

A Note on 'Mooning' and 'Streaking', as forms
of non-violent Protest.

Events taking place in the very week that this issue of J.A.S.O. goes to press have prompted me to submit a few ethnographic notes and preliminary comments from a study which I am making of various non-violent forms of protest, soon to be completed. In particular I am interested in the use of nudity and vulgarity in situations of conflict. Some aspects of this research were included in a paper entitled 'Sexual Insult and Female Militancy'.¹

The phenomenon which has been brought to our attention now is popularly known as 'streaking'. Although this takes a specific form, it can be seen as belonging to a wider class of behaviour which occurs when normal modes of exhibiting deference and mutual attention are inverted. Often such inversions originate as expressions of hostility, but they may take on secondary characteristics involving questions of identity of individuals and groups. There is no space in this present brief note to give many examples of the wide variety of forms which this mode of communication takes in different space and time, but it may be of interest to draw attention here to one type of vulgarity, known as 'mooning' which emerged in the United States in greater frequency in the late 'fifties and sixties'. I give as examples two instances, one of which was initiated by females and in one of which the predominant actor was a male.

In the autumn of 1966, in a co-educational residential college in Iowa, the girls and boys both lived in one H-shaped building. It was a three-storey building with a block of rooms for girls on one side, and a block for boys on the other, joined across the middle on the ground floor by single-storied common rooms. Each room occupied by girls had a large plate glass window. Twelve such windows faced the rooms occupied by the boys opposite. I collected the following account from one of the female residents.

'At night, after we were locked in at midnight, stripping and dancing in the windows took place to tease the boys. Normally this never went beyond bra and pants. One night, when the ring-leaders were happy-drunk, instead of a peep or strip show, it was decided to do a 'mass moon'. In each room one girl was ready in the dark, standing on a chair bending over with her bottom pressed against the window. Another girl then flicked the light on for a few seconds. It was like a dare. It was considered naughty and wicked - they decided to have a go.'

When a closed window is involved as in this case, the activity is sometimes known as 'pressing a ham', 'hamming' being a variant for 'mooning'. My informant stressed the fact that the girls at the College referred to were normally considered to be very 'moral'; and little actual sexual intercourse took place - for one thing, because at that time there was no opportunity. She felt that 'mooning' was essentially a female manifestation, and that when men engaged in this activity, they were modelling their behaviour on that of women. I will return to this aspect below.

My second example is a case I recorded of a young man who was involved in an episode which was dubbed by my informant as 'the Mooning of Yale'.

"In the fall of 1966 there was the first vague rumblings of drug problems on the campus of Yale. At least a couple of people were involved in what amounted to a kind of raid and the first publicity began to appear in such well-known publications as the New York Times. One freshman, I remember, was quoted as saying that, by the end of his four years at Yale, he would have turned on the whole campus with his little chemistry set. So this is the background for the mooning incident. One of these people who had been more or less confronted by the administration with the possibility of facing some sort of disciplining as a result of the drug problem was subsequently involved in the mooning incident. It happened like this:

One afternoon he was standing in the window of a five-storey building overlooking the old campus, where all the freshmen lived in a kind of quadrangle, all together. On a few days before this he would sit in his window and just perch out like a bird overlooking the campus. When he perched he would squat down and just sort of stare very intently in the same direction that he eventually mooned in. He was doing this conspicuously. He was sitting right in the window-sill, perched with his toes curled over the edge looking out. But on this day, instead of perching like a bird, he waited for what he must have thought had been the opportune moment, turned around, and mooned in the direction of the old campus where most of the University lay.

This was the subject of great conversation and laughter thereafter. It was pointed out that the opportune moment came when apparently two girls were in visible sight of the moon and this seemed to make this sort of larger protest at the University more effective. It's hard to say whether or not the University itself had a kind of a female aspect.'

When these incidents took place, mooning was well-known in various parts of the States, but not a common practice. It was much talked about in the early sixties in schools, particularly in boys' schools, being often used as a boast. 'A would say to party B that he was going to moon party C in order to put down party C and to elevate himself in the eyes of his peers'. The seeming paradox of persons acting in ways which would normally be thought to degrade them, in order to degrade others, I have discussed elsewhere.

These practices allowed the actors to be readily identified, but in parts of the United States, at about the same time, individuals sometimes engaged in 'doing a moon' from the windows of passing cars. A similar kind of activity, of milder impact, was known as 'Drop Trou', when males let their trousers fall. This, although sometimes enacted at parties and the like, is more commonly found in its verbal form 'Wow! He is really going to Drop Trou when he hears about this!', and primarily expresses extreme surprise and astonishment.

What sparks off 'moonning' and similar behaviour? In the case of the girls in Iowa, in answer to my questions, the following points were made:

'There had to be men [witnessing this] and we had to think they were there. It had to be witnessed and we had to think there were witnesses - we wouldn't have done it to women except perhaps as a joke. There didn't have to be many men - not specific men. We just had to be under the impression that men were witnessing. It was not merely a friendly gesture towards the boys. It was a gesture of independence. The men were free to come and go and we were locked in. It was a gesture: 'Look, we are locked in because of you'. We resented being locked in. It was a defiance against authority: 'You locked us in to prevent this'. We weren't hiding it from authority, we were like shop-lifters who wanted to attract attention, but didn't really want to be caught.'

The response to my enquiries as to the general background and motives behind the events at Yale (which was made in the knowledge of some of my general conclusions concerning the use of vulgarity in protest movements) was as follows:

'As much as I can see just from knowing the people involved, this act was a total expression of indignation and rage, where very young people of eighteen years old were involved in all kinds of pressures in a changing environment. The actual date of the incident was in the fall of 1966 - it was a very confused time and clearly the means of expressing such indignation and rage were quite limited. It's certain that [the man who mooned] had a lot of reasons for to feel closed in, confronted by things that were different, confronted by things that he didn't like at all. He was subjected to an environment in which he was sort of the lowest man on the totem pole, without much positive feedback or ego satisfaction, and there was a strong craving among his age-group in general to have some sort of social recognition, that simply wasn't there. And most of them were uprooted from their home environments as well, where they had been well-known people. And it had to have involved some kind of desire for recognition. At the same time [it was] a kind of muted protest against all of these pressures which built up so fast right at the beginning of University.'

In the over-all American scene of the time, the student group may have been in the position of what Edwin Ardener has termed a 'muted group'. Such a group is one that has no ready means of expression for variant views which it wishes to present, which would be given a hearing in any effective sense.² He has suggested that women may perhaps be best seen as a 'muted group', and I have shown elsewhere that in certain circumstances when such a group feels that its identity is threatened, if resort to direct violence is ruled out, it may invert the normal modes of expression by the use of obscenity and vulgarity (see 'Sexual Insult and Female Militancy'). The evidence suggests that moonning caught on in the United States at a moment of transition, when the stereotype of the 'all-American Boy' (or Girl), the well-groomed, bobby-soxed, conformist college student, relatively uninvolved in political movements, no longer fitted the 'model' which the student had of himself or herself. This 'identity crisis' led to frustration which turned into hostility, but at this period of time, the release of this aggression through

direct action, and in particular through violence, was generally ruled out. As I have found elsewhere, in parallel circumstances, the use of vulgarity was resorted to. Sometimes, a display which starts off as an expression of hostility may acquire secondary properties. It may, for instance, for a while become a badge for group identity.

Mooning, I suggest, faded away when students eventually took direct action. In due course, violence itself became unacceptable, partly, perhaps, because some of the deep seated frustrations and fears were lessened. This may have been due, among other things, to the recognition of a new model for students, and because the isolation of students from University authorities was decreased, and also because the call-up for military service in Vietnam was abandoned. Probably also the effects of violence were in the actual event, found to be unacceptable for many.

The eruption of 'streaking' is too recent for a thorough analysis of its particular history. It is possible to speculate, however, and to suggest that, perhaps, the frustrations felt by the seeming impossibility of affecting the resignation of President Nixon, despite pressure of public opinion, may have played a part. A new generation of college students is on the scene, trying to establish its identity, probably wishing to avoid the violence which became associated with the college generation immediately ahead of it. That the mode of expression known as 'streaking' has been copied in various parts of the world outside the United States, may be due to similar frustrations over the inability of the young to affect world affairs, or be due to a desire to identify with those who have cause to feel hostile, or for many other reasons. 'Streaking' may be regarded as a 'dare' or a 'game', as an attempt to establish a reputation for courage in defying more commonly accepted modes of proceeding, but it may also be a form for expressing anxiety and hostility. If such expressions are not responded to, then the possibility of ensuing violent action is not something which should be overlooked.

1. Ardener, Shirley, 1973. Sexual Insult and Femal Militancy, Man, September, Vol.8, No.3, pp. 422-440.
2. Ardener, Edwin, 1971. Belief and the Problem of Women, in The Interpretation of Ritual (ed. J. La Fontaine). London: Tavistock.

Shirley Ardener