Finding New Monsters in Old Places: A Review of the Works of Simon J. Bronner through an Age-Intersectional Lens

Cory Thomas Hutcheson

In the Fall of 2015, *Midwestern Folklore: Journal of the Hoosier Folklore Society* published a collection of essays by students from Simon J. Bronner's graduate course on the folklore of aging and the life cycle. I was fortunate enough to be among those students selected to contribute to the issue, which featured essays on Mormon baptism, life-cycle board games, and quilting traditions. My piece discussed the phenomenon of father-child "horror play," in which the adult pretends to be a monster in pursuit of the child or children. In his introduction to the issue, Bronner said "the subject of aging has been approached mostly by categorizing folklore under the heading of an age *group*, especially children or senior adults, rather than analyzed as a human-cultural developmental process in which folklore plays an instrumental role" (Bronner 2015:3). Dr. Bronner is, of course, being a bit modest in his assertion that aging has mostly been seen as a taxonomic activity rather than a scholarly pursuit of process. In fact, he has published copiously on exactly that process over the years. Even his landmark 1988 work, *American Children's Folklore*, turns to questions of linear and cyclical development in the aging stages of young people. Bronner's encouragement has led many of his students—several of whom appear in this volume—to engage with the aging process ethnographically, symbolically, functionally, and folklorically to determine how people create meaning out of the dynamic temporal structure of their lives. His work has covered aging from many angles, including two which became central to my study of father-child play: the role of "horror" in childhood (and adult) development and the intersectionality of age-related lore among generations. As Bronner passes his own life-cycle milestone and retires from the legacy program he founded at Penn State Harrisburg, we, as folklorists, would do well to take stock of his influence and re-interrogate his work in light of our own scholarship (and vice versa) to discover the vast territory he has already mapped and the many lands he is leaving us to explore.

My most natural point of departure is Bronner's chapter in *American Children's Folklore* (1988:143-60) on supernatural tales and legends, given my previous focus on the monstrous. As a way of marking children's evolving maturity, Bronner locates the transmission of folk narratives involving ghosts, witches, monsters, and other malevolent forces in the spaces between children. Even in his introduction to the chapter, however, Bronner points out that "[p]arents, camp counselors, and babysitters have helped to stock the children's world with stories in order to warn them about potential dangers and to exert some control over their wanderings" (143). Why are adults and, more importantly, teenagers and young adults, interested in scaring children in this way? A functionalist interpretation could situate these stories as educational, guarding the well-being and safety of the child by providing supernatural forces of discipline in the form of ogres and bogeymen

(Bascom 1954). Bronner's interpretive framework suggests such a reading, although it does not make that analysis definitive. Bronner specifically devotes a portion of his supernatural chapter to the discussion of "Horror Legends of Killers and Cars," although even in tales more generically labeled as "Ghost Stories," automobiles make repeated appearances:

> "This man and lady were riding down *the street*, and they had a *car wreck* in this one place…"
>
> "The *street* in front of a school had been covered with tar and cement…One gloomy, muddy day, a man was carelessly *driving down this road*…"
>
> "One day a little boy was playing near *the street*. He was sitting on *the curb* near *a car*. The little boy was playing with something he found *in the street* and did not hear a lady get in *the car*…" [All italics mine]

Children emphasize cars, Bronner demonstrates, because of the association of automobiles with "maturity and arrival into society," but their lore also warns of the "dangers" posed by that change (147). Similarly, the impetus to work for money and join adult society informs legends of babysitters, who, being left alone, fall prey to killers and monsters. Camp counselors share traditional tales that mingle humor and horror in an environment "[a]way from the restrictions of parents and teachers" where children "far [outnumber] counselors" and "feel a streak of independence and mischief" (152). Given the deep anxieties children may feel about their growing self-reliance and maturity, supernatural legends do manifest a degree of what longtime Bronner-friend and associate Alan Dundes labels "projection" in folklore. Dundes perceives as the transference of an unconscious and symbolic understanding of the world to external actions, beliefs, narratives, and behaviors in a way that characterizes supernatural legends as functional projections of fear and externalizations of powerful internal anxieties rooted in the life cycle process. Children, through projection, face their fears. What, then, are those who disseminate the tales to younger children getting out of the exchange? Is this merely a case of deploying the monstrous to keep children from wandering away from camp or into the street?

Approaching Bronner's research with an eye towards generational intersectionality might tell us a bit more about the motivations of the tellers. In my paper on father-child monster play, I drew upon psychoanalytic interpretations of fairy tales by Sheldon Cashdan, who asserts that "fairy tales are not for children, do not teach moral lessons, and…[point] to a psychodrama of anxieties played out in narration" (Hutcheson 2015:40). Cashdan is overzealous and ignores the intersectional ways in which children can make meaning out of hearing fairy tales while adults simultaneously make meaning out of telling them, but he does raise the question of adult use of folklore. Cashdan believes that adults see the deployment of folklore as primarily educative, a narrative performance that reinforces the values teachers and parents wish to see develop in their children,

as well as a social control to outline taboo behaviors (Cashdan 1999:15). Cashdan emphasizes that children experience lore on a psychological level despite the best intentions of adults, of course, but fails to give enough psychological agency to grown-ups who engage with children through fairy tales, urban legends, and monstrous performances. When adults, here construed as anyone aged above their mid-teens, share lore, they do so expecting a response from their listeners. The negotiation between audience and performer has been well-explored by others (Bauman 1974; Dundes 1980; Toelkein 1996; Blank 2009), but many explorations of lore transmission frame the exchange as a two-way dynamic. Bronner has addressed the inadequacy of that transmission model recently by emphasizing the ways traditional expression operates at, what he terms, a "purposeful activity with a repeatable, multi-layered message that can be called *phemic*" as opposed to a more functionally, "*phatic*" expression (Bronner 2016). When camp counselors transmit lore, for example, the children who hear the tale are certainly a target audience, but so are the other counselors listening. A parent engaging a child in a ghost story may be performing both as an "adult" and as a "husband" or "friend's dad" at the same time, creating multivalent channels of communication that situate the narrative transmitter as a person belonging to myriad life-cycle stages simultaneously. The children hearing the tale validate the challenges of those who have passed through young adulthood with their awed or stricken responses. Similarly, Bronner's 2012 *Campus Traditions* contains a chapter on supernatural legends and horrors in the lives of young adults, presumably many of whom have already experienced these stories at earlier stages in their lives, but who now begin circulating urban legends and terror tales anew. These students, according to Bronner, are explicitly acting out phemic meaning, fulfilling "a need to adjust to this [college] environment by connecting themselves to those who have come before" (277). The performative nature of the tales, which often reframe the unfamiliar and temporary home of the campus in terms similar to previously encountered environments such as the childhood home or summer camp bonfire, offers those who tell and hear a way to interact with their new peers in a particular life-cycle phase—"college kids"—while synchronously linking to their own experiences of childhood. Most potently, they synchronously experience a narrative and performance in which the campus itself plays a role, and all students who have engaged in the practice of sharing the legends associated with the school are brought into harmony. The multifaceted, multivalent expression of supernatural tales demonstrates that tales are not affixed to a single life-stage, but form the reusable material of an extended lifetime of folk practice.

One of the clearest examples of intersectionally phemic folklore in action is the *Belsnickel*, a holiday guising figure found in Pennsylvania German culture primarily. Several scholars have investigated the symbolism and social role of the Belsnickel, most notably Richard Bauman (1972), Alfred Shoemaker (1954, 1999), and Susan G. Davis (1992). The Belsnickel is a thickly fur-clad fellow, often with a mask or soot-smeared face to hide his identity. He visits nearby homes and farms, where he is welcomed by parents into the family home and proceeds to cut capers and play the bombastic fool. At some point, his attention turns to the children, whom he quizzes about their behavior over the previous months. He

uncannily seems to know all the wrongs they think they have kept hidden, and his fearsome demeanor cows them into promises of better obedience in the future. With a flourish, he scatters treats about the floor and then playfully whips or raps their knuckles as they grab for them. Soon, he is gone, often with a bit of cake or a draught of ale to warm him on his journey. Under the mask and furs, however, was a person—a local boy in his late teens or early twenties, usually unmarried, who knew his community very well. Bauman identified the Belsnickel performer exactly in terms of his adolescence:

> [B]elsnickling…was thought of as an activity predominantly for the older boys and young unmarried men of the community…The youngest belsnickles [*sic*] were fifteen or sixteen years old, with the majority around eighteen to twenty-one and the oldest between twenty-five and thirty…[T]he age of belsnickling was a socially transitional one, between childhood and full adulthood; boys began working for a living around sixteen, but did not conventionally marry or leave their parents' households till their early twenties. (Bauman 1972:232)

Bauman, along with others like Shoemaker (1999) and Davis (1992), point towards the liminal nature of the Belsnickel in every rural community in which he is found. He is a figure neither fully adult nor fully child. He occupies the period of misrule and topsy-turvy in the closing of the year. Why did neighborhood lads take on the Belsnickel role? Shoemaker and Bauman both identify a transgressive function which fell within acceptable community parameters. In short, the Belsnickel boy could play the fool and act upon his aggressions without fear of reprisal, so long as he did not overstep the bounds of the role—he could not do serious harm to the children, for example, and often households with very small youngsters would be bypassed on the Belsnickel's rounds. One component has been underemphasized in previous accounts of the singular, domestic Belsnickel visit, however. The Belsnickel boy certainly underwent his rite of passage, being both isolated and reintegrated into the community as noted in previous scholarship. We can also ask what function the Belsnickel's visit played for the larger community. In many accounts of the Belsnickel, we do not have the memories of those performing the role to rely upon nearly so much as we have the memories of those visited by the Belsnickel. Visits such as these were remembered fondly long after the lone Belsnickel receded from the scene. Several remembrances note the mixture of fear and pleasure the Belsnickel's visit provided. The Belsnickel, as a lord of misrule, was a creature both fearsome and benevolent, and as such would have embodied the experience of the New World for many first and second generation immigrant families. Boys taking on the role of the Belsnickel represented an important concept to the community: they had passed the dependence and dangers of childhood and were nearing an age of majority, in which they would be expected to provide for others. Here we have the phemic folklore operating in a multivalent fashion in both performed time and the practiced time of memory. Teenage and young adult boys performed

for the children, yes, but also for the parents, other boys in their peer group, the communities around them, and for themselves. They inhabited a folk practice that brought circles of time into overlapping conjunction, and those points of conjunction then became the basis for new memorate transmission later in the lives of those visited by the Belsnickel. Perhaps not surprisingly, Bronner has also written extensively about the traditions of the Pennsylvania Germans, including an article on folk speech and humor (2011) and 2017's *Pennsylvania Germans: An Interpretive Encyclopedia*, which he co-edited with Joshua R. Brown, although he has not written at any length on the Belsnickel to date, despite the figure's clear articulation of his phemic principle.

What has all of this to do with the fathers chasing their children around a room, roaring like a dinosaur? In writing my own assessment of "horror play" among father and their children, I chose to de-emphasize the children's experience and instead incorporate the much less richly explored perspective of the fathers who engaged in such play. The dynamics of parental-child relationships are complicated and tricky, a web of multiple meanings that can represent simultaneously constructive and destructive principles at play in cultural formation. Bronner has also noted that intergenerational web and its influences in his work on the African American storytelling traditions within the Powell family (2011). His detailed ethnographic work with Eugene Powell and his son, Ernest, demonstrated the continued practice of storytelling within the family and the personal emphasis on differentiation for Ernest. The son did not wish to be his father or to tell his father's stories, but he did wish to do as his father had done. When Ernest told stories, he told them for his audience and filled them with a level of violence beyond anything in his father's tales, but he also performed for his father as a tradition-bearer. Bronner decoded a level of tension between father and son, noting that "Eugene's insecurity spilled over into his relationship with Ernest. Eugene saw much of himself in his son…Eugene worried about his control over Ernest" (Bronner 2011:261). Eugene was telling his stories in the same way a father might pretend to be Godzilla or a zombie for a five-year-old. He entertained his audience but simultaneously accommodated his own anxieties about his role in his child's life and, crucially, in his own life. Eugene and Ernest Powell occupy different "stages" of life but also reflect the stages of one another's lives through the sustained practice of storytelling.

The materials which Simon J. Bronner has gathered through his prolific corpus of work on American folklore continue to provide much to think about. His recent concentration on a "practice theory" of folklore offers new insights into materials he has compiled over a lifetime. Similarly, as we develop our own insights and ideas with relation to new material, Bronner's work provides a bank of comparative fodder rich with potential for close reading and reinterpretation. My own work with the intersectional father-child "horror play" dynamic, which was supported from its inception to publication by Bronner, represents only the smallest fragment of possible interpretive lenses that might be applied to concepts of phemic folklore. Here, Bronner has remained ahead of the game, and provided scholars with new terminology and frameworks to apply to their findings. Bronner's earlier work, such as *American Children's Folklore*, demonstrate

significant opportunities for review and rediscovery. His proclivity for production has cast a wide net, and we are certainly indebted to him for what he has given us so far. Yet his work also demonstrates a notable "lack," if I may co-opt Dundes' term from game morphology and apply it here. He leaves us much yet to do in the form of a lifetime of work that can still benefit from attentive reinterpretation. Is he then playing a game across time, whose object is an "elimination" of his "lack" through our own diligent scholarship? If so, that would be very much the playful and phemic Bronner, acting the part of mischievous child as he crosses the threshold of retirement.

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