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From the Editor

Elizabeth Tucker

This thirty-fourth volume of *Children's Folklore Review* offers research by children's folklore scholars in both the United States and Japan. I am delighted that our journal is continuing to publish international submissions and want to encourage other international scholars to submit manuscripts for future issues.

The first article, "Manipulating Play Frames: The Yo Momma Joke Cycle on YouTube," was written by Steve Stanzak, one of the two co-winners of the William Wells Newell Prize in 2011. Stanzak's innovative article analyzes YouTube performances of jokes, in which the way the jokes are told seems to be a more important source of humor than the jokes themselves.

Besides Stanzak's Newell Prize-winning essay, this volume of *Children's Folklore Review* contains three other essays. Linda Kinsey Spetter's "Zashikiwarashi, The Ghost That is Saving Japan" explores the relationship between traditional stories about ghosts of unborn children and current social problems in Japan. It is very interesting to see that this ghost has six different visual representations, one of which is on the cover of this volume of *Children's Folklore Review*. Robyn M. Holmes's "Young Children's Table Talk with Peers in Early Childhood Settings" examines the intricacies of young children's conversation during lunch, taking into account gender, social class, and other important variables. In contrast to Holmes's study of young children, my own essay "The White Lady of Devil's Elbow" addresses the behavior of teenagers who play pranks related to a well-established local ghost legend near Owego, New York.

All back issues of *Children's Folklore Review* except the most recent one are now available on the Internet on Indiana University's Scholar Works Web site. It is wonderful to know that the research published by our journal is now accessible to anyone who has a computer.

I want to thank the Dean's Office at Harpur College of Binghamton University, which generously supports *Children's Folklore Review*. 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.

If you would like to review a book on children's folklore or a related subject, please contact our book review editor, Li Cornfeld: licornfeld@gmail.com.

Submissions and comments are always welcome. Please feel free to contact me any time: ltucker@binghamton.edu. Thank you very much for your support of our journal.

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Manipulating Play Frames: The Yo Momma Joke Cycle on YouTube

Steve Stanzak

Despite their prevalence on school playgrounds, the Internet, and mass media, modern forms of the Dozens have garnered surprisingly little notice from folklorists. This lacuna is particularly unfortunate considering the important role played by folklorists such as Roger Abrahams in bringing this verbal dueling tradition to the attention of the scholarly community. Abrahams's seminal 1962 study, based on his fieldwork in a Philadelphia ghetto, examined the Dozens as performed in urban African American communities. When "playing the Dozens," Abrahams tells us, participants direct ritual insults at their opponents' family, most often their mothers. These insults are often highly stylized, contain sexual or obscene themes, and are sometimes rhymed, as in this Dozen collected by Abrahams:

> I f----d your mother in a horse and wagon,
> She said, "'Scuse me, mister, my p---y's draggin'"[1] (1962, 216).

Other Dozens are less stylized and more likely to be recognizable to a modern audience, as in the Dozen below, recorded in the 1960s.

> Your mother's so skinny, about that skinny, she can get in a Cheerioat and say, "Hula hoop hula hoop!" (Labov 1972, 133).

Although a version of the above Dozen is still told among children today, there are still significant disconnects in both content and performance between the Dozens that were observed by Abrahams and those of contemporary children and adolescents. Little ethnographic or analytical work on the Dozens tradition has been conducted in the past several decades, despite their continuing presence in the social life of children and adolescents. My goal here is to demonstrate that not only have the Dozens survived and done well, but they have also adapted to changing social and technological contexts. This goal will be accomplished by examining one particular subgenre of the Dozens that remains exceedingly popular among children and adolescents: the Yo Momma joke. First, I will identify both the connections and disjunctions between the Dozens described by earlier scholars and one iteration of the Dozens—the Yo Momma joke cycle—so that a tentative formal and functional definition of the Yo Momma joke can be offered. Second, I will analyze Yo Momma jokes on the video social networking website YouTube, which has emerged as a key site for their performance. While the content of Yo Momma jokes is usually traditional, YouTube offers innovative new ways for participants not only to manipulate jokes' performance contexts, but also to create new contexts entirely. Many Yo Momma jokes on YouTube are no longer functional ritual insults; instead, they have been embedded into virtual folk dramas

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in which performers act out hypothetical verbal duels. These mock-duels engage with the Yo Momma joke's traditional form and content in ways that interrogate notions of play and seriousness.

Method

The most attention to Yo Momma jokes comes in the form of published joke collections and amateur websites. However, the jokes in these collections remove the performance elements of their original joking sessions and thus lack the contextual data necessary for this study. My research of Yo Momma jokes on YouTube takes into account those performance contexts absent from these collections. YouTube is a website that provides a digital space for Internet users to view, share, and comment on videos uploaded by anyone with access to a web connection and a device capable of recording video. Most users of YouTube only use the website for watching videos, but others create an account with the site in order to post their own videos, comment on existing videos, or "subscribe" to their favorite video producers. For active users, YouTube provides an arena for extended interaction with a diverse range of social groups.

One of the most persistent problems I encountered while collecting data for this project was the transient nature of the materials. Too frequently in the early stages of my research did I return to a video I had recently viewed, only to find it removed by the user. I can only speculate on the reasons why users remove their videos or even delete their accounts entirely, but I suspect that it has to do with how children constantly refashion their identities on the Internet. A video that inspired pride or amusement at age eleven might be seen as embarrassing at age thirteen. On the other hand, many of the videos I surveyed for this project have been on YouTube for several years. Still, after several frustrated experiences with removed videos, I began transcribing those videos I used for my research. As will be seen in several instances below, these transcripts have been useful in cases in which videos have since been removed.

For my data collection, I informally surveyed several hundred videos that their creators had identified as containing Yo Momma jokes.[2] This method had some inherent limitations, as I could only find videos that were correctly labeled with this information. Patricia Lange, who has extensively studied social networks on YouTube, describes how video producers on YouTube manipulate tags and titles to control access to their videos (2007). In my searches, I was only able to find videos that were publicly identified as containing Yo Momma jokes. My search still revealed several thousand videos containing the search term "yo momma" or one of its variant spellings. The sample I use here was not arrived at randomly; it was limited by my choice of keywords and biased by the order videos were displayed by the YouTube website—I was much more likely to view videos that showed up in the first few pages of my search results than videos buried in the thirtieth page of search results. From these videos I found in my keyword searches, I sought out those that presented actual people performing Yo Momma jokes. I excluded a number of videos that were commercially produced (either from commercials, television shows, or movies) and videos that were simply Yo Momma jokes written

in text on the screen, often accompanied by background music. Also excluded were a number of videos that dubbed Yo Momma jokes told by professional comedians, usually George Carlin, over some other scene.[3]

The use of Internet data raises ethical questions that have been insufficiently addressed by folklorists. In my own research, I have treated YouTube videos as broadcasted, published materials. The site itself promotes this view; comparisons to television are contained in both its logo and its name, as well as the site's slogan "broadcast yourself." Although the Internet is by and large a public venue, there is still a range of privacy expectations held by Internet users (Lange 2007). Users have means by which to limit access to their videos, and many seem to have either removed or limited the audience of their videos between the research period and publication. However, all videos examined for this project were available to public viewing at one point and accessible to search engines through creators' use of appropriate tags and titles. Where possible, I have identified participants by first name. When real names are not identifiable, I use the username if it can be safely assumed that the performer is the same person as the video producer; otherwise I use descriptive identifiers. I have included user name and web addresses for all videos still online at the time of publication.

Arriving at a Definition of Contemporary Yo Momma Jokes

I will attempt to distinguish Yo Momma jokes from the Dozens based on my tentative observations, but an exact classification is difficult. The Dozens are a genre of ritual insults that encompasses a wide range of diverse forms, including the form now called the Yo Momma joke.[4] These jokes are marked by a particular structure that has remained relatively stable over time. Despite this formal conservatism, contemporary Yo Momma jokes often differ significantly from those collected in the 1960s and 1970s.

Thus, arriving at an updated definition of the Yo Momma joke must entail a reckoning with its history and a disentangling from the larger Dozens tradition. One notable discrepancy between the Dozens as collected and analyzed by earlier scholars and those Yo Momma jokes performed by youth today is the identity of their performers. Although some scholars acknowledge that the Dozens were also performed among white adolescents (Ayoub and Barnett 1965; Labov 1972, 140-41), most analyses of the Dozens emphasize their function in the social and psychological lives of urban African American communities. John Dollard suggests that the insults act as a pressure valve to relieve some of the psychological anxiety felt by African Americans. He theorizes that this anxiety is displaced from the actual target of hostility onto the safer target of the peer group, where it is framed as play and made safe (1939, 20-21). Roger Abrahams partially rejects this hypothesis and offers two others. The first hypothesis centers on the typical family structure observed by Abrahams in South Philadelphia in the 1960s, which he classifies as a matriarchy. In this type of family structure, African American boys must struggle to form a masculine identity and in doing so are rejected by the family. Abrahams argues that forming this identity requires a violent shift from feminine to masculine values. This transformation is enacted through playing the

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Dozens, which not only attacks the feminine as embodied in the mother but also affirms the participants' masculinity (Abrahams 1962, 213).

Abrahams also touches upon a social function of the Dozens, theorizing that they contribute to the development of verbal skill essential to the successful social life of adult African Americans. Later scholarship on the Dozens emphasizes this social function rather than the psychological model favored by Dollard and Abrahams. Harry Lefever proposes that the Dozens act as a nonviolent means for social control, in which African American men learn how to control their temper while under verbal assault (1981, 76). Lefever argues that performing the Dozens among peers hardens African American men to obscene and vulgar insults that might have been directed at them by antagonistic whites. Ayoub and Barnett, examining instances of verbal insults in a white high school, suggest that playing the Dozens is important in establishing one's identity within a peer group because the insults emphasize that peer group bonds are more important than protecting one's mother from verbal attack (1965, 341).

Many of these functions theorized by scholars of the Dozens must be reevaluated, as they largely posit race as the primary factor in their telling. Yo Momma jokes have been common among non-blacks for decades,[5] and although race still plays a role in contemporary Yo Momma jokes on YouTube, it is a much diminished one.[6] Most of the Yo Momma joking sessions on YouTube were performed by white adolescent males, although African American, Latino American, and Asian American performers were also represented, as well as women, younger children, and young adults. The performance of Yo Momma jokes today must be disassociated on some level with research done by previous scholars working within completely different contexts, and new functional explanations should be investigated.

The function closest to the surface seems to be the entertainment value of the jokes themselves. Although the Dozens were certainly performed for entertainment, their competitive, dueling function seems to have been foregrounded. Performers of contemporary Yo Momma jokes, however, have reversed this emphasis, instead highlighting the role of Yo Momma jokes in providing amusement to both participants and audience. Yo Momma jokes on YouTube are often a performative event in which participants collaborate rather than compete.[7] In all cases, these performances offer participants an opportunity to showcase not only their verbal skills, but also their ability to create a framework for performance. Most videos I observed were not candid recordings of spontaneous Yo Momma joke sessions, but rather framed as planned performances for a particular viewing audience. Several participants emphasized their role in constructing these Yo Momma joke sessions:

Mike: "Peace up."
Sean: "Woooord."
Sean: "Alright. Today, we're going to do some mama jokes."
. . . . .
Sean: "Um, so basically, we're gonna go now. Hope you enjoyed the video and we'll see you later."

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Mike:	"Peace out to all my YouTubers, MySpacers."
Sean:	"Oh yeah!"
Mike:	"Let's go"
Sean:	"Let's go MySpace!" (scpafc 2007)

Teenage Girl:	OK people, we're going to teach you some good your momma jokes."[8]

These performances are set apart from ordinary discourse by the very fact of their medium: the participants intentionally chose to record their joking sessions and post them on YouTube with titles and tags referencing Yo Momma jokes. In addition, participants frame these events as joking sessions through announcements of their intentions and their intended audience. In both examples, it is obvious that the joking session is planned rather than spontaneous, even though what happens within the joking session may be less scripted.

Although entertainment and performance concerns lie at the forefront of contemporary Yo Momma jokes, scholars have also proposed other functions. A cognitive function is intimated by Benjamin Bergen and Kim Binsted, who theorize that such jokes provide children with an introduction to verbal play and assist in the formation of conceptual relations between objects and people (2003). With Yo Momma jokes, the mind must work to grasp the relationships between the different constituent elements of the joke and in doing so grapple with linguistic devices such as hyperbole, understatement, imagery, and metaphor. In addition, these jokes are formulaic, built on structural models of varying complexity. Although linguistically simple to repeat, they are difficult to successfully create.[9]

A socialization function has also been suggested. As noted above, Ayoub and Barnett hypothesize that playing the Dozens emphasizes peer bonds over familial ones. Similarly, Yo Momma jokes emphasize friendship bonds that are tested and stretched through the creation of a play framework. Labov and Lefever both claim that the Dozens are told largely among members of the same in-group, and my own research on contemporary Yo Momma jokes reinforces this assertion.[10] Children may play Yo Momma jokes because it is a social activity that may be done among friends and even, counter to expectations, among family members. These performances acknowledge the shared social framework of the participants.

In addition, children may find this joking form fascinating because of the referential content of the jokes themselves. Numerous scholars have pointed out the prevalence of obscenity and subversion in children's folklore (for an overview of this scholarship, see McMahon and Sutton-Smith 1999, 300-08), and Yo Momma jokes certainly possess both features. The obscenity in these jokes not only challenges adult conceptions of taste but is often attributed to the mother herself, disrupting her stereotypical role as defender against the obscene.

Simon:	"Well listen, yo mama's so fat when she's on toilet she need a map to find her asshole" (Halfcastkid 2008).
Alex B.:	"Yo mama's so manly her balls are bigger than yours!" (bbumps123 2008)

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Obscenity is not the only subversive feature of Yo Momma jokes. A joke from four-year old Aaron shows how Yo Momma jokes can subvert traditional family power structures:

> Your mama's so fat that
> she went and threw the fish tank in the car that
> she broke the, the like, she broke the shade with the part and said
> she said, "Mom, Dad, I broke my shade part" and then
> she went to the living room and changed again, had to stay home
> (thecomputernerd01 2007).

The mother here is presented as the very embodiment of excess, hardly discernable from the four-year-old child who tells the joke. The mother of the joke has no control over her body, emotions, or environment. She throws a fish tank in the car, which causes her own parents to punish her. By effectively transforming the mother into a child, Aaron creates through his joke a world turned upside-down, one in which he is in control through his verbal skill and his mother is the one who is unrestrained and punished for it.

The Structure of Yo Momma Jokes

In regard to form, Yo Momma jokes are distinct, stable, and easily identifiable. Attempts to define Yo Momma jokes on the basis of form have been recently undertaken by Bergen and Binsted, who classify Yo Momma jokes under the category of "scalar humor." Briefly, scalar humor is defined as a subset of humor that manipulates ambiguous conceptual relations of scale in order to highlight incongruous relationships between objects or ideas (Bergen and Binsted 2003). Bergen and Binsted formulate a linguistic blueprint for scalar humor that follows the construction: "X IS SO Y THAT Z." Although Yo Momma jokes utilize this formula, it is also used by non-humorous expressions, as in this example: "It was so cold in the arctic circle that we found frost on the lettuce" (2003, 6). Here, the relationship between the first clause and the second is sensible. The first clause sets up a scenario ("it was so cold in the arctic circle") that is fulfilled in the second ("that we found frost on the lettuce"). This statement is not funny because the relationship between the two clauses is logical and expected. For this construction to be considered humorous, the implied relationship between the first clause and the second must fail to be fulfilled. This is accomplished by a number of rhetorical devices that manipulate or distort the implied relationship, such as hyperbole, understatement, polysemy, metaphor, or imagery. Consider the scalar joke "Yo' mama's so fat, when she was diagnosed with a flesh eating disease, the doctor gave her 5 years to live" (Bergen and Binsted 2003, 7). Like the previous example of the lettuce, this joke also uses the "X IS SO Y" construction. However, unlike the last example, this one is humorous because the second clause disrupts the logical relationship of scale implied by the first clause: the doctor's prognosis is nonsensical except in the world of humor, where mothers of extraordinary weight reside. Humor results from the "X IS SO Y" construction when there is a "mismatch

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between the hearer's expectations about the utterance and its actual realization" (Bergen and Binsted 2003, 3).

Although Bergen and Binsted offer a thorough examination of scalar humor based on linguistic analysis, they do not take performance contexts into account. Here, I wish here to make several modifications to their structural framework based on my own observations of Yo Momma jokes in performance. I propose four key constituent elements that contribute to the structure of Yo Momma jokes. The first and most characteristic element of these jokes I label the *introductory formula*. This element contains the formulaic opening that gives the joke cycle its name: "Yo Momma so," containing both the subject of the insult as well as the required intensifier "so." The introductory formula is the primary framing device for the joke; it signals to participants that a framework for play is being constructed and that the discourse within the frame is not to be taken seriously. The following failed start of a Yo Momma joke told by Alejandro[11] illustrates several key features of the introductory formula:

> Yo Momma's so fat she—
> your momma's so ugly—
> [*Alejandro's mother walks into the room*]
> Sorry sorry sorry.
> This is a momma joke. Don't—
> Run away.
> If you're a mom, please run away.[12]

As can be seen from this example, Alejandro constructs a play frame using the introductory formula that gives him license to tell a Yo Momma joke. However, Alejandro has several concerns about the effectiveness of the frame. Either he doubts that this licensing given by the frame is adequate enough to allow telling of the joke in front of the actual insult target (a mother), or he is unsure that adults hearing the joke will understand the play framework that he constructs. In either event, Alejandro makes the play frame explicit to his audience, emphasizing that that what he's saying "is a momma joke." The presence of this overt declaration is perhaps due to Alejandro's young age and his insecurity with the joke form; it is doubtful that older children would have found such distancing maneuvers necessary in this context. Although Alejandro firmly establishes this framework through the introductory formula and an unambiguous explanation, Alejandro still warns all mothers listening to "run away" while he tells his joke. The introductory formula as a framing element is crucial to successful performances.

Variations upon this formula are possible, but were rarely found in the videos observed. The intensifier "so" is critical to the effectiveness of the joke because it sets up the incongruity between scalar relationships that must be resolved by the audience. Therefore, the intensifier must always be present in the opening formula for a Yo Momma joke to be told successfully. The insult subject, however, is variable. A change in the insult subject to father or grandmother is found in some of the Dozens collected by Labov, but mothers were by far the most popular

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target. This was also the trend in my examination of contemporary Yo Momma jokes on YouTube.[13]

Some notable exceptions appeared in my research, particularly in the jokes told by four-year old Aaron, who tells Yo Momma jokes to an older relative behind the camera. Aaron struggled with the joke structure, but firmly grasped the introductory element. Not only does the introductory formula define the Yo Momma joke cycle, but it is also formulaic, concise, and rarely variable—in other words simple and memorable enough for young children to learn easily. Although Aaron comprehended that this element was crucial for the reproduction of this joke type, he had considerably less competence in the other structural parts of the joke.

> When your momma's so fat that
> Spider-Man was so fat that
> Spider-Man comes down his web
> And he was scared that he was fat
> And then he said "What happened to me?"
> And then he was fat on my shirt
> So he popped out of my shirt (thecomputernerd01 2007).

Although this joke demonstrates a limited competence of the Yo Momma joke, it suggests a developing understanding of form. The introductory formula is present, but the statements that follow do not relate to this formula. Once Aaron has established a play framework with the introductory formula, he changes the insult subject from a mother to Spider-Man. The point of the introductory formula here is not to logically connect to the rest of the joke, but rather to signal the presence of a play framework. Aaron's joke is much more dynamic than typical Yo Momma jokes, which are largely conservative and formulaic. Lost in this transcription are the environmental cues that Aaron draws upon in his own joke creation: Aaron is wearing a shirt bearing a depiction of Spider-Man. Although Aaron has not yet developed a repertoire of conventional Yo Momma jokes, he improvises using stimuli immediately present. Although he is not successful in his attempts to tell a Yo Momma joke, his attempts show a beginning understanding of form.

The second structural component in the Yo Momma joke cycle is what I label the *modifying element*, that term which limits and clarifies the excessiveness of the subject denoted by the "so" intensifier in the introductory formula. The most common modifier in Yo Momma joke cycle is "fat," but others are possible, such as "poor," "ugly," "black," "dirty," "old," and even "short." The main function of the modifying element is to define the type of scalar relationship that will be presented in the next section of the joke. In engaging with the joke structure, Aaron attempts to change the common modifying element "fat" to "ugly," but is unsure how to do so effectively. The following example demonstrates a change in the modifying element that is immediately followed by a retreat back to the original "fat." The insult subject is also modified, as above.

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> Your momma's so fat that
> she ride a horse and the horse is so ugly,
> that the horse was so fat.

The first line is consistent with the standard introductory formula and modifying element. However, in the second line Aaron introduces a horse to the joke that quickly becomes the subject of the joke, which is first called "ugly" and then goes back to the original "fat."

The next two elements operate together in a cause-and-effect relationship that is informed by the modifying element. The *causal component* introduces a normative and neutral scenario to the joke that has not yet been influenced by the modifying element or intensifier of the introductory formula. As such, the causal component acts as a bridge between the first part of the joke ("yo momma's so fat") and its punchline.

> Simon: "Your momma's so fat she need a boomerang to put on her belt" (Halfcastkid 2008).

The elements of this joke do not quite match the structure I outline here, but can easily be standardized:

> "Your momma's so fat that when she put on her belt, she needed a boomerang."

The causal component here is the mother putting on a belt, which is presented as a neutral scenario that should be easily possible. However, Yo Momma jokes are characterized by exaggeration and absurdity. Thus, the mother presented here is so excessively fat that she defies normalcy and the plausible scenario presented in the causal component is negated by the introductory formula and modifying element.

The last structural element to be considered here is the *consequential component*: the punch line of the Yo Momma joke that synthesizes the other joke elements. The consequential component is the result of applying the excessively modified mother subject to the normative scenario depicted in the causal component to produce an image of the mother in which she is unable to operate within the world, effectively reversing the causal component. Her inability to function in this world renders the subject foolish, obscene, and even deviant. This example, collected from Sean and Mike, exemplifies this phenomenon.

> Sean: "Your momma's so poor that when I ring the doorbell she says *ding*."
> Mike: "Sean."
> Sean: "I shouldn't have said that. Sorry."
> Mike: "Sean. Sean, yesterday I came to your house, and that's what you did."
> Sean: "I didn't do it."

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Mike: "Yeah."
Sean: "I can't afford a doorbell."
Mike: "How you gonna make fun of my mom if you do it too?"
Sean: "You're horrible."
Mike: "Get out of here" (scpafc 2007).

The scenario set up in the above joke is one in which a doorbell is rung and, due to the presentation of the mother subject as being excessively poor, a situation emerges which lies outside the range of logical possibilities and is seen as ridiculous. This particular joke is a well-known example of the genre and thus not particularly original. However, the participants here carry the humor of the joke beyond the scenario presented by the joke's structure through verbal maneuvers that position them further within the joking framework. Both boys play off each other, deliberately misinterpreting the joke as truth, despite its absurdity, and opening up an arena for verbal play that is at once part of the joke and yet outside it.

Genre and Play Frames

Like the Dozens, contemporary Yo Momma jokes reside where jokes and verbal duels intersect. Despite this similarity, contemporary Yo Momma jokes still inhabit a distinct subgenre separable from the Dozens in particular and verbal duels in general. My observations have shown that contemporary Yo Momma jokes on YouTube, unlike the Dozens, emphasize the joking framework much more than the dueling framework. Although it is not uncommon for Yo Momma jokes on YouTube to take the form of a verbal duel between two participants,[14] it is just as common for a video to feature just one person reciting a Yo Momma joke to the camera,[15] or even just to display jokes in the form of written text on the screen. Even when a dueling framework between two or more participants is present, this framework is often radically different than those created in traditional verbal duels. Often, the duels are staged rather than spontaneous, and the number and identity of participants are manipulated by skillful digital editing.

As a form of verbal duels, contemporary Yo Momma jokes share many features with the Dozens. John McDowell defines verbal duels as "the competitive use of language within the confines of a game structure with rules that are codified and available to participants" (1985, 203). The content of verbal duels is often framed in formulaic patterns with a definite structure and generic content. Although some of the Yo Momma jokes I observed were obviously improvised, especially those told by younger children, most of the jokes were traditional. The same jokes were often heard in different joking sessions, performed by different participants. Even the jokes that were apparently improvised aligned themselves to the structural patterns defined above. Hence, these joking sessions can then be seen as highly ritualized and engaging with a generic pattern of verbal exchange.

A principle crucial to verbal dueling and to the examination of Yo Momma jokes considered here is what McDowell terms the "conservation principle." Briefly, the conservation principle recognizes that verbal dueling is a discursive

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process in which participants pattern their responses based on previous utterances. Yo Momma joking sessions on YouTube often follow this conservation principle, allowing for a constant give-and-take between participants, or, as I also observed, between a single participant interacting with objects in his environment. An example from two adolescent brothers illustrates the conservation principle.

Brother 1: "Your momma's so fat people jog around her for exercise!"
Brother 2: "Your mom's so fat that when I jog around her for exercise she went 'Stop it, you're making me dizzy, yah.'"[16]

Two jokes told by the youngest informant, four-year-old Aaron, demonstrate the conservation principle as enacted between the solo participant and his environment. This first joke was told in the beginning of the session:

Your mama's so fat that she looked into the mirror
and she saw it and the mirror cracked
and then it went into the living room,
but it slide, it slide into the living room (thecomputernerd01 2007).

The following joke was told closer to the end of the session, when his cousin Amanda entered the room where he was conducting the joking session.

Your mama's so—
No Amanda, don't come in.
Your mama's so fat that
She saw a mirror was blue and orange
And pink so Amanda was in the mirror.

Considering these two jokes as a progression within the same joking session, we see that Aaron conserved elements of the first joke (the mirror) and incorporated that element into a later joke that also incorporated Amanda, who encroached on his play space. Although this move is not as dialogic as the first example of the two brothers, it does indicate a move towards the direction of conservation between participant turns that allows for effective dueling.

Although Yo Momma jokes share certain features with verbal duels, the form of such duels in the Dozens and contemporary Yo Momma jokes differs in several important respects, particularly in how each constructs frameworks for play that structure the discourse that occurs within it. These frames free the joke teller from responsibility for the content of the joke and signal to the audience that what is to be said is not to be taken seriously, that the performer is "just joking." This frame is central to most human cognitive and behavioral processes, but manifest in contemporary Yo Momma jokes in particular ways.

Erving Goffman describes frames as devices that organize and represent experience (1974). Frames accomplish this task by arranging discourse into

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demarcated spaces set off from other discourses through framing devices. Play is marked by particular framing behaviors, identified by Gregory Bateson as "interactive sequence[s] of which the unit actions or signals [are] similar to but not the same as those of combat" (1972, 179).[17] Play is signaled through metacommunicative messages that indicate to participants aware of such messages that the next actions are not to be interpreted and evaluated as they normally would outside the frame. Goffman makes a similar observation: "playfulness and other keying may be involved which sharply reduce personal responsibility; that often what the individual presents is not himself but a story containing a protagonist who may happen also to be himself" (Goffman 1974, 541).

All communicative acts involve a certain level of framing and are subject to interpretation by the receiver of the message. The Dozens and other verbal duel forms are framed in a number of ways that establish and maintain the play frame. Labov writes: "Since responses to sounds [i.e., Dozens] are so automatic and deep-seated, we must pre-suppose a well-formed competence on the part of members to distinguish ritual insults from personal insults" (1972, 153). The formulaic character and the high stylization of the Dozens serve to remove the insults from the context of normative speech acts and instead place them into the category of ritual speech. In addition to the formal structure of the Dozens, their referential content also frames them as play. Abrahams recognizes that the rules formulated for playing the Dozens seem to say "'You can insult my family, but don't exceed the rules because we are dealing with something perilously close to real life'" (1962, 211). Labov echoes this sentiment, emphasizing that the situations in which insults move from the ritual to the personal occur when the insults approach too closely to actual life. To create Dozens that are safe, therefore, requires a move from the probable to the "bizarre and unlikely" (1972, 157). This strategy also holds true for contemporary Yo Momma jokes, although performers on YouTube often exploit the ambiguous distinction between personal and ritual insults.

The participants involved are also an important consideration for understanding the framing of verbal duels. Dozens are often told among peer-group members who occupy the same in-group. This performative context allows for metacommunicative actions signaling the play frame to be understood by all participants as well as providing a safe verbal battleground for the Dozens to be played. Playing the Dozens requires participants to make themselves vulnerable to a certain amount of verbal abuse. This voluntary exposure to attack is a risk taken in all gaming activities and involves an assumption that all participants will play by the rules and that ritual insults will not give way to personal insults. However, there are situations in which this play frame breaks down. Labov notes that "with strangers it is considerably harder to say what is a safe sound, and there are any number of taboos that can be broken with serious results" (1972, 158). As a result, playing the Dozens is most often done between in-group members, and outside of this group this activity is usually intended to provoke a fight. Lefever notes a similar occurrence: "Fighting is associated more with the Dozens when it is played between exclusive out-group members, when it is played in regimented and restrictive settings and when it is played by adults" (1981, 80). In these breakdowns, a failure or an unwillingness to recognize the play frame results

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in a literal interpretation of the insult. For playing the Dozens to be successful, participants must operate within the same metacommunicative framework and be able to recognize the verbal acts that signal the play event.

As verbal duels, contemporary Yo Momma joke performances on YouTube look much different than the Dozens collected in past decades. Although humor and play were certainly part of the Dozens, contemporary Yo Momma jokes emphasize the play and joking aspects to a much greater extent. I have classified Yo Momma jokes as "jokes," and they are popularly referred to as such, but this generic distinction presents some inherent problems. As jokes, contemporary Yo Momma jokes do contain humor at their core and attempt, whether successfully or not, to provoke a laughter response. This attempt may be accomplished in a variety of ways, but Yo Momma jokes most often accomplish this by word play, absurd imagery, or the reversal of societal norms or expectations. These rhetorical maneuvers have been discussed above, and are most often inherent in the content of the jokes themselves. However, my observation of Yo Momma jokes on YouTube shows that participants are finding dynamic ways to revitalize jokes that are often seen by audiences as boring and clichéd.[18] Performers on YouTube accomplish this through innovative framing techniques, such that the source of humor is less in the joke content itself than in the framework in which the joke is performed.

I have identified three techniques utilized by performers of contemporary Yo Momma jokes on YouTube to innovate this traditional joke form: obscuring participant identities, taking seriousness playfully, and taking play seriously.

Obscuring Participant Identities

Framing necessarily requires a different interpretation of events. In play frameworks, relationships that are not central to the play may be temporarily obscured so that the participants may engage in a joking session that would otherwise be unable to occur. Often, the relationships that are obscured are familial ones. In the following example taken from two adolescent brothers, their familial relationship is ignored for the sake of the play:

Brother 1:	[*interrupting*] "Your mom's so fat she goes into a restaurant, looks at the menu—"
Brother 2:	"*Hey*."
Brother 1:	"—and says ok!"
Brother 2:	"Your mom's so fat, no wait, dude. Your mom's my mom."
Brother 1:	"Oh shit."[19]

This exchange closes the joking session and ends the video. The relationship between the brothers has been temporarily suspended so that they can tell Yo Momma jokes to each other; once reinstated, such jokes can no longer be told effectively. Several joking sessions between siblings follow this basic formula, with the main humor of the video deriving from the family relationship that is revealed at the end of the video.

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One video that uses this technique (perhaps unintentionally) sets up the joking framework in the typical manner:

Jimmy: "Yo mama fight!"
Alex: "Your mom's so poor I saw her kicking a can down the street and I said 'hey, whatcha doing?' She said, 'moving.'"
Jimmy: "Yo mama's so fat that she brought a little tiny spoon to the Super Bowl" (bbumps123 2008).

Whereas the previous examples relied on the revelation of familial relationships to provide the video's humor, such a device within the video itself is unnecessary here because the two participants are identical twins.[20] The humor here results from the obvious irony of the framework; the act of watching identical twins insult each other's mother approaches the surreal. The identities of the participants cannot be obscured, only temporarily ignored by the audience. Still, the very constructedness of this joking framework is emphasized in several places. One commenter seems to either miss the point or is making an ironic joke of her own: "hello retards u have the same mama so u cant make a joke about ur mama."[21] The relationship between the twins is further identified by the video's title, "when brothers fight 3" and metacommentary at the end of the video:

hope you enjoyed
sadly this is our last video with violent
stuff because our dad said no more but please
comment and we will show our dad
thank you and comedy ideas by
jimmy and alex m

As demonstrated by these examples, Jimmy and Alex M. do not require a grand revelation at the end of their video to point out the presence of a play frame and the obscuring of participant identities that resulted. These twins are able to both obscure and reveal their identities at the same time through the use of intersecting and contradictory frameworks.

Another video that plays with the idea of obscured familial relationships presents two siblings acting out a Yo Momma battle. It begins with the two sitting at a table. The older sister is playing a handheld video game when she is interrupted by her younger brother:

Brother: "Yo momma's so stupid that she thinks one plus one equals *elephant*."[22]

At this point, music appropriate to verbal dueling begins playing in the background as the sister turns off her game and menacingly stands up from the table:

Sister: "Let's handle this the *mature* way."

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What follows are typical Yo Momma jokes told back and forth between the participants in dueling fashion. Despite the silly content of their jokes (e.g. "[your momma's] so ugly she looked in the mirror and thought it was a picture of Michael Jackson"), the siblings adopt an appearance of seriousness that complements the dramatic music. The trope of taking these jokes seriously appears again and again in these videos, which serves to highlight their very playfulness. For these two participants, the video's production implies, the Yo Momma battle has high stakes.

The revelation of their obscured familial relationship occurs at the end of their video, after the sister levies an insult that causes her younger brother to cry:

> Sister: "Yo momma's so ugly that the storeowner uses her picture to keep the *rats* away."

After this insult, the sister approaches her little brother and puts her arms on his shoulders in a manner meant to suggest consolation. However, this action too is pretense:

> Sister: "Um, little dude. Uh, your mom is still ugly."

At this point, the sister runs away as the camera pans to an older woman, presumably their mother, coming out of a doorway. In a raised voice, she begins: "what the f—." Here, the video conveniently ends, letting the audience's imagination supply the rest of her outburst. From the video's editing, it is obvious that the mother's arrival is part of the performance, but it still serves to break the play framework these siblings have constructed by foregrounding the familial relationship between all the participants. Her invective at the end is a reply not only to her children's fighting, but also to her place at the center of their duel as the target of their jokes.

Family relationships are not the only ones obscured by contemporary Yo Momma joke sessions. In several videos observed, the selfhood of the participant(s) is also concealed. Through video editing, some participants stage a joking session between themselves. In many, but not all, instances, this fact is obvious. User Spectator24 posted a video featuring his favorite Yo Momma jokes because he was "feelin' real funny today." Although Spectator24 is the only participant in the video, he still decides to frame it as a verbal duel between two participants. He accomplishes this through video editing, cutting back and forth to himself in different poses. One "participant" faces right to his assumed opponent, who faces left. No other attempts are made to disguise the self-identity of the participant(s). His imitation of an actual dual, however, is effective—there is even evidence of the conservation principle:

> Spectator24 (facing right): "Yo momma got one toe and one knee and they call her Tony, heh heh heh heh heh."

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Spectator24 (facing left): "Dude, that's not funny, that's a serious problem. She can't even wear sandals, you asshole" (Spectator24 2007).

Some videos use more advanced video editing techniques and costuming to disguise the fact that there is only one participant. One particularly skillful example is a video by user azaelive (2009). Many of azaelive's videos feature his alter-ego persona, an outrageously crude woman named Monikka who sports long black hair and wears an excessive amount of black lipstick on her lips, under her eyes, and in her eyebrows. Azaelive's Yo Momma video pits Monikka against "the other guy," both played by azaelive. The jokes they tell are largely traditional, but what is innovative here is how azaelive edits the video so that both participants occupy the shot at the same time. Both participants are edited to be sitting next to each other on the same couch, giving the impression of an actual dual in real-time.

Taking Seriousness Playfully

A number of YouTube videos portray Yo Momma jokes inserted in the course of normal conversation, where a joking framework is not present. Instead, the performers pretend that their play is real life. Of course, this absence of a play frame is a fiction, as the video itself is a staged performance. These videos often offer an evaluation and commentary of the Yo Momma joke format, highlighting their simplicity.

One video by user LuLu615 plays out another instance where seriousness is taken playfully when one girl uses an insult that is too true to life:

Natalie: "You know, speaking of big-ass mommas, you know how I know yo' momma's fat? Because she *irons her drawers on the driveway.*"
Alex: "Well, yo' momma's so fat when her beeper goes off people think she's backin' it up."
Natalie: "You know how I know yo' momma's so fat? Because people *jog around her for exercise.*"
Alex: "Well, yo' momma's so fat she weighs 800 pounds" [*mournful violin music begins in the background*] "she got a clogged artery, had a triple bypass surgery, she *died.*"
Natalie: [*slaps Alex across the face*] "Not cool."[23]

The two girls here have created a play framework that allows for the telling of Yo Momma jokes, but Alex's last joke clearly breaks that framework by using serious events for the content of a joke. Of course, as is usually the case in Yo Momma jokes on YouTube, this seriousness is actually part of the joke; Natalie's mother presumably does not suffer from the afflictions alleged by Alex. This video indulges in a "what if" scenario that details what might happen "when simple jokes go wrong," which is the video's description. By acting out the breakdown of

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a play framework, Alex and Natalie's video draws attention to those features that are integral to its construction.

A video titled "SO IS YO MOMMA!" by user AlexDH92 emphasizes the fact that Yo Momma jokes can be easily inserted into the course of everyday conversation. Like azaelive's video discussed above, this video consists of only one performer who plays two parts. The entirety of the video consists of one character (whom I've labeled Alex 1) making a statement, followed by a mother insult spoken by another character (Alex 2).

Alex 1: [*looking into a mirror*] "God, I'm so ugly."
Alex 2: "Well so is your momma!"
Alex 1: "This T.V. is so big!"
Alex 2: "And so yo' momma's boobies!"
Alex 1: "This show is so stupid."
Alex 2: "Well, so is yo' momma!"
Alex 1: [*holding up a piece of paper*] "I've got testicular torsion!"
Alex 2: "Well, so does yo' momma!"
Alex 1: [*playing a video game*] "You're a s– [*bleeping noises*] little f– [*bleeping noises*]!"
Alex 2: "Well, so is yo' momma!"[24]

The insults spoken here are highly abbreviated and unsophisticated when compared to standard Yo Momma jokes. The jokes here are left to the audience to parse and reconstruct. The first joke in the above transcript could be expanded to fit the structure:

"Yo momma's so ugly that she's as ugly as you."[25]

This clumsy joke is neither complex nor original, but that is precisely the point of the video. Alex's performance highlights the simplicity of the Yo Momma joke structure by demonstrating how easily the joke can be constructed in almost any speaking context. Even the joke about testicular torsion works on some level despite its impossibility due to both its humorous incongruity as well as its insinuation of masculinity.

The video ends by testing the limits of the Yo Momma joke's applicability to non-play frameworks.

Alex 1: [*talking on a cell phone*] "What, she's dead?"
Alex 2: "And so is yo' momma!"
Alex 1: "No, no, not now, my mum's just died in a horrible car crash."
Alex 2: "Ooo, that's awkward."
Alex 1: "Not as awkward as yo' momma!"

This humorous turn reverses the roles played by the two participants throughout the video. Here, Alex 1 sets up a serious scenario that resists the imposition of a

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play frame by his double; Alex 2 recognizes that he has transgressed the boundary for appropriate play. However, in this instance the situation that establishes this boundary is imaginary, part of a play framework designed by Alex 1. Alex 2's response "ooo, that's awkward" denotes his disengagement from play. It is at this moment that the participants' roles are reversed; it is now Alex 1 who turns seriousness into play.

A video by user ZKSbrothers also exploits the simplicity and wide applicability of Yo Momma jokes, but employs a more dramatic method of conveying this commentary. The description for this video summarizes the main plot:

> After watching "Yo Mamma" jokes for many hours, Stephen becomes obsessed, and can't stop making his own jokes (ZKSbrothers 2007).

The video includes a cast of five older teenage boys and is comprised of a number of scenes in which Stephen goes to extreme lengths to interrupt normal, non-play speech and activities, including sleeping, getting dressed, talking on the phone, and fishing. Throughout, Stephen hides nearby, waiting for the appropriate opportunities to interject. In one scene, Stephen runs to a group of three boys in order to tell them, "that's what your mother said last night." The last thing said in the video was "see you later," but Stephen was too far away to possibly hear this, implying either that Stephen has preternatural hearing or commenting on the applicability of this insult to a wide variety of contexts.

In another scene, Stephen hides himself on the roof of a house and listens in on a conversation between two of the boys.

Boy in Brown Shirt:	"Sorry I was late coming over here. I, uh, was driving and there was this crazy kid that came out and he was screaming Yo Mamma jokes and it was really weird."
Chris:	"Yeah, that was probably Stephen. He stayed up all night on the Internet watching those stupid Yo Mamma jokes and now he can't stop."
Stephen:	"Your mother can stop…last night!" [*laughs*]
Chris:	"Where is he? Where is he? What now?"
Stephen:	[*Jumps off the roof*]
Chris:	"Oh my God! Oh my God! Are you all right?"
Stephen:	"Ah, yeah, I'm fine. *But your mom wasn't!*" [*laughs*]

The video contains several other scenes that follow this general pattern. In each, Stephen disrupts seriousness with play and irritates his companions. The video ends when the other boys, provoked by Stephen's antics, beat him up (during the beating, Stephen shouts, "your mom was this aggressive!").

The jokes in the above two videos are incredibly simplistic, even by Yo Momma joke standards, but this simplicity is evaluated and manipulated by the videos' creators. As seen in these examples, serious actions are quite easily

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appropriated for play activity by these abbreviated Yo Momma jokes. Although these videos rely on these simplified Yo Momma jokes to drive the action, the creators are actually rejecting them as a legitimate source of humor. The humor in these videos comes not from the jokes themselves but rather from their performance contexts, the stuff that happens around the jokes. By devising the intricate framing techniques used in these videos, the creators add complexity to the traditional joke form and showcase their talents as innovators of play.

Taking Play Seriously

Another technique used to create humor in Yo Momma jokes on YouTube is to deliberately ignore the play framework necessitated by joking. Of course, this disregard of frames is feigned by participants; no actual people were offended in the making of these jokes. By pretending to ignore these play frames, participants actually draw attention to them, highlighting the act of performance rather than the jokes' actual content. This maneuver was used in a large number of the videos studied.

One extended example from Sean and Mike takes the referential content of the jokes themselves as being real events:

Mike: "Man. Man, I've got to tell you something. Your momma's so fat her senior picture, was taken aerial view. Aerial? You know. That that that's fat."
Sean: "That's where I was, that's where my senior picture was taken. Yeah."
Mike: "You're pretty fat. Whew. Man, your momma's so fat, so so so fat she used a sock—. [*laughing*]. I'm joking, I'm joking. Your momma's so fat, she used a pillowcase as a sock."
Sean: "Oh shit, I think that's what I have on. Oh yea, that's what I have. Uh oh."
Mike: "Fatness. Whew. [*inaudible*]. It's ok, it's ok. It's alright, it's alright. Man, your momma's so fat that the doctor went to cut her leg open and gravy started flowing out, just flowin' like a volcano."
Sean: "That happened to me two weeks ago."
Mike: "Are you serious?"
Sean: "Yeah."
Mike: "You are pretty damn fat."
. . . . .
Sean: "Your momma's so fat [*whispering*] that we're in her right now. Shhh, don't wake, don't wanna wake up Her Fatness."
Mike: "What, what's that stuff covering you?"
Sean: "Poop? Poopie poopie poopie" (scpafc 2007).

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These jokes are not original (several commenters even accuse them of reading the jokes off a screen),[26] but the metacommentary surrounding the jokes is. These two performers attempt to increase the humor of the jokes' content by emphasizing their absurdity and insisting on their reality. These jokes move back and forth between play and seriousness. This movement is largely done through the self-identification of one participant with his mother, who is being insulted by the other. The pretense of ignoring the play framework allows these two boys to gain extra mileage from traditional Yo Momma jokes by imagining their excessive effects as present in the real world.

Although other videos show performers ignoring the presence of a play framework, most take a much different course than the one above. One video that utilized this technique is a direct parody of the MTV television show *Yo Momma*. This program, which ran in 2006 and 2007, brought together the best verbal duelers from different urban neighborhoods to face off in verbal battles facilitated by celebrity host Wilmer Valderama. In a cyclical process typical of many folklore genres, the *Yo Momma* television show drew from folkloric dueling traditions, but was then re-appropriated by folk culture as in the parody video below. The Yo Momma battle in this video begins as expected:

> Zero Degrees Kelvin: "Yo. Yo momma is like a brick. She's dirty, she's flat on both sides, *and* she always get laid by Mexicans.
> [*crowd cheers*]
> Lil' Mufasa: "What'd you say about my momma?" (LutopianSociety 2008).

At this point, however, Lil' Mufasa pulls out a gun and shoots Zero Degrees Kelvin, killing him. Lil' Mufasa has misinterpreted the joke as a real insult, but the audience then interprets his action as a legitimate response to the first joke. The crowd responds with the typical noises that follow an insult, and then the performer playing Wilmer Valderama consults with the judges and returns with a decision:

> Wilmer Valderama: "Alright, so, I had a tough decision to make. Uh, you both were good, but, um, I did feel that one of you stepped up the most and that one of you was dead-on with your jokes. So, now, we decided, and the winner is…Zero Degrees Kelvin."

Wilmer then speaks to the dead Kelvin and presents him with his thousand-dollar prize. The video begins with an instance of play taken seriously but ends with seriousness taken playfully. Not only does the video toy with the differences between play and seriousness, but also with those between life and death; the participants are unable to distinguish between both conceptual categories.

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The last video I wish to consider is sophisticated in terms of both performance and editing. Like the previous video, "Gaelen and Paul's First Fight" also hinges on a joke that is taken seriously by another participant. It begins with the two performers conversing while playing video games together:

Paul: "Hey, hey. Dude. I got a joke. I thought about this earlier today. Yo momma is *so* fat—"
Gaelen: "What'd you say about my momma?"
Paul: "Come on man, it's just a joke." [*lightly shoves Paul*]
Gaelen: "What? Did you just exercise physical contact in my bubble?"
Paul: "What?"
Gaelen: "*Did you just touch me?*"
Paul: [*stands up*] "What does it matter, Mr. Sensitive?"
Gaelen: "I'm packing heat."
Paul: "Me too, bub."
Gaelen: "Tomorrow. Downtown. High noon."
Paul: "No, no, I can't do it then. I'm going downtown to see a movie with Joseph."
Gaelen: "Wait, why didn't you invite me?"
Paul: "I don't know, you've been kind of annoying lately. The whole bean thing."[27]
Gaelen: "*You gave me those!* You, you know what? Ten minutes, front yard!"
[*long pause*]
Paul: "Man, we've got ten minutes to burn"[28]

The two resume playing video games together, and thirty minutes later (indicated by an on-screen message) they meet outside. In an imitation of a classic Western-movie dueling scene, Gaelen and Paul stand back-to-back before pacing off in opposite directions. Both the background music and close-up shots of each participant's eyes also bring to mind other Western-movie genre conventions. The music suddenly changes to epic choral music as the two draw their guns and shoot. Both of them are hit, shown by spurts of blood that are digitally edited into the shot. Gaelen comes out on top, however. The scene ends with Gaelen standing over Paul, his gun pressed against Paul's head. He speaks, "I never liked comments about my momma."

This video is particularly sophisticated in the ways it draws upon Western genre conventions to play with the idea of retribution, in this case for a joke taken seriously. However, at the same time that these performers are employing these conventions, they are also subverting them through parody and play. The end of the video reveals the playfulness of this Western-style gunfight explicitly, while at the same time imposing an additional play framework upon the entire video. After the end of the last scene, when Gaelen is just about to shoot Paul, the scene abruptly changes to show the two in a bedroom, looking over pages of paper, presumably a script:

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Paul:	"And that's it! Wouldn't this be the most awesome movie idea you've *ever* read?"
Gaelen:	"This is good stuff!"
Paul:	"Hey, hey. Your momma's so fat—"
Gaelen:	[*menacingly, in slow motion*] "What?"

Even in this scene, in which the viewer assumes that the play framework is not operating, is shown to be subsumed in yet another framework, as a Yo Momma joke is again taken seriously. This entire video contains several nested play frameworks that consistently interact with and interpenetrate each other. The viewer can never be quite sure in what framework the participants are operating at any time and this ambiguity is exploited by the two participants.

Conclusion

Although original ethnographic work on the Dozens has declined in the last three decades since Labov's treatment, this gap in the scholarly literature is not indicative of a decline in its performance. The Dozens have undergone significant changes since Abrahams and Labov conducted their fieldwork, but there are also telling similarities that demonstrate a continuity of form and content across generations of children and adolescents. A strictly textual study comparing the Dozens collected in the 1960s and 70s with those collected today might emphasize such continuity as evidence for the power of tradition. Analysis of performance contexts, however, shows that although the jokes remain the same, the message has not.

I have identified here one key site where Yo Momma jokes continue to be told among peers to an audience that evaluates their performance. My survey of contemporary Yo Momma jokes on YouTube shows that this form of the Dozens is still vital among youth who have adapted this traditional joke genre to changed social and technological contexts. Here, digital video technology has provided contemporary youth with means by which to innovate and reinvent a somewhat stale joke form, and Internet sites like YouTube have facilitated the communication of these creations with a wider audience.

However, this study is far from conclusive. The videos here are only a sampling of those available on YouTube, and YouTube is only one website where such jokes are shared, reinvented, and performed. I have identified three techniques by which performers innovate Yo Momma jokes, but further research of a wider sample of jokes would undoubtedly uncover a wider range of maneuvers. Ethnographic work on Yo Momma jokes told offline would go far in identifying ways that Internet performance contexts shape the content, structure, and execution of jokes. This study points to the rich and vital possibilities of Internet folklore, but much work remains to be done by folklorists in the realm of vernacular culture on the Internet.

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NOTES

1. This text is censored in the original article.

2. Alternately spelled yo momma, yo mama, yo mamma, and yo moma. In video transcriptions, I have used the spelling "yo momma" unless other spellings are specified in the video's tags or title, in which case I use that spelling. I use the grammatically incorrect "yo momma" rather than "yo' momma" as an emic classification; no YouTube videos surveyed for this project used the contracted form in their tags or titles.

3. One video dubbed a skit by Weird Al Yankovic over the children's cartoon "Naruto" (a video that has since been taken down due to a copyright violation) and another dubbed Yo Momma jokes from the Blue Collar Comedy Tour over a World of Warcraft video (krooltee 2008).

4. Labov identifies ten different forms the Dozens can take, based on form. See Labov 1972, 128-42.

5. In 1972, Labov briefly discussed Dozens performed among white peer groups. Notably, he observed that performances of the Dozens by white peer groups were largely restricted to a limited set of insult routines. One of these is what Labov calls the "You are so X that Y type," which includes Yo Momma jokes (140-42).

6. One consistent connection to urban black culture that finds its way into Yo Momma jokes on YouTube consists of those videos inspired by the MTV television show *Yo Momma*, which ran for three seasons between 2006 and 2007. This show took place in large cities (Los Angeles, New York, and Atlanta), emphasized urban culture, and pitted two people against each other in a verbal battle. The winner received a cash prize and advanced in the competition. The structure and content of these battles differed significantly from their vernacular counterparts, but it is obvious that some YouTube videos observed took inspiration from the television show.

7. However, sometimes the pretense of competition is maintained, although it is obvious to viewers that such competition is scripted. This is particularly true of those videos that take inspiration from the *Yo Momma* television show, which maintains a strong competitive element. I will touch on such staging later in this paper.

8. This video has since been removed by the user.

9. Although Bergen and Binsted use traditional Yo Momma jokes that are fully formed and divorced from performance contexts, my own ethnographic work with Yo Momma jokes on YouTube supports their cognitive function. As will soon be seen, young children are capable of grasping the structure of Yo Momma jokes, but often struggle with providing content that successfully manipulates scalar relationships.

10. Indeed, I could find no Yo Momma joking sessions performed between participants who did not know each other. This is not particularly surprising, as most of the sessions I observed on YouTube were videotaped and hence self-selected for participants that knew each other. However, there are many other videos on YouTube that are recordings of spontaneous rather than scripted events

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observed by the recorder, and my survey did not turn up any recording of an impromptu Yo Momma joking session between strangers. Scholarship on the Dozens also largely upholds this trend, and I speculate that further ethnographic evidence on Yo Momma jokes in particular would uphold this claim. One notable exception is in the mass media. The *Yo Momma* television show on MTV pits participants from different neighborhoods against each other, but these battles are planned by producers for a mass media market.

11. Although I could not identify Alejandro's exact age, he appears to be between five and eight years of age.

12. This video has since been removed by the user.

13. Of course, this trend is partly the result of the search terms I used in this study. However, a brief search for phrases such as "yo daddy," "yo sister," and "yo brother" returns videos that feature mostly Yo Momma jokes. Jokes with targets other than a mother are comparatively rare, and usually told at the same time as Yo Momma jokes.

14. As will be seen later, however, sometimes this duel framework is artificially created. For example, several videos constructed a dueling relationship through clever editing, thus pitting the participant against himself. This phenomenon will be explored later in the paper.

15. In some cases, the participant clearly intends for his audience to be the target of these jokes and invites video responses and comments as replies to his verbal attacks. One notable example of this type of video by YouTube celebrity Shane Dawson garnered several hundred video responses and more than 100,000 comments as of September 2012, four years after the original video was posted (ShaneDawsonTV 2008).

16. This video has since been removed by the user.

17. The idea of play as faked combat is especially pertinent to verbal duel forms, as much of the tension inherent in such duels revolves around maintaining this distinction.

18. Remarks on the unoriginality of the jokes themselves is one of the more frequent responses to Yo Momma joke videos on YouTube. Users often critique the video for using videos taken from somewhere else, although others often respond that Yo Momma jokes by their nature are unoriginal.

19. This video has since been removed by the user.

20. The conclusion of this joking session ends logically enough with simulated violence when one brother takes offense to a joke, which is another technique employed by performers of contemporary Yo Momma jokes to increase the humor.

21. Comment by user ilovejustin2525, found on the page for the video when brothers fight 3.

22. This video has since been removed by the user.

23. This video has since been removed by the user.

24. This video has since been removed by the user.

25. This kind of reconstructive work is modeled on Labov, who also looked at the structure of these abbreviated Dozens of the "X is so Y" type. For examples of how Labov reconstructed these abbreviated Dozens, see Labov 1972, 154.

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26. The comment by user astalavista123321 is indicative of the general tone and language of other such comments: "ok that was so gay that gay people laugh at you for being gayi mean,wtf dude,the yo momma's so fat, she fell in love and broke it and i think there was one more that was actualy funny, ok, but why the hell must you act like that? and the kid on the right side of the screen was fucking retarded..i mean,he kept forcing himself to laugh.and as many others have said,i even found the site were you were reading the jokes from, so bloody come up with one and take credit for it."

27. This refers to another video by the two posted a month earlier, in which Gaelen eats some beans. His ensuing flatulence causes an explosion. The purpose of the video, other than entertainment, was for the pair to experiment with software that creates special effects. This video has since been removed by the user.

28. This video has since been removed by the user.

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Zashikiwarashi, The Ghost that is Saving Japan

Linda Kinsey Spetter

Zashikiwarashi is a ghost which is well known in Japan but not well known in the western world. Richard Dorson did briefly mention this ghost in his *Folk Legends of Japan* (1962), a book that he began with high praise of Kunio Yanagita, the "father of Japanese folklore," who first wrote about Zashikiwarashi in 1910 in his *Tono Monogatari* (which translates Legends of Tono). Michiko Iwasaka and Barre Toelken also mentioned the ghost briefly in their book *Ghosts and the Japanese* (1994), and they pointed out that the spirit of Zashikiwarashi has been associated with the spirit of unborn children, either through abortion or through *mabiki*, which was an old practice of killing some children right after they were born so there would not be too many mouths to feed. Even though Zashikiwarashi is not well known outside of Japan, for the past few years Japanese culture has been inundated with Zashikiwarashi stories in numerous manga, anime, TV dramas, novels, movies, stage plays, musicals, computer games, short stories, newspaper articles, magazines, Internet websites, folklore books and children's books. In my opinion, these stories relate to a number of social problems that Japan is now experiencing: a low birth rate because young people do not marry until they are almost 30, a high suicide rate, bullying, a phenomenon known as "hikkikomori" (young men and women who withdraw from society to stay in their rooms because of their inability to interact with society), and the economic necessity of families often having to live apart because of their jobs. This is not to even mention the depression and despair of the 2011 tsunami which killed more than 15,000 people and displaced more than 340,000 people in Japan.

Zashikiwarashi literally means "tatami mat child." Tatami mats are the traditional flooring made of woven rice straw in most Japanese homes. In the older versions of this tale, Zashikiwarashi is a child ghost only seen by children; it brings good luck to the homes it visits and bad luck to the homes it leaves. The oldest, most traditional version of Zashikiwarashi is of a little girl, dressed in a kimono, with a topknot on her head (see Figure 1). Sometimes an extra child in the counting of children is Zashikiwarashi.

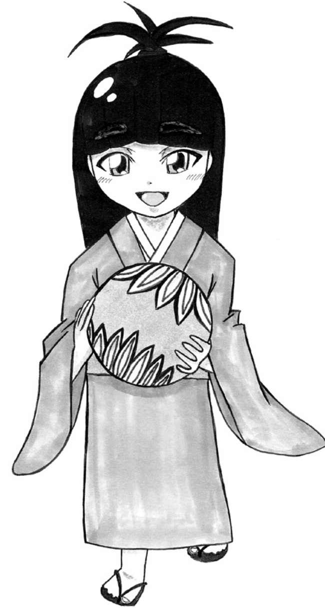

Figure 1. The traditional form of Zashikiwarashi, a little girl in kimono with a topknot on her head. Sketch by Kiyomi Nakano.

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Always, the spirit of Zashikiwarashi has been associated with abandoned or aborted or lost children. In recent versions, there seems to be a thematic element emphasizing the desire of the child to be born or taken in. An example of this kind of story can be seen in the 2007 anime film, *Mononoke: Zashikiwarashi*, by Takashi Hashimoto. A pregnant woman is traveling and is caught in a rainstorm. She begs the people at an old hotel to let her stay there, but they refuse because the hotel is full. She keeps begging for the sake of her unborn child, so at last they put her in "that" room which is usually never used because it is full of Zashikiwarashi spirits. The hotel had previously been a brothel, and prostitutes had buried their unwanted children below the tatami mats in that room. All night long, the Zashikiwarashi spirits haunt and torment the woman, until at last she agrees to give birth to them, removing the talisman from her stomach that had prevented their entry into her body.

Figure 2. Zashikiwarashi portrayed as a baby, as in Osamu Tezuka's 1974 manga "Enai Enai Baa." Sketch by Kiyomi Nakano.

In an earlier manga comic book story entitled "Enai Enai Baa," published in 1981 by Osamu Tezuka, probably the most beloved manga artist ever in Japan, a man goes to a resort hotel to study for his exams, but he is constantly tormented by a mischievous Zashikiwarashi ghost baby, who wants to play (see Figure 2). Finally the man gives up trying to study, and plays with the ghost. Magically, the man does very well on his exams, and he credits it to the lucky ghost. The ghost gets the man to promise that he will one day marry and allow the ghost's spirit to enter his baby. The man marries and takes his bride on a honeymoon to the same resort hotel. When the hotel catches on fire, the couple escapes, but the man rushes back into the burning hotel to rescue the tatami mat which houses the Zashikiwarashi spirit, even though everyone thinks he is crazy to risk his life for a tatami mat. He takes the smelly tatami mat to his home, and his wife often tries to throw it away, but he rescues it every time, leading the wife to wonder what kind of crazy man she has married. She becomes pregnant, and at the hospital he drags the smelly tatami mat into the hospital room, and as she gives birth to the child, we can see that the spirit of Zashikiwarashi has happily entered the child, and the ending is quite happy for everyone. Again, in this story we see the desire of children to be born.

In a 2006 young people's novel, *Yuta and His Strange Friends* (Yuta to Fushigina Nakamatachi), by Tetsuro Miura, a young boy is being bullied by many of his classmates. He becomes friends with five Zashikiwarashi, who teach

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Figure 3. Zashikiwarashi as a wild-haired boy, as in the 2006 children's novel Yuta to Fushigina Nakamatachi *(Yuta and His Strange Friends). Sketch by Kiyomi Nakano.*

Figure 4. Zashikiwarashi as an old man, as in the 2008 musical stage play of Yuta to Fushigina Nakamatachi *(Yuta and His Strange Friends). Sketch by Kiyomi Nakano.*

him self-defense. They like him because his friend is a girl who always carries a baby doll on her back. The Zashikiwarashi like her because she seems to like babies. In the young people's novel, a Zashikiwarashi who befriends Yuta is a wild-haired boy (see Figure 3). However, in the 2008 musical stage play from the same novel, the Zashikiwarashi are not in the form of young children but rather look like old men (see Figure 4). They are still wearing diapers, and since their diapers have never been changed, their rumps have grown big and they smell bad. Because they like the bullied boy, they encourage him and teach him how to defend himself against the bullies. When he fights with the bullies, their fighting magically changes into a dance every time, and the bullies find that dancing is more fun than fighting. The musical stage version of this novel was presented by the famous Shiki Theatre Company all over Japan, and I was lucky to see one of the presentations in Kitakyushu City. It was fun watching the five Zashikiwarashi fly through the air above the audience. In the novel and the stage play, Yuta the boy learns that rather than withdrawing from society, he can become a positive force in society. This story seems to address the current Japanese problem of "hikkikomori." Hikkikomori is a social phenomenon which is said to be affecting as many as 20 percent of Japanese adolescents now; the young people withdraw

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from society into their rooms and do not emerge, possibly because of some perceived socially devastating experience they have suffered. The story about Yuta and his experiences with the Zashikiwarashi teaches children to make themselves strong and to value their lives.

Another film version of a Zashikiwarashi story, "Natsushojo" by Gyo Hayasaka, has been shown in private audiences since 1995 but has never been distributed in theaters. I learned about it in a book called *Atomic Bomb Cinema* by Jerome F. Shapiro, a Hiroshima University professor (Shapiro 2002, 258-59, 261-63). In this film, a link between Zashikiwarashi and the atomic bombing of Hiroshima is made. A man and his wife were caught in the bombing. They were separated, but they both survived. The man saw his high school classmate, a young woman, dying in the burning river. There was nothing he could do to save her. His wife, who was pregnant, lost her baby. Later, they moved to an island near Hiroshima. When a very young little girl came to their door a few years later looking for a place to find shelter, both the man and woman thought she was a Zashikiwarashi. The man thought she was the spirit of his lost classmate whom he felt guilty about for not being able to help. The woman thought the child was the spirit of her lost baby. The man seems not to value his own life and behaves recklessly, while the mother learns to value her life even more and gladly accepts the little girl as her own child.

Incidentally, after the atomic bombing at Hiroshima, the abortion rate in Japan was the highest it has ever been. People were worried about the effects of radiation on their unborn children. Now, in modern times, the abortion rate is again high. Birth control pills are illegal in Japan; they can only be prescribed to help a woman regulate her period. So, aside from using condoms and the rhythm method, abortion is the most common form of birth control, and Japan's current birth rate is the lowest or second lowest in the world. Recently I have been collecting information about *mizuko kuyou*, which is a religious ceremony to honor the spirit of an aborted baby. *Mizuko* literally means "water baby" and refers to a child that has been aborted or otherwise died before birth. Single motherhood is still a stigma in Japan, so abortion often seems the only choice for young girls who become pregnant. After the abortion, girls usually contact a Buddhist temple on their own without their families' knowledge to purchase a small *mizuko jizo* god in the shape of an infant. These actions are usually pursued not so much because of guilt but because of a fear that the spirit of the dead infant will come back to

Figure 5. Zashikiwarashi in the form of a mizuko statue. Mothers often place such statues at temples in memory of their lost children. Sketch by Kiyomi Nakano.

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haunt and cause trouble in the person's life, so annual visits to the *mizuko jizo* to deliver presents, and to dress it up in baby clothes, are ways that women who have aborted their children can appease their spirits. You can see many of these when you visit a temple, little statues of babies lined up side by side, usually in red hoods and bibs. In the *Mononoke* anime film which I mentioned earlier, in which the pregnant woman stayed in a room full of Zashikiwarashi spirits, the spirits were in the form of small mizuko statues (see Figure 5).

Not to be confused with the playful child ghost Zashikiwarashi is another Zashiki figure called "Zashikionna" (Zashiki Woman). This creepy female ghost, as portrayed in a graphic 1993 manga novel by Mochizuki Minetaro, does not bring joy or luck, but rather stalks young men in classic horror fashion (see Figure 6). She seems to be a modern blend of an inverted Zashikiwarashi and the vengeful Japanese demon ghost Oiwa.

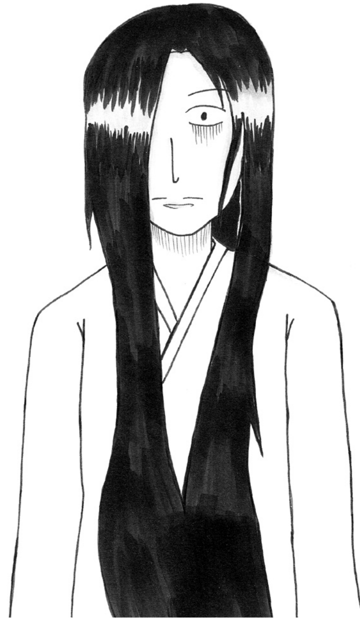

Figure 6. Zashikionna ("Zashiki Woman"), who seems to be an inverted variant of Zashikiwarashi combined with the demon spirit Oiwa. This evil ghost stalks young men. Sketch by Kiyomi Nakano.

A new movie about the traditional Zashikiwarashi came out in April 2012. The movie is entitled "Home: Itoshi no Zashikiwarashi" which translates Home: Our Dear Zashikiwarashi. It is based on the 2008 novel, *Itoshi no Zashikiwarashi*, by Hiroshi Ogiwara. In this story, a family with many problems is forced to move to the country because of the father's job transfer. The father is having troubles with his new supervisor, the boy has asthma, the girl is being bullied at school, the mother is overwhelmed with caring for the huge, old-fashioned house, and the grandmother is showing signs of dementia. But gradually, Zashikiwarashi, the ghost of the house, a mysterious little girl in kimono with a topknot on her head, makes herself known first to the boy, then the grandmother, then the girl, and finally the mother. The family's luck begins to improve in every aspect. In one of the most touching scenes of the movie, the child ghost is seen sleeping on the mother's back as the mother is cooking. The father is offered a chance to go back to Tokyo with a big promotion, and at a family meeting, the group decides they should stay together and so they agree to go as a family group. Guess who goes with them? Even though the father himself has never seen the ghost, he accepts the ghost, and at a restaurant on

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their way back to Tokyo, he asks for a table for six, and after the family of five has been seated, he pulls out the sixth chair for Zashikiwarashi, a fully accepted member of the family. In ordinary Japanese life, when a family has children well situated in schools, the father normally would have gone on to his new job alone and commuted to home on weekends, but this film emphasizes the importance of a family living together.

One of the elements in this story is that as the grandmother descends into dementia, she begins to think that the Zashikiwarashi ghost is the embodiment of her brother who died as a child, just as the Hiroshima film characters also saw the ghost as the embodiment of an abandoned friend or lost child in their lives. Thus, Zashikiwarashi comes to be very personal for people who have lost someone. At the same time, Zashikiwarashi spreads joy and happiness everywhere. The people who are willing to accept Zashikiwarashi into their lives have good luck. This element is exaggerated in one of the manga cartoon magazines called "*Jigoku Sensei Nube* (*Hell Teacher Nube*)" in a story by Shou Makura, in which a little Zashikiwarashi girl (Figure 1) just walks down the street and everything she passes suddenly turns to good: a dog that had just died from eating insecticide suddenly springs back to life, a couple with their baby suddenly sees the baby stand for the first time, children who only had mudpies for their party suddenly have a real cake, and a man discovers he has a winning lottery ticket (Makura and Okano 1996). Good luck is certainly something that the people of Japan need right now, and it seems that this friendly ghost is being called upon to deal with many of Japan's current social problems. The problems of hikkikomori, the young men and women who withdraw from society, and also the phenomenon of young women who decline to marry and who choose to stay in their parents' home without beginning new families of their own, are contributing to talk about "Japan's lost generation," i.e., a generation of babies not being born. The Japanese government is actually working on ways to induce women to marry and have babies, as the old-age pension system will eventually collapse without the birth of new babies. One of the results is that companies are being encouraged to build day care centers so that mothers can work and have their children cared for at their place of work. I cannot help but think that the proliferation of Zashikiwarashi stories at this time is somehow functioning in a special way to help Japan deal with its current social problems.

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Young Children's Table Talk with Peers in Early Childhood Settings

Robyn M. Holmes

As Mechling (2000) noted, mealtime is both a biological necessity and a social activity. Mealtime has been acknowledged as a context and setting in which children can acquire language competencies and skills. During mealtime, young children have the opportunity to interact socially with both adults and peers. For example, Cote (2001) compared the mealtime experiences of preschool children in two different classroom settings. She found that the structure of mealtimes was related to children's language learning opportunities. She compared language use during mealtimes to other times of the day and introduced strategies to help encourage children's discourse during mealtime events. Other studies such as those by Snow and Beals (2006) have explored mealtime events as they relate to children's language competencies and skills.

The relationship between mealtime and language development has also been investigated cross-culturally. For example, Majorano, Cigala, and Corsano (2009) explored teacher-child and peer to peer speech in Italian nursery schools. They found that children were linguistically active during mealtime compared to other times in their routine such as free play. In fact, they found that children produced longer utterances and more complex speech during mealtime. Thus the nature and context of this activity helped shaped children's language skills, development, and competencies. Others cross-cultural comparisons on children's conversations include Tulviste et al's (2010) work on Estonian, Finnish, and Swedish children's peer discourse. They focused more upon the types of speech children use and how culture guides peer conversations.

Employing participant observation, Stone (1992) analyzed preschoolers' spontaneous conversation that takes place in the classroom. Using categories such as content, structure, and form, he found that children typically utilize three forms of narrative. In the classroom context, the greatest number of narratives were produced during lunchtime and directed toward teachers. He found that preschoolers, similar to adults discuss events that happen outside of the classroom and also use a "show and tell approach" (375). In his sample, children's narratives focused upon personal experiences, family and friends, and dreams or movies. He concluded that adults and children should share mealtime as the child searches for a responsive partner.

Many previous studies on children's conversations have focused upon adult to child rather than child to child speech. As Blum-Kulka and Snow (2004) noted, few studies have systemically explored peer to peer conversation outside of the play context. Exceptional studies that have investigated the content of young children's peer to peer conversations during non-play contexts include works by O'Neill et al. (2009) and Holmes (2011). O'Neill et al. (2009) investigated the content of young children's speech in peer conversations. They video recorded the conversations of a class of preschool children during snack time, twice a week for

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approximately 500 speech episodes. Raw linguistic material was coded for speech initiations, person reference, semantic content, time, and location. They found boys were slightly more verbally active than girls, conversations were primarily dyadic, most topics involved people, jokes were infrequent, food was a topic in only a small percentage of conversations, and children produced more comments than questions. They concluded that preschoolers are working on a theory of mind through their social and linguistic interactions with peers.

Other studies have focused upon the social nature of children's speech. For example, Hamo and Blum-Kulka (2007) explored the purpose and function of language in Israeli preschoolers' peer interactions. In their view, discourse is a unique linguistic, social, and cultural phenomenon. In their work, they acknowledged the daily moment by moment social construction of peer culture in addition to the collaborative creation of discourse as it relates to individual development. Their focus was twofold; talk as activity and the use of conversation as a medium to help children develop social ability. In a related work, Kryatzis and Green (1997) used a Vygotskian lens to examine the relationship between the social construction of children's narratives and peer relationships. Using subsamples of preschool and middle school children, they suggested that children's discourse serve as a medium through which children socially construct. There are peer culture, identity, and friend relationships

Rather than linguistically analyzing children's speech, another approach to understand children's language use has addressed preschool children's understanding of conversational structure. The sociolinguist William Corsaro (1986; 1990; 1997) has extensively studied how young children use language and discourse to communicate their social status and understand their position within their peer groups. In the interpretist view, children use language to both collaboratively construct and understand their social worlds.

Kryatzis (2004) presents a review of this approach and its focus upon how children utilize language to both create and reflect their social worlds and relationships. One issue that surfaces is the concern children, even young children, have with power in their peer groups. In this case, children's ability to establish and maintain relationships with peers is reflected in their ability to use communication effectively to create and maintain social order. This can be accomplished by teasing, manipulating adult categories, and controlling conversations. This is the essence of peer talk (see also Karrebæk 2011; Kryatzis, Ross and Koymen 2010).

Empirical studies on children's use of language to reflect their social status include Kyratzis, Marx, and Wade's (2001) ethnographic work. They examined how preschoolers use language to mark social status and ranking in a friend group and found that children used specific control acts to regulate the behavior of others in the group. Powerful girls used mitigated pretend statements, whereas powerful boys employed unmitigated declaratives and direct commands. Researchers such as Anderson (1990) focused upon children's use of linguistic markers for power in pretend play. In the neighborhood setting, Goodwin (1990, 1993) explored African American children's strategies for establishing dominance hierarchies and alliances. She continued this line of inquiry (2007) by focusing

upon language as a medium through which young children mark their power. As Wolf (1996) suggested, child to child conversations may provide the context for critical language lessons, since the inequality and power differentials in adult to child speech are not present in peer speech interactions.

Finally, in her work with preschoolers, Holmes (2011) investigated the nature and content of peer conversations in a classroom context during lunchtime. She also explored how the activity of eating at school framed the children's conversation and play and the role of gender in guiding the conversations and play forms. Audio and written recordings of conversation using a time sampling unit of five minutes were employed. Simultaneous play and non-verbal behavior were also recorded. She found that children primarily conversed with peers and not with adults. Pervasive conversation topics were food, family, and daily events. Child to teacher speech frequently involved requests for assistance. Girls were more active verbally than boys in almost all instances except in asking the teacher questions. Boys played with their food, told jokes and engaged in taboo humor and language play more than the girls did.

The present work is aligned with the following viewpoints. First, children are regarded as active agents in their own socialization (Schwartzman 2001). Second, setting is acknowledged as guiding the behavior that occurs within it. In agreement with Mechling (2000), children's meal times are viewed as social contexts that frame the conversation and behavior that emerges in that setting and playing with food is a normative behavior for children. Third, peer conversations serve as a medium in which children create their own culture, manage their relationships, convey social status, and discuss what is culturally relevant to them. In short, children's peer conversations reflect children's everyday experiences in their micro and macro social worlds (Göncü 1999).

This project on children's mealtime conversations is framed within the socio-cultural perspective which emphasizes the social functions of children's discourse (Corsaro 1990; Hamo and Blum-Kulka 2002). This view focuses upon the interconnectedness between culture and behavior as it is reflected in children's conversational skills. Such interactions take place within a social context in which cultural norms and social relationships are constructed. This project focuses upon the role of children's conversations in providing a medium by which children convey and share commentary on their social world, relationships, status, everyday events, and the adult world. Of particular importance are conversation and language. One might expect preschool and kindergarten children's conversations to vary according to cognitive understanding and language competencies; popular children will control table talk; status will shift situationally; and girls and boys will engage in these acts in different ways.

Method

Participants

Participants included preschool children who attended a private, not for profit learning institution primarily for children 3-5 years of age with additional enrichment programs for older preschoolers. There were 70 children (31 boys,

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39 girls). Ages ranged from 38-70 months with a mean age of 48.2 months. Children were primarily from middle income families of European American heritages. Parental /Guardian consent return rate was 78% (70/90). Some children attended school every day, some three days a week, and others two days a week. All children were eligible for the lunchtime program. An Institutional Review Board granted approved for this project and the director and caregivers granted additional consent. Children were treated according to the American Psychological Association's guidelines for ethical treatment of participants (American Psychological Association, 2002). Since the participants were minor children additional resources were consulted (Christensen and James 2008; Fraser 2004).

There were seven kindergarten children (two boys, five girls). The children attended a private, for profit learning center whose mission includes teaching educational as well as life skills while emphasizing all domains of development. Children who attended the center may be between 6 weeks and 12 years of age. The participants attended a full day kindergarten program, ranged in age from 5-6 ½ years, and were of diverse ethnic heritages. Parental consent return rate was 75%. All children were treated according to the American Psychological Association's (2002) guidelines for ethical treatment of human participants (See Greene and Hogan 2005 for information on conducting research with children). An Institutional Review Board, the cooperating preschool and learning center, and parents/guardians granted approval for this project.

Design and Procedure

This project utilized a qualitative design, a naturalistic observation approach, and the technique employed was written and audio recordings of children's conversations in the natural setting of the classroom during lunchtime.

In the preschool, raw material was gathered between spring 2009 and fall 2010. The children were visited three days a week for 25 weeks. Lunchtime lasted for approximately one hour per visit. Total observation time was approximately 75 hours. The author and her four research assistants were naturalistic observers in the classroom. They neither initiated conversations nor engaged the children in interactions. Within several weeks the children acclimated to the researchers' presence, although sometimes the children invited them into their conversation or asked them for assistance with their lunch. The latter requests included opening a lunch box, pouring a drink, or inserting straws into juice boxes. The kindergarten fieldwork period took place between fall 2007 and spring 2008.

The following procedure was maintained in the preschool field site. After the children had selected their seats for lunch, the researchers filled in a seating chart. They then graphically noted the individual children for whom they had permission to record. Initially, teachers provided the children's names for the seating chart to ensure accuracy. Even after the researchers learned the children's names, teachers were consulted when the researchers were uncertain about a child's identity. After the seating charts were completed, the researchers positioned themselves on different sides of the tables so they could record independently the children's conversations from different vantage points. Each researcher had a notebook and pen with which to record the children's speech. Conversations were also

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audio- recorded to verify the quality and accuracy of the written notes. On some occasions, the volume of the children's voices during lunchtime was so loud that the researchers had to rely exclusively on written field notes.

The researchers selected tables for recording conversations based upon which table had the greatest number of children for whom consent was granted. Order of observation and recording proceeded from most to least number of children for whom consent was granted. On some occasions when children were silent at a table, researchers moved on to the next table. In the preschool, table compositions changed with every lunch time in part because attendance was voluntary and different children attended preschool on different days of the week.

To begin recording conversations, the researchers synchronized their start time and each began recording the children's conversations at the designated tables. Each table was time sampled for five minutes since lunchtime lasted approximately 30 minutes. When the 5 minute period had elapsed, the researchers moved on to the next table. All of the children's speech was recorded as well as any accompanying play and non-verbal behavior. Children who were seated at the table for whom consent was not granted were simply marked with an X in the field notes. Several trial sessions were accomplished prior to the start of the project. The researchers then compared field notes to determine discrepancies and gaps in the recorded material. After ten trials, the researchers were able to achieve 88% compatibility. Undecipherable words and phrases were discussed immediately after the recording session in a quiet room of the preschool.

The author was the only observer in the kindergarten field site. She adhered to the same procedures as those used in the preschool classroom.

Coding

The author trained the four research assistants to code the children's speech. First, all the researchers independently transcribed their recorded material. Next, these transcriptions were compared across all researchers to verify their accuracy. Once the accuracy of the transcriptions was verified, sample text was selected for training the researchers how to content code the material. A sample category was selected and each researcher worked independently coding randomly selected material from the children's actual conversations. Additional categories were added and all coders worked independently on the selected material. First, text was highlighted in different colors each color corresponding to a different category label. Then coders exchanged the highlighted material to discuss any discrepancies. Next, phrases that could be subsumed into a larger category were extracted. These were also checked for accuracy. When a discrepancy arose it was discussed at that time. After ten trials, no discrepancies arose and the actual coding began.

The coding procedure was performed following guidelines that appear in the methodological literature (e.g., Bernard 2006; Côtê, Salmela, and Russell 1995) and utilized by the author in an earlier study (Holmes 2011). First, verbatim phrases were extracted from the children's conversations. Next, phrases that contained a particular person, idea or thought were grouped together. These phrases were used to form higher order categories. For example, if children spoke about a

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family member, pet, or an event these were incorporated into the cultural domains of family and life events. If children conversed about a food item such as when two children were conversing about their lunch, these events were subsumed into the higher order category, Food. Next, transcribed text was highlighted using different colors to designate larger cultural domains. Color coding larger domains helped the coders compare material and efficiently locate raw material and examples for larger cultural categories.

Sometimes a child's conversation might contain criteria for more than one category. For example, John and Joe were involved in a conversation that contained multiple topics. They shared stories about their siblings and the food in their lunchboxes. Utterances that contained different people, ideas, or thoughts were coded for every response, placed into their respective higher order categories, and counted separately. This coding procedure has been employed in other studies that utilize semi-structured interviewing and open ended questioning (Dupuis, Bloom, and Loughead 2006; Holmes 2005; Holmes 2011). Category frequencies were tallied to yield percentages of behavior. Speech responses were used rather than conversational units given the pervasive occurrence of transduction reasoning (Piaget 1952).

Results

In this section the nature and content of the children's conversations with both peers and teachers are presented. All raw material was coded, analyzed, and tallied for descriptive statistics and is presented by sex of child and the conversational partner.

In Table 1, the content and frequency of the children's conversations to peers and teachers are presented (see Table 1). This group of children, both boys and girls, spent the majority of their lunchtime speaking with peers. The nature of these linguistic acts focused upon food and making general declarative statements. These accounted respectively for 36.0% and 39.4% of all peer conversations. By contrast, children spent only 10.9% of their time engaged in conversation with their teachers.

Gender differences surfaced with respect to both the nature and the content of the children's speech to peers and teachers. One major pattern that emerged was that girls were responsible for most of the conversation during lunchtime. Second, only a few major cultural domains or higher order categories were uncovered from the children's conversations. Food was a major topic of conversation for these children. However, girls spent more than twice as much time (68.6%) on this topic than boys (31.1%). Similarly, girls made approximately twice as many declarative statements (60.1%) than boys (39.9%) and interjected daily events in their conversations. Girls accounted for 75% of these instances. In addition, girls (86%) spoke about their families much more at lunchtime than boys did. As a group girls approached and spoke with their teachers more (76.7%) to their teachers than boys did (23.3%).

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Table 1: Frequencies for Topical Categories during Mealtime

Categories	Sex of Children		
	Boys	Girls	Total
Peer Discourse			
Talk about food	75	165	240
General declarative statements	105	158	263
Talk about daily events	6	18	24
Talk about play or games	7	10	17
Talk about family	7	43	50
Child to Teacher Discourse			
Talk with the teacher	17	56	73
Peer Play			
Play with food	10	11	21

There were two categories in which boys and girls participated equally. One was related to speech content; the other was behavior that accompanied speech and eating. For example, boys (41.2%) and girls (58.8%) gave almost equal attention to games and things related to play in their conversations and in this sample both boys (47.6%) and girls (52.4%) played with their food. Worthy of mention is the category Family and the nature of the children's conversations. Interestingly, pets were the topic of conversation more so than either siblings or parents. In the latter subcategory, only mothers were mentioned in conversation. Not one child included his or her father in conversations on the topic of family.

Examples of Child Speech to Teacher

Both preschooler and kindergartener speech interactions with their teachers were similar. Most were phrased in the form of questions either for assistance or information. For example, one preschooler, Michele, asked her teacher, "Can you open this [a snack container]." Similarly, Jeff, a kindergartener, asked his teacher, "Is Tia coming today?" His classmate, Linda, asked her teacher for another helping, "Miss Lynn, Can I have more spaghetti please?"

Declaratives also appeared in the children's speech to their teachers but with less frequency than questions. For example, on separate occasions two different preschooler girls announced to their teacher, "Kristin has tic tacs!" and "I ate my sandwich." Kindergarten children used more declarative speech to their teachers and asked them fewer questions than preschool children did. One major difference was the length of the utterance. Kindergarteners tended to use longer sentences than most preschoolers, often by several words.

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The Topic of Food

For both preschoolers and kindergarteners, food was a major topic of conversation. Children asked questions about food, declared their gustatory likes and dislikes, traded and shared food, and described their food. Some interactions were simple rhetorical questions. For example, Mira, a preschool girl, asked her tablemate, "I don't like chicken. Do you want it?" Other speech interactions were simple declarative statements such as when Uma told Tess, "I have chocolate juice." Her tablemate, Alana declared to her table, "This is not good, I have a bagel. My mom put jelly on my bagel. My sister has a spoon."

Sometimes the conversation involved several preschool children at the table who participated.

Michael:	This French fry is big.
Richard:	Look at my Dorito.
Jill:	This is not a burrito, that's lemonade.
Richard:	It's a Capri Sun and I said Dorito. It's spicy nacho. It's so spicy.
Trish:	It's fruit punch.
Richard:	It's Capri Sun.
Trish:	No, it's lemonade.

Similarly:

Christina:	I don't want these.
Hope:	So don't eat them.
Christina:	Can I have fruit snacks?
Hope:	Those are sour.
Ellen:	What are (*points to fruit Holly*)?
Adam:	I have an ice pack to keep my food cold. Do you want this? (*to his sister*) I don't want my yogurt.

Interestingly, kindergarten children frequently stayed on topic when discussing food and rarely included or moved to another topic of conversation. For example, the following conversation illustrates the children's ability to contribute to a conversation while centering on the topic of food:

Kevin:	Drink your milk if you want to get strong.
Kim:	I don't like the soup.
Kevin:	Do you like chicken noodle?
Kim to the teacher:	I like those (*pears*)
Julia to Amy:	Can I have your green beans? I like green beans.
Amy:	I don't like cheese. I don't like this. Is this white cheese or yellow cheese?

On some occasions, conversations included more than one topic, such as this one that began with food. The following conversation was between two preschool

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boys, one of whom began his conversation about food using the home context to initiate the dialogue:

Brian: I don't have anything in my house to eat.
Tim: You should have gotten McDonald's.
Brian: I wanted Burger King for the Spiderman toy.

Preschooler conversations were typical of this age group and often included more transductive thinking and rapid movement from one topic to the next in a given speech event. For example, the following conversation began with a query about beverages and concluded with the children's pets.

Taylor: What flavor is your juice?
Steven: Strawberry.
Oliver: But they have chocolate in them. I think my mom's going to take me to the beach.
Taylor: The other day was hot.
Steven: Yeah, I was burning myself.
Taylor: I got two Star War ships.
Steven: Yeah my dog's a girl. She's my sister.
Oliver: When I first got my dog I was dressing her up in girls' clothes. One time my dog bit me on my side.

When the teacher was a participant in the conversation, her speech helped shaped the conversation.

Todd to Rosie: We have a fish.
Melissa to teacher and table mates:
I have a pet that's a sandwich to me.
Teacher to Melissa: What's its name?
Melissa: Wingnut! I have a hamster.
Teacher: Who named it?
Melissa: Me! My mom calls me that, I named the hamster that. That's why. It's a guinea pig from a guinea pig pond. You could rent a hippo there.
Teacher: Have you ever done that?
Melissa: No, mommy won't let me. Hamsters are small and fat. I'm all done. This is my hamster.

Family

Family was a major topic of conversation that illustrated the importance of the children's ever increasing social worlds. Family members, events, and pets often were shared with table mates. In many cases, conversations began with either a declarative fact about family or a question about one's family. The following conversation is illustrative.

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Jenn:	Enrique!
Enrique:	What?
Jenn:	One of my cousins has a real phone.
Enrique:	She's only 8.
Maryanne:	I have two brothers, one is seventeen and he has a girlfriend, a real phone, and an iPod.
Michaela:	I'm not allowed to have one.

Younger children's declaratives regarding family often contained instances of transductive thinking as in the following example:

Teresa:	My aunt cut my hair. I have a cheese bar! I love chocolate chips! I love chocolate chips! They're so yummy.

Some children made a public announcement at their table and depending on social status, the child's utterance might receive a response. For example, when Jimmy stated, "My sister's in the Girl scouts," the table ignored the statement and continued the conversation on the topic already on hand. Jimmy had lower social status than the children controlling the conversation at the time.

Kindergarten children's conversation regarding family paralleled the preschoolers' with less of an emphasis on pets, though they also were mentioned.

Amy to Teacher:	Do you have a mom?
Jack:	My brother's name is Alex.
Amy to Jack:	My sister and other sister. She's 18.
Jack to Amy:	How old is your brother?

Play with Food

Both preschool and kindergarten children played with their food. It served as a focal point of the conversation, to help the children pass time while they were eating, and it helped socially construct playful interactions.

Much of the play was transformational, and in assimilative fashion children substituted food for real life objects that they resembled either in form or function. For example, Michaela manipulated a banana like it was a telephone and shaped the peels like a slide, saying "Now I made a slide" while using the table. Maria transformed her circular ice pack into a food item: "Look at my ring today" as she put her finger through the hole of her ice pack. Kindergarten children were also creative with their food play, turning peas into necklaces and mashed potatoes into volcanoes.

Media Influence

As is common with children of this generation, these children were heavily invested in cultural experiences the media provided for them. This included movies, DVDs, computer games, and television. These experiences became fodder for their conversations. For example, the following conversation was generated from the Princess Diaries movie at an all girls table:

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Michaela: My favorite princess is Cinderella!

Amy: I have all the Princess movies!

Michaela: Which is your favorite? I like Cinderella. [*Gather around lunch bag pointing to*] "I like that one."

Similarly, at her all girls table Stephania stated, "I watched Hannah Montana and at the end Jackson was in the tub and the kitties were in the tub. You have twinkle toes. Are you three? I'm five." Conversational topics regarding media were often gender specific. For example, the following dialogue occurred at an all boys' table. Girls never discussed these TV and comic characters.

David: I like Power Rangers.

Noel: Is there a red one?

David: Yes and a blue and red one like Spiderman.

Noel: Are Spiderman power rangers?

Jamie: There's a pink one.

Kindergarten children also integrated the media in their conversation though their understanding and memory, for the material was more detailed than preschoolers'. For example, the following conversation took place during one lunch and continued for the next few days as a topic. It was based upon the movie "Alvin and the Chipmunks." Jenn, a child with higher social status, controlled the conversation.

Jenn: Chicky chicky wow wow and dances. [*Noel sings with her in a duet*].

Jenn: Now was that a boy or a girl who did this? [*She is rotating her hips as she sings*].

Amy adds: Alvin and the chipmunks did it like this in the movie. Then they threw something at the daddy.

Julia: Then Alvin hid it behind his head like this and then he sang chicky wow wow.

Gender

Both the preschool and the kindergarten children used more linguistic markers for gender in their conversations and speech. The following is a typical example of preschooler speech that highlights gender as a social category.

Michaela: We want to play with the boys.

Amy: Yeah, the boys.

Michaela: We do want to play.

Kindergarten children illustrated their understanding of gender identity, awareness, and gender as a social construct in the following speech events. Jack was the most popular boy in class and regularly controlled both the topic and the tempo of lunchtime conversations.

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Jack:	You are a girl and I am a boy. I'm on your team and you're on my team.
Jenn:	I'm going on, the boys team that mean to chase us.
Jack to table counting the table:	
	There's five girls and three boys.
Bobby:	Raise your hand if you are a girl.
Amy:	Raise your hand if you're a boy.
Jack to Jenn:	You need to get someone else on your side.
Jenn and Wendy:	No, she's on my side. I'm on the boy's side.

Friends

Both the preschool and kindergarten children were aware of the importance of friends as playmates. For example, these two preschoolers illustrate their conceptions of friends and their ability to categorize friends by setting.

James:	The other day I slept over my nana's house. Do you know Joseph?
Nicky:	No.
James:	He's my friend. I play with him at home.

The kindergarten children often discussed play dates at their table.

Talia to Jenn:	I'm having a play party and Tom is going to invite you? Can you come to my house?
Jack to Bobby:	I'm still your friend and are you coming to my party?

Some preschool children drew attention to degrees of friendship when it came time to food sharing. This event was reserved only for one's best friend. For example,

Carin to Jackie:	Want a punch (fruit punch)?
Nicola:	He's my best friend.
Jackie:	You don't even know him.
Nicola:	Yes, I do. He's in my gym class.

Daily Events

The children's daily, everyday experiences were often the topic of conversation. In many instances, children both commented on and tried to process their everyday experiences. For example, Talia, a kindergartener, couldn't wait to tell her tablemates about her impending visit to the dentist.

Talia:	I have to go to the dentist. He is going to take pictures. He puts a little thing in and then he takes it out.

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Amy:	If your tooth is wiggling, they take a picture.
Talia:	I need to take pictures.
Steven to Talia:	Pictures don't hurt I got a picture right here. My friend used to live across from me. She got a shot in her mouth.
Talia to Amy and Jenn:	You have to go to the dentist even if you don't have a cavity.

In families with siblings often children recounted for their table mates the arrival and/or birth of their new sibling. For example, Jenn to David: "My mom's tummy came apart when she had the baby and they had to put it back together. Next they do that for all moms."

Play with Language

Unexpectedly, kindergarten children enjoyed word play more than the preschool children did. Preschool children tended to sing nonsense syllables or meaningless words. Kindergarten children enjoyed using ordinary words in comical if not borderline taboo ways, hoping to get the attention of adults within earshot.

Amy:	Know what, my brother says "butt." It's a potty word. My other brother says the word too. I eats butt. Mine's a chicken butt, butt, butt.

Taboo Humor

Only the kindergarten children seemed to include taboo topics such as bathroom humor, parodies on etiquette, and things that grossed each other and adults out. The children seemed to take pleasure in these topics and did not seem deterred even if their teacher was within listening distance of their conversation. Jack, one of the most popular boys in class, often introduced the topic and controlled the flow of the conversation.

Jack to his table:	Raise your hand if you eat poop. All raise their hands.
Jackie:	I do like the brains (*he talking about the broccoli in the chicken soup*)
David:	Brains taste like worms. I ate all of mine. They taste like book racks.
Jackie:	Did you hear me? Listen, I am making farting sounds.
Amy to Jenn:	Everybody poops. Everybody eats. Everybody drinks. Everybody pees.

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Discussion

The preschool and kindergarten children in this project found table talk to be a social and enjoyable activity. Mealtime conversation was widespread and began as soon as the children unwrapped their food and prepared for mealtime. Although much of the literature has focused upon adult involvement and participation in children's language development, these children primarily conversed with and preferred peer partners during mealtime, even when their teachers were present in the setting.

For example, Massey's (2004) and Dickinson et al.'s (2008) work reported that children were more talkative when an adult was present and seated with the children. Teachers in this project were always in the classroom and near the children, though they never sat with the children while they ate. Interestingly, the children actively engaged their peers in conversation throughout the lunch period and interacted with adults only when they needed assistance of some kind. This was true for both age groups. Girls were primarily responsible for child-initiated speech to their teacher and asked their teachers for assistance more than boys. Boys asked their teachers questions more so than girls.

This contrasts with Leman et al.'s (2005) findings where boys dominated their teacher's attention. This may be due in part to differences in age and contexts. Leman et al.'s work was with older children in collaborative learning groups. The present study involved younger children during mealtime. As a group, girls were more heavily invested in lunchtime conversation than boys and this may be partially explained by differential socialization processes in which girls are more likely to concentrate on the social aspects of their world (Maccoby 1998, 2007).

With respect to conversational topics, food was discussed more than any other topic followed by general declarative statements and family. As Mechling (2000) noted, the most discussed topic – food – was framed in part by the setting. Children also conversed about topics relevant to them such as their family and friends while including topics that are framed by the setting itself such as food. Interestingly, girls were responsible for more than half of conversations revolving around food and this may also be due in part to socialization differences where girls are more attuned to body image and what they eat than boys are (Maccoby 1998; 2007).

These findings contrast with those O'Neill et al. (2009) reported. Several possible factors may explain the differences between their study and the present work. First, in O'Neill et al's work, conversations were mainly dyadic, adults were not present in their setting, the setting was a laboratory preschool, and children from Eastern European heritages were included in their sample. They also recorded conversations during snack time rather than lunchtime, seating was prescribed, and food was served buffet style. It is possible that the findings in the current study differ from O'Neill et al due in part to the differences in the setting, freely selected seating, differing meal time events, and the fact that children brought their lunches from home.

Family and daily events surfaced in the children's conversations in part because they were culturally relevant to them and part of their social world (Göncü, 1999).

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Interestingly, children included their pets in family topics and when individuals were involved, mothers were the focal family member. None of the children mentioned their fathers in any family conversations. As expected, girls discussed these topics more than boys did. Interestingly, boys talked to each other more than girls and conversed more about family, play dates, and personal events than girls did. Jokes and teasing were rarely observed. This is supported by other empirical findings (Holmes 1992; Reifel 1986). As Mechling (2000) noted, mealtime frames the content of children's speech and their play behavior. Children frequently played with their food and appeared to enjoy doing so (Reifel 1986).

Gender differences also surfaced during play at lunchtime. Both boys and girls enjoyed playing with their food, and this supports Holmes' (1992) work where girls engaged in play with food along with the boys. As Mechling (2000) noted, children's play with food often takes place in the presence of peers and facilitates the use of food as a prop in pretend play. Holmes (1992; 2011) also found that play during mealtime also centered upon the food. Numerous examples in the literature support Mechling's (2000) and Bronner's (1995) utilization of food in this unique way in children's cultures (Holmes 1992; 2011).

Although there is an existing literature on the influence of gender on children's conversations (Leman 2002; Leman, Ahmed, and Ozarow 2005; Leman and Lam 2008), surprisingly few, if any studies have explored how gender influences the extent and content of children's conversations. For example, Leman et al. (2005) found that in mixed collaborative groups, boys capture their teacher's attention more than girls do. In line with Maccoby (1998; 2007), differential gender socialization should influence children's conversations in content, interaction style, and quantity. If one accepts the two cultures approach, girls in the United States generally are socialized to be more cooperative and attuned to social relationships than most boys are. In contrast, boys are socialized to be more competitive and dominant than most girls are (Leman et al. 2005).

Also of interest, findings from this study support those of Holmes (1992) in so far as boys were primarily responsible for the taboo humor and jokes and rhymes. It is possible that engaging in such acts helped boys established their social status in the classroom, whereas girls used conversation as the mechanism with which to solidify this social status. Boys may have played with food more than girls did; however, girls clearly talked about their food more than boys did.

One interesting difference between the preschoolers and kindergarten children was the occurrence of conversations that included taboo humor and bathroom etiquette. Although Guerra (1989) found preschoolers engaged in verbal swaggering – attempts to leave conversations in children's control – these preschooler children neither uttered declarative statements nor discussed any off color material during their lunch time. By contrast, kindergarten children seemed to take pleasure in trying to gross each other out or moving into fuzzy boundaries with taboo body humor such as farting.

There were some limitations and challenges to this study. First, the sample was homogeneous with respect to ethnicity and socioeconomic status. Second, in the preschool lunchtime attendance varied widely. Third, children freely chose their own seats, which often produced single-sex tables. Finally, there was no attempt

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to control for the children's familiarity with one another. Thus, some conversations may have been influenced by the children's prior relationships.

Future research might pursue content and text analyses of young children's peer conversations. Such studies will help expand our knowledge about the cultural transmission of knowledge between children, the role of language in that process, and the role of children's peer conversations in helping them interpret and rebel against the adult world. Other studies might focus upon young children's talk as power with peers, given the importance of forming and maintaining friendships in children's lives. Finally, the inclusion of different settings and diverse cultures and the nature of same-age and cross-age conversations would also be interesting avenues to pursue.

NOTES

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The White Lady of Devil's Elbow

Elizabeth Tucker

While doing research for my book *Haunted Southern Tier* (2011), I found a relationship between a local "Vanishing Hitchhiker" legend and a murder that took place near Owego, New York about 180 years ago. This legend, "The White Lady of Devil's Elbow," raises an interesting question. To what extent can speculation about a violent death that happened many years ago influence the development of a local legend that belongs to a migratory legend pattern? This essay will explore the development of "The White Lady of Devil's Elbow" from the early 1900s to the present, examining legend texts and reports of "White Lady" pranks played by teenagers. It will also delve into the White Lady's symbolic meaning, in an effort to explain why she has been important to young people in upstate New York for many years.

Near Owego, New York on Route 17C, some people who have driven past a hill called Devil's Elbow have claimed to have startling experiences. Legends about these experiences describe a young woman wearing a long white dress. Narrators who learned her story in the early twentieth century have described her as a young Victorian lady carrying calling cards who travels in a horse-drawn carriage. In the 1980s, 1990s, and early twenty-first century, adolescent and young adult narrators have described her as a prom queen or a bride. Before vanishing, she asks the driver to stop at the bottom of Devil's Elbow Hill. When the driver goes to a nearby house to ask about the young woman, he learns that she died in an accident on the hill many years ago. In some versions he sees her in a portrait, wearing a lovely white dress. From the mid-1920s to the present, teenagers have enjoyed playing pranks with white dresses, using flashlights and other special effects to scare passing motorists.

In 1932, a steam shovel operator digging up some dirt near Devil's Elbow Hill discovered the skull of a young woman who seemed to have been murdered with an axe or a long, flat board about a hundred years ago. Almost sixty years later, Tioga County historian Thomas C. McEnteer wrote that this young woman, who was killed near the site of a tavern built in the early 1800s, may have become the central character of "White Lady" legends. McEnteer suggests that belief in a "real ghost" has grown from this evidence of a local murder but that clever pranks, such as a teenaged girl standing below Devil's Elbow Hill wearing a white dress covered in Scotch-Lite tape, have made the ghost seem less serious and less believable (1990, 750).

My own fieldwork with Owego area residents during the past two years has resulted in a different conclusion: both legends about the murder and pranks by teenagers have encouraged belief in "White Lady" legends. All of the people who have talked with me about the murder have found it to be a significant event closely connected to "White Lady" legends. I have learned two versions of the story of the young woman's murder around 1832. The first version explains that the young woman was killed by a rough, drunken tavern visitor after going out

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alone, while the second states that both she and her husband died at the hands of a greedy tavern owner who had stolen their cow (or cows) and did not want to give up his new livestock. The second version is, of course, more prosaic than the first; the murder of a married couple in order to keep a cow or cows seems less mysterious and troubling than the murder of a lone woman near a tavern. As Jan Harold Brunvand has noted, horror legends tend to emphasize the vulnerability of young women and men who go out on their own, especially at night (1981, 11). Legends about young women dying after going out alone deliver warnings about staying safe and following guidelines for proper behavior. This legend pattern has been firmly established in American culture.

Since American legends tend to emphasize dangers for young women, it is not surprising that few of the legend texts I have collected in recent years mention a husband. Over time, Owego's "White Lady" legends seem to have become more like other "Vanishing Hitchhiker" legends that are well known across the United States. The legend cycle explicated by Brunvand (1981) and others generally features one person (usually a woman but sometimes, in "Jesus Hitchhiker" versions, a man) hitchhiking alone. The following "White Lady" legend, told by my student and Owego area resident Irene in 2004, includes a husband whose body vanishes:

> A long time ago, on a dark and stormy night, a newlywed couple was driving over Devil's Elbow Hill Road. It was so foggy that they never saw the headlights of the oncoming truck—the groom's body flew out of the car on impact. The body was never found. The bride, however, was crushed in the car. She died instantly. Sometimes, on a dark and stormy night, if the fog is just thick enough, you will see the bride standing in the road waiting for her groom to join her. Just for reference, Devil's Elbow is called that for a specific reason. The road goes almost vertically up to a point and down again very steeply. The road isn't in use any more, but the story is still told and some have even been said to see a white figure standing on the old abandoned road. Devil's Elbow Hill is located on the way to Waverly, New York if you're taking old 17.

Perhaps this vanishing husband is a vestige of the murder story that includes both a husband and a wife. Only the wife becomes a visible ghost, although the husband presumably dies too: an indication that the young woman's plight requires more attention than her husband's does. This "White Lady" variant and others focus on young women who die after a wedding or prom. The sudden downshift from joy to tragedy highlights life's fragility and warns young women to be careful.

Somewhat similarly, teenagers' pranks combine joy with tragedy; besides giving kids the chance to have some illicit fun, they highlight deaths and hauntings described in local legends and films. Scholars of children's and adolescents' folklore have noted the shock value of such pranks and the importance of the link between the legend and the prank or joke. Sheldon Posen's "Pranks and Practical

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Jokes at Children's Summer Camps," for example, describes the dramatic impact of a ghost seeming to appear immediately after its legend is told (1974, 303-9). Linda Dégh's "Symbiosis of Joke and Legend: A Case of Conversational Folklore" (1976) shows how easily people can move from horror to humor when discussing local legends. I have studied "Scary Maze Game" pranks, in which a child or adolescent frightens a younger sibling by making him or her play an Internet game in which the face of Linda Blair from *The Exorcist* suddenly pops up on the screen (Tucker 2011). Such pranks have given their players so much pleasure that they have become the subjects of YouTube videos for the entertainment of friends and others: an audience that seems to be virtually limitless.

Researching "Scary Maze Game" videos and comments online has helped me understand the relationship between fright and delight in young people's prank playing. A prank that suddenly scares someone belongs to the broad category of *ilinx* play: the kind of play defined by Roger Caillois (1961) as vertigo-inducing playful behavior. In contrast to *agon* (competition), *alea* (chance), and mimicry (simulation), *ilinx* subjects the player to dizziness and disorientation. Swinging or twirling on a merry-go-round can cause dizziness; so can the sudden appearance of something shocking and/or frightening. Ghosts that appear quickly not only shock viewers through the rapidity of their appearance, but also scare them by bringing to mind tragic events delineated in legends. The child or adolescent who plays the prank can enjoy the pleasure of victimization, while the one upon whom the prank is played may enjoy the stimulation of getting scared and can certainly take pride later on in having survived that process.

Since scary pranks tend to be highly memorable, they reinforce awareness of legends and films to which they are related. I have learned, while talking with students of mine who lived in the Owego area during their teenaged years, that "White Lady" pranks sharpen young people's awareness of local legends. In order to play a good prank related to this legend, it is necessary to know the legend's details well. After the prank takes place, the story of its occurrence—either by its players or by others—refers to aspects of the legend that local residents find to be important, as well as highlighting the audaciousness of the kids who dared to go out on the road to scare drivers passing by.

Owego teenagers' "White Lady" pranks have ranged from simple displays of a white dress at the base of Devil's Elbow Hill to elaborate use of flashlights, reflecting tape, pulleys, ropes, and other materials. Since flashing lights can cause accidents at night, local police have pursued and, in some cases, apprehended "White Lady" prank-players (McEnteer 1990, 750). Since police have gone after these pranksters, the stakes of playing such pranks have become very high. According to my students, successful "White Lady" prank-players have earned admiration from friends for their bravery, especially around Halloween.

Besides tracing the development of these local legends and pranks, I have wondered why legends about the young female ghost of Devil's Elbow have kept the descriptive term "*white*." All of her outfits—visiting dress, prom dress, and wedding gown—are white, a color that suggests innocence and joy. *Godey's Lady's Book*, a popular periodical from the nineteenth to the twentieth century, includes lyric poems such as "Leura" by Anson G. Chester, in which a young woman

receives praise for having "a brow pure as snow-flakes/From Winter's white wing" (1850). White wedding dresses have been common in England and the United States since 1840, when Queen Victoria married Prince Albert. Unlike Queen Victoria, the White Lady is a young woman alone (or at least separated from her husband) on a dangerous country road next to a hill with an evil-sounding name. Perhaps she wears white to show that she represents goodness and proper female behavior that will resist the Devil's influence. Her story works well as a warning legend for young women, reminding them to preserve their safety, innocence, and happiness.

Another reason for the White Lady's persistence may be the prominence in the Owego area of German immigrants, including some from southern Germany. German immigrants have also settled in nearby Pennsylvania, which has a "White Lady" legend associated with a curve called "Devil's Elbow" on Wopsononock (Wopsy) Mountain. The famous German legend of the "White Lady," about a countess who kills her two children after coming to the conclusion that her husband will not let them live, originated from Schloss Plassenburg in Bavaria in the fourteenth century. Like other "la llorona" legends, this one emphasizes the horror of a mother killing her own offspring. Although scholars have determined that the Countess Kunigunde of Plassenburg never had children, the story of her child-killing has been remarkably durable and is still told by guides at Schloss Plassenburg today (Nickell). In his scholarly study *Die Weisse Frau* (1984 [1931]), Martin Wachler mentions that members of the Plassenburg court used to dress up as the White Lady to scare people away from the castle. Young people who heard stories about pranks of this kind may have tried similar pranks of their own. Even if they didn't play pranks, they knew the legends and could tell them to their own children later on.

Any ghost that insists on staying in one place for hundreds of years accrues multiple layers of meaning. In *Possessions: The History and Uses of Haunting in the Hudson Valley* (2003), Judith Richardson analyzes information about the ghost of a young woman from the village of Leeds who has been important to her community for almost 250 years. This young woman, Anna Dorothea Swarts, was the black, German, Scottish, Spanish, or Indian servant or slave of a rich man named William Salisbury; she died after her master beat her and had her dragged behind a horse in 1762. Although not all the facts of this woman's terrible death are known, it is clear that her ghost is as firmly attached to the place where she died as the White Lady's ghost is to Devil's Elbow Hill. Richardson notes that "the ghost is both vestige and novelty, positive and negative, powerful and powerless, a possessing force that descends upon the town and through history, and something passive that is possessed" (123). This intriguing set of antitheses reminds us that ghosts are powerful and enigmatic beings who do not give up easily. It may be difficult for us to understand their motivations, but if they stick around for many years, we can feel sure that they have a reason for staying; and that reason probably goes beyond the traditional idea that ghosts like to haunt the locations of their deaths.

There are plenty of reasons why the White Lady persistently haunts Devil's Elbow. Representing young women's hopes for safety, respectability, and joy, she

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guards a dangerous curve next to the site of a tavern where a young woman died violently and was buried furtively during the town's early days. Is the White Lady herself this young woman? Some townspeople, including the county historian, think she is. It is also possible to view her as a spiritual descendant of the White Lady of Schloss Plassenburg, who suffered from a difficult relationship with her husband, killed her own children, and gradually became a frightening figure for members of the court. The thread that connects this fourteenth-century countess to the twenty-first-century bride or prom queen is young women's suffering, which takes many forms and leaves a lasting legacy. The "la llorona" legend pattern is an especially important part of this history. Although the local "White Lady" legend that I have studied does not include death of a child or children, its counterpart in Pennsylvania does.

Teenagers' perception of our local White Lady tends to be more upbeat. For high school students who live near Owego now, the White Lady is both familiar and strange, a famous ghost who makes both kids and adults shiver around Halloween. Kids with an adventurous spirit may want to play a "White Lady" prank or two, because this ghost isn't just scary; she's also fun to imitate and encourages escapes from the police. From a kid's perspective, the White Lady is a cool community member who is there to stay.

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Book Reviews

Recess Battles: Playing, Fighting, and Storytelling. By Anna R. Beresin. Foreword by Brian Sutton-Smith. (Jackson: University of Mississippi, 2010. Pp. xii + 168. Appendixes, notes, bibliography, index.)

Simon J. Bronner

A spate of books lately have signaled a dire warning about the threat to free play with the elimination of recess by school administrations and the regimentation of children at camps and after-school programs. Folklorists have much to contribute to this discourse in the "war on recess" because of the association of recess play with spontaneous, evolving traditional practices controlled by children rather than administrated by adults or influenced by corporations (in the form of video games and other gadgets directing play). Some advocates such as Joe L. Frost have even referred to a movement to counter the detrimental effects on child development with the redesign of playgrounds and the war on recess with the urgency of a "child-saving movement" (see his *A History of Children's Play and Play Environments: Toward a Contemporary Child-Saving Movement*, 2009). To date, much of the folkloristic attention to the issue of the decline of free play seems to have been centered in Great Britain with the publication of Steve Roud's sweeping tome, *The Lore of the Playground* (2010), and Julia C. Bishop and Mavis Curtis's editing of nine insightful essays in *Play Today in the Primary School Playground* (2001). To this bookshelf can now be added an incisive ethnography by Anna R. Beresin of recess at one American urban school between 1991 and 2004.

Readers might wonder if this focus on one school severely limits the possibility of generalizing about play and the framed activity of recess. Beresin is good about contextualizing the distinctive background of the children and their environment, and yet at the same time she draws lessons from what she saw in the schoolyard that could contribute to the discourse on "the war on recess." She clearly falls on the side of advocates for recess as essential to children's development and she views detrimental effects to children when recess is removed. She explains the assault on recess as an adult fear of violence and she uses ethnography to show that the "roughness" of time that children have to themselves occurs primarily in the transitions in and out of organization time rather than in the activities of recess. She confirmed this observation with video and showed it to administrators who set new guidelines for moving in and out of recess. This section is probably the most revealing of the book, not only for childhood and play studies, but for the uses of ethnography.

Beresin also uses a narrow ethnographic lens for a wider vision about play in her drawing out children's own views on what constitutes play—and for that matter violence—in a brief but provocative section on "Keywords of the Playground." She raises, as others have done, the linkage in children's cognition of

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play and "fun," and readers might wish for conversation that reveals the rhetoric of play as a mode of self-awareness. Also on the wish list is visual material, since Recess Battles more than other studies of children's play refers to patterns evident in visual terms. To be sure, she includes illustrations rendered by the children themselves, a reminder of the "native" terms she seeks through ethnography, but perhaps out of concern for children's privacy, photographic figures are omitted from the book. To Beresin's credit, the photography is instrumental not only as a tool but also as a concept of frame and paradox borrowed from Bateson. She sees, perhaps more readily than many folklorists, the power of child-controlled frames in the form of supposedly invented games to resist, and comment on, adult control.

There is text, and musical transcription, that add to the understanding of changing expressive forms in twenty-first century childhood environments. Beresin is especially concerned with a reading of the many adaptation, and in many instances, apparently unique expressions, that draw on commercial references ("Mine costs more, Yours costs less, Mine Footlocker, Yours Payless"). She considers the reflection of corporate exploitation of inner-city youth in this folkloric "incorporation" on the playground. She also astutely interprets the "old school" rhymes, or rather their adaptation (e.g., "Mailman mailman, Do your duty, 'Cause here come miss American beauty, She can do the pom pom, She can do the twist, Most of all, she can make the boys kiss") as framed performances of bodily asset and control. This question of children's culture in conflict when expressed as free play with adult sense of restricting movement, and hence the body, also comes into play in the resources of popular culture, and especially hip-hop music, in the content of rhymes and actions. Beyond this one schoolyard, Beresin coins the term "gamestory" to designate the narrative intrinsic in activities children associate with the playground. Her book is a starting point to decode the frames and patterns elsewhere, that is, if recess survives administrative fiats that Beresin shows to derive from serious misunderstandings of what children do when they play.

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Children's Folklore Section: 2011 Annual Meeting

The annual meeting of the Children's Folklore Section of the American Folklore Society took place in the Indiana Memorial Union in Bloomington, Indiana on October 13, 2011. Those present included Priscilla Ord, Libby Tucker, John McDowell, Spencer Green, Tom Johnson, Kate Schramm, Steve Stanzak, Irene Chagall, Julia Bishop, Ruth Stotter, Kate McCormick, and Eric César Morales. Spencer's arrival at the Section meeting was delayed, so Libby chaired the first part of the meeting, and Spencer chaired the second part.

Since we did not have minutes of the previous year's meeting, we briefly discussed what happened then, including the Newell Prize's amount going up as of 2010.

Priscilla presented the Treasurer's Report, which showed that the Children's Folklore Section is doing very well. There has been a slight drop in the number of Section members, but otherwise the Section is in very good shape financially.

Libby presented the Editor's Report. She expressed appreciation to Binghamton University for covering all of the expenses of *Children's Folklore Review* and explained that the next issue of the journal would be published in November. She also said how pleased she was that Indiana University's Scholar Works now publishes all back issues of *CFR* on the Internet. This is a wonderful upgrade of accessibility to the journal for students and scholars of children's folklore. Libby also mentioned that the *Children's Folklore eNewsletter* will continue to be published once a year.

Libby announced that there are two winners of the Newell Prize for students this year: Spencer Green, author of "Disastrous Alternatives: Boy Scout Disaster Stories and Legends and Imagining the Natural World," and Steve Stanzak, author of "Manipulating Play Frames: The Yo Momma Joke Cycle on YouTube." Spencer's article will be published in this fall's *CFR*, and Steve's will be published in the following issue, because there was not enough space for both articles in the upcoming issue. Many thanks to Chip Sullivan for selecting these two outstanding winners.

Kate Schramm announced that the winner of the Aesop Prize is Matt Dembicki, author of *Trickster: Native American Tales, A Graphic Collection*. Aesop Accolade winners are Stephen Alcorn and Samantha Thornhill, authors of *Odetta: The Queen of Folk*, Wafa' Tarnowska, author of *The Arabian Nights*, and Veronika Martenova Charles, author of *It's Not about the Rose!, It's Not about the Crumbs!, It's Not about the Pumpkin!, It's Not about the Hunter!, and It's Not about the Apple*. Kate proposed that Catherine Baer become the committee's new chair and that Anne-Marie Craus join the committee; Kevin Cordi's membership continues. These suggestions were approved by the Section.

There was no old business.

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New Business:

The Children's Folklore Section is bringing back the Opie Prize for the best recent scholarly book on children's folklore, which will, on a one-time basis, have a five-year window for books published from 2007 to 2012. Chairs of the Opie Prize Committee will be John and Julia. Warm thanks to both of them for taking on this important task!

Section members also agreed that it would be fine to have a one-year lag between publication of an issue of *CFR* and placement of its contents on Scholar Works.

Kate Schramm will continue to take care of our Web page; thanks, Kate! She also suggested that the Section write a note of thanks to the Dean of Binghamton University for his support of the journal. Kate McCormick suggested that CFR publish a theme issue: perhaps one on Internet folklore or playground games.

Irene made the point that members of the Aesop Committee should come to AFS meetings. Tom recommended that someone write an article on the Aesop Prize for Wikipedia, and Julia mentioned the significant new *International Journal of Play*.

All agreed to work on ideas for children's folklore panels next year at the AFS meeting in New Orleans.

The meeting was adjourned at approximately 1:15 PM.

Respectfully submitted,
Libby Tucker

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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 1, 2013. Submit papers to Dr. C.W. Sullivan III, sullivanc@ecu.edu.

Book Reviews

Children's Folklore Review is seeking book review submissions for its next issue, to be published in October of 2013. 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 book review editor, Li Cornfeld (licornfeld@gmail.com). Book reviews should not exceed 750 words.

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Contributors

Simon J. Bronner is distinguished professor of American studies and folklore and chair of the American Studies Program at the Pennsylvania State University, Harrisburg. Formerly president of the children's folklore section of the American Folklore Society, he serves currently as president of the Western States Folklore Society and the Fellows of the American Folklore Society. He is author or editor of over thirty books, including in the area of the folklore of youth and human development *American Children's Folklore* (awarded the Peter and Iona Opie Prize by the Children's Folklore Section), *Piled Higher and Deeper: The Folklore of Student Life*, and *Campus Traditions: Folklore from the Old-Time College to the Modern Mega-University.*

Robyn M. Holmes is Professor of Psychology at Monmouth University where her teaching and research interests reflect interdisciplinary and cross-cultural perspectives. She teaches courses in anthropology, child development, children's folklore, play, and qualitative methods. Current research interests include cheating at games, mealtime play, recess, and most recently, play and childhood in the Pacific Rim. Her works include *How Young Children Perceive Race*, *Fieldwork with Children*, and numerous chapters and articles on topics such as play, folklore, and sports.

Linda Kinsey Spetter has a Ph.D. in folklore from Indiana University (1998) and is now Professor of American Literature in the Graduate School of Baiko Gakuin University in Shimonoseki, Japan, where she has lived for 16 years.

Steve Stanzak (sstanzak@indiana.edu) is a doctoral candidate in Folklore and Medieval Studies at Indiana University, Bloomington, where he is currently completing his dissertation on medieval narratives concerning death and resurrection.

Elizabeth Tucker, Professor of English at Binghamton University, is the editor of *Children's Folklore Review.* She served twice as president of the Children's Folklore Section and is currently 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), and *Haunted Southern Tier* (2011).

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