

The Art of Dueling with Words: Toward a New Understanding of Verbal Duels across the World

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A common view of verbal duels posits that they are a cathartic expression of aggression. This is partially due to the fact that—although a body of cross-disciplinary studies on verbal duels demonstrates their complexity as forms of expression—works intended to summarize and disseminate them have tended to rely on a minor number of sources, many of them studies on the African-American “dozens,” and to adopt a restrictive definition of verbal duels as exchanges of insults.¹ For example, in his definition of “poetic contests” for *The New Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics*, Earl Miner writes: “Indeed the poetic contest itself is not a genre at all but rather the verbal expression of a general mode of human interaction—the aggressive and agonistic—whose roots extend deep into biology and psychology” (1993:925). Marco Jacquemet, in a review of verbal conflicts for the *Encyclopedia of Language and Linguistics*, defines verbal duels as “the competitive exchange of usually obscene insults and invectives between at least two parties” (2005:4923).

The view of verbal duels as a cathartic expression of violence where the negative impulses of society or its members get released, and conflict gets resolved, developed in an ethnological milieu dominated by functionalistic and structural-functionalistic theories around the middle of the twentieth century. The scholar most closely associated with the concept of social catharsis is probably Max Gluckman (1954; 1963), who defines it as “the purging of emotion through ‘pity, fear and inspiration’” (1963:126). Gluckman saw verbal duels as particular cases of *rituals of rebellion*, which had the function of venting aggressiveness against power in a way that reinforced the status quo.² As summarized by Andrew Apter (1983:525), “rituals of rebellion are, for Gluckman, an ‘acting of conflict’ in a sacred context which allows ‘unbridled excess.’ In these ritual acts, the implicit tensions surrounding the kingship—the threat of rival heirs or a disaffected public—are made explicit. [This] serves as a collective psychological release, what Van den Berghe (1963:414) glosses as the ‘blowing-off-steam’ hypothesis.”

As a cathartic expression of aggressiveness, verbal duels have been interpreted as an

¹ This problem is compounded by the limited availability of many original works on verbal duels, which are hard to locate, out of print, or even unpublished.

² With particular reference to the African context.

alternative to the rule of law in societies that were perceived as “lacking” a Western-style law system (cf. Bohannan 1967). As such, they have been associated with the “primitive,” with the “old-ways” of the “ethnics” and “folk,” or with undesirable social groups, such as racial minorities, seen as living on the boundary of society itself and its rule of law. For example, E. Adamson Hoebel saw Eskimo song duels as juridical instruments used to settle disputes not according to justice but merely by making the contestant “feel relieved” (1941:682, *emphases mine*):

In these ways, Eskimo society, without government, courts, constables, or written law, maintains its social *equilibrium*, *channeling* human behavior according to its own accepted standards, buttressing the *control dikes* along the channels with primitive legal *mechanisms*, or their equivalents.

Here civilized justice is substituted for by a sort of homeostatic mechanism that insures release of tension, a release valve for conflict—namely, verbal duels. Thus verbal duels are explained as having a normalizing social function, as the negative but temporary eruption of conflict and chaos into an otherwise orderly social organization.³

In other studies, functionalist arguments reduced verbal dueling to fulfilling only one role in society. At times these theories have a racializing character. Roger Abrahams, for example, writes about the “dozens” as “an early example of the infantile fixation illustrated by the use of agonistic rhymed verbal forms, a neurotic symptom which is observable in many Negro males through much of their lives” (1962:209). Other scholars, focusing on verbal duels entailing exchanges of insults among young males, instead interpreted their function as expressions of male sexuality (cf. Dundes et al. 1970).

These studies continue to be cited today, in disciplines as distant as law (for example, Nader 1965) and in sociobiological accounts of youth criminality in Detroit as the “young male syndrome” (Wilson and Daly 1985). They can be found in encyclopedias and books on child psychology, as well as anthropology textbooks. Margo Wilson and Martin Daly (69), for instance, link confrontational disputes among young American men to homicide and then cite, as evidence from other cultures, Penelope Eckert and Russell Newmark’s work on Eskimo verbal duels (1980). Hoebel’s theorization of law-ways in primitive societies (1967) has been cited so many times that it has become the prototypical example for verbal duels.

This history of research may have had the important secondary effect of creating a sort of distorting lens that led other scholars looking at verbal duels to adopt a stereotypical image of what duels should look like—something close to the image of the Eskimo song duels, or to the “dozens,” for example—and thus to record exactly those aspects of them that would fit such an image. This is clearly the case, for example, in David Schwebel’s study of verbal duels among U.S. teens, where the author defines verbal dueling as “the artful exchange of spoken teases and insults between two or more participants, usually performed in informal circumstances” (1997:326). He then restricts his data-gathering to include only exchanges of insults (329).

³ See also Lefever (1981:80), who considered such duels (in particular “playing the dozens”) a social control mechanism.

In sum, while a large and complex literature on verbal duels exists, a bias persists (especially among the wider academic public) that identifies verbal duels with insults and aggressiveness, notwithstanding the fact that scholars have often found verbal duels to have very different forms and social uses. For example, Karel Van Der Toorn (1991), looking at ancient Near Eastern poetic duels, explains them as vehicles for critical reflection on social and political changes and underlines their political importance. Correspondingly, John Zemke (2005) demonstrates a link between the Basque *bertsolaritza* and the expression of cultural identity, pointing out that the improvised poetry in song duels is akin to “a prophetic mode of speech” and comparing the artists to seers who perform cultural tradition itself for their audiences (84).

In this article, I will argue for abandoning definitions and will suggest the following. First, it is crucial to consider the enormous variety of forms of verbal duels across the world, many of which may not deploy insults or at least may not do so most of the time, and are not performed by young people or by males. Second, it is important for future inquiry to carefully distinguish insults from what I will call “outrageous speech” such as “dirty words” and profanity. Third, we need to rethink the link between insults and aggressiveness. Insults are not necessarily threatening, and cannot always be interpreted as aggressive or violent behavior, or even as “causing offense” to the other party. Finally, it is important to avoid conflating verbal duels with ritual insults, since these are substantially different, albeit overlapping, genres. I will try to tackle each of these issues in order. In conclusion, I will ask the question of why, despite so much evidence to the contrary, a reductionist and overgeneralizing perception of verbal duels as the catharsis of aggression among young men persists. The answer, I will suggest, may be connected to a tendency to dismiss and gloss over argumentative genres of language.

As a start, I would like to propose a relatively open and inclusive definition of verbal duels as *a genre of argumentative language that entails exchanges between two persons, parties, or characters that challenge each other to a performative display of verbal skillfulness in front of an audience*. The dialogic form is fundamental to all verbal duels. Differing from other genres, dialogue in verbal duels is always argumentative.⁴ Some kind of opposition of different views is necessary. Yet this is true of any form of debate and argumentative language. In addition, in verbal dueling there is stress on the performance, the display, and the search for a public witnessing. At the same time, in verbal duels there is also a heightening of the poetic dimension of language.

I base my attempt at definition on a reading of the available literature, as well as on more than a decade of work on a genre of sung, improvised verbal duel, the *contrasto* of Tuscany and central Italy, performed by artists called *poeti bernescanti*, or simply poets.

The first thing to know about the *contrasto*, the poets say, is that it takes two: that is, two singers, two voices, and two minds. A harmony between them must be developed as they attack each other. The poets admit that sometimes a single person can try doing stanzas alone. In this circumstance one has all the time necessary to think through his or her stanza, choose the rhymes with which to end it, rethink and change it many times, and polish the finished product. The poet

⁴ Even in those rare but possible cases in which a verbal duel is created by one author, two characters will be represented.

Realdo Tonti once told me that he liked to sing when he worked. He would think of poets he had met and imagine duels he could conduct with them. “Then maybe they would say to me something like this, then I could answer this way,” he explained. This practice kept him company during the long hours he spent working at the factory. The poet Altamante Logli remembered singing alone in the fields as a child. It made him feel less lonely. But other times he adamantly insisted that each duel must include two performing voices. On your own you are free to put it as you like, the poets say, but it is not the same thing. I found the same need for the expression of two sides in all of the verbal duels I reviewed. Beyond that core similarity, verbal duels demonstrate an astonishing heterogeneity of forms around the globe.

The Variety of Forms⁵

Verbal duels can be highly structured or more free-flowing; some traditions use rhymes, while others prefer alternate forms of parallelism. They can be performed primarily by men or women or both; they can be done by children or by elderly persons. They can be insulting or praising; they can be improvised or memorized, or even written down; sung or spoken.

The *contrasto*, for example, uses a highly complex fixed structure that has remained virtually unchanged for centuries. The poets duel by exchanging octets, stanzas of eight verses in hendecasyllables, in rhyme (following the scheme ABABABCC), on a theme usually proposed by the audience. The octets are “chained,” in that each poet’s first verse must use the same rhyme as the previous poet’s last verse. This strategy assures that the octets will be improvised and cannot be previously prepared. In terms of performance, however, the *contrasto* is relatively simply managed: the poets stand near each other, dressed as on any other day, and exchange turns.

By comparison, a form of verbal duel known as the *haló* of the Anlo-Ewe of Ghana presupposes a complex performance apparatus, including preparations and events that can last for years. Daniel Avorgbedor writes that the *haló* can be summed up as a multimedia event, “a sociomusical drama that involves songs of insult, dance, drumming, mime, poetry, spoken forms, costume, and a variety of visual icons” (1994:84; see also Avorgbedor 1999; 2001a and b). The *haló* duels can take place between villages or within factions inside the village, and the participants include large groups of people. The performances are carefully prepared and rehearsed in secrecy (1994:92-93):

Before a new song is performed publicly in the normal musical situation, a special session known as *havɔlu* is held in secret. In this session allusions, metaphorical references, and facets of personal biography and history not commonly available, which are contained in the song texts, are

⁵ While the present article covers examples of verbal duels from various parts of the world, it does not attempt a survey of current studies on verbal duels. Instead, I present only a very limited number of examples, chosen mainly to cover various geographical and cultural areas and to demonstrate the variety of forms. In addition, I have given priority to studies of contemporary performed genres, and thus have not included many excellent studies of verbal duels in the classic written tradition. For a sense of the scope of those studies, see Bossy 1987, Brogan 1993, Miner 1993, Parks 1986, Reinink and Vanstiphout 1991, and Waugh 1995.

explained to members of the performing group.

Later, during the actual performance, singers may interrupt their singing to give an exegesis and a commentary on the texts sung, “including explanation of allusions and metaphorical constructions” (93-94). Dancing and music accompanies the singing, and specially prepared carvings called *dufozi* are displayed, or mime is used to underline particular verbal attacks. The music includes talking drums that can encode and repeat part of the song texts so that “the rhythmic or musical content of these verbal forms is also usually supported by the accompanying drum ensemble” (104).

In contrast, some forms of verbal duels are relatively spontaneous. Such are the white “dozens” studied by Simon Bronner (1978) and Millicent Ayoub and Stephen Barnett (1965), or the verbal duels among U.S. college students researched by Schwebel (1997). The white “dozens,” writes Bronner, are called by various names by the performers, commonly *ranking* but also *mocks*, *cutting*, and *scamps*, and they take place in moments of relaxation, while “hanging out” with friends or at work (120). They happen with practically no previous set-up or preparation and, as Bronner describes it, “the performance usually involved two players facing each other while an audience ranging from one to ten individuals laughed and shouted encouragement” (121). Similarly, in the verbal duel exchanges among French Algerian teenagers in France, as studied by Chantal Tetreault (2009), the duel can emerge and develop at any moment as the participants interact.

These forms of verbal duels, like the *contrasto*, are improvised. As noted by Bruno Nettl (1974), any performance is in part improvised and some element of improvisation is always present in verbal duels. However, verbal duels differ in the extent to which the performance is prepared and rehearsed. The *haló*, for example, is carefully prepared in advance. Similarly, memorized texts are involved in verbal duels in Fiji, among people of Indian origin, as reported by Don Brenneis and Ram Padarath (1975). As they explain, Fiji Indian “song challenges” include both improvised and memorized songs as well as songs learned from written texts (285-86):

Two distinct types of songs with different performance styles are sung. *Bhajan*, “religious songs,” taken from books written and published in India, are used in weekly worship services as well as in competitions.... *Gayan*, “songs,” are usually local products; some are composed on the spot, some are sung from memory, and some are sung from handwritten collections made by villagers.

In Somalia, poets who desire to respond to another poet may compose a poem.⁶ Customarily, that poem will mention the target poet’s name and will be closely related intertextually. Once composed, such poems are recited to an audience that memorizes them, or recorded on tapes, and repeated again and again, including today by radio. In this way the poems spread quickly from one context to another, and from one audience to another, until they

⁶ There are several poetic genres in Somalia, each of them used for different purposes. They can be improvised or composed in advance, and can be performed in various contexts. For more on Somali genres, see Samatar 1979; Andrzejewski and Lewis 1964; and Luling 1996.

eventually reach the ear of the poet for whom they were originally destined. In this case it is the audience that has the important role of performing the poem for the poet who is supposed to receive it.

Forms of verbal duels also differ according to the amount of innovation involved, and in the use of a rhapsodic style in which the artists weave together pre-existing formulas, expressions, proverbs, and so forth in new and creative ways. The *balah* of Yemen, for example, is improvised, but the singers employ many pre-existing formulas. As Steven Caton explains (1990:285-86):

The *Balah* is constructed out of relatively fixed linguistic expressions known as formulas. The formula is used as a building block to construct a regular meter in a rapid-fire performance.... The poet's challenge is to finish the hemistich by linking the fixed formulas and epithets available to poets as a system.... Selection from the system of formulas is only half the problem, for the poet has to know how to combine them into the syntagmatic or sequential unit of the hemistich so it will scan according to the desired meter.

Caton, however, notices that the Yemenite poets also insert original verses (96ff.).

In other forms of verbal duels, innovation is stressed and predominates. According to Tanure Ojaide, among the Urhobo of Nigeria the *udje* contests, while not improvised, require songmakers to create original compositions (2001:50-51):

If by chance, according to Ogbariemu who attended many of such workshops in his practicing days, there was a word or phrase that appeared in another song elsewhere, it was removed. There was to be no copying of words, and the song had to be a purely original composition. Usually at night they went into the bush by the palm oil press and sang out the songs before their wives married from other towns. The women identified songs that had language close to theirs and such songs were re-phrased. This rigor made *udje* songs highly crafted original poems that bore the stamp of the poet or his quarter.

However, in the case of the *udje*, repetition of song segments is commonly managed in performance both by the main singer and by a chorus (66). In the *contrasto*, on the other hand, formulas can be used, but repetition is kept to a minimum. *Contrasto* poets can never re-use the same words to rhyme during a performance.

Stanzas in verbal duels can have one part that is improvised and another that is repeated or formulaic. This kind of pattern is found, for example, in the Bolivian *coplas de todos santos*. In the *coplas* the stanza has four verses, and each verse is composed of a six-syllable improvised section plus a five-syllable formulaic refrain, thus forming a hendecasyllable. Here is an example quoted from Thomas Solomon (1994:394):

(11) Isabel:

Charangueroytawan, ay palomita
Phifianachiwanki, por vos vidita

With my charango player, ah little dove
You made me get mad, for you, little dear

Guitarreroytawan, ay palomita
Reparachiwanki, por vos vidita

With my guitar player, ah little dove
 You made gossip at my expense, for you,
 little dear

In regard to music and singing, many forms of verbal dueling are sung, but not all. In Guyana, both the insults in *busin* and the friendly bantering in *tantalisin* are spoken performances only (Edwards 1979). Among the various verbal dueling styles in the Afro-Caribbean tradition, the “dozens” studied by William Labov (1972) are also spoken with no music. Yet in rappers’ sessions (belonging to the same cultural-historical matrix as the “dozens”) there is both singing and music.⁷

Tuscan *contrasto* poets sing, yet there are no musical instruments accompanying them. In many other cases instrumental accompaniment is present and fundamental to a successful performance. In the Kazak *aitys*, as described by Eva-Marie Dubuisson (2009), the performers sit and play the *domyra*, “a two-stringed wooden instrument”:

One of the first things I learned about *aitys* was that poets accompany their song with music from the *domyra* because oral poetry is inherently imperfect. Unlike written poetry, say poets, where the author has plenty of time to think carefully and choose precisely the right words and phrasing, oral poetry is composed on the fly and is therefore inherently imperfect; the music of the *domyra* makes the song whole.

In the case of the Anlo-Ewe *haló*, as discussed earlier, talking drums can be used to exchange messages. In many forms of verbal duels, the text of the song tends to be favored, even when music is present. In the *contrasto*, the music tends to be relatively repetitive, and its chant-like quality allows the singers to bend it to the necessities of versification. However, this is not a universal rule.⁸ In the *didong* verbal duels among the Gayo of highland Sumatra, there has been an increasing tendency in recent years to include music in the performances. In this regard John Bowen noticed (1989:31) that

as the content of the song came to take precedence over the contextualized event, performers began to record their works on cassettes and market them in Takengen. In the 1970s the leading *didong* groups added guitars and Indian *dangdut* melodies on these recordings (which were never used for live performances, however). As tapes and tape players became more widely available, Gayo living elsewhere in the highlands began to adopt the new form as more “modern” and prestigious. Even in Terangon, in southern Gayoland, where only individual poetic duels are performed, Takengen songs are now inserted into the performance.

⁷ Other genres that include singing and music are the Argentinean-Chilean *payada* (Rubman 1967; Dannemann 2000), the Maltese *spirtu pront* (McLeod and Herndon 1975), and the Lebanese *zajal* (Haydar 1989), among others.

⁸ While not properly a verbal duel, it is interesting to mention that musical duels, called *muqabala* and accompanied by improvised music, are present in India (MacIszewski 2001) and in the Indian diaspora.

In the *didong*, and in many other cases, a chorus is present. This is true in the Sardinian *gara poetica* (Mathias 1976), the Yemenite *balah* (Caton 1990), and the *haló*, among others.

From the preceding discussion it appears that verbal duels cannot be restricted to a particular structure. Nor are they always staged performances, although, as with any other genre of speech, they are undoubtedly appropriate to certain contexts and not to others. The beauty, creativity, and complexity of the genres also show that there is a great deal more to them than a simple exchange of insults. They more appropriately belong to the realm of the poetic, art forms, aesthetic systems, and the expression of human creativity.

In terms of who can, must, or must not duel, there is similar variety. The *contrasto*, for example, can be performed at any age, although many poets are older. It can be done by men and women, although the majority of the poets today are males. Although rare, female poets in Tuscany are well respected and encouraged to perform. Other genres, such as the *coplas*, are performed by men or women at any age, against practically any adversary (Solomon 1994:383). Tetreault (2009) reports young French-Algerian women and men exchanging duels, but no older adults or elders. Alan Dundes, Jerry Leach and Bora Özkök (1970) reported verbal duels in Turkey as performed only by young males. However, Mark Glazer (1976) noticed that women will at least occasionally engage in these duels as well.⁹ Similarly, while the African-American “dozens” or “sounding” have usually been associated with young males (among others, Abrahams 1962; Labov 1972; Lefever 1981), John Dollard noted that “dozens” were done by women as well (1939:4).

The Sardinian *gara poetica* is performed only by adult males (Mathias 1976).¹⁰ In Sardinia, male shepherds spend months at a time isolated from their villages as they lead the herds to pasture. In these periods, verbal duels are a common pastime among men. By contrast, the *busin* style of verbal duels in Guyana, which entail the exchange of vicious insults, is used mostly by women. In fact, *busin*, far from being associated with masculinity, is directly associated with femininity, as Edwards reports (1979:25):

Because men do not buse each other in Guyana, one frequently finds cases where women buse against men, secure in the knowledge that men are prevented by the social rules from responding in kind. If a man in such a situation attempts to buse, he opens himself to the insult of being labeled an *antiman* (i.e., a homosexual). The situation is sometimes resolved by a female relation of the man *taking up* for him and busing against his tormentor.... Note, however, that extrovert Guyanese male homosexuals who wish to publicize their “gayness” often buse each other or buse against women, much to the amusement of audiences.

During the *fiesta de wayllunk’a* in Bolivia, only women are supposed to sing *coplas* (Solomon 1994:388):¹¹

⁹ It must be noted that the data used by Dundes et al. (1970) were based on self-report by the co-author Özkök, himself male, who might not have known of similar forms among women and older adults.

¹⁰ I have independent confirmation of this practice from my own fieldwork in Italy.

For these fiestas giant swings are specially constructed, hanging from high sturdy tree limbs or from a framework of poles planted in the ground. The men pull on ropes attached to the seats of the swings to make the women swing. The women are supposed to sing *coplas* while swinging, and the men encourage them to sing by swinging them fast and high. The *coplas* sung by the women may be directed at the men swinging them or at other people present at the fiesta.

I must note that in some genres male poets can impersonate female characters or vice versa. This is true in the *contrasto*, where characters are assigned by the audience. Sara Davis (1999) reports women impersonating males in courtship verbal duels among the Tai minority in Yunnan, China. In the *contrasto* there is often a multiplication of images of both femininity and masculinity, rather than a simple upholding of a dominant or hegemonic one, so that the genre problematizes gender itself (see further Pagliai and Bocast 2005).

Since verbal duels cannot be considered only a (young) male activity, interpretation of verbal duels as connected to masculinity cannot be generalized. The same is true of psychoanalytic explanations that connect verbal duels to the Oedipal complex (such as Abrahams 1962:214). The problem may be compounded when such explanations are based on relatively scarce data. Solomon, discussing the interpretation of Turkish verbal duels given by Dundes et al. (1970), notes that “the authors’ psychologistic explanation of Turkish male sexuality” is based on “generalized examples, not taken from actual performed duels observed during fieldwork” (1994:378).

The list of variations I have so far given does not exhaust the subject, but provides some sense of the difficulty of a definition. This diversity also shows how problematic it is to understand verbal duels as a simple display of aggressiveness or exchange of insults. However, in many cases verbal duels do appear to deploy insults. The place of insults in such forms thus needs to be addressed, and the best way to start is by first asking what exactly is an insult.

The Problem with Insults

Insults, as we know from Judith Irvine’s beautifully argued analysis (1992), can be practically anything that participants decide they are. Irvine refutes previous attempts at categorizing insults, including, most famously, Edmund Leach’s model of verbal abuse. According to Leach (1964:28) there are three categories of verbal abuses: “(1) ‘dirty words,’ usually referring to sex and excretion; (2) blasphemy and profanity; (3) animal abuse—in which a human being is equated with an animal of another species.”

Contra Leach, Irvine notices that “verbal abuse involves evaluative statements grounded in specific cultural systems. Even with a detailed familiarity with cultural context, there can still be no hard-and-fast semantic criterion distinguishing statements that are abusive from statements that are not” (1992:109). Instead, she continues, we need to know the specific context and the identities of the participants; it is only contextually that we can hope to decide which insults are

¹¹ See further Olmos Agreda 1966:125-27; Paredes Candia 1976, i:220-21.

more or less insulting. Irvine concludes that no expression, action, or even lack of action could be considered as insulting per se (110):

Insults are not simply a set of statements, or a type of content inherent in statements. Instead, insult is a communicative effect constructed in interaction—constructed out of the interplay of linguistic and social features, where the propositional content of an utterance is only one such feature. In fact, the content could even look like a compliment.

In verbal dueling many insulting behaviors and words may not be immediately apparent as such. Not showing up for a performance, for example, is a serious insult that one *contrasto* poet can perpetuate on another, an insult by absence.

Outrageous Speech

Leach's distinction is, however, worthy of further consideration, not as a categorization of insults but as pointing toward what I will call "outrageous speech," including obscenities, vulgarities, blasphemy, dirty words, and so on. As far as I know, every society has a category of outrageous words and expressions that, even when not used as insults, raise people's eyebrows, so to speak. However, what actually falls into this category still depends on context. Their level of outrageousness is also contextual, and may be connected, for example, to the age, gender, or status of the speakers. A word like "mouse," neutral in English, can be used in Tuscan Italian (in the female form only, *topa*) as a dirty word to indicate the female genitalia. Yet the same word (in the male form only, *topo*), when uttered among lovers of either sex, is a term of endearment. Similarly, the word "bitch" in English—insulting in some contexts—may simply refer to a female dog in others.

Outrageous speech, words that cannot be used lightly, are more powerful than others in modifying the mood or key of the interaction. These words are often connected with liminal states, with the carnivalesque, with strong emotions and their threatened release, with the breakdown of everyday rules of appropriate behavior and hierarchies of power, with the upsetting and upending of social distinction, with rebellion and iconoclastic behavior, with the "lower" impulses, with what Barbara Babcock (1978) calls "the world upside down." They are also associated with irony, in itself connected to the unexpected, to the growth of chaotic elements, to the inversion of perceived social truths and realities. They often index the power of the speaker to go against society and its morals, or they may be used exactly to claim such power.

Outrageous speech may or may not be used in conjunction with insults, or as insults. Obscenities, per se, are no insult. In fact, people often seem to derive pleasure from using or hearing them. The capacity of outrageous words to suspend social distinctions makes them into a powerful means of social bonding; they can foreground friendship. In some contexts, they are able to "lighten" an otherwise awkward atmosphere, just as in others they can create awkwardness. Outrageous speech can also be used for other reasons, for stress and emphasis, for example, or as an expletive or response cry. In verbal duels, it can be employed for self-aggrandizement. In the following excerpt from a duel between two rappers in Los Angeles,

Flawliss and Lyraflip (Alim et al. 2009), the former boasts:

186 F: [Imma chew the top off
 187 and imma letchu flow
 188 nigga, my dick longer than the damn election [^]*pole*
 189 L: [^]((lip synch's F's rhymes))

We must be aware not only of what counts as outrageous speech, then, but also of what ends and outcomes it achieves in the emergent, contextualized interaction. When used in conjunction with insults (or to insult), outrageous speech may increase, amplify, or decrease the effect.¹² Such speech may point to a dangerous internal state of rage of the speaker, to his or her willingness to break boundaries. But it can also play up irony, make the insult hyperbolic, and thus negate rage. More generally, outrageous speech may point to a condition of powerful agency and unbound liminality of the speakers. It always attracts the attention of the audience and, undoubtedly, the attention of scholars as well. Yet, taken alone, instances of outrageous speech are far from constituting the whole picture of what there is to know about verbal duels.

The Target of Insults

Contrary to obscenities, which do not need a target (although they have audiences and recipients), insults do require a target (although the person does not need to be present or hear the insult or even be aware of it). A few more words must therefore be spent on targets. We owe to Erving Goffman (1974) the distinction between various speaking personae in the *participant framework* of interactions. Using a theater metaphor, he distinguished the addressor as *principal*, *author*, and *animator* of the speech. One speaker or different speakers may embody the three roles. When the three roles are distributed among separate speakers, the responsibility for what is said or performed, including insults, is also distributed among them (cf. Irvine 1992; Yankah 1995:9; Goffman 1974:540). Similarly, the addressees can include primary recipients of the speech (to whom the utterance is told), targets (to whom the utterance is addressed), and bystanders (either overhearers or eavesdroppers). As Stephen C. Levinson (1983:68) notes, “the speaker or spokesman can be distinct from the source of an utterance, the recipient distinct from target, and hearers or bystanders distinct from addressees or targets.”

One of the best examples of this distinction can be found in Kwesi Yankah's analysis of the Akan *okyeame* of Ghana (1995). Among the Akan the chief will never address an audience directly, but will always talk through his orator, the *okyeame*, a mediator who “transmits the message in embellished form, either through artistic elaboration or paraphrasing” (13). People addressing the chief, in turn, will not do so directly, but rather speak to the *okyeame*, who then relays their words to the chief. It is important to know that in these situations the chief is present, thus probably hearing and being heard. However, what the chief says is not considered as having been said—that is, it does not take effect—until the *okyeame* repeats it.

Similarly, the target of an insult may not be the same person to whom the insult is told.

¹² However, insults, as Irvine appropriately noticed (1992), do not require outrageous words to be insulting.

This is particularly important in understanding interaction in verbal duels, where these speaking roles are often distinguished. In the *contrasto*, for example, the recipient of a poet's speech, the other poet, embodies at least three *personae*: the poet as person,¹³ the poet as artist, and the poet as character (namely, the personage being represented). When an insult is hurled, the target can be any of these three personae. However, it is only when the insult targets the poet as person or the poet as artist that recipient and target are one and the same. If the target of the insult is the character, the target and the recipient are no longer the same. In this case, the actual target is whoever or whatever is being represented. For example, in a duel where the theme contrasts known Italian politicians, such as "Prodi vs. Berlusconi," the targets of the insults are the politicians, who thus get publicly insulted in front of an audience. In an extreme case, the distinction between poet and character enables a poet to indirectly insult the character he or she is impersonating through the use of double voice.

Decades ago Thomas Kochman noted that there is a distinction to be made between "personal insults and insults taken personally" (1975; quoted in Edwards 1979:22). A person can realize that he or she has been insulted and still not take "offense" over it. Conversely, a person can take offense at a speaker's words that s/he has overheard, without the speaker even knowing about the existence of the offended person. Yet in this latter case one can hardly argue that the speaker intended to be aggressive or to insult. It is necessary, then, to ask when and for whom an insult becomes insulting or causes offense.¹⁴ The simple use of insults in a verbal duel, or in an interaction in general, does not allow us to know whether the insult is meant to hurt or is said in jest. The distinction most often is ambiguous and subject to interpretation by its target. Furthermore, in verbal duels, the audience is fundamental in deciding what is or is not an insult, whether the target should be considered as having been offended or not, and the appropriate reaction to the offense. Considering that audiences do not necessarily have homogenous knowledge of the context and participants, and may have differing opinions of what is going on, in the end this uncertainty constitutes a further level of ambiguity around insult. At the same time, there may be particular expectations in regard to the appropriate reaction to an insult, and the target may or may not react according to these expectations. Again, the ends of an insult and its outcomes are contextual.

Variety of insults, praises, outrageous speech, and reactions to them

Having made some finer distinctions in regard to insults, I can now move to examine their use in verbal duels. The first thing to be noted is that while many verbal duels do involve the exchange of insults (contextually understood), others do not. Many verbal duels, conversely, involve the exchange of praise. Similarly, obscenities, however they are defined in specific contexts, are used in some verbal duels, but not in others. Even when insults are included, this does not mean that the performers are actually targeting or insulting each other. Finally, when

¹³ Including the poets' physical appearance, behavior, sexuality, social identities, and family ties.

¹⁴ Considering also that the consequences of an insult are not necessarily negative for the offended person, since social ostracism may affect the offended or the insulting person equally (see also Haviland 2009 for a discussion of the consequences of a verbal fight).

they are employed, insults may still be perceived as “not meant to cause offense,” and thus the expected reaction to them also varies.

In the *contrasto*, insults may be exchanged in some cases, praises in other cases (they may occur at the same time, in fact), and in yet other cases the poets debate by articulating different opinions without insults or praises. For example, in a *contrasto* between “The Present Times and the Past Times” (“il mondo vecchio e il mondo nuovo”) sung by the poet Lio Bianchi with the poet Gianni Ciolli, no insults were exchanged.¹⁵ As we see below, in this case Bianchi, an older man, was singing about the past times, and Ciolli, a young novice poet, the present times:

Gianni Ciolli / Present

*La chioccia a lungo sai lo cova l'ovo
e po' alla fine l'alleva il pulcino
e come lui incerto un po' mi muovo
a imparare a fa' i'ppoeta contadino
lo vedo sai mi chiedi i'mmondo novo
certo trasmuta tutto ogni poinino
ma io son di questa generazione
un po' ci trovo anche soddisfazione*

The brooding hen, you know, long broods the egg
And then at the end she raises the chick
And like him, a bit uncertain, I move
To learn to be a peasant poet
I see indeed, you ask me about the new world
Of course everything transmutes so often
But I belong to this generation
I find in this also a bit of satisfaction

Lio Bianchi / Past

*Io quando nacqui per combinazione
lassù nel territorio Massetano
e c'era una piccola stazione
e di un trenino che vi andava piano
ora è cambiata la situazione
e vedi in cielo c'è l'areoplano
e in terra su le strade e c'è i motori
quanto gli da importanza a que valori*

When I was born, by chance,
Up there in the Massetano territory¹⁶
There was a little train station
And a little train that would go through slowly
Now the situation has changed
You see, in the sky there is the airplane
And down on earth on the roads are the cars
How much importance do you give to those values?

Gianni Ciolli / Present

*Vedi questa l'è l'era degli esploratori
l'uomo sulla luna già c'è andato
e quando io nacqui aveo degli umori
di un mondo sai informatizzato
in televisione vedi i giocatori
chiunque ragazzo vent'anni gli ha
studiato
tra i'computer e l'autovettura*

You see, this is the age of explorers
Man has gone already on the moon
And when I was born I had some inkling
Of a world, you know, informatized
On television you see the [soccer] players
Anybody young has already studied twenty years
Between the computer and the car

¹⁵ This *contrasto* was sung at the annual gathering of the *poeti bernescanti* in Ribolla (province of Grosseto) in April 1998.

¹⁶ In the province of Massa and Carrara.

di molto gli è cambiato la cultura.

So much culture has changed

Lio Bianchi / Past

*E un sai te quanto è bella la natura
ci son le foglie ci son le erbe e i fiori
ma quando che indossava la armatura
il cavaliere un c'era i gioatori
or ci son cose fuori di misura
che le più volte recano i dolori
vi raccomando si col cuore in mano
su certe cose ndateci più piano.*

You do not know how beautiful nature is
There are the leaves, the grasses and flowers
But when would don his armor
The knight, there was no [soccer] player
Now there are things out of measure
That most times bring sorrows
I recommend to you, yes, with heart in my hand
On certain things, slow down

Gianni Ciolli / Present

*Io sono proveniente da Calenzano
laggiù sai nella piana Fiorentina
e quell'è un territorio molto strano
vicino c'è Careggi e Medicina
nel tempo andato sai nin questo piano
mangiava poco la famiglia contadina
oggi che la scienza è progredita
di molto si è allungata la nostra vita.*

I come from Calenzano¹⁷
Down there on the Florentine plains
And that is a very strange place
Nearby there are Careggi and Medicina¹⁸
In past times, you know, in these plains
The peasant family would eat little
Now that science has progressed
Our lives have become much longer

Lio Bianchi / Past

*La nostra distruzione un è finita
io mi ricordo quando ero bambino
e l'aria mi sembrava più pulita
e più sano era il pane e il vino
ora l'è roba si vi è più sciapita
tanto a Firenze come sia a Piombino
e ce la fanno si tanta reclame
ma è tutta roba nello scatolame.*

Our destruction is not finished yet
I remember when I was a child
And the air would seem cleaner to me
And healthier was the bread and the wine
Now there is stuff, yes, more tasteless
As much in Florence as it is in Piombino¹⁹
They make for us so much advertisement
But it is all stuff in boxes.

Here the poets, while bringing up opposite arguments that undermine each other's points, do not deploy insults, relying instead on their eloquence, cleverness, and beautiful imagery. The exchange between them, appropriate to the theme and the performers themselves, evokes the relationship between the elder poet and a disciple. Notice, for example, the initial metaphor through which Ciolli compares himself to a chick, and by association the elder poet to a

¹⁷ A town in the province of Prato.

¹⁸ Locations near Florence.

¹⁹ A town in Southern Tuscany. The verse means: both in northern Tuscany, where Ciolli grew up, and in southern Tuscany, where Bianchi lives.

protective hen. The metaphor is then extended into the debate as the young poet acknowledges that in the present things may be changing too quickly, but at the same time, as a young person, he appreciates this quick change. The elder poet's voice, by contrast, is the voice of nostalgia and also of experience that cautions the young one "to go slowly" and to think twice, as what seems to be good and new may bring destruction as well: the new life is the end of the old, the opposite sides of the passing of time. The poetry is about particular persons, and concurrently about universal human conditions.

As they argue, poets can use a vast range of rhetorical techniques and strategies to make their points. Describing the Lebanese *zajal* argumentative style, Adnan Haydar writes (1989:208):

In addition to the main argument, duelers adopt other strategies. A favorite approach is to say that the opponent's argument is old and that the intelligent audience will not buy it. Here the appeal to the audience's wisdom earns the dueler psychological support. Another approach is to put words into the opponent's mouth and then attack these words. Still another strategy would be for one of the duelers to charge his opponent with evading the whole issue, or to berate him for having totally missed the point. Finally, one of the poets may repeat his adversary's weak argument in order to expose and explode it.

I found all of these techniques used in the *contrasto* as well. Insults in the *contrasto* tend to become more frequent when the audience is cold and does not offer a theme—the poets then refer to the insults as "warming up" the audience—or when the theme represents a quarrel, such as "husband vs. wife." Any topic, however, can be discussed with the use of insults (and often is), while any topic could also be engaged without them. Insults seem to be connected to a particular way of building humor and effect, a goal that is relatively easy to accomplish and that has appeal at the same time. In the end, the performers insult each other for the sake of the audience, just as they sing for the audience. It is the success of the performance that matters.

Insults are common in many forms of verbal duels, and seem to dominate the performances in some genres, such as the "dozens," the *busin* in Guyana, the New Guinean *kroses* (Kulick 1993), and Eskimo song duels. Below is an example from this last tradition (Hoebel 1941:679):

Now shall I split off words
 Little, sharp words
 Like the wooden splinters which I hack off with my ax.
 A song from ancient times
 A breath of the ancestors
 A song of longing
 For my wife.
 An impudent, black skinned oaf has stolen her
 Has tried to belittle her.
 A miserable wretch who loves human flesh
 A cannibal from famine days.

Reciprocal praising in verbal duels is also common. A *contrasto*, for example, may be completely based on reciprocal praising between the poets, or the poets may compete in offering praises to the audience. In this case the element of challenge is still present and it is articulated in the competition to build beautiful octets and to elevate the other poet or the audience. Poets may also produce verses that lower themselves in order to enhance the greatness of their interlocutors. In the Yemenite *balah*, generally sung at weddings among the male participants in the wedding party, there are praises to the Lord Allah, to the groom and hosts, and to various guests (Caton 1990). In the U.S., rappers will often insult each other, but they will also at times praise allied rappers.

In Palestinian improvised debates, performed at traditional weddings, circumcisions, baptisms, and feasts, praises are common. Palestinian improvised poetry takes several forms and meters. In the following *qarr ādi* poetic debate (Sbait 1993:112), the poets Jihad Sbait and Hanna Sbait praise each other while debating the theme of “The Olive Tree in the Land of My Country”:

iii. Jihād:

An olive tree in the land of my country
Is a cure for my heart.
My grandfather planted it,
And I am proud of it.

Refrain by the audience:

The olive tree in the land of my
country, the clouds are hung over it.

iv. Hanna continues:

You [Jihad] have a sense of honor in your poetry,
You sound happy with your poems.
The light shines from the [oil of] the olive tree,
So we have to be proud of it.

In the *desafio* verbal duels among Canadians of Azorean origin, we find a range “from the exposition of a topic or story, to the logical debate of a question or series of questions, to the joking exchange of personal criticisms” (Avery 1984:3). In the following *quartera* from one of these verbal duels, the poet himself fluently articulates the balance between insults and praises (319):

Sung by poet Bravo to Poet Charrua

Trago-te n'alma e coração, I bring you in my heart and soul,

| | |
|-----------------------------------|-----------------------------------|
| <i>Tal é a minha grande fé!</i> | Such is my great faith! |
| <i>Tal é a minha grande fé!</i> | Such is my great faith! |
| <i>Se te deito co' uma mão,</i> | If I lay you low with one hand, |
| <i>Co'â outra ponho-te em pé.</i> | I also lift you up with my other. |

The power that destroys is also the power that creates. Praise and abuse are in the end two sides of the same coin, since to praise one side is to debase the other. This double identity is well described by Charles Keil in his analysis of Tiv songs (1979:99):

In effect praising *and* blaming, “crying” (*vaan*) about sufferings *and* “begging” (*zamber*) for help are four quadrants of the same cycle.... Praise for one elder implies a low opinion of his nearest rivals, asking for help implies suffering caused by someone, and “crying” poverty (*ican*) implies blame.

Where insults are used, outrageous speech is often present as well, but not necessarily so. In the *contrasto*, for example, obscenities are rare and expressed in metaphorical, indirect form. The poet Altamante Logli described this preference with a metaphor: “the use of insults should not rise above the low roofs.” By “low roofs,” he explained, he meant the many children, who were present at all performances. The insult must be covered enough by metaphors and ambiguity that the simpler minds of children would not understand it, nor would they learn foul language inappropriate to their age. The innuendo created by the metaphor increases the irony of the insult, and the insult expressed so indirectly is more—not less—funny or cutting.²⁰ In the following octet by the poet Gabriele Ara, impersonating the character of “the lover” in a *contrasto* among “The Lover, the Husband, and the Wife,”²¹ an “illicit” sexual act is described:

Gabriele Ara (Lover)

| | |
|--|---|
| <i>Ebbene glielo detti i' guiderdone</i> | Thus I gave her the reward |
| <i>Come il cannolo cià in cima la panna</i> | Like a <i>cannolo</i> , it has whipped cream on top |
| <i>E i fatti vi dimostrano ragione</i> | And the facts demonstrate the reason |
| <i>Che gliene detti più di una spanna</i> | That I gave her more than a <i>spanna</i> ²² |
| <i>La sta—l'era abituata a i' penzalone</i> | She was—she was used to the big pendulum |
| <i>Ma conosciuto gli pareva di ave' la manna</i> | But she thought she had discovered the manna |
| <i>Che a te a parlarti di donne</i> | That talking to you about women |
| <i>Gli è come dare i' cconcio alle colonne.</i> | It's like giving manure to columns. |

The lover insults the husband by accusing him of impotence and telling him how he can

²⁰ I heard obscenities used in very few cases, most frequently by beginning poets. The younger poets, the others would say, think it is fine to just throw in obscene words, but they should refine their vocabulary instead.

²¹ A rare *contrasto* with three poets singing, all males, including the one impersonating the wife.

²² An ancient form of measurement that refers to the measure from the tip of the thumb to the tip of the smaller finger with the hand held wide open.

sexually satisfy his wife. Although the references are all quite explicit, there is no direct mention of the sexual act or body parts. Instead, the graphic effect is built up completely through metaphors and allusions. In the fifth verse, for example, Ara creates a new word by taking the verb *penzolare* (to hang down), transforming it into a noun, *penzolo* (something that hangs down, like a pendulum), then adding to it the accrescitive suffix *-one*, thus creating *penzolone* (something big that hangs down) and a rhyme with *guiderdone*. The context clarifies that the *penzolone*, to which the wife was used (and resigned), is the penis of the husband incapable of erection. This sequence explains why she is so happy to have met the lover, as if she had received the food of the gods. The poet concludes with a common metaphorical formula: giving manure to columns is useless, since columns cannot grow. This formula can be interpreted as an accusation of impotence and possibly homosexuality. I must note that both poets were laughing as Ara sang this octet, showing that no actual offense was taken.

Finally, we could ask when insults in verbal duels are supposed to offend, and when they are taken personally. Matters here are even fuzzier, since everything depends on the way people interpret what is said and its possible intentions. In many if not most forms of verbal duels, however, the participants agree that insults are to be taken in jest. Such is the case of the “dozens,” the *desafío*, the Puerto Rican *relajo* (Lauria 1964), and some forms of Eskimo verbal duels (Hoebel 1941:681), among others. This is not a general rule, however, since in some other forms insults are supposed to offend and hurt. Such is the case in the *haló*, *busin*, and *kroses*, as well as in verbal duels among the Sori of New Guinea (Chodkiewicz 1982), among others. There may be finer lines that are not supposed to be crossed. Labov, for example, argues that in the “dozens” insults should be hyperbolic in order not to offend. In the Fiji-Indian verbal duels, Brenneis and Padarath (1975) note that opposed sides perform in separate places, at a physical distance, to avoid the possibility of matters getting out of hand.

Francis M. Deng observes that even if insults are present in Dinka song duels, the songs are “generally taken as funny and not particularly insulting to the competitor” (1973:94) because they were composed before the competition, when the identity of the actual competitor was still unknown. In other words, they cannot be considered to be *ad hominem*. Suggestively, this dynamic may be at play in the “dozens” as well, and in other genres that use formulaic insults. What makes the insults less insulting, then, would be not only the hyperbole but also the general knowledge that the insults are part of a memorized repertoire and not composed to insult the particular opponent. This is something to keep in mind: who is the target of the performance and who was the target of the original composition? The new target is superimposed on the old, and in a way the insult loses some its sting. This lessening of force may be even more the case with formulaic insults.

In the Tuscan *contrasto*, insults to the poet as person or as character will not offend; however, insults to the other poet as poet are considered offensive, and can bring the performance to a halt and create hostility between poets. As such, they are usually avoided in a duel.²³ However, in other cases, such as the *balah* and the *desafío* (Avery 1984), insults to the other poet’s ability and art are acceptable and considered extremely humorous.

²³ Even in this case, however, everything depends on the context and the participants. Poets who are good friends can insult each other as poets and still have their words perceived as a tease, not as an aggressive offense.

In most forms of verbal duels, the insulted party is supposed to laugh at the insults or remain unfazed by them, regardless of the possibility that they may be taken personally. In Turkish verbal duels, for example, when the poet (called an *ashik*) is insulted, he is supposed to remain calm. As Yildiray Erdener explains, “a talented ashik uses his imagination to come up with a witty insult. As one of the ashiks put it, ‘A competent ashik should respond with a novel insult and should not get angry at all. Only incompetent ones get angry’” (1987:144).

In this case, then, an angry poet would literally be seen as the cause of the offense, not the victim of it. Note also that in this case the poet loses face not for being insulted but because of his reaction to the insult. There are exceptions to this practice as well, however. In the *haló* the offended party is expected to answer—even with physical violence (Avorgbedor 1994). Overall, it depends again on the context and the participants involved.

Ritual Insults

A problem with defining verbal duels as “exchanges of insults” is that it leads one to confuse or conflate duels with ritual insults. This conflation may in turn have been furthered by the relative attention given to one form of verbal duel over all others: the African American “dozens.” In this genre there is indeed exchange of insults, and these exchanges are ritualized. William Labov (1972:*passim*) in fact calls them “ritual insults” rather than verbal duels. Such categorization may have been a factor leading scholars to see all verbal duels as ritualized exchanges in general, and from there to understand them as “staged conflict,” or “not real conflict,” even when the duelists themselves stress improvisation and the conflictual element is quite strong.

However, they are simply not the same thing. Ritual insults are, as the name itself indicates, ritualized forms of insults. As such, the principal/author/ animator of the insult may not be seen as personally responsible for the insult itself, since it is part of a ritual. Or the insult may be understood as not even having a principal and author, except in tradition itself. Nor do ritual insults have to be argumentative or part of an exchange. To clarify the distinction, I will present three examples of ritual insults performed without dialogue.

The *xaxaar* is a genre sung in celebration of marriages among the Wolof of Senegal (Irvine 1992). The performance is carried on by a female *griot* and sponsored by the co-wives of the new bride. During the *xaxaar*, the *griot* sings the worst possible insults to the bride, including allegations of misbehavior not only by the bride herself, but especially by her near and even distant kin. All of the village’s women may be invited to witness a *xaxaar*, and to participate in it as a chorus. Thus the publicly sung insults can raise gossip that can be damaging to the bride’s family. Throughout the performance, however, the bride is supposed to sit still and listen without replying or showing anger, lest she confirm people’s suspicions that the insults may be true. No reprisal is allowed against the insulting *griot* singers; the insults are to be treated as no insult at all. As Irvine explains, “What would really insult [the bride] is if this were not done, since it would imply that she had absolutely no importance” (116). Thus the insults go in one direction only, without any possibility for exchange. Since they are spoken as part of a traditional ritual, the personal agency of a principal or author to insult is obviated.

In the Swazi *nwala* ritual, songs including insults are sung against the Swazi king in his

presence. Andrew Apter calls this a “ritual of dispraise” (1983). As part of the speech-act, songs of praise and dispraise alternate. In the meantime, the king is ritually killed through the sacrifice of a bull, while he remains inside a sacred enclosure. Eventually he will emerge from it purified (and symbolically reborn) the next day.

A last example comes from Italy. In Napoli, on precise dates three times a year the blood of Saint Gennaro (the protector of the city), which is preserved in two cruets in dried form, liquefies. The miracle is witnessed every time by thousands of the faithful, including church and city officials. It is considered to bode a good future for the city. But if the blood fails to liquefy, people interpret the event as a warning of hard times to come. A group of faithful older women, called *parenti del santo* (relatives of the saint), stands at the front inside the church and intones ancient prayers during the ceremony, asking Saint Gennaro for the miracle. If the result they seek is not immediately forthcoming, these women may start ritually insulting the saint, in some cases also falling into trances (see also Niola 2003:131; Malafronte and Maturo 2008). Of course, these women are not faulted for such a performance, not even by the saint.

A verbal duel thus may deploy ritualized forms of insults, but not necessarily. Moreover, many insults used in verbal duels are not ritualized. Such duels are no more similar to ritual insults than, for example, to the ritual dialogues studied by Greg Urban in indigenous South America (1986; see also Fock 1963), where insults are excluded and the accent is on cooperation, social solidarity, and the construction of harmonious relationships.

Conclusions

In summary, performers in verbal duels will draw on a wide range of rhetorical and non-verbal means to sustain their position, and they may (but do not always) resort to insults. They perform according to what they perceive the audience wants to hear, including at times insults. This kind of dynamic is well described in the words of Vasco Aguiar, a *desafio* singer interviewed by Avery (1984:247).

You see it depends on the audience that is listening to the *cantigas*, because . . . just as there are differences in *cantigas*, so also are there differences in the way one appreciates the *cantigas ao desafio*. There are those who like funny *cantigas*. There are others who like *cantigas* about a topic which they know, and to hear it in rhyme. . . . And then there are others who like the secular. It depends on the audience that is listening. Over there may be one or two or ten or twenty who don't like that theme: “I would like it more if it were something which had a meaning, which developed a topic.” There is another who says: “Ah, I would like it more if it were humorous!” And when it falls to the contrary you have your so-called “poor *cantoria*.”

Only such an ability to adapt to the audience's tastes assures a successful performance, applause, or other forms of approval. It is by pleasing the audience that the duelers obtain their authority or renown. In many cases, it is the voice of the audience that their voice carries. The construction of the performance between poets and audience is therefore the key.

Understanding each form of verbal duel requires a careful attention to its context, the

meaning it has for the participants themselves, and the history and social matrix of the societies where it is performed. Even inside a single genre, situations, different participants, and different audiences can lead to very different outcomes for the verbal duels. At times there may be anger and previous conflict, at other times not. It is well to consider their variety, and the need to understand them as part of the linguistic and cultural system where they belong.²⁴

Interpretations based on a particular form and context can be valid for that particular case, but they should not be hastily generalized to all forms of verbal duels. To see all verbal duels as egalitarian law systems for conflict resolution (Hoebel 1967) is problematic, since they are present in non-egalitarian societies. Explanations connected to growing and becoming an adult (Dundes et al. 1970) cannot explain verbal duels conducted by elderly people. One argument at times used to demonstrate that verbal duels have a cathartic function is that this conflict is “staged” rather than real. In part this belief is due to the conflation between verbal duels and ritual insults that I already examined, and does not always hold true. On the other hand, stressing the aggressiveness of insults misses the distinction, for example, between the recipient and target of attacks in verbal duels.

The question remains of why insults, aggressiveness, violence, and catharsis attracted the attention of scholars in the first place. I believe that this inclination stems, in part, from the concept of (civilized) society as rule-governed. As Don Kulick (1993) noticed in his analysis of *kroses*, studies of conflict language are still rare and insufficient. He surmised that perhaps the reason for this situation is that “anthropologists—despite over a decade of postmodernist rhetoric and elegant lip service to multiplicities, difference, and cacophonies—still remain more comfortable with order than with disorder, and are happier concentrating on those social processes that seem to promote order (e.g. conflict settlement or talk about conflicts) than they are seriously engaging with the chaos and disorder of abuse” (511). Nor was Kulick the first to complain about the lack of pertinent studies. Marjorie H. Goodwin had previously wondered if there was an avoidance of studying conflict determined by a bias against conflict in White American middle classes (1990:141). And more than a decade earlier Jean-Luc Chodkiewicz, reporting a genre of verbal duel among the Sori of New Guinea (1982), had noticed the lack of recognition of the widespread presence of verbal duels across the world and their scarce analysis. I believe Kulick and Goodwin are correct in pointing to a predisposition in the social sciences toward conceiving of society as rule-bound, and of relegating chaos and disorder to a position or status external to it, as a “problem” to be quickly resolved. For these reasons verbal duels have often been disregarded and, when studied, have been seen as aggression and explained away as catharsis, or as providing an eventual normalizing social function.

As argumentative language, verbal duels always present a conflict of some kind: between two personae, two factions, two characters, two points of view, and so on. The conflict can originate in the social relationship between the performers (as in the *kroses*) or in the larger society (as in the case of *contrasto* poets debating the point of view of two political parties); in such cases the performers become the spokespersons for a conflict that does not originate in their personal relationship. But verbal duels do not necessarily work toward resolving conflict. On the contrary, they may raise and exacerbate it (such is the case of the *haló*; Avorgbedor 2001a). As

²⁴ Cf. Gary Gossen’s analysis of Chamula duels as “recent words” (1971).

forms of argumentative language, and independently from the use of insults, they create, mirror, and sustain conflict; in many cases they increase it, dwell on it, and bring it to the fore (see also Pagliai 2009).

Finally, one should not forget that the artists are unique individuals who produce unique art. To understand verbal duels, we need to listen to them. What emotions are expressed when they sing? Why do they choose a verse? Why does the audience applaud a particular rhyme? What makes them angry? For the *contrasto* poets, a primary goal is to entertain their audience, since successful performances, and also renown for the artists, accrue from it. Of equal importance for such duelers is expressing themselves both as artists, by producing beautiful poetry and unique verses, and as political agents, by proposing often scathing critiques of the Italian state and its institutions. To achieve each and all of these goals, the *contrasto* poets have to collaborate with each other in performance. “It takes two to do poetry,” they often repeat—two minds, two voices. But their collaboration is built on disagreement and argument, and heightens sociopolitical conflicts. By understanding the milieu and the uniqueness of verbal duels, as well as the aesthetic and performative sense of their creators and their audiences, a door can be opened toward a rich and complex universe of verbal art that has been insufficiently explored and understood.²⁵

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References

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