

ANIMAL CATEGORIES IN CHICANO CHILDREN'S SPOOKY STORIES AND RIDDLES

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The thesis to be advanced in this essay is that two common genres of folk expression, riddle and narrative, carve out distinct realms of experience for artistic representation, and that they treat these separate realms in contrastive fashion. Specifically, riddles focus on the familiar domains of experience and render them strange, while spooky stories focus on the strange to render it more familiar. Finally, this differential usage of experience implies an underlying folk cosmology.

Raw materials supporting this thesis are riddles and narratives performed by Chicano children in Austin, Texas, during the year 1974. The children ranged in age from 4 to 11 years, with both sexes represented, and collection was done in the peer-group setting in an effort to capture the authentic flavor of child-to-child interaction.¹

In all, I perused several hundred riddles and perhaps one hundred narratives. The riddle corpus is primarily in the English language, and approximates a general North American juvenile riddling sample, since over eighty percent of it can be indexed with reference to prior North American collections. The narratives, on the other hand, are more likely to be recited in Spanish, and constitute an obvious ethnic heritage. I am concerned only with the category of narrative designated by the children as spooky stories. These narratives combine elements of *Märchen* and belief tale, and are greatly cherished by the children.

PERFORMANCES Both riddle and narrative are conversational genres, and they often share conversational settings; the rapid give-and-take of the riddle provides a respite from the more deliberate pacing of the narrative. Each genre tends to open a field of discourse; that is, a speech context favoring the recital of related items. Among the Chicano children whose interaction I observed, riddle fields often alternated with narrative fields, thereby preserving a situational bond between the two genres.

The tendency of riddle and spooky story to share discourse environments is tantamount to a wedding of opposites. At the level of performance, the two genres are highly contrasted. The riddle delegates to all willing participants an active role, either as one who poses or as one who attempts to resolve a propositional ambiguity. The narrative establishes essentially active and passive roles, those of narrator and audience respectively. Furthermore, the complete riddle act, with semantic closure, rarely endures more than a minute. A single narrative act, with final comments included, commonly lasts five to fifteen minutes among children. Certain strictures of conversational etiquette such as the tendency to take turns and censure repetitive material apply equally to both genres. But within these broad constraints, riddle and narrative establish starkly contrastive interactional dynamics. In addition, these oppositions of performance have their counterparts at the levels of semantic reference, and semantic transformation.

SEMANTIC REFERENCE The problem of the natural generic habitats of animals is articulated by Archer Taylor in reference to the content of European riddling traditions:

In European riddling . . . the themes of riddles are found almost exclusively in the vicinity of the farmer's house. . . . European riddlers rarely allude to wild animals. It would be hard to find riddles for a stork, a bear, a fox, or a wolf, frequent as these creatures are in folk story. . . . Provisionally at least, we can say that modern European traditional riddles deal with the objects in a woman's world or a world as seen from the windows of a house.²

The general proposition here, which remains an unanalyzed observation, is that riddles concentrate on the more intimate realms of experience. In pastoral settings, the farmhouse and barnyard furnish riddles with virtually all of their referents. In a modern urban setting, we would expect to find some representation of urban artifacts, similarly confined to the more intimate domains.

The riddles performed by the Chicano children confirm these expectations. The primary referential domains are household objects, body parts, and familiar animals. In particular, animals figure prominently in both European traditional riddling and its modern Chicano extension. It is apparent that the animals populating the riddles performed by the Chicano children emerge from the more familiar realms of the cosmos; this argument can be easily made for all but one category of animals present in the riddling.

Two classification schemes proposed for our animal bretheren suggest ways in which to order the materials presented here. Edmund Leach offers the following scheme, categorizing animals according to their interactions with humans:

1. Those animals who are very close--"pets"--always strongly inedible.
2. Those who are tame but not very close--"farm animals"--mostly edible, but only if immature or castrated.
3. Field animals--"game"--a category towards which we alternate friendship and hostility.
4. Remote wild animals--not subject to human control, inedible.³

Another system is proposed by S.J. Tambiah, and founded on a set of correspondences between "marriage and sex rules, eating rules, and rules of etiquette concerning house categories."⁴ While Tambiah's entire scheme of correspondences need not concern us here, his set of animal categories, derived from emic classifications in Thai villages, is relevant:

1. Domestic animals
 - a) that live inside the house
 - b) that live under the house
 - c) belonging to other households.
2. Animals of the forest.
3. Powerful animals of the forest.

These two systems concur in establishing three basic animal types: those that are domesticated, either as pets or animals dwelling in and about the house and its immediate environs; those that are not domesticated, but represent no major threat to human society; and those who are wild and prey on human beings. The first of these subsumes Leach's categories 1 and 2, and Tambiah's category 1; the second type includes Leach's category 3 and Tambiah's 2; and the third type corresponds to the final category in each of the above reference systems.

These classification schemes are germane to the Chicano children's riddling materials, as long as one important reinter-

pretation is accepted. Animals in these riddles are the following:

1. Type 1--domesticated animals
 - a) pets: cat, canary, dog
 - b) farm animals: chicken, cow, pig, horse.
2. Type 2--neutral animals (neither domesticated nor predators): ant, mosquito, mouse, rabbit, frog.
3. Type 3--animals of the wilderness.

Riddles present no true examples of Type 3 animals, that is, animals of the wild. But they do present one other category of animal which on the surface could be designated Type 3, though upon inspection these animals are better assigned to the Type 1 category. These are the picture book animals--such as elephant, kangaroo, zebra, monkey, and penguin--which the children are exposed to from a very early age. Presented in a highly denatured form, the elephant, kangaroo, and penguin of children's riddles have only the most superficial relationship to their savannah, outback, or polar counterparts.

When we turn our attention to animals in spooky stories, we note the replacement of Type 1 and 2 animals by Type 3 animals; that is, domesticated and neutral animals presented in the riddles yield to human predators in the narratives. Spooky stories I have recorded tell of bear, panther, crocodile, wolf, bat, and snake, and portray these animals (unlike the picture book animals) as human predators. Consider the following example:

There was a little girl that went to buy tortillas but there wasn't any in the store, so then she went to the other store, and there wasn't none in that store; so then she went to that other store and there wasn't none in that other store; and then there was some, and when she came back it was already night and the mother said not to come inside the house 'cause it was already late and then the black panther ate her all up.

[narrator: girl, 7 years old]

This is a simple tale, based on non-incremental repetition, but properly focused on the animal predator. As is frequently the case in these stories, the mother is implicated here as a collaborator in the child's undoing. Other renditions are more dramatic, evoking the perceptions of the human prey:

. . . so he kept walking, he heard some steps, he heard some steps, he looked back, he saw some feet, when she was walking, then he saw, turned around, he saw a dark eyes, then when he turned around he saw the face, then he saw the pads and head and all the body . . .

[narrator: boy, 9 years old]

Here we vicariously experience the rush of the body as the animal throws itself at us. Clearly this element is foreign to the riddle, with its litany of the ordinary and the familiar.

Even more striking are the narratives dealing with supernatural foes like *la llorona* (the weeping woman), witches, devils, and ghosts.

Hey you know the little girl she had a, she had a mother but the mother was a witch, and the mother had said, "Go get apples and don't give anybody one," so that lady had turned into a witch and she went up there and she said, "Can I have an apple, I haven't eaten for years and years," and she goes, "OK"; so that lady had eat it and had turned into her mother again and she said, "Didn't I tell you not to give anybody an apple?"--"Mom, she said she never eat for--" then her mother had killed her; then her little brother had pulled her hair:

Brother, brother, don't pull my hair

Mother had killed me for one single pear.

And then he ran and go called her father; then her father pulled her hair, she said:
 Father, father, don't pull my hair
 Mother had killed me for one single pear.
 And her father killed that lady.
 [narrator: girl, 8 years old]

This story illustrates the blending of elements of **Märchen** and belief story. The interdiction-violation, and the poetic couplets with their pattern of incremental repetition, recall the "artistic logic of the **märchen**."⁵ Yet these stories are firmly rooted in the community belief system, and are often presented as personal experience narratives.

The supernatural figures appearing in these narratives are composites of human and animal characteristics. Not only are they perversely concerned with human affairs; they also frequently take human form, or even masquerade as human beings. These traits ally them with the human domain. Yet like animals they come and go at night, unobserved, live in old houses or by creeks and rivers, and scratch, maim, or even devour their prey. And some of them have tails, pointed ears, cloven hoofs, and other anatomical features peculiar to animals.

TRANSFORMATIONS Riddles are agents of strange-making, to use the term employed by Russian Formalists.⁶ Transformations of the familiar occur through the device of linguistic trickery, or through the manipulation of conceptual codes. The former device can be illustrated with the following riddle:

Why is a barn so noisy? Cause the cows have horns.
 [boy, 7 years old]

The word "horn" allows for two different semantic glosses, facilitating a momentary association of two distinct semantic domains, those of cattle and cars. In the process our standard conceptualization of the cow and barn is enriched and enlivened.

Riddles operating through conceptual trickery may involve novel comparisons founded on some authentic affinity between objects, as in the following instance:

What's like a turtle, it has the shell of a turtle, and it's attached to the ground?
 A mushroom.
 [boy, 7 years old]

Here the perceptual affinity between the mushroom and the turtle shell (each belongs to the superordinate category of concave objects) produces this arresting comparison between a plant and an animal. The animal itself enters into a novel associative frame, thereby acquiring a new conceptual vitality.

Another device investing riddle referents with strangeness is the presentation of real world anomaly; that is, anomaly deriving from our capacity to transcend pragmatic articulations of experience.

What's taller sitting than standing? A dog.
 [girl, 8 years old]

We have a common understanding that a creature should lose height when moving from a standing to a sitting position. The dog offers a contrary instance, and this contradiction is brought to our attention in the riddle. The dog is rendered strange here through the attribution of a trait it actually possesses.

Some riddles achieve the same effect by endowing their animal referents with counter-factual characteristics.

What's yellow and it's the fattest brain in the world? A 10,000 pound canary.
[girl, 6 years old]

The fragile canary is indeed made strange in the world of the riddle.

All of the mechanisms discussed above have the capacity to transform familiar referents into less familiar ones, by investing the everyday frame of reference with unconventional associations. The ordinary animals--dog, cow, turtle, canary, in the examples given--take on fresh semantic value, whether momentarily, as in the case of riddles employing linguistic trickery, or more profoundly, when real perceptual affinities or anomalies are cited. This same transformational move, from the familiar to the strange, operates in other semantic domains besides that of animals.

Spooky stories accomplish precisely the opposite transformation. They begin with fierce animal antagonists, or bizarre creatures of fantasy embodying basic anxieties such as fear of rejection by the mother in the story quoted earlier. The antagonists of these narratives emerge from the outer regions of the cosmos, the wilderness beyond town, or the liminal districts of the imagination. These outer regions are inhospitable to human purposes, and thereby present a contrast to the utilitarian, inner cosmological regions selected for presentation in riddling.

The denizens of the outer regions are rendered less threatening, and more familiar, through two devices. First, they are included in a narrative frame and thereby implicitly brought under human control to some minimal extent. Presentation in narrative constitutes a preliminary move towards domestication. The very act of encasing these human predators in verbal icons imposes limits on them, and the transition from a formless anxiety to a finite threat (as in the case of the mother/witch story cited previously) represents an important step towards familiarization. Panther, witch, and their ilk, are not necessarily entirely neutralized through this procedure, though some narratives perform further manipulations reducing these once awesome figures to the status of ridiculous spook imposters.

Moreover, the spooky stories integrate their spooky antagonists into the social contract. Society provides safe preserves (often the home, or the city streets by day), and secure behavioral norms (obey your mother). In the two stories cited, the children incurred their dire fates by violating these basic social precautions. Society also offers preventative measures, should evil intrude even upon the circumspect, as the following excerpt shows:

. . . and then, and she came at night, and I put a big old cross up there. She was not here, she was all night at my sister's house

[girl, 8 years old, in reference to *la llorona*]

When evil is perpetrated, the narratives assign to social forces the task of restoring the social equilibrium. Thus the witch/mother does in her child, but she in turn is vanquished by her husband. Through these two mechanisms--the inclusion of human foes in a narrative frame, and their integration into the social contract--the spooky stories may be said to deprive their strange protagonists of some of their strangeness.

COSMOLOGY The allocation of different animal Types to riddles and spooky stories indicates an underlying folk cosmology which is not articulated directly by the children, but appears to govern the observable patterns of genre content. We have discovered three types of animals non-randomly dispersed among riddles and narratives:

- Type 1: domesticated animals (riddles)
- Type 2: neutral animals (riddles)
- Type 3: human predators (spooky stories)

Each animal Type is a metonymic statement concerning cosmological structure. A precedent for this view can be found in the article by S.J. Tambiah, which interrelates animal types with a set of other variables, including marriage and sex rules, and constraints pertaining to the use of house space.⁷ The animal Types would then take on the following connotations:

- Type 1: domesticated animals
 - the home and its immediate environs; the scope of operation of the family; the domain of security, enduring affective relationships, identity.
- Type 2: neutral animals
 - the town; the scope of operation of society; a domain of provisional security, transitory relationships, achieved identity.
- Type 3: human predators
 - the wilderness; beyond society; a domain void of security, and barren of affective relationships or sources of identity.

A cosmological partitioning of this kind would not be the exclusive property of the Chicanos, nor would it necessarily constitute a cultural universal (nomadic peoples, for example, might well present a different picture). But it does accord rather well with supplementary evidence, both sociological and novelistic, stressing the central importance of home and family in the Chicano world-view, and the catastrophic loss of security and identity as one moves away from this inner domain.⁸

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Notes

- 1 For a fuller treatment of the riddling corpus and the children responsible for it see my *Children's Riddling* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1979).
- 2 Archer Taylor, *English Riddles from Oral Tradition* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1951), pp. 4, 5.
- 3 Edmund Leach, "Anthropological Aspects of Language: Animal Categories and Verbal Abuse," in *New Directions in the Study of Language*, ed. Eric Lenneberg (Cambridge, Massachusetts: M.I.T. Press, 1964), pp. 23-63.
- 4 S.J. Tambiah, "Animals Are Good to Think and Good to Prohibit," *Ethnology* 8 (1969): 424-59.
- 5 Linda Dégh, *Folktales and Society* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1969), p. 133.
- 6 See Frederic Jameson, *The Prison-House of Language* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1972).
- 7 Tambiah, *passim*.
- 8 See William Madsen, *Mexican-Americans of South Texas* (New York: Holt, Rinehart, and Winston, 1964), and Rudolfo Anaya, *Bless Me Ultima* (Berkeley: Tonatiuh International, 1972).