

## Welcoming the Newlyweds: Charivari, Shivaree, Serenade, Banjo, and Saluting in Nova Scotia, 1917-c.1975

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### Résumé de l'article

*Jusque dans les années 1970, certains mariages et parfois d'autres événements socioculturels notables (controversés ou louables) étaient suivis de charivaris dans la Nouvelle-Écosse rurale. La signification complexe de cette tradition aide à expliquer sa persistance alors que les comportements dans les localités rurales étaient surveillés de près et sanctionnés. Son but déclaré de souhaiter la bienvenue, les noms évoquant des bruits, sa fonction de rituel cacophonique, les blagues à caractère sexuel qui l'accompagnaient et son déroulement en milieu rural démontrent que cet événement se rapportait avant tout à la reproduction des individus et des communautés, tout en attribuant cette responsabilité principalement aux femmes.*

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# Welcoming the Newlyweds: Charivari, Shivaree, Serenade, Banjo, and Saluting in Nova Scotia, 1917-c.1975

PAULINE GREENHILL

*Jusque dans les années 1970, certains mariages et parfois d'autres événements socioculturels notables (controversés ou louables) étaient suivis de charivaris dans la Nouvelle-Écosse rurale. La signification complexe de cette tradition aide à expliquer sa persistance alors que les comportements dans les localités rurales étaient surveillés de près et sanctionnés. Son but déclaré de souhaiter la bienvenue, les noms évoquant des bruits, sa fonction de rituel cacophonique, les blagues à caractère sexuel qui l'accompagnaient et son déroulement en milieu rural démontrent que cet événement se rapportait avant tout à la reproduction des individus et des communautés, tout en attribuant cette responsabilité principalement aux femmes.*

*In rural Nova Scotia, until the 1970s, charivaris followed certain marriages and occasionally other notable socio-cultural events (either contentious or praiseworthy). This tradition's complex meaning helps to explain its persistence as part of the ongoing scrutiny and sanctioning of behaviour in rural communities. Its stated purpose as a "welcome," noise-invoking names, cacophonous ritual means, accompanying sexualized trickery, and rural location demonstrate that the event's main concerns were with the reproduction of individuals and communities while placing the responsibility for this mainly upon women.*

IN RURAL NOVA SCOTIA, UNTIL WELL INTO THE 1970s, a charivari followed certain marriages and, on rare occasions, other socioculturally notable events – either contentious or praiseworthy. This late-night house visit, usually by family, neighbours, and other members of the community, was supposed to be unexpected. It was termed a surprise, though the vast majority of charivaris pertained to marriages and would usually be held on the wedding night or immediately upon the couple's return from their honeymoon and thus their timing could usually be accurately predicted. Generally announced by a tremendous racket from the clanging of pots and pans, the banging or running of agricultural and woods implements, and the shooting of rifles or shotguns, the tradition's Nova Scotia names – shivaree, serenade, banjo/bango, and saluting – associate it with sound, particularly with noise.<sup>1</sup>

1 This article uses "charivari" when referring to the custom in general, and the particular terms when quoting or referring to specific Nova Scotia practices. This research was conducted thanks to the author's Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada Standard Research Grant, "Charivari and the Sexual Regulation of Women in Formal and Folk Law" (2004-08). Many thanks to research assistants Leah Allen, Angela Armstrong, Juliette Loewen, and Lisa Vivian for their work in helping with the documentation and processing of the information gathered. Jodi McDavid sent in

The research for this article began in 2004 with sending letters to the editors of community and ethnic newspapers across Canada – most of them dailies or weeklies – seeking individuals who participated in or who recalled charivaris. Every person who responded was interviewed or sent a questionnaire. The sample is limited by the newspapers that chose to print the letter, the papers' circulation, and the attentiveness of their readers, but most responses about Nova Scotia came from the counties of Annapolis, Antigonish, Cumberland, Colchester, Guysborough, Halifax, Hants, Kings, Lunenburg, and Pictou. It remains unknown which Nova Scotian periodicals chose to include the notice, and so the concentration of responses in the central counties may not be only an artifact of the actual distribution of charivari in the province. Although the author expected fewer than 50 responses from across Canada, there was a deluge, including 36 responses from individuals or groups in Nova Scotia alone. Some of the resulting documents reflected the knowledge of multiple individuals (that is, a group of people who together responded to the questionnaire or participated in an interview).<sup>2</sup> The events discussed happened exclusively in rural areas or small towns. As this article contends, the commonsensical explanation that cities have noise ordinances that would preclude such noisy practices by no means offers a full account. And because of the variety of sound-related terms used to refer to the practice in Nova Scotia, the province offers an excellent location for reflection on the symbolic significance of noise in charivari.

Charivari has been well documented in French Acadia and thus this article addresses the far-lesser-known English traditions.<sup>3</sup> Most respondents traced their origins to Britain, although the persistence of the French term (in its form as "shivaree") rather than the English language terms such as "rough music" and "skimmington" suggests a strong French influence (as it does elsewhere in Canada). Although historically charivaris – at least in Ontario – could be directed by white people against black people (particularly in the context of interracial marriages), none of the personal accounts gathered during this appeal through the newspapers in Nova Scotia – or elsewhere in Canada for that matter – discussed such practices.<sup>4</sup> Catholics

an excellent item. Thanks as well to Barry Cahill, then at the Nova Scotia Archives and Records Management, for encouraging the author to turn to this subject. Thanks also to those who shared their information and knowledge with the author (some of whom requested pseudonyms, which have not been distinguished from actual names): Ron Barkhouse, Christina Brown, Jane Brown, R.C. Butler, Sadie Cann, Terry Carroll, Barbara Cochrane, Clair Corbin, Shirley Corbin, Lynne Crozier, Sandra Densmore, Elizabeth Fraser, Patsy Farrell, Nancy Huston, Ruby Kewachuk, Ben Legere, Val Légère, Murray MacCara, Donald MacKenzie, Jean Palmeter, Laverne Rabatich, Mary Reid, Joy Robley, Bernard Spurr, Leona Stephen, Helen Terry, and Elmore Ward. Finally, the author thanks the three anonymous reviewers and especially editor Bill Parenteau for their careful attention and helpful suggestions.

- 2 This is by no means the largest set – the author has three feet of file drawer space containing interviews and questionnaires from Ontario.
- 3 See, for example, Jean-Claude Dupont, *Heritage d'Acadie* (Montreal: Lemeac, 1977); Lauraine Léger, "Le charivari en Acadie," *Les cahiers de la Société historique acadienne* 10, no. 4 (1979): 164-9; Lauraine Léger, *Les sanctions populaires en Acadie: Région du comté de Kent* (Ottawa: Éditions Leméac, 1980); and Lauraine Léger, "Le charivari en Acadie," *Les cahiers de la société historique de la vallée de Memramcook* 11, no. 2 (2000): 72-4.
- 4 See Susanna Moodie, *Roughing It in the Bush; or, Life in Canada*. 1852. A Critical Edition, ed. Elizabeth Thompson (Ottawa: Tecumseh Press, 1997), [http://www.uwo.ca/english/canadianpoetry/architexts/mnemographia\\_canadensis/works\\_cited.htm](http://www.uwo.ca/english/canadianpoetry/architexts/mnemographia_canadensis/works_cited.htm), and Julia Roberts, "'A Mixed Assemblage of Persons': Race and Tavern Space in Upper Canada," *Canadian Historical Review* 83, no. 1 (2002): 1-28.

and Protestants predominated among respondents, as they did in the regions at the time. Across Canada, particular community, friendship, work, and sometimes family groups conducted the practice.

As this article argues, the tradition's complex meaning helps to explain its persistence as part of the ongoing scrutiny and sanctioning of appropriate behaviour in rural communities. But the charivari in Nova Scotia offers some compelling puzzles. Some of these are shared with charivaris in other provinces but, as always, their local manifestations are distinctive. What is welcoming about a charivari? How did it in Nova Scotia (as it did across English Canada) transform from a disapproval to an approval custom? Are negative evaluations from several women, who unlike most male respondents did not entirely welcome the charivari, personally or socioculturally motivated? That is, are these women simply misanthropic and lacking a sense of humour, or do they have an acute understanding of the fundamental misogyny of the practice? Can the structural position of noise, and its eponymous associations, offer any insight? Nova Scotia, especially for the latter question, is a particularly relevant location because of the number of sound-invoking names for the practice. A feminist response to these queries emphasizes gendered roles in this long-maintained and broadly distributed practice. As ethnomusicologist Jacques Attali notes: "With noise is born disorder and its opposite: the world . . . in noise can be read the codes of life, the relations among men. . . . Noise is the source of purpose and power. . . . It is a means of power and a form of entertainment."<sup>5</sup> While Attali's use of "men" is perhaps intended to include all humans, this paper works through his meaning in the literal, non-inclusive sense – as a reference to male persons only.<sup>6</sup> In the earliest account from Nova Scotia discussed in this paper (Springfield, Annapolis County, 1917), the saluting was conducted entirely by men.<sup>7</sup> Descriptions of this charivari, as well as those of other charivaris, reflect the reality that the purpose, power, and entertainment of this practice encoded a patriarchal order. And although charivari in Nova Scotia, as it did elsewhere in English Canada, subsequently changed to a mixed gender practice with a different professed purpose, the analysis in this article demonstrates that its symbolic function and ritual means remained surprisingly constant. Using the results from interviews and questionnaires, this article argues that aspects of charivari, including its naming, the use of noise as ritual means, its stated purpose as a "welcome," the often-sexualized trickery that accompanied it, and its rural location demonstrate that the event's main concerns are with the reproduction of individuals and communities, with responsibility placed nearly exclusively upon women.

### **From Disapproval to Approval**

The period under examination – 1917 to the mid-1970s – marked a complete transition within charivari practices in English Canada. Originally expressions of disapproval, best known from the European research of historians such as Natalie Zemon Davis

5 Jacques Attali, *Noise: The Political Economy of Music*, trans. Brian Massumi (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1985).

6 Deborah Cameron, ed., *The Feminist Critique of Language: A Reader* (London: Routledge, 1998).

7 The author is not aware of any work that traces the genealogy of charivari in Nova Scotia specifically, but as elsewhere it undoubtedly came to Canada with French, British, and American settlers.

and E.P. Thompson as well as the ground-breaking work on English and French Canada by Bryan Palmer and Allan Greer, charivari became what the great majority of respondents termed a “welcome.”<sup>8</sup> Yet although its ostensive purpose changed, charivari’s fundamentally negative aspects survived. Charivari was originally a French word for the din and ritualized scorn that in early modern Europe greeted newlyweds whose marriage was in some way problematic (or for other activities meriting community disapproval).<sup>9</sup> In Britain, similar practices were termed “rough music.”<sup>10</sup> Along with its anglicized form “shivaree,” and like the British form’s musical reference, “charivari” has come to signify noise – one of the practice’s most striking ritual means. The responses to the newspaper appeal for charivari accounts demonstrates that “shivaree” was used throughout Nova Scotia, but that the same kind of event could also be known as “serenade” (Colchester, Cumberland, Halifax, Hants, Lunenburg, and Pictou counties); “saluting” (exclusive to Annapolis and Kings counties); or “banjo/bango” (mainly around Colchester, Cumberland, and Lunenburg counties).<sup>11</sup> Understanding saluting in the sense of a gun volley rather than as a hand gesture, then, all the terms for charivari point towards sound or music. Nova Scotia charivaris also usually involved a quête (the charivariers gathering money, treats, or special food from the newlyweds in exchange for the visitors’ ritual performance) and/or a series of traditional pranks. The latter aspects tend to receive less scrutiny by anthropologists and historians studying the practice, but they are integral to its patriarchal ends.

Across Canada, almost all answers in the interviews and questionnaires to the questions “Why charivari?” and “What does the charivari do that other events don’t?” were that it “welcomes” the bride and/or groom.<sup>12</sup> As Laverne Rabatich put it, “Shivarees seemed to me to be a fun way of welcoming a couple into the state of marriage and, often, to welcome them as new members of the community.”<sup>13</sup>

8 See, for example, Natalie Zemon Davis, “Charivari, Honor, and Community in Seventeenth-Century Lyon and Geneva,” in *Rite, Drama, Festival, Spectacle: Rehearsals Toward a Theory of Cultural Performance*, ed. John J. MacAloon (Philadelphia: ISHI, 1984), 42-57; E.P. Thompson, “Rough Music Reconsidered,” *Folklore* 103 (1992): 3-26; E.P. Thompson, *Customs In Common* (New York: The New Press, 1993); Bryan Palmer, “Discordant Music: Charivaris and Whitecapping in Nineteenth-Century North America,” *Labour/Le Travailleur* 3 (1978): 5-62; Allan Greer, “From Folklore to Revolution: Charivaris and the Lower Canadian Rebellion of 1837,” *Social History* 15, no. 1 (1990): 25-43; and Allan Greer, *The Patriots and the People: The Rebellion of 1837 in Rural Lower Canada* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1993).

9 See Natalie Zemon Davis, “Charivari”; Natalie Zemon Davis, *Society and Culture in Early Modern France* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1975); and Jacques Le Goff and Jean-Claude Schmitt, eds., *Le Charivari* (Paris: Ecole des Hautes Etudes en Sciences Sociales, 1981).

10 See Thompson, “Rough Music” and Thompson, *Customs in Common*.

11 The origins of this diversity of terminology are beyond the scope of this research. However, then as now, multiple terms for traditional practices were not uncommon. For charivari practices see, for example, Alan Davis and Raven I. McDavid, Jr., “‘Shivaree’: An Example of Cultural Diffusion,” *American Speech* 24, no. 4 (1949): 249-55.

12 This conclusion is based on the author’s SSHRC grant research (fieldwork 2004-07), which involved interviews with and/or questionnaire responses from nearly 1000 individuals across southern Canada from Prince Edward Island to British Columbia. Only Newfoundland and Labrador, the Northwest Territories, the Yukon, and Nunavut appear to lack charivari traditions.

13 Laverne Rabatich, Questionnaire 750 (Q750), Plaster Rock, NB, July 2005. The number for each of the questionnaires represents the sequence in which it was completed and received. These and all other original research materials are in the collections of the Canadian Museum of Civilization, Gatineau, QC.

Sometimes that response would be mitigated in retrospect. Jean Palmeter saw the tradition's purpose as being to "annoy, I would say, the newlyweds. Embarrass them. Or basically, underneath it could've been a form of welcoming them. But I think in most cases it was an annoyance to the young couple."<sup>14</sup> Answers other than "a welcome" were invariably due to the respondent, always female, being an outsider to the community and unfamiliar with the practice or because she had only attended one charivari and thus was not sufficiently inculcated with community ideas about it. And yet, as one respondent put it, "Cruel may be too harsh a word but it's the first word I think of. The couple is tired and it is a special day and night for them. Would it be better to give the newlywed couple time to themselves?"<sup>15</sup> Nearly all male respondents seem to have enjoyed the event wholeheartedly.<sup>16</sup> In contrast, about a quarter of the women indicated at least some distaste for the tradition and several condemned it outright.

The practice of charivari currently seems to be in suspension in Nova Scotia, as it is in most of the rest of English Canada. Except in parts of New Brunswick and southern Ontario, it remains primarily a memory – enacted now only within extremely limited community settings such as the new home of a favourite local teacher and among a few families. In the two areas of Canada where charivari remains extensively and continually intact, this research shows that they are associated with a particular ethno-religious group (Mennonites in southern Ontario) or have morphed into exclusively celebratory events, without the edgy qualities they retained elsewhere, and have been extended from wedding celebrations to milestone anniversaries and even housewarmings (central New Brunswick). Yet while traditions often wane, they can be revived. For example, Newfoundland Christmas mumming, another rowdy house visiting and quète custom that had lain dormant for some time, experienced a new life following the 1984 release of the band Simani's "The Mummer's Song."<sup>17</sup> Across North America, prognostications of charivari's demise date to at least the middle of the 19th century. As early as 1838 a New York newspaper asserted: "The only portions of this continent, we believe, in which the evil custom of the Charivari is kept up are the Canadas and New Orleans. . . . [It is] practiced when matrimony is committed between persons whose age exhibit a strong disparity . . . [and] performed nightly . . . until the demands of the musicians are complied with . . . for money to be given for some charitable society or sometimes it is expended for jollification. . . . It is a wrongful custom and ought to be abolished."<sup>18</sup> Over 100 years later, John T. Flanagan noted Edward Eggleston's 1872 complaint that "shiveree" had not been

14 Jean Palmeter, interview by author, 24 May 2005, North Grand Pre, NS (PG2005, 11/12). Interviews are noted by interviewer (Pauline Greenhill), year (2005), and sequential number(s) within that year (11/12).

15 Helen Terry, Q857, place withheld, July 2005.

16 An exception was a devoutly Christian man from Alberta who refused to answer the questionnaire because he thought the author was covertly and deviously planning to revive the practice of charivari, despite her repeated (and entirely authentic) assurances that she had no such intention.

17 See Herbert Halpert and George M. Story, eds. *Christmas Mumming in Newfoundland: Essays in Anthropology, Folklore and History* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1969) and Gerald L. Pocius, "The Mimmers Song in Newfoundland: Intellectuals, Revivalists and Cultural Nativism," *Newfoundland Studies* 4, no. 1 (1988): 57-85.

18 Quoted in Charles Haywood, "Charivari," *Journal of American Folklore* 70 (1957): 279.



incorporated into Webster's American lexicon and commented: "Perhaps by the time the custom which it denotes has become obsolete even in the backwoods, the word will become part of standard English."<sup>19</sup> Yet the custom holds on. And despite a significant change in stated intention over that period, from community disapproval to community approbation, it has maintained essentially the same ritual form and means – noise, quète, and/or pranks.

There were also explicit objections to the practice of charivari from some of those targeted by charivariers. In 1918, for example, 21-year-old Irene Louise Varner of Springfield, Annapolis County, Nova Scotia, took her charivariers to court, accusing six of her neighbours of defamation, conspiracy, and personal injury. The wrong these men had done her, she charged, was that they had saluted her with bells, shotgun blasts, and shouts when she arrived home from a visit to her in-laws in New Germany, Lunenburg County, after being driven there in a horse and buggy by her friend, 52-year-old Lambert McNayr. At the time, saluting was normally reserved for married couples, and Varner (along with her community of Springfield and the surrounding areas, as evidenced by those who testified both for and against her in the resulting court case) understood that it meant that she and McNayr (both married to other people) were suspected of carrying on an affair.<sup>20</sup> Though this was a somewhat anomalous event in that most salutings at that time would probably have been directed at people whose weddings were being celebrated by the community, historically the charivari was, like this one, a shaming ritual. As historian Bryan Palmer notes: "Although it could be directed against virtually any social offender, the custom was most often used to expose to the collective wrath of the community adulterous relationships, cuckolded husbands, wife and husband beaters, unwed mothers, and partners in unnatural marriage."<sup>21</sup> Such marriages would include those between two older people, between an old and a young person (especially if one or both had been married previously), and those involving interracial couples.

Charivari could also be deployed with more explicitly political or economic objectives. It could be used, for instance, to extract money from the wealthy or in the context of property or labour disputes or against unpopular figures (usually in the realm of local politics and/or the law). Leona Stephen, from Colchester County, remembered "in the '50s when the Liberals defeated the long-ruling Conservatives a group of Liberals went to the home of a local Conservative leader and gave him a serenade but no food or fun!"<sup>22</sup> Bryan Palmer argues that charivaris in North America sought to control economic as well as sociopolitical behaviour, but notes that by the end of the 19th century they had come to represent "the threatening order of custom counter posed to the rule of law." Palmer contends that charivari persisted because there were "obscure corners of everyday life where the rule of law could or would not intervene" such as "domestic discord, inappropriate marital union, and immoral behaviour" (except in cases of "gross cruelty or sexual deviance"), and that charivaris provided the means to impose "the discipline of the community" against "violation[s]

19 John T. Flanagan, "A Note on 'Shivaree,'" *American Speech* 15 (1940): 110.

20 This example, with three others, is detailed in Pauline Greenhill, *Make the Night Hideous: Discourses of Four Canadian Charivaris, 1881-1940* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, forthcoming).

21 Palmer, "Discordant Music," 9.

22 Leona Stephen, Q96, Sault Ste. Marie, ON, July 2005.

of time-honoured conceptions of appropriate behaviour. . . . [Charivari] posed an order, an authority that was . . . spontaneous, traditional, personal, commonly known, corporate, and relatively unchanging.”<sup>23</sup>

Some older Nova Scotians did indeed remember charivaris as sometimes making explicitly negative commentary. Murray MacCara of Pictou County recalled that this was the case when serenades first began in that area: “If . . . any unpopular people got married, they would give them a bigger serenade.”<sup>24</sup> Bernard Spurr of Bridgetown, who attended salutings when he was a boy in the 1920s, explained that at the time they marked what he called “unique” marriages. He said, for instance, that when an older, relatively wealthy widower married a younger, physically challenged woman, they obviously expected to be saluted. At the first sounds of bells and rifles, the groom came out with plates full of tailor-made cigarettes, and the bride invited the saluters in for food and drink: “Were they expecting it or had they been tipped off? I don’t know. But . . . he had the trays of cigarettes to give away and he had the dining room table with trays of sandwiches and cakes.” In another case, Mr. Spurr’s uncle, who had vowed never to marry, fell for a young woman from out of town:

He was married when he was 26 or 27. And he had always professed to be a lady’s man, or a dandy, and chased all the girls at all the local dance halls. And he had an old car, which was an advantage back in the twenties. And till finally he found a girl that he would settle down with. So I think . . . it was probably because of his reputation . . . to think that he had finally been tied down to someone [laughs]. Put him out of circulation, more or less. And he was an outgoing, gregarious type of chap. Irresponsible as they come, but loved life.

This couple, too, was saluted, and they also invited the revelers in for a treat.<sup>25</sup>

Nevertheless, as already indicated, charivaris changed meaning as early as the late-19th century in Ontario, and probably around the 1920s in Nova Scotia. Growing up in Cumberland County, Donald MacKenzie recalled “there was always a banjo. Every time anybody got married there was a banjo.”<sup>26</sup> Despite the alteration of the practice’s intention from disapproval to welcome, however, the charivari was not always understood in this manner – particularly by women who were newcomers to a community and who often came from urban locations where the tradition was unknown. The practice shocked British war bride Ruby Kewachuk, for whom the context in which people shot guns signified war rather than celebration:

I was so scared. . . . The joke was that people had gotten into the house while we were getting married in the church and they hung milk buckets and cream cans to the railings under the bed and somebody had made an apple pie [short-sheeted] bed. . . . And then when it was dark – I had no idea this was going to happen – there

23 Palmer, “Discordant Music,” 59-60.

24 Murray MacCara, interview by author, 31 July 2004, West Branch, NS (PG2004-82).

25 Bernard Spurr, interview by author, 24 July 2004, Bridgetown, NS (PG2004-58/61).

26 Donald MacKenzie, interview by author, 24 July 2004, Lower Sackville, NS (PG2004-50).



were people there with pots and pans banging them together and a few idiots with rifles firing them into the air, which really scared the devil out of me. Coming from England, this is not known! My god, I didn't know if it was somebody attacking us [laughs]. Of course there were screams and yells, "Bring the bride to the window." I was so petrified and my husband went down, [and I thought] he's going to let them have it. I don't know what he passed out. You're supposed to give them cake or cookies or something. He was passing out beer to them. I don't know what he gave to the women. I didn't care at that point. But I was actually horrified by the whole thing. I had no idea what was going to happen. And after dark of course, having all these noises in the yard. We lived on a farm too, and oh my stars what is this? And I found it really horrible. If I had perhaps known, and if I'd known what they'd been up to . . . And the rifles going off – that scared me more than anything. I was scared. I don't mind admitting, I was scared. I thought "Are we being attacked? Why are they shooting guns for goodness sake?"<sup>27</sup>

Most charivaris practiced within living memory, however, do not have the negative connotations that characterize the historical form. Charivaris were almost always for weddings.<sup>28</sup> The community members who would be charivaried would be extensively linked with the locale in that at least one member of the couple would have to have parents born in the community. Their charivari-worthiness would be even higher if they had one or more grandparents born there and/or could trace their families to one of the historic or even founding families of the region. The kinds of couples who would be charivaried historically – those the community disapproved of – would be precisely the ones who would not be charivaried in recent times. Couples charivaried would be those who had extensive ties with the community and who had participated enthusiastically in occupational and recreational aspects of local life. Historian Loretta T. Johnson argues that the early-20th-century American plains charivari "tied the married couple together in a shared experience and also, by implication, integrated them – with a somewhat rowdy seal of approval – into the community of married folks."<sup>29</sup> Her explanation, however, fails to address why this particular process might do so as well as why some of its ostensibly unwelcoming aspects remained integral to charivari's newer purpose.

### **Noise, Rites of Passage, and Their Meanings**

Charivaris began, according to respondent Barbara Cochrane, with "car-horn blowing, pounding on milk-buckets . . . tin cans, cow bells 10-15 minutes before they came out of the house."<sup>30</sup> She also states that guns were common: "And shotguns were

27 Ruby Kewachuk, interview by author, 24 July 2004, Wellington, NS (PG2004-52/53).

28 Leona Stephen (Q96) also remembers a serenade for her grandparents' 50th wedding anniversary in 1950.

29 Loretta T. Johnson, "Charivari/Shivaree: A European Folk Ritual on the American Plains," *Journal of Interdisciplinary History* 20, no. 3 (1990): 372.

30 Barbara Cochrane, Q723, Windsor, NS, July 2005.

used, for sure. I know Dad always took his twelve-gauge shotgun to a saluting. But he was always prepared and he had removed the lead pellets and wadded the shells with torn up newspaper, so when they fired the shots outside the house, it was flame. And, of course, the house was surrounded by people with shotguns, as well as kids beating on tin pans and one thing and another. . . . Usually, once you were welcomed into the house, the noise died out completely.”<sup>31</sup>

British anthropologist Rodney Needham links this kind of discordant noise to rites of passage. These rites mark the symbolic movement of individuals (and sometimes of groups) from one social location to another.<sup>32</sup> Rites of passage include those associated with an individual’s life course – birth, marriage, childbirth, and death – as well as those initiating membership in organizations or groups. Such social transition structures are comprised of three phases: an initial separation of the individual(s) from the group; indications of threshold, transition, or liminality; and, finally, reincorporation into the group.<sup>33</sup>

Transition rites have received considerable attention from anthropologists and folklorists as has the concept of liminality (the state of being on a threshold, in a transition, and/or betwixt and between one social location and another), which characterizes the middle stage of rites of passage. Its expressions employ not only noise and often physical movement, but also a vast array of ritual means. Elements from disguise and tricks to special foods and clothing mark liminality’s special character as taking place beyond normal time and space. Victor Turner, who in Euro-North American anthropology during the 1970s revived van Gennep’s concept of liminality and extensively elaborated upon it, insisted on a distinction between transitional rites that were mandatory (which he associated with tribal societies) and those that were optional (which he linked to contemporary complex societies). He called the latter forms “liminoid” and suggested their strong association with play in Euro-North America.<sup>34</sup> The term liminoid was not extensively taken up in the literature, perhaps because the distinction between the required and the optional did not invariably prove useful, as the example of charivari illustrates: while not all married couples were charivaried, for example, for those within the communities that had the practice the expectation persisted that they would have one (at least until the mid-1970s when the tradition should have waned). If the couple felt they belonged to the community – or if at least one member of the couple, usually the groom, did – not having a charivari could constitute an insult. At best, the lack of a charivari demanded some kind of explanation (i.e., sickness in the family).

Furthermore, although charivari did not formally move individuals from one status to another (as the marriage ceremony, for example, moves individuals from their previous family to a newly created one as well as from single to married status), it was sufficiently useful within communities to be continued for some time. Its common

31 Bernard Spurr, interview by author, 24 July 2004.

32 See Victor W. Turner, *The ritual process: Structure and anti-structure* (Chicago: Aldine, 1969) and Arnold Van Gennep, *The rites of passage*, trans. Monika Vizedom (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, [1909] 1960).

33 Victor Turner, “Liminal to liminoid in play, flow, and ritual: An essay in comparative symbology,” *Rice University Studies* 60, no. 3 (1974): 53-92.

34 Turner, “Liminal to liminoid in play, flow, and ritual.”

explanation as a “welcome” to the newlyweds, though by no means intuitively sensible, shows a single, shared intention. Yet while charivari can quite easily be seen as a rite of transition, what this “welcoming” means in symbolic terms is not immediately clear.

Needham, positing “there is a connexion between percussion and transition,” asks how scholars can “make sense of the bangs, thumps, taps, rattles, and other reverberations which indisputably have such a wide social importance.” He argues that “sound-waves have neural and organic effects on human beings, irrespective of the cultural formation of the latter. . . . These effects may be more or less consciously undergone, but they are in any case unavoidable. The sounds mark off points on a scale of intensity the effects of which range from an agonising disruption of the organism down to subliminal thrills or other bodily responses which contribute to the conscious affective appreciation of the sounds.”<sup>35</sup> Charivari din could often be counted as an example of the “agonising disruption of the organism.” Improvised noisemakers like giant metal saw blades beaten with a hammer can be thunderous and deafening. At the charivari the author attended near Mitchell, Ontario, in the summer of 1991, the loudest noises were produced by three or four men running chainsaws (with the blades removed). As one woman there suggested, once that tumult commenced there was no point in rattling pots and pans or tin cans filled with pebbles. The chainsaws drowned out everything but the car horns, also mostly sounded by men while the women massed at the entrance to the house, waiting to get in to play their tricks. And those pranks could be tendentious. Donald MacKenzie of Colchester County remembers one reluctant couple:

We all went over to the household at dark and we started making a noise. And there was no appearance at all of anybody, and nothing was said from inside. So along between probably 10 to 11 at night, the crowd got a little anxious that nobody was appearing. So these twin brothers of mine who were always very helpful in times like this . . . thought that if they put a little piglet from the barn into the bedroom window it might get them to arouse. . . . So they got a ladder and they put it up to the back of the house into the bedroom window and they took the little piglet and one of them walked up the ladder and put it in the window. And before long the piglet and bridal couple arrived at the door, and they weren’t very happy.<sup>36</sup>

Anthropological studies suggest “of all physical stimuli sound is an ideal marker[;] it is pervasive and far-reaching yet capable of infinite variation. It may just be coincidence that many rites are conducted at night . . . although this could be merely to enhance the relative importance and sensitivity of the ear.” The darkness and noise certainly heighten the charivari’s intensity. They increase the surprise and make secrecy effective. But the timing also alludes to the event’s function because at night the newlyweds are presumably having sex and will thus be interrupted. Furthermore, Anthony Jackson argues that “if rites have a marked off time, it means that they are

35 Rodney Needham, “Percussion and transition,” *Man*, n.s., 2, no. 4 (1967): 613, 610-11.

36 Donald MacKenzie, interview by author, 24 July 2004.

to be specially placed in chronological time and hence there must be indicators to denote the beginning and end of the rite besides the sequential order of events. . . . Percussive noises might well be the most appropriate markers, for not only can they produce an implied note of warning but they can easily break up a patterned sequence.”<sup>37</sup> The ending of the charivari may be denoted by the return to relative quiet around the newlyweds’ house. Few charivariers or charivaried, however, remarked upon this aspect of the tradition.

Ethnomusicologist John Blacking criticized Needham’s terminology: “Percussion is a meaningless category term in any discussion of the meaning of noise, and it has long been abandoned by ethnomusicologists.” Blacking does, however, agree with Needham about the relationship between transition and noise: “[The] connexion between transition and noise organised rhythmically by human beings . . . contains the germ of a truth known to musicians throughout the world. Music’s special world of *virtual time* has the power to awaken ‘the other mind,’ to transport us away from the world of culturally regulated, *actual time*.”<sup>38</sup> And the noise marking the transition to ritual time at a charivari would not only be loud, but also persistent; respondent Leona Stephen, for example, stated “the couple usually waited a bit so people could enjoy the fun but if they waited too long a rooster might have been thrown through a window or other threats issued to bring them to the door.”<sup>39</sup>

Respondents usually noted noise ordinances and the fear of disturbing the neighbours as the reasons why the cacophony of charivari survives only in the country, where neighbours may be too far to disturb and the police even more difficult to bring out than they are in cities. For example, Sandra Densmore recalled one serenade where the couple had “moved to Truro to an apartment while the house was being built. So nine or ten months later when they moved back to Upper Stewiacke . . . into the new house . . . a group got together and they went and serenaded them. They didn’t care if it was months late. . . . They serenaded them, and took food and drink and so on with them. And the couple was completely unprepared. But of course, you couldn’t go serenade them in town ’cause you would have gotten arrested.”<sup>40</sup> As Joy Robley put it: “As a final result, they would take an old musket and fire that in the air, which was rather scary, I’m sure! But nowadays you wouldn’t dare do something like that. You’d be in jail.”<sup>41</sup> For her part, RCMP employee Lynne Crozier called in advance to warn the Mounties about the charivari she and her church group were planning: “It’s always nice to know and not be surprised if somebody calls in. I worked in a rural detachment and if things were going on, and if neighbours would call and say ‘There’s a disturbance here,’ we would say ‘This is what it is about.’ And if they knew what it is about, if it was a gathering or a special kind of thing like that, then they’re quite delighted and not – they might phone up being annoyed, and then when they find out what it is, they think it’s great.”<sup>42</sup> Jacques Attali, though, offers a

37 Anthony Jackson, “Sound and Ritual,” *Man*, n.s., 3, no. 2 (1968): 293-9, especially 296.

38 John Blacking, “Correspondence: Percussion and transition,” *Man*, n.s., 3, no. 2 (1968): 313, 314 (emphases in original).

39 Leona Stephen, Q96.

40 Sandra Densmore, interview by author, 27 July 2004, Upper Musquodoboit, NS (PG2004-65).

41 Joy Robley, interview by author, 31 July 2004, Durham, NS (PG2004-83).

42 Lynne Crozier, interview by author, 28 July 2004, Truro, NS (PG2004-69/70).

more socio-politically savvy explanation than Crozier and other respondents:

Today, every noise evokes an image of subversion. It is repressed, monitored. Thus, the prohibition against noise in apartment buildings after a certain hour leads to the surveillance of young people, to a denunciation of the political nature of the commotion they cause. It is possible to judge the strength of the political power by its legislation on noise and the effectiveness of its control over it. . . . We see noise reappear, however . . . at certain ritualized moments: in these instances, the horn emerges as a derivative form of violence masked by festival. . . . The noise of car horns on New Year's Eve is, to my mind, for the drivers an unconscious substitute for Carnival . . . a rare moment, when the hierarchies are masked behind the windshields and a harmless civil war temporarily breaks out throughout the city.<sup>43</sup>

Though the participants might not consciously recognize their actions in Attali's terms, car horns remain major ritual means in contemporary charivari in Ontario; the honking chase after marriages, still somewhat popular in most parts of Canada, is also incorporated into the charivari traditions of Nova Scotia. Effectively, it invokes the same kind of flirtation with the subversion of authority at the same time as it celebrates a quintessentially socially compliant act – marriage.<sup>44</sup> The potential (and actual) danger and destruction of property mark these actions as anti-social and anti-structural. For example, Sandra Densmore of Halifax County remembered post-charivari perils:

We had a very merry ride through a lumber yard at full speed with my uncle driving while a friend got our car down off the blocks [on which the charivariers had placed it]. . . . And luckily my uncle knew the lumberyard like the back of his hand, cause we were . . . zigzagging through the lumberyard. And of course it slowed everyone else down because nobody else knew the lumberyard like he did. . . . We were in the back seat, he was driving, and I just kept my eyes closed and just prayed the whole time. And that five-ten minutes going through the lumberyard was I think the longest five-ten minutes of my life. The tossing, whatever you could do to the car, the chasing them, hemming them in so that they came to a complete stop on the highway; very dangerous, very dangerous. People in front of you and behind you in both lanes going around turns and up and down hills.<sup>45</sup>

43 Attali, *Noise*, 122-4.

44 See Sidney Eve Matrix and Pauline Greenhill, eds. "Wedding Realities: Les noces en vrai," *Ethnologies* 28, no. 2 (2006): 5-222.

45 Sandra Densmore, interview by author, 27 July 2004. The "tossing" refers to holding the groom's feet and shoulders and then throwing him into the air repeatedly while the some of the things done to cars included fish on the manifold, confetti in the vents, and shaving cream on the windshields.

Noisemakers themselves could be dangerous, and not always in the most obvious ways (as when charivari gunshots became deadly).<sup>46</sup> Nancy Huston recalls one shivaree in which “they fired guns and they rang cowbells, they honked car horns, they shot the corner off the eaves trough of their house. They had a large circular saw round by the front door. They were hammering that with hammers ‘cause it was extended on a post. The schoolteacher came running around and she ran into it, her legs were badly cut and she was taken to Springhill. I think that was pretty well the end of that shivaree.”<sup>47</sup>

Noise, then, is not only the means for opening the charivari, notifying the recipients that it has begun; it can also be used during the event as it progresses. The noise itself, and the actions that accompany it, at best often flirt with illegality and sometimes cross the line. The harm and danger of charivari – with its guns, collisions, and noise – are actually integral to it, even though participants often see this harm and danger as epiphenomenal. To some extent, harm and danger can be linked not only to the event as transitional rite, but also to the *quête* and/or trickery. This risky quality provides an entertaining diversion as well as its own meaning. Thus, Laverne Rabatich recalled the time “when a crowd of well-wishers managed to get the key to the newlyweds’ room at the Cornwallis Inn in Kentville and had it festooned with toilet paper streamers – a real surprise to a tired couple who thought they were finally alone after driving around the Annapolis Valley for some time trying to evade noisy followers.”<sup>48</sup>

### **Noise, Marriage, and Food**

Noise itself may be gendered through the association of the best noisemakers with male work (such as saws and chainsaws) as well as in those objects’ use in charivaris primarily by males. The gendering of noise, however, occurs at a more symbolic level as well. French anthropologist Claude Lévi-Strauss, like Needham and Attali, connects discordant noise (like the charivari) with celebration, but more specifically with symbolic cultural problems that must be ritually resolved. He argues that the noise of the historic, denunciatory charivari marks “an anomaly in the unfolding of a syntagmatic sequence.” In its association primarily with second marriages, for example, the historic charivari marks the fact that the participants have broken the expected linear movement from birth to marriage to death with an additional marriage. Lévi-Strauss’s notion of charivari noise also links it directly with disorder: “It signified the breaking of a chain, the emergence of a social discontinuity which could not be really corrected by the compensatory continuity of noise, since the latter operates on a different level and belongs to a different code; but which it indicates objectively and which seems at least to be able, metaphorically, to counterbalance.”<sup>49</sup> Even celebratory charivaris mark a discontinuity for all of their participants. The victims, by marrying, have created a new dyad within the community that did not

46 See Pauline Greenhill, “‘Make The Night Hideous’: Death at a Manitoba Charivari, 1909,” *Manitoba History* 52 (2006): 3-17.

47 Nancy Huston, interview by author, 30 July 2004, Pugwash, NS (PG2004-78/79).

48 Laverne Rabatich, Q750.

49 Claude Lévi-Strauss, *The Raw and the Cooked*, trans. John and Doreen Weightman (New York: Harper & Row, 1969), 289, 338.



hitherto exist. They have thus cut themselves symbolically away from their previous family, age, and community groups.

But noise is not only about transitions in rites of passage. Lévi-Strauss's arguments about noise also relate to its use in what folklorists call "calendar customs" – customs related to particular times of year. Instruments, including hammers, rattles, knockers, clappers, castanets, horns, whistles, pots and pans, wooden clogs, bells, drums, shells, and hunting horns – "instruments of darkness . . . a liturgical complex belonging to the Old World . . . [used] from the Thursday to the Saturday of Holy Week" – summon a congregation to church. And these are exactly the kinds of noisemakers, producing precisely the forms of disturbance, used in charivari. Lévi-Strauss's approach, though, is strongly gendered in that he symbolically contrasts cooking (a literally and symbolically female activity) with noise (practiced by males, using instruments associated with male work): "The myths about the origin of cooking relate to a physiology of the marriage relationship, the harmonious functioning of which is symbolized by the practice of the art of cooking, whereas, on the acoustic and cosmological levels, charivari and eclipses refer to a social and cosmic pathology which reverses, in another register, the meaning of the message [the harmonious symbolic functioning of the social order] conveyed by the introduction of cooking."<sup>50</sup>

Unpopular weddings and eclipses "are both expressions of the threat of disorder, one social, the other cosmic . . . noise or unpatterned sounds [that] reflect uncontrolled situations or transitional states or threats to the patterned social order."<sup>51</sup> As already indicated, even popular marriages implied rifts in society. Charivari is clearly strongly implicated with marriage, but it is also about cooking and food, particularly when the *quête* is understood as a means to purchase food and drink. Similarly, the *quête* sometimes involves the charivaried giving out specially marked food like candy or supplying a meal to the visitors. Jean Palmeter stated that in her experience "they always went and made a noise. But if they would stop their noise, the young couple would bring them out candy or something and treat them. They never even got in the house. They went away."<sup>52</sup> Sometimes the *quête* memorably also involved non-food items in addition to food. Mary Reid recalled that "treats were passed around, especially chocolates and cigarettes, although there may also have been sandwiches, cookies, and squares. The chocolates were in their original boxes, while the cigarettes were taken out of their packages and piled, in tiers, very neatly on plates."<sup>53</sup>

Providing copious food for an unexpected party of visitors – particularly a group who could number 50 or more – could be difficult for a new bride in a new house. The charivariers would try to catch her unprepared (with no food) or ill-prepared (with inappropriate food) to serve lunch (a meal of sandwiches and sweets) to a crowd at midnight. Sometimes female relatives or friends took pity on the bride and brought food themselves or warned her in advance. R.C. Butler remembers going to her "first and only banjo" in 1976 as a chance for "family and friend socializing/partying, eating of course!" and that food and drink was supplied by "guests, those of us who planned

50 Claude Lévi-Strauss, *From Honey to Ashes*, trans. John and Doreen Weightman (New York: Harper & Row, 1973), 404, 470-1.

51 Jackson, "Sound and Ritual," 295.

52 Jean Palmeter, interview by author, 24 May 05.

53 Mary Reid, interview by author, 23 July 2004, Halifax, NS (PG2004-46).

the banjo.”<sup>54</sup> But the ideal would be, according to Sandra Densmore, that “the bride would be embarrassed. The bride would be, ‘Oh my goodness, how am I going to feed all these people? I really don’t want all these people. I’m just going to have to clean this up afterwards’ because realistically that was the way it was.”<sup>55</sup> Not having food ready for visitors is the woman’s problem; it reflects poorly on the man only in terms of him having picked a wife who was unprepared. But ultimately it is her fault and her responsibility. In the best scenario she would be ready: “The serenaders would be asked in by the couple. The homeowner would have baked food and all the women brought food as well. They also brought gifts which would be opened by the bridal couple.”<sup>56</sup> Laverne Rabatich remembers “back when my parents married (1920) it was customary for the newlyweds to expect to be shivareed and have a full-course meal ready to serve the revelers. At least a piece of candy from the newlyweds for each of the revelers was expected at any shivaree I attended, and almost everyone attending brought along food to be served.”<sup>57</sup> Expectations could also be different. Participants in historic charivaris against problematic marriages invariably sought money from the groom.<sup>58</sup> The traditional charivari, in its shaming form and as a transition ritual, can be seen as marking and repairing with noise and then a quète the problem of an inappropriate – or as Lévi-Strauss might put it, a disharmonious – marriage. The process seems not unlike the payment of legal damages.

But the quète also moved into the newer form of charivari. In some locations, it became a children’s practice (not unlike Halloween)<sup>59</sup> as Jane Brown remembered from her experiences in Cumberland County during the 1950s: on their wedding night, “outside the house where the reception was being held . . . the bride and groom came out to throw pennies to the children. . . . As children we were very excited to go to the shivarees as we were in a poor town and at the time a few pennies bought a lot of candy.”<sup>60</sup> Ellen Giles Millard notes the same practice for bango/banjo (she uses both spellings) in Colchester County.<sup>61</sup> Sadie Cann recalls from her childhood in Cape Breton that on one occasion “the young people got together and gathered up all these noisemakers and we went to [the newlyweds’] house and made all this racket. Then Ada and her husband Bob came back on the verandah. . . . I’m not sure if they gave us sweets or coins, anyway distributed to all of us and it only lasted a few minutes and they went back into the house.” She recalled considerable disappointment with a second couple who “seemed very ill at ease” and who did not treat the children: “And they lived down by the lake which was a little stretch from town, so we made quite an effort to get there and do that, and I didn’t think that it was appreciated. And then again it might have been because it wasn’t their tradition” (the bride was from Newfoundland).<sup>62</sup>

54 R.C. Butler, Q577, Saint John, NB, July 2005.

55 Sandra Densmore, interview by author, 27 July 2004.

56 Leona Stephen, Q96.

57 Laverne Rabatich, Q750.

58 See, for example, Greenhill, “Make the Night Hideous”; Greenhill, *Make the Night Hideous*; and Moodie, *Roughing It in the Bush*.

59 See Jack Santino, ed., *Halloween and Other Festivals of Death and Life* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1994).

60 Jane Brown, Q862, Port Williams, NS, July 2005.

61 Ellen Giles Millard, *Back When, Volume V* (Truro: Print Plus, 2004).

62 Sadie Cann, interview by author, 25 July 2004, New Minas, NS (PG2004-56).

Terry Carroll, who grew up in Guysborough County, talked about “three or four shivarees, particularly the one when my teacher got married, because we all got a nickel. That’s what I remember most of all, that we got the nickel. . . . And that would have been ’46, I suppose. You can imagine a nickel. I mean, you could fill every pocket with candy! . . . That was treat money; that was your money.” Carroll remembers that in the village of Sherbrooke, the children would gather and parade to the couple’s house: “We all gathered with a pot and pan, or something like that, and a stick and marched . . . beating on these things. . . . And as little kids it was so much fun, we just loved them. It was a chance to be out, especially at night.”<sup>63</sup> Patsy Farrell, also from Guysborough, remembers that the couple would give candy or money “just to get rid of us. And so once that happened, then you were happy with what you got and you would just continue on away and continue what you were doing.”<sup>64</sup>

But it is not the quète or food that Lévi-Strauss associates with the problematic marriage – it is the noise itself. Others concur. For anthropologist Chris Knight “noise seems to be persistently associated (in the mythology of the Americas and beyond) with incest and a range of other phenomena which include eclipses, darkness, storms, rebellion and the flowing of blood.” Semiotically, cooking is noise’s converse. It “coincides symbolically with marital availability and legitimate . . . sex. If cooking is upset by noise, then, given the symbolic equivalence between marriage and cooking, marriage should suffer from noise in the same way. . . . The charivari was a custom in which basins and saucepan lids were banged outside the bedroom of a honeymooning couple when it was thought necessary to highlight the union’s incestuous or otherwise illegitimate character.”<sup>65</sup> If cooking is symbolically linked to legitimate sex, and noise illegitimate sex, as Lévi-Strauss and Knight argue, where does noise marking – and ideally interrupting – legitimate sex (as in the more recent forms of charivari) fit?

Indeed, part of the purpose – not only the effect – of the charivari, often alluded to by respondents, was to interrupt marital sex. Laverne Rabatich, for instance, stated: “Friends and relatives try to surprise the happy couple in bed with lots of noise – drums, horns, pot covers, violins, kazoos.” She remembers that her cohort “once left a dummy clad in a sexy nightie to greet the new bride!”<sup>66</sup> The purpose, according to Val Legère, was “to disrupt (temporarily, of course) what is expected to be an activity worthy of celebration.”<sup>67</sup> A couple’s elopement or lack of attention to religious ritual could make inevitable charivari more pointed. Ron Barkhouse commented that “if the

63 Terry Carroll, interview by author, 27 July 2004, Shubenacadie, NS (PG2004-63).

64 Patsy Farrell, interview by author, August 1, 2004, Antigonish, NS (PG2004-87).

65 Chris Knight, “The Wives of the Sun and Moon,” *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* 3, no. 1 (1997): 137, 139. Chris Knight’s usefully feminist conclusion with respect to the Arapaho myth “The Wives of the Sun and Moon” indicates that “tradition holds that without women’s ‘noisy’ and ‘rebellious’ periodic rupturing of marital bonds, all order, harmony, balance and renewal in the universe will be in danger of becoming lost. The world, fixed in permanent marriage, might then become fixed, correspondingly, in only one phase: in permanent day or night, summer or winter. To avoid this disaster, male ritual therefore seeks to make amends, preserving the forms of menstrual synchrony and alternative even as the menstrual potency of real women is being devalued and denied” (152).

66 Laverne Rabatich, personal communication with author, 17 July 2005 (emphasis by Rabatich).

67 Val Legère, Q551, Sackville, NB, July 2005.

couple eloped and they didn't attend church the following Sunday . . . apparently then the shivaree was a little more intense, you might say, than the usual shivaree."<sup>68</sup> Note that eloping could have the effect of facilitating legitimate marital sex without the community knowing it. Alternatively, locals might suspect the couple of having extra-marital sex. Further, elopement combined with failing to attend church might suggest insufficient concern with what the community thought, or even that the couple was staying home to pursue sexual instead of religious interests. Preventing consummation of marriage, said Shirley Corbin, was often the effect of a wedding night shivaree:

Another couple got married and they couldn't find out where they went for their honeymoon. . . . All the mother would say was "The Wandlyn, the Wandlyn." So we phoned every Wandlyn and we finally found out they were in Kentville, at the Wandlyn. So somebody phoned and said, "We're here in Kentville" (it was midnight). "We're here in Kentville and we're just going to drop over for a little while." So she got up and she got dressed, cause she didn't want to be in her nightgown or anything when they arrived, and she waited hours and nobody showed up. Wasn't that a mean thing to do?<sup>69</sup>

Thus, even the threat of noise, and being wakened or interrupted in coitus allows the charivari to do its work. But why should sex be interrupted when it has been legitimized in marriage? Clearly the symbolic situation is not as simple as the correlations suggested by the structuralists. The meaning of the charivari practices, like that of noise itself, as Attali suggests, may be profoundly antistructural, but charivari and noise can also hold considerable ambiguity as

noise carries order within itself; it carries new information. . . . Noise does in fact create a new meaning: first, because the interruption of a message signifies the interdiction of the transmitted meaning . . . and second, because the very absence of meaning in pure noise . . . by unchanneling auditory sensations, frees the listener's imagination. The absence of meaning is in this case the presence of all meanings, absolute ambiguity, a construction outside meaning. The presence of noise makes sense, makes meaning. It makes possible the creation of a new order on another level of organization.<sup>70</sup>

This transitional quality of noise as a means for restructuring is gendered. Men make the new meanings by making the charivari noise – meanings that pertain, as this article argues next, to fundamental distinctions between what the community expects

68 Ron Barkhouse, interview by author, 26 July 2004, New Ross, NS (PG2004-12).

69 Shirley Corbin, interview by author, 23 May 2005, Wilmont, NS (PG2005-9/10). Wandlyn is a hotel chain.

70 Attali, *Noise*, 33.

of men and what it expects of women. This gendering further relates to the stated purpose of the charivari – to welcome the newlyweds.

### **Welcome?**

In the interviews, the author usually asked respondents what was welcoming about arriving unannounced late at night, waking a couple up with obnoxious noise, then going into their house and making a sometimes destructive mess of it; this question was usually met with pitying looks. People talked about being able to count on their neighbours, and the value of being a good sport, but these were not particularly helpful responses. Surely there would be better ways of indicating good sporting qualities and helpfulness as well as welcoming. Laverne Rabatich remembers: “Occasionally, if friends could find where the newlyweds would be spending the night they would get into the room with a key from the manager and make an ‘apple pie bed.’ I’ve heard of leaving a raw chicken in the nuptial bed and helped spray shaving cream slogans around the bathroom.”<sup>71</sup> These actions do not easily reconcile with most notions of welcoming!

Some respondents, such as Clair Corbin, recognized that such activities could be problematic: “Depends on who the people were. . . . Sometimes you had to be careful because that trick might be taken not as in fun. And there could have been a retaliation, possibly. Just because I never heard of [a charivari being] emotionally taken doesn’t mean that there was none.”<sup>72</sup> Helen Terry, remembering her own shivaree from the late-1970s, stated: “At the time I thought it was fun. These were our friends, families, members of the community. So what that we were covered in whipped cream and confetti and our curtains ‘stolen.’ Later, after showering, rehangng curtains, and falling asleep, we were abruptly woken by pounding on the building, singing, etc. We ignored this, eventually the revelers left and we returned to sleep.”<sup>73</sup> Elmore Ward noted that often the most destructive and annoying actions were done by the couple’s closer friends and relatives – those most likely to have less-restricted entrée inside: “Most of the activity was outside. Any inside activity such as tampering with the bed would usually be done by someone quite close who would have access to the area: sewing the sheets together, putting horse hair between the sheets to cause itching.”<sup>74</sup> Much of the destruction pertained to the inside of the domestic space, women’s contexts of responsibility, or their personal belongings; but this destruction could also involve a woman’s personal possessions outside of the home. Lynne Crozier, for example, stated: “I know the girl this happened to but I wasn’t part of the wedding or attended it all. She had a beautiful white wool suit on, and they were going off on their wedding trip and everyone was waving goodbye. And they had put molasses in the seat of the car and then they covered it with feathers, or something, and she didn’t see that it was molasses and she sat in it. And it ruined her suit. Ruined, ruined it. And I thought, that’s not something I wanted, nothing hurtful or nasty.”<sup>75</sup>

The destruction caused by charivaris could not only take place outside of the home

71 Laverne Rabatich, Q750.

72 Clair Corbin, interview by author, 23 May 2005, Wilmont, NS (PG2005-9/10).

73 Helen Terry, Q857.

74 Elmore Ward, Q656, Winfield, BC, August 2005.

75 Lynn Crozier, interview by author, 28 July 2004.

in terms of a woman's things, but it could also involve objects considered in the male domain, which sometimes resulted in equally permanent and/or costly damage (though individuals or families often offered reparation for damage and destruction outside the house to cars, barns, livestock, and so on):

One was at a neighbour's. It was early fall, and he had a huge, huge stack of straw in the front yard, and of course they had just threshed, so they kept the straw for bedding in the wintertime. Somebody got the smart idea to set this on fire. So they burnt this stack of straw, much to the delight of everyone except the farmer who had it, because he had planned to use that to bed the animals in the winter. I don't remember a lot about that except the owner was naturally upset and not very happy with them. Likely he had to take the loss; I don't suppose anybody compensated him.<sup>76</sup>

A particularly dangerous practice, however, was aptly called "groom tossing." As Barbara Cochrane described it, "Once the groom arrived outside the door, he was grabbed by the men gathered there. He was thrown in the air at least three times. Brides, never having been to a serenade and not knowing what to expect, were quite often terrified for their new husband in case he would be hurt. One young bride from outside the province knew nothing about serenades and was sure her husband would be killed."<sup>77</sup> Elizabeth Fraser had a similar story: "About six or eight men grabbed him. And everybody else was gathered around, and it would be some of the younger more sturdy who would do the grabbing. And then I guess . . . they had him occupied during that, [and] somebody rolled the barrel of water off the truck. And immediately after they got him to the ground of the balcony they sort of carried him over and dropped him in a barrel of water." She remembered another friend getting bounced:

Alan was a fairly strong fellow and I remember on the way out my brother saying, "I'm not getting anywhere near his hands." And my brother was a big guy. But he made sure he got his feet. And this one poor man who was up near his hands, the next morning when he woke up he had a ring of bruising right around his neck. Alan apparently got hold of his shirt and had tugged it so tight it had literally put a ring of bruising right around his neck. And so Alan wasn't going to be dropped. If he was going down there were a couple of people coming on top of him.<sup>78</sup>

Sometimes, though, it was not exclusively the groom who was thus treated. Sandra Densmore recalled "it used to be in some communities, they tossed the bride as well. Literally tossed the bride. . . . And you gathered in a circle and you grabbed the groom and you tossed him as high as you can as often as you can until . . . and why nobody

<sup>76</sup> Christina Brown, interview by author, 23 May 2005, Bridgewater, NS (PG2005-7/8).

<sup>77</sup> Barbara Cochrane, Q723.

<sup>78</sup> Elizabeth Fraser, interview by author, 30 July 2004, New Glasgow, NS (PG2004-80/81).

<sup>79</sup> Sandra Densmore, interview by author, 27 July 2004.



was ever hurt, killed, crippled, whatever, I don't know. I have no idea."<sup>79</sup> Similarly, Leona Stephen stated: "At some time later in the evening the couple would be 'bounced' or 'tossed,' the bride first. The men would line up, grab the bride and throw her in the air, then the groom got his turn. This event would be accompanied by many screams and much laughter."<sup>80</sup> On the face of it, the welcoming value of charivari is difficult to reconcile with these and other dangerous acts (not to mention the annoyance they must have caused). But gendered noise and gendered pranks can be seen to help mark the couple's movement from single life to community attachment. Food, as a symbolic opponent to the primarily male-associated noise that precedes it, marks the woman's responsibilities of nurturing community in the broadest sense. Thus, attention to symbol and structure help to explain how charivari means welcome.

### Restructuring Gender

As Bonnie Huskins notes, it is by no means unusual for ritual events to "build and challenge social relations (including gender ideology)."<sup>81</sup> Not only charivaris, but ceremonial events as diverse as urban parades and Cajun country mardi gras were and are enacted very differently by women and men, whose experiences of those events vary markedly.<sup>82</sup> Indeed, the historic charivari's frequent attention to adulterers, wife-beaters, unconsummated marriages, and other aspects of heterosexual relations make it excellent material for gendered analysis because of its implication of and often direct address to relations between the sexes.<sup>83</sup> Like gender relations themselves, the charivari seemed inescapable and resistant to variation. The respondents' comments show the extent to which the sequence of events in any locality was known, expected, and difficult for the charivari's potential victims to avoid. In Nova Scotia generally, the charivari would last "from the time the noise started until everyone had congratulated the couple and had a cup of tea."<sup>84</sup> In Pictou County (but not necessarily in all Nova Scotian locations), the noise would continue until the bride and groom appeared at the door of their house (sometimes wearing their wedding clothes), and would not be over until the treats were served and other activities like bouncing the groom took place.<sup>85</sup> And, as Ben Legere noted, charivariers were unlikely to give up until they got the response they desired: "Pound and pound and pound for maybe a half hour or so. Then they'd show themselves. But you didn't stop until they came out."<sup>86</sup> Whatever other

80 Leona Stephen, Q96.

81 Bonnie Huskins, "The Ceremonial Space of Women: Public Processions in Victorian Saint John and Halifax," in *Separate Spheres: Women's Worlds in the 19th-Century Maritimes*, ed. Janet Guildford and Suzanne Morton (Fredericton: Acadiensis Press, 1994), 145.

82 See Susan G. Davis, *Parades and Power: Street Theatre in Nineteenth-century Philadelphia* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1986); Mary Ryan, *Women in Public: Between Banners and Ballots, 1825-1880* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1990); and Carolyn E. Ware, *Cajun Women and Mardi Gras: Reading the Rules Backward* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2007).

83 Russell P. Dobash and R. Emerson Dobash, "Community Response to Violence Against Wives: Charivari, Abstract Justice and Patriarchy," *Social Problems* 28 (1981): 563-81; Natalie Zemon Davis, *The Return of Martin Guerre* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1963).

84 Barbara Cochrane, Q723.

85 Murray MacCara, interview by author, 31 July 2004.

86 Ben Legere, interview by author, 29 July 2004, Wentworth, NS (PG2004-73).

activities might intervene, some communal sociability almost always ensued.

The charivari may have been optional – not all community members would be charivaried – but the univocal description as welcome suggests that its purpose was (and is) singular. The juxtapositions of the contemporary charivari are as jarring as the sudden noise that marks its opening, and, like its historical predecessor, they link individual experiences of marriage to community morality and ideals. Indeed, activities generally taken in Euro-North American society as personal – like sexual relationships, marriage, and reproduction – seem at times inextricably linked with patriarchy’s hierarchy of tasks for women and men. Within charivari’s complex weaving of noise, food, and sociability with humour, trickery, and danger is a metaphorical concern with what the community sees as the proper objective of marriage: reproduction.<sup>87</sup> And that process, though it usually requires two individuals in a heterosexual coupling to be accomplished, is viewed in patriarchal societies like contemporary Canada as primarily the woman’s responsibility.<sup>88</sup> In rural Canadian communities – the locations for all the Nova Scotian charivaris reported on were rural – the general pattern was for land to be passed down to sons and the expectation followed that wives would move onto their husbands’ property (rather than vice versa). Though sometimes the bride would be from the community, she was most often a newcomer. Indeed, schoolteachers, who frequently came from urban areas, were a perennial source of wives for farm sons; war brides held compounded outsider status. These unknown or, at best, less-well-known individuals could not be presumed to be knowledgeable about their newly accepted role – to reproduce and thus to continue the community. Concerns for literal reproduction in marriage would be paramount for rural places, not coincidentally the locations where charivaris persisted. With no such issues around reproduction in urban communities, there is no need for charivaris and thus there were and are very few if any “welcoming” charivaris in cities and larger towns.

One might expect that a groom solicitous of his new bride’s feelings might warn her of what was to come. The number of female charivari victims who not only pointed out that they were not notified, but who also seem to have perceived the event’s surprise as a kind of betrayal, indicates that men were part of the patriarchal expectation that wives needed to be taught their role. This does not suggest the need for formal conspiracy; instead, husbands’ expectations of their wives would be so commonsensical, and would extend to knowledge about the charivari, that likely even the most solicitous groom might not even think that warning his bride would be necessary. Some charivariers, though, did help the bride out; almost invariably, they would be other women. Often the groom’s mother, who would herself have been given the same treatment and might empathize with her new daughter-in-law’s uncomfortable position, prepared food for the charivariers or even let the secret slip

87 This correlation was first noted in the author’s previous research on charivari, conducted some 20 years ago in Ontario. See Pauline Greenhill, “Welcome and Unwelcome Visitors: Shivarées and the Political Economy of Rural-Urban Interactions in Southern Ontario,” *Journal of Ritual Studies* 3, no. 1 (1989): 45-67.

88 Adoption and various forms of assisted and surrogate reproduction offer exceptions to the requirement of the personal presence of one woman and the man to whom she is married for there to be children.

(accidentally or purposefully).

Ontario charivaris were similarly structurally gendered. That practice concerned the position of women as welcomed newcomers (by no means are all newcomers to rural communities welcomed) who would help generate the community by producing babies (again, the pattern was almost invariably for a woman to move onto her husband's family farm, or at least into his community, rather than hers). The current charivari offers a structural contrast to the historic charivari's concern with unwelcome matches that could not replace the community, either because the partners might be too old to reproduce or, in the case of mixed-race couples, because any children they might have could not be integrated into it. The transformation of the Ontario charivari, then, from unwelcome to welcome retained its concern with reproduction. Historically, a couple could be charivaried night after night until the groom paid the revelers to go away; more recently, a couple could be charivaried over and over until their first child arrived.

Perhaps a charivari offers a metaphor for the experience of becoming new parents – the expected and welcomed outcome of most marriages. Whether or not a couple is charivaried, marriages are commonly followed in due course with the arrival of a being who, like charivariers, wakes up the couple and sometimes interrupts sex, often in the middle of the night, with loud noise and demands for feeding. The woman must always be prepared to feed that little interruption and indeed to deal with its mess-making and take care of its every need. The newcomer disrupts the marriage thoroughly. The man is no longer entirely responsible for his own life and movements; he must be at the whim of the child's requirements for food and clothing, not to mention the more-unexpected or at least less-predictable illnesses and injuries.

Charivaris in Nova Scotia, as mentioned at the beginning of this article, offer a compelling puzzle. The changed position of the newlyweds, combined with the expectation that they reproduce, suggests that the charivari's welcome relates to the couple's special and marked position in the community as that latest addition to the group of those who will ensure its continuity. At the same time, it notes that their change of status is subject to community scrutiny and that they must uphold their end of the inchoate bargain. In return for the celebration of the marriage and for the gifts and feasting, they must reciprocally produce the gift of children or new community members. Note, of course, that this exchange is not exactly an equal one. It is economically skewed against the newlyweds. Though after the wedding is over they may find the balance sheet tipping in their favour when they tally up the gifts they receive, the expenses of childrearing usually outpace even the most extravagant wedding presents. And the workload related to reproduction and childcare is clearly balanced against the woman, on whom most of the burden relating to the reproduction of the community will fall. Sudden noise in the night and community trickery reminds them that the community knows who and where they are, and recalls the community's notion of what they are there for and why. Locals do not care about the couple's personal sexual relationship so much as they do about what follows it – pregnancy, childbirth, and the introduction of a new community member.

Like the noise discussed by structural anthropologists, charivari racket marks a tremendous disjuncture between the individuals' relatively free lives before marriage and the more constrained ones they enter. Contrary to Lévi-Strauss's view of historic charivaris, though, Nova Scotia charivaris do not mark an anomaly in an expected

sequence; they mark a qualitative jump in the couple's experiences and relation to their community. The charivari's transformation from a disapproval to an approval custom clearly relates to a common subject (reproduction of the community) as well as a common purpose (marking community scrutiny). The negative and positive charivaris in Nova Scotia both concerned themselves with reproduction, its more recent forms symbolizing quite directly the effects that children would have upon the marriage. Babies, like charivariers, are welcome, but trouble. It is possible for a nuisance to be welcome – as both clearly demonstrate.

Finally, the gendered difference in reaction to the charivari clearly stems from the differing relation the female half of the couple has to their new community. Women must take responsibility not only for reproduction itself, but also for maintaining the couple physically (in that marriage is symbolically linked with food). To this they must add their role in maintaining the home, family morals, and family morale. The structural positions of noise and food/socializing in the charivari, indeed the naming of the Nova Scotia custom after forms of noise, simply marks and re-marks the centrality of all of the symbolic issues the event invokes. And, again, the effect is primarily upon women. As a couple interviewed in Ontario stated when asked what they currently thought of charivaris, the husband called them “great fun” and the wife called them “a nuisance.”<sup>89</sup>

89 Jack and Joan Bush, interview by author, 23 June 2004, Frankford, ON (PG2004-24/25).