

Expressing and Creating Ourselves in Childhood:

A Commentary *Simon J. Bronner*

Alexander Chamberlain (1865-1914) would have been surprised by the essays in this volume. Editor of the *Journal of American Folklore* from 1900-1907, he promoted child study in the understanding of culture as the pivot that allows for examination of "yesterday" and "to-morrow," for children as a semiliterate society inherit the oral tradition of the past and use it to shape the future. This concern for historical progression ran through many anthropological works of the Gilded Age, including Chamberlain's other writings on "primitive science and industry." With folklorists taking a prominent role, Gilded Age scholars celebrated and studied children's culture with unprecedented enthusiasm.

Indeed, the *Journal of American Folklore* was a sympathetic home for studies of children's culture, especially since its editors from 1888 to 1907 established their reputations in research of children's folklore. While Chamberlain's predecessor at the journal, William Wells Newell (1839-1907), is often given credit for his groundbreaking collection *Games and Songs of American Children* (1883), it was Chamberlain who most forcefully articulated an early anthropological interpretation of children's culture in *The Child and Childhood in Folk-Thought* (1896). He fixed on what he called the "child-idea" in culture, the view that children represent through folklore the vitality of a culture. Unabashedly romantic and religious, yet appealing to science, Chamberlain took the vantage of "elders" who pass tradition on to children and evaluate them. "Everywhere through the world," Chamberlain wrote, "the activities of childhood have been appealed to, and the race has wonderfully profited by its wisdom, its naiveté, its ingenuity, and its touch of divinity" (403). From a perusal of Chamberlain's impressive tome or Newell's collection, one might gather that children primarily knew simple rhymes, games, and beliefs crafted ages before, probably by adults, and surviving despite the advance of civilization.

Much of children's folklore study in the twentieth century owed at least some debt to the collections and ideas of the Gilded Age folklorists, but replacing evolutionism with ideas of relativism pervading new scholarship in folklore, the essayists in this volume make several important theoretical breaks with our Gilded Age legacy. I offer that the focus on narrating among the essays in this volume is more than the common subject examined;

the focus reveals a rethinking of children's culture in light of new documentary and interpretative techniques. These historical and theoretical winds of change and their implications for comprehending children's culture command my attention in this commentary.

Neither Newell nor Chamberlain offers much in the way of narrative behavior given by children; four brief paragraphs in Chamberlain's study describe "story-telling" to children, but none gives an account of what children do with this knowledge, no less recognize narrative creativity (Chamberlain 204-5). Ultimately Chamberlain's book becomes a study of the image of the child in adult lore rather than an exposition of children's ways of thinking, learning, and developing.

For Chamberlain, Newell, and so many others to this day, the essential question to be answered with the materials of childhood is the relation of literary art as a reflection of culture of an early age to the advanced stage of adulthood. Hence we can appreciate the remarkable attention to children's lore by late-nineteenth-century folklorists as a tribute to the industrial progress and rationality supposedly achieved by "modern" adults in the Gilded Age (see Bronner, *Folklife Studies* 119-34). In the predominant evolutionary thinking of the day, children represented the infancy, the origins of adulthood and civilization. On the ladder of progress from savagery, through barbarism, to civilization set up in most evolutionary studies, children were our little savages, noteworthy for their retention of ancient lore and invention of new fantasies.

The influences of Darwinian philosophy and modern aesthetic values should be apparent in the assumptions of many studies of children's folklore from the nineteenth-century to the present. From Darwin's influence is an evolutionary premise about the "natural" movement from simple to complex forms, from children's rhymes to adult narratives. The "specimens" of past lore therefore needed to be collected and arranged into comparable types that showed the evolution of forms according to natural laws (see Bronner, *American Folklore Studies* 1-38). Although Newell recognized the inventiveness of children, he and others nonetheless selected the "traditional" forms showing stability and distribution over generations for comparison (see Fine). Scholars well after Newell chose specimens that had a completed quality to them and drew attention to themselves because of their artistic characteristics. Such arrangements and choices resulted in a picture of cultural stability over an extended time. Another result was a map of cultural space in which isolable groups expressed their differences through lore. Within this map, children and adults, women and men, to name some groups, inhabited separate spheres (see Bronner, *American Folklore Studies* 1-38).

I consider the essayists here as part of a trend toward asking different

kinds of questions based on new assumptions. They share with Chamberlain a concern for the "thought" that folklore reveals, although they would probably phrase it as process rather than form, as "thinking" rather than "thought." Significantly, in their very raising of narrative as an essential part of the child's way of forming and communicating meaning, they suggest a further departure from the evolutionary model of movement from simple to complex forms. They don't collect so much as recognize interactions that employ "stories," many of which may be unique but follow recognizable structures (see Goodwin). The child studied by Judith Haul, for example, responds with narrative behavior to different situations. The understanding of these interactions comes not from the historical forms to which they relate as much as the social needs presented in certain situations and the ways that people communicate with one another. Natural laws commanding cultural development over the globe don't explain the scene presented by Haut as much as do the functions and structures of the moment. The essential questioning thus becomes behavioral rather than naturalistic. The questioning is not about the lines from "yesterday" into "tomorrow," but rather about the ways people express themselves taking cues from any number of simultaneous influences, and indeed create themselves through expression.

The breaks that this questioning of expression make with Gilded Age approaches are evident in the emphasis placed today on the keywords of development, learning, and communication. By using development, many researchers today draw attention to varying rates of growth and varieties of expression among children. It is granted that children strive toward the maturity of adulthood, but one also recognizes that children have distinctive behaviors that don't necessarily carry over into adulthood. In looking at development, researchers also try to get around the misleading opposition of childhood and adulthood as unified groups. Children, the researchers point out, have individual profiles and acquire different skills and tendencies according to a wide array of factors—including gender, class, ethnicity, location, and family. Even taking into account the predominance of shared age-related traits among children, one finds more complexity to the subtle difference between, as one child exclaimed in an interview to me, "fifth and sixth grade!" (see Fine, 17083, for discussion of "circular generations"). He was not talking about educational skills as much a cultural property of play and narrative styles appropriate to the group with whom he spent most of his time and the environment in which it was spent (see Virtanen for a study using these considerations). In addition, many interviewers of youth note the insistence of children ("kids," children prefer to say) on their age not as five or six, but as five and a half or six and a half.

Within the broad neutral native category of "kids" lies an implication of change, physical and social-and cultural. The rapid physical and cognitive changes that occur in childhood, not to mention the social clustering of children in school, tempt us to categorize it separately. Yet contextualizing aging with the life course in the investigation of children's lives offers a closer look at the ways children use lore to respond to developmental and social changes (Bronner "Left to Their Own Devices").

Through the life course, individuals learn from a variety of sources about responding to different situations. During the late nineteenth century, evolutionary assumptions led some scholars to imagine that literacy and technology naturally replace oral forms of learning. Yet experience shows that people surrounded by technology demand the kind of learning we usually associate with folklore-by word of mouth, by imitation and demonstration, by custom. Indeed, literacy and technology often become tools to engage narrative behavior, as Elizabeth Tucker's study shows. Other examples might be the use of photocopiers for passing traditional humor and computers for folk games. The important lesson is that people use folklore for the kind of powerful learning and communication it offers and are willing to adjust it to new technology so as to engage its qualities.

The new awareness of children's complexity and ability that informs essays here by C. W. Sullivan III and Judith Haut leads us to consider the remarkable rapidity with which children learn language and the distinctiveness of the first few years of life (see Brown; Sanches and Kirshenblatt-Gimblett). Within their first year, children become aware quickly of sequences of words that carry meaning and evoke responses from adults (Brown 1973). In multilingual households, children can quickly select different codes of speech and often exaggerate their styles.¹ All too little recognized are the culturally variable developments of ordered "baby talk" and the creative uses of play languages by children (see Sherzer; Sanches and Kirshenblatt-Gimblett).

Explaining the mechanisms by which children recognize some word sequences as "stories" and find ways to strategically use them essentially challenges scholars to question social interaction and development. Even before language is acquired, children become aware of culturally defined spaces that suggest narrative structures in that they have directions and boundaries. In American culture, the rectangle-in the crib, the room, the play block-is a particularly ubiquitous model (see Bronner, *Grasping Things* 15-17). In many cultures, circular spaces dominate and may be investigated for a relation to narrative structure. In one study of the Mescalero Apache, for example, Claire Farrer found that houses, dances,

and children's games such as Tag show strong circularity in contrast to Anglo-American linearity (Farrer; see also Bronner "Anglo-American Aesthetic").

While C.W. Sullivan III asks readers to contemplate the influence of the reading process in the ways that children perceive their own narrating, he also notes the processes that occur prior to reading. Before adults "read" to children, they typically use play to enumerate objects on the body as points of reference for narrative sequencing. Among the first playful performances recalled from tradition offered by adults to children are finger or toe formulas. In French a formula uses the structure of the family in a sequence from the thumb to the little finger:

Voici le père
Voici la mère
Voici la demoiselle
Voici le fils
Voici le petit rincouincouin. [Shiver 223]

Some of my Pennsylvania-German informants recall a formula using the occupations on the farm:

Der ist der Bauer [farmer]
Der ist die Bauerin [farmer's wife]
Der ist der Knecht [farmhand]
Der ist die Dien'rn [farmhand's wife]
Und ides kleine wutzklein in der wiegen [piglet in a cradle].
[see Stoudt]

A common sequence played on the toes in American culture is:

This little piggy wen to market
This little piggy stayed home
This little piggy had roast beef
This little piggy had none
And this little piggy went wee, wee, wee.

Sometimes known inaccurately as "rhymes," these expressions offered by adults usually before they read to a child are more in the way of verbal formulas accompanied by physical action that make the infant aware of itself. The verbal stress and elongation in the conclusion accompanying the grabbing of the toes or fingers gives the sense of an ending that relies on what preceded it. Are these expressions recognized as stories? In some German sources, these expressions are called *Fingermächen*, or "finger tales" (Shiver). If American children do not recognize them as

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stories, then they may employ their structures in their own playful expressions using repetition and rhythm. The formulaic rhythm of "This Little Piggy," for instance, relates closely to the youthful narrative Elizabeth Tucker identifies as "In a Dark, Dark Wood":

Okay, you walk down this long, black road and there's this big, urn, black house and you go in this big black room and there's-- (speeds up) In the big black room there's a big black closet, in the big black closet there's a big black tuxedo, in the big black tuxedo there's a big black pocket, in the big black pocket is a big black box, in the big black box is a red jelly bean. (laughs) [Tucker 483; see also Opie and Opie 36].

Even later in childhood, the rhythm and repetition characterizing this narrative form appears in ghost stories often given at camps and slumber parties. One such story is sometimes identified as a subunit under the heading "Johnny, I Want My Liver" (a subtype, as it has been categorized by folklorists, of Arne- Thompson Tale-Type 366), although the narrative technique repeats in many stories used by children.

This lady gave this boy named Johnny a dollar to go to the store to get some liver. But he spent it on something else before he got the liver, and he had to bring this lady her liver. So he saw this graveyard right next to the store. So he unburied a guy, and he got the guy's liver and brought it to the lady. The lady said, "this is a real good liver." But that night they heard, "*I want my liver back, I want my liver back, I want my liver back.*" Then they hear, "*I'm on your first step, I want my liver back, I want my liver back, I want my liver back.*" Then "*I'm on your porch, I want my liver back, I want my liver back. I'm in your living room, I want my liver back, I want my liver back. I'm in the bedroom, I want my liver back, I want my liver back*" (teller grabs listener in abdomen) [Bronner, *American Children's Folklore* 158; see also Opie and Opie 36; Virtanen 76; Tucker 370-73,495-96]

And in so-called invented stories, one can discern similar structures and rhythms, such as this one told repeatedly by a girl from two to three years old that employs the familiar family structure along with the repetition of actions leading to a conclusion:

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The man stayed home
the children went out
then a Cookie Monster came

then the Cookie Monster went away
and the mommy was angry
and then the father was angry
and then the children went out again
then the father went out
then the mother went out
they went to the park
then they went home
and then the father was doing work
and then it was getting late
the children went to sleep
and the mommy and the father went to sleep

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The mother went out
then the father went out
then the mother went out again
and then the father went out
then the children went out
then policeman came
the mother came back from the meeting
then the father came back from the meeting
then a Cookie Monster came
and the policeman came again
then the Cookie Monster went away [Sutton-Smith 53]

With these "texts," we long to know the social interactions and cues that gave rise to them to understand how participants understood their meaning. When these texts are construed as narrative, there is an assumption that they are in themselves part of a sequence. There is an additional assumption that while the story draws attention to the text, "narrative" directs inquiry to the performance, some of which may be out of the awareness of the "story-teller." As Judith Haut's essay demonstrates, the sequence around the narrative may involve conversation, or play, signals that aid in the recognition of the beginning and ending of "story" and its different meanings in various situations.

The use of "narrative" to describe such sequences deserves discussion because it illustrates the different questions being asked by the essayists in this issue. The use of "narrative" is more characteristic of present scholarship than the Gilded Age folklorists (see Bronner 1987). Narrative is a technical term that refers to the result of a process (narrating in context) rather than the form of relating information in an organized way. "Narrative" is conspicuously absent in folkloristic dictionaries such as the *Standard Dictionary of Folklore, Mythology and Legend* (1950) and

General Ethnological Concepts (1960). Elliott Oring, however, made the term central in his chapter on "Folk Narratives" in the textbook *Folk Groups and Folklore Genres* (1986). "Narrative," he declared, "is another word for story." Then why not use the more familiar "story"? The answer lies in the suggestion of process of "narrating" in narrative. Oring continues, "Narrating is a method by which an experience is transformed into verbal account" (121). In an even more recent source, the *Dictionary of Concepts in Cultural Anthropology* (1991), Robert Winthrop claims that "one trend discernible, in both anthropology and folklore studies, is a concern for understanding narrative as a communicative performance, 'a totality encompassing not only the verbal story but the entire narrative experience, auditory and visual, of spectator and actor.'" Essentially, narrative, Winthrop argues, brings out the "expressive dimension of culture" (126).

By using narrative, researchers blur the lines between the verbal and non-verbal dimensions of culture. Narrative suggests the organization of experience in a number of ways. Non-verbal customs such as games played in childhood also follow narrative structure that culturally varies. In many American chasing games, for example, dramatic tension is created in a tripartite narrative structure: a departure from home, a chase, and return home (Dundes). In what ways does the parent's playing of "Peek-a-boo," one of the first traditional forms of play experienced between adult and child in American culture affect an understanding of narrative sequence? The structure moves from the hidden face to the face revealed accompanied by a rhyme, "Peek-a-boo, I see you!" This frame around the repeated play activity causes delight in the child. Then among the first organized games played by children among themselves is Hide-and-Go-Seek (Bronner, *American Children's Folklore* 176-78). One can also notice that a number of spontaneously "invented" fantasies in verbal and non-verbal form reported in *The Folkstories of Children* by Brian Sutton-Smith (1981) or *City Play* by Amanda Dargan and Steven Zeitlin (1990) involve the dramatic tension of disappearance and recovery.

Of particular significance to the analysis of learning and development raised by these books and the essays here is the questioning of the uses to which narrating is put. Strictly speaking, children don't need stories to communicate, but they demand stories, and quickly employ narrative behavior for various ends. From their early and subsequent experiences, the question arises, how do children perceive the functions of narrative behavior? Is their demand based on the aid to learning that stories provide? Do they recall the entertaining reinforcement of the finger rhyme, the social organizing effect of the game, and the communicative clarity of putting ideas in story? How are distinctions made between the

televised story and the told story? Or for that matter, between the true and fantastic story? How do they perceive the strategies for recounting a tale to an adult or to other children? Judith Haut keenly observes the importance of social awareness to the kinds of performances she heard from a single child, while C.W. Sullivan III incisively questions the ways that children learn structural competence for performance. Sullivan's inquiry begins at the point of literary understanding of story, but suggests a broader inquiry into the relations of narrative to children's cognitive development. To view such relations and the strategies for employing narrative, the emphasis needs to be on the expressive behavior used, rather than the isolation of finished forms. The categories of pre- and post applied to the development of narrative forms, I'm afraid, reflect the old evolutionary opposition of child and adult, and may be misleading because they suggest a magical transformation caused by natural law rather than the process by which expressions are used.

When talking of process, researchers look to the communication that can be observed and documented. This discussion differs from the collections of specimens because in the study of communication the lore emerges as a small part of an encompassing event. Judith Haut, for example, documents several situations in which a story emerged in response to the conversation between participants in the situation. In some cases, the story was offered because one was specifically asked for: "Tell me a story," someone asked. On other occasions, the story came out as part of conversation to impose an effect on listeners. What Haut is describing is a process of creativity rather than one of creations. Creativity is employed to bring old and new elements, as well as individual and social concerns, together in response to the social situation; it suggests a process that combines tradition and invention. The "creation" of concern to Chamberlain implied the separation of folklore survivals from new inventions. As the essays in this issue show, various kinds of learning intertwine as do creativity and tradition. The essays suggest therefore that our driving ethnographic task is to examine the various roles of tradition in the communication of meaning. No longer considering the survival of folklore the main issue, they turn to the creativity of tradition in everyday life (see Bronner *Creativity and Tradition*).²

I'm not surprised by the themes presented in the essays here. As Chamberlain and Newell used folklore research to reflect on the hierarchical industrial age rising in their Gilded Age society, so the trend today is to contemplate the swirling social currents of an electronic era. More than an objective anthropological endeavor envisioned by Chamberlain, the ethnographic task now is broadly interdisciplinary and simultaneously involves us as participants and observers. One might argue that the

observations made by the essayists are at least a response to our ability to document ourselves in the communication technology that in itself stresses process. From this communication technology, we learn more about the simultaneity and spontaneity of everyday life, and we are reminded of how little we remember of ourselves from our own childhoods. We need more attention to children's folklore in an interactional framework to move beyond the blinding influence of the "child-idea."

Can we separate what happens in childhood from the "child-idea," the images we have created as adults for the age? Priscilla Ord approaches this subject by examining the adaptations of children's language and lore in books written for children. Her discussion reminds me of my experience with reality and image in *American Children's Folklore* (1988). In the book, I recorded children's traditions as I heard them, and that commonly included language somehow considered fit only for adults. I received less than kind comments for suggesting in the book that children's expressiveness frequently takes on a harsh tone. "I swear that my child doesn't say those things," I heard. Yet many open-minded parents came back to me after I asked them to ask their children about the content of their "stories" and told me that, to their surprise, their children indeed expressed themselves and created themselves outside of adult limits. In recording the creativity of children's tradition, I violated the idea of childhood as evolving from innocence to experience. I also violated the notion of children's expression--sometimes referred to as "ditties"--as quaint or "childish" art.

What may be surprising as well in these essays to some readers is the turn from art to expression, for the popular study of children's lore still has a tendency to identify the gems of a diminutive art. In the questioning of structure and process in this special issue, I hope we come to appreciate more the competence each child has for creativity, rather than the concern of Chamberlain for "those rude scribblings and quaint efforts at delineations, whence, in the course of ages, have been evolved. . . the marvelous creations of a Rubens and an Angelo" (Chamberlain 3). Even Priscilla Ord's essay, apparently concerned with literary devices used by accomplished authors, reveals sources of narration in the everyday language of children. The "creativity of tradition" thus applies as much to authors as to storytellers. In Judith Haut's essay, we learn that there is no right version of the child's favorite story; the child employs the structure of what he recognizes as "story" in several situations to create something new. In Elizabeth Tucker's essay, we learn the ways that children interpret packaged stories for themselves. Indeed, all these essays touch on how narrating or storytelling as cultural praxis becomes a way of knowing (see Bronner "Art, Performance, and Praxis").

If the major theme presented in the various essays for consideration is the appreciation for the complexity of children's communication using narrative behavior, then the subtheme is the need to understand children as they perceive their situation in addition to the way we perceive them. These essays signal, in sum, the recognition of tell-tale signs of human thinking. Their suggestions inspire an uncovering of the ways that discernment is connected to the telling, the ways as folklore offers, that every child sees, or should I say, tells which way the wind blows.

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NOTES

1. To give an example in my home state of the implication of multilingualism on the development of speech and narrative styles, 6.9 percent of Pennsylvanians speak a language other than English at home. Yet too often, American researchers assume narrative ability exclusively in English. The Pennsylvania-German folklorists early on discussed multilingual abilities to express folklore among children; see Gladfelter, Kreider, and Spotts; Shoemaker; Stoudt. A more recent exception to the American tendency is found in Brady on Navajo children's stories, although no texts are offered in Navajo.

2. Similar to the guiding concept of "narrative," the use of "creativity of tradition" underscores the emergent quality of expressive behavior and its purposeful uses in various situations. This folkloristic consideration of the "creativity of tradition" cuts across material and verbal expressions. See Crowley; Evans; Bronner, *Grasping Things*; Briggs; Jones.

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