

## LUST AND DISCUST ON THE JOB: BROADENING OCCUPATIONAL FOLKLORE

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Many previously published occupational folklore collections have relied upon the content of the texts to define the lore as occupational. Although some steps have been taken by Bruce Nickerson and Bob McCarl, the vast majority of the folkloric items in the well-known occupational collections (e. g., George Korson among coal miners and Mody Boatright among oil rig workers) contain either a specific reference to an aspect of the work itself or to some famed occupational character.<sup>1</sup> However, I am sure that Korson and Boatright would agree that the concept of occupational folklore need not be restricted to lore which contains such specific references. When field collections are conducted in an occupational context, it is clear that the content of much of the lore deals neither with work-related practices nor with famous workers; yet when the lore is used by workers to affect their occupational environment in order to put them in a frame of mind expedient to the job at hand, it should be considered occupational folklore. The following examples from a work situation in which I participated can serve as cases in point.

The workers in this case are janitors, an occupation which by its very nature poses a number of social contradictions which the worker must somehow resolve. Despite the fact that few people willingly accept a role to which an inferior status is conferred, and in which behavior indicating a recognition of this inferiority is demanded, the janitor nevertheless must deal with the glaring fact that his work involves physically cleaning up after and acting inferior to others with whom he is otherwise equal. I do not wish to imply that janitors are the only ones to deal with this contradiction; most occupations involve personal submission to a boss or foreman, and the roles of domestic servants and waiters are particularly analogous to the janitor's role in that they frequently require submissive behavior to others.<sup>2</sup>

The succession and inflation of euphemisms for janitor--custodian, building superintendent, maintenance engineer, and so on--indicates the use of a lexical strategy in an attempt to obscure the low status of the janitor's role, and reveals that the personal paradox inherent in the occupation needs to be continually resolved. In discussing the data I have collected I shall try to show how folkloric communication may be utilized in an attempt to resolve the contradiction between the requirement for submission and the need for self-assertion.

On 11 September 1973, a crew consisting of R. R., B. R., T. W., and me, washed the windows at an Indiana University sorority house in Bloomington, Indiana.

T. W., in his late twenties, is from a small town fifteen miles from Bloomington. He is also sometimes a musician, leader of a local rock band, is married and has small children.

R. R. was born in 1920 and was raised on a large farm west of Bloomington, Indiana, the second in a family of thirteen children. He has worked as a janitor most of his life and for the last seventeen years has been the owner and operator of a janitorial service--a small business in which he still does most of the actual work himself. He is the father of five children, all of whom have left his household by now. He has a poor relationship with his wife and they avoid contact with each other. He works at odd hours of the day and night, nearly always eats in restaurants, and sometimes even sleeps in his truck. A large part of R. R.'s social life takes place among his employees. He encourages socializing by buying meals in area restaurants for his crew, which usually consists of one to three men. R. R. is generally extroverted and enjoys the role of raconteur. He is always telling funny stories from his experiences, telling jokes, and teasing good-naturedly.

B. R. is R. R.'s youngest brother, over twenty years his junior. He has been married twice and is the father of three children with his first wife; he has three step-children with his second wife. B. R. plays guitar and sings in a country music band which sometimes earns him good money, when engagements are plentiful; he often has to fall back on odd jobs. He is extremely extroverted, speaks and laughs loudly, and enjoys his reputation as a cut-up and a practical joker.

Even before arrival at the sorority, the men were excited about the prospect of working there. After calling on the phone to inform the housemother that we'd arrive shortly, R. R. told us in a sarcastic tone, "I had to warn 'em. If I walked into a room with a naked girl in it, why that'd shake me all up."

Upon arrival at the house, a maid, an elderly widow from Bloomfield, Indiana, was assigned to precede us into each room to prepare the girls for our entry. We worked in two groups, B. R. with T. W., and R. R. with me. Generally, the girls were up and fully clad, but in a few cases they were still in bedclothes and bathrobes. The most common reaction of the girls was to act mildly irritated and vacate the room for the duration of the window cleaning. However, several girls stayed nearby and exchanged pleasantries with the window-washers. Among them were both the fully clad and the bathrobed girls. Most of the time the window washers were exaggeratedly polite and avoided the profane language that is the usual idiom while working.

At occasional moments, when we felt sure that we couldn't be overheard, disguised sexual comments were made. For example, as we were preparing to go to lunch, B. R. commented in the midst of a mundane conversation about what a lot of work there was to do, "Yeah, I ought to clean every crack in this place." Everyone chuckled and R. R. replied, "Boy, that would be some work. You clean every crack in this place and your hair'd turn grey overnight."

As soon as we were out of the sorority, driving down Tenth Street in R. R.'s truck to a lunch counter, there was a very distinct change in the polite submissive behavior that had been the rule for the past few hours. The men made a conspicuous effort to ogle the passing co-eds. While driving, R. R. reached out the window to feign grabbing at a girl who was standing in the street waiting for the traffic to pass. Everyone laughed and talked loudly. The men were commenting on the sorority girls they'd seen while at work. T. W. related how he'd chatted with a girl who was wearing such a filmy nightgown that "you could see everything." At this point R. R. told a joke:

A couple of ol' boys was at a baseball game and they saw a woman sitting across the way with her legs all spread out. And they got to arguing about the hair on her snatch: one of 'em said it was black, and the other one said red. There was a popcorn boy, so they sent him over to find out--gave him a dollar. He went and walked on down the bench underneath her. He came back, said, "Wasn't neither one of you guys right. Wasn't no hair at all, it was flies."

The response to the joke was a kind of combined groan and laugh, which was the expected sign of appreciation of the joke. B. R. and T. W. continued to converse the rest of the way to the lunch counter on the subject of all the women who threw themselves at them when they were playing in bars with their band, and how dangerous jealous husbands can be to musicians.

We arrived at the lunch counter and were seated. R. R. asked the waitress, "Honey, you married yet? When are you and me gonna get married?" The waitress, a plain-looking girl in her twenties and wearing an enormously high hairdo, blushed, laughed, and dismissed the

comment in a practiced mechanical sort of way.

While eating our ham and beans, B. R. related another joke:

Say, you heard about this one? There was an ol' boy and his wife, she was seventy and he was seventy-two. She got to feeling kinda poorly and went to see the doctor. The doctor examined her. Oh, her name's Ida and his is Homer. The doctor said, "Ida, there isn't nothing wrong with you except you're pregnant--that's all it is." She said, "You sure? I'm seventy years old." He said, "Yeah, that's all it is." She said, "Let me borrow your telephone." She calls up, says, "Homer, God damn you, you done made me pregnant." Homer says, "Now who is this?"

A hearty laugh that was a second or two delayed was the response to this joke. After lunch, when we got back into the truck, R. R. told another joke:

That's like the fellow that got in trouble--had him a young wife and she was a-wearing him out. Couldn't get no rest. The doctor told him he should take a vacation away from his wife and rest up. So he went on down to Florida. He was a-laying out on the beach and this woman comes by. He said, "Don't look at me, Ma'am, I'm a fuckin' wreck."

There wasn't much loud response to the above joke--just a few forced snickers.

On the return drive, the men were much calmer and quieter than on the trip thirty minutes earlier. As soon as we returned to the sorority, the exaggerated politeness and subdued behavior on the part of the janitorial workers resumed.

I don't think anyone will contest that there was an inherent implied sexuality in the nature of the work that was done that day. One need not even resort to a Freudian interpretation to see the suggestion of sexuality in a man's entering a young girl's bedroom. The awareness is there even on a conscious level. It certainly must have played a part in the housemother's decision to have the maid precede us into each room. The maid stayed pretty close to us at all times, especially when girls were around. She must have considered her role in terms of being a chaperone. The bars on the windows of the most accessible bedrooms are a manifestation of the idea of the sorority house as a fortress of virginity. When, due to unavoidable circumstances, males must be allowed to violate this all-female sanctuary, their behavior must certainly be carefully controlled.

Furthermore, the girls are members of a higher social class than the janitors. Unlike waitresses, who by the nature of their work are considered socially inferior to the patrons and thus are fair game for teasing in a thinly disguised sexual way, the sorority girls are off-limits for this kind of activity. They must be respected as the future brides of the upper crust. When conversations took place between a janitor and a sorority girl, it was of very inane content--about the weather and such. No one considered the content of the conversation to be meaningful, but rather it served as a device to avoid the tension of a long silence. In fact, it was what social linguists call phatic communication, the particular words of which signify little but whose tone demonstrates that the parties are reassuring one another that they will behave in their assigned social roles--in this case, essentially those of servant and master.<sup>3</sup>

Now in opposition to this assigned humble role for the janitor is the concept of male superiority, one of the beliefs of many males. The prescribed behavior for a male toward a female that serves to enhance the man's status among his peers, in terms of this male superiority concept, is an approach to her that is very much conscious of sexuality. It is a flirtation, a "come-on". In fact, under circumstances where there is no restraint,

such as in the husband's presence, it is rare for a male to be able to relate in any other way to a woman who could be considered an object of sexual appeal. Therefore, in order to perform in the occupational role of humble servant, the role of the aggressive male--the preferred role status-wise for janitors--had to be completely suppressed. As soon as the men removed themselves from the area in which servant behavior was demanded, aggressive male behavior assumed an exaggerated form.

The first joke was directly concerned with the vagina, the ultimate symbol of the female. The tone is basically hostile to women as complete human beings and reduces them to this organ, their most basic female characteristic. The woman sitting across the way in the ballpark was a vagina and nothing more. Nothing else about her entered the men's area of consideration. Yet their interest was keen, as shown by their willingness to pay the popcorn boy to find out what they wanted to know--the color of her pubic hair. The revelation that her pubic hair was actually flies produced the amused-disgusted reaction that is intended to be the response to the joke, as well as brought to mind the image of the vagina as a dirty, foul thing. However, fly-attracting objects fall into two categories. These could be termed the fecal and the sweet. Both feces and honey draw flies. This ambivalence toward the female genitalia is expressed in the joke on a less conscious level. A love-hate or a lust-disgust feeling is expressed.

That this joke was told at that particular moment is significant. In reducing women to vaginas, it reverses the inferior status of servant to master by making the servant the superior one in the penis-vagina relationship. In expressing ambivalence, it puts women down as disgusting things, yet at the same time expresses that they are nevertheless desirable objects.

The aggressive male behavior continued in the bragging about sexual exploits that followed, and in the teasing of the waitress. (As I noted earlier, since she is not of a higher class--in fact now she is the servant--she is therefore fair game. Such class awareness is a factor in this matter and is further demonstrated in R. R.'s comment during the meal that the particular restaurant where we were eating is the best place in town for working people.)

During the meal, B. R. told a second joke. This one is a super-potency joke. The humor is in the idea that seventy-two year-old man could not only make his old wife pregnant, but still could be fooling around with enough women that he couldn't be sure which one was calling him on the phone. The joke as told at this moment represents an attempt at bolstering the sexually aggressive behavior which in this more-intense-than-usual manifestation had perhaps begun to tell on the men's confidence. The internal query of "Can I really perform this kind of a dominant role?" is given a strong positive answer--"Of course, even a seventy-two year-old man can." However, in the fact that this is considered unusual enough to be funny and absurd, the opposite is simultaneously implied--that no one can really do it. It contains then another compound opposite concept, like the lust-disgust ambivalence in the first joke. This time it is strong-weak, or confident-unsure.

It is no surprise, therefore, that the third joke followed shortly after this one as we were preparing to return to the sorority house and to reassume submissive behavior. In this one the trend away from sexually aggressive behavior is further continued. Here the male, unable to fulfill his status-enhancing sex role, drops out of the game, retreats from his wife and admits the defeat before another woman.

The sequence of these jokes occurring in this context represents a bursting forth of the earlier forbidden sexually aggressive male behavior, which quickly spends itself through the exaggerated intensity and serves to emotionally prepare the janitors to re-submit to the humble servant role with regard to the sorority girls when they returned to work.

Some readers may be offended by the content of these narratives and others may be dismayed that the janitors' reaction to enforced submission was to denigrate another oppressed group--women. Nevertheless, this is what actually occurred and it is not an atypical reaction. Oppressive and dehumanizing institutions often rely upon this kind of reaction to guarantee their persistence. The narration and accompanying behavior represented an attempt to resolve the contradiction of the occupationally demanded role with the preferred role; there was an attempt to restore equilibrium--for a moment the last became the first, the inferior became the superior in terms of another set of relationships. The narration resulted from and had an affect upon a work situation; in this case, the telling of jokes was an occupational use of folklore and thus may be labelled occupational folklore.

#### Notes

1. See George Korson, Minstrels of the Mine Patch (Philadelphia, 1938); Coal Dust on the Fiddle (Philadelphia, 1943) and Black Rock (Baltimore, 1960); Mody Boatright, Gib Morgan: Minstrel of the Oil Fields (Austin, 1945) and Tales from the Derrick Floor (Garden City, NY, 1970); Bruce Nickerson, "Is There a Folk in the Factory?" Journal of American Folklore, 87 (1974): 133-40.
2. I am particularly indebted to Richard Vidutis for his personal communication on this issue and his insightful discussion of his steel mill work experience.
3. Bronislaw Malinowski, "The Problem of Meaning in Primitive Societies," in C. K. Ogden and I. E. Richards, The Meaning of Meaning, 10th ed. (London: Routledge, 1949), p. 315.