

A Half-Dozen Definitions

Slip:

1. To kid.
2. To slip in the dozens, to disparage one's family.

—Rudolph Fisher, "An Introduction to Contemporary Harlesemese, Expurgated and Abridged," in *The Walls of Jericho*, New York: Knopf, 1928.

PLAY THE DOZENS. To speak slanderously of one's (or another's) parents.

—Hugh Sebastian, "Negro Slang in Lincoln University," *American Speech* 9, no. 4, December 1934.

The "Dozens" is one form of "talking" recreation often engaged in by rural boys. It is usually played by two boys before an appreciative, interested audience. The object of the game is to speak of the opponent's mother in the most derisive terms possible. Many boys know long series of obscene ditties and verses concerning the immoral behavior of the mother of the one whom they are "putting in the dozens," and they sometimes recite for hours without interruption.

—Charles S. Johnson, *Growing Up in the Black Belt*, Washington, DC: American Council on Education, 1941.

[To] play the dozens . . . is a way of saying low-rate your enemy's ancestors and him, down to the present moment for reference, and

then go into his future as far as your imagination leads you. But if you have no faith in your personal courage and confidence in your arsenal, don't try it. It is a risky pleasure.

—Zora Neale Hurston, *Dust Tracks on a Road*, New York: Lippincott, 1942.

Dozens: Songs of derision used extensively by Negro troops of World War II. The allusions of the "dozens" are sexual, using as a theme parents and parentage, and as a vehicle of spoken and sung banter in rimed and unrimed form. A medium of release through abuse, which affords much opportunity for improvisation, and for which there is no retaliation permitted except a response in wittier and more telling form, this song-type is in the direct tradition of the many other kinds of "songs of allusion" found among African and New World Negroes.

—Melville J. Herskovits, in Maria Leach, ed., *Funk & Wagnalls Standard Dictionary of Folklore, Mythology and Legend*, New York: Funk & Wagnalls, 1949.

Dozens, playing the—A contest to see which young brother can remember or make up the greatest number of obscene, rhymed couplets reflecting on the opponent's parents. Sometimes called "signifying" or "mamma talk." Sometimes done with finger-snapping accompaniment. Though it may start in fun, it often attracts a crowd of admirers, and it can easily end in a fight. Not approved by parents.

—Adrian Dove, "Soul Story," *New York Times*, December 8, 1968.

A Trip down Twelfth Street

*I don't play the dozens, the dozens ain't my game,
But the way I fuck your mother is a god damn shame.*

—Traditional verse

THE DOZENS CAN be tricky, aggressive, offensive, clever, brutal, funny, inventive, stupid, violent, misogynistic, psychologically intricate, deliberately misleading—or all of that at once, wrapped in a single rhyming couplet. Writers and researchers have attempted to explain the tradition for more than eighty years, and for most of that time they have been arguing and contradicting one another, trying to stick a collector's pin through an elusive blend of verses, jibes, and banter that floats like a butterfly and stings like a bee.

The game can be deceptively subtle: Two young men meet, and one asks, "How's your mother?"

The other replies "How's yours? Give her my love."

What could be nicer or more polite? But this is how the New Orleans musician Danny Barker described his reception as a new member of the Lee Collins band in 1926:

Ernest Kelly [the trombone player] looked at me, I looked at him, and he said, "How's your mother?" That was playing the dozens. In New Orleans that was a thing they had. He didn't know my mother—why ask about her? It was a smart aleck thing to ask after my mother, playing the dozens. He was trying to see if I could take it. Having been raised in the seventh ward where all the do-wrong cats hung out, I'd heard people play the dozens all day: "Your mother don't wear no drawers," "Your mother fell in love with a police dog," and all that kind

me I looked around—everyone was looking back at me—and I said, “How’s yours? Give her my love.” He shut up his mouth, because I’d put him back in the dozens, and from then on he always looked at me with a straight face.¹

Any language is a code, using simple words and phrases to convey complex meanings, which are understood because the users share a body of knowledge and experience. And we have all had conversations in which the subtext was more important than our words. But that story involves a particular kind of coded subtext, a game in which everyone in the room was to some degree involved and understood the rules and stakes. It was a very quick and subtle version of the dozens, but as Barker suggests, there were plenty of more extended and uncouth variations.

Barker and Kelly were hip New Orleans jazzmen, but the dozens was by no means unique to that city’s Seventh Ward, nor was it exclusively a hip thing. African Americans played in country and city alike, and in the North, South, East, and West. Like the blues, the dozens was also picked up by some of their Euro-American neighbors. In 1933 the novelist Erskine Caldwell provided the following scene between two white South Carolina farm workers:

Will looked at Buck, debating momentarily whether to hit him.

“Got any message to send your folks?” he asked finally.

“If you want to play the dozens, you’re at the right homestead,”

Shaw [Buck’s brother] said.²

On the whole, though, it was part of the linguistic code of black America, and like so much African American culture, outsiders often encountered it in connection with music. The first person to define the dozens in print was an African American songwriter and pianist named Chris Smith, in the opening verse of a pop song from 1921, “Don’t Slip Me in the Dozen, Please”:

Slipping you in the dozen means to talk about your fam’ly folks

And talkin’ ’bout your parents aren’t jokes.³

There are a couple of problems with that definition. For one thing, in many situations and to many people the dozens was definitely a string of jokes. For another, in some areas and times it did not have to involve parents. Depending on who was talking, “playing the dozens” or “putting someone in the dozens” could mean cursing someone out, specifically insulting someone’s mother or

other relatives, or engaging in a duel of increasingly elaborate insults that might or might not include ancestors or female kin. It could be a challenge to physical combat or a test of cool in which the first player to throw a punch was regarded as having proved his lack of self-control. Dozens techniques at times included viciously funny rhymes, which are an obvious source for the aggressive comic rhyming of rap, along with puns, extravagant exaggerations, and other forms of verbal play. But insults could also be direct, nasty, and intended simply to hurt.

Numerous writers have discussed and defined the dozens over the years, and every authoritative statement has tended to provoke equally authoritative and contradictory critiques. Even the word itself is up for grabs: it has usually been written in the plural, but in the 1920s and 1930s there was a long string of “Dirty Dozen” songs, and all the singers matched that singular orthography.⁴ Meanwhile, street terms kept evolving: A book from 1940 used “joaning” as a synonym for slipping someone in the dozens, and by the 1950s some neighborhoods had shortened Smith’s phrase to “slipping,” or “slip fights.”⁵ When the dozens became a popular subject of study in the 1960s and 1970s, writers often prefaced their articles by explaining that contemporary players did not use the older name. The sociolinguist William Labov wrote in 1972, “The term ‘sounding’ is by far the most common in New York, and is reported as the favored term in Philadelphia. . . . ‘Woofing’ is common in Philadelphia and elsewhere, ‘joning’ in Washington, ‘signifying’ in Chicago, ‘screaming’ in Harrisburg, and, on the West Coast, such general terms as ‘cutting,’ ‘capping,’ or ‘chopping.’” Herbert Foster, a New York City high school teacher, provided a list that included “crackin’ on the kitchen folks,” “going in the kitchen,” “getting down on the crib,” and “ribbin’,” but added that most teenagers just called it “talkin’ about moms.” Robin Kelley, growing up in Harlem during the same period, recalls the terms “ranking” and “busting” and adds that other areas used “bagging” and “dissing,” while Jack Landrón, who grew up in Boston in the 1950s, knew it as “playing house.” Other writers have added “hiking,” “basing,” “hoorawing,” “lugging,” “snaps” (a term that caught on across the country in the 1990s when it was used in a series of popular joke books), and of course the NBA standard, “talking trash.”⁶

People who grew up using any of those terms will undoubtedly shake their heads over others. “‘Woofing’ isn’t playing the dozens,” some will say, or “We played the dozens all the time, but we didn’t talk about anybody’s mom unless we wanted a fight.” And they are

undoubtedly right about their neighborhood, or at least their group of friends. In some cases they may even be right about every neighborhood and every group: some terms on those lists probably reflect researchers' inexperience or misperceptions, especially since most of the researchers were white adults gathering material from black teenagers. Street language is slippery, shifting in subtle and complicated ways. It often conveys its most important information not in the words but in the intonation, style, or context, and its taxonomy can change from week to week.

That is not to say that scholars are necessarily more precise than teenagers about their linguistic taxonomy. Exploring the verbal interactions of Harlem gang members in the mid-1960s, Labov's team of researchers found that the youths they interviewed made clear distinctions between different kinds of insults: "'The dozens' seems to be . . . specialized, referring to rhymed couplets. . . . But 'playing the dozens' also refers to any ritualized insult directed against a relative. 'Sounding' is also used to include such insults, and includes personal insults of a simpler form. . . . But when someone says something specific that is to the discredit of someone else, before an audience: 'Hey, where's that five dollars you owe me!,' that is not sounding but *louding*." A few years later, Thomas Kochman wrote that among black teenagers in Chicago "the term 'sounding' would describe the initial remarks which are designed to sound out the other person to see whether he will play the game. The verbal insult is also subdivided, the term 'signifying' applying to insults which are hurled directly at the person and the 'dozens' applying to insults hurled at your opponent's family, especially the mother."⁷

If those teenagers read Labov's or Kochman's reports, they might have grinned in recognition of familiar lines, but they might also have echoed Ralph Ellison's more general comment on the era's ghetto sociology: "I don't deny that these sociological formulas are drawn from life, but . . . I simply don't recognize Harlem in them. And I certainly don't recognize the people of Harlem whom I know."⁸ Outsiders reading the same reports may be fascinated, but are likely to be perplexed by a lot of what is there. Scholarly explorations of the dozens provide only brief glimpses of the players, the situations, or how the whole thing worked. Many center on an idealized duel: two young men try to top each other with progressively more fantastic and hilarious insults, urged on by their friends, until one finally says something so brilliant that the other surrenders—or so offensive that the other can't take it and throws a punch. Such duels certainly existed

and a few were preserved on paper—Richard Wright included one in his first novel—but normal dozens playing was often a lot looser than that. Some of the surviving scraps, lines, and rhymes were extracted from long, complex interchanges, while others were just offhand remarks, jokes, or bits of songs. Few researchers provided much sense of context: who was talking, or to whom, or how someone came to make a particular remark at a particular moment, or the reactions of the listeners.

One reason for that discrepancy is that virtually no one was exploring the dozens as an extended performance or art form. Some enjoyed the verbal gymnastics and some did not, but in either case they tended to approach the insults as part of psychological, sociological, or linguistic studies, and to quote only the phrases that suited their arguments. Another problem was censorship and self-censorship. Before rap changed the rules, most record companies and publishers considered the standard dozens insults too dirty to print or record, and even people who were gleefully foulmouthed among friends tended to be more circumspect around unfamiliar academics or reporters. Researchers create an unusual situation just by being present, and that tends to be particularly true when they are white adults studying black teens. As Robin Kelley wrote, "Asking their subjects to 'play the dozens' while an interloper records the 'session' with a tape recorder and notepad has the effect of creating a ritual performance for the sake of an audience, of turning spontaneous, improvised verbal exchanges into a formal practice."⁹

To be fair, that caveat applies to any improvised art form. When a group of black teenagers in Lyons, Mississippi, vied to top one another with rhyming dozens as part of a session of jokes, songs, and stories recorded by the white folklorist William Ferris, the evening would undoubtedly have gone differently if Ferris had not been present, or if the tape recorder had not been on. But to a great extent the same is true of any recording of improvised blues, jazz, or rap—all forms that emerged as vernacular styles before becoming defined genres. A recording session is different from a relaxed jam or party, and record producers have often come from quite different backgrounds than musicians, singers, and rappers. Nonetheless, few jazz, blues, or hip-hop fans would deny the importance or value of records. So if we accept a record date as the model, we can grant that the situation was atypical and still note that Ferris preserved plenty of "spontaneous, improvised verbal exchanges." Like jazz instrumentalists, the Delta teenagers drew from a deep well of familiar phrases but strung them together with the

immediacy of skilled players listening to each other's licks and coming up with hot responses:

I know your mama.
She can weeble, she can wobble, she can throw it so good,
She got the best damn pussy in the neighborhood.
Lightning struck,
She wanted to fuck.
Hit your dick with granpoppa nut.

Another player picked up on the dick reference:

I knowed your pappy when he didn't have no dick.
He fucked your mammy with his walking stick.

And the next response extended the theme of recollection:

I remember when your mama didn't have no stove.
She cooked flapjacks on her pussy hole.¹⁰

The analogy of a dozens session to a musical jam is not new. In the 1940s the clarinetist and marijuana dealer Mezz Mezzrow suggested that the whole concept of the jazz jam session was an extension of African American verbal displays:

The idea right smack in the middle of every cat's mind all the time was this: he had to sharpen his wits every way he could, make himself smarter and keener, better able to handle himself, more *bip*. The hip language was one kind of verbal horseplay invented to do that. Lots of other games sprang up for the same reason: snagging, rhyming, the dirty dozens, cutting contests. On The Corner the idea of a kind of mutual needling held sway, each guy spurring the other guy on to think faster and be more nimble-witted. . . .

[Instrumental] cutting contests are just a musical version of the verbal duels. They're staged to see which performer can snag and cap all the others *musically*. And by the way, these battles have helped to produce some of the race's greatest musicians.¹¹

The folklorist Roger Abrahams made a similar point in 1970, though focusing more attention on the surrounding crowd. He noted that dozens duels and jazz cutting contests were both communal events in which the central figures drew inspiration from the comments and reactions of friends and fans. Some duels produced clear winners and losers: jazz aficionados still talk about the night when Coleman Hawkins, newly returned from Europe, whipped New York's greatest

saxophonists in a marathon cutting session. Likewise, Abrahams wrote that "certain men-of-words are regarded as inevitable cappers. Their best caps are celebrated in their group in legendary stories." But he also noted that such duels "need not have a winner or a loser to justify the performance, since the competition is entertainment in itself."¹² Whether the context is verbal or musical, the most influential audience members have often themselves been players, cheering on the combat and ready to jump in any time the duelists' inspiration flagged.

To people surrounded by both jazz and the dozens, such connections were more than just rhetorical analogies. It is a commonplace that the great jazz improvisers talk and preach on their horns, and in a short story from 1956, Ralph Ellison's teenaged protagonist interpreted a jazz jam as a dozens match:

"Listen to that trombone, man," I said.
"Sounds like he's playing the dozens with the whole wide world."
"What's he saying, Buster?"
"He's saying, 'Ya'll's mamas don't wear 'em. Is strictly without 'em. Don't know nothing 'bout 'em . . .'"
"Don't know about what, man?"
"Draw's, fool; he's talking 'bout draw's . . .!"
"Now that there tuba's saying:
"They don't play 'em, I know they don't.
They don't play 'em, I know they won't.
They just don't play no nasty dirty twelves . . ."
"How about that trumpet?"
"Him? That fool's a soldier, he's really signifying. Saying,
"So ya'll don't play 'em, hey?
So ya'll won't play 'em, hey?
Well pat your feet and clap your hands,
'Cause I'm going to play 'em to the promised land . . ."

"Trumpet's got a real nasty mouth . . . he's slipping 'em in the twelves and choosing 'em, all at the same time. Talking 'bout they mamas and offering to fight 'em. Now he ain't like that ole clarinet; clarinet so sweet-talking he just eases you in the dozens."¹³

Like blues, jazz, and African American preaching, the dozens mixes immediacy and inspiration with a deep affection for tradition, and as one traces its history many of Ellison's phrases recur again and

again. Danny Barker quoted “Your mother don’t wear no drawers” as a typical insult, and variations on that line have been found throughout the United States in songs, recitations, and schoolyard game rhymes. Henry “Ragtime Texas” Thomas, a hobo singer and guitarist born in the 1870s, recorded a song based on the phrase Ellison used for the clarinetist’s style: “Don’t You Ease Me In.” And numerous people over the years have quoted some variation of “I don’t play the dozens, but I’ll pat my foot and listen”—a joke that once again links the insult match to a musical performance. Some writers broaden this connection still further: in 1947, Harriet Janis noted the resemblance between mocking “signifying songs” in black culture and African “songs of derision,” and added, “The wa-wa trumpet in jazz, and in the blues in answer to the singer, is frequently used to suggest this same satirical play.”¹⁴

Some readers may be offended by the analogy of jazz improvisation or blues poetry to filthy insults, just as some people are offended by discussions that link those styles to gangsta or dirty south rap. Likewise, some rap fans may feel the dozens lines lack the artistry that would earn them a proper place in this analogy. In part, that is due to the limitations of the historical record: rap has provided a long-overdue forum for great street talkers, but the dozens lines and exchanges that survive from earlier eras were mostly gathered in studies of average teenagers rather than at virtuoso sessions by notable “men of words.” Scholars were interested in documenting a widespread folk custom or sociological quirk, so although the dozens was always understood to be intensely competitive, no one bothered to seek out and record its masters.

The dozens has attracted less scholarly attention than other forms of African American performance art, not only because it tended to be informal and played by kids but because most educated people dismissed it as violent nastiness. Nor were outsiders the only people who took that view. Street dueling, whether verbal or physical, has an element of danger that musical dueling does not, and adolescent insults can have very different consequences from the comradely competition of professional musicians. A frequently reprinted passage on the dozens from the memoir of the black activist H. Rap Brown (now Jamil Abdullah Al-Amin), starts by celebrating the game as an exercise in verbal dexterity and poetic improvisation:

I learned how to talk in the street, not from reading about Dick and Jane going to the zoo and all that simple shit. The teacher would test

our vocabulary each week, but we knew the vocabulary we needed. They’d give us arithmetic to exercise our minds. Hell, we exercised our minds by playing the Dozens.

I fucked your mama
Till she went blind.
Her breath smells bad,
But she sure can grind.

I fucked your mama
For a solid hour.
Baby came out
Screaming, Black Power . . .

And the teacher expected me to sit up in class and study poetry after I could run down shit like that. If anybody needed to study poetry, she needed to study mine. We played the Dozens for recreation, like white folks played Scrabble.¹⁵

This passage has obvious appeal for those of us who consider the dozens an art form and a source of rap—and Brown’s nickname testifies to his mastery of street jive and rhyming long before “rap” was associated with a musical style. But the following paragraph provides some balance:

In many ways, though, the Dozens is a mean game because what you try to do is totally destroy somebody else with words. It’s that whole competition thing again, fighting each other. There’d be sometimes 40 or 50 dudes standing around and the winner was determined by the way they responded to what was said. If you fell all over each other laughing, then you knew you’d scored. It was a bad scene for the dude that was getting humiliated. . . . The real aim of the Dozens was to get a dude so mad that he’d cry or get mad enough to fight.¹⁶

While the dozens is part of the larger world of African American verbal art, poetry, and comedy, it is also part of the larger world of combat. The rhymes and linguistic dexterity make it unique and interesting, but many of the crowds that encouraged insult battles were just as happy to encourage physical battles, and verbal duels could easily move on to fists and occasionally to knives or guns. As a result, a lot of people who grew up around the dozens recall it not as fun or entertaining but as something to be avoided.

A navy psychologist named Ralph Berdie published one of the first studies of the dozens in 1947, and he portrayed the game as essentially violent and predatory:

One or more individuals decide, explicitly or implicitly, that they will attempt to arouse another individual to the extent where he will initiate physical combat. One of the tormenters will make a mildly insulting statement, perhaps about the mother of the subject. . . . The subject, in turn, will then make an insulting statement about the tormenter or some member of the tormenter's family. This exchange of insults continues, encouraged by the approval and shouts of the observers, and the insults become progressively nastier and more pornographic, until they eventually include every member of the participants' families and every act of animal and man. . . . Finally, one of the participants, usually the subject, who has actually been combating the group pressure of the observers, reaches his threshold and takes a swing at the tormenter, pulls out a knife or picks up an object to use as a club. That is the sign for the tormenter, and sometimes some of the observers, to go into action, and usually the subject ends up with the most physical injuries.¹⁷

Berdie acknowledged that there was more going on than ordinary bullying or provocation. One of his informants explained that "the insults frequently consisted of rhymes and limericks, some of which were made up on the spot, if the participants' ability so permitted, and others which had acquired almost traditional respectability." And although in most cases he believed that "the man with the widest pornographic vocabulary and the loudest voice attains victory," he noted that "sometimes the beauty and relevancy of [the subject's] insulting statements will win over the audience from the tormenter, who is then on his own."

This description left out the factor Abrahams stressed: that the dozens need not involve a tormenter and a tormented, or produce a winner and a loser. As a psychologist in a disciplinary barracks, Berdie may have been particularly inclined to blur the lines between nudging jokes and hostile assaults, and to miss the fact that a sufficiently funny response could not only refocus the crowd's sympathies but might turn a hostile interchange into a friendly one.

Another level of cultural disconnection is also at work here: For kids all over the world, and for a lot of adults as well, fighting is a normal form of play or entertainment. Langston Hughes wrote about men at a local barbershop who "could play the dozens for hours without anger, unless the parties concerned became serious, when they

were invited to take it on the outside. And even at that a fight was fun, too."¹⁸ I have Scottish friends whose idea of a good time on a Saturday night is a "punch-up," sometimes with a buddy, sometimes with a stranger, and often resulting in black eyes, broken noses, or a trip to the hospital. These fights tend to start as arguments and escalate to shouting, pushing, then stepping outside for a full-on slugging match—but a fairly common ending is for the combatants to go back into the bar together, laughing at how they've banged each other up, and have another drink.

Such battles may seem completely crazy to outsiders, but are versions of the kind of tussling we have all seen puppies do and that most of us did as kids, and also of the kind of tussling that made Bruce Lee and Mike Tyson famous. Whether one draws a sharp divide between verbal and physical nudges, jabs, and battles is to a great extent a matter of age, culture, and habit, and both exist on a continuum that can be as innocently friendly as a light punch on the shoulder and as brutal as a fight to the death. A lot of people have described the dozens as a test of cool, a verbal exchange that ended if someone was provoked into throwing a punch. But in some situations the whole point of the dozens was to provoke a physical response, and taking it to that level implied no dishonor. Claude Brown was as intent as anyone in Harlem on keeping his cool, but he also took pride in his fistic prowess and wrote that "a guy who won't fight when somebody talks about his mother is the worst kind of punk."¹⁹

Brown was familiar with the dozens, and I assume he did not draw that line so clearly when he was kidding around with his buddies. But phrases that are friendly joshing in one situation can be fighting words if the situation changes. This tension is one of the things missing from the dozens matches captured by folklorists: the words may be the same, but the feeling is different. And the analogy to musical cutting sessions breaks down here as well: a jazz jam may involve proving oneself against other players, but it doesn't sound like a fight and is not going to turn into one. Some academics have argued that there is a similar safety in the dozens because the insults are so outlandish that they could never be taken seriously, but there is always the possibility that someone will say something that hits a nerve and the tone will shift.

I am interested in the dozens primarily as a verbal rather than a martial art, but I cannot pretend the two aspects are neatly separable. As with rap, jazz, or boxing, its artistry may be appreciated without much context, but cannot be understood. And I am doubly conscious of an obligation to understand rather than define, because I come to

the form as an outsider. I didn't grow up playing the dozens, and although I have been in plenty of situations where sharp insults and words like "motherfucker" were used to indicate tight friendships, I have also spent time with groups where I was intensely aware that I didn't understand the code. The only time I was ever punched in the jaw, it was for calling an African American acquaintance a sonofabitch, and until he hit me for insulting his mother it had never occurred to me that anyone would parse that word literally.

Thinking back on that incident, I suspect he took the word literally only because he was looking for a good excuse to hit me. Along with the dozens' other aspects, it is a handy way to stir up trouble. The rapper 50 Cent recalled being beaten up by a bigger kid, coming home crying, and being told by his mother to go back out and fight. He hit the other kid with a rock, and the kid yelled, "I'm gonna tell my mom!" 50 Cent figured his mom could handle the other mom, so he responded, "Go tell your mother. She can get hit, too." He wasn't playing the dozens; he was just imagining his mother standing up for him. But then "all the kids started egging the fight on. 'Ooooh! He talked about your momma!'"²⁰

That story also brings up another point: men and boys are not the only people who get into fights, whether verbal or physical. In general the extended, exhibitionistic dozens duels seem to have been a male thing, but that perception has undoubtedly been skewed by decades of male researchers. Rap Brown recalled that in his neighborhood "some of the best Dozens players were girls,"²¹ and in 1935 the Memphis blues singer Robert Wilkins sang:

I'm going uptown, buy me coke and beer,
Coming back and tell you how these women is.
They drink their whiskey, drink their coke and gin,
When you don't play the dozens they will ease you in.²²

As a general thing, boys go for rougher play than girls, but that is just a generalization, and in any case it only holds true as long as they are playing—when things get serious, the gender divide can disappear. There are no recorded examples of extended, friendly dozens matches involving girls or women, but no one has ever suggested that black women are less brilliantly sharp-tongued than black men. The poet Nikki Giovanni, growing up outside Cincinnati in the 1940s, recalled her older sister Gary expertly insulting some girls who were trying to bully them on their way home from school. Gary didn't fight and Nikki (then age four) had a reputation for throwing rocks at anyone who

picked on her sister, so the gang teased them: "Look at the stuck-up boobsie twins. . . . Mama had to send the baby to look out for the coward. . . . Hey, old stuck-up. What you gonna do when your sister's tired of fighting for you."

Gary responded:

"I'll beat you up myself. That's what."

"You and what army, 'ho'?" . . .

"Me and yo' mama's army." . . .

"You talking 'bout my mama?"

"I would but the whole town is so I can't add nothing." . . .

"You take it back, Gary."

"Yo' mama's so ugly she went to the zoo and the gorilla paid to see her."

"You take that back!"

"Yo' mama's such a 'ho' she went to visit a farm and they dug a whole field before they knew it was her."

The other girls apparently didn't play, so after that remark the game was over and the fight was on, with Nikki grabbing a big girl's hair and twisting her enemy to the ground until some grown-ups pulled her off.²³

Clearly the dozens meant different things in different situations, and not everybody played the same way or for the same reasons. One person's bitter insult was another's comic masterpiece, and what one observer interpreted as predatory bullying another might interpret as the fascinating survival of an ancient African tradition. There is a lot of history involved, and a lot of intricately coded social interactions, and even people who grew up around the dozens found it confusing at times. The poet and journalist Frank Marshall Davis was born in Arkansas City, Kansas, in 1905, and recalled that in his neighborhood the dozens consisted of mildly insulting rhymes:

I can tell by the shape of your jaw
A monkey must have been your pa,
'Cause you look jus' like your ma.

When Davis was seventeen he moved to Wichita to take a job as a busboy and was startled to find the grown-up waiters indulging in a rougher, unrhymed version of the game during their afternoon lunch break. It started with the same seemingly innocent phrase that sparked Danny Barker's anecdote: A short waiter "spotted a thin, mournful undertaker type, grinned, and asked pleasantly, 'How's yo mammy today?'"

"Uh-oh," said another waiter laughing. "Right straight in the dozens!"

"Soon's these jokers git together, they're 12th Street bound," commented another.

"I hear yo' baby sister's in jail again," came back the undertaker type. "She was runnin' a service station with a great big sign, 'Oil an' Ass for Sale.'"

The first threw up his hands in mock supplication. "I was jus' being polite, askin' 'bout your ma, an' you insults me. Jus' for that, nex' time your mother comes aroun' offering me a ten-cent trick, I'll turn her down."

"You ungrateful motherfucker," the other shot back. "If it don't be for me, you wouldn't be alive today. Yo' ma was all set to drown you 'til I step in an' say no. Soon's you was born, you ran up a chandelier. Yo' ma not only couldn't tell whose you was, she couldn't even tell *what* you was."

"Listen at this grannydodger," said the first. "When you was born, you was las' in a litter of three. The fust two out grabbed yo' ma's titties an' started sucking. That meant they wasn't but one thing left fo' you to eat on. So you ain't no motherfucker, you's a mothersucker."

Davis laughed along with the rest of the company, but rather than being treated as part of the group, he was immediately singled out for attention: "The undertaker type, as if he had been awaiting this opportunity, turned to me and asked solemnly, 'You play the dozens?'" When Davis said no, his demurral was met with a warning: "If you don't play 'em, don't laugh or I'll put you in 'em too." The other bus-boy leapt to his defense, saying he was new on the job and not used to "that crap," but one of the onlookers suggested that he could not expect more than a temporary respite: "If he stays 'round here long, he's gonna either play 'em or sing 'em."

As in Barker's story, Davis was a newcomer being put to a test. Not being a player and not wanting to mess up his first day on the job, he spent the rest of the meal trying not to laugh at the waiters' jibes. Finally, after everyone else had left the room, an older man took him aside and explained that the waiters didn't mean any harm, but eventually they were going to slip him in the dozens and he should just "tell 'em in a nice way that you don't play. . . ."

"But why do they have to play that way?" I asked.

"You ever call a friend of yours a son of a bitch in a jokin' way?" he countered.

"Why, yes," I admitted.

"Your friend get mad?"

"Of course not!"

"Seems to me they ain't much diff'rence. When you call a man a son of a bitch, you call his mother a dog. In the dozens you jus' elaborate an' expand on it more. Both ways you's talking about his females, an' also you're jus' kiddin' 'round. Another thing: you notice two men don't go off an' play the dozens by themselves. It's in front of somebody else."

Davis could not argue, but neither was he comfortable with the situation. And the exuberant nastiness of the display still baffled him.

"I guess you're right," I said, "but why do they make such a production of it?"

He thought deeply for a moment, then replied, "I s'pose because it's a way to feel important. Most of us ain't goin' nowhere in this world; the white folks done saw to that. We ain't ever goin' to do much better than we's doing now, an' that ain't much. But still we all like to feel important. So when a man thinks up somethin' real funny an' the others laugh, he feels good. A man's jus' gotta feel important some kind of way."²⁴

This explanation obviously resonated with Davis, who recalled it many decades later. And it is echoed in modern discussions about the violent boasting and obscenities of rap. But if the dozens expresses some profound truths about the African American experience, it is also rooted in ancient, universal responses to the complications of interacting with our fellow humans. It may not be a pretty tradition, but neither is it simple, and, love it or hate it, it is inextricably part of our history and culture. Kind of like our mothers, and fathers, and great-great-great-great-grandparents . . .