"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.[1] 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.[2]

In 2004, children's imitation of the hanging of Dhananjoy 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. Chaterjee'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 came 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.[3] 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. Leonardi in January of 2006. Leonardi'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 Leonardi'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 Leonardi'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.[4] 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.[5] "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).

WORKS CITED

Ashliman, D.L. 2000. The Hanging Game: Folktales of Aarne-Thompson Type 1066. http://www.pitt.edu/~dash/type1066.html (accessed August 2, 2009).

Azam, Matloob, Nasera Bhatti, and Naheed Shahab. 2008. Piracetam in Severe Breath Holding Spells. *International Journal of Psychiatry in Medicine* 38: 195-201.

Boesky, Lisa. 2007. *When to Worry: How to Tell If Your Teen Needs Help—and What to Do*. Saranac Lake, New York: AMACOM Books.

Bronner, Simon J. 1988. *American Children's Folklore*. Little Rock: August House.

_____. 2009. E-mail communication. 14 August.

Brutalization Effect: Children Die Imitating Recent Execution in India. 2009. *Death Penalty Information Center*. http://www.deathpenaltyinfo.org/article.php?did=2118 (accessed August 10, 2009).

Cooper, David D. 1974. *The Lesson of the Scaffold: The Public Execution Controversy in Victorian England*. Athens: Ohio University Press.

Dattilio, Frank. 2006. The Versatile Effects of Breath-Holding. *Archives of Psychiatry and Psychotherapy* 8: 41-46.

DeCoccola, R. and King, P. 1986. *The Incredible Eskimo: Life among the Barren Land Eskimo*. Surrey, British Columbia: Hancock House.

Dégh, Linda. 2001. *Legend and Belief*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.

Ellis, Bill. 1982-83. Legend-Tripping in Ohio: A Behavioral Study. In *Papers in Comparative Studies*, vol. 2, ed. Daniel Barnes, Rosemary O. Joyce, and Steven Swann Jones, 61-73. Columbus, OH: Center for Comparative Studies in the Humanities.

_____. 2007. E-mail communication. 8 June.

Famous Trees of Texas. 2005. http://famoustreesoftexas.tamu.edu/default.aspx (accessed August 12, 2009).

Flatliners. 1990. Twentieth Century Fox.

Forsloff, Carol. 2009. Grieving Parents Warn Others of 'Choking Game.' *Digital Journal*. 25 Apr. 2009. http://www.digitaljournal.com/article/271516.

Foucault, Michel. 1977. *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*. New York: Pantheon Books.

G.A.S.P.: Games Adolescents Shouldn't Play. 2008. http://www.stop-the-choking.game.com/en/flash_vid.html (accessed July 30, 2009).

Hazelwood, Robert R., Park Elliott Dietz, and Ann Wolbert Burgess. 1983. *Autoerotic Fatalities*. Lexington: Lexington Books.

Holecko, Catherine. 2009. Catherine's Family Fitness Blog. 2 June. *About.com*: Family Fitness. 2 June. http://familyfitness.about.com/b/2009/06/02/don't-hold-your-breath.htm (accessed August 29, 2009).

Johnstone, J.M., A.C. Hunt and E. Milford Ward. 1960. Plastic-Bag Asphyxia in Adults. *British Medical Journal* 2 (5214): 1714-15.

Knapp, Mary and Herbert. 1976. *One Potato, Two Potato: The Secret Education of American Children*. New York: Norton.

Langlois, Janet. 1978. "Mary Whales, I Believe in You": Myth and Ritual Subdued. *Indiana Folklore* 11: 5-33.6

Leonardi, Kate B. 2009. ChokingGame.net (Passout, Fainting, Blackout, Space Monkey). http://ChokingGame.net (accessed August 4, 2009).

McCarthy, Moira. 2008. *The Everything Guide to Raising Adolescent Girls: An Essential Guide to Bringing Up Happy, Healthful Girls in Today's World*. Cincinnati: Adams Media.

Nicholas Andres' Serna. 2005. http://www.nickserna.com (accessed August 6, 2009).

North Lincolnshire Council—Melton Ross Local History Pack. 2006. *North Lincolnshire Online*. http://www.northlincs.gov.uk/NorthLincs/Leisure/libraries/localstudies/localhistorypacks/MeltonRoss.htm (accessed August 23, 2009).

Opie, Iona and Peter. 1969. *Children's Games in Street and Playground*. New York: Oxford University Press.

_____. 1959. *Lore and Language of Schoolchildren*. New York: Oxford University Press.

O'Sullivan, Jack. 1999. So You Still Want to Send the Kids to Boarding School? *The Independent*. 18 March. http://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/so-you-still-want-to-send-the-kids-to-boarding-school-1081328.html (accessed August 9, 2009).

Piaget, Jean. 2001. *The Language and Thought of the Child*. New York: Routledge.

Resnik, H.L.P. 1972. Erotized Repetitive Hangings: A Form of Self-Destructive Behavior. *American Journal of Psychotherapy* 26:1: 4-21.

Saunders, Edward. 1989. Life Threatening Autoerotic Behavior: A Challenge for Sex Educators and Therapists. *Journal of Sex Education and Therapy* 15: 82-91.

Sauvageau, Anny, and Stéphanie Racette. 2006. Autoerotic Deaths in the Literature from 1954 to 2004: A Review. *Journal of Forensic Science* 51 (1): 140-46.

Schneider, E.C. 1930. Observations on Holding the Breath. *American Journal of Physiology* 94: 464-70.

Sheleg, Sergey, and Edwin Ehrlich. 2006. *Autoerotic Asphyxiation*. Tucson: Wheatmark.

Sherman, Josepha, and T.K.F. Weisskopf. 1995. Greasy Grimy Gopher Guts: *The Subversive Folklore of Childhood*. Little Rock: August House.

Stearns, A.W. 1953. Cases of Probable Suicide in Young Persons Without Obvious Motivation. *Journal of the Maine Medical Association* 44: 16.

Still Loving My Gabriel. 2005. http://www.stilllovingmygabriel.com (accessed August 7, 2009).

Tucker, Elizabeth. 2005. Ghosts in Mirrors: Reflections of the Self. *Journal of American Folklore* 118 (468): 186-203.

_____. 2007. Haunted Halls: *Ghostlore of American College Campuses*. Jackson: University Press of Mississippi.

_____. 2007-2008. Levitation Revisited. *Children's Folklore Review* 30: 47-60.

_____. 2008. *Children's Folklore: A Handbook*. Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood Press.

Ulrich, Nicole J., Ann M. Bergin, and Howard P. Goodkin. 2008. The Choking Game: Self-Induced Hypoxia Presenting as Recurrent Seizurelike Events. *Epilepsy and Behavior* 12: 486-88.

Unintentional Strangulation Deaths from the "Choking Game" Among Youths Aged 6-19 Years—United States, 1995-2007. 2008. *Morbidity and Mortality Weekly Report*. 15 February. http://www.cdc.gov/mmwr/preview/mmwrhtml/mm5706a1.htm (accessed August 12, 2009).

Warner, Paul M. 2005. "Choking Game" Claims Life of One California Teenager. *Canyon News*. 7 August. http://www.canyon-news.com/artman/publish/article_3310.php (accessed August 7, 2009).

Yannucci, Lisa. 2009. *Mama Lisa's World Blog*. 19 July. http://www.Mamalisa.com/blog/pool-games-and-chants (accessed August 30, 2009).