

# CHILDREN'S FOLKLORE REVIEW

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## FROM THE OUTGOING EDITOR

ELIZABETH (LIBBY) TUCKER

This thirty-sixth volume of *Children's Folklore Review* is my last, so I am feeling nostalgic as we go through the process of getting the journal ready to print. C.W. (Chip) Sullivan had edited *CFR* for thirty years when he passed its editorship on to me in 2007. Chip did amazing work, and I am grateful to have had the opportunity to follow in his footsteps.

During the past seven years *CFR* has published extremely interesting articles, including some that have heralded the importance of digital media in children's lives. I am enormously pleased that Trevor J. Blank, an expert in folk and popular culture, mass media, and the digital humanities, is *CFR*'s new editor. Trevor is not only the author or editor of seven books, most recently *The Last Laugh: Folk Humor, Celebrity Culture, and Mass-Mediated Disasters in the Digital Age* (University of Wisconsin Press, 2013) and *Toward a Conceptual Framework for the Study of Folklore and the Internet* (Utah State University Press, 2014), but also an outstanding editor and a wonderful person. Last year, after concluding his editorship of *New Directions in Folklore*, he joined me as co-editor of *CFR*; next year he will edit the journal solo. We are incredibly lucky to have Trevor as *CFR*'s new editor. I want to congratulate him on his new position and to wish him the very best as he starts work on volume thirty-seven.

This volume includes three articles by folklorists of childhood. Jeffrey G. Howard's "Trickster's Economics: Conservation and Innovation in the Game of Jinx" analyzes a game first discussed by Iona and Peter Opie in their *Lore and Language of Schoolchildren*. Two other articles, Simon J. Bronner's "'The Shooter Has Asperger's': Autism, Belief, and 'Wild Child' Narratives" and my own "The Endangered Child: Choking and Fainting Games in the Online Underground of YouTube," originated as papers on a panel titled "Children's Folklore in the Twenty-First Century: Folklorists of Childhood Respond to the Newtown Tragedy" at the American Folklore Society's annual meeting in Providence, Rhode Island in 2013. The introduction to that panel is also included in this volume.

All back issues of *Children's Folklore Review* except for the most recent one are available online via Indiana University's Scholar Works Repository website (<https://scholarworks.iu.edu/dspace/handle/2022/13438>). All of the research published by our journal is accessible to anyone who has a computer.

I want to thank the Dean's Office at Harpur College of Binghamton University for its very generous support of *Children's Folklore Review* for so many years. Dean Anne McCall and Associate Dean Anna Addonisio have both been strong supporters of the journal, as were Dean Donald Nieman and Dean Ricardo René Laremont. I am also very grateful to Kathy Buchta for her excellent work on layout/design and to Sheridan Press for its fine printing and mailing service.

Many warm thanks to all of you who have subscribed and contributed to *CFR*! It has been a great experience to edit this journal, the only one of its kind in the world. Trevor, thanks so much for becoming our new editor! I know you will do fantastic work.

## FROM THE INCOMING EDITOR

TREVOR J. BLANK

I'm fairly certain that I have been drawn to collecting and sharing children's folklore since I was a child myself. When I was in second grade, for instance, my teacher asked my fellow students and me to write a short story and subsequently present it in front of the whole class. While most students quickly read through their mini essays and returned to their desks with little fanfare, I was not content to put forth a similarly meager thirty-second effort. Upon reaching the end of my paper's written words, I proceeded to concoct a grandiose tale of a boy who lost and chased a soccer ball down the sewer — even pretending to turn pages to heighten the story's authenticity as a written account — for another five whole minutes, incorporating motifs that followed longstanding narrative traditions I had somehow internalized in the course of my youth. (In response to this performative charade of mine, my teacher called my parents to complain about my “lying” in class; a missed opportunity to celebrate creativity, I say!)

Upon entering graduate school, first at Indiana University under the tutelage of John H. McDowell and later at Penn State with Simon J. Bronner, the tremendous breadth of children's folklore studies really came into focus for me. Stretching far beyond the schoolyard, I found the works of my academic mentors, as well as those of Alan Dundes, Bill Ellis, Mary and Herbert Knapp, Jay Mechling, Brian Sutton-Smith, Elizabeth Tucker, and of course the renowned Opies, to be incredibly inspiring. In my final graduate course at Penn State, several classmates — including three of the four authors featured in last year's issue of *CFR*, Volume 35 — jokingly “dared” me to write my final research paper on children's folklore surrounding flatulence, which I accepted. This effort not only invited a prolonged period of weird fecal and flatulence-related book purchase suggestions when browsing Amazon.com, it also led to the article, “Cheeky Behavior: The Meaning and Function of ‘Fartlore’ in Childhood and Adolescence,” which won the 2010 William Wells Newell Prize and later appeared in Volume 32 of *Children's Folklore Review*. This project marked my first formal collaboration with the journal; more importantly, it crystallized children's folklore as one of my core professional interests within folkloristics and sparked my ongoing commitment to scrupulously monitoring and contributing to the academic treatment of the subject, especially in the pages of *CFR* itself. That passion continues to this day, and I am extraordinarily excited to transition into my new role as editor of *Children's Folklore Review*, the preeminent folkloristic organ dedicated to the study of the vast, meaningful traditions that comprise the expressive dynamics of pre-adult life.

I come to *Children's Folklore Review* from *New Directions in Folklore* (<http://newfolk.net>), an open access e-journal specializing in the study of contemporary folklore in the digital age and beyond, where I served as editor and journal website manager from 2010 to 2014. Like *CFR*'s online back issue repository, the journal is hosted by IUScholarWorks. Throughout the experience I learned so much about effectively managing and editing a refereed publication; developing

and working collaboratively with a team of engaged, reliable scholars; and increasing readership, article submissions, and overall journal visibility in academia. I love the *process* of editing, especially how all stages of the journey from written draft to final publication welcome interactions with various people, each of whom contribute uniquely to the advancement of new research and insights that seek to deepen our collective understanding of folklore. I pledge to bring my unwavering enthusiasm to the editorship of *Children's Folklore Review* and I am so humbled and honored to join such a storied cast of editors who have graced this journal's pages over the years.

Finally, I must express my deepest gratitude to outgoing *CFR* editor, Libby Tucker, who has been an indescribably wonderful friend, mentor, and colleague. She has been such a patient and thoughtful co-editor, teaching me the ins-and-outs of the journal's intricate editorial and publication protocols while carefully tending to the masterful compilation and completion of this issue. Libby leaves behind big shoes to fill, and it has been a privilege to work in the shadow of her effortless warmth and generosity over the last year. She is a true model of professionalism and I am so grateful for her guidance and for her years of service to *Children's Folklore Review*. Thank you, Libby! And to the readers of *CFR*: Thank you for your continuing patronage and support and for making every page-turn — planned or performatively improvised — a welcome and valuable one.

## TRICKSTER'S ECONOMICS: CONSERVATION AND INNOVATION IN THE GAME OF JINX

JEFFREY G. HOWARD

*"It is desirable to combat the persisting popular tendency to disregard the holistic humanity of children as equal, fully human beings — even to the extent of their having meaningful culture" (Carpenter 1994, 19).*

Forty years ago, as of the time I am writing this, Herbert and Martha Knapp published an article in *The Journal of American Folklore* called "Tradition and Change in American Playground Language." Their article dealt with national — rather than regional — distribution of language and terminology types whose long-lasting presence on the playground had separated certain games from more trendy and faddish types of activities practiced by schoolchildren (Knapp and Knapp 1973, 131). These language types included the truce terms "Time Out" and "King's X," the tag terminology involving "cooties," and finally — and perhaps the most significant and popular phenomenon — "jinks." Peter and Iona Opie have also written about Jinx as they observed it in English schoolchildren (although they do not refer to it by that name), describing the performance in this manner:

If two children accidentally say the same thing at once (it must be accidental), they instantly stop what they are doing and, without uttering a further word to each other or making any sound, glide into a set ritual which varies only according to the part of Britain or, for this is an international performance, the part of the world in which they live. (Opie and Opie 1961, 310)

The Opies recorded various rituals associated with this game, including phrases such as "touch wood and whistle" and "white rabbits" and actions like linking pinkies and making wishes. In the U.S, many children use the word *jinx*, a more modernized form of "jinks" (which I will use to refer to the game throughout the remainder of this essay), as the cue for the performance of their own rituals. These rituals have consisted of pinching, poking, punching, counting, and even extorting. Sometimes the winner demands silence from the loser; other times, a simple soda pop. In fact, although the game does have quite a few variations, a few of which the Knapps recorded, one of the most widespread phrases associated with the game is "Jinx, you owe me a Coke!" In 2006, the line even made an appearance in a Season 2 episode of the American TV sitcom *The Office* when the office secretary, Pam, and her co-worker Jim say something at the same time, and Pam calls, "Jinx! You owe me a Coke!"

Unfortunately, since the Knapps' article in 1973, the game has received very little attention, which is odd since the Opies in *The Language and Lore of Schoolchildren* claim that "the rite would bear detailed investigation in the United

States,” and the Knapps’ exposition of the game, while interesting and informative, was by no means definitive or exhaustive (Opie and Opie 1961, 19). One of the few references to the jinx game in folklore scholarship since that time occurs in Simon J. Bronner’s classic work *American Children’s Folklore*. Bronner records a single instance of the game, but provides no commentary on it (Bronner 1988, 172). Consequently, while I make no assertions about conducting a “detailed investigation” of the game, I feel the need to break the near-silence of forty years regarding the state of the Jinx to respond to the Knapps’ uncertainty as to whether “the popularity of the game [was] increasing or decreasing” (Knapp and Knapp 1973, 138). Not only does Jinx still continue to be popular among schoolchildren — and even some adults, myself included on occasion — as both a game and a linguistic performance, but it is also changing and evolving in response to social influences. A version of the Jinx game that I collected from my niece (to whom I will refer as Lydia for the purposes of this project) illustrates Brian Sutton-Smith’s dual concept of innovation and conservation at work in the game (qtd. in Zumwalt 1995, 43). Lydia’s version of Jinx conserves some of the traditional aspects of the game, such as rhyming and demanding compensation, but it also creates content that reflects the innovative trends of the technological society of today and combines those trends with the role of the trickster archetype. Jinx, like other games and teasing, is for my niece (and children like her) “a means of more fully experiencing and defining the people in their lives and the world in which they live” (Jorgensen 1995, 213), and through the rules of jinx and the spirit of play she breaks down existing hierarchies and sets up new ones in their place.

### Etymology and Context

The term *jinx* is a fairly recent one. The *OED* records the earliest known usage of the term in 1911, although its variations may be far older (Oxford English Dictionary Online, 2013). In fact, the Knapps trace “jinks” back to 1670 as “a piece of conjurer’s gibberish,” and it has since appeared in other variations (*jinkgo*, *jingo*, *jings*, etc.) since then (Knapp and Knapp 1973, 139). A jinx is more than just a spell or conjuration, though; it can also come in the form of a person with contagious ill fortune. Barbara Rieti reports instances in Newfoundland of fisherman with bad luck who were and are known as jinkers, which is close enough to *jinx* to potentially share an etymological heritage. The following is an account given by one of Rieti’s student regarding such bearers of bad-luck: “If you went with a fisherman and he got a water haul, i.e. no fish, ... then you were considered a jinker or Doone dinker ... and it was highly unlikely that they would let you go with them again” (qtd. in Rieti 2008, 19). Incidentally, the *OED* also associates *jinx* with a *Jonah*, another seafaring term taken from the biblical Jonah and assigned to people who bring bad luck not only on themselves but also on their mates (Oxford English Dictionary Online, 2013). The Jonah-as-jinx concept has been referred to both explicitly and implicitly in various books such as Daniel Defoe’s *Robinson Crusoe*, Herman Melville’s *Moby Dick*, Ernest Hemingway’s *The Old Man and the Sea*, and even films such as Peter Weir’s *Master and Commander* (in which the Jonah character receives such ill treatment from the crew members

that he finally throws himself overboard).

Regardless, though, of how *jinx* and its associated ideas of luck, superstition, and powerlessness have been preserved in written language and oral tradition up until the term *jinx* surfaced in its current form in 1911, it eventually made the jump from conjurers' spell and sea-farer's lore to the schoolchild's playground as a word game. According to the Knapps, the Jinx game became popular in the 1940s as a replacement (so it seems) for a prior "ceremonial colloquy" known only as "Needles and Pins" (Knapp and Knapp 1973, 138). "Needles and Pins" was a wishing ritual that required two children to accidentally say the same word at the same time (it cannot be on purpose, or the mystique is lost), lock pinkies, and repeat the chant, "Needles and pins, / needles and pins, / when a man marries/ his trouble begins" or some derivation (Knapp and Knapp 1973, 138). The chant appears as a nursery rhyme in the 1916 children's book *The Real Mother Goose*, and B.A. Botkin recorded the same rhyme in 1947 in his hefty volume *A Treasury of New England Folklore, Stories, Ballads, and Traditions of the Yankee People*. However, neither version mentions speaking at the same time or making wishes. Both the Knapps and the Opies recorded children in New England, but also in Missouri and east Texas, who employed the "Needles and Pins" model and wishing ceremony throughout the early to mid-1900s (Opie and Opie 1961, 312).

The Opies also recorded multiple verbal rituals similar to "Needles and Pins" in England during that same time period. Many of these rituals also have to do with wishing as a collaborative endeavor in which both individuals participate. The Opies collected one version "at the Royal School, Bath," in which "after making the wish, one girl says: 'I wish, I wish your wish comes true.' And the other replies: 'I wish, I wish the same to you.' In Southampton both chant: 'I wish, I wish this wish to you, / I wish, I wish your dream come true' (Opie and Opie 1961, 311). These ceremonial procedures emphasize unity of purpose and the idea that people must work together and look out for each other in order for needs and wants to be realized. Luck is only responsible for the opportunity, but they must take advantage of it together.

Jinx, on the other hand, at least those versions that the Knapps collected and many of the versions I have heard work in an almost opposite direction, stressing competition and dominance of one individual over another instead of collaboration and equality. Many versions make references to payment and indebtedness, i.e. "You owe me a Coke!" while others allow children to perform a type of physical dominance with pinching and poking or discursive superiority by forcing them to be silent. My dad explained that the version he played with his siblings involved both hitting and remuneration: "You yell 'Jinx!' and you hit them, and then they have to buy you a pop or something" (Howard, 2013).

The reason for this shift from the cooperative wishing of "Needles and Pins" to the more antagonistic relationships of "Jinx" in the 1940s could be due to a number of social factors. The 1940s, of course, consisted of a rise in international tensions that resulted in the United States entering WWII. The global community, while still maintaining some sense of alliance and cooperation within the competing sides (the Axis and the Allied forces), became a place of competition and combat. Coping mechanisms dealing with this wartime environment might



have manifested themselves in the form of rough physical play had not the 1920s and onward begun to curtail and reduce such things with more adult supervision (Hughes 1996, 320). Thus, by replacing games like "Needles and Pins" with "Jinx" allowed children to express that type of antagonism verbally when they were not allowed to express it physically.

Whether or not these factors are responsible for the shift, I think it fair to say that the need for collaboration and the need for control and dominance form major roles in a child's developing personality. The game in either form is certainly reflective of each set of tendencies, and the fact that children are able to express both of these diametrically opposed characteristics is a testament to their inherent complexity. Children play with both of these needs in order to achieve power and success, and these versions of Jinx demonstrate this weighing of capitalistic and communal roles as children seek to translate these ideologies into the idiom of their own lore.

### **The Jinx Machine: an Analysis**

One evening in May 2013, I was sitting down to eat a dinner of pizza and salad at a family get-together. At gatherings of this nature, I generally sit with my nieces and nephews because I happen to like the topics of conversation circulating around the kids' table more so than those selected by the adults'; tales of second-grade romances, name-calling, and body humor suit me far better than hearing about number of circumcisions my OBGYN brother-in-law has done and how easy it was to perform an especially gruesome C-section (the story of which he might choose to relate at the exact moment I am cutting into the pizza).

In between mouthfuls of Bell peppers and Canadian bacon, my niece and nephews shared funny stories about school and church and friends and knock-knock jokes, frequently interrupting each other in order to usurp an especially silly punch line (I don't often understand their humor, but the fact that it doesn't make any sense at all doesn't deter me from enjoying it. Most of their jokes are made up on the spot, and, to use the rhetorical terminology of my profession, consist primarily of non-sequiturs). At one point, my niece, Lydia, and her brother said the same thing at the exact same moment. Lydia pointed at her brother and shouted, "Jinx!" They giggled at the coincidence, and she continued, "The jinx machine is out of order. Please insert another quarter" (Lydia, 2013). I quickly overcame my surprise at hearing a version of Jinx that I had never heard before (and which does not seem to exist anywhere else in jinx-lore), asked her to repeat it, and I transcribed it into my phone calendar (I would have used something more official to record the event, but I had no pencil and my napkin was covered in marinara and grease). Her brother complained that she had stolen the phrase from him, although when I questioned him more closely, he admitted that he, too, had taken that version of Jinx from friends at school. While innovative in several ways which I will discuss later, this particular version of Jinx conserves some of the elements found in versions collected by the Knapps and Simon J. Bronner, and even in some of the versions that I have heard and used at various times as a child.

First and foremost, Lydia's Jinx couplet is what Jan Brunvand would call a "game rhyme" (Brunvand 1968, 64). C.W. Sullivan III says, "Children's games ... often include rhymes," but the appearance of rhyme in recorded Jinx versions is rare, although in its predecessor "Needles and Pins" rhyming is standard issue (Sullivan 1995, 147). However, in 1971, the Knapps did collect a game rhyme version of Jinx in Smithville, Indiana: "Pinch, poke, / you owe me a Coke" (Knapp and Knapp 1973, 137). The metric qualities of this rhyme (two stresses, one iamb, and one anapest) are a bit chaotic for a couplet, but it does demonstrate that my niece's version still (after forty years) conserves the notion of Jinx as a game rhyme.

Lydia's game rhyme, however, has a more unified rhythmical structure than the Knapps'. Her two lines consist of a variation of iambic tetrameter (with one extra unstressed syllable), a metric form employed by poets such as Emily Dickinson, Alfred Lord Tennyson, and Percy Bysshe Shelley, among others. The first line of the rhyme begins with four iambic feet and an extra unstressed syllable at the end ("The jinx machine is out of order"). The final unstressed syllable, however, connects to the stress in "please" in the second line, thus unifying the rhyme as one line glides into the next.

Further, the couplet is not only an example of poetic completeness, but also of satire. One of the most well-known usages of iambic tetrameter appears in Samuel Butler's "Sir Hudibras," a seventeenth-century poetic satire written about Puritans and Roundheads in the late seventeenth century. The iambic tetrameter and couplet form (like those found in my niece's rhyme) rhythmically convey the sense of mockery and derision. In the same way, the metric quality of this version of Jinx (not only a game rhyme but also a "rhyme of derision" or taunt [Brunvand 1968, 68]) also asserts the competitive nature of the game; in a sense, the rhyme celebrates the victory of the crowing child and the defeat of the rival, not in words but in music.

In addition to its rhyming quality, Lydia's Jinx game also conserves the motif of playing the game at dinner. Bronner records,

Ganie and Neil had a custom when people said the same thing at the dinner table. One person shouted out "jinx," and started to count until the other person said "stop." The person who said "jinx" got to slug the second person who said stop as many times as he counted. (Bronner 1988, 172)

Dinner time is traditionally supposed to be a time of familial unity and cooperation. According to Gregory K. Fritz, "Family dinners allow all members of the family to be involved, to know what is important, enjoyable, difficult or annoying for the others ... For parents, regular family meals provide opportunities to inculcate values and model supportive interactions" (Fritz 2006, 8). Richard Wilk echoes that sentiment, referring to the "image of the happy family meal" in the United States as "the warm, encompassing circle of commensality [that] drew everyone together around real food cooked with unique family recipes, teaching children religious values and respect for their elders, and brought order and

comfort to a nation founded on family values" (Wilk 2010, 428). His assertion in a sense gives dinner time a connotation of spiritual development, sustenance, and, most importantly, ritual. At the table, parents, as the authority figures, have constructed an ordered setting in which children and parents can interact in meaningful ways. Even at the kids' table, when authority figures are physically absent, the values and expectations of the parents should keep the parents figuratively present. Ideally, children will behave because they will give into the panoptical gaze of the absent parent and behave as if they are not completely unobserved.

The child's performance of the Jinx game, though, disrupts the order that is supposed to prevail at dinner time. The rituals of Jinx trump the dinner ritual and essentially provide the child the opportunity to act the part of the trickster, a virtual Brer Rabbit whose intent is to subvert the sacred ritual of eating and the system imposed by the more powerful parental authority, not out of spite but for the sake of spectacle and performance. George Lankford says,

Trickster is more likely to be discovered through roles and functions than through labels and appearances ... Inordinately clever, he frequently lures others into humiliation, injury, and even death ... He is a menace to society without being its enemy, and he brings disaster to others without malevolence. He is the rule breaker par excellence. (Lankford 1996, 716)

The trickster archetype fits well with the Jinx game (and many other children's games as well) because of what Roger D. Abrahams refers to as his "regressive infantilism" and his desire to play (Abrahams 1968, 173). While Lydia's and Bronner's Jinx games are certainly not intended to bring about injury or death to the other participants, they do "menace" the society of the table by upsetting the rules of good behavior and peer-ness, humiliating competitors, and reducing that person's position in the eyes of the others. In my niece's case, the victim of the rhyme game is her brother, who is both older and bigger than she is. Her jinxing of him temporarily overturns not only his advantage in age, size, and strength (once again an echo of Brer Rabbit and his encounter with animals like Brer Bear and Brer Fox), but also the constructed superiority of his masculinity. Further, Jinx not only becomes a mockery of her male rival, but by extension also of the ritual of dinner time and the adults who have instituted it. All of them fall prey to the culprit's jinxing couplet.

The mental superiority of the trickster as manifested in its ability to upset the status quo not only demonstrates of the children's ability to conserve elements of the game, but within the behavior of the same archetype exists an illustration of childhood innovation and understanding of everyday realities and their complexity. Marilyn Jorgensen suggests (paraphrasing Richard Tallman's article "A Generic Approach to the Practical Joke") that one of the main roles of a trickster involves trying to "get something for nothing" (Jorgensen 1995, 214). Interestingly, this endeavor to procure amenities at someone else's expense is also the guiding objective of the Jinx performance. In a few cases, such as the one that Bronner

reports, the winner procures the right to strike the opponent a certain amount of times, while in other cases (and I remember having played it this way) the winner gains control over loser's speech because the loser has to be silent until the winner says his name three times. Most commonly, the trickster cries, "Jinx, you owe me a Coke!" "Pinch, poke you owe me a Coke!" or, as the Knapps report from an informant in Tacoma in 1959, "Jinks, Cokes, and Hamburgers" and thus secures physical sustenance (Knapp and Knapp 1973, 137). Regardless of which version is used, the winner gains something by calling "Jinx!" first without investing anything. Lydia's Jinx version retains or conserves this "something for nothing" aspect. The phrase "The jinx machine is out of order, / Please insert another quarter" indicates this underlying ideology because inserting a quarter into a broken machine indicates logically (though logic frequently matters but little place in a children's rhyme) that the giver will receive nothing in return. After all, a machine that is "out of order" can't actually do anything. However, her request (her demand, I should say) for the quarter also demonstrates her creativity in that instead of asking for a type of currency like the Coke or other kind of soda that has limited usage (she can only drink it), she asks for *money*.

Her demand for cash is clever in that it makes the brother beholden to her and gives her real power in the economic discourse of the world in which she lives. Though a Coke possesses physical fluidity, she realizes that money is the only true liquid asset. Money has far more weight and versatility than a Coke does in its purchasing power. A person who has money has the ability to buy a Coke, should she feel the need, but she can choose to purchase something besides a Coke. She can even choose not to spend it at all. In her own way, she is demanding more freedom at the expense of her brother's. She is not only Trickster, but she is Trickster masquerading as the economic "machine."

My niece's couplet, further, is also interesting in that it asks for an amenity (money) whose system is founded on belief, which is exactly how the game functions. The power of money comes from the trust and belief of consumers; the metal disk we call a quarter has no real power in and of itself, but only insofar as people believe in the value it represents. In the same way, she only has power over her rival because both parties believe in the rules of the game. In a sense, then, her innovative demand suits the game's ideology better metaphorically than the Cokes and pinches of previous Jinx versions.

In the end, the trickster/my niece triumphs, but her victory is only short-lived, which is to be expected since, as Lankford states, "Trickster is as much tricked as tricker in countless stories about his dealings with others, often leaving the analyst to ponder who is the Trickster" (Lankford 1996, 716). In the Jinx game, the final part of the performance occurs when the loser refuses to make good on his or her debt. This seems to be a fundamental part of the game's narrative. The Knapps mention that frequently after the winner proclaims victory, "no one takes [the] debt seriously" (Knapp and Knapp 1973, 137). Essentially, this refusal to pay up by the loser becomes the proverbial Tar Baby; trickster Lydia never collects the quarter from her brother and is thus outfoxed in her demand for remuneration. She has, though, throughout the game shown her ability to deal with the complex issues of modern economic systems of exchange, while also retaining some of the

original elements of the Jinx tradition in unexpectedly profound demonstration of the “dynamics of cultural acquisition” (Carpenter 1994, 19). Overall, her version of Jinx is a veritable playground where the interaction of old and new ideologies can occur.

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## CHILDREN'S FOLKLORE IN THE TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY: FOLKLORISTS OF CHILDHOOD RESPOND TO THE NEWTOWN TRAGEDY

ELIZABETH TUCKER

*This introduction to the panel "Children's Folklore in the Twenty-First Century: Folklorists of Childhood respond to the Newtown Tragedy" was presented at the annual meeting of the American Folklore Society in Providence, Rhode Island on October 17, 2013.*

At the American Folklore Society's annual meeting in 2000, the Children's Folklore Section sponsored a panel in response to the Columbine tragedy of 1999. Titled "The Monstrous Child: Folklore Responds to Columbine and Adolescence," this panel resulted in a special issue of *Children's Folklore Review* (2002) in which folklorists of childhood responded to both Columbine and adolescence. Jo Ann Conrad's paper, "The War on Youth: A Modern Oedipal Tragedy," identified the concept of a "monstrous child" from which tragedies come. Since the time of our panel on Columbine, questions have arisen about the line between play and violence in frames of children's activities and the issue of adult control of such activities. In the aftermath of the horrifying tragedy at Newtown in 2012, in which twenty children and six teachers died at the hands of a late-adolescent shooter, this panel again gathers folklorists of childhood to re-examine the use and urgency of children's and adolescents' folklore for youth and adults.

During the thirteen years since our panel on "The Monstrous Child," many changes have taken place. With horrifying rapidity, so many school shootings have occurred that it is hard to remember when all of them happened. Newtown, however, has left an indelible imprint of horror and sadness on people's minds. The children who died were so young; there were so many of them, and their killer was a troubled late adolescent or young adult who also killed his mother. Newspaper reporters wrote about Newtown as "slaughter of the innocents," invoking a well-known Biblical theme. Something terrible had happened, and people of diverse backgrounds struggled to find meaning.

In this panel we will try, as folklorists of childhood, to interpret contemporary children's and adolescents' behavior. Our presentations address diverse aspects of contemporary children's folklore, but all of them reflect the need for folklorists to analyze how children's culture develops and changes, particularly in relation to intertwined roles of play and violence in youth folk practices. This year's theme of cultural sustainability, defined on the AFS website as "meeting the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs," fits our panel's purpose well. We plan to examine the culture of childhood from multiple vantage points, exploring how children and adolescents maintain their own culture and what methods and strategies we choose to use in our research.

During the discussion period, we will ask you to consider how childhood is growing and changing in the early twenty-first century and how it contributes to the discourse of play and violence in twenty-first century public life.

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## THE ENDANGERED CHILD: CHOKING AND FAINTING GAMES IN THE ONLINE UNDERGROUND OF YOUTUBE

ELIZABETH TUCKER

In 1987, a nine-year-old boy named Derek told a student fieldworker in Binghamton, New York, that he and his friends had taken turns putting a rope around their necks and pulling it tight, to see “who [could] choke himself the longest” (Tucker 2008, 79). Having expected to hear Derek speak about active but not life-threatening games, the student felt shocked and concerned. I also felt worried about Derek but knew that such games had been going on for years in the United Kingdom and the United States. In the late 1980s, choking and fainting games, as well as other games involving breath control, were not very familiar to the public. Iona and Peter Opie had identified fainting games as “misplaced audacity” in their book *Children’s Games of Street and Playground* (1969, 273–74), but their documentation of the games had not caused widespread concern. Children and adolescents had identified choking and fainting games by so many different names (including Pass Out, Space Monkey, California Dreaming, Purple Dragon, and the Gasp Game), that it was hard for adults to identify the games’ purpose. Because of the childhood underground — a network of young people that adults did not usually enter — choking and fainting games took place in relative obscurity until the early twenty-first century, when media reports of accidental deaths of game-players became common.

In my article “Go to Bed, Now You’re Dead’: Suffocation Songs and Breath Control Games” (2008–2009), I examined choking and fainting games’ origins and interpretations of their meaning by folklorists, forensic pathologists, psychologists, and anthropologists; I also discussed adults’ educational websites and young people’s accounts of playing breath control games. In conclusion, I noted that playing these risky games seems to facilitate passage from childhood to adulthood and asked whether adults can persuade young people to stop playing such games (2008–2009, 54). Building from and expanding upon my previous work, this article analyzes adolescents’ and adults’ interaction based on videos about fainting and choking games posted on YouTube in an effort to interpret the meaning and impact of such broadcasts through the analysis of meta-information. By taking a close look at comments on videos uploaded by boys and girls, as well as comments on videos uploaded by adults, I interpret adolescents’ and adults’ interaction related to this important, difficult subject and explain why young people persist in posting their own videos in spite of parental opposition.

From the late 1990s to the middle of the twenty-first century, more and more people have become accustomed to communicating with each other on the Internet. An important change took place in 2005, when three young computer specialists activated the domain name “YouTube.com” (Snickars and Vonderau 2010; Van Dijck 2013). Suddenly it became possible for kids aged thirteen and over (and many younger children as well) with access to the Internet to upload, share,



and view videos. Curious adolescents could upload videos of themselves playing games with friends and watch videos uploaded by others. YouTube gave kids a new kind of childhood underground in which they could share their traditions and interests with peers around the world.

This online childhood underground is porous because parents and other adults can attempt to check what kids are doing. Before the Internet made checking so easy, it was common for adults to let children learn and play games on their own. According to Brian Sutton-Smith's concept of the "triviality barrier" (1970, 1-8), adults tend not to find children's games and other forms of folklore very significant or useful for children's development. There have, however, been good reasons for adults to try to learn all they can about choking and fainting games. Tragically, many preadolescents and adolescents have died while playing such games, and numerous reports of these fatalities have appeared in newspaper, television, and Internet articles (e.g. O'Sullivan 1999; Parker-Pope 2008; Warner 2005). Choking games involving ropes and chokeholds are high-risk; fainting games tend to be somewhat "safer" but can result in death from head injuries. More boys than girls have died as a result of choking games. The Center for Disease Control's report of 2008, based on news reports, explains that 86.6% of choking game deaths in the United States from 1995 to 2007 were males aged six to 19, with a mean age of 13.3 years. Information about fatal falls resulting from fainting games is more difficult to find, but such information has gradually become available (e.g. Phillips 2014).

Without breathing, it is impossible to live. Understanding the peril of breath control games has contributed to adults' awareness of young people's vulnerability. The Columbine High School massacre in 1999, followed by a series of tragic school shootings culminating in the Newtown massacre in 2012, has enhanced American adults' sense of children being in danger.<sup>1</sup> When I wrote my article "Changing Concepts of Childhood" for the *Journal of American Folklore* in 2012, I noted the significance of the "monstrous child" concept that emerged after the death of so many teenagers at the hands of fellow adolescents at Columbine High School. I also found that Carole Carpenter's (2011) analysis of the "bubble-wrapped child" conveyed adults' worries about safety very well. Two years later, I find that the metaphor of "the endangered child" fits the impression of childhood that has come from both school shootings and fatal breath control games.

Folklorists of childhood have a unique perspective; their close observation of children's interaction and respect for children's own rules result in significant perceptions. Since the Columbine High School massacre, these scholars have paid particular attention to the relationship between folklore and school violence. Simon J. Bronner has noted that since the publication of reports on school shootings in the 1990s, which have emphasized the fact that most shooters have been male, boys have seemed to be more at risk than girls; "much of their plight [has] seemed expressed or exacerbated by circulating folklore" (2011, 149). The higher percentage of males' deaths after playing choking games fits this pattern, which should be studied closely. Careful consideration of YouTube videos and comments posted by viewers makes it possible for researchers to gain insight into young people's performances and responses.

## Methodology and Numerical Results

Methodology for analyzing young people's use of YouTube is still developing, since this medium of communication is relatively new. One good study of the performative use and function of YouTube videos is Anthony Buccitelli's "Performance 2.0: Observations Toward a Theory of the Digital Performance of Folklore" (2013). Between September 26, 2013, and November 1, 2013, I did keyword searches on YouTube to find videos of breath control games, searching for "choking games," "fainting games," and "pass out games." Through these searches I found 54 videos: 27 (50%) of all-male groups posted by boys, 16 (30%) of all-female groups posted by girls, and four (7%) of mixed groups posted by either boys or girls. There were also seven educational videos (13%) posted by adults. I took notes on the content of all 54 videos and recorded comments that had been made. In some cases there were numerous comments; in others there were none or very few. I also noted the gender and, if possible, the place of residence of the individual who posted the video. In some cases it was difficult to learn the age, gender, place of residence, and past experience of the people who posted comments. The tone and diction of many comments suggested that teenagers had posted them, but it was impossible to be certain. Some teenagers commented that they had "pranked" their younger brothers or sisters by making them play choking or fainting games while making videos. YouTube is supposed to be used only by people aged thirteen and older, but a close look at comments shows that children are sometimes involved as well.

My search for percentages of video generation was influenced by Martha Linkletter, Kevin Gordon, and Joe Dooley's (2009) article, "The Choking Game and YouTube: A Dangerous Combination," a significant medical study that points out the connection between watching videos online and playing games; it also notes that familiarity with videos posted online may deter some young people from playing.<sup>2</sup> The study's main goal is to describe demographics and techniques of the choking game; its methodology is retrospective content analysis. Noting that very little information on this subject exists in medical literature, the authors conclude: "There is no causal link between YouTube allowing increased access to videos and any increase in participation and increase in morbidity and mortality. It is possible that YouTube has merely allowed access to previously unobserved activity" (277). Linkletter, Gordon, and Dooley discovered that 90% of the participants in the 65 videos they studied were male. In 55% of the videos, participants had hypoxic seizures, but the percentage of seizures went up when participants used the Valsalva maneuver, usually called the "sleeper hold," in which one person puts an arm around the other's neck and squeezes it. In 88% of those videos, there was a hypoxic seizure. Clearly, the level of danger rises when this kind of choking takes place.

In contrast to Linkletter, Gordon, and Dooley's (2009) study, my own research — compiled three years later — shows a larger percentage of female participants and only one use of the Valsalva maneuver. In most of the videos I watched, children or adolescents lost consciousness after hyperventilating while squatting, then standing up and putting their thumbs in their mouths. This difference might

seem to indicate a major change in kids' game-playing patterns since the study by Linkletter, Gordon, and Dooley, but it seems more likely that the difference in percentages results from YouTube having limited viewings of the most dangerous choking games during the past several years. Some videos that have been deemed inappropriate by YouTube can still be viewed. In the video "Cofer Passed Out" (2010), which I found in the fall of 2013, a late-adolescent boy uses the Valsalva maneuver to make a girl have what appears to be a hypoxic seizure. When I clicked on this video on July 28, 2014, I was able to watch it, although it was labeled with the message "This video has been removed because it violates YouTube's terms of service." Perhaps part of the content had been removed before I watched the video. According to YouTube's Community Guidelines, any member of the YouTube community can flag a questionable video, and staff members work twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week, to remove objectionable content ("Flagging Content" 2014). It is noteworthy that YouTube recommends, in its "Teen Safety" section, consideration of "The Grandma Rule": if you don't want your grandma to watch a video you have made, you should not post it. In this way, YouTube promotes standards that might be found in a family or a small community ("Teen Safety" 2014).

Reading young viewers' comments on YouTube videos helps adults understand the impact of videos of the games on young people. But why do so many kids want to play these games? What questions and worries arise as they learn about the games and think about playing them themselves? Comments on videos show adults how children and adolescents react to the videos while engaging in dialogue with peers and adults.

### **Defiance, Dizziness, and Danger**

Before examining the videos and comments, it is necessary to consider scholarship that puts them in the context of youth culture. Since the 1970s, folklorists have studied adolescents' trips or quests to experience something amazing or shocking that has a connection to a legend (Dégh 2001, Ellis 1982-83, Meley 1991, Thigpen 1971). Bill Ellis observes that when they visit legendary locations, teenagers seek "deliberate escapes into altered states of being where conventional laws do not operate" (2001, 189). This escape, Ellis explains, is part of a broader behavior pattern involving defiance of adults' rules and drinking.<sup>3</sup> When I was doing the research for my essay on breath control games in 2009, I found that the same general pattern applied. During breath control games kids seem to be "pushing each other to the brink of a seductive dream world ... prob[ing] boundaries between conscious and unconscious awareness and between life and death" (Tucker 2008-2009, 54). This kind of experimentation is deeply embedded in youth culture and resists regulation by parents and teachers. Simon J. Bronner notes that adolescents tend to take risks and withdraw because of their "betwixt and between" stage of development, during which they may act both defiant and restrained (2014b). In a similar vein, Richard A. Friedman observes that although teens have an "enhanced capacity for anxiety," they are also "novelty seekers and risk takers" (2014).

Like legend trips or quests, breath control games offer new experiences and tests of courage before and during adolescence. Challenges can, of course, take many forms, but the French play scholar Roger Caillois's (1961) study of *ilinx* play — the kind of play that produces dizziness and disorientation — helps us understand young people's fascination with breath control. Both Caillois and Finnish play scholar Marjatta Kalliala (2007) note that children actively seek dizziness, lightheadedness, and related feelings. At amusement parks, young people line up to get dizzy on Tilt-a-Whirls and other rides. The popularity of such thrilling, disorienting rides, like the popularity of breath control games, never seems to wane. Caillois partially explains this phenomenon by comparing vertigo-seeking children with spinning sheep and tail-chasing dogs, but he does not explain why members of different species crave vertigo. Instead, he notes that both *ilinx* play and related spectacles appeal to the young because play is self-rewarding and separate from daily life:

Essential is the pursuit of this special disorder or sudden panic, which defines the term vertigo, and in the true characteristics of the games associated with it: viz. the freedom to accept or refuse the experience, strict and fixed limits, and separation from the rest of reality. What the experience adds to the spectacle does not diminish but reinforces its character as play. (Caillois 1961, 26)

The key phrases here are “freedom to accept or refuse the experience” and “separation from the rest of reality.” We can apply Caillois's analysis of *ilinx* play to the process of maturation during adolescence. Play's creation of a different realm becomes especially valuable during this stage, when it becomes necessary for young people to pull away from their parents to establish independence. This process of separation involves both reliance on parents and resistance to parental control.<sup>4</sup> If adolescents post videos of themselves playing breath control games, they take the risk of parental intervention, which may lead to unpleasant objections but may also bring parental attention that the adolescents want to receive. Those who post breath control videos show their peers that they have accepted a difficult, possibly dangerous challenge; they also show that they have gone beyond everyday reality to experience something thrilling, unusual, and bravely playful.

There is not much consideration of play's rewards in the current folkloristic discussion of children's endangerment and early death in mass and new media. This discourse, including the subject of school shootings, may encourage playful but dangerous performances on the Internet. Some adult viewers of YouTube videos express outrage and implore YouTube to remove a video because it sets a bad example. Both educational videos and comments by concerned adults have potential value, but it is not unusual for young viewers to reject them. While some kids express horror and sadness about negative consequences of choking and fainting games, others make snide or humorous comments that suggest opposition to adults' guidance. Recently it has become apparent that some teenagers who do not like adults' interference on YouTube are sending their videos to Instagram

instead (Bronner 2014a). Choosing a new site is one of many ways in which young people can keep adults from viewing their communications. danah boyd's term "social stenography," which refers to teenagers' interpersonal encryption, fits this situation well (boyd 2014).

### Adults' Educational Videos

Educational videos made by adults comprised only 16% of the choking and fainting game videos I found on YouTube in the fall of 2013, but comments suggested that many kids had also watched them. In my study of educational websites about choking games in 2008, I found that such websites typically presented personal testimony from parents who had lost children, as well as information about the games' extreme risk (Tucker 2008-2009, 50-52). The seven videos on choking and fainting games uploaded by adults that I found in this recent study also contain parents' testimonies and information about risk. In addition, they emphasize testimony from young people who have lost friends or relatives and want to warn their peers not to experiment with the game.

An example of videos of this kind is "Survivors of the Choking Game," uploaded February 8, 2010. With a shocking profile photo of a child lying in a hospital bed breathing through a respirator, this short (3 minute, 44 second) video has drawn many viewers; 300,509 people had watched it by July 27, 2014. Consisting of quotes, images, and video clips accompanied by suspenseful music, the video delivers a strong message: choking games can cause brain damage, and brain damage may be irreversible. The video clips of young teenagers struggling through therapy after playing the choking game convey this message powerfully. Comments indicate a broad range of responses: appreciation of the warning, eagerness to warn others, skepticism, and interest in playing choking games. Missy, a teenaged girl, writes "Thank you for taking the time to help someone." Another teenaged girl, Erica, comments, "I did it don't do the after symptoms aren't fun. DON'T DO IT! Nykro, whose gender is unclear, writes "my class mate 'friend' almost died of this shit 'choking game,' so guys please trust the rules and live longer." All of these comments express concern and a desire to help other young people stay safe.<sup>5</sup>

In contrast to these responses, several teenagers question the truth of the information in the video. Brad, a teenaged boy, writes, "OK so this video makes no sense at all. There is no proof that any of these children received their injuries from it." Similarly, "Whammy" (gender unclear) asks, "is this real?" and "Jesting" (gender unclear) comments, "This video sucks. It's misleading." Suspicious of warnings from adults, these three young people reject the video's message.

Many young commenters on the video support playing choking games and describe their own experiences in a positive way. Kelly, a teenaged girl, writes, "I did it, and I'm fine! Just hurt my nose a little bit. The vids up on my challenge." Similarly, Julius, a teenaged boy, comments, "This is bullshit. I've done it a hundred times and never gotten hurt." Sara, a teenaged girl, goes a step farther, explaining why she enjoys playing choking games: "its really addicting, you guys don't know the amazing feeling it brings unless you try it." Brian, a teenaged

boy, offers vivid details: “did this shit and my vision was shaking + it was like I was reborn like a new me, all the birds and light and sounds. THIS SHIT GOOOOOO00D.” His comment shows that, like some takers of hallucinogenic drugs, teenagers playing choking games may feel that they have entered a new world full of enchanting sensations.

One of the most significant aspects of this video’s comment section is the interaction between teenagers and adults (see Appendix). When Sandra, a teenaged girl, says that the pictures of choking game survivors in the video do not look real, two adults, Bob and Neecy, assure her that she is wrong. Bob expresses himself angrily, telling Sandra that she has “shit for brains,” but Neecy calmly and authoritatively observes that she knows the parents of the teenagers whose images appear in the video and that her own son died after playing the choking game. After reading Bob’s angry comment, Sandra retorts, “And who are you to judge me?” She does not object to Neecy’s more gentle and reasonable comment. Maybe she has stopped questioning the video’s veracity, or maybe she does not want to engage in further dialogue with an adult who proves her wrong.

Throughout these comments and the comments on many other breath control game videos, we become aware that issues related to belief and non-belief are generating lively debate. Are choking and fainting games real, and are videos about such games based upon true information? Linda Dégh and Andrew Vázsonyi (1973) argue that both belief and skepticism keep legends alive. Comments on choking and fainting game videos display a similar dynamic, in which teenaged skeptics engage other teens and adults in lively, sometimes acrimonious dialogue.

## Boys’ Videos

While viewing boys’ and girls’ videos in the fall of 2013, I discovered a contrast in settings. Most of the boys’ videos were filmed outdoors, in the back yards of private homes or on playing fields, while most of the girls’ videos were filmed in bedrooms of private homes. This contrast fits previously observed patterns of American teenaged girls’ and boys’ social interaction: girls are much more likely than boys to have “sleepovers” at which they eat junk food, play exciting games, watch movies, and stay up all night talking (Tucker 2007-2008). Teenaged boys also stay overnight at each other’s houses, but the “sleepover” tradition is more formularized among teenaged girls.

Among the boys’ videos that I watched, two, “Choke Rope” and “Fainting game!!!,” are especially revealing. “Choke Rope” was removed from YouTube between the fall of 2013 and the summer of 2014, and “Fainting game!!!” was flagged on July 29, 2014. Because both of these videos are part of the argumentation on choking and fainting games that has been taking place in the YouTube community, I use them as examples here.

“Choke Rope” is a parody of adults’ educational videos. It was posted on September 21, 2011, by Adam, a teenaged boy, and had been viewed by 464 people when I took a close look at it. “Choke Rope” shows two early adolescent boys horsing around with a rope in their backyard. The video’s soundtrack is garbled, but that problem does not become evident until a person starts watching.

Its cleverly assonantal title suggests the possibility of both humor and violence. The two boys give their video a facetious tone, saying with exaggerated strictness, "Warning: do not try this at home!" and outlining steps that viewers should take to choke each other with a rope. Mocking serious educational videos, they shove each other, knock each other down, and go indoors, then outdoors again. They enjoy themselves hugely and expend much energy throughout the film.

The two boys' video has serious content, however. Throughout their one-minute, four-second performance, they toss around a rope, at one end of which they have made a noose. When they go inside the house, they enter a closet, and one of the boys puts his wrist into the noose. Both the choice of the closet as a location and the placement of a wrist in the noose show the boys' awareness of hanging games in closets and other enclosed spaces. At the end of the video, one boy places the noose around the other's neck, and both stare into the camera. The absence of words here has its own kind of eloquence. Have the two boys played hanging games with ropes, or are they thinking of doing so? We do not know, but the video certainly brings those possibilities to mind.

The two boys' video received no comments at all: no applause, no criticism, no questions. Nothing in the video raises the question of "true or fake?" and nothing seems terribly alarming. The fact that 464 people watched the video and nobody chose to comment through early November of 2013 shows that it had not yet become part of the dialogue on dangerous play at that point in time. Between November of 2013 and July of 2014, the video was removed from YouTube. Its removal suggests that someone flagged the video because its content seemed inappropriate for young viewers. Although I have not found specific information about the video's removal, it seems likely that it disappeared from YouTube because a staff member or a viewer questioned the appropriateness of its content.

The second boys' video, "Fainting game!!!," was flagged for inappropriate content on July 29, 2014. Its poster was League City Stunts, a group that films "all types of things, from 4wheeling to rolling people down hills in tires." The video was uploaded on May 30, 2013, and had been viewed 314 times as of November 1, 2013. By July 25, 2014, the number of viewers had risen to 2,620. This brief, 59-second video is typical of short fainting game videos made by boys. Four adolescent boys stand on a playing field, laughing and pushing each other. Two of them start to play the fainting game, first squatting on the ground and hyperventilating, then standing up and putting their thumbs in their mouths. Two other boys, one of whom looks older than the others, serve as spotters, supervising the two boys who are playing. The two players collapse, seeming to have lost consciousness, and the others laugh. The video ends shortly afterwards.

Comments on this video show why it was removed from YouTube (see Appendix). The first few comments indicate amusement; one commenter pokes fun at the legs of one of the boys. On July 29, however, Adriana, who appears to be a teenaged girl, comments, "You know you can die from playing this game or end up brain damaged." Shortly after her comment, "Music Lover" (age and gender unclear) writes, "Y'all finna [fixing to] die." The following day, the video appears with a prompt: "This video has been age-restricted based on our Community Guidelines." It is possible for viewers who can confirm their age to view the video,



but others are not allowed to see it. This restriction demonstrates responsiveness to viewers' concerns, which is a key aspect of YouTube's ground rules. Since the fall of 2013, there have been increasing restrictions and removals of videos that clearly display choking and fainting games.

### Girls' Videos

From the many available videos of fainting games created by adolescent girls, I have chosen to examine two: "Pass Out Game- Mikala and Madison," posted on June 21, 2013, and viewed 12,181 times by September 27, 2013, and "Faint game," posted on October 13, 2012 and viewed 1,726 times by July 28, 2014. Teenaged female video-makers made both films in their bedrooms, with other girls present.

"Pass Out Game — Mikala and Madison" shows five teenaged girls taking turns hyperventilating and passing out in a bedroom. The girls stand against a wall next to a bed. When they fall, they collapse onto an array of colorful pillows. They seem both excited and nervous as they perform for their friends and the larger audience of YouTube. The first comment on this video is part of a pattern that is, unfortunately, common on the Internet: men ogling teenaged girls and trying to get their attention. This comment, "Well I think you are both really cute with sexy legs!" comes from a male who self-identifies as "Steve from London"; he cautions the girls to "play safe," adopting a quasi-parental tone. Steve writes "thanks for the uploads," showing that he enjoys watching pretty girls faint; on breath control videos and others, such responses are fairly common. Comments two through six — questions and compliments — are also typical of comments on YouTube videos of fainting and choking games.

In the sixth comment, however, the young male writer, "Go Pro Hero," explains that, because he thought the game was "bullshit," he "just tried it," passed out, and woke up screaming. Although he ends his comment with the abbreviation "lol," he sounds shaken up. Is he really upset after trying the fainting game, or is he pretending to participate in the game to develop rapport with the individual who uploaded the video? It is not possible to know what he did or did not do, but it is significant that this male commenter wants to find out whether the game is "real" or "bullshit." The "real or fake" question, commonly expressed by young people on YouTube, arises often in comments on fainting and choking game videos. Debate about what is real and what is fake fuels discussion of performances of these games, as in the dialectics of the legend (Dégh and Vázsonyi 1973).

After Go Pro Hero's comment, other writers criticize the game and the girls: "Fucking Idiots," "you are killing a ton of brain cells," and "DON'T IT CAN KILL YOU." In comment 12, Caitlin, who self-identifies as an adolescent girl, writes, "Please tell me how to do this!!" Undeterred by the three previous writers' negative remarks, she seems eager to try the game herself. Like the ancient Greek Pandora, who cannot resist opening her box of troubles, Caitlin seems irresistibly drawn to the strange sensations caused by fainting games, as do the creators of the video, Mikala and Madison.

In late September of 2013, when I found Mikala and Madison's video, the video had not yet been flagged. By the summer of 2014, however, it was apparent that



Mikala was trying to evade family opposition. Her video “Passout game — Mikala and Madison” had disappeared from the Internet, and she had posted three sections of the video with different titles. In mid-July, a comment appeared on “Pass out Game — 2 Mikala and Madison”: “Reported a bunch of these btw, you really have been bad. Granddad.” This sounded like the end of Mikala’s subversive fun. Nonetheless, it was still possible for anyone to view all three fainting game videos through the end of July.

The second girls’ video, “Fainting game,” comes from Hayley, who introduces her video with the apprehensive comment “If you are going to pist [post] comments telling me its bad then go fuck yourself.” Her brief, 30-second video shows her or a friend hyperventilating, then collapsing while standing against a bedroom wall. The viewer hears laughter and then, after the girl’s collapse, the words “Wakey-wakey!” This is a typically short video from girls in a bedroom with a closed door, who are maintaining their privacy from parents and siblings while sharing their adventures with a wide audience of young and older viewers on YouTube.

Although Hayley expresses worry about receiving critical comments, she gets compliments and friendly questions from viewers of her video (see Appendix). “Steve from London,” who complimented Mikala and Madison on their fainting game, tells Hayley, “Well I think you are gorgeous!” Claiming to have experienced “*déjà vu*” after playing a fainting game, he asks her whether she has had the same sensation. Answering that she felt as if she were dreaming and does not think that Steve is “creepy at all,” she seems receptive to his overtures. Another commenter, Hizzy, asks, “you got a boyfriend?” Answering “no lol,” Hayley seems to like his question. Both Steve’s and Hizzy’s questions suggest that they would like to get closer to Hayley, and her responses do not discourage their interest. She self-presents as a young woman who has had little experience with men, and, unlike Mikala, she has not had relatives intervene by contacting YouTube. In the ambiguous realm of the Internet, this is one kind of peril of which parents need to be aware.

Choking and fainting games give young people exciting but nerve-wracking chances to test their bravery. The urge to do something risky, thrilling, and heroic is hard to resist, even (or especially) when pressure from adults provides a deterrent. Becoming dizzy, feeling disoriented, and experiencing a briefly altered state of consciousness has a strong appeal to young people on the cusp of adolescence. This experience helps young people feel brave and resilient; they have accepted a difficult, possibly life-threatening challenge and returned from an alternate state of consciousness that seems like another world. Not all kids accept this challenge, of course; some agree with adults that the games are too dangerous. But for those who do, performance of breath control games for peers, in defiance of adults’ rules, demonstrates strength of mind and determination. Worried parents want to stop the games so that their kids can stay safe and grow up to be responsible adults. Both parents and their offspring value progress toward adulthood, but they tend to have different ideas about how to achieve it. In the dynamic performance arena of YouTube, new videos appear every day. Comments on new and older videos reveal concern about truth and fakery, as well

as safety and danger. Viewers who object to particular videos can ask YouTube staff members to remove them. Although YouTube's community guidance system has placed viewer-based limits upon some videos, it has not stopped kids from posting new videos that they want to share with others. As the discourse on safety and endangerment continues, we should remember that young people feel a need to demonstrate their courage and that many of them find enormous satisfaction in peer-based video-sharing.

## NOTES

Many thanks to Simon J. Bronner and Trevor J. Blank for reading an earlier draft of this essay and sharing their insights, which I greatly appreciate. I especially want to thank Simon J. Bronner for his very helpful suggestions regarding adolescents' engagement with adults as they move toward maturity. I also want to thank Trevor J. Blank very much for his very perceptive, constructive suggestions. I presented a shorter version of this essay at the American Folklore Society's annual meeting in the fall of 2013.

1. On December 14, 2012, 20-year-old Adam Lanza shot and killed 20 children and six adults at Sandy Hook Elementary School in Newtown, Connecticut. Soon afterwards he committed suicide. Shocked by the massacre of so many children and adults, Americans questioned gun control laws and other aspects of this tragic occurrence.

2. There is no mention in this article of folklorists' studies of choking games from 1969 to 2009, although the authors note fourteen folk terms for choking games in English and one folk term in Spanish, *intento desmayo*. The authors cite an early study of fainting and choking games in the *British Medical Journal*: Howard, Leathart, Dornhurst, and Sharpey-Schafer's "The 'Mess Trick' and the 'Fainting Lark,'" which was published in 1951.

3. Scholars outside the field of folklore have examined children's and adolescents' rebellion from a number of perspectives. An analysis of childhood that contrasts adults' sheltering and spoiling of children with children's desire to rebel is historian Gary Cross's *The Cute and the Cool: Wondrous Innocence and Modern American Children's Culture* (2004).

4. See Roger D. Abrahams's *Deep Down in the Jungle* (2006 [1970]) for an insightful study of young men's defense and criticism of their mothers while playing the "Dozens" in urban Philadelphia.

5. Because YouTube videos are public documents, I have included links to videos that can be viewed online. In this article, for the sake of preserving individuals' privacy, I use first names only and do not identify full screennames. All YouTube comments are presented in their original form, without correction of spelling or syntax.

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## APPENDIX

Excerpt from comments on YouTube video "Survivors of the Choking Game," uploaded Feb. 8, 2010 by Carrie (300,509 views by July 27, 2014):

1. Sandra: Omg...people seriously? You believe that all teenagers from this video died? And their show pictures of them?? Really?? Okay i believe that someone died from that "game" and im really sorry for their parents but i really don't believe that the pictures of children who died are real.. you really think that some adults or teenager would go to the hospital and take a picture or video of survives.. no i don't think so.. no hates is just teenage girl opinion, don't believe her because all teenagers are stupid.
2. Bob: Well you're certainly not helping people think any more highly of teenagers, I mean maybe you should work on being able to post comments that don't make you look like you have shit for brains.
3. Sandra: And who are you to judge me?
4. Neecy: They are real kids ..... how can you say this is fake? She has permission from all these kids parents to use this material because it really happened. I know these parents and can say it is 100% real and kids die. My 13 year old died from it as many others have. Educate yourself and do your research if you have any doubts.

Comments on YouTube video "Fainting game!!!," uploaded May 30, 2013 by League City Stunts (314 views as of November 1, 2013):

1. Nicholas: hahahahahahaha!!!!!!
2. Connor Look at those calves on the white kid!
3. Connor: Your welcome
4. Adriana: You know you can die playing this game or end up brain damaged.
4. Music Lover: Y'all finna die.

Comments on YouTube video "Passout Game- Mikala and Madison," uploaded June 21, 2013 by Mikala (12,181 views as of 9-27-2013):

1. Steve: Well I think you are both really cute with sexy legs! Did you feel déjà vu when you came round? I used too. Anyway, play safe and thanks for the uploads. Steve from London
2. Mikala: Lol thanks!!!!
3. Mojave: Why did she fall so hard?

4. Adrian: What's your guy's twitter/Instagram?
5. Johanna: Cool T-shirt J
6. Go Pro Hero: Well I thought for sure this was bullshit never believed the game was real ... I just tried it, bend down breathed hard for half a minute, and stood up and breathed on my thumb. My dogs were pushing me and I passed out I guess, because I woke up screaming what the fuck what the fuck what the fuck with a big pain in my back. Landed on a Gopro case:/ that was terrifying lol
7. Mikala.: adrian it's @smoking\*\*\*\*\*
8. Mikala: And I know go pro. It's I cool aft ho
9. Jonathan: Fucking Idiots
10. Gentril.: Well, for starters you are killing a ton of brain cells when you do stuff like that. And I am convinced it's more noticeable because people who play this game already have fewer brain cells than average.
11. Dark: DONT IT CAN KILL YOU
12. Caitlin: Please tell me how to do this!!
13. Dark: whats crazy is she is having a seizure
14. Trinity: She fell hard
15. Savanna: the girl that fell last with the cool story bro shirt on or whatever she faked it well at least it looked like she did
16. Garrett: Yo tell that girl in the white to hmu?
17. Morgan: The cool story shirt fake ass
18. Jzone: because getting drunk is too much work
19. Theo: get rekt

Excerpt from comments on the YouTube video “Fainting game,” uploaded October 13, 2012 by Hayley (1,191 viewers by July 30, 2014)

1. Hizzy: ok lol you do it to your mates then, you got a boyfriend?
2. Super: How to do it
3. Hayley: hizzy no lol me and my step sister used to it when we were about 13 so there is some old vids from then. Im 17 now then remembered about it so we were bored one night and decided not to do it again :/
4. Steve: Wow, you were out cold. Did you feel déjà vu when you came round? I used to when I did this. Great upload, thanks. Just play safe if you haven't got anyone to catch you. I concussed myself one time! Anyway, I think your sexy, not Bering creepy, just an observation. Take care Steve from London
5. Hayley: Haha I know! No I didn't feel Deja Vu, but I do remember dreaming but I couldn't remember what about. Like when you wake up and you know you were just dreaming but you forgot. And oh dear lol I have never concussed myself although I did one time fall forward and nearly broke my nose haah. No not creepy at all lol

## **“THE SHOOTER HAS ASPERGER’S”: AUTISM, BELIEF, AND “WILD CHILD” NARRATIVES**

SIMON J. BRONNER

Having reviewed hundreds of press reports on school shootings since 2000, I find a consistent pattern of narrative speculation about the association of autism and more specifically Asperger’s syndrome with individuals who commit mass violence in America. In reporting the “motivation” for shootings by teens and young adults, the press typically relies on oral narratives provided by classmates and family members, rather than medical documentation. Often these reports cite odd, unusual, or asocial behavior by the individuals, sometimes prompted by bullying or engagement in game or music participation, that lead to an unanticipated violent outburst, colloquially called a “meltdown,” “breakdown,” or “losing it.” The press reports reflect, or respond to, a more general belief found in the population concerning the shooter’s deteriorating mental state since childhood and the notion that he, and the shooter is assumed to be male, had gone undiagnosed or kept his diagnosis secret in mainstream society, commonly with the suggestion that he should have been institutionalized or separated from “normal” youth. Pathologizing or folklorizing the phenomenon, observers often mention an unrecognized or suppressed “epidemic” of autism or mental illness along with speculation about environmental as well as medical reasons bordering on the conspiratorial for the contemporary rise of retributational violence by youth. Without discounting scientific attempts to understand brain function in relation to youth violence, I frame the discourse among such observers in the context of folk psychology, a term that has come into usage outside of folkloristics, but can be applied to issues of social interaction as manifested in traditional cultural practices of children (Haselager 1997; Thomas 2001). The key concept suggested by folk psychology is that people as part of their localized cultural experience perceive, predict, and explain one another’s actions, thoughts, and motivations, often in relation to inherited norms of social behavior expressed through narrative and ritual.

### **The Intellectual and Cultural Construction of Autism, Asperger’s, and Aspies**

Although the public has a number of beliefs about autism, and Asperger’s characteristics which is usually tied to autism, thus expressing a folk psychology, the psychiatric community has a set of definitions it circulates among its practitioners, most notably in the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders*, known by the initialism DSM and a number indicating its edition. In the most current version of DSM-5 prepared by the American Psychiatric Association, autism is listed under “neurodevelopmental disorders” as “autism spectrum disorder.” The disorder entails “persistent deficits in social communication and social interaction across multiple contexts, including deficits in social reciprocity,

nonverbal communicative behaviors used for social interaction, and skills in developing, maintaining, and understanding relationships" (American Psychiatric Association 2013, 31). The spectrum refers to relative severity of symptoms, related in the scientific literature to impairments of the development of the brain or central nervous system. Neurodevelopmental disorders that are differentiated from the autism spectrum are intellectual developmental disorder, attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder, tic disorder, and developmental coordination disorder (American Psychiatric Association 2013, 31-86). Readers will notice the absence of Asperger's syndrome from this list. In DSM-5, the American Psychiatric Association declared that "many individuals previously diagnosed with Asperger's disorder would now receive a diagnosis of autism spectrum disorder without language or intellectual impairment" (2013, 32).

Autism as a label is a little over a hundred years old, and became popular only after 1943 when American child psychiatrist Leo Kanner described eleven children with "autistic disturbances of affective contact," that is, a highly variable social impairment that he linked to a neurodevelopmental disorder (Schriber, Robins, and Solomon 2014). Kanner differentiated this disorder from schizophrenia that Eugen Bleuler, a Swiss psychiatrist who introduced the term "autism" in 1911 along with "schizophrenia" in his weighty tome *Dementia Praecox or the Group of Schizophrenias*, thought was connected (McNally 2009). Kanner hypothesized that the autistic disturbances he observed were inborn and presumably genetic. Later psychiatrists described the social impairment that Kanner described as "Kanner's infantile autism," which appeared similar to the syndrome proposed around the same time as Asperger's. One major difference is the muteness or abnormality of speech among Kanner's children in his study, whereas Asperger's was viewed as more of a social disorder and in the twenty-first century is more popularly known (Pearce 2005). Notice of Asperger's syndrome is credited to Austrian pediatrician Hans Asperger's paper "Die 'autistischen Psychopathen' im Kindesalter" in a German journal of psychiatry and neurology in 1944. In the essay, he identified patterns of children who had poor nonverbal communication skills (their speech, however, was fluent but long-winded, literal, and pedantic), were emotionally detached, displayed egocentric behavior, and were physically clumsy. Later clinicians identified additional symptoms of repetitive behavior, obsession with specific interests, and normal to superior intelligence despite difficulty in conventional school work. Although Asperger noted the association of abnormalities with the childhood years, usually among males after starting school, he noted that the traits were lifelong.

Before Asperger's paper, psychiatric literature included case histories of "schizothymic" or "schizoid" patients. Ernst Kretschmer in 1925, for example, wrote about a patient who had no friends at school, was odd and awkward in social interaction, was observed being oversensitive, and was unhappy when away from home. Drawing psychiatric attention, including folkloristic as well as psychoanalytic commentary from Sigmund Freud, such patients were described as having invented a detailed imaginary world. Freud in 1918 in his famous cases of the Wolf Man and Rat Man referred to "infantile neurosis" as a mental disorder caused by an Oedipal conflict that has been symbolically noted in the



male patient's early childhood. In adulthood, the patient displays obsessional and paranoid behaviors associated later by psychoanalysts with autism (Loewald 1974). Freud did not observe violent tendencies in his case histories of young adults plagued by this neurosis, but Kurt Schneider in 1923 identified a psychological type called "affectionless psychopaths" who pursue their own interests with ruthless indifference to other people's feelings. Although Asperger, Freud, and Kretschmer did not mention a propensity for violence in the different childhood disorders they identified, Schneider noted the possibility that "psychopaths" could harm others in pursuit of their special interests.

The connection of "affectionless" patients to autism owes largely to a 1981 paper "Asperger's Syndrome: A Clinical Account" in *Psychological Medicine* by English psychiatrist Lorna Wing. She introduced the label "Asperger's syndrome" to replace the negative, vague terms "psychopath," "schizoid," or "neurotic." Her connection of Asperger's to autism was based upon similarity of symptoms described by Asperger to Kanner's autism, such as the inability to understand that others have beliefs that are different from their own. These neurologically based deficits prevent normal social intercourse, including the ability of the children to engage in joint fantasy or to empathize with the feelings of others. The significance of the connection to autism is the shift to what Kanner (1943) called an "innate" disorder with the suggestion of genetic transmittal within families.

For the first time in 1994, and then in a revision of 2000, the American Psychiatric Association in its influential *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* (DSM-IV-TR) listed "Asperger's Disorder" (299.80) as a distinct condition (Klin 2003, 106-7). The primary features, according to the manual, were "severe and sustained impairment in social interaction and the development of restricted, repetitive patterns of behavior, interests, and activities" (American Psychiatric Association 2000, 80). The stated contrast to "Autistic Disorder" was the absence of "clinically significant delays or deviance in language acquisition ... and spontaneous communicative phrases" (American Psychiatric Association 2000, 82). No mention was made of a propensity to violence; in fact, the concern in the manual for Asperger's patients was the experience of "victimization by others" (American Psychiatric Association 2000, 82). Although the DSM-IV-TR noted occasional associations with Depressive Disorders, more frequent was a prior diagnosis of Attention Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD, estimated to affect 3 to 7 percent of all school-age children). As with Asperger's, ADHD primarily affects boys, according to the manual, ranging from ratios as high as 9 to 1 (Asperger's is 5:1). DSM-5, released in 2013, however, eliminated Asperger's as a distinct condition and placed its symptoms under a broad category of "Autism Spectrum Disorder" (American Psychiatric Association 2000, 50-59).

Placement of Asperger's syndrome or disorder on the autism spectrum by medical authorities has been disputed, primarily on the bases of the refocusing of Asperger's as a communication disorder rather than a neurological or learning characteristic. Some critics who view the autism spectrum as a social construction worry that psychiatrists have broadened the population of individuals as patients who are at the high functioning end. The diagnosis on the autism spectrum, according to this view, will stigmatize these persons and potentially concentrate

treatment on communication rather than intellectual and social issues. Another argument against the elimination of Asperger's syndrome as a separate category is a cultural defense. One report from the College of William and Mary, for example, points out that "Many also see the Asperger's diagnosis as part of their identity, especially those who have lived with the label for many years. By grouping all spectrum individuals together, they fear they will lose this, as they will not be able to relate or identify with a majority of their autistic peers under the new criteria" (Disability Services 2014). This identity for many individuals diagnosed with Asperger's is the "Aspies" who view themselves positively as "neuro-diverse" with creative, intellectual, and occupational assets (Robison 2007). They often express Asperger's as a value of being different that they do not want to change (Robison 2012). As a group whose members often communicate with one another in listservs, online networks, and special groups (including camps), Aspies nonetheless worry about being misunderstood, and feared, as diseased, incapable of social relationships, and dangerously violent (Robison 2012). Although Aspies increasingly advocate for themselves, they are aware that Asperger's has become a folk term with negative connotations in popular culture and folklore (Robison 2012; Seventhvoice 2013).

In the psychiatric community, the issue of communication skills apparently was a key in the decision to eliminate Asperger's from DSM-5. The manual stated that "individuals who have marked deficits in social communication, but whose symptoms do not otherwise meet criteria for autism spectrum disorder, should be evaluated for social (pragmatic) disorder" (American Psychiatric Association 2013, 51). Apparently responding to criticism of cultural standards for social communication, especially in narrative competency, the DSM-5 noted culture and gender-based diagnostic issues. Acknowledging that "cultural differences will exist in norms for social interaction, nonverbal communication, and relationships" (and therefore the perception of maladjustment), the manual insisted nonetheless that "individuals with autism spectrum disorder are markedly impaired against the norms for their cultural context" (American Psychiatric Association, 57; emphasis added). It hypothesized, for example, the late- or under-diagnosis of autism spectrum disorder among African American children. Still finding more males with the disorder, the manual considered the possibility that girls might be left undiagnosed because of "subtler manifestation of social and communication difficulties" (American Psychiatric Association 2013, 57).

Another factor in the elimination of Asperger's from DSM-5 was the concern of overgeneralizing behavioral difference into a definite pathology. As one writer who self-identified as an Aspie reported in response to the Newtown shooting, "If you meet somebody with Asperger's, you've only met one person with Asperger's. Asperger's is a blip on the far-reaching autism spectrum and no two cases are the same. Just as no 'typical' person deserves to be tar-brushed with the evil acts of another, Aspies don't deserve the bad press they're getting" (Inquisitr 2004). Parents in a support group I attended for caregivers for youth diagnosed with Asperger's often uttered the statement "If you've seen one Aspie, you've seen one Aspie" as proverbial wisdom, and I heard this saying in conversation with parents of Aspies elsewhere (Lovett 2005, 29-30; Snowy Owl 2005; Szalavitz 2009). It

counters the adage "Seen one, seen them all," which suggests that characteristics of an individual or thing repeated in other instances, and therefore do not have to be witnessed (Ammer 2013, 393; Mikkelsen and Mikkelsen 2006; Shapiro 2006, 11).

Despite the cautionary message in the folklore of Aspies about overgeneralizing and pathologizing non-conforming behavior, the term "autistic" has emerged in popular parlance to refer to someone socially disconnected or annoying, showing up in middle-school slang, so my children tell me, apparently to replace playground use of "spastic" and "retard" which has become repressed or obsolete. According to DSM-5, Autism and Autism Spectrum Disorder are general terms for disorders of brain development (autism first appears as a separate condition in DSM-III in 1980; in DSM-II, schizophrenics could be identified by "autistic, atypical and withdrawn behavior" and autism is totally absent in DSM-I published in 1952). In that sense, such disorders are neurological rather than psychological conditions, although diagnosis is based upon a checklist of manifest behaviors, not on a physiological examination. If it is physiological, skeptics have questioned why so many more children are being diagnosed as autistic in the twenty-first century. As of 2008, about 1 in 88 children were identified with an autism spectrum disorder and boys (1 in 54) are 5 times more likely to be diagnosed with autism than girls (1 in 252). In 2002, the number was 1 in 150, or 23 percent lower. Medical sources note the difficulty of an exact count of individuals with Asperger's syndrome, but most sources cite an incidence between 1 in 250 to 500 persons (Stanford 2003, 33-34). That suggests the syndrome to be more common than childhood cancer, muscular dystrophy, or cerebral palsy (Bashe and Kirby 2010, 18). Other estimates run between 2 to 7 per 1,000, still a small segment of the population (Baio 2014; Kuehn 2007). Even if Asperger's is no longer in the DSM, it is getting more attention in popular culture with characters on twenty-first century television shows such as "The Bridge" (2013-2014), "Parenthood" (2010-2014), "Glee" (2011), "Grey's Anatomy" (2008-2009), and "Sherlock" (2012-2013). Others such as Sheldon Cooper on "Big Bang Theory" (premiering 2007) while not identified as having Asperger's, are popularly associated with its characteristics (Learningneverstops 2012). Indeed, showing the rise of Asperger's awareness in public consciousness, press reports refer to Cooper as the first, and most popular, situation comedy character with Asperger's (Collins 2010).

The trend to depict modern-day "oddball" characters having Asperger's on television and movies raises speculation whether Asperger's cases are more prevalent in the twenty-first century because of conditions of modern society and environment, including linkages made by commentators to various children's vaccines, drugs (acetaminophen is frequently mentioned), and high-gluten and fast-food diets, or the tendency to diagnose autism more for behavior that some would call characteristic of children or particularly boys (Park 2011). In January 2014, a folkloric event occurred when Jenny McCarthy, host of the popular television show "The View," angrily answered rumors that her eleven-year-old son Evan was misdiagnosed with Asperger's syndrome or autism. The story was connected apparently with McCarthy's outspoken criticism of childhood vaccinations such as the Measles, Mumps and Rubella shot (MMR)

being responsible for the rise in autism rates (Vultaggio 2014). She also claimed to have cured her son of autism through a gluten and dairy free diet and vitamin regimen she developed from social connections (McCarthy 2008). Many postings on social media concerning the rumor referred to her questionable parenting as a single mother who served as a model for *Playboy* magazine (Johnson 2014). One comment, for example, was that "Jenny McCarthy's son might grow up to be surprisingly levelheaded, which would be a miracle considering his parentage" (Nguyen 2014). The comment arose in McCarthy's public statements on her difficulty of controlling her autistic son, who often reported his mother to the police. On her XM radio show, "Dirty, Sexy, Funny" she broadcast this anecdote: "He [her son Evan] called 911 and said, 'I am alone in the house. My mom abandoned me. I go back in the house and it's 911 and they're like, 'Your child just called. Is there an emergency?' I'm like, 'What? No! Everything is fine.'" (Nguyen 2014). Critics use this narrative to question whether she has an active boy rather than someone with a neurodevelopmental disorder (Celebitchy 2014; see also Gnaulati 2013).

Even Hans Asperger in 1943 wondered if the condition he was observing might be, in his words, "an extreme variant of male intelligence, of the male character," which appeared increasingly out of place in a feminizing or domesticating society. In other words, he opened for comment that the syndrome he observed was a case of "boys will be boys," which with Euro-American modernization appeared abnormal. British psychologist Simon Baron-Cohen hypothesized that autism in boys might be overdiagnosed to control male behavior in a feminizing society, but saw truth to the idea that autistic behavior is related to what he called an "extreme male brain," which presumes differences between typical men's and women's brains (2004). Another connection to masculinity as a problem in cases of autism is in genetics. Research has been undertaken to investigate a folk belief that violent and criminal behavior can be explained with a chromosomal deviation. The investigation hinges on an additional Y sex chromosome attached to the normal XY pairing in males, a rare condition estimated to affect 1 to 1.5 per 10,000 live births (Cashion and Roden 2011). In an attempt to explain severe temper tantrums and violent tendencies biologically, questions have been raised by popular writers as to whether patients diagnosed with Asperger's have this configuration (Miedzian 2002, 70-71).

Another line of biological investigation that responds to folk psychology questions the role of parents rather than environment and more often than not, the research subject is the mother. One proposed explanation for the rise of autism diagnoses, for example, is the increased number of pregnancies by women over the age of 40 (Moisse 2010). Although an epidemiological study published in 2010 confirmed a 51 percent higher risk for mothers over 40 compared to women 25 to 29, it did not dig down specifically to Asperger's syndrome (Moisse 2010). One study in 2012 that specifically concerned maternal connections to Asperger's children used crowd-sourced data to suggest that women who have a history of bipolar disorder or depression are more likely to have a child with Asperger's syndrome than classic autism (Wright 2012). The scientific evidence is growing for biological factors contributing to Asperger's characteristics in children, and even

before these studies became publicized, cultural representations of youth with Asperger's often pinned blame following folk psychology on a single, inattentive, or depressed mother.

### **School Shootings and the Folk Psychology of Asperger's Syndrome**

Why is the tragedy of, and the discourse that followed, the Sandy Hook shooting significant toward a modern conceptualization of folk psychology? The answer lies in the projection of anxiety about independent children and their parenting onto narratives of mental derangement in public space. Here are the facts. Around 9:30 a.m. on December 14, 2012, 20-year-old Adam Lanza, armed with guns and ammunition, entered Sandy Hook Elementary School in Newtown, Connecticut, and proceeded to fatally shoot twenty children and six adult staff members. As first responders arrived twenty minutes later, Lanza took his own life with one of the three guns he brought into the school. One of those responders was also Newtown Bee associate editor Shannon Hicks, who sent out the first photographs over AP wires of police and teachers leading children away from the school. National news agencies rushed to the scene and 24-hour news networks cut into programming to give live coverage. Confusion existed about the identity of the shooter and in the rush to report the news, national outlets such as ABC and CNN mistakenly reported that the shooter was Adam's brother Ryan and that his mother was a kindergarten teacher at the school who was found dead inside. ABC News talked to neighbors who described Adam Lanza as "odd" and displaying characteristics associated with mental illness. An AP story on December 17 quoted a high school technology club adviser who claimed that Lanza, who was a member, had a "rare condition in which he couldn't feel pain." Although 'congenital insensitivity to pain' (CIP), a neuropathic disorder, is associated with self-inflicted injuries, press informants interpreted this report as pointing to Asperger's Syndrome (Wagner 2012; see also Magee 1963)). The *New York Times* in its cover story the next day was more specific: "Some former classmates said they had been told that Mr. Lanza had Asperger's syndrome which is considered a high-functioning form of autism" (Flegenheimer and Somaiya 2012).

Other reports collected from classmates, counselors, and teachers claimed the shooter had sensory integration disorder, obsessive compulsive disorder, a developmental disability, or autism generally, but the rumor that Lanza had Asperger's had the most traction in print, television talk shows, and social media, despite the declaration by H. Wayne Carver II, the state's chief medical examiner, that Asperger's is not associated with violent behavior and his dismissal of Asperger's as a reason for Lanza's rampage (Owens 2012; see also Nano 2012). Although Carver reported looking for identifiable diseases associated with Lanza's violent action, he told the press that Asperger's "is simply not on the menu, in terms of what is wrong with this kid. Asperger's is not associated with behavior patterns that are violent" (Owens 2012). The state's attorney's report issued almost a year after the shooting refers to a diagnosis in 2005 of "Asperger's Disorder" related to "significant social impairments and extreme anxiety." It added that he "lacked empathy and had very rigid thought processes. He had a literal

interpretation of written and verbal material. In the school setting, the shooter had extreme anxiety and discomfort with changes, noise, and physical contact with others." He did not have a learning disability and tested with an overall IQ in the average range. The report related his Asperger's characteristics along with Obsessive Compulsive Disorder (OCD) concerns, emotional and/or Pervasive Developmental Disorder (PDD) spectrum behaviors, and high level of anxiety to problems of school performance rather than violence. The report underscored that "those mental health professionals who saw him [Lanza] did not see anything that would have predicted his future behavior" (Sedensky 2013, 35).

Nonetheless, in the absence of a clear motivation for the killing spree, speculation spread about whether Asperger's explained his outburst of violence. And even though reports came out of his OCD and PDD spectrum behaviors, public commentary focused on labeling him with Asperger's (Koplewicz 2012). On CNN the night of the shooting, Piers Morgan interviewed psychologist Xavier Amador, who told a nationwide audience that "a symptom of Asperger's, and this is one report coming out which may or may not be true, is something's missing in the brain, the capacity for empathy, for social connection, which leaves the person suffering from this condition prone to serious depression and anxiety" (Christopher 2012). On *60 Minutes* on December 16, Lanza family friends Mark and Louise Tambascio informed reporter Scott Pelley that Adam's mother told them he been diagnosed with Asperger's and she complained that it was a full-time obligation to take care of him, made all the more difficult as a single mother (Owens 2012). At the same time, Fox News's *Hannity* presented Dr. Marc Siegel, who told interviewers, "If he had something called Asperger's, he may have had ongoing meltdown." His remark was countered by Curtis Brainard, who covers science journalism for the *Columbia Journalism Review*: "There's absolutely no association between autism and acts of premeditated violence, such as those that we saw in Newtown" (Garfield 2012).

Among Adam Lanza's alleged symptoms was a lack of sociability and narrative competency. His high school Latin teacher told a reporter that "he didn't want to be around people." "He had a great 'Latin mind,'" she said, because the language is very structured. Suggesting that he did not fit in because he was humorless, she told the interviewer, "The day he made his first joke, I almost cried." The *New York Times* reported that he was the butt of jokes, stating, "Mr. Lanza's evident discomfort prompted giggles from those who did not understand him" (Hallbinger 2012). But most quoted informants noted that he was not bullied or ridiculed. Matt Baier, a high school classmate, summarized: "From what I saw, people just let him be, and that was that." Others mentioned that he had a positive experience in his time at Sandy Hook; there appeared to be no reason for revenge. Although he was described as a "shut-in," classmates remembered a boy involved in outdoor activities of soccer and skateboarding in addition to playing video games and reading indoors (O'Leary 2013; see also Flegenheimer and Somaiya 2012).

Classmates mentioned Asperger's in relation to his "flat affect." "If you looked at him," an unidentified classmate said, "you couldn't see any emotions going through his head." Referring to cultural expectations of middle and high school, one classmate stated, "In high school, no one really takes the time to look and

think, "Why is he acting this way?" Although he was reported talking about aliens and "blowing things up," this was, according to a classmate, "the typical talk of prepubescent boys." If classmates were aware of other social transitions such as his parents' divorce, departure of his brother to New Jersey, and withdrawal from his mother, pundits were not linking them to the Newtown shooting as much as the attribution of Asperger's. In a kind of confirming narrative coda common in legends, classmates pointed out that he was smart, having been placed in honors classes, lending credence to the belief that children with Asperger's, while not socially adept, were savants, or in the vernacular, geeks. In an unconfirmed story, a supposed friend of Adam's claimed that his mother's threat to have Adam committed to an institution triggered the violent rampage. Another blame-the-mother narrative claimed that his mother's obsession with guns influenced young Adam (Halbfinger 2012). Adam's estranged father Peter Lanza in various interviews tried to answer public association of his son's violence with Asperger's by stating that it was a name for Adam's quirky ways but he never thought of it as a condition leading to violence. For his father, Adam was a "normal little weird kid" who enjoyed his time as a student at Sandy Hook Elementary School (Ellis 2014).

The connection made in the press and on the street in Lanza's case between mass murder and Asperger's Syndrome came on the heels of a mass shooting inside a movie theater in Aurora, Colorado, on July 20, 2012. Attorneys for James Eagan Holmes, who was arrested for the crime, entered a plea of not guilty by reason of insanity but did not disclose the nature of the suspect's mental illness. Nonetheless, on MSNBC, Joe Scarborough caused a row by stating that after he heard the news of the shooting, "I knew it was a young, white male, probably from an affluent neighborhood, disconnected from society, it happens time and time again. Most of it has to do with mental health. You have these people that are somewhere, I believe, probably on the autism scale." Although he admitted that he did not know "the specifics about this young man," he generalized that "we see too many shooters bearing the same characteristics mentally" (Joe Scarborough 2012). Scarborough was skewered by the mental health community for his comments. In response, he issued a statement revealing that he had a son with Asperger's syndrome and claimed that his comments about the Aurora shooting were in the context of advocating for stronger support systems for youth with autism. He referred to the "growing Autism epidemic" that is, in his words, "a tremendous burden for children, parents and loved ones to endure" (Zakarin 2012).

The belief that people with Asperger's syndrome are violent accelerated when police identified 22-year-old Eliot Rodger for a killing spree of students in Isla Vista, California, near the campus of the University of California, Santa Barbara, on May 23, 2014. Although Rodger had not been officially diagnosed with Asperger's syndrome, Deborah Smith, the principal of a high school he attended, told the *New York Times* that he displayed "classic symptoms of Asperger's syndrome: He was socially awkward, had trouble making eye contact and was very withdrawn, if very smart" (Nagourney, Cieply, Feuer, and Lovett 2014). On Twitter, hundreds of tweets attributing his violence to Asperger's appeared with the hashtag #Aspergers with the suggestion that the condition, like a hidden virus, is dangerous because



people who have it blend into society until a violent "meltdown" occurs. The implication was that contemporary society was too tolerant of the mainstreaming of persons with mental illness. Another connotation was that Asperger's was a virulent illness that many "geeks," "gamers," and loners possess (Roberson 2014). Nichi Hodgson answered these knee-jerk responses with the complaint that variations on the belief "the dude has Asperger's" is a "mawkish non-sequitur that quickly closes down any further interrogation of the reasons for his actions, and the notion of personal agency" (Hodgson 2014). Moreover, the label of Asperger's stigmatizes and pathologizes anyone who seems odd, idiosyncratic, or iconoclastic in a mass society.

Rodger had misogynist feelings of vengeance against women that he expressed in a YouTube video and a long manuscript, but these sentiments are not part of the criteria of Asperger's (Hodgson 2014). Voicing the attribution in social media, however, offers a physically evident trigger in the absence of a rational motive. The tweets could be interpreted as folk beliefs to fill in details not available in official reports. Those beliefs not only express post-modern fears of being surprised by violent perpetrators in a world of strangers in which individuals' identities and mental states are not manifest, but also indicate the charge of mental instability in a child as a function of poor parenting. In a narrative that extends from the underlying anxiety about proper child-rearing, youth are most susceptible to coming-of-age stress in which students are pressured to conform by totalizing institutions that have a role of in loco parentis. According to this scenario, violent retribution is the tragic, sociopathic outcome of pent-up frustrations that the disease channels abnormally. The Santa Barbara County Sheriff Bill Brown, for example, said in an interview on the CBS program "Face the Nation" that Rodger had been able to "fly under the radar" and conceal his mental instability. "It's very apparent," Brown said, "that he was able to convince many people for many years that didn't have this deep, underlying mental illness that also manifested itself in this terrible tragedy" (Gazzar 2014; see also Inquisitr 2014).

Of folkloristic interest, commentators on mass shootings frequently reflected on a central trait by shooters of blurring the lines between fantasy and reality in addition to play and violence, in key cultural practices such as game playing, music fandom, and movie watching. Despite the recognition of living in an individualistic society that with consumer technology makes it easier to engage in activities alone, commentators consistently mentioned the trait of being a "loner" as a sign of maladjustment. Further, this social "disability" became a problem supposedly in not being able to recognize a culturally formed frame of play that might contain violent elements. Of special concern to commentators was the relation of secluded individuals to technology when engaged in video games with violent content and disembodied messaging through social media and texting. Commenting on an inventory of Adam Lanza's possessions three and a half months after the shooting, for example, the *New York Times* stated that "he had cocooned himself in front of electronic game consoles in the basement of their home, playing warfare games." Noting that information on the lives of the family to date has yielded little insight, the article viewed the contents as affording a "fuller picture of the dark corners of Mr. Lanza's mind." Among the



items were books connected to autism. The *Christian Science Monitor* viewed the content as revealing "a troubled young man who clipped newspaper articles about school shootings and played hour upon hour of violent video games" (Kleinfield, Rivera, and Kovaleski 2013). He reportedly had aspirations to become a Marine and participated in gun play, which the press interpreted as an oddity for a boy (Scherer and Khadaroo 2013).

Beliefs in a direct link between autism and violence also had come out in the case of 22-year-old Jared Lee Loughner, convicted of killing six and injuring thirteen people in a shooting attack in 2011 at a public meeting at a Safeway supermarket north of Tucson, Arizona. Medical evaluations diagnosed him as a paranoid schizophrenic, but psychologists speculated to the media that he had "autism or other mental illnesses." According to CNN, he "creeped out classmates and teachers with his odd behavior" (Fantz and Grinberg 2011). The *New York Times*, however, reported that "Several of Jared's friends said he used marijuana, mushrooms and especially, the hallucinogenic herb called *Salvia divinorum* ... none of this necessarily distinguished him from his high school buddies. Several of them dabbled in drugs, played computer games like *World of Warcraft* and *Diablo* and went through Goth and alternative phases" (Barry 2011: 16). The report quoted teachers who noted his sudden outbursts in class and asking incoherent questions. WrongPlanet, the primary discussion forum for autism, featured a thread, "Jared Loughner is an Aspie?" Zen wrote "What annoys me is that every time some nutcase goes on a shooting spree, the media is all, 'He was a loner, quiet, kept to himself, didn't have many friends ...' No wonder we have it rough." In response, Jared Guinther wrote, "I wouldn't doubt that he is an aspie, but I think he has a severe mental illness." The distinction here is that despite popular perception of Asperger's as a mental illness, Aspies refer to medical literature asserting that it is a developmental disability and neurological condition. Indeed, they commonly refer to themselves positively as "neuro-diverse" in contrast to "neuro-typical" society, and do not look to get "cured" or "fixed" (Jared Loughner 2011; Scally 2008).

Before the Newtown, Aurora, and Santa Barbara shootings, I wrote that expressive culture suggests an American folk psychology in which youth violence represents a failure of individual responsibility and public morality (Bronner 2011). For example, "classic" twentieth-century teen legends such as "the roommate's death" and the "boyfriend's death" portray youth as victims by crazed or insane killers, presumably adults, but in the school-shooting discourse of the twenty-first century, apparently ordinary youth whose problems go unnoticed lash out at children unreasonably and tragically, either because of a difficult family life, strange habits or clique, or bullying by peers. Nonetheless, the assumption is that they were lost socially and emotionally in mass society. When their secret "disease" is revealed, lines that were thought to be clear on what is normal and what is not are questioned, often with a reference to modern self-indulgence and lack of parental or institutional control. Another boundary that gets questioned is the division between play and reality, especially one involving violence in games and other forms of fantasy entertainment. A status anxiety becomes apparent in the role of individuals who in an open, inclusive society navigate on their own,

rather than with the support of familiar community structures such as family, religion, and school. In the absence of direct motives for an act of violence, an undetected disease of the mind, much like a virus without symptoms, is blamed for driving a lost, unguided individual to disaster.

The folk idea of the individual ill-equipped to navigate modern social worlds often leads to parables of experience, in the form of wild and diabolical child narratives, frequently with the implication that parents have lost control of their children in modern society and do not pass ethical values and discipline associated with a secure, community-based past to their children. Aware of the predominance of these narratives in society, Aspies counter with stories of successful, admired historical figures such as Albert Einstein, Isaac Newton, or Andy Warhol, who supposedly had Asperger's characteristics of asocial and repetitive behavior. This is not to say that there are not individuals who have violent tendencies, but my point is that the association of school shootings with an autism epidemic embedded in statements claiming a duplicated pattern or plot has a core of unsubstantiated belief that potentially projects anxieties of enfeebled masculinity, absent parenting, and massification in modern society. The belief especially relates to incidents in public space, which act as microcosms of a bureaucratized, impersonal culture in which traditional activities of childhood are no longer controlled by communities and parents. The discourse is indicative of the uncertainty of post-modern boundaries between normal and abnormal in which traditional control of youth from generation to generation appears in decline and communities vie with institutions for moral hegemony over public space.

Lorna Wing, who is often credited with popularizing Asperger's Syndrome, resorts to folklore to epitomize the dilemma of Asperger's as a negative disorder or positive condition. She tells the story of Brother Juniper, called the "jester of the Lord," who was one of the original followers of St. Francis of Assisi. A persistent legend is his service for a feeble poor man who longed for a meal of pig's feet. Capturing a pig in a nearby field, he cut off a foot and cooked the meal for the man. Trouble was that the pig's owner came to St. Francis in great wrath about the slaughter of his pig. St. Francis reproached Juniper and ordered him to make amends. Juniper did go to him but retold the tale of the pig's foot as though he had done the man a favor. The owner then gave Juniper the rest of the pig for the sake of charity. Her point is that the Asperger's youth is often unconventional and literal, and this can get him into trouble, but the outcomes are usually noble.

But in contemporary discourse, the more frequent legendary reference with questioning of the child's ability to discern between fantasy and reality is likely to be stories of the autistic child who, alone at home, tells his returning parent that he caught a "troll" (Emery 2012; Mace 2010). Raising narrative questions about possible symbolic equivalents of the earlier circulating story of the choking Doberman who eats the fingers of a thief who hides in a closet, the troll is found to be suffering in the "shut-in" closet. He had been a delivery person or leafletter who had come to the door. On Snopes.com, the earliest version dates to 2009 and two others from 2010 are reported, all from the United States (Mikkelsen 2013). A key element of the narrative is that the child is left unsupervised, or lacking parenting, at home. Folklorists might recognize other connections

to stories circulating in the early twenty-first century of a developmentally or mentally challenged child who, left on his own, brings a penguin home from the zoo, thinking the animal is there for the taking, and a small child mistaken for a gnome by drug-tripping young adults. Whereas earlier collected narratives mention a child with Down's Syndrome, later ones replace this with Asperger's or mention a "mentally ill" child. The legend invites commentary on the literalness of the Asperger's child, and in the case of the latter, a connotation of adults as irresponsible guardians or representatives of an addled popular culture, who have a mistaken folk perception of the Asperger's child.

The uncontrollable or "wild" child and its symbolic equivalence with animals has been the subject of numerous narratives since the eighteenth century and as late as 2008, often focusing on the consequences of isolation from humans by small children. Popular psychologist Bruno Bettelheim may have had an influence on the connection of autism in legends of feral children to autism with his famous essay in 1959, "Feral Children and Autistic Children," in which he suggested that reports of the feral children were more likely descriptions of autistic children rather than infants raised by non-humans. He hypothesized, however, that ultimately, the stories point out the problem of "extreme emotional deprivation" for abnormal children. Although he does not say so, his thesis raises the possibility that the popularity of the animal-parented story, even if the raising by animals is untrue, could be a projection of a belief that the rambunctiousness of some children, especially boys who resist "domestication," owes to poor or single-mother parenting characteristic of a modernizing society. Folklorist Michael Carroll observes that the "animal-parented stories," typically with male children suckled by a female parent, demonstrate that a female animal in the absence of a male produces an autistic or defective human being and this view is inherent in a folk psychology of the "normal" family. His conclusion is that sons who "fail to repress their Oedipal desires would suffer disastrous [sic] consequences" (1984: 81).

Yet an added trope is apparent in the discourse of the allegedly autistic shooter in modern America. The son has withdrawn from both mother and father, not embraced the mother, and displaced them with popular culture, which he cannot relegate to its proper place of fantasy as normal children can. Rather than being guided by culture, he is trapped in it, and unable to rely on traditions to help him perceive how to act properly, i.e., sedately. In saying he is autistic, narrators are projecting an attitude that the child was like anyone else but was not able to process the meaning of masculine entertainment. Violence, even if *out of character*, expresses in narrative the adult fear that the child is retrieving the male warrior ideal that eliminates the sign of mainstream society — its institutionalized children doing what they are supposed to do. In this folk logic, the boy, who was confused about what a modern man should do, becomes primal or feral and exerts revenge on other children as representatives of childhood and the institutions that could not help him. The task, then, is not just to incarcerate him as a criminal but to figure out what his frame of mind is, and by extension, examine the vulnerability of the cultural frame that surrounds neuro-typical society. The discourse of the Sandy Hook, Aurora, and Santa Barbara shootings reveals a folk psychology, especially pervasive in America, that the ultimate explanation of mass

violence, and the uncontrollable boy, is an invisible internal ailment that points away from possible external cultural factors that would make adults culpable.

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## CHILDREN'S FOLKLORE SECTION: 2013 ANNUAL MEETING

PROVIDENCE, RHODE ISLAND, OCTOBER 17, 2013

**Announcements:** The Children's Folklore section will be utilizing the new tools of the AFSnet.org website to communicate with its large membership. There is also a new *Facebook* account at <https://www.facebook.com/ChildrensFolklore>, and shortly a new Twitter account will be formed to have a more active and open forum of communication.

Volume 35 of the *Children's Folklore Review* was published, thanks to the editorship of Dr. Elizabeth Tucker of Binghamton University. This was Dr. Tucker's final year of sole editorship and will be aided next year by Dr. Trevor Blank of SUNY-Potsdam. This year's publication was a collection of past Newell Prize winners and focused on LDS (Mormon) children's lore with a special introduction by Dr. Tom Mould of Elon University.

**Attendance:** Sixteen members were in attendance, including Trevor J. Blank, Brooke Bryan, Brant Ellsworth, Spencer Green, Kristin Josvoll, Denise McCormack, Jodi McDavid, Jay Mechling, Semontee Mitra, Priscilla Ord, Randall Parsons, Jared Rife, Kate Schramm, Steve Stanzak, Libby Tucker, and Kristiana Willsey. Many others were unable to attend due to other section responsibilities.

**Convener:** Jared Rife opened the meeting with a brief introduction from present members of everyone and how long they have been involved with the Children's Folklore Section. There were numerous veterans as well as first-time attendees.

**Secretary Pro Tem:** Kate Schramm volunteered to take minutes for Priscilla.

**Treasurer:** Priscilla reported on the status of the section's finances. The section has a total of \$4,280.50 in its AFS account. Expenses for the past year were \$600 for Newell Prizes, \$400 for Opie Prizes, and \$94.50 for the AFS administration fee. Revenue for the past year was \$895.50. Figures for the three endowment funds had not been provided by AFS at the time of the annual meeting. These will be added to the final report when they become available.

**Editor:** Libby Tucker announced that Trevor J. Blank will be the new editor for the *Children's Folklore Review (CFR)*. This will be a transitional year, with Binghamton University helping to fund the *CFR*. The next issue, soon to be out, will be on Mormon children's folklore.

Priscilla, speaking as treasurer, noted that universities help pay for the journal through various forms of institutional support. Many thanks go to Binghamton University for its past and ongoing support.

**Aesop Committee:** Kevin Cordi is stepping down as chair but has asked to remain on the committee. Anne Marie Krause will be new chair of the committee.

Suzy Grindrod will be staying on. Jared Rife nominated Terell A. Young to be the new member of the committee. The nomination was seconded by Brant Ellsworth, and the members voted to confirm the nomination.

*2013 Aesop Prize*

Ellis, Deborah. *Looks Like Daylight*. Toronto: Groundwood Books, 2013.

*2013 Aesop Accolades*

Goldman, Judy. *Whiskers, Tails & Wings: Animal Folktales from Mexico*. Illustrated by Fabricio VandenBroeck. Watertown, MA: Charlesbridge, 2013.

Parry, Rosanne. *Written in Stone*. New York: Random House, 2013.

Weulersse, Odile. *Nasreddine*. Illustrated by Rebecca Dautremer. Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans Books for Young Readers, 2013.

**Newell Prize:** This year's winners are Brant Ellsworth, for "Playing for Change: The Performative Functions of Children's Piano Play," and Semontee Mitra, for "Children Have Their Own World of Being: An Ethnography on Children's Activities on the Day of *Saraswati Puja*."

A new committee needed to be formed to judge and solicit both undergraduate and graduate papers for the Newell Prize. Brant Ellsworth, Jodi McDavid, and Steve Stanzak were nominated. A discussion of the Newell Prize criteria, length, and credentials of committee members followed. All nominated members were confirmed by unanimous vote; Jodi McDavid will serve as chair.

**Opie Prize:** The Opie Prize will be awarded next year. The committee currently consists of John McDowell and needs a new person to be on the committee with him. Members will need to draw up a list of books, solicit copies, and read them. If eligible, one book list will be from beyond United States, and one book list will be from United States.

**New Business:** Trevor J. Blank gave a brief address as the new editor of *CFR*.

**Discussion:**

Jared opened the discussion concerning the quality and usefulness of the Children's Folklore Section website. Further discussion ensued as to possibility of utilizing *Twitter* or *Facebook* to generate interest in the section although it is noted that this requires a commitment from a large group of people who make it work and requires participation. Libby said that she started a *Facebook* page for the English Department at Binghamton, and the six or seven co-administrators who run it is key.

The website is deemed useful as a source for some information, such as information on the *CFR* and the Aesop Prize. In terms of the "best" place to share information (*Facebook*, Yahoo Groups, etc), social media was pointed out as an effective means of sharing ephemeral children's folklore to not only notify others while it is happening, but also to aggregate content and build a community of interest around it. By making folklore relevant to the shared material by framing it,

that commentary in turn becomes part of the content aggregation. Jodi McDavid drew a parallel to what Marc Armitage is doing.

Another issue that was brought up was what we are doing to get professors and students to write/research/promote children's folklore.

A subcommittee on social media was proposed. Randall Parsons was confirmed as chair, and Kristiana Willsey is a member.

Jay Mechling raised the issue of putting the *CFR* online, and discussion followed on the pros and cons of print versus digital journals. The possibility was raised for having short papers in the *CFR*, similar to *Western Folklore's* "Topics and Comments," to allow for the publication of good, short papers that may resemble edited conference proceedings with commentary published alongside them from several reviewers/commentators. Jay Mechling noted that previous issues of the *Children's Folklore Newsletter* had just such short articles published with commentary.

Additional discussion followed on how to solicit conference papers, promote the Newell Prize around various places, and increase visibility, from utilizing CFPs like the *Unjournal*, Amazon ads, and printing t-shirts.

Kate Schramm moved to adjourn the meeting. Spencer Green seconded.

*Respectfully submitted,*  
*Kate Schramm, Secretary pro tem.*

**Addenda:** As of August 31, 2013, although not reported until January 13, 2014, the section's endowment funds gained 2% in the 2012-2013 fiscal year. Their totals are Life Membership, \$1,400; Newell Prize, \$7,901; and Opie Prize, \$2,928.

*Respectfully submitted,*  
*Priscilla A. Ord, Secretary/Treasurer*

## NOTES AND ANNOUNCEMENTS

### Newell Prize

The Children's Folklore Section of the American Folklore Society annually offers the William Wells Newell Prize (which includes a cash award) for the best student essay on a topic in children's folklore. Students must submit their own papers, and published papers are eligible. Instructors are asked to encourage students with eligible papers to enter the competition.

Papers must be double-spaced and submitted as a Word document. On the first page, include the author's name, academic address, home address, telephone numbers, and e-mail address. Deadline for this coming year's competition is September 30, 2015. Please submit papers electronically to Dr. Jodi McDavid, [jodi\\_mcdavid@cbu.ca](mailto:jodi_mcdavid@cbu.ca).

### Book Reviews

*Children's Folklore Review* is seeking book review submissions for its next issue, to be published in October of 2015. This is an excellent opportunity for graduate students interested in building their writing credentials and demonstrating breadth in folklore, literature, and childhood studies. Books are selected for review in *Children's Folklore Review* according to their relevance to the field of children's folklore and their year of publication (within the past two years). If you would like to request a book for review, please contact the editor, Trevor J. Blank ([blanktj@potsdam.edu](mailto:blanktj@potsdam.edu)). Book reviews should not exceed 1,000 words.

## CONTRIBUTORS

**Simon J. Bronner** is distinguished professor of American studies and folklore and chair of the American Studies Program at Penn State Harrisburg. The author and editor of over thirty books, his most recent titles include *Campus Traditions: Folklore from the Old-Time College to the Modern Mega-University* and *Explaining Traditions: Folk Behavior in Modern Culture*. Formerly president of the Children's Folklore Section and the Fellows of the American Folklore Society, he now serves as editor of the reference works *Youth Cultures in America* and *Encyclopedia of American Studies*.

**Jeffrey Howard** received his M.A. in Literature and Writing from Utah State University and is currently in the Ph.D. program for English and the Teaching of English at Idaho State University. His areas of specialization include eighteenth-century British literature, specifically the author Samuel Richardson and his novel *Clarissa, or the History of a Young Lady*, and folklore, including children's folklore, Italian studies, and the supernatural. He has published in the American Folklore Society's *Digest*, and his current research deals with female trickster figures in the work of the early British novelists Aphra Behn, Daniel Defoe, and Eliza Haywood.

**Elizabeth Tucker**, Professor of English at Binghamton University, is co-editor of *Children's Folklore Review*. She served twice as president of the Children's Folklore Section and is Past President of the International Society for Contemporary Legend Research. Her publications include *Campus Legends: A Handbook* (2005), *Haunted Halls: Ghostlore of American College Campuses* (2007), *Children's Folklore: A Handbook* (2008), *Haunted Southern Tier* (2011), and, with Ellen McHale, *New York State Folklife Reader: Diverse Voices* (2013).