

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

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*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.

**WORKS CITED**

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