

Sacred Dirt: On Words and Power

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Among African hunter-gatherers (and beyond) some of the richest and most powerful ritual lyrics are rooted in what Bakhtin called ‘the lower bodily stratum’: the grotesque body in dialogue with the social world. Guenther’s work on trickster supports this conjuring up and scrambling of the corporeal as potent cultural device. Reproductive organs and fluids, birthing and fucking, pus and snot command the lyrical field particularly in contexts where women have maintained a loud collective presence. Why is this so? What is the relationship between the female body and ‘sacred dirt’? Is it possible, as recent writing on the resonance of poetic language suggests, that drawing the fertile organic into a cultural lexicon is one of the most powerful – and empowering – counter-remedies for individualism?

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bJpH03HUWKA>

Introduction

Camilla Power: Welcome everybody, thank you for coming to UCL tonight and to everybody on Zoom. We are very lucky to have Morna here with us. She has made the trip all the way from Edinburgh to come down tonight and to go all the way back to Edinburgh tomorrow. So, we really appreciate her effort as it’s always wonderful to have Morna speaking at RAG. That’s why we twisted her arm to get her to come all the way.

Morna has been a very long-term friend and colleague of us in the Radical Anthropology Group, and myself, Chris, and Ian Watts. And her work, she did a PhD with field work with the Evangele, hunter-gatherers in Congo, Brasville, and did that PhD with the late Alan Barnard, who very recently died up in Edinburgh University. It was very sad to lose Alan just recently. He’s one of the great experts of hunter-gatherer history, cosmology, and of the Khoisan, but he was supervising one of the Central African hunter-gatherers. Morna’s work has been about gender, power, ritual, laughter, bodies, and all of this, the mixtures of ingredients that go into distributing power among egalitarian hunter-gatherers. And it’s always been a great inspiration for us. And what’s sort of especially fascinating is the way that she melds ideas from people like Bakhtin, who’s very famous as the historian of Carnival of Rabelais in this world, the idea of the lower bodily stratum as the speaking body in the dialogue speaking body and how she brings that into her work on hunter-gatherer ethnography.

I also should mention, because I had great pleasure to co-edit with Morna a book which is now five or six years old, but with also Hilary Kellum, who is part of the

triumph feminine of editors, a book on human origins, contributions from social anthropology. And that was a huge pleasure to do that.

So I'm going to hand over to Morna for her talk Sacred Dirt: On Words and Power.

Lecture

Morna Finnegan: So, I suppose I will start by saying that the part of the idea for what I want to do this evening comes from Joanna, an article, an essay by Joanna Overing on the Piroa use of the ludic, of the body, of the obscene in their most sacred ritual, rituals and chants. And so I'll start with this plea that she makes for why we fail to carry so much of this rich material into our academic reports and analysis. And she asks this really provocative question about what it could be saying and why it's important to to keep sacred dirt, to keep the words that are fleshed in academic reports. So my spiel for the talk was mentioning, as Camilla said, Bakhtin, who I love. I think that he manages to bring the organic together with the cultural in a way that it's really compelling, but also quite radical if we follow through on what he's saying in terms of politics. And it fits perfectly with so much hunter-gatherer ethnography. This is what's really striking to me in the work of our team. So I find it really hard to get through a talk without a little bit of Bakhtin in there somewhere and as always, it's easier tonight as well. But also what I'm going to do is refer to different kinds of evidence for words as being much more of an embodied medium than we generally allow for. And so I'll also refer to the ethnography on Central African hunter-gatherers, the groups that I do best. And also the idea of the archetypal figures that represent the organic in speech and in symbol. So what's the relationship between the female body and sacred dirt? And might it be possible, as some of the recent writing actually on the resonance of poetic language suggests, that drawing this fertile organic quality into a cultural lexicon might be one of the most powerful remedies or counter remedies for individualism. And so I want to begin by reiterating over into the point of 20 years ago about the kind of expelling or exiling of the dirty or mucky elements of ritual life, the ritual lives of other peoples who are getting on with the more serious business of analysis and theory building. which is a difficult move, firstly because you end up trying very hard not to say the word **** in academic seminars or vagina, but also because intellectually and creatively, you lose access to some of the richest and most powerful cosmological material in the lives of people such as the Piroa and indeed, I suggest, many Central African groups. So Overing says, frivolity doesn't belong to the workplace, the pulpit, political committee, or the academic manuscript. Why do we persistently overlook this? And I want to really examine our relationship with where it's here and the idea of the lexicons held in Western culture and literate culture and science. And look at where we might start to ease out of this rather stiff jacket that we're wearing, or, suit and tie that we're all wearing when we're trying to communicate some very different kinds of material and information. And

because I'm really good at digressing, I'm going to drop in a little bit of an Irish writer called Manton Magan. in his examination of old Irish and the type of mind which it expresses here. And I'm really just flagging this up because it's something that I've recently been reading, which is very relevant actually. Just speaking to the ideas that I want to draw out tonight. Megan is trying to demonstrate the relationship of Gaelic with the physical, the reproductive, the land, in order to demonstrate how deeply and inextricably molecular Irish is at its root. And he writes, and this is what I want to emphasize here, words were pure sound. more like an embodied medium and could be communicated only by vocalizing them into the air from within the cavity of a physical body. Words were embedded in the human body and the physical senses to an extent that's leagues from digitally processed words on a page. So This is one of the points that I want to carry forward through this evening and looking at these different scraps of ethnographic work or theoretical ideas. Words as fleshed, words as conductors almost more like molecules and particle waves than fixed or concrete, than a fixed or concrete element. And indeed, Megan shows in this book called *32 Words for Field*. So it's about emphasizing the verb-based and specificity of languages that have maintained some of that orient quality. And he shows that for eons, Irish was used in this capacity. It wasn't used as something cerebral necessarily. The language was a way to touch. It was a way to conjure up, to evoke, to effect changes in the world which were necessary. And that could have been from everything from relationships with the land to healing relationships. And here I claim some really small indigenous knowledge in that my mum's kin line has what's colloquially known as the cure running through it. And the cure in this sense means a series of words and gestures passed mother to mother to mother back into antiquity further than any of us know. And the idea of the cure is that you use haptic, you use physical touch along with sequences of words which are spoken to people who are suffering from various kinds of ill health. And this is an old kind of folk remedy that was passed through various families through time in Ireland. like I said, over the eons and way back into beyond Christianity. So what I want to emphasize here in talking about Irish before I start to talk about some of the interesting ethnography is I'd like to keep with us in the room tonight when I'm talking about the ethnography on African hunter-gatherers, for example, when I'm talking about the idea of the female body, in particular, the procreative female body coming into form through words and interrupting cultural fields, redefining the cultural field. What I would like to really do, and I'd like to encourage everyone to do, is to kind of maintain this sense that we are not just working with ideas here. We're working with something which is much more tangible and potentially much more provocative. Something that we all feel when we use words in particular words. And you get that sense very clearly from listening to poetry or ritual chants, religious chants. But how can we bring that kind of lit quality from the peoples whose cultural lives we're describing into a room like this? It's a question that I think is really pertinent and important. So rather than speaking about the data from the outside, I am more and more trying to keep my own ancestry and kin knowledge in the room, in the mix,

and acknowledge that we have full-bodied lives that inform the ways that we think, the ways that we know, and the ways that we communicate that thinking and knowing to other people. So just to keep that in the same kind of field as this term, sacred dirt, Now, the understanding here is really about the types of words used and the ways that they're used, the frequencies they disperse at, the bodies that they move through, the state of the bodies, the polyphony or antiphony of the voices. And this is so particularly when we come to look at the ritual language that I wanted to talk you through. the conjuring of other species of resonance in the sonic and phenomenal fields, the breath, the percussion, the movement of bodies pushing words out and emerging through them, all of this in the understanding of, for example, Gaelic. All of this is kind of taken as a given. And all of this we know now has an impact on the people present. It activates areas of the brain, which behavioural scientists now know relates causally to mood, empathy and social behaviour. I'm talking about ritual speech, the way we use words and communicate through words. And I'm emphasizing it because when we come to talking about some of the chants and the songs that Benjele women use in their ritual associations, like Mgoku, it's almost like an imaginative leap to put ourselves in context, to put ourselves in body as we're as we're thinking about what these words would be achieving. Now, Joanna Overing's work offers this platform into the kind of Baba Yaga type, topsy-turvy, inside-ID power that I want to draw on and which so intimidates, I have argued, systems of fixed power. And again, just another little quote from her. She said she writes, laughter in an extraordinary Christian physiology was understood to have a dangerous relationship with the body. And that's a point multiple writers from Victor Turner to Marshall Sahlins have made. But like Bactine, Overing is actually interested in the relationship between laughter, the organic or fertile body, and what I'm calling sacred dirt. So forms of speech which claim power by pulling everything into the social fabric, including the biological, what we might categorize as the biological, the whole body. And Overing continues, Why do Pierroa myths center on the rise of the ***** and the obscene? Why are there strongest obscenities and most colorful, dirty words to be found in the sacred language of chance? And she speculates that good, strong words have a positive effect on the body, just as bad words have an ill effect. And this is part of Pierroa's social psychology, which repeatedly uses strong words to emphasize fertility within the community. However, I'm suggesting, and I have suggested, that the use of strong words or what I'm calling sacred dirt is also clearly connected to the female procreative body as cultural archetype. And that's the female body as a resource for everyone, by the way, not only available to biological women. Because what you're talking about when this reaches a certain level of ritual resonance, the cultural resonance is, yes, a politics coming fundamentally from the female biological procreative body. But when that gets collectivized, when these statements get collectivized, it's almost as if you're opening the whole zone of culture to incorporate the missing half. In patriarchal cultures, there's a missing half in case anyone hasn't noticed. And what happens in these rituals is that, and it's tangible. And I have a little quote from my own attempts to bring this into body

from my experience when I was living at and what happens when you experience this taking of the cultural, social, public space repeatedly by noisy, irreverent, body groups of women, clapping, stamping, chanting, elbowing them out of the way just acoustically, physically, and in terms of their ritual movements. There's this mood, there's this motion of the female body entering into the world in a really concrete and tangible way. So I've talked about words as potentially powerful when they retain the flesh and blood and understandings and oral cultures and old languages of spoken words and symbols actually acting on the world by conjuring things into being. Finally, because this touches very, very closely on Bourdieu's work, and some of you might be thinking about Bourdieu and language and symbolic power, on the politics of language. None of this is complete without mentioning the politics of language. Ownership of the power to articulate truth, control of what Bourdieu calls the feed of doxa, is in many ways ownership of the power to define reality. But by the same process, there's always the potential for subversion or what Bourdieu calls heretical truth, heretical discourse. So how do we see through this non-arbitrary nature of power? Bourdieu calls the feat of doxa, the stuff that we just take as given. He says it comes without saying because it goes without, it goes without saying because it comes without saying. It's so automatic and so obvious to us that we don't see it anymore. And so the question that I'm asking is how do we begin to see through the limitations of any particular reality? And this is where anthropology and ethnography come into their own. So this is just a very, a sentence that I picked out of an earlier paper of mine called *The Politics of Eros*. And it underlines what I'm trying to say or beginning to say in a roundabout way. Standing in the central camp clearing at Mbula one night as a snake of beaded women stormed through camp, yodeling, cackling, cracking open the major social space with their bodies. I began to wonder what the implications are for a society when the story that is ritualized through bodily comportment highlights female reproductive anatomy, female bodily fluids, female desire, and refracts this back to the community as cultural power. So let's look at some other examples of ways in which this happens. And Camilla mentioned the human origins, our human origins volume. There's an essay in there from Shirley Ardiner on female militancy and sexual insult, focusing, but not confined to the back area of West Cameroon. And this is an old but a really, really interesting piece because Shirley is talking about the term, which I'm probably not pronouncing correctly, TTE Coley. TTE Coley. TTE Coley translates roughly as 1000 vulvas, women's underparts, women's secrets and the insult of these. And Ardiner describes how blackweary women were able, using this quote, TT polling, and its war pride, to mobilize this formidable collective presence against anyone who had offended an individual woman, particularly her genitals, or where a female had been assaulted. Women were able to draw on Titi Ekoli, and it starts with this, apparently her raising war cry together. And she quotes, Ardenner quotes one of the main songs or chants sung by women. It says, Titi Ekoli is not a thing. I'm sorry, I didn't have the original. language, but it's the translation is TT equally is not a thing for insults. Beautiful, beautiful. And that's it. It's just sung over and

over again. Underlining that in TT equally, Ardiner says, we find a semantic theme which includes beautiful, a bulk price, the female genitals, the neighboring area of the **** and buttocks, and women's secrets. And she goes on, Insults concern not only the woman directly abused, but all women. Mandatory militant action follows, which overrides allegiance to kin and to tribal groups. Women demonstrate not on behalf of the victim of abuse only, but on behalf of themselves as a group. And Ardiner stresses the important parallels with what's going on here with the feminism of the time, and this attempt which I want to come round to at the end. This attempt you find particularly in French feminism to kind of break into being through voicing the female body into life and to interrupt male symbolic fields by doing that. So let's look at the Central African data that I have to hand from my own research. And I used the work of two other anthropologists in particular in looking at some of the important song lyrics when I was writing up my thesis. One is Michelle Kisluk and the other is Jerome Lewis. And I'm just going to cite a few of their songs that they discussed as well. So Michelle Kisluk and her book *Sees the Dance* highlights the sexual teasing, which is the focus of AKA women's songs. And you have one popular Ding Boku chant, which cries, directing the cry of male spectators, the penis gives birth to nothing, only urine. So an obvious, but sometimes neglected point is made by Jerome, Jerome Lewis, on this ritual focus on the ability to grow and produce new human beings. So he emphasizes that for the Bengèle, for the AGA, the ability to conceive and carry a baby to fruition and give birth is really something hugely important. It's up there with all of the other important cultural work that's done. And in fact, it only happens as it only happens in Amazonia. through the cooperative labour of the sexes. So it's very much something that happens when the community is functioning correctly in the Vinjelli understanding. And it's something that we tend to forget in societies where that capacity, that fact, and the labour that goes into it has been moved away down the the scale of importance, very close to the bottom, actually, if you live in capitalist cultures. So in its creativity and doubling capacity, the body, and particularly the female body, is a powerful cultural player here, both Kisluk and Lewis emphasise. So you have a direct reversal in many ways of a lot of Western philosophical and feminist theory, where biology is what diminishes or reduces the social person. Biology here is what enlarges the social person. And several writers on Central African celebrations of the fecundity, which Oberg highlights. I've described how this production of new people from one's own skin is considered a cultural achievement. If you're familiar with the work of Laura Rival, you'll also know that she brings this out really beautifully in her writing on the Amazonian Cubade. The fact that people only really become married when they have gone through the labour of bringing a child into the world, that's what creates the marriage, and it's also, it ripples out And so, the whole, you get this feeling from work that the whole community is rippling out from babies and children, and it's moving. So, there's this lovely pulse of ritual and social activity, cultural activity organised around reproduction, which means reproduction is very highly valued. It's not just something what biology does by itself while we get on

with our nine to five job. It's A hugely important part of being a full cultural human being. So during women's dances, there's a recurrent statement about the specifically female color that is embedded in pro-creativity and the emotional and sexual economy that runs parallel to it. And so it makes sense that we have these amplified body statements by women publicly calling up into culture that power. Which brings us to another well-known Nilamba song, stripped back to its lyrical bare bones and consisting of just one word, Dumana, shouted over and over, which translates as Mitzvak. Now, men are not actually physically involved in this dance. And this is the point that Kisluk emphasizes. You have these beautifully oiled and painted and interlinked women from very young girls through to older women dancing and dancing, singing, Dumana, Dumana, but you don't touch them. And so there's this pushful rhythm happening in Dumana and in Goku, actually, the Benjele in Goku is very, very similar. Constant tension, constant drawing in and pushing out that happens in these dances. And a lot of it oriented around the words, oriented around the use of body words. When Kisluk later relayed these songs to become non-bayaka Pongalese men, they were, she reports, horrified that Bayaka men would put up with such humiliation. But aside from the fact that the teasing is short-lived because women kind of cede that space to ritual groups of men, there is also this generative power of dance and music happening this kind of dialogic happening that promotes a sense of openness and permission, fluidity, which verbal and cognitive forms ordinarily inhibit, but not in this case. So this is really interesting because Keeping in mind the possibility that I mentioned at the beginning of words as connecting or conducting forces between physical bodies and cultural form. If we move on through, there is clearly a connection between that idea of collective effervescence, collective fluidity and euphoria and happiness and the impact that the lyrics have. And the willingness of men to engage with this, ritual humiliation and sexual teasing. When lines like, the penis is no competition, it died already, the vagina wins, their testicles are broken, And it's another one from Jerome are delivered from within this ecstatic moment. It's often, but the fact that they've been spoken is important. So you have these, you have these kind of fleshed pants and lines moving out into the community, which means that people are singing them, dancing them, children are hearing them. And they're becoming part of the whole social field in a really profound way, which of course reinforces women's coalitionary power, coalitionary right and voice within the community. And you'll be familiar, many of you, I'm sure, with Joan's work, Joan Lewis's work on angelic community politics, where each gender group continuously subverts the potential prestige that the other group might accrue from their role in society. And Jerome says, Masana celebrates gender and emphasizes independence, yet endured dependence, antagonism, yet desire, separation and unity. So again, that's pushful effect. And in Goku, which was referred to by someone I met at Mbula, the community where I lived, as the primary dance is believed by women to be the most powerful spirit. And this is the Makondi or spirit who represents women's collective potency, just as Ijengi represents men's collective potency. The both have vital elements of the other. So when Ngoku is summoned by

women into camp, men are expected to retire to their huts or leave for the forest. And older women, Lewis Wright's League songs, which focus again on sexual insults to men or declarations of women's reproductive and sexual superiority. Some examples are Dotoba, Diepe, old men are no good. their testicles are broken, and there's a wide repertoire of dances connected to this, most of which have sexual connotations. So, in my research with the Bengale, I was really struck by how meticulously egalitarian they are. You know, every last cigarette will be shared, every last string of beads will be carefully distributed, nothing gets hoarded. And this is also largely because you have these groups of older women who would descend on you, like pecking chickens, and tear you to shreds if you tried to hoard anything. So there's, it's very much a dynamic and aggressive demand sharing, which you'll probably have heard as well from speakers like Jerome. But it's during ritual that you see the community kind of splitting into contending coalitions. And that ensuing conversation involving some of the stuff that I'm mentioning, sexual taunting, teasing and insulting and merciless laughter, resonates with Bakhtin's assertion that true polyphonic dialogue demands that the opposition of one person to another. The dialogic reparted, he says, was not an end, but a means in itself. It wasn't the threshold to action, it was the action itself. So we're talking here about a theme where you have dancing, singing, collective bodies moving in synchrony, you have these powerful, earthy, graphic chants being delivered. But from the perspective of BAC team, the chants are not peripheral, they're not a nice thrill. That's dialogue, that's physical and vocal. Um, dialogue is actually action itself. It's not a prelude, um, to something happening. It is the happening. That's, that's culture happening right there. And it has to continually happen so that we don't lose vital parts of the, of the community, such as that this coalitionary body of women or children or older people all of the parts together moving, uh, at one moment against one another and at the next in synchrony. And within the dance choreographies that I've mentioned, you have this real sense of condensed ritual language, drawing the eye back all the time to procreative possibility. And I've talked about the lines already. So these are ideological taunts. But they're also, when they're continually reiterated, a little bit like an alarm going off in the culture, keeping this issue of reproductive labour and the value that gets accorded to it live. So you have in all this, this lovely injection and contraction of power and oscillation between sexes, between individual desire and group equilibrium, But you're not talking, as I said at the start, about individual biological bodies. This is what Bakhtin called the great generic body of the people. And I think it's really a crucial, a crucial line in thinking through the move from sex to gender. We're not talking here about a private biological quality severed by this long history of political and religious repression from its own root and ability to express its own language. The formality achieved in the move from sex to ritual sex or gender is what expands bodies out into something universal, representing all the people, as my team said. So to close and kind of round out the circle as it were, I want to take a final look at the possibility which bringing exiled human material back into cultural expression might offer politically. And I spoke a little bit at the beginning about Or

do you use understanding of language and power? This kind of symbolic theme where it becomes almost impossible to bring the outside in or to bring the exiled elements into expression and in a dynamic way. And of course, that's something that Bourdieu's work was centrally concerned with. And I mentioned as well that French feminism took many of Bourdieu's ideas and thought about them from the point of view of the female body. So, okay, what would it be like if we could break through that invisible field of doxa and introduce something else? What would it be like if the female body did have a voice? Kristeva and Rigueret, they were all asking this question, what would it be like if you had the female body actually speaking socially, culturally and politically? What would it do to culture? And they were considered, even at the time, they were terms like essentialists and reductionists were thrown at them. um for this attempt to draw the the the female body back into some kind of cultural and and symbolic um expression as a way to uh to liberate um female energy female potential um However, when you read their work, their theoretical writing, people like Kristeva, in the context of, and this is something I think is really fruitful and I like to do a lot, reading two things against one another so these writers struggling to say, maybe we've forgotten our bodies, maybe we're not, just floating around in space and maybe we should not be trying to reinvent ourselves as something else in order to gain social power, political power. And I realise that these are points that are now kind of familiar, but they weren't at the time. They were fairly radical. It was a little bit like stamping on sheet ice the cracks starting to appear in the version of normality and reality that second wave feminism was trying to engage with. And if you read what they were saying in the context of what the Bengale women are actually, this was wishful thinking for French feminism, but what in Bengale, Baiaka women, Baqueri women are actually doing it's almost like you're seeing it come to fruition and you're seeing what can happen where women have maintained, uh, that, that coalitionary voice drawn out of their physical bodies, their blood, their sweat, their milk. And, and it's resonating on the culture, in the cultural field in a, in really powerful ways. Um, and actually, um, a much later dance and movement theorist, Janet Wolfe, talking about that the break between the classical docile body and the grotesque body in European history as a feminist question. She argues that the denial and marginalization of the body in Western culture generally is inseparable from the denigration of women as a group. and does harm to individuals just as it does harm to cultures and to what material remains available to all of us, regardless of biological sex. So we'll ask this really interesting question. She says, if the body, and specifically the female body, has been systematically repressed as part of the political project of capitalism, and she's looking at the relationship with movement, dance and the body with capitalism. She says, does it follow that the eruption of the grotesque body, the explosion into visibility of its suppressed features, sex, laughter, excretion and so on, constitutes a political revolution as well as a moral transgression? So we return again to the visceral power of language and indeed it's political and social power personified across diverse cultural settings. And you see that visceral power of language coming up in a lot of the symbolic figures because I haven't talked tonight and

there isn't a space to talk about Trickster, for example, Jontwa Trickster, which is the kind of symbol of para excellence for scrambling all kinds of corporeal materials into this topsy-turvy, kind of upside-downy power, which turns out to be incredibly slippery and invites laughter, it invites mockery, it invites the flofunery and the dancing and the the craziness back into the religious field. But alongside Trickster and his myriad faces, you have also have Jackal and Bear. You have thinking of the Central African forests, birds, and dancers. You have Mgoku, Jengi, Alamba, Yele. And I mentioned my relationship, my growing relationship with my own heritage and language at the beginning. And there, of course, you also have these master symbols or key symbols like the Kalyakbara or Bridget, figures who exist in between spaces for their communities. And they're used as I don't use that term key symbols incidentally, because they're used to open doors into other realms of possibility, which might get closed if we let our guard down. And the fact that they still exist and are still drawn on, even in cultures the book that I talked about at the beginning, makes the point of that, although Gaelic still has this incredible diversity and richness in it, in reality, we all go of Ireland as kind of devoutly Catholic and traumatically Catholic society in some ways. But you still have the Cagnac. You still have these ancient epitomies of visceral language and being embedded in the culture and available to pull into language and into discussion and dialogue at any moment. So Bakhtin argues that the communal laughter of that body dancing, that body dancing rabble in the team he talks about so beautifully in his writing was inherently threatening to the emerging hierarchy. and that kind of cackling body of the hag while they're moving through medieval marketplaces and festivals. And Baktin says, in order for the project that was ongoing at the time to work, the religious and state building and later the industrial and capitalist project to work, you had to, you had to get rid of that body and what it was saying. You couldn't possibly have lines like the ones we've just heard from Imbula in the central cultural platforms. And so the great generic body of the people all about menstrual blood and milk and semen and pus and saliva. slurping up power and spitting it out again as the trickster or the clown, that had to be removed from the social field. Because its orientation to boundary was completely different. Cultures and societies based on elites benefiting from the privatisation and exploitation of others have to take a defensive approach. They need fences, they need to police themselves very carefully, to fix and close potentially incendiary spaces. Whereas the kind of power principle being involved among many hunter-gatherers, which Bac Team talks about, is really about keeping borders open. And Jerome Lewis speaks about this beautifully. For the Benjele, there's nothing better than keeping camp open. open to the forest, open to possibility, open to all kinds of conversations that are essential for people to remain fully human. OK, so I'm going to finish off. I just want to say that. OK. So, actually, I'm going to finish on quite a poetic note. I'm going to try to finish on a poetic note. And I suppose what I it's a challenge to myself as much as anything, because I've talked about this theoretically. But I want to put the question out there. So if the sound stream that's moving through you is also emitting from you, The sound stream, the soundscape, the symbolic stream

around you is also moving through you, out of you. If as the beautiful quote from Bleak and Lloyd that I was talking to Chris and Camilla about before we came, from an informant talking about words, and he said, The bushman's letters are in his body. They speak, they move, they make the bushman's body move. So if the letters that are making us move, the logic of power formalizing into these words or chants is actually raising out of your own viscera, your own blood, your own womb. your own ***** as well as the heat of the collective body. And here I want you to imagine specifically a female proprietive body. And imagine we're all inside it and it can speak. A bit like where Chris is having his birthday party. So you have this kind of blood pulse and pulse and inside pulse, limbs inside limbs, earth opening, tunnels of red, light pushing into other worlds defined by different laws and being able to breathe here, which is the experience of a baby being slowly massaged out of its mother's belly. And you have to, you'd almost have to define new terms, right, to describe it and bring it onto a level of cultural and political resonance, what that body's doing. And what would it be based on fundamentally? Opening, opening boundaries, opening possibilities, the doubling capacity, everything that the trickster is and does, everything that the spirit is, that the Central African experience are and do. You'd need almost different terms, sprawl gas, wet light, heat shine, sweat sock, milk sweet, drawing on this verb based subatomic social field, a field defined by the pulse of vitality, pulse of the body, salt, motion and beat, resonance tugging at dissonance, singularity tugging at oneness, circularity, tugging at linearity, polyphony at antiphony, the moon at the sun, and nothing fixed. Because this is why sacred dirt is so powerful. I believe really strongly that this is why these lines are telling us something really fundamentally important in terms of power, because nothing can be fixed. When you're using this kind of language, you're taking it right out of the viscera, right out of the blood, right out of the menstrual cycle and the moon. It can't be fixed. It can't be fenced. It's uncontainable by nature. So the penis gives birth to nothing, only urine. The vagina wins. The penis has no competition. Let's ****. These are earth words used in particular moments, in particular ways, and they're not incidental. Sacred dirt is culturally distinct and locally embedded, but it's also a pan-human capacity or an element. The power to call up power, to call on the spirits, using obscene words and gestures, obscene, which means flesh to earth, as well as a whole range of other techniques. also based on the principle of motion. And to ask for them to intercede on behalf of the human is really ancient because the gods, the forest, the land, the ancestors and the children savour the muck and heat of the full human body. And in that relishing and coming into being together, we become human. Thank you.

Discussion

Camilla: Fantastic, thank you so much. So, we're going to open the floor here for questions for Morna. Would anybody like to put forward any thoughts?

Morna: I'd just like to say that was incredible. It's so amazing to hear everything you have to say because it's so hard to even find out that kind of information.

Morna: Thank you so much. That's really, really good to hear. Some of it is stuff that I'm repeating from other articles or talks, so I'm never sure if people are hearing the same thing twice.

Camilla: We're hearing elements of things being thrown up and coming down into quite new configurations. It reminds me of the calm girl in the menstrual part who's getting angry and throws the ashes into the sky to create the Milky Way. So it's all incredibly new.

Morna: One of the things that I was thinking about and I would have liked to reference as well is Camilla's amusing work in drawing the cosmology into that kind of realm of possibility. How you can use those stories open of possibilities beyond the local, beyond the single culture.

Camilla: This whole idea of the keyness of this movement between the fixed and the unfixed. And this was coming out so beautifully, linking that to the sacred dirt and all the flowing and the beyond boundaries of the grotesque. That is putting together those bodies and the trickster and all of that. That's beautiful.

Audience member #1: When in the story does the penal body start to lose his voice and how?

Morna: That's a very good question. Different writers located at different points. I think depending on interest. I think already in the Middle Ages, it was contentious to be stampeding these bleeding the dead through the marketplace, through the town square, lampooning authority, so clearly and repeatedly. But there's another dance, I think it's really interesting to look as well at dance theory. There's another interesting dance theorist called Norman Bryson. And he writes specifically about the kind of nail in the coffin of industrial mechanical thinking and relationships with the body and how you have this final abstraction around that time where carnival really starts to just vanish. And specifically that connected public female body epitomized by the hag mother who's giving birth and very much the carnival equivalent of trickster. And, but I think if you look at, if you look at contexts like Ambula, where women are doing this all the time, what you realise is, and actually it's in the literature too, you would really only have to break that ability of women to be so publicly vocal for a relatively short period of time to interrupt, for there to be a stagger. And I don't know if that, I don't think that would necessarily be a permanent thing because Michelle Kisluk also writes about dances that vanished because missionary interstated, you can imagine the missionaries of some of these lyrics. and then popped up again two years later because they had actually given the dance a new name and slipped then under the nose of the missionaries. It was the dance for God, but it was, using some of these lyrics very provocatively. So I think, by and large, the message that I take from the ethnography of places where this is still actively happening is that it has to be, there has to be an ongoing quality to it it's a pendulum that has to keep happening. And even seasonally wouldn't be enough, I think. It's too, it's too long of a distance.

Chris Knight: So what is it if it's not seasonal?

Morna: Well, we have the, we have the lunar clock, which is linked perfectly to the female menstrual cycle. And these clocks don't exist for arbitrary reasons. I mean, they're obviously connected. They're obviously to do with relationships between bodies. But what I saw at Mbula was actually even closer than the monthly in terms of, okay, so maybe the bigger rituals, which seem to be fairly spontaneous, but you had women keeping this acoustic motor running all the time. You, I mean, and it was torture. I've talked about this as well at like three in the morning, four in the morning, people were still singing. And there was this sense of keeping the space open with voice, keeping the dynamic going all the time, even if it was only two or three people holding it. a little bit like a spark. And then, you've got the fire again, and it goes down to a spark, but you don't want to let it die out completely. And of course, the Verangele, as Jerome is much better qualified than I am to talk about their musical expertise at Chags recently. I've got going on a lot here, but I just wanted to say we had a beautiful presentation by Martin Craddock on Baca. musical expertise and the level of accomplishment that's happening in this symphony going on within Baka communities, but also between them and the forest and all the other species. And he played some of his reportings, which are just extraordinary. People in the room, we were in an academic lecture theatre and people were saying, I want to get up and dance. It's just it really does something to you.

Camilla: Margaret is raising the question about what happens for women who can't have children and where in these women who choose not to is Margaret's. But Mary further down is talking about the Kayla Vera pronunciation. Wise woman usually presented as childless.

Morna: Yeah, absolutely. I mean, the Kaliak Bara is a hag. She's the winter queen and she's the representation of, apparently, the representation of death. Although in spring, she shrinks and shrinks until she becomes Bridget, her young, fertile self. But, this is a point that's so important. I'm really, really glad that you've raised it because it's not about individual. I mean, there are two things. Of course, it's about individual fertility. You can't have children and you're struggling with that in a society where we don't share children. But I think The point is that in a community where women have maintained this collective body, yes, they're individual mothers and loving that role as much as many individual mothers in any culture love it and possibly not loving it as much as many individual mothers in other cultures. The difference is that everything is collective. And so The fertility is shared and the womb is shared, the milk is shared. I watched babies be passed around the community routinely and getting fed by lots of other women who weren't their biological parent. And I know that teenage boys, for example, really loved holding babies and slings, jiggling them and dancing with them and teenage girls as well. So I think On 2 different levels, on the material level, you, where there isn't a privatization of kids, everyone shares to some extent in that experience of motherhood, parenthood, because it's bigger than motherhood. On another level, on a symbolic and ritual level, we're talking about

an archetype, which appears in culture, which is the archetype of the fertile female body, the bleeding female body that everyone has access to, not just women who men ought choose to have children or can't have children, but I think also men, boys this possibility opens for everyone to experience what it's like when you keep the principles of opening, doubling, physically connecting through bodies, fluidity, et cetera. When you keep those cultural, everyone benefits from it. I believe.

Margaret: Yeah, I just was wondering, I suppose, the real choice, I suppose, that we might have today, just to opt out of wanting a baby. Can you be there and not want a child? Or is that not acceptable? For the groups we normally talk about in RAG.

Morna: Well, firstly, personal autonomy is really paramount. So the choice to not have a child would be, I think that Benjelli would consider it a little bit odd because it's such a highly valued activity and so relished. viable community. However, if an individual didn't want to do it, there wouldn't be any question of forcing them to have a baby. A baby is something as a source of joy. Then you also have to bring into the picture, which is very different from the ways that we have and raise children in this society, for example, that it's not stressful. you don't see mothers stressed continually. And I know this from my own children. Because the energy, the care needed for them is being offered by a collective. Because in that mix as well is that you aren't under enormous pressure to prove yourself in the world as something other than a mother, which, as I said, the starters often sits at the very bottom of the ladder of what's important, what's valued.

Camilla: Yeah, thanks, Margaret. I was just going to stress and just say how much Mona's idea that gender really emerges with the collective, that it's that collectivity where bodies are not separate sex bodies. And we can think of it with the Bakhtin hack as you reference, the old hack, that is kind of the representation of all the bodies of carnival linked together for different ages, different sexes time and load. But also examples like, for instance, the language of the Hudself, if you're using terms, the collective terms to reference Hansen, Hansabe, means sort of plural female bodies. So the Hansen are quite different from our language, which thinks of men as collective and women, it's just subservient to that. And the Hansen are quite the opposite, that any collective of human beings must be female and so it has this I think, I think it's, it's corresponding to the sense that no fixity, that there is this all these open possibilities for this potential for sharing all these pathways. And yeah, that, that it's, it's that power of collectives that, that is so, so strong. There's a contribution from Catherine Williams about Lozenges. Catherine, did you want to say anything about that? In the threat about the threat, I've heard about this, the symbol of lozenges that from the work of Elizabeth Wen of Barber, a book surrounded by the lozenge symbols supposedly representing the ***** and aprons in folk costumes embroidered with lozenge symbols. I don't know if anybody knows much about that, but I mean, we can think about all kinds of motifs and so forth. Dance costumes very often with these symbols. Wasn't it Anish Kappa was? He did all this work on the Turkish and Kalimans.

Chris: They're all carpet designs, all the carpet designs, these little squares, these lozenges, all the Turkish carpets and all that. That's where they come from.

Camilla: They're all woven in.

Chris: They're woven in.

Camilla: They're very and they've got the same.

Chris: Rhythmicity and openness and constantly rippling out, but essentially they're a lozenge. Our late lamented friend. And that lozenges are ages ago.

Camilla: You're talking about Lionel. Yes. And lozenges was people.

Chris: Thank you. And this went way back to caves in the Basque country, 15,000 BC. So it's not new stuff. End of story.

Camilla: Another way to think of the laws, it might be of a dual sex that they kind of combine both because you've kind of got one triangle and another triangle.

Chris: Clearly all I can see was having a ladies chapel. And if you have a ladies chapel, you can you see just end it, you just see so many, what are clearly bonus, kind of doesn't shape, repeated all over the place. Beautiful. And I was just going to say one thing, which is just that Karina Alai this year, we went to the carnival. I mean, I've been going to carnival in my life, so I was the school of sandwich, so carnival was sort of normal for me. But I mean, I must say, don't think that we don't have coalitions are very, very, very assertive. women, hugely potent in Nottingham Carnival, it's overwhelming the great lines of women strutting their stuff and teasing everybody else.

Camilla: And what I can remember is the female coalition who had breast pumps, who were producing, they were dancing in beautiful costume, and they had breast pumps to get to produce the breastfills. And so, yeah, they were making a special show.

Chris: Of course, that counterculture, but I mean, the counterculture seeped into this culture over here in London, in a big way. It's the biggest column in Europe, of course.

Camilla: Yeah, that's absolutely interesting.

Morna: Thank you. And I think that these, I think that, of course, there is always, and there has been for decades, like a conscious push to bring those, that kind of counterculture, counteraction into, onto the streets. in different ways. But I think specifically as it relates to what then happens in the wider society, it's not carrying through yet.

Chris: Carnival doesn't run society even for half a month, let alone...

Camilla: It's incredibly confined and it's incredibly confined by capitalists of course.

Chris: But if anyone wants to feel some of that over here, I mean, I imagine everyone's at least had some experience of carnival. But I mean, it really is an extraordinary experience. If it's new to you, treat yourself.

Audience member #2: A hypothesis, which has to do with that as well from now. So you are saying that through words, which we call upon spirits, tribes in Central America and in general, South America, call upon spirits for words. But the words

were given by spirits. itself. So what if today's rituals that we have are not as potent because they were not given by spirits? So there is a disconnect. And what can we do then to reconnect and recreate powerful rituals?

Morna: I think that, yes, you're right. There's a continuity in cultures that haven't had that rupture between the, all the other species of being and even as far as their own bodies and everything else. But I think that, for example, there's a lot of really interesting writing on our relationship with with, our biomes, with the land, with the environment, with forests, rivers, mountains, and the fact that, the spirits for the Benjele, for example, or the Baiaca, the spirits are drawn out of the forest, found in the forest, hauled out of the forest, using certain techniques, which are a lot of the time, women's songs, women's singing and dancing, and with songs in particular. And I think there are a couple of really important things that would need to be taken into account in societies that have, we all have some kind of, it's kind of why I started with Irish, because I think embedded in our own cultural history and linguistic history are many of these spirits disguised them. But I think there's something about the full bodiedness of the way we're engaging with these ideas too, before we even discuss the spirits, because, and actually Darcia Narvez's work brilliantly brings this out, where if you have had, if you've been severed from your own thought, as it were, very early in childhood or infancy, for a variety of reasons, and have learned if you've gone through the education system that most of us should live in our head most of the time, then it's firstly, I think personally, this is personal, I think firstly, it's about Learning to engage with your own full body in different ways, experimenting with how you can engage with yourself physically. all the ways that your, hip knows or your foot knows or your, ***** thinks or your belly speaks. because we are actually constantly, constantly, that's what we do. We're molecules communicating all the time. And to find ways in traumatized cultures, because I think that we are largely those of us who were raised in societies premised on the dissociation of the full person from from language and from symbolic power early on. There's a trauma in that before you even get to individual incidences of trauma, it's going back in, it's like climbing back into your skin, whatever way you can get back into your guts, whatever way you can get grounded in yourself again, so that you can start to nurture connections with the earth, with the flesh of the earth, trees, birds, rivers, but not in a sentimental way. Like body, earth, I'm back, I'm here I touch all the amazing sensitivity that we have in our hands, which we so rarely use. It's like making contact with your body so that you can make contact with your head, with your cognitive cerebral functioning. And I think the spirits live in that. I think they live in our DNA, in our cells, in our blood, in the moon, in our relationship with all of these other bodies. So it's much wider than theory. I mean, actually, theory falls flat on its face when it comes to this, which is why I'm really trying hard to find other ways to the information is amazing. The ethnography is revolutionary. The ethnography, the archives that we have on almost infinite numbers of cultures which have existed this way or still exist this way. But If we continue to tell it in academic formats, a small minority of specialists and who else is getting the information? Who else is feeling the

information? It has to be felt. And again, that's the spirit is in what's felt between us when we receive things through each other. Yeah.

Camilla: I wanted to come back to that. was just amazing what you were saying here. It's all recorded, so we've got the evidence. But then I wanted to come back to language and symbolic power and this question of who has the right to speak for everybody and how important that has to be grounded in something that everybody has agreed on. And it's this thing of the of the bodies, the words that let's **** know. And I'm going to say a word that's really earthly **** is the wings. It's **** not vagina, because that is of course a medical word which has been brought in on top. And so that is like **** does not lie. It can't lie. You can ground everything on that. You can put everything on that because it So all your meanings, all your meanings layer, all your meanings can come out of there. And you just keep, you just keep putting those words, or the, or the test or the broken to always be nailing down. This is not a lie. This is our, this is our bodies, this is, this is our power. And you're not going to. You're not going to beat us. You're not going to have to mess with us. So it's a constant, as you say, this constant toing, froing, always simmering, always ready to come up. The need to kind of bring it back down on bodies, always bring it back down to keep that power to speak the right to speak the truth of the speech.

Morna: Actually, Camilla, you just reminded me that there is in the Amazonian literature anyway, and I think also, actually, I know in a lot of the African literature, this idea that the spirits love bodies, they love blood, they love sex, they love heat, they love skin. And In the Amazonian literature, Peter Gao's work has this beautiful description of how when you die, you become a spirit and you have to move on. And there's so much ritual emphasis paid, ritual attention paid to Making sure that those spirits do move on because at every second they're trying, they're, they're attracted to us. Never mind calling the spirits. They want, they want body, but they want a particular kind of body, a unified electrical body that's charged and, and able to communicate with itself, with others, with the spirits. You know, there's that hunger for blood and skin. Again, Peter Gow is really masterful at bringing that out. Yeah. Question.

Audience member #2: I want to thank you so much for your words, because they're felt. You talk about these words that open door so many today. words really matter, and they haven't mattered in matter the way that you're talking about for a long time. And I'm really interested in this idea of visceral language and this idea of words that don't lie. How do we render words visceral when they are constantly being co-opted and inflated and used in so many different agendas working all together at once in this very like Western hegemonic capitalistic kind of way of like capitalizing all these words, but essentially like capitating them and completely updoing them. Like how do we find that root? Like how do we make them matter again? Because these words can be spoken, but just because they're spoken doesn't mean they're being treated as like mediums, as bodily mediums, as humans. infinite amount of really important things that happens. So I was wondering if you.

Morna: Could speak about it. Yeah, that was a beautiful question. I think I agree with you. I think it's not for no reason that feminists have been mulling this one over for a long time. And I think in the case of, if I refer back to the case of the Ben Jelly, there's something about interrupting the public space in a really graphic way. So, Yes, they're speaking these words, singing these words actually again and again and again. They're also physically interlinked. They're stomping, dancing. You know, it's like the whole engine is going full throttle. The whole body is going at full throttle. And looking at contemporary politics, beside that, I think the questions are really around how you manage to mobilize that level of energy and bring it into public spaces and public discussions. One way to start, I think, is by, like you said, using these words that matter. Using them in more concrete ways in the ways that we write, in the ways that we speak, in the ways that we convey information. And I I think the political project is also about trying to get that female body, get the reproductive body, get children into political spaces in any in any way that we can that is. empowering and joyful um, but also militant. It's, it's redeeming these, these really powerful, uh, forms of symbolic speech, which actually are, are, are fleshed speech and somehow finding ways to use them in ways that are compelling for, for other people. Because there is that idea of, like, um, you mentioned spirits, there is that idea of what sparks when you start to bring bring the cont back into the poetry the, the earth back into the singing and the blood back into the analyses we, we, we find that actually we can use that. Joanna Overing says these aren't obscene words, these are strong words. They're good, strong words. They're sacred. And it's why I came to the second notion of sacred dirt. Because they're really the muck somehow brought into cultural resonance by women, by the action of women, because it is absolutely in these cultures and these communities, it's women powering this. And I think it's just finding ways to get women moving and in that way again, I mean, I know you do this amazing thing with Jerome and Ingrid, where you go out and sing to the trees and it's in a very public space.

Camilla: Yeah, we've done it in Russell Square, like dark moons. We gather to do polyphony with the trees and. God knows what else might happen, but we need to start doing it again and more. We've actually used to have polyphony in this space. We're kind of hoping that will happen again. But we just need Ingrid to be OK. She's she's healthy health issues. But yeah, she could lead that polyphony because we've experienced it in this space. And then we've gone marching out to the pubs. I was singing the polyphony in the street. So and used it on the demonstrations that you were and that was the COP demonstration, the one against the COP on the COP26 demonstration. So it's like, yeah, there's techniques out there. We kind of know what the ingredients are, how to, how to call those, how to, how to start. We keep relearning, reinvigorating all those techniques.

Morna: And I think there's also, there's also so much room for youth and and young people's action here because, um as you. Well, I think there's been a kind of disengagement, a disgusted disengagement from a lot of the youth from anything really smelling politics because it's so depressing. But I think there's something about getting

that youthful vigor and energy into the mix as well, because I didn't talk about teenage girls, but teenage girls in this community that I was with were really another big motor. And they have the energy and the drive to start up songs if there isn't one going to get people moving. You know, it's like, come on everybody loosen up. Let's get out there and let's move. Let's say something really cheeky so that we get the so that we get everyone else speaking back to us. But I agree with you. I mean, how many books did Bourdieu write? And on language and symbolic power, on the power of the established authority, the established normality, and how incredibly resistant it is, even in us and as us, to change because that's the other thing I was saying about trying to get back into body, I think as body, touch as body. It's, you're also meeting elements of yourself that have been conditioned into one particular what he calls doxa, truth, reality. It's a hard and a long process. I think personal and it's also public and it's also emotional. It's it's psychological, political and spiritual. But it's never been more urgent.

Tam Dean Burn: Hi, Mona. Yeah, it was just striking how much that everything that Mona's been saying is being embodied by these young Iranian women that were written off as sort of the TikTok generation and all of that, and that their chanting, their ability to take on these clerics through chanting, through their bodies, that it's like, this is it happening here and now. And I've looked at they are the avant-garde of the world right now. And this is possible that this could trigger, if it's only like me too, if me too would get the sense of these young Iranian women's support, but then things could change so quickly. And that is the closest I've seen for such a long time to what we need. Yeah.

Morna: Yeah, there are these episodes where it crystallizes and people act and the reaction and the speech and the collectivity come together. And you have this feeling of like, just like you said, how quickly things could change. Because on one hand you think, well, it's immovable. And on the other hand, How quickly whenever something else comes into body, you see the positive, you see the power field starting to flex and shift. You're right. It's a better example.

Camilla: Thanks, Tam. So, I think we should say thank you so much for making it all the way down here to from Edinburgh and fantastic talk.

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Morna Finnegan
Sacred Dirt: On Words and Power
November 15, 2022

Radical Anthropology. <www.youtube.com/watch?v=bJpH03HUWKA>

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