden goose, Solomon's concubines, Job's Comforter, Croesus, Pontius Pilate, and Pythias. Similarly, when The Captain describes The Doctor as being "obstinate as a bee in a bull's foot" (HMS, 74), it is evident that he has misheard the old saying about not knowing a *B* (i.e., the letter) from a bull's foot, which doesn't make much more sense that way, either (see RM, 24). In another well-intentioned but muddled Shakespearean reference, The Captain once cries, "Lead on, Macbeth," upon which a sailor who happens to be named Macbeth springs forward and asks in a thick Scottish dialect, "Wheer tu sirr?" When Jack corrects himself—"Lead on Macduff"—the cry immediately goes through the ship, "Macduff to the quarterdeck at the double," and Jack must rephrase his order literally: "Belay there. . . . Scrub it. No, no. My meaning is, the officers may go over the side as soon as they please" (FSW, 50).<sup>7</sup>

The mental processes by which The Captain arrives at some of his other fractured proverbs are often quite obvious. When he quotes, "If only pigs had wings, we should have no need for tinkers' hands, as they say" (DI, 126), he is combining two things that "they say," first about impossibilities ("If pigs had wings"), and second about necessity ("If 'ifs' and 'ands' were pots and pans, there were little need for tinkers"). When Aubrey compliments "a fellow . . . who ran like a hare, without beating about the mulberry bush, or making any bones about it" (SM, 77), he is just mixing three traditional metaphors. He does it again when he says, "He is the kind of lamb that lies down with the lion in wolf's clothing" (LM, 134). Jack's remark, "Many a stitch saves time" (SM, 230), although a fractured saying, applies pretty well to his hoisting extra sails for more speed. Even his remark, "There are two ends to every pudding" (IM, 126), is at least as good a phrase as the usual "two sides to every question." Likewise, "There's many a slip twixt the cup and the sip" (COM, 268) is not quite right but means about the same as the original. Once, in anger, Aubrey tells an officer, "You shall sow what you have reaped" (TT, 182), reversing the usual terms. Sometimes the correct proverbial expression is quite obscure, as when Jack remarks that an officer is "all wool and no cry" (PC, 304) and again that some supposed omens are "all cry and no wolf" (SM, 275); here he is half remembering the fable about the boy crying wolf and confusing it with the Wellerism, "'All cry and little wool,' as the Devil said while shearing the hog."

As a sort of counterpoint to errors like this streaming from The Captain's mouth are such mangled expressions occasionally spoken by other characters, particularly the common sailors. When Stephen brings a potto, a kind of lemur, on board, one of the marine officers says, "My servant Joe Andrews tells me that many of the old African hands say there is nothing like a potto for luck: and, after all, there is a potto's field in the Bible, is there not?" (COM, 242). When The Captain takes a letter by dictation from a Sicilian-born woman writing to her imprisoned husband, a British naval officer, he puzzles over her request to include the statement that she has been true to him and "would not ply the oar"; Aubrey thinks it over, then he writes carefully, "'play the whore' . . . smiling secretly as he did so" (TH, 65).

The Doctor, although he has mastered the nautical term "sailing both by and large" by the end of the first book (M&C, 411),

continues to puzzle over some expressions throughout the series. He refers to someone who “passed [an examination] with sailing colours,” which is corrected by The Captain to “flying colours,” to which Stephen replies, “Let us not be pedantical, for all love” (IM, 303). Other examples can easily be found, for, as we read in one scene,

Jack looked at Stephen with affection: Dr. Maturin could dash away in Latin and Greek, and as for modern languages, to Jack’s certain knowledge he spoke half a dozen; yet he was quite incapable of mastering low English cant or slang or flash expressions, let alone the technical terms necessarily used aboard ships. Even now, he suspected, Stephen had difficulty with starboard and larboard (RM, 21–22).

Perhaps the best example of Stephen’s problems with English proverbial expressions is his uncertainty when someone tells him that “the shipwrights will go through her [i.e., the ship] with a fine tooth comb” (LM, 205). The Doctor asks,

This tooth-comb, now, this fine tooth-comb that the worthy shipwrights will be using—we often hear of it; it appears in daily speech. And yet who has ever combed his teeth, in this or any other day?

When it is explained to him that “the fine qualifies the tooth rather than the comb . . .” (i.e., “fine-tooth comb”), The Doctor responds,

“Of course, of course”. . . clapping his hand to his forehead. “This is not my most brilliant hour, I find.”

What is, perhaps, Stephen Maturin’s most brilliant witticism comes when he offers the joke that the so-called dog watches, which are shorter than the other watches aboard ship, were so labeled because they are “cur-tailed” (PC, 428). It takes a moment before the others understand it, but eventually a midshipman explains the joke: “He said, cur-tailed: the dog-watch is cur-tailed.” This little pun, which O’Brian evidently found in an 1867 book about sailor’s language (King 2000, 208) becomes a running gag in the series, being repeated with much hilarity at least four times in later novels (IM, 123; RM, 127–28; NC, 147; COM, 166).

Returning to The Captain's own wit, what is termed by the narrator as "perhaps the best thing Jack had ever said," is a complicated double pun, hardly worth explaining, based on naval slang and English place names: "I must warn you that Plush often leads to Folly" (YA, 230).<sup>8</sup> Much better—and a proverb parody to boot—results from The Captain's trick of forcing The Doctor to choose between two weevils found crawling through some ship's biscuits; when Stephen, puzzled by the request to choose, selects the larger of the weevils, Jack gleefully exclaims, "There I have you . . . you are bit—you are completely dished. Don't you know that in the Navy you must always choose the lesser of two weevils?" (FW, 54–55). This joke is thrice repeated in later books (SM, 218; TT, 148; COM, 117).

One should not assume that Captain Jack Aubrey is always wrong about his proverbs or only utters proverb parodies; at times, he hits the nail squarely on the head with an apt proverbial expression. For example, commenting on an instance of one man's cruelty toward another, he says, "When one sea-officer is to be roasted, there is always another at hand to turn the spit," explaining to Stephen that this is "an old service proverb" (PC, 105). Similarly, The Captain provides The Doctor with a plausible naval explanation for the common expression (often metaphorically applied), "the Devil to pay and no tar [or no pitch] hot" (TMC, 280; the expression also occurs in IM, 138; TH, 311; and HD, 11 and 105). Once, having a problem with an officer under his command, Jack observes, quite appropriately, that the man is "cutting his coat according to his cloth" (DI 175). When Stephen objects mildly to Jack's taking some albatross eggs for their breakfast, we read this: "'You cannot make an omelette without breaking eggs,' said Jack quickly, before the chance should be lost for ever." To this, Stephen replies, "I might say something about pearls before swine—the pearls being these priceless eggs, if you follow me—were I to attempt a repartee in the same order of magnitude" (DI, 293; see also SM, 32). Even, on one occasion, when The Captain ashore has had a few too many drinks at a party, his wits are clear enough to retaliate to a rival for a lady's attentions by quoting, aptly, a line from Dryden: "None but the brave deserve the fair," even singing the line as a sort of refrain "in his deep, surprisingly tuneful voice" (SM, 56).



In fact, Captain Jack Aubrey on a few occasions is surprisingly good at adapting proverbial expressions in new and interesting ways. I believe it is an original idea when he converts a familiar proverb into a kind of riddle, saying that one of his prisoners is “rather like the creature that was neither flesh nor fowl nor good red herring but partook of each: the Sphinx” (WDS, 36). Another effective transformation occurs one dark and stormy night when The Captain observes, “Not a fit night out for man or beast, as the Centaur observed, ha, ha, ha!” (YA, 219). It also seems right, though certainly unconventional, when Jack refers to Stephen as a man whom “Lucifer could not hold a book, bell, or candle to for pride” (NC, 169–70).

But most often, Captain Aubrey’s attempts at wit, quotation, metaphor, or proverbial wisdom are somewhat fractured, and frequently these lapses are noted by listeners, as when he remarks while speaking to an admiral that many of his loyal officers and men had “followed me since my first command . . . in one fell sloop.” The admiral asks, “What sloop, Aubrey?” to which Jack lamely replies, “. . . I do not mean any specific vessel: it was an allusion to the Bible” (FW, 17). It should be noted, also, that earlier in the same conversation, when the admiral refers to the French ship *La Flèche* as being “quick as an arrow,” Jack does not catch the bilingual pun but must be reminded that “*flèche* is the French for an arrow, Aubrey.” “Oh, indeed? I was not aware. Very good, sir. Capital, upon my word. Quick as an arrow—I shall repeat that.” “I dare say you will,” the admiral responds dryly, “and pass it off as your own, too” (FW, 16).

Sometimes the intended corrections of Jack’s remarks are as confused as the original error; when he is warned by yet another admiral to be careful in his dealings with certain people, Jack promises, “I shall speak to them like a sucking dove,” and the admiral corrects him, “Pig, Aubrey: sucking *pig*. Doves don’t suck” (RM, 25). In this instance, Jack is correctly quoting Bottom the Weaver in *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* (1.2.85) who, however, is himself misquoting the phrase “like a southing [i.e., a cooing or moaning] dove”; pigs and sucking have nothing to do with any of this.

O’Brian filled his novels with this sort of clever ambiguity; just to cite one further example, in a conversation with his wife Sophie, Jack admonishes her, “Sweetheart . . . you might as well save your breath to cool your porridge.” Sophie asks, “What porridge?”



and Jack explains, "Why, porridge—burgoo. It is what people say, when they mean to give you a hint that it is no use carping on the same string" (DI, 67). The proverbial phrase "to save one's breath to cool one's porridge," although sometimes spoken as "cool your broth" or "cool your soup," was originally "cool your pottage" (a sort of stew) and occurs in writings by Plutarch, Rabelais, Cervantes, and others. But O'Brian most likely had in mind a remark made by Elizabeth Bennet to Mr. Darcy in Chapter 4 of *Pride and Prejudice*, one of his favorite books. Elizabeth remarks, "There is a fine old saying, which every body here is of course familiar with—'Keep your breath to cool your porridge,'—and I shall keep mine to swell my song." As for burgoo, that was, indeed, an oatmeal gruel or porridge served to sailors, although it has no real connection to the proverbial phrase. As for "carping on the same string," Jack means harping, of course, and that form of the saying was used by Shakespeare, Cervantes, and a host of ordinary people expressing their dislike of hearing the same old complaint over and over again. Part of the humor in this scene obviously derives from Sophie being even less aware than her husband of such conventional expressions and their meanings.

Many of The Captain's fractured proverbs are either mixed-up versions of two or more sayings or else apt remarks that he is not quite able to finish. Here are some examples of the proverb blends: "The fall very nearly came before the pride,' he said to himself . . ." (FW, 94); "Let us cross that peacock when we come to it" (FW, 219); ". . . a heavy frigate with a bite worse than her bark" (SM, 294); "I am afraid there is no room for two nightingales in one bush" (TH, 173); "The best-laid mice gang oft astray" (TH, 174); "Do you know what a lame duck does? . . . It attempts to pull wool over your eyes" (TH, 200); "I am not one to fling a hundred thousand dollars in a gift-horse's teeth" (FSW, 234); "At least it is better than rushing at a bull in a china-shop without a plan" (LM, 150); "I cling to it day and night, like a bull in a china-shop. But promises are made of pie-crust, you know" (YA, 237); "A needle in a haystack would not bear the comparison, on such a thick night; but a stitch in time saves nine, as you know very well" (LM, 169); "No humming and whoreing, no barking about the wrong bush" (TGS, 96); "Better a dead dog than a lead lion" (NC, 47); "The wish could so easily be farther than the thought" (NC, 147); "My tongue took the bit between its teeth, so I was laid by the lee again . . ."

(NC, 195–96); “I am afraid I have been like a bear in a whore’s bed” (WDS, 122; Jack is probably thinking of the saying “like a bear with a sore head”); “We must not sell the bear’s skin before we have locked the stable door” (WDS, 231); “What an early worm you are to be sure” (YA, 24; he is thinking of the early bird that gets the worm); “We are the very pink [peak?] of perfection” (YA, 211); and “I shall rest my laurels on that” (YA, 240).

One of Jack’s most glorious mixed-up proverbs occurs in his thoughts as he considers his longtime servant, Preserved Killick: “Killick was in many ways a wretched servant, fractious, mean, overbearing to guests of inferior rank, hopelessly coarse; but in others he was a pearl without a thorn. For a moment Jack passed some other expressions in review, and having reached bricks without price he went to sleep” (NC, 151).

When The Doctor joins in trying to find the right expression, it is evident that mostly he is mocking The Captain’s attempts at wit without letting on. Consider this exchange:

“. . . you may say it is buying a dog and barking at the stable door yourself—”  
 “The stable door after it is locked,” said Stephen, holding up his hand.  
 “Just so: the stable door after it is locked, yourself. But there are more things than heaven and earth, you know. . . .” (FSW, 137)

Later in the same novel, Jack tries the expression again, and it comes out like this: “That would be locking the horse after the stable door is gone . . .” (FSW, 293).

Here are some of The Captain’s unfinished proverbial expressions: “. . . A good woman is a’—there is something in the Bible I don’t quite recall, but it hits the nail on the head, as you might put it” (SM, 112); “What is sauce for the duck . . .’ began Jack . . .” (FSW, 84); “I may be able to cook two geese with one—” (RM, 66); “That is surely selling the bear . . . that is surely counting your bears . . .’ he hesitated . . .” (LM, 175); and “I find that I had counted my geese without laying their eggs—that I had killed my geese—that is to say . . .” (TGS, 277).

Again, when The Doctor realizes that Jack is fishing around for just the right conventional term, he “helps” with some tongue-in-cheek suggestions, like this example (with The Captain speaking first):

". . . I could see him as plain as . . ."

"The ace of spades?"

"No. Not quite that. As plain as a . . . God damn it. As plain as the palm of my hand? A turnpike?"

"As Salisbury sphere? A red herring?"

"Perhaps so . . ." (FSW, 106).

They never do agree on the rest of the saying, which may have been "plain as day . . . as your hand . . . as the nose on your face . . ." etc.

As noted, the most charming instances of fractured proverbial uses in the novels, and those that best reveal character, occur when Stephen Maturin comments upon Jack Aubrey's vagrant way with witticisms, sometimes correcting him, sometimes agreeing (or pretending to). Stephen is often referred to as The Captain's "particular friend," and as such he feels free to speak his mind, just as Jack does; neither one usually takes any offense from whatever is said (although they do twice come close to dueling over a perceived slight). At any rate, these exchanges between two old friends, several of which have been quoted already, are wonderfully written. Here are some further examples, with The Captain always beginning the conversation:

"Perhaps you could tell him to judge the pudding by its fruit."

"You mean prove the tree by its eating."

"No, no, Stephen, you are quite out: eating a tree would prove nothing" (IM, 292).

\* \* \* \* \*

"It is no good carrying your pig to market and finding . . ." He paused, frowning.

"It will not drink?"

"No, that ain't that neither."

"That there are no pokes to be had?"

"Oh well, be damned to literary airs and graces . . . ." (TGS, 114)

\* \* \* \* \*

"Only this morning I was thinking how right they were to say it was better to be a dead horse than a live lion." He gazed out of the

scuttle, obviously going over the words in his mind. "No, I mean better to flog a dead horse than a live lion."

"I quite agree."

"Yet even that's not quite right, neither. I know there is a dead horse in it somewhere; but I am afraid I'm brought by the lee this time, though I rather pride myself on proverbs, bringing them in aptly, you know, and to the point."

"Never distress yourself, brother; there is no mistake, I am sure. It is a valuable saying, and one that admonishes us never to underestimate our enemy, for whereas flogging a dead horse is child's play, doing the same to a lion is potentially dangerous, even though one may take a long spoon." (FSW, 307; Stephen alludes to "He who supps with the Devil must have a long spoon.")

\* \* \* \* \*

". . . let us hope that the first plan . . . comes to root. That is to say . . ." He paused, frowning.

"Rules the roost?"

"No . . . no."

"Takes fruit?"

"Oh be damned to it. The trouble with you, Stephen, if you do not mind my saying so, is that although you are the best linguist I was ever shipmates with, like the Pope of Rome that spoke a hundred languages—Pentacost come again . . ."

"Would it be Magliabechi you have in mind?"

"I dare say: a foreigner, in any case. And I am sure you speak quite as many, and like a native, or better; but English is not one of them. You do not get figures quite right, and now you have put the word clean out of my head." (NC, 130)<sup>9</sup>

\* \* \* \* \*

And a final example of one of these exchanges that involves a literary allusion:

He paused for quite a while and then in the tone of one quoting an aphorism he went on, "The heart has its reasons that the . . . that the . . ."

"Kidney?" suggested Stephen.

"That the kidneys know not." Jack frowned. "No, Hell and death, that's not it. But anyhow the heart has its reasons, you understand."

"It is a singularly complex organ, I am told." (YA, 59; see also YA, 94)<sup>10</sup>

The richness, variety, and humor created by all the proverb use and misuse in the Aubrey-Maturin novels lends itself very well to parody, and it is no surprise to find lists both of the original misquotations and also parodies of them circulating nowadays, either in print or on the Internet. The quotation that forms part of my title is taken from *The Aubrey Coat-of-Arms*, an image available as a JPEG file from one of the Patrick O'Brian Web sites, where the motto is actually given in Latin as "Avis matutina duabus in dumo par est." One can download the image and convert it to use as a poster, letterhead, name tag, T-shirt, whatever.<sup>11</sup>

A book-length parody titled *The Port-Wine Sea* (Wenger 1999) includes a number of renderings of fractured proverbs similar to The Captain's (here named Jack Audibly), including these: "Don't eat the horse before the cart" (p. 23), "Uneasy lies the head that wears a frown" (p. 23), "deaf as a post-captain" (p. 35), "The road to heaven is paved with good inventions" (p. 70), and "When in Rome eat the sauce of the gander" (p. 115). It may be debated whether these euphemisms are as good or better than the epigrams coined by O'Brian himself, but they are certainly pretty close to the march and not to be despoiled, nor looked scantily at, since a rolling stone butters no parsnips, as they say.

In the figure of Captain Jack Aubrey, Patrick O'Brian (who himself inhabited something of an invented persona) created a memorable character who is superb in his professional role at sea, somewhat less successful on land (especially when it comes to investments and politics), and altogether convincing as a believable personality. An important part of his credibility as a literary character comes from the language he speaks—rich in the technicalities and jargon of early nineteenth-century sailing, but made more human by his earnest efforts to find appropriate proverbial and other traditional expressions for his feelings, even when (or especially when) he gets the sayings not quite right. These delights provide just one more reason to read what one reviewer called "the best historical novels ever written."<sup>12</sup>

Appendix: More Fractured Speech  
(Spoken by Jack Aubrey, unless otherwise noted)

“. . . and I must remind you that Fortune is bald behind” [spoken by R. T. Farquhar, a colonial administrator] “What is this that Farquhar tells us about fortune? Is she supposed to have the mange?” [asked by Jack] “I conceive he was referring to the old tag—his meaning was, that she must be seized by the forelock, since once she is passed there is no clapping on to her hair, at all. In the figure she ships none abaft the ears, if you follow me.” [reply by Stephen] (TMC, 235)

“There is something to be said for making hay while no clouds obscure the sun; and that it is your rolling stone that gets the worm” (DI, 62; spoken by Stephen to Jack).

“. . . as you know, one man may lead a horse to the water, but ten cannot make him think” (FW, 176; spoken by Stephen to Jack).

“You are not to suppose that they are all tarred with the same feathers” (RM, 61).

“I was just wondering whether the infernal ptarmigan [i.e., termagant] was there when Sam called at Ashgrove Cottage . . .” [Jack explains to Stephen] “Ptarmigans are those contentious forward cross overbearing women you come across only too often” (RM, 87,88).

“He [Jack] was turning parsnips, butter and soft-words over in his mind in the hope that something brilliant might come of it . . .” (RM, 122; the narrator describing Jack).

“. . . although Fanny Harte may be neither Scylla nor Charybdis, they are very, very fond of one another, and when all is said and done, that is what really signifies” (LM, 63).

“. . . dirty dogs ate hungry puddings—that is to say, hungry dogs ate dirty puddings . . .” (LM, 229).

"Upon my word, Jack, that woman is as headstrong as an allegory on the banks of Nile" (TGS, 73; spoken by Stephen).

"Two precautions are better than one" (TGS, 288).

"Do you know, I very nearly said a good thing just now, about your cock and hen turtles. It was on the lines of sauce—sauce for the goose being sauce for the gander, you understand. But it would not quite take shape" (NC, 19).

"'He counted his chickens without reckoning with his host,' said Stephen" (NC, 91). "He counted his chickens without his host, by God" (WDS, 249).

". . . so there is a Roland for your. . . . The name Oliver floated up out of a score of others. . . ." (NC, 180; Preserved Killick suggests that the saying may refer to "Roland . . . gunsmith off of the Haymarket; and . . . Oliver's Warranted Leadenhall Sausages.")

". . . roar like a bull in a basin" (NC, 222).

"'Here's a pretty kettle of fish,' cried Jack. 'An elegant God damned kettle, upon my word'" (TT, 32).

"May I take it this is so, or is the fish wather to—that is to say . . ." (TT, 46, referring to "The wish is father to the thought.").

"'Let them gather their peasecods while they may,' said Jack, 'Old Monday he's a-dying'" (TT, 54).

". . . a childhood memory to do with Satan and idle hands floated there, but he could not quite fix it . . ." (TT, 108; the narrator describing Jack).

". . . as Captain Aubrey often says, 'You cannot both have a stitch in time and eat it'" (COM, 135; spoken by Stephen).

"'Scylla and Charybdis ain't in it, with a strong southwester and a falling tide,' said Jack. 'Nor the Gorgonzola'" (YA, 108).

“I shall sleep . . . like a crew of hedgepigs in an ivy-tuft . . .” (YA, 165).

“I never said a word,’ cried Jack. ‘I was as mute as a swan” (HD, 141).

“ . . . a near impossibility, like. . . .’ He searched for the word. ‘Making a mountain out of a molehill?’ [Stephen asks] ‘Even worse, Stephen, even worse” (BAM, 49).

## Notes

1. The Aubrey-Maturin novels, their dates of first publication, and the abbreviations used for reference are as follows:

M&C *Master and Commander* (1969)  
 PC *Post Captain* (1972)  
 HMS *HMS Surprise* (1973)  
 TMC *The Mauritius Command* (1977)  
 DI *Desolation Island* (1978)  
 FW *The Fortune of War* (1979)  
 SM *The Surgeon’s Mate* (1980)  
 IM *The Ionian Mission* (1981)  
 TH *Treason’s Harbor* (1983)  
 FSW *The Far Side of the World* (1984)  
 RM *The Reverse of the Medal* (1986)  
 LM *The Letter of Marque* (1988)  
 TGS *The Thirteen Gun Salute* (1989)  
 NC *The Nutmeg of Consolation* (1991)  
 TT *The Truelove* (1992; published in England as *Clarissa Oakes*)  
 WDS *The Wine Dark Sea* (1993)  
 COM *The Commodore* (1994)  
 YA *The Yellow Admiral* (1996)  
 HD *The Hundred Days* (1998)  
 BAM *Blue at the Mizzen* (1999)

All of my page references are to the W. W. Norton & Company U.S. editions, which began in 1990 with the reissue of *Master and Commander* and *Post Captain*, then continued through the series.

2. The essential reference works for historical, biographical, geographical, naval, military, musical, scientific, philosophical, gustatorial,



linguistic, and a host of other technical details in the Aubrey-Maturin novels are these:

- Bowen Kerrthard's Aubrey/Maturin quiz book*. 1998. South Bend, Ind.: Quill Communications Services.
- Brown, Anthony Gary. 1999. *Persons, animals, ships and cannon in the Aubrey-Maturin sea novels of Patrick O'Brian*. Jefferson, N.C., and London: McFarland & Co.
- Cunningham, A. E., ed. 1994. *Patrick O'Brian: Critical essays and a bibliography*. New York: W. W. Norton & Company.
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- King, Dean. 2000. *Patrick O'Brian: A life revealed*. New York: Henry Holt.
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- King, Dean, with John B. Hattendorf, and J. Worth Estes. 1995. *A sea of words: A lexicon and companion for Patrick O'Brian's seafaring tales*. New York: Henry Holt.

3. This detail is typical of O'Brian's sense of history and humor, for as Anthony Gary Brown writes in his indispensable reference (1999), "Pietro Antonio Locatelli (1695–1764) was an Italian violinist and composer, famous as a great virtuoso and technical innovator. Although many of his works for both solo violin and string quartet survive, the 'great C major quartet' . . . is not among them, appearing to be a happy invention by O'Brian (as is the trio of HD, 3)" (1999, p. 195).
4. In a fairly attentive second reading of the series, I noted 472 proverbial expressions, an average of 23.6 per book. The low number was 11 (in WDS), the high, 44 (in DI). Probably a close third reading would bring the total to more than 500 items.
5. Although the characters Jack Byron and Tobias Barrow in O'Brian's novel *The Unknown Shore* (1959) are prototypes for Aubrey and Maturin, resembling them in many ways, Jack in the earlier book never misquotes or utters fractured proverbs.
6. The Captain may also be confusing Yorick/Borwick with two different ships mentioned in the novels named *Berwick*, one French, the other British.
7. O'Brian's biographer notes an instance during World War II when "a lanky Harvard-educated American [possibly Archibald MacLeish] . . . in a conversation corrected Patrick's misquotation of some Shakespeare lines" (see King 2000, 93).
8. Plush and Folly are place-names in Dorset, and officer William Harding inherited a small estate between the two villages, which

prompted Jack's witticism. *Plush* was also the naval term for the grog left over after the regular measure had been served out, which by custom belonged to the cook. Thus, as the narrator explains, "unless he had a good head for rum, this often led him to commit a foolish action."

9. Stephen is alluding to Antonio Magliabechi (1633–1714), a bibliographer and linguist said by his contemporaries to be "a living library," according to the note in Brown's lexicon (1999, p. 204).
10. The aphorism Jack tries to quote here is from the *Pensées* of Blaise Pascal (1623–62): "The heart has its reasons which reason cannot know."
11. The JPEG file is available at <http://www.hmssurprise.org/Coat.html>
12. Richard Snow writing in the *New York Times*, and quoted on the covers of the Norton paperback editions of *Post Captain* and *The Surgeon's Mate*.

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- Bowen Kerrhard's *Aubrey/Maturin quiz book*. 1998. South Bend, Ind.: Quill Communications Services.
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# As the Crow Flies

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## A Straightforward Study of Lineal Worldview in American Folk Speech

Alan Dundes

(For Wolfgang Mieder, *Magister Proverbium*,  
paremiologist without peer)

“We do not see the lens through which we look.” So wrote anthropologist Ruth Benedict (1887–1948) in an essay entitled “The Science of Custom” that appeared in *The Century Magazine* in 1929. Although this essay was later expanded to become the first chapter of her classic *Patterns of Culture*, published in 1934, for some reason, this succinct articulation of the difficulty of perceiving one’s own culturally relative cognitive categories was omitted. From a folklore perspective, it suggests that one of the important potential contributions of folklore with respect to identifying the characteristics of that critical lens may be that native categories of perception are clearly delineated in various genres, including those subsumed under the rubric of folk speech.

In 1950, another outstanding anthropologist, Dorothy Demetracopoulou Lee (1905–75) published her insightful paper “Codifications of Reality: Lineal and Non-Lineal” in *Psychosomatic Medicine*. Her main point was to demonstrate that fellow anthropologist Bronislaw Malinowski (1884–1942) had misread some of his famous Trobriand Island ethnographic data by seeing lines where the Trobrianders did not. In other words, Malinowski was guilty of imposing Western lineality upon nonlinear phenomena. While she did speak of anthropologists referring to “unilinear” or “multilinear” courses of development and more generally of

Westerners following a “line of thought,” she was not particularly concerned with documenting Western lineal worldview. The bulk of her discussion provided instances of Malinowski’s misinterpreting Trobriand culture. She did conclude, however, that “much of our present-day thinking, and much of our evaluation are based on the premise of the line and of the line as good” (Lee 1950, 96).

Lee’s brilliant essay did not receive all the credit it deserved (see Graves 1957). It is my contention that Dorothy Lee was on the right track and American folk speech amply confirms her assertion that the line is absolutely central, if not sacred, in American worldview. But she did not distinguish between drawing parallel lines and concentric circles as a lecturer’s means of making a point. In contrast, I argue it is “straight lines” that are crucial, not curved ones. Moreover, the straight lines are often displayed in the form of a square or box. It is precisely the combination of “line,” “straight,” and “square,” I suggest, that shapes the lens through which Americans (and other Westerners) look. These constituent features that so significantly affect our perception are found repeatedly in dozens of examples from familiar folk speech.

The word “line” or the plural “lines” occurs alone, in combination in various compounds, and often as an affix, e.g., guidelines, deadlines, outlines, bloodlines, hemlines, necklines, hairlines, headlines, bylines, baselines, goal lines, property lines, airlines, ship lines, railroad lines, bus lines, trolley or streetcar lines, chorus lines, battle lines, pipelines, assembly lines, picket lines, time lines, datelines, telephone lines, fishing lines, waterlines, coastlines, shorelines, skylines, and lifelines, among many others.

The *line* functions as a kind of limit. One must “toe the line,” not “cross the line,” “lay it on the line,” or have one’s fate be “on the line.” One may be asked to “hold the line,” meaning to maintain the status quo at any cost to prevent any unfavorable incursion or development. One can think or be “in line” (with the prevailing code or trend) and by the same token, if an individual’s behavior or suggestion is inappropriate, he may be admonished that he is “(way) out of line.” One may seek to keep a rebellious child “in line,” that is, insist that he or she conform to existing social conventions. The son or daughter of a king is said to be “in line” to occupy the throne. Presumably the heir must belong to the appropriate “lineage.” To reach the Internet or use e-mail, one

must go “online.” Runners begin a race at the “starting line” and end at the “finish line.”

A line can be an occupation or profession. Upon an initial meeting, one person may ask another, “What’s your line?” meaning “What do you do for a living?” If one’s vocation is the same as one’s father/mother and grandfather/grandmother, one may boast that he or she comes from “a long line” of doctors, lawyers, educators, etc. If a line can reflect the past, it can also represent a trajectory pointing toward the future. One can look forward to success “down the line.” In business, one speaks of a line of products with the “top of the line” being the best. The “bottom line” refers to the grand total or final figure on a financial balance sheet but more metaphorically, to the final upshot of a contract or deal. If one seeks information about a product or a person, he is said to be trying to “get a line on” it.

A line is also an insincere formulaic ploy (often a well-rehearsed sales pitch) or tactic intended to sway or seduce an addressee, as in trying to persuade a member of the opposite sex to accept an invitation for a date. These are often termed “pickup lines.” Such usage almost certainly relates to the notion of a “line of argument” or “line of reasoning.” Political organizations often have specific agendas or platforms which may be referred to as “party lines.” It may simply be the influence of print, but one tends to refer to poetry, even purely oral poetry, in terms of lines, and the same goes for “learning one’s lines” or “forgetting one’s lines” in a stage play. Clothing has “lining,” and a metaphor speaks of “lining one’s own pockets” (with illegal funds). Even clouds have a “lining,” as in the proverb, “Every cloud has a silver lining,” which in the best tradition of American optimism urges citizens to “always look for the silver lining.”

A line is still a line even if it’s narrow. One speaks of a “fine line” or a “thin line” when making a subtle distinction between two different things. A line is no less a feature for its being intermittent, as in a “dotted line” upon which to sign one’s name, say, to open a “line of credit” at a bank. With telephones, in former times, one could have a “party line” or indulge in a “private line.” A difficult superior may take a “hard line” in dealing with a subordinate, especially if his performance is adjudged “borderline,” and consequently “draw the line” in demanding future improvement. A fired employee, without adequate salary or benefits, may

well fall below the “poverty line.” One can also draw a “line in the sand” to indicate that an opponent can approach no farther. The names of famous borders also include the word line, such as the Mason-Dixon Line or the Maginot Line. Banks and insurance companies often “redline” impoverished urban areas where credit is denied residents. The red line in this instance serves as an unofficial and often illegal demarcation of areas that loan officers use to evaluate requests for funds.

It is not just that one is forced to stay “in line” and not “jump the line” by disregarding the folk principle of “first come, first served” in a “checkout line” at a grocery store, but there is an implicit and sometimes explicit understanding that the line must be straight. Lines, of course, can be either straight or curved, but the straight line provides the norm. “As the crow flies” is a traditional response to an inquiry as to how far away a given objective is. “As the crow flies” means the minimum distance from the present point to the objective as measured in a straight line. There is also the proverb: “The shortest distance between two points is a straight line.” Often, however, it is not possible to go directly from point *A* to point *B*. Only crows (and other birds) can do so, flying over obstacles that impede the progress of land-bound creatures.

*Straight* means direct, honest, and right, among other things. One tries to “get one’s facts straight,” that is, correct. “Be straight with me” is a request for honesty. “Setting the record straight” is an attempt to eliminate previous errors. “Straight from the horse’s mouth” refers to an unimpeachable source of information, presumably deriving from the practice of actually examining a horse’s teeth (to determine its age and condition) as opposed to simply taking the word of a horse trader. To speak “straight from the shoulder,” a phrase apparently derived from boxing (referring to a direct punch), means being frank and to the point, without exaggeration or embellishment. The “straight dope” is slang for true information. To be a “straight shooter” or a “straight arrow” implies that the individual in question is completely honest and trustworthy. Someone who is not so dependable may be urged to “straighten up and fly right.” “Straight talk” is sincere, honest talk. To “see straight” means to discern reality clearly. “To go straight” implies that one may have had a shady past but has now decided to lead a righteous, law-abiding life. If a person

“plays it straight,” he or she is being totally above board, completely honest.

If a person is successful in a job, he may be promoted. The promotion may be gradual, or it may be dramatic so that he goes “straight to the top.” In stage comedy, the “straight man” has to keep a “straight face” when he delivers a “straight line” to set up the joke’s “punch line” uttered by the principal comedian. Straight can also mean unadulterated, as in taking one’s whiskey “straight” or “straight up,” that is, without any diluting mixer or ice cubes. To do something “straightaway” means doing it right away. A parent may tell a child to “come straight home” after school, meaning to come directly home without meandering or taking any wrong turn or detour. Ideally, one’s destination lies “straight ahead.” To win seven “straight” games (seven in a row) signifies that one has won an unbroken series or sequence. Straight also designates conventional norms in sexuality. Hence, a “straight” is a heterosexual as opposed to a homosexual, at least in gay slang.

If straight conveys honesty, frankness, forthrightness, then it may be contrasted with “crooked” (cf. the abridged form “crook” for a criminal) or “bent,” as in “bent out of shape,” or someone who “bends the law” or terms involving circles or the adjective “round.” One must not get “out of line” and certainly, as already mentioned, not “cross the line.” Incidentally, “cross” implies departing from “straight.” An individual may betray another by “crossing up” that person. An even worse betrayal is called a “double cross.” In any event, one makes a “beeline” for an objective and does so by going “straight ahead” toward one’s goal.

This is very different from taking a “roundabout” way. Someone who “beats around the bush” is not being direct. Someone who gets the “run around” is not being treated in an honest, truthful manner. To “mess (kid, horse) around” is to waste time and not stay on course. Someone who is driven crazy may be said to be “(a)round the bend.” There is an old American folk metaphor, “to go ‘round Robin Hood’s barn,” meaning to follow a winding road or be long-winded. “Round Robin Hood’s barn makes a tedious yarn” (Whiting 1977, 365; Mieder 1992, 38). The word “around” may also signify inexactness or at best a vague approximation. A friend tells another they should meet “around five o’clock.” That is certainly not the same as specifying “five on the dot” (the dot presumably being a point on the line?). Even the use of the

Latin “circa” with respect to dates reflects the same indulgence with approximation. A certain person may be said to have been born circa 1900, circa being, of course, cognate with the English word “circle.” A similar nuance of around is found in the common leave-taking formula, “See you around,” meaning in no particular place at no particular time. To “round off” a number, say an amount of money owed, is a self-conscious admission that one is willing to be inexact just for the sake of keeping things simple.

The negative associations of round and roundness in contrast to straight are occasionally reversed in American proverbs. We know that proverbs are famous for presenting two completely opposite points of view. “He who hesitates is lost” urges immediate action to ensure success while “Look before you leap” recommends caution. There is even a proverb covering this characteristic of the genre: “The devil can quote scripture,” meaning that one can always find a proverb to justify one’s position. So in contrast to “The shortest distance between two points is a straight line,” we have “The longest way round is the shortest way found.” But by the same token, we also have “Don’t go round the world for a short cut.” So the upshot is, “You pays your money, and you takes your choice.” Still the general mistrust of round prevails: “Money is round and rolls away” (Mieder 1992, 416).

The epitome of roundness is, of course, the *circle* (Loeffler-Delachaux 1947; de Alvarez de Toledo 1951). “Circular reasoning” is clearly in opposition to “thinking straight.” In terms of logic, if one uses a proposition to lead to a conclusion and then purports to prove the proposition by means of the conclusion, one is guilty of “circular reasoning,” the idea being that one has completed a circle so there is no starting point. One has argued or reasoned in a circle (see Walton 1991; Rips 2002). A folk belief also states that when one becomes lost, say in a forest, in the course of trying to find one’s path to safety, one will wind up “going around in circles.” A bit of military doggerel, which is, however, known generally, confirms the association of being frustrated or lost with going in circles: “When in danger, when in doubt; Run in circles, scream and shout.” Perhaps analogous to going in circles as a metaphor for working to no purpose may be the expression “spinning your wheels” that signifies “going nowhere fast.” A wheel is, conceptually speaking, a kind of circle (Loeffler-Delachaux 1947, 69), and a “wheeler-dealer” or someone who “wheels and deals” is



typically a person who is deceptive or even ruthlessly dishonest. Finally, one of the most striking pieces of evidence revealing the folk perception of circles is that a repeated series of actions that lead to an increasingly negative situation may be termed a “vicious circle.” The adjective is surely telling!

If the circle (and roundness) connotes an undesirable state of confusion, the *square* does the opposite. The square is obviously an expanded form of straight lines. “To square” accounts is to settle matters equitably. One tries to treat others “fair and square,” for example, by giving them a “square deal.” Meals that are substantial and satisfactory are called “square meals.” One tries to get “squared away,” meaning to get things in order, to be prepared for whatever the future may hold. A “square shooter” is synonymous with “straight shooter,” referring to someone who is scrupulously honest. To face an issue “squarely” means to confront it head-on and directly. To stand behind someone or something “foursquare” implies being steady, unswerving, and without equivocation. Two opponents will “square off” or “square up,” that is, face one another directly, for a fight.

The literal centrality of square in American (and very likely Western) thought is also present in dwellings and city planning. It is no coincidence that major cities typically express their identities in open areas commonly called “squares.” This is so even if the shape of the area is not actually a square. Such is the case, for example, with Times Square in New York City. Some city squares are in that quadrangular shape, but many are not. Other venues such as arenas may reflect the penchant for squares, e.g., Madison Square Garden, also in New York City.

Since the area of a geometric square is the length of one side multiplied by itself—if a side is represented by  $s$ , then the area of that square is said to be  $s$  “squared.” This principle has been extended so that any number  $n$  multiplied by itself is said to be  $n$  squared. This leads further to the term “square root.” The square root of nine is therefore three. But there is nothing literally square about either the number nine or threes. Mathematics has other connections with lines and squares. For centuries, mathematicians interested in number theory have been fascinated by what is called the “magic square.” This consists of an arrangement of numbers in the form of a square so that every column, every row, and each of the two diagonals adds up to the same sum, this

total being called the “constant” (Meister 1952). A branch of geometry is called “lineal geometry,” and there are “linear algebras.” In addition, there are “linear equations,” and in physics there are “lines of force,” not to mention the “linear accelerator” by means of which particles are propelled in straight paths.

The contrast between the square and the circle is not just a matter of there not being any vicious squares. The fundamental opposition between these two basic metaphors is signaled by the expression about attempting to “put a square peg in a round hole” or the equally apt but perhaps less well known variant “to put a round peg in a square hole.” The phrase may be used to label a misfit, someone deemed not qualified or fit to carry out a particular task. In the present context, the expression states that squareness and circularity are incompatible; they are mutually exclusive. Another traditional articulation of this incompatibility is the mathematical fool’s errand of trying to “square the circle.” The idea of trying to find a circle and square with equal areas is allegedly an insoluble problem, a mathematical impossibility (Hobson 1913; Jessep 1999; but see Ruthen 1989). Hence, the idiom is a way of suggesting the futility of a given action. Speaking of futility, when some project comes to naught, one may well exclaim that it is “back to square one,” that is, one must return to the very beginning of the enterprise to start all over again (possibly an allusion to a game such as hopscotch). A wastepaper basket may be referred to as “the circular file,” that is, the place to deposit unneeded correspondence. It may be worth noting that both of the binary oppositions: straight/crooked and square/round are reported in a single catchphrase once popular in England. Evidently, a humorous hyperbolic way of “setting a man on his word” was to say, “Straight down the crooked lane and all round the square” (Partridge 1961, 818).

Because square signals fairness and honesty, one should not be surprised to see just how much squareness permeates society. Perhaps the most popular traditional folk dance in American culture is called the “Square Dance.” This may be contrasted with round dances such as the waltz, where dancers move or whirl in circular fashion. But for that matter, in social dancing, beginners are frequently taught to do the “box step.” *Boxes*, like squares, are linear in nature. One is obliged to remain in a box in the same sense as toeing the line and not crossing it.

In baseball, for example, the batter steps into the “batter’s box,” where a pitcher from the opposing team throws the ball into what is called the “strike zone,” an imaginary rectangular area above home plate through which a pitch must pass for the umpire behind the plate to call it a strike. If he misses the strike zone (and the batter doesn’t swing), the pitch is labeled a ball, much as a ball hit outside the left- or right-field lines (also called “foul lines”) is called a foul (as opposed to fair) ball. The place where the pitcher stands is sometimes called the “pitcher’s box,” and if too many batters are successful, thus forcing him to leave (to be replaced by another pitcher), it is said he has been “knocked out of the box.” The final results of a baseball game, often appearing in newspapers and giving the statistics (e.g., runs, hits, errors, etc.), are called the “box score.”

Baseball, America’s national pastime, is just one instance of the way boxes and lines permeate the culture. A “line drive” or “liner” is a sharply hit ball with little or no arc. One of a pitcher’s most effective pitches is a “curve” or “curveball,” that is, a ball that does not go in a straight line toward home plate but rather bends or curves in its flight, the aim being to fool the batter so he fails to hit it. In American slang, to “throw someone a curve,” taken from baseball, means to ask an unfair question or make an unreasonable demand. Again, “curve” like circle and round implies a departure from the “straight and narrow,” from directness and honesty.

Many sports and games have lines. For example, in basketball, one shoots foul shots from a position immediately behind “the foul line” aka “the free-throw line.” In football, there is an “offensive line,” consisting of players who protect their quarterback when the team is on offense, or a “defensive line,” consisting of players who attack the opposing quarterback. When a team is on defense, there may be several of eleven players who are positioned slightly behind the defensive line to shore up the defense, e.g., protect against a short pass by the opposing offense. These players are called “linebackers.” In football, the playing field is divided into ten ten-yard strips. Position on the field is accordingly measured by “yard lines.”

No one likes to “boxed in,” but the fact is that Americans are always “behind enemy lines,” so to speak. Lines are everywhere, it seems, and when they meet, they frequently form rectangles

and squares. (One need look no further than to the shape of most windows and window panes, bricks and boards, picture frames, postage stamps, rugs, and hundreds of other mundane objects.) Though businessmen may look for an “angle,” there is always a danger of being “cornered.” It is one thing to be boxed in but even worse to be forced into a small corner of a quadrilateral enclosure. At sporting events or theaters, would-be spectators go to the “box office” to purchase tickets. Typically, the best seats in the house are the “box seats.” At sporting events, spectators are not allowed to enter the actual playing area, e.g., the “boxing ring” (despite its name, a square) or the baseball or football field. They are obliged to remain on the “sidelines.” An injured player may have to be “sidelined” for a period of time. In ice hockey, a player who commits an infraction is punished by being sent to a particular area on the sidelines termed the “penalty box.”

Houses and rooms therein may resemble boxes, and in the bedroom, one sleeps on a rectangular mattress that sits squarely on a “box spring.” Office workers may be forced to occupy small spaces called “cubicles.” (Why are pieces of ice used to chill drinks in the shape of cubes? Round bits of ice surely function equally well.) Early on, children are socialized by such rhymes as “Step on a line, break your father’s (mother’s) spine.” The variant uses terms other than line, but the message is the same: “Step on a crack, break your father’s (mother’s) back.” A line is a limit that must be respected, that is, not stepped on. In tick-tack-toe, the winner is the person who can draw a straight line through either three x’s or three o’s. In hopscotch, one must step carefully so as not to go outside any of the series of boxes.

Whether it’s the military or show business, individuals are constantly asked to “line up.” Suspected criminals are frequently asked to participate in a “lineup” (to see if eyewitnesses can identify them as perpetrators of a crime). One also speaks of an outstanding “lineup” of talent, either on a sports team or a theatrical stage. Drunk drivers, when stopped by police officers, may be asked to “walk a straight line” (as a sobriety test to prove that they are sufficiently sober to be permitted to continue driving their vehicles).

It should be noted that despite the ubiquity of lines and squares in American worldview, the semantic associations are not always positive. A square in slang terms is a “strait-laced”

person, someone who is excessively conventional and law abiding. There have even been a few proverbial attempts to denigrate squareness, for example, “Be there or be square.” In other words, show up for the event in question unless you are too inhibited or fearful to do so. Other traditional verbal efforts to escape the vise of linearity include the notion of “reading between the lines” and the exhortation to “think outside the box.” But it can be said that these very attempts to escape the boundaries imposed by lines and boxes confirm the existence of such cultural restraints.

If a person is terminally ill in the hospital and the EEG monitor suddenly shows that he or she has “flatlined,” one can safely say that person has reached “the end of the line” and, unless cremated, is very likely to be shortly thereafter buried in a box (coffin).

What can we conclude from this brief demonstration of the apparent American penchant for straight lines and squares as well as a complementary mistrust of round curves and circles? Do we, in fact, have a window on a facet of American worldview? Anthropologist Aidan Southall suggests in a provocative, if admittedly speculative, essay devoted to an evolutionary approach to architecture that original “circularity” has given way to “rectangularity” (1993, 378). Citing the discovery of a dome-shaped construction of arched branches, unearthed in the Ukraine and said to be fifteen thousand years old, perhaps one of the oldest-known examples of human architecture, Southall wonders if this structure in any way symbolized the “dome of heaven.” He might well have also considered such examples as the shape of the Eskimo igloo or the curious beehive-shaped *trulli* in the village of Alberobello in southern Italy. In any event, he remarks that whereas “sticks and stones are naturally round,” they tend to be replaced as building materials by the cultural invention or borrowing of “rectangular bricks and square stones.” He notes further, “Round stools precede square thrones and chairs” and that “humankind as a whole has clearly moved from the universal occupation of the round to an almost universal occupation of the rectangular” (1993, 379).

Here is Southall’s thesis in his own words:

It is more natural (though I use this adjective with great caution), to live in the round than in the square, whether it is a question of

dwelling or village, settlement or city. For virtually nothing in nature appears in rectangular form, whereas round, spherical and curved phenomena, both stationary and in motion are both ubiquitous and so impressive as to imprint themselves on the human imagination and consciousness. Is the rectangular city, then, a symbolic statement of human culture triumphing over nature by making an opposite statement? Surprisingly, in all the literature on nature and culture I have not noticed the question raised. With the other pair lurking behind, it becomes a question of whether the rectangular city is a male statement as well." (1993, 380)

Southall is not the first to suggest an evolutionary sequence from circular to rectangular structures. Robbins, for instance, suggested that dwelling shapes and settlement patterns were related to whether people were nomadic or sedentary: "Considerable archaeological data also indicate that as cultures have moved from shifting to more settled subsistence patterns temporally, there has been a corresponding trend from circular to predominantly rectangular dwellings," and he hypothesized "that circular ground plans will tend to be associated with relatively impermanent or mobile settlement patterns, and that rectangular house ground plans will tend to be associated with more permanent or sedentary community settlement patterns" (1966, 7; see also Flannery 1972, 29-30).

One emerging controversial issue is not so much whether there are round or square dwellings, but rather whether or not specific social organizational constellations are associated with either one (see Saidel 1993 and Flannery's response). Of interest in the present context is the possibility there may be a common observable pattern in both house type and the configuration or grouping of multiple dwellings. Whiting and Ayres claim (1968, 126) that societies that build rectangular houses tend to arrange them in a line or square. If this is the case, it indicates that the pattern of circularity or squareness may apply equally to house or dwelling shape and the overall settlement plan. Moreover, the charter, so to speak, for such a pattern may well extend to the cosmos. One explanation for the priority of the circle is that the sun (and moon) are perceived as celestial circles (Peet 1888; Loeffler-Delachaux 1947; Lurker 1966, 523), not to mention the perception of the horizon. Hence, architectural plans might have been intended to mirror the celestial model. One thinks of the

circular form of Stonehenge, for example, as a prime example of a likely sacred construction connected with sun worship.

Lest the reader think that the idea that circularity may be manifested in dwelling construction or other social forms is just pure speculation on the part of academics, one should ponder the following testimony given by a talented professional Oglala Sioux storyteller in the early twentieth century:

The Oglala believe the circle to be sacred because the Great Spirit caused everything in nature to be round except stone. . . . The sun and the sky, the earth and the moon are round like a shield. . . . Everything that breathes is round like the body of a man. Everything that grows from the ground is round like the stem of a tree. Since the Great Spirit has caused everything to be round, mankind should look upon the circle as sacred for it is the symbol of all things in nature except stone. It is also the symbol of the circle that marks the edge of the world. . . . The day, the night, and the moon go in a circle above the sky. . . . *For these reasons the Oglala make their tipis circular; their camp circle circular and sit in a circle for all ceremonies.* The circle is also the symbol of the tipi and of the shelter." (Walker 1917, 160; italics added)

It may well be that the distinction between nature and culture is not so much matched by one between the circle and the square as by the presence or absence of the line. Nature does not necessarily come in lines. Rather, man attempts to impose order by perceiving or drawing lines. In terms of folk speech, there is a desire to "connect the dots," but the connected dots may form circles as well as squares. Lines of latitude and longitude follow the shape of the earth. Still, Southall may be correct in identifying a preference for rectangles, though I suggest that it would be more accurate to say a preference for straight as opposed to curved lines. It is a desideratum to "get all one's ducks in a row," and it is surely no coincidence that man tends to plant his crops in straight rows, or that the military obliges men to march in precise line formations, or that seniority and rank are indicated by the number of stripes, which are essentially glorified lines. In the navy, there is a distinction between "line officers" as opposed to staff or supply officers, referring to an old label assigned to warships or "ships of the line." All military units, not just the navy, insist on performing prescribed tasks "in the line of duty."



While the evidence adduced from American folk speech cannot necessarily support the evolutionary aspects of Southall's argument, it seems to corroborate his "delineation" of a critical distinction between the circle and the square. If one accepts and expands upon his suggestion that the "rectangular city" is male—and one can easily cite numerous examples of penile architecture, for example, the Washington Monument or the Empire State Building—then one may go on to propose that roundness and circles belong to the realm of the feminine. In evolutionary terms, the (linear?) progression from circle to square then corresponds to the alleged schema whereby original matriarchy was in time replaced by patriarchy. Certainly in American folk speech, "curvaceous" refers to a woman's well-shaped figure, signifying voluptuousness. It would not be used to refer to a man's physique. Moreover, it is women, according to American male stereotypes, who are accused of not being able to think logically, that is, linearly.

In Shakespeare's day, we have indisputable evidence that circle referred to the female pudendum. In *Romeo and Juliet* (2.1.23–26), we find Mercutio's bawdy remark: "Twould anger him to raise a spirit in his mistress' circle of some strange nature, letting it there stand till she had laid it, and conjured it down." In more recent times, women of easy virtue were called "round heels," presumably because they spent so much time on their backs that their heels became increasingly rounded. (The term is also applied to inferior boxers, who were so frequently knocked out that they consequently suffered a similar fate.) So perhaps one can make a justifiable case that women are round while men are square. It is, after all, women who by nature have menstrual "cycles"; men do not. The stereotypical association of women with roundness and men with squareness (and hence women with vagueness, dissemblance, and dishonesty, as opposed to men with precision, directness, and candor) can easily be construed as part of the larger paradigm that "aligns" women with nature and men with culture (Ortner 1974). For that matter, the proposal that "rectilinear represents the male body image and curvilinear the female" is not new (see Whiting and Ayres 1968, 128).

However, I would argue that both men and women in American culture think in linear terms. This may be why there is resistance to the notion of reincarnation. Reincarnation implies that a



person's being or soul, after death, is recycled. A person is reborn and begins life anew. In some religions, the recycling is repeated ad infinitum. In American worldview, in contrast, the progression from birth through life to death is an irreversible path or line. One may choose to believe (in a culturally sanctioned denial of human mortality) that one continues to live on in heaven, but that belief does not include the possibility of being reborn on earth as a new baby. Americans do observe a certain cyclicity of seasons: spring, summer, fall, winter, a sequence from birth to death and then rebirth, as well as the recurrent series of the days of the week and months of the year, and Eliade credits the phases of the moon: "appearance, increase, wane, disappearance, followed by reappearance after three nights of darkness" as contributing significantly to the belief in cyclical concepts of time (1954, 86). Nevertheless, years, the larger temporal units, are counted serially in an irreversible sequence. One can go back in time only through fiction and fantasy. The point is that Americans, males and females alike, perceive both time and space in lineal terms. It is of some interest that a native Aleut environmentalist from Alaska claims that it is precisely the lineal bias of Western society that causes problems in the repeated failure to understand the cyclical worldview systems of many aboriginal societies (Mercurielief 1994).

We may conclude, therefore, that Dorothy Lee was right when she alluded to the American (and Western) propensity toward codifying reality in lineal terms. In fact, the straight/circular dichotomy is of some antiquity; it existed in classical Greek literature and philosophy (Bellef 1979). However, we may wish to modify slightly Ruth Benedict's pessimistic dictum that "we do not see the lens through which we look." Inasmuch as folklore does encapsulate native cognitive categories, we may through its analysis indeed be able to see at least some small portion of that lens, as I hope these few lines have succeeded in demonstrating. On the other hand, perhaps I simply assumed what I planned to prove, in which case I am undoubtedly guilty of *circulus probandi*.

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