

# CHILDREN'S FOLKLORE REVIEW

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## FROM THE EDITOR

ELIZABETH TUCKER

As I finish editing volume 31 of *Children's Folklore Review*, I want to thank several important people. C.W. Sullivan III, editor of the journal for thirty years, has kindly served as associate editor for this issue; his help has been greatly appreciated. I have also appreciated the wise counsel of our editorial board: Priscilla Ord, Jay Mechling, and Simon J. Bronner. Dana Hercbergs, our new book review editor, has done a superb job of soliciting and editing reviews, and I am delighted that we have this new section. Kathy Buchta has done excellent work with our layout and design, and Sheridan Press has printed the journal beautifully. The generous support of Donald Nieman, Dean of Harpur College at Binghamton University, has made our whole publication process possible. I am very grateful for Dean Nieman's help.

Our second Binghamton University issue covers a broad range of subjects, with emphasis on children's and adolescents' creativity, boundary exploration, and rites of passage. Simon J. Bronner's "Fathers and Sons: Rethinking the Bar Mitzvah as an American Rite of Passage" closely examines the symbolism of the bar mitzvah ritual, finding that it resolves father/son conflicts. The last part of Bronner's article shows how children compete with their parents for ownership of their bar mitzvah celebrations, adding creative touches such as skateboard centerpieces. Priscilla Ord's "Children of the Holocaust" also analyzes children's creativity, tracing the persistence of children's games, play, and pastimes in literary works about the Holocaust. My own essay, "Go to Bed, Now You're Dead: Suffocation Songs and Breath Control Games," explores a difficult subject that has seldom been studied by folklorists. While suffocation songs seem light-hearted and amusing, breath control games have resulted in deaths and serious injuries. Another painful subject, bullying, provides the focus for Glen Retief's "The Karma of Violence." C.W. Sullivan III's "Children's Oral Poetry: Identity and Obscurity" offers a very interesting overview of the development of children's rhymes from the 1950s to more recent times. And Kathryn A. McCormick's "Kid Culture: Neighborhood Exploration through Enrichment Clusters" gives us a glimpse of a very successful elementary-school field project that helps children discover the traditions of their home neighborhoods.

This year, the executive board of the Children's Folklore Section hopes to put *Children's Folklore Review* on the Internet. We are exploring various ways to achieve that purpose and will discuss the subject at the annual meeting of the American Folklore Society in Boise, Idaho. Comments and suggestions from all readers are welcome! Please feel free to e-mail me at any time (ltucker@binghamton.edu). If you would like to suggest a book for review, please e-mail our book review editor, Dana Hercbergs (hercberg@sas.upenn.edu). Thanks very much for your support of *Children's Folklore Review*.

## FATHERS AND SONS: RETHINKING THE BAR MITZVAH AS AN AMERICAN RITE OF PASSAGE

SIMON J. BRONNER

The bar mitzvah draws popular as well as folkloristic attention because it is one of the few publicly recognized American rituals for entering adolescence. Popularly categorized as a Jewish folk tradition, the bar mitzvah is hardly a private affair; it is recognized, if not participated in, throughout the general population of North America as a result of being featured in popular films, television shows, and novels. Some of the notice for the bar mitzvah owes to depictions in the media of material excess. Additionally, the bar mitzvah raises a social psychological question of the relatively early coming of age at thirteen years old. The age is perceived as early in a modern American society characterized by an extended childhood and adolescence before adulthood. Elaborating on this critical coming-of-age issue, I propose that the folk sources of the bar mitzvah reveal a symbolism that suggests the ceremony acts to resolve father-son conflicts. Further, in the American context both non-Jews and Jews have heightened the ceremony's importance because the event represents public displays of, or compensations for, uncertain masculine status.

### **Problem Statement and Background: The Folk and Popular Logic of Bar Mitzvah**

The bar mitzvah is the coming-of-age ritual that everyone knows, in image if not in practice. If one has never attended the event, he or she probably has been exposed to it in popular television and film. Jonathan and Judith Pearl, discussing media portrayals of Jewish themes in *The Chosen Image* (1999), claim that "of all the Jewish rites of passage depicted on popular TV, none has received more attention than the *bar mitzvah*" (Pearl and Pearl 1999, 16). Since their book has come out, the bar mitzvah has been dramatized, or spoofed, in popular movies such as *Glow Ropes: The Rise and Fall of a Bar Mitzvah Emcee* (2005), *Keeping Up with the Steins* (2006), *Sixty Six* (2006) *Knocked Up* (2007), and *Two Lovers* (2008), and television series such as *Entourage* (2005), *Sex and the City* (2000), *Frasier* (2002), *The Simpsons* (2003), *Unfabulous* (2005), and *Naked Brothers Band* (2008). It has been the butt of many jokes and cartoons among Jews and non-Jews alike, many of which concern the apparently young age, 13, when the boy is pronounced to be entering manhood or which question the Jewish boy's claim to manliness. In the *Naked Brothers Band* episode "The Bar Mitzvah," for example, wordplay is evident when a parent commands the bar mitzvah boy to join his friends with the Yiddish word *gey* meaning "go," but the Americanized boy understands the word as questioning his masculinity for acting "gay." Related to this humor in a surfeit of comic graphics and mocking photographs is the common theme of discomfort for the boy in the fabled misfitting bar mitzvah suit. The humor depends on the perception that the Jewish boy is uncomfortable in, or not ready for, the commanding pose of an adult suit.

The kind of bar mitzvah commanding popular culture attention is likely of non-pietistic Jews, often called liberal or assimilated. In such satirical portrayals, viewers become aware of anxieties, not just for the bar mitzvah boy's relation to his faith or ethnicity, but also for the modern consumer society of which he is a part. Depictions of the bar mitzvah in popular culture focus primarily on the party because of the broader societal interest in modern materialism, or parental indulgence, that it raises, but contextualizing the celebration within traditional practices and symbols for the bar mitzvah boy leading up to, and during, the event sheds light on the inherited, and invented, meanings for the bar mitzvah. To get at these meanings, I will examine more closely the folk cultural aspects of the event to explain its growing appeal since the mid-twentieth century.

The folk cultural source of the bar mitzvah appears rooted in synagogue practice. Along these lines, Jewish parents will probably voice the attitude that the bar mitzvah is the most self-conscious expression of Jewishness in one's life and understand that it signifies entrance into what is known as religious majority: the ability associated with Jewish maturity to participate in a *minyan* (quorum of 10 for prayer), fast, and read from Torah. Orthodox Jews may more clearly recognize the obligations it represents to Judaism to put on *tallit* (prayer shawl) and *tefillin* (phylacteries), but the bar mitzvah in Orthodox communities does not have the conspicuous consumer display that it does among liberal Jews. For many Jews, it signals a finality rather than a transition to another stage; it is an end rather than a beginning of religious participation. Ivan Marcus writing on the Jewish life cycle observes that the bar mitzvah "can be seen as a finishing rite for many young Jewish adolescents. It moves the child from Judaism into the larger world possibly without any additional traditional Jewish rites until death, if then" (2004, 123).

That a traditional ceremony would contribute to discontinuity rather than the continuity expected of rites of passage has not only been a concern of historians and ethnographers. American rabbis since the early twentieth century have complained about the use of the bar mitzvah to conclude synagogue attendance. Rabbinical philosopher Mordecai Kaplan during the 1930s, for example, in his incisive tome *Judaism as a Civilization: Toward a Reconstruction of American-Jewish Life* (1934) criticized the "spiritual chaos" caused by "so casual a contact with Jewish knowledge" in short-lived attendance at a Hebrew school before the bar mitzvah (Kaplan 1994, 58). Although acknowledging that the Jewish educational focus on preparing for the bar mitzvah kept youth in Jewish schools, he advocated for a reorientation to signal entrance into a new stage of life or developing a life-long commitment to Judaism (Kaplan 1994, 58-59). A later popularly known rabbi, Joseph Telushkin, renewed the complaint in *Jewish Literacy* (1991) by stating, "While the bar mitzvah is intended to mark the beginning of a Jewish boy's adulthood, for non-Orthodox Jews it frequently signifies the end of his Jewish education" (1991, 612).

Surveys by Jewish organizations of their youth members verify that children perceive the bar mitzvah to be a conclusion to education rather than a transition to another stage. Barry A. Kosmin found, for instance, for the bar/bat mitzvah that less than a quarter of Conservative Hebrew school students showed a high score on their plans for attending synagogue monthly or more after the bar/bat

mitzvah (2002, 263). Despite the intentions of this minority, actual attendance was even lower, and this disengagement is typically blamed on teens focusing on secular high school studies and extracurricular activities with the support of their parents (Leneman 1993, 17-19; Sidlofsky 1993, 302). A higher percentage of boys go through a bar mitzvah than girls for the bat mitzvah, and the boys report feeling pressure more intensely to disengage from religious activities in favor of weekend sports and social activities. Of the *b'nai mitzvah* students, girls having gone through bat mitzvah were more likely to volunteer in the Jewish community and attributed more importance to being Jewish than did the bar mitzvah boys (Kosmin 2002, 253).

Although civic leaders often point to the structure of American Hebrew school education for the rise of the bar mitzvah, rabbis and educators alike insist that Jewish education is geared toward wider goals and the bar mitzvah ceremony involves an important (and to some the most important) secular component. In light of the disappointing effects of the bar mitzvah on religious maintenance and coming of age transition, the most common alternative explanation is family socialization and community networking it provides (Davis 1995, 2003; Kennedy 2005; Schoenfeld 1993b). Kosmin's statistics lead him to consider the familial bonding of the bar mitzvah in light of the uncertainty of holding a Jewish wedding in the life cycle of the boy for the continued appeal of the bar mitzvah, despite criticisms of the bar mitzvah by rabbis for undermining their religious purpose and by civic leaders for being too materialistic and competitive. Basing his view on the observation that "for many couples it is the first major family and social event since their own wedding," Kosmin hypothesizes that the bar mitzvah is a developmental milestone for the parents who "must present themselves publicly in relation to their religious tradition to the most significant people in their lives—their family, colleagues, and social network" (2000, 236). There is merit in this argument because of the background of social and economic anxieties for many liberal Jews of on the one hand, appearing integrated into the larger society, and on the other, of validating their commitment to Jewish identity among members of their religious group. Yet a closer look at the ceremony reveals that the ritual portions of the bar mitzvah feature the relationship of the father and son, rather than the whole family.

Related to the question of the bar mitzvah's modern appeal is its historical trajectory since the early twentieth century. Although popular culture may present the bar mitzvah as an ancient Jewish rite, its tradition is of relatively recent origin. Many scholarly observers have editorialized that its rise among the people of the book is remarkable considering there is no mention of the ritual in its sacred texts of Torah or Talmud. The term *bar mitzvah*, or son of the commandment, appears in the Talmud (BM 96a) for a person subject to law, but it does not appear in reference to assuming religious obligations before the fifteenth century (Chill 1979, 315). The scholarly consensus is that as a ceremony it dates to local medieval German practices which diffused to eastern Europe, but there it did not gain the elevated or standardized status now given it in western Europe and America (Abrahams 1958, 32; Marcus 1996, 119-26; Marcus 2004, 82-123; Pollack 1971, 59-62).

The key components of the *derashah*, or interpretive speech, and examination drew significant notice in eighteenth century Italy, and it may be from there that the ritual made some inroads into north African Jewry (Goldberg 2003, 90-91; Ouaknin and Ménager 2005, 335-39). Yet in the substantial Jewish communities of Yemen it did not develop at all (Ouaknin and Ménager 2005, 342-43). It is also noteworthy that in North Africa, religious majority could be reached any time the boy was ready, and among Indian Jews it occurred around five years old (Goldberg 2003, 92). The historical explanation of a German-Italian influence is often accompanied by speculation on the rise of the bar mitzvah rituals as local imitations of Christian confirmation practices, whether out of interests of assimilation or modernization (Marcus 2004, 109-13; Schauss 1950, 120-21). Well into the twentieth century, Judaism's rabbinical annals observed that the bar mitzvah was a fading tradition or one that the rabbis should eradicate because it challenged elite notions of Judaism (Silverman, Morris 1932, 329-31). A leading authority for Orthodox Jewry in North America, Rabbi Moshe Feinstein (1895-1986), for example, publicly declared, "If I had the power, I would abolish the *bar mitzvah* ceremony in this country...It is well known that it has brought no one closer to study or observance" (Sherwin 1990, 150). For notable modern Jewish historians such as Jenna Weissman Joselit, the triumph of the bar mitzvah over this rabbinical resistance is the example *par excellence* of a singular American culture within the wider Jewish world. It demonstrates the ascendancy in the United States of the creative, upwardly aspiring folk interested in accommodating modernity over the elite hegemony of the ancients in the stodgy synagogue (Joselit 1994, 89-118).

Sociological and psychological inquiries have underscored the way the bar mitzvah involves the family and could be used therapeutically to link generations and create community (Davis 1995, 2003; Kennedy 2005; Schoenfeld 1993b). Certainly the bar mitzvah can take on a different character depending on the family dynamic, but the unanswered question remains after examining these findings about the centrality of the father-son relationship despite growing egalitarianism and feminization in Judaism. The sociopsychological interpretations positing a social bonding function are not that much different from the folk view that the bar mitzvah is something that each family wants to make its own while still showing fidelity to tradition. Logically, the bonding is a consequence rather than a source of the ceremony.<sup>1</sup> This folk view has been contrasted, particularly in religious literature, with elite pressures of rabbinical leaders to maintain the bar mitzvah's synagogue function of encouraging participation in the *minyan* (Kosmin 2002, 239-41; Liebman 1973; Schoenfeld 1993a).

The implication of the functionalist analysis is that the bar mitzvah persists because it provides benefits to participants, but the bar mitzvah has raised conflicts in the Jewish community and surveys affirm the tremendous pressures that preparation for the event raises. Folklorists and ethnologists for their part have emphasized the expressive ritual components of the bar mitzvah as a Jewish version of global pubertal ceremonies. The bar mitzvah is cited most commonly in folkloristic textbooks and reference works as a prominent coming-of-age "rite of passage" evident in western industrialized countries (Haskell 1996, 410; McKeever-Furst 1992, 29; Smith, Robert 1972, 165; Spiro 1977). Folklorists and ethnologists

are eager to include this example probably because few public coming-of-age rituals exist in America and Europe to compare to the anthropological haul of so-called primitive puberty initiations that draw attention to themselves as exotic, sexually tinged practices of public transition to adulthood (Raphael 1988; Spiro 1977). The bar mitzvah lacks this sexual undertone, it seems, but it burst on the American scene at a time when industrialized countries were extending childhood and becoming aware of adolescence as a distinct stage of life (Russ 1993). This coincidence is apparent in the connection of the bar mitzvah to rites of passage although a correlation cannot be established because of its pre-modern existence. The bar mitzvah conceptualized as a rite of passage shows folk tradition to be socially functional, presumably needed to mark passage from childhood into adulthood. Jewish educator Jack D. Spiro summarizes this view when he states, "The process itself may consume most of childhood, but the initiation rite is a form of 'cultural compression,' when all that is learned is compressed in the rituals. The compression itself focuses on the new roles that must be assumed by the initiate as he enters into the realm of manhood" (Spiro 1977, 394). For Spiro, this process is common among rites of all societies, but what is distinctive in Jewish culture is "the high degree of emphasis on learning, the paramountcy of knowledge and understanding" (1977, 399). Thus manhood is attained along with Jewish identity, he concludes, through the rite of passage, although he has difficulty reconciling the "long, arduous intellectual process" of preparation with the relatively short "transition" phase on the big day.

A logical problem with the demarcation line for Jewish male passage is the fixed age of thirteen years old. Biblical sources, for instance, cite twenty as a legal adult age and do not prescribe rituals for puberty. One can join the *minyān* without being bar mitzvah and could celebrate bar mitzvah at other ages and localities. Jewish folklorist Hayyim Schauss hypothesizes that thirteen became ritually significant not because of a developmental stage it marked but because "thirteen was a sacred number among the Jews in ancient times" (Schauss 1950, 113). He speculates that the designation of twenty for maturity was a later development, "when a more advanced legal system was in force among Jews" (Schauss 1950, 113). If a sacred number was applied, however, it would probably be eighteen after the mystical numerological equivalent of *chai* (consisting of the Hebrew letters of *bet* and *yod*) for "living" (indeed, at bar mitzvahs today, common cash gifts are denominations of eighteen to signify good luck). And in fact, Rabbi Stuart Rosenberg (1923-1990), spiritual leader of Canada's Jews, writing in the influential journal *Religious Education* on the "right age for Bar Mitzvah" advocates for reforming the bar mitzvah tradition by holding it for boys at the age of eighteen (Rosenberg 1965). Other liberal rabbis in the twentieth century tried to replace the bar mitzvah with a confirmation ceremony at fifteen or sixteen, to keep children in Jewish education longer and to align it with an age perceived to be more of a coming-of-age period (as in the popular girls' celebration of "sweet sixteen"), but the efforts have been largely unsuccessful (Joselit 1994, 105-30).

Looking to ancient sources for the entrenchment of thirteen in the Jewish ritual cycle, folklorist Theodor Gaster was concerned that correlation was difficult because neither a pubertal or sacramental rite appears at thirteen in sacred texts.

Its cultural significance, he offered, was in being the traditional age for marriage in the ancient Near East (1980, 68). The *Mishnah*, however, gives the expected age for marriage as eighteen, preceded by stages of study beginning “at five years the age is reached for Scripture, at ten for the study of Mishna, at thirteen for the fulfilment of the commandments, at fifteen for the study of the Talmud, at eighteen for marriage, at twenty for seeking at livelihood....” (Pirkei Avot 5:25; see Hertz 1945, 101-3). In this interpretation, thirteen is the appropriate age for understanding and enacting commandments in an educational life cycle, even though various rabbinical authorities have countered that it is too young (Rosenberg 1965). Rather than viewing a religious significance to the bar mitzvah because of the sacredness of the number, Gaster observed that the bar mitzvah is a custom without meaning; he thought of it in the modern era as an occasion for a party without spiritual or developmental importance. Reflecting a common rabbinical attitude of “elite” Judaism, Gaster in his influential survey of Jewish folklife disparaged the bar mitzvah by concluding, “It confers nothing, imparts nothing, creates nothing; it merely celebrates” (Gaster 1980, 67).

“Merely celebrates”? What about bar mitzvah as rite of passage? Ivan Marcus hypothesizes that “In recent times, as Jews sought to mark the life cycle in ritual ways even in lives not otherwise filled with Torah observance, the bar mitzvah emerged as a rite of passage from Jewish childhood into adolescence and acculturation into the larger secular world, especially in American or Israeli life” (2003, 123). The reference to “rite of passage” declares its function of moving from one stage to another thought to be universally containing a structure of separation, transition, and incorporation by French folklorist Arnold van Gennep in 1908. It should be pointed out that although van Gennep as a scholar of religion knew about the bar mitzvah, the event is totally absent from his foundational book *Rites de Passage*, and in texts such as Gaster’s and the *Encyclopedia Judaica* it is labeled a *ceremony* that is not about transition to adulthood as much as either a celebration of the conclusion of Hebrew education or a display of commitment to Judaism (Gaster 1980, 66-77; Kaplan and Roth 1972). For psychologist Jacob Arlow the bar mitzvah also has educational more than developmental significance. He calls it an “ordeal by recitation,” linking it to nineteenth-century educational tests establishing the authority of the patriarchal synagogue (1951, 357). Spiro agrees, pointing out, “The boy is on trial, perhaps not the kind of trial involved in walking over hot coals. But it is an intellectual trial, no less traumatizing as he stands before relatives and authorities to demonstrate his skill, ability, and knowledge of Torah and Jewish law. ‘It is, in essence, an academic degree’” (1977, 397). Ivan Marcus observes that “there is a culmination in the bar mitzvah as well as a celebration of youth. It often is the end of a Jewish child’s formal Jewish schooling, his or her graduation” (2004, 122). Anthropologist Harvey Goldberg in his comparative survey of Jewish rituals surmises that this association with examination and graduation is grounded in the bar mitzvah’s evolution out of an educational context. In his view, the bar mitzvah displaced the common ritual of entering religious education with one to mark its end. Part of the rationale is that the transition of thirteen is one from elementary school to higher education of *bet-ba-midrash*.

Part of the problem with the bar mitzvah as a rite of passage is how van Genneep's structural order for moving from one stage to another of separation, transition, and incorporation applies to the event. One would expect much transition in a coming-of-age practice, but the bar mitzvah involves an inordinately long preparation time, typically starting as early as three years old. The bar mitzvah is not separated during the event and is not presented as liminal. The bar mitzvah's central task is to read a Torah portion and provide a speech rather than engaging in an initiatory act with male elders. As an incorporation, as sociologist Judith Davis noted, it struggles to mark a change in status or passage to another stage. Adult privileges outside of congregational life are not granted, and for most children, it is something that parents plan for them. It is therefore in practice a milestone rather than an initiation.

I contend that meanings exist often outside the awareness of the participants that contributed to its spread in folk Judaism since the mid-twentieth century in western Europe and America. My evidence comes from participation in a number of ceremonies, symbolic reading of liturgical texts, a survey of former *b'nai mitzvah*, and a content analysis of *derashah*, the interpretive bar mitzvah speeches the boys make. Using developmental psychology and historical context in the mid-twentieth-century crisis of masculinity, I will provide a folkloristic explanation of why the bar mitzvah rose to its present status. I look at it as an invented milestone tradition that has dealt with father-son conflicts as the boy deals with the uncertain status of his masculinity in a wider modern context.

### **Identification: Preparation, Fasting, Separation, and Recitation**

Let me review the components of the bar mitzvah. Most Jewish educators and synagogue administrators encourage participation in Hebrew School beginning with the Aleph grade coinciding with kindergarten age as preparation for bar mitzvah by being able to read and chant Biblical Hebrew, recite prayers, and participate in congregational life. The bar mitzvah is treated as a culmination of one's education demonstrated by reading from the Torah and a speech. In the days before the bar mitzvah, no special events are planned, although in some communities, the boy may wear tefillin all day, get his hair cut or shaved off, or fast.

The ritual fast for the boy usually occurs on the Yom Kippur before his bar mitzvah, and it is distinguished from the fasting he may do with adults afterward by lasting until *Chatzot* (midday as defined by *Halakhab* or practical Jewish law). Rather than being prescribed in Torah, the transitional fast for the boy before his bar mitzvah on the Day of Atonement arose apparently as a folk custom in the modern period.<sup>2</sup> It may be based on the examples of the father's obligations to train a Jewish child mentioned in the Talmud, which include partial fasting on Yom Kippur after the age of nine years old (Shulem and Koenigsberg 2007). Yet *Halakhab* calls for fasting as a commandment *after* the bar mitzvah, with special reference to the symbolism of pubic hair growth for maturity: "a boy of thirteen and one day who have brought forth two hairs" is considered adult "with regard to all of the commandments and must complete the fast as an obligation from



*Figure 1. Sephardic bar mitzvah ceremony, Brooklyn, New York, 1998. Photograph by Simon J. Bronner.*

the Torah, but if they have not brought forth two hairs then they are regarded as minors and complete the fast as a rabbinical obligation only” (Krieger 2006). The significance of the occasion of Yom Kippur for the fast on special occasions is that it symbolizes a death and rebirth, divesting the individual of his or her previous life (Linke 1999, 149). The fast and wearing the white robe traditionally donned on Yom Kippur and burial at the end of life will be reenacted, for example, on the wedding day along with the same confessional prayers that are said on the holiday and at a death bed. The process therefore ritually confronts mortality, which, according to clinical psychologist Stuart Linke, “returns us to our core values and enables us to perceive ourselves more deeply” (1999, 149).

On its surface, the ritual fast before bar mitzvah appears to be preparation for the obligations that the boy will accrue after reaching the age of religious majority. Although fasting on Yom Kippur marks adult practice, the suffering it brings, even for the outcome of atonement, hardly could be considered a motivator to push on with the home stretch of bar mitzvah preparations, unless it is intentionally uncomfortable to metaphorically focus the bar mitzvah as an “ordeal,” as psychologist Jacob Arlow points out (1951, 357). If so, then it is a risky metaphor of pain and hunger to impose, if as Arlow argues, the period before the bar mitzvah “becomes the occasion for rebellion against the parents. The boy, for various reasons, may refuse to participate in the entire process and

may repudiate his parents' authority as represented by the need to go through the Bar Mitzvah initiation" (1951, 356). But a symbolic rationale outside of the awareness of the participants may be at work to explain why it is important in the custom (apparently in defiance of *Halakhic* authority) to fast rather than other *mitzvot* the boy will practice after turning thirteen. One possible connection in religious scholarship is that the sacrifice of fasting is accepted as a purificatory rite and declaration of faith because it is followed by a joyous feast (Farrell 1985). On the high holy day of Yom Kippur, fasting after the New Year is followed by an occasion for a social "breaking the fast," as it is called in North American locales. Occurring during the first Jewish month of *Tishrei* (from the root for "beginning"), the purificatory fast marks a fresh start in the ritual year. Is the comparison being made between the enforced fast before the bar mitzvah, then, and the bar mitzvah in which the immaturity and irresponsibility of childhood are ritually replaced with adult religious obligations, and encouraged by the festive meal?

If so, the comparison seems strained between the deprivation of food in fasting and the central recitation and discourse at the bar mitzvah ceremony. Both actions do have something in common, however, in their arousal of parental attention, and this clue may lead to an explanation of the tradition. My argument hinges on the symbolism of fasting in many religious contexts as the maternal provision of food pointed out by theorists of ritual (Dundes 2002; Farrell 1985, 254). Anthropologist Eileen Farrell, for example, suggests that fasting representing birth or infancy in ritual time "evokes the most primitive wish-fulfillment of all, the moment when the hungry infant regains its mother's breast" (1985, 254). It is symbolically consistent, therefore, that fasting as a reminder of infantile dependence on the mother's sustenance is accompanied by prohibitions on adult male activities of shaving and "seminal pollution" (Trachtenberg 1979, 212). With fasting often occurring during periods of mourning, representing, according to Theodor Gaster, "the state of suspended animation which ensues at the end of a life lease" (1961, 29), it offers a separation from the mother that allows transition and growth. In other words, a previous state or life is being let go and a new one is being embraced. As with other symbolic practices, oral activity is associated with maternal attributes (such as the Jewish folk term *mameloshn* for "mother tongue" or folk language) that leads to patriarchal reading or codification (such as *Pirkei Avot*, literally "chapters of the fathers or patriarchs," or idiomatically as "Ethics of the Fathers," which is a significant tractate of the *Mishnah* composed by male rabbis). At Yom Kippur and other religious occasions where a connection to God is being made, part of that transition is making a transfer from the physical dependence on the mother to spiritual guidance from the father (see Smith, W. Robertson 1907, 51-53). Worshippers in the traditional Jewish liturgy thus speak of God in the central prayer of the *Amida* as "our God and God of our Fathers, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac and the God of Jacob." Even with revision of liturgies to reflect egalitarianism, the principle holds, as articulated by folklorist Alan Dundes, that "if an infant associates feeling hunger pangs with the coming of an adult parent or parent-surrogate, then the adult who wants a deity to approach must clearly make himself hungry. Moreover, the hungrier he is, the more likely it is that the parent-deity will approach" (2002, 9), and that parent as authority will

likely be patriarchal. Many Midrashic legends underscore the idea that matriarchal intervention brings the patriarchal God closer. A popular narrated example is of the Jewish matriarch Rachel, frequently depicted as the compassionate mother weeping for her captured children, who the *Midrash* recounts arising from her grave and imploring God's clemency for the Israelites driven into captivity. Rachel points out her self-abnegation and thereupon God promises her the restoration of Israel (Rothkoff 1972, 1489). She also shows up in modern wartime legends protecting Israeli male soldiers from terrorist harm in campaigns outside their borders (Wagner 2009).

In line with the symbolism of fasting as separation from the mother to invite the father-deity, the spread of the pre-bar-mitzvah fast begins to make sense. A question that is often posed about the bar mitzvah is how it acts as a coming-of-age ritual if the mother associated with childhood is absent from the supposed rite of passage. The answer is that the separation occurs before the ceremony beginning with the ritual fast, and the transition from physical dependence to spiritual awareness continues into the ritualized haircut and acquisition of *tefillin*. The task of the ceremony on the big day then becomes through reading and discourse to accentuate the role of the father-deity. Still remaining to be resolved is the relationship of the familial father who had been an authority over as well as provider for the boy. It appears that the rabbi and cantor can act as spiritual surrogates for the father who allow the boy to separate from familial paternity. Still complicating this ritualistic scenario connected to traditional cognitive categories held in Judaism is modern awareness of changing gender roles, especially in relation to the boy's understanding of "becoming a man," where intellect in the Jewish ceremony rather than bodily strength is being used as a ritual measure of masculinity.

The ceremony begins with the boy going to the *bimah* (reader's stand) to recite standard blessings over the Torah that would be heard on any occasion the Torah is read. According to Spiro's ethnography of the event, "the boy separates himself from his mother, from his childhood, as he walks to the altar of the synagogue," where he is "wrapped in his 'tallit' and surrounded by the males who will read with him" (1977, 398). Traditionally, women do not wear a *tallit* and do not participate on the *bimah*. The mother is a spectator while the father takes a prominent position at the platform with his son. Unlike preparations for other readings of the Torah, the father recites a short prayer, *Barukh shepetarani meonsbo shel zeh*, after the son's conclusion of the second blessing. This blessing is unique to the bar mitzvah; it is not said for the daughter at the bat mitzvah. The translation is "Blessed be He, Who has now rid (or freed) me from the responsibility or punishment for this one." Rabbinical literature suggests two interpretations from the source of the benediction in the *Midrash* (a compilation of commentaries on the Hebrew Bible) commenting on the phrase, "And the boys grew up' (Gen. 25:27). One is that the father was punished when his son sinned, for he failed to raise him properly, and the other is that the son was punished for the sins of his father (Nulman 1993, 91-92). Whichever interpretation one argues, the common thread is that the opening of the ceremony is thematized in relation to a father-son conflict. Unlike other blessings, the name of God is

omitted from the prayer and the Hebrew word *patoor*, meaning to exempt or rid, conveys a negative connotation of vexation (Arlow 1951, 357).<sup>3</sup> With this connotation, Jewish historian Cecil Roth contends, the father's prayer declaring his freedom from responsibility for the boy "was considered an integral part of the celebration, *hardly less than the boy's own participation in the service*" (Roth 1955, 18; emphasis added).

The conflict resolution in the ceremony is for father and son to part ways, and at that moment the boy's teacher steps in to guide the boy in the reading, either the prophetic portion of the week (*haftarah*) or an entire biblical portion—the *sidrah*. Indeed, the father will often stand off at a distance at that point. Afterward the boy presents a speech that interprets a point of Jewish law or interprets the weekly Torah portion (*parshah*). The speech is a narrative that typically follows a tripartite structure: (1) a standard opening of "Today I am a man," followed by an expression of gratitude to parents, especially the father, for having raised and educated the boy; (2) reference to Biblical sources (a favorite in recorded speeches is the sacrifice of Isaac by his father) followed by its application to his own conduct or the society; and (3) a promise of allegiance to the Jewish community, often accompanied with acknowledgment of the role of the religious leaders who helped him to become bar mitzvah (Glazer 1928; Gruberger 1993; Katz 1931). At the conclusion of the speech, it is now common among both Ashkenazic and Sephardic services for children in the audience to throw candies at the boy.

After the service, the parents host a *seudah mitzvah* (festive meal celebrating a commandment), and this has expanded into the bar mitzvah party often held in a rented hall. Despite harsh criticisms of the party such as that voiced by Rabbi Abraham Chill, "The contemporary custom of celebrating the *bar mitzvah* with lavish and ostentatious parties has no basis in Jewish tradition and it is in fact contrary to the spirit if not the letter of Jewish law and morality," the secular celebration has grown and featured various themes geared to the boy's worldly interests (Chill 1993, 317). The party has become tightly controlled by party planners, but an expectation among the bar mitzvah boy's male friends is that some pranking or even hazing will occur to torment the center of attention and provide a test of his toughness. This might include giving the bar mitzvah boy a "wedgie" (lifting his underwear so as to grip his genitals or get stuck between the buttocks) and doctoring his food and drink. The boys may sit with the bar mitzvah on a dais, and frequently they initiate lifting the bar mitzvah on a chair in imitation of a wedding custom for the bride and groom. More sedate and official is the ritual lighting of candles by family members during the party.

Among the Sephardim, the donning of *tefillin* or phylacteries is featured in bar mitzvah practices, and families may hold a separate celebration before the bar mitzvah called *Yom Tefillin*. The tefillin are two cubical leather containers with attached leather straps. One is worn on the head (*shel rosh*) while the other is on the arm (*shel yad*); the thongs for *shel yad* are wrapped seven times around the arm while the straps on *shel rosh* hang loosely behind the head and shoulders like hair strands. The cases hold parchments with four biblical passages, expressing four basic Jewish precepts—the law of tefillin, recognition of God's kingship, the unity of the Creator, and the exodus from Egypt (Roth 1955, 23). Betrothal

is symbolized in the arm thong which is wound three times around the middle finger while reciting “And I will betroth thee unto me forever; yea, I will betroth thee unto me in righteousness, and in judgment and in lovingkindness, and in mercy. I will even betroth thee unto me in faithfulness; and thou shalt know the Lord” (Hosea 2, 21-22). In keeping with the laying on of tefillin as a male rite, the Exodus story encased in the tefillin (Exodus 13:1-10, 11-16) opens with the commandment to consecrate to God “every firstborn male” and relates the promise of a “land flowing with milk and honey” promised to “your forefathers” (Exodus 13: 1, 5). Indeed, the text signals a transference from a submissive state of slavery under Pharaoh in Egypt to a liberation with the guidance of Moses to the promised land. The bearded rabbi in the ceremony takes on the role of teacher Moses guiding his flock to be independent (Moses does not enter the land of Israel). The ceremony for *Yom Tefillin* also brings out patriarchal symbolism between father and rabbi in their ritual placement of the tefillin or phylacteries on the boy before he does it himself. Typically, the father puts one of the cases on the boy’s head, representing his education for which he was responsible, and the rabbi works the other case on the child’s arm, representing his action (Roth 1955, 22). The boy may give a speech then as well as on the Sabbath, and the boy is blessed aloud by the congregation. A ritual practice that appears to reinforce the transition from father to teacher as patriarch is the boy walking around the assembly with his new decorated tefillin bag into which congregants would drop silver coins, which are then presented as a gift to the bar mitzvah boy’s teacher (Roth 1955, 22).



*Figure 2. Bar mitzvah boy with tefillin accompanied by father and teachers, Brooklyn, New York, 2008. Photograph by Ronnie Habbaz, courtesy of Ronald and Adi Cohen.*

The mother is involved usually in making arrangements for the event, and a modern tradition has been for her to weave or present a *tallit* to the bar mitzvah boy. The significance of the *tallit* is that after his thirteenth birthday, it can be worn on the Sabbath in prayer and thus represents his reaching religious majority. It is customary to have a formal photo portrait taken of the bar mitzvah boy in his *tallit* as a keepsake to distribute. The mother's role is what Judith Davis (1995) calls the traditional *balabosta*, translated from the Yiddish as the woman of the house with the implication that she has a managerial role to compensate for her exclusion from the ceremony. Her management has extended to responsibility for the boy's Jewish education, although the bar mitzvah ceremony conveys the frequent fiction that the father has been overseeing the boy's religious training (See Gordon 1959, 58-59). Nonetheless, at the bar mitzvah the father takes center stage with his son, until he is moved aside by the supervising rabbi and cantor.

**Annotation: Relation of the Bar Mitzvah to Circumcision, Haircutting, Wedding, and Examination**

In its structure and symbolism, the bar mitzvah can be compared to four separate traditions: *bris* (Yiddish; *brit milah* in Hebrew) or circumcision, *upsberin* (Yiddish) or the ritual first haircut, the Jewish wedding, and the final examination or dissertation. The comparison to the *bris* comes up in the discourse of the bar mitzvah because of its coincidence with the boy's birthday, which raises images of circumcision. Typical is a memoir I collected showing that the bar mitzvah was narrated in relation to the *bris*:

I was constantly reminded that the bar mitzvah was the biggest event in my life after my *bris*. Since the bar mitzvah came around my birthday, my mother brought up her memories of the *bris* and how much I've grown. She's always sentimental, you know. My father would make a bad joke about it would be just as painful besides telling me that another thing that's the same is that everyone will want to hold me. I did think it was funny when he said they're not talking about my pecker when they say, "my how you've grown."

More official charting of the Jewish boy's milestones typically involves the bar mitzvah's relation to ritual circumcision. Roth in the mid-twentieth century, for example, declares, "In the traditional Jewish scheme, there were three great festive occasions in a boy's life. There was the eighth day after his birth, when he was introduced into the Covenant of Abraham. There was the day when he was first initiated to study, being taken to synagogue, blessed by the rabbi, and given honey to lick from a slate on which letters of the Hebrew alphabet were written, as a token that the Torah should be sweet to his mouth all the days of his life. And there was the day when he was first considered legally bound to fulfill the obligations of Jewish law and practice, and could be regarded as a Bar Mitzvah, a 'child of precepts'" (1955, 15). With the decline of honey licking to mark the

start of study among modern liberal Jews, more attention has been focused on the continuity in the Jewish life cycle from circumcision to bar mitzvah.

Like the bris, the bar mitzvah is represented as an induction into faith and is prescribed in intervals of time: 8 days for the bris and 13 years for the bar mitzvah. The bris also centrally involves the father-son relationship, for the father gives the child to the *mohel* (Jewish ritual specialist in circumcision) who circumcises the child. Several college students who gave me memoirs of their bar mitzvah mentioned that references to the *bris* were made in pranking by the boy's friends. Connections were made to binding and cutting in the bar mitzvah suit and ritual haircut, often accompanied by checking whether the boy has pubic hair despite the "damage" done by the circumcision.

Jewish advisers Marc-Alain Ouaknin and Françoise-Anne Ménager connect the haircutting to the importance of manhood to a haircutting ritual (*upsberin* in Yiddish and *chalakab* in Hebrew) that many orthodox communities observe for the three-year old boys (2005, 46-48). An educational connection exists because the child is expected for the first time to go to school, where he will learn to read Hebrew. They find similarities between the attention in the haircutting ritual and bar mitzvah (they could extend this comparison to the *bris*) to the trauma of loss and its provision of healing with cultural identity. Both rituals also are replete with reminders of masculinity. The haircut distinguishes the boy from the long hair of the girl. According to Ouaknin and Ménager, the immersion into books is symbolically consistent with the gendering of cutting rituals: "He goes from the maternal language, which is oral, to the paternal language, which is written. Hebrew also links writing to the paternal language in an extraordinary way. The word 'alphabet'—*aleph-bet* in Hebrew—is pronounced *av* and means 'father'" (2005, 48). Further underscoring study as intellectual gain to compensate for physical loss is a traditional gift in both rituals of a honey cake or sweets shaped like letters (Ouaknin and Ménager 2005, 48). In circumcision, haircutting, and bar mitzvah rituals, the boy acquires a new ceremonial garment. In the haircutting the boy gains a small *tallit* to wear as an undergarment known as *tzitzit* (based on the commandment in Torah to wear fringes at the corners of garments and also meaning "hair"; see Ezekiel 8:3). *Tzitzit* or braided fringes are attached to the boy's *tallit* and are often used in the service to touch the Torah as it is carried around the synagogue.

In addition to the larger *tallit* conspicuously worn over the shoulders at prayer, the *tefillin* adds long strips of leather on the arm and head. The boy usually receives the gift of *tefillin* before the *tallit*; a common time to present the phylacteries is 30 days before the bar mitzvah. This period is related to a monthly cycle in the Jewish lunar calendar and is commonly associated with a mourning period of *shloshim* (from the Hebrew for "thirty."). A mourning period is simulated for the passing of youth, and as in the ritual guidelines after burial, hair of the family mourners cannot be cut until after the mourning period (usually just before the bar mitzvah). "Laying *tefillin*," as the act is called involves a form of binding because leather cases attached to the leather straps contain Torah passages. One that is especially conspicuous is on the forehead with straps hanging down over the shoulders in the manner of hair. Rabbis teaching the laying of *tefillin*

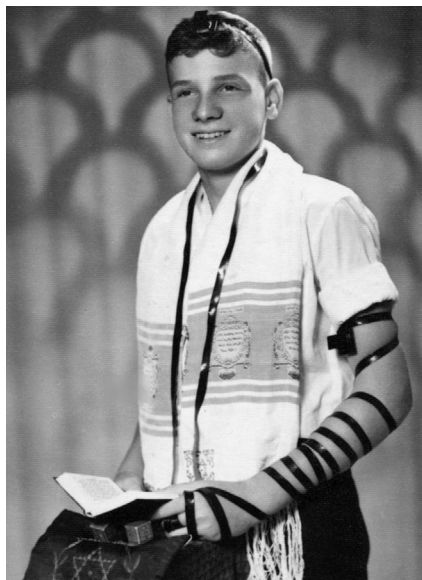


Figure 3. Bar mitzvah studio portrait, New York City, 1961.

will comment on the placement on head and arms as committing intellect and body to fulfillment of commandments. But there is also an important connection to the father-son relationship. The four passages from the Torah on the *tefillin* parchments are teachings the father will address to the child and relate to communicative skills: *Veamarta* for you will say, *Veshinaneta Vedibarta* for you will repeat and you will speak, *Velimadeta* for you will teach (Ouaknin and Ménager 2005, 161-62). Both *tefillin* and *itzit* are symbolically cut to show completion by going over the head and removing them after prayer (Ouaknin and Ménager 2005, 50).

A ceremonial connection to the circumcision at the bar mitzvah is the wimpel (from the German *Wimpel* for “flag” or “sash”), a decorated cloth on



Figure 4. Judy Goldberg holding a wimpel she made for a bris/bar mitzvah, Harrisburg, Pennsylvania, 2009. Photograph by Simon J. Bronner.

which the boy is circumcised and later used as a sash to bind the Sefer Torah.<sup>4</sup> It might be part of a custom at the age of three when the boy is toilet trained. The father gets an *aliyah* (invitation to the altar) and brings his boy with him to the *bimah* to wrap the wimpel around the Torah. Thought to be of German origin like the bar mitzvah, the decorated wimpel gains significance because it is used to swaddle the baby boy at his *brit milah* and represents the covenant with a patriarchal figure, as the Hebrew blessing recited by the father reminds the gathered group: "Praised by Thou, O Lord our God, King of the Universe, who has sanctified us by Thy commandments, and hast bidden us to make him enter into the covenant of Abraham our father." The group responds, "As he has entered into the covenant, so may he be introduced to the study of Torah, to the wedding canopy, and to good deeds." Based on this text, wimpels are inscribed in Hebrew with the following message underscoring the patriarchal line: "(Name of child, called) son of (name of father) born under a good constellation on (day of week, date, month, year) may he (or may the Lord let him) grow to Torah, marriage, and good deeds." An artist may illuminate the text with related depictions of a Jewish wedding under the traditional canopy (*huppah*); masculine animals such as the lion of Judah, eagles, and leopards<sup>5</sup>; and a boy holding up a Torah commonly interpreted as a bar mitzvah scene (Eis 1979, 32; Kirshenblatt-Gimblett 1977, 18-19). One way that the bar mitzvah is thematized in the father-son relationship is in the transfer of the wimpel. After the circumcision, the wimpel belongs to the father, but after the bar mitzvah, possession transfers to the son.

Bar mitzvah (exemplifying the commandment at the *bris* to "grow to Torah") and wedding are connected in the custom of giving the groom an *aliyah* the week before his wedding to re-enact the call to the *bimah* at his bar mitzvah. In a sign of readiness for marriage, the groom often donates his wimpel to his synagogue before the wedding. The covering of the *huppah* is frequently composed of the boy's bar mitzvah *tallit*, and the bride will replace it with a larger *tallit* she has woven or purchased for the groom (Marcus 2003, 117). The transfer of the *tallit* (at a critical part of the ceremony, bride and groom are both covered by the *tallit* to symbolize their unity) and the circling of the bride around the groom indicates readiness for sexual relations. Practices at the bar mitzvah suggest the metaphor of the wedding is used to represent sexual displacement by immersion in books rather than sexual awakening. When the boy is called to the *bimah* at the bar-mitzvah he is identified as the "Bar Mitzvah Groom" and the Torah is the bride to which he is bound. According to Arlow's description, wedding and bar mitzvah are joined in the recitation, because "Throughout his recitation the initiate is observed intently as a young man on trial undergoing a very difficult examination. A sense of compassionate participation grips the audience, especially the boy's mother" (Arlow 1951, 357). The anticipation can be related to anxiety over sexually consummating a marriage; in this case the enactment is displacing the sexuality with potency in touching the Torah with a *yad*, a metal extension in the shape of a finger, and the oral recitation. In the tefillin ceremony described previously, the boy places the *shel yad* on the arm and wraps straps that extend from it around the middle finger while saying verses referring to betrothal. Although thirteen seems young to invoke the metaphor of marriage, Ouaknin and Ménager find

evidence for its enactment as compensation for sexually “losing a part of oneself through the body” (2005, 46). They argue that “boys lose sperm (wet dreams and first masturbation)” at ages that “correspond closely to the time that the losses described above are first sustained” (2005, 46). Further, the ejaculatory praxis of throwing candies at the bar mitzvah boy resembles the showering of the bride and groom after a wedding.

Arguably, access to Torah is unconsciously equated with access to a woman which the father already possesses. Arlow hypothesized that organizing the ordeal as an examination is symbolically important because, in his words, “Failing an examination, together with the humiliation which the student experiences, is often unconsciously equated with being castrated,” and from clinical cases, he argued that examiners are identified with the father image of the oedipal phase (Arlow 1951, 365). To be sure, the bar mitzvah boy is expected to pass the examination by his male elders, but more than any other theme, memoirs mention performance anxiety about successfully completing the reading and speech under the watchful eye of teacher and father. The chanting for the reading is done by rote, and it is all the more challenging because of the absence of vowel aids to pronunciation. As Ouaknin and Ménager point out, “This means that to learn it, one has to accept being part of a tradition. One cannot learn this vowel-less text on one’s own, even if one reads and speaks Hebrew fluently” (2005, 63). The process of tradition they are referring to involves an oral “handing down” of performative practices from male elder to the boy. In this way, the connotation of identity formation at the bar mitzvah is prominent because more than a text is being chanted; tradition as a sustaining process for the group is being enacted—and honored.

A lesson of the boy’s ordeal is that being part of the tradition is difficult and is administered by the synagogue patriarchy rather than the familial one. The following narratives collected from young men who had experienced their bar mitzvah five to eight years before bear out these pervasive themes of performance anxiety and participation in tradition at the bar mitzvah:

I was nervous beyond words. The cantor tried to calm me by telling me it was my special day, but that made me only feel worse. I felt that all eyes were on me and I could never be ready in time. I felt that my voice was going to crack at any moment. It’s different from show and tell in school, because it was so formal and when I was reading, I was dwarfed by these older men who I thought were breathing down my neck.

I think my mother worried about everyone coming and that the party would go well. It was my father who sweated the synagogue part, and I sweated the more he did, even though he didn’t have to say much. That suit bothered me and my friends teased me about my get-up. Older relatives told me they remembered my father’s bar mitzvah that was so wonderful and I felt that I had to live up to that. I think that’s why I pushed to read faster than I should have. I don’t think my sister had as hard a time at her bat mitzvah. There was totally more pressure on me.

I dropped everything as the time got closer so I could concentrate. I would have loved to have postponed it but that date was set. I was into sports and let that slide for the bar mitzvah. The rabbi told me that I would have the support of family to get me through, but I didn't know half these people. I felt that I was singing for strangers, which made me nervous. I think it was definitely worth it after everything, but I was a wreck before.

The tone of these narratives is borne out by Kosmin's survey, which showed that 51 percent of parents reported that the bar mitzvah dominated the life of the family during the year of preparation, but 97 percent still felt that the bar mitzvah "was worth the time and trouble involved" (2002, 235-236). Despite complaints that the bar mitzvah was time consuming and "nerve-racking," only one percent of the *b'nai mitzvah* wrote that it "was not worth the time it took" (2002, 235).

The bar mitzvah treats learning as a masculine attribute because of command of the Torah associated with male leadership and the association of the bearded rabbi with an especially learned man at a time when the boy is concerned with the growth of pubic and facial hair as a sign of masculinity. These images are reinforced by cake-toppers (a cake in the form of a Torah is commonly reported), a host of figurines often given as gifts that depict the tallit-covered, hairless boy at the Torah or *bimah* under the tutelage of a bearded religious figure.<sup>6</sup> Arlow, however, did not believe the bar mitzvah was effective in resolving oedipal conflicts because of the time lag between sexual maturity and heterosexuality sanctioned by modern society. He suggested that as a result of the failure of the ceremony to ritualize puberty the bar mitzvah boy chooses a number of psychological strategies, including channeling sexual and aggressive energies into study, rejecting the father by renewed submission to an exalted father image of God, or cessation of religious adherence to either join or rebel against his biological father (Arlow 1951, 364-68). Although there is a symbolic replacement of the father in the bar mitzvah, the separation from, and competition for, the mother characteristic of pubertal rituals is not as apparent. What is manifested more than sexual competition is the celebration of the child's precociousness evident in command of the "ordeal by examination."

Instead of independence to another stage, the bar mitzvah presents a paradoxical combination of separation and connection. The reading declares an early autonomy from education even as it joins the individual to a patrilineal tradition. The boy is not integrated into the community as much as he is forced to become self-aware of his own development and aspirations. Following the symbolic communication of the circumcision (*brit milah* is literally the "covenant of the word") of which he was unaware, and possibly the *upsheerin* at which he begins immersion in the alphabet, the bar mitzvah shows his readiness for the world by a performance that draws attention to itself for what Ouaknin and Ménager call "creative combinations and recombinations of letters and words" challenging the linear structure of storytelling (2005, 63). The boy becomes conscious of the attainment of skills that will carry him into adulthood. Rabbis hope that the ancient source of the texts will remind him to commit to the

synagogue, but the praxis of his “reading in bursts” (words bursting out into letters or into groups of letters, making other words and coming together into a new order) and exemption of his father allows him to detach (Ouaknin and Ménager 2005, 62-63).

### **Analysis and Explanation: Historical and Social Contexts for Jewish Manly Display**

If the bar mitzvah is not effective as a sacramental or pubertal rite, its value as an ethnic commitment is questionable because of the decline of Jewish involvement after the event. If it is not particularly useful for coming of age or revitalizing Jewish identity, and parents complain of its exorbitant expense and material excess, then what explains its spreading popularity during the twentieth century? The Joselit thesis that it became entrenched as a life cycle celebration in which the family’s economic success could be displayed and ethnic identity unhinged from synagogue life in the post-immigrant generation does not readily apply to a different set of social and historical circumstances for Jewish parents with only faint memories of the ghetto experience. And if there are traces of this motivation of status anxiety still apparent in the suburban conspicuous consumption evident in popular-culture portrayals such as *Keeping Up with the Steins* and *Entourage*, then why did the synagogue component not disappear, particularly since prominent American rabbis held a negative or ambivalent attitude toward the bar mitzvah? The psychosexual connections of circumcision, examination, and wedding are strong in the ceremony, suggesting a developmental explanation, but is the ceremony working to resolve oedipal conflicts, considering that the mother plays a peripheral role by most accounts and the separation that occurs is from the father rather than from the mother as described in other coming-of-age processes?

With the rush to find a source in antiquity for the age of thirteen as a Jewish ritual age, it appears that being forgotten is its modern symbolism as the first year of adolescence, or the teen years. The twentieth century, especially the years after World War II, was marked by the rise of teenagers as a separate, often troubled or rebellious age and marketing target. Many factors went into the creation of adolescence particularly within North America and western Europe, including the end of child labor and the rise of the high school in attendance as well as status within popular culture. Wrapped up in the emerging image of the teen in the modern context of compensating for a lack of the provider role is the tough guy image of the adolescent relying on strength, competitiveness, and aggressive heterosexuality in preparation for economic and social independence. This was coupled with the feminized, constricted, suited father of the 1950s vividly spread in iconic images such as the rebellious teen’s father wearing an apron in *Rebel Without a Cause* (1955) and the domestication of the father-businessman in *The Man in the Gray Flannel Suit* (1956) (see Cross 2008, 95; see also Cohan 1997; Gilbert 2005; Gordon 1959, 57-64; Osgerby 2001; Young and Young 2004, 30, 184-86). Against this background of changing views of age-based masculinity, the Jewish emphasis on learning as the basis of masculine identity caused conflicts with the dominant society, at least if the goal was to integrate into society. The

Jewish body, as Sander Gilman has pointed out in his study of the European sources for this conflict, was defined as unsuited for military or strenuous work (Gilman 1991; see also Konner 2009, 144-53). Jews were known for brains rather than brawn (Gilman 1996). During the 1950s, Jews were notably absent from many cultural displays of teen masculine power including music, motors, sports, and dance (Kimmel 1996, 277-78). In folk humor, Jews were smart but weak, and many jokes about the bar mitzvah boy underscored his inadequacy as a sexualized man (Ouaknin and Ménager 2005, 55).

If that pressure to show manly traits came from outside of the Jewish community at a time when the bonds of the community began to unravel, from within the community, egalitarian ideas about the bat mitzvah began to take hold in Conservative and Reform wings of Judaism. The time of maturation for girls was defined a year earlier than the boys, adding insult to injury, even though her ceremony was not thematized with any declaration of "Today, I am a woman." In the background of the Jewish boy's maturation is the growth of the image through popular sources of the overprotective mother who inhibits the Jewish boy's maturity and stays with him through adulthood (Antler 2007). One should also not underestimate the psychological impact of Jewish circumcision as another internal conflict among Jews because of the implication that it diminishes sexual aggressiveness and masculine identity (Glick 2005; Mark 2003; Silverman, Eric 2006). Looking historically at bar mitzvah announcements, the theme of the bar mitzvah began to change from a subdued family ceremony of joining congregational life to the public celebration of manhood during the 1950s. It first becomes a theme of television sitcoms in the 1960s, usually representing a Jewish boy's anxiety about either going through the "ordeal by examination" or having missed an opportunity to have one (Pearl and Pearl 1999). Many of the parties had as themes the interests of the boy, such as music, sports, and motors rather than religious subjects, and these interests along with displays of economic power were significant for culturally connecting to a normative, if not precocious hypermasculinity. For example, I asked boys who had gone through the bar mitzvah how they arrived at the themes for their post-ceremony parties. As the following narratives attest, it was a decision that they felt strongly they wanted to control.

If I left it to my parents, I'm sure they would have rented a boring hall and made it look like their wedding. I wanted a teen party and I wanted it to be cool. I was into cars and skateboards, so I got them to put it in an auto museum, which none of my buddies had done, and the centerpieces were dudes on skateboards. I told them that I would do all the traditional stuff for the synagogue if I could have the party that wouldn't embarrass me.

My parents did ask me for ideas about the party, and I'm glad they did. I was worried that they would want too much of a family affair. The ceremony followed the law, and I wanted the party to be something that would be mine. I wanted to let go and impress my

friends. It had to be about sports to save face after all the stuff I took about going through bar mitzvah lessons. There weren't too many Jewish signs, although my parents did want the candle lighting for the relatives. But I had a rock band, so the kids could get into it.

More than a celebration of the completion of the bar mitzvah, the party allowed the boys to show their connection to normative culture, especially to masculine pursuits of sports, recreation, and music. This was especially important because the boys recognized that for the most part, their mothers made the arrangements for the party. With demonstrations of masculinity and maturity being important at the party, the ceremony is remembered in relation to the father's role. The components of the synagogue ceremony emphasizing the boy taking the father's role and the rise in status of the recitation as an "ordeal" were adapted into the declaration, "Today, I am a man." Considering the praxis of the bar mitzvah, one might easily construe this declaration as "Today, I am the father"—and I am better than he was. Competition for ownership of the event is evident in the idea that the successful bar mitzvah reflects on the status of the father, as shown especially in *Keeping Up with the Steins*, in which the materialism of the party conveys the father's male provider role coming into conflict with the boy's identity formation.



Figure 5. Skateboarder centerpiece at bar mitzvah held in auto museum, Hershey, Pennsylvania, 2006. Photograph by Simon J. Bronner.

The early age at which the bar mitzvah occurred added to the ceremony's appeal for announcing the Jewish boy's claim to manliness if not legal maturity.

Into the twenty-first century under the influence of the women's movement, questions of the proper masculine role taken by Jewish boys increased. Reports in books such as *Jew-fitsu: The Hebrew Hands of Fury* by Rabbi Daniel Eliezer and Paul Kupperberg (2008) along with satirical movies such as *The Hebrew Hammer* (2004) expressed a confusion about whether the answer to these questions would be to embrace knowledge as a source of social power or a sign of diminished masculinity. I contend that the bar mitzvah gained importance therefore in what increasingly became seen as the most important phase of modern life and for a group that felt the most conflict in its definition of masculinity. Despite Theodor Gaster's avowal that the bar mitzvah imparts nothing, I find that its symbolism of circumcision, examination, and wedding is joined to modern meanings of masculine maturity. It is imperfect as a ritual of religious commitment, to be sure, but it has persisted and even spread in the modern context, not because of its signal of religious majority or adult obligations, but its negotiation of adolescence for an ethnic group uncertain in American popular culture of its masculine identity and patriarchal continuity.

### **Implication: Feminization and the Ritual Burden of the Bar Mitzvah**

Having made this argument for linking the rise of the bar mitzvah to a crisis of masculinity for assimilating Jews within North America, I see signs today that it is likely to enter a new phase as an invented tradition. Some of the connections to masculinity, for instance, are undermined as the synagogue goes through what has been heralded as feminization, including female rabbis and cantors leading the bar mitzvah (Goldstein 1991; Marder 1996; Seidman 1997). Mothers are taking more of a role, and for my memoir writers concerned for their masculine image, that caused more, rather than less, distress. One compensation that several writers mentioned was taking more control of the party, infusing it with masculine themes and holding it at auto museums, ski slopes, or sports stadiums. Or the party exuded a sense of coolness in representation of a modern fashion and electronics rather than the process of tradition evoking continuity with Jewish identity. One bar mitzvah adviser touched a nerve by showing parents how to highlight their son's hip individuality in step with high style rather than collective tradition associated with sameness by offering *Mitzvah Chic*, subtitled, "How to Host a Meaningful, Fun, Drop-Dead Gorgeous Bar or Bat Mitzvah" (Greenberg 2006).

Some families view holding a bar mitzvah in Israel as a sign of religious devotion, but rather than departing from tradition, it fits into the trope of announcing masculine attributes at a young age because of the image of Israelis as tough Jews. A common post-ceremony activity, for example, is to go to Masada, the historic site where a small number of rebellious Jews held off legions of the Roman Empire. Many of the boys show their vigor by climbing up a steep path to the plateau 1,300 feet high. In addition to this bar mitzvah trip, others show a variety of creative ways to engage the boy with a strenuous and memorable experience. As the boys seek to declare their own identity, the fathers

are frequently involved as the son's pal engaged equally in sports and music, rather than speaking as the authoritarian voice of the elders or sages (see Cross 2008). If the above argument holds up, then as the popular perception of Jewish masculinity changes to the point where it joins normative muscular manliness, then the bar mitzvah will carry less of a ritual burden to show the development of the boy's mettle as well as his mind (see Brod 1988, 2004; Bronner 2005, 34-36). The bar mitzvah is the tradition everyone thinks they know from popular culture as a sign of excess of mass culture generally, although assigned to Jews, but its folk cultural practice reveals an uneasy father-son relationship in a society that creates conflicts for the boy between brains and brawn as he declares at the age of thirteen, "Today, I am a man."

## NOTES

1. For the logical problem of social functionalism analyzing consequences rather than causes, see Oring 1976; Bronner 1986, 74-88; Bronner 2006.

2. Evidence for the Yom Kippur fast before the bar mitzvah as a folk custom is found in discussion groups such as *Imamother: Connecting Jewish Mothers* ([www.imamother.com](http://www.imamother.com)). The question of whether to allow children to fast frequently comes up. Among Orthodox members, there is reference made to "the three fasts" (out of seven Jewish fast days) which are ritually done by the bar-mitzvah-to-be: Yom Kippur (Day of Atonement, usually occurring in September or October), Tisha B'Av (usually held in July or August remembering the tragedies of the Jewish people), and Ta'anit Bechorim (the Fast of the Firstborn commemorating the saving of the firstborn in Egypt from plague, observed the day before Passover in March or April). On September 10, 2008, for instance, "1<sup>st</sup>" from Israel posted this query, "I am looking for the reason/source behind the custom of the fasting the 3 fasts before bar or bat mitzvah. Do only people from certain backgrounds do this, where does this custom come from? Is there a basis for it? I always learned that children under bar/bat mitzvah age should not fast the whole day. Once they are at the age of chinuch, they can be encouraged to fast for a few hours in the morning (and at night 9 av and yom kippur). And then that when they do eat, it should only be what is necessary, not indulging on junk food and continuous snack." I recorded seven replies, none of which proposed any textual sources, and rabbis who were cited in the thread were mixed on whether to follow the custom. Shalhevet from Israel wrote on the same day, "Our rov says not to do it," whereas ChossidMom replied on October 2, 2008, that "My son who will be Bar Mitzvah a couple of weeks after Succos should fast this Yom Kippur, according to the rav," even though he "says it's a bunch of baloney...He said there is absolutely no source for this." The other replies referred to doing it although they did not know the rationale: "we did—but I have no idea why" (greenfire, September 10, 2008); "My father holds by it. He told me the reason but of course I forgot" (flowerpower, September 10, 2008); "I never heard of 3 fasts before, but one I did. My parents always said to fast one fast before also only if you can" (cuteson, September 10, 2008); "I did, as a kid! I grew up in a modern orthodox community, and my whole circle of firends were really machmir on that one. (Then again, we made fasting

into a competition—how long did YOU fast?’ ‘What did you break YOUR fast on,’ etc...) (shininglight, October 2, 2008).

3. The rhetorical use of *patoor* in regard to release from manly obligation is still apparent in modern Hebrew where it refers to an exemption from military duty.

4. Ruth Eis (1979) states that although the sashes are referred to as “Torah binders” in English, “the correct name is *wimpel* (f.), an old German word for cloth or veil, related to the Middle High German *bewimpfen*, to cover, to conceal. Typically, they are made from the cloth which covers the new-born male during the circumcision ceremony (11).

5. Ellen Frankel and Betsy Platkin Teutsch in *The Encyclopedia of Jewish Symbols* (1992) trace the frequent presence of lions, leopards, eagles, and deer in ceremonial Jewish objects to the *Mishnah* (Pirke Avot 5:23) which commands, “Be as strong as a leopard, as light as an eagle, as swift as a deer, as brave as a lion to do the will of your Father in heaven” (40).

6. See, for example, the cake toppers at the website *Magic Mud* (www.magicmud.com/Judaicshots.htm) accessed December 28, 2008. It offers personalized bar mitzvah cake toppers and figurines at the *bimab*. Another site shows a figurine with the bearded rabbi overlooking the bar mitzvah boy, entitled “Bar Mitzvah—Father and Son Figurine” promoted by Liorel Art from Israel: stores.ebay.com/Art\_From\_Israel\_Figurines-Sculptures\_WOQQFsubZ2100394.

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## CHILDREN OF THE HOLOCAUST: COMMON GAMES, PLAY, AND PASTIMES IN UNCOMMON TIMES

PRISCILLA ORD

Several years ago when I was living in Farmville, Virginia, and teaching at Longwood College, now Longwood University, I was involved in an adult Bible study class, composed of college professors and other, well-educated professionals who lived there. One evening, for some reason, the topic of the Holocaust came up. I cannot remember why we strayed off the subject we were studying, how we arrived at that one, or even what was being said about it until one woman said, "I wonder why almost none of the survivors have ever written about how they managed to survive." Others mentioned that, because those who would have survived were getting on in years, one would expect more of what they were calling survival literature to have been written.

I was stunned because I had read numerous books on the subject, almost all of them first-hand accounts from the lives of the authors themselves, and then it struck me. I was, at the time, teaching children's literature, and I worked in a children's bookstore on the weekends. All of the books, but one, that I had read and, in fact, owned had been, thanks to an eye for marketing, published as children's books. Those who wrote them had been children and had written about the experiences they had had as children when they lived through and ultimately, sometimes by extraordinary means, survived those awful years of the late 1930's and early 1940's in various countries in Europe.

The one notable exception is *In the Mouth of the Wolf* (1983) by Rose Zar, which is well worth reading. At nineteen Rose, Ruzka Guterman, was urged by her father to save herself by hiding "in the mouth of the wolf." Traveling alone with false papers under the name of Wanda Gajda, she escaped from the Piotrkow ghetto, dug ditches for the German army, and worked as a laundress, a cleaning woman, a nurse's aide, and ultimately, as the war ended, a housekeeper for an SS officer, even traveling with the man's wife when she returned to Germany for the birth of her second child.

At our next meeting, I brought several bins of the books that I owned to share with those who were interested. Even I had to admit, however, that the books for children and young adults had only been written somewhat recently. Why was it that they waited for so long? Perhaps Doris Orgel, whose book *The Devil in Vienna* (1978) gave me the idea for this paper, explains it best:

I knew I needed to write it. Why did I keep putting it off? Wonder about that reminded me of friends I had in high school—close friends, all refugees like me. We talked endlessly about any subject, except one: Where we'd come from, what happened there, and how we got out (in my case nearly not!).

The deepest reason for our friendship was the background we shared. Yet talking about it was taboo. We were probably scared, even though our lives in Europe were behind us. I know *I* had fears locked up inside—fears all the scarier because they were vague, dating back to Vienna and things I'd only dimly understood.

Most of all, we wanted to be popular, do well, and have fun, like everybody else. We pushed aside what made us different, and told ourselves it didn't matter. We were Americans now.

So for many years, I did not write this book.

Belatedly, after writing other books, and visiting Austria twice as a tourist, with my American husband and kids, I pulled my head out of the sand and faced the truth: What happened when the devil came to Vienna mattered very much to me.

I started doing historical research. Then I interviewed my parents and everyone else I knew who had experienced that time in Austria. Finally, I was ready to write about what living under Nazism was like.

It happened a long time ago, but it still matters. I hope it makes readers ask themselves: "If someone like Hitler came to power here and now, how would I feel? What would *I* think and do?" (242-43).

Hearing the words *children* and *Holocaust*, one's thoughts are almost immediately and invariably drawn to those children who did not survive, particularly to the plight of Anne Frank and her family. There were, however, many who did survive, and the autobiographical and biographical stories of their survival, published predominantly as children's or young adult fiction because the protagonist is a child or young adult, although the content is far from fiction, provide interesting and poignant insights of their lives in the most difficult of times.

The details of how these young people managed to escape, not only from occupied cities and countries but also the work details and concentration camps, were provided safe passage on the Kindertransports, were hidden, sometimes for years, by sympathetic friends or neighbors, were taken in by religious organizations for "safe keeping," were able to pass as non-Jewish, or endured the camps until liberation are only part of their stories. They were, after all, children, and, as such, when possible, they participated in common games, play, and pastimes.

Somewhat ironically, when one considers the subject matter, a number of these accounts appear in books whose titles refer to children's games or practices or, in one case, a children's song. Among these are *Hide and Seek* (1991) by Ida Vos, translated by Terese Edelman and Inez Smith; *Touch Wood: A Girlhood in Occupied France* (1988) by Renee Roth-Hano; *Tug of War* (1989) by Joan Lingard;

and *Dancing on the Bridge of Avignon* (1995), also by Ida Vos, taken from the French children's song "Sur le Pont d'Avignon":

Sur le pont d'Avignon l'on y danse, l'on y danse.  
Sur le pont d'Avignon l'on y danse tout en rond.

On the bridge of Avignon, they are dancing, they are dancing.  
On the bridge of Avignon, they are dancing in a ring.

In *Hide and Seek*, based on her family's life, Ida Vos relates how, as an eight-year-old Jewish girl living in Holland, she cannot understand why there are restrictions on her all of a sudden. She has to go to a different school and wear a gold star on her sleeve, she cannot sit on certain benches in the park, and when a group of Jewish children are taken away, she and her family go into hiding.

Renee Roth-Hano, writing in *Touch Wood*, tells her story and that of her family, who, living in occupied France, flee their home in Alsace and live a precarious existence in Paris until Renee and her sister escape to the shelter of a Catholic school in Normandy.

One finds that not all of the children who were affected by the events of the Holocaust and World War II were Jewish. Joan Lingard, for example, writes about her husband and his family and follows the ordeal of fourteen-year-old twins Astra and Hugo Petersons, as members of the family flee their native Latvia in late 1944 before the advancing Russian armies and find themselves homeless refugees in war-torn Germany. These stories and others provide amazing insight into how their authors, or the author's subjects, lived, played, and survived the Holocaust.

Based on his own childhood, Uri Orlev writes in *The Island on Bird Street* (1984) of Alex who, alone at eleven except for a pet white mouse named Snow, struggles to survive in a nearly deserted, bombed-out Polish ghetto. Waiting for his father to return after his being taken to a work camp, he lives by his wits and hides from the Nazis in an abandoned house. "For as long as we'd been living in the ghetto, we children from Bird Street had gone to Number 78 to play hide-and-seek and all kinds of 'secret' war games" (26).

In *Run, Boy, Run* (2003), another book by Orlev, there are at least two examples of children being able to play games by making do with available materials. Eight-year-old Srulik Frydman finds himself on his own when the rest of his family is killed following their escape from the ghetto and takes the Polish name Jurek Staniak. He goes from village to village seeking refuge and sometimes lives with a band of boys in the forest. In one place a woman takes him in who needs someone to lead the cows and the sheep to pasture. There he meets a girl who takes her family's two cows to pasture and teaches him to play jacks with stones:

After they ate, Marisza led him to the footpath that ran between the meadow and the wheat field. They sat on the hard earth and she taught him to play jacks with stones. She was awfully good at it.

"It's a girl's game," she said. "But what do you care?"

Srulik tried flipping the stones in the air and catching them like Marisza. It was hard (58).

In another village, taken in by a Christian family, Srulik plays soccer with some boys in the village. The boys, however, lack an actual ball but had made one from rags:

Jurek excelled at rag-ball soccer, ... There were also spitting and peeing contests. Spitting was no problem. In peeing, though, he had to be careful not to let no one see that he was circumcised. Fortunately, everyone was looking at where the pee landed. And at running Jurek was the champion. No one was faster (79).

*Run, Boy, Run* is the fourth of Uri Orlev's books about children in or suffering the effects of the Holocaust to win the prestigious Mildred L. Batchelder Award. This award, given each year by the American Library Association, honors the most outstanding children's book originally published in a foreign language, translated into English, and published in the United States. His others of equal merit are *The Island on Bird Street* (1984), *The Man from the Other Side* (1991), and *The Lady with the Hat* (1995), which won the award in 1985, 1992, and 1996, respectively.

It is in *The Devil in Vienna* (1978) by Doris Orgel that I found, perhaps, more examples of folk games and folklore than in others of these books. Orgel writes of Inge Dornenwald, who is Jewish and is based in part on her sister and partly on herself. Inge and her best friend Lieselotte, a Roman Catholic and daughter of an SS officer, play Heaven and Hell, a game similar to hopscotch, which she occasionally plays with Evi, a younger child who lives upstairs. It may be inferred from what she writes that the game is usually played with another. The game is mentioned more than once.

Anyway, she wanted to play Heaven and Hell. She always does, she's at that age.

"All right." I got my coat. I checked to see if Lieselotte's lucky pebble was in the pocket. It was.

We went down to the courtyard.

The little bit of snow had melted. The ground was dry enough. Evi had chalk and drew the boxes.

Heaven is where you rest. Hell is when you miss...

Lieselotte never used to miss, except when a dog came anywhere near. Then her pebble would land in the wrong box, or she'd lose her balance, almost on purpose, so she could pet it (Orgel 43-44).

A bit later in the book:

I happened to have a piece of chalk in my pocket. I stooped down, drew a line, just to test if the pavement was dry. And before I knew it, I'd drawn a whole set of Heaven and Hell boxes.

The pebble happened to be still in my pocket, from playing with Evi yesterday. Quickly I threw it into Box One, skipped to there, picket it up; into Box Two; and so on. I felt a little foolish playing alone. But I'd already decided that if I got through all the boxes without missing, the wonderful something would all the more certainly happen.

I was up to Box Eight, usually a lucky one for me, when I heard footsteps down the stairs, looked around—and missed. ... Interference, it doesn't count, I tried to think, but that was stupid. I quit... (60).

In attempting to determine the actual, graphic pattern for this particular game, I came across the following, which may link this version of the game to the cult of Mithra:

In the Mithriac mysteries, adepts finally reached an eighth portal, the Gate of Light, where they stood naked, divested of all material qualities and ready to be reborn in the spiritual world. ... It may be that a children's game something like hopscotch contains a dim memory of this mystery cult, which came to Germany and Britain along with Roman soldiers: in this game (which is still played), one leaps through a ladder-like figure drawn on the ground, and the last station in the eighth square is variously called heaven or hell (Schimmel 1993, 143).

Inge's Uncle Herbert on one occasion said, "'Teu, teu, teu,' ... and knocked three times on wood—that's a joking thing one does to keep the Devil away" (Orgel 1978, 36). This practice is used in much the same way today to keep the opposite of what has been verbally expressed from happening, but according to folklorist Stephen Roud, it may actually be a transfer from children's games of tag where one is free or safe if touching wood.

There is also a reference to the pastime or game of ball where one throws a ball against a wall and performs various routines, including clapping hands and turning around before catching it again. After Lieselotte and her family move to Munich, Inge goes to her old house in an attempt to learn of her address from the janitor, Herr Magrutsch, and remembers, "..., he used to yell at us for playing ball against the side of the house ..." (Orgel 1978, 37).

The two girls become "blood sisters," based on something Lieselotte has learned from a book, *Beneath Distant Skies*, that belongs to her brother Heinz:

"Now let's drink blood brotherhood," said Lieselotte.

I'd never heard of that. But I wanted to.

She took down a bottle of cooking wine. She poured a little into a glass. "We need a needle."

She went to get one. "Now we prick our fingers."

"How do you know?"

"I read it in a book Heinz has. Want to be first?"

"No, you."

She stuck the needle in her finger. She didn't even wince. She squeezed two drops of her blood into the wine.

I pricked my finger. I didn't wince either. I squeezed my blood in.

We stirred up the wine with the blood.

"Now we link arms," Lieselotte lifted the glass. "Now we drink blood brotherhood."

"Shouldn't that be blood *sister*hood?"

"I don't know. Heinz says there's no such thing. But you're right. If we drink blood sisterhood, then there will be such a thing. Let's" (Orgel 1978, 28).

When Lieselotte and her family are preparing to leave Vienna for Germany, she gives Inge Heinz's book, where she reads:

Then Trapper Charlie unsheathed his trusty hunting knife and pricked his finger with it; the noble Apache, Swift Eagle, unflinchingly did likewise; whereupon they mingled their blood in a cup of firewater, linked arms, raised the cup to their lips and drank. Thus it came to pass that these two, though from worlds apart, became blood brothers. And blood brothers they remained unto their dying days (Orgel 1978, 51).

Lieselotte then signs her letters to Inge, "Much B. S. L.," for Much Blood Sister Love."

There is also mention of that favorite childhood prank of ringing someone's doorbell and then running before the homeowner is able to answer. One day

at the skating rink, seeing someone who looks like Heinz, and believing that Lieselotte and her family have returned to Vienna, Inge goes to their old home and rings the bell. When she hears a dog bark that could not have been theirs, she runs before anyone can answer the door:

By the time someone opened the door, I was already down on the first floor.

“You wait, next time I’ll catch you,” a man’s voice shouted. He thought it was children playing the old game Ring a Doorbell and Run. (Orgel 1978, 65)

It appears that anyone seeing a bride’s dress, not merely the groom seeing the bride, before the wedding would bring bad luck. Mitzi, the Dornenwalds’ maid, was planning to marry, and Inge, who would soon be leaving with her family for Yugoslavia, wanted to see her dress. “Are you crazy? Don’t you know that’s bad luck?” (Orgel 1978, 106)

These are but a few of the wealth of childhood memories that one might find in reading the books of and about those who survived the Holocaust as children and have somewhat recently written about them or told their stories to others who have written them for them. This paper, which is a portion of a larger work in progress based on the books for children and young adults about these survivors and exactly how they survived, hopes to serve as a record of their activities and, where possible, an analysis of the games, play, and pastimes in which they participated.

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- Lingard, Joan. 1989. *Tug of War*. New York: Dutton.  
This book follows the ordeal of fourteen-year-old twins Astra and Hugo Petersons, as they and their family flee their native Latvia before the advancing Russian armies in late 1944 and find themselves homeless refugees in a war-torn Germany.
- Orgel, Doris. 1978. *The Devil in Vienna*. New York: The Dial Press.  
This novel is about two best friends in pre-World War II Austria—one whose father is a Nazi SS officer and the other who is Jewish—and has surprising truths to tell about individual acts of bravery and love in the face of mass betrayal.
- Orlev, Uri. 1984. *The Island on Bird Street*. Tr. Hillel Halkin. Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company.  
Based on the author's childhood, this is the story of a young Jewish boy's struggle to survive in a bombed-out Polish village during the Second World War. Eleven-year-old Alex has to live by his wits as he hides from the Nazis, searches for his father, and tries to find a way to safety and freedom.
- \_\_\_\_\_. 1995. *The Lady with the Hat*. Tr. Hillel Halkin. Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company.  
Seventeen-year-old Yulek is the only member of his family to survive life in the concentration camps of the Holocaust. He moves to Palestine, where he meets Theresa, a Jewish girl saved from the Nazis by Catholic nuns. Meanwhile, an elegant lady in England has seen a photograph of Yulek in the paper and recognizes him at once. She is Yulek's aunt—long estranged from her family when she married a Christian and moved to Britain. As Yulek and Theresa try to determine their places in the postwar world, the aunt begins her efforts to be reunited with Yulek.
- \_\_\_\_\_. 1991. *The Man from the Other Side*. Tr. Hillel Halkin. Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company.  
Like many Poles, fourteen-year-old Marek shares a prejudice against Jews, but that does not stop him from helping his stepfather smuggle goods to the Jews trapped in the ghetto. Stunned to find that his own father was Jewish, Marek feels compelled to act, helping Jozek, a Jewish medical student, escape, learning to love Jozek as a father.
- \_\_\_\_\_. 2003. *Run, Boy, Run*. Tr. Hillel Halkin. Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company.  
This novel tells the true story of Srulik Frydman, an eight-year-old Jewish orphan living on his own in Poland during the time of the Holocaust.

Roth-Hano, Renee. 1988. *Touch Wood*. New York: Four Winds Press.

In this autobiographical novel set in Nazi-occupied France, Renee, a young Jewish girl, and her family flee their home in Alsace and live a precarious existence in Paris until Renee and her sister escape to the shelter of a Catholic school in Normandy.

Vos, Ida. 1991. *Hide and Seek*. Tr. Terese Edelstein and Inez Smith. Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company.

Eight-year-old Rachel Hartog, a Jewish girl living in Holland, can't understand why there are restrictions on Jews all of a sudden--she must go to a different school, she must wear a gold star on her sleeve, she can't sit in certain benches in the park--and when a group of Jewish children are taken away, she and her family go into hiding. Separated from her parents, she has to change her name and move from family to family, constantly in dread of discovery. Rachel describes the horror of those years, how she lived in fear, couldn't speak to anybody, and wondered whether she would ever see her family again

\_\_\_\_\_. 1993. *Anna Is Still Here*. Tr. Terese Edelstein and Inez Smith. Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company.

Thirteen-year-old Anna, a Jewish girl, has recently been reunited with her parents after hiding from the Nazis for three years. Being free is not as easy as Anna thought--she's troubled by nightmares, finds it difficult to speak after being silent for three years, and knows that her parents are hiding what they went through during those terrible years. Anna finds she can only open up to Mrs. Neumann, a fellow survivor who is hoping to be reunited with her daughter, who she believes must still be alive. Anna also finds that, although the war is over, the feelings of anti-Semitism are still present.

\_\_\_\_\_. 1995. *Dancing on the Bridge of Avignon*. Tr. Terese Edelstein and Inez Smith. Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company.

Relates the experiences of a young Jewish girl and her family during the Nazi occupation of the Netherlands.

Zar, Rose. 1983. *In the Mouth of the Wolf*. Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society of America, 5743.

Ruszkka Guterman, at age eighteen, knows that to be a Jew in Poland in 1942 is a death warrant. Her father knows this too, and convinces Ruska and her brother Benek to flee the ghetto and try to find safe haven in one of the larger cities in Poland. Luckily, Ruszka has learned that to show fear is to give herself away. Bold, brash, and defiant, Ruszka becomes Wanda Gajda, working for an SS Kommandant, and remains safe in the mouth of the wolf.

“GO TO BED, NOW YOU’RE DEAD”:  
SUFFOCATION SONGS AND BREATH CONTROL GAMES

ELIZABETH TUCKER

When I was growing up in Washington, D.C. in the late 1950s, my best friend Karen taught me some new games and songs. During the winter when we were nine years old, she showed me a game that she enjoyed playing with her younger brother Geoffrey. “He’s really good at the game of Smother,” Karen told me. “Come see!” Following her into her brother’s bedroom, I heard a faint voice from the bottom of a pile of quilts. “More, more!” the voice called. Karen and I ran from room to room, pulling blankets off beds and piling them on top of Geoffrey. Finally he shouted, “Let me out!” and we removed the pile of sweltering bedcovers. None of us told our parents what we had been doing.

A year later Karen taught me a song called “Suffocation,” sung to the tune of the French “Alouette”:

Suffocation, easy suffocation.  
Suffocation, easy way to die.  
First you get a plastic bag,  
Then you put it on your head.  
Go to bed, now you’re dead.  
Oh, oh, oh, oh.

We thought this song was hilarious. Our mothers had warned us against putting plastic bags on our heads, so this song about defying such warnings appealed to us. We sang the song for a while, until other topical songs took its place in our singing repertoire.

Almost twenty years after Karen and I learned the above version of the popular “Suffocation” song, Mary and Herbert Knapp included a very similar text in their *One Potato, Two Potato: The Secret Education of American Children* (1976, 253). In 1995 Josepha Sherman and T.K. F. Weisskopf published four variants of the song, identifying them as parodies of the Remco company’s game Fascination. Noting that the concept of suicide is “all too intriguing to children and teenagers, most commonly the latter” (1995, 71), Sherman and Weisskopf document the “Suffocation” song’s circulation in the United States through the early 1970s and its popularity at American summer camps. Among the methods of self-strangulation that these songs describe are “a big, brown rope” and “a rubber hose,” as well as plastic and rubber bags (71-72). Whether or not youngsters had been familiar with these suicide methods before learning the verses, they certainly knew about them afterwards.

This “Suffocation” song has been documented well by folklorists of childhood, but games involving breath control have not. Iona and Peter Opie’s “Daring Games” chapter of *Children’s Games in Street and Playground* includes a thought-provoking discussion of hanging and fainting games, with emphasis on the Dangling Man

game in which a child hangs above the ground with a roller-towel twisted around his or her neck (1969, 273). With characteristic insight, the Opies explain that games of this kind emerge in cyclical "crazes," sometimes causing injury and death of children. They describe one such craze in 1961 and another in 1966. Quoting boys' confident assertion to their primary school's headmaster, "We can make a boy faint for a minute, sir," they note children's pride in mastering a risky new game (274).

During the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, more information about breath control games has become available. It has gradually become clear that young people's activities range from risky pursuits such as the Smother game I once played with my best friend and her brother to very dangerous choking games played in groups or alone. Accounts of children's group games have tended to stress the brevity of such experimentations. In the fall of 2007, fellow folklorist Bill Ellis sent me a long e-mail about levitation games that I quoted in my recent article "Levitation Revisited" (2007-2008). The message's last line was "[Levitation] was one of those things, like 'knocking yourself out' by hyperventilating that went the rounds of preadolescent kids like wildfire, then next week was gone." Experimentation with breath control usually ends quickly, but sometimes it leads to permanent damage or loss of life.

Although a short period of hyperventilation may seem relatively safe, all games that suppress normal breathing involve risk. In *Children's Folklore: A Handbook*, I include a description of the game Hangman, collected from a nine-year-old boy in Binghamton, New York in 1987. According to his description, "We take a rope, and it gots a hole in it, and you put it around their head. We close it as tight as we can and see who can choke himself the longest" (2008, 79). This description haunts me. How many young people have risked their lives by playing such a game? Because breath control games belong to the childhood underground, it has not been easy for adults to understand the games' extent and meaning, but the Internet has greatly increased adults' and children's understanding of the games' dangers. Warnings against breath control games have circulated actively on the Internet during the past five years.

In this essay I examine relevant studies by folklorists, psychologists, anthropologists, and specialists in other fields. I also consider portrayals of breath control games on the Internet that have significantly influenced public perception. After presenting some recent examples of games gathered from young adults, I draw a few conclusions and raise questions for future study.

When I began my research on this subject, I asked my son, a young adult, what he knew about breath control games. "A lot of my friends played choking games in middle school," he told me, "but I didn't play myself." I was not surprised that he and his friends had not brought this subject up before. Like Karen, Geoffrey, and me, they had known what kind of information belonged to the childhood and adolescent underground.

### Origins and Explanations

Although the origins of children's breath control games are unclear, it seems likely that such games began through imitation of adults' activities. In *Children's Games*

of *Street and Playground*, the Opies trace children's imitative game-playing back to ancient Rome, when boys played the roles of judges and other officials; the Opies also mention sixteenth-century Flemish children's imitation of christenings, weddings, and religious processions (330-31). As Michel Foucault explains in *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison* (1977), public executions in pre-modern Europe restored the sovereign's authority through spectacles open to all viewers. Crowds at these public events often expressed derision and sympathy for the criminal in a rowdy way. Hangings, conducted on easily visible scaffolds, drew large crowds of adults and children (Cooper 1974, 13-18). The horror, excitement, and fascination inspired by public hangings probably encouraged children to create their own hanging games.

We know some details about an eighteenth-century hanging game played by boys in Melton Ross, a village in England, through a local legend published in the first issue of *Notes and Queries* in 1849. In this legend, three or four boys "[are] playing at hanging, and seeing who [can] hang the longest in a tree." As one boy adjusts the noose around his neck, the devil in the form of a three-legged hare distracts the boy's friends, who run away and do not return until after his death. Afterwards, a gallows goes up on the site of the boy's demise (Ashliman 2000). Today Melton Ross includes this legend in summaries of its history on the Internet ("North Lincolnshire" 2006).

In the nineteenth- and early twentieth-century American West, public hangings generated excitement for young and older people.<sup>1</sup> Memories of these public hangings persist through some western towns' continuing recognition of a "hanging tree" in the center of town. In Goliad, Texas, for example, a hanging tree outside the town's courthouse reminds residents of the many public hangings that took place between 1846 and 1870. In Shelby County, Texas, a young boy helped a mob hang a suspected criminal from a hanging tree ("Famous Texas Trees" 2005). Houston, Columbus, and other municipalities in Texas also take pride in their centrally located hanging trees, which serve as focal points of local history. Although I have found no narratives about games played in American hanging trees, I believe that often-told stories about these living reminders of hangings have made young people more aware of events that have troubled and excited members of their community.<sup>2</sup>

In 2004, children's imitation of the hanging of Dhananjay Chatterjee in India resulted in two deaths and a near-fatality. A fourteen-year-old boy died after hanging himself with a rope attached to a ceiling fan; a twelve-year-old girl died after demonstrating the execution to her younger sibling; and a ten-year-old boy almost died after he and his friends took the roles of Chatterjee and his hangman, doctor, and prison warden ("Brutalization Effect" 2009). The third case, which fortunately resulted in no deaths, demonstrates children's enjoyment of impromptu multi-role dramas. We might wonder why all of these children engaged in similar imitative play soon after Chatterjee's hanging. The answer seems to be that this execution, the first in India since 1995, received a great deal of public attention. Chatterjee's hanging occurred as the result of a rape/murder of a girl in 1990, so it is not surprising that children felt fascinated and horrified by the details of his execution.

Besides imitation and excitement, pursuit of pleasure explains the development of breath control games. Getting a "rush" or a "high" from choking increases young people's interest in playing dangerous games of this kind. After oxygen deprivation, the brain responds to normal airflow with a euphoric sensation ("Unintentional Strangulation Deaths" 2008), although other effects may be alarming (Ullrich, Bergin and Goodkin 2008). Frank Dattilio's study "The Versatile Effects of Breath-Holding" (2006) asks whether breath holding alleviates anxiety and makes people feel better. Young people who have told me about their own breath control experiments have tended to emphasize pleasure and entertainment. One of my recent interviewees, a twenty-four-year-old male student who watched friends play Pass Out in middle school, told me, "What you do is, you put your hands around somebody's throat and then push their chest in. They get a rush, pass out and wake up. It's a funny thing to do." In this interview and others, the word "rush" has repeatedly come up. Clearly, feeling euphoric makes this game attractive to young people, as does the intriguing strangeness of the breath control process.

Forensic pathologists, psychologists, and anthropologists have documented the quest for pleasurable sensations that has motivated some hangings. The term "autoerotic asphyxiation" (called "AeA" by specialists) means self-strangulation for the purpose of erotic pleasure. Children, adolescents, and adults have pursued this solitary process, which differs from group games without a specific sexual orientation. A 2006 study by Anny Sauvageau and Stéphanie Racette, "Autoerotic Deaths in the Literature from 1954 to 2004: A Review," identifies the age range of AeA practitioners as 9-77. Since this study analyzes 408 deaths reported in 57 articles, it covers a wide range of situations resulting in the same tragic outcome. Sometimes it is difficult to know whether or not young people have intended to commit suicide. Careful studies such as the one by Sauvageau and Racette have made it somewhat easier to distinguish between dangerous game-playing and deliberate self-destruction.

Psychologists and psychoanalysts have raised interesting questions about breath control. E.C. Schneider's "Observations on Holding the Breath" (1930) suggests that will power, not physiology, determines how long a person can hold his or her breath. Psychoanalytic studies of autoerotic asphyxiation have found that breath control results from regressive and masochistic fantasies. J.M. Johnstone's, A.C. Hunt's, and E. Milford Ward's "Plastic-Bag Asphyxia in Adults" (1960) interprets the use of a plastic bag in asphyxiation as a symbolic attempt to return to the womb. Robert R. Hazelwood, Park Elliott Dietz, and Ann Wolbert Burgess, authors of *Autoerotic Fatalities* (1983), find that the need for oxygen deprivation has a strong connection to masochistic fantasies and sexual arousal through risk-taking. Similarly, Edward Saunders' "Life Threatening Autoerotic Behavior: A Challenge for Sex Educators and Therapists" (1989) emphasizes the prominence of risk-taking and thrill-seeking. Saunders suggests that castration anxiety and masturbation guilt account for autoerotic behavior. These psychoanalytic treatises and others have raised thought-provoking points that deserve further consideration.

Besides pursuit of pleasure, excitement, and risk, a search for understanding accounts for young people's motivation for playing breath control games.

According to Jean Piaget's stages of cognitive development, children in the concrete operational stage (ages 7-11) build concepts based on trial and error, while adolescents in the formal operational stage develop more abstract and logical thought (2001). Legend specialists have documented children's and adolescents' efforts to understand death by telling stories and taking trips to places associated with death and dying. According to Linda Dégh, author of *Legend and Belief*, "Most of the adolescent legends are quest stories" (2001, 253). Some of these quest stories describe attempts to communicate with dangerous spirits, as in Janet Langlois's essay "Mary Whales, I Believe in You': Myth and Ritual Subdued" (1978). Numerous studies of legend trips, including Bill Ellis's "Legend-Tripping in Ohio: A Behavioral Study" (1982-83) and my own chapter on legend trips in *Haunted Halls* (2007, 182-210), have demonstrated young people's eagerness to probe the borderline between life and death.

Learning how breathing works and what happens when breathing stops constitutes a significant quest for understanding. Simon J. Bronner suggested in a recent e-mail message that adolescents' questioning of life may include wondering "whether breath as life can be controlled" (2009). His suggestion rings true. Since living requires breathing, it makes sense that young people ask what will happen when breathing changes or stops.<sup>3</sup> This question makes breath control games part of a larger search for understanding of life and death.

Studies of breath control games played by groups of children have been less common than studies of solitary autoerotic asphyxiation by children, adolescents, and adults. The earliest anthropological essay, A.W. Stearns' "Cases of Probable Suicide in Young Persons without Obvious Motivation" (1953), observes that Eskimo (Inuit) children hang themselves in games that involve sexual stimulation. Psychologist H.L.P. Resnik explains in his essay "Erotized Repetitive Hangings: A Form of Self-Destructive Behavior" (1972) that children of Shoshone-Bannock Indians play suffocation games; this generalized statement does not seem persuasive. A more convincing, detailed observation of a hanging game played by a group of boys appears in DeCoccola and King's *The Incredible Eskimo: Life Among the Barren Land Eskimo* (1986). DeCoccola and King describe what happens when most of the boys playing the game get distracted and run away; with no friend nearby to help, the boy with the rope around his neck chokes to death. This sad account makes the reader wonder how many other boys died in similar circumstances.

Stories told by British boarding school students show that hanging and fainting games have flourished in school settings since the 1950s; these games seem to have entertained boarding school students for quite a long time. Like levitation, which an informant of Iona and Peter Opie learned at boarding school in Bath in the 1940s (1959: 309), hanging and fainting games give students an intriguing alternative to games organized by adults.

Journalist Jack O'Sullivan describes variants of fainting games played by male and female boarding school students from the 1950s to the end of the twentieth century in his essay "So You Still Want to Send the Kids to Boarding School?" (1999). He identifies three kinds of games: breath-holding games that involve bending the knees, hugging games, and strangulation games involving a cord.

Tragically, a game of the third kind resulted in the death of Nicholas Taylor at Eton in February of 1999. This well-publicized death increased parents' and teachers' awareness of the games' dangers.

Since the turn of the twenty-first century, authors have given more attention to young people's breath control games. Forensic specialists Sergey Sheleg and Edwin Ehrlich have written a very informative study, *Autoerotic Asphyxiation: Forensic, Medical and Social Aspects* (2006). Their chapter devoted to "AeA and Adolescents" includes detailed descriptions of children's and adolescents' efforts "to induce unconsciousness in various ways to gain approval of their peers, without apparent sexual intentions" (93). Sheleg and Ehrlich note that games involving a "bear hug" replicate the Valsalva Maneuver (VM), weight lifters' breath-holding and abdominal muscle-squeezing to improve their ability to lift heavy weights (93). This similarity suggests that children and adolescents may have imitated weight lifters in developing hugging games.

There have also been a number of books for parents of children and adolescents. Dr. Lisa Boesky's *When to Worry: How to Tell if Your Teen Needs Help—and What to Do* (2007) offers parents practical advice about young people's experimentation with drugs, choking games, and other challenges. Similarly, Moira McCarthy's *The Everything Guide to Raising Adolescent Girls* (2008) tells parents about breath control games played in groups. These books and others sold at commercial bookstores and on the Internet have given parents much useful information.

### Educational Websites

Twenty-first-century websites have significantly heightened public awareness of breath control games. YouTube, the video-sharing website that went online in 2005, has made it possible for children and adolescents to post their own videos, including graphic enactments of life-threatening games. Grieving parents of children and adolescents who died playing these games have opposed posting such videos to encourage others to play and have created educational websites. As a result of their work, many educational websites currently offer help for young people and their parents on YouTube.

One of the most influential websites of this kind, "ChokingGame.net (Passout, Fainting, Blackout, Space Monkey)," comes from the DB Foundation, founded by Kate B. Leonard in January of 2006. Leonard's eleven year old son, Dylan, died in October of 2005. Her activism in helping other parents become aware of breath control games' dangers has been recognized by the *New York Times* and the *Today* show (Forsloff 2009). It is noteworthy that Leonard's website lists multiple folk synonyms for "the choking game" in its title: "Passout, Fainting, Blackout, Space Monkey." While these are some of the most widespread names, there are many others, including "gasp game," "the scarf game," "suffocation roulette," "American dream," "California dreaming," "purple dragon," "purple hazing," "flatlining," and "the tingling game." As in the drug culture, a multiplicity of names makes it harder for parents to understand what their children are doing. Now that Leonard's

website and others list many of the names, parents and educators can better identify this part of the childhood and adolescent underground.

According to "ChokingGame.net," 148 young people were seriously injured or died after playing suffocation games from 1974 to 2004; 96 were seriously injured or died in 2005, 117 in 2006, 63 in 2007, 50 in 2008, and 25 in the first half of 2009. These figures show an encouraging downturn in the yearly total of deaths, but the website's list of victims reminds readers how important it is to be vigilant. This same list of victims is printed on the backs of "Choking Game Awareness" t-shirts, which visitors to the website can purchase.

Memorial websites dedicated to young people who died playing breath control games provide heart-rending evidence of the games' lethal impact. Most of these websites, lovingly created by grieving parents, contain warnings, folk terms for the games, details about the tragic loss, and links to other websites and newspaper articles, as well as tributes to the lost child. Nicholas Serna's memorial website, for example, includes photographs, music, and strongly worded warnings. The "bio" section explains that Nicholas learned to play a choking game at summer camp before his death at the age of sixteen in Arizona in 2005. A photograph shows Nicholas passing out during a game at camp. As of August 6, 2009, 15,929 people had visited Nicholas's site.

Another moving memorial website is "Still Loving My Gabriel" (2005). Gabriel Harry Mordecai, aged thirteen, died in 2005 in Paradise, California after playing a choking game. Gabriel's twin, Samuel, found his brother lying unconscious with a noose around his neck. Admitting that he had played the same choking game about five times, Samuel explained that a friend from another town had taught him and his brother how to play. Trying to describe how the choking game felt, Samuel said, "It's like a dream world, kind of, and then you wake up." Usually, adults would not hear such explanations of a game's transmission and appeal. After a suffocation game tragedy, however, parents may put the story of events that preceded their child's death up on the Web in an attempt to prevent similar tragic losses.

Sometimes news of a game-playing fatality elicits reminiscences from adults. After Gabriel Mordecai's death, his mother, Sarah Pacatte, received mail from people who had played suffocation games, including a woman who had played one in 1939. Pacatte herself remembered playing the game but not liking it. Having learned about the game through personal experience, she understood its dangers and warned her twins not to play. Unfortunately, only one of the twins stopped playing (Warner 2005).

One of the most informative and emotionally wrenching websites devoted to choking game prevention is "G.A.S.P.: Games Adolescents Shouldn't Play" (2008). This website's video begins and ends with the "911" emergency call that Samuel Mordecai made after discovering his brother's body. Samuel's heartbroken crying and desperate appeal to the operator, combined with visual images of his home, give the video a painfully intense impact. The narrator explains the deadly effects of oxygen deprivation with the help of an anatomical diagram. He states that between 250 and 1,000 people die from suffocation games each year but that "many [of these deaths from game-playing] are reported as suicides." Designed

to stop high school students from playing choking games, this video seems very effective.

Some parents' blogs have also warned others about swimming pool games that involve breath control. Catherine Holecko's "Family Fitness Blog," for example, describes "see how long you can hold your breath" games played in bathtubs and pools (2009). Holecko notes that some swimming pools have banned such games because of the risk of drowning. "Mama Lisa's World Blog," by Lisa Yannucci, presents swimming pool games in a more positive way; one of her commentators calls the Canadian pool game Hen Rooster Chicken Duck "a great game for kids as it gets them to hold their breath and put their heads under the water" (2009). This blog-based dialogue has raised parents' consciousness of pool games' perils. Folklorists have documented the traditionality of children's pool games (Knapp and Knapp 1976, 52; Bronner 1988, 179; Tucker 2008, 74) but have not emphasized these games' risks. In a recent e-mail message, Simon J. Bronner told me that his students have played both "tame" and "extreme" versions of the traditional pool hide-and-seek game Marco Polo; in extreme versions, "the 'it' is supposed to hold his or her breath for extended portions of time" (2009). Twenty-first-century children's love of "extreme sports" seems to be raising the risk level of pool games.

### Recent Game Descriptions

During the fall of 2008, I asked the students in my Children's Folklore class at Binghamton University what they knew about breath control games.<sup>4</sup> Of the 51 students in the class, aged 19-24, only four seemed completely unfamiliar with such game-playing traditions. One male and one female student remembered taking leadership roles in games as young teenagers because of their expertise in passing out. The other students had participated briefly, watched friends play, or heard friends talk about games. None of them knew of injuries or deaths from breath control games in their own communities. As a result of our class discussions, several students asked friends to give them information about breath control game experiences.

One male student, Alan, told me about "The Couch Game," played by a small group of boys during sleepovers. To take one member of the group by surprise, the other boys would suddenly catch him between the mattresses of their fold-out couch. Trapped between the two mattresses and caught inside the couch's heavy metal frame, the hapless boy would try to stay inside as long as possible. Anyone who begged for a quick release earned the hated nickname "baby." Before tiring of the game, the boys held competitions and praised the ones who could last the longest with little air to breathe. In this way they tested their bravery and endurance. Fortunately no one got injured during the long game-playing sessions, about which their parents knew nothing.

Another male student, Phil, described learning the choking game Space Monkey at summer camp, then teaching it to his friends. His memories of the game follow:

My camp friends had instructed me to take ten deep breaths and hold the last one in, while one friend would push on either side of my larynx until, to my surprise, I fell asleep. I went into the game with honest expectations and had no idea that I would be experiencing such a rare sensation, which is only usually obtained right before/ during sleep. I woke up confused, disoriented, and on the ground. When I finally realized what had happened, it was such a thrill that I immediately started laughing, right along with my cackling friends. I thought the game was great. I had no qualms in doing it over and over—I didn't consider the physical harm I could have been doing to myself.

Phil's statement offers valuable insight into this choking game's appeal. Even though the game makes players feel "confused" and "disoriented," it takes them by surprise and makes them laugh. Like many other young players, Phil did not stop to consider the possibility of harm.

Besides providing these interesting details about the game's appeal, Phil explained that Space Monkey made his friends "babble and talk like babies." He and his friends videotaped each other acting strangely while unconscious, laughing when anyone did something especially odd. These filming sessions lasted until one of the boys accidentally fell through a large piece of glass, cutting himself. Suddenly, the game stopped seeming harmless and funny. The boys never played it again.

One other description came from my female student Marie, who had interviewed her friend Emily. During high school, Emily had enjoyed playing a version of the Passing Out Game that involved taking turns while sitting in a circle. Her description follows:

We were on vacation with another family, and they had two boys and the older boy had played it with his friends before, and he's the one who introduced it to us. He's such a bad influence... You'd have one person sitting down and another person get down behind them on their knees, and what they would do is they would kind of put you in a headlock. You weren't supposed to breathe, so they just put you in a headlock in case you started to breathe. They'd put their elbow by your windpipe, and once you went limp, they would let go... We were bored and the older kid said that people do all kinds of crazy things when they were unconscious and that it was funny, so we were just looking for a source of entertainment.

Emily's graphic description of the Passing Out Game sounds frightening.<sup>5</sup> "Were you ever scared?" her friend Marie asked while conducting the interview. Emily replied, "Yes, I was. You kind of just got the black spots around you and then you don't remember anything after that. I don't know. All I remember is waking up and people laughing at me."

After her interview with Emily, Marie commented, "After being forced into a risky situation, you get to sit back and enjoy the humor of seeing others lose control. Thus, to be in this state of control, you also need to be put under control as well." This insightful observation helps us understand how the more complex breath control games work. Although the excitement of discovering unconsciousness partially explains the game's dynamics, an exchange of power keeps the process moving. Players voluntarily submit themselves to friends' control and possible mockery so that they can enjoy exerting the same power themselves. Watching friends do "all kinds of crazy things" seems so rewarding that giving up control does not seem as difficult as it might under other circumstances.

### Conclusions and Questions

Writing this essay has made me draw upon several roles from the past and present: nine-year-old game-player, ten-year-old singer, professional folklorist, and parent. Memories of childhood game-playing have helped me understand how easily children and teenagers take risks; my academic training has given me a methodology, and my experience as a parent has made me grieve for parents who have lost their children. Knowing that any parent could experience a loss of this kind, I have felt acutely aware of the importance of studying breath control games. Folklorists of childhood usually try to maintain objectivity, but in this case, the need to protect young people from danger seems more important than maintaining a professional distance. I am glad to express the hope that children's breath control games will stop endangering lives.

Can we, however, expect children and adolescents to stop teaching each other popular, long established games because of adults' warnings? One of the greatest pleasures of playing dangerous games has been rejection of adult authority, so it seems unlikely that kids will stop playing breath control games just because their parents and teachers worry about their safety. Game-playing traditions tend to keep going, and kids' belief in their own strength makes them resist warnings. Although recent breath control game death totals have shown some improvement, deaths and serious injuries still occur.

Why do children and adolescents have such a strong desire to experiment with unconsciousness? Some players' explanations show that they find unconsciousness to be exciting and compelling. Pushing each other to the brink of a seductive dream world, they probe boundaries between conscious and unconscious awareness and between life and death. This kind of boundary probing seems to facilitate passage from youth to adulthood. By losing consciousness in a risky way, young people prove their bravery and readiness for more complex challenges.

Building upon the literature that psychologists, anthropologists, and forensic specialists have generated, folklorists can contribute to the ongoing dialogue about breath control games. Depth psychology offers one possible approach. Having applied Jungian theory to late adolescents' ghost stories (2005 and 2007, 94-114), I see potential for analysis of children's and adolescents' encounters with their own negative, death-seeking "shadow sides" through breath control games. Folklorists who study group dynamics should find some of these games' focus on role-

playing and control-taking to be worth exploring. Other approaches can also lead researchers in productive directions.

There is much research to do and many questions to answer. Amid restrictions on research with human subjects, can one ask children about this sensitive subject? How have choking games developed in Korea, Australia, Pakistan, and other nations in which they have become popular? And how does gender influence the playing of these games? These questions and others need answers. I hope to read new studies of breath control games by folklorists of childhood in the years ahead.

## NOTES

This essay is dedicated to the memory of Gabriel Mordecai, Nicholas Serna, Chelsea Lynn Dunn, Jason Linkins, and other young people who died after playing choking games. I want to thank Simon J. Bronner, Janet Langlois, C.W. Sullivan III, and Geoffrey Gould for their helpful comments on an earlier draft of the essay.

1. Public hangings have also occurred in other parts of the United States and in the American colonies; among the most notorious hangings are those that took place in Salem, Massachusetts during the witchcraft trials of 1692.

2. The American tourist industry has also done its part to preserve memories of hangings. While visiting the Wild Wild West casino in Atlantic City, New Jersey in the summer of 2009, I noticed a sign on the casino's wall: "Hangings on Tuesdays."

3. The film *Flatliners* (1990) portrays young medical students' experiments with induction of near-death, causing terrifying consequences. While this is a commercial film designed for entertainment, it mirrors young people's quest for understanding very well.

4. To maintain confidentiality, all students who participated in our class's dialogue and Marie's interviewee are identified with pseudonyms.

5. An interesting article that explores the connection between breath holding and fright is "Piracetam in Severe Breath Holding Spells" by Matloob Azam, Nasera Bhatti, and Naheed Shahab (2008).

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## THE KARMA OF VIOLENCE

GLEN RETIEF

When I was twelve years old and skinny as a grasslands cheetah, my parents sent me away to boarding-school. They had no choice in the matter. We lived in a staff village in a game park more than an hour away from the nearest secondary school, so boarding-school was both an unavoidable and unremarkable rite of passage for all of those entering Standard Six (eighth grade). One baking hot, glaring Monday afternoon in January 1983, the day before the start of the school year, they drove me to Nelspruit, a shady farming town on the main road between Johannesburg and Mozambique. Here, they dropped me at a complex of red brick buildings in a newly-built first-floor dormitory still smelling of concrete dust, builders' tape and paint, and lined with metal lockers and identical blue-and-white-quilted beds.

It didn't take me very long to get into trouble at my new school. That very first afternoon, after the parents had left, all of us had to stand, according to boarding-school tradition, in the downstairs showers and wait for our two seventeen-year-old dormitory prefects to finish soaping and rinsing themselves. After a minute or two one of them, a skinny blond muscular boy named John, with bright red acne all over his face, announced an initiation ritual which involved dropping our towels, placing our hands on our heads, and singing an athletics song while jumping up and down in the nude. At some point he caught me looking at his groin.

"You," he said, beckoning me to come to the front.

He asked my name, then told me to bend over. From somewhere he produced a cricket bat. He proceeded to give me six hard strokes on my bum. I remember that he put tremendous force into them, swinging back on his strokes so that the cracks echoed through that stark concrete bathroom. I also recall that the burning on my buttocks was absolutely extraordinary, a fierce, searing agony that caused my throat to harden and my eyes to mist up. I was terrified. Bile rose in my mouth. It was tough to breathe.

"Let that be a lesson to you, Standard Six," he said when he was finished. "We are fighting a war in this country, and there isn't any room here for queers and weaklings." He actually used those words—*queers*; *weaklings*. After my whipping I had to ask Martin, the skinny freckled boy who slept in the bed opposite mine, to explain to me what queers were; when he told me there were men in the world who lived together and had intercourse, at first I refused to believe him.

"It's true," Martin said, "and John thinks you're one." And so many other boys all agreed that Martin was right, that in the end I had to bow to their superior numbers.

Unfortunately, that was just the beginning of it. Over the next ten months, and especially during the first three of them, when John lived in the Standard Six dormitory with us, I, along with to varying extents the other Standard Sixes in the dormitory, would, in the name of "initiation," face an avalanche of sexual violence and torture. I would be given hidings with a cricket bat for walking past candy

wrappers lying on the floor or not greeting a matric (twelfth-grader) energetically enough when I saw him. I would receive electric shocks to my genitalia and be beaten with pillowslips full of athletics spikes; for laughs I would be made to pretend that my penis was a drill bit and I had to plow through the concrete floor into the building foundations. I would have my food and snacks confiscated from me; on an afternoon when the temperature in the shade was more than a hundred degrees, I would be confined to my bed under a pile of blankets, with the rest of the Standard Sixes forbidden from bringing me water. By the end of that calendar year – easily the worst year of my life to date, and certainly my closest brush with the kind of oppression that society usually metes out to those on its furthest margins—I would be gaunt and skeletal as a stray dog; so petrified, fragile and shell-shocked that I would spend afternoons hidden away in the toilets, lying with my head on my hands and listening to the water drip into the septic tank; and touched, for the first time in my life, with a kind of existential sadness that has never quite left me, a sense that something was fundamentally out-of-kilter both with myself and the larger world, and that whatever this thing was, it wouldn't be easy to restore to balance again or put right.

These memories are hard to summon up in the daylight. They lurk, somewhere in the shadows of my mind, as much a part of me as the freckles on my arms or the oval-shaped birthmark on my left thigh, but in some mysterious way they also seem separate from me, disassociated film clippings of things that happened to someone else. On rose-tinted South Florida mornings, when I drive to the private high school where I teach, and I see the tranquil school buildings surrounded by the banyans and poinsettias, the lawns and sports fields and neat little wooden benches where the students sit at break and eat their sandwiches, the thought that crosses my mind is: *None of that was real. All of that porn-flick, Abu Ghraib-style stuff was just a bad dream.*

In my daily sequence of high school English classes, there is little to remind me of my past. At this school, which is attended mostly by the ultra-wealthy sons and daughters of investment bankers and mogul land developers, a strict anti-bullying policy makes even the slightest suggestion of physical violence or intimidation punishable by detention, suspension, or expulsion. All over campus, rectangular brass and steel plaques remind students of their contractual obligation to report all instances of hostile teasing to the administration. According to my tenth and eleventh graders, students here settle their differences either through conversation or through threats, humorous or actual, to contact their fathers' hot-shot lawyers. "If one student really bullied another here, there'd be a lawsuit before you could dial 911," they tell me, and I believe them, these fresh-faced, optimistic ruling-class denizens of the world's richest and most powerful country.

There are times, watching my students, that I pity them for living such sheltered lives. The gleaming SUVs bringing them to school seem obscenely far from the barefoot African children who trudged to school near where I grew up. ("Don't forget how much harder the black people have it," the teachers said whenever we complained about our own rough boarding school, and of course, in a sense

they were right). The case management meetings called for every flunked test or irritable outburst by a student in Math class, where a thoughtful, sympathetic school counselor suggests anger management strategies or procrastination-beating mental tricks—these seem from a different universe than our mock hangings in school bathrooms, where once my friend Andre involuntarily stained the wood of an improvised gallows with his urine. (“Disgusting! Phew!” said the seniors when he did this, and they, too, were in a sense correct).

I look at my American students in their polo shirts, wedged between their counselors, homeroom advisors, parents, teachers, and administrators, and I think: *I'm happy you're so spoiled, even though you don't have a clue.*

But then, after the school day, superciliousness gives way to envy—a blind rage at them and their lucky country, accompanying me on the I-95 highway past the billboards and the palm trees. This, in turn, later decomposes in its constituent elements: a naked pain as I sit in front of the television, and unadulterated abandonment plaguing me as I try to do my grading. A hole throbbing in my chest, right above my diaphragm. A cold terror in my hands, spreading over my body.

And I ask myself yet again: why was there no one? Why did no teacher take the trouble to notice what was happening, all of those years ago, in bathrooms with doors left unlocked and open, in dormitories with glass windows open to the clouds and birds? Why did no one snap Abu Ghraib-style pictures of *our* grinning and jaunty tormentors—cause a local scandal? At that year's final honors assembly, when John received the award for community service and moral leadership for making sandwiches for the neighboring old age home – everyone in the audience rising to applaud, John standing in the amber-colored spotlight, smiling his aw-shucks grin, holding up his trophy for the school photographer—why did no one heckle him from the back rows?

A memory: late afternoon, perhaps a week or so after the beating in the shower room. The sun is a luminous blood-red, the color of the hostel bricks. I stand at a wooden door, the entrance to the apartment of the teacher-on-duty. The teacher answers it, a ruddy-faced man with ginger hair and thick, stocky arms full of blonde hairs. I try to explain to him that John has been beating me several times a day ever since I arrived, for everything from walking past an empty Coke bottle left on the landing to not folding the corners of my bed hospital-style. In my mouth these jumbled complaints transmute into a mangled story about how I need to cover my textbooks and John won't let me do this during study hall because he wants all the Standard Sixes to go to a dance the next evening. Sometime during this jeremiad I begin to sob and ask if I can call my parents from his phone. The teacher touches me on the arm, firmly but not unkindly.

“You tell John I say he needs to let you cover your textbooks,” he says. “Be strong now. You'll be OK, I promise you.” Why does he never mention this incident to me again?

Or here is another one: another late afternoon, just before sunset, the quality of light heavy-red and golden. I am in my parents' car driving back to the game reserve, the first weekend I have been permitted to go back home—along with the other boarders, I am required to stay in the hostel and cheer at sports events when the school is playing one of our neighbors. I have contacted my parents several

times since the abuse began, mostly from my aunt's office in the newsroom of a community newspaper across the street: I have been stealing away, unseen, after lunch, and spending entire afternoons sitting on piles of phone books and stacks of returned tabloids. My father shifts the vehicle into third gear to go up a hill. Then he sighs, a sigh deeper than any I have heard him issue before, a moan that seems pregnant with a grief that is far beyond my twelve-year-old comprehension.

"The thing is, it's not *true*, Glen," he says. "I *know* it isn't. You're *not* a sissy or a nancy boy, or another of the other things they're calling you. This is what makes this all so unfair." Perhaps the tremble that starts on his lip also indicates that he is angry with them; his shoulders and neck tense up. Is he also annoyed at me?

He says: "Some of these young guys just act like walking penises." I don't understand what he means. He says: "This does happen to everyone, you know." He never, to my recollection, articulates the sentiment that in retrospect I so long to hear from him, the words that will touch my inner ache: *The fact that this is happening is a moral abomination, and I will do everything, I mean everything, my son, to protect you from it.*

Or here, at last, is the most painful memory. It is late one afternoon at school—I think the afternoon after John made me lie under a pile of blankets. Somehow I have made my way to the top of the school, to the fourth storey of the building we called the East Wing, with the view over rolling green hills covered with citrus orchards and the ribbon of tarred road leading to Johannesburg. I can see the little toy houses where my grandparents live, on an orange farm ten minutes' drive away: these are the grandparents whom I have begged my parents to let me live with, but they have refused. I lean over the railing, the top half of my body precipitously hanging above the hard ground. Death's release exerts a strong attraction. I pray: "Please, if I jump now, Lord Jesus, send your angels and carry me over there, to Granny and Grandpa, and make it so that I don't have to come back here."

But there are no angels, at least none that I believe in enough to risk my fate. I do not jump.

A significant part of my adult life has been spent trying to come to terms with these experiences. "I am a survivor of torture," I have said to myself, by way of trying to force myself to take my own victimization seriously. But the words *survivor* and *torture* stick in the throat like fruit pits; they clang hollow and untrue, sound to me like self-pity and dramatization. I long to spit them away from me — even though, reading through the incidents listed in reports by Human Rights Watch and Amnesty International it is hard to see how the actions of John and his friends back in 1983 could not at some level have qualified as war crimes.

Denial is complex and multi-faceted, universal, pernicious. To confront it means not just to challenge the multiple lies and half-truths embedded in the self, but also to face loved ones and personal anchors, family and friends, the communities that provide structure and identity.

Until age twenty-four, when I first arrived in New York City as an immigrant and expatriate, I truly had no idea there was even anything strange in the story

of my early adolescence. All of my life I had simply thought of myself as unlucky for having been hit “harder” than the average Standard Six, because of being visibly homosexual. Being stripped naked, though, and forced to enter a pillow slip lined with menthol muscle relaxant; being punched and clobbered and called names; dealing with jokes and high jinks, a little telephone-crank “cock-shock” machine here and some humorous armpit hair-burning over there: all of this I took for granted as a regular part of growing up. When, after three months of John’s depredations, my parents managed to persuade the school authorities to transfer him to another passage—an action they took without telling me, for fear I would give away the secret and become more of a target—the abuses continued, albeit at a reduced intensity, and in fact they persisted throughout high school. My father was not wrong in telling me these things happened to “everyone.” A 2001 report of the South African Human Rights Commission, authorized by the new democratic parliament, found that such abuses were widespread and accepted in schools “within an institutional culture of authoritarianism and bullying.”<sup>1</sup>

It took several years and the utterly anguished, horrified expressions on the faces of friends of several different nationalities—American, Swiss, Spanish, Brazilian and Chinese—for me to realize that, say, having one’s head shoved in a tiny wooden mailbox while being caned with a three-foot hockey stick was not a universal coming-of-age ritual. Even then, I was reluctant to acknowledge that my childhood wasn’t “normal,” “happy” and “safe.” It is no exaggeration to state that it is those moments sitting around in Brooklyn brownstone apartments watching faces crumple into utter bewilderment at the descriptions of my childhood and adolescence that I felt the first serious stirrings to provide a fiction and nonfiction of witness; to share with the wider world my story and its implications.

In talking to my family over the years, and in sharing my published memoirs and personal essays, it has been hard to share this newfound international perspective. My parents tend to be sympathetic, yet guarded. “We did the best we can,” says my father. “In those days, that’s the way things were done.” It is all but impossible to communicate frankly with my former teachers who still live and work in the town where I grew up. Recently, when I suggested to one of my old Math instructors that school discipline may have been cruel in the old days, she proceeded to regale me with a diatribe about how, under democracy, academic standards have collapsed and the blacks have brought drugs, laziness, and knife fights into previous citadels of order. “Yours was the last generation,” she tells me, “to be educated in safety.”

At the political level, the denial of the abuse of young white male preadolescents under apartheid is a glaring absence in the national discourse about reconciliation, healing, and the building of the so-called “rainbow nation.” Existing narratives of the apartheid era rely heavily on notions of white aggression and black victimhood. To some extent feminists have succeeded in adding to the mix concepts of male belligerence and female injury. Entirely missing from this world view is any sense of white males themselves as dual victims and perpetrators, stuck in a perverse, topsy-turvy karma of oppression—not being subjected to the ills that they inflicted on others, as in the Hindu cosmology, but

rather treating others they way they were once treated, and thus perpetuating the cycle *ad nauseum*.

And yet in the universe of apartheid, this is exactly what happened. At countless institutions like my boarding school, spread across the African veld like red-brick blisters, boys without hair on their bodies became, for a time, honorary black South Africans. As the years went by, these boys, with all the verve of understudies stepping into stage roles, went on to bully the juniors under them, shouting orders to polish shoes or make beds, walloping them in the kidneys when they took too long to bring back Coca-cola from the corner store. When the time came for these seventeen-year-olds to be conscripted into the South African Defence Force, the roles flipped once more. This time, they were made to do push-ups over mud puddles until their arms collapsed, or run miles with backpacks on their shoulders, or perhaps even have sexual intercourse with female prostitutes to prove their masculinity. According to at least one post-apartheid human rights study, if they showed signs of gentleness or effeminacy they were made to endure punishments including electric shock treatment and having their genitalia rubbed with shoe polish and inspected by whole platoons.<sup>2</sup>

In white male South African society, the final step on this ladder of suffering and oppression was to become a soldier or officer entrusted with the task of maintaining white supremacy. According to the report of Desmond Tutu's Truth and Reconciliation Commission, here there were few limits on the exercise of brute power. Herero and Ovambo women on the Namibian border were beaten and gang-raped. Captured guerilla fighters got fried alive on the engines of armored cars. At the higher levels of military command, white men who looked and spoke just like John and his friends gave orders for the engineering of civil wars and famines that would claim millions of lives. Like so many mad Kurtzes, many white men seemed to lose all sense of themselves in those days, to become intoxicated with power and cruelty, and to have no qualms about destroying individuals, families, and nations. By time it all came to an end, the damage done, both to South Africa and its neighbors—the child soldiers with their legs blown up, the families left abandoned and destitute—simply beggared the human imagination.

Perhaps I was either too gentle or too tough a soul to succumb to the karma of violence. Perhaps it was simply that as a gay man I was a natural misfit in my own society, with no hope, under apartheid, of ever being comfortable in the laager, the circle of wagons drawn against indigenous Africans. Perhaps, back in those humid summer days when John was standing over my bed, with his smell of Clearasil facewash and his ironed black boxer shorts, trying to plant in me the spiritual kernel of what he was—perhaps on one of those, another seed managed to blow into my soul, much as, even on the hottest afternoons in the dormitory, a breath of honeysuckle would come in through the open windows. Grace, divine or otherwise, is inevitably mysterious.

When I myself reached Standard Ten, I never participated in the torture of the younger boys. I never punched them full-force in the chest or struck them with

canes and athletics spikes; I never seized them, thrust them up into corners, and threatened to bash out all the teeth in their mouths. But I cannot claim to be a hero. I never reported or spoke out against any abuse or bullying. I never looked at the juniors while they were being tormented, never offered them as much as a commiserating shake of the head. On one occasion, so as not to appear a weakling in front of my peers, I did make a Standard Seven in my passage bend over for being disrespectful to me, and I hit him as hard as I could with a cricket bat, until he begged me to stop. I remember that when I was done I threw up in the passage toilets.

I never joined the South African Defence Force. At age nineteen, a student at the University of Cape Town, I joined the End Conscription Campaign and declared that I was a conscientious objector, that I would not fight for white supremacy. Along with many thousands of white men of my generation, I decided simply to ignore the call-up papers, not to show up at one of those train or bus stations where we were supposed to shave our heads, heave our duffel bags onto our shoulders, and be transformed into killers. The penalties for refusing military service were six years' prison, if they caught you. By that time, though, the laws had become virtually unenforceable.

I have said that the karma of violence was repetitious and unchanging, but that is not strictly true. By the time I reached matric, the so-called initiation rituals in my school were already markedly reduced in intensity, and soon after that, under the leadership of a new school principal, they were forbidden. After the transition to democracy in 1994, all forms of corporal punishment and bullying were outlawed. The rest of the story of the South African transformation is well-known. Today, the liveliest wars fought are on the soccer fields, cricket pitches, and rugby stadiums.

As I write these words, summer has once again descended on Miami. Days so scalding that when I leave the air conditioning it feels like I have stepped into a furnace give way to cool, fresh evenings lit up by thunderstorms. The poinciana trees are all in red, fiery bloom; my students are on summer vacation. Before leaving, one of my favorite students, who plans to one day become a memoirist herself, ran up to me early one morning and told me that she had not only managed, with the help of a peer counselor, to defuse a bullying situation between an older boy and a younger one, but that she had joined the local Amnesty International club, and would be working next year to secure the release of political prisoners in Guantanamo, Havana, Mexico, and the Middle East. She was so exuberant and happy; her arms wheeled as she talked about going to Washington, D.C.; her mouth opened wide as she laughed about the fun she was going to have in Chiapas. *You, too*, I thought, *are going to be a witness*. And this time, instead of provoking jealousy, her open, innocent face, so full of youthful happiness, gave me hope.

**NOTES**

An earlier version of "The Karma of Violence" appeared in *Hotel Amerika*.

1. See South African Human Rights Commission 2001.
2. For examples of such violations within the SADF, see Van Zyl, Mikki, et al. 1999.

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## CHILDREN'S ORAL POETRY: IDENTITY AND OBSCENITY<sup>1</sup>

C.W. SULLIVAN III

*I offered this paper for publication not so much for any original insights present but as it may be (or may not be!) an example of how to take children's folklore scholarship into other venues—in this case, children's literature, at a conference where this was the only children's folklore paper.*

### Introduction

We were all children once, and according to children's folklorist Jay Mechling, that might pose a problem for collectors of children's folklore. In an essay entitled "Children's Folklore," in Elliott Oring's collection, *Folk Groups and Folklore Genres*, Mechling begins his argument by saying, "The white, male folklorist recognizes that he will never really know what it means to be a black woman, but we all think we know what it means to be a child" (1986, 91). But our knowledge of what it means to be a child is filtered through a lens that is thick with the years that have passed since we were children, years during which we have forgotten or glossed over much, years during which selective memory has compressed some experiences and expanded others, years during which we have developed our own "presumptions and emotional responses" to the very subject that we think we are treating objectively (91).

In fact, some adults, when confronted with certain materials collected by children's folklorists, deny the reality of those materials or, worse, accuse folklorists of unethical behavior. I, as editor of *Children's Folklore Review*, was accused of providing children with obscene materials when I published a series of articles by sociologist Gary Alan Fine on pre-adolescent male slang. My accuser, a local high school principal, neither recognized that the publication was for adults, not children, nor remembered that children of that age, especially perhaps boys, were capable of such language. Thanks to an understanding department chair and dean who defended me and the journal, I suffered no professional ill effects from the situation and *CFR* has continued on as a successful and, I hope, a well-respected journal of children's folklore research.

Other scholars have not been so fortunate. An Australian collector photographing girls' playground games took a picture of girls flipping up their dresses and showing their undergarments as such an action was described in the rhyme they were chanting:

Flintstones, Flintstones, yabba, yabba, doo!  
(repeat)  
Fred does the bow,  
Wilma does the curtsy,  
Pebbles shows her Knickers,  
And we all go "Wow!"

His dissemination of these photographs caused him to be arrested and suspended from his university position for distributing child pornography. The case dragged on for six months or so until it came before an understanding magistrate who threw it out of court (*Australian Children's Folklore Newsletter* 1994, 1). Neither of these cases is about the children, but both illustrate adults' misperceptions about childhood, adults' projections of their own attitudes onto what they see happening on the baseball field or the playground.

These projections arise for at least two reasons. On one hand, as Mechling recounts, our imagination is still dominated by "[e]nlightenment and romantic era portraits of the child," by our "American commonsense understanding of childhood...[as] a period of separation, protection, preparation, and innocence," and by the "various schools of child psychology" that are all "bound by cultural assumptions and biases" (93). On the other hand, it seems to me that the American (if not western) process of "growing up" encourages us to leave childhood behind. How often are children told "Act your age," "Don't be a baby," and "You're too old for that"? Children are told, with regard to rivalry with younger siblings, "You should know better; you're older." Some growing up, "Act like a lady" and "Big boys don't cry," is gender coded. This attitude is nothing new, as an often-quoted, ancient passage indicates: "When I was a child, I spake as a child, I understood as a child, I thought as a child; but when I became a man, I put away childish things" (1 Corinthians 13:11).

The solution, Mechling argues, is for the folklorist to "approach the child's folk group assuming very little" (93). One of the definitions of a folk group is that it operates on a very "high context" level; that is, things happen in the group that outsiders would not understand without explanation. This is especially true of folk speech; within a folk group there are words and phrases that members of the group will share with each other and understand that outsiders would need explained—if, in fact, members of the group were willing to share such words and phrases with outsiders. Mechling continues his argument by suggesting a solution: "the folklorist [should take] an approach that views children's folk cultures as if they were fully complex, developed, and autonomous. This 'as if' assumption means that we approach children's folk cultures just as we would any unfamiliar culture" (93).

To rephrase Mechling, then, one might say, "The adult folklorist recognizes that he or she no longer really knows what it means to be a child and approaches the collection of children's folklore as one would approach the collecting of folklore from any group of which he or she is not a member." What I would like to present here, then, is a look at children's oral poetry as the creation of a culture significantly different from the adult culture around it and examine the ways in which the members of this culture use poetic forms to create, first, an identity separate from the adult culture and, second, especially through the medium of obscenity, an identity in opposition to the adult culture.

## Identity

Much of what I wish to say about identity in general has been said before, but I hope to be able to add something to the discussion. In *American Children's Folklore*, Simon Bronner asserts that the division between adult authority and the children under adult control is reflected in children's folklore in general: "For children, we must remember, do not simply ape the mores of adults. They want to declare their own identity, and lore is their protected expression of cultural connection to one another" (1988, 29).<sup>2</sup> Bronner continues, "Besides rebelling against adult norms, children's folklore reflects children's concerns about their rapid growth, the appropriate responses to adult society, and traditional roles and values in a nation being modernized" (31). Oral poetry, whether handed down traditionally to deal with recurring situations or created and circulated in response to contemporary cultural stimuli, forms a very large part of younger children's folklore.

Children use traditional rhymes in what Iona and Peter Opie, in *The Lore and Language of Schoolchildren*, call "oral legislation" (1959, 121-153); that is, they use rhymes in the way older children and adults use books of rules. Counting-out rhymes, for example, such as "Eenie, meenie, miney, moe" or "One potato, two potato," are considered unbiased ways of selecting the first "IT" in a game, the sacrificial person who has to be "IT" without having been caught.<sup>3</sup> Game or play rhymes are not always legislation, but they do structure children's activities; examples include game rhyme "The Farmer in the Dell," hand-clapping rhyme "I'm a pretty little Dutch girl," ball-bouncing rhyme "My name is Alice," and the largest category of all, jump-rope rhymes "Cinderella Dressed in Yellow," "Teddy Bear, Teddy Bear, turn around," and "Policeman, Policeman do your duty." Such rhymes have been circulated by children for generations as they organized their own play, without direct adult supervision, long before they were whisked off to such regulated activities as adult-organized football or baseball leagues, Boy Scouts, or Girl Guides.

In addition to regulating their own games, children have a series of rhymes that attempt to enforce conformity. Children have their own ideas, independent of (but to some extent derived from) the adult culture that surrounds them, and they have rhymes which make fun of or insult transgressors within the group. Overweight children hear "Fatty, fatty, two-by-four," a child hastily dressed might hear, "I see London, I see France / I see [name]'s underpants," informers to authorities hear, "Tattletale, tattletale, / Hanging on the bull's tale," liars hear "Liar, liar, pants on fire," and, of course, immature or sensitive children hear, "Cry, baby cry, stick your finger in your eye." There are many more such rhymes, and the point is that they are circulated by children, not taught by adults, and address what the child's folk group considers proper or, more to the point, improper behavior.

On a slightly more complex level, and more obviously influenced by the adult community, perhaps especially by the family, are rhymes that insult people outside the child's immediate peer and age group. The Opies, collecting in the 1950s, included the following rhymes in a chapter entitled "Partisanship." Some rhymes have historical origins:

The Irishmen ran down the hill,  
 The Englishmen ran after,  
 And many a Pat got a bullet in his back  
 At the Battle of Boy'an Water. (1959, 343).

Other kinds of partisanship can be directly religious. Protestants may say, "Catholic, Catholic, ring the bell, / When you die you'll go to hell" and be answered by the Catholics, "Protestant, Protestant, quack, quack, quack, / Go to the Devil and never come back" (344). Still other rhymes can be political, this one based on an Oscar Meyer bologna commercial jingle:

My peanut has a first name  
 It's J-I-M-M-Y  
 My peanut has a second name  
 It's C-A-R-T-R [sic]  
 Oh, I hate to see him every day  
 And if you ask me why I'll say  
 'Cause Jimmy Carter has a way  
 Of messing up the U-S-A (Sullivan 1980, 9).

What are serious matters to adults—war, religion, and politics—become fodder for children creating parodies of that adult seriousness.

There are also national and ethnic attitudes in some children's rhymes. When I was young, we caught "a Nigger by the toe," although later and more sensitive versions of "Eenie, Meenie, Miney, Moe" change "Nigger" to "tiger." In *One Potato, Two Potato: The Folklore of American Children*, Herbert and Mary Knapp, collecting collecting and publishing some twenty years after the *Opies*,<sup>4</sup> include, in addition to political rhymes, what I would call derisive rhymes about African-Americans, Asian-Americans, Jews, and "Polacks"<sup>5</sup> (1976, 190-206). One that the Knapps collected covers several bases:

Franklin said to Eleanor,  
 "Eleanor, how are you?"  
 Eleanor said to Franklin,  
 "I've got some advice for you.  
 Roses are red, violets are blue,  
 You kiss the niggers,  
 I'll kiss the Jews,  
 And we'll stay in the White House  
 As long as we choose." (1976, 201).

Rather than reinforcing internal conformity, these rhymes solidify the folk group's identity in opposition to what anthropologists and sociologists, as well as folklorists, would call "The Other"; i.e., those people who are obviously and demonstrably not "Us."

Another way in which children assert their own identity is through parody. This seems to me a more subtle kind of partisanship or derision in which children take what is presented to them by the adult culture and parody it; that is, they take something serious and change it to make it humorous. Bronner suggests that "Children are fond of parodying the standard and familiar, especially when in the process of doing so they can establish that they have a world of their own making" (1988, 77). Nothing is out of bounds as far as children are concerned. They will parody religious materials from evening-meal grace, "Good bread, good meat, / Good God, let's eat" to evening prayers, "Now I lay me down to sleep, / A bag of peanuts at my feet," to Christmas carols, "Joy to the world, the school burned down." School is a particular target; "The Battle Hymn of the Republic" becomes "Mine eyes have seen the glory of the burning of the school" and in a parody of "On Top of Old Smokey," we hear "I shot my poor teacher / With a forty-four gun." Commercial jingles, too, are prime targets: "MacDonald's is your kind of place, / They throw french fries in your face," "Pepsi Cola hits the spot, / Smells like vinegar, tastes like snot," or "Sani-Flush, Sani-Flush, / Cleans your teeth without a brush." And there are many more parodies of this sort.

While most parodies serve to establish children's identity as separate from the adult world, some parodies indicate different levels within children's folk culture.<sup>6</sup> By parodying the theme song from the television show, *Barney and Friends*, older children can indicate that they have outgrown a program directed at the very young viewer. In "I Hate You, You Hate Me"; Children's Responses to Barney the Dinosaur," Elizabeth Tucker, while also acknowledging timely references to topics like the AIDS epidemic, asserts this very point. The original theme song, which begins "I love you, you love me," becomes in parody versions:

I hate you, you hate me.  
 Let's go out and kill Barney  
 And a shot rang out and  
 Barney hit the floor  
 No more purple dinosaur (1999, 28).

And as Judy McKinty points out, there are similar songs about the Teletubbies set to the Barney tune:

I hate Po, Po hates me,  
 We're not a happy family,  
 With a dagger in his back and a bullet in his head,  
 Uh-oh Laa Laa, Dipsy's dead (2000, 49).

The older child's execution of Barney or one of the Teletubbies signals his or her rejection of that earlier stage of life and is part of the putting behind of childish things I spoke of earlier.

By far, the most popular area of parody is the nursery rhyme. Nursery rhymes are among the earliest rhymes to which children are exposed, the earliest rhymes they learn themselves, and the earliest rhymes they parody. Moreover, the

parodies show both the separation from the adult world and the development of the child within his or her folk group. The earliest of these, that is, those said by the youngest children, are usually innocent.

Mary had a little lamb,  
It was a greedy glutton,  
She fed it on ice cream all day,  
And now it's frozen mutton (Opie 1959, 90).

And one of my favorites:

Mary had a little lamb,  
Her father shot it dead,  
Now Mary takes her lamb to school,  
Between two hunks of bread.

But as children get a bit older, the parodies become somewhat more daring:

Mary had a little lamb  
She tied it to a heater  
Every time it turned around  
It burned its little peter. (Bronner 1988, 80).

And then more sexually suggestive and linguistically complex:

Mary had a little lamb,  
And, boy, was the doctor surprised.

And:

Mary had a little lamb,  
She also had a bear;  
I've often seen her little lamb,  
But I've never seen her bear [bare].

What is true of the "Mary had a little lamb" parodies is also true of other nursery rhymes. Parodies tell what Jack burned when he jumped over the candle stick, what Jack and Jill were really doing up on that hill, what happened to Mother Hubbard when she went to get her dog a bone from the cupboard, how having so many children affected the Old Woman who lived in the shoe, and what Jack Horner was eating in the corner—just to name some of the most popular.

### **Obscenity<sup>7</sup>**

This obviously brings us to the R-rated section of the performance. Children's rude or off-color or obscene humor (let's just settle on "obscene" as the cover term)

has been a problem for folklorists for some time. On one hand, as Iona Opie has testified (see note #4), publishers would not accept such materials in the 1950s. By the time of the Knapps' *One Potato, Two Potato* in 1976, things had changed, and materials that could not have been published in the 1950s could be published. When Simon Bronner published *American Children's Folklore*, in 1988, it seems as of anything was allowed. However, the Opies said, "Genuinely erotic verse...is unusual" (1959, 95), and the Knapps echoed that sentiment, "Little erotic verse shows up in grade school" (1976, 85); however, as the Knapps admitted on the very next page (86), it wasn't easy, and was sometimes impossible, for adults to convince children to tell them such materials—and for obvious reasons.

As the Knapps suggest and Bronner's examples reinforce, such erotic materials become plentiful among junior high school age children. As with the "Mary had a little lamb" parodies, children's obscene humor is developmental within the folk group; that is, as the children get older, their obscene verse changes. The first subject of such verse is feces. One of the first insults a child learns is to call someone else a "doo doo head," and there is an attendant verse, "Nanny, Nanny boo boo / Stick your head in doo doo." The very first obscene verse I learned from an older boy in the neighborhood was:

1944  
 The monkey climbed the door  
 The door split  
 The monkey shit  
 1944

Why this made me laugh heartily, I now have no idea. A rhyme reported by the Knapps may illustrate its age with a reference to a chain-pull toilet, "Push the button, pull the chain, / Out comes a little black choo-choo train" (1976, 62). Bronner includes

The night was dark  
 The sky was blue  
 Down the alley  
 A shit wagon flew  
 A bump was hit  
 A scream was heard  
 A man was killed  
 By a flying turd

and remarks that "These rhymes comment on children's growing understanding of taboos on certain images and words" (1988, 81). They are also opportunities for children to engage in what Mechling might call "obscene play" or "forbidden play" (1986, 94), a kind of play which is their own and in which they engage in direct opposition to the attitudes of the adult folk group. And feces is just the beginning.

In addition to feces, there is a general interest in all eliminatory and excretory functions. A rhyme in which the reciter points to the general areas of chest, crotch, and buttocks creates interesting food metaphors:

Milkly Milky,  
Lemonade,  
Around the corner,  
Hot dogs made.

As the title of Donna Lanclos' article "Bare Bums and Wee Chimneys," indicates, there is a great deal of children's lore—rhymes, jokes, sayings, and songs—about those two areas of the body. In addition, underwear, which covers those body parts, is another topic of more than passing interest to children, and in addition to the "I see London, I see France" admonitory rhyme, there are others; and most of the rhymes in this category involve someone's having lost his or her underwear. One such rhyme begins:

Tarzan, Tarzan, through the air  
Tarzan lost his underwear  
Tarzan say, "Me don't care—  
Jane make me another pair" (Bronner 1988, 78).

In that rhyme and its many variations, Jane, Boy, and Cheetah are also naked. These rhymes about body parts and underwear, as well as the jokes and songs and sayings about them, allow children to engage in some forbidden language play, and because adults would find at least some of that language play objectionable, the children have, once again, delineated and taken possession of something that is not only their own but in opposition to adult norms.

From a focus on body parts and their excretory and eliminatory functions, it is probably not a huge step to focus on body parts and their reproductive functions. The information children have about sex and reproduction is often incomplete, hazy, and/or erroneous; but as soon as they are aware that babies come from women's bodies, their lore begins to reflect this. The Knapps report the following recitation by a ten-year-old boy: "Now I lay her on the bed, / I pray to God I'll use my head" (1976, 172), both a parody of "Now I lay me down to sleep" as well as a rather vague rhyme about sexual activity. More familiar, but no less vague, is a parody of "My Bonnie Lies Over the Ocean":

My Bonnie lies over the ocean  
My Bonnie lies over the sea,  
My daddy lies over my mommy,  
And that's how they got little me. (Knapp 1976, 185).

About a variation of the song, Bronner reports the person from whom the song was collected learned it in second or third grade; he comments, "Within the apparent innocence of this ditty, the singer is declaring her astute awareness

of sexual knowledge supposedly kept hidden from children" (1988, 218, n.22). Children's questions about where babies come from show that they are, indeed, interested in the subject, and the rhymes, songs, jokes, and sayings indicate not only a sort of innocent knowledge, but also a willingness to know and share whatever information they have.

While it may be obvious that children know what they are talking about in the immediately previous examples of innocent sexual rhymes, it may be that they are saying more than they know in others. According to Roger Abrahams (1969, 31-32), the single most popular jump-rope rhyme is:

Cinderella  
 Dressed in yellow  
 Went upstairs  
 To kiss a fellow  
 Made a mistake  
 And kissed a snake  
 How many doctors  
 Did it take?  
 1, 2, 3, 4, 5...(Bronner 1988, 70).

In a variant reported by the Knapps, Cinderella "Came downstairs with a bellyache" between "Kissed a snake" and "How many doctors did it take?" (1976, 125). Mechling argues:

One way to account for the popularity of this rhyme is to see in it a disguised discussion of sex and pregnancy. The rhyme begins innocently enough with a fairytale character, probably known to children through the Disney film and storybooks. But the Cinderella story itself is about the sexual awakening of a young woman. In the jump-rope rhyme, the young woman goes upstairs to kiss her boyfriend, but she kisses a "snake" instead, and one way to interpret the meaning of "kissing a snake" is in sexual symbolic terms. In the child's vague understanding of reproduction and the difference between the womb and the stomach, sexual contact could result in a "stomach ache"—that is, pregnancy (1986, 101).

The "bellyache" figures in numerous hand-clapping, jump-rope, and other game rhymes; and it is important to note that these are girls' game rhymes, making the sexual interpretation even more convincing.<sup>8</sup>

### Conclusions

Where does one draw the line? I do not mean with children; this is their material, and forbidding it to them would be as successful as King Canute's fabled attempt to halt the incoming tide. I do not mean in this presentation, although I will admit a certain trepidation in presenting increasingly obscene materials (as well as some

I have already presented) to such an august gathering as this. No, I mean where do we draw the line between children's and adolescents' folklore?

Folklorists often talk about age-group folklore (Brunvand 1998, 54-56), and that almost works here, ending childhood at 12 and beginning adolescence at 13, but some children learn things sooner and others later. Perhaps it might be better to look at intent. I mentioned earlier the Opies' and the Knapps' comments that little erotic verse exists at the grade-school level. It does exist at the junior-high and high-school levels, where it is recited or told perhaps expressly for its erotic value (the basic knowledge of sex and sexuality being fairly well understood by the tellers at that age).

In other words, the intent of the adolescent teller is different from the intent of the child teller. The adolescent teller intends to be erotic; the child teller, generally, does not. On the first level, "Identity," the child tellers are creating and passing on verses that are their own, outside of and sometimes in opposition to what they hear from and see in the adult community; and it is difficult to tell just how important it is for those who are essentially powerless to have something of their own, something that they can control. On the second level, "Obscenity," the child tellers are also asserting their independence from the adult culture, especially with the verses about bodily functions and the like; but they are also beginning to show an awareness of, in their own language, direct and metaphorical, that most secret of all adult knowledge, the knowledge of sexuality. But the child's intent, whatever else it is, is not to be erotic.

We will read our children poems from *A Child's Garden of Verses*, *When We Were Very Young*, and *Now We are Six*, and our children will love those books and poems, but when they are on their own, on the playground or in the woods, it is more likely that they will be reciting some of the materials, or variations thereof, mentioned above. And this is as it should be; they are entitled to their own poetry and to their identity as children as they express it in that poetry.

## NOTES

1. A shorter version of this article was originally presented at the "Poetry and Childhood Conference and Exhibition" sponsored by Cambridge University and the British Library, London, 20-21 April 2009, and will be published in a volume of selected papers from the conference.

2. By "protected," I assume that Bronner means that children protect their lore from adults, not that someone else is protecting the children.

3. Examples, unless otherwise noted, are from my own experiences or collections.

4. The publication date is important. Iona Opie has since said to me in private conversation that Oxford University Press would not publish some of the ruder materials that she and Peter collected.

5. Polack jokes, of course, are not really about Polish people but are actually an iteration of the Numbskull jokes that have circulated about various groups with ethnic and religious labels suitable to the time.

6. See Donna M. Lanclos' "Bare Bums and Wee Chimneys" for an extended discussion of defining lines between children and adults.

7. I am omitting the larger category of what Simon Bronner (1988, 81-82) calls gross rhymes, as violence and other subjects of gross rhymes are not generally considered "rude" or "obscene."

8. Prior to the twentieth century, boys may have participated in what are now considered girls' games. For a discussion of gender and hopscotch, see Derek Van Rheen, "Boys Who Play Hopscotch: The Historical Divide of a Gendered Space" 1998.

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## KID CULTURE: NEIGHBORHOOD EXPLORATION THROUGH ENRICHMENT CLUSTERS

KATHRYN A. McCORMICK

Public school calendars of cultural and historical events are a resource for those who want to view cultural exchange at work. Urban environments give students the opportunity to understand folklore through connecting to their neighborhood and describing their experiences. A 2007 enrichment project at P.S. 261 in Brooklyn, New York introduced local lore and solicited students' responses to literature, visual presentations, and neighborhood walks in a study of their own neighborhood. Students were encouraged to record with all of their senses, cognitive mapping, interviewing, photographing, diagramming, and planning food tasting to relate their experiences in their neighborhoods.

*How to Get Famous in Brooklyn* was used as an inspirational piece of literature to tap students' knowledge and awareness of places in their neighborhoods. Third grade students in the Enrichment Cluster Project had done neighborhood study in grade 1 and the bridge study in grade 2 and so were quite aware of the working environment of their world. Daily travel to school by walking and taking subways, buses and cars provides various levels of awareness and involvement, as does experiencing playgrounds, games, parks, favorite stores and restaurants, gathering places, places they go with parents, street memorials, funeral traditions, and even lost or changing places.

The book *The Heroic Adventures of the John J. Harvey* was used to stimulate conversation about transportation, and harbor life in New York City. Students created a model of New York Harbor, the working home of the historic fireboat that was activated as an evacuation boat on 9/11. The book emphasizes the working fireboat's value as a survivor of an earlier time on New York Harbor. Students appreciate the will of restorers to keep the boat as well as the heroic use of it for a present day event.

### Social Outcomes

Visual presentations of street memorials stimulated conversations about death, remembering loved ones, accidents, and funerary practices in families and communities in the city. Students adopted the appropriate moods for these presentations. In fact, the social outcomes of local lore were many, reflecting the importance of recognizing the value children give to their own experiences. Students demonstrated pride in discovering their culture and sharing other students' cultures.

Students shared their interests and concerns about their community, their play spaces, and their safety and illustrated neighborhood planning strategies to implement model neighborhoods. Their sense of belonging was enhanced because they researched and presented material on their own culture, traditions, customs and choices within their living environment. Play was affirmed and

categorized as “just fun,” and serious play as an interesting means to understand and communicate “kid” culture. Lastly, students became skilled fieldworkers and evaluators of their own lore.

### **What Teachers Learned**

Students were less interested in the monuments and museums of Brooklyn than the everyday life within their neighborhood. Their stories were travel narratives of “spatial practice,” as in Asim and Eli’s model of their favorite park before the renovation planned by the Parks Department. They related exactly which activity took place in each space of the park, taking ownership of the space. Other students showed their skills as keen observers and recorders of physical space, showing how changes to that space impact their daily experiences. Emeka and friends demonstrated the use of space where they played games before and during the renovation of their school playground. Although they spoke nostalgically about the loss of particular corners of the schoolyard, they pointed out new small spaces which they had adopted for their games during the playground renovation.

Students recognize ‘folk’ culture and the dynamic clustering of culture as a concept of generative life in the city. They are receptors and communicators of culture, enthusiastic about learning and sharing their own customs. Ali and Raymond’s model of ‘life on the block’ related what Michel de Certeau refers to as “spatial narratives...narrated adventures, producing geographies of actions” signaling where they observe their own culture being transmitted, where they shop, eat and spend time with relatives in the Middle Eastern stores and restaurants on Atlantic Avenue (1984, 115-16).

Students are receptors and transmitters of lore involved in making themselves “famous in Brooklyn,” as the book *How to Get Famous in Brooklyn* suggests. Participation in activities and festivals in their neighborhoods as well as daily travel and use of the neighborhood roots students actively in their environment. They proudly display a sense of ownership, enthusiasm and confidence in knowing their own displays of culture. In addition, students utilize their own cultural codes and ‘kidspeak’ for their neighborhood and playground. These codes are not necessarily understood or used by adults, and that may be the point; students like to own their place in their local environment.

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## BOOK REVIEWS

**Designing Modern Childhoods: History, Space, and the Material Culture of Children.** By Marta Gutman and Ning De Coninck-Smith, eds. (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 2008. Pp. vii + 346, introduction, photographs, epilogue, index.)

CATHARINA I. KESSLER

*Designing Modern Childhoods* is a collection of fifteen illustrated essays that draw from a vast variety of sources, accompanied by a foreword by Paula S. Fass and an epilogue by social and cultural historian John R. Gillis. Marta Gutman is an associate professor in the School of Architecture, Urban Design and Landscape Architecture at the City College of New York, and Ning de Conninck-Smith is an associate professor in the Department of Educational Sociology at the School of Education at Aarhus University in Denmark. The book is partly a result of an international, multidisciplinary conference organized by the two at the University of California, Berkeley in 2002 and assembles contributions from architectural historians, social historians, social scientists, and architects.

The essays are grouped into four parts: 'Child Saving and the Design of Modern Childhoods'; 'The Choreography of Education and Play'; 'Space, Power and Inequality in Modern Childhoods'; and 'Consumption, Commodification, and the Media: Material Culture and Contemporary Childhoods.' Drawing on data from the USA, Canada, New Zealand, South Africa, Europe, Turkey, Senegal and Indonesia from the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, the collection covers a broad spectrum of landscapes and time periods. The essays are framed by the thesis "that spaces and settings made for children are pivotal to the construction of modernity in global society" (2).

The first two sections of the book are mainly historical and discuss and challenge the concept of the "islanding of children," described by Gutman and de Conninck-Smith in the introduction as "the specialization of space and material culture" (5) designed by adults for children, thus systematically separating the lives of the two groups by relegating children to the home (as in the paper by Annmarie Adams and Peter Gossage), schools (Anne-Marie Châtelet, Zeynep Kezer, Kristin Juul), special children's hospitals (David C. Sloane), playgrounds and special parks (Roy Kozlovsky, Anéne Cusins-Lewer and Julia Gately), and summer camps (Abigail A. van Slyck). An essay by Annmarie Adams and Peter Gossage on "Sick Children and the Thresholds of Domesticity" sits well in this volume and highlights the large "extent of healthcare practices that took place beyond the thresholds of the bedroom and the home" of Canadian families of the Victorian era (77). The authors ask to reconsider notions of the passive child in their analysis of letters written by members of John William Dawson's family, culled from the McGill University Archives. Adams and Gossage show

how Dawson's healthy teenage daughter manages the everyday affairs of her sick siblings while her mother is away, actively reordering the domestic spaces, opening windows to provide them with fresh air, and reporting back to her mother about her activities, in which she is aided by a close network of relatives and other families (70). The study challenges historians' suggestion that in the past, sick children of middle-class Canadian families were tended by mothers before being admitted to hospital, isolated from other families or outside institutions. Rather, it argues that sick children inspired travel and connection beyond the home.

The second half of the collection is mostly ethnographic, focusing on the historical present of childhood with one section on power and inequality, and another on consumption, commodification and the media. The chapters in this section complement the first, historically-oriented portion of the volume in positioning children as actors in their own right. They highlight children's strategies of using, co-creating and influencing spaces of the house and backyard (Rebecca Ginsburg), street (Harriot Beazley) and school (Mary S. Hoffschwelle), or their use of material goods and associated cultural practices such as presents (Alison J. Clarke), McDonald's Happy Meals (Helene Brembeck), snowboards (Olav Christensen) and anime media (Mizuko Ito). The insightful essay by architectural historian Rebecca Ginsburg on "The View from the Back Step," set in the context of South African apartheid, draws attention to the tight nexus of dominant social values and spatial order by examining how white children learned about apartheid by observing and partaking in its racial geography. Through the analysis of interviews with white people who were children in the 1960s and 1970s and former African servants from the same period, Ginsburg traces the relationships of white children and their black nannies, who used to live in huts in their backyard. The authors show how their understanding of racial hierarchies led many children to change their views of these maids from integral figures to peripheral ones, while others defied their parents' expectations by regularly venturing into the backyards and spending time with their nannies. The chapter provides a nuanced view of children's varied responses and actions in a social world where behaviour appears to be spatially restricted.

Overall, the volume is a good example of comparative, multidisciplinary childhood studies, demonstrating especially the importance of material culture to, and the impact of design on, children's lived experience. The broadly conceptualized book appears to be very useful for classroom instruction in Folklore, Childhood Studies, Architecture and History, as it introduces readers to a wide-range of topics as well as to different forms of data and analysis, making it a valuable source for any instructor willing to contextualize the special scientific and theoretical backgrounds of the different chapters.

**From Nursery Rhymes to Nationhood: Children's Literature and the Construction of Canadian Identity.** By Elizabeth A. Galway. (New York and London: Routledge, 2008. Pp. 1 + 196, notes, selected bibliography, index.)

JON D. LEE

Focusing on children's literature from the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, *From Nursery Rhymes to Nationhood* provides scholars of folklore, literature and history with a much-needed text that examines the role children's literature played in forming Canadian national identity. As a whole, the book is well-written and free of academic jargon, and Galway, using 115 primary sources (i.e. 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> century children's literature) and at least twice as many secondary sources (largely contemporary academic texts from various disciplines, including history and English), details well the many themes and ideals that permeated children's literature in this formative era.

Galway argues that literature provides a source for ongoing contemplation of identity and that children's literature plays a crucial role in their own understanding of belonging and difference. She examines how the books and stories of the age dealt with questions of loyalty, differing in their opinions about whether Canadians should remain faithful to the British Empire, show greater political and cultural alignment with the United States, or attempt to establish themselves as independent of both. Next, Galway demonstrates how, on the basis of these three alternatives, authors proposed varying ideas for how to best construct a national identity, some attempting to do so on "a racial or ethnic basis" that placed dividers among Anglophones, Francophones, and First Nations people and others adopting a "biracial, bilingual system" free of hierarchies (175). Finally, she establishes that the literature was also attempting to formulate national values like pacifism, environmental concern and freedom, around which Canadian citizens could unite.

As Galway proves, the problems associated with the struggle between belonging and differentiation are numerous and varied. Some of these problems were overt, such as questions relating to which country Canadians should remain loyal, or indecision concerning how "Indians" should be represented in stories—as "noble savages," as unmitigated protagonists, or (as was unfortunately less common) as equals. Paraphrasing Canadian children's literature critic Roderick McGillis, Galway notes that the treatment of First Nations people functioned "as a means of negotiating the boundary between 'self' and 'other,'" a debate that helped structure "who and what the Canadian identity should represent" (114). Another debated issue was the fact that much of the children's literature available at the time was published not in Canada, but in Britain or the United States, and was often written by citizens of those countries.

As post-Confederation Canada struggled to form a national identity separate from that of England, children's literature increasingly featured Canadian, English, and American children interacting, with Canadian children having to instruct or rescue their foreign friends. For example, in *The Captain of the Club*, a novel from 1889 that Galway references frequently, the author presents Canadian children

as “physically superior to their American counterparts” at canoeing (68) and instinctively aware of landscape as “a source of pride” (159) as they teach their friends about the benefits of interacting positively with nature.

Galway makes a valuable contribution to the study of children’s literature as a source of debates on identity and nation-building. As she traces these arguments Galway maintains an intelligent, objective, and insightful commentary. The scholarship is impressive for its coherent synthesis of a wide scope of data, resulting in a text that should be easily accessible to undergraduates. Indeed, a class on children’s literature in Canada would be remiss not to assign this as a textbook, so valuable are the ideas presented here. The book is not without its small faults, however, and there are some sections where data could have been better organized. For instance, page twelve of the introduction lists the assassination of Louis Real, the Boer War of 1899, and the 1903 Alaska Boundary Question as important historical points in the development of children’s literature. However, these events receive no elaboration until pages thirty-eight, forty-six, and fifty-five, respectively, and there is no notice in the introduction that these elaborations are forthcoming. It would be easy for readers—especially if they are unfamiliar with this era of Canadian history—to glean from such an introduction that the book assumes a far greater comprehension than it actually does. Still, such faults are relatively minor, and are few in number. Overall, the text is exceedingly well-organized and lucid. Though the book focuses only on Canadian children’s literature of a specific period, it should be required reading for students of any aspect of children’s literature, regardless of concentration. The lessons learned in these pages about the importance of literature for national identity would be well emphasized in other works, and Galway provides an excellent and attention-worthy method of analysis and discussion. The book is a wonderful and valuable contribution to the field.

**Haunted Halls: Ghostlore of American College Campuses.** By Elizabeth Tucker. (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2007. Pp. vii + 241, illustrations, references, index.)

JODI MCDAVID

*Haunted Halls* is a unique approach to the somewhat familiar subject matter of campus legends. Elizabeth Tucker, a professor of English at Binghamton University, comes to this material through an interesting set of circumstances; she has been Faculty Master of a residential community on the Binghamton campus for a number of years. Her experience as a folklorist and residence coordinator creates a unique viewpoint for this readable and academically grounded book.

*Haunted Halls* straddles the line between legend collection and analytic text quite well, providing tale type and motif index references for many of the narratives. The chapters all stand well on their own, due in part to some of their previous lives as articles which have been edited for the current publication. Four chapters draw on articles which were published elsewhere. Tucker links legends thematically across campuses, for example, finding “Wailing Women” at a variety

of institutions. Other chapters include discussions of topics such as legend quests, encounters with ghosts, evidence of them, and ghostly lovers (jilted, waiting and so on). A variety of campuses are surveyed: Tucker conducts interviews and searches university and folklore archives to provide a well-rounded selection of legends from at least fifty universities and colleges. Types of ghosts are compared to those found at other institutions, and a typology of sorts is exposed through the subject matter of each chapter (although the author herself may not suggest this) with ghosts under the categories of “desperate lovers” found at a variety of colleges. Chapter Seven, “Spectral Indians,” goes beyond campus legends to discuss legends told by non-Indians and to analyse these types of legends and their function. This chapter would lend itself well to American Studies courses, as well as to a discussion of the concepts of emic and etic folklore that are frequently discussed in introductory folklore courses.

One issue of concern for some readers may be the use of psychoanalytic theory and Jungian approaches. This mode of analysis is limited to Chapter Four, “Troubling Encounters,” where Tucker cites several academics who have used Jungian approaches, for example, in studying Bloody Mary. In some ways, the use of psychoanalytic theory can be limiting, but it is necessary in a literary review of previous work by folklorists in the area of “adolescent legends.” The use of fieldwork methods which are conducive to the collection of narratives within this age group (approximately aged 17-25) is indeed a contribution to the field. Student culture maintains a highly oral component even as students employ a variety of social networking sites and digital communication media. Throughout the text, Tucker cites legends culled through oral sources as well as those documented via instant messaging and email, a very useful means of collection for the age group that forms the crux of the study.

As an instructor, I was delighted to see Tucker use these forms as she provides a wonderful example of how they can be studied academically. I can see positive implications for using this book in teaching courses in American Studies, Children’s Folklore, Narrative, Legends and so on. The book could be used in whole or in part for teaching, although the subject matter of some chapters (rape, murder and suicide) may not be suitable for a high school curriculum. Those wishing to use it at this level—to spur creative writing or encourage discussion about legends—may find some chapters to their liking. Overall, the book provides interesting approaches to some compelling subject matter, and several pages of my copy are marked for future reflection, citation and exploration.

## CHILDREN'S FOLKLORE SECTION: 2008 ANNUAL MEETING

The Children's Folklore Section of the American Folklore Society met on October 23, 2008 at the Hyatt Regency Hotel in Louisville, Kentucky. John McDowell, the Section's president, called the meeting to order, and those present introduced themselves.

Secretary's Report: The minutes of the 2007 section meeting in Québec were distributed and approved.

Editor's Report: Elizabeth Tucker reported that Volume 30 of the *Children's Folklore Review* will be complete and in the mail soon. C.W. Sullivan III, editor of the journal for thirty years, co-edited this thirtieth volume. Binghamton University has provided generous financial support for the publication and mailing of one issue per year.

Information about the 2008 Aesop Award winners, taken from the Children's Folklore Section website, follows:

### 2008 Aesop Prize

**Ain't Nothing But a Man: My Quest to Find the Real John Henry.** Scott Reynolds Nelson, with Marc Aronson. National Geographic, 2008.

Scott Nelson's outstanding work is a meticulously documented historiography of his lengthy search to find the historical roots of the legend of John Henry, rather than a retelling of the well-known story and song. Derived from his academic book for adults, *Steel Drivin' Man: John Henry and the Untold Story of an American Legend* (Oxford University Press, 2006), his research has been recast, with the assistance of Marc Aronson, as non-fiction for a younger audience, heavily illustrated with period photographs of railroad history. The research on the origin of the legendary figure is fascinating, while the work also provides insight into what it means to be a historian or a folklorist. Nelson stresses the open-ended nature of history as process, not simply an endless account of facts and dates. In examining the historical process, he demonstrates the role that research into folklore can play in revealing previously unwritten history.

Nelson is not the first to ask whether there was an actual historical figure behind the well-documented song recounting an epic battle between man and machine, in which a steel-driving man outperformed a steam drill, but died as a result of the contest. However, he has unearthed new evidence and presents it persuasively to suggest that there was a real John William Henry, incarcerated in the Virginia Penitentiary in 1866 at the age of 19, who was one of over 300 African-American prisoners who died as a result of being contracted out to work on the C&O Railway. He includes an intriguing picture, taken in 1863, of a young black man named John Henry who worked in the Union Army's 3rd Army Corps in Virginia, but he acknowledges that he can not prove that this is the same man.

The Aesop committee's comments note that "by exposing the racial complications of the story, [Nelson] provides insight not only into the history of one song, but also into the complex relationship of history, race, and folk memory." Aronson's afterword, "How to Be a Historian," extends the importance of the story to young readers by emphasizing ways that they themselves can participate in the historical process.

### **2008 Aesop Accolades**

**Dance in a Buffalo Skull.** Told by Zitkala-Ša. Illustrated by S. D. Nelson. Prairie Tales Series, no. 2. South Dakota State Historical Society Press, 2007.

S. D. Nelson's stunning illustrations bring new life to the language used by Zitkala-Ša (Gertrude Simmons Bonnin) when in 1901 she retold a story she heard as a child on the Yankton Sioux Indian Reservation. In this small-format picture book, the breathtaking artwork by Nelson, a member of the Standing Rock Sioux Tribe, heightens the suspense of this tale of night on the prairie, as happy mice feast and dance inside a buffalo skull, heedless of danger, while a wildcat silently creeps close, attracted by their merriment. The sensory imagery is rich, drawing out the sights and sounds of the prairie. Zitkala-Ša's powerful storytelling makes this an excellent choice for reading aloud.

Zitkala-Ša, herself Lakota, born in 1876 on the Yankton Sioux Indian Reservation in South Dakota, served as a bridge between the tribal people of her birthplace and the white society that educated her in a Quaker mission boarding school, Earlham College, and the New England Conservatory for Music. As a writer, political activist, and musician, she sought to convey for a white audience, the traditions, values, and worth of her Indian heritage. This voice from the past is still strong today as her love for the teaching tale she learned from the Elders shines through in this story. One Aesop committee member commented, "For someone writing a hundred years ago as an indigenous author, trying to present her culture to an outsider audience, I think she did an incredible job - and I love the way Nelson's illustrations enhance the language for a modern audience and make it clear how well-done her telling really is." The work of the South Dakota Historical Society Press, in its ongoing efforts to reflect the rich and varied history of South Dakota and to preserve its colorful culture and heritage, merits recognition.

**The Adventures of Molly Whuppie and Other Appalachian Folktales.** Anne Shelby. Illustrated by Paula McArdle. University of North Carolina Press, 2007.

Storyteller Anne Shelby's updated Appalachian sensibility brings a charming twist to a collection of stories based on traditional tale types. The dynamic storytelling voice has the ring of folk wisdom, with a flair for the fun in the familiar. Heroine Molly Whuppie encounters witches, giants, an ogre who refuses to do housework, unwanted boyfriends, and a spectrum of puzzling predicaments. This clever and

courageous girl manages to circumvent catastrophe with a potent combination of nerve, trickery, and plain old luck. Other characters include Molly's sisters Poll and Betts, the famous Appalachian hero Jack (rescued more than once by Molly herself), and three cornbread-baking mice. In looking for stories with a strong woman or girl character, Shelby brings together the British Molly Whuppie with the Appalachian Munciemeg or Mutsmag. She also borrows some stories more commonly associated with Jack or the less well-known Appalachian male Merrywise. Whimsical illustrations complement the witty delivery and enliven the text.

Shelby is frank about the liberties she has taken in bringing a modern sensibility to her adaptations, but she carefully notes her sources and acknowledges the changes she has made. While she sometimes transforms male characters to female, she also brings existing women characters to the forefront, as in her version of "Raglif Jaglif Tartliff Pole," in which the often anonymous giant's daughter who saves Jack's life is transformed into an Appalachian Molly. She notes her driving criteria: "I had to have some evidence of the story's having been told in the Appalachian region, and I had to like it." The Aesop committee especially commends "the care with which she preserves unique cultural expressions that give her stories such a strong flavor of Appalachian language;" a language she herself grew up with in eastern Kentucky in the 1950s. This collection is sure to appeal to readers, young and old alike.

**Opie Prize Report:** There was no Opie Prize nomination this year. Carole Carpenter (York University, [carolec@yorku.ca](mailto:carolec@yorku.ca)) chairs this committee.

**Children's Folklore Section Sessions:** The section sponsored one panel, "Youth, Ritual, and Play," at the AFS meeting in Louisville. Participants were:

Elizabeth Tucker, chair

Elizabeth Tucker (Binghamton University) "Levitation Revisited"

Simon J. Bronner (Pennsylvania State University) "Fathers and Sons: Rethinking the Meaning of the Bar Mitzvah"

Priscilla A. Ord (McDaniel College) "Children of the Holocaust: Common Games, Play, and Pastimes in Uncommon Times"

Bill Ellis (Pennsylvania State University), discussant

We had a lively discussion of ways to make information about children's folklore scholarship more readily available. It seems particularly important to explore ways to put back issues of *Children's Folklore Review* on the Internet. With Section members' approval, John McDowell and Elizabeth Tucker will investigate some possibilities for the future.

At the end of the meeting, we gave prizes to winners of our Children's Folklore Section raffle. Prizes included a complete set of back issues of *Children's Folklore Review* and a folkloric Barbie doll.

## 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 typed, double-spaced, and on white paper or 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, 2009. Submit papers or write for more information to Dr. C.W. Sullivan III, English Department, East Carolina University, Greenville, NC, 27858-4353; electronic submissions should go to [sullivanc@ecu.edu](mailto:sullivanc@ecu.edu).

### **Book Reviews**

*Children's Folklore Review* is seeking book review submissions for its next issue, to be published in October of 2010. 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, Dana Hercbergs ([hercberg@sas.upenn.edu](mailto:hercberg@sas.upenn.edu)). Book reviews should not exceed 750 words.

## CONTRIBUTORS

**Simon J. Bronner** is Distinguished University Professor of American Studies and Folklore and director of the doctoral program in American Studies at the Pennsylvania State University, Harrisburg. He is the author or editor of over 25 books, including *American Children's Folklore* (awarded the Opie Prize for outstanding book on children's folklore), *Piled Higher and Deeper: The Folklore of Student Life*, and the *Encyclopedia of American Folklife* (4 volumes, awarded an Editor's Choice Award). Formerly president of the Children's Folklore Section of the American Folklore Society, he also serves on the editorial boards of the *American Journal of Play*, *Folklore Historian*, *Folklife*, and *Children's Folklore Review*.

**Dana Hercbegs** is a doctoral candidate in Folklore and Folklife at the University of Pennsylvania and a visiting assistant professor of Judaic Studies at Siegal College in Cleveland, Ohio. Her dissertation focuses on Palestinians' and Israelis' narratives about growing up in Jerusalem throughout the last sixty years. Her research and teaching interests include Jewish and Arab relations and identities, children's folklore, memory and narrative, and healing traditions.

**Catharina Kessler** studied Cultural Anthropology, Media and Communication Studies and English at the Georg-August-University in Göttingen, Germany and Folklore at the University of California, Berkeley. She has completed her MA thesis on the jokes of children and teenagers and currently works on the interdisciplinary research project "School Culture," in which cultural anthropologists and educational scientists seek to develop a comprehensive concept of school culture based on ethnographic research at two Gymnasien [German secondary schools].

**Jon D. Lee** received his Ph.D. in Folklore from Memorial University of Newfoundland in 2009. He divides his time between folklore and creative writing, and is currently working on a second book of poetry, as well as an academic text on the role of narratives in disease outbreaks. He currently lives in Boston, Massachusetts, and teaches literature at various universities.

**Kathryn McCormick** is a guidance counselor and independent folklorist who has used folklore in guidance and education in Brooklyn schools. Utilizing skills learned from the Folklore Department at UCLA and from NYU's Department of Performance Studies, she has designed enrichment and guidance projects linking the child with family, neighborhood and the larger community, often with cognitive mapping and child-centered narratives.

**Jodi McDavid** is a doctoral candidate at Memorial University of Newfoundland, researching counter-clerical narratives in Atlantic Canada. Her Folklore MA thesis, also from MUN, is titled "'We're Dirty Sons of Bitches': Residence Rites of Passage

at a Small Maritime University.” McDavid works at Cape Breton University, teaching Atlantic Canadian Folklore, Urban Legend and Custom. She is also a researcher at the Centre for Cape Breton Studies.

**Priscilla A. Ord** lives in Westminster, Maryland, where she is an adjunct lecturer in English at her alma mater, McDaniel College, formerly Western Maryland College, which was founded in 1867 as the first co-educational college south of the Mason-Dixon Line and is now recognized as one of the forty “Colleges That Change Lives.” She holds a BA in English education from Western Maryland College and an AM in linguistics from the University of Pennsylvania and has taught English at the secondary level and English, children’s literature, and linguistics at several colleges and universities.

**Glen Retief’s** memoir about growing up gay and white in South Africa, *The Jack Bank*, is forthcoming in 2010. His writing has appeared in numerous journals here and abroad, including *Virginia Quarterly Review*, *The Massachusetts Review*, and the flagship South African journal *New Contrast*. He teaches creative nonfiction at Susquehanna University.

**C.W. Sullivan III**, the associate editor of *Children’s Folklore Review*, is Harriot College of Arts and Sciences Distinguished Professor at East Carolina University and is a full member of the Welsh Academy. His major publications include *Welsh Celtic Myth in Modern Fantasy*, *The Mabinogi: A Book of Essays*, *Fenian Diary: Denis B. Cashman on Board the Hougoumont, 1867-1868*, six other books, and a variety of articles on mythology, folklore, fantasy, and science fiction. He edited *Children’s Folklore Review* for thirty years and is currently the editor of the e-journal *Celtic Cultural Studies*.

**Elizabeth Tucker**, the editor of *Children’s Folklore Review*, is Professor of English at Binghamton University. Her areas of interest include the folklore of children and college students, legends, and folklore of the supernatural. She has published three books, of which the most recent is *Children’s Folklore: A Handbook* (2008), and various articles, book chapters, memoir pieces, and poems. She is the editor of the International Society for Contemporary Legend Research’s e-newsletter, *FOAFtale News*, and an editorial board member of *Voices: The Journal of New York Folklore*.