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Introduction

In March 1981, having just arrived in the Murik Lakes, I went to a meeting of men from two feuding villages. They had assembled in the male cult house of a neutral community to begin to resolve a recent sequence of brawls which had broken out between their respective youth. The men of Darapap, numbering ten or twelve, arrived first and engaged their neutral hosts in a riotous comedy, the content of which was far beyond my comprehension. However, new as I was then to the culture of Murik men, and uninformed about its meanings, what they did made a lasting impression.

One elderly man hobbled into the male cult house with the aid of a staff, stood to rest for a moment a few steps inside the doorway, surveyed the scene until he spotted a junior man lying motionless on the floor, supine. Darting across the hall, the man launched himself crotch first onto the face of the prone figure. Squatting over him, he began to bob up and down, as he shouted something about the younger man's penis. Another man rubbed his buttocks on the leg of a youth. I saw a man lift his leg over someone's head. Others groped each other in the genitals. At the same time, the men engaged in a mock repartee which I gathered (because it was partly spoken in Tokpisin) was about adultery. I did not know what to make of the gleeful yet casual effrontery with which adult men called each other "dickheads," "pricks" and "lechers." I nonetheless felt a distinct sense of *déjà vu* and asked Marabo, a relatively senior man sitting next to me, if mothers' brothers were joking with sisters' sons. I could hardly contain my astonishment when he told me that they were.

Despite this man's verification of my guess, I knew nothing about these abuses, profanities and improprieties (or even the extent to which the Murik considered them as such). I understood little about the acceptability of "this peculiar combination of friendliness and antagonism"

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(Radcliffe-Brown 1965b: 91) in that, or any other, context. My knowledge of the sacred male space in which the meeting took place, or about the organization of kinship or marriage among the Murik, was nil. Except for a vague awareness that some sort of peacemaking ritual was underway, I knew nothing about the background which had necessitated these negotiations. Amid the anxiety created by such ignorance (Devereux 1967), my initial encounter with Murik slapstick was uncanny, at once familiar yet unnatural.

Uncanny? Why uncanny? Because I had read about something like it in *Naven*, Gregory Bateson's (1936) classic monograph of ritual and society among the Iatmul, a people living upriver from the estuary-dwelling Murik. At the culmination of the rite for which Bateson named that book, a transvestite man paid tribute to his sister's son by rubbing the cleft of his buttocks along his nephew's shin. Put simply, Bateson's complicated, functional analysis of this tributary gesture was that its performance inhibited the outbreak of structural tensions in Iatmul society through the force of its condensed poetics. The alternative to the clefting gesture and the rites it climaxed was an unchecked escalation of conflict into violence – “symmetrical schismogenesis,” Bateson called it – among individuals or groups of kinsmen who, by virtue of their bravado and weak affinal ties, rejected the performance of any form of tribute as culturally demeaning to their gender identity.

Of the many responses to Bateson's difficult, but prescient, analysis of *naven* rites,¹ rethinking the clefting gesture *per se* – locally viewed as a male pantomime of the maternal body during sexual intercourse and birth – has not been among them. I myself had given a careful reading to Bateson's Iatmul ethnography while preparing his biography (Lipset 1980) but did not expect to discover this contradictory, androgynous image of reproduction when Barlow and I arrived in the Sepik estuary. The uncanny experience of seeing *naven*-like behavior in a context of social control excited me and gradually I turned my attention² to the ethnographic puzzle Bateson and others (Mead 1935; Hogbin 1970; Forge 1966) had found in the Sepik so many years earlier: namely, the equivocal relationship between men and the maternal body.

Masculinity, the maternal body and hidden dialogue

In this book, I argue that in Murik culture the dynamic in this relationship is a particular kind of dialogue. Underlying the ethics, satire, crises and expiatory experiments by which men understand their part and participation in cultural relationships is a set of values in personified

form. A prototype of the body, which I call a maternal schema,³ is taken for granted as Murik men think about and make order out of lived experience. As they create or renew moral relationships, for example as elder brothers, or in positions of ceremonial leadership, they see themselves as possessing qualities or attributes they associate with a chaste mother who is surrounded by hungry, dependent children in need of “her” nurture, hygiene, protection and instruction. This schema may take on different, but identifiable, forms depending on the context. Missing values may be filled in completely or partially, or inverted, for example, in the kind of obscene joking relations depicted above. Actors may explicitly acknowledge being guided by the maternal schema in certain situations, such as with their inland trading partners, while in others they presume it and do not admit of “her” prototypical guidance, as when reinventing a rite of reconciliation. What is culturally distinctive about “the mother” is that, while the exterior and visible conduct of her mothering offers to them a model for moral behavior and order, qualities and substances inside of her body, particularly her powers of sexuality and fertility, the men stigmatize.

The most important ethnographic argument I shall make is that this inner/outer split in the maternal body is part of a “hidden dialogue” in terms of which men think through and negotiate the reproduction of Murik culture. In a hidden dialogue, “the statements of the second speaker are omitted, but in such a way that the general sense is not at all violated. The second speaker is present invisibly, his words are not there, but deep traces left by these words have a determining influence on all the present and visible words of the first speaker” (Bakhtin 1984b: 197). This book analyzes contexts in Murik culture in which men are that present speaker. No matter how reified or authoritative they would purport themselves and their voices to be, I argue that “their masculinity” remains a conditional and stylized disposition in the shadow of a barely disguised figure. The mysteries definitive of the Mangrove Men are marked by paradoxical metaphors, rather than assertions of unilateral control. Ideas of domination, autonomy and so forth fail to apprehend the complexity of their engagement with and responsiveness to what I am calling the maternal schema.

If dialogue is a more appropriate characterization, I need to specify and clarify the kind of dialogue to which I am referring: it is not a literal one. I shall not be concerned to analyze the conversation of men actually speaking with women or vice versa, to analyze women talking to them (but see Barlow and Lipset 1997). Nor will I be concerned with whether or how the

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maternal schema may be differentially presumed or answered by men and women. Nor do I mean to suggest that only men respond to it while Murik women do and say little more than present an image of their bodies to men. Empirically, nothing could be farther from the case (see, e.g., Barlow 1985a; 1992; 1995). I am relying upon the idea of hidden dialogue as a metaphor and a methodology to explain why the meanings of men's practices and performances coalesce to form an ambivalent whole. The men's answers are not to women *per se*, but to and about a culturally particular image of womanhood.

The view of dialogue to which I subscribe here is part of a more general theory of discourse and culture developed by Mikhail Bakhtin, the anti-Stalinist, Russian semiotician. As its critical framework is neither intuitively nor conceptually obvious, it is necessary to present a brief exposition of what he meant by "dialogism." According to Bakhtin, culture is saturated with multiple, equally authoritative discourses whose "essence . . . lies precisely in the fact that . . . [they] remain independent and, as such, are combined in a unity of a higher order" (Bakhtin 1965/1984a: 21). Multiple points of view, which are not kept in check by self-regulating mechanisms or terror, make up a contrapuntal unity. At the same time, dissent is neither random nor revolutionary. Dialogized thought and speech are molded by objective and stable forms of expression – genres – which are a "means of collective orientation in reality" (Bakhtin 1978: 131–5; 1981: 249, n. 17). Culture therefore consists of grand, indissoluble ambivalences. Centripetal and centrifugal voices contest each other *within generic forms* to make up open-ended, rather than canonical, wholes. Personalistic imagery of the threshold between freedom and dogmatism, or between irreverence and piety, that appeared in the human states of becoming, particularly absorbed Bakhtin. Laughter, eros, birth and death preoccupied him. The mockery of fools, novels whose heroes were independent of their authors' intentions, the fantastic temporality of carnival, fascinated him. Characteristic of the fiction of Rabelais and Dostoevsky, the subjects of two of his main works, was not just dialogicality but equivocality. What Bakhtin said of Dostoevsky applies to himself: "In every voice, he could hear two contending voices, in every expression a crack, and the readiness to go over immediately to another contradictory expression; in every gesture he detected confidence and lack of confidence simultaneously; he perceived the profound ambiguity, even multiple ambiguity, of every phenomenon" (Bakhtin 1984b: 30). For Bakhtin, the unity of culture is and must remain paradoxical: the moral diversity in the nineteenth-century novel was irreducible.

Anthropologists have tended to neglect two related dimensions of his position (see, e.g., Tedlock 1983; Bauman and Briggs 1990; Bandlamudi 1994). One is that dialogicality in discourse, or in discursive performances – the view that the meaning or design of expressive action is always formulated in response to the other – does not require the physical presence of an interlocutor. It rather becomes all the more powerful in the literal absence of the other, who nonetheless goes on exerting unseen material and historical effects on language and meaning. The second is that Bakhtin not only loathed reigning political (or theoretical) centers which he condemned as monologic, but also viewed dialectical progressions of order and conflict from which new, totalizing syntheses emerge as no less objectionable. His concept of culture was not teleological (Kristeva 1967: 58; Todorov 1984: 104). What he extolled in discourse were antithetical “two-in-one image[s] . . . after the manner of the figures on playing cards” (Bakhtin 1984b: 176) which admit to no finalizability.

But what might such a nonliteral, nonteleological view of dialogue and culture, a view which, in a sense, is “really” a liberal attack upon repressive state power via exegeses of Western poetics and a critique of structural linguistics, possibly have to do with rural Papua New Guinean men? I see several kinds of relevance. Instead of the orderly metaphor of function, or the moral metaphor of text, it offers a more prosaic, human image of culture. Institutions, discourse cannot even be conceived outside of semiotic relations between self and other, relations that are presumed to make up a rupture-prone, unfinished environment. Instead of privileging a local voice (e.g., one gender), or a foreign one (e.g., a postcolonial regime of value), as either noble or demonic, dialogism would seem to emphasize ambivalent systems of meaning that accept no resolution. An objection which could and ought to be raised here is whether a plurality of rejoinders all made within a single schema of images and values does not contradict the Bakhtinian notion of unfinalizability in culture. This is not, of course, a problem that would bother Murik actors. The relationship between the plurality of lived reality and generic, taken-for-granted, assumptions about discursive form, which do indeed limit fields of representation and do aim for completion, raises a thorny methodological problem for a dialogical view of Murik culture. Bakhtin of course did distinguish between more and less dialogical genres; but even ones that were most dissonant and “free,” such as carnival, were still rejoinders to an official world.

I should nominate one further advantage of the dialogical approach to ethnography. Instead of a methodology of the reader unilaterally discovering patterns of meaning in symbols and action as if culture was “poetry”

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(Geertz 1973: 443), understanding “burn[s] from the borrowed light of alterity” (Bakhtin quoted in Todorov 1984: 100). Knowledge is and can only be known in relations from without, through the irrevocable position adopted by all ethnographers, that of the outsider. Thus, in its vision of being as always in discursive relation to the other and in its rejection of unilateral voices, Bakhtinian dialogism offers a constructive, inexhaustible methodology that is appropriate for the study of changing Melanesian cultures, where, as Leenhardt (1979: 153) once remarked, the person was understood as an “empty” intersection at which the others to whom he or she is related meet.

The monologic body

My ethnographic project here is to analyze the terms in which men think through, live, create and negotiate culture, as if they were responding to a particular schema of the maternal body. Neither in Melanesia, nor anywhere else in the world, however, has this relationship been understood as a dialogue, hidden or otherwise.⁴ Rather, the body has been unilaterally defined by “fundamental principles of . . . culture” (Bourdieu 1977: 94).⁵ According to Emile Durkheim, a founder of this unilateral view, persons have two bodies: a high moral one, and a low physical one. The latter, possessed by the individual, is profane, if not simply evil. The former, possessed by society, is a *tabula rasa* for sacred representations of collective, moral authority (Durkheim 1915: 307). Beliefs about comportment – say, about courtesy, or the appropriateness of laughter – convey the degree of control exerted upon the individual, or a lack thereof, by collective institutions (Radcliffe-Brown 1965b; 1965c; M. Douglas 1975: 87). Alimentary and gestative processes conceptualize moral process itself (van Gennep 1914). The duality of good and evil is projected onto duplicated limbs and bilateral symmetry, the body’s left and right sides, as well as onto its vertical posture, whether low or high (Hertz 1960). Short hair symbolizes and publicly communicates sexual restraint or repression (Leach 1958; cf. Hallpike 1969). Substances entering or exiting through the thresholds of the body – foods, sexual fluids and so forth – define the moral status of a person (Frazer 1922) in accordance with the legitimate norms of society. On the one hand, “the uncontrolled orifices of childhood and senility and the unmediated flow of menstrual blood widely signify infrasocial states of being, and a less than optimal containment of the person within his/her bodily margins. On the other hand, bodily closure [often] signals a clearly distinct, centered identity and the capacity to engage in stable . . . relations with others” (Comaroff and Comaroff 1992: 73). Anthropologists, it

seems, have assumed that categories of moral order impose themselves on the body. Bakhtin would have called this approach monological.

In Melanesia, the terms and idioms of this monologue inevitably arise from symbolic relationships between men and the feminine body. I want to cite two brief examples of what I mean. Among the Hua of the eastern highlands, certain foods were deemed to have toxic effects on the health and agency of initiated men. The men used to eat no possum, because its hair resembled women's pubic hair, and its odor was like that of menstruating women. Possums, moreover, lived in holes that looked like vaginas and bore children like human women. Eating possum, men believed, made them pregnant (Meigs 1976; 1984). My second instance comes from Wogeo Island, just a few miles offshore of the Sepik River, where men and women were understood to pollute each other. Women menstruated, men knew, to cleanse themselves. Men, for their part, used to isolate themselves from women and bleed their genitals, an ablution which they likened to male menstruation (Hogbin 1970). There is no question that ritual practices of men could be rethought as if in dialogue with culturally variable concepts of the feminine body for the whole of Melanesia, if not the entire insular Pacific. In addition to its analytical and empirical value, such a survey would vindicate the constructivist theory Margaret Mead made famous in her Sepik triptych, *Sex and Temperament in Three Primitive Societies* (1935); namely, that gender is neither a natural nor an inevitable category of bodily meaning. More theoretically, it would demonstrate how understanding "the feminine" functionally, namely, as serving reigning masculine authority (Herdt and Poole 1982; M. Strathern 1988a), obscures the astonishingly complex androgynous stylizations in which the latter realize their agency and positions in society.

Feminists and "the feminine" in simple societies

The functional relationship of the feminine body to male authority in technologically simple societies was the central problem that preoccupied feminist anthropologists during the 1970s and 1980s. Relying upon an analytical framework adopted from Meyer Fortes, they assumed that society could be divided into "domestic" and "politico-jural" domains in which the latter encompassed or dominated the former (Fortes 1969: 72; cf. p. 100). Michelle Rosaldo observed that, typically, "the gender" of the subordinate domain was feminine, although in differing degrees, while the superior politico-jural, or public, domain was masculine (1974: 23; see also Lamphere 1974; Ortner 1974). Debate about Rosaldo's dichotomy ranged from outright empirical rejection of it to identifying variations, whether

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balanced, unisex, segregated, or hierarchical.⁶ Ortner and Whitehead (1981) then refined it by contending that kinship, gender and political authority ought to be viewed as parts of a single, variable field of meaning, rather than as separate domains. Nevertheless, the politico-jural domain, which they now called “prestige structures,” or how men established and legitimated conjugal rights (see also Evans-Pritchard 1965), was still said to determine or explain the feminine. Collier and Rosaldo (1981) devised a typology of prestige structures. The *bridewealth* type included large sedentary economies of food producers among whom social standing was won and validated through affinal exchanges of valuables between kin groups. The *brideservice* type referred to small, nomadic, hunter-gatherers among whom men initiated and validated conjugal relations through a groom’s reciprocal provision of a woman to his spouse’s kin in addition to working for them in the course of daily life.⁷

Marilyn Strathern acclaimed the Collier/Rosaldo typology as having distinguished nothing less than a “profound symbolic shift” in modes of collective representation of the feminine (1985a: 198; see also 1988a). When, for example, a groom gave meat to his affines as an act of brideservice, his gift would not square a debt. It was rather part of a continuous claim a man had to make in his wife. Neither labor nor any transfer of wealth would stand in any categorical or aggregate sense for this, or any other, relationship in such a prestige structure. Only the exchange of another person, usually a sister, and the other services provided by the groom, could create and maintain a marriage (cf. Kelly 1993). In the bride-wealth type, by contrast, exchanged valuables do create new relationships, or mediate old ones. The transaction of wealth-objects for women, in other words, allows for systematic cultural differences in how the feminine might be understood. Woman is no longer an embodied cluster of indivisible capacities, as she is construed in brideservice systems, but, being more thing-like, “she” can indeed be represented as a “gift” given from one group to another (see also Lévi-Strauss 1969). Her “labor may be conceptualized as detachable from the person and, like [her] fertility or sexuality . . . a disposable asset” (M. Strathern 1985a: 198). That is to say, as well as the wherewithal to achieve prestige, Strathern concluded that bride-wealth-based prestige systems yield metaphors for a different kind of feminine body.

Sherry Ortner (1981; cf. Howard and Kirkpatrick 1989) distinguished a third type of feminine status and body (see also Collier 1984; 1988; and Collier and Yanagisako 1987). Western Polynesian women, she observed, held elite status in society along with men. They maintained politico-jural

status, either as sisters or fathers' sisters, after they married; and did not lose ascribed rank. Ortner was not disavowing her earlier argument developed with Whitehead (1981) which had explained the feminine in terms of how men legitimated conjugal rights. Marriage might otherwise account for womanhood in western Polynesia but did not because a more important social value – being high-born – superseded it.

Some years later, however, Ortner (1990) did indeed argue that women's status might be determined by multiple, possibly contradictory, historically specific "gender hegemonies" rather than a single, timeless prestige structure. This refinement was part of a general movement among feminist anthropologists of the late 1980s and early 1990s away from the Fortesian assumption that politico-jural authority was "a dominant" (Jakobson 1971: 82) that defined or silenced women. Some feminists had now begun to focus on the intricate lives of self-possessed, sometimes insubordinate, women living at the margins of local authority and the world system (Geiger 1986; Abu-Lughod 1986; 1993; Tsing 1993; Behar 1993). Their studies sought to extol and commemorate "voices claiming no final authority" (Ong 1987: xv; Serematakis 1991; see also Abu-Lughod 1990) not only as resistant but as "creatively constructing a complete social world" (Behar 1990: 229).

Perhaps they had begun to develop a more dialogical view of the feminine. But the legacies of adopting the domain model, and contending with oppressive, androcentric forces, left them with a somewhat limited appreciation of contradictory images of the feminine. "Women's . . . commentary . . . shows a range of response – acceptance, resistance, subversion and opposition – to dominant, often male discourse" (Gal 1991: 193). Certainly, the feminine was no longer being viewed as a Pygmalian subject in the 1990s, created and defined by masculine centers of authority, but as an independent voice in the great dialogue (see also M. Strathern 1988a: 57, 127). But is theorizing the feminine exhausted by substituting a metaphor of defiance or autonomy for one of mutedness? If, as Bakhtin argued, culture is a contrapuntal and unfinalized environment, then other, more ambivalent images of the feminine than those handed down either by male prestige structures or created by women resisting them ought to exist. Such refractory imagery is the gift that Pacific island men have presented to Western social thought. For in them, the reference of the feminine is neither to wealth nor to the politico-jural authorities who transact it. This reference "cast[s] a sideward glance to an absent interlocutor" (Bakhtin 1984b: 206) living in and presiding over another context. Rather than women viewed in terms of men, or as if living apart from men, here

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we find the mysteries of culture expressed in androgynous, double-voiced, images of agency that do not lie beyond dialogue but exude polyphony (see, e.g., Mead 1935: 256).

In an otherwise perceptive reanalysis of exchange theory based upon an interpretation of Trobriand mortuary rites, Annette Wiener (1978; 1979; 1980; 1983) overlooked this point. Ritual yam exchanges were there understood as a phase of “reproductive process” (Wiener 1979: 330). Because Wiener made the then orthodox Fortesian assumption that politico-jural institutions organize domestic relationships, she did not conclude that this image might be part of a larger cultural dialogue. Among the matrilineal Trobriand Islanders, ritual exchanges explicitly disperse to men, or to one descent group instead of another, procreative forces that regenerate society. Wiener even went on to discover the image of reproduction in Melanesian societies practicing every conceivable lineal principle, but never recognized the salience of the maternal body in which it is located. However masculine in voice, the hidden dialogue Melanesian men carry on with embodiments of “woman,” particularly in “her” variable role as mother, provides them with artifices through which authority over and agency in culture may be asserted (Meeker, Barlow and Lipset 1986).

The Mangrove Men

My empirical goal is to illustrate the relationship between Murik men and the maternal body as a Bakhtinian dialogue. There are several reasons why they provide an excellent case in point. To begin, the Sepik River spills out onto a great cultural frontier. Here institutions that recall non-Austronesian-speaking inland New Guinea, and its deeply misogynist male cults, meet the stratified, more gender-equal cultures of the Austronesian-speaking Pacific. Among the groups living in the estuary of the great river, without doubt, the Murik are the leading intertribal actors. Although Murik culture is distinctively “Sepik,” that is, distinctively non-Austronesian, the gaze of the people is nevertheless fixed on the Schouten Islands offshore as well as along the coast, rather than upriver. Their fishery is supplemented by extensive overseas trade. Subsistence, and the attribution of political status, depend upon access to intertribal relationships and resources. Today, the Murik engage this cultural frontier in motorized outrigger canoes, voyaging to hereditary trading partners or to market in the provincial capital.⁸ Rather than living self-sufficiently, the pivotal role Murik men have played in this region has underscored representations of interdependency, representations that admit rather than resist their prototypical imagery.