

TRICKSTER'S ECONOMICS: CONSERVATION AND INNOVATION IN THE GAME OF JINX

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"It is desirable to combat the persisting popular tendency to disregard the holistic humanity of children as equal, fully human beings — even to the extent of their having meaningful culture" (Carpenter 1994, 19).

Forty years ago, as of the time I am writing this, Herbert and Martha Knapp published an article in *The Journal of American Folklore* called "Tradition and Change in American Playground Language." Their article dealt with national — rather than regional — distribution of language and terminology types whose long-lasting presence on the playground had separated certain games from more trendy and faddish types of activities practiced by schoolchildren (Knapp and Knapp 1973, 131). These language types included the truce terms "Time Out" and "King's X," the tag terminology involving "cooties," and finally — and perhaps the most significant and popular phenomenon — "jinks." Peter and Iona Opie have also written about Jinx as they observed it in English schoolchildren (although they do not refer to it by that name), describing the performance in this manner:

If two children accidentally say the same thing at once (it must be accidental), they instantly stop what they are doing and, without uttering a further word to each other or making any sound, glide into a set ritual which varies only according to the part of Britain or, for this is an international performance, the part of the world in which they live. (Opie and Opie 1961, 310)

The Opies recorded various rituals associated with this game, including phrases such as "touch wood and whistle" and "white rabbits" and actions like linking pinkies and making wishes. In the U.S, many children use the word *jinx*, a more modernized form of "jinks" (which I will use to refer to the game throughout the remainder of this essay), as the cue for the performance of their own rituals. These rituals have consisted of pinching, poking, punching, counting, and even extorting. Sometimes the winner demands silence from the loser; other times, a simple soda pop. In fact, although the game does have quite a few variations, a few of which the Knapps recorded, one of the most widespread phrases associated with the game is "Jinx, you owe me a Coke!" In 2006, the line even made an appearance in a Season 2 episode of the American TV sitcom *The Office* when the office secretary, Pam, and her co-worker Jim say something at the same time, and Pam calls, "Jinx! You owe me a Coke!"

Unfortunately, since the Knapps' article in 1973, the game has received very little attention, which is odd since the Opies in *The Language and Lore of Schoolchildren* claim that "the rite would bear detailed investigation in the United

States,” and the Knapps’ exposition of the game, while interesting and informative, was by no means definitive or exhaustive (Opie and Opie 1961, 19). One of the few references to the jinx game in folklore scholarship since that time occurs in Simon J. Bronner’s classic work *American Children’s Folklore*. Bronner records a single instance of the game, but provides no commentary on it (Bronner 1988, 172). Consequently, while I make no assertions about conducting a “detailed investigation” of the game, I feel the need to break the near-silence of forty years regarding the state of the Jinx to respond to the Knapps’ uncertainty as to whether “the popularity of the game [was] increasing or decreasing” (Knapp and Knapp 1973, 138). Not only does Jinx still continue to be popular among schoolchildren — and even some adults, myself included on occasion — as both a game and a linguistic performance, but it is also changing and evolving in response to social influences. A version of the Jinx game that I collected from my niece (to whom I will refer as Lydia for the purposes of this project) illustrates Brian Sutton-Smith’s dual concept of innovation and conservation at work in the game (qtd. in Zumwalt 1995, 43). Lydia’s version of Jinx conserves some of the traditional aspects of the game, such as rhyming and demanding compensation, but it also creates content that reflects the innovative trends of the technological society of today and combines those trends with the role of the trickster archetype. Jinx, like other games and teasing, is for my niece (and children like her) “a means of more fully experiencing and defining the people in their lives and the world in which they live” (Jorgensen 1995, 213), and through the rules of jinx and the spirit of play she breaks down existing hierarchies and sets up new ones in their place.

Etymology and Context

The term *jinx* is a fairly recent one. The *OED* records the earliest known usage of the term in 1911, although its variations may be far older (Oxford English Dictionary Online, 2013). In fact, the Knapps trace “jinks” back to 1670 as “a piece of conjurer’s gibberish,” and it has since appeared in other variations (*jinkgo*, *jingo*, *jings*, etc.) since then (Knapp and Knapp 1973, 139). A jinx is more than just a spell or conjuration, though; it can also come in the form of a person with contagious ill fortune. Barbara Rieti reports instances in Newfoundland of fisherman with bad luck who were and are known as jinkers, which is close enough to *jinx* to potentially share an etymological heritage. The following is an account given by one of Rieti’s student regarding such bearers of bad-luck: “If you went with a fisherman and he got a water haul, i.e. no fish, ... then you were considered a jinker or Doone dinker ... and it was highly unlikely that they would let you go with them again” (qtd. in Rieti 2008, 19). Incidentally, the *OED* also associates *jinx* with a *Jonah*, another seafaring term taken from the biblical Jonah and assigned to people who bring bad luck not only on themselves but also on their mates (Oxford English Dictionary Online, 2013). The Jonah-as-jinx concept has been referred to both explicitly and implicitly in various books such as Daniel Defoe’s *Robinson Crusoe*, Herman Melville’s *Moby Dick*, Ernest Hemingway’s *The Old Man and the Sea*, and even films such as Peter Weir’s *Master and Commander* (in which the Jonah character receives such ill treatment from the crew members

that he finally throws himself overboard).

Regardless, though, of how *jinx* and its associated ideas of luck, superstition, and powerlessness have been preserved in written language and oral tradition up until the term *jinx* surfaced in its current form in 1911, it eventually made the jump from conjurers' spell and sea-farer's lore to the schoolchild's playground as a word game. According to the Knapps, the Jinx game became popular in the 1940s as a replacement (so it seems) for a prior "ceremonial colloquy" known only as "Needles and Pins" (Knapp and Knapp 1973, 138). "Needles and Pins" was a wishing ritual that required two children to accidentally say the same word at the same time (it cannot be on purpose, or the mystique is lost), lock pinkies, and repeat the chant, "Needles and pins, / needles and pins, / when a man marries/ his trouble begins" or some derivation (Knapp and Knapp 1973, 138). The chant appears as a nursery rhyme in the 1916 children's book *The Real Mother Goose*, and B.A. Botkin recorded the same rhyme in 1947 in his hefty volume *A Treasury of New England Folklore, Stories, Ballads, and Traditions of the Yankee People*. However, neither version mentions speaking at the same time or making wishes. Both the Knapps and the Opies recorded children in New England, but also in Missouri and east Texas, who employed the "Needles and Pins" model and wishing ceremony throughout the early to mid-1900s (Opie and Opie 1961, 312).

The Opies also recorded multiple verbal rituals similar to "Needles and Pins" in England during that same time period. Many of these rituals also have to do with wishing as a collaborative endeavor in which both individuals participate. The Opies collected one version "at the Royal School, Bath," in which "after making the wish, one girl says: 'I wish, I wish your wish comes true.' And the other replies: 'I wish, I wish the same to you.' In Southampton both chant: 'I wish, I wish this wish to you, / I wish, I wish your dream come true' (Opie and Opie 1961, 311). These ceremonial procedures emphasize unity of purpose and the idea that people must work together and look out for each other in order for needs and wants to be realized. Luck is only responsible for the opportunity, but they must take advantage of it together.

Jinx, on the other hand, at least those versions that the Knapps collected and many of the versions I have heard work in an almost opposite direction, stressing competition and dominance of one individual over another instead of collaboration and equality. Many versions make references to payment and indebtedness, i.e. "You owe me a Coke!" while others allow children to perform a type of physical dominance with pinching and poking or discursive superiority by forcing them to be silent. My dad explained that the version he played with his siblings involved both hitting and remuneration: "You yell 'Jinx!' and you hit them, and then they have to buy you a pop or something" (Howard, 2013).

The reason for this shift from the cooperative wishing of "Needles and Pins" to the more antagonistic relationships of "Jinx" in the 1940s could be due to a number of social factors. The 1940s, of course, consisted of a rise in international tensions that resulted in the United States entering WWII. The global community, while still maintaining some sense of alliance and cooperation within the competing sides (the Axis and the Allied forces), became a place of competition and combat. Coping mechanisms dealing with this wartime environment might

have manifested themselves in the form of rough physical play had not the 1920s and onward begun to curtail and reduce such things with more adult supervision (Hughes 1996, 320). Thus, by replacing games like "Needles and Pins" with "Jinx" allowed children to express that type of antagonism verbally when they were not allowed to express it physically.

Whether or not these factors are responsible for the shift, I think it fair to say that the need for collaboration and the need for control and dominance form major roles in a child's developing personality. The game in either form is certainly reflective of each set of tendencies, and the fact that children are able to express both of these diametrically opposed characteristics is a testament to their inherent complexity. Children play with both of these needs in order to achieve power and success, and these versions of Jinx demonstrate this weighing of capitalistic and communal roles as children seek to translate these ideologies into the idiom of their own lore.

The Jinx Machine: an Analysis

One evening in May 2013, I was sitting down to eat a dinner of pizza and salad at a family get-together. At gatherings of this nature, I generally sit with my nieces and nephews because I happen to like the topics of conversation circulating around the kids' table more so than those selected by the adults'; tales of second-grade romances, name-calling, and body humor suit me far better than hearing about number of circumcisions my OBGYN brother-in-law has done and how easy it was to perform an especially gruesome C-section (the story of which he might choose to relate at the exact moment I am cutting into the pizza).

In between mouthfuls of Bell peppers and Canadian bacon, my niece and nephews shared funny stories about school and church and friends and knock-knock jokes, frequently interrupting each other in order to usurp an especially silly punch line (I don't often understand their humor, but the fact that it doesn't make any sense at all doesn't deter me from enjoying it. Most of their jokes are made up on the spot, and, to use the rhetorical terminology of my profession, consist primarily of non-sequiturs). At one point, my niece, Lydia, and her brother said the same thing at the exact same moment. Lydia pointed at her brother and shouted, "Jinx!" They giggled at the coincidence, and she continued, "The jinx machine is out of order. Please insert another quarter" (Lydia, 2013). I quickly overcame my surprise at hearing a version of Jinx that I had never heard before (and which does not seem to exist anywhere else in jinx-lore), asked her to repeat it, and I transcribed it into my phone calendar (I would have used something more official to record the event, but I had no pencil and my napkin was covered in marinara and grease). Her brother complained that she had stolen the phrase from him, although when I questioned him more closely, he admitted that he, too, had taken that version of Jinx from friends at school. While innovative in several ways which I will discuss later, this particular version of Jinx conserves some of the elements found in versions collected by the Knapps and Simon J. Bronner, and even in some of the versions that I have heard and used at various times as a child.

First and foremost, Lydia's Jinx couplet is what Jan Brunvand would call a "game rhyme" (Brunvand 1968, 64). C.W. Sullivan III says, "Children's games ... often include rhymes," but the appearance of rhyme in recorded Jinx versions is rare, although in its predecessor "Needles and Pins" rhyming is standard issue (Sullivan 1995, 147). However, in 1971, the Knapps did collect a game rhyme version of Jinx in Smithville, Indiana: "Pinch, poke, / you owe me a Coke" (Knapp and Knapp 1973, 137). The metric qualities of this rhyme (two stresses, one iamb, and one anapest) are a bit chaotic for a couplet, but it does demonstrate that my niece's version still (after forty years) conserves the notion of Jinx as a game rhyme.

Lydia's game rhyme, however, has a more unified rhythmical structure than the Knapps'. Her two lines consist of a variation of iambic tetrameter (with one extra unstressed syllable), a metric form employed by poets such as Emily Dickinson, Alfred Lord Tennyson, and Percy Bysshe Shelley, among others. The first line of the rhyme begins with four iambic feet and an extra unstressed syllable at the end ("The jinx machine is out of order"). The final unstressed syllable, however, connects to the stress in "please" in the second line, thus unifying the rhyme as one line glides into the next.

Further, the couplet is not only an example of poetic completeness, but also of satire. One of the most well-known usages of iambic tetrameter appears in Samuel Butler's "Sir Hudibras," a seventeenth-century poetic satire written about Puritans and Roundheads in the late seventeenth century. The iambic tetrameter and couplet form (like those found in my niece's rhyme) rhythmically convey the sense of mockery and derision. In the same way, the metric quality of this version of Jinx (not only a game rhyme but also a "rhyme of derision" or taunt [Brunvand 1968, 68]) also asserts the competitive nature of the game; in a sense, the rhyme celebrates the victory of the crowing child and the defeat of the rival, not in words but in music.

In addition to its rhyming quality, Lydia's Jinx game also conserves the motif of playing the game at dinner. Bronner records,

Ganie and Neil had a custom when people said the same thing at the dinner table. One person shouted out "jinx," and started to count until the other person said "stop." The person who said "jinx" got to slug the second person who said stop as many times as he counted. (Bronner 1988, 172)

Dinner time is traditionally supposed to be a time of familial unity and cooperation. According to Gregory K. Fritz, "Family dinners allow all members of the family to be involved, to know what is important, enjoyable, difficult or annoying for the others ... For parents, regular family meals provide opportunities to inculcate values and model supportive interactions" (Fritz 2006, 8). Richard Wilk echoes that sentiment, referring to the "image of the happy family meal" in the United States as "the warm, encompassing circle of commensality [that] drew everyone together around real food cooked with unique family recipes, teaching children religious values and respect for their elders, and brought order and

comfort to a nation founded on family values" (Wilk 2010, 428). His assertion in a sense gives dinner time a connotation of spiritual development, sustenance, and, most importantly, ritual. At the table, parents, as the authority figures, have constructed an ordered setting in which children and parents can interact in meaningful ways. Even at the kids' table, when authority figures are physically absent, the values and expectations of the parents should keep the parents figuratively present. Ideally, children will behave because they will give into the panoptical gaze of the absent parent and behave as if they are not completely unobserved.

The child's performance of the Jinx game, though, disrupts the order that is supposed to prevail at dinner time. The rituals of Jinx trump the dinner ritual and essentially provide the child the opportunity to act the part of the trickster, a virtual Brer Rabbit whose intent is to subvert the sacred ritual of eating and the system imposed by the more powerful parental authority, not out of spite but for the sake of spectacle and performance. George Lankford says,

Trickster is more likely to be discovered through roles and functions than through labels and appearances ... Inordinately clever, he frequently lures others into humiliation, injury, and even death ... He is a menace to society without being its enemy, and he brings disaster to others without malevolence. He is the rule breaker par excellence. (Lankford 1996, 716)

The trickster archetype fits well with the Jinx game (and many other children's games as well) because of what Roger D. Abrahams refers to as his "regressive infantilism" and his desire to play (Abrahams 1968, 173). While Lydia's and Bronner's Jinx games are certainly not intended to bring about injury or death to the other participants, they do "menace" the society of the table by upsetting the rules of good behavior and peer-ness, humiliating competitors, and reducing that person's position in the eyes of the others. In my niece's case, the victim of the rhyme game is her brother, who is both older and bigger than she is. Her jinxing of him temporarily overturns not only his advantage in age, size, and strength (once again an echo of Brer Rabbit and his encounter with animals like Brer Bear and Brer Fox), but also the constructed superiority of his masculinity. Further, Jinx not only becomes a mockery of her male rival, but by extension also of the ritual of dinner time and the adults who have instituted it. All of them fall prey to the culprit's jinxing couplet.

The mental superiority of the trickster as manifested in its ability to upset the status quo not only demonstrates of the children's ability to conserve elements of the game, but within the behavior of the same archetype exists an illustration of childhood innovation and understanding of everyday realities and their complexity. Marilyn Jorgensen suggests (paraphrasing Richard Tallman's article "A Generic Approach to the Practical Joke") that one of the main roles of a trickster involves trying to "get something for nothing" (Jorgensen 1995, 214). Interestingly, this endeavor to procure amenities at someone else's expense is also the guiding objective of the Jinx performance. In a few cases, such as the one that Bronner

reports, the winner procures the right to strike the opponent a certain amount of times, while in other cases (and I remember having played it this way) the winner gains control over loser's speech because the loser has to be silent until the winner says his name three times. Most commonly, the trickster cries, "Jinx, you owe me a Coke!" "Pinch, poke you owe me a Coke!" or, as the Knapps report from an informant in Tacoma in 1959, "Jinks, Cokes, and Hamburgers" and thus secures physical sustenance (Knapp and Knapp 1973, 137). Regardless of which version is used, the winner gains something by calling "Jinx!" first without investing anything. Lydia's Jinx version retains or conserves this "something for nothing" aspect. The phrase "The jinx machine is out of order, / Please insert another quarter" indicates this underlying ideology because inserting a quarter into a broken machine indicates logically (though logic frequently matters but little place in a children's rhyme) that the giver will receive nothing in return. After all, a machine that is "out of order" can't actually do anything. However, her request (her demand, I should say) for the quarter also demonstrates her creativity in that instead of asking for a type of currency like the Coke or other kind of soda that has limited usage (she can only drink it), she asks for *money*.

Her demand for cash is clever in that it makes the brother beholden to her and gives her real power in the economic discourse of the world in which she lives. Though a Coke possesses physical fluidity, she realizes that money is the only true liquid asset. Money has far more weight and versatility than a Coke does in its purchasing power. A person who has money has the ability to buy a Coke, should she feel the need, but she can choose to purchase something besides a Coke. She can even choose not to spend it at all. In her own way, she is demanding more freedom at the expense of her brother's. She is not only Trickster, but she is Trickster masquerading as the economic "machine."

My niece's couplet, further, is also interesting in that it asks for an amenity (money) whose system is founded on belief, which is exactly how the game functions. The power of money comes from the trust and belief of consumers; the metal disk we call a quarter has no real power in and of itself, but only insofar as people believe in the value it represents. In the same way, she only has power over her rival because both parties believe in the rules of the game. In a sense, then, her innovative demand suits the game's ideology better metaphorically than the Cokes and pinches of previous Jinx versions.

In the end, the trickster/my niece triumphs, but her victory is only short-lived, which is to be expected since, as Lankford states, "Trickster is as much tricked as tricker in countless stories about his dealings with others, often leaving the analyst to ponder who is the Trickster" (Lankford 1996, 716). In the Jinx game, the final part of the performance occurs when the loser refuses to make good on his or her debt. This seems to be a fundamental part of the game's narrative. The Knapps mention that frequently after the winner proclaims victory, "no one takes [the] debt seriously" (Knapp and Knapp 1973, 137). Essentially, this refusal to pay up by the loser becomes the proverbial Tar Baby; trickster Lydia never collects the quarter from her brother and is thus outfoxed in her demand for remuneration. She has, though, throughout the game shown her ability to deal with the complex issues of modern economic systems of exchange, while also retaining some of the

original elements of the Jinx tradition in unexpectedly profound demonstration of the “dynamics of cultural acquisition” (Carpenter 1994, 19). Overall, her version of Jinx is a veritable playground where the interaction of old and new ideologies can occur.

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