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METAPHORS OF COMMERCE:
TRANS-VALUING TRIBALISM IN YEMENI
AUDIOCASSETTE POETRY

Over the course of more than three decades, efforts to integrate theories of political economy with verbal culture have produced some of the most generative inquiries into the social meaning of discursive form. Beginning in the 1960s, sociolinguists developed what became known as the “ethnography of speaking,”¹ with the aim of considering verbal skills and performance as aspects of a socioeconomic system whose resources are apportioned according to a hierarchical division of labor. Critical of the more formalist and universalist language paradigms of Leonard Bloomfield and Noam Chomsky, these theorists argued that speaking is a socially and culturally constructed activity that is meaningful precisely in its relationship to specific systems of material organization. By the 1970s, sociologists were extending these insights to broader political theory by proposing that linguistic competence be considered a form of “capital” that is distributed in “linguistic markets.”² Through pioneering interdisciplinary efforts, inquiries into the competences of individual speakers gradually yielded to analyses of situated calculations that individuals make in exchange—calculations of quantities and kinds of return, of symbolic and economic capital, of alternative representations. Meaning was becoming as much a matter of value and power as it was an expression of relationships between, as Ferdinand de Saussure once proposed, a “sound pattern” and a “concept.”³ Indeed, in recent work in linguistic and cultural anthropology, studies of meaning have been linked even more intentionally to political economy by scholars who locate signs within social and material contexts. Words are things that circulate as signs through social, symbolic, and economic trajectories⁴ and are refracted through linguistic markets that are multiple and shifting.⁵ Building on earlier social anthropology, these studies suggest that, even within one tightly knit social community, exchange becomes meaningful only at the intersection of multiple systems of value.

The concerns with linguistic diversity, situated ethnography, and performance that have enabled scholarship over these decades provide excellent models for synchronic analysis of linguistic valuation—that is, valuation that occurs within a single chrono-

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logical framework. However, they leave us less adequately prepared to consider diachronic, historical changes in linguistic value as words are reappraised within contexts of economic, political, and ideological transformation. This paper examines how a specific discourse of language valuation in Yemen, articulated most clearly in folk poetry, has changed over the course of five decades. Long used as a persuasive political medium to influence the performance, outcome, and recollection of important events,⁶ folk poetry has been enabled and transformed since the mid-1960s by a flourishing audiocassette industry. Today, through the purchase of a single, cheap cassette and access to a friend's cassette player, a poet in a remote village can record verses that, within a week, will find their way into the homes of tens of thousands of listeners across the country. As the value of poetic words is amplified and refracted through trans-local circuits of cassette exchange, poets who reflect on such valuative changes have become spokespeople for large sectors of the Yemeni populace who are negotiating their own entries into a "global ecumene"⁷ of material, technological, human, and informational circulation.

For Yemenis, gains are certainly to be had in contributing to an emergent "public sphere."⁸ These include access to cultural and material capital, connections to the metropolises, and a sense of belonging to national and transnational communities. In a popular moral space of tribalism, however, there are also costs. Where a discursive space mediated by an amorphous public entails the loose circulation not only of objects but of words, public expression can lead to a relinquishing of control over language, a destabilization of authorship. Nowhere is such verbal vulnerability more acute than for the cassette poet, whose political voice—even while amplified on magnetic tape across the nation—becomes subject to uncertain patterns of circulation and appropriation in a radically decentralized recording market. How do cassette poets, as exemplary public speakers, confront the individual's encompassment within markets whose currencies, exchange rates, products, and potential rewards are heavily regulated by radically trans-local forces? How do reflections on the sentient self enable indexical habits that favor new kinds of public affiliation? For cassette poets as well as popular audiences in Yemen, the transition from oral production to audible cassette production can be a fraught enterprise insofar as it entails moving from embodied authorship to disembodied mediation of heard sound. This difference between the oral and the aural becomes useful to cassette poets as a ground of referential speculation about competing claims to value: while folk poets in Yemen have long debated over the social, moral, and political value of poetry, cassette poets in recent decades have increasingly appraised poems along axes of economic value. Within the expanding compass of transnational markets, how does such revaluation reflect and express the uncertainties of tribal identity in modern, mercantile Yemen? What new forms of public are required to sanction new ethical parameters of tribesmen and merchants? And how are the meanings and practical domains of mercantile transaction affected in the process?

I conduct my analysis of valuation at the level of discourse, which I define from the perspective of linguistic anthropology as patterned language use that, though culturally and socially durable over time, is articulated by particular interlocutors in particular communicative acts.⁹ Specifically, I examine a discourse of speech that is found in much folk poetry. In tracing several changes in a discourse of speech over

the past fifty years, I show how cassette poets are exploring contradictions between their own roles as tribesmen and the obligations of the profit-driven, public recording market through metaphors of speech as commerce. George Simmel submits that the device of analogy is instrumental to any process of valuation: “[a]ll proofs of the value of an object are nothing more than the necessity of recognizing for that object the same value as has been assumed . . . as indubitable for another object.”¹⁰ Metaphor is an especially imaginative form of analogy that functions centrally in acts of valuation. By establishing not simply an equivalence (*a* is like *b*) but an imagined projection from one domain to another (*a* is, on some ground, *b*), metaphor enables cassette poets to correlate playfully and subversively between “regimes of value.”¹¹ Thus, as we will see, while poetic words and economic profits may well be polarized in a moral economy, they can also both be “valued” as forms of capital. A diachronic analysis of the shifting grounds of metaphor can suggest much about how the value of poetry is calculated for poets and listeners, about how axes of valuation have been imagined relationally over time, and—as I suggest toward the end of the paper—about the effect that can accompany, and problematize, conversion from one regime of value to another.

The poems selected for consideration cover a period that stretches from the 1950s, before South Yemen’s independence from the British in 1967, to the late 1990s. The featured poets are men from the highlands regions between Aden and Sa‘a, the two largest cities in the Republic of Yemen and, prior to unity in 1990, the capitals of South Yemen (the People’s Democratic Republic of Yemen [PDRY]) and North Yemen (the Yemen Arab Republic [YAR]), respectively.¹² Most of the poets, however, are specifically from Yafi‘, the most densely settled region in southern Yemen outside Aden (approximately 176,000 inhabitants), where I conducted several years of fieldwork. Yafi‘ has a prominent place in the annals of southern Yemeni political history, a role that can be traced in part to its system of tribal administration¹³ and its proximity to the port of Aden, the main commercial and political center both before and after independence. A long history of emigration has also contributed to the region’s prominence, as Yafi‘is both within Yemen and abroad have maintained material and informational ties with relatives at home. It is through such contacts, in fact, that Yafi‘i poets, renowned not only for their strong political verses but also for their plaintive love songs, have managed in recent decades to extend their reputations throughout Yemen and among Yemeni migrant communities in the Gulf, Britain, and the United States. For as Yafi‘i entrepreneurs in Aden, Sa‘a, and Ta‘iz, as well as in Saudi Arabia and Qatar, have sought to capitalize on developments in the recording industry, folk poets—either through recordings in their highland villages or through visits to studios in the metropolises—have been granted privileged access to the latest technology and emerging consumer markets. Under such trans-local conditions of production and consumption, cassettes in particular have become an important contact site among disparate Yafi‘i communities.

The poets featured in this paper draw from a diversity of political discourses. However, tribalism (*al-qabyala*) remains one of the most dominant of these. Many of the distinctive moral terms of tribal discourses such as honor (*sharaf*), dignity (*nāmūs*), self-esteem (*‘izz*), courage (*shajā‘a*), generosity (*karāma*), autonomy, and manliness (*marjala*) feature frequently in this poetry.¹⁴ Such moral contours are traceable not

solely to the highlands origins of the poets and their preferred genres for political debate, but also to current political transformations. Since unity between North and South Yemen in 1990, tribal discourses have gained wide currency in the south after decades of determined suppression by progressive socialist administrations. While clarifying at the outset that tribalism is an appropriate framework for examining changes in folk poetry, I also caution against overcommitting to a set of “traditional” representations and practices that may well doom our insights from the start. As other authors have noted, tribalism can be attached to conventional moral spaces and political idioms only at the risk of stereotyping what is in practice a much more complex expressive domain.¹⁵ With the aim of developing an analytical approach to tribalism that is responsive to historical as well as contextual change, I suggest in this paper that we devote more meticulous attention to socially situated patterns of language use. Toward this end, I will begin by identifying the contours of a conventional tribal discourse of speech that exists in much folk poetry.

SOMATIC MEASURES OF SPEECH

Scholars of folk poetry on the Arabian peninsula have long noted poets’ inclinations to attribute symbolic import to the spoken voice. More than one hundred years ago, Charles Doughty commented in his travel account *Arabia Deserta* (1888) on the social significances that the bedouin attributed to linguistic variation: “[a]ll Beduin talk is one manner of Arabic, but every tribe has a use, *loghra*, and neighbors are ever chiders of their neighbours’ tongue.”¹⁶ In a more recent, textual analysis of Alois Musil’s collection of Rwala poetry (1928), Michael Meeker notes that “[t]aken as a whole, the Bedouin materials recorded by Musil include an impressive variety of vocal metaphors. There is then every reason to believe that the Bedouins are extraordinarily sensitive to the implications of any minor detail that suggests a form of voice.”¹⁷

In Yemen, as elsewhere on the Arabian Peninsula, vocal metaphors are instrumental to tribal discourses. Among poets, a capacity for powerful speech is considered to be a sign of personhood, of social life itself. This connection is made most explicitly through metaphors of speech as an empowering somatic experience: the tongue, teeth, lips (a “kiss”), and ears all symbolize language produced and received. Loud speech that can be heard across rugged territory indexes an honorable tribesman, while a poor poet “does not raise his voice” (*mā yirtifa‘ šawtuḥ*). Greetings, too, like a tribesman’s gunfire, are resounding and public. Speech is also tasteful, a quality evoked in many analogies between speech and food. Speech is “honey” if pleasant, or alternatively “aloe” or “poison” if a rebuke, bad news, or an insult. In being tangible, speech is quantifiable: “full” or “empty,” “heavy” or “light,” “straight” or “crooked.” Although speech is a bodily experience, it is also a point of access to powerful forces beyond the body. For poets, the language of inspiration comes from the *hājis* and *halīla*, muses that dwell in the world of *jinn*. A less orthodox tradition holds that poetic words come from God. More common are metaphors and symbols linking speech to natural processes. “As the trees bear fruit, so the tribesman holds to his word” (*al-ashjār tathmar wa-l-qabīlī min kalimatuh*). Strong words are often depicted as thunder, storms, or even destructive floods, while amorous words are a fragrant zephyr or rustling breeze.

Speech, then, is one of those privileged links between the mundane and the transcendent. The phrase “Mr. Prattle” (*abū hadara*) indicates someone who speaks without considering his words, a serious charge in Yemen. But the poets are the most expressive on the subject: the verb *yu'tajam* “he speaks Arabic poorly” can imply that someone has died; “chatter” in one poem is a sign of inhumanity and chaos, and silence can connote utter paralysis.

The following poem, composed by Tahir ʿUthman, a Yafiʿi poet and shaykh writing in the 1950s, illustrates how this discourse was employed by one poet during an era in which tribal order was undergoing severe deterioration. He uses a discourse of speech to express the power of tribesmen and the weakness of those who engage in “commerce” (*tijāra*). After a seven-line supplication to God at the outset of the *qasida*, the poet begins his diatribe against regional sultans who cooperate with the British. Their self-serving profiteering has taken a nasty toll on communal unity, as has the spread of *qāt*, a leaf that is chewed for its stimulant effects and that plays a central role in daily social gatherings in Yemen to this day. Concerned with the spread of this cash crop that was occurring in the 1950s and beginning to replace the farming of traditional crops, the poet offers a warning:

The community has been wrecked, [and] the People of Insight
 Soon they will confound tribalism
 They make their turbans [as fat as] cow heads
 A lengthy coil just for coiling's sake
 And *qāt* is what has been playing a domino game
 It got into money until it frittered it away
 Its share went to dynasties and the People of Intellect;
 Such addicts were not secluded on their own
 The People of Dillyings and of Beggars'-cords won with it
 Those in whose house you do not find a digging-spade¹⁸

In criticizing the heads of “dynasties” (*duwal*), both the sultans and the British, for their involvement in the “domino game” of cash-crop speculation, the poet invokes a long opposition in tribal ideology between the “tribesman” and the “merchant.” The tribesman’s honorable means of livelihood is agriculture, in which hard work is highly valued; engaging in financial transactions without a mediator is impugned, as is the marketplace, a domain conceptually reserved for “merchants” who trade. Other ethnographers of Yemen have thoroughly discussed variations of this conceptual antinomy between tribesmen and merchants.¹⁹ I suggest that we consider this antinomy a regime of value, inasmuch as it is used and manipulated by folk poets to calculate kinds and prices of capital.

What is interesting here is how Tahir ʿUthman constructs the model and its intersecting axes of valuation. Using a discourse of speech familiar to folk poets, he chastises corrupt leaders and colonial authorities by contrasting them with ideal tribesmen. Not only are the authorities cash-crop addicts, unlike hardworking tribesmen, but they are ineffective speakers: with ripe sarcasm, the poet describes them as contemplative, quiet sorts, “People of Insight” and of the “Intellect” who prefer complacent pondering to action. In immediately subsequent verses, the poet takes them to task most explicitly through the quintessential tribal terms of gunfire, “manhood,” and a voluminous roar that echoes from one end of Yafiʿ to the other:

The People of Stone-walls and Struggles have become destitute
 Where is the past in this? Where is manhood?
 A tremorous roar I call out, that Mt. Thamar may hear
 And Habwal, and Suwal and 'Ataf al-Samsara
 The al-Ahmar Mountain, and Mt. Gabaḥ and 'Ushar
 Who sniped with the [muscular] forearms that they had
 From Mt. Salab they will come, with the sons of Mt. Thamar
 And from Mt. Bin 'Akar to Maqsara
 And that the sultan [too] may hear, the one who seizes zeal
 And [with him] his brother Muhammad, thousands of greetings to him [see n. 18]

In this final verse, the poet salutes several sultans who have not cooperated with the British, one of them Muhammad ibn 'Aydrus al-'Afifi, who several years later would lead a concerted campaign against the British colony's largest cotton plantation.²⁰ Toward the end of the qasida, the poet launches a more explicit tirade against the British and those who collaborate with them. Using the symbolic terms of vocal power, this time metaphorically represented as a flood, he says:

And they established the ports and traded,
 And they reaped interest by it, [while] no one else touched it
 O flood! Sweep them away, till the channels overflow
 Drenching Khanfar and drenching Ga'wal [see n. 18]

Just as the true peaks of Yafi' confirmed the volubility of his "deafening roar" in the previous lines, the "flood" iconically enables the poet's vocal power by driving away the British and bringing back traditional agricultural prosperity.

This qasida from the early 1950s exemplifies how one poet uses a conventional tribal discourse of speech to frame political and economic changes from his own perspective. At this stage, the powerful voice of the tribesman is still unequivocal, although enraged by a penetration of capital that is threatening a traditional livelihood.

IDEOLOGIES OF POETIC CURRENCY

A review of a few socio-economic transformations that have occurred over the past half-century, and of the emergence of the recording industry, will help set the context for discussing metaphors of speech as commerce that became especially popular among Yafi'i cassette poets during the 1980s. Over the course of this century, the Yafi'is have been drawn from a small-scale, agricultural economy dependent on sorghum, wheat, and coffee into a market of commodity exchange based in Aden (about forty miles away). Much of this transformation was fueled by the British colonial project, which, having taken root in 1837, had converted Aden into the world's second-busiest port by 1958.²¹ While the traditional economic and social systems of most rural areas experienced accelerated deterioration (noted in Tahir 'Uthman's poem), mercantile elites in Aden were witnessing unprecedented revenues. Along with flourishing mercantile and service sectors that brought the latest products to twenty-four hour seaside emporiums, new technology fostered dramatic cultural transformations that radiated out from the city. In the years following World War II, one of the earliest recording centers in the Middle East emerged *con brio*. With new contracts and performance opportunities to be had, the traditional songster (*nashshād*) began to acquire the trappings of the city artiste (*fannān*).²²

In the highlands in and around Yafīʿ, a conservative tribal ideology had long stigmatized the professional musician and poet. The few professional musicians who lived in Yafīʿ were of lower-ranked status groups (*shuhādh*), and those higher-status tribesmen who sang or played an instrument had to make abundantly clear that they received no money for their performances. Such conservatism began to change with the growing prestige of the performing city artiste (*fannān*) through the 1950s. An increasing number of rural musicians began to be invited to recording centers in Aden. For these people especially, foreign-manufactured recording technology such as records, open-reel recorders, and the radio (which was becoming a household appliance by the mid-1950s) could give a far more cosmopolitan glossiness to performance than could earlier forms of media. Although earning profits from live performances remained as taboo as it had ever been, pinching a few dinars from the media magnates—the city slickers whom tribesmen had always had a zeal for outwitting—was less problematic. Ultimately, alongside the emergence of new spaces for artistic expression and new song genres came the production of a diacritically modern kind of capital, one whose acquisition no longer barred—indeed, by some measures, necessitated—professionalization and profit.²³

The increasing integration of poetic language with a media market generating considerable revenues was a matter of some concern to poets. The poet’s craft was changing. For some in the tribal highlands, the problem was, quite simply, money. Poetry had long been the symbolic currency of honorable tribesmen and political pundits; it could bring honor, reputation, and power, and strong recriminations had to be launched against those who used poetry for monetary gain.²⁴ Others argued that the media might be “cheapening” poetry in more consequential ways. During the late 1950s, one of Yemen’s most famous popular singers, Muhammad Murshid Naji, remarked that although an increasing number of poets were coming to him with their work, fewer of them seemed to be composing high-quality verse.

Trust me, dear reader, I and others have become embarrassed about the issue of those song composers. . . . The word “poet” has come to designate everyone who can gather scattered words from here and there and put them in a comic poetic form, without any consideration for meanings or meters. This is an odd phenomenon that has received [short-sighted] encouragement from the newspapers, radio, and negligent artists (*ghayr al-wāʿn*). The reasons for this go back—regretfully—to the sterile method applied by some of our poets who begin composing songs with insipid, faulty words.²⁵

He goes on to complain that when he asks them about the aesthetic merit of their work, they respond:

No, that’s not the issue. When I hear the names of those esteemed poets [who perform] on the radio and in public parties, and hear all the praise [about] the composition of their work, I say to myself “Why can’t I be one of them? I have the ability to be better than they are . . . to hear my name on the radio, and read it in the papers like a well-known poet who turns heads wherever he goes.

[Author’s narration] Here my tongue stammers in response, as I say with great distress: So the issue is simply that of fame?

Of course fame, what else?

[Author to reader] But if that is called “poetry”, then we are all poets!²⁶

For men like Muhammad Naji, it is the instant prestige and fame that can be had through the media, more than its monetary reward, that perverts the intentions of poets. In this passage, the author complains specifically that poetry faces unprecedented deterioration through the expansion of a media-driven public sphere that values verses not by aesthetic quality (“consideration for meanings or meters”) or by authorial integrity (poets “gather scattered words from here and there”) but by its breadth of circulation. The value of poetic speech, in other words, is being dangerously recalibrated not only in terms of monetary calculation but also in terms of loose circulation.

NEW VALUES FOR NEW PUBLICS

The material and ideological transformations that were taking place in the 1950s and 1960s were registered by poets from the highlands through a new set of terms that began to emerge in a discourse of speech. As poets sought ways to use their verses in an expanding political arena that was developing both in Aden and abroad, they were aware of new demands being made on the tribal poet: demands of nascent national communities, emerging publics, unfamiliar forms of political activism; demands on the very identity of the “tribesman.” Keenly expressing the textures of subjectivity, a discourse of speech begins both to reflect and to shape the contours of an uncertain, modern “tribesman.” Where the “tremorous roar” of the tribal poet was conventionally represented in empowering sensuous terms, the tribal voice becomes more consistently problematized. In the early 1970s, one well-known Yafi‘i poet delivered a sharp warning to party members who were betraying the goals of the revolution:

My voice is beneath [your] sandals, you gangsters,
 You instruments of ignominy, slaves to dirhams
 [There is] commerce in your land, you depraved ones
 And it drives the counter-revolutionaries like cattle²⁷

In the same verse that the poet describes “my voice” (*sawfī*) as literally crushed beneath the sandals of “gangsters,” he labels his opponents “slaves to *dirhams* [a Yemeni coin]” and to “commerce.” In no uncertain terms, it is mercantile capitalism, represented as a rancher who compels counter-revolutionary forces to behave like animals, that vitiates the poet’s voice. Although the poet here is just as concerned as earlier poets with the negative influences of commerce on tribal life, his voice is hardly the enabling force of the ideal tribesman. The vitiation of the voice by commerce is more explicitly represented than it was in earlier poetry. After a section describing the goals of the party conference, the poet turns to slam Egypt, whose political links to North Yemen had brought it in to conflict with South Yemen. The poet’s terms are revealing: he chooses the Suez Canal as his target, calling it a “canal of busyness” (*qanāt at-tazāhum*) that is at once a den of calumniators, “quick to spread in the hazy air / Rending the winds, they go, transitory / Imagination in imagination, dreams of a sleeper.” The work of the merchants “in the canal of busyness” serves to diffuse not only the poet’s voice but also the merchants’ own voices. Commercial interests fueled by capitalism are making speech—and, by equation, the political aspirations of dedicated Yemeni revolutionaries—evanescent.

Of course, such vitriol against mercantile interests was not simply an expression of tribal ideology that endured unchanged during the revolution leading to independence in 1967. Through the 1950s and 1960s, nationalist ideas entered Yemen through the labor unions and intellectual circles in Aden and through the tremendously popular Egyptian radio program “The Voice of the Arabs” (*Sawt al-‘Arab*). As national newspapers such as the *al-Amal*, *al-‘Amil*, *al-Masir*, and *al-Sharara* expanded their readerships, poets played an important role in articulating Marxist resentment against the mercantile imperialism of those in power.²⁸ Idris Hanbala, a leader of the Aden Trade Union Congress, earned a reputation for strong political poetry by publishing in newspapers. In one of his most famous poems, “The Voice of Conscience” (*Sawt al-Damir*), written while he was imprisoned for political activity, Hanbala warned the British authorities: “Careful, for the people today have become conscious / of the plots of conspirators and merchants.” Such views were developed more systematically in poems, essays, and short stories in such literary magazines as *The Future* (*al-Mustaqbal*), edited by the communist leader and well-known poet ‘Abdalla Ba Dhib.²⁹ As Communist Party leaders consolidated power in the decade of radical social and cultural reforms that followed independence, “uprising” (*intifāda*) campaigns were launched throughout the countryside urging the “peasant” (*fallāh*) to rise up against the “feudal conspirator” (*al-iqtā‘*) who owned land and small-scale businesses. Taking its cue from Mao Zedong’s “Green Revolution,” South Yemen’s leadership viewed cultural reforms as central to the revolutionary project.³⁰ Through the efflorescence of youth committees, literary clubs, popular-cultural journals, and folklore conferences, poets became influential vanguards of popular fervor rallied against mercantile interests.

Although the contours of national ideology, of public culture as it developed after independence, were assiduously disseminated by members of the National Liberation Front throughout the rural highlands in the decade after independence, not all folk poets were equally keen to adopt the rhetoric of the day. Although the banning of tribal revenge killings and outdated customary law was generally lauded by all, radical punitive measures enacted against shaykhly families and traditional religious elites caused considerable popular resentment against the state.³¹ The systematic suppression of tribal expressive culture was even more controversial.³² At the same time, ideological momentum against mercantilism was somewhat less convincing for some highland communities. Not only were land-ownership and sharecropping arrangements generally less exploitative than they were in the lower, more fertile plains; a high rate of emigration from the highlands to metropolises in Yemen as well as Saudi Arabia and the Gulf countries had done much to persuade highlanders of the material rewards of more liberal market economies. Such socio-economic factors legislated some caution against the radical reforms of Adeni ideologues. Although they were thoroughly committed to the revolution, many highland folk poets were disposed not only to retailoring, rather than abandoning, tribal expressive forms, but to seeking synthesis between the experiences of migrant laborers in the metropolises and traditional values at home.

Opportunities for such synthesis became more frequent during the 1980s. The forced resignation of PDRY President ‘Abd al-Fattah Isma‘il in 1980 and his subsequent replacement by Muhammad ‘Ali Nasir provided an opening for more moderate elements to begin implementing a range of political, cultural, and economic reforms.

In the months leading to Isma'īl's downfall, the party sought to give more recognition to regional identities and to enfranchise larger sectors of the rural populace.³³ At the same time, constraints on freedom of expression began to be somewhat alleviated at both the local and national levels. Folk poets and local cultural organizations, for example, were given greater leeway to organize and perform traditional folk poetry (such as the tribal *zāmil* poem) and dancing beyond the auspices of rigid party censorship.³⁴ Combined with these political and cultural transformations, economic policies were revised to encourage greater private enterprise and foreign investment. As import restrictions were eased, an increasing diversity of products began to appear in urban and rural markets, giving consumers a more immediate sense of connection to national metropolises and expanding global markets.³⁵

In the wake of liberal civil reforms and expanding markets in the early 1980s, then, rural populations throughout southern Yemen were confronted with an exciting and confusing barrage of transecting expressive possibilities. A traditional ideology that had maintained conceptual distinctions between the “tribesman” and the “merchant” was becoming simultaneously more relevant and less sustainable. On the one hand, discourses of tribal identity that had been effectively banned for more than a decade were gradually, if tentatively, re-emerging in popular public celebrations, official events, weddings, and so forth. These discourses were accompanied with signs that the administration might be seeking to promote pluralism, if not in government, then in public culture. On the other hand, economic reforms were complicating traditional distinctions between tribal and market mores, a trend that led some analysts to wonder whether tribalism would gradually lose ground to market forces.³⁶ Within such a context of discursive transformation, Southern Yemenis debated in daily forums how to seek a balance between the “authenticity” (*aṣāla*) of the ancestral past and the contemporaneity (*mu'āṣira*) of the future.

It was precisely in this expanding sphere of public discourse that certain cadres of political cassette poets were able to provide vital perspective on the mediation between the tribe and the market. As men who had acquired much experience, especially before independence, in using poetry toward political ends—notably, in dispute mediation and public oratory—many folk poets saw distinct advantages to publicizing a more regionally inflected and markedly tribal expressive space that might contend with the state's models of corporate affiliation and public discourse. This critical angle was especially the case where poets had connections with Yemeni cassette producers in Saudi Arabia and the Gulf states. These migrant producers were often some of the strongest critics of the socialist left, an orientation that derived from their beneficial experiences with market economies, from their somewhat nostalgic view of pre-independence tribal life, and from their backgrounds: many belonged to families of pre-independence tribal elites whose property had been confiscated and members exiled in the turmoil of independence. Given even the faint breeze of political, economic, and cultural change that was stirring, increasing numbers of folk poets and migrant producers saw the cheap, easily reproducible, and difficult-to-censor cassette technology as an especially useful device for disseminating political views among tens of thousands of listeners.³⁷ Undoubtedly, one of the most successful of such cassette poets, whose life I have most closely documented and whose works I will discuss later, was the Yafi'i poet Shayif al-Khalidi (1932–98). From an extremely modest

highland family that was of neither shaykhly nor sayyid descent, Khalidi spent most of his young adulthood migrating between the highlands, where he worked as a pastoralist and used his skills in poetry to mediate between disputants, and the port of Aden, where he loaded and unloaded cargo. In 1979, however, a few months before the government shakeup of 1980, he worked out an arrangement with a Yafi'i musician living in Qatar, Husayn 'Abd al-Nasir, to begin releasing regular cassettes featuring an older-style tribal genre of poetry that had been all but banned by party ideologues since independence. In this genre, called *bid' wa jiwāb* "initiation and response" poetry, one poet composes a qasida in writing and sends it to a recipient, who then composes a response qasida that matches the former in verse rhyme and metrical structure.³⁸ Although the *bid' wa jiwāb* has a long history as an epistolary genre, it has become one of the most popular genres of cassette poetry due in no small part to its explicit political focus and its head-to-head format, the combination of which has set the stage for exciting national debates between poets across the country. Indeed, through the recordings of his *bid' wa jiwāb* exchanges with Northern poets, Khalidi would become a regional hero by the late 1980s and, after unity, a household name throughout much of the South.³⁹

For highland cassette poets and musicians who were seeking alternatives to statist models of public culture, then, refurbishing traditional tribal poetic genres and discourses was politically expedient. Nevertheless, serious difficulties existed with broadcasting tribal poetry through the cassette market. According to the popular tribal ideology, which I mentioned earlier, the egalitarian moral sphere of the tribesman varied in inverse proportion to that of the merchant. By these terms, the political verses of the tribal poet were valued for their impartiality and justice and were removed at an ideally maximal distance from the merchant's (supposed) interests in monetary calculation, profit, and personal interest.⁴⁰ Folk poets who recorded political verses in a commercially oriented cassette industry, then, had to adopt a number of precautionary measures to ensure that popular audiences understood they were not benefitting financially from their recordings. These measures included rarely recording and marketing their own poetry, instead leaving such tasks to musicians and studio owners; publicly disavowing payment from musicians or cassette producers to whom they gave their poems; and refusing gifts from admirers, official or otherwise. To be sure, returns did come, however discreetly, and often in the form of interest-free "gifts." Rumors that spread of extraordinary cash payments and material largesse further compromised the political integrity of cassette poets. A few folk poets I met had actually refused to be recorded commercially, for fear of tarnishing their reputations. They joined other critics in charging that cassette poets used a "language of the market" (*luḡhat al-sūq*) that was linguistically, aesthetically, and morally inferior to the higher aims of the decorous (*mu'addab*) and just (*'ādil*) poet.

The commercialization of the cassette industry could cause particular problems for tribal poets who, as Steven Caton has argued, were concerned with constructing representations of themselves, or others, as ideal tribesmen.⁴¹ Cassette poets who sought to stylize themselves as ideal tribal speakers had to reconcile the integrity of their verses and their identities with their involvement in the "market." In the following section, I suggest that poets express and explore tensions between the "tribesman" and the "merchant" through innovative metaphors of speech. By using metaphor to

transpose playfully different axes of speech valuation, poets develop meta-commentary on their own entry into a cassette-poetry market. Ultimately, I argue, through critical self-appraisal they become spokespeople for highland audiences who are confronting, and attempting to negotiate ways past, contradictions between traditional moral spaces of the tribe and the market.

METAPHORS OF THE MARKET

Over the course of the 1980s, highland cassette poets continued to rely heavily on a conventional discourse of speech to evaluate people and events. A number of the most prominent poets, however, introduced metaphors that compare words to commerce, currency, and the market.⁴² The cassette series orchestrated by the Yafi'i musician Husayn 'Abd al-Nasir, the longest series of folk-poetry cassettes in Yemen, provides one of the best archives for analyzing new valuative strategies adopted by popular poets, and most of the following poems are taken from his series.⁴³ Having begun cooperating with the poet Shayif al-Khalidi in the late 1970s, 'Abd al-Nasir released cassette no. 108 in 1998, averaging one new release every three months for approximately two decades. Although many of the poets featured on the series are from highland regions of the former North Yemen, most are from Yafi'. In one of the earliest of *bid' wa jiwāb* exchanges featured on the series, the poet Ahmad al-Sunbahi, just across the North-South border from Yafi', sends an initiation qasida to Khaledi, immediately after the forced resignation and subsequent exile of South Yemeni President 'Abd al-Fattah Isma'il in April 1980. To discuss the sordid political scheming that seems to be taking place, the North Yemeni poet begins with an analogy in which the captain of a merchant-marine ship has lost his bearings. More grave, he has lost his ring: "Sunbahi [said]: The ring fell into the sea and its depths / Today's friend slipped away, what will follow in his place?" Several verses later, he exclaims:

It was not on my hand. If it dropped, Lord knows I won't forget its pain
See how the nitwit set off, fleeing his countrymen?
What he had was a forged ring, its loss was cheap
He [would have] lost it or broken it, if he didn't sell it first
It's of no concern. The merchant could not guarantee the price in the market
He who brought along a sordid thing, it is his reputation that is sordid⁴⁴

After comparing the former South Yemeni president's administration to a "forged ring" that was "cheap" and "sordid," the poet evokes a contrast with what is valued in the next verse:

He couldn't sell what is guaranteed, whose price is fixed by everyone
Cheap if imported to the market, yet whose price is most dear [see n. 44]

Perhaps national honor, perhaps honesty, the poet's reference is ambiguously connotative. Its value, however, is precisely denoted not solely in oppositional terms to what is "cheap" and lacks any "guarantee," but also through an exquisite paradox: "Cheap if imported to the market, yet whose price is most dear." By suggesting that the symbolic capital of good politics converts poorly in the market, the poet foregrounds for listeners the existence of two axes of valuation, each diacritically inverse to the other: what is "dear" in tribal value is "cheap if imported to the market."

In this and other exchanges during the early 1980s, the inverse relationship between these axes of valuation became especially generative for sparring folk poets who sought to attach moral implications to the economic orientations and fiscal policies of one another's administrations. In attacking the Southern leadership for its conservative views of entrepreneurship and tight monitoring of imports and exports, Northern poets could easily shift to implications of niggling avarice and lack of generosity, which are so important to tribal leadership. Likewise, Southern poets who criticized the North for its liberal economic orientation and its reliance on aid from Saudi Arabia could, in the same breath, launch charges of profligate and immoral behavior. In a similar fashion, metaphors of the market were immensely useful in discussing the immorality of politics. Self-interested politicians were morally impugned by virtue of their involvements with the material calculations, price wars, speculations, and chicanery of "merchants."

But such metaphors also easily worked to facilitate discussions about the exchange of poetry itself and the value of poetic speech on the market. As the 1980s progressed and cassette exchanges between North and South Yemeni poets grew in frequency, poets increasingly framed speech used as commerce. In 1983, when Khalidi won a seat on the local popular committee, the Northern poet Ahmad al-Qayfi (nicknamed "Abu Zayd") released a poem in which he discussed the "market" as a place where Khalidi and other poets could rise to fame through bribery and charlatanry:

Bribery from him comes first, and the rest follows
Get ready for those who remained hidden, rumors have not yet become clear
And Kuhali with you, tell him to pray and to prostrate
Like you once did long ago, in deep-seated submission
And if he remains in the market, playing and dancing
In the place of Khalidi who now has it: What a melee!
A merchant of nuts, Kuhali ["Bin Salim"], according to what we hear
Don't claim that Abu Zayd just gathered [the news] from the street⁴⁵

The market, as a locale of loose goods and words, is a place where religious piety becomes lax, says Qayfi, and where poets play and dance with abandon. Other poets describe the loose words of the market in terms of high finance and nefarious corporate deals. One Northern poet, curious about news of sinister political events circulating in Aden, instructs his imaginary messenger to question Khalidi (nicknamed "Abu Lawza") who, as a chief executive officer, should know the scoop:

And ask him about what happened and try
To learn concealed news that agitates the mind
Nasser quarter and the news channels circulate it
I warned him about such news and words.
Now, tell me what you have done, rug merchant
I urge you to clarify for me, you chief executive officer
They say, Abu Lawza, that you have become a contractor
So that you can exploit the venture capitalists
Half of it came to you forbidden and spoiled
And the other half came from a charlatan partner
As well as from a respected merchant who obtained
A certificate of bribery and banter⁴⁶

In these verses, Khalidi is described as a “rug merchant,” a “chief executive officer,” and a “contractor,” and the poets with whom he works “capitalists,” a “partner,” and a “merchant.” Their common currency, moreover—poetry itself—is depicted as “forbidden and spoiled” merchandise.

These verses also suggest how easily accusations of plagiarism, and more generally accusations of authorial dishonesty, could be incorporated within market metaphors. In telling Khalidi that both “halves” of his verses were imported to him in corrupt form by charlatan merchants, Qayfi implies that Khalidi’s poetry is not his own. For earlier generations of folk poets, of course, borrowing and swapping others’ verses had been an acknowledged practice in an oral tradition in which such devices as formulas, citation, and reported speech were instrumental and appreciated. “Plagiarism” (*sarqa*) had largely been the concern of literary scholars and poets who composed in classical verse.⁴⁷ By the mid-1980s, however, folk poets began to express a concern about plagiarism, a concern that can be traced to a number of factors that include recording opportunities for rural folk poets that expanded after independence; the spread of education and, with it, new concepts of authorship; the popularization of state-sponsored discourses on “folklore” and “authenticity”; the codification of intellectual-property laws; and, especially after unity in 1990, the expansion of publishing opportunities that accompanied a general easing of constraints on the freedom of expression throughout Yemen. On the heels of the 1994 Yemeni war, Husayn ‘Abd al-Nasir released one cassette (no. 99) whose popularity throughout Yemen eclipsed that of any previous release. On side two of the cassette, Khalidi dismisses the accusations of a poet from the Hashid tribe—the largest tribal group in northern Yemen—by saying he was absent during the battle and could not know the truth of events. Using the notion of plagiarism to impugn his opponent’s talents, Khalidi describes the Hashedi poet as a discount shopper who has acquired his “goods” from elsewhere:

Whoever didn’t attend in the encompassing gathering
Like Abu Qays who was absent, seeking lostness
He didn’t hear the roar of the tank or the report of a canon
He didn’t have anything but to brag in the name of the group
God call you to account, you procurer of desultory goods
From where in the market did you bring such goods?⁴⁸

In another catchy cassette poem released several years later, another poet accuses an acquaintance, who has gained considerable fame through a recent cassette, of stealing his verses. He instructs his imaginary messenger:

Tell him: Silence, you fledgling! You still have no feathers!
Don’t think that everything will come to you haphazardly.
Three points you obtained through bribery
You became “a rising brilliance of the East,” but without the points atop the *shīm*⁴⁹

In the final verse, the poet produces a clever pun between two Arabic words, noting that the word *shāriq* “a rising brilliance from the East” is transmogrified into *sāriq* “a thief” when the three points atop the first consonant are removed and the Arabic letter [*sh*] becomes the letter [*s*] (*shāriq* becomes *sāriq*). In the next verses, the poet adds “Others than yourself ship cargo (*yashḥan*) to you, how it clouds people’s visions / While you have neither a German (rifle) nor a flintlock” (see n. 49). In this manner,

the poet not only makes explicit a particular homology between mercantilism and problematic speech—plagiarism is a form of commerce in which authorial agency is especially compromised. He also contrasts speech used as commerce with speech valued according to the terms of a conventional tribal discourse of speech. The poet, as a merchant, lacks a traditional supply of tribal weapons.

Metaphors of market, then, become multiply indexical for cassette poets, as aspects of political deal-making and bribery, ineffective economic plans and fiscal policies, national betrayal, loose goods and lax morals, sinister news, and plagiarism are all projected metaphorically into a domain of commerce in which moral standards and identities are dangerously convertible. It is a discourse of speech, however, that is drawn on most consistently to implicate poets, as performers of words and deeds, in the shifting currencies of sordid market politics. Indeed, I suggest that it is at the level of speech that some of the most generative insights are made by cassette poets into the contours of transforming subjectivities and the tensions between “ideal” and “mercantile” tribesmen.

RE-ACCOUNTING FOR SPEECH AS COMMERCE

Through market metaphors, poets largely reaffirmed the valuation of words as they were calibrated in a conventional tribal ideology. Poetry was the currency of honorable tribesmen and political pundits; it was a symbolic capital that was inversely correlated with economic advancement. Nevertheless, by couching poetic speech in terms of commerce poets also opened the avenue for considering the tribesman in the market, for better or for worse. Rather than consigning the tribes to the “dustbin of history,” a program that many Marxist ideologues advocated after independence, cassette poets were contemplating radical revisions of tribal identity in an effort to bridge what they and their ancestors had known of tribal life and what was rapidly becoming a more capital-intensive political, economic, and cultural world. Many of the cassette poets producing poetry in the Southern highlands continued to find tribal discourses meaningful and rhetorically effective. However, in the wake of the radical purges of tribal identity that had occurred, Southern poets, and those who corresponded with them, were especially compelled to ask questions about how tribalism might be integrated with the revolutionary (*thawrī*) and contemporary (*mu'āṣira*). In reviewing the prominent cassette poems later, I argue that such poets—although adhering in many respects to the terms of a more conventional discourse of speech—simultaneously defended their portrayals of speech as commerce. A discourse of speech as commerce articulated a tribalism that, precisely in its hybridity and uncertainty, expressed for many fans a sense of their own positions in changing linguistic markets.

In the following *bid' wa jiwāb* exchange, released on cassette in 1984, poets affiliate with the market much more explicitly than in earlier poetry. In sending another qasida to Khalidi to warn him against the minefields of socialism, the poet Sunbahi uses a metaphor in which poets are compared to traders in the market—in this case, a local grain market. Sunbahi avers that Khalidi has manipulated grain stocks to his own ends, an especially prickly accusation given Khalidi's recent and extraordinary success in drawing poets from around the country to respond to him through cassette exchanges. As in earlier poetry, the poet evokes two axes of valuation: he describes the

“grain”—poetry—as “expensive,” on the one hand, and as auctioned cheaply by Khalidi’s underhandedness, on the other. Curiously, however, Sunbahi’s metaphor of the market begins with a reversal of roles. It is he who is counting coins:

I’ll sit and hold you to account, Bu Luwaz, by fils’ and dinars
 Including the *‘awdhalī* seed and the wheat that you swiped from the winnowing ground
 Today, grain is expensive, and you divided [it] among merchants
 You auctioned off whatever was in the market, and shoved what was paltry to the corners
 I already told you to reckon cautiously, to prevent loss and pilfering
 And return the seed that you let spill to the cat and mouse⁵⁰

Sunbahi’s unapologetic comparison of his own work as a poet to that of a merchant relocates the value of his poetry on an axis somewhat below that of ideal tribal value. In his response to Sunbahi, Khalidi defends himself against charges of underhandedness in his success as a poet. However, rather than chafing at Sunbahi’s revaluation, he effectively confirms it, describing himself as a merchant who, although practicing in the market, can regulate his words and deeds through moral behavior:

Tell me, what grain did I swipe from the winnowing ground?
 What did I shove [aside] or distribute among the merchants?
 I only eliminate that which I see to be rotten or harmful
 [We] will procure whatever may be lacking in the market, even if pricey
 [And] whoever doesn’t care for his keep or lets the cows eat it
 It is a loss if it is taken, it causes me harm and injuries
 I am content, I’ll keep [what I have of] clean grain, I won’t put it on the scales
 [Whoever] loves malevolence, his security is erased or will catch fire [see n. 50]

In contrast to “whoever loves malevolence” and wastes his resources, Khalidi describes himself as merchant of moral economy, neither a spendthrift nor a miser. Ultimately, it is by reinscribing the market within a traditional sphere of morality that these poets imagine a space, a value, for the poetic speech used as commerce.

In an increasing number of cassette poems, metaphors of the market become instrumental in enabling poets to consider how a recalibration of poetic speech along an axis of market value—a positive assessment of speech as commerce—may be possible under certain moral conditions. In the following qasida, released on cassette in 1987, the poet Bin Karut acknowledges that the “market” of cassette-poetry exchange must be entered. Positions of leadership and power are at issue. Entry must be done only with care, however, because deceit is everywhere:

I know the market and I carefully reckon every coming thing
 I enter only after I have thought about how to launch attack.
 First I came to you willingly, but now I come under compulsion
 I can not withdraw. Don’t you see how I would be culpable?
 How can you want me to retreat, when Shayef [al-Khalidi] invites it?
 [A] master of the confederacy who made his supporters support him
 Every time he erected a pillar, it eventually collapsed
 On the [very] day he laid its foundations. And I wonder:
 which is the leader and which is the destroyer?⁵¹

The poet must enter the market to defend his reputation and prevent his challenger, Khalidi, from winning their debate. But the poet is especially motivated by his own

moral obligation to expose Khalidi's apparent duplicity. He asks listeners: is he a "leader" or a "destroyer"? In the verses that follow, which I will not cite here, the poet develops his accusations of deceit by invoking the scene of a corrupt courtroom, where forced affidavits are procured by a Janus-faced judge. Under such conditions, his entry into the market is a matter not only of moral but of civic responsibility, where justice and national pride are at stake.

By stipulating the conditions under which a poet may enter the market, then, cassette poets intimate a change in the relations between axes of linguistic valuation. By and large, the dominant tribal regime of value continues to inform poets' discussions: an axis of value that is informed by notions of honor and of the disinterested gift continues to be correlated negatively with a mercantile axis on which the use of words for monetary gain is valued. Nevertheless, where metaphors of speech as commerce are inflected with irony ("I know the market") or with self-parody ("We will procure whatever may be lacking"), a certain double voicing is obtained, a "sideways glance"⁵² at a mercantile tribesman that subverts conventional value systems. In such moments, valuation along a tribal axis of value becomes correlated positively with mercantile value.⁵³ Through poetic acts of transvaluation in which tribal speech "cashes in" without moral reprobation, systems of capital that were once polarized become interpolated by a ground of equivalence that at once problematizes evaluative boundaries and destabilizes exchange rates.

I suggest that a pragmatic model of transvaluation can be especially generative in enabling us to think about how domains of valuation are continually recalibrated in social practice. In the broadest terms, such a model foregrounds rather than brackets the dynamism (aesthetic, contextual, historical) that must be accounted for in any analysis of valuation. The ongoing, practical variations and inversions of value suggest not only that axes of value are defined only in relation to one another,⁵⁴ but that regimes of value themselves co-exist in contextual and historical fluctuation.⁵⁵ As Arjun Appadurai notes, distinctions between "gifts" and "commodities" are at best two ends of a single continuum that is mediated by social interaction.⁵⁶ Such a model is perhaps most useful inasmuch as it suggests how relationships between axes of valuation are continually negotiated in discursive practice and by way of specific tropes. By playfully incorporating metaphors of market into a conventional discourse of speech, Yemeni cassette poets develop metacommentary on the extraordinary ambiguities, contradictions, ironies, and compatibilities between tribesmen and merchants.

While cassette poets have been exceptionally innovative in portraying the tribesman as a citywise trickster, their insights are arguably part of a broader popular admiration these days for the talent of "cleverness" (*dhikā'*). In its positive connotations, *dhikā'* implies a kind of "shrewdness" (*shāṭira*), a tried-and-true resourcefulness that involves "reason" (*aql*) sharpened by alacrity. One group of young men, explaining how their shaykhly ancestors had been "clever" (*adhkīyā*), even told me that the term was related to truthfulness (*ṣidq*). Its more common, vernacular usage tends more toward a number of pejorative connotations, including "roguery" and "duplicity" (*qal-buh yalawwan*). From this perspective, cleverness is a dangerous threat to candor and friendship (*ṣadāqa*). Most of the time, those who were spoken of as "clever" had a kind of street smarts that tended to be expressed in terms of the rural and the urban. Stories of clever deeds involved those from the countryside who could manipulate the

labyrinthine codes of the city, foremost among them the law (*qanūn*), to their own advantage. Such individuals were underdogs who lived by their wits and who were esteemed in terms not of honor and social status but of an alternative moral economy. I suggest that it is this same alternative system of valuation, one that in popular usage is no less “tribal,” that is also referenced by a discourse of speech as commerce. To use poetic speech in the marketplace is the token of the trickster savant, one who can invoke a positive correlation between tribal and mercantile value, then revoke it.

SOMATIC REACTIONS TO SPEECH AS COMMERCE

Conversions between axes of value are never neat. They exact residual costs, if not from the clarity or meaning of the message, then from the producers themselves. These costs are psychological, emotional, and corporeal. Raymond Williams suggests that attention to such costs—that is, attention to the slippage between normative systems of behavior and thought—can help identify pre-rational “structures of feeling” that can tell us a great deal about how broader social processes work on and through the individual.⁵⁷ In this final section, I explore how metaphors of speech as commerce in the market express cassette poets’ “feelings” about uncertain transformations in the role of the poet in a modern market economy. In the context of a flourishing cassette-poetry industry that can itself be seen as a symptom of broader, transnational flows of goods, human labor, technology, and information, cassette poets’ own subjectivities become acutely foregrounded. I suggest that cassette poets explore this subjectification by attending to the *somatic* costs of speech as commerce, and that by exploring these costs they enable audiences to reflect on both the losses and the gains that can result from evaluative slippage.

Let us first consider a *bidʿ wa jiwāb* exchange, composed in 1986, between Khalidi and the Yafiʿi poet Bin Yahya, a well-known, older folk poet whose verses are little circulated due in a large part to their more classical language register and density of expression. Khalidi portrays his own poems as much-traded and ostensibly, in comparison with Bin Yahya’s, less valuable. In the following verses, Khalidi appraises the value of poetry according to its worth on the market:

And I saw that some of his shells, pearls and jewels:
They are not like my jewels
Not a commodity, imported to port towns, did he create
Something typical and commercial.
I have a provincial product, rank nine or ten
Imported to me by a wealthy merchant . . .
While Bin Yahyā has the best of original and opulent makes
Expensive to the buyer⁵⁸

In these verses, Khalidi explicitly frames his own poetry as “something typical and commercial” and contrasts it with the more “original” poems of Bin Yahya. From the vantage point of a conventional discourse of speech, Khalidi offers the highest compliment to his correspondent, a long-time friend and neighbor. Nevertheless, he proceeds in the following verses with a critical clencher, a quandary about Bin Yahya’s poetic thrift:

He can't permit its sale to any merchant
 Kept close, not revealed
 I don't know whether he is protective of it, is an outright miser
 Or a prejudiced hoarder
 Who doesn't want people in parties or gat-chews to enjoy the evening "free" [see n. 58]

Through insinuations of avarice, especially incriminating when a tribesman's generosity is a mark of honor, a subtle, ironic inversion of valuation is intimated. Even though Bin Yahya's verses are more valuable for their rare aesthetic, it is Khalidi's verses—popularized on the commercial market through cassettes—that assure his social vitality and widespread success. Indeed, by concluding with the English word "free" (*farī*), perhaps picked up from the British during their presence in Aden or even from Cable News Network television received by satellite dish, Khalidi ribs Bin Yahya with a loan word that indexes his own cosmopolitan capital even while it winks at transgressive Western attitudes toward enjoyment.

What is especially interesting here is how Khalidi's revaluation, true to a conventional tribal discourse of speech, is measured and expressed as much in bodily as in commercial terms. Not only are Khalidi's own poems depreciated in economic terms as "cheap," "typical," "commercial," and "provincial" while Bin Yahya's are "expensive" and "opulent"; they also lack any characteristics of taste, smell, beauty, or sound. Contrast Khalidi's appraisal of Bin Yahya's verse with those made by poets who receive poems, in the typical tribal fashion, with sensual relish:

Welcome to the words that you proffered
 Shaykh of generosity, who is as generous as you?
 Sweet nectar arrived, and I savored in it
 Even if it is from the bitter cactus, a bile of the spleen

Welcome to the script of Abu Lawza and to what has been composed
 Of rhymes, how the air still burns from their flames

Welcome to the Qutaybi and to his initiation poem that reached us
 He honored me with a flower, so I will return sweet perfume and incense⁵⁹

In describing poems as a "commodity" (*biḍā'a*) cut and dried, Khalidi keys listeners to the vocabulary of commerce that appraises poetic speech along an axis of mercantile value. Khalidi underscores such valuation, moreover, by explicitly representing words as distanced from the body. After remarking that his "commodity" is "imported to port towns," he reiterates in the next line that his "product" is "imported to him from a wealthy merchant." By contrast, his friend's poems are described as "original" rather than "imported" or "typical" and are "kept close, not revealed." In fact, Khalidi remarks that Bin Yahya refuses even to let any merchant purchase his poems, thereby calibrating them to a value suited to commodity exchange and alienating them from his personal protection. Where such thrift might once have been prized in a conventional tribal ideology that valued speech in terms of somatic experience, Khalidi implies that such valuation has become, quite literally, counterproductive. Ironically, tribal poetry has become most highly appraised by the laws of price and circulation, at a distance from the body. The alienated word can be a form of generosity.

Bin Yahya's response qasida effectively acknowledges Khalidi's evaluative frame.

After marveling at Khalidi's success as a cassette star, Bin Yahya contemplates his own lack of voice and social death, conveyed through scenes of his late arrival to a poetic event and his lonely drowning in a lake:

If the summoner called, the poets give praise to you
 In our present time
 As for me, I arrived late and you earlier
 How wonderful is the early bird
 You immersed me into a lake, and for shame, you are skilled [at swimming]
 [Though] my dear friend does not feel a thing⁶⁰

Bin Yahya confides that in "our present time," Khalidi's poetry has won greater praise from poets, and Khalidi is therefore the first to arrive at social gatherings. While confirming the value of Khalidi's commodified and marketed poetry, however, Bin Yahya also laments the cost of conversion in bodily terms. Khalidi's use of poetic speech as commerce has literally deprived him of his senses: he cannot feel for his friend's profound sorrow.

Other poets who used cassettes and coped with the implications of poetry in the market through the 1980s and 1990s expressed similar concerns about the costs passed on to the body and the senses by poetic speech used as commerce. One cassette poet who released a *qasida* in 1984 warns Khalidi not to assume that the support he received from other poets across the South is reliable:

If you brought them to the market at the time of selling, you would lose
 Not a meager *qirsh* would they bring to you nor even its price
 The praising and chasing increases and repeats itself
 No one withdraws or decreases the babble⁶¹

The empty "praising" and "chasing" featured in cassette poetry debates are like a cheap Yemeni coin (*qirsh*): they are worthless. In order to suggest in the following verses that cassette poets only hinder the aims of the socialist revolution, the poet personifies the revolution as a woman named "Samira" and describes her as becoming blinded and misled by a party of ranting prattlers:

If Samira sires iniquitous spawn
 Whose goal is to draw her into a hole
 [Or if she] clings to them like the blind yearning for images
 They will not hear, even though she walks in the dark [see n. 61]

Unlike the ideal tribal poets whose clear voice echoes voluminously from peak to peak and who can hear those far away, poets who babble in the marketplace are dumb; those who follow them are blind. Poetic speech as commerce, implies the poet, dangerously debilitates the senses.

For some poets, especially those choosing to represent themselves in the tribal idiom, the consequences of speech as commerce are less anaesthetizing than they are simply painful. In the verses of the first poet discussed in this article—the tribal Shaykh Tahir 'Uthman, who composed in the 1950s—the threat of "those who established the ports and commerce" was countered with a "tremorous roar" that shook the mountains, deltas, and listeners. Although his voice was still unequivocal in its volume and rage, his violent reaction to the spread of mercantile interests conveyed some of

the desperate somatic energy that poets already felt was needed to thwart the penetration of commerce into tribal life. As later poets become more acutely subject to the deterioration of tribal administrative and moral codes, the painful effects of commerce on the body became more explicitly represented. In verses sent to the poet Sonbahi (cited earlier), Khalidi describes his own “harm and injuries” (*adhā w-aḍrār*) when poetic words are immorally wasted in the market:

[And] whomever doesn't care for his keep or lets the cows eat it
It is a loss if it is taken, it causes me harm and injuries⁶²

More elaborate expositions of the pain caused by poetic speech as commerce are developed throughout Khalidi's other poems. In 1981, he began a *qasida* with the following verses:

al-Khalidi says: O my spleen, ride easy on the breeze
Don't prattle with empty chatter or confine me with talk
Respond with song, my companion, linger through the evening, O companion of beauty⁶³

Here the poet invokes his muse according to a conventional discourse of speech in which powerful language is metaphorically embodied. He urges his “spleen” to give him meaningful, sonorous, and cheerful poetry. In the next hemistich, we learn why the poet is worried that his muse should give him “empty chatter”: commerce threatens to convert the value of his poetry to an alternative axis of valuation. He reassures his muse that:

No one is at the refinery to burn you in crude oil
It is I who will apply the fire and brand to the point of pain
I'm the doctor of heads, illness, and bone injuries [see n. 63]

In explaining that the “refinery” will not convert “crude oil” for the market, the poet consoles his muse that its own natural resource, “song,” will remain untouched by commercial interests. Despite the poet's good intentions, however, the link between poetic speech and commerce still produces pain. In this case, Khalidi—the poet famous for his fiery responses—achieves an ironic twist: the pain is his opponents', not his, and “crude oil” is a symbol for his own incendiary verses, not his opponents'. Nevertheless, the poet's attention to the corporeal costs of linguistic revaluation suggests in no uncertain terms that the tribal poet (whoever he may be) is acutely vulnerable to commercial penetration.

A final extract of a *qasida*, released on cassette to wide popular acclaim in 1995 by the Yafi'i poet Yahya 'Ali al-Sulaymani, illustrates the extent to which many other cassette poets have been exploring, in perhaps increasingly explicit ways, the powerful effects of commerce on the tribal voice. The *qasida* begins with the poet awaking from a nightmare. The nightmare turns out to be the entry of “coins” (*biyās*) into tribal life, symbolized by the “people of principles, stature, dignity, and honor”:

Brother Yahya bin 'Ali [said] as the rain brought drowsiness
After the beautiful dreams came the nightmare
A ghastly nightmare made me self-constrained
Strange images that have neither encyclopedia nor dictionary
Cure us from it, my people, sense today such sensations
O people of principles, stature, dignity and honor!

We said "God have mercy," how many coins is your fortune worth
Because coins have everything to do with tangible reality⁶⁴

His description of the nightmare—or, effectively, "coins"—as "strange images that have neither encyclopedia nor dictionary" captures exquisitely the way in which, for many poets and listeners, the entry of commerce into a conventional system of speech valuation defies standard interpretive modes. Like other poets, Yahya 'Ali reacts with violent somatic energy to a world in which money has so thoroughly enveloped tribal life: he feels physically confined and assaulted by a Kafkaesque multitude of "such sensations." In an effort to quell his pain, he cries out vocally several verses later, in the fashion of earlier tribal poets: "Enough prattle! O sons of the people, enough! Such news confounds me, and I feel burning pain on my spleen." Yet his cry, far from a resounding roar that echoes from peak to peak, is itself the dialogic sigh of an imported commodity:

Coins. You sweat for them by the honor of your head, appraised by coins
All else is for nought, even if you have a chunk of paradise,
I sighed like the sighing of sparkling buttons
They come with them from the factories of Hungary and Russia
To the eyelash of the pupil [i.e., Yemen], curls on her shoulders, free-flowing
A lamp to the heart of the passionate, a "light" and lantern. [see n. 64]

Here, the word for "light" the poet uses is not *nūr*—the standard Arabic word—but the English word "light." Like Khalidi, Yahya 'Ali suggests that the ironies of life as a modern tribesman inhabit even the language he speaks: the alien traces of the British and those in the West—pre-eminent merchants—are intrinsically present.

CONCLUSION

The metaphor of a "linguistic market" is clearly not Pierre Bourdieu's alone.⁶⁵ Yemeni cassette poets have found the metaphor of the market not only indexical of linguistic transactions but also iconic of an affective realm that inhabits commodification of both things and words. Of course, the relationship of the poet *qua* subject to circuits of exchange is informed by ideology. Through the expressive terms of a discourse of speech, language ideology transposits into verbal practice the long-standing conceptual opposition in tribal culture between the tribesman and the merchant. Speech used as commerce is as enervating as a tribesman who trades in the market. Yet as ideologies refract through the shifting contours of subjectivities, metaphors, and discourse, they are subject to rearticulation and, with cassette technology reiteration in tens and hundreds of thousands of popular aural texts. Through the practices of the cassette market, cassette poets' discursive innovations provide large audiences with important cultural means for considering transformations in older tribal and mercantile value systems.

The notion of value has proved instrumental to my analysis, despite its sometimes debilitating polyvalence for social theorists of diverse disciplines.⁶⁶ However developed, value is an especially useful framework insofar as it demands attention to, rather than brackets, metadiscourses on the dialectics between the individual and larger social forces. In all societies, value is held to be at once a deeply personal matter and

a foreign presence, a *doppelgänger* bred by societal interaction and exchange. This recognition of alienation, in fact, is central to acts of valuation, as noted by Marx. What Marx calls a “value-form” is, in effect, the necessary calibration of one object’s value through the value of another.⁶⁷ The occlusion of the unique, valuative equation between two given objects becomes the centerpiece of Marx’s labor theory of value, in which the relationships between objects are reducible in capitalist systems to equivalences of abstract labor. This process of abstraction becomes especially generative for subsequent generations of Marxian theorists, among them Georg Lukacs and George Simmel, who showed how processes of reification and fetishization lead generally to the subjectification of the individual.⁶⁸ But in focusing on how abstraction is actively reconfigured by different systems of capital, this line of inquiry also enables consideration of how the mediation between regimes of value—how the recognition of alienation between one valued “object” and another—is socially constituted in every micro-culture, however capital-intensive.

Expressions of quantification so central to discourses of speech suggest that Yemenis have long been aware of how alienation inheres in acts of valuation. In a conventional tribal discourse found in folk poetry, comparisons of spoken words to measures of volume, weight, and direction, as well as to powerful forces of velocity such as wind, thunder, floods, and bullets, all represent the movement of spoken words away from a speaker’s body. The fetishizing of personal experience is certainly not exclusive to capitalist systems. Nevertheless, according to this conventional discourse of speech, vocal alienation—especially when conveyed through sound—maintains illocutionary force; something of its original “spirit” (*hau*), in the words of Marcel Mauss’s Trobrianders, is seen to remain with its “giver.”⁶⁹ Cassette poets also explore the alienation of words from people, although in addition to drawing on established conventions, they use analogies that invoke different evaluative relations. Metaphors of commerce express better their positions within trans-local recording markets in which their own voices, and bodies, are subject to new kinds of quantification. Even as poets draw on conventional valuative relationships in such metaphors—speech used as commerce is typically disparaged and powerful words are embodied—their employment of double-voicing, irony, parody, and other discursive turns inverts normative cultural paradigms. Much of the extraordinary draw, shock, and fascination of cassette poetry for many audiences derives from the evocation of a topsy-turvy world of transactual possibility, where commoditization becomes a form of generosity, commerce enables poetry, and pain turns to gain.

By focusing on a discourse of speech that is exquisitely attuned to the resonances between spoken words and somatic experience, I have been able to articulate some of the nuances of subjectivity that poets express as they move in and out of valuative frameworks. Poets’ sensual reactions to figures of speech effectively serve as signposts for audiences that mark the boundaries between moral and ideological domains. The pain that accompanies speech used as commerce signals the ongoing ideological polarization of tribal and mercantile domains, a polarization that survives in Yemen, in part, precisely as the practical spheres of tribesmen and merchants become more entwined. Nevertheless, when descriptions of pain are nuanced in bodily registers of sensation—numbing, sighing, and so forth—and are embedded within the symbolic contexture of political debate, they can signify new forms of transvaluation. When

Khalidi's poetic muse brings him words that "burn" precisely because they are commoditized like "crude oil," it is his opponents' pain, rather than his, that aches.

It is by attending to the subjectification of the body, then, that cassette poets are able to reflect on and communicate new valuative relationships. Their eloquence as subjects, moreover, is not the express result of forces of production, consumption, and circulation that operate beyond their control. Rather, cassette poets evoke metaphors of speech as commerce because they enable reflection on new modes of social mediation that inform the public communicative acts of Yemeni speakers. It is the trans-local recording market, one that is quantitatively different from local highlands markets in which roles of tribesmen and of merchants were ideologically and practically distinguishable, that increasingly directs the language of public poets. Metaphors of speech as commerce openly acknowledge the problems inherent in such a commercially regulated form of public mediation. When spoken words are inscribed into reiterable aural form and sold by the thousands to popular audiences, a significant shift occurs in the relationship between the individual and the social collective. Metacommentary on the value of speech enables reflections on these changes in public audiences and the subjectivities required to address such audiences.

Ultimately, in order to explore how such individual expressive acts exert influence on specific moral and political economies, we need a diachronic approach to value, one that accounts for historical transformations as much as durable systemic relations. Pierre Bourdieu's economistic model of different forms of material, social, cultural, and symbolic capital has generated much excellent inquiry into the strategies of individuals who vie for restricted resources. By reducing social relationships to objects (of honor, of taste, of property) that individuals try to possess, however, such a model fails to account for the multiple systems of valuation that continually recalibrate the social meaning of objects. By historicizing processes of reification and nuancing processes of capital formation in different cultures, we create spaces for individuals who work within, and on, forms of social action.⁷⁰

Cassette poets acknowledge and lament the negative effects of a market economy and commodification on the cultural and affective life of Yemenis. For many, the past was a time of truer, wiser, and stronger poets, men whose voices echoed from peak to peak. Nevertheless, their efforts to focus directly on the compromises of modern life, rather than overlook them with nostalgia, attest to their stakes in a modern political world and their determination to say something useful to contemporary audiences. Of course, the domains of tribe and market have mutually informed and overlapped each other for a long time. But cassette poets' heightened attention to their intersection correlates especially well with broader socio-economic and cultural transformations now underway in Yemen. By foregrounding the dialogic interplay among systems of valuation, cassette poets make mediating between the moral economies of the "tribe" and the "market" productive of new forms of identity.

NOTES

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¹Two of the earliest scholars of the ethnography of speaking were Dell Hymes and John Gumperz. See Dell Hymes, “The Ethnography of Speaking,” in *Anthropology and Human Behavior*, ed. T. Gladwin and W. C. Sturtevant (Washington, D.C.: Anthropological Society, 1962); idem, “Toward Ethnographies of Communication: The Analysis of Communicative Events,” in *Language and Social Context*, ed. Pier Paolo Giglioli (Baltimore: Penguin Books, 1972 [1964]), 21–44; John Gumperz and Dell Hymes, “The Ethnography of Communication,” *American Anthropologist* 66 (1964).

²See Pierre Bourdieu, “The Economics of Linguistic Exchanges,” *Social Science Information* 16 (1977): 645–68; idem, *Language and Symbolic Power*, 3rd ed. (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1994 [1982]); Ferruccio Rossi-Landi, *Language as Work and Trade: A Semiotic Homology for Linguistics and Economics* (South Hadley, Mass.: Bergin and Garvey, 1983).

³Ferdinand de Saussure, *Course in General Linguistics*, trans. Roy Harris (La Salle, Ill.: Open Court, 1983 [1916]).

⁴Several recent influential works include Arjun Appadurai, ed., *The Social Life of Things: Commodities in Cultural Perspective* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986); Webb Keane, *Signs of Recognition* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997); Paul Friedrich, “Language, Ideology, and Political Economy,” *American Anthropologist* 91 (1989): 295–312.

⁵Kathryn A. Woolard, “Language Variation and Cultural Hegemony: Toward an Integration of Sociolinguistic and Social Theory,” *American Ethnologist* 12 (1985): 738–48; Judith T. Irvine, “When Talk Isn’t Cheap: Language and Political Economy,” *American Ethnologist* 16 (1989): 248–67. Niloofar Haeri’s work on socio-linguistic patterns in Cairo and language change represents some of the most compelling research on Arabic and “linguistic markets” to date: Niloofar Haeri, *The Sociolinguistic Market of Cairo: Gender, Class, and Education* (New York: Kegan Paul International, 1996).

⁶For an ethnography of political poetry in Yemen, consult Steven Caton, “Power, Persuasion and Language: A Critique of the Segmentary Model in the Middle East,” *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 19 (1987): 77–102; idem, *Peaks of Yemen I Summon* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990); Salih Harithi, *al-Zāmil ft-l-Ḥarb w-al-Munāsabāt* (Damascus: al-Kātib al-‘Arabī, 1990); Mikhail Rodionov, *Poetry and Power in Hadramawt* (St. Petersburg, Russia: St. Petersburg University Press, 1992); R. B. Serjeant, *Prose and Poetry from Hadhramawt*, 1st ed. (London: Taylor’s Foreign Press, 1951); W. Flagg Miller, “Public Words and Body Politics: Strategies of Two Women Poets in Rural Yemen,” *Journal of Women’s History* (forthcoming).

⁷Ulf Hannerz, “Notes on the Global Ecumene,” *Public Culture* 1 (1989): 66–75. The reach and pluralism of a distinctly Yemeni “ecumene” grew dramatically after the early 1970s, when out-migration, commodity markets, and cash-crop revenues reached unprecedented levels. The spread of media technology and growing sophistication of programming have provided important narrative frames that invest such changes with new forms of cultural significance. Radios could be found in most homes by the 1960s; television became a standard apparatus in Yemeni households by the mid-1980s, and since 1993, satellite television has been gaining steady ground in semi-urban areas. Most important, the expanding use of “new media” technology, including audiocassettes, telephones, photocopiers, faxes, and Internet links, has ensured increasingly regular informational and cultural exchange among Yemenis at home and abroad.

⁸Jürgen Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*, trans. Thomas Burger (Oxford: Polity Press, 1992 [1962]); Michael Warner, *The Letters of the Republic: Publication and the Public Sphere in Eighteenth-Century America* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1990).

⁹Gumperz and Hymes, “Ethnography of Communication”; Dell Hymes, “Ways of Speaking,” in *Explorations in the Ethnography of Speaking*, ed. Richard Bauman and Joel Sherzer (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1974); Bauman and Sherzer, ed. *Explorations in the Ethnography of Speaking*; Joel Sherzer, “A Discourse-Centered Approach to Culture,” *American Anthropologist* 89 (1987): 295–309.

¹⁰George Simmel, *The Philosophy of Money*, trans. Tom Bottomore and David Frisby (Boston: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1978 [1907]), 61.

¹¹Appadurai, *Social Life of Things*, 15.

¹²Although female poets are common in Yemen, few of them have been able to have their own verses

recorded on cassette. Those who do usually remain anonymous. This is especially true in Yafi', the region whose cassette poetry I focus on in this paper. For a study of female poets and media technology in Yemen, see Miller, "Public Words."

¹³Before independence as well as after unity in 1990, Yafi' has been segmented administratively into ten districts (*makātib*), each of which is headed by a shaykh and subdivided into sections (*asdās*, *akhmās*, *arbā'*), each of which is led by an sub-shaykh (*'āqil*). Historically, these districts were grouped into two blocs of five districts, each nominally subject to a sultanate family: the Harhara of "Upper" Yafi' and the 'Affī of "Lower" Yafi'. Both blocs managed political affairs by relying on a common tradition of orally maintained tribal law (*aḥkām*), and on a complex network of legal-religious institutions, whose writs of authority resided in carefully managed archives of handwritten contracts and treaties. Records I have collected suggest that the *maktab* system was established in its contemporary form during the reign of the Imām al-Mutawakkil Ismā'īl ibn al-Qāsim in the mid-17th century.

¹⁴For ethnographic discussion of these terms in Yemen, see Caton, *Peaks of Yemen*, 26–35; Najwa Adra, "Qabyala: The Tribal Concept in the Central Highlands, the Yemen Arab Republic" (Ph.D. diss., Temple University, Philadelphia, 1982), 129–58; Paul Dresch, *Tribes, Government, and History in Yemen* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989), 38–74.

¹⁵Paul Dresch and Bernard Haykel, "Islamists and Tribesfolk in Yemen: A Study of Styles and Stereotypes," *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 27 (1995): 405–31.

¹⁶Charles Doughty, *Travels in Arabia Deserts* (New York: Boni and Liveright Publications, 1921 [1888]), 1:264–65.

¹⁷Michael Meeker, *Literature and Violence in North Arabia* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979), 252. With extraordinary insight, Meeker shows how vocal metaphors provide elaborate commentaries on people and events. Analyses of the contours of "voice" are fundamental to his discursive approach to political structure: "As we analyze the most thoughtful articulations of this voice—the Rwala oral traditions collected by Musil—we shall discover metaphors of leaders and followers and of strategies and policies which raise the problem of composing the voice in the midst of uncertain relationships. At the root of political and social forms, that is to say, we shall discover a problem of constructing the voice" (*ibid.*, 29).

¹⁸I obtained this qasida from a cassette of pre-independence Yafi' poets released by the musician Husayn 'Abd al-Nasir in the early 1990s.

¹⁹See especially Gabriele Vom Bruck, "Kinship and the Embodiment of History," *History and Anthropology* 10 (1998): 263–68; Tomas Gerholm, *Market, Mosque, and Maḥraj: Social Inequality in a Yemeni Town*, Stockholm Studies in Anthropology (Stockholm: Stockholm University Press, 1977), 5:130, 116; Adra "Qabyala," 63–65; Dresch, *Tribes, Government*, 376.

²⁰For a discussion of the Abyan cotton project in Lower Yafi', see Tom Little, *South Arabia: Arena of Conflict* (London: Pall Mall Press, 1968), 52–53.

²¹R. J. Gavin, *Aden under British Rule, 1839–1967* (New York: Barnes and Noble Books, 1975), 319.

²²Philip Schuyler, "Hearts and Minds: Three Attitudes Toward Performance Practice and Music Theory in the YAR," *Ethnomusicology* 34 (1991): 8–12.

²³Yemen's first modern musical club, the Adeni Music Club, was founded in 1948 and was soon followed by other region-specific clubs throughout the south. Such clubs became centers for elite, urban musicians whose formal training, access to privileged audiences, and travel abroad allowed them to establish standards to which professional musicians could aspire. By the mid-1950s, Egyptian songs from Port Sa'īd and Isma'īliyya had become the rage, as Yemeni recording artists competed to refurbish traditional songs with foreign stylistic adaptations. Although the popular appeal of foreign song would eventually diminish in the wake of the nationalist cultural movements that would lead to independence, standards of metropolitan song were becoming established that would benefit those who could master transregional and transnational musical styles.

²⁴Composing panegyric (*madh*) poetry for patrons has never been widespread in Yafi', although the practice exists elsewhere in Yemen.

²⁵Muḥammad Murshid Nājī, *Aghānā al-Sha'biyya* (Aden: Dār al-Jamāhīr, 1958), 88–89.

²⁶*Ibid.*, 90–91.

²⁷From a qasida by the poet 'Atif Ghuramah, a photocopy of which I obtained from a musician in Yafi'.

²⁸Nabil Hadī, *17 Sā'a Tārīkhīyya 'ind Bāb al-Mandab* (Beirut: Dar al-Farabi, 1978), 236.

²⁹See Abdullah Muheirez, "Cultural Development in the PDRY," in *Economy, Society and Culture in Contemporary Yemen*, ed. Brian Pridham (London: Croom Helm, 1985), 211.

³⁰It was especially after the 22 June 1969 "Corrective Move," when President Salim Rubay' and leftist elements took power, that this cultural project became central to the state's revolutionary objectives: see Hādī, *17 Sā'a*, 240–41.

³¹State campaigns against tribal leaders had been especially severe in the highlands. The Tribal Reconciliation Decree of March 1968 signaled a radical shift in the political climate that, within several years, would lead to the executions, imprisonment, and exile of numerous shaykhs and traditional tribal leaders throughout South Yemen. The tremendous tension that resulted in many highland areas was not eased by mandatory and tightly controlled weekly gatherings at "cultural clubs" that were constructed by the National Liberation Front (NLF) in every village center. Where literacy training classes were supplemented by long discussions of political consciousness and party ideology, little dissent against the party or its youthful cadres was allowed. Such controls over political expression began to be alleviated somewhat with the organization of Local People's Councils (*majālis al-sha'b*) in 1977. Through these councils, local elections were held for the first time throughout the South, and apparatuses of local state-governance were put in place.

³²At official events and cultural-club meetings during the 1970s, folk poets were greatly constrained from performing traditional verse. When poets were given the floor at the end of meetings and even at weddings, they were largely expected to compose in genres that reflected commonalities between the Yemenis and their Arab and socialist counterparts throughout the world. Free-verse poems in modern standard Arabic and with neo-classical themes were considered most appropriate, as were nationalist anthems (*anāshīd*) and love poems. The columnar qasida became, for many, a folkloric throwback, and qasidas mentioning tribal customs or ethos were absolutely "reactionary" (*rajā'iyya*).

³³Fred Halliday, "The PDRY: The 'Cuban Path' in Arabia," in *Revolutionary Socialist Development in the Third World*, ed. Gordon White, Robin Murray, and Christine Pelzer White (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1983), 50.

³⁴I was told that when Foreign Minister Muhammad Muti' visited Yafi' in the months just before his arrest in 1980, he expressed disappointment that he had not been greeted with traditional tribal poetry (*zawāmil*) and dance (*bar'a*). On the level of the major national press, Helen Lackner reports that some open criticism of the administration began to be allowed by 1984: see Helen Lackner, *P.D.R. Yemen: Outpost of Socialist Development in Yemen* (London: Ithaca Press, 1985), 122.

³⁵Although the National Liberation Front had made weak gestures toward the private sector, its nationalizations of foreign economic institutions, foreign assets, and housing had done nothing to encourage private businessmen and investors. According to Lackner, although some liberalizing measures were implemented during the Unification Congress of 1975, it was not until the 1980s that private enterprises were effectively encouraged: *ibid.*, 72, 155. Commenting on the availability of products in local markets, Lackner also notes that throughout most of the 1970s, imports and "anything smacking of luxury goods" were extremely hard to acquire: *ibid.*, 162.

³⁶Adra, "Qabyala," 150; Gerholm, *Market*, 119; Walter Dostal, "Sozio-ökonomische Aspekte der Stammesdemokratie in Nordost-Yemen," *Sociologus* 24 (1974): 14.

³⁷For a well-researched case study examining the influence of audiocassettes in facilitating the spread of revolutionary ideas, see Annabelle Sreberny-Mohammadi and Ali Mohammadi's *Small Media, Big Revolution: Communication, Culture, and the Iranian Revolution* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1994.)

³⁸Some study of *al-bid' wa-l-jiwāb* poetry (or *da'wā w-ijāba*, as it is known in Khawlan) has been conducted by other scholars of Yemeni poetry: see Caton, *Peaks of Yemen*; Rodionov, *Poetry and Power*; Ulrike Frietag, "A Poetic Exchange about Imperialism," in *Encounters of Words and Texts: Intercultural Studies in Honor of Stefan Wild*, ed. Edward Lutz and Christian Szyska (New York: Georg Olms Verlag, 1997), 203–14; Muḥsin Dayyān, *Yāft': Bayn al-Aṣāla wa-l-Mu'āṣira al-Yamaniyya* (Damascus: al-Kātib al-'Arabī, 1995). The word *bid'* is a southern Yemeni vernacular form of the word *bad'* (initiation). For brevity's sake, I use a version of this expression that lacks nominative articles.

³⁹After unity in 1990, when tribal discourses swept back through the south, and during the Yemeni War of 1994, several of Khaleidi's cassette exchanges reached millions of listeners both in Yemen and abroad.

⁴⁰Fawwaz Traboulsi, a scholar with some experience in South Yemeni politics, attributes tribal antipathy to the market, money, and capitalism in general to a prevailing ethos of egalitarianism: Fawwaz Traboulsi, "Les Transformations des Structures Tribales Depuis L'Indépendance du Yemen du Sud," *Cahiers du Grem-*

amo (1991), 236. He argues that such an ethos greatly hampered capitalist development in the former South Yemen. Shelagh Weir, however, points out that tribal egalitarianism was not hostile to trade and mercantilism in Razih, northern Yemen: Shelagh Weir, "Tribe, Hijrah, and Madinah in North-West Yemen," in *The Middle Eastern Cities in Comparative Perspective*, ed. K. Brown et al. (London: Ithaca Press, 1986), 236. She suggests that the crucial factor explaining tribal hostility to the market is land ownership: where tribal families can link claims of status and honor to land, landless merchants can be conceptually isolated as morally inferior. I think Weir's observations are helpful insofar as they link ideological orientations to material factors and appear to be ethnographically applicable across Yemen.

⁴¹Caton, *Peaks of Yemen*, 109–26, 50.

⁴²Metaphors equating speech and poetry to commerce or the market are common to literary and expressive life in many countries. In an early English literary tradition, metaphors of commerce were commonly used to connote moral breaches in courtesy, social interaction, and spiritual life: P. Taylor, "Commerce and Comedy in Sir Gawain," *Philological Quarterly* 50 (1971): 1–15. Comparisons of poetry itself to commerce, however, appear to occur in many cases with the spread of printing technology and the commoditization of poetry in expanding markets. Liz Bellamy argues, for example, that during an era of commercialization in early-18th-century England, the poet Bernard Mandeville released a short but scandalous book of doggerel verse, *The Fable of the Bees* (1714), that paved the way toward popularizing poetry by proposing a compatibility between commercial and moral aims: Liz Bellamy, *Commerce, Morality, and the Eighteenth-Century Novel* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 28. Walter Benjamin discusses how French poets, too, began to compare their work to commerce in the 1830s, when the realm of belles-lettres began to become accessible to the public through the new technology of paperback printing: Anne-Marie Brinsmead, "A Trading of Souls: Commerce as Poetic Practice in the Petits Poèmes en Prose," *Romanic Review* 76 (1988): 460. Yemeni cassette poets' discursive innovations are obviously linked to specific socio-cultural and historical contexts, not the least important of which is Yemen's extraordinarily disadvantaged relationship to sophisticated capital markets dominated by Western industrial powers. Nevertheless, such comparisons are instructive insofar as they shed light on cross-cultural tropes used to explore the moral effects of commercially produced and distributed folk poetry.

⁴³From his residence in Qatar, 'Abd al-Nasir cooperates with hundreds of Yafi'i and Yemeni folk poets, who send him their poems via written letters, cassettes, faxes, and telephone. He then sets them to song, with modest instrumental accompaniment, and they are distributed. By the mid-1990s, some of his cassettes were reaching hundreds of thousands of Yemeni listeners throughout the south, north, and abroad.

⁴⁴Cassette no. 2 in the 'Abd al-Nasir series.

⁴⁵Cassette no. 58 in the 'Abd al-Nasir series.

⁴⁶Verses by Ahmad al-Ma'mari on cassette no. 56 in the 'Abd al-Nasir series.

⁴⁷Plagiarism has long been a central concern of Arab literary critics and poets; poets can richly embroider their work with intertextual references, citations, quotations, and so on, but these must be embedded in an original purpose (*gharad*) or thought (*fikr*). For a useful discussion of the boundaries between plagiarism and legitimate citation in poetry, see Ibrahim 'Awadain, *al-Mu'arada fi-l-Adab al-'Araby* (Cairo: Matba'at al-Sa'adah 1980).

⁴⁸Cassette no. 99 in the 'Abd al-Nasir series.

⁴⁹Verses by Yahya al-Sulaymani on cassette no. 53 by the Yafi'i musician 'Ali Saleh.

⁵⁰Cassette no. 43 in the 'Abd al-Nasir series.

⁵¹Cassette no. 57 in the 'Abd al-Nasir series.

⁵²M. M. Bakhtin, *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*, trans. Caryl Emerson, 6th ed. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1994 [1984]), 205.

⁵³If an horizontal x-axis defines ideal mercantile value, and an horizontal y-axis defines ideal tribal value, what was once a relationship defined along a negative slope (upper left to lower right) becomes defined along a positive slope (lower left to upper right). In practice, poets' evaluative appraisals might be seen to fall on either side of the ideal 1 : 1 slope, depending on the ratio between tribal and mercantile values that is invoked. In Khaledi's verses cited earlier, for example, we might think of his statement, "What did I shove (aside) or distribute among the merchants?" as a specific point along a positive slope: he accepts Sonbahi's valuative comparison between the work of poets and that of merchants (even if he does so with an air of defensive compulsion). However, when he acknowledges more explicitly, less ironically, his mercantile calculation in the next verse, "I only eliminate that which I see to be rotten or harmful," his "point"

effectively increases the correlation between tribal and mercantile axes of valuation toward an ideal 1 : 1 ratio.

⁵⁴Keane, *Signs*, 72.

⁵⁵David Graeber, *The False Coin of Our Own Dreams* (New York: St. Martin's/Palgrave, forthcoming), chap. 1.

⁵⁶Appadurai, *Social Life of Things*, 13.

⁵⁷Raymond Williams, *Marxism and Literature* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977), 131–32. Since Williams's publication, discussions of "feelings" have been refined through finer inquiries into less culturally reductive "sentiments": Lila Abu-Lughod, *Veiled Sentiments: Honor and Poetry in a Bedouin Society* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1986). However we may wish to approach the nuances of emotional life, I emphasize Lutz and Abu-Lughod's insights into the discursive aspects of emotions: "emotion and discourse should not be treated as separate variables, the one pertaining to the private world of individual consciousness and the other to the public social world. . . . Rather, we should view emotional discourse as a form of social action that creates effects in the world, effects that are read in a culturally informed way by the audience for emotion talk": Catherine Lutz, *Language and the Politics of Emotion* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), 11–12.

⁵⁸This qasida was obtained in the form of a photocopy that was circulating in Yafī' in 1996.

⁵⁹These verses were selected from three cassette poems that were released during the 1980s and 1990s, and are representative of a conventional style of greeting found in much vernacular poetry in general.

⁶⁰Photocopy of qasida obtained in 1996.

⁶¹Verses by Ahmad al-Qayfi on cassette no. 42 in the 'Abd al-Nasir series.

⁶²Cassette no. 43 in the 'Abd al-Nasir series.

⁶³Cassette no. 25 in the 'Abd al-Nasir series.

⁶⁴Cassette of recited poetry released by Yahya al-Sulaymani in 1995.

⁶⁵Bourdieu, *Language*, 39.

⁶⁶At the risk of oversimplifying, I might suggest three "schools" of value that are frequently invoked by theorists. Value in an economic sense is a strictly interactional affair, to be determined by calculating how much someone else is willing to give away to get what I possess. Value in a more moral and psychological sense, such as family or social "values," was the topic of anthropological inquiry by such figures as Clyde Kluckhohn and Morris Opler in the mid-20th century. And value in its most structural guise was most insightfully developed by the linguist Saussure, whose insights later proved instrumental to Claude Lévi-Strauss. I thank David Graeber for help with delineating some of these currents, though all simplification is my own.

⁶⁷Karl Marx, "The Value-Form," in *Debates in Value Theory*, ed. Simon Mohun (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1994), 25–27.

⁶⁸Georg Lukacs, *History and Class Consciousness: Studies in Marxist Dialectics* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1971 [1968]); Simmel, *Philosophy of Money*.

⁶⁹Marcel Mauss, *The Gift: The Form and Reason for Exchange in Archaic Societies* (London: Routledge, 1993 [1925]), 10–12.

⁷⁰A recent work that triangulates individual creativity, commoditization, and social change is Deborah Kapchan's study of women and marketplaces in Morocco: Deborah Kapchan, *Gender on the Market: Moroccan Women and the Revoicing of Tradition* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1996), 2–4. Kapchan argues that the extension of commoditization from traditional marketplaces in Morocco into public domains has enabled liminal individuals in the marketplace, particularly women, to lay new claims to social authority. While taking my cue from Kapchan, I would argue that expressive agency, and its liminal domains, be located more explicitly where history enters.