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Mexican Speech Play:
History and the Psychological Discourses of Power

José E. Limón
Department of Anthropology

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Mexican Speech Play: History and the Psychological Discourses of Power

If one spends time among Mexican descent working-class men of the lower socioeconomic level either in Mexico or the United States, it is quite likely that, subject to the cultural constraints of time and social context, one may eventually witness the display of expressive performances of speech play. These displays may generally be characterized as metaphorical, often sexually and scatologically charged, exchanges of ritualized insult. They carry various names, for example, albur, chingaderas, or puntadas.¹ For all its marked recurrence among Mexican working-class men, such expressive discourse has received almost no closely analytical ethnographic attention, and no one, as far as I know, has critically discussed these speech forms in relation to the class position of these men in the larger political economy. In another paper I offer an ethnographic discussion in these terms based on my fieldwork in southern Texas (Limón 1985).

To be sure, this sociolinguistic phenomenon has been noticed by two kinds of commentator. Various popular collections have taken account of such ritual insult, although usually not with a great deal of analytical, interpretive attention (Usandizaga y Mendoza 1972; Mondragón 1973; Morones 1977; Jiménez 1982). To the extent that they offer analysis, however, they often reveal the influence of a second kind of commentator, whom, in a relatively simple way, I shall designate as the Mexican social intellectual.

The purpose of this paper is not to investigate this kind of Mexican speech play ethnographically in itself; that, as I say, I have attempted

elsewhere. Rather, I want to examine certain critically Mexican intellectual discourses about such expressive discourses in an analytical interpretive language that will relate both types of discourse to the political economy in recent Mexican history. I bring to bear analytical language from Gramsci, mediated through Raymond Williams (1977), from Bourdieu (1977), and from Foucault (1980), on the discourse of two key Mexican social intellectuals, Samuel Ramos and Octavio Paz. It is first necessary to establish the political-economic context for the emergence of these intellectual discourses.

Mexico: The Frozen Revolution

After the long night of the Porfirio Díaz dictatorship, the Mexican Revolution of 1910 offered the Mexican masses some glimmer of hope, although Mexico's full emergence into the clear light of social justice is still at issue. Certainly the immediate post-Revolutionary period between 1920 and 1940 was full of brighter promise, although soon darkened with socioeconomic relapses such as the hesitant character of land redistribution under Calles (Bazant 1977:174-176) and the persistence of right-wing cacique politics, corruption, and political assassination. This relapse signaled the emergence of a new set of elites replacing those of the Díaz regime. These men--Calles among them--were veterans of the Revolution, a Revolutionary Council, who dominated Mexican politics and began to lend it a conservative, self-serving function at some distance from the goals of the Revolution (Hansen 1971:156-163).

However, their domination was initially incomplete. The sluggish move toward full implementation of the Revolution took a decisive step forward with the election of Cárdenas to the presidency in 1934. Of

