

Dark Carnival and Juggalo Heaven: Inside the Liminal World of Insane Clown Posse

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ABSTRACT

In 2012 the FBI profiled horrorcore rap group Insane Clown Posse (ICP) and its Juggalo fans as a gang. In January 2014, ICP and the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) sued the FBI in Detroit Federal Court. Toward a timely corrective sociological account, this paper offers its findings derived from over ten years of concert fieldwork observation, hundreds of informal interviews, and in-depth (DVD, CD, band, and fan site) music media analysis. It provides a marginal insider-outsider account of ICP's Dark Carnival, focused on its rituals, traditions, and mythology that create a proto-utopian surrogate family of acceptance and belonging, identity reversal, and ethical guidance for many who have suffered from unpopularity, abuse, other familial dysfunction, and/or who do not fit in where they are. Utilizing Bakhtinian carnival concepts, thick description and abundant quotation, the paper exemplifies sociology's debunking quality, or the sociological axiom that things are often quite different than presumed. The paper concludes by underscoring the troubling dangers of criminalization.

Keywords: Carnival, Unpopularity, Rituals, Criminal Profiling, Sociological Debunking, Bakhtin, Surrogate Family.

DARK CARNIVAL AND JUGGALO HEAVEN

"They uncrowned and renewed the established power and unofficial truth. They celebrated the return to happier times, abundance, and justice for all people." [1]

Violent J and Shaggy 2 Dope are leaders of the horrorcore rap group Insane Clown Posse (ICP). They are down-to-earth orchestrators of a contemporary type of Bakhtinian carnival. Carnival is a liminal reality or "second life" that inverts the inequalities of everyday life and centralizes the grotesque, including ludic violence. ICP's Dark Carnival features "serial killa clowns," the "hatchetman" logo, "chicken huntin," "piggie pie" slaughter, "death match" wrestling, and "chop slide" dancing. It also contains ludic thrashing of haughty unfair judges, selfish rich people, and an array of rapists, pedophiles, domestic batterers, bigots, and racists. ICP's carnival grotesque "wicked clowns" enliven and entertain with oddball bonanzas, murder and mayhem, and staggering zombies, prowling werewolves and pitch fork carrying and red-caped-devils that spray exuberant fans with Faygo soda, as well as glitter, feathers, and confetti. Silly signature Faygo breaks, or "times to get loose with a little juice," punctuate singing, chanting, moshing, body surfing and sundry counter-cultural celebrations of "fat bitches," "freaks," "black sheep," "scrubs," "zombie prom queens," and "those who don't fit in where they are." Exemplary of carnival's commensality, ICP's Dark Carnival heaves with old and newly welcomed friends and brims with homie handshakes, hospitable hugs and "whoop, whoop" hoots.

When asked to define Dark Carnival, Violent J responded straightforwardly, "Oh, that's family. It's people escaping reality for a minute. It's dark. It's grim. It's for the oppressed, the underdog." [2] I probed, "Why do you identify with the oppressed, the underdog?" J elaborated more emphatically. "Because that's what we were and that's what we are. That's why we're

here with you. We don't go to the fucking Grammy's. The only time we're getting any press, we're getting dissed. We rap about shit like fat bitches and that ain't cool" [2]—uncool at least for strangers to this scary on the outside celebratory scene where loners, misfits, oddballs, and nonconformists revel self-assuredly and gleefully amid surrogate family, community, equality, and non-judgmental acceptance and belonging.

A 23 year old Juggalo, employed as Verizon underground driller, articulated his understanding of Dark Carnival. "Behind the bullying, the blood and the murder, the message really is about being yourself and treating other people like equals; and not taking any kind of bullshit for no reason." [3] An 18 year old Juggalette (female juggalo) added, "The message in the music is no racism, no bigotry. A lot of quote unquote normal people think Juggalos are a bunch of assholes. (But) Juggalos are not the kind of people who judge people. That's why I love this! I can be myself." [4] A 28 year old mother of two continued briskly, warding off societal disapproval. "A Juggalette is a person that doesn't give a fuck. We don't care what society says about us, or anyone else." [4] Then I spotted a t-shirt that similarly expressed that vehement nonjudgmental spirit and communicated it loud, proud and defiant: "I'm Fat. Fuck Off." Indeed, many of the crowd—including Violent J—this night and any night at an ICP concert were noticeably heavier than the societal ideal but walked tall in this proto-utopian carnival setting.

Like ICP concert scenes, the yearly summer Gathering is an enchanting celebratory reunion of "clown luv" and "fam-mi-ly!" Its usual location is Cave In Rock, Illinois, where thousands (like Deadheads of yesteryear) journey to in crammed cars, trucks, and RVs. Once ticketed and safely gated, with keys handed over, they stay for four days, over a long weekend. Some of the entertainment includes tattoo, wet t-shirt and the Miss Juggalette contests; the Neden Game; Juggalo Championship and Exotic Ladies wrestling matches; Jim Norton, Dante Nero, Jared Norton, and Charlie Murphy comedy acts; and music by closely affiliated bands Twiztid, Big Hoodoo, Vanilla Ice, Kottonmouth Kings, and Swollen Members.

Violent J reminisced over the second 2001 Gathering of approximately 8000 attendees, where surreal libertine rules ruled:

The gathering is unreal, unreal. It's fucking unreal!...Those fucking Juggalos were so creative. They had lights hanging from the trees. They were dancing in the woods...the bitches were walking around naked...it was the ultimate experience. We bring in all the catering. Ten little different carnival stands, foods, lit up carnival stands selling everything. It's four days of music...partying, total crazy fucking nonsense. [2]

J said the third Gathering attracted about 10,000. It was held in the Peoria Convention Center but then was banned, Violent J explained, "because a cop put a girl in a headlock when she lifted her shirt. Juggalos reacted, got pissed off." [2] The 2009 Gathering attracted about 20,000. Since then, with prevalent media-disseminated controversies, rising costs of entry tickets, parking and camping, attendance has waxed and waned. The 2013 event was sparsely attended, a dip which surely related to fears concerning the recent criminalization of Juggalos as a gang. But Juggalos are fighting back.

On January 9, 2014, CNN reported that ICP and four Juggalos filed a lawsuit in Detroit's Federal District Court against the FBI for profiling the band and its fans as gang members, or more precisely as a "loosely-organized hybrid gang." The filing complained that "gang designation violates free speech, free association and due process." [5] The same day *The Wall Street Journal's* Market Watch blog, The Margin, reported that the Michigan American Civil Liberties Union joined the ICP lawsuit against the FBI for placing Juggalos on its 2011 National Gang

Threat Assessment list. The ACLU tweeted, "It may not be your cup of tea, but it's not a gang." [6] At a press conference, Violent J explained the harms of FBI profiling, "The FBI gang designation has caused real and lasting harm to the lives of the juggalos. Parents have lost custody of their kids, they've been fired from jobs, they've been denied housing, they've been subjected to illegal searches and sometimes added to gang database for walking down the street wearing an ICP T-shirt." [6] In a *Rolling Stone Magazine* interview, J stated, "We don't fit in anywhere...when people don't understand you, people fear you. All we're trying to do is be like the Stephen King of music. We like to tell horror stories." [7]

Perhaps on the advice of lawyers or to provide the standard uncomplicated blip for the media, Violent J understated what ICP's culture is and has been for many years. For the walking wounded who compose the bulk of so called hardcore fans, ICP and its Dark Carnival is a community of acceptance and belonging; a place that positively affirms outcast identities; a surrogate family; a means of catharsis; a set of ethical guidelines for equalitarian living; and a 'heavenly' liminal space where a rebellious spirit ardently challenges and inverts numerous inequalities in the body politic. Countering ill-informed criminological profiling, this sociological account offers a corrective informational piece that cautions against the odious consequences of simplistically judging a book by its cover or failing to understand what truly lies behind ICP's carnival mythology and the celebratory rituals and the carnivalesque activities of so many proudly self-described "wicked clowns."

Study Background and Significance

This study is part of a larger one on Heavy Metal Carnival. [8] The subset of the data utilized herein includes extensive concert fieldwork, interviews with Violent J and previous band manager Billy, and media analysis of ICP's LPs, videos, biographical writings, and fan and band websites. Additional data include informal interviews at 14 ICP concerts in Philadelphia, Reading, and Allentown Pennsylvania and in New York City between 2001 and 2013. Ordinarily I conducted interviews before and after shows, in the smoking sections and during breaks.

Much like Mikhail Bakhtin's description of medieval carnival, ICP and its Dark Carnival is widely misunderstood, spurned and rejected. For many who know little from the inside about ICP and its carnival culture, its black and white face-painted Juggalos are scary, stupid, sick, and probably violent. Earlier on what aided in affixing ICP's bad reputation was *Spin* magazine's three time vote of ICP as the "worst band ever" and *Blender's* characterization of ICP as the "worst group of all time." [9] Notwithstanding such criticisms, Violent J explained that musical talent is not the point. "We can't sing. We can't even play an instrument. We know we suck. Everybody knows we suck. But Juggalos love us because we are theirs." [2]

More serious than denigrating media labeling is the 2012 FBI's official profiling of ICP Juggalos as a gang. A superficial or vacant understanding of Violent J's pre-ICP personal history, magical messages conveyed through ICP's joker cards, Juggalo rituals and traditions, and song lyrics taken out of their carnival context might lead to that spurious conclusion. Toward more valid account, this report will reveal the origins of ICP and its Dark Carnival and the variety of ways ICP and its Dark Carnival songs, rituals and traditions provide a carnival prototype; a community of acceptance and belonging and a surrogate family of "clown luv" for those who, like Violent J and Shaggy 2 Dope, have suffered from family abuse, unpopularity, and outcast status in an un-equalizing society. Additionally explained is the import of Joker Card messenger "prophets" who provide moral guidance for ethical living.

While this paper contributes to the social science literature with its detailing of a contemporary prototype of Bakhtinian carnival, its additional sociological and practical value is debunking numerous misconceptions about ICP, Juggalos and Juggalettes. Debunking is a primary task of sociologists. In fieldwork studies, like this one, it was accomplished by assuming a necessary marginal insider-outsider perspective, or an in-but-not-of position vacillating between subjective and objective understanding. Thinking outside the box or being open so far as possible to hearing, seeing, feeling, and otherwise experiencing the realities of others from their standpoints, minus moralistic or aesthetic judgments, was necessary in maximizing objectivity. However, if I am correctly accused of bias, it pertains to a certain celebratory acknowledgment of human agency, or transformative capacity, exemplified by ICP's music and Dark Carnival culture. With sociological eyes and ears, at over ten years of ICP concerts, I witnessed something significant: the creation of an outcast family of acceptance, belonging, love, and collectively sustained positive identity, which are otherwise glaringly missing in the everyday lives of the vast majority of Juggalos and Juggalettes interviewed. Thus, this paper is written in the spirit of Peter Berger's *Invitation to Sociology* (1963) where he says that the "first wisdom" of sociology is that "things are not what they seem." The FBI criminalization of ICP and its Juggalos as a gang is a quintessential example of the error possible when judging a book by its cover.

The following pages begin with a description of Violent J and Shaggy 2 Dope's early life experiences of poverty, abuse, unpopularity, rejection, and rebellion and how they resonate with the life experiences Juggalos and Juggalettes. Then explained is how ICP's Dark Carnival provides a means of turning things around. In this liminal place and space outcast status and unpopularity are inverted into positive identity, "clown luv," "fam-il-ly," and/or community acceptance and belonging. Subsequent sections of the paper describe rituals of acceptance, belonging, identity reversal, death and rebirth, life blood and endurance, and of baptism with Detroit slums. Next discussed are Dark Carnival spirits, magical messages and moral guidance, or ICP's mythology via joker messengers. The paper concludes with a critical assessment of possible consequences of FBI criminalization of ICP and its Juggalos and Juggalettes.

Outcast Carnival Clowns

Like Kings of any true carnival, Violent J and Shaggy 2 Dope are cut from the same cloth of those they inspire. They are down-to-earth school drop outs who grew up poor, unpopular and abused. As such, they share real life experiences as socio-economically disenfranchised and emotionally wounded outsiders.

In the autobiographical book *Behind the Paint*, J reflected on his school days. "I was like a geek, a nerd...like a scrub. My goal was to wear the same pair of sweats for a whole year, but I dropped out. I didn't have any friends. Technically, things sucked. We were on welfare." [10] In an interview after the Wicked Wonka show J further expressed his and Shaggy's Juggalo-loyal intention to remain outsiders. "If we do learn how to be fresh...Juggalos will be crushed. But we don't know how to be fresh." [2] J contended, much as he did in the Psychopathic Records film *Shockumentary*, "We're like a wicked fungus."

Violent J (real name, Joseph Bruce) further detailed growing up "broke-ass poor" in Detroit, just off Nine Mile Road, one street down from the home of Marshall Bruce Mathers III (Eminem). [10, p.4] He was raised amid domestic violence and divorcing parents. One of his first memories is of his father hurling a television set from the top of the stairs at his "ma." [10, p.3] J's mother of three worked as a janitor and struggled to pay bills. His grandmother spent time in and out of an insane asylum and finally went "flat-out paranoid schizophrenic." [10, p. 6] His Uncle Steve, described as a "drug addict" and a "pretty much crazy-ass gone wrong," did

“an eight-year prison bid for robbing a gang of 7-11s when he was a kid.” [10, p. 7] More family sufferings included: a babysitter abusing him, his step-father raping him, and his step-brother sexually abusing him. Like J, his sister was sexually abused. She had frequent violent fights with their mother, took drugs, ran away from home, and eventually settled down in the projects once she got pregnant.

J's sad tale is about growing up struggling to make it with his mother's sparse income, dressing in rummage sales clothes, eating donated food from “hunger barrels,” having his debts announced over the school P.A. system, having few friends, suffering unpopularity and ridicule by neighborhood kids, and being labeled a “scrub.”

J's early rejection and rebellion included a spontaneous drive-by shooting before he turned 15 years old. At 16, he quit school and started a small gang called Inner City Posse. In the interview J joked about the gang being scorned and beat up all the time. This was his early unsuccessful attempt at being a gangster.

In *Behind the Paint* J elaborates on how his two friends fought back, especially against the judging rich and powerful. They vandalized cars and stole hood ornaments off luxury cars such as Mercedes, Cadillacs and BMWs and filled bags with their collections. J emphasized the vehement class resentment motivating their activities. “I HATED THE RICH. We'd drive around...and just beat the shit out of rich kids.” [10, p. 112] Most of the time spent with his friends was devoted to organizing backyard wrestling matches. They also created a rap crew called the JJ Boys (for Joe, John, and Joey, and sometimes Joey's homey, Jay). Then he joined a gang of 15 “ninjas” who, besides stealing hood ornaments and beating up rich kids, did fun things like beating each other with garbage cans. Sometimes people called the police on them, thinking they were serious. [10, p. 75]

J revealed how ICP ultimately changed things, “We may have been these scrubby losers during middle school and then high school, but we turned it around and made it cool to be a scrub...We turned our scrubbiness into something we could be proud of.” [10, p. 35] J freely admitted his enduring unpopularity, even amid financial success:

We're scrubs. We're clowns. We don't fit in....We're just two face-painted guys. The rap stations don't want to play us. The rock stations don't want to play us. We used to get laughed off stage...We don't have chicks. We don't even know how to be famous. Everyone that works for us is a homie from back in the day...You think anyone's covering this tour? Rolling Stone? No. No one's covering this tour. [2]

Like Violent J and Shaggy 2 Dope, many Juggalos and Juggalettes frequently have sad tales of sexual abuse, domestic violence, other familial dysfunction, and numerous additional sufferings associated with rural and urban poverty. Most emphasize experiences of unpopularity. For example, at the Wicked Wonka show a group of white and black face-painted Juggalos and Juggalettes collectively explained what a plethora of others said when asked about the allure of ICP's Dark Carnival. One said, “Ninety percent of Juggalos have had something bad in their lives. Almost everyone here has been through bad times.” Another explained, “We didn't grow up rich. We didn't get invited to the prom. But we don't care.” A third explained compellingly, “For many of the people here, this is all that they have. If it wasn't for ICP, I would have committed suicide.”

At a Cradle of Filth concert I ran into a group of four Juggalos who further illuminated the significance of being a Juggalo or Juggalette. Two 18 and 21 year old males who worked full time at Radio Shack said consecutively: "We are a family of homies. All of us are outcasts, never popular, so we get together." "In high school, I was the epitome of the kid that was picked on." A 19 year old female college sophomore explained further, "A Juggalo is like a whole group of people that are all the black sheeps of the family." [11]

Outcast Community: Belonging, Acceptance and Identity Reversal

According to the seminal writer on the subject, Mikhail Bakhtin, medieval carnival was a totalizing opposition, "a world unto itself," where the "carnival spirit" offered "a chance to have a new outlook on the world, to realize the relative nature of all that exists, and to enter a completely new order of things." [1, p. 34] It was "a temporary liberation from the prevailing truth and from the established order; it marked the suspension of all hierarchical rank, privileges, norms, and prohibitions. Carnival was the true feast of becoming, change and renewal." [1, p. 10]

Most exemplary of this "fantastic freedom" or "utopian radicalism" is how Juggalos and Juggalettes experience acceptance amid Dark Carnival, in stark contrast to their experiences of rejection, mistreatment and marginalization in everyday life. One Juggalo explained, "(W)hen everyone's together, no one's an outcast." Another said, "Size and shape don't matter. How much money you have don't matter. Nothing about your appearance matters. It's all in your heart. And we all smoke too many cigarettes." Dark Carnival's egalitarian spirit was further articulated by a 21 year Juggalo college student: "In this kind of environment, everyone is on the same level. Here there are people from all walks of life, but when you are covered in Faygo, you're all the same color." [12] At the Oddball Bonanza a 27 year old Juggalo from Long Island and a fan since 1997 said what attracted him was the freedom to be one's self. He continued to say that Juggalos experience a break from "pressures that come from all facets of life" and from "mainstream media that push images of perfect bodies and how to dress." [13] Another Juggalo declared triumphantly, "Here, you are not an outcast. You're one of us! You have a lot of kids who live everyday life as outsiders and come to the show and no one's getting on you for who you are." [13] Similarly, at the Pow Bang Boom show a 29 year old white male welder passionately conveyed the uniqueness of ICP's Dark Carnival, "There's no other place like this. You can be rich or poor, young our old. It's all family. It's all love...There's a couple of bad seeds here and there who don't follow rules of love and mutual respect." [14]

At the Murder Mayhem Show, I asked one Juggalo if he felt different here than at other places. The third year college student said, "I'm accepted much more freely than in my college or in my work...I was always picked on, mistreated in school." [15] I questioned whether he thought others experience this scene the same way, to which he responded, "There's thousands of people that can relate to this music. It's just a lot easier for people who were the underdog, who were pushed aside, to relate, to understand." I probed, "What makes it easier to relate?" He answered, open-book style, further revealing the commonality among Juggalos, "Juggalos always talk about how they were the underdogs, how they were nerds. That's always been true of me since I was born." [15] Another Juggalo explained at the Mighty Death Pop concert, "Honestly, growing up I didn't have a place to belong. I was an outcast among outcasts." [16]

What Juggalos and Juggalettes explained over and over again was not only finding a community of acceptance and belonging, but an experience of identity reversal, possible in and through ICP's Dark Carnival. For example, a 23 year old who did computer assisted drafting and design for a living emphasized how important Juggalo identity was in his life when he said, "It's like a part of me now. I'm thinking of branding myself with the Hatchet Man logo." I questioned about his

level of dedication, and he underscored the main point. "What is boils down to is that everyone that's family here has been rejected in some way, rejected by the mainstream media...rejected in some way by mainstream society. Then everyone comes here and is family. People don't fight here. Nobody's going to mess with anyone else." Stressing the unique opportunity for freedom of self-expression, away from the pressures of the media, he elucidated further, "Like the media tells you what to do, to say, how to dress. Here you can do what you want. Here, it's pretty much individualism at its prime. I don't think there's anything like this." [17] Another Juggalo explained at the Murder Mayhem Show, "Music brings us together like a family." However, unlike other music scenes, "this sticks." He exclaimed, "I'm coming out of the closet as a Juggalo. Being a Juggalo lets me find myself, be myself, feel good about myself." Another said, "It kind of completes you in a way." [15]

Clown Luv, Show Your Tits and Fat Bitches

ICP's Dark Carnival contains a ritual of acceptance called "show your tits" or what in other carnival settings, such as Mardi Gras, is termed parade stripping. While being a standard ritual at ICP shows, it is at the same time exemplary of identity affirmation. That is, in and through Dark Carnival the negative judgments imposed on persons stigmatized as "fat" or "obese" are upturned, reversed, or inverted.

Like Big B's inverted positive value as "the well rounded one" (discussed below), at ICP concerts and gatherings Juggalettes, who often weigh more or much more than what is considered attractive outside carnival, are self-confident and positively affirmed. They spurn the rejection and ridicule of weightiest society by wearing tight short shirts, by revealing rolls of flesh, and by walking and standing tall. They are supported by fellow Juggalos and Juggalettes whose ICP gear expresses "clown luv" for "fat bitches." In ICP's Dark Carnival, well rounded women proudly expose their breasts. Men and women cheer, affirm and approve.

I asked Juggalettes about their experiences flaunting their breasts and they replied enthusiastically, one by one. "Here my body is sexy. I feel good, sexy, wonderful...but not on the outside (world)." "I'm defined as big, fat, and ugly in everyday life, but not here. Here, I'm beautiful, appreciated, loved!" "Fat bitches are the shit!" "Juggalos love us!" [13]

Aware of my ordinary bias against parade stripping activity (as a form of sexual objectification of women), I inquired further. "Do you feel objectified? Do you feel in any way demeaned by showing your tits?" Without exception, Juggalettes claimed, to the contrary, that they felt incredibly edified, enhanced and redeemed precisely by being able to show off their big-bodied breasts and experience the intoxication of corporeal acceptance and approval in this setting. My perspective changed, here at least. I saw and understood that the activity was liberating, especially when overhearing men and women approving and appreciating, and with and no indication of denigration. Juggalos and Juggalettes apparently do love fat bitches, as they love so many other outcast members of society.

This reversal of things exemplifies how ICP's Dark Carnival, like Bakhtinian carnival, is a liminal "time outside time," "a special condition of reality that challenges all that exists in the regular order of things. It gives birth to a reality of its own, subject only to its own utopian laws of freedom." Bakhtin elaborates, "While carnival lasts, there is no other life outside it. During carnival time life is subject only to its laws, that is, the laws of its own freedom." [1, p. 7]

Fa-MI-ly! and Clown Luv

Besides experiencing acceptance, belonging and identity reversal, Juggalos experience being part of a loving family. "Big B" explained, while pointing to the Juggalo standing next to him. "Look at this guy. He was a rich preppy with a lazy eye. No one liked him. Now he's a Juggalo and he has a family." Confirming what his 'brother' said, the young man asserted confidently, "Now I have a family! But it's like being in a special relationship but just take out the romance." Others chimed in: "It's a family. It's a whole lot of love going. A whole lot of misfits and outcasts. It gives us something to belong to." "It's the freaks family reunion." Another Juggalo emphasized family loyalty, defense and protection, "Juggalo family defends each other. My car out there has a broken window. I don't have to worry. If someone touches my shit, they don't have to just deal with me, but *all* these Juggalos." [14] Another explicated happily, "When you're a Juggalo, *everyone* is down with you." A 17-year old Juggalette summarized, "It gives us community, hope, a place to belong." [14]

At the Murder Mayhem Show, celebrating The Wraith LP, Big B, a large young man self-secure in this setting with the additional positive nickname "the well-rounded one," wanted me to understand the power of family. Raising his fist proudly in the air, he began shouting 'Fa-mi-ly! Fa-mi-ly! Fa-mi-ly!' Within seconds, the entire concert hall chimed in. At this moment I understood. I felt the collective effervescence of this intensely powerful outcast family of acceptance and belonging.

What aids in the creation of family at ICP concert scenes is the expressed equalizing attitude of band leaders Violent J and Shaggy 2 Dope. A 28 year old Juggalette said what first attracted her to ICP was that J and Shaggy "don't treat their fans as fans." [4] This is apparent at the grand finale of every show when all rush the stage, dance and spray. Further, many Juggalettes and Juggalos recounted personal conversations they had with J and Shaggy, partying with them at gatherings, and visiting with the band leaders at their camp sites. One Juggalo fondly reminisced about a conversation with J and Shaggy in an airport. "They are very approachable. One time I ran into them at the Newark airport and they saw my hatchetman shirt and they came up. Violent J comes up and shakes my hand. They know where they came from and they don't forget." [12]

Approachability is not only between Juggalos and their band leaders but also among themselves. One Juggalo explained, "Like all these people don't know each other from Adam and Eve, but you can walk up to anyone and talk to them because it's family." Another Juggalo put his arm around the guy standing next to him, demonstratively showing, "See, I've never seen this motherfucker in my life, but we're brothers." I asked a Juggalo standing close in, "Why do you need family?" "Because you ain't nothing without family." I probed, "Do you think a lot of Juggalos have families that might not be that supportive, so they come here for a family?" He responded affirmatively and revealed his identification with J and Shaggy. "Yah. J and Shaggy didn't have it either. His (Shaggy's) whole family worked a paper route." Another commented with familiarity, "Joe and Joey grew up in the slums of Detroit. They didn't have money, no rich family to hand it to them. They started in a basement in 1992." [4]

Summing up the widely held spirit, a 27 year Juggalo music critic who attended 18 or 19 shows, stated, "I haven't found something so alive and resurrecting than this." Emphasizing what is axiomatic for Juggalos, another commented at the Pow Bang Boom show, "You don't have to be blood related to be family." [14] One more summarized what ICP and the Dark Carnival are all about, "family, love, mutual respect for each other." [14]

Finally, at the Hell's Pit show a 24 year old Juggalo who worked in a restaurant kitchen

reiterated what was uttered hundreds of times about Juggalo family bonding that extends beyond concert scenes. "You see another Juggalo on the street and they are automatically friends. They see the Hatchetman and they start talking to each other like they've known each other for years." [12] Hence, it appears that ICP gear and tattoo symbols constitute an interactional bridge to automatic kindness and kinship beyond concert scenes and thus are a motivation for wearing them.

Singing Rituals of Death and Rebirth

In carnival death brings forth life or rebirth, new truth and new realities. However, carnival truth is conveyed "in the form of laughter, foolishness, improprieties, curses, parodies, and travesties." [1, p.48] It also includes "fights, beatings, and blows," throwing adversaries "to the ground," trampling them "into the earth. They bury their victim. But at the same time they are creative; the sow and harvest." [1, Ibid.]

Exemplifying the playfully ludic violence that is integral to carnival's life-birth was when backup band BTH was pumping up the family just before ICP appeared. They teased good-humoredly with the lethal thundering question: "How many potential serial killas do we have in the crowd tonight?!" Juggalos cheered jubilantly. Then J and Shaggy came on stage dressed as tattered clowns. Their white and tan suits, with red and white bell bottom pants and balloon hips, were worn and stained. Violent J's hair was dyed clown red. Multiple tattoos covered his arms and legs. Both performers appeared with black and white face paint, as usual. Standing beside them were two saggy skeletons dressed in old, dirty, torn up black suits. They were swinging big buckets filled with Faygo soda and pointing playfully and ominously at selected audience members. Then they threw. Everyone reveling up and against the front stage got totally, happily, soaked. My son was up there too. When the show was over, his clothes were drenched and his wrinkly stained hands looked like he took a bath for too long.

Next, fans immediately recognized and applauded at ICP's first song, Piggie Pie. Two gigantic bear-like figures emerged, wearing tattered clothes, socks and sneakers. Violent J greeted the energized crowd with an inspiring message, "Juggalos will never die, motherfucker!" Enthralled Juggalos yelled, screamed, chanted, and started moshing. The carnival singing commenced.

Piggie Pie, this time and always, begins with a loud pig squeal and then the sound of slaughter. The first of three piggies rapped about is a "poor piggy" who "fucks his sister," "drinks moonshine," "lives in a house of wood," and in a typical "redneck chicken-turkey neighborhood." The second piggie, the rich piggie, is called "the devil." He lives in a house made of gold and sleeps on a mattress stuffed with hundred dollar bills. The crowd cheers as ICP and the crowd sing-a-long about hitting him in the head with a "brick of gold" and "wack(ing) on the brain made of pork rinds." The third piggie rapped about lives in a mansion, another "house of gold." He is also hunted down and killed. The song concludes with an anti-victim stance via a telephone call from a guy sadly lamenting about how he is not "sure he wants to live." Violent J, the comic clown and herald of Juggalo resiliency and endurance, responds, "Don't blow your head off...Bring me the fucking gun and I'll do it for you!" Victorious laughter—laughter conquering the many injuries committed against Juggalos—resounds throughout the concert hall.

Besides slaughtering piggies, Chicken Huntin' is a signature event at ICP concerts. The chant "Let's go Chicken Huntin! Let's go Chicken Huntin! Let's go Chicken Huntin!" punctuates time in rhapsodic Juggalo crowds. The throng grinds up, especially before performances of this song

about hounding down “bigots, rednecks, (and) racists.” Violent J pumps up the crowd even more: “Who's goin chicken huntin?” Juggalos chant back, “We's goin chicken huntin'. We's goin chicken huntin'.” And they go cheerfully, energetically, gleefully back and forth. Stage clowns come forth and throw buckets of feathers all around. Up above, on the balcony, Juggalos are wearing t-shirts that say things like Wicked Shit, Psychopathic Bitch, The Most Hated Band in the World, Wicked Clowns, You Suck, Juggalette, Faygo, Carnival of Carnage, Wicked Wonka Tour, and FUCK OFF!

To outsiders, Piggie Pie and Chicken Huntin may be exemplary of the promotion of real violence. As one Juggalo put it correctively, “Sounds like they're killing people, but if you just listen, it's about gettin' rid of people who hate, gettin' rid of child predators.” A Juggalette explicated further, “Everybody loves each other. Family, dude!...They are singing about what's going on in the world. They're not telling you to go out and do it.” [14] Stated more abstractly, in Dark Carnival violence is a form of comic laughter. In and through carnival laughter, all that is fearful, constricting, oppressive, and constraining on the outside—in the ordinary every day “first life”—is defeated. Bakhtin said, accordingly, “All that was terrifying becomes grotesque...The people play with terror and laugh at it; the awesome becomes a 'comic monster.’” [1, p.91] Bakhtin elaborated on this important point, “This laughing truth, expressed in curses and abusive words, degrades power. The medieval clown was alas the herald of this truth.” [1, p.93]

Rituals of Life Blood and Endurance

On the first day of spring, March 20, 2010, the OddBall Bonanza started early, at 5 p.m. A wrestling ring was set up. People began assembling around it, chanting “You Suck!” People clapped and cheered, “Fuck em up Tony. Fuck em up!” The death match goal was to push the wrestling opponent into the barbed wire circumventing the ring. Similar threats come from within, as one wrestler was assailed with a barbed wire club. He escaped by jumping up and off the wire into the crowd. A guy behind me affirmed with appreciation, “that takes balls!” Others bellowed, “We want blood!” I pondered and asked out loud, “How does this relate to clown luv?” Self-correcting, I thought, “This is carnival. This is a demonstration of hyper-masculinity, but it is also something more. The blood is significant, yes, life symbolizing blood.” I jotted down more. “The book *Bright Red Scream*, about how self-mutilation, is not about wanting to die, but is a piercing cry for life amongst the ‘walking wounded’. The blood signifies victory for those seriously even maliciously injured with deadened body egos, spirits. It's a bright red scream for life, for all to see!” A Juggalo edged into me, viewed my notes, and made an unsolicited helpful comment, “Most of us have anger issues, but what do you expect?” He reiterated, “Most of us have issues.” I asked if this type of activity helped relieve some of the anger. He responded unequivocally, “Of course!”

One of the wrestlers in the ring downed a whole bottle of vodka. Then he was smacked with a metal folding chair. His face was drenched red. More chants called for more blood and gore: “Fuck him up! 'Holy shit!’ 2 Tuff Tony came into the ring and downed more liquor. Then Up Chuck the Clown appeared on stage, beyond the ring, followed by Reverend Tommy Gunn. The Reverend bull-whipped flower petals out of Up Chuck's hand and then from his ass. Next, Gunn inserted a screw driver into his own nose and passed a needle through his arm. Juggalos chanted unimpressed, “You suck!”

In another display of life-evoking blood and endurance, Annabel the Clown came into the ring with a Juggalette who walked on broken glass. More audience volunteers were solicited to participate by standing on top of a board with 500 spikes. It covered Tommy. Tommy teasingly queried the audience, “Who wants more danger?” Nearby, two in the audience started a fist

fight and were quickly removed by security staff. Back in the ring, Eric was juggling a machete, a bowling pin and a can of mace. The Reverend Tommy Gunn jumped back in and announced: "freak show deluxe." Gunn challenged Up Chuck to swallow a sword, which he did. Then Malice, a female clown, displayed her talent with a three-foot pumped up balloon by swallowing it. Then she was given a two dollar tip and asked what she was doing after the show. The side ring show concluded with Mike E Clark rappers hurling all kinds of ICP merchandise into the crowd. Meanwhile, the multitude was packed up and along the front stage, swaying tightly back and forth. Chanting was louder and louder and omnipresent. "Fa-mi-ly! 'Fa-mi-ly!' 'Fa-mi-ly!' 'Fa-mi-ly!' 'Fa-mi-ly!'" Amid a cloud of marijuana smoke, Violent J and Shaggy 2 Dope emerged, dancing and opening with appropriately carnival-grotesque singing, "In Your Face Something Special."

Ritual Baptism with Detroit Slums

Faygo sprayed through the air, as did several empty or mostly empty plastic 2 liter bottles. They were snatched up quickly as essential concert souvenirs (at least by those new to the scene). The strobe lights flashed. An incredible vibration passed through bodies. A gigantic Wicked Wonka sign was vivid under orange neon lights. Amidst pounding music, two glittered circus clown sidekicks appeared on stage, followed by three more masked clowns in convict glitter suits. The dead-looking clowns scattered glitter and confetti amongst the audience. Next, there was an announcement over more distinct circus music, "Faygo, Faygo, Faygo." Shaggy and J first christened themselves, pouring bottles of Faygo all over themselves, and then began spraying everyone. Violent J invigorated the crowd with a friendly command, "Put your motherfucking hands up in the air!" The song was shared. The audience sang a line, then J and Shaggy, and then all sang together. Everything was sticky and wet.

With a 20 gallon bucket, six two gallon buckets, three super soakers, and between 400 and 600 2 liter bottles of Faygo per show, ICP drenches the crowd with hundreds of shaken up bottles that are spilled, jetted and flung into the crowd. As one Juggalo put it, "You can't hide from Faygo sprayings." As bottles were lobbed, a strong smell of root beer filled the air. Fans scurried to catch and snatch from puddles on the floor. One soaring bottle knocked my pharmacy glasses off. I looked down at the crushed glasses and shrugged it off, aware that any novice Juggalo or Juggalette worth their "down with the clowns" face paint must obtain at least one empty, sticky smashed up bottle by the end of the show. After the final insane dancing and dousing up on stage with J and Shaggy and hordes of zombie clown creatures, the dense crowd departed drenched, sopping wet from head to toe.

In the post Wicked Wonka interview I asked J about the ritual significance of Faygo and he responded, "It's Detroit ghetto soda." I scribbled in a side note. "It's like a metaphorical baptism with Detroit slums." At another concert, I queried about this thesis with Juggalos, who confirmed the notion: "It's like being Christianized, like being baptized." "It's holy water." J explained further in *Behind the Paint*, "Faygo was and is the ghetto pop of Detroit...Anyway, Faygo's cheap as hell, and it's available in these crazy-ass flavors: Moon Mist, Red Pop, Rock 'n' Rye, etcetera. So it kind of fit our whole Floob thing' (Floobs being the precedent of Juggalos)." [10, p. 58] I asked (previous) band manager Billy, "What does Faygo soda mean?" He replied, "It doesn't have a logic behind it at all. It don't make any sense. If you were at your house and dumped a bottle of soda over your head it would be a bad thing, a worst experience. But here, the kids want it. They can't live without it. It's just fun." [18] J explained that the signature Faygo ritual started out organically and simply from him always drinking Faygo 2 liters, including when performing on stage. One day he spontaneously decided to douse a few fans with it. They reacted. He sprayed more. And so the non-commercial origin of the story goes. [2]

Dark Carnival Spirits, Magical Messages and Moral Guidance

ICP's Dark Carnival is characterized by several rituals, as explained above. But it can be conceptualized more generally as a "ritual process" or a liminoid experience defined by suffering, death and resurrection. [19] In Dark Carnival the ritual process is accomplished through ICP's mythology. Its origins are explained in *Behind the Paint*, where J wrote, "Our way of escaping life had always been and through non-reality' or fantasy." [10, p. 43] Picker Forests, a big undeveloped plot of land between Eleven and Twelve Mile Roads, was his and his sole friend Rob's "escape from being geeks in the real world, because nobody judged us there." [10, p. 44] J demarcated this as the "beginning of the Dark Carnival." He said the forest existed as an imaginary safe haven, away from his "mom crying, fighting with my sister," and frequent "yelling on the phone." [10, p. 47] In Picker forests, J claims he was touched by Dark Carnival spirits. Later, he committed to the mission of spreading magic messages through music. They are conveyed through six Joker Cards (or seven, with the last one split into two LPs) distributed by ICP's label Psychopathic Records (starting in 1991). The cards (inserted in LPs) traverse a magical, spiritual journey for Juggalos and offer moral or ethical guidance.

The first of seven revelatory LPs, *Carnival of Carnage*, warns of "the coming of the end of time, and the need to make your soul right." [10, p. 541] That is when the rich and powerful will be condemned for stigmatizing the poor and ignoring their pleas for help. In Dark Carnival they are defeated. Song lyrics elucidate how ICP's Dark Carnival ludic violence is mimesis, a theatrical reaction to real socio-emotional violence.

Welcome to the travelling ghetto. Years of breathing the souls of rotted minds has created a bad case of 'Ghetto Insanity.' As you walk the streets, stared at as if you were a freak show, less than human, an ogre walking the streets paved with gold, you'll begin to understand. If those of the ghetto are nothing more than carnival exhibits to the upper class, then let's give them the show they deserve!...A traveling mass of carnage. The same carnage witnessed on a daily basis in the ghetto can be yours to witness, feel, and suffer through. No longer killing one another, but killing those who heartlessly ignored our relentless pleas for help. [20]

One of the most significant—but hardly understood—aspects of ICP's Dark Carnival is that it constitutes parodic resistance and a politics of exposure. While contained as carnival, it gives visibility to the harsh material realities of poverty. It is an organic critique of and protest against those who ridicule, ignore and oppress the poor and ghettoized. During carnival's liminal second life, time outside time, or what ICP calls "the end of all time," the aggrieved, the damaged and the rejected of society transgress against officialdom by grotesquely hectoring at the body politic's inequality, by smashing and inverting it, and by rejoicing as victorious insiders. ICP and its Juggalo community are precisely what Mike Presdee said when he wrote: "Carnival is a playful and pleasurable revolution, where those normally excluded from the discourse of power may lift their voices in anger and celebration." [21]

The second joker card is the Ringmaster messenger, the symbolic orchestrator of the Dark Carnival. He signifies gang harmony and rival gang factions, with forks up and forks down. The Ringmaster also initiates "awakening" and "looking into the consciousness of man." This prophet poses the critical question: "Who are the real demons that walk this earth?" The Ringmaster, thus, encourages ethical questioning and introspection and ultimately condemns evil doers. One Juggalo explained concretely, but non-exhaustively, that Dark Carnival's opposition is against "racism, bigotry, beating wives, beating kids." [14]

The third messenger, the Riddle Box character, represents the vision many claim to see when they die. "When you turn the crank, what comes out determines if you go to Heaven or Hell." [10, p. 552] Thus, the Riddle Box prophet encourages, if not threateningly cajoles, further contemplation about one's actions and cautions about ultimate consequences.

The fourth Joker Card, The Great Milenko, is the "master of illusion" with the ability to "cast aside people's self-delusions so they can see what they really are. For most, this is a hideous, horrible reflection of their evil souls." [10, p. 556] The Great Milenko, like the Riddle Box, inveigles deep reflection about one's true moral character and warns about the ultimate effects of living an immoral life. As one 29 year old Juggalo who listened to ICP since 1995 put it, "Anyone can be a Juggalo. You just have to be honest with yourself. You are who you are." [14] The fifth Joker card, a double messenger, The Amazing Jeckel Brothers, refers to Jake and Jack Jeckel. They juggle your sins to determine the relative weight of the specified virtue, caring for others, versus sins of non-caring. These messengers express the many struggles people face in living a proper life. *Behind the Paint* elaborates:

Jake is good, and cares for the well-being of people, while Jack is sinister and evil. When you die these two spirits juggle your sins....For each sin you committed in your life a ball is added to their juggling act, making it harder for them to perform. If they drop a ball you go into Hell. If not, you will enter into Shangri-LA. To make things worse, Jack is trying to mess Jake up, just for the fun of it. [10, p. 565]

The sixth Joker Card, The Wraith: Shangri-LA, is "the end of the story, the Wraith, heaven or hell?" It is the beginning of the end. The Wraith "exists in shadow and earth, Heaven and Hell, life and death. He is the final vision that we must all face upon our death, for he is the Grim Reaper; the one who carries us to our final destination in the afterlife." The second (LP) part of The Wraith, made for non-Juggalos, is Hell's Pit. It offers "a glimpse of Hell, and all its horrors." [10, p. 594] Taunting and teasing death, the Grim Reaper and all those who will go to Hell—proto-carnival style—track 17 ends, "we'll see you later motherfucker!"

The joker cards lend didactic, moralistic, utopian structure to ICP's Dark Carnival. They are akin to what Bakhtin describes of the carnival grotesque:

Actually the grotesque discloses the potentiality of an entirely different world, of another order, another way of life...The existing world suddenly becomes alien...precisely because there is the potentiality of a friendlier world, of the golden age, of carnival truth...The world is destroyed so that it may be regenerated and renewed. [1, p. 48]

Capturing and conveying this spirit, a Juggalette at the Murder Mayhem show exclaimed, when asked to define Shangri-LA: "It's Juggalo heaven!" A compatriot chimed in, "It's Heaven. But to us you don't have to wait for it until you die." [15]

The Mighty Death Pop

The last ICP concert I attended as fieldwork was The Mighty Death Pop in Philadelphia (May 3, 2013). It opened with J and Shaggy shouting out loud "Fuck you to the FBI!" The pumped up crowd cheered back with approval. However, this concert that began so enthusiastically, was different from any other I previously attended. Painted Juggalos were sparse and the level of excitement was dimmed. Smiles, handshakes, hugs, and confidence were observable diminished. One Juggalo complained about the high ticket price, saying, doubtfully about ICP,

“They know most of their fan base don’t have money.” However, he said he was still loyal to the show.

Lines for t-shirts, Hatchetman gear, and other Psychopathic Records merchandise were shorter than ever. It also appeared that there were more spectators than usual. While wading through the observably disenfranchised audience, I noticed something else that was dissimilar. A lot of cell phone conversations were taking place while people were standing in groups. In past times, interactions were much more immediate and intimate, not impeded by technology. I was struck by a kind of technological normalcy, otherwise out of place in this setting.

While hearing the familiar chants “Fa-mi-ly, Fa-mi-ly, Fa-mi-ly;” “who’s goin’ chicken huntin’, we’s goin’ chicken huntin;” and “whoop, whoop,” I wondered about how the ascription of gang status to Juggalos in Pennsylvania, California, Michigan, Massachusetts and elsewhere was related to this waning effect on family unity, the spirit of clown luv, and what was previously a vibrant, jubilant, affirming and fearless family of belonging. During the course of the disappointing evening I was told that ICP’s last Gathering was smaller than usual.

I further worried and wondered about possible alternative outlets for so many Juggalos and Juggalettes I had met over the past decade or so. What was more certain was that bullying, parental abuse and other domestic violence, poverty and inequality more generally were on the rise. I surmised that the impending death at hand—the mighty death pop—was of a uniquely proto-utopian community that has been misunderstood and criminalized but that has provided family, loving acceptance and belonging, and positively affirming identity for so many misfits, oddballs, unpopular teens and adults, and/or those who do not fit in where they are. I recalled what a Juggalo said at the Pow Bang Boom show, “A lot of people are outcasts at home, but they are popular here. At home they may be the nerds or the geeks but here they belong. They’re accepted for who they are. It’s being who you are. You don’t have to dress in fancy clothes or drive a nice car.” [14] Serendipitous, Bakhtin-knowledgeable, and down-to-earth Juggalette J-Rach, fortune teller at the 2013 Gathering, shot me an e-mail on 5/24/2010 that offered a vivid description of the egalitarian spirit and activities of the Gatherings, which are also at risk of demise. She said gatherings are

A place where we call each other “family, family, family” and for a couple of weeks a year we are all on the same level, and we share with each other. If you ain’t got a pair of shoes, dude, her take these pink flip flops (real story)...If you’re hungry, we’re servin up grub right here. Need a ride half way across the country, jump in. I gotcha homie. U can’t afford a ticket, here, I’ll distract the security guard, we’re sneakin u in...U got thrown out? Here’s the shirt off my back. Tie this bandana ‘round ur face and walk up, they’ll never know ‘ya. And then we dance in a circle, the violent, aggressive slam around dance of men who are furious and lost, hopped up on colorful sugar water, soaked and belligerent. It seems stupid. It seems brutish. It seems despicable. But I tell you, if you fall during that dance? A helping hand is there within half a second to pick you back up.

In conclusion, this paper has explained how ICP and its Dark Carnival have provided a utopian alternative for the damaged, disappointed and disenfranchised who have channeled much pain and aggression into liminal and life affirming ludic violence. However, this socially useful source of acceptance, belonging, positive identity affirmation, family, and love has been undermined and attacked through criminal profiling, precisely aimed at dismantling this compensatory carnival community. Without a utopian outlet, Juggalos and Juggalettes will be banished to banality of commercial and commodity culture, where they do not fit and do not want to fit. In a word, FBI profiling of ICP Juggalos and Juggalettes as a “loosely organized

hybrid gang” has undermined socially and psychologically necessary outlets, substitutes and surrogates. The real danger at hand is that damaging and possible destruction of this community may produce a self-fulfilling prophesy. For those with even the slightest insider knowledge about ICP and its Dark Carnival culture, the latter are societal insurance for peaceful, cathartic and equalitarian “good living” among the emotionally and physically wounded, the disenfranchised, not a route to criminal behavior. So far as I know, the FBI is not actively investigating all the social, cultural and familial abuses perpetrated against Juggalos that have, in the first place, attracted so many to this proto-utopian carnival community.

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