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"LMAO—that wasnt [*sic*?] even scary": Comments on legend-related performances on YouTube

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During the last ten years, folklorists' studies of the new media have been growing rapidly. Of the twenty-three papers presented at the annual meeting of the International Society for Contemporary Legend Research in 2009, seven analyze folklore of the World Wide Web. The Internet, which became an accessible mode of communication in 1989, has generated so many kinds of human interaction that it has kept researchers running. The first book-length folkloristic study of Internet folklore, edited by Trevor J. Blank, was published in 2009. This is an exciting time to study how legends appear on the Internet, and one of the most exciting sites to study is YouTube. Invented in 2005 by three former employees of PayPal (either at a dinner party or in a garage, depending on which legend you choose to believe), YouTube gives participants the opportunity to post short clips of films, TV shows, and music videos, as well as videos of their own. The Google corporation bought YouTube for $1.65 billion in 2006 and discovered that year that more than one hundred million people were visiting the site each day. Since then, the number of participants has grown rapidly (Cloud 2006).

YouTube

YouTube is a virtual movie theater where critics come and go, leaving positive and negative comments. The site's portability enhances its appeal. We can bring it with us and turn it on at any time of the

day or night, as long as we have Internet access. Legends, rituals, jokes, insults, and summaries of pranks emerge in comments on YouTube videos. Because of the prominence of these forms of folklore, YouTube comments deserve legend scholars' consideration. Gillian Bennett's "Playful Chaos: Anatomy of a Storytelling Session" (1989) shows how participants in oral legend-telling sessions interrupt each other, commenting upon each other's stories as the stories develop. In contrast to that interactive communication pattern, YouTube commenters do not interrupt; they respond to fully developed videos. Posters of videos may or may not reply to comments on their work, but there is certainly potential for interaction between video-makers and commenters.

YouTube has added a new dimension to children's folklore fieldwork, since it has made an enormous number of child-generated videos available. When I taught my undergraduate Children's Folklore class in the fall of 2008, I used YouTube videos as examples of children's folkloric behavior and asked my students to find videos to analyze. My research on YouTube videos resulted in the essay "Levitation Revisited," which explores origins of children's levitation rituals in magicians' performances and religious drama, examines relevant scholarship, and briefly analyzes a YouTube video in which a group of teenagers lift a friend while chanting "Light as a feather, stiff as a board" (Tucker 2008).

For the second stage of this research project, I have gone back to the same YouTube video and studied its comments. The video, filmed by a female high school student using the screen name "OmgTraceXBang" in Albuquerque, New Mexico in 2006, begins with levitation and ends with the sudden appearance of a frightening face.[1] Since the student's screen name is rather long, I refer to her as "Trace" in this essay. In analyzing the video and its comments I have been fortunate to have the help of my young research assistant, Ashley Black, who has patiently recorded data from the YouTube channels of all 238 commenters. I have also benefited from the advice of fellow folklorist Steve Stanzak, who told me about the "Maze Game" (2008), a hugely popular online game designed to scare the viewer with the shocking appearance of actress Linda Blair's face from the film *The Exorcist* (1974). Described on its website as an "Internet screamer favorite," the Maze Game, also known as the Exorcist Maze Game and Scary Maze Game, has jolted countless

people, including me ("Letusbeus" 2007). Teenagers have had an enormous amount of fun filming siblings' and friends' first reactions to the game, as a result of which there is now a genre of YouTube videos devoted to Maze Game responses.

Analytical approach

Twenty-first-century youth culture makes extensive use of New Media technology. Social networking sites such as Facebook and MySpace, online games, and other Internet attractions keep young people busy, as do games and other special features on cellular phones. Using Erving Goffman's *Frame Analysis* (1986) and Brenda Danet's *Cyberpl@y: Communicating Online* (2001), I suggest an analytical approach to YouTube video comments that recognizes intersecting frames. Goffman's "theatrical frame" fits teenagers' own videos and comments on each other's productions. In his chapter on the theatrical frame, Goffman brings up "the folk notion that everyday life is to be placed on one side and the fanciful realms on the other" (1986: 155). He wisely suggests that we should question this division. I agree that we should hesitate to apply a strict separation between theatrical and everyday behavior to young people's self-expression on YouTube. Online performance has become such a popular pursuit in youth culture that it now belongs to everyday life, where legends and other expressive forms frequently get people's attention.

To illustrate this point, I will describe an incident that took place at Binghamton University during the early evening of April 1, 2009. Several students had gathered in the apartment communities' recreation room for a program on healthful nutrition given by one of our favorite faculty Fellows; I attended the gathering as the residential area's Faculty Master. Just before the group came together, I had been doing some research on the Maze Game. As Goffman would say, I "shifted frames" to resume my role as advisor to students. One of the students flipped her cell phone open and started to play a game. "EEEEEEE!" she screamed in delight, showing the image on her phone to a friend sitting in the seat next to her. The name of the game she was playing was "Haunted," and the face she had just seen was Linda Blair's face from *The Exorcist.* I was surprised and thrilled; here, at work, I was suddenly finding material for my ISCLR presentation. "Do you know about this game?" I asked the other students

at the table (two young women and one young man). "Of course we do!" they answered, politely suppressing the syllable "Duh!" This game was one of many audiovisual amusements in their everyday lives. For the student who played "Haunted" while waiting for a program to begin, the shift from social interaction to game happened casually and easily. For me, on the other hand, shifting from one frame to another involved a demarcation between research- and work-related activities. I was (and am) a fieldworker of the "Baby Boom" generation, for whom current communication patterns represent a brave new world.

Methods

Research for this paper has differed from my previous children's folklore and legend research, because it has required many hours of online investigation. Besides reading comments, I have checked all commenters' YouTube channel websites and, if possible, their Facebook or MySpace pages. After recording information about the first 103 commentators, I was glad to delegate that task to Ashley. She found that the group of commenters included 76 males and 61 females, as well as others whose gender cannot be identified. None of the males and only one of the females seem to be real-life friends of Trace, the creator of the "Light as a Feather" video that I chose to study. Declared ages range from 14 to 108, with a concentration of ages between 19 and 28. Trace lists her age as 36 but states, in the same profile box, "I'm 15. I go to Del Norte high school." As far as I can tell, many of the people who have commented on Trace's video are teenagers and young adults who enjoy playfully altering their ages. They also enjoy onomastic play, which generates such screen names as "piratepumpkin," "Brownidgirl62," "BoberMcBoberson," "halifaxtothemax," "iwillnailyou," "heyyall!i love soccer!," "allabout-melisa," "guitar123guy," and "Lolathedog7." While the commenters have diverse interests, they also have commonalities: music (72 commenters), videogames (18), animé (22), movies (19), TV shows (20), and, of course, video-making (30).

Three-fourths of the 200 commenters who specify their home countries seem to reside in the United States; 15 seem to live in Canada, 13 in the United Kingdom, 13 in other parts of Europe, one in Central America, one in South America, seven in Australia, and

two in Asia. I say that they *seem* to reside in these areas, because in some cases the posted locations do not match the writers' self-descriptions. Playing with one's national origin is part of the fun of posting information on the Internet, so it is not easy for researchers to decipher demographics. Although I cannot provide a reliable list of commenters' ages and places of residence, I feel confident in stating that Trace's video has attracted a large audience of adolescents and young adults. As of this date (July 25, 2011), 76,658 people have watched her video.

Besides gathering information online, I have considered folklorists' studies of young people's legends and rituals. In her insightful study "'Mary Whales, I Believe in You': Myth and Ritual Subdued" (1978), Langlois explains that myth, ritual, legend, and game all pertain to children's summoning of a spirit known by such names as Mary Whales and Mary Worth. The game or ritual for summoning a hostile spirit thrives in the context of legends about that spirit's death. Alan Dundes's thought-provoking essay "Bloody Mary in the Mirror" (1998) places girls' spirit-summoning rituals in a psychoanalytic context. According to Dundes's analysis, trying to envision the spirit of a dead woman in a mirror reflects the life-crisis of puberty. My own essay "Ghosts in Mirrors: Reflections of the Self" (Tucker 2005) compares preadolescents' "Bloody Mary" legends and rituals with those of female college students. Although the ages of informants in these studies vary, all of the informants are young. From preadolescence to young adulthood, many individuals find supernatural rituals and legends to be exciting and meaningful.[2]

Frames

Since the spring of 1960, when I first heard about "Light as a Feather" at a slumber party for sixth-graders, patterns of adolescent social interaction have changed. Instead of waiting for an invitation to a slumber party, a campout, or another gathering where they can eat junk food, stay up late, and experiment with supernatural rituals, kids can surf the Web and practice social networking through Facebook, MySpace, YouTube, and other sites. With its constantly changing array of funny and scary videos, YouTube offers a virtual coed slumber party for young people with no limits on the number of participants. By posting videos and making comments, participants in this virtual

slumber party can share legends, rituals, pranks, games, and other kinds of traditional knowledge. Guests generally do not stay long in the comment area of any particular video. There are no restrictions on the number of times people can visit. This situation proves Richard Lanham's point that the Internet makes fluid, democratic information-sharing possible (1993:106). YouTube's open interaction includes games, pranks, jokes, insults, and legend- and personal experience storytelling, as well as creation of a legend-like atmosphere.

In *Cyberpl@y*, sociologist and pioneering Internet researcher Brenda Danet presents college students' playful party behavior online as the product of five frames of interaction. From the largest to the smallest, these frames are:

REAL LIFE
THE INTERNET RELAY CHAT GAME
PARTY
PRETEND PLAY
PERFORMANCE (2001:102).

The above schema effectively situates college students' playful performances within the frame of a party that belongs to an Internet game, one of many entertainments inside the broader frame of Real Life. The "Pretend Play" frame reminds us that such Internet performances tend to be fanciful. One of the Internet's most appealing features is its allowance of imaginative play that can take place at any hour of the day or night.

According to Danet, the meta-message of playful online performance is "Let's show each other what we can do with the keyboard" (2001:105). She examines performances that express or provoke laughter, finding that Roger Caillois's "ilinx" category applies well to online behavior. Ilinx means "whirlpool" in Greek; it represents games and play that result in dizziness or disorientation (Caillois 1961:23). Danet aptly observes that in the rich environment of certain Web sites, "even a one-line pun is a 'tiny ilinx'" (2001:145). My own research on levitation confirms Danet's observation. When playing online, adolescents and young adults enjoy both causing and experiencing shock and disorientation within safe circumstances. By posting startling videos and commenting on other videos that surprise viewers, they participate in a satisfying form of ilinx play.

I have adapted Danet's schema to demonstrate how comments on Trace's levitation video appear within nested frames:

REAL LIFE
YOUTUBE
VIRTUAL SLUMBER PARTY
ILINX PLAY
PERFORMANCE OF LEVITATION RITUAL
COMMENTS (IMPROVISED PERFORMANCE)

As in Danet's original schema, performance appears inside the frame of play within the larger party frame. Here, however, there are two kinds of performance: videos and comments. Videos that include rituals follow certain traditional expectations, while comments on the videos leave more room for improvisation.

While YouTube comments do not have the same dramatic intensity as the videos they critique, they can, like the videos, entertain and dispel boredom. Much of the wordplay on YouTube aims to surprise, shock, annoy, and amuse the viewer. This wordplay contains various acronyms for laughter—LMAO, ROFL, and others—which can indicate either praise or scorn.[3] YouTube's tolerance for jeers, insults, and four-letter words leaves young people free to criticize each other openly; they seem to enjoy having that freedom as they respond to each other's videos and comments. Praise for good videos also appears fairly often.

Before turning to specific comments on Trace's video, I want to consider meta-messages related to folklore genres. Young people's supernatural rituals convey the meta-message "Will it work?" For "Light as a Feather" rituals, the more specific question is "Will this person rise up into the air?" Pranks have different meta-messages, one for pranksters and another for their targets: "Can I victimize this person?" and "Will I fall for this, or won't I?" Both pranks and legends involving horror raise the questions "Did this scare me? And if it did, was this a good scare or a bad one?" To make this array of meta-messages even more complicated, I should mention that contemporary films often provide some of the most vivid examples of supernatural rituals. When teenagers comment on a YouTube

levitation video, they are quite likely to be thinking about *The Craft* (1996) and other films and TV shows, as well as levitation performances that they have witnessed themselves.

Discoveries

When I started reading the comments on Trace's 2006 levitation video, I found that numerous commenters wanted to assess how well Trace and her friends had followed rules for successful performance of levitation. Shortly after the video appeared on September 1, 2006, "RedHeartsXBlackrose" wrote, "the only reason why nothing is happening is because you're doing the entire ritual wrong." Trace immediately replied, "we know we were, love. The only reason this was made was for the exorcist thing at the end. We were in a band room, filled with people and their instruments, obviously we knew nothing was gonna happen. duh." Her explanation shows that she understands what kind of setting young people would usually choose for levitation: a private location with minimal interference from non-participants. A year after the posting from "RedHeartsXBlackrose," "inachu" commented, "I have done the *real* light as%" (italics mine), adding, "You can do this also with the one being tossed sitting on one of those metal trash cans." One wonders whether inachu had learned the trash can method from a friend's demonstration or from a different video on YouTube.

While some comments critique the video performance's correctness, others express resistance to feeling scared. About a year after the video appeared, "lair89" commented, "I knew it was fake and something was going to pop out at the beginning since you all weren't even doing it correctly. Didn't scare me." A little later, "sassymothercat" wrote, "I did not read the comments, and my 6 year old sister did not even flintch. Me either!" [*sic*]. Immediately afterwards, kalburt complained, "I hate flash pranks." More recently, "1stCassiusStorme" wrote, "I didn't jump or get shocked or anything…I'm going to show my little sis, who is absolutely a screamer!" Here we see an older sibling pleasurably planning to get the better of a younger one—and he or she seems to have had plenty of experience at doing just that.

When do YouTube video comments show that a "good scare" has taken place? Various positive but scrappy-sounding comments

come from teenagers who feel surprised but not seriously victimized and stimulated but not shocked. Their comments focus on moments of laughter and disorientation: in Danet's terms, tiny ilinxes. Representative comments include one from "phorque2"—"I love it when these kinds of things catch me completely off-guard :D"—and one from "SuzQ101": "that scared me. I put my hand over my eyes at the end. I love horror stuff, but I can never look at pictures like that and hear someone screaming! Congrats." After SuzQ101's positive evaluation, Trace wrote "thank ya ☺." Some other responses have a less clear positive or negative orientation. One from "Phorque2," "AHAAHAAHAHAHAHAHAHAHaslidfhalis dhfilashdflishdfsa," made Trace ask, "I'm not sure if that was a good or bad reaction?" When phorque2 replied "good reaction," Trace wrote "haha okay good :D."

The sequence of comments on Trace's video shows that virtual slumber party participants enjoy evaluating each other's work and playfully developing legend-related material. According to Brenda Danet, Internet chat can be "much like a jazz jam session in which some of the players happen to appear and spontaneously begin playing with the others, without necessarily having played with them before" (2001:101). Verbal jam sessions let commenters demonstrate their creativity and knowledge of folk tradition. Among the forms of folklore that they can choose to share, legends and legend parodies are especially popular. Firmly entrenched in the "real world" but also intriguing and surprising, legend-related performances add humor and mystery to group play.

One sequence of responses to Trace's video presents "Latualatuka," a chain-letter message that has spread virally across websites where people can comment on movies or videos. This message has become so well known that it appears on the Web-based *Urban Dictionary* ("Letusbeus" 2007). The first comment on Trace's video that makes use of "Latualatuka" comes from "fonsio3," a male teenager from the Philippines:

> In 1945, a young girl named katu lata kulu came over to America in a grey boat from Africa. A mysterious man killed her by cutting the word "LATUALATUKA" into her back. Now that you have read this message, she will come to your house on a full moon and

> steal your soul unless you follow these directions: 1. Retype this message as a comment for three other videos.

Right after this comment appears, "cky727" sarcastically replies, "wow that's a lot of directions isn't it." After that putdown, "fifteensixtyfive" offers a self-referential version of "Latualatuka":

> In 2007, a young girl named fifteensixtyfive signed onto YouTube. She saw a mysterious message about a young girl who came to America in a grey boat (because, face it, grey is the scariest of all colors, eh?) from Africa. Now that you have inspired this message she will come through your computer on a full moon and BITCH SLAP YOU.

Cky727 immediately answers fifteensixtyfive's message with the putdown "Yawn, lots of people don't read the comments eh?" and Trace replies, "nope."

Both of these chain-letter narratives about mysterious messages are legend parodies, and both bring to mind the popular movie *The Ring* (2002), in which viewing a certain videotape leads to an early death. "Latualatuka" narratives have circulated through text-messaging, Facebook, and MySpace, as well as on film or video comment sites. While fonsio3's narrative closely follows the usual details found on comment sites, fifteensixtyfive's adaptation shows that she has creatively adapted the boring, virally repetitive story to make herself a central character who jumps out of a computer to "BITCH SLAP" unsuspecting You Tube users. Here we see a "Bloody Mary" or "Mary Whales"-like figure appearing on a computer screen rather than a mirror, indicating that computers provide favorable sites for supernatural visitations. This ghostly figure seems angry and vengeful, like the male revenant in the film *Candyman* (1992).

A longer series of humorous improvisations refers to mothers. Getting back at Trace for startling them with the *Exorcist* face, commenters humorously insult her. In one derogatory comment, "thegame9100" writes, "Wow that was SOO Scary. I almost flinched. But wait whats this? Breaking news! LAME AS HELL AND OLDER THEN YOUR MOM!" [*sic*]. *The Exorcist* came out in 1973, so it may indeed be older than some mothers of teenagers. "Dildo-factorytester" responds, "How'd you get a picture of my mom?"

Soon after that comment, "rocketlauncher2" asks, "How did you get a picture of my mom? WHO ARE YOU?!" This expression of injured innocence is, of course, meant to be funny. A few comments later, "xxlinkinparkloverx" queries, "How come you put a picture of your mom taking a bubble bath? Wtf?" All of these references to a familiar, mockable mom effectively deflate the scariness of the suddenly emerging image of Linda Blair's face.

In contrast to "Latualatuka" legend parodies and humorous insults, we find among the comments on Trace's video a story representing the kind of legend-telling that often precedes levitation. I include examples of this kind of storytelling in my essay "Levitation and Trance Sessions at Preadolescent Girls' Slumber Parties" (Tucker 1984). In trance sessions, a member of a group tells horror legends to someone who will be lifted up soon. About a year and a half after Trace's video appeared, "nesirac" posted this description and narrative:

> a fun way to do this is to be in a semi dark room, and fake a story something like this but longer (make sure their eyes are closed to get the full effect): You are walking along a cliff and as you look over the edge you see the creek bed below, you slip off the edge and your falling falling falling falling falling...then you hit the ground. paramedics show up and take you to a place that you think is a hospital, they cut open your arms (you drag your finger along their arm to simulate what you say you are doing to him/her) and they place rocks in them, followed by some bricks. they top it off with cement and sow your arm back together (and you simulate each thing) you try to move, but you cant. you try to move your legs but it's no use they are of no use. (pause for 15 or so seconds) "light as a feather stiff as a board" slowly repeat a couple times then with one or two fingers, rise the person up. if done the right way, when they open their eyes, their weight will come back and they will fall to the ground. This has been known to cause heart attacks so be advised.

This richly detailed trance session summary demonstrates the importance of legends as precursor of young people's rituals. Although nesirac writes that storytellers should "fake a story" before helping to perform levitation, it seems evident that levitation participants take this kind of storytelling very seriously. Nesirac begins with a description of a terrible accident followed by an attack by evil

paramedics, who stuff rocks, bricks, and cement into the victim's arms, much as the huntsman fills the wolf's belly with rocks in the Grimms' tale "Little Red Riding Hood" (Ashliman 1999). This stuffing of the victim's arms with heavy substances makes the victim feel "heavy as lead," one of the formulaic phrases associated with levitation. Completion of the story leaves the victim in an immobile state that resembles sleep paralysis. Here we see a coming together of legend, tale, and dream or nightmare, in which the story's central character becomes scared and disoriented, imagining horrible injuries and immobility that culminate in apparent death and the upward movement of levitation.

Conclusion

Shock, horror, and laughter all fit Caillois's ilinx pattern, as does the dizziness caused by being lifted up by friends after a story's conclusion. Within the overarching frame of ilinx play, online performers can draw from various folk genres. In videos, they can perform rituals of intense interest to their peers. In comments, they have numerous other options. They can tell scary trance session legends, share horrific and annoying legend parodies, describe pranks played on younger siblings, and deliver funny insults to get the attention of fellow virtual slumber party participants. Although multiple folklore genres come into this mix, legends and rituals provide some of the most meaningful entertainment. Offering disorientation and humor, they challenge, delight, and irritate viewers of videos and readers of comments.

Regarding young adults' interaction online, Brenda Danet has insightfully identified performance as an aspect of play that takes place within the frame of a virtual party and the larger frame of an Internet site. Since many Internet sites promote playful interaction, there is much potential for further research of this kind. Frames that surround videos and comments on YouTube have helped visitors to the site engage in storytelling, insult-swapping, and other kinds of communication. Will such communication continue as Internet technology keeps changing? Given the tenacity of folk tradition, I expect that it will. A plethora of playful interactions awaits all of us who wade into the whirlpool of ilinx play, enjoying immersion in ever-evolving youth culture.

Notes

[1]The citation for this video is listed under its creator's full screen name, "OmgTraceXBang," with the url that identified the video at the time of its posting. A quicker way to find the video and others by its creator is to type her screen name into the "search" box of YouTube's home page.

[2]Some artistic videos made by young people also reflect interest in rituals and legends. One of the winners of the Rod Serling Video Festival in 2009 was "The Bloody Mary Experience," created and directed by two high school seniors from Cropseyville, New York. Video-making offers exciting opportunities to play with the shock and horror that rapidly appearing frightening figures inspire.

[3]"LMAO" means "laughing my ass off"; "ROFL" means "rolling on the floor laughing." ":D" signifies "big grin"; "wtf" means "what the fuck."

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