



# ANTHROPOLOGY AND HUMANISM

VOLUME 25 NUMBER 2

DECEMBER 2000

*Special Issue in Honor of James Fernandez*  
*Moral Reimaginings: An-trope-ological Engagements*  
*with the Inchoate*



PUBLISHED BY THE SOCIETY FOR HUMANISTIC ANTHROPOLOGY  
A SECTION OF THE AMERICAN ANTHROPOLOGICAL ASSOCIATION

## The Wild Man and the Elephant: A Revelatory Incident

JAMES FERNANDEZ  
*Department of Anthropology*  
*University of Chicago*  
*1153 East 59th Street*  
*Chicago, IL 60637-1528*

The cover sketch to this issue of *Anthropology and Humanism* represents me in carnival garb, indeed in carnival action as a Wild Man of the woods or the Green Man of European tradition. We owe the sketch (and the costume) to Renate Lellep, my esteemed field companion these many years. This last March for several nights we both dressed for carnival participation in certain towns in Asturias, northwestern Spain. For the last decade in Spain there has been a revival of interest in Carnival.

Renate captures me at a ferocious moment. I am covered with a bulky bed pad; hung with a thousand eucalyptus leaves; and bedecked with several dozen clangorous sheep, goat, and cow bells, along with a burnt-cork-blackened face, Santa Claus beard, and I am wielding a three-meter stave. Young children and old women could be terrified as I lunged at them, bells shaking, leaves rustling, stave pounding, eyes piercing. But they also could be brought to laughter as I jumped up and down and whirled around my staff—bells and leaves flying. My wife, accompanying me with a two-pronged stick and dressed as a moonbeam pixie, tried to control me—just barely. Young men tried to stare me down but soon withered in direct confrontation with the basilisk gaze of this now ferocious, now laughable, sylvan apparition, the stuff that nightmares and also laugh-ins are made of. For me it was a ball to prance, dance, and lunge down those medieval streets. How I relished the shapes that Carnival had allowed me to shift into.

And how appropriate is this sketch taken from this festival moment and this "merry" mask for the much-appreciated collection of perceptive papers that appear here? The papers take up some old ideas—poetic principles in Vico's sense—that I have been trying to body forth for the last four decades. It is a charge I now joyfully see most illuminatingly carried forth in the next generation. Of course, "shape shifting" in social life—its possibilities and its limits—has long been an interest of mine and of the tropological approach that I cultivate. There was a question from our editors as to whether it shouldn't be my actual picture in a genial scholarly pose on the cover. The same question arose when I contributed the department picture that Albro and Sutton mentioned to accompany a large, CIA-style world map, which bristles with color-coded pins marking our ethnographic operatives abroad, that we at Chicago anthropology maintain on the second-floor landing of Haskell Hall. The map is surrounded by student and faculty photos. I contributed a photo of myself carrying a load of hay to a loft in an Asturian mountain meadow, my shoulders and head entirely obscured. Wasn't that rather "hayheaded"?—I was asked. (We are an ironic department). Perhaps. But I simply wanted to make the point that fieldwork is work and not a philosopher's holiday. (We are a very philosophic department. And that is a good thing, too, but not necessarily so in the field.)

So what is the philosophy or antiphilosophy or anti-antiphilosophy at play here? Other than a gesture to the importance of participant observation and

whatever it has to tell us about the inevitability of shape shifting as we play out life's roles—the "life is carnival" trope—it is about carnival itself and about some of the things, like all tropes, that carnival reveals to us and other things that it conceals about our life in society. Like all tropes that we are brought to enact as we "figure out" life's challenges, the carnival trope and the carnivalesque contain some important regenerative wisdom.

For one thing, carnival in Asturias, the field locale of our present work, is both ancient and modern. It was prohibited throughout Spain by the Franco dictatorship and suffered a 40-year hiatus. Now it is being revived. Franco claimed that masking allowed for the anonymous discharge of personal vendetta and class warfare. There may have been some of that in former years, and certainly had the moralists of the dictatorship read Le Roy Ladurie's *Carnival in Romans* (1979), they would have found ammunition for their argument. But I think differently. Carnival, as Bakhtin argues, refreshes the world by inverting rank and making nonsense out of the sensible and vice versa. It makes diversion out of dogma and relativity out of reliability. It turns the world upside down, and what dictators (and other people who take themselves very—if not deadly—seriously) dislike about it is just that: The mighty are brought low, and broadsides are applied to their backsides. What they fear is the always possible mockery in masking. And, as I have been writing of recently, there is a lot of parodying of power and pelf, a lot of derision of government dictums and pretentious bureaucratic practices in the revived Iberian carnival. This is surely so in Asturias. It is a convincing testimony of the return of democracy to the peninsula. Can any society be truly democratic without the carnivalesque—the power to parody the overbearing pretenses of the powerful?

Of course, in any role we play we are always likely to be hoisted on our own petard. In the case here, for example, and in respect to participant observation, I quickly came to realize that our lively participation and intense self-involvement prevented us from observing so many other things that were going on in the carnival parade. We were reminded again of the delicate balance of role playing that challenges the anthropologist. And in respect to sincerity and authenticity, Renate Lellep and I sincerely endeavored to put together a folkloric costume that is as authentic as possible, with as much referent to the well-known Wild Men or Green Men of Asturian tradition as we could. The Wild Man we crafted made, in many ways—or so we thought—recognizable referents to the bell-bedecked, staff-wielding *zamarones*, *bardancos*, or *guirrios* of Asturian tradition. We are anthropologists after all. But when the prizes came to be awarded, it was those maskings more influenced by contemporary cultural currents, the emergent public culture of a "Disney-fied," globalizing world that were rewarded. Wild Men may have been appreciated, but they were, alas and ironically, signifiers of declining stimulus value in the Asturian carnival. Prizes also were awarded to skits and floats that more directly engaged contemporary pretensions of Spanish national politics. The Wild Man was a "political figure" of another era, a throw-back to the moral order of kinship societies.

### Apparitions and the Moral Imagination

"Wild Man"-type figures are widespread in world folklore to be sure. They are transitional apparitions with guaranteed if momentary shock value in festival moments. And they had their more perduring uses in socialization and family dynamics. I remember *koko ebibi* among the Fang of Equatorial Africa, a being of the equatorial forest who could come into the villages and gobble up obstreperous and disobedient children whose wailing could not be stopped. If need be, a

lifting as we play out  
 itself and about some  
 other things that it  
 e brought to enact as  
 carnivalesque contain

present work, is both  
 the Franco dictator-  
 Franco claimed that  
 vendetta and class  
 s, and certainly had  
*val in Romans* (1979),  
 at I think differently.  
 ng rank and making  
 on out of dogma and  
 , and what dictators  
 y—seriously) dislike  
 sides are applied to  
 ery in masking. And,  
 g of power and pelf,  
 ureauaucratic practices  
 s. It is a convincing  
 any society be truly  
 dy the overbearing

hoisted on our own  
 icipant observation, I  
 use self-involvement  
 ere going on in the  
 lance of role playing  
 ity and authenticity,  
 folkloric costume that  
 ll-known Wild Men  
 an we crafted made,  
 o the bell-bedecked,  
 n tradition. We are  
 awarded, it was those  
 rents, the emergent  
 ere rewarded. Wild  
 onically, signifiers of  
 so were awarded to  
 etensions of Spanish  
 another era, a throw-

ore to be sure. They  
 mock value in festival  
 alization and family  
 ial Africa, a being of  
 obble up obstreper-  
 opped. If need be, a

man in a neighboring hut would be asked to puff and roar and beat with a stick against the thatch walls of the child's hut. Koko was coming! Invariably the wailing ceased. The Asturian Wild Man was that kind of figure, useful as a menace to out-of-control children in the interests of domestic tranquility.

We cannot overlook the use of apparitions, of mythological beings, indeed of many of the figurations of the inchoate we know from folklore, in the maintenance of moral order in family and community. The philosophic lucubrations of a Kant or a Rawls on theories of justice must always take account of how, in fact, the moral order of the world is figured and achieved in the imagination from the very earliest moments of socialization. I am not particularly in favor of frightening the young into obedience by the use of the Wild Men of the Woods and the like, but I am in favor, as I believe my young colleague contributors are, of understanding how in our life in society the undesirable, from a personal point of view, is made the obligatory. And here, as in so much of social life, we have to turn to the dynamics of the imagination to find the carrot and stick, the glue that holds society together, on the one hand, or that makes possible, on the other, "returning to the whole"—for many in society, a sticky wicket indeed.

By the time (the turn of the millennium) I was huffing and puffing through Asturian streets, the Wild Man had long since been replaced by television or an admonitory schoolteacher or a coach of a local sports team as a source promoting domestic tranquility. The moral order of community now is more complexly achieved, if indeed it is achieved at all. There are plentiful questions about the declining exchange value of social capital in a world where imaginations are increasingly persuaded by the pleasures of consumerism and possessive individualism and by a multitude of virtual realities that can be lived out alone in one's living or bedroom. But the bottom-line questions, in any situation, is how moral order is achieved or lost and what the imaginative configurations are that enable its achievement or neglect. These are questions, in short, of the dynamic of the moral imagination and its movements.

I was very glad that the November session at the American Anthropological Association meeting in Chicago, from which this selection of essays derives, was entitled "The Movements of the Moral Imagination," for in the end I believe that what our studies are principally about are indeed the dynamics of the moral imagination. Possibly because we Americans live in a Puritan-derived society that is very moralistic in its fundamentals, and also because the objectivity of social science fears the subjectivity and ultimate irreconcilability and undecidability of moral commitments, the "m" word, as it is called, is used with trepidation. Yet in the end—it is an old Durkheimian preoccupation—we must be interested in how moral order is achieved or lost, in how the obligatory in respect to social order is made the desirable in one form or another of the imagined moral order.

### Interrogating the Carnavalesque, Interrogating the Wild Man

Carnival and the parodies of the carnivalesque has something important to do with the moral order if only that, by turning it upside down, it democratizes the hierarchies and the presumptions and the arrogance that almost inevitably creep into the maintenance of order of any kind. Carnival fascinated Bakhtin, the great theorizer of the carnivalesque, because it was a classic instance of the dialogic imagination contesting the dictatorial monotony of monologism. But we recognize that the carnivalesque cannot be more than an occasional expression of the spirit of readjustment, a rebalancing or replacement of the inequities and iniquities of the social order. Carnival, in fact, is usually too exhausting, too demanding in its vertiginous expressivity to be anything more than occasional. At the least,

playing the Wild Man those few hours on medieval streets exhausted me. Because of its excess and because of its ephemeral nature, are we not obliged to interrogate the relation of carnival to the social order? Are we not obliged to interrogate, as with any trope, what it reveals and what it conceals? By the nature of the case, carnival, like much-related revolutionary expression, speaks more clearly what it is against than what it is for. In revealing its impieties, it conceals some necessary commitments that make life in society possible. It conceals what it is for, indeed if it is for anything. But can the mood of mockery be all-pervasive? In the end, even anarchists have to be serious—alas, in Spain's history they have often been deadly serious—about something. I believe in the importance of carnival, but I also believe in the importance of questions of moral order. And so after the carnival is over, the question remains: What are the enduring commitments?

I am, of course—and it goes almost without saying here—enduringly committed to the development of trope theory, that insightful theory that comes down to us from Aristotle and the Sophists, of the imaginative configuration of experience and behavior. I see that commitment and that insight in my young colleagues' papers offered here. But I am glad that our editors mention our (Renate and my) long-term commitments to teaching the development course and to applied anthropology. For, in such courses, which are not terribly popular, admittedly, in the preeminent departments of cutting-edge anthropology like Chicago, it is the ultimate commitments that are contemplated: the commitments to relieving, amidst all the problems of "doing good without doing well," the tremendous disparities of well-being in our contemporary world (Fernandez in press). And so we interrogate the Wild Man of the Woods when his parody is over and he takes off his costume. "We have a sense now of what you are against. But what are you for? Where do you stand?" Not that such coherence of positioning is easy to assume or to maintain in thought and action, as Dale Pesmen shows us.

Now once back into his street clothes this author ought to be interrogated as well. The world was not created in a day and no man's thoughts are entirely or even mainly his own possession. They are lodged in the milieu in which he thinks and speaks and acts. Even anthropologists, who seek to pass beyond borders into other milieus, are not entirely exempt from these conditions of possibility of their practice. My former students and present colleagues in this collection and in the AAA session give me and my mentorship, as Ruth Behar calls it, kind credit and they do me great honor. But they all recognize, I hope, that I am simply a delegate that for a certain time and a certain place has been bodying forth and playing out—trying to improve a bit—some very old ideas and commitments. And they must recognize that they themselves have been an indispensable part of the milieu that has enabled me to do this with whatever success I may have achieved.

As always when I read my young colleagues' essays, I see they understand many things as fully or more fully than I, about "inchoateness," about "returning to the whole," about "metonymic misrepresentation," about "synesthesia" and the arts of memory, about the art of ethnographic composition, about the fictive relationship of parts to wholes, about the moral imagination of the moral economy in "communitas societies," and about the figurative use of nostalgia. But that is the great pleasure and profit of any teacher: of gladly learning as he or she gladly teaches. It is often hard enough to distinguish what one has taught from what one has learned in teaching it. So the interrogative, and particularly the self-interrogative mode, is always in order; and, surely in order in the pedagogic professions, unless any teacher be carried away by the power of the podium for the self-privileging and cutting off of his figure from the ground from which it emerges and out of which it has been nurtured.

My wise young colleagues in good faith seek in various ways, by insight and the third ear, to say what my teaching is mainly about, to put their palpating fingers on just what this elephant, this lumbering lecturer, is about and why he has been firing off all these petards over these many years. Ruth Behar sees that it is because I have a fundamental interest in the poetics of things. Daphne Berdahl sees as fundamental my interest in the dynamic of the argument of images. David Sutton sees that I teach because I have a fundamental interest in social revitalization and devitalization through synesthesia. Dale Pesmen finds in me a fundamental interest in social coherence and its artful, if questionable, composition. Rob Albro sees as fundamental an interest in the fiction of human relationships. Marko Zivkovic finds me animated by the constant challenge of the inchoate, and Mary Scoggin finds me focused on what excites and solidifies the "moral imagination." I would like to believe that all together they have grasped the complex whole of what my teaching may be about, and that they have put their collective fingers on that which I have only been able to probe for with my proboscis. I would be lucky if it were the case. With any subject matter as complex and shifting as human social life in culture, any teacher, true to that complexity and his or her calling, can only offer a changing and a partial package of procedures and perceptions. And each student will have, as we see, a rather different grasp of what is being or has been taught. Indeed, the teacher himself is subject to the vicissitudes of changing time, place, and participation. He or she will in each new version of the teaching be seeking to grasp and to present a rather different sense of that "complex whole." This at least is my experience—it may be the wild man's, or the rabbit's, or the fox's eye view—of the lumbering elephant.

### Notes

*Acknowledgments.* I want to register my gratitude for the participation in the 1999 panel session of my student colleagues from Princeton who could not be present, Begoña Aretxaga and Joseba Zulaika, and for the participation of my generational colleagues, Edward Bruner, Michael Herzfeld, David Kertzer, Carmelo Lisón, and Richard Werbner. Over a long career in teaching there are many students, other than the valued ones associated with the panel, whom I recall and from whom I have learned: they include Susan Reynolds White at Smith in the early 1960s, Rob Lavenda and the late Jim Lemke at the end of the 1960s at Dartmouth, and Jeff Bennett, Kevin Caffrey, Laurie Frederik, and Gisela Canepa Koch currently in the field in Portugal, China, Cuba, and Peru. As a teacher, one is embarrassed in two senses by such a special issue as this. First, one doubts that one deserves such attention. Second, one regrets the sheer impossibility of recognizing all those during these forty years who have enriched one's teaching experience.

1. Bruner attached the names of prominent living anthropologists to these animals. It will be left to the reader to make his or her own assignments.

2. I cannot fail to mention the marvelous poem, "Hum'nistic Hymn," alias "Gunga Jim," sent over from Italy by my old friend David Kertzer and read masterfully by Rob Albro to launch the proceedings. Kertzer played mischievously on the subaltern trope that has become so central in anthropology and undoubtedly conceals as much as it reveals.

### References Cited

Fernandez, James

In press The Irony of Complicity and the Complicity of Irony: The Development Project in the West and the Anthropological Engagement with It. *In Irony in Action: Anthropology, Practice and the Moral Imagination*. James Fernandez and Mary Taylor Huber, eds. Pp. 84–102. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Ladurie, Le Roy

1979 *Carnival in Romans*. New York: Braziller.