CULTURAL ANALYSIS

AN INTERDISCIPLINARY FORUM ON FOLKLORE AND POPULAR CULTURE

VOL. 22.1

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Cultural Analysis

An Interdisciplinary Forum on Folklore and Popular Culture

Vol. 22.1

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Folk Research: A Query and a Critique

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Abstract
This essay is a commentary on the rise of "folk research," the "research" conducted by individuals who claim the status of folklorist in public venues without formal training, engagement with learned societies, and other markers of expertise. Drawing upon examples from contemporary southern New England, this essay describes and critically analyses three stances of the folk researcher: the enthusiast, the self-proclaimed expert, and the professionally unreasonable. This essay further argues that folk researchers should be considered a concern for academic and public sector folklorists and their intellectual allies. It contends that folk researchers pose serious issues for professionalism in the discipline and as potential perpetuators of anti-intellectualism, misinformation, and even racist or otherwise socially problematic perceptions of folklore and folklore studies.

Keywords: Folk research, New England folklore, expertise, anti-intellectualism, public, folklore studies

Introduction

Permit me to begin with two representative anecdotes. The first is a direct quote from Richard Dorson, penned in his indelible combative style, from his essay "Is Folklore a Discipline?":

> At a meeting of the American Folklore Society back in 1957, a panel of two well-known scholars and a dentist who wrote children's books on folklore addressed themselves to a topic such as I am presenting here. At that time the society was treading slippery ground between the pulls of amateur enthusiasts and university professors. Many of the academics themselves felt only a secondary interest in folklore, having been trained in other subject matters. The first American Ph.D. in folklore was only granted in 1953. At any rate our writer of juveniles bounced up and down on the podium flailing at the pedants who squeezed all the juice out of folklore with their dusty monographs while enviously criticizing the successful nonacademic authors whose folklore books sold widely. (1973, 177)

The second anecdote is personal. As Halloween 2019 approached, an article by the travel writer Natalie Compton appeared in the *Washington Post*, "Seven Spooky Places to Visit according to a Ghost Hunter." It featured the recommendations of a "paranormal investigator," Greg Newkirk, and promoted his website and media company. I wrote to Ms. Compton:

Cultural Analysis 22.1 (2024): 1–51
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> Although I fully understand the appeal of such a topic for readers and for journalists, I feel compelled to reach out to you as a professor with a Ph.D. in folklore studies, and as someone concerned about both the misunderstanding of science in our society and the potential exploitation of storytellers by so-called "paranormal investigators." Inadvertently, by promoting "ghost hunters" who make money selling such "expertise," you run the risk of denigrating the work of trained folklorists, as well as talented storytellers in local communities. Paranormal investigators do not, as whole, hold any credentials. Professional folklorists, on the other hand, are often very adept at conveying and explaining stories and selecting and promoting interesting tourist destinations.

Ms. Compton sent a gracious reply and informed me that she had never heard that professional folklorists existed prior to my email.[1]

In other words, from the battle recounted by Dorson to the paranormal tourism of the present day, we have lost the campaign against folk research.

This essay is a query about whether my colleagues consider this loss an issue warranting redress. It is also a critique of certain popularizers in response to their folk research. For clarification, this commentary is not a criticism of folklore studies or research into folk practices. The inflection in the term "folk research" instead is on *folk*, akin to *folk psychology*, *folk epistemology*, and *folk science*—that is, a means of describing a phenomenon without rigorous methodology or thorough attention to empirical data. The utilization of "folk" further underscores the identity construction of those who, by engaging in such practices, constitute themselves as an allied group of individuals, often in opposition to other groups. In this configuration, "folk researchers" could exist for any topic—as, for example, the COVID pandemic saw people claim to do their own research on vaccines. Given space limitations, however, the subject of this critique is modest; it concerns claims of "research" conducted by people who lack formal training and expertise yet purport to investigate folklore.

I am also posing this query to ascertain if this is a widespread problem. From my purview in southern New England (Massachusetts, Connecticut, and Rhode Island), we are inundated with imposters. There are only a handful of professional folklorists and allied anthropologists, historians, literary scholars, and curators employed in the public sector and higher education. However, the region is a hotbed for so-called paranormal investigators, cryptozoologists, and others forming what Sharon Hill, in her perspicacious book *Scientifical Americans* (2017), terms ARIGs: Amateur Research and Investigation Groups. These individuals and teams—many of whom self-identify as folklorists or "folklore researchers"—flood the market with books, websites, documentaries, radio and television series, public lectures, and related media. Some have lucrative contracts with "edu-tainment" outlets or even with public radio and television stations such as WGBH. As Halloween approaches, local and regional newspapers—including the venerable *Boston Globe*, the *Hartford Courant*, and the *Providence Journal*—often feature interviews with such so-called experts. With the spotlight upon them, these folk researchers opine on matters they have not researched carefully or offer absurd statements about folklore, routinely merging it with pseudoscience.

There are other grave problems with folk researchers / ARIGs beyond their lack of attention to data. In their ardor, self-interest, and lack of standards they often propagate and perpetuate xenophobic, racist, misogynistic, and classist folklore. In many cases, they proliferate anti-intellectualism and anti-science attitudes, thereby contributing to what Tom Nichols has called "the death of expertise" (2017). Although there is little chance that these non-experts would gain employment in academic or applied settings in educational institutions, they have an impact on public opinion and perception about the work that trained folklorists do and, arguably, what it means to conduct legitimate research of any subject.

In the pages that follow, I offer a critique of three stances taken by folk researchers: the enthusiast, the self-proclaimed expert, and the professionally unreasonable. I do not intend these as hard categories but as recognizable patterns of practice regarding professional responsibilities to the presentation of public knowledge. As stated briefly, the enthusiast recognizes the amateur nature of their work but their zeal for the material cannot rein in the compulsion to participate in the production of knowledge. The self-proclaimed expert upholds themselves as the sole authority for judgments about the nature of the material to create the rhetorical appearance of being a possessor of knowledge. The professionally unreasonable operates within a fantasy reality and is unbound to any checks or professional standards. All three types rarely (if ever) publish in reputable journals or form alliances with legitimate institutions. Nevertheless, they seek—and sometimes exploit—laudatory attention from intellectuals in the academic and public sectors. I provide a specific example culled from southern New England for each stance. Again, given space limitations, I cannot review all the errors, misconceptions, and rhetorical strategies of the named practitioners in detail, but I am prepared to offer an extensive critique of each of them if called upon.

Professionals and Popularizers in Folklore Studies: A Review

The primary audience of this commentary are readers of *Cultural Analysis*, an academic community "dedicated to investigating expressive and everyday culture." Fortunately, the journal's online existence also guarantees availability to other scholars facing similar concerns, to folk researchers and their fans, and to relevant institutions such as libraries, historical societies, schools, and media outlets. I am keenly aware of the need not to abuse the patience of those additional readers, but I am also compelled to provide a review of the historical basis for this topic in folklore studies. Although that history warrants a lengthy and thorough explanation, in this section I will only summarize a few of the most poignant previous exchanges for the sake of general orientation.

The Fakelore / Folklorism Debates

Arguably, the oldest debate concerning professionals and popularizers in folklore studies arose in accusations by academics in the United States and Europe that certain practices advertised as folklore were spurious traditions and recent inventions by specific creators rather than products of community transmission and adaptation over

time. Richard Dorson coined the term "fake lore" in an essay published in 1950 in the *American Mercury* to address such perceived violations. Therein he laments:

> In recent years folklore has boomed mightily, and reached a wide audience through best-selling books, concert and cabaret folksingers, even Walt Disney cartoons. But far from fulfilling its high promise, the study has been falsified, abused and exploited, and the public deluded with Paul Bunyan nonsense and claptrap collections. Without stirring from the library, money-writers have successfully peddled synthetic hero-books and saccharine folk tales as the stories of the people. Americans may be insufficiently posted on their history and culture, as the famous New York Times survey indicated, but their knowledge of these subjects is erudition, compared with what they know about their own folklore. The saddest aspect of this fraud is that the spurious article is so dull and thin, and the genuine material so salty and rich. (1950, 335)

Dorson's specific targets in that earliest configuration were promoters of Paul Bunyan stories, especially the writer James Stevens, and fellow folklorist (and Ph.D.) Benjamin Botkin, who had published three folklore treasuries, all well received by the wider public. In subsequent decades, Dorson continued a campaign against "faklelore," those expressions that he regarded as falsehoods or not genuine expressions of folklore, and "fakelorists," the "[a]mateurs, dilettantes, popularizers, [and] charlatans" who promoted it (1976, 1).[2]

Stevens, in his response to Dorson, drew a different distinction. He suggested that Dorson himself was confused "between the tasks of the anthropologist and those of the artist with folklore" (1950, 343). Stevens continues:

> The scientist of long technical training and expertise will use folklore to reflect the vital phases of human tribes in times past. The artist adopts folklore for the work of his imagination. He sees Paul Bunyan as substance for art, in the tradition of Twain with King Arthur's court, of Byron with Don Juan, of Marlowe with Faustus, of Homer with Odysseus. …
>
> So much for my main difference with Dr. Dorson. There are other points of his argument on which I have to go to bat against him. And on some prime points, of course, I would have to support him. He is a scientific authority on folklore. I have never pretended to be a folklorist. (1950, 343–44)

That distinction, I contend, lies at the heart of this present commentary. Stevens willingly recognizes that he is an artist—and one operating in the entertainment industry—and does not pretend to be a folklorist. Dorson may not have respected authors who popularized folklore or anyone who brought folklore into commercial ventures, but Stevens clearly respected academic folklorists in this reply and did not represent himself as such an expert. As will become apparent, contemporary folk researchers refuse to muster similar respect. They are willing to pretend to be folklorists even as their primary social function is entertainment.

To clarify the position that I am arguing in this commentary, I stand with Stevens,

even as I applaud Dorson's desire to dignify folklore studies and promote professional folklorists. I have no objection to the notion that artists would utilize folklore in their works. I would further submit that Botkin's treasuries served a radically different social purpose than "research"—they were, after all, collections of excerpts from previous writers for a general readership, a far different creature than the studies he published in academic folklore journals. My argument against folk researchers is not that they engage folklore, but that they represent themselves as experts in research (including such ill-defined fields as "paranormal investigation") rather than as entertainers. I have no qualms with those who identify as storytellers, although I may criticize the content of a given story.[3] Furthermore, I would never suggest that raconteurs cannot do research or that entertainment cannot instruct or offer critique. Instead, I wish to draw a distinction between the work of researchers and entertainers and recognize that there are social consequences when the former's mechanisms collapse into the latter's expectations.

Successful entertainment warrants the production of pleasure in audiences. Successful research has no such obligation. Folklore *can* be decidedly entertaining. Folklore also can be weaponized to denigrate and demonize others for the pleasures of only certain parties. Folklore research requires a different commitment than entertainment, including the pursuit of accuracy. In folklore studies, accuracy may necessitate examination, disclosure, and critical analysis of patterns and productions of deeply problematic expressive culture such as colonialism and colonialist mentality. Such revelation may produce the antithesis of entertainment, namely an unpleasant unmasking of social realities that cause harm and pain for those subject to it.

Folk researchers often maintain the status quo because it is profitable to do so as long as they find audiences who derive pleasure from their work. On the other hand, scholarly folklorists may pursue research and draw conclusions that disturb, disquiet, or disconcert. In this manner, folklore studies differ from the aims of folk researchers, who generally seek to promote folklore rather than analyze and criticize it.

The role of entertainment plays significantly in debates concerning folklorism in Europe. Folklorism, as Saša Poljak Istenič succinctly explains, "denotes a social and cultural phenomenon that presents and revives folk culture forms in a series of versions ranging from scholarly reconstruction to (folk) performance" (2011, 51). In a similar vein, the recently coined term "folkloresque" identifies usages of folklore within popular culture (see Foster and Tolbert 2016). Representative examples include modern renditions of folk dancing (and concurrent folk music and costumes), festivals of recent invention that claim ancient vintage, rituals of newly emergent identity groups that borrow from or hearken to earlier traditions, and numerous expressions of heritage tourism.

Scholars often dismiss folklorism as an expression of fakelore, although the concept historically predates Dorson and involved different inflections within the European context (Šmidchens 1999). Criticism of folklorism concerns authenticity and applica-

tion of standards that something is a "genuine" tradition according to an arbitrary set of standards. Proponents of folklorism (whether scholars or performers) counter that such demands are capricious and misunderstand the folkloric process itself.

The dominant concern in the fakelore and folklorism debates—a practice's potential status as an invented or spurious tradition—is not centrally relevant to this present commentary. For the most part, the folk researchers identified herein do not invent folklore out of thin air, although they often embrace claims by "paranormal investigators" of longstanding traditions that do not hold up to historical analysis and scrutiny (I discuss one such case, the so-called Bridgewater Triangle, below). The community of paranormal investigators frequently return the favor and cite sympathetic folk researchers in their accounts.

New England folk researchers, for example, often examine established—if not outright classic—folklore, especially historical legends and social phenomena such as witchcraft. The problem, then, is not that they produce fakelore or folkorism per se but that they claim the authority to interpret recognized folklore and do so without attention to legitimate research methods. It is also my contention that many contemporary folk researchers deliberately seek to befuddle lines between research and the expression of uniformed opinion and often do so to gain capital in the form of money and prestige. Folk researchers benefit from misinforming in ways that delight the public. In this manner, I agree with Dorson about threats posed to research when it must satisfy the commercial marketplace and not the marketplace of ideas.

Indeed, I would go further and sharply distinguish between folklore used for entertainment or social commentary and the expectations for best practices in folklore research. For example, in 2016, a group of women who formed the Wolfshäger Hexenbrut in Wolfshagen im Harz, Germany, performed a public choreography celebrating Walpurgis at the end of April. The women dressed as stereotypical European witches and danced to a German reggae song "Schüttel deinen Speck"—"Shake Your Bacon"—by Peter Fox.

Videos of the women went viral and inspired pagan organizations, covens, and feminist groups throughout the globe to perform The Witch Dance, often signaling commitments to female empowerment. In the United States, celebrants incorporated the dance into Halloween in October. It became all the more poignant in 2017, in the aftermath of the #MeToo movement and the Women's March protests against Donald Trump. Variations have begun in earnest. The performers of The Witch Dance that occurred near my home in Connecticut at Halloween 2019 included gay and straight male allies to women's rights, including one dressed as the devil.

I do not dispute that The Witch Dance has become folklore, even as it may have begun as an expression of "popular culture." I would wholeheartedly disagree with scholars who disparage it as fakelore or "mere" folklorism and refuse to recognize how it has spread rapidly and evolved as a global phenomenon. I would dispute, however, any claim that the song used by the Wolfshäger Hexenbrut in 2016 is "Witchy Woman" by the Eagles or that the group near my home in Connecticut danced at *Walpurgis* (April 30) in 2019. I would also dispute that men invented the dance to mock feminists or that the dance is a *direct* descendent from secretive medieval Hexennacht celebra-

tions. I would do so because each of those hypothetical claims are erroneous—that is, they are inaccurate, unreasonable, or lacking in evidence. I believe that professional folklorists and all those who claim expertise have an ethical responsibility to correct error. Folk researchers, on the other hand, take no such responsibility. That lack of responsibility is the reason for this critique.

I am also not dismissing the notion of fakelore entirely. As an example, I apologize to the reader for employing a personal example. For a few years, I consulted with Essex Steam Train and Riverboat, a major tourist destination near the mouth of the Connecticut River, to design entertainment events inspired by New England folklore. Working with Free Men of the Sea, a history reenactment troupe specializing in pirate performances, I helped create two commercial adventures, one for children and one for adults. Free Men of the Sea had long performed as Captain Kidd's crew members and incorporated the global historical data and folklore concerning that infamous figure. For our events, we expanded the crew, giving each an identity of another pirate in New England folklore, well beyond Connecticut.

We also incorporated mermaids, drawing loosely upon a regional tradition, including from the town of Stratford, Connecticut, about an hour west of Essex. Kidd legends permeate the Connecticut River, where our events occurred. Mermaid legends do not; indeed, there is no case in the record. In inserting folkloric materials into a new setting, I recognize that we did so for entertainment, not historical accuracy. I would readily accept this gesture—and the resulting spectacles—as an act of fakelore. I would also indict myself if I suggested that the mermaid tradition was deep-rooted on the Connecticut River and would criticize any researcher who, based solely on these entertainment events, erroneously argued that mermaid lore was prevalent there.

The Public Perception of Professional Folklorists

The second site of tension involves the public perception of what professional folklorists do. It too has a complex history that is impossible to summarize quickly, so instead I will point to a similarity in three works spanning three decades. In 1991, Robin Evanchuk noted a widespread interest in folklore among the general population, of a similar strength that Dorson identified in 1950. Evanchuk's expressed intention was to provide insights to professional (and particularly academic) folklorists for improving their relations with the public, especially by "refining communication techniques" (13). Drawing from a vast range of phone calls into the UCLA Folklore and Mythology Program and a 1984 AFS survey conducted by Frank de Caro, she observed that "there is some confusion among members of the public at large about who folklorists are and where and how to find one" (15).

At UCLA, perhaps not surprisingly, one of the most frequent seekers of the professional folklorists' attention were those in the entertainment industry, who sought inspiration or clarification for projects. Evanchuk noted with concern that the general practice of that industry was not to credit or even adequately compensate folklorists for their research and time. However, despite several associated problems, she hoped

that "dialogue can develop to explore new ways of presenting folklore and folklorists on radio and television news programs" (17). Evanchuk further advised other basic public relations tactics, including "films, advertisements, phone information services, brochures, and public-oriented magazines," press releases, and syndicated newspaper columns (18-19), all in an effort to explain what folklorists do.

In 2015, Jeffrey Tolbert published an essay entitled "On Folklore's Appeal: A Personal Essay." Akin to Evanchuk, Tolbert advised academic folklorists to take public perceptions seriously and engage them, to foster dialogue and collaboration with interested members of the public. Tolbert recognized, however, that for many consumers, folklore implied a traditionalist and romanticized notion of a specific material, especially supernatural narratives and practices. Non-academics, he continued, desired something different than did scholars, namely examples that could help them learn about a topic "before any further analysis or criticism can occur" (103). If folklorists provided such information, Tolbert argued, they would create a productive means for the transition from popular perceptions to disciplinary ones. He was convinced that professional folklorists who were "rankled" by non-academics using the title (as, for example, in the series *The Folklorist*) should recognize that "there is nothing preventing them from answering this portrayal with one of their own, equally accessible to non-scholars but reflecting contemporary theories and trends in the discipline" (103). "We are in a position," Tolbert concluded, "by virtue of our credentials and the pervasiveness of digital technologies, to address popular audiences directly, to work with filmmakers and television producers and other creators of popular culture to produce works which draw on folklore as material and simultaneously reflect disciplinary understandings of the social significance of that material" (106–7). His examples, an updating of Evanchuk's, included documentaries, blogs, social media, coffee table books, public lectures, and the kinds of work that public sector folklorists accomplish daily.

In 2021, Andrea Kitta, Lynne McNeill, and Trevor Blank published an essay in *Advancing Folkloristics* with a similar intention to advise professional folklorists on the means and benefits of engaging with the broader public, including popular media. In contradiction to Dorson and other anchoring figures of the discipline's past, they ambitiously recommended embracing certain popularizers:

> The thing is, popularity is great—it should be something that strengthens our field, rather than weakens it. Amateur interest in folklore is what got many of us here today. People who are engaged by legend-themed shows or podcasts and who read world folktale books from general bookstores should be discovering that the things they are interested in are encompassed within folklore studies. We need to bridge the gap and find straightforward ways to communicate the basics of our field to nonexperts. This is not an easy thing to do, and it will require intentional, thoughtful preparation. (206)

Among the tools for such connection, Kitta, McNeill, and Blank recommend "writings or interviews for the general public in magazines, blogs, podcasts, and social media" (207), including outreach on Twitter, Facebook, and meme creation. The metaphor of bridging and positive examples of outreach permeate their essay.

I could not more strongly agree with the opinion that academic folklorists need to engage and educate the public. I have, on the record, encouraged AFS to launch a series of books on folklore for widespread consumption. I am a tenured professor, but I have published three books for the general reader and am working on a fourth—and have given partial to total royalties from all to nonprofit organizations. I served as the resident folklorist for a regional museum for five years, bringing to completion two exhibits, and did so pro bono. I have hosted several folklore-oriented series on an internet radio station for years, again entirely without remuneration. I regularly present public lectures on New England folklore and do not ask for compensation if the organization serves the public good. I offer hiking tours of folkloric sites to benefit outdoor organizations. I give media interviews throughout the year, provide free advice to fiction writers and visual artists, and volunteer on the board of a state governmental agency to promote cultural heritage tourism. I also teach large lecture, General Education classes on the folklore of New England, the global folklore of alcohol, and humor and comedy studies.

I mention these activities to demonstrate my bona fides for a differing opinion of the ease with which professional folklorists can influence the public by embracing popular media. While I deeply appreciate the optimism and successes expressed by colleagues, I also speak from experience—I am not a cloistered academic—when I say that the problem is not that we academic folklorists are too reticent to reach out through popular technologies. Rather, folklorists committed to accuracy cannot compete with the entertainment industry, which has little to no regard for such precision or critical analysis. Sensationalism sells. Accuracy can be dull or impossible to reduce to soundbites. Furthermore, to underscore the point of this present commentary, one problem with folk researchers—especially those who make a living selling their "expertise"—is their willingness to play by the rules of the entertainment industry rather than by, for example, the ethics statement of the American Folklore Society regarding responsibilities to the public:

> Folklorists are responsible to all presumed consumers of their professional efforts. To them they owe a commitment to candor and truth in the dissemination of their research results and in statements of their opinions as students of human behavior.

Candor and truth are not the goals of entertainers. While I have no problem with creatives who employ and adapt folklore for projects, I still believe that candor and truth should be the guiding principles for anyone who represents themself as a researcher aiming to inform and influence the public.

The Debate over Who Is and Who Is Not a Folklorist

As with the previous sections, the many debates concerning who qualifies as a folklorist are too demanding to repeat even in summary. Still, for clarity among my colleagues, I wish to be clear that this present critique is not a revisiting of the false dichotomy between academic and public sector folklore (Kirshenblatt-Gimblett 1988;

Zeitlin 2000), an artificial division that I hope has forever ceased. It is not a criticism of contributions by all amateurs or by "citizen folklorists" (to adapt a term from citizen scientists) or of collaborative ethnography. It is certainly not a criticism of organic intellectuals in Antonio Gramsci's sense of the term. It is also not a rehash of the Walter Lippmann-John Dewey debate over expert control of public policy in a democracy, although there are implications for a robust democratic society when anti-intellectualism and entertainment in the guise of education reigns.

This present commentary most closely resembles one initiated in 1991 by Robert Georges. To provide some context, Georges was the guest editor for the journal *Western Folklore*, then celebrating its fiftieth year of existence. The theme of the special issue was "Taking Stock: Current Problems and Future: Prospects in American Folklore Studies." Another issue lingered, however, beside that anniversary. In 1989, the American Folklore Society's Executive Board initiated consideration of altering the nature of the organization from a learned society to a professional association more akin to the American Medical or American Bar Association.

In a series of exchanges in the society newsletter in 1990, Elliot Oring, Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, and James Leary debated the move. Oring proposed the establishment of a related but separate organization for professionalism, noting it could provide benefits for its members and require licensing and related restrictions to identify a certified folklorist. Kirshenblatt-Gimblett considered such a move destructive and countered that a folklorist is not a profession that requires accreditation. Indeed, she argued that since AFS membership was relatively small, the issue of debating who is and who is not a folklorist was ill-founded. Leary defended public sector folklorists and reiterated that a folklore degree was not the sole mark of a folklorist but further expected that anyone "hired" as a folklorist fulfill a set of responsibilities, including the AFS code of ethics. In response, Oring agreed that stringent definitions of a folklorist were unproductive but challenged the implications that AFS should champion anyone who identifies this way. "*Anyone*?" Oring inquired, "Even if they do not possess the requisite knowledge and skills to do the job?" (5).

Georges insisted that his opinion was unrelated to the certification debate and that he did not support efforts towards professionalization in that manner. Nevertheless, his commentary raised a host of issues concerning who is a legitimate folklorist. His opening statement recalled a discussion he shared with a colleague—later self-revealed as Bill Ellis (1992)—who identified as a folklorist without a formal degree (but holding a Ph.D. in a related field). "Identifying oneself as a folklorist when one has had no formal training in the field had certainly once been the norm," Georges insisted, drawing attention to the distinguished contributions of laypeople and academics to the founding of the American Folklore Society (4). Georges was incredulous, however, that such a practice could continue after the establishment of degree-granting institutions in the 1950s. Ruminating further, he identified nine ways in which people "became" folklorists—that is, "appropriated the folklorist identity" (4)—since the 1960s despite little or no academic training in the subject. Self-declaration was first on his litany and generous acclamation by well-meaning folklorists was his last, but the middle seven require pause for this present essay. Georges notes such tactics as:

- Focusing in their own work on the kinds of phenomena that folklorists study
- Organizing or participating in performing groups that have the word *folk* or *folklore* in their names
- Joining folklore societies
- Presenting papers at folklore meetings
- Getting essays published in folklore periodicals
- Authoring books with the word folklore or some derivative thereof in their titles
- Obtaining jobs requiring folklore training, even though they have none (4-5)

"Why do some individuals feel," Georges pondered, "that all it takes to be a folklorist is the desire or willingness to be so identified?" (5). His answer concerned the nature of folklore itself, namely that so many people in public "continue to conceive folklore to denote phenomena that they regard as—and/or feel that others consider to be—archaic, fantastic, or trivial" (6). In the minds of many, he continued, "one need have no special training to be a student of the archaic, fantastic, and trivial, and hence one need not 'study' to be a folklorist" (6). Georges contended that folklore societies and journals even promoted this impression in hopes of garnering widespread support and did not dutifully criticize fakelore publications whose authors claimed the status of folklorist. He argued that because interest in folklore served as the sole criterion for identification as a folklorist, the belief that anyone could be one was widespread in academia, to the discipline's detriment.

Georges' counterpoint is worth quotation in full:

> I have taken the position that folklorist is an identifying label that people should earn, and that formal academic training is the way to earn that right. I have repeatedly criticized the view that anyone who wants or is willing to be identified as a folklorist should be recognized and identified as such. I have noted, with an implicit mixture of anger and sadness, that many academically trained folklorists prefer, or are forced by circumstances, to conceal or deny their folklorist identity; and I have implied that many academically trained folklorists continue to contribute to the perpetuation of the view that it is acceptable in this day and age for individuals to be identified as folklorists by appropriate or conferment. I have given some reasons for, and consequences of, the fact that the identity of folklorist can be appropriated, concealed, and denied as well as earned; and I have implied that the persistence of this fact has unsettling implications for the future of folklore studies. (9–10)

Bill Ellis' response was equally passionate in decrying Georges' conclusion, which he considered "hopelessly—indeed recklessly—unrealistic in its elitism" in requiring formal training in folklore studies (180). Ellis, however, concurred with Georges that "folklore's image is tarnished by the common perception that no specialized training is needed to study the subject" (181). He continues:

> To that extent, I agree that we should criticize self-declared folklorists who simply apply the methodology specific to their own discipline to material that they intend to marginalize as archaic, foolish, or trivial. I did get the message early on that facile application of one field's methods to folk materials was not acceptable: I needed to become familiar with the concepts and analytical skills proper to folklore. (181)

Echoing Georges, Ellis himself presents a list of basic expectations for would-be scholars, namely they:

- Know what they are talking about, in all its textual and contextual complexity
- Know what other people have said about the material
- Have something fresh to say about it
- Take pains over Getting Things Right
- Have a modicum of chutzpah
- Show professional courtesy (181–82)

Ellis' greater point, however, was that one became a scholar not through the earning of a specific degree but through accomplishments "that an audience of trained professionals felt was worth doing" (182). He concludes on this same point, offering that "a scholar becomes a folklorist in the same way that a performance becomes folklore: by being 'accepted, influenced, and recreated' … by an audience of chosen peers" (186). I will return to that point of the social nature of expertise in the next section. Here, it bears notice that both Georges and Ellis consider folklorists to be experts housed within higher education or public institutions dedicated to education or minimally those in regular interaction with learned societies, conferences, and journals. While they certainly differ on the necessity of a formal degree in folklore studies, neither makes the case that one deserves to call oneself a folklorist without attending to the cultural expectations of folklore scholarship. By identifying and criticizing folk researchers, I am arguing that those who represents themselves as folklorists in public can and should be held accountable to standards of scholarly practice, just as those who claim the status of storyteller or entertainer are open to critique by aesthetic standards. My aim is to forefront the ethics of candor and truth in the representation of research and claims of expertise.

The Nature of Expertise

To complicate matters further, there is no consensus on the nature of expertise. Indeed, in the past two decades, the topic has become a hotly debated concept in academic and popular circles. Rather than work through the extensive weeds, in this section, I draw attention to two highly influential contributions to the debate, the work of British sociologist Harry Collins and US American political scientist Tom Nichols.

In a series of publications, Collins persuasively argued for an understanding of expertise that is not solely a possession of a body of knowledge by individuals nor a

process of increased skill and experience. He admits those capacities as essential components of expertise, but he further recognizes a social dimension. Collins maintains that expertise occurs when individuals progress through a society of domain experts. He asserts that the foundation of such activity is exposure to, and transmission of, domain-specific tacit knowledge and "esotericity" (2013). He does not use the terms "folklore," "tradition," or "folk group," but Collins opens the conversation to an understanding of expertise as the mastery of knowledge, habits, expectations, and ways of communicating in communities dedicated to specialized practices. Collins does not, however, regard an "expert" as someone who is simply declared so by a group. On the contrary, he recognizes that although groups define expertise and that awareness and accumulation of their tacit knowledge is essential to navigating such social dimensions, there exists actual bodies of knowledge, standards, and best practices that are relevant to knowing what one is talking about.

Collins takes a realist rather than a relational approach to expertise. He recognizes explicit knowledge, tacit knowledge, and the need for social interaction with other experts as the core ingredients of expertise. This idea stands in opposition to an approach that fosters the "folk wisdom" view, which claims "that ordinary people are wiser than experts in some technical areas" (Collins and Evans 2007, 5). In a damning exhortation that is strikingly relevant to this present commentary, Collins and his colleague Robert Evans inquire:

> [U]nder the folk wisdom view it is the ordinary person that is said to understand the closed and narrow world of science merely by observing its surface—just as the colonialists and Victorian anthropologists were said to be able to understand the world of the natives without direct experience. Here the ordinary people are thrust into a position like that of the elite, Oxbridge-trained, amateurs of the pre-Fulton Report Civil Service—"we do not need experts among us, good thinking is sufficient."… Finally, we find, implicitly, that the ordinary people are not in need of the specialist experience championed by those who believe in extreme standpoint epistemologies when it comes to understanding and researching ethnic or other minority groups. Could it be that under this implicit model it is the ordinary person represented by Alf Garnett (*'Til Death Do Us Part*) or Archie Bunker (*All in the Family*), who must be taken to hold a robust, commonsense view of minorities, in no need of refinement from arcane academic analysis? (6)

Accordingly, the difference between expertise and folk wisdom lies in the depth of knowledge and practice gained through social interaction with other experts.

I recognize that to many folklorists, Collins' use of "folk" in "folk wisdom" (and mine in "folk researcher") may seem pejorative. We folklorists often take great pride in defending everyday experience and the socially marginalized and I applaud those efforts. Collins' point, however, is that there is a vast difference between expertise and folk understandings, the latter of which can exist in a vacuum or unchallenged by domain experts. He further recognizes a distinction between the arts and the sciences in a manner complementing a distinction between entertainment and research:

> The folk wisdom case—the case for the general public as the ultimate audience—is also much more easily made in the case of art than in the case of science. "I may not know much about art but I know what I like" is less frivolous than "I may not know much about science but I know what I like." In the case of art we might be inclined to come down on the side of the skilled viewer as opposed to the public consumer, but at least the tension between lay and trained judges is easy to understand. Science, by its nature, is not directed at either kind of consumer but at the truth; this means that if we want to preserve it as we know it the audience should have less in the way of interpretive rights in respect to its meaning. (Collins and Evans 2007, 119)

Collins is not opposed to folk wisdom, then, but to its misapplication or valorization.

Nichols does not employ the same terminology as Collins nor overtly emphasizes tacit knowledge and embedding in social domains, but his definition of expertise is consistent with those observations.[4] The key, he argues, is specialized knowledge within occupations. Experts are "people who have mastered particular skills or bodies of knowledge and who practice those skills or use that knowledge as their main occupation in life" (2017, 29). True expertise, Nichols continues, "is an intangible but recognizable combination of education, talent, experience, and peer affirmation" (30). Such marks of expertise include formal training and credentialing where appropriate, but Nichols recognizes that degrees and similar institutional recognition are only a start. Experience plays an important role, which includes how experts "stay engaged in their field, continually improving their skills, learn from their mistakes, and have a visible track record. Over the span of their career, they get better, or at least maintain their high level of competence, and couple it to the wisdom—again, an intangible—that comes from time" (33).

For example, Nichols describes the Sovietologist Marshall Shulman, who had become an expert in discerning important policy news from the seemingly banal liturgies of Soviet newspapers. When questioned about the practice, Shulman could only explain that he read *Pravda* until his "nose twitched." Nichols, initially dismissive of this explanation—a fine image of internalized tacit knowledge, incidentally—came to understand that what Shulman meant was "that he'd spent years reading Soviet periodicals, and thus he had become so attuned to their method of communication that he could spot changes or irregularities when they passed before his trained and experienced eye" (34).

Nichols' final component of expertise is especially prescient to my present commentary:

> Another mark of true experts is their acceptance of evaluation and correction by other experts. Every professional group and expert community has watchdogs, boards, accreditors, and certification authorities whose job is to police its own members and to ensure not only that they live up to the standards of their own specialty, but also that their arts are practiced only by people who actually know what they are doing. … Mechanisms like peer review, board certification, professional associations, and other organizations and professions help protect quality and to assure society—that is, the

> expert's clients—that they're safe in accepting expert claims of competence. (35)

Nichols' point complements Collins on the social dimension of expertise and hence offers a means to distinguish between hobbyists or dilettantes and experts. Experts willingly engage other experts, seeking feedback, critique, and opportunities to learn, improve, and practice their explicit and tacit knowledge. This perspective—which supports Ellis' response to Georges—also demonstrates why self-trained experts "are rare exceptions," because such isolation (or echo chambers) prohibits people from gaining tacit knowledge and from confronting how they may be mistaken (37). Another poignant marker of expertise is that experts are less inclined to make mistakes and more importantly, "know better than anyone the pitfalls of their own profession" (36).

Given the nature of folk research, I would like to reiterate the specific responsibilities and requirements of peer-review. Nichols explains:

> This process—when it works—calls upon an expert's colleagues (his or her peers) to act as well-intentioned but rigorous devil's advocates. This usually takes place in a "double-blind" process, meaning that the researcher and the referees are not identified to each other, the better to prevent personal or institutional biases from influencing the review.
>
> This is an invaluable process. Even the most honest and self-aware scholar or researcher needs a reality check from someone less personally invested in the outcome of a project. …
>
> In modern life outside of the academy, however, arguments and debates have no external review. Facts come and go as people find convenient at the moment. Thus, confirmation bias makes attempts at reasoned argument exhausting because it produces arguments and theories that are *nonfalsifiable*. It is the nature of confirmation bias itself to dismiss all contradictory evidence as irrelevant, and so *my* evidence is always the rule, *your* evidence is always a mistake or an exception. It's impossible to argue with this kind of explanation, because by definition it's never wrong. (52–53)

The present commentary in this essay, for example, was peer-reviewed by four colleagues and the journal's editors. I only submitted it after two trusted friends, who are also professional folklorists, provided initial critique. All four reviewers suggested radically different improvements, with three concluding that it could be publishable following redress of those concerns and one recommending rejection (but also providing sound reasoning and suggestions for the judgment). That social process not only greatly improved the work, but it raised the stakes of the commentary to become serviceable to a community by instigating a larger conversation or a debate. Peer-review can be a brutal process, but it is one of the essential elements of expertise conceptualized as a social exchange. Folk researchers, of course, do not submit their work to peer-review and therefore do not benefit from such interactions with a community of domain experts. On the contrary, they often cite each other, or sympathetic ARIGs, in imitation of scholarly practices but maintain no mechanisms to check opinion and

demand evidence for assertions.

Another aspect relevant to folk research is that peer-review and related evaluation often mean slower content production and publication. For example, in the original draft of this commentary, I mentioned nearing the one year anniversary of retreating to my home office due to a global pandemic, made all the more deleterious by a rising anti-vaccination movement. As I write these lines, we have now passed the *second* anniversary of that retreat. The rewards of peer-review make such a meticulous pace worthwhile, but they also illustrate what professional folklorists are up against when pursuing candor and truth. Folk researchers have no guardrails, especially on the internet or digital media. They are free to publish or perform at any pace that pleases them and their fans. Local bookstores often stock their continuous stream of publications, which become selling points for the authors to secure additional gigs.

Thomas D'Agostino, for example, advertises he published "thirteen books and counting" with The History Press (a subsidy of the mass market Arcadia Publishing that does not require peer-review or maintain standards for judging the intellectual integrity of a contribution). His other major qualification for speaking to southern New England folklore is that he and his wife "have been extensively studying and investigating paranormal accounts for more than thirty-seven years with well over 1,200 investigations to their credit" (2020, 144). Yet virtually everything he writes about the folklore of Indigenous people in the region is incorrect or otherwise problematic. For example, he routinely misidentifies "Indian romances"—motivated and prejudiced tales concocted by white storytellers about Indigenous people—as genuine Native stories.

His representations of the history of Indigenous people are often cringe-worthy in their misconceptions and their neocolonialist (or sometimes simply colonialist) pronouncements. His record on other folkloric items fares little better and often contains copious errors and dubious claims of paranormal activity. D'Agostino, nevertheless, presents himself as an expert in New England folklore because he has published so many books, given so many public talks, and conducted so many paranormal investigations. In other words, quantity supersedes quality or standards.

The general lack of quality among folk researchers partially arises due to a related common practice, epitomized by the title of a chapter in Nichols' book: "Let Me Google That for You." Nichols argues that the internet "has accelerated the collapse of communication between experts and laypeople by offering an apparent shortcut to erudition," allowing people "to mimic intellectual accomplishment by indulging in an illusion of expertise provided by a limitless supply of facts" (106). Against this trend, Nichols offers a sober conceptualization of research attentive to best practices:

> Plugging words into a browser window isn't research: it's asking questions of programmable machines that themselves cannot actually understand human beings. Actual research is hard, and for people raised in an environment of constant electronic stimulation, it's also boring. Research requires the ability to find authentic information, summarize it, analyze it, write it up, and present it to other people. …
> The deeper issue here is that the Internet is actually changing the way we read, the way

> we reason, even the way we *think*, and all for the worst. We expect information instantly. We want it broken down, presented in a way that is pleasing to the eye—no more of those small-type, fragile textbooks, thank you—and we want it to say what we want it to say. People do not do "research" so much as they "search for pretty pages online to provide answers they like with the least amount of effort and in the shortest time."… Sometimes, human beings need to pause and reflect, to give themselves time to absorb information and to digest it. Instead, the Internet is an arena in which people can react without thinking, and thus in turn they become invested in defending their gut reactions rather than accepting new information or admitting a mistake—especially if it's a mistake pointed out by people with greater learning or experience. (110–12)

The rush to produce and rely upon as few sources as possible is precisely the problem animating folk research. Many folk researchers equate expertise with locating something on the internet or a previous statement, whether scholarly or entertaining. They follow the logic that if someone else articulated an idea, discovery and recognition of that previous attempt constitutes research, regardless of whether it was vetted by legitimate processes or domain experts. I argue that such action is neither research nor a hallmark of expertise. With that distinction in mind, I now proceed to the three stances of folk research.

The Three Stances

In this section, I outline three stances of folk research and illustrate each with a specific representative who assumes such a position regarding New England folklore. I hope that the terminology proves useful to intellectual disciplines and commentary beyond folklore studies. These three positions are the enthusiast, the self-proclaimed expert, and the professionally unreasonable.

The Enthusiast

Although far less intellectually odious than the self-proclaimed expert and the professionally unreasonable, the enthusiast often epitomizes the proverbial wisdom that a little knowledge is a dangerous thing. The enthusiast is well aware that previous research exists and attempts to draw upon it, but frequently does so in woefully imprecise ways. In attempting to share knowledge—and often to show how much they know—enthusiasts sacrifice careful analysis and evaluation of sources for displays of avidity.

With respect to southern New England folklore, Peter Muise has occupied the quintessential role of enthusiast for some time. I confess that I do not know him personally, but regard him as an affable fellow based on his online presentation of self. However, that judgment of character cannot inoculate him—or any of us—from criticism, and the reasons for criticizing Muise's contributions are manifold. Since 2008, he has maintained a blog, *New England Folklore*. Each entry retells a folkloric tale or practice in an appealing, often whimsical, rhetorical style. It lacks the braggadocio of the self-proclaimed expert's pronouncements and the sheer detachment from reality perpetrated by the professionally unreasonable. Muise is a genuine enthusiast; his ad-

miration and passion for New England folklore are abundant and apparent. Furthermore, he has obtained a Master's Degree in Anthropology in pursuit of his interests.[5]

Muise has published two books to date. The first, *Legends and Lore of the North Shore*, is in the American Legends series from The History Press. It is effectively a collection of his blog posts. As a result, it carries all of their sincerity and vigor without adding anything new and potentially distracts from public knowledge in its plentiful missteps. Rhetorically, it is chatty work. There's nothing wrong with informality, even in academic writing. But it must serve a purpose, and an evaluator certainly may critique the use of informality under conditions that require decorum or seriousness.

Take, for example, Muise's summary on Hobbomocko, a complex supernatural being associated with shamanism among the Indigenous people of southern New England:

> Hobbamock was associated with the northeast, the direction from which the most unpleasant weather emanates. While Cautantowwit dwelt in the sky, Hobbamock could be found in the swamp, marshes and darkest forests. His sacred animal was the snake, and he controlled darkness and disease. After reading this, you might think, "Hmm, that Hobbamock guy sure sounds like the Christian devil." The Puritans who settled in the area definitely thought he was, and they sometimes used his name when talking about the devil. (2014a, 14–15)

This is an egregious understatement of the demonization of Hobbomocko (and the religions of Indigenous people) by European Christian colonialists. That demonization began early—the first written reference appeared in 1624 when Edward Winslow, a Plymouth governor, directly identified Hobbomocko as the Devil. It continued unabated into the 1800s, including in the early works of John Greenleaf Whittier, who came to express regrets about them and the horrific images of Indigenous people they conveyed. The rhetorical diabolism of Hobbomocko and his presumed devil-worshipping human minions was instrumental in propagandistic justifications for the genocide and removal of Indigenous people from southern New England. Chattiness is probably not the right tone to capture the implications of the association of Hobbomocko with Satan.

The folklore enthusiast may recognize that there are narrative patterns in folklore but rarely invokes tale types, motif indices, or awareness of transmission by the oral tradition or in newspapers. Having found a single example of a legend, the enthusiast often rests. In his second book, *Witches and Warlocks of Massachusetts* (2021), Muise identifies several witch legends on Cape Cod. He does not examine all of the surviving variants of each tale. He seems entirely unaware of, or simply ignores, their relationship to one another, their relationship to Kidd treasure tale legends circulating throughout the region, and their relationship to racist, sexist, and ageist worldviews. This pattern continues throughout the book for every region in the state. By treating each tale as a separate entity, Muise fails to go beyond the surface of a complicated storytelling legacy.

Similarly, the enthusiast often knows to cite sources but not enough to evaluate

them. Muise routinely closes his blog posts by citing the originating source for his entry. Unfortunately, his sources are as varied in trustworthiness as Dorson's meticulous *Jonathan Draws the Long Bow* to the spurious works of paranormal investigators and inclusive of the sensationalist tourist pamphlets penned by Robert Ellis Cahill. In his books, he equally cites fellow folk researchers and ARIGs as legitimate sources of information and interpretation. In a vigorous attempt to show audiences *something*, there is no attempt to adjudicate, perhaps because the enthusiast lacks the expertise to do so.

As a result, the enthusiast often produces and reproduces errors or misinformation from impoverished sources, including overcorrections, projections, and simplifications. It has become customary, for example, for contemporary folk researchers into southern New England folklore to declare that the copious range of place-names associated with the Devil have their origins in Puritan demonization practices. Muise dedicates four pages of text to this topic in *Legends and Lore*. He writes:

> Why are so many places named after the devil around here? One theory is that many of the locations the English settlers named after the devil were originally connected with local Indians. The English thought the Indians were heathens, and heathens worshipped the devil; therefore, Indians worshipped the devil, and the places they frequented were named to reflect this. … Another possibility is that when the English encountered New England's abundant weird rock formations, they assumed they were created by some supernatural entity. They weren't aware that retreating glaciers has scoured the earth and dropped thousands of boulders across the landscape. Other than the devil, the only other supernatural entity that could have done it was God, and they couldn't believe that God would have made such inhospitable natural features. (2014a, 69–70)

Muise is not in error that some diabolical nomenclature represents deliberate attempts to denigrate sites sacred to Indigenous people. He is also correct in assuming that some weird shapes were given devilish names. However, he is profoundly incorrect in his assertion that Puritans would not assign inhospitable marvels to their God. Early colonialist literature brims with references to natural wonders—including earthquakes that left reminders in the scarred landscape—believed to be sent as admonition by the Christian God of his power and moral authority.

More importantly, the error here lies in the degree of omission. To state the obvious, early English colonialists did not name all places in New England. Many devil names are traceable to the 1700s, 1800s, and even 1900s, including playful ones associated with scouting groups or even former ski runs. Moreover, even those named in seriousness did not always regard Satan. Many diabolical names were so called because of their inhospitable natural features, such as terrain difficult for farming or settlement or travel. Some were associated with natural creatures considered 'devils' of a problem, including raccoons, wildcats, and snakes—especially rattlesnakes. It is a much more sober starting place to assume a location in southern New England named the Devil's Den, for example, was a dwelling of copperheads than a Puritan nightmare

of the Evil One.

The enthusiast is prone to make connections where they are not appropriate. On his blog, Muise frequently attempts to link New England witchcraft—either actual accounts such as the Salem Trials or later folk narratives—with scholarly analysis. He is usually wrong in his application, just as he frequently is misguided in asserting historical matters, despite being cognizant of high-caliber scholarship such as Stephen Nissenbaum's. In a rumination, for example, on the "witches" associated with the Moodus Noises (personages that were, incidentally, inventions of yellow journalism by *The Sun* of New York), Muise attempts to link them with Carlo Ginzberg's study of the battle between *benandanti* and the *streghe* in Italian tradition (2014b). The two are simply incomparable when one examines cultural specificities, but again, Muise's tendency to universalize is an element of enthusiast rhetoric.

Finally, and perhaps obviously, the enthusiast is not wont to be critical. As a result, utterly ridiculous notions receive attention rather than dismissal. In *Legends and Lore*, for example, Muise entertains the question for several pages as to whether the Deep Ones from horror writer H.P. Lovecraft are fact or fiction. (The answer is fiction.) The Deep Ones are monsters appearing in "The Shadow Over Innsmouth" but, as Muise muses, "in the years since the story was published, many people have wondered if Lovecraft was actually writing about real supernatural entities" (2014a, 105).

That construction—"many people are saying"—is stylistically useful for an enthusiast to introduce absurdities into discourse without taking responsibility for them or critiquing their inanity. For the most part, Muise's commentary is a basic summary of Lovecraft's tale, which is set in coastal Essex County, Massachusetts. Following this explanation of diegesis, Muise then invokes actual occultists who conduct magical rituals invoking the Deep Ones, including celebrity practitioner Michael Bertiaux. Bewilderingly, Muise concludes as follows:

> If you're skeptical about the reality of the Deep Ones, you might want to contact the Esoteric Order of Dagon with your questions. An occult order of this name was created in 1980, dedicated to "exploring the connections between the fiction of H.P. Lovecraft and other occult concepts." You can find it online, but members might not be willing to answer your questions. The group is made up of prominent occultists and is somewhat secretive. (2014a, 109)

Admittedly, we all need hobbies. Unfortunately, the hobbies of the folk research enthusiast provide no justice to explaining to the public the beneficial work that professional folklorists actually accomplish. I think a case could be made that the excesses of the enthusiast proportionately demonstrate the necessity of genuine expertise.

I am willing to concede that the underlying impulse of the enthusiast should not be discouraged solely due to its propensity for error. When nourished by additional training and experience, it can be the impetus for genuine contributions to public knowledge. I also have no objection to enthusiasm. Who among us did not follow an enthusiasm into folklore studies? Nevertheless, I have significant objections to substituting enthusiasm for expertise and misidentifying enthusiasts as experts. By the

very nature of their rhetorical endeavors, enthusiasts lack the skepticism and critical reflection necessary to be on guard against nonsense. Accordingly, they may inadvertently pass along highly problematic materials or valorize anti-intellectual positions in pretending to know more than they do and in convincing audiences that it is easy to become an expert by sheer will alone.

The Self-Proclaimed Expert

The defining feature of the self-proclaimed expert is their deference to their own authority regardless of whether they possesses the training, skills, experience, or comprehension of the explicit or tacit knowledge in question. Like the enthusiast, the self-proclaimed expert is aware that previous research exists and may utilize it to advance their agenda (often without attribution). However, the routine aim of such citation and incorporation is narcissistic: a confirmation that one knows more than one does. Creating the veneer of expertise is the lifeblood of the self-proclaimed expert's rhetoric, often in pursuit of personal benefit.

According to his website, Jeff Belanger "is one of the most visible and prolific researchers of folklore and legends today." That may be news to members of learned folklore societies. His accolades do not end there:

> A natural storyteller, he's the award-winning, Emmy-nominated host, writer, and producer of the *New England Legends* series on PBS and Amazon Prime, and is the author of over a dozen books (published in six languages). He also hosts the *New England Legends* weekly podcast, which has garnered over 2 million downloads since it was launched.

According to a second website for *New England Legends*, Belanger "is one of the world's most visible and prolific paranormal researchers, authors, and public speakers. Born and raised in New England, Jeff investigated his first haunted house at age ten during a sleepover at a historic home. Since then, the journalist has interviewed thousands of eyewitnesses to paranormal occurrences. He's the ultimate insider and knows how to connect with people from all walks of life when it comes to the unexplained" (Belanger has since removed this second ascription and replaced it with the first, deemphasizing his role as a paranormal investigator and amplifying his identity as a folklorist).

For clarification, Belanger's publications include *World's Most Haunted Places* (in which he authoritatively declares that "Oral traditions are mostly dead in our world" except ghost stories; 2009, 11); *Communicating With the Dead: Reach Beyond the Grave*; *Encyclopedia of Haunted Places*; *Our Haunted Lives: True Life Ghost Encounters*; *The Ghost Files*; *Picture Yourself Legend Tripping*; *The Mysteries of the Bermuda Triangle*; and *Who's Haunting the White House?* among others. Most of them are published with New Page Books, a company specializing in the occult and the paranormal.

In the spirit of full disclosure, Belanger contacted me to be a guest on *New England Legends* to speak on the Micah Rood / bloody apples story, which was one of the most popular legends in Connecticut during the 1800s. He had read the chapter on it in my book on hiking the folkloric sites of Connecticut. I declined the request because his podcast is rife with errors, and as a representative of a university, I had to consider

where I lent my expertise. He invited constructive criticism of his podcast. I provided an example and recommended that he solicit the assistance of a professional folklorist, whether me or otherwise, and encouraged him to reach out to AFS. The conversation deteriorated quickly from that point, and he eventually informed me that he would not promote my work to his fans. I am fairly certain my response made clear that I do not need his permission to educate the public on the folklore of New England.[6]

In our exchange, I raised the concern that the folklore of Massachusetts has a long history of problematic material that requires critical analysis instead of celebration. Belanger's best-known book, *Weird Massachusetts*, provides copious examples of that disconcerting material. It is part of the *Weird* series inaugurated by Mark Sceurman and Mark Moran and includes *Weird New England* by Joseph Citro (2005), another self-proclaimed folklorist with no credentialed training whose books are often laden with misconceptions.

Weird Massachusetts is replete with classic legends from the Commonwealth. It is also awash with errors. In recounting the "legend" of Bash Bish Falls, for example, Belanger identifies it as "a story from Mohican folklore" (2008, 46). In the tale he narrates, Bash Bish is a Mohican woman accused of adultery and sentenced to death. In protest, she leaps from the waterfall that now bears her name and disappears into the midst. Her daughter, White Swan, later joins her in a Lover's Leap variant. Belanger seems utterly unaware that Mary Bolté composed this version in 1972. He is further unenlightened that the original tale of Bash Bish Falls, which featured only the White Swan character, was a literary invention of a white writer and former public relations specialist, William Coxey (1934). Coxey's tale was subsequently enlisted by the local tourism district and the Works Progress Administration guide to Massachusetts to promote a newly cut Civilian Conservation Corps trail to the waterfall in the 1930s. The "legend" of Bash Bish is not a Mohican tale and, in its earliest manifestations, is a potentially racist story about the Mohicans, who had been forcibly removed from the Berkshires in the previous century.

Following this headstrong fallacy, Belanger offers the following in another entry:

> The heart of the Bridgewater Triangle is the Hockomock Swamp, a six-thousand acre wetland located in southeastern Massachusetts. The mystery behind the swamp dates back to the Wampanoag Indians, who felt that the land had an inherent magic. … And the Wampanoag knew the swamp well. If their enemies could be drawn into the area, they clearly had an advantage in knowing where not to step.
>
> This knowledge served them well during King Philip's War (1675–1676), when the Wampanoag rose up against the English settlers and their allies in one of the bloodiest conflicts in American history. One in twenty were either wounded or killed, and more than a few met their end in Hockomock Swamp. Some English went in and were never seen again. Others managed to make their way out and spread tales of the frightful scenes and monsters that lurked inside. (2008, 78–79)

If verifiable, this remarkable account of English forces encountering monsters in Hockomock Swamp during "King Philip's War" would be astonishing news to any

historian. Belanger does not cite a single source for this remarkable claim, however. As presented, it appears to be his fabrication. For contextualizing, this statement is from the same writer who in introducing the Pukwudgees, the purported Little People of the Wampanoag, proffered that they were known to push hunters off ledges to their doom. Belanger then ponders in conclusion:

> Between 1616 and 1618, eighty percent of the Wampanoag nation died from plague. Or did the Pukwudgees perhaps work their horrible magic on them? (2008, 51)

You read that correctly. Belanger trivializes the mass death in a population of Indigenous people by a relentless epidemic—there is debate as to whether smallpox or leptospirosis—an event that contributed significantly to subsequent colonialism and seizure of land, with a quip about a legendary being.

These are only three examples from *Weird Massachusetts*, but they demonstrate the typical pattern of the self-professed expert. No bibliography exists, sources are scant, and there is only occasional mention of an originating document. It is abundantly clear to anyone with expertise in New England folklore that Belanger consulted very few legitimate sources. There is undoubtedly no evaluation of previous texts or source integrity. Rhetorically, there is little distinction between travel writing, storytelling, and reporting on historical or folkloric matters. The writing style continually refers to the "expert," establishing a presentation of self as a celebrity and arbiter of truth. Fact-checking is irrelevant, and "facts" appear when they are convenient. Similarly, no challenges (scholarly or otherwise) to that self-proclaimed authority manifest that would risk interference with a fan base.

Weird Massachusetts commences, however, with a disclaimer that it "is intended as entertainment" and that the authors and publishers make no claim as to the factual accuracy of the legends (2008, 4). That admission presents a curious dilemma for a self-proclaimed expert. How can one be both an entertainer and "one of the most visible and prolific researchers of folklore and legends today?" The answer hinges on a paltry definition of "research" as looking things up on the internet or someone else's book.

Belanger provides another perfect, even comical, example of this tendency to mistake the nature of research as simply googling and expertise as having googled. In one of his *New England Legends* podcasts, he attends "The Dinglehole," a purported site of supernatural activity. In this episode, Belanger visits a small pond tucked between two yards in a suburban neighborhood in the town of Millis. He is seemingly ignorant that Dinglehole—the original name of the location—was three miles away in Sherborn near the "Gate" of the Charles River.

The detective work to determine how Belanger ended up in the wrong place is not difficult. In 2010, Peter Muise featured the Dinglehole on his blog. Muise confessed that he did not know its location but mentioned two sources for the information, one of which was the WPA guide to Massachusetts. In a fascinating turn of events, a handful of residents from Millis responded that the small pond in question was indeed the Dinglehole. Muise considered the mystery solved and has since embraced that location (2021, 166–67). Having done no research beyond consultation of two books, he

was nescient that there were copious documents from the 1800s and early 1900s that located Dinglehole in Sherborn. I still cannot determine the reason why Muise's first source, a town history from the nineteenth century (Jameson 1886), relocated it to a farm in Millis. The WPA guide, hastily culling the information solely from that Millis history, was ambiguous in locating this site in the town (such imprecision is common in the WPA guide to Massachusetts, whose compilers rarely fact-check folkloric tidbits).

Residents' responses in Millis reveal that the WPA guidebook's attribution was accepted by the neighborhood and incorporated into local lore. In other words, there *was* something interesting to report here about the migration of the tale, but Muise was unprepared to see it. Belanger, in turn, adopted the location from a local source, Muise, or a book (Vecchi and Krimmel 2012) on Millis in the Images of America series, also owned by Arcadia Publishing (incidentally, that book, for some inexplicable reason, erroneously suggested that witchcraft panic gripped Millis in the 1690s, a mass anxiety that resulted in superstitions regarding the Dinglehole). At no point in his podcast did Belanger demonstrate any comprehension of the legend's genealogy.

Of course, comprehension and thoroughness are not the points of such an activity. *New England Legends* is self-referential entertainment, designed to heighten Belanger's celebrity status—and, of course, to secure financial benefits for him and his crew. Routinely during each podcast, he and his broadcast partner encourage listeners to contribute money and support their sponsors. While I begrudge no one making a living, Belanger's dilemma is to be constantly entertaining in order to cultivate an audience that can be monetized; that dilemma compromises any ability to do critical work even if he wanted to do so, as people might find the results less than enjoyable and abandon him. It is far safer to produce jejune and juvenile reenactments of folkloric scenes that appeal to the lowest common denominator. In many ways, then, Belanger's podcasts and books represent the pinnacle of self-proclaimed expertise: a considerable amount of poor work building on poor work that is entertaining to those desirous for simplistic narratives.

The Professionally Unreasonable

The professionally unreasonable earn capital by asserting the outlandish. The defining feature of such an approach is willful disengagement with institutional intellectual traditions to establish a fantasy in which they stand as the authority and font of expertise. Since this rhetorical endeavor is predicated upon demonstrating mastery of phenomena purportedly beyond the comprehension of the academic establishment, the professionally unreasonable requires no awareness of previous research, However, the use of such material may be incorporated if it benefits the impression of an alternative reality.

Christopher Balzano's Twitter page announces that he is a "Writer, Researcher, Analytical Folklorist." I am tempted to reference the Inigo Montoya joke from *The Princess Bride* that the word may not mean what he thinks it means, but that would only underscore the attempt by the professionally unreasonable to create their own

reality in which words denote what they wish them to denote. Nevertheless, Balzano again self-identifies as a folklorist on his Amazon pages and in related publications describes himself as a paranormal investigator; a teacher and writer; founder and director of Massachusetts Paranormal Crossroads (an online collection of legends); a contributor to Jeff Belanger's *Encyclopedia of Haunted Places* and *Weird Massachusetts*; and a contributor to newspapers including the *Boston Globe*. He has published several books, including *Ghostly Adventures*; *Haunted Objects*; *Haunted Florida Love Stories*; *Picture Yourself Ghost Hunting*; and *Picture Yourself Capturing Ghosts on Film*. He hosts a podcast, *Tripping on Legends*.

Balzano's earliest two publications are relevant to this essay. The first is *Dark Woods: Cults, Crime, and the Paranormal in the Freetown State Forest*. The second is *Ghosts of the Bridgewater Triangle*. Both are products of Schiffer, another publishing house that encourages local authors on supernatural matters. One does not have to read any further than the Introduction to *Dark Woods* to witness the stance of the professionally unreasonable. Entitled "The Cursed Land," it commences:

> Do curses exist or are they the product of superstition and retrospect? Why does the evil in the world seem to find the same ground time and time again? Why does the same land become the stage for tragedy played out over time, taking different forms and affecting different people from varied walks of life over centuries? Can a place be born bad? (2008a, 6)

Within a few pages, Balzano explains how he, a paranormal investigator, became a believer in curses. He further details how he has come to understand that Freetown State Forest—another contribution by the CCC—is a supernatural "beacon for misery." He explains the simple methodology behind this claim: he feels it. Feeling, Balzano explains, is the most powerful sense. In the same way that one can feel love or hate but cannot see or hear those emotions, feeling must be the guide when seeking the supernatural. He continues:

> The sense of anticipation or anxiety creates electricity you can *feel*. There is a link between energy and the paranormal that moves far beyond the hairs on the back of your neck. In the study of the paranormal, an investigator comes across this connection regularly. The most common haunting involves what investigators call a psychic recording. An event quickly gives off a massive amount of energy, imprinting the event in its environment. The right situation, whether it is another emotional trigger or the weather or the right person to perceive it, then triggers this energy and replays the event, like listening to the same song over and over again on the radio. (2008a, 9)

Balzano subsequently explains how demonologists, paranormal investigators, and ghost hunters follow this energy in pursuit of their research. Freetown State Forest, he avers, is a place of such high levels of uncanny energy—it is a "crossroads"—that it is now "tainted," causing spillage of paranormal activity, disproportionate criminality, and mental health issues (2008a, 11). In his introduction to *Ghosts of the Bridgewater Triangle*, Balzano clarifies by further explaining that the area may be a site of an "energy

rift" that allows forces and beings from different dimensions to enter our world, but he is willing to admit that he does not quite understand the quantum physics behind it. In consolation, he offers a few other possibilities for how the paranormal broke through into our world (2008b, 16).

From that introduction in *Dark Woods*, Balzano offers nineteen chapters on a range of supernatural activities, quoting from direct experience or anonymous sources. Some of them include localized variants of legends such as the Vanishing Hitchhiker, and typical Lovers Leap stories centered at The Ledge, an old quarry filled with water. Ghost stories are plentiful, as is a tale of a "zombie," described by one of Balzano's informants as "being of Latino descent" and "covered in dirt" (2008a, 95). Memorates are numerous in this collection, including encounters with a witch and a "mad trucker." Many of these stories are standard examples of contemporary legends narrated by teenagers and young adults since the late 1960s. If there is any value to Balzano's book, it is that he reproduces this potential data, although one cannot trust that he did so diligently, and he does not provide field notes or transcripts as evidence.

More troubling, *Dark Woods* relies heavily on an undercurrent of Native American tropes. Having invoked in his Introduction a haunting theme reiterated in *The Amityville Horror*, *The Shining*, and *Pet Sematary*, Balzano waxes with irrepressible fervor on the Forest's role in the history of Indigenous people (the Wampanoag people maintain a 227-acre reservation in the Forest). He gives credence to those who claim that the events and aftermath of "King Philip's War" may have produced supernatural conditions:

> Many see [King Philip's War] as the beginning of the curse on Freetown. The bloodshed and death (often of children and noncombatants) and betrayal felt could produce enough negative energy to punch a hole into another dimension or imprint themselves in the air and replaying themselves over like a skipping record. Perhaps the souls of all those lost are trapped on earth trying to find a reason for their deaths. Maybe the negative intentions on both sides could become an actual curse left behind to fall on future generations. (2008a, 23)

Balzano, however, offers an alternative theory, namely that "King Philip's War" was not the *cause* of the curse but a *symptom* of a still greater evil, a dark force that had tainted the land prior to European colonialization and conflict. He continues this implication in a chapter on Native American ghosts and another on the Wampanoag reservation, which he claims is a shelter of spiritual serenity in an otherwise cursed land and where informants claim to have seen Wampanoag ghosts performing ceremonies.

Here is my direct query to colleagues: May I call this the racist claptrap that it is? And if so, do I have an obligation to criticize it and encourage media and other public outlets not to take the bait? (I do so in an academic article; see Gencarella 2022.) Moreover, if this is not an isolated example but a growing norm, do we professional folklorists have a responsibility to call it out?

In addition to exploitative fantasies about Indigenous people, Balzano demonstrates all the rhetorical indulgences that characterize ARIGs as defined by Hill. These

include an emphasis on "having an experience" and feelings; reliance upon tropes circulating in popular culture; the use of "scientifical" language to mask pseudoscience; routine and improper use of the word "theory;" the employment of readily-explained anomalies in video and audio technology as evidence of supernatural activity; the conducting of "case studies" to confirm preexisting beliefs; lack of skepticism; and conspiratorial thinking. These elements appear brazenly in Balzano's chapter in *Dark Woods* on the so-called Bridgewater Triangle, a topic that inspired his second publication.

In that second book, he follows the work of "renowned cryptozoologist Loren Coleman" (2008b, 14). Coleman's vast contributions to public ignorance deserve a critique of their own, but in summary, he began "research" into UFOs and cryptozoological beasties in the Massachusetts area in the 1970s. He was extremely successful in attracting the attention of reputable newspapers willing to put their reputation on the line for eye-catching headlines and interviews. In 1983, Coleman parlayed that successful public relations campaign into a book, *Mysterious America*, which included several entries from southern New England. Key among them was the Bridgewater Triangle, a term Coleman coined (obviously inspired by the Bermuda Triangle) to designate an area originally restricted to three adjacent towns of Bridgewater, East Bridgewater, and West Bridgewater. He soon widened the Triangle to include a wide swath of land in southeastern Massachusetts between the towns of Abington, Rehoboth, and Freetown. This includes the Hockomock Swamp, where Coleman posited numerous cases of spectacular creatures ranging from Sasquatch to a pterodactyl. Coleman provides the Preface to Balzano's second book, in which he erroneously contends that "Hockomock" is an Algonquian term for the Devil (It is not; Coleman follows an established pattern of white people mistaking a word for hook-shaped natural places with Hobbomocko, the aforementioned supernatural being demonized by Christian colonialists) (Balzano 2008b, 8).

Balzano's agenda in *Ghosts of the Bridgewater Triangle* is no different from *Dark Woods*. In each chapter, he provides memorates and commentary as proof that supernatural phenomena exist within the Triangle. He doubles down on the notion that Freetown State Forest is the eeriest site in the region but implies that Hockomock Swamp is yet another place where the inherent evil of the land has broken through into this world.[7] Fantasies about Native American history continue in these pages, equally controversial in their potential adherence to prejudiced beliefs.

There is a serious problem for the professionally unreasonable in their assessment of this phenomenon: the Bridgewater Triangle spans a much greater land mass than Freetown State Forest. It comprises at least 18 towns, 200 square miles, and 15–18% of the current population of Massachusetts depending on accounting. For a majority of citizens it is not a hellscape of paranormal activity. Accordingly, Balzano faced an uphill task to be persuasive regarding its eldritch horrors. To accomplish this goal, he—observing a common pattern wrought by ARIGs—elects to nominate any unusual, criminal, or folkloric phenomena occurring within that massive space as evidence of supernatural malfeasance that binds them together. The effect of this umbrella is to flatten or starve local storytelling traditions. All narratives of haunted spaces collapse

into a single purpose, to serve as testimony for the existence of the Triangle.

There are several colleges and universities within the area, for example, all of which have robust campus ghostlore that pre-existed the declaration of the Triangle and follow typical patterns fruitfully analyzed by professional folklorists (see Tucker 2007 for a recent example and summary). Balzano wholly lacks engagement with these works; the single approximate in his bibliography is Jan Brunvand's *Encyclopedia of Urban Legends*. Most of his other citations are works by allied "experts," including Citro, Coleman, and D'Agostino—an echo chamber. In a telling chapter, for example, Balzano recounts an investigation and attempted exorcism of a haunted house with D'Agostino and other area paranormal investigators. The results were ongoing at the time of publication.

I am tempted to quote the now clichéd observation by Emerson that a foolish consistency is the hobgoblin of little minds. The greater problem is that the rhetorical productions of the professionally unreasonable may alternate wildly between consistency and inconsistency. To search for reasonableness in them is a fool's errand. Nevertheless, quite often, these "analytical folklorists" represent what we professionals do to a public waiting with anticipation for answers, indulgence, or bias-confirmation.

Conclusion

In closing this commentary, I wish to raise the issue of potential responses and corrective actions from professional folklorists to folk researchers. I have made the case that folk researchers fail in numerous ways to rise to the best practices that constitute expertise and the specific basic expectations for folklore scholarship, including their lack of interaction with the community of folklore scholars and their reliance upon echo chambers. Yet they are in no threat of disappearing. On the contrary, there is every reason to think that the influence of folk researchers will only increase in the decades ahead due to the machinations of the internet, social and digital media, and the contemporary entertainment industry as it influences publishing and broadcast arenas. What options are available to resist this tide?

First, I propose as imperative that we recognize that these folk researchers are currently winning the *public relations* campaign. The reasons for that are beyond our control and intimately and irrevocably tangled up in the compromised nature of contemporary journalism, especially regional and local newspapers that must compete for attention to survive. However, if professional folklorists accept an understanding of expertise grounded in social exchange, we are poised to flex our strength. That said, we need unwavering institutional support to do so. I am not recommending rekindling the debate around certification, but I think international, national, and regional folklore societies need to go on the offensive through their media and public outreach divisions. While I do not consider Dorson's relentless use of martial metaphors (Bronner 1998, 364) productive, I believe treating this as a competition that can be lost for good is important.

Moving forward, I do not see anything gainful in working with the enthusiasts, self-proclaimed experts, and the professionally unreasonable. They operate on the

fundamental logic of the next gig. They need to continue the endless production of podcasts, publications, and public talks to obtain and maintain social and economic relevance. Fact-checking (and facts), critical reflection, and collegial assessment frustrate that voracious practice. Experts in folklore who hope that they may influence “from the inside” are more optimistic than I am, but they may also miss that the entertainment industry that sustains folk researchers is uninterested in change as long as the current configuration remains profitable. I am certain that some colleagues will disagree on this point, and I welcome the discussion and remain persuadable.

Newspapers and other media may be the unwitting accomplices to folk researchers’ agendas—although many in “edu-tainment” media are willing partners—so it behooves us to intercede there. The same applies to local organizations dedicated to public knowledge such as historical societies and libraries, which often host these forays into folk research, frequently unaware of how to judge between experts and non-experts. Although individual folklorists reaching out to these venues (and to publishers—and folk researchers) to correct the record and encourage engagement with legitimate scholars of folklore can have some impact, imagine the benefits of those communications coming from international, national, and regional folklore societies. Our learned societies can take stands against misinformation; they should do so. Imagine, as well, a *rigorously promoted* Speakers Bureau of folklore experts. When I wrote the original draft of this commentary, AFS was planning to launch a “Find an Expert” database. As a positive sign, it has since gone public. However, this database must be advertised and promoted widely by the organization, overtly reaching out to important venues, not solely waiting for those venues to contact them. Folk researchers already control the ground game; professional folklorists must catch up and exceed them.

I hope this is an obvious statement, but I think it would be a mistake not to recognize the appeal of folklore to the public in our contemporary era. We should recognize that the public does not know how to judge accurate folklore scholarship and often resorts to entertainment. In this manner, expert folklorists, who have always been vanguards of public intellectualism, have much to offer in teaching how to distinguish the viable from the ill-advised. Professional folklorists already have a beachhead in museums, art commissions, universities, and related institutes that can attract the attention of the public and the press. Responsibly engaging the public’s desire for ghoulies and ghosties to frustrate the anti-intellectualism that thrives out there cannot be an injudicious venture. We need good folklorists to compete with the shoddy work of folk researchers.

Accordingly, and in agreement with earlier sentiments, I advocate for the potential benefits of podcasts, documentaries, and book series written for the general reader under the auspices of learned folklore societies and organizations. If I were to have one wish fulfilled (or the wealth to finance projects), however, it would be for the creation of an online news and opinion website dedicated to amplifying the voices of folklorists, ethnologists, and related fields invested in cultural expression from academia, the public sector, and the private sector. I have in mind—with apologies for the reference to mainstream political US American examples—sites such as Salon, Talking Points Memo, The Bulwark, The Daily Beast, and Vox. As readers of these sites are surely

aware, the exchange of opinion can be acerbic, but it is also timely in a manner that is impossible with our current means of academic publications. Such a site would likely preclude peer-review, of course, but its purpose would be commentary and debates on cultural issues and the kinds of sociality required for achieving and maintaining expertise and public relevance.

Finally, I propose it is essential that professional folklorists review the books, documentaries, podcasts, and related products of folk researchers with a critical eye, especially on internet sites accessible to the general reader. The readership of folklore journals pales in comparison to the spectatorship of some of these celebrities, but so be it. There is something to be said for putting objections in print and on the record, especially for the sake of future generations. There is also ample precedent for this commitment; professional folklorists have assessed popular works as far back as William Wells Newell's reviews of Alice Morse Earle's books on New England traditions in the late 1800s (1891 and 1893).

I recognize that colleagues of good faith may dismiss these concerns and potential remedies. I can think of three objections to my objection. Against cause for alarm, one could argue that folk researchers are merely harmless entertainment, undeserving of attention. Alternatively, one could insist that they provide a service to the public sector and academic folklorists by stimulating interest in the subject. Finally, one could suggest that folk researchers are creators of new lore and that their frequent mistakes testify to the inherent dynamism of any living tradition as it evolves. I am certain there are other arguments to ignore or be charitable to folk researchers, and I invite colleagues to share them.

Nevertheless, I contend that the problems posed by folk researchers are very serious and must be taken seriously. They are shaping public perception of what folklorists do, not for the better. Furthermore, they often spread falsehoods, misunderstandings, and prejudiced narratives. So I ask again: If we do not take a stand against this, what do folklorists stand for?

Acknowledgments

This article is dedicated to the memory of Charlie Johnson.

The author wishes to thank Ray Huling, Anthony Buccitelli, and the four anonymous reviewers for their critical commentary and collegiality. He also wishes to thank Semontee Mitra and Deldar Golchehreh for their generosity and support through its publication.

Notes

1 I passed this information along to Lorraine Cashman, who generously offered to send it to the AFS Media and Public Outreach Committee.

2 Although there are numerous accounts of Dorson's evolving campaign against fakelore, Simon Bronner (1998) offers the most productive example for this present commentary. This account is helpful for its depth and organization of the sprawling amount of moves by Dorson, as well as Bronner's contexualization, which include his relationship with Dorson and his awareness of the historical permutations of the struggles in the discipline and society as a whole.

3 This does not suggest that storytelling alone is out of bounds for critique. As a case in point, S.E. Schlosser's *Spooky New England* retells a story entitled "The Loup-Garou," concerning a werewolf in Woonsocket, Rhode Island (2004, 125–27). It is a compelling tale. It is also apparent, however, that Schlosser misunderstood the original narrative published in Benjamin Botkin's *Treasury of New England Folklore*, in which a French-Canadian immigrant to Woonsocket recalls traditions in Canada (1965, 222–23). The story is not a representative of folklore set in New England, although Schlosser has every right to make it so in her creative retelling. That decision, however, has increasingly inspired local audiences to think that there is longstanding werewolf folklore in Woonsocket, which is historically inaccurate.

In a similar vein, the Mohegan scholar Rachel Sayet offers (2011, 110–12) a politically poignant critique against the portrayal of Indigenous people in *The Good Giants and the Bad Pukwudgies* by acclaimed children's book author Jean Fritz (1982). Fritz's book received wide praise in New England, but it is both historically inaccurate and culturally insensitive. Sayet's astute criticism is an important corrective to white exploitation of Native stories and demonstrates that the role of the storyteller is not above reproach due to artistic license.

4 Nichols invokes folklore throughout his book and points to (as does Hill) potential collaborations between folklorists and experts across fields equally concerned about anti-intellectualism in contemporary democratic liberal society. See especially Buccitelli 2020 for a sustained analysis of the ethical and political concerns in the work of contemporary folklorists going forward. See Eyal 2019 for a differing opinion on expertise, one that resists Nichols but embraces Collins and extends the notion that expertise is a historically significant way of speaking.

5 Unlike Georges, I make no argument about degrees as a prerequisite for expertise. Progress in folklore studies often hinged upon people who did not have formal degrees, starting with William Wells Newell. Southern New England folklore studies would be penurious without the contributions of Clifton Johnson, whose publications (including one essay to *JAF*) are highly regarded. Nor do I think that a Ph.D. solely counts for expertise. One need only consider the contributions of Edward Rowe Snow, who held a Masters from Boston University; his books remain influential to this day with good reason, as they are both informative and entertaining. Finally, any appreciation of expertise must take into account experience in the public sector or journalism. I invoke the issue here only in response to Muise's mention of his degree as a qualification of his presumed expertise to comment on New England folklore. As is often the case with enthusiasts, it becomes clear under assessment that he would benefit from additional training.

6 I will also mention that one of Belanger's podcasts (2019) concerns the legend of the XYZ bandit in Deep River, Connecticut. It followed an interview that I gave on the subject to *Connecticut Magazine*, in which I revealed information associated with a Bloody Mary in

the Mirror practice (Ofgang 2018). I gathered that information firsthand in interviews with former students who lived in Deep River. Belanger dramatized it in his podcast. If he used my interview as the source, he did so without attribution.

7 As evidence of supernatural evil afoot, Balzano includes a personal incident of being bitten by a tick in Hockomock Swamp (2008b, 15). This hyperbole would be laughable were it not an attempt to prove the existence of a curse functioning outside the realm of science, science that readily explains the existence of ticks in swamps throughout southern New England.

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Responses

Standards and Boundaries of Folklore Studies

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Stephen Olbrys Gencarella in his complaint about pseudo-research in folklore recognizes that the issue of academic authority has erupted periodically through the history of folklore studies. He provides telling examples and could have gone back even further to the roots of the American Folklore Society organized by William Wells Newell in 1888. Newell underscored "scientific character" of the Society's journal and derided idle dabblers and dilettantes aroused by the rise of popular interest in folklore. He declared that the "collection of folk-lore is not an amusement for leisure, but an important and essential part of history" (Newell 1888, 5). Newell counted academics and museum curators among his charter members to emphasize that the study of folklore was a professional and time-consuming endeavor.

Writing eight years earlier about the formation of the Folklore Society in England, George Laurence Gomme even slighted the work of antiquarian William John Thoms, who in the mid-nineteenth century was the first to claim the title of folklorist. Gomme listed contemporary scholars who gave the study of folklore at the end of the nineteenth century "the dignity of a separate department of study, with a title specially its own" (Gomme 1880, 13). Probably thinking of literati creatively adapting folklore rather than those who wanted to build a scientific field for culture akin to natural history, Gomme sought authority for an educated class holding the folklorist title and thought that the proper academic home for these experts was in the social science of anthropology. The learned society, he offered, was the key to the study's legitimacy by acting as a guild to maintain high standards of scholarship. Under the auspices of the Folklore Society, Gomme prepared a handbook to guide intelligentsia on proper methods to pursue what he called the "Science of Folk-lore" (Gomme 1890, 5).

The first journal to tout the title of "folklorist" in its masthead was *The Folklorist* published in 1892 by the Chicago Folk-Lore Society (later the International Folklore Association), which carved out a literary niche among the other emerging anthropologically oriented folklore societies (Bassett 1892b). The Chicago Folk-Lore Society, too, issued the *Manual of Folklore* as a handbook suited, according to its author and Society organizer Fletcher Bassett, "to the wants of the Folk-Lorist in the Field." Despite its more humanistic tone, the publication carried the acknowledgment that "*Folk-Lore has become a science*, and there is a pressing call for more material, fresh from any unworked field" (Bassett 1892a, 3; emphasis added). The categorization of folklore studies as a science implied systematic, objective study, and a deference to scientists-folklorists as expert, credentialed authorities (see Samuelson 1983).

Several other handbooks followed that shared the paradoxical goals of on the one hand encouraging the spread among lay authors studying and writing about folklore while on the other limiting popular productivity by imposing scientific

standards (see Bronner 2019c). Folklore studies was hardly alone in dealing with this apparent conflict. With the spreading adoption of a liberal arts model in universities at the end of the nineteenth century were other increasingly popular fields driven by lay knowledge mentioned by Newell, Gomme, and Bassett of modern history, literature, and ethnography. This array of fields suggests that the professionalization of American folklore studies was influenced and grew out of popular interest and took a humanistic turn by the mid-twentieth century that represented public, and often amateur, engagement (Bronner 1986; Zumwalt 1988). Differences in the American situation could be discerned from a class-based, nationalistic European academic model in which academic chairs were assigned responsibility for a discipline (Dégh 1965; Hautala 1969). With this intellectual history in mind, my contribution to the discussion here is to comment on trends and conditions that folklorists seeking academic authority in the twenty-first century America have seemingly accepted but should re-consider for the future of a discipline, whether scientific or not.

The two major episodes in the second half of the twentieth century that Gencarella presents involve Richard Dorson and Robert Georges, both of whom were in leadership positions in doctoral-degree-granting folklore programs. Their vantage in academe therefore has features that Newell and Gomme in the nineteenth century did not address. The debates carried on in print and at conferences are notable primarily in their reference to the standards and boundaries—and earned credentials--of folklore studies as a separate degree-granting discipline and secondarily in the emergence of "public folklore" as a distinct vocational field and expansion, and in many cases displacement, of folklore with alternative rhetoric such as "heritage" (Ben-Amos 2019). Having known Dorson and Georges, I can say they had a pragmatic, and often defensive, objective of convincing their colleagues as well as the public that folklore is a demanding study that requires serious, devoted study and training (Dorson 1976). A more general concern evident from their debates, if not overtly stated, is the questioning of the certification, and ultimately redefinition, of the "folklorist" in an open, democratic society (Bronner 2006; Frandy and Cederström 2022; Jones 1994; Lloyd 2021). Implied is the difficulty of managing a branch of knowledge that is by its nature both popular and esoteric in addition to being fluid academically. I add here for consideration of these latter points an especially germane war of words between the first state folklorist and first chair of an academic folklore department after World War II that is worth analyzing because it presaged later developments. I will suggest lessons in their dispute and reflect on the distinctive circumstances of twenty-first century America that have caused their issues to arise again.

The first state folklorist position held by Henry W. Shoemaker (1880-1958) and first academic department of folklore (chaired by Alfred L. Shoemaker, 1913-c. 1968) in the United States were both established in Central Pennsylvania in the years 1947-1948 (Bronner 1998a, 266-348). The location and timing for the landmark advancements in folklore studies were not coincidental. Central Pennsylvania was drawing national touristic interest as a "folk" region because of unprecedented post-World-War-II interest in the

Amish, America's colonial roots, and pre-industrial pastoral landscape that were promoted for auto excursions a short distance away from America's largest urban-industrial center (Yoder 1990). Henry Shoemaker was a Harrisburg-based newspaper publisher and self-identified folklorist who wrote a widely read daily column for the *Altoona Tribune, Reading Times,* and other newspapers in Pennsylvania (Bronner 1996). He had attended Columbia University and was active in literary and journalistic clubs but did not have formal coursework in folklore studies, although he attended a school in New York City with a classical curriculum that included studies of Greek and Roman mythology. He commented, however, that upon spending summers in the Central Pennsylvania highlands, for which he invoked mythological terms of Eldorado (Shoemaker 1917), he became aware of storytellers and songsters that he considered contemporary bards and balladeers. He used this material for many books beginning in 1912 with legends, songs, speech, and anecdotes about Central Pennsylvania, often drawing on its distinctive landscape features and frontier history. More than other regional writers, he wrote on hunting and logging lore which drew popular interest and were neglected areas of study among academic folklorists. However, Shoemaker did not cite his sources and took creative license with narratives he presented. Academic folklorists such as Harvard-educated Samuel Bayard, who was a student of George Lyman Kittredge, president of the American Folklore Society in 1904, accused Shoemaker of fabricating the stories out of whole cloth rather than collecting them from oral tradition. Moreover, Bayard recoiled at Shoemaker's "empty gesturing of the past" and "publicity effects resorted to in order to hold the attention of an uninformed public" (Bayard 1959, 12).

With his political connections to the Herbert Hoover presidential campaign, Shoemaker in 1933 was appointed ambassador to Bulgaria where he was impressed by what he called "the Bulgarian idea, that the government should subsidize the work of preserving folklore" ("Introducing" 1936). Upon his return to Pennsylvania from Bulgaria, Shoemaker was appointed to the post of State Archivist responsible for governmental written records and he lobbied for the creation of a complementary State Folklorist position to compile folklore that he defined as oral "unwritten history." On March 11, 1948, the Pennsylvania Historical Commission based in the state capital of Harrisburg announced Shoemaker's appointment as the country's first governmental state folklorist. Shoemaker in this post circulated articles on Pennsylvania folklore to newspapers around the state and he made numerous presentations as the state's designated folklore expert. In the post-war period, folklore in the form of nationalistic hero legends and often sensationalized regional folklife, particularly in the romanticized frontier West, as Richard Dorson (1971) had pointed out, was all the rage, and Henry Shoemaker endeavored to publicize Pennsylvania's role in this trend. In his writing, he publicized Pennsylvania as culturally rich compared to regions of the West, South, and New England.

For his detractors, Shoemaker's promotional work meant exaggerating and even concocting folklore texts for public consumption. For supporters, Henry Shoemaker was a prominent public fig-

ure and resident writer who brought out lively, entertaining stories that were distinctive in literature for featuring the overlooked cultural lives of rural Pennsylvanians. For his fans, Henry Shoemaker fit into Gencarella's category of an enthusiast who gained attention because of his governmental and newspaper roles. Detractors protested his self-proclaimed (non-academic or analytical) expertise and "professionally unreasonable" (exaggerated) claims, as Gencarella describes these roles. Yet those protests did not affect his popularity or folkloristic endeavors. In fact, it is fair to say that with his outpouring of books and newspaper articles Henry Shoemaker through the mid-twentieth century was Pennsylvania's best-known writer, if not expert, on folklore. Further, as head of the public-oriented Pennsylvania Folklore Society (established in 1927) he was often sought for advice on collecting and writing about folklore by local organizations. At the national level, in 1952 he was named a "councillor" of the American Folklore Society. Did that make him a bonafide folklorist representing the dignity of a separate department of study, as Gomme avowed?

Alfred L. Shoemaker meanwhile had established the nation's first college department of folklore at Franklin and Marshall College in Lancaster, Pennsylvania, with a curriculum focused on ethnological research that in a Bachelor of Arts degree (Bronner 2020). The Pennsylvania-born Shoemaker had his Ph.D. in German from the University of Illinois with a dissertation on the Amish and had studied in European centers of folk cultural studies in Sweden and Ireland. Alfred Shoemaker was not against public folklore in the form of festivals and museums but wanted programming to be guided by academic principles and organized by professionals. To break down the town-gown divide, especially as tourism to the Amish areas boomed, he established a Pennsylvania Dutch Folk Cultural Center with two fellow professors-- Don Yoder and J. William Frey—to issue publications, compile archives and artifact collections, create museum exhibits, and manage festivals (Louden 2022). He also set out to correct tourist literature on folklore penned by the likes of Harrisburg-based bookseller Monroe Aurand, who issued pamphlets sensationalizing Pennsylvania witchcraft, bundling, and humor (Louden 2022, 268-69; Weaver-Zercher 2001, 114-21). Alfred Shoemaker at Franklin and Marshall together with Samuel Bayard at Penn State hurled criticism at Henry Shoemaker for distorting folklore study with political and romantic leanings.

Alfred at first tried to transform the Pennsylvania Folklore Society into an academic organization and when that takeover bid was unsuccessful, then formed the rival Pennsylvania Folklife Society. Alfred became especially annoyed at Henry's invitations to creative writers and amateurs to adapt folklore, and resisted associations that the state folklorist made between the Pennsylvania Folklore Society and amateur storytelling leagues and poetry societies. Brandishing his expertise as an experienced publisher and journalist, Henry made unflattering remarks about the bland appearance, narrow scope, and academic tone of Alfred's *Pennsylvania Dutchman* which morphed into the broader-based *Pennsylvania Folklife.* Bayard who became president of the American Folklore Society in 1965-1966 was even more assertive than Gencarella in condemning pseudo-research

by calling Henry Shoemaker "as arrant a faker and 'fakelorist' as ever existed" (Bayard 1993; see also Bayard 1959).

Henry Shoemaker died in 1958, and so did the Pennsylvania state folklorist position. When it was revived in 1967, it was with doctoral candidate Henry Glassie from the recently established folklore program at the University of Pennsylvania. Alfred Shoemaker's department of folklore did not last either, but the festival based on ethnological principles he began still runs as the Kutztown Folk Festival, although critics claim that his original academic vision has been corrupted by tourism and commercialization. An academic chair has been named for Alfred, ironically not at Franklin and Marshall but rather at the University of Wisconsin which has a folklore program with a specialist in Pennsylvania German language and lore (Louden 2022). This outcome could appear on Gencarella's scorecard as a win for academic authority, but the reality is that Pennsylvania is as vulnerable as New England in the twenty-first century to self-declared folklorists exploiting popular touristic interest in a purported regional legacy of witchcraft and ghostlore with the rhetoric of "weird," "bizarre," and "strange" in their titles (see Nesbitt and Wilson 2006; Schlosser 2006).

So what's different now? And what if anything can be done about it? I return to the themes I introduced earlier for the twentieth century episodes and add two critical twenty-first century differences. First, undoubtedly academic involvement in "public folklore" is more conspicuous at present and I reflect on its linkage to the heritage movement in the twenty-first century. A second factor is the redefinition of folklorist in the context of digital culture in what many would call the flattening or democratization of academic authority.

Public Folklore and the Heritage Movement

I argue that an unintended consequence of folklorists adopting "heritage" as a keyword to join professional folklore studies to public appreciation of folk culture is the undermining of authority of folkloristically trained experts. I write this as a university administrator who introduced a folklorist-led "public heritage" curriculum and certificate program to link history, folklore, museology, and sociology with a title and field that would be appealing our regional communities (Bronner 2020). The program took off, despite skepticism from historians and sociologists who thought that the folklore part would introduce fictions into their fact-filled mix. They worried, too, that heritage ceded authority to community-based enthusiasts who "do history wrong." To be sure, an implication of the public heritage program was that community voices and efforts should be valued, and that university-trained specialists would guide rather than initiate projects. Inspired by the legacy of Alfred L. Shoemaker, another goal was to have the university take responsibility for providing accessible training and organization to community enthusiasts, especially with the end in the 1990s of the third Pennsylvania state folklorist office in Pennsylvania rebranded as "folklife" within a governmental Heritage Affairs Commission (Staub 1988). On a national level, in 1999 the Smithsonian Institution renamed its office organizing the Smithsonian Folklife Festival as the Center for Folklife and *Cultural Heritage*. And internationally, many scholars adopted the legalistic term "intangible cul-

tural heritage" to refer to practices that had formerly been under the purview of folklorists (Foster and Gilman 2015; Stefano and Davis 2017).

Supporting this move to reconceptualizing folklore as part of a larger cultural heritage movement to engage local publics was Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett's often-cited essay "Mistaken Dichotomies" in the *Journal of American Folklore* (1988). Kirshenblatt-Gimblett sought to disrupt a binary she imagined between "pure" and "applied" folklore. The heritage movement, she thought, was a way for folklorists to get out of the ivory tower and broaden their significance. Referring to the example of conflicts between folklorists and art collectors over the meaning of folk art, she complained that with their narrow esoteric definition of heritage as inherited tradition, "folklorists have drawn and policed boundaries that, until recently, have left to the American folk art specialists what folklore as a discipline has not been able to assimilate" (Kirshenblatt-Gimblett 1988, 147). Of relevance to Gencarella's irritation is Kirshenblatt-Gimblett's observation that "The public sector has tended to embrace received notions of ethnicity and ethnic group, of heritage and tradition, without considering the historical formation of these notions in the postwar American context" (Kirshenblatt-Gimblett 1988, 149). Kirshenblatt-Gimblett hoped that folklorists could reform the heritage movement by bringing a multicultural perspective to the table and in return folklorists would loosen their strict transmission-based definition of tradition.

Checking the assumption that folklorists had mummified their study of traditions, I found data that suggested that American folklorists by and large in their embrace of performance and vernacularism have since the 1980s actually drifted away from transactional criteria of tradition (Bronner 2019b; Bronner 2022). I have used those approaches myself but I have come to the realization that they detrimentally eschew social and psychological guidelines and on the basis of superficial evidence impose a class-based aesthetic judgment on the kinds of expressions considered "folk" or traditional (Abrahams 1993; Bronner 2012; Bronner 2022; Dundes 2005; Mechling 2006; Morris 1995).

Although Gencarella is not willing to critique "Mistaken Dichotomies," I am. Besides the false dichotomy Kirshenblatt-Gimblett presents of "pure" and "applied" folklore, the essay validates the undermining of folkloristic expertise that Gencarella bemoans. My larger concern is that the folding of folklore into a preservationist concept of heritage in the way she proposes opens the door to any claim to the material (see Ben-Amos 2019). No policing of boundaries is necessary because in essence folklore no longer exists, at least as a social reality. If it does, it is objectified, and I fear commodified, as a relict artifact of the past or esoteric knowledge that can only be known by insiders. It is rendered incomprehensible by learned individuals and can only be interpreted as a staged or mediated performance of identity. Another consequence is that no need exists for academic programs if the knowledge is not one that can be gained intellectually, subject to scholarly standards, and analyzed in aggregate. Breaking with nationalistic and regionalistic rubrics that in her historiography had been part of the history of folklore studies leaves a gap for dabblers and dilettantes to fill once again. With the ac-

celeration in twenty-first century America of "fast capitalism" fueled by digital media, the effect is that the conspicuous authorities are those who are not academically credentialled and further, explore macro-level folkloric commodities for mass consumption (in contrast to micro-functionally oriented academic folklorists) (see Bronner 2019a; Cross 2017). Is that not what Gencarella draws out as the current problem?

As I have pointed out in *The Practice of Folklore* (2019d), the separation of noble "public heritage" goals and academic folkloristic interests does not necessarily lead to conflict. I observed as a resident academic during the "Year of Folklore" throughout the Netherlands that was managed by cooperating separate centers devoted to public and academic work. Although those professionals who were involved did not refer to "policing" of boundaries, it was evident that the kind of self-proclamation of authority over folklore was not tolerated, largely because of the centuries-old role of universities as knowledge centers that integrated with public organizational work. This high-context environment in Dutch organizational life may explain why academics in the Netherlands do not worry about the paradoxical inclusiveness involving the sharing of authority on the one hand and promotion of deference to professionalism that American folklorists frequently strive, probably quixotically, to achieve.

Participatory Culture and the Flattening of Academic Authority

The first endowed chair of folklore in the United States was held beginning in 1920 by Martha Beckwith (1871-1959) at Vassar College. Having studied with Franz Boas in anthropology at Columbia University, she used the prestige of the new chair to declare the exceptional identity and discipline of the folklorist while her mentor still referred to folklore as a subfield, albeit an important one of anthropology (Beckwith 1931; Bronner 1998b). Known for her self-assertiveness, Beckwith was not shy about criticizing distortions of folklore she witnessed in public venues. One story that the president of Vassar told was of her outburst at a theater performance of Hawaiian hula dancing. She confided to her companion, "This is unscholarly, I must protest," to which the reply was "Please, Martha, don't make a scene. *What is the use?*" Not to be deterred, Beckwith rose and bellowed to the audience, "In the interest of truth, I must denounce this performance. It has nothing about it that in any way represents the true hula, except the skirt, and even that is artificial. You are being taken in!" The show halted and according to the president's account, she began to lecture the audience about "what the true hula was" and then stormed out to the cheers of the crowd (Bronner 1998, 249-50). The president does not say if the show changed because of Beckwith's ire, but he does add that it resumed after she left.

One might interpret the president's intent to show the feistiness of the folklore professor and her admirable devotion to maintaining scholarly standards. Yet considering Gencarella's comments, the narrative might also be read to indicate the futility of academic intervention in popular presentation of folk traditions. Beckwith also sought to change pre-conceived notions about the narrow boundaries of folklore research among her academic colleagues. She objected to her folklore courses being listed under Comparative

Literature and requested an independent prefix of "folk" for a curriculum centered on a broad definition of folklore's scope. She argued that folklore studies is a wide theoretical field representing advanced multi-disciplinary learning. Concerned about the misinformation in the popular press about immigrant and regional American folklore, she dashed off a memorandum to the president that such a curriculum bridging humanities and social sciences "aims to bring the student in touch with modern theory in the field of folklore in the light of older methods of interpretation to give practical help in recognizing folk forms of the past and in collecting and preserving disappearing forms alive today in oral art and in the practice of the folk group" (Bronner 1998, 252). Speaking out against the view of folk customs as survivals or relics of the past, she underscored the contemporariness and functionality of folklore to argue for its necessity in a liberal arts curriculum. She vowed to educate students on the many ethnic "strains in the process of creating an American cultural life," and she assured the president that this knowledge would be applicable to a number of occupations, particularly social work (1931, 64).

Gencarella shares with Beckwith a frustration that he cannot stop the show or at least was not consulted to make it better. However, Beckwith's vision of folklore playing more of a role in the liberal arts curriculum has materialized in the twenty-first century with courses offered in many universities across North America. Yet the spread of independent degree-granting programs with academic authority in folklore that she sought has not fared as well (Sawin and Zumwalt 2020). Public recognition of the study of folklore as an academic specialty in which one needs advanced training would perhaps prevent the easy appropriation of the folklorist title. Having taught in the Netherlands and Japan where there is more public deference to academic authority I observe that even if such recognition suddenly shot up credentialing by or affiliation with the American university does not wield the clout that scholars expect. Terminological attempts to aggrandize, or avoid, the discomforting populist implications of "folklore" such as "vernacular culture" have only exacerbated the problem (Bronner 2022).

One might point to an attributed trait of anti-intellectualism in America as an explanation for acceptance of amateurism (Hofstadter 1963), but I would also open for consideration the effect of spreadable new media on the rapid democratization or flattening of learning and the arts in the twenty-first century (Bonk 2011; Friedman 2007; Gurri 2018; Jenkins, Ford, and Green 2013). The digital media resources of Wikipedia, YouTube, and the blogosphere have led many cultural critics to observe an undoing of the divide between expert and lay authority. I am aware of this phenomenon because in my enrollment management role, I have been told that a wave of digital natives graduating from high school are less convinced that they need a college education (see Tapscott 2009).

With the merging of performers/producers and spectators/consumers, several social theorists have announced a move beyond cultural democracy to a broad participatory culture (Graves 2004; Delwiche and Henderson 2013). Media scholar Henry Jenkins refers to participatory culture growing out of fandom in a way that could apply the phenomena that

Gencarella describes. Jenkins observes a change in the twenty-first century from fans as consumers to a prosumer, "creative community that took its raw materials from commercial entertainment texts and appropriated and remixed them as the basis for their own creative culture" (Jenkins 2016, 1; see also O'Neil and Frayssé 2015). Whereas many cultural critics hail this development as fostering social and economic equity, Jenkins points out the possibilities of exploitation by commercial platforms as well as by the prosumers.

If one accepts the rise of participatory culture, there appears to be a Gramscian hegemonic scenario in which the apparent positive trend of lay prosumer folklorist commercialism in various forms of media, and consequently into popular culture, appears to foster a populist inclusiveness while contributing to a negative entrenchment of inequities that folkloristic study serves to uncover and remediate. One answer has been new versions of the nineteenth century handbooks in which credentialed folklorists guide users to professional applications, rather than methods, of folklore studies (Frandy and Cederström 2022; Lloyd 2021). Apparently in answer to the advent of participatory culture, most of the occupations that the editors of these volumes describe are in the public sector and do not carry the title of folklorist. Nonetheless, the editors suggest that folkloristic education within the realm of the humanities is helpful to succeed in agencies for community advocacy, social services, and public policy. One of those editors, Tim Lloyd, who served for many years as Executive Director of the American Folklore Society, proclaims that "the robust development of public-sector work in the 1970s brought folklore studies into a richer and more diverse version of today's 'alt-ac' [alternative academic] business quite some time ago, and both educational curricula and professional development efforts in our field for many years have reflected this commitment to opening more doors to folklorists' professional orientation and practice" (Lloyd 2021, xvii). The obvious implication is that the future of folkloristic professionalism lies outside of the academy, and leaves in doubt, at least in my mind, the viability of folkloristic credentialing. It leaves to many of the prosumers the title of folklorist.

Maybe as Kirshenblatt-Gimblett reflected, it is difficult if not impossible to police the standards and boundaries of folklore studies under such post-modern conditions. Nonetheless, effort is needed to revitalize academic programming with attention to folklore and folklife studies as a distinctive field, instead of subsuming it or ceding it to heritage, vernacular, and cultural studies (Ben-Amos 2019; Bronner 2022). And I daresay that credentialed folklorists might take a cue from Martha Beckwith to review and critique prosumer appropriations and distortions of the folkloric subject. That might be a start to reclaiming, in Gomme's words, "the dignity of a separate department of study, with a title specially its own" (Gomme 1880, 13).

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Stephen Gencarella's commentary on this issue of *Cultural Analysis* is a needed provocation. He offers a wide-ranging discussion of the issues faced by experts, including experts in folklore, in rendering usable knowledge to a broader public within the rapidly changing information landscape of the early 21st century. Undoubtedly, some of Gencarella's arguments will generate significant debate among folklorists, and many may disagree with some or even most of his points. Yet, I think he has done a tremendous service to the field by provoking us to push past our typical hand-wringing over concerns about the low visibility of our discipline in the academy or the need to promote our work better to the broader public.[1] Along a second line, he has reopened some of our long-past considerations about how to mark off the boundaries of expertise but has done so in a way that attempts to mitigate some of the elitist sensibilities that have rendered previous discussions distasteful.

Perhaps the most needed intervention that Gencarella makes in this essay is to distinguish between academic experts, tradition participants, and community experts, creative artists, and the group he dubs pseudo-researchers. From my perspective, this discussion helped clarify a conflict I have long held in my own mind: how to preserve the important role of "amateur," or to use Gencarella's better term "citizen," folklorists from the puerile work of pseudo-researchers. In fact, the long history of inclusiveness in folklore studies with regard to citizen folklorists is a unique and, I think, quite valuable feature of our field.[2] Yet, Gencarella is right to assert that there is a fundamental problem with allowing simply anyone to identify as a folklorist. Many of these problems are well-detailed in Gencarella's essay. To this list of problems, I suggest adding an additional one: the inclusion of pseudo-researchers under the term "folklorist" makes it harder for us to comfortably identify ourselves professionally by that label. Of course, there have been some high-profile instances when individuals or institutions have refused to acknowledge the field because of the unserious connotation the terms "folklore" or "folklorist" carry with them (see, for example, Dundes 2005, 392). I can't imagine many folklorists who have *not* encountered numerous minor situations where they felt uncomfortable applying the label to themselves or, when they did so, were met with a profound misunderstanding of who folklorists are and what we actually do. To be clear, I do not intend to resurrect the debate over the naming of our field (see, for example, Ben-Amos 1998; Bendix 1998; Kirshenblatt-Gimblett 1998; and Oring 1998); instead, I suggest that with more sustained efforts to address some of the issues raised by Gencarella in this essay, using the terminology we already have might simply become easier.[3]

In this essay, Gencarella begins by reviewing some of the most well-known debates around the delimitation of folklore expertise. These include Dorson's formulation of the concept of "fakelore" (1950), the rise of discourse on "folklorismus"

(Moser 1962; Bausinger 1969; Voigt 1970, 1979; Gusev 1980; Newall 1987; Bendix 1988; Smidchens 1999); and the exchange between Robert Georges, Bill Ellis, Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, Jim Leary, and Elliot Oring on the boundaries between professionalism and amateurism in folklore and the appropriate role of the American Folklore Society (Kirshenblatt-Gimblet 1990; Leary 1990; Oring 1990; Georges 1991; Ellis 1992). Gencarella then attempts to distill some of the central points of the exchange from the early '90s into a consideration of the "social nature of the expert." While it certainly no longer seems revolutionary to suggest that the ideological construction, persona, and role of the expert are social phenomena, Gencarella usefully elaborates and deepens Collins' argument, which considered expertise as a form of tacit knowledge and social practice that can only take shape within the habitus of a community of scholars. In fact, Collins' argument seems to capture one of the most contradictory experiences that many scholars have during their careers. On the one hand, one's body of knowledge certainly increases, and to greater or lesser degrees, this is accompanied by some confidence in one's mastery of that knowledge. On the other hand, however, as one develops the critical and methodological capacities required to do good scholarship, there is also a tendency to become increasingly aware of the fuzziness of categories, the ambiguities of concepts, and the fragility of fact. [4]

As Gencarella nicely points out, it is exactly this kind of intellectual nuance (I hesitate to use the term humility—in some cases, though, this might fit), developed through the long training required of scholars, that pseudo-researchers often lack. Though I agree with Gencarella that "sensationalism sells," it may be this lack of nuance that is also part of the attraction. After all, in a complex world, what is more attractive than easy certitude, even if that certitude concerns something supranormal? In this respect, it's interesting that we've seen a flourishing of narratives and vernacular subcultures that seem to celebrate the romanticized figure of the elite scholar at the very moment that, as Gencarella notes, actual experts, with our careful method and circumspect speech, are increasingly distrusted and disparaged in the public eye and marginalized within the academic system. For example, we might note the increasingly popular "dark academia" aesthetic online, a culture that celebrates the putative exterior trappings of the academic world (ivy-covered stone buildings; cavernous, dimly lit reading halls; crisp uniforms; readings of languid Romantic poetry; etc.). New York Times columnist Pamela Paul recently characterized this aesthetic as "a deeply romanticized view of higher learning with its idealization of paperbound matter, leather book bags, and unapologetic elitism." However, Paul speculates:

> It may be that the very real world of academia feels a little *too* dark and unhappy of late. The towering, all-powerful professors of yore are now often adjunct or contract instructors, with lower pay and tenuous job security…In this dimmed light, Oxford and Hogwarts and small New England colleges can feel like safe harbors. You can understand the allure of an aesthetic that offers TikTokers "a version of a dream life in which they can spend their days reading the classics in a centuries-old library," as CNN put it (Paul 2022).[5]

Like any good folklorist, of course, we should begin by formulating answers to the questions we have about the popular reception of experts, including in our own field, by paying attention to these kinds of folk expressions and images and learning from them how we might best address ourselves to a broad audience.[6] This requires us to understand the appeal of pseudo-research from a vernacular perspective and, in doing so, learn how to craft more effective and appealing modes for the communication of our research. It also requires us to push back strongly against the exploitation of what I have referred to, following Michel de Certeau, as the "specialist/expert gap" (Buccitelli 2020, 421–25). While I have argued that this gap has been increasingly exploited and manipulated by malign political actors, the various sorts of pseudo-researchers described by Gencarella, even if they don't explicitly participate in this process, lay the groundwork for such exploration by polluting the public discourse with falsely authoritative information while devaluing the decidedly less enticing, but much more responsible, research of professional and serious citizen specialists.

Notes

1 Handwringing, I am likely guilty of myself. Gencarella and I first began discussing these issues following the publication of my article "(Folk)Life, Interrupted: Challenges for Fieldwork, Empathy, and Public Discourse in the Age of Trump" in the *Journal of American Folklore* in 2020. In that essay, I devoted considerable attention to long-standing questions about whether to approach the scholarly study of folklore as empathic translation or critical intervention, as well as broader questions about the status and role of the expert in contemporary society. While ultimately, as I noted, that "essay offers no definitive answer to either set of issues," I was hoping, as I think Gencarella is, to "reframe some of the long-standing issues we confront and articulate a clear, forceful, and unified response to the challenges we all now face" (Buccitelli 2020, 425).

2 This inclusiveness appears to have had certain boundaries, however. I explored these boundaries to some extent in my 2014 article "The Reluctant Folklorist: Jon Y Lee. Paul Radin, and the Fieldwork Process." In that article, I focused on the life and works of Jon Y. Lee. Even though he was employed professionally to collect folklore as part of a WPA-funded project led by Radin, Lee was a citizen folklorist since he had no formal training in the field prior to taking this job.

3 This does not, of course, resolve the range of important issues with the name raised especially by Bendix and Kirshenblatt-Gimblett.

4 Some scholars, like sociologist Kieran Healy (2017), have argued that these dispositions toward nuance are a relatively recent feature of the scholarly habitus. Certainly, it may be true that these kinds of dispositions have become increasingly common among scholars in the wake of postmodernism, post-structuralism, and other important theory movements of the late 20th century. Yet one might also think of works like that of Peter Novick in his landmark study *That Noble Dream: The "Objectivity Question" and the American Historical Profession* (1988), which have nicely demonstrated the long-running internal debates that have taken shape within academic disciplines over a variety of epistemological concerns, even in periods when professional practitioners

outwardly projected façades of certitude.

5 For a brief but brilliant analysis of the intertwining shifts in the economic, social, and intellectual structures of universities in the late 20th and early 21st centuries that explores similar ideas, see Graeber 2014.

6 Jeffrey A. Tolbert, among others, has examined this issue in recent years. See, for example, Tolbert 2015; 2016.

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"Laugh like Surpanakha": Modern Literary Re-Imagining of a Famous Villainess in Indian Folkloric Traditions

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Abstract

The Ramayana*, a mythological tale passed down in oral folkloric traditions with the earliest discovered written version dating between the 4th and 6th centuries BC, continues to hold dominant cultural sway in India and many south Asian countries. To the many millions of people in South Asia, Surpanakha, the female character in Ramayana who instigated the great war between good and evil, continues to be upheld as the embodiment of all things women should not be—vocal of her lustful desires, fearless to proposition a man, violent and selfish. However, her role as a villainess is being questioned. In contemporary re-imagined narrative, she is portrayed as a misunderstood and oppressed female in a patriarchal system. Through qualitative analysis of online user generated content (UGC), this study explores how modern readers perceive Surpanakha's characterization in Kavita Kane's novel* The Lanka's Princess*.* *Findings suggest readers' willingness to accept Surpanakha's villainous traits as expressions protesting mainstream expectations of the female ideal*.

Keywords: female villain, villainess, fairytale, folklore, feminist revisioning, India, Surpanakha

In Western countries, fairytales are some of the first stories children hear. These continue to be part of cultural socialization narratives. While growing up, children continue to build familiarity by seeing the same characters in films, television, and market mediated narratives like advertising (Odber de Baubeta 1997; Mieder 2007). Beginning in 1960 with the use of fairytales and traditional folklores by the advertising industry and up to the present-day framing mechanisms of contemporary issues of modern society, demonstrates the continued relevance of characters in popular culture (Greenhill and Rudy, 2014). Within this broad genre, where the fight between good and evil imparts the ideals of gender norms by pitting the hero against the villain, the female antagonist is the focus of this study. Although pivotal, their stories are typically secondary to the male characters. In Western narratives, enduring villainess characters continue to have their presence culturally felt, such as Maleficent (Sleeping Beauty), Mother Gothel (Rapunzel) and Ursula (The Little Mermaid) in contemporary revisions and reimagined retelling of the original stories. Deviating from earlier one-dimensional portrayals where gender role portrayals remained intact, contemporary creators of entertainment content are exploring narratives that extend such bi-

Cultural Analysis 22.1 (2024): 52–72
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polar depictions such as re-imagining the wicked stepmother as the heroine (Williams 2010). The American Broadcasting Company (ABC), in their television series *Once Upon a Time*, which ran from 2011 to 2018, as well as the National Broadcasting Company's (NBC) *Grimm* series incorporated fantasy imaginings of fairytale characters in real-world settings, thus giving them back-stories where none existed. Along similar lines, Angelina Jolie's *Maleficent* films (2014, 2019) produced by Disney centralize and portray the character of the villain in Sleeping Beauty in a sympathetic light.

So, what stories of villainesses do children in India hear of while growing up that continue to hold sway into their adulthood? If one were to ask, one of the most famous would be that of Surpanakha, the strong-willed sister of the villain Ravana in the Ramayana. Her story is familiar to hundreds of millions of people in Asia (Erndl 1991; Pillai 2020; Ramanujan 2004). She is a pivotal character who manipulates and connives to trigger the war between good and evil in the epic tale. The legendary story, crafted a few thousand years ago, has been told and retold in several languages, intertwined in folktales and performance arts in multiple countries across South-East Asia. Stories from the Ramayana can be found in various forms in folktale arts, fiction and nonfiction books, comics, video games, theater arts, television and films (Austin 2014; Pillai 2020). In recent times, with a growing interest to discover the rich literary heritage of India's folklore including mythical narratives, women writers are offering fictional retellings of female characters. One such effort is the fiction novel, *Lanka's Princess* which offers Surpanakha's story from her point of view (Kane 2017). This study answers the call to explore modern interpretations of the female villain in popular culture content (such as the fictional novel). The perceptions of modern Indians, articulated in the form of user generated content (UGC) within the context of participatory culture in today's networked era, offer insights into the evolving nature of gender identity and socio-cultural norms of such retelling efforts by feminist writers.

Surpanakha as the Female Antagonist in Traditional Telling of *The Ramayana*

The Ramayana is described as an exemplar of the Hindu ideals where Rama, the main male protagonist, is the epitome of an ideal male faithfully sacrificing himself in his duties as a son, a husband, a brother and a king (Goldman 2004). At the behest of one of his stepmothers, Kaikeyi, Rama gives up his right to the throne and accepts a fourteen-year exile accompanied by his wife Sita and one of his brothers, Lakshmana. Kaikeyi wanted her own son to ascend the throne and Rama, although the eldest and thus the rightful heir, fulfils his filial duties towards his ailing father Dasaratha who owed a promise to Kaikeyi. In the tenth year of exile, Rama meets Surpanakha. Surpanakha is the princess of Lanka, the kingdom of Ravana, the demon king. Smitten by his beauty, Surpanakha propositions to Rama. Rama rejects her, noting he is married to Sita and humorously suggests she proposition Lakshmana instead (he too is married having left his wife Urmila behind as he followed Rama into exile). Lakshmana also rejects Surpanakha, who mistakenly believes that Sita is the cause for the rejections, and lunges at her. Lakshmana intervenes and cuts off Surpanakha's ears and nose. Strick-

en, Surpanakha goes back to Lanka, recounts her humiliation and manipulates Ravana by describing Sita's beauty as worthy of his possession. Ravana, upon confirming Surpanakha's claims for himself, abducts Sita and takes her back to Lanka. Rama then fights with Ravana and defeats him to rescue Sita. This fight is described as the Great War where good overcomes evil (Kishler 1965; Ramanujan 2004). While Rama is the male ideal and Sita is the epitome of the ideal woman, the villains are the extreme opposite. Ravana is the main antagonist with no moral character. Surpanakha, the sister of Ravana, is portrayed as selfish and cunning. Surpanakha's brief but pivotal appearance in the story begins and ends with the war between the male hero and villain. This black and white, good versus evil characterization has remained consistent over thousands of years as the epic tale has been shared across geographic borders in various written, oral, and performative traditions. In popular culture, stories from the Ramayana remain popular in media and entertainment (Booth 1995; Mclain 2001; Pillai 2020). Surpanakha is never too far from the public attention, as women who do not conform to heteronormative gendered ideals are often compared to her.

Situating the Mythical Narrative of Surpanakha in Fairytale Discourse

One would argue why mythical tales like the Ramayana should be part of the fairytale literature. The answer would be to decolonize fairytale academic discourse from the predominantly Western focus (Haase 2010). This is evident where stories from Asia are classified under "Asian Literature" or "Asian Studies" with predominantly Western authors leading the scholarship (Brockington and Brockington 2016). Scholars have long suspected the origins of fairytales in folk narratives to have diverse Indo-European roots dating back thousands of years (Hasan 2009; da Silva and Jamshid 2016; Sugiyama 2001). This view is not without merit, given that the artificial lines drawn by academe cannot untangle the threads of storytelling that has woven itself across borders through human activities (migrations, trade) over thousands of years (da Silva and Jamshid 2016; Jacobs 1892; Zhang 2015). Parsons (2004, 138) notes that despite the Grimms or Perrault given credit for popularizing fairy tales, "there is no genuine or authentic version of a fairy tale." This is evident in the uncanny similarities between Jataka folktales from India and Aesop's Fables, where Jacobs (1892, viii) notes:

> Some—as Benfey in Germany, M. Cosquin in France, and Mr. Clouston in England—have declared that India is the Home of the Fairy Tale, and that all European fairy tales have been brought from thence by Crusaders, by Mongol missionaries, by Gipsies, by Jews, by traders, by travellers…..So far as the children of Europe have their fairy stories in common, these—and they form more than a third of the whole—are derived from India. (Jacobs 1892, viii)

In response to Haase's (2010) call to acknowledge the cross-cultural heritage of the origin of fairytales, this study introduces an iconic female villain from Indian folkloric traditions. Although her story is a few thousand years old (at least what can be traced at present), it is known by many people around the world. Acclaimed as one of two

great epics of India (the other being the Mahabharatha), its earliest origins, believed to have been passed down through oral folkloric traditions in various regions and languages, is estimated to have originated between the 4th and 6th centuries BC (Ramanujan 2004). Historians have traced approximately three hundred different versions of the Ramayana in written form adopted across countries such as Myanmar, Indonesia, Cambodia, Laos, Thailand, China, and Japan amongst others (Ramanujan 2004; Watanabe 1907).

The Ramayana permeates every aspect of the Indian culture in every form of content imaginable, comparable to fairytale influences in Western societies. Similar to the depiction of Snow White and the Evil Queen as female ideals of the good and the bad in Western fairytales, Sita is upheld as the ideal woman in a righteous Indian society steeped in Hindu traditions while Surpanakha is “othered” as the opposite of this ideal. In this “other” framing, villainesses, irrespective of their origins, often suffer violence resulting in death, to depict the triumph of good over evil (Luthra 2014). The mutilation of Surpanakha is upheld as a just punishment for a woman’s transgression of overstepping gender norms to proposition to a man. There are various interpretations of this act as the critical event that changes the trajectory of the plot (Erndl 1991; De Clercq 2016). Similarities of such is also seen in Western fairytales with Cinderella suffering active and passive injuries from her step-mother and step-sisters (Alcantud-Díaz 2012).

Arguments against the stereotypical depictions of female ideals (pure versus evil) and aspirations (happy endings resulting in marrying the handsome prince) have been evident in the waves of feminist critique of fairytale literature in the 20th century (Ragan 2009). Haase (2000; 2004) notes that the works of Suzanne Barcher, Rosemary Minard, Ethel Johnston Phelps, Kathleen Ragan, James Riordan, and Jane Yolen challenge patriarchal gender norms in the literature to subvert such narratives. Feminist ‘rewriting’ have expanded the genre of folkloric conventions to encode novel discourses challenging troubling patriarchal ideologies that are detrimental to modern societies (Crew 2002; Luthra 2014). Indeed female characters, even the idealized, have little agency in the narrative.

Surpanakha’s Relevance in Contemporary India

> Sabhapati ji meri aapse vinti hai Renuka ji ko kuch mat kahiye. Ramayan serial ke baad aisi hansi sunne ka saubhagya aaj jaake mila hai. (Chairman sir, don’t stop Ms. Renuka. Ever since seeing Ramayana serial, for the first time I have got an opportunity to hear such a laughter)
>
> *Narendra Modi, Prime Minister of India, February 7, 2018*

The traditional interpretation of Surpanakha has sustained well into the 21st century. To this day, Surpanakha continues to be referenced in stereotypical ways to draw comparisons of the actions of modern women. In 2018, an incident involving a female politician was widely covered in the national media. Ms. Renuka Chowdhury, a member

of the opposition party, laughed during a parliamentarian session. She was rebuked harshly by the presiding chairman at the time. Mr. Narendra Modi, Prime Minister of India, and the leader of the ruling party, mocked her loud laughter and jokingly asked the chairman to not censure her with the remark in the above quote (Bhatia 2018). The quote references the exaggerated cackling laughter made famous by an actor essaying the role of Surpanakha in the extremely popular Ramayana television show (Cusack 2012), and refers to Surpanakha's disregard for gender norms of the demure female. In this popular series aired in the 1980s, the exaggerated laughter of Surpanakha as she made her entrance to proposition Rama made a significant impact on the public (Nagpaul 2018). Mr. Modi's censure of Ms. Chowdhury was criticized by the media as a form of gender oppression (Bhatia 2018). Surpanakha trended again on Social Media platforms such as X (formerly Twitter) March 2021. Media reports of a physical altercation where Hitesha Chandranee, a female customer, uploaded a video of herself on Instagram with her nose bleeding where she narrated the story of being assaulted by a male food delivery service person. In subsequent reports, the male service person accused Chandranee of fabricating the story. While the police reviews the case (Arakal 2021), social media users created and shared memes of Chandranee referring to her as the modern day Surpanakha, falsely accusing a man of a fight which she may have initiated. Thus, be it Renuka Chowdhury or Hitesha Chandranee, women in 21st century India are familiar with societal comparisons to the female characters in the Ramayana in their everyday, mundane lives.

To question such stereotypical depictions, along with the growing interest in India's rich literary folkloric heritage, some women writers are re-imagining such narratives. One must note that feminist retelling of traditional stories is not new in India. Reviews of historical oral traditions by women have found that the male ideal of Rama has been questioned (Rao 1998; Dev Sen 1998). In the 21st century, a myriad of retellings of India's folklore in the works of Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni, Anuja Chandramouli, Amruta Patil, Samhita Arni, Sara Joseph, Kavita Kane to note a few, have been received enthusiastically by readers eager to explore their rich literary history (Ramadurai 2021; Sattar 2017). In her review of the portrayal of Surpanakha in the arts and media in modern times, Pillai (2020) reveals the primary depictions continuing along similar plots as seen through centuries, with some exceptions where cinematic portrayals and fictional writings showcase Surpanakha in a more sympathetic light. One such retelling of Surpanakha's story is the fictional novel *Lanka's Princess* by author Kavita Kane published in the English language in 2017 (Binoj 2019). Kavita Kane is noted for her attention to the lesser known female characters in traditional tales. She conducts in-depth research and does not deviate from what is already known about the story or the characters. Her intent is on providing a fictional feminist account of characters that do not have any notable narrative arc in the original stories.

The interest amongst academic scholars to understand the author's retelling of Surpanakha's story is evident in recent works (Meenakshi and Kumar 2021; Srishti 2021). Readers are encouraged to review these studies for an in-depth understanding of the novel. For instance, in her analysis De (2020) reviews Surpanakha's disfigurement in the hands of Lakshmana by authors Kavita Kane and Navanita Debsen as

seen through the lens of abusive patriarchy. Similarly, Dirghangi and Mohanty (2019) conclude that Kane portrays Surpanakha as the "new" woman of the modern times who seeks independence from male-centric societal dominance. Asha and Nandini (2019), in their review of Kane's approach to feminist retellings in her novels, note that the author sought to make her readers view the patriarchal subjugations faced by the female protagonists through the latter's point of view. Kane gives voice to the voiceless, thus offering a different perspective than what the traditional versions offer through the male gaze. In her re-imagination of Surpanakha, Kane stays within the traditional view of her role as the villainess while giving her voice and agency by narrating the story from her point of view. Kane's work is comparable to the philosophy of that of Donna Jo Napoli who offers revisioning to empower characters, alter narrative conventions and encode feminist themes and values (Napoli 1993, 2000; Napoli and Tchen 1999). Kane writes in English. Her works have been translated into regional languages. For this study, the novel itself is not the focus. It is the reader's responses that are analyzed as a form of participatory culture.

Methodology and Data Analysis

The purpose of this study is to explore how Lanka's Princess resonated with contemporary readers as articulated in their own UGC, which depict a form of participatory culture in today's networked world (Jenkins, Ito and Boyd 2016). Not content in merely reading books, people are sharing their experiences in the form of online reviews, blogs and social media posts. Since the advent of Web 2.0 technologies, UGC is ingrained in participatory culture. Empowered with digital tools and platforms, users are able to create and share their thoughts and creative output (text, audio-visual content) "at the intersection between old and new media, (and) are demanding the right to participate within the culture" (Jenkins 2006, 24). UGC is understood to be "i) content which is made publicly available, through internet, ii) boasting a certain level of creativity and maybe the most important aspect iii) created outside of professional practices" (Balasubramaniam 2009, 28). Examples of UGC are online blogs, fan fiction, wikis, images and videos prevalent on websites and social media. For the purposes of this study, since the story developed Surpanakha's villainous character that is prominent in its absence in the original version, the readers' perceptions of the re-imagined narrative was of particular interest. Blogs in particular are utilized by women to express their thoughts and feelings in the online domain (Chen and Huang 2020; Kurtz et al. 2017).

Table 1 lists the sources of secondary data gathered through purposive sampling (Kurtz et al. 2017). Simple keyword search of "Kavita Kane" and "Lanka's Princess" was used to access publicly available data using Google's search engine, social media platforms and other websites. The textual content of blog posts and review comments on Goodreads, Amazon India and Flipkart formed the units of analysis of this study. To access these data sources, one can find the book Lanka's Princess on these prominent websites. The review comments of consumers who purchased the book are easily accessible. Several consumers include hyperlinks to their individual blogs that are

also available in the public domain. A majority of the blog posts and reviews were favorable. Adhering to the best practices recommended by Kurtz et al. (2017), personally identifiable information have been removed when presenting quotes in the analysis.

Table 1: Data Sources

Type of Data	Number	Select sources	Data Format
Units of analysis			
Online reviews on E-commerce sites	375	Goodreads.com Amazon.in Flipkart.com	Textual content : Review comments
Online Blogs	37	Blogspot.com Wordpress.com	Textual content : blog posts
Informed the analysis			
Media reviews		Hindustan Times India Today The Hindu Times of India Daily News & Analysis The Statesman The Indian Express	Textual content : News articles on the book News articles on author
Social Media UGC	843 Not counted Not counted 27	Instagram Twitter Facebook Youtube	Audio-visual content and accompanied text in original post, comments, emojis.

Qualitative analysis was adopted to analyze the textual content of the blogs and review posts to examine readers' perceptions of the reimagined story of Surpanakha in *Lanka's Princess*. Qualitative inquiry was appropriate for the purposes of this study, as cultural transference of meanings needed to be interpreted in a nuanced way. Data was analyzed within (e.g blog posts) and across (e.g e-commerce purchase reviews). Additional sources of secondary data that informed the analysis include social media posts, mainstream media reviews of the book, interview videos and transcripts of Kavita Kane in literary festival venues and mainstream media outlets. A hermeneutic interpretivist approach (Laverty 2003) was used to develop codes from emic terms evi-

dent in the data such as gender norms, power dynamics, and cultural systems. These were supplemented with codes from feminist fairytale literature (e.g. androcentrism, renegotiation of patriarchal ideologies) to situate the findings within the context of extant knowledge. Throughout the analysis, the iterative practice of continuous comparisons of the data analysis and the literature (Strauss and Corbin 1998) helped identify emergent descriptive themes. Representative quotes from the UGC of blog posts are utilized to elaborate on the perceptions of the readers of Surpanakha as reimagined in *Lanka's Princess*. These are discussed as follows:

What's in a name? Meenakshi First, Surpanakha Later. In this theme, perceptions of Surpanakha as the beautiful princess of Lanka in the re-imagined narrative takes center stage, rather than the grotesque demon Surpanakha of conventional portrayal. Often female villain characters are used as props to further the plot and perpetuate gender stereotypes (Austin 2014; Fisher and Silber 2000). After they serve the purpose, they are either killed or negated to the background. In traditional depictions, we first see Surpanakha as she happens to encounter Rama in the forest. In *Lanka's Princess*, readers are introduced to her at birth. She is an unwanted girl child. She is named Meenakshi by her father which refers to her beautiful golden hued eyes. UGC blog posts marveled at the fictional story arc that encompass Surpanakha's childhood and growing up years.

> I remember in my younger days where we used to watch Ramayana cartoon at home in one of those old DVRs. This character gets approximately 10 minutes of screen presence, but the most important 10 minutes. (Blogger 1)

> The POV is brilliant. Surpanaka's story is an often neglected one. She gets a secondary appearance (firstly because she is a monstress and secondly as she is a woman) in the epic. I like how Kane weaved the story from Meenakshi's thoughts as a child and the grief she encounters because she is always loved lesser than her brothers. (Blogger 6)

The agency of her story arc, where her neglected childhood and fraught relationship with her parents, resonated with readers. Here, the point of view of the female villain allowed her to reclaim her voice. The absence of the male gaze allowed her to demonstrate low self-esteem stemming from gendered discrimination she faced in her environment.

> It is a tale of a girl, a kid who yearned for love from the ones who mattered most her parents but who faced nothing but ridicule. Always the butt of ridicule Meenakshi or the one with beautiful, fish-shaped eyes finally became Surpanakha the woman ‘as hard as nails.’ (Blogger 35)

> Meenakshi is the youngest of the children born to Kaikesi, an asura, and Vishravas, a rishi (yes a scandalous intercommunity marriage). She was also the only girl born after 3 sons- Ravan, Kumbha and Vibhishan. One would expect the youngest girl to be petted and pampered, but unfortunately that was not Meenakshi's life. (Blogger 17)

> The childhood incidents of Meenakshi were beautifully narrated, especially the one in which she attacks Ravan with her nails because he killed her pet. (Blogger 14)

It Is Not All Black Or White. It Is Mostly Gray. The reimagination of Surpanakha's life allowed for character development typically subverted by the folkloric bi-polar gender identity depictions (Austin 2014). How the young Meenakshi earned the name of Surpanakha gave the female villain agency and a venue for self-determination. As she tried to save her pet by fighting with her bigger and stronger brother, effective use of her sharp, long nails earned her the name of Surpanakha. The retelling with detailed incidents in Surpanakha's life allows a multi-dimensional portrayal of the progression of the female self (Haase 2000).

> ….as the story progressed I found myself going through a myriad of emotions directed at, and sometimes with, Surapanakha. The story makes you reflect at what is right and what is not, and whether what you've believed them to be so far is the truth. (Blogger 3)

> I felt various emotions for Surpanakha. It's not whether her actions justified the bloodshed and loss but what forced her to take such drastic steps. In retrospect, she suffered a lot. Right from being neglected by her parents and brothers in her childhood to always competing for her parents love. Constantly trying to prove her worth but failing each time. People who were close to her left her. Her father left her after Ravan captured Lanka. Her grandmother whom she had immense respect for was killed. She lost her husband. Her son was killed. Her face was maimed by Lakshman. Suparnakha lived a life of pain and loss. (Blogger 12)

These character development narratives over the course of the novel allowed for a deeper reflection into how Surpanakha attempted to challenge the traditional power dynamics within patriarchy. Due to her lack of power she resorts to manipulations, as the sex-gendered system did not allow her to succeed and resulted in persistent failures. Associating Surpanakha's tactics as trickery resonates in fairytale literature where villainesses, like witches, justify such acts as necessary to overcome the oppressive systems within which they live (Mills 2018). As androcentric views of utilizing extreme measures to get one's way is denounced by society, readers are left to wonder what is right and what is wrong if the system is designed to oppress women (Schimmelpfennig 2013).

> Be it Helen of Troy or Draupadi, women were indirectly the reason behind great wars. In Ramayana, it was Surpanakha who triggered the war by manipulating events and provoking Ravana to kidnap Sita.…. In the first few pages the reader will feel sympathy for the poor Meenakshi. In the later pages, as Meenakshi's happy family gets devastated, she takes no time to show her grey, vamp shades. (Blogger 9)

> All throughout the book, you will alternate between feeling bad for Meenakshi on one hand and on the other hand feeling disgusted with her choices. (Blogger 2)

> Kavita Kané's books usually have lead female protagonists who haven't been given much voice in the telling of the epics. This is a first though, where the lead is an antagonist. Surpanakha as we know her has no redeeming qualities, by the end there is no good in her. (Blogger 27)

Violence Continues To Be Internalized. Gender role expectations are utilized as a comic mechanism with the warning of violence if the women propositions to a man. These misogynistic interpretations of Surpanakha's mutilation are commonplace in social media discourse. Memetic imagery in media and contemporary UGC often contextualize Surpanakha's violent mutilations from a macabre male gaze (Arakal 2021). This theme reinforces the internalized gender norms where UGC comments refer to the incident as a recount of the traditional narrative. The bloggers, the majority women, appear to seek the reclamation of Surpanakha's agency but are ambivalent in engaging with the physical violence, perhaps in deference to prevalent norms of hegemonic masculinity. Agarwal (1995) notes that perhaps it is because of conservative patriarchal structures that protect women who belong and violate those that do not, thus legitimizing the latter. As folkloric traditions often espouse glorification of gendered violence against non-conforming women as a form of patriarchal honor, one can only speculate if the disfigurement of Surpanakha is accepted by modern readers as a symbolic act.

> I knew of her as Ravan's ugly sister who was attracted to and tried to entice Laxman and had her nose and ears cut off as a punishment and to teach her a lesson. (Blogger 3)

> How much do we really know about Surpanakha apart from the fact that she was Ravana's sister? We do know that she had her nose cut off by the hands of Laksham but that is pretty much it. She has always been portrayed as an evil character who was the reason behind the war between Ram and Ravana. (Blogger 25)

Despite the ingrained internalization of violence against women, there are some reader comments likely arising from lived or observed experiences which demonstrate the need for further retelling of these significant events in the story of Surpanakha.

> Lanka's Princess may be a mythological retelling of events. However in today's day and age, when women are still subjected to various forms of discrimination. (Blogger 7)

> Surpanakha's role is often glossed over to one episode where she suffers a nose cut when she makes her advances to Ram and Lakshman in the forest and rushes back to goad Ravan into taking her revenge. (Blogger 29)

> Every woman (and I mean 'every' not 'almost every') I have met in my life experiences some form of abuse, just that the abuser adorns a different role in each case; husband or parent or sibling or colleague or friend and so on. (Blogger 36)

Appreciation of Reimagined Narrative. As Surpanakha gains agency and questions gendered norms in the patriarchal system she was born into, UGC comments appreciated the re-visioning of her place in the story. Where earlier she was a convenient prop, the catalyst that ignited the war between good and evil, *Lanka's Princess* allowed for a space where she is able reclaim her voice and agency. It is her point of view envisioned in feminist retelling (Palmer 2016). The familiar tropes of gender socialization where female characters are pitted against each other is utilized (Zipes 1994). Here Surpanakha is reviled by her mother who favors sons over daughters. However, in the absence of the male gaze with no gendered admonition in the context, one is able to view through the female lens and sympathize with her perspective.

> Surpankha or Meenakshi reminded you of someone who is beyond reason and needed a moment of catharsis to even consider a different viewpoint. It reminds you of a lot of the younger generation today who think the world is out to get them and fail to even consider or notice that the people who care are only looking out for them. (Blogger 8)

> Kavita Kane bravely picked up the most difficult character to narrate the events of Ramayana. Story of Surpanakha was shrouded in mystery throughout the epic. Author did a beautiful job of connecting all dots and filling the gaps with her vivid imagination. One unique element of the novel is the depiction of all shades of feminism, joy and warmth of jovial girl, agony and pain of hurt woman. This novel is a blend of all recognizable-unrecognizable human emotions. (Blogger 13)

> Having grown up despising Surpanakha to an extent due to her antics this story was a refreshing read in terms of the descriptions. The layers of her character brought out so beautifully by the author make her more relatable now than she ever was. It is like trying to see her a new light altogether and in a way try to understand why she behaved the way she behaved.(Blogger 33)

Conclusion

This study answers the call to decolonize and expand the purview of fairytale and folklore literature (Haase 2010) by introducing a famous villainess from the Indian subcontinent's vast trove of traditional literature. India is a Hindu majority country, hence folkloric traditions are intrinsically intertwined with mythological tales that are part of societal tenets. Such folkloric traditions have been crafted both in oral and written versions by men from ancient times to present day renditions in contemporary formats such as books, performance arts, television and films. In this predominantly patriarchal world view, female characters are marginalized with little agency of their own. They are depicted as either the idealized yet subservient heroines or the loathed and indomitable villainesses. The latter in particular are held up as examples

of everything that a woman should not be. The villainess's violent destruction is often the highlight where good wins over evil at the climax of the story. Such established fairytale and folkloric narratives are cultural sources from which millions of women develop their self-concepts, what they can and cannot accomplish, what type of behavior is rewarded and censored, indeed the type of rewards and censors as well (Haase 2000; Lieberman 1972; Zipes 1994). Even in modern media such as comic books and videogames, Sita is the epitome of the ideal Indian woman deserving of a happy ending and Surpanakha is the extreme "other" who meets a violent end (McLain 2001; Austin 2014).

In the 21st century, some women writers are venturing into this male dominated genre to re-write the scarcely developed female characters. This form of intervention is posited as a form of 'refleshing' of these characters by defamiliarizing the masses from the previous version with a new characterization. The notion of 're-vision' is established in post culturist thought of feminist writers and refers to their decision of how to rewrite the original by retaining certain original elements while challenging others (Parsons 2004). This goal is achieved with fictive versions that lend agency to the voices of female and gender queer storytellers (Evans 2011; Fisher and Silber 2000; Palmer 2016). Although fairly recent in India, such feminist rewritings of established mythical and folkloric narratives have been previously published in the West (Carter 1979; Joosen 2004; Le Guin 2008). To re-imagine narratives of these highly revered folklores, particularly in the patriarchal society of India, is a sensitive undertaking. Surpanakha, in particular, continues to be referenced in public discourse to persecute women who deviate from the heteronormative patriarchal gender norms through centuries of the established traditional narrative.

However, modern Indians are also contesting such societal manifestations by reading emergent retellings such as that of Kavita Kane's Lanka's Princess. Moreover, they are generating UGC as a form of engaging in participatory culture to share their thoughts and perceptions of such retellings in online public spaces. The findings of this study demonstrate that modern Indians' evolving perceptions of the negative stereotypical female archetypes welcomes the negotiation of patriarchal ideologies in these reimagined narratives. Subverting black and white characterization of the female villain to where a spectrum of gray is acceptable is cause for celebration.

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Response

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At a time when the rereading and rewriting of canonical texts is done with much fervour, perhaps with respect to mythological texts in particular, and which has expectedly caught the attention of scholars the world over, a subversive, feminist reading of the Indian epic poem *Ramayana*'s arguably minor character, Surpanakha, is timely as well as relevant. There have been several creative attempts in recent times when Indian mythological characters, particularly female characters who did not have a major voice in their original narrative spaces, have been revisited by creative writers. Kavita Kane herself, the author whose novel *Lanka's Princess* (2017) has been selected for this article by Ray Chaudhury, has attempted similar reinterpretations in other novels of hers, such as *Karna's Wife: The Outcast's Queen* (Kavita Kané 2013), *Sita's Sister* (Kavita Kané 2014), and *Menaka's Choice* (Kavita Kané 2016). Her works may be seen in the larger context of this literary trend of reinterpreting female characters of popular Indian mythological narratives. Some other such famous endeavours, especially by female writers, include *The Palace of Illusions* (Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni 2009), *Yajnaseni* (Pratibhā Rāẏa 1995), *Sita's Ramayana* (Samhita Arni, Moyna Chitrakar, and Vālmīki 2018), *Liberation of Sita* (Volga C Vijayasree T Vijay Kumar 2018), and *Until the Lions: Echoes from the Mahabharata* (Karthika Nair 2019), among others.

Thus, the text chosen for this study, thus, is particularly well-suited to current literary trends. It is, however, also pertinent from the still prevailing social perspective of women being compared favourably or unfavourably to mythological characters, particularly in India. The sympathetic reconstruction of the character of Surpanakha in the novel, *Lanka's Princess*, assumes an ironic significance in how women in real life are shamed by being compared to Surpanakha, as seen in the Indian parliament as cited by the author in the section of the article entitled 'Surpanakha's Relevance in Contemporary India'. Significantly, the remark alluded to in this section made by the Prime Minister in the Indian Parliament seems to be based on an understanding of Surpanakha's laughter as depicted in a famous television adaptation of the *Ramayana*, called "Ramayan" (Sagar 1987) which is often considered a faithful adaptation of the epic and rules public perception as wholly representative of the epic for many years. A reference made to the allegedly monstrous laughter of Surpanakha as depicted in the television series in order to mock the laughter of a female Member of the Parliament may be seen as an act resulting from a refusal to indulge in critical thinking, since an adaptation can never really stand in for the text it represents. An adaptation is the adapter's take on a particular text, and therefore a completely new text in its own right. A completely faithful representation of the source text is impossible to achieve in any adaptation. An adaptation can also take creative liberties in approaching a text, in accordance with the adaptor's vision and agenda. Nevertheless, the incident referred to bespeaks how popular culture sways public per-

ception in terms of their interpretation of ancient epics. People who may not have read any of the existing versions of the epic *Ramayana* (and there are several hundred versions that exist, as famously seen in the now controversial essay of Ramanujan called “Three hundred Ramayanas: Five examples and three thoughts on translation” (Ramanujan 1991), and several other works on the topic that came later) or people who may only be familiar with certain aspects of the epic transmitted to them through the oral culture of storytelling, which often involves a selective narration of certain parts of famous epics, might strongly associate certain traits with Surpanakha based entirely on her portrayal in the television series. The comment in question appears to have been made in a similar situation. The several epic versions of *The Ramayana* (such as Valmiki’s Ramayana (Vālmīki et al. 2021), Tulsidas’s Ramcharitmanas (Ojha 2003), and the Kamban Ramayana (Kampan 2008)) do not make any mention of Surpanakha’s demonic laughter that Ramanand Sagar’s televised version does, in addition to several animated versions of the epic made specifically for children’s consumption. The reference to Surpanakha’s laughter, therefore, is in itself a questionable mythical element since the various versions of the epic do not mention it but television series often depict it to emphasise the demonic nature of Surpanakha as well as to paint her as a villainess. One would expect that when epics that are considered to be holy texts in a country and are cited in parliamentary proceedings, one would refer to the epical narratives themselves rather than the televised artistic recreations of them, but that is not quite the case in daily parlance. If there are so many written versions of *The Ramayana* and so many versions in other media such as television, films, radio shows and graphic novels, one must ask here which of these versions’ Surpanakha’s supposedly raucous laughter was alluded to in the comment made in the Parliament. Just as there are different Ramayanas, there are several different Surpanakhas too, and the ones created from the point of view of creative works like *Lanka’s Princess* offer a human understanding of a largely villainised character. If one had to imagine Surpanakha’s laughter in terms of her portrayal by Kane, it would perhaps first be a rather beautiful laughter. In fact, most of the epic versions of *The Ramayana* describe Surpanakha as a beautiful woman with a beautiful smile. Second, it must be a melancholy laughter tinged with sad irony because Surpanakha has been imagined as a wronged and discriminated child who grew up to become a bitter adult in this particular representation. Seen in this light, the meaning of the female Member of the Parliament’s laughter’s meaning would change entirely and one would then perhaps see her as emitting a sad laughter as an ironical response to a policy she sees as problematic in the Parliament. So, if one is referring to Surpanakha as a devilish woman and her laughter as equally diabolical (in order to establish a real, living woman as equally disgraceful), one perhaps needs to ask: Which Ramayana? Which Surpanakha? Which description of Surpanakha’s laughter? The answers would be so baffling that the logic behind the comparison would topple entirely. The reference to this incident in the article, therefore, problematizes not only the general refusal to see the interpretations of mythological characters as non-absolute but also the

problematic vilification of real-life women through their comparison with these mythical figures.

On the other hand, the various kinds of online reviews to *Lanka's Princess* that constitute the analytical matter of this article tellingly make references to alternative understandings of Surpanakha's character. Many of these reader responses rightly perceive the childhood discrimination faced by the character which cancels out the uncritical acceptance of her as an out-and-out monster. The perception of the importance of Surpanakha's backstory as expressed by the readers is encouraging in the critical thinking these reviews reveals. In fact, the last reader comment cited in the article (Blogger 33) shows that some readers are willing to reevaluate their own conventional stance of understanding the character as typically villainous, a stance they presumably held strongly for several years. The obvious limitation of such a survey, however, is that the general public's perception of the characters from mythological stories is not shaped or reshaped by the reading of such alternative narratives. In fact, the desire to read an alternative narrative such as *Lanka's Princess* will stem likely from an earlier reading of at least one or two versions of the several available of the epic, *Ramayana*. But a major part of the general populace would not read the epic followed by a reading of its subversive rewritings, and would rather allow their perception of these epical characters to be shaped solely by their uncritical reliance on depictions of such characters in film and television media, most of which often lead to very simplistic interpretations of rather complex characters, quickly heroizing or villainising them to allow people to take sides conveniently.

As Ray Chaudhury points out, the retelling of a canonical text which strongly shapes public perception of good and evil in Indian society is indeed a difficult and sensitive endeavour on part of an author like Kane. More so because India is a predominantly religious country where even mythological tales written in epical forms such as the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata* are believed to depict historical reality rather than fictional. The portrayal of characters as good or evil in such religious mythological texts is considered sacrosanct (even if, ironically, the understanding of these characters is often based on the simplistic televised representations of these epics which are naively regarded as faithful representations and wholesome substitutes of the texts themselves). Any alternative narrative is therefore likely to be seen as a threat to the beliefs of the people, possibly even as a sinful understanding of the canonical texts. It is then indeed a risky as well as brave venture to undertake a sympathetic, especially feminist, rewriting of a character like Surpanakha who is almost unquestionably seen as a villainess in popular Indian understanding. What is definitely encouraging are the online responses of readers to this novel which have been analysed in this study, most of whom have opened up to the possibility of reevaluating the character of Surpanakha. However, in this context, another obvious limitation of this study is that it only takes into consideration the responses of presumably well-educated, perhaps also urbane, readers. These readers would, first, have the interest to read a subversive novel like this and second, have the openness of mind to accept not only the depiction of an otherwise marginalised character brought into the centre of the

narrative as the protagonist of the novel, but also to see the flaws in the traditional black and white reading of her character and admit the possibilities of seeing her character as grey, especially from the point of view of the childhood traumas that she has survived. Ray Chaudhury's article brings into focus the importance of public perception of villainous characters depicted in religio-mythological texts by mentioning the Prime Minister's disparaging comments on a female Member of the Parliament by comparing her raucous laughter to that of Surpanakha's. It needs to be considered that the part of the population (in no way a small minority) that would enjoy, appreciate, and approve of an act of shaming as such would also do so based on their perception of Supanakha's character from televised adaptations of the *Ramayana*, as seems to have been the case with the Prime Minister who made the remark. It is unlikely that they have read any of the existing versions of the text where the description or even mention of Surpanakha's supposedly demonic laughter has, to the best of my knowledge, not been made. This group of people are also unlikely to be interested in reading a subversive version of the character of Surpanakha, as dealt with in the novel 'Lanka's Princess.' It is presumably some of India's city-educated people, endowed with critical thinking skills and an interest in the rethinking of mythology, who would ever pick up such a novel like that and explore its nuances. The popular public opinion of Surpanakha, and by extension, its potential comparison with real women in order to vilify them, therefore is unlikely to be changed by novels like Kane's or the reception of such novels by the presumably well-educated and progressive-minded Indians. One can view the comments section of the video ("PM Modi's Ramayana Jibe in RS Has Renuka Chowdhury Seeing Red | the Quint" n.d.) where the Prime Minister had taken the liberty to ridicule his colleague by an explicit comparison with Surpanakha, and the way several people have expressed their enjoyment and approval of the comment. Books like *Lanka's Princess* are unfortunately meant for a niche readership in India, and therefore, the possibility of a progressive and empathetic relook at characters like Surpanakha also remains limited to such an audience. The impact of a study such as Ray Chaudhury's, therefore, remains equally limited at the social level, albeit highly pertinent and deeply enriching in the scholarly and academic arenas in the ways in which it sheds light on perspectives related to feminism and literary rewriting.

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Ethnopsychiatry of the Devil: Demonic Possession as a Cultural Language for Subjective Suffering in Contemporary Italy

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Abstract

The aim of this article is to present a theoretical and historical reading, in dialogue with the propositions of ethnopsychiatry/ethnopsychoanalysis, on the uses of the ritual of exorcism and possession as possible languages to manage human suffering, particularly in contemporary Italian society. We will first analyze what motivations incite people to seek an exorcist and verify the conflicts and similarities between the cultural and medical languages used to deal with the subjective suffering of those who seek help through exorcistic rituals. This data will be verified and discussed based on the investigations made during our doctoral research, especially through some case studies conducted by researchers in sociology, anthropology and psychiatry. In this way, we will present how the ritual of exorcism is constructed based on the participation of all those involved, promoting a cultural language to deal with subjective pain different from the paths proposed in psychiatric manuals such as the DSM. We are not interested in the veracity of the ritual and the effectiveness of its therapeutic functions but in the manner they are handled and conveyed as a solution to many social and subjective problems.

Keywords: ethnopsychiatry, possession, exorcism, mental health, Italy

Introduction: Why an Ethnopsychiatry of the Devil?

Our aim in this paper is to identify and analyze how the grammars of diabolical possession and exorcism are structured in today's Italian society as cultural languages for dealing with the suffering of living, ultimately to promote a theoretical and historical analysis of this phenomenon in dialogue with Italian ethnopsychiatry/ethnopsychoanalysis.[2] We will use as central documents the publications written by Italian exorcists, especially between the years 1980–2000, as well as some data collected during the ethnography we conducted in 2017 in the annual "Course on the exorcism minister and the liberation prayer" at the *Ateneo Pontificio Regina Apostolorum* (Field notebook 2017).[3] However, the focus of our analysis will be theoretically oriented and based on the books published by exorcists, as well as on case studies in psychiatric and sociological fields.

Cultural Analysis 22.1 (2024): 73–94
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The use of the term “ethnopsychoanalysis/ethnopsychiatry” refers not only to the studies of Georges Devereux (1981) but to its unfolding in the current methodologies elaborated by Italian anthropologists and ethnopsychiatrists (Beneduce 2002, 2007; Taliani 2008, 2017; Coppo 2005; Beneduce and Taliani 2001; Beneduce and Martelli 2005), with special attention paid to the initial studies of the “Italian ethnoclinic”[4] formulated by Ernesto de Martino (1908-1965, 2010, 2012, 2013). In this sense, an “ethnopsychiatry of the devil” aims to investigate other grammars used to classify and treat subjective sufferings, distancing itself, in some cases, from the nosography[5] of the DSM (*Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders*), for example.

We will use the term “subjective suffering” precisely because it can express forms of psychic suffering not linked to the classification of mental disorders promoted by the DSM or WHO’s documents (*World Health Organization*). The terms ethnopsychoanalysis and ethnopsychiatry, which will not be discussed in this article, refer to the authors mentioned above. This variation of the former and latter is less important for this paper, as Devereux prioritized ethnopsychoanalysis at the beginning of its investigations. Later, he began to use the term “ethnopsychiatry,” which today is more common (Barros and Bairrão 2010).

The important thing to consider here is the theoretical-methodological principle that these ethnoclinic approaches provide, which refers to the attempt to de-hierarchize nosographic practices and therapeutic measures to deal with different types of subjective suffering. However, we do not want to state that this “diabolical grammar” is really effective in the treatment of mental disorders or other forms of distress. Alternatively, we can affirm that they are paths to cultural languages for existential pain in the contemporary Italian context, even if these forms are not the only ones existing and being used by the population.

We recognize that there is extensive discussion about ritual efficacy and about exorcism and possession as languages for social and subjective pain (Goodman 1988; Cohen 2007; Lambek 2016; Favret-Saada 1991; Crapanzano 2004). However, in this article, we will prioritize the theoretical approach developed by Ernesto De Martino and its unfoldings in contemporary Italian ethnopsychiatry.

We will first analyze what motivations incite people to seek an exorcist, considering as our object of study contemporary Italian society. We will later verify the conflicts and similarities between the cultural and medical languages used to deal with the subjective suffering of those seeking help from exorcism rituals. This data will be verified and discussed based on the investigations made during our doctoral research, especially through some case studies conducted by researchers in sociology, anthropology, and psychiatry. From this, we will present how the ritual of exorcism is constructed based on the participation of all those involved, promoting a cultural language to deal with subjective pain different from the paths proposed in psychiatric manuals such as the DSM.

Looking for an Exorcist: Mental Disorders and Other Cultural Languages for Subjective Suffering

In the ritual practice of many Italian priests, exorcism ended up taking other forms and being performed in different ways. In this sense, "believing" is not about a set of documents or doctrines but about the investment of the subject in a position, the act (or rite) itself (De Certeau 1998). However, we think it is important to introduce this topic with some canonical considerations. Besides the New Ritual of Exorcisms (approved in 1998), we have the Catechism of the Catholic Church (CCC), which, in its 1999 version, lists in one of the chapters some guidelines for the regulation of exorcism. Item referring to exorcism in the 1999 edition is the 1673. The item 1673 is found in article one, within the second section of the CCC, called "The Seven Sacraments of the Church - Chapter Four: Other Liturgical Celebrations." Exorcism is understood as a sacramental, which in the Catechism's definition takes on the following characteristics:

> 1673: When the Church asks publicly and authoritatively in the name of Jesus Christ that a person or object be protected against the power of the Evil One and withdrawn from his dominion, it is called exorcism. Jesus performed exorcisms and from him the Church has received the power and office of exorcizing. In a simple form, exorcism is performed at the celebration of Baptism. the solemn exorcism, called "a major exorcism," can be performed only by a priest and with the permission of the bishop. the priest must proceed with prudence, strictly observing the rules established by the Church. Exorcism is directed at the expulsion of demons or to the liberation from demonic possession through the spiritual authority which Jesus entrusted to his Church. Illness, especially psychological illness, is a very different matter; treating this is the concern of medical science. Therefore, before an exorcism is performed, it is important to ascertain that one is dealing with the presence of the Evil One, and not an illness. (Catechism of the Catholic Church 1999)

What those who seek help from an exorcist have in common is suffering, whether physical or mental, which might be understood as the result of demonic possession. This "diabolic interpretation" does not occur only through the discourse of exorcists but circulates in a specific manner in contemporary Italian history in different religious and cultural manifestations (Pires 2019, 2020). The victims of these situations of human pain do not seek the ritual of liberation just because this method has been imposed on them by a theological-political project of pastoral and narrative nature. They seek it because they really trust in the efficacy of the ritual. There is no imposed order in contemporary society that ensures the predominance of exorcism as a solution to personal problems. On the contrary, the tendency is to deny it, even among certain ecclesiastical groups (Pires 2020). In this sense, it is a process that is structured through different social actors, and not only from the intention of some priests to spread this theme and the ritual practice.

Those who seek exorcism, usually immersed in the Catholic cultural universe (Talamonti 2005), seek healing and relief for their existential issues or even problems that

manifest in their bodies and minds (Field notebook 2017). The Italian exorcist Gabriele Amorth (1925–2016) even reported that many people came from outside Italy to be assisted by local exorcists due to the lack of this ministry in European countries (Amorth 2014[1990], 174). However, the majority of those assisted were Italians. Because of this, our explanation refers specifically to the contemporary Italian situation, which may vary in other countries.

Although most of the exorcists analyzed in our research were somehow connected to Rome, they came from and worked in different parts of Italy. Thus, the perspective of characterizing southern Italy as magical and northern Italy as rationalist does not apply to our research. For example, at the founding meeting of the *International Association of Exorcists* in Rome in 1991, the following exorcists were present, all Italian and active in different regions: Gabriele Amorth (Rome), Fr. Silvino Battistoni (Rome), Giuseppe Capra (Turin), Antonio Di Monda (Benevento), Marcello Pellegrino Ernetti (Venice), Matteo La Grua (Palermo), Gennaro Lo Schiavo (Badia di Cava dei Tirreni, Salerno), Msgr. G. Battista Proia, (Rome), Raul Salvucci (Fermo, Ascoli Piceno), Msgr. Ferruccio Sutto (Pordenone), Father Ignazio Terzi (Rome), Father Leandro Tiveron (Modena) (Pires 2020).

The same can be said, based on the accounts of Amorth (2012/1992; 2010/2013; 2014/1990) and other exorcists such as Raul Salvucci (2016/1992), as well as through our ethnography (Field notebook 2017), that the people who sought exorcisms belonged to different sociocultural groups. The vast majority had an average education and, in some cases, a university degree. They belonged to different social classes, came from different parts of Italy (south, north, central region), and, in most cases, had a Catholic culture in their families. Before going to the exorcist, many of these people sought psychiatric or psychotherapeutic help or did it together with the priest. In this way, we can infer that the search for ritual help was not necessarily connected to the lack of mental health services or social and cultural status.

Amidst so many options available for resolving the suffering such people feel, exorcism remains a plausible and sought-after path, even though quantitatively, it seems low in demand. However, the search for exorcism does not exclude participation in other forms of therapy and treatment, such as visits to doctors and psychologists or magical or religious practices outside Catholicism (Field notebook 2017). Regardless of the particular motivations, we have subjects who, when participating in the ritual of expulsion of evil, share the same discourse: exorcists and victims create a diabolical narrative through their discourse and ritual performances.

The subjects who seek an exorcist have similar symptoms and complaints, which range from the perception of "supernatural" phenomena to problems in family and social relationships (Giordan & Possamai 2017). An issue much discussed by exorcists in their narratives, public speaking, and also in the annual course about exorcism at the *Ateneo Pontificio Regina Apostolorum* (Field notebook 2017) is the difficulty and challenges in identifying a "true possession." The symptoms presented by those seeking the ritual are similar to other mental disorders, such as Dissociative Identity Disorder (DID), Dissociative Trance Disorder (DTD), depression, and other clinical and personality disorders (APA 1994).

Some of the symptoms of depression indicated in DSM-IV[6] (Chapter I2, Mood Disorders, APA, 1994)[7] are often reported by exorcists and "exorcised people," highlighting the proximity between mental disorder and symptoms of possession. Some examples are the loss of interest in external and social activities and depressed mood most of the time occurring almost every day; intense feelings of guilt and self-denial; fatigue and lack of energy almost every day; reduced ability to think and concentrate; recurring thoughts of death and suicide; psychomotor agitation or deceleration almost every day (Coppo 2005, 61–62). In order to be considered a case of depression, such symptoms must be combined and have a duration of weeks, compromising social life, labor, and other important areas. In relation to the complaints of the faithful who seek an exorcism, we always have more than one of these symptoms that last a considerable time in the life of these subjects.

The diagnosis of depression is also a cultural process (Coppo 2005) in which the symptoms are found within an explanatory category provided by the medical-psychological literature, considering the individual a part of the depressed collective. There is a process of identification and a shared language for suffering that is used by patients. In the case of the search for exorcism, the shared language comes from other cultural matrices, but it resembles a clinical case in its diagnostic procedures. A conversation between the faithful and the exorcist can result in many conclusions, one being: "you are possessed." In clinical cases, the patients may be less active, as they cannot relate to the medical language, although they use the commonplace phrases that are popular. On the other hand, in Catholic exorcism, the "diabolical" language is shared by those involved in this ritual process, although it has different matrices.

What is understood as "depression" is constructed from a cultural (psychiatric-psychological) repertoire that names and offers healing solutions for this disorder. However, in other cultural modalities (other than "Western Culture"), outside of medical and psychological knowledge, it is possible to identify the same symptoms, complaints, and experiences of subjective suffering. Thus, other nomenclatures, languages, and repertoires of healing and diagnosis may be used, and they can also be effective, according to some recent investigations (Coppo 2005; Beneduce 2002, 2007; Taliani 2008, 2017; Schaffler 2013, 2017; Beneduce & Martelli 2005). Subjective suffering is connected to the culture of the person who suffers, being formed and manifested within and through cultural situations and languages. Therefore, the therapeutic processes can be varied and found even within these cultural systems, something that is, in a certain way, strange to psychoanalysis and Western psychiatry but validated by ethnopsychiatry/ethnopsychoanalysis. Possession and exorcism within Catholicism, although belonging to the predominant religious culture in Italy, are examples of these other techniques of dealing with subjective pain. Hence, these techniques of the expulsion of "evil" and suffering diverge from traditional medical and psychological therapies.

Exorcism and Possession in the Demartinian Perspective: Loss of Presence, "De-historicization" and Cultural Re-integration

The anthropologist Ernesto de Martino (1908–1965) is considered a fundamental author, and his theoretical-methodological work is the basis of the constitution of Italian ethnopsychiatry. In his research, he was able to identify the curative efficacy, symptomatologies, and nosographies that manifested in culturally different ways in the rituals of tarantism in Puglia (De Martino 2013a).

Ernesto de Martino perceives human history as a place of precariousness and contingency, where it is possible to live only on the basis of trust in a metahistory. He indicated not only a way to analyze religions (the *de-historicizing* rites) but elaborated a key interpretation for understanding human existence, a philosophical approach that was part of his path and intellectual choice. The concepts of "*crisi della presenza*" (crisis of presence) (De Martino 1953–1954, 16) and "*destorificazione del divenire*" (de-historification of becoming) are central to his theoretical elaboration. Presence is not something guaranteed in human life; it is a cultural and existential construction, and therefore, there is the risk of losing it (losing oneself, losing the ability to act in human history from one's sociocultural values). De Martino argues that religious rites are capable of producing a "de-historification," which is the ability to promote the "exit from human history" (a place of pain and problems), thus creating a protective reality in which these difficulties are banished.

The "diabolic possession" in Catholicism is presented in a complex way in Demartinian theory because the rite of exorcism does not only create a protective reality but also one of combat between good and evil, initiating a process of symbolic reconfiguration and possible healing at the end of this journey. In De Martino's theory, there is always a risk of crisis and loss of presence, a process of de-historification (religious, ritual protective reality), and a return to history (a cultural reintegration), since leaving history would be a non-return to the social, a "physical and mental suicide" (De Martino 1953–1954, 21).

The exorcism induces a (religious) type of de-historification, since the person loses their presence and another speaks from their body: this occurs when the priest begins the ritual or when there is some sacred element displayed or performed (mass, crucifix, saints, relics, prayers). This state of possession and expulsion of evil during the exorcism would be close, in Demartinian terminology, to an "institutional de-historification," since it is produced and limited to the ritual time in the attempt of cultural rescue of the sick and lost "presence." On the other hand, the "*destorificazione irrelativa*" (irrelative de-historification) occurs in traumatic and critical moments of existence. This may cause, without the institutional and ritual apparatus, a "loss of self," which is a loss of the ability to act in history according to its cultural values (De Martino 1993, 131).

In Catholic exorcism, the loss of the subject's autonomy corresponds to a replacement by another (a "demon") who speaks through the "possessed" from a specific linguistic-cultural repertoire shared by those who compose the ritual and have similar experiences in faith.

> The same Demartinian definition of possession (in its pure form) is influenced by Janetian terminology and concepts: "[DE MARTINO:] the margin of autonomy of the presence narrows until it disappears" and "an aberrant and perverse second personality abruptly breaks in replacing the historical consciousness"; this state is followed by amnesia (De Martino 1993/1959, p. 102). (apud Talamonti 2001)

The symptoms of possession are similar to the disorders described by Sigmund Freud and Pierre Janet, authors with whom De Martino had considerable dialogue. However, for the Italian anthropologist, "true possession" cannot be reduced to a case of mental illness, although it is not a metaphysical phenomenon. According to De Martino, "the belief in possession is merely the popularized translation of a psychological truth." (De Martino 1993, 57). Thereby, the religious rite would be able to alter the psychological and physical state of the person (*natura culturalmente condizionata/culturally conditioned nature*) (De Martino 2013, 268), producing another reality and, therefore, the equivocal of understanding it through categories that are foreign to the ritual language. Psychology would confirm, according to De Martino, a reality produced through mythical-ritual processes, from *de-historification* to *cultural reintegration*.

Exorcism is constructed as a "representative horizon" capable of understanding and incorporating the elements of human pain, which are also historical-cultural, transforming and modifying their meanings. The rite of exorcism begins with a conversation with the supposed possessed (Field notebook 2017): the exorcist tries to understand if it is a case of "true possession" or "demonic obsession," if the person has been a victim of a curse or other forms of diabolical attacks, or even if the case is linked to a psychological disorder (Talamonti 2005). In this "investigative conversation," the symbolic and linguistic apparatus of the rite is shared and constructed in a dialogue between exorcist and possessed. The subjective pain and the personal problem are slowly transformed into a defined evil that must be expelled.

The *sick presence* finds in the symbolic horizon of exorcism an explanation for its evil and a space in which the subject can rebel and free itself from its problems. During the ritual, the possessed person rebels against the sociocultural burden that oppresses him and causes him pain. The perversion of the bodily order in exorcism represents not only the Christian struggle between good and evil but also the conflict against culture and human history, which can be places of anguish and suffering. The rite is capable of transferring existential pain, trauma, weakness, and "loss of self" to a "supernatural evil." This transference initiates a meta-history (an exit from sociocultural reality and the place of pain—*de-historification*) that is not entirely protective, as De Martino maintained, since during exorcism, a battle between "good and evil" is performed. However, the rite is protective to a certain extent because, although this "violent battle" exists, the pain of the "possessed" is transferred to another symbolic and linguistic modality, no longer belonging to that daily and existential one in which the individual witnessed in their life.

After the conclusion of the ritual, the individual comes out of the state of trance, regaining his autonomy, what De Martino called *reintegrazione culturale* (cultural rein-

tegration). In this way, exorcism is not only a technique of *de-historification* and *reintegration* of the sick presence but a procedure of expulsion of an "evil presence" that acts and causes torment to its victim.

For Ernesto De Martino (Altamura 1993, 39), culture could be the struggle against the radical crisis of the human being, that is, the risk of becoming mentally ill. Before going to the exorcist, many people seek help from other religious, psychological, and psychiatric practices (Field notebook 2017). The exorcist is not the only choice. This is why we state a difference between our interpretation and De Martino's approach since many of his cases were situated in southern Italy where the sociocultural situation was different, marked by severe precariousness and with few horizons of choice and solutions for pain. Exorcism is still a discourse used, shared, and lived in Italian society, although it is not a common ritual. It is presented today as a way to face existential and spiritual dramas in a society that increasingly provides different possibilities of choice and cultural techniques that seek to guarantee the "healthy" presence of the individual in their history.

Constructing Demonic Possessions: Case Studies Between Mental Disorders and Cultural Languages

According to the research conducted by Ferracuti, Sacco, and Lazzari in 1996, it was found that in Italy, *Dissociative Identity Disorder* (DID) is less common than DTD (*Dissociative Trance Disorder*), and both are similar in symptomatology (Ferracuti et al. 1996, 526). In DTD, there is a loss of subjective identity (and a replacement by a "diabolic entity") and a state of unconsciousness that may occur during the "possessive" trances developed during religious rituals, for example. During one year of observation, the researchers witnessed 400 exorcism rituals involving 100 people. Only 16 people out of the 100 manifested the symptoms considered typical of "diabolic possession." Ten of them accepted being a part of the psychiatric and psychological investigation of the above-mentioned research.

These ten people who went through procedures of exorcism, carried out by the Italian priest Gabriele Amorth in Rome, displayed an intense aversion to religiously sacred elements (like going to Mass or being close to a church). They had also witnessed "paranormal" phenomena (hearing voices, seeing "spirits") and participated in cults interpreted by them as satanic. In most cases, previous contact with doctors and psychologists had not solved their symptoms and problems which according to them, were caused by the intervention of the "devil."

Among the analyzed cases, most of the interviewees reported symptoms of depression (70%), physical abuse (40%), as well as high rates of somatic complaints and personality disorders. Among the paranormal experiences described, there is a predominance of the sensation of being possessed by the devil (100% of the cases), participation in sects (70%), premonitions (60%), contact with ghosts (50%), dreams with premonitions (50%), contact with spirits (40%), and other less recurrent cases (Ferracuti et al. 1996, 532). Thus, even before beginning the ritual treatment proposed by the exorcist, these individuals had already been in contact and were immersed in a

cultural environment of supernatural and diabolic discourse and interpretations.

The DSM IV itself already contained a clinical explanation for the phenomena of possession, called *Dissociative Trance Disorder*. Although episodes of memory loss and involuntary trances are placed in such a category, the DSM does not consider them an illness if such events occur within the cultural and religious context developed by the subjects in the form of a ritual. If "cultural possession" does not bring any harm to individuals and occurs in a momentary and circumscribed manner, it is not categorized as a mental disorder by the DSM IV (APA 1994/1952). However, if the trance occurs at other times, with loss of memory, personal identity, and the ability to act voluntarily, the manual then considers the event as a clinical case. The limits, as we can observe, are tenuous, showing us that psychiatric literature and much earlier psychoanalytical productions (Freud 2011/1923) had already provided an explanation for what exorcists intend to call "diabolical possession." The "game of truth" to define who is right produces tension. It creates a power dispute between a scientific-social discourse that tries to "symptomize" the possession and the other that tries to prove its veracity through a theological-political language.

This methodological challenge is also present in our research since it is not possible to identify, without an accurate ethnography, whether the case presents a possession developed during the ritual, as we will analyze later, or if it incorporates a clinical symptomatology outside the rite and could be resolved by the medical-psychological field. These probabilities are considered by the DSM IV itself, which prioritizes a medical assessment of the situation. In any case, we can consider the possibility of the subject's suffering going through these two dimensions and being "treated" by means of different languages: one of a ritual nature and the other of a medical-psychological perspective. It is not our goal, and it would be beyond our competence to identify the origin and cause of these symptoms. They are important because they allow us to identify some forms of human suffering, as well as different languages chosen by the subject, in order to solve and diagnose mental disturbances.

Giordan and Possamai (2017), besides noting some of the previous information from the 1996 research (Ferracuti et al. 1996), add other reasons for the search for an exorcist, emphasizing emotional, family, social, and affective problems. In this research, 1075 people were analyzed, and they were accompanied by an exorcist from an important Italian diocese.[8] Only 55 (5%) of them went through the solemn ritual of exorcism. In other cases, the exorcist recommended blessings, confessions, prayers (of liberation or other types), or even the search for a mental health professional (Giordan and Possamai 2017, 11). As this was a larger study, since the previous investigation only had ten people who had participated in the solemn exorcism, it was possible to identify a greater diversity of symptoms and motivations that the population has when seeking help from an exorcist.

According to Giordan and Possamai's research (2017), among the 55 people who went through the exorcism, there was a greater presence of cases in the ages between 40 and 49 years (56%), 30 and 39 years (12%), and 50 and 59 years (11%). Only five individuals were between 20 and 29 years of age, which was the same number as those over 60. Unlike the literature on the subject, which lists many cases of female

possession, in this investigation, men made up the majority (60% of 55 cases) (Giordan and Possamai 2017, 6). Although this is a case study, it is possible to identify a certain tendency among those who believe the ritual of exorcism could be a solution to the cause of their problems. The "possessed" usually belong to the lower middle class and working class, which is somewhat opposed to the discourse of Gabriele Amorth (2012/1992, 2013/2010, 2014/1990). Amorth warned in his books that those who sought exorcism sessions pervaded all social classes and levels of formal education. Only six cases of exorcism were performed on graduate professionals, for example.

From this data, we can infer that the symbolic horizon of exorcism as a solution to some social and subjective life problems develops more easily among the elderly and those belonging to the working class. The cases cited in the books of the Italian exorcists (Amorth 2012/1992, 2013/2010, 2014/1990; Salvucci 2016/1992; Bamonte 2011/2006) differ from the social pattern presented by Giordan and Possamai (2017), which makes us question the exorcist's interpretation or even the aforementioned research (Pires 2020). Although the hypothesis of social weakness and low formal education as factors that encourage the search for an exorcist should not be ruled out, there is no reason to believe there is a direct cause–and–effect relationship between these factors. Social and economic factors are only one of these elements since most Italians are immersed in cultural Catholicism and embrace existential, mental, physical, and social problems. However, there are some tendencies and similarities in the complaints and in the social and subjective experiences of those seeking an exorcist in Italy.

Some of the main reasons that motivate people to seek an exorcist are the incidence of psychological and emotional problems, such as the feeling of emptiness, difficulties in socializing, and stress (these represent 35.1% of the 1075 cases described by the exorcist); problems in marriage (25.6%), such as adultery, loss of romance and reduced sexual activity; problems in family relations and friendship (20.2%); experiences with "paranormal" phenomena (19.7%) such as possession, feeling the presence of demons and their forces, rumors and unknown voices, mystical experiences, visions, among others; participation in sects and occult rituals, "satanic groups," spirituality and alternative healing practices (19.1%); suspicion or certainty of being affected by evil influences, a victim of "evil eye," or spells and curses (17.4%) (Giordan & Possamai 2017, 10).

Although these are not statements from which we can draw a panorama of the situation in contemporary Italian society, since it is a case study, it is possible to verify that those who sought the exorcist had already used diabolic and magical languages and interpretations during their lives. These languages are capable of building a supernatural narrative about human pain and the cause of their problems. There is a predominance of problems in social relationships (friendship, family) and affective relationships (marriage), as well as the incidence of psychological symptoms common to depression and other forms of subjective suffering (feelings of emptiness, stress, difficulty in socializing).

In addition to these social problems of existence, there is a predominance of people who were, before the search for an exorcist, involved in rituals and religious activi-

ties that somehow encompassed the world of the occult and its experiences. A strong contribution to the circulation of these languages has been the charismatic Catholics. At this moment, we are less interested in the veracity of these findings and more interested in the people's perception of their experiences. This brings about a language capable of providing a "superhuman" and "diabolical" explanation of what they were facing. It is not, therefore, a diabolic interpretation provided and imposed only by the exorcist. There is a cooperation that seems to be one of the keys to understanding possession and exorcism in contemporary Italy (Pires 2020).

According to Sean McCloud's hypothesis (2015), the search for "magic" exorcisms and cures in the USA is part of a cultural pattern of neoliberal consumption in which the solutions to suffering are sought as though they were "therapeutic products." The author states that the capitalist consumerist economy reverberates in institutions, languages, practices, and daily interactions among individuals (work, affective relationships, religious choices) (McCloud 2015, 14). Thus, the widespread growth (narratives and media content) of exorcism as a form of "healing evil" and the intense social demand for quick solutions to subjective pain would be able, according to McCloud (2015), to sustain possession and exorcism as possible techniques to deal with these personal difficulties. The different kinds of therapeutic languages, besides circulating in society in different modalities (holistic, magical, psychological, and psychoanalytical), refer to the treatment of the individual of a *modern self* that would be the origin and the solution to the problems of body and mind.

We can, however, dispute McCloud's considerations not only by studying a country with a diverse historical-cultural background but by analyzing other elements of relief from suffering within the exorcist topic. Consumerist capitalism is present in Italy and in the European Union as a whole, although it develops in different manners in the United States. It is global, with historical variations of intensity. In the Italian case, we assume that besides the consumerist choice of exorcism as a possible solution, there is a "supernatural discourse" that circulates not only through narrative projects of the exorcists (Pires 2020, 2020a) but also through other cultural means[9] (literature, newspaper, magazines, religious and "magical" events). These practices were already circulating in the country, and they were appropriated by the population in different forms, including through secular exorcisms carried out outside the ecclesiastical sphere.[10] Catholic exorcism does not always occur momentarily and demands a journey of commitment and reintegration into religious life from the faithful. Thus, the ritual is a "solution" less linked to immediate consumerism and closer to a return to the institutional religious tradition.

It is in the sharing of these discourses that a narrative about exorcism and possession is built. It is a dialogic procedure that encompasses the participation not only of the exorcist, but also of the victims of the "demon." Both are active and promote an important role in this contemporary "diabolic ritual" that develops among those who are inserted, somehow, in the context of Catholic belief. The revival of exorcism, whether in its narrative or ritual dimension, would not occur without social support of this manner of "expelling evil." It is certainly not a causal explanation of supply and demand but a complex discursive network full of tension and dispute between different personal, theological and political intentions (Pires 2020, 2020a).

In one of the victim's accounts from Gabriele Amorth's book, we have the following statement: "I had an extremely strict father who watched my every move and was always short with me. The sum of all this grief and these humiliations he used to put me through made me jump like a spring into the street" (Amorth 2014/1990, 106). Traumatic situations in the affective and family fields are, again and again, reinterpreted in a "diabolical" way by both exorcists and those who seek them out. This subjectivity, divided by an event not symbolically overcome, moves to the conversation between exorcist and possessed and, later, to the ritual and pastoral space that occurs after the end of each session. This journey of the expulsion of evil (initial conversation, ritual deliverance, pastoral aid) provides a language to the distressing and disturbing experience and transference of individual pain into a larger battle between "good and evil." It is in this fabrication, agreed upon by those involved, that there can be a therapeutic relieving element. A fable with nothing to do with fiction or delirium is a narrative, linguistic, and ritual procedure that efficaciously affects the subject (Pires 2020).

In a statement addressed to the exorcist Raul Salvucci, reported in his 1992 book, a woman questions herself about her uncontrollable desire, providing space for the exorcist's diabolizing interpretation, as if she expected a "supernatural" explanation for a subjective force she could not deal with or name. The absence of a language to deal with desire finds comfort in the discourse on possession and the action of the demon elaborated through the cooperation between victim and exorcist:

> "I have been fighting a heavy curse for a long time. I am a girl and, among so much evil, I was lucky enough to meet a good guy. He adores me and I love him too, but when we are together I feel an incredible coldness towards him and, in some moments, I feel tired or even repulsed to be near him. What is most incredible is that, in the office, I am close to a married man who is several years older than me. When we work together for business reasons, this relationship gives me a great sense of peace and relaxation. There is absolutely nothing between me and him, but when we are like this, I dream of being able to carry these very pleasant feelings to the time when I will be with my boyfriend. Instead, as soon as I meet him, everything disappears, it becomes only a burden and boredom to be near him. How can I explain all this and moreover I have so many problems: should I tell him clearly, should I leave him, what should I do?"
>
> [The exorcist, Raul Salvucci:] This is what I set out above. It hits on what is most sacred and most cherished. In this case there is an even more evil, diabolical tactic. It attempts to ruin your righteous love and in the process tries to lead your co-worker to a wrong love, to destroy him and his family. [...] What to do with your boyfriend? You must fight with all your might and without fear in the right sense [...] Whenever Satan unleashes such a war, you must fight. (Salvucci 2016/1992, 144–45)

This transgression is cultural in the sense that it would be socially strange for a woman to assume her desire and leave her partner in search of her satisfaction. In the language of diabolical possession/obsession, it would be possible for her to think that the devil put this desire in her, which is not hers, but belongs to "another." Therefore,

the responsibility shifts to the evil entity, to the demonic action that embodies my subjective desire repressed by the shared culture (De Certeau 2000). In this narrative and ritualistic space, the desire shows itself and becomes plausible and realizable.

During the ritual, the "possessed" transgresses certain gender roles that still circulate in contemporary society. It is not only about being strong, animalistic, and anti-Catholic during the possession, but about transgressing culture in the sense of being able to express oneself, to be able to speak (recover the word), and to transfer subjective issues (desires, traumas, anguish) to another place (Pires 2020). There is, beyond the resolution of individual pain, a social and subjective demand for transgression and cultural rupture, and exorcism can be a symbolic horizon for that, even if it is not the choice of the great majority of Italian Catholics.

Conclusion

As has been demonstrated from our theoretical analysis and some specific case studies, diabolical possession can be understood as a cultural language in which subjective symptoms find a "representative horizon" (De Martino 2010) capable of naming and managing psychic pain. However, it might promote tension with the medical language defined above all by Western psychiatric manuals such as the DSM. This circumstance is very instigating since the help of an exorcism is still sought amid advanced psychiatric research and drug society, among other clinical treatments as well.

This critique is not a claim that mental health manuals (DSM, WHO's documents) should be discarded in favor of a culturally oriented treatment. However, with the knowledge that they cannot map the complexity of human mental suffering and forms of treatment into different historicities, we must take a more critical and attentive stance to other forms of suffering and paths of "healing." Once again, we affirm that our goal was not to prove the veracity of the ritual of exorcism nor even to postulate that it is an effective treatment for some types of mental suffering. What was presented were other cultural pathways to deal with subjective pain and social problems. Thus, the hegemony of the medicalizing reading of rituals and languages used to understand and treat different types of human pain is evaluated in this paper.

In this sense, contemporary ethnopsychiatry and ethnopsychoanalysis can be important in rethinking the nosographic pathways and culturally oriented treatments (Heinz & Ulrike 2010; Beneduce & Martelli 2005; Beneduce 2007; Taliani 2008; Baubet & Moro 2000; Devereux 1981). Ethnopsychiatry has contributed, in dialogue with anthropology, to the decolonization of hegemonic medical language undertaken by DSM and other medical manuals. There is a concern about not hierarchizing the languages used to deal with mental suffering, using them as "therapeutic tools" (Devereux 1981, 524) in different clinical, social, and subjective contexts. Thus, it is possible to think of the ritual context of exorcism—from the conversation with the priest to the solemn rite—as a space for transferring the subjective pain of those who suffer (Pires 2020).

We do not mean that "possession" is an effective therapeutic technique; however, it constitutes a possible alternative to human issues, becoming a language for several forms of human suffering. A possible ritual effectiveness can be considered not as a

result of a supernatural intervention but as a procedure of transferring inner pain to another (in this case, diabolic) grammar (Certeau 2000). Furthermore, exorcism (especially when people talk to exorcists and tell their stories) constitutes a "place of listening" to the complaints, demands, and sufferings of subjects who find some meaning in this diabolical narrative. In a certain way, the act of listening by the exorcist and this diabolical narrativity make more sense to some people who do not find a reasonable explanation for their pain in the medical field.

Notes

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2 This article is related to my doctoral study (Pires 2020), in which I investigated the return of exorcism and possession as theological-political languages and narratives in contemporary Italy, specifically from the 1980s.

3 The *Ateneo Pontificio Regina Apostolorum* is an educational and academic pontifical institute located in Rome, Italy. The Athenaeum is directed by the Congregation of the Legionaries of Christ. I was able to do this ethnography by means of an authorization from a bishop, indicated by a very close friend. However, it was not possible to conduct official interviews during my stay at the exorcism course, since I was there as a lay participant, not as a researcher. When I presented myself as a researcher to some exorcists, I felt a lot of resistance. Since this would hinder my research, I decided to remain anonymous and conduct conversations and observations instead of formal interviews. This was the reason why it was not possible to transcribe the exorcists' speech directly.

4 The term "ethnoclinics" is used in my research as a set of psychoanalytic, psychiatric, and anthropological approaches that emerged in the mid-20th century in an attempt to understand the relationship between subjective suffering and culture, trying to identify possible cultural languages to cope with psychic pain and so-called mental disorders. Some of these approaches are transcultural or cultural psychiatry, ethnopsychiatry, ethnopsychoanalysis, and ethnopsychology.

5 Nosography means the classification, organization, and description of mental diseases or disorders.

6 I reference the DSM IV, published in 1994, because this was the most recent version of the manual at the time the cited research was developed and because it was the first to include a more in-depth cultural discussion of religious rituals and trance states. My doctoral research was conducted based on documents published between 1980 and 2013, except for the ethnography done during the exorcism course (Field notebook 2017), explored briefly in the present text. This is the reason why DSM V (2013) has not been properly explored.

7 The *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders IV* was published in 1994 and revised in 2000. Its new edition, number V, was published in 2013. It describes the different categories of mental disorders and their diagnostic criteria.

8 The authors did not inform the name of the said exorcist. They only identified that he was an exorcist from an important Italian diocese (North Italy), and he had a high degree of

theological and philosophical instruction, following the institutional rules for carrying out the exorcism. It was deduced that at the time the priest was probably more than 60 years old. (Giordan & Possamai 2017, 5).

9 This is something that McCloud mentions when he discusses the literature (secular and evangelical) and the cases of "haunting" and "supernatural" phenomena conveyed by the American media. For further information, check the introduction of the aforementioned work. (McCloud 2015, 3–4).

10 This is similar to cases of exorcism performed by sorcerers and other characters of contemporary Italian religiosity.

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Responses

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I enjoyed this article, and I am jealous that Dr. Pires was able to attend the exorcism course at the *Ateneo Pontificio Regina Apostolorum.* I teach at a public university where I have struggled to create a new major in religious studies. I designed a course on exorcism to get "butts in seats" for the growing program. Claims of demonic possession or the supernatural are notoriously challenging to analyze in a way that is both critical and considerate of the cultures from which these claims emerge. My students are often quick to curtail this analysis in one of two ways: either they conclude that these accounts prove demons are real (and usually that all the truth claims of their particular church must therefore be true as well) or they turn the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual 5* (often accessing it on a smart phone) in search of a list of symptoms that vaguely resembles behavior described in the case study. These two facile interpretations of either theologically-motivated credulity or medicalization rarely address the specific details of the case. The example reported by Raul Salvucchi in this article is a perfect example: the woman's ambivalent feelings about her boyfriend do not require a supernatural explanation, nor do they warrant a diagnosis of a "dissociative disorder." Rather, this is an ordinary human problem and the language of the demonic provides a culturally specific way of talking about it with a professional. With data obtained by researchers such as Giordan and Possamai, it seems increasingly apparent that most contemporary people who reach out to exorcists are seeking help for similarly quotidian issues.

Furthermore, there is evidence that exorcism has always been a way of addressing ordinary human problems. In the gospels, with the exception of the spectacular case of the Gerasene demoniac, most of the people Jesus exorcises are afflicted with mundane medical problems such as blindness and muteness (Matthew 12:22) or lameness (Luke 13:10–13). Historian Moshe Sluhovsky (2007) has suggested that in the Christian tradition, exorcism has traditionally been seen as a disease of the body, and only became a disease of the soul during the Counter-Reformation. Anthropologist Erika Bourguignon (1976) interpreted possession as a "diagnostic model" that cultures use to interpret specific problems. Elsewhere, Bourguignon (2004) has described possession as an "idiom of distress." As Pires notes, it elicits a "place of listening" for the afflicted (**p. 86**).

This leads me to the only part of this article that gave me pause, which is the choice of the word "victim" in describing those who seek exorcism. In emic terms, these people are, of course, "victims" of demons. But in another sense, they often have agency in how they ask for and receive help with their problems. In fact, when victimization occurs in exorcism, it is often because afflicted people have accepted a subordinate position in constructing a diabolical narrative about their life. It is not uncommon for exorcists to shape narratives of possession in ways that aid a particular theological or political agenda. For example, Gabrielle Amorth famously argued that increased

demand for exorcisms was partly due the rise of yoga classes and Harry Potter novels (Squires 2011).

In closing, I would encourage anyone who enjoyed this article to seek out the Italian film *Il Demonio* (1963) by director Brunello Rondi. The film is based on De Martino's book *Sud e magia*. It opens with the lines, "The producer would like to thank professor Ernesto De Martino of the University of Cagliari whose funding made possible our ethnological studies in the south of Italy. This film is based on a recent and tragic true story. The rites, spells, and demonic possessions you will see are scientifically verifiable and are a fact of life in Italy, just as they are anywhere else in the world." *Il Demonio* follows a troubled peasant girl named Purificata who is beaten by her father, raped by a shepherd, molested by a *mago* (folk healer), subjected to an exorcism, and finally murdered. It is ambiguous whether actual supernatural events are taking place, Purificata is mad, or she has been driven to act this way by intolerant villagers. The film invites the viewer to think past the dichotomy of theological propositions or the medicalization of deviance and instead consider the move made by Pires that exorcism is "a language of human suffering."

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Supernatural Solutions to Familial Suffering: A Response to Pires

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Contemporary Italy is not the contemporary United States. Roman Catholic exorcism is not evangelical Protestant deliverance ministry. Moreover, Catholic possession, evangelical demonic infestation, and reality television house hauntings are by no means the same things. Even so, Pires's argument that the "diabolical grammar" of possession and exorcism offers—for some Italians—a "supernatural narrative about human pain" related to various troubled family relationships and individual psychological suffering sounds very familiar and persuasive (**p. 82**). I would suggest that Pires's conclusion equally applies to what I have previously dubbed the "gothic therapeutic" of American Third Wave spiritual warfare as well as to the domestic dramas narrated in popular ghost reality television programs, stories that are increasingly ubiquitous in the last 25 years on American small screens (McCloud 2015, chap. 3; see also, 2020, 57–73). These religious and cultural movements have different histories, but they all seem to be harvesting from the same large amorphous field of contemporary supernatural practices and beliefs. I've already written at length elsewhere about Third Wave spiritual warfare, so here I will briefly focus on paranormal media.

Despite occasional scholarly assertions that we live in a disenchanted world, American culture continues to be infused with supernatural entities such as ghosts, angels, and demons. Polls suggest that one-third and one-half of all Americans are either certain or think ghosts probably exist (Alfano 2009; Lyon 2005; Bader, Mencken & Baker 2017). An even larger number (68 percent) "completely" or "mostly" agree that angels and demons are active in the world (Heimlich 2009). One 2013 YouGov poll suggested that a majority of Americans believe that the devil and his evil spirits can possess people (Jagel 2013).

If we are to believe the polls and our conversations with friends and neighbors, we all live in a ghost reality television show now. Since the middle 2000s—and leaving out the hundreds of YouTube and TikTok channels dedicated to the paranormal—there have been over 65 ghost and haunting-related series on expanded American cable television (Lawrence 2022). A consistent trope in many series (for example, *The Dead Files*, *Ghost Brothers: Haunted Houseguests*, *The Holzer Files*, *Paranormal State*, and *Kindred Spirits*) features paranormal investigators coming to the homes of individuals to help them rid their dwelling of ghostly and sometimes demonic inhabitants. The clients tell the researchers about scary sights and sounds and interpersonal conflicts that they believe the specters are causing. "Our marriage has never been worse," they tell the investigators, who then work to uncover the haunted histories that trouble familial relationships.[1]

In this brief response, one example of such supernatural domestic drama that coincides with Pires's findings will suffice. In a 2009 episode of *Paranormal State* titled "Dead and Back," we meet Vicki, a middle-aged Alabama woman

who lives in a little old white house. She is being physically harassed and mentally tormented in her home by a horrific lurking shadow man. She not only hears sounds and sees the figure but has been struck in the face and back by him. Interviews with Vicki's daughter reveal that this harassment is not location-based but rather an entity that has been following her into each house they rent. The first night's investigation—following the narrative trajectory of most episodes—yields sounds, feelings of dizziness, and a noisy old attic vent. However, when reviewing the night's videos the next day, the paranormal research team sees Vicki alone in her kitchen. She is speaking on the phone and mentions her deceased father. At that moment, she violently jerked as if she had been struck in the back.

The next day, the team brings in psychic Chip Coffey, who channels the tormenting spirit and confirms that it is Vicki's father, who died several years previously from a self-inflicted gunshot that may have been suicide. Moreover, Coffey reveals that in life, this hateful spirit was a violent and sexually abusive person who had targeted Vicki. Vicki listens emotionally to Coffey and confirms that she suspected that the entity might be her father, who she describes as a vicious alcoholic whom had sexually abused her when she was very young. She tells the team that she used to beg her mother to kill him.

With this horrific history spoken, the team works with Vicki to remove the entity from her house. Paranormal research team leader Ryan Buell tosses holy water into the air and yells, "I cast you out in the name of Jesus!" Simultaneously, Vicki and her daughter talk and yell at the spirit, with Vicki shouting at him, "I am your daughter you sick son of a bitch—that should have never happened!" After these dramatic tear-filled scenes, Vicki and her daughter embrace and pray together, feeling that he has left the house.

Following the typical structure of most *Paranormal State* episodes, the next scene, announced by Buell's voice-over as "final director's log," sums up the investigation and ends with a suggestion that Vicki may finally find peace. However, the last scene, featuring the outside of the house, acts as a postscript, explaining through a written summation over the scene that "Though she still experiences a dark presence, Vicki no longer feels like a prisoner in her own home."

While different in important ways, the real suffering experienced by Vicki and the supernatural solution offered by the *Paranormal State* research team, mirrors Pires's findings about Italian exorcism in that the tropes of contemporary ghost reality television can provide some with a cultural language to describe and understand the "subjective suffering" experienced from familial traumas, past and present.

Notes

1 For more about the connection between Third Wave spiritual warfare and ghost reality television, see Sean McCloud 2018, 137–49.

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Midwestern Strange: Hunting Monsters, Martians, and the Weird in Flyover Country. By B. J. Hollars. Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press, 2019. Pp. 198 + 10 bibliography.

"Go ahead. Take my hand. Let's wallow in the weird together" (7). With this intriguing invitation, author B.J. Hollars, a professor at the University of Wisconsin-Eau Clare, begins his journey of exploring the strange and paranormal in his wide backyard, the Midwest. He encourages readers—and himself—to question the oddities of this world with an open mind: "What if, rather than scoffing at the unknown, we approach it from a place of curious inquiry? What if, rather than dispensing with the weird, we try to embrace it instead?" (5). Hollars accomplishes his goal and relays his discoveries in nine "Case Files" arranged in three sections: *Monsters*, *Martians*, and *The Weird*. The book investigates the Beast of Bray Road, Oscar the Turtle (aka the Beast of Busco), Mothman, alien encounters, the Kensington Runestone, Project ELF, and the Hodag. Throughout his explorations, delivered in an easygoing, casual writing style, readers are encouraged to consider the possibilities, keep an open mind, and understand what a mystery can do for a town—or to an individual.

There are two overarching themes in all the chapters: How experiencing "the strange" impacts an individual negatively and how the same experience creates a positive effect for a community. Hollars discusses what he terms "monster martyrdom," where the more one believes in the existence of the so-called monster, the more a person's credibility suffers. Those who claim that the stories of the supernatural or weird are true face ridicule, humiliation, and a severe disruption to their lives. Gale Harris, the original sighter of the Beast of Busco, spent years trying to prove the creature's existence, even going so far as to drain the lake. Joe Simonton, a local plumber in Wisconsin, found himself the object of ridicule after receiving his space pancakes from aliens in a UFO. Historian Hjalmar Holland's reputation was ruined as he tried to prove the authenticity of the Kensington Runestone in the early 1900s. Hollars quotes Jerome Clark, an investigator and author of books on anomalies about the social cost involved in discussing the strange: "'Ridicule really enforces silence,' he says. 'Ridicule keeps the boundaries firm. And people don't want to be ridiculed, of course'" (81). Those who approach their encounters with the unexplained with a skeptical viewpoint fare the best and escape much of the censure. Sheriff's deputy Val Johnson could not explain what happened to him in an encounter in 1979. The deputy was on patrol when he spotted a strange light in the sky. Before he knew it—and without remembering all the details—Johnson's police cruiser was damaged in unusual ways, and he sustained facial burns. However, after speculating on what happened—from a UFO to time travel to a government experiment—Johnson stated, "[M]y pay grade does not permit me to make all these speculations with any credibility. So I don't" (120). This indifference to whether or not he could determine the source of his encoun-

Cultural Analysis 22.1 (2023): R1–R5
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ter allowed Johnson's experience to fade into the background of his everyday life.

Even though these strange events and beings have negative consequences for the individuals who claim their authenticity, the opposite holds true for the community where they happen, particularly in the case of cryptids. In the towns where Mothman, the Beast of Busco, the Hodag, and the Beast of Bray Road supposedly live, the residents may or may not believe in the existence of the entity, but they celebrate the notoriety it brings to the town. Churubusco resident Chuck Jones said, "after all, the story's better than the real thing" (51). Another local, Miles Wilson, said of his town's infamous turtle, "Oscar gave us a dot on the map…Before him, Churubusco was not known" (49). Jerry Shidell, who took up the story of the Hodag mused, "the Hodag makes us a place on the map…We've gone to a lot of little towns, and they're nice little towns…but I would guess the thing that's missing is a rallying point. Something to identify with." (145-46). Instead of facing ridicule, the local economy and reputation of these places thrive with festivals, museums, and tourists. "The strange" gives these tiny towns cachet—a reason for visitors to stop and pay attention (and spend their money).

The tales of small, Midwestern towns and the people who live there star in this volume. Yes, there are plenty of details about the strange and the weird, but more so, the stories of the people who "come at the subject from a place of curious inquiry…[who] have no intention to mislead" (193) take primacy. This book draws attention to the oft-overlooked heartland and its many oddities. Yet, while doing so, it reinforces the message that the extraordinary is experienced by the very ordinary—the plumber, the Sheriff's deputy, the fisherman. Although Hollars sought to find an answer to these Midwestern mysteries, he found that the truth lies "somewhere between the 'evidence' and the perception of that evidence" (2). This book feels like a leisurely road trip with informal conversations about curiosities along the way. Scholars will find it a welcome change from heavy theory, and casual readers will likely enjoy the vignettes of small-town life woven with the bizarre. Hollars reminds us that not all events have a clear explanation, and we can just enjoy the thrill of the strange.

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Handbook for Folklore and Ethnomusicology Fieldwork. By Lisa Gilman and John Fenn. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2019. Pp. xi + 271, acknowledgments, introduction, works cited, index, black and white photographs, tables, and charts).

It is likely that the past three generations of folklorists and ethnomusicologists have read work by Kenneth Goldstein, Sandy Ives, Bruce Jackson, or similar guidebooks to doing fieldwork during their graduate studies. The best of these guides blends practical experience with current theory and practice. Unfortunately, even the best fieldwork

manuals can quickly become dated with the rapid pace of technological change. It is difficult to update these older manuals, thereby creating a real need for a new resource for use in classes, workshops for applied projects, and consultation by students, instructors, and practitioners. Lisa Gilman and John Fenn's book admirably fills this gap. Their writing is reminiscent of the best of the earlier guidebooks, and they integrate new technology in ways that will keep this book current for a new generation of fieldworkers.

The *Handbook for Folklore and Ethnomusicology Fieldwork* is divided into three sections. Part I is a thorough discussion of methods for preparing for entry into the field. These chapters clearly define fieldwork and develop discussion of ways to develop a project, design a research plan, and find ways for arranging to document and fund projects. Various chapters stand on their own as pull-out readings, and they can be used for workshops, institutes, or conventional classroom instruction. Part II brings readers directly into the field. These five chapters outline research settings, explain the essentials of participant observation, provide tips for successful interviewing, and explore additional techniques of documentation while also touching on interpersonal (and personal) aspects of life in the field. The third part offers excellent techniques and discussion for working with field materials after time in the field. The discussion of using metadata with the resources is particularly strong, and Gilman and Fenn provide resources for coding and interpreting data as well as a wealth of ideas for presenting the results of fieldwork through scholarship and public programming. They both have in-depth knowledge of the latest technology, and their writing is especially strong when they offer readers ways to use even newer technology in response to the emergent needs of fieldwork.

The writing is engaging and accessible throughout the book. Gilman and Fenn illustrate points by drawing from examples in their own fieldwork. While both authors have worked in Africa, Gilman's scholarly research and publications provide a strong basis for sharing her experiences throughout this handbook. Gilman brings in additional diverse scholarship, including research with veterans that contributed to other publications and the documentary "Grounds for Resistance." In addition to referencing his own fieldwork in Africa, Fenn describes his fieldwork with a great variety of projects, including research on builders of guitar effect pedals, Chinavine.uoregon.edu, and research on musical traditions in Malawi. They both use these references to develop and expand upon their discussion of the importance of reflectivity and reflexivity in ethnographic fieldwork. These incidents also will spark a reader's curiosity to investigate the author's other publications and projects. The book also includes ample examples of classroom-tested instructional activities. They are presented throughout the book and cover a range of topics. Each activity simulates how situations that arise in fieldwork are relevant to interpersonal situations that occur outside of research situations. These classroom activities illustrate one of the authors' main points: the value of connecting fieldwork to everyday experiences.

The book is oriented toward the interests and needs of ethnomusicologists and folklorists, especially in terms of

practical techniques for *in situ* documentation. The smooth writing seamlessly moves from topic to topic, and they make shifts into second and first person that pulls the reader into the world of fieldwork. As I was reading, I began to either anticipate their references to some of the classic writing on fieldwork methodology, and I kept flipping to their selected bibliography, where I found many of the works that I have been assigned or have else assigned in fieldwork classes. This approach helps to preserve the fine insights from earlier writers, and Gilman and Fenn, in turn, make their own contributions that are relevant to contemporary practice. Those who plan to use this handbook in their classes may wish to assign excerpts from their list of Works Cited. Instructors may also fill in some gaps by including more books or articles from related fields such as cultural anthropology and sociology. The wealth of new publications on reflexive fieldwork would be an excellent supplement to this handbook.

They offer a good discussion of library research, use of archives, and the integration of scholarship into fieldwork. Gilman and Fenn suggest several ways to process fieldwork materials, and they give specific resources that inform a researcher how to log fieldwork, transcribe interviews, create forms and systems for metadata, and they offer perspectives on ethnographic coding. These resources will all be useful, especially for community-based fieldwork projects directed by researchers beginning their research practice outside of an academic context. The challenge is to integrate these techniques with academic research, the authors note that as students they "received little guidance about moving from data to analysis" (211). This shift from documentation into analysis and interpretation remains a central challenge for those who write these kinds of fieldwork guides as well as for teachers in the classroom. The use of resources from approaches developed within grounded theory and ethnoscience can be useful for helping to spark the shift from documentation into cultural interpretation. Perhaps subsequent publications can illustrate how to move beyond the preservationist imperative into gaining new perspectives on analysis and interpretation. One problem is that there is such a variety of theories that make it difficult to spark ways for students to make heuristic leaps. Nevertheless, specific example of spreadsheets and annotated transcripts that illustrate ethnographic coding would be a welcome resource in this respect.

The book is an excellent handbook for learning to do fieldwork and developing innovative ways to do research. Its orientation to issues that are central to folklore and ethnomusicology is both a strength and a potential weakness. The discussion of photography and videography is limited and needs new complementary guides that are designed for use in other humanities fields. There is space to develop a take on visual documentation that reflects central perspectives from folklorists and ethnomusicologists. The authors include discussion of ways to document material culture, but there is limited discussion of techniques used to document vernacular architecture and landscape. Curiously, these topics are included in the numerous guides that are being published in other disciplines. It would have been useful to either incorporate some references to visual anthropology from this literature or to carve

out approaches that are characteristic of folklore methodology. The book's title clearly identifies its intended audience, but it could also be useful within a wider range of disciplines and practices, including oral history, cultural anthropology, and heritage studies. The discipline-specific foci could be especially helpful for interdisciplinary use. It also could carve out a limited readership for this volume. These challenges are not unique to crafting such a handbook. Rather, they are endemic to the field as a whole. Fenn and Gilman have made an excellent contribution to folklore and ethnomusicology. It would be especially rewarding to find ways to extend their good work to related disciplines.

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