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EDITORS

Anthony Bak Buccitelli, The Pennsylvania State University,
Harrisburg, United States

Simon J. Bronner, University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, United States

Michael J. Bell, Registry for College and University Presidents,
United States

EDITORIAL ASSISTANT

Evan A. Davis, The Pennsylvania State University, Harrisburg,
United States

JOURNAL INFORMATION

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MARGARET MURRAY: WHO *DIDN'T* BELIEVE HER, AND
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ABSTRACT

Folkloristics in Britain passed through a period of intellectual torpor in the mid-twentieth century, particularly during the ascendancy within the Folklore Society (FLS) of Margaret Murray and Gerald Gardner. That it emerged relatively healthy is testament both to the better scholars who led its intellectual renaissance and to those who followed, people like Professor Jacqueline Simpson. The scars remain raw, however, and those triumphant scholars like Simpson, who have contributed to our disciplinary historiography, have been understandably short in their treatment of earlier trends. All broad historical summaries can erode nuance, and examination of some minor disagreements around one of Murray's Presidential Addresses shows the ground on which the seeds of intellectual renaissance were cast. This article, originally written as a 90th birthday tribute to Simpson, examines the disagreement there and at subsequent public FLS lectures to flesh out more detail of the historical development and to enable a better understanding of later historiographical accounts of it.

Professor Jacqueline Simpson is rightly celebrated as one of the most important guiding figures of British folkloristics over the last seven decades. Sometime (1993–1996) President of the Folklore Soci-

After acquiring a first degree in Classics (Magdalene, Cambridge), Dr. Paul Cowdell completed an M.A. in Folklore (Sheffield). His Ph.D. (Hertfordshire) researched "Contemporary Belief in Ghosts." He has published articles and chapters on ghost lore and belief, folklore about rats, tongue twisters, ballads about cannibalism at sea, and, more recently, folk horror and the folkloresque in popular culture. He has recently been working more extensively on the disciplinary history of folklore in Britain, publishing an article on folk dance researcher Violet Alford. He is a Council member of the Folklore Society and serves on the editorial board of the *Folk Music Journal*. Dr. Cowdell is currently a Visiting Research Fellow at the University of Hertfordshire and can be reached at 27 Atherley Road, Shanklin, Isle of Wight, PO37 7AU, UK or at paul.cowdell@talk21.com.

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ety (FLS) and editor of its journal *Folklore* and its *FLS Newsletter*, she has been a continued and powerful intellectual presence, indefatigable and good-humored in her fight for the highest standards of scholarship and the encouragement of emerging scholars. Simpson's efforts have been rooted in a powerful assessment of the history of the discipline, including the part she has lived through, in works both formal (e.g., Simpson 1994) and charmingly personal (Simpson 1992). For younger folklorists, Jacqueline's reminiscences have been invaluable—theoretically informed but bringing out the personal and social interactions that embodied the discipline's development. It is impossible to separate her discussion of the encouragement shown to younger scholars by her forebears from her own active efforts in that area. Earning Jacqueline's distinctive appreciative laugh during an early conference paper was a cherished moment in my own development. Her support has never been artificial or feigned: I have heard other scholars rewarded with her equally forceful snort of derision from the conference floor for their willfully misplaced thinking.

Given her widespread appreciation in the discipline, it had been hoped to celebrate Jacqueline's 90th birthday in 2020 publicly, but COVID lockdown conditions made this impossible. Instead, a rather informal collection of papers, greetings, and gifts—including an earlier version of this paper—was delivered to her home. This paper has been reworked for publication, but I hope (and thank the *TFH* reviewer who encouraged this endeavor) that it still shows the discursive joy and gratitude that prompted it.

Every discipline has ebbs and flows, periods of relative success and decline. The 1950s marked a low point for folklore studies in Britain, with the discipline itself hanging in the balance. One can now present the discipline's history in this way largely because a counter-wave of excellent scholarship emerged to overcome that intellectual torpor, but this flags certain problems in disciplinary historiography. The glee expressed in a disciplinary history, especially by a participant in the successful vanquishing of the retrograde and unhelpful, may offer an accurate enough shorthand summary of a period and its actors at the expense of nuance. Where easy villains emerge from a narrative—perhaps fairly—it can be tempting to draw in too broad strokes. One can get it right without quite getting it all. One can lose sight of the fact that scholarship is a process, not just

a sequence of turning points. Ironically, as a result, one may only be consolidating the iconic status of the vanquished, while also doing a disservice to those who, without leading the pushback, still had partial or unformed disagreements that informed it.

Our ability to make sense of the difficult times of British folklore in the 1950s owes much to Jacqueline Simpson. She has written engagingly, passionately, and unforgivingly about the period that formed the backdrop to her own entry into British folkloristics, giving her readers a clear sense of the intellectual trajectories, heroes and villains, and (above all) the sensitivities involved. Her distinctive voice is recognizable in joint-authored coverage of the same period, often expressed in succinct summaries so pithily quotable they risk skewing closer reading. The remark that “Folklore study in England gradually gathered a negative reputation for unsound reasoning, lack of intellectual rigour, ahistorical assumptions, and general pottiness” rings with Simpson’s voice, never fails to make me laugh, is a true enough survey of the discipline’s broad tendencies, and yet still might not be entirely helpful if one wants to examine English folkloristics more closely (Simpson and Roud 2000, 129).

Simpson has been unflinching in linking the decline of folklore scholarship in Britain during this period with the ascendancy in the FLS of two specific people: Margaret Murray and Gerald B. Gardner. Murray and Gardner are extremely complex historical figures, and Simpson’s writings remain essential for negotiating one’s way through the period of their dominance. Simpson’s writings clearly also form part of her own negotiation through that period. I am not disagreeing with the broad sweep of Simpson’s argument, as I have indicated in recent articles (Cowdell 2019; 2021a). It does, though, require some nuance to gain a fuller appreciation of Murray, Gardner, and those who joined the FLS under their influence. This is also necessary to gain a better understanding of those (like Simpson herself) who were not devotees of Murray and Gardner but joined the FLS when it still very much bore their stamp. Although Murray and Gardner may have sometimes behaved like it, they are not usefully cast as pantomime villains, even when the results of their influence had a markedly pantomimic character. The title of this article is a teasing provocation, yes, but its comment on Simpson’s title (Simpson 1994) is an appeal for further nuance.

THE FLS UP TO THE 1960s

When Jacqueline Simpson joined the FLS, membership was still granted through the approval of an application. Her application was accepted in 1964, the year after Murray's death. One of the best young scholars entering an FLS already shaking off its torpor, Simpson was guided and inspired by (and aligned with) the scholars who had begun that delineation over the previous decade, but the FLS still displayed Murray's influence. Despite the thorough academic debunking and dismantling of her folklore writing (a process which began almost as soon as she started writing on witchcraft in 1921), Murray to this day retains a surprisingly high public profile.

At the time, the FLS held a regular series of public lectures, reflecting not just the breadth of current folklore research, but also to some extent the Society's internal preoccupations and discussions. The reorientation of the FLS on sounder scholarly lines was well under way when Simpson joined, led by younger scholars like Iona and Peter Opie and Hilda Ellis Davidson. These scholars provided attractive perspectives not just to the newcomers who would shape the future FLS, but also to the more serious older scholars, notwithstanding whatever theoretical background they shared with Murray. This disciplinary reorientation, therefore, had a public character, and the first FLS public lecture Simpson attended on February 19, 1964 (discussed below) should be seen as part of that scholarly reevaluation of the ideas that had until recently dominated the Society's life. (Simpson gave her own first FLS lecture 18 months later).

That 1964 lecture, Rossell Hope Robbins's "The Synthetic Sabbath," was a critical demolition of Murray's views on the history and persistence of witchcraft as "a secret society of fertility cultists" and was correspondingly high profile. Press reports of FLS lectures were syndicated nationally, ensuring widespread awareness of the Society's discussion. This lecture also occasioned a determined rearguard action from the witchcraft loyalists. Simpson recorded the presence of (and occasional squawk from) Hotfoot Jackson, a tame jackdaw perched on the shoulder of Sybil Leek, High Priestess of the New Forest Coven closely associated with Gardner. Simpson's characteristic amusement remained to the fore as she "noted with dismay that

female scholars and witches can look rather alike, both tending to dramatic jewellery and hats” (Simpson 1992). Some of my female folklorist contemporaries have delighted in the continued accuracy of this observation, which was perhaps also informed by Simpson’s own sartorial preferences and style.

I do not propose here to review the biographies of Gardner or Murray in detail; I have given thumbnail sketches elsewhere (Cowdell 2019, 309–10; 2021a, 193–95), and would refer readers more generally to invaluable work by Caroline Oates and Juliette Wood (1998), Jacqueline Simpson (1992, 1994), and the relevant entries in Simpson and Roud (2000). It is sufficient to note two things. From the very start (1921), the Egyptologist Murray’s writings on witchcraft had been critically attacked, but they retained prominence and authority for popular readers. It should also be noted that the “flamboyant and sinister” Gardner (Davidson 1987, 124) was already active on the FLS Council when Murray was elected the Society’s President in 1953. Gardner used Murray’s writings to legitimize his new religion of witchcraft/Wicca, although Murray seems not to have identified with that movement. Hilda Ellis Davidson, another representative of that new wave of British folklore scholarship that successfully pulled the FLS back from the intellectual brink, wrote later that “It is, in retrospect, difficult to see how Dr Gardner ever got on to the [Society’s] Council, but possibly it was after his arrival that people became so cautious” (Davidson 1987, 124). Davidson was writing with the hindsight of success, but her comment should indicate again the ways in which intellectual disputes unfold as processes.

The combination of Murray and Gardner must have made the FLS extremely appealing for many whose views of folklore were far from being scholarly, academic, or even up to date. Much of the inspiration for Murray’s speculative turn to folklore in the first place had been driven by her reading of J.G. Frazer. Frazer had also been subject to critical attention from serious folklorists, even during his ascendancy, and became increasingly discredited or disowned within academic folklore over the course of Murray’s long career. By calculated design, however, he remained—and remains—hugely (and, to these eyes, bafflingly) attractive to a popular readership (Beard 1992; Cowdell 2019). With the abridgement of *The Golden Bough*, above all, Frazer deliberately and successfully turned towards a pop-

ular readership. Murray, following the academic criticisms of her first publication on witchcraft, made a similar popular turn. Gardner was writing as an inventive practitioner, and therefore addressing potential new recruits if not seeking mass audiences.

Their undoubted popular appeal certainly brought many into the FLS. The active and striking Gardner was a proselytizing ambassador for his new religion. Murray was established as an *eminence grise*, the authority figure for that religious movement, granted further influence by her seniority. She turned 90 the year she was elected FLS President, and in its magnanimous generosity the FLS gifted her honorary life membership of the Society on her 100th birthday. She had begun a deliberate policy of disregarding complicating or critical evidence and arguments quite early in her work on witchcraft. By the 1950s, she engaged less and less with disputes over that work, now taken as authoritative by the new religious practitioners. Her aloofness from the debate regarding her own pronouncements, even as she continued to lecture and make new observations on witchcraft and on folklore more generally, lent her only a greater silent weight that would raise her status even further among acolytes (including those drawn to the FLS because of her). This may have encouraged a rather uncritical respect for her as an individual, even if it also led to a speedy dismantling of her authority after her death. There were certainly nuanced disagreements with her during her lifetime (which she ignored), but her posthumous reputation among a wider popular readership may also not be what it is among folklorists and other scholars. A circular argument among practitioners allows for criticism of such figures while also suggesting that their vilification was driven by more than scholarly considerations (the argument that although they may have been wrong on some counts, their denunciation points to them having been onto *something* after all). Folkloristic vanquishing of Murray has not eliminated her popular status but instead may have cemented her place in legend and conspiracy theory more securely.

It is not just that the specific omissions and errors of fact in Murray's scholarship that have been disputed and rejected by subsequent scholars continue to be recycled and reincorporated at a popular level. The badly applied and misappropriated Romanticism that fueled Murray's misplaced speculation masquerading as scholarship continues to bedevil the discipline (it is bad Romanticism fueling bad schol-

arship). This takes particular forms in Britain, where folklore still has relatively little academic presence (although this is happily changing). The essays in Cheeseman and Hart (2021) provide a useful overview of the related concerns for British folklorists. The concerns arise with especial acuteness in an area to which Jacqueline Simpson has contributed greatly: local folklore. Archaeologists are currently waging their own high-profile struggle against this tendency (see, for example, Hoopes, Dibble, and Feagans 2023), but the two struggles are explicitly connected in Britain, as Tina Paphitis—greatly influenced by Simpson’s work on folklore and place—has examined (Paphitis 2013, 2020). Paphitis co-organized three successful FLS “Popular Antiquities” conferences at the Institute of Archaeology, University College London. Simpson supported the series enthusiastically, attending all three and presenting at one.

Belief scholars must also negotiate the deliberate and inventive use of speculative material in the bricolage of new religious movements. Those scholars who lived and fought through the deliberately retrograde scholarship fostered by Murray in particular could be occasionally intemperate towards it, after having created the suitable intellectual conditions for younger scholars to be rigorous but more nuanced in their own appraisal of the phenomenon. The late W.F. (Will) Ryan, one of Simpson’s successors as FLS President (2005–2008), reported with amusement that he had been removed from an internet discussion group run by belief scholars for some remarks considered curt and disrespectful, for example.

Consider, then, how much more intense the argument must have felt in 1964 for scholars tackling the ongoing, decades-long intellectual decline of the FLS. Syndicated press coverage of Robbins’s lecture drew national attention, and his lecture was well attended, with new FLS member Simpson and a young Angela Carter (actively involved in folk song clubs at the time) among the many visitors. Arriving at the lecture hall, Simpson found “a pile of broomsticks in the corridor,” although she suspected these were a satirical gesture by students rather than the witches’ conveyance. She describes a lively question session after the lecture, in which Robbins continued to demolish Murray’s claims and arguments:

Angrily, the witches asked how Dr Robbins could explain the close

likeness between what they did and believed and what Dr Murray had described in her books. Simple, said he, modern witches had cribbed all their ideas from these very books, which had been around for forty years, and from later ones by Robert Graves and Gerald Gardner. None of these were historically sound. It must have been bitter for the witches to hear all this; not only was their cherished self-image being denied, but Margaret Murray was being criticised by the very Society where she had been President ... Probably the FLS Committee were feeling equally tense – dreading bad publicity and striving to make clear their academic standards. (Simpson 1992)

It is a great pity that the FLS never published Robbins's lecture. This might have accelerated the slow acceptance of his astute and correct comments on Murray as the source for contemporary witchcraft practice, which took a long time to become orthodoxy (Heselton 2003, 385). Perhaps, despite the FLS's evident determination to clear the intellectual decks, there was simply too much anxiety about what was involved. Simpson reports that Peter Opie, another of that brilliant generation who revived serious folklore study in Britain, was "the luckless Chairman, sat with his head in his hands, speechless" (1992). However taxing for those effecting it, this was an important step towards the more robust theoretical appreciation that gained ground through their efforts. Only six years later, on February 18, 1970, Geoffrey Parrinder's FLS lecture on witchcraft "referred to Margaret Murray's theory that witchcraft represents the survival of an ancient pagan cult, and pointed out that it was based on insufficient evidence" (FLS Minute Books Feb. 18, 1970). The discussion was still "lively," but it was not open warfare.

Contemporaries noted that Murray had no particular concern for—or interest in—this adaptive application of her thinking in new religious practices, but her continued public comment as an authority on the subject required her supporters to do that work for themselves. In 1945, Murray connected the recent murder of Charles Walton at Lower Quinton in Warwickshire with the discovery of a woman's skeleton inside a wych elm in Hagley Wood, Worcestershire two years earlier. The unidentified woman had been dead around 18 months, and 1944 graffiti asking "Who put Bella in the Wych Elm?" gave her an enduring name in legendry. Walton's throat had been cut

with a billhook, and his corpse was pinned to the ground with a pitchfork (Cowdell 2019, 312–314 on Lower Quinton; 2021a, 198–200 on Hagley Wood). Drawing comparisons with Walton’s murder, Murray suggested in an interview that the wych elm corpse was possible evidence of a ritual magical killing. This was awkward for the increasing number of those interested in the occult and witchcraft, and it was left to Gardner (2004 [1959], 196) to make a careful argument *against* the connection. Gardner sought to protect practitioners against absurd and lurid claims without abandoning Murray’s underlying thesis; it was a dispute about the application of interpretation, not the interpretation itself. Gardner’s surprisingly sensible comments on this bear revisiting.

Yet this is the important thing for folklorists studying the discipline’s history to grasp. One might sketch out the big picture, but that will always contain small, gritty details that give it depth without necessarily contradicting that bigger picture. It is correct enough to point to a prevailing Murray/Gardner tendency, but even those without an axe to grind against them did not necessarily agree with everything they said—the ensuing reorientation triumphantly embodied by Jacqueline Simpson would not have been possible otherwise.

MURRAY’S 1954 PRESIDENTIAL ADDRESS

Consider, for example, Murray’s 1954 Presidential Address, “England as a Field for Folklore Research” (1954). It is an often odd lecture, combining sound advice on documentation—although her correct observation in the lecture that “the two qualifications required in a collector of folklore are accuracy and honesty” (Murray 1954, 9) may sound unconvincing coming from someone criticized for “ruthlessly ignor[ing] in her sources anything which did not support her case” (Hutton 1999, 196)—with an evident ignorance of the actual documentation of folklore in England that was already ongoing. Murray cannot, perhaps, be held solely responsible here, as she was echoing the concerns of two of her post-war Presidential predecessors, Lord Raglan (1945–1947) and Allan Gomme (1951–1953). Their Presidential Addresses were directly focused on perceived shortcomings in this area—historical background—and proposed practical responses

to overcome its deficiencies.

Even within this framework, however, their Addresses reflected the shortcomings that they were trying to overcome. This is hardly unexpected, of course, but as Dan Ben-Amos (1998) notes, Raglan's 1964 address in particular contained parochial and historical limitations. Raglan's appeal for a turn to include dialect came almost a century after the new word "folklore" appeared in a book title for the first time: Thomas Sternberg's *Folklore and Dialect of Northamptonshire*. Ben-Amos's criticism is correct, but he is not quite sympathetically sensitive to the attempt, on even such a limited and parochial level, to address a problem which the FLS itself embodied. The post-war travails of the FLS are a relatively minor part of Ben-Amos's considerations—by way of comparison with the contemporaneous situation for folklore in America—so he does not contextualize his remarks with any reflection on the more significant fact that many British contemporaries were also weighing in on these questions. Even if not directly tackling the theoretical basis for the situation in which they found themselves, these post-war presidential lectures did attempt to engage critically with the result, in however limited a way.

Despite these limitations, Gomme and Murray were attempting to think about the problems Raglan had highlighted, as did Gomme's eventual successor Sona Rosa Burstein, rather differently, using her three Presidential Addresses to reorient the FLS historically to its theoretical pioneers. (When T.W. Bagshawe resigned abruptly in 1955, only months into his presidency, the Society's governing bodies decided to proceed without a President rather than rushing to appoint a replacement; the following year, Burstein was encouraged to take formally the position whose functions she had been fulfilling in the meantime, and the sanity of her attempts at intellectual reorientation confirm the wisdom of the move). The folklorists now identified as belonging with the future of the FLS rather than its past or its beleaguered present were also getting involved at this time, shaping a turn in British folkloristics. Peter Opie's direct response to Raglan's challenges, outlining a newer shift in consideration and collection of folklore, took its title from a phrase in Murray's Address: "England, the Great Undiscovered" (1954). The Opies, with their rigorous fieldwork, their urban collection, and their attentiveness to newer lore, were representative of the younger folklorists who would reinvigo-

rate the discipline in Britain (and the FLS specifically), break it free of the doldrums in which it was drifting, and prove a magnet for scholars of Simpson's quality.

However, that those representatives of the future were joining the debate was facilitated, in part, by the fact that they were not the only ones making critical noises. Recognizing intellectual stagnation says less about the quantity of activity or discussion than it does about its content. As a representative example, one can look at one comment in Murray's presidential address that attracted considerable attention. Given that Britain generally, and England specifically, has such a long-established reputation for ghostliness, it is striking to read Murray assert baldly that, like belief in the devil, "belief in ghosts is also dying out." This she attributes largely to technological developments, above all electric lighting (a familiar trope in ghost legendry internationally): "Ghosts are notoriously fond of darkness, but now every town and most villages have street lamps, houses are lighted by electricity, vehicles have head-lamps which illuminate the darkest lane..." Her argument is an encouragement to base field collection on the old salvage ethnology approach to folklore: "belief in those entities were, and still are, in many places part of the background of the life of those believers. As the belief dies out, the stories and traditions will die also, so now is the time to record them." The distinction should be drawn between legends and the experiential memorates that can support them, but Murray's argument is that a decline in the latter would inevitably result in a decline in the former.

This conclusion is not supported by other research, including the local legend material meticulously assembled by Simpson and Jennifer Westwood (2008). Simpson has also made perceptive contributions on the belief positions of folklore researchers in this field, concluding that "insofar as one is conducting folkloric research on beliefs and memorates, one is ipso facto taking up a non-believing position" (pers. corr. Apr. 7, 2008). This has implications for the chain of legend transmission, especially the place of folklorists within this phenomenon, which is considered further below. Such generous correspondence exemplifies her supportive encouragement of younger scholars, and her corroborating statement about the non-believing position is typically brilliant and good humored: "If I ****believed**** there are fairies at Findhorn, or a grieving ghost in Castle X, or a

dragon in the Knucker Hole [Lyminster, Sussex], I'd surely go off and ***do*** something about it—try to photograph the fairies, arrange for requiems for the ghost, join the Psychical Research Society, run like hell from the dragon..." (pers. corr. Apr. 7, 2008).

In light of this, and given Murray's personal distance from Gardner's religious movement, it is worth noting a passing remark in Murray's Address contrasting witchcraft belief and belief in the devil, which seems predicated on a similar reading of the relationship between experience, belief, and narrative. (Simpson's discussion of the belief attitudes of folklore researchers was informed by her own religious beliefs). "[B]elief in the devil is dying out," Murray argues, "due to a change in religious thought." She means by this a shift in theological readings of sin from the temptations of the devil (followed by punishment "due to the wrath of God") to a simpler cause-and-effect mechanism, coupled with a psychological revelation of mental working that showed "the real cause of sin" to be "want of self-control." She notes as "a curious fact," however, that this was the case "though the belief in witches and their power is rampant." This reads less as implied criticism of Gardner's observants than as a slightly baffled acknowledgement of a situation without implicating herself in it at all, even though it could also be used to argue for her historical correctness on witchcraft's survival (Murray 1954, 7).

ALASDAIR ALPIN MACGREGOR'S RESPONSE

Reading reports of lectures at historical distance can leave one viewing them solely in textual terms, tracing the threads of argument chiefly through congruence and date. Murray's 1954 comments are clearly connected to earlier presidential pronouncements, and Opie made explicit that his article later that year was a response to Murray's Address; this is invaluable, of course, but there is more. In normal times—outside of health lockdowns, say—public lectures are attended by actual audiences, who respond in person to what they hear. For all that the FLS was treading water intellectually during this period, its public status was still somewhat higher than it is today. Lectures by a prominent figure like Murray, especially when touching on popular subjects like ghosts, were reported in syndicated

press notes that were discussed widely. Robbins's 1964 lecture demolishing Murray was also widely reported, and the FLS must have been relieved that the extensive coverage was "reasonably balanced" (Simpson 1992). Tracing syndicated publication in local papers might be interesting, although possibly fruitless: the original printing would simply be a press agency summary of the lecture, and any real interest would come from subsequent reactions in letters or comment articles.

We are lucky, therefore, that at least one member of the audience for Murray's 1954 Address commented in print, noting how the press reported Murray's remarks. The Scottish writer Alasdair Alpin MacGregor was an enthusiastic member of the FLS who participated actively in lecture meetings. Although a prolific professional writer, with the National Library of Scotland listing some 42 titles written or edited by him in its main catalogue, he contributed only two short pieces to *Folklore*: a note on an itinerant Irish rat-man and a comment on E.I. Begg's collection of Highland folklore. He wrote professionally on a wide range of subjects. His travel writings, mainly on the Highlands and Islands, show a great interest in local life and beliefs. In this field he was known chiefly for his writing on ghosts, often incorporating discursive travelogues with lengthy geographical descriptions and local history before the ghost narratives proper. He contributed articles on this subject to several periodicals, and at the time of Murray's Address was working on his *Ghost Book*, published a year later. The disputing of legend is an important part of the negotiation around all supernatural narratives, and MacGregor's comments are a fascinating example of this unfolding both in person and in print. Although MacGregor is not one of the figures around whom the revitalizing of the FLS took place, either personally or theoretically, his comments shed some light on the inner life of the FLS then, which served as both context for and contribution to that change.

The significance of Murray's discussion to MacGregor can be gauged by his decision to use it as the opening of his *Ghost Book*. The book's first words are Murray's: "Belief in ghosts, like belief in the devil, is dying out" (MacGregor 1955, xi–xii for the following). As is often the case with ghost narratives, MacGregor's response is framed around the authority and expertise of the speaker, but (as is also often the case) this does not so much imply simple agreement and definitive solutions as it allows serious and informed context for consideration

and contemplation. He emphasizes both Murray's expertise and a lack of any personal animosity, describing her as "that extremely learned friend of mine" and humbly comparing their positions a paragraph later: "If one so vastly knowledgeable as Margaret Murray felt called upon to make so authoritative a pronouncement before an audience so distinguished, and in a setting so academic, how was *I* to justify myself when I arrived on my publisher's threshold with the typescript of the present work?"

Ghosts, however, allow for disagreement and dispute without challenging such authority. FLS members seemed disinclined to accept Murray's argument about the decline of ghost belief. MacGregor reports that Murray's comment elicited "An audible sigh of respectful disagreement... along our benches at University College." MacGregor places himself not on Murray's level, but as having some recognized knowledge in the area. He writes, "I became conscious that one or two members, aware of my own mild preoccupation with matters ghostly, were glancing in my direction to see my reaction at this devastating declaration." Indeed, he admits that he "may have sighed a little disapproval" himself, although he claims this had more to do with him "momentarily entertain[ing] misgivings about the prospects" of his own book. The disagreement expressed within the room at Murray's comment did not, therefore, contradict or disallow her more general authority or status as President. That legend dialectic continued to unfold once the press took up the story, particularly giving "considerable publicity" to the comment about electricity and improved lighting. Murray reiterated her thinking in an interview with the *London Evening News* a couple of days after the lecture, explaining that "If you think there is something in the room... all you have to do is put on the bedside light. Either it was all imagination, in which case the light ends one's fears, or else the ghost disappears—because no ghost is seen in the light." (This discussion, incidentally, seems revealing of Murray's own beliefs, and its formulation is usefully contrasted with Simpson's informal comment cited above).

MacGregor followed the dispute as it unfolded publicly, mentioning in the process the reputation for ghostliness already noted, although the Scot MacGregor's description of "this ghost-haunted country of ours" covers all of Britain rather than the England of Murray's original purview. The first voice launched publicly against

Murray's declaration came from another Scot, Mary Balfour. As is frequently the case with ghostlore, the dispute hinges around experience as much as authority. The London-based Balfour sent "broadcast from Fleet Street" a clear statement that she had seen ghosts "in all lights...If a ghost be there, light does not matter, so long as one has the faculty of 'seeing.'" Her personal authority and experience came, she wrote, from being a Highlander, and "the seventh child of a seventh child." This criterion was much invoked within the FLS during this period, pointing again to the complicated untangling of *outré* folkloristics over the period; it was most famously claimed of herself, falsely, by Ruth Tongue. Tongue can be seen as the sort of element encouraged by the poorer folkloristics of an earlier period, but whose contributions to the field were improved by working under the guidance of the newer, better scholars (Katharine Briggs, in Tongue's own case). The seventh child criterion, however, has longer provenance within folkloric discussions of ghosts and persists today. I have heard the claim from an informant in an interview, and one popular medium emphasized it for his own authority by subtitling his autobiography *The Remarkable Story of a Seventh Son of a Seventh Son* (Smith 2003). MacGregor lined up with his "gifted" friend, writing "I think I'm on Mary Balfour's side in all this: I see no reason for supposing that Britain's ghost population has dwindled to a mere shade of its former self."

MacGregor is not strident, but he has no need to be. As a seventh child of a seventh child, Balfour has sufficient folkloric authority to back up her forthright statement. MacGregor supports her, however, with another voice, anonymous but blunter. A Midlands reader of MacGregor's ghost articles "in various periodicals" sent him a postcard on which had been pasted a local newspaper cutting of Murray's remarks. At the bottom, "in a firm and determined hand," were just "two telling, if not also encouraging, words—"UTTER ROT!!" (The tone is appealingly Simpsonesque).

One should not make exaggerated claims for these rejections of a barely supportable comment from Murray. They were not a vanguard challenge to Murray's authority overall, and such dismissals are perfectly consonant with the ways in which ghost narratives are disputed and considered. Even hostile or critical opinions like Murray's, if expressed seriously, may trigger a response. Such responses may not

themselves be literary or polished narratives or arguments (as with the Midlands correspondent) but do then become available for incorporation into published discussions like MacGregor's. Moving from reactions to Murray's comment into a more general introduction, MacGregor comments that "Ghost stories, as a rule, suffer from their seldom being firsthand" but are told as a chain of reported stories (MacGregor 1955, xiii). In part, he is trying to acknowledge the problem caused by an amalgamation of older and newer material while simultaneously presenting a collection of stories appearing mostly for the first time, but he may also have been downplaying his own role in the dissemination of these narratives. When he insists that he is trying "to *relate*, rather than to *explain*" (xiv, his emphasis), he is clearly shaping himself as a contributor to the circulation and assessment of narratives. His comment in this regard fits perfectly with the consideration of the chain of transmission of stories outlined by Linda Dégh and Andrew Vaszonyi. Importantly, and usefully, they explicitly include the folklore scholar as a direct link in that chain (Cowdell 2006 [2010]; Dégh and Vaszonyi 1974). Scholarly argument and dispute are also shaped by folklorically accepted narrative patterns. My own writing on Violet Alford benefited immeasurably from Simpson's discussion of her presentation style as well as her content.

CONCLUSION

My teasing title may have misleadingly hinted at some articulated anti-Murray Resistance movement. That is clearly not what was happening with MacGregor's comments, nor with those of Balfour and the splenetic Midlander. Rather, as I have suggested, the legend dialectic of ghost narratives allows the possibility of disagreement without undermining the status of the authority figure. This disagreement with Murray is predicated on her authority, and thus served to reinforce it. Although that authority has been subsequently dismantled, the existence of the disagreement on such terms allows for Murray's authority to be continued, if required, even in the contested terms of legendry. To ask critical questions in a folklore genre that allows them also creates the chance for critical questioning to develop more broadly in folklore scholarship as well as in the folklore it is studying.

Perhaps we should listen more to the passing critical noises made by folklorists who were not necessarily hostile or even opposed to Murray, reading them as part and parcel of the broader development of the discipline that allowed it to survive those difficult years.

The sociable and gregarious Violet Alford, for example, shared many influences with Murray, above all Frazer. Alford's fieldwork had long satisfied the criteria Murray laid out in her 1954 Address (alongside encouraging new waves of fieldworkers), but it also provided her reasons for not being able to accept some of Murray's claims. She used her critique, however, to finesse and support Murray's broader thesis, not reject it: Alford and Rodney Gallop accepted Murray's claim that a Dianic cult in Western Europe had survived the introduction of Christianity, for example, but the volume of contemporary Christian involvement they saw in fieldwork left them unable to agree with Murray's claim it was "entirely in the hands of the so-called witch communities" (Alford and Gallop 1935). Alford, as I discuss elsewhere (Cowdell 2021b), was hardly an adversary of Murray. They broadly agreed on much, in fact, but Alford's energetic and serious fieldwork still provided a beacon for folklorists who could and would transcend the constraints of Murray's thinking. Despite her sympathies with Murray, Alford was also engaged in work that pointed forward to Simpson's generation. Pleasingly, she had a reputation for supporting younger scholars, much as Simpson would; Alford and Margaret Dean-Smith conspired in offering to ask planted questions after conference papers given by inexperienced speakers (Davidson 1987, 125). Alford was a lively speaker herself, with Simpson recalling one "passionate tirade" (Cowdell 2021b, 383).

As with MacGregor's ghost lore, Alford's minor criticisms point well beyond her own thinking and ambitions. Too much should not be drawn from this, but a suggestive letter about press misrepresentations of folklore can profitably be set alongside the press coverage discussed above. Alford had long been concerned about press misrepresentations of folklore—specific events and customs, and the conceptual understandings drawn from them—and about reasserting the authority of folklorists. The latter involved advocacy of the FLS as folklorists' senior organizing body in Britain. It marked no new departure for her in 1955 to suggest that *Folklore* publish orienting comments alongside items culled from the press to prevent confusion

and misunderstandings among, particularly, newer and less experienced members of the FLS. Her letter, however, coincided with the rising media profile of the FLS thanks to the Murrayite/Gardnerian leadership. (Gardner also had to confront the problems this created). Given her reputation for supporting younger scholars, Alford's comment does not seem pointed or underhanded, but many of the less experienced folklorists relatively new to the FLS would have been Murray admirers. Even without seeking to undermine or contradict Murray, Alford's direct engagement (whatever its limitations) with the content of her argument contributed to the possibility of that argument being later superseded.

One should not be Panglossian in reading the opportunities opened for later, better, folklore scholars by the possibilities enabled by such serious discourse: the exploitation of those possibilities was not inevitable, and failure to overcome them would have been catastrophic. This may account for (or at least contribute to) the anxious fury found in many serious historical accounts of the period, including Simpson's. One can, however, at least celebrate the fact that some of the scholars who seized on those opportunities, like Jacqueline Simpson, were able to make their own enduring contributions to the discipline and provide an invaluable historical summary to orient newer scholars. As a folklorist whose historical orientation was, and continues to be, guided by Jacqueline Simpson's thorough and brilliant work, my own fascination with the wrinkles and nuances of that history is enabled and informed by her broad sweep. I am raising an eyebrow in bemusement at Alasdair Alpin MacGregor across a lecture hall, but I am doing so with a somewhat different future understanding and engagement with the discipline in mind. For that, I raise another toast to Jacqueline.

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Kathi King

“HE IS THE STORY THAT ALL WEAK PEOPLE CREATE TO
COMPENSATE FOR THEIR WEAKNESS”: AFRICAN AMERICAN
WOMEN WRITING FOLKLORE IN THE FEDERAL WRITERS’
PROJECT

ABSTRACT

The 1930s, shaped by the hardships brought on by the Great Depression, were also a time when folklore collecting was institutionalized. Anthropologists and ethnographers, who had developed new tools and perspectives to document culture and history in the 1920s, slipped into positions the New Deal had opened for officials and directors in the Federal Writers’ Project (FWP), which was part of the Works Progress Administration (WPA). Their aim was to re-write American history to give new self-respect and -understanding to a nation struggling with the effects of dramatic economic changes. They collected narratives of “ordinary people,” wanting to do justice to the diversity of American society. Oral and cultural history methods were at the center of their practice. The FWP also funded local and regional projects devoted to the documentation of Black culture and history, often carried out by units of Black writers, and interviewed about Kathi King is a doctoral candidate in North American Studies at the Albert-Ludwigs-Universität, Freiburg im Breisgau, Germany. The title of her dissertation project is “African American Women Writers and the WPA.” She served as a guest scholar at the Abraham Lincoln Presidential Library and the University of Illinois in 2019 and at the Kansas State University in 2022, and is a member of the American Folklore Society. She works as a project coordinator with the NGO iz3w (short for information center 3rd world) in Freiburg and is among the editors of *Común*, a German publication on urban political interventions. She has contributed the chapter “‘Crime and Juvenile Delinquency - my pet hobby at present’: Margaret Walker and the WPA in Chicago” to Sara Rutkowski, ed., 2022, *Rewriting America: New Essays on the Federal Writers’ Project* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press). Her research interests are African American history, racism and the Black experience, cities from below, and radical history.

King, Kathi. 2023. “He is the Story that All Weak People Create to Compensate for their Weakness: African American Women Writing Folklore in the Federal Writer’s Project.” *TFH: The Journal of History and Folklore* 39 & 40: 22–57.

2,300 ex-slaves. African American writers belonged to the group hit hardest by the economic collapse. Among them were three women writers: Margaret Walker, Dorothy West, and Zora Neale Hurston. These women conducted interviews, collected folklore, wrote and edited manuscripts, and used both their time in and material from the FWP for their own fiction. In this way, narratives of Black female subjectivity made it into literature and history, with women writing Black female voices and heroines into the historical narrative of the United States by revising, transforming, and subverting traditional codes and genres. Margaret Walker's folk ballad "Yalluh Hammuh" can be seen as such a venture. It also exemplifies the interplay of personal memory, folklore, and poetry. An examination of the use of oral history and folklore in the New Deal era, with a focus on the voices and roles of African American women, can help us better understand the nexus of "*race*,"¹ *class*, and *gender* within literature, poetry, and historiography.

"The story that all weak people create to compensate for their weakness" – African American Women Writing Folklore in the Federal Writers' Project

In the 1930s, the national history of the United States was re-written. This undertaking was authored by the Federal Writers' Project (FWP), "an artistic appendage to the tremendous socioeconomic program of the Works Progress Administration [WPA]," as writer Margaret Walker put it. The "needy, but capable writers" (Walker 1988, 68) were "turned loose on the landscape with a government mandate to 'hold up a mirror to America'" (Taylor 2009). They collected interviews, life histories, folklore, and historical records (cf. Felkner 1991, 147). This social experiment was launched by a government which hoped that the ambitious agenda the WPA presented would "both lift the spirits and provide weekly paychecks for thousands of unemployed Americans" (Bascom 2001, 1). The program was proposed by Franklin Delano Roosevelt in the early spring of 1935 and after it was passed by Congress, it began in the early fall of 1935 (cf. Walker 1988, 86). But how was it possible that one of the most ambitious projects of collecting oral accounts by ordinary Americans was

undertaken during a time when the American economy experienced a dramatic recession? Is it not counter-intuitive to invest in the writing of travel guides and folklore anthologies while people are struggling to survive? As dire as they were, the 1930s were not only a time of struggle, but also of progressive politics, which made possible what is considered “the most expensive program ever launched by any government anywhere in the world.” The Works Progress Administration was “designed to provide meaningful work instead of make-work and charity” (Quinn 2009, 10f). For instance, the country’s infrastructure had fallen into disrepair over the course of the crisis, so federal support for its renovation appeared pragmatic and uncontroversial. Considerably more people were employed in the building trades—but what about the white-collar workers? For them, one of the answers was the Federal Writers’ Project.

THE GENESIS OF THE FWP

This endeavor was made possible by an array of political and social factors: Roosevelt’s idea of work relief, a political and social climate generally inclined towards progressive ideas regarding the significance of culture and the arts, the pluralist composition of American society, the union activity of writers and journalists, and a good helping of path dependency. In the following paragraphs I will elaborate on these factors, while also providing a broad overview of the politico-cultural context of the FWP.

The 1920s, a decade of economic growth and laissez-faire policies, ended abruptly with the Wall Street stock market crash in 1929, which marked the beginning of a twelve-year-long economic crisis. 100,000 businesses suddenly failed and unemployment skyrocketed, until it peaked at 24.9 percent in 1933 when Roosevelt was inaugurated. He was famous for his use of radio broadcasting as a means to “speak directly to the people” (Taylor 2008, 91) with his “fire-side chats.” During the Depression, a ten-year-long drought hit the southern and midwestern plains and caused approximately 2.5 million farmers and agricultural workers to leave the dust bowl states. Slums nicknamed “Hoovervilles” cluttered the roadsides across the country. Sarcastically named after the president whom the inhabi-

tants of these shantytowns blamed for their situation, Hoovervilles became the symbol for the Republican failure to deal with the crisis. Unlike his Republican predecessor Herbert Hoover, Roosevelt understood that the gravity of the situation required bold measures. His New Deal policies were modeled after relief and public employment programs he had employed during his time as governor of New York. Now they were applied on a federal level. Of course, FDR's opposition excoriated these projects: believing in rugged individualism and local charity as sufficient means to fight nationwide poverty, they found it an outrageous dissipation to spend so much of the national budget just to give relief and jobs to the unemployed, who were nothing but "bums and loafers" to them (cf. Taylor 2008, 130). While it may seem counter-intuitive, the New Deal fit with president Franklin D. Roosevelt's economic, political, and cultural agenda, as well with contemporaneous debates among intellectuals and labor organizations. In its original conception, the WPA was a measure to alleviate unemployment, not an instrument to document culture and history. It was Roosevelt's—and WPA supervisor Harry Hopkins's—principle that everyone employed by the WPA should work in their original profession, or even receive further training in it. When challenged for his decision to develop work relief projects for artists and intellectuals, Hopkins famously countered: "Hell, they've got to eat just like other people" (Adler 2009). Both Roosevelt and Hopkins were against relief in the form of "make-work" and cash handouts—those methods were thought to be taking too much of a toll on people's spirits. Roosevelt told Congress on January 4, 1935, that

the Federal Government must quit this business of relief. I am not willing that the vitality of our people be further sapped by the giving of cash, of market baskets, of a few hours of weekly work cutting grass, raking leaves, or picking up papers in the public parks... To dole out relief in this way is to administer a narcotic, a subtle destroyer of the human spirit... We must preserve not only the bodies of the unemployed from destitution but also their self-respect, their self-reliance and courage and determination. (Roosevelt qtd. in Quinn 2009, 10f)

As for the arts, Roosevelt “believed that the principle of access to the arts was ‘as logical as access to the ballot box or schoolhouse’” (Sklaroff 2009, 28). Though far from uncontroversial, the New Deal fueled a generally favorable climate for the arts. Milton Meltzer, himself a former FWP writer, wrote one of the first comprehensive histories of the WPA arts projects in 1976, titled *Violins & Shovels*. Here he recounts: “Some people asked, Why help the artists? Pay them, instead, to use a shovel or a rake.” The answer from Aubrey Williams, a WPA administrator, was “We don’t think a good musician should be asked to turn second-rate laborer in order that a sewer may be laid for relative permanency rather than a concert given for the momentary pleasure of our people.” Meltzer stresses that this was a revolutionary idea, coming from a public official. In the perception of most Americans in the 1930s, art was not considered “work”: “These activities were luxuries for the rich to toy with, or avocations for people who worked at ‘regular’ jobs.” Nor were the arts considered a part of popular education and culture. It was not in the interest of politicians to change this perception, either. For Meltzer, the Great Depression marks a turning point in the public and political understanding of the arts, “something that we should have known long ago: Art was a necessity, something everybody’s spirit thirsted for” (Metzler 1976, 19).

It was Henry Alsberg—who was appointed national director of the FWP—and his colleagues who pushed the idea that the FWP could document American culture in a way that would implement concepts evolving from debates in the emerging new anthropology and discussions in the arts and sciences of the era. As Jerrold Hirsch puts it, “National FWP officials, under the leadership of Henry Alsberg, aimed to redefine American national identity and culture by embracing the country’s diversity” (Hirsch 2003, 1). The new anthropology which had begun to emerge in the 1920s fueled their desire to find new ways to describe the relationship between culture as an expressive artform and culture as a way of life (Hirsch 2003, 2). Writers were involved in an ongoing discussion which had also begun in the 1920s about what Hirsch phrases “the possibility of creating literature in an urban-industrial world, and the meaning of modernity.” Further on, “[t]hey saw themselves as a larger cultural project” (Hirsch 2003, 2). It is important to note that most leading positions in the FWP were not occupied by people from the literary world. Henry Alsberg—who had

studied law—worked as a journalist, a playwright, and for the WPA precursor the Federal Emergency Relief Administration (FERA). A friend of anarchist Emma Goldman, Alsberg had abandoned his more radical stances and became a government official. As a New Deal liberal in his fifties, he knew many people in the New York literary scene (cf. Dolinar 2013, xi). Alsberg also had experience as a humanitarian aid worker: he had visited Soviet Russia several times and became director of the American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee, which aided famine victims of the Russian Revolution (cf. Sklaroff 2009, 31). Entrepreneur folklorist John Lomax, who had worked for the Archive of American Folk Song at the Library of Congress, was appointed national adviser on folklore by Alsberg. His achievement was broadening the field of what was considered folklore in the project, and encouraging the special consideration of African American folklore, as well as the collection of ex-slave narratives (cf. Kennedy 2017, 3; Stewart 2016, 76). When taking office in June 1936, he compiled a list of everything folklore fieldworkers should be on the lookout for. This list included

wishing seats, wishing wells, proposal rocks, swamps and quick-sands with sinister reputations, localities with beneficent qualities, animal behavior and meanings, stories about animals and their relations with people, table service, blessing crops, public punishment, tall tales, drinking toast, graveyard epitaphs, psychics, and witches. (Kennedy 2017, 3)

In 1938, Lomax was succeeded by folklorist Benjamin Botkin, who had taught at the University of Oklahoma and edited the annual anthology *Folk-Say – A Regional Miscellany* (1929–1932). In his perspective, cosmopolitanism and provincialism were neither complementary nor hostile approaches (cf. Brewer 1994, vii; Hirsch 2003, 27). His was a “two-way street” approach to folklore, an “insistence that urban lore was no less significant than the rural, the living no less than the long-dead, and that folk culture had not at all been doomed by the industrial revolution,” as wrote his colleague Stetson Kennedy (2017, 3–4). African American scholar, poet, and critic Sterling Brown was one of the few “literary” people in the highest positions

within the FWP—he was appointed “National Editor on Negro Affairs” (Penkower 1977, 66). Brown urged for accurate representations of African Americans in the project. In a letter to *Opportunity* editor Elmer Anderson, he announced “I am anxious to do a good job here. You know my anxiety to see the record straight on matters concerning Negro history and life” (Sklaroff 2009, 92). Sklaroff describes his field of work as follows:

With two editorial assistants from Howard University, Ulysses Lee and Eugene Holmes, and another editor, Glaucia Roberts, Brown reviewed all copy for the state guides. He also worked on other FWP projects such as the ex-slave narratives and the WPA historical records survey. In addition, he took on the responsibility of attempting to provide African Americans with employment in as many states as possible. (Sklaroff 2009, 92)

Hirsch argues that the FWP leaders advocated a modernized form of Romantic Nationalism. According to him, Romantic Nationalism was built on the idea that there was an organic relationship between individual personality, nationality, and the creative arts. Its followers rejected the conservative notion that high culture could only be of European origin (cf. Hirsch 2003, 20). The transcendentalists and Walt Whitman operated in this tradition and much of the FWP’s writing has been characterized as “Whitmanesque” (Hirsch 2003, 6). The idea that “ordinary people” had something to say, that their culture and lore were a meaningful part of an American identity was central to the work and practices of the FWP. These ideas were already part of contemporary understandings of American culture, but they were radicalized by the project—especially when it came to the question “who is an American?” Almost everybody in the leading ranks of the FWP was committed to the ideals of the new anthropology of the 1920s—especially Franz Boas’s ideas—which must not necessarily be seen as a rebuke of Romantic Nationalism, argues Hirsch: “The particularist romantic nationalist strain in his thought can be seen in his emphasis on a pluralist description of a multiplicity of cultures that had developed in response to specific historical conditions and could not be ranked hierarchically as best or worst” (2003, 5). Boas’s

theory of cultural relativism, Hirsch contends, “lifted anthropology from the racial constraints of nineteenth century evolution theory and placed equal value on all cultures” (Bordelon and Hurston 1999, 10).

This was a rejection of racism, and with it an attack on White Anglo-Saxon Protestant (WASP) ideas of American identity: “his attack on racist thinking made it possible to consider who was an American in pluralist terms... The universalist strain in Boas’s thought was tied to his rejection of race as a way to understand individual difference. He denied that any group was incapable of being American citizens” (Hirsch 2003, 5). All of them advocated a theory that was centered on the functional and integrative aspects of culture. Botkin espoused anthropologist Paul Radin’s case for “a cultural history in which individual life histories played a central role” (Hirsch 2003, 109). Before FWP officials embraced this anthropological concept of culture—which allowed them to pursue a mode of historiography and a type of historical material they were interested in—it had only been present in the work of a few historians. Up to then, the historical tradition in America had relied heavily on written, archived material—a profession committed to supposed objectivity and empiricism. Hirsch quotes from Caroline Ware’s introduction to *The Cultural Approach to History* (1940), a volume Botkin had also contributed to: “Although the literate parts of the population were always in the minority, these were necessarily regarded as the ‘people’, since it was they concerning whom the historians had direct evidence.” So, they went for what would today be called “oral history.” In the early-to-mid-twentieth century, terminology for this practice and material was diverse. The interviews FWP fieldworkers conducted “went under an assortment of names in the Writers’ Project: life histories, living lore, industrial lore, occupational lore, and narratives. All of these terms were used to describe efforts to document real people telling their own stories in their own words” (Banks 1991, xiii). Oral history methods were central to all of the sub-projects of the FWP: Creative Work, American Guide, Folklore Studies, Slave Narratives, Social Ethnic Studies, and Negro Studies (cf. Brewer 1994, xiv).

Within a broader scope, these efforts and discourses on the democratization of history and the arts can be seen as a part of the wider global movement from the Left during this era. A significant politico-cultural factor was the strategic program of the Communist Party

of the United States (CPUSA) called the Popular Front, which would later become eponymous for the cultural climate of the 1930s. The CPUSA followed the path of other communist, socialist, and social democratic parties and organizations from the trade union movements around the world, which were organized in the Communist International (Comintern). With an acute awareness that their sectarianism was a precarious position with regard to the rise of fascism in Europe, the Comintern decided to seek coalition with Socialists and Liberals. Their assessment that the fascists had used culture as an effective and successful means for mobilization led them to conclude that culture was an important field within the antifascist struggle (cf. Smethurst 2011, 492). Far from being an abstract strategy, the Popular Front was put into practice by a broad range of politicians, activists, and writers from the radical left. As Hirsch writes:

Many national FWP officials and other liberal New Dealers supported the political and cultural trust of the Popular Front because they valued a cultural politics that showed concern for the lives of ordinary Americans, in particular the poor, the industrial workers, and the racial and ethnic minorities—these are overlapping categories—and opposed fascism at home and abroad. (2003, 3)

With this strategy on the cultural level came broad mobilization for union activity. As a reaction to the exclusion of African Americans and unskilled industrial workers by the American Federation of Labor (AFL), the Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO) was founded in 1935 (cf. Berke 2011, 140). Sklaroff notes that these political movements and developments not only created a climate in which progressive culture and political art could thrive, but that they were also crucial to the political struggle of African Americans:

individuals wove in and out of New Deal programs and Popular Front organizations rather seamlessly, fomenting a proletarian-based cultural renaissance. Thus, the formation of the inclusionary Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO), opposition to totalitarianism abroad, and the ambition of the New Deal all fostered an atmosphere conducive for civil right reform. (2009, 25)

Obviously, writers formed their own union organizations: The Writers' Union, the League of American Writers, a successor organization of the John Reed Clubs (JRC), the Unemployed Writers Association—all of them also closely associated with the JRC's, the CPUSA, the Authors Guild, and the Newspaper Guild (cf. Mangione 1972, 245). These organizations helped writers to exert pressure collectively and to pose demands at pre-WPA New Deal Agencies. "CHILDREN NEED BOOKS / WRITERS NEED A BREAK / WE DEMAND PROJECTS" it says on a placard carried by a writer on a photo of the Writers' Unions first picket line from February 25, 1935 (cf. Mangione 1972, 38). A proposal from the Authors Guild to the Civil Works Agency (CWA) on February 1934 for the employment of writers reverberates with ideas later put into practice by the FWP: "'to survey varying aspects of everyday life as it is lived in all parts of the United States' ... an indefinite number of writers could be assigned to write 'a complete hour-to-hour-account of a single day in the life of a man, woman or child in which a writers lives'" (Mangione 1972, 36).

Lastly, as is common in political institutions, there was a certain amount of path dependency at play—political decisions were made based on prior decisions and past experiences rather than on an assessment of the current situation. Oral history collecting had already taken place under FERA (1933–35), and it was a Black history project that was chosen to be the first one conducted. It was probably Charles S. Johnson, African American sociologist and president of Fisk University, who made collecting ex-slave narratives part of the WPA's efforts. He encouraged staff researcher Ophelia Settle Egypt to interview ex-slaves in Kentucky and Tennessee. One-third of these interviews were published as the *Unwritten History of Slavery: Autobiographical Account of Negro Ex-Slaves* (1945). Lawrence D. Reddick acted as an assistant to Settle Egypt. When he was teaching at Kentucky State College in 1934, he successfully submitted a proposal to Hopkins, then director of the WPA precursor FERA. There he supervised twelve African American college graduates who conducted 250 interviews with ex-slaves in Indiana and Kentucky from 1934 to 1935—a project which is today considered the New Deal's first take on collecting oral history, and which apparently proved to be a worthwhile venture (cf. Stewart 2016, 63).

“LOOK WITH FRESH EYES”—ORAL HISTORY AND FOLKLORE
COLLECTING IN THE FWP

Examining the manuscripts available at the Library of Congress, it is hard to tell for which program a particular interview was conducted: Creative Work, American Guide, Folklore Studies, Slave Narratives, Social Ethnic Studies, or Negro Studies (cf. Brewer 1994, xiv). In fact, there was a great deal of overlap between these projects. An interviewer might talk to an interviewee to hear about customs or tales, then come back a few days later to record a story from their life. For example, Dorothy West, who worked for the New York City office of the FWP, went to see her partner Marian Minus's mother “Mrs Laura M.” to record “Game Songs and Rhymes” in October 1938, and came back in November to note down a story her informant told her about supernatural phenomena in her Harlem apartment (see West 1938a; West and Mrs. Laura M. 1938). Although the first manuscript would classify as straightforward folklore material, the second one's genre-affiliation is messier: is it a folktale, or is it a life history? Both are classified as “Folklore” on the project's forms, and both are filed in the series “Folklore Project, Life Histories, 1936-39” by the Library of Congress. Ann Banks, editor of *First-Person America* (1991), puts it as such: “In theory, the Folklore Unit dealt with ‘a body of lore in relation to the life of a group or community,’ while the Social-Ethnic Studies Unit focused on ‘the whole life of a group or community’ in which folklore was only one aspect. In practice, the distinction between the two ventures was frequently blurred: both stressed the collection of first-person narratives; and both drew on the same pool of FWP fieldworkers” (1991, xv). With the ex-slave narratives, of which the project collected 2,300, it is equally difficult to label the collected material—at the same time, however, the collected material clarifies the role of folklore and tall tales in historiography. On the cover of the 1945 edition of Benjamin Botkin's *Lay My Burden Down – A Folk History of Slavery*, it reads “In their most fascinating anecdotes and folk tales former Negro slaves tell what slavery and emancipation meant to each of them” (Botkin 1994 [1945]). This

quote sums up nicely what oral history is all about: recognition that individual accounts as well as folk tales are important to understand how people felt and made sense of their world. Or, as Banks puts it, they “add the resonance of memory to the formal record of written history” (1991, xxv). In his introduction to the 1994 edition, Jerrold Hirsch exemplifies these ideas: “The personal and communal functions of memory, ways of living and ways of wresting a living from the land, the meaning of slavery and freedom, the struggle to create a family and community life in a world of slavery and racial conflict—these are some of the great themes of this folk history” (1994, ix). Especially when it comes to the functions of memory, oral history material contributes to a historiography of how history in the form of memories and tales was passed down from one generation to the next within a predominantly forcibly illiterate community. Botkin compiled the selection himself from the collection of FWP slave narratives after the project was defunded in 1939 and shut down in 1943 (cf. Brewer 1994, vii). Jerre Mangione, FWP writer and a chronicler of the project, recounts “Struck by the potency of the ex-slave material, Botkin excerpted from ten thousand papers enough selections for an anthology he published in 1945 with the title: *Lay My Burden Down: A Folk History of Slavery*” (1972, 256). The book was a literary and commercial success; it had gone into eight printings by 1969. Mangione emphasizes its impact on common perceptions of American history—it made “the public aware that, thanks to the Writers’ Project, a significant facet of the American story had been faithfully recorded in detail and saved from oblivion” (1972, 265). Botkin’s advocacy of the democratization of history is expressed in his preface and introduction, in which he notes that in “the collective tone of many voices speaking as one,” (1994 [1945], xxxiv) the narratives create an effect, namely as “a mixture of fact and fiction, then, colored by the fantasy and idealization of old people recalling the past, the narratives constitute a kind of collective saga of slavery” (1994 [1945], 5). The narratives selected for the collection were chosen using criteria for which Botkin had coined the term “Folk-Say”: “broadly human and imaginative aspects and...oral, literary and narrative folk values” (Botkin 1994, xxxiii). They are at the same time—or in a transition between—oral history *and* folklore, “as they are told again and again” (Hirsch 1994, xv). Botkin’s oft-quoted characterization of

this type of narrative stresses what might be considered their earthy quality: “They have the forthrightness, the tang and tone of people talking, the immediacy and concreteness of the participant and the eyewitness, and the salty irony and mother wit which, like the gift of memory, are kept alive by the bookless.”²

The ex-slave narratives also serve well to exemplify the FWP’s shortcomings and pitfalls of oral history collecting. Naturally, few of the fieldworkers had received professional training in the methods they employed. This was, however, not necessarily a disadvantage. As recalls Stetson Kennedy, who worked at the side of Zora Neale Hurston for the Florida FWP:

As for the fieldworkers, a majority were housewives with a high school education and a penchant for writing. What the fieldworkers lacked in formal training was more than compensated for by their zealous belief in the importance of the work they were doing. Unlike many an academic collector, they did not have to relate to their informants; they were related: by class, culture, and sometimes kinship. All they had to do was knock on any door, and the rapport was there. (Kennedy 2017, 5)

Neither was the lack of recording equipment; recording machines existed but were huge and heavy. John Lomax had a 315 pound acetate disc recorder sponsored by the Library of Congress that was built into the trunk of his Plymouth Sedan in 1933 and Stetson Kennedy remembers Lomax’s son Alan toting around a five hundred pound device, and sometimes several automobile batteries if there was no electricity (cf. Kennedy 2019; “Lomax Collection” 2020). Kennedy would later head expeditions to different parts of Florida, where such a recording machine was used, a privilege the Florida FWP likely owed to Zora Neale Hurston:

In 1939, the Florida project borrowed a recording machine from the Library of Congress. The fact that Zora Neale Hurston had worked with the machine on a recording expedition with Alan Lomax in 1935 may have been a factor in our being entrusted with the cumbersome device. Nevertheless, we were very glad to have the machine

and Zora. I never heard any discussion which so much as considered sending out an 'inter-racial' team. Those were the days when so innocent a gesture as a white man lighting a black woman's cigarette could get them both lynched. The solution, handed down to me from above, was to send Zora ahead as a sort of 'talent scout' to identify informants. (Kennedy 2017, 17)

All ordinary FWP fieldworkers had was paper and pen and their memory. Empirical objectivity was not their main goal, but they did emphasize awareness of the subjectivity of first-person accounts and the processes involved, including the subjectivity of the interviewer. Kennedy remembers:

fieldworkers were admonished "to look with fresh eyes" and to "stick to the precise language of the narrator." A set of forms was devised to accompany the text of each oral interview, to provide biographical and occupational background data on the informants. A final reference page was required for the listing of name and address of each informant, together with any published sources utilized. (Kennedy 2017, 2)

Those were the instructions of Benjamin Botkin, who stressed the importance of the collection process:

The best results, he wrote, were obtained "when a good informant and a good interviewer got together and the narrative is the process of the *conscious or unconscious collaboration of the two*." Botkin sought to implement this philosophy through specific instructions to Federal Writers. "Make your informant feel important," he directed. "Well-conducted interviews serve as social occasions to which informants come to look forward." (Banks 1991, xvi; emphasis added)

However, this collaboration was often breached when white interviewers interviewed Black informants. This phenomenon has been widely documented for the ex-slave narratives project. It happened especially frequently in the South, where many fieldworkers still looked back nostalgically to the plantation system of the antebellum era. Informants did not feel they could speak freely, and fieldworkers

asked suggestive questions and acted in patronizing ways; African American dialect was transcribed in a way that evoked minstrel images (cf. Stewart 2016, 80). The focus on the perspective of the *ex*-slave and their perception of freedom, which Lomax emphasized—wanting to shed light on a genuinely underrepresented viewpoint—disastrously backfired. Catherine Stewart, who in her 2016 book analyzed the representation of “race” in the FWP, argues:

in order to encompass the continued exploitation of slaves [after slavery] opened the door for employees who were advocates for the “Lost Cause” version of Southern history. Making not slavery, but the *ex*-slaves the object of study allowed for invidious comparisons between the hardships of the Great Depression and the benign paternalism of Southern slavery. (2016, 69)

Meltzer observes similar problems, but also recognizes that the collection process did not necessarily have to go this way:

Lomax instructions to the field insisted upon the importance of recording interviews exactly as given—with no censorship. Lomax had no control over hiring or assignments. The great majority of the interviewers were white. Their biases and methods violated sound interview procedure. The whites, as can be realized from the transcripts, were often patronizing, condescending, and sometimes insulting. The result could be stock responses, evasive answers, or compliant “yassuhs.” Occasionally, white interviewers revealed both sensitivity and insight in their interview technique. In places like Florida, where the interviewer’s were black, the difference in results is evident. Answers were engaged, candid, direct. Deep feelings were openly expressed. (1976, 126)

“CONSCIOUS OR UNCONSCIOUS COLLABORATION”—AFRICAN AMERICAN WOMEN WRITERS AND THE FWP

Three African American women writers who were part of this project did not have a problem with creating narratives in a process of “conscious or unconscious collaboration,” as Botkin had in mind—

for them, rapport was easy to build. Not only did they share certain realities with their informants—who frequently also understood the circumstances of being Black in 1930s America—but they also had a genuine interest in documenting the various facets of this experience. Their own working conditions at the FWP highlight how different participation in and employment with the project could look for African American women. Zora Neale Hurston worked for the Florida project from mid-1937 to August 1939, Dorothy West was in the New York City office from 1938 to 1939, and Margaret Walker wrote for the Illinois FWP in Chicago from 1936 to 1939.³ While West and Walker worked in integrated office spaces, Hurston worked from home because the Jacksonville office was white-only.⁴ Despite being a widely published writer at the time of her employment, Hurston received the lowest position available at the FWP: relief writer, making \$67.50 a month. Other writers of her caliber acquired well-paid supervisory or editorial positions in offices north of the Mason-Dixon line, but Hurston had to go through the embarrassing procedure of having her home investigated to certify her eligibility for relief. Her placement is a clear-cut example of the racism Black writers encountered in Southern FWP offices. However, as Pamela Bordelon suggests, she was likely quite happy with the conditions of this remote job: “Being a field writer made it possible for her to live and work out of her own home in Eatonville, a privilege extended to only a handful of writers nationwide. For Hurston this was a far greater prize than editorial status. It enabled her to come and go as she pleased, do her own writing, and merely check in with director [Carita Doggett] Corse in the state office periodically” (cf. Bordelon 1999, 17). Her placement produced repercussions within the federal office. Henry Alsberg wanted to see her in the editor position for the study *The Negro in Florida* and demanded her salary be raised \$150 per month to make up for the additional responsibility.⁵ Bordelon writes:

Alsberg’s liberal recommendation that Hurston be made an editor sent shock waves through Florida’s WPA organization, which controlled the state FWP’s employment and finances. In the Southern scheme of things, blacks were not given supervisory positions, even if they were more capable or better suited. Placing an African American over whites would have violated the unwritten code of the Jim

Crow South and rankled whites on the WPA and its arts projects.
(1999, 16)

WPA state offices were more conservative than Writers' offices—there were few chances to upend the Jim Crow order in terms of positions and salaries. It is likely that Corse circumvented the pay raise that would have upset the states headquarters by granting Hurston a monthly travel allowance of \$75, which raised her salary to as much as \$142.50 per month—close to the highest salary for state editors, \$160 (Bordelon 1999, 16). Walker and West had it comparably easier in their offices in the urban North. Walker, who was only 21 and fresh from college, got a position as junior writer at \$85 per month on March 16, 1936. Nine months into her employment, she was admitted into the prized Creative Works section, a position that allowed her to pursue her fiction and poetry full-time. On August 14, 1938, Walker was promoted to the position of senior writer—an event that made it into her diary: “The nicest thing of all was that when I got home I found a nice fat check waiting...the raise I have been wanting so long to \$94” (Walker 1938, 35). Walker’s employment also lasted an unusually long time: over three years. Dorothy West was promoted to the position of Senior Newspaperman at a salary of \$91.10 per month on October 20, 1938, about two months into her employment with the FWP (Cody and FWP 1938, 1). For Walker, the FWP was the beginning of her career as a writer; she had only one published poem when she began, “Daydream” (later titled: “I Want to Write”), which was published by *The Crisis* in 1934 (Walker 1934). Dorothy West had already been part of the Harlem Renaissance in the 1920s, but as yet had only published short stories in magazines, including her own publication *Challenge* (1934–1937).⁶ The FWP was a springboard for their writing careers. Walker’s first poetry collection *For My People* was published in 1943, and West landed a job as a short story writer with the *New York Daily News* in 1939 and published her first novel *The Living is Easy* in 1948. For Hurston, the FWP was a sturdy bridge into academic employment. When Congress voted down federal sponsoring of the arts projects in 1939 and the 18-month-rule was implemented, curbing the maximum time for employment with the WPA, Hurston had already found a position as a drama instructor at North Carolina College in Durham and had received an honorary doc-

torate from her alma mater, Morgan State (cf. Bordelon and Hurston 1999, 46). Although there was a substantial experiential difference at the FWP for Black women below and above the Mason-Dixon line, the program proved to be beneficial for all three of these writers. Even more than it bridged a period of economic calamity, it was a phase of extremely prolific writing activity for all of them, the products of which have not yet been fully uncovered. The encounters, perspectives, and practices the FWP facilitated sparked inspiration and led to experimentation with new forms and genres. These innovations can be characterized as folklore writing, interviews, ethnography, reportage, and documentary.

In *Women, Art and the New Deal* (2015) Katherine H. Adams and Michael L. Keene stress the innovative role of women within the new conceptions and practices of literature facilitated and fostered by the FWP: “Primarily through the lens of documentary, woman artists employed a unique form of interweaving, of their own stories with those of other women whose lives would otherwise not have been considered worthy of artistic rendering” (2015, 2). They use the term “collaborative narrative” for stories that involve “telling together” as well as “telling about.” The term “collaborative narrative” was coined by critic Anne E. Goldman, who uses it to describe extra-literary texts. These types of texts are usually classified as sociology, labor history, or cultural studies, but Goldman emphasizes their literary qualities, which she sees as manifestations of a “desire to speak autobiographically, which is negotiated in narratives that simultaneously write the self and represent the culture(s) within that self takes shape” (1996, x). As examples, Goldman lists African American accounts of midwifery or stories of labor union involvement. Most of the art and literature produced for Federal One⁷ could be classified as the first type of collaborative narrative: “telling together.” As it was practiced in these projects, it led

not to personal stories of the artists’ lives but to sympathetic engagement with other Americans, viewed as worthy of consideration and praise. In the collaborative narratives of the New Deal art projects, such as life histories, slave narratives, and posed photographs and paintings, involving various levels of input between artist and subject, women expressed complex truths about gender. (Adams and

Keene 2015, 2)

Another type of narrative can be characterized as “telling about.” This narrative type portrays fictional characters who share typical experiences with their contemporaries or with people from bygone eras. In this context, Adams and Keene use the term “doubling,” which they borrow from the group therapy form of psychodrama. They argue that woman artists employed fictional characters to typify the Depression experience. Artists created a “telling about” by giving voice to perspectives and experiences (Adams and Keene 2015, 2–3). The way FWP writers included narratives, reportage, and observations collected during their time on the project into their own fiction could be characterized as an example of this narrative type. Adams and Keene add another aspect to this definition of “doubling” to describe the composite character of this type of literature:

[Psychodrama] therapists might access a particularly well-wrought example created by a colleague, a means of echoing impactful stories that could speak to current situations. Along with collaborative narratives involving the artist with individual women, New Deal art fostered similar types of doubling, through sympathetic character studies that allowed artists to access their own creativity, their knowledge of their contemporaries, and the work of others to give voice to Depression experience as well as historical realities and larger truths. (2015, 3)

By putting these narratives on display—in anthologies, as public art, or in their poetry and prose—FWP writers contributed to a discourse that opened gaps and spaces for people to speak about their own experiences and to view their own stories as worth telling. For instance, experiences of unemployment and the failure to care for oneself and one’s family are a subject of shame, but by hearing narratives of other people’s similar plight, an experience one encountered as an individual could become a common problem not related to personal failure, but instead to structural issues. Narratives such as these can offer encouragement to talk about one’s own situation. They can provide consolation and insight, and maybe even fuel change. The effects of engaging with described phenomena, however, cannot be measured

empirically. Social realist portrayals of ordinary people are characteristic of 1930s art, as are collections of oral narratives, but their effect on people's storytelling—and the practices and subjects they employ—remains a matter of speculation.

In literature from the New Deal era, representations of Black women as complex characters are very rare. This is partly due to the underrepresentation of African American women writers (as on the payrolls of the FWP) but is also due to the fact that many of the FWP's planned studies and anthologies never made it into print. Archival rediscoveries show that a fair number of FWP narratives by and about Black women actually do exist. They are snapshots of the Black female experience in 1930s America and shed light on the innovative ways authors made use of the framework the FWP offered them.

Many have observed a special empathy in women's Depression-era writing, in which artists often expressed a sense of a commonality between themselves and the working class (i.e., Washington 1997, xv). FWP writer Betty Burke's words illustrate this sentiment: "We were poor ourselves and these people were, if anything, poorer, so I was very close to them...I understood every word they said with all my heart" (qtd. in Bascom 2001, 16). Collections of FWP writings by Hurston and West have already been published and allow for an inspection of these instances of empathy and collaboration.⁸ An outstanding example for this phenomenon is Dorothy West's piece "A Tale – 'Pluto'" (see West 2001; see also Bascom 2008, xxi; Mitchell and Davis 2005, xiii; Sherrard-Johnson 2012, 119). West used the forms of the Folklore/Life Histories subproject for the story, which, rather than a tale, is a personal anecdote "reported by Dorothy West (Staff Writer)" (West 1938b, 1). It is a laconic yet complex personal story, a self-observation of the writer in an encounter with a poor Black woman and her child in West's Harlem apartment. West had worked as a relief investigator for the WPA before she started with the FWP. She knew all too well the living conditions relief recipients faced and had heard many a pauper's oath—the vow of not owning any financial or material means in Depression-era slang. West's sensitivity and frankness in describing her own callousness in the face of a tragic life story creates a chilling image of what years of economic deprivation can do to the human psyche. Indeed, in her story,

the woman who knocks on West's door has been trying for so long to obtain money for her and her child that her narrative has turned into a "drab recital" (West 1938b, 4); the young boy is so hungry he forgets his curiosity and looks not seven years old, but "an under-sized seventy" (West 1938b, 5); and herself, the writer, who, though wanting to write a story "about poor people, too; A good proletarian short-story," (West 1938b, 4) cannot bear to hear another story about poverty. The woman's story is recounted in "Pluto," but relegated to a single paragraph. As West reflects on the encounter, she also narrates difference through Black female subjectivity: the two women are bound together by the position society puts them in and by the history of Black people in the United States. As an FWP writer, West is still in a more privileged position, but what she can give to the poor women amounts to an improvised breakfast and a quarter that she actually cannot spare. "'Why aren't you on relief?' I asked suspiciously, although in my heart I was disarmed by her southern accent," writes West, encapsulating middle-class snobbishness, her history as a relief investigator, and her Southern roots in a single sentence (1938b, 2). As the woman and the boy leave, the child has mustered enough strength to pick up a collapsible puppet of Pluto, Walt Disney's yellow hound, which stands on West's bookcase. West had wished he would do that from the moment he stepped into her home, but saw he was too hungry to find joy in toys. The boy lets Pluto drop and laughs. West ends the story on a somber note: "I was thinking that it is not right to take a child's joy away and give him hunger. I was thinking that a child's faith is too fine and precious for the dumpheap of poverty. I was thinking that bread should not be bigger than a boy. I thought about those things a lot" (1938b, 6).

For an anthropologist like Zora Neale Hurston, the FWP did not exactly invite new ideas or practices, but it allowed the writer to practice her craft in relative independence and on a stable yet modest budget. The largest part of her work for the FWP consists of straightforward folklore: conceptual and critical writing on folklore, as well as collected and retold material. Although Hurston only has a few female protagonists or informants in her FWP portfolio, she created one of the most important Black heroines in African American literature during this time: Janie of *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (1938). Her conceptual writing on folklore for the FWP can be considered an early

example of ethnographic writing by an African American woman. An essay titled "Go Gator and Muddy the Water," which would become a chapter on folklore and music for the study *The Florida Negro* (in some manuscripts titled *The Negro in Florida*), is probably "one of Hurston's most complete discussions of the origin of folklore" (Hurston and Bordelon 1999, 68). Her distinct tone and wit make it an outstanding document about her conceptualization of folklore: "Folklore is the boiled-down juice of human living. It does not belong to any special time, place, people. No country is so primitive that it has no lore, and no country has yet become so civilized that no folklore is being made within its boundaries" (Hurston and Bordelon 1999, 68). The oft-quoted first sentence resonates not only with Hurston's voice and convictions, but also with the idea of cultural relativism, which she acquired studying with Franz Boas at Barnard, as well as with Benjamin Botkin's ideas, with whom she was also in contact. Among songs and poetry from various sources, Hurston includes tales collected from inmates at "Blue Jay," one of Florida's largest prisons. The informants—Bob Davis, Frank White, and "Panama Red" Hooper—had been interviewed by Martin Richardson, a Black FWP writer. Hurston concludes that their tales on Black folk heroes, namely Daddy Mention and Big John DeConquer, were "important in their ability to highlight the prisoners' feelings about their captivity," as Bordelon puts it (Hurston and Bordelon 1999, 69). Hurston writes:

Big John DeConquer is the culture hero of American Negro folk tales. He is Jason, or Ulysses, of the Greeks; Baldur of the Horse tales; Jack the Giant Killer of European mythology. He is the story that all weak people create to compensate for their weakness. He is a projection of the poor and humble into the realms of the mighty. By cunning or by brute might he overcomes the ruling and utterly confounds its strength. He is among men what Brer Rabbit is among animals. In the Old Massa tales he compensates the slave for his futility. He even outwits the Devil, who in Negro mythology is smarter than God. (Hurston and Bordelon 1999, 78–79)

Big John DeConquer is the hero of a story cycle that goes back to the times of slavery, with its hero outwitting the slave holders "Ole Massa" and "Ole Miss," but also the devil. Daddy Mention is a younger

character, a “wonder-working prisoner” and alleged inmate of many Florida prisons (Hurston and Bordelon 1999, 83). According to Hurston, many a prisoner claimed to have known him, although nobody could give a definite description. “In fact,” muses Hurston, tongue in cheek, “it is this unusual power of omnipresence that first arouses the suspicions of the listener: was Daddy Mention perhaps a legendary figure?” (Hurston and Bordelon 1999, 83). Daddy Mention suffers abuse by the prison overseer Cap’m Smith because the latter becomes insecure due to Daddy Mention’s loose lip. The hero survives three days in “the box,” a tin cage that gets unbearably hot in the sun. As he begins laboring with a wood working gang, Daddy Mention demonstrates his strength by carrying trees and logs too heavy for regular men. Pretending to carry a log to its ordered destination, he walks out of the prison gate unbothered. He escapes the prison, time and again, thanks to his wit, but also due to his strength. Although his comical escapes might even reflect real events, he is a foil for the inmates’ wishes and hopes. By including both Big John DeConquer and Daddy Mention, Hurston’s “Go Gator” also follows Botkin’s suggestion of a two-way street approach: their story worlds are set in the past—Florida’s era of slavery—as well as in the present—the 1930s prison system. Folklore, as documented by Hurston, not only served as cultural memory and expression, but as a way to deal with life in a society that was still deeply marked by the conditions and social relations of slavery.

Margaret Walker’s writing from her FWP years is still dormant in archives. Folk heroes—and heroines—play a major role in it, but Walker also experiments with sociological, documentary, and proletarian realist writing while working alongside the likes of Richard Wright, Horace Cayton, Nelson Algren, and Jack Conroy. She documents the Black female experience in Depression-era Chicago in the unpublished novel *Goose Island*, which she wrote while on her Creative Works assignment. Conscientiously written articles and reports bear witness to her contributions to various FWP projects, from the Illinois Guide to her study *The Negro Press in Chicago*. She also conducted fieldwork to collect folklore, tall tales on which she based at least two of the folk ballads in *For My People*: “Two-Gun Buster and Trigger Slim” and “Yalluh Hammuh.” An FWP manuscript of the latter name serves as intertextual evidence for artistic collaboration:

her crafting a poem based on the oral account of an interviewee.⁹ In its usage of the ballad form, it also provides evidence of women's innovations in and subversion of genre conventions as well as of the desire to tell stories of female subjectivity.¹⁰ Indeed, Walker adds a twist to the murder ballad tradition and creates a female folk-heroine.

The history of the "Yalluh Hammuh" manuscript is mysterious. Unlike Dorothy West's interviews, it is not typed into the forms of the Life Histories/Folklore subproject that include a questionnaire on the interviewee's identity. Cecil Brown claims Walker interviewed an ex-slave woman named Mary Brown, while Sara Rutkowski imagines a masculine narrator. The real identity of the interviewee, however, remains unclear.¹¹ The manuscript bears a scribbled note saying "American Folk Stuff." Even though it looks like the hasty classification of an archivist, it means that Walker's piece should have been included in a prospective but unpublished sequel to the *American Stuff* anthologies.¹² Walker meticulously transcribed the story in the informant's Black vernacular, showing her ear for Southern dialect (she grew up in Alabama, Mississippi, and Louisiana) (cf. "Margaret Walker" 2017). The informant—seemingly spontaneous—comes up with a story about their cousin Yalluh Hammuh (probably named after the yellowhammer, the state bird of Alabama): "Is ah evah telled you bout mah cousin, Yallah Hammuh? Well, man dat wuz one moah bad guy. Dat guy so bad de sharef scairt ta go nigh his house" (Walker 1939, 1). Yalluh is a "bad man," an archetypal folk hero very common in African American folklore. With a mix of fascination and horror, "bad men" are presented as witty, strong, and unscrupulous enough to outwit the white man, often policemen. And accordingly, the narrator relates Yalluh's badness to that of other bad men, placing the hero of her story within a tradition: "Now Yalluh Hammuh is a bad guy all right, but dis Pick-Ankle-Slim pose ta be a badder guy. He a bad bad guy. He so bad he real bad; bad as Stagolee."¹³ According to Cecil Brown, this "indicates that the legend of Stagolee as a bad man circulated widely among the illiterate people of the Midwest as well as the South. The usual distinction given Stagolee was not that he was bad, but that he was badder than some other 'bad nigger'" (2004, 149). Brown quotes from an historical article on the concept of the "bad nigger" by H. C. Brearly from 1939. Brearly claims that in "many Negro communities...this emphasis upon heroic deviltry is so marked

that the very word bad often loses its original significance and may be used as an epithet of honor.” According to Brearly, it was up to the speaker to convey the meaning of their ascription in their pronunciation of “bad”: “If a black wanted to use the word with its usual meaning, he pronounced it as described in the dictionary, but if he wished to describe ‘a local hero, he calls him ‘ba-ad.’ the more he prolongs the a, the greater is his homage” (Brearly qtd. in Brown 2004, 149). According to Brown, what he calls the “‘bad nigger’ trope” was not used by Harlem Renaissance Writers except for Sterling Brown and Langston Hughes. The Black writers of the Renaissance were wary of folklore’s associations with “ignorant, backward, superstitious ex-slaves,” which embarrassed the aspiring middle-class writers of the movement. Brown notes that even in Hurston’s fiction, which relied heavily on folklore, there was but one rebellious character who came close to the archetype: High John DeConquer, who already appeared in *Mules and Men* (1935), selling his soul to the devil. Brown refers to Walker as the first African American writer who, after years, dared to write a poem about Stagolee (actually, she wrote two, mentioning him in “Yalluh Hammuh” and also in “Bad-Man Stagolee,” which is part of her collection *For My People*). Unlike in earlier Stagolee renditions, and different from the standpoints from which tall tales and legends are told, “[h]er voice is not that of an eyewitness, but of the community, at some distance in time” (cf. Brown 2004, 197).

As the story goes, the two bad men Yalluh Hammuh and Pick-Ankle Slim get into a barroom brawl over a woman and in the end one of them has to die—in this case Pick-Ankle Slim. Yalluh proved that he was the baddest man in town: “Yalluh Hammuh an Pick-Ankle-Slim tusseln an wraslin right dere on de edge o dat dere canal. Who beat? Yalluh Hammuh uv cose. He mah cousin an he de baddest man in town” (Walker 1939, 5). The story of Yalluh Hammuh is a story about men—the woman, who remains nameless in the folktale, is but an object to be rivaled over. This is part of the tradition Walker referred to, but which she also subverted. As Nancy Berke notes:

Black folktale culture is decidedly masculine in outlook. Maintaining masculine heroes such as Stagolee and John Henry has been traditionally important in resisting a white racist culture, one determined if not to destroy, at least to stereotype black men through

emasculatation. The emergence of a folk figure such as Kissie Lee [a folk heroine—and “bad woman”—from another poem in *For My People*] challenges the existing framework in which the bad male folk heroes appear representative. (2011, 149)

The same is true for May, the heroine introduced in Walker’s ballad rendition of the folk tale.¹⁴ Judging from the foreboding expressed in its first and second stanza, it appears to be a murder ballad, a traditional form of oral culture/folklore, but it lacks a murder and a murderer. Walker does not adhere to the typical stance of horror and fascination in “bad men,” but instead describes a man whose high spirits get him into trouble. She makes the woman the hero of the story and Yalluh Hammuh’s unexpected antagonist. The first five stanzas describe the bad man character from the FWP narrative, but in a comical way. The sixth stanza presents a twist: Yalluh does not find his adversary in his rival Pick-Ankle, but in the latter’s girlfriend May. Here Walker changes the original story and subverts the reader’s expectations: “But Yalluh Hammuh met his match / One Saddy night, they say, / He come in town an’ run into / Pick-Ankle’s gal named May.” And in the last stanza, when one might expect to see one of the rivals dead, (Yalluh draws his gun in the tenth stanza) it is just Yalluh who gets robbed: “The lights went out and womens screamed / And then they fit away. / When Yalluh Hammuh come to hisself / May was gone with his pay.”¹⁵ Walker’s May, like her character Kissie Lee in the ballad of the same name, is the heroine of a new “folklore of women,” as Adams and Keene call it (2015, 124). In their subchapter *Rewriting the Folk Hero*, Adams and Keene argue that women sought to depict “the worst of torture, and especially of sexual violence, but also emphasize moments in which women triumphed” (2015, 121). They suggest that here the memories of interviewees and the priorities of New Deal artists coincided. These collaborations exhibited, sometimes more and sometimes less realistically, the ability of women to bear hardships and to defend themselves and others. They articulate a shared desire, the power of which “moved women to revise narrative as they searched for gaps through which to enter history,” as also noted by Paula Rabinowitz, who characterizes this desire as “utopian.” As such, it has the prospect to “eliminate the hierarchies implicit within dualisms [male/female, black/white] and, in so doing,

demands new narrative forms” (Rabinowitz 1991, x and 180–81). In the 1930s, new narrative forms were established and subsequently fostered by the FWP. These narratives were able to accommodate desires to supplant typical narrative forms: in the genre of documentary, in collaborative narratives, and in instances of “doubling” created by interviewees and New Deal artists, as well as in the revision of traditional codes for men and women and the transformations of literary traditions such as the figure of the folk hero. “Yalluh Hammuh” can also serve as an example of how oral history/folklore from the FWP made it into the written poetry from this era. Walker, as the first Black woman ever, won the *Yale University Younger Poets Award* for her collection. This also indicates that poetry containing strong motifs of African American folklore was considered valuable by an institution of “high culture”—something quite unprecedented for 1942. The success of *For My People* exemplifies the significance the Writers’ Project for this author—in this program, Walker benefitted from time, support, and inspiration. Indeed, it enabled her to write and prepare her first collection of poetry for publication.

CONCLUSION

As a general conclusion, I argue that the FWP not only facilitated the democratization of history by enabling women and men to add their personal accounts to a national historiography, but also that it was especially beneficial for Black women writers. It elevated folklore and oral culture—and thus the culture of ordinary people—as a valuable aspect of American life. Thereby, it challenged the notion that only high culture should be considered important for the cultural identity of a nation—especially for a country as multicultural as the United States. The FWP opened a gap for Black women to participate in the debate about folklore’s role in American national identity, even if Hurston’s article “Go Gator and Muddy the Water” did not make it into print. As a work relief program, the FWP provided not only money for writers and the opportunity to practice their craft, but also training in methods for studying oral history and materials. This had a beneficial effect for African American women authors: although Black women as a social group had been quite present and recognized

as writers and organizers in the literary and political movements of the 1920s, it took the FWP for them to take part *again* in literary, poetic, and political discussions during the 1930s.¹⁶ Black women artists created collaborative narratives, told together with their interviewees, as envisaged by the FWP. They documented both their own Depression experiences, as well as those of others, and in doing so created a multi-modal, polyphonic portrait of this era. But they also subverted and transformed traditionally male genres and created heroines—giving women a place and a voice in history and literature and therefore providing them an active role in it. They took what they were given but made something much bigger and more radical out of it.

What should not go unmentioned, however, is that the FWP, as beneficial as it was, did have its downsides. While the negative aspects of this program have been elaborated in other studies, I will sketch the main reasons for this criticism here. As in all projects of the WPA, racism and sexism in hiring were a tremendous problem, as was workplace sexism and wage discrimination (cf. Rose 2009, 10). This was especially true—and has been documented in FWP offices in the South—in Florida, for instance, where Hurston worked (cf. Bordelon and Hurston 1999, 15). On a larger scale, the arts projects, with their goal of a just representation of African Americans, could also be seen as a distraction from or appeasement for demands for change in the legislative, political, and economic system—from the filibustered anti-lynching bill FDR failed to push through to Jim Crow laws and practices, housing discrimination, and economic disenfranchisement (i.e., Sklaroff 2009, 1). As a whole, the FWP could be considered the beginning of institutionalized culturalization of political discourse, a discourse that is centered on issues of representation to the detriment of issues of structural change. Indeed, Caren Irr suggests what could be regarded as one of the larger-scale effects of the FWP on how we see the world today: “The Depression of the 1930s stimulated an emphasis on culture and politics as sites of struggle that expanded exponentially in the postwar years, to the virtual exclusion of the economy as site of officially recognized contest—at least in the United States” (Irr 1998, 242). Irr wrote these words in the late 1990s, when economic questions, or rather labor issues and the questioning of capitalism as the only viable economic system, had very little legitimacy in mainstream discourse. Today, a few crises later and in the midst

of a pandemic, calls for a rejuvenated New Deal have reached center stage again, while labor and housing struggles have also become more visible. A reconsideration should take into account the wealth of historical material and art that was produced thanks to the WPA, as this does speak to today's situation. It should also include, however, the instances in which FDR's policies failed, and how the pressure of social movements brought on decisions that put new policies into place—movements that relied heavily on culture, but which framed their goals in other areas, too.

NOTES

¹ Writing "race" in quotation marks is a reference to Henry Louis Gates, Jr., who uses them to signify the constructedness of the concept: "Race, as a meaningful criterion within the biological sciences, has long been recognized to be a fiction. When we speak of the 'white race' or 'the black race,' 'the Jewish race' or 'the Aryan race,' we speak in biological misnomers and, more generally, in metaphors...Race has become a trope of ultimate, irreducible difference between cultures, linguistic groups, or adherents of specific belief systems which, more often than not—also have fundamentally opposed economic interests. Race is the ultimate trope of difference because it is so very arbitrary in its application. The biological criteria used to determine 'difference' in sex simply do not hold when applied to 'race.' Yet we carelessly use language in such a way as to will this sense of natural difference into our formulation" (Gates, Jr. 1985, 5). Or, for a similar argument, see Gilroy 2002 as quoted in Storey 2009, 167.

² Botkin 1928, quoted in Mangione 1972, 265. Mangione locates this quote in Botkin's Preface for *Lay My Burden Down*. This has been re-quoted by several other scholars, i.e., Adams and Keene 2015, 38. The quote, however, cannot be found in the 1994 edition of *Lay My Burden Down* I have access to. Kennedy states that it is actually from Folk-Say. A Regional Miscellany (cf. Kennedy 2017, 3–4).

³ cf. Warren 2006, 561. These three are usually named when discussing Black women writers who worked for the FWP. There were, however, at least four more. Two of them are still remembered today, namely dancer and anthropologist Katherine Dunham and Era Bell Thompson, who would later become editor of *Ebony* (Thompson, to be precise, did not work for the FWP but instead occupied a clerical position for the WPA). Two others remain a mystery: Kitty (De La) Chapelle, who, like Dunham and Walker, worked for the Illinois FWP, and Vivian Morris, who worked for the NYC FWP. The total number of African Americans on the FWP is unknown. Only Illinois, New York, and Louisiana had substantial Black Units—the Illinois FWP leading with 23 Black writers employed. It can be suggested that African Americans were underrepresented on the FWP, with the number of Black women amounting to a mere handful. For a list of African American writers on the Illinois FWP, see Bone and Courage 2011, 237.

⁴ To maintain segregation, the Florida FWP's "Negro Writers' Unit" had its offices in

the Clara White Mission, a soup kitchen and shelter housed in the old Globe Theater, half a mile away from the white state office and close to the Black Jacksonville neighborhood Sugar Hill. cf. Stewart 2016, 178.

⁵ The study never made it into print. A xerox copy of the FWP manuscript *The Negro in Florida, 1528-1940* can be found at the George A. Smathers Library in Gainesville, FL. A reconstructed version was published by Gary W. McDonough in 1993. See McDonough 1993.

⁶ Her most anthologized story from this period is "The Typewriter," published in 1926 by *Opportunity*, the magazine of the National Urban League. West won the publication's writing contest with this submission, which she shared with Zora Neale Hurston. She would later live in Hurston's Harlem apartment with her cousin Helene Johnson. See Sherrard-Johnson 2012, 60 and West 1926.

⁷ Federal One was the first federally sponsored project of the WPA, hence the name (August 2nd, 1935). It comprised the Federal Arts Project, the Federal Theatre Project, the Federal Music Project, and the Federal Writers' Project. See Taylor 2008, 184.

⁸ See Bascom 2008; Bordelon and Hurston 2001; West 2005. The greatest wealth of FWP material that qualifies as oral narratives told and collected by African American women can be found in Dorothy West's FWP portfolio: of 17 rediscovered FWP manuscripts, ten consist of, or include, interviews with Black women. As for Hurston, only fragments of her FWP interviews have survived. Her field notes from an expedition to a Florida turpentine camp include the words of Ethel Robinson, a "jook woman." The bigger part of Hurston's FWP manuscripts consists of prose: short and medium length articles that include pieces of oral narratives. She sometimes names her informants, but not consistently. The same is true for Margaret Walker's FWP manuscripts. What has survived of her folklore and narrative collecting either has the character of field notes, is included in longer manuscripts, or it is an edited version which includes no information on her informants. Other manuscripts have the character of reports or surveys and although they list women as informants, they cannot be classified as folklore, narrative, or life history.

⁹ Margaret Walker, 1939, "Yalluh Hammuh," series MSS55715, Library of Congress, Manuscript Division; an earlier version, dated 1937, should have been included in West's *New Challenge*. See Margaret Walker, 1937, "Yalluh Hammuh," Schlesinger Library, Radcliffe Institute.

¹⁰ As suggested by Paula Rabinowitz (1991, 11) and Hazel V. Carby (1987, 6).

¹¹ Two manuscripts of this tale exist, one dated 1937 and the other 1939. The latter is stored in the Library of Congress. This version indicates that Brown probably mixed things up: another folder in the archival box that holds the Yalluh Hammuh manuscript at the Library of Congress says "Mary P. Brown," who was another FWP writer. There is no indication whatsoever that Walker collected ex-slave narratives at the FWP. cf. Brown 2004, 148 and Rutkowski 2015, 77–78.

¹² Hints for the existence of such a collection can be found in online archive catalogs, which, however, seem to only hold state-specific folklore material (i.e., Vermont, Mon-

tana, Louisiana). Stetson Kennedy mentions a meeting on the planned anthology in his memoir (2017, 4). Thomas Barden notes an article in the *Southern Folklore Quarterly* 3 (1939) in which national folklore director Ben Botkin announces plans for a publication named *American Folk Stuff: A National Collection of Folk and Local Tales* (1992, 27).

¹³ See Walker 1939. The story of Stagolee is one often retold in folk culture. It is based on a real-life character: “On Christmas Day, 1895, a local pimp named ‘Stack’ Lee Shelton walked into a St. Louis bar wearing pointed shoes, a box-back coat, and his soon-to-be infamous milk-white John B. Stetson hat. Stack joined his friend Billy Lyons for a drink. Their conversation settled on politics, and soon it grew hostile: Lyons was a levee hand and, like his brother-in-law—one of the richest black men in St. Louis at the time—a supporter of the Republican party. Stack had aligned himself with the local black Democrats. The details of their argument aren’t known, but at some point Lyons snatched the Stetson off Stack’s head. Stack demanded it back, and when Lyons refused, shot him dead” (Kloc 2018).

¹⁴ The poem is written in the ballad meter: alternating by line, there are iambic tetrameters and iambic trimeters. The stanza form is a ballad stanza with four verses. The second and fourth lines rhyme, forming an ABCB pattern. It has eleven stanzas.

¹⁵ See Walker 1990. The poem also allows the conclusion that the robbery was a scheme planned by May and Pick-Ankle. This interpretation would certainly diminish May’s status as a folk-heroine within the poem. In comparison to the original tale, however, she still has a name and is not relegated to the status of a passive object, but to that of a partner in crime.

¹⁶ As suggested by Smethurst, “African-American women poets are noticeably absent from the various groups of writers associated with the Left until, at least, the establishment of the Federal Writers’ Project in 1935. This stands in contrast to the New Negro Renaissance, where black women, though suffering from various sorts of discrimination, were clearly important as writers and organizers, and were recognized as such.” (1999, 9). cf. Smethurst 1999, 58.

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Jay Mechling

TEN ESSENTIAL BOOKS NOT WRITTEN BY FOLKLORISTS

ABSTRACT

Folklorists need to acquire a cognitive map of all the disciplines that have something to offer the study of folklore and that, in turn, can benefit from what folklorists have to offer. This essay discusses ten books from various disciplines and interdisciplinary fields that should be on the folklorist's bookshelf. The author realizes that other folklorists would make a list with different choices. Running through the list are a few themes, including the emphasis in American Pragmatism on the individual's experience and the dialectical relationship between the individual's internal reality and external reality.

In order to realize folkloristics' interdisciplinary aspirations, folklorists must read beyond the canon of folklore scholarship and consider what other disciplines have to offer. Many do read outside the discipline, of course, some going to psychology, some to sociolinguistics, some to anthropology, some to sociology, and many to history. All of my academic training is interdisciplinary—interdisciplinary American Studies—and I have given a lot of thought to how one learns and teaches interdisciplinary thinking. I still have not figured that out.

What I do know is that the scholar, the folklorist in this case, should have in her mind a map of the disciplines. Unfortunately, it is the nature of disciplinary communities to guard their borders, to build walls against poachers, to claim a unique understanding of reality, despite evidence that many disciplines are really studying the same thing, just with their own ideas and language. The natural scientists are better at ignoring the borders than are humanists or social scientists, but that is a matter for another time. How does the folklorist acquire a working map of the disciplines that might have something to offer to the study of the symbolic behavior we call folklore?

Mechling, Jay. 2023. "Ten Essential Books Not Written by Folklorists." *TFH: The Journal of History and Folklore* 39 & 40: 58–85.

In an article addressing this question, the noted psychologist Donald Campbell (1969) recommends spreading faculty members across the campus such that in any office building professors of English and history and anthropology and psychology and even the natural sciences inhabit offices side-by-side, forcing conversations across the disciplines. His example when he published the article was the University of California, Santa Cruz, then a new campus and (unlike the other UC campuses) arranged by interdisciplinary colleges. This radical idea is rarely adopted, and even UCSC has pretty much abandoned much of what was radical and exciting about the campus in its early days. An example from folklore is the fact that the graduate program in Folklore and Mythology at the University of California, Los Angeles, was housed in the building for the Graduate School of Management, and before long Michael Owen Jones discovered in casual conversation that the management faculty who studied the symbolic lives of corporate cultures in essence did what folklorists do when they study the symbolic culture of a group, including groups of workers. Jones organized a conference and then an edited book, *Inside Organizations* (Jones, Moore, and Snyder 1988) to examine the phenomenon.

Since by their nature many academic administrators and their faculty tend to be risk-averse, there is little chance that schools will suddenly mix up their faculty offices. The next best thing is for folklorists to undertake the interdisciplinary project on their own, and I am offering this list and discussion of “ten essential books not written by folklorists” as my substitute for a walk down the interdisciplinary hallway, poking my head in one office or another to chat with the occupant.

There are books on this list that I always turn to when I am trying to understand human (and not always human) symbolic behavior, which I attempt to understand and interpret for readers. If I face a puzzling bit of behavior, I ask myself “what would Gregory Bateson say about this?” or “what would Berger and Luckmann say about this?” or “what would Mary Douglas say about this?” These thought experiments almost always lead to a breakthrough in my understanding of what I am observing.

This list is idiosyncratic, of course. Every reader of this essay would construct a different list, and my hope is that in the pages of

this journal readers will, in fact, write short commentaries about a book they find essential but not written by a folklorist. The books I have chosen have the virtue of being written for a general audience, which means the writing is clear, accessible, and usually free of disciplinary jargon; or, at least, if a term is essential, the author defines it for the reader in equally clear prose. In an article titled “Ten [New] Axioms for an American Cultur[al] Studies” (Mechling 1997), I offer as one of the axioms “eschew obfuscation,” a funny bumper sticker I saw on a car once. The authors here certainly eschew obfuscation.

The order of my presenting the books and offering a brief assessment of what I see so valuable in their ideas is alphabetical by the author’s last name. I limit myself to no more than one thousand words in each of the ten descriptions.

The reader will detect a few key ideas running through most if not all of these books. One thread derives from the perspective of American Pragmatism about the mind. A passage from William James’s Fifth Lecture published in his 1908 book *Pragmatism: A New Name for Some Old Ways of Thinking* puts it this way:

Our minds grow in spots; and like grease-spots the spots spread. But we let them spread as little as possible; we keep unaltered as much of our old knowledge, as many of our old prejudices and beliefs, as we can. We patch and tinker more than we renew. The novelty soaks in; it stains to ancient mass; but it is also tinged by what absorbs it. Our past apperceives and co-operates; and in the new equilibrium in which each step forward in the process of learning terminates, it happens seldom that the new fact is added RAW. More usually it is embedded cooked, as one might say, or stewed in the sauce of the old. (James 1908, 168–169)

James, one of the “fathers of American psychology,” put the individual’s mind at the center of his psychology and philosophy. What the folklorist can take from this passage is that the symbolic acts we call folklore, acts in the public world, become part of the individual’s internal reality, and the individual then projects back into the external, public world some of these thoughts and emotions. This dialectic of introjection and projection (as the psychoanalyst would call the process) should be the central topic of folkloristics, though too often

the folklorist looks only at the public symbolic acts, only half of the dynamic system. The folklorist needs to be as adept at analyzing the interior, private, often unconscious thoughts and emotions as she is the external events we call folklore. And the folklorist needs to be adept at analyzing all of the public channels of communication that carry messages about collective thoughts, emotions, and motives, including verbal and nonverbal communication, of course, but also print and electronic communications—mass-media messages in film, television, and video games, for example.

Many of the authors below view the dialectic between internal reality and external reality as the puzzle of human behavior to solve, and though not all of them are explicit about the role of psychoanalytic methods and concepts in unpacking the dialectic between our internal reality and the external world in which we live, the concept of the unconscious permeates the ideas in these books. The individual internalizes (introjects) public fantasies into her mind, where they mix with the individual's private fantasies (see James on grease spots) and then sometimes are projected back into the public world.

This is enough preface. Here are my ten books.

GREGORY BATESON, 1972, *STEPS TO AN ECOLOGY OF MIND* (NEW YORK: BALLANTINE)

I am a fan of the natural history essays by Stephen Jay Gould. He asks interesting questions and poses interesting puzzles, such as “is the zebra a white animal with black stripes or a black animal with white stripes?” (Gould 1983). He approaches the puzzles of evolutionary natural history much as a detective would when presented with a crime scene, observing the facts and constructing a story that makes “best sense” of the array of clues. And, like the author of so many detective novels, Gould makes the reader wait for the end of the story to reveal the solution.

Gould's approach reminds me of Clifford Geertz's (1973) argument that interpretive anthropology is “scientific” in the same way clinical inference is scientific. Like the clinical diagnostician, the anthropologist gathers an array of facts (symptoms in the medical version, symbolic acts in the anthropological version) and constructs

a story that makes “best sense” of the data, a hypothesis that then becomes the map for treating the patient who gets better or does not, in which case the physician gathers more evidence and formulates a new story. And so on. The anthropologist rarely can actually “test” her hypothesis, as can the physician, but she can usually explain why her “story” connecting the known facts is superior to competing stories.

I begin this discussion of Gregory Bateson with Gould and Geertz because finding the “pattern which connects” was Bateson’s goal. He and his wife, Margaret Mead, were among the group of scientists and social scientists who explored how insights into cybernetics (the science of communication and control) could help to make sense of everything that has the elements of a system, from machines and people to ecosystems. Thinking about patterns within systems and noting the importance of feedback proved very useful as Bateson explored human and nonhuman animal behavior, from ritual to therapeutic communication (he held the position of “ethnologist” at the Veterans Administration hospital in Palo Alto, California, from 1949 to 1962).

Elsewhere (Mechling 1983) I have explored the usefulness of Bateson’s application of cybernetics to cultural systems, so I shall not look here at the many provocative chapters in *Steps* but instead make the case for Bateson’s chapter “A Theory of Play and Fantasy” as essential reading for folklorists. This chapter, with ideas first presented at a conference of psychiatrists in 1954 and published in *Steps* in 1972, had its origins in the “puzzle” Bateson encountered during visits to San Francisco’s Fleishhacker Zoo. Observing otters and monkeys playing at the zoo, Bateson wondered how the animals could engage in acts of play that to the observer appeared to be fighting. Bateson realized that there must be some metacommunication between the playing animals, a metamessage “This Is Play,” and if the invitation to play was accepted, the animals understood that the messages (symbolic acts) within the play frame did not mean what they meant outside of that frame. The play frame is fragile and easily broken, though the players can re-establish the frame if they value the use of the frame in signaling their trusting relationships.

Nonhuman animals extend the invitation to play with nonverbal signals, and though human animals have language to initiate the invitation to play, in many cases the body language and initial acts

function as invitations. For example, two male adolescents do not say “let’s trade insults,” they just launch into the verbal duel with a trusted friend. Handelman (1977) and others have observed that the play frame and the ritual frame resemble each other.

Bateson’s frame theory of play (and fantasy) informs much of my writing, but Bateson got one thing wrong. His view of play is too romantic, assuming that play is always voluntary, that players exercise the same power in the play frame, and that the motives for entering the play frame are benign. Erving Goffman’s *Frame Analysis* (1972) shows how a socially constructed frame like play can be used to manipulate others (social relations as a confidence game); not everyone in the play frame shares motives nor does everyone have the same power. Sutton-Smith and Kelly-Byrne (1984) add that players can use play to “mask” other motives.

The “fantasy” part of Bateson’s “theory of play and fantasy” actually leads the inquiry into psychoanalytic theory, where the individual’s fantasies and the collective cultural fantasies we find in popular culture interact. Bateson does not mention Freud in his discussion, but he does note that the play frame “implies a special combination of primary and secondary processes” (1972, 185), that is, of both conscious and unconscious thoughts and desires. Two of the best psychoanalysts of childhood and youth—Melanie Klein (1960 [1932]) and Anna Freud (1937, 1965)—see children’s play as the royal road to the child’s unconscious life of the psyche. Klein puts it in a way strikingly similar to Bateson’s point: “in certain strata of [the child’s] mind communication between the conscious and the unconscious is as yet comparatively easy, so that the way back to the unconscious is much simpler to find (Klein 1960 [1932], 30).

Folklorists who are interested in the complicated relationship between the individual’s private fantasies found in dreams and fantasy play and the collective public fantasies acted out in cultural symbolic acts, from rituals to films, television, and videogames, actually are working in this realm mapped out by psychoanalysts, even if the folklorists do not adopt psychoanalytic concepts and language. Another book on my list—Nancy Chodorow’s *The Power of Feelings* (1999)—explores this dynamic from a sociological and psychoanalytic perspective (see below).

PETER L. BERGER AND THOMAS LUCKMANN, 1966, *THE SOCIAL CONSTRUCTION OF REALITY: A TREATISE IN THE SOCIOLOGY OF KNOWLEDGE* (GARDEN CITY, NY: ANCHOR/ DOUBLEDAY)

When faced with a puzzling bit of human behavior, I ask myself “what would Peter Berger say?” as often as I ask that question of Gregory Bateson. I read *The Social Construction of Reality* (SCR) as a new assistant professor in 1971; I knew immediately that this “treatise in the sociology of knowledge” addressed my interest in epistemology, an interest sparked in high school and then ignited the fall of my first year in college when I read William James’s *Pragmatism* (1908). My University of California, Davis, American Studies colleagues and I liked the SCR book so much that for much of the 1970s the “Introduction to American Studies” course for majors consisted of reading that one book, only 189 pages (plus notes), one small piece every week for the quarter, and writing a 750-word essay each week applying the ideas of that section to other cultural events they encountered in everyday life. To this day, former students write to me to say that reading this book was a transformational experience.

The academic year 1975–76 I was the youngest Fellow at the Yale National Humanities Institute where I met another Fellow, Henry Glassie, who that year guided my reading in folklore (Bill Ferris was at Yale then and frequently joined the Institute seminars). Peter Berger, then at Rutgers University, was a monthly guest scholar at the Institute, and since I seemed to be the only one of the twenty Fellows who even knew who Peter Berger was, I got to spend hours talking with him every month. I went on to write and publish articles on Berger’s work (Mechling 1979, 1984, 1985, 1986). I begin with this history of my engagement with Peter Berger’s work to signal how powerful and lasting has been his influence on my own work. I shall refer to the author of SCR as Berger, since I am familiar enough with Berger’s writing style that I know he likely wrote this book, consulting with Luckmann.

It is clear to me that Berger works in the Pragmatic tradition (see Mechling 1986), as I do. Like William James, Berger casts aside the simple correspondence theory of truth and reality. Berger is as interested in everyday knowledge, “commonsense” knowledge, as he is in

more specialized knowledge, all constructed through social interaction. Commonsense knowledge is taken-for-granted, in the “natural attitude” as social theorists would put it. Geertz on “Common Sense as a Cultural System” (1983 [1975]) is worth reading in this regard. The line of Pragmatic thinking from James through Dewey and Berger and Geertz and Goffman and Kenneth Burke (see next section) and Abrahams (1985, 2005) is clear to me.

SCR establishes a vocabulary for understanding “society as objective reality” and “society as subjective reality,” a distinction that runs through many of the books on this list. We create objective reality in social interaction, from small institutions like families to larger ones. Public knowledge in an institution becomes “sedimented” as “tradition” (1966, 67), a familiar idea to folklorists. The author adopts role theory, which also should be familiar to folklorists. When the author turns to “the internalization of reality,” the role of the small group, starting with the family but then in larger circles of small friendship groups, becomes clear. The family is the site of primary socialization, a foundation on which secondary socialization in friendship groups and school and youth groups is built.

In considering individual identity, the author posits a personality type that can practice “cool alternation” (1966, 172), moving effortlessly between roles learned and played in different settings, a kind of code-switching. So count Berger and Luckmann among the others (Goffman, Toelken, Wallace, and Sutton-Smith, for example) who insist that people “perform” an identity that can be false and manipulative.

SUSAN BORDO, 1993, *UNBEARABLE WEIGHT: FEMINISM, WESTERN CULTURE, AND THE BODY* (BERKELEY: UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA PRESS) AND 1999, *THE MALE BODY: A NEW LOOK AT MEN IN PUBLIC AND IN PRIVATE* (NEW YORK: MACMILLAN PUBLISHERS)

The specialty dubbed “bodylore” in the study of folklore draws upon a much larger body of interdisciplinary scholarship on how we “think” with and about our bodies. Breaking free from the longstanding mind/body dichotomy, natural scientists, social scientists, and humanists continue to explore the unity of mind and body. One of my favorite

books in this body of body scholarship is Frank Wilson's *The Hand* (1999). A neuroscientist who treats a range of people with damaged hands, Wilson explains how the hand teaches the brain as much as the brain teaches the hand. Folklorists already are familiar, I hope, with Lakoff's and Johnsons's *Metaphors We Live By* (1980), and Mary Douglas's (1970) attention to the body as a condensed symbol of society. Susan Sontag's *Illness as Metaphor* (1978) is in this vein, as is Murphy's (2001) book on "the metaphors men live by." This is a small sample. The focus here is on Bordo.

I do not consider the inclusion of two books for this entry a violation of my single book rule since these two books by Bordo are really two aspects of the same body project—the first on females and the other on males. Her 1993 book *Unbearable Weight* cemented her reputation in the cultural analysis of bodies. She charts what she calls "the empire of images," and she surveys a range of visual images of women in popular culture (film, television, advertising), documenting the history of a normative female body—an impossible norm. Bordo's project is to show how these images harm women, most dangerously in the eating disorders that sometimes kill women, but also in the practice of seeking cosmetic surgery to reproduce on one's own face and body the normative "ideal." If the folklorist chooses not to read the book, I recommend reading the eighteen-page Preface to the tenth anniversary edition of the book (2003) for a concise look at "the postmodern body" and the state of the body problem she wrote about in 1993. Bordo argues that the images of women in the mass media "offer fantasies of safety, self-containment, acceptance, [and] immunity from pain and hurt" (2003, xxi), yet another book on my list that examines the relationship between private and public fantasies, a reason for folklorists to constantly ask what fantasies in public culture show up in the symbolic action we call folklore.

I shall focus here on her 1999 book, largely because I work so much in masculinity studies. The title of the book is *The Male Body* but really it is primarily about the penis as a cultural object and, I should add, about the gaze at the penis as a cultural practice. She opens the book with a long prologue titled "My Father's Body" (1999, 3–11), and she soon offers a chapter named "Hard and Soft," where she writes "[w]e live in a culture that encourages men to think of themselves as their penises" (1999, 36). She affirms that both bi-

ology and culture are relevant in thinking about bodies (1999, 39). She pursues the meaning of hard bodies and the paradox of the hard and soft penis through several genres, from art and photography to popular culture genres such as advertising, film, and television. Like other cultural historians (e.g., Jeffords 1994), Bordo sees the male body as a condensed symbol of the society, a bounded system—as Douglas (1966) would say—with an inside and an outside and the fear of invasion. The language of “soft versus hard” permeates political discourse, from international relations to domestic politics.

Bordo notes that American boys are socialized in a public culture (but also in most private families) that values strong, hard bodies in males. Many boys are ashamed of their weak, soft bodies and work to value muscles and strength (1999, 56–57), suffering “muscle dysphoria” in parallel with female anorexia (1999, 221). Another part of the body the male does not want soft is the penis, and Bordo explores in her chapter “What is a Phallus?” the contrast between the phallus as a cultural symbol of masculine strength and patriarchal authority, on the one hand, and the actual male organ, which often does not “measure up” to the phallus as “an impossible ideal,” on the other (1999, 95).

Those folklorists devoted to charting the linkages between folklore and mass-mediated, popular culture will appreciate Bordo’s chapters on “public images” of the male body found in 1950s Hollywood films, the emergence of gay male bodies and stories in the 1960s, the display of the ideal male body in print and electronic advertising (mainly underwear and male beauty products), and more.

If Bordo’s cultural analysis of male bodies seems far from what interests and assists folklorists, I can point to what is useful to me as a scholar who has written a lot about masculinity, and in particular masculinity as constructed, maintained, and repaired (if necessary) in the male friendship group, a folk group. The key insight is that males create bonds and communicate thoughts and emotions in the male friendship group far more often with their bodies than with their words. This insight helped me understand the meanings of the organized games and spontaneous play I observed over two decades of studying a California Boy Scout troop at their summer encampment high in the Sierra Nevada (Mechling 2001), and then in my analysis of the ways male warriors use their bodies to manage relationships in

their friendship groups (Mechling 2021; Wallis and Mechling 2019). Many folklorists are working in the area of bodylore without realizing it.

KENNETH E. BOULDING, 1956, *THE IMAGE: KNOWLEDGE IN LIFE AND SOCIETY* (ANN ARBOR, MI: UNIVERSITY OF MICHIGAN PRESS)

I easily could have listed *Plans and the Structure of Behavior* (Miller, Galanter, and Pribram 2013 [1960]) and *Culture and Personality* (Wallace 1970 [1961]) as books I turn to often, but instead I include Boulding's book, which provides so many ideas to the other two. I see William James's *Pragmatism* in all of those books, as they provide ideas and a language for understanding the individual mind and how it guides choices of behavior, and in this regard I also see connections between Boulding's book and the books by Berger and Luckmann and Chodorow and Sapolsky on this list. Each employs a slightly different language to describe the relation between individual, subjective knowledge (ideas and impulses and emotions), and behavior in the external world of other people, objects, and public events. Boulding uses the word "image" to name the internal "knowledge" the individual possesses and draws upon for action.

Boulding begins his book with a few fundamental "propositions," the first of which is "behavior depends on the image" (1956, 6). Just as James would put it, the "image is built up as a result of all past experience of the possessor of the image" (1956, 6). His second proposition, the "meaning of a message is the change which it produces in the image" (1956, 7), reflects his fairly new (in 1956) embrace of cybernetics, which interested Bateson so much (see above). In cybernetics and in the social, behavioral science adaptations of those ideas, meaning is created only in difference. Images do change. Boulding sounds like James when he avers that "there are no such things as 'facts'...only messages filtered through a changeable value system" (1956, 14).

At this point, Boulding stumbles into an error, I think. He correctly makes the relationship between the individual's private image and the public image (from individual conversations to grand cultural discourses) the focus of his laying out the idea of images, but he seems to

think that every individual exposed to the public image incorporates those images into her private image. Wallace (1970 [1961]) makes an important correction to this assumption of shared images. Wallace's model of the relationship between culture and individual personality posits that for society to work, the actors do not need to share cognitive maps (images), which would be impossible in a complex culture. All the actors need to share is complementary cognitive maps. Social interaction and larger organizations of society can "work" so long as people act "as if" they share private images, even if that is not true. Humans (like many animals) do learn to read external cues about the other's internal thoughts and emotions, but these are just guesses that can be wrong. Wallace's point that culture is not about the replication of uniformity but instead is about the organization of diversity makes the folklorist rethink the accepted view that in folk groups the actors share "high context" (restricted communication)—that sense of sharing is not necessary, as Toelken points out in his article on the superstitions of Northwest fishermen (1985).

Boulding (like Bateson) draws upon ideas from cybernetics (1956, 20–21) to understand the exchange of messages in all sorts of "organizations" (organized systems), from simple cells to forests to large groups to whole societies. The communication patterns within folk groups have the same patterns as other systems; the challenge is to find (as Bateson puts it) "the pattern which connects." A few folklorists have paid systematic attention to the feature of feedback in the symbolic actions we call folk performances, like the role of an interruption when someone is telling a story, for example (Georges 1981).

Boulding does not discount the unconscious and subconscious elements in an individual's private image (1956, 52–54). The public image circulating in a society shows up in all forms of communication, from simple conversations between two people to large-scale narratives in the mass media. Boulding says that "every public image begins in the mind of some single individual and only becomes public as it is transmitted and shared" (1956, 64). The individual incorporates some of the public image into her private image, though the incorporation is not always conscious. Chodorow (see below) uses psychoanalytic language to discuss the individual's projection of her private reality into the public sphere, possibly for others to absorb into their personal image, while she introjects elements of the public

sphere into her private world. Some folklorists write about the travel of public folk images to the mass-media of television, film, and videogames, but most of those folklorists write about the link in the other direction, from images in the folk group back into the individual's image. Those who write about popular culture are familiar with the ways those media "poach" ideas and images from folklore.

Boulding notes that public images produce a "transcript," a "record in more or less permanent form which can be handed down from generation to generation" (1956, 64). A system of public transcripts becomes a "map" of shared knowledge, an idea that likely led Wallace to write about cognitive maps and non-sharing. Folk traditions carry such "transcripts." Boulding sustains his model of private and public images as he continues with chapters on "economic life," the political process, and American history (e.g., the image of "Manifest Destiny" and other cultural myths).

KENNETH BURKE, 1945, *A GRAMMAR OF MOTIVES* (BERKELEY: UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA PRESS)

I owe to Elizabeth Walker Mechling, my wife and coauthor of several essays in rhetorical criticism, my familiarity with Burke's work, and in particular his book *A Grammar of Motives* (GoM). In graduate school in Speech Communication (rhetoric), she had a teacher well-versed in Burke's method "dramatism" and its application to a range of symbolic acts. In the course of our writing together, I came to appreciate Burke's explicit connection to the Pragmatism of James and Dewey. Later, I saw how much Roger Abrahams drew from Burke in his work on the "poetics of everyday life" (2005). Elizabeth and I appreciate the relevance of rhetorical theory to folklore and of folklore studies to rhetorical criticism, though we are in a minority in both scholarly communities.

The opening sentence of GoM announces a goal familiar to folklorists. "What is involved," asks Burke, "when we say what people are doing and why they are doing it?" (1945, xv). He then introduces his "pentad," five key terms in his method: Act, Scene, Agent, Agency, Purpose. The most important of these is Purpose, or Motive. Any "complete statement about motives will offer some kind of answers

to these five questions: what was done (act), when or where it was done (scene), who did it (agent), how he did it (agency), and why (purpose)” (1945, xv).

I immediately began to see the pentad as folklorists might pose the questions. “Who performed what traditional symbolic act, in what context (time and place), how, for what audience, and why?” I added a sixth question—“what was the outcome?”—because I think we need to consider the failures of folklore performances (Mechling 1991). Note that all of these elements of the symbolic act can be observed with the important exception of motive. We must infer motive from everything else we know about the actor, even if the actor offers a motive (people lie and there also are unconscious motives for most acts). The method, as Geertz says, is “clinical inference.”

NANCY J. CHODOROW, 1999, *THE POWER OF FEELINGS: PERSONAL MEANING IN PSYCHOANALYSIS, GENDER, AND CULTURE* (NEW HAVEN, CT: YALE UNIVERSITY PRESS)

My first acquaintance with the work of Nancy Chodorow was back in the very early 1980s when I read *The Reproduction of Mothering* (1979), a book drawing on both her sociological expertise and her training in psychoanalysis, and I saw immediately its usefulness for the analysis of the social construction of masculinity in young people, a topic I was immersed in then, having been doing fieldwork with the Boy Scout troop since 1976. During that time I was reading a lot of psychoanalytic literature by feminist scholars, always keeping in mind what those books had to say about masculinity. The 1970s was a moment when feminist scholars turned their tools from the analysis of women to the analysis of men, just in time for my extended work on the Boy Scouts.

I returned to Chodorow recently when I began reading widely in the scientific literature on emotions (the unconscious biology) and accompanying feelings (the conscious experience triggered by the emotion), fed mainly by Sutton-Smith’s argument that play and games evoke secondary emotions in order to keep primary emotions under control (2017). Moreover, I had been reading much on primatology, a field interested in the ways nonhuman primates communicate

their emotions without language. When Chodorow's 1999 book came along, I was ready.

The first sentence of the Introduction reads "[t]his book is a contribution to our understanding of individual subjectivity" (1999, 1). That sentence should suggest to folklorists why they should pay attention to Chodorow. When folklorists pay attention to the individual, it is usually the performer of a tradition, but it is always seen in the context of the group. Chodorow is saying something different. She brings to her work both the "sociological eye and the psychoanalytic ear" (Chodorow 2020), which is to say she sees the meaning of any symbolic act as drawing both from inner reality (emotions, thoughts) and external reality, as the individual projects meanings out into the public world and introjects public meanings into her private world. "Experienced meaning," she writes, "combines the individually idiosyncratic and the cultural, [and] is situated and emergent in particular encounters and particular psychic moments for the individual" (1999, 2).

Individuals have "unconscious fantasies" the psyche taps to reduce anxieties and fears (1999, 13), and these fantasies encounter public fantasies (group expressions acted out in symbolic behavior, but also in popular culture). In the case of gender, for example, "an individual, personal creation and a projective emotional and fantasy animation of cultural categories create the meaning of gender and gender identity for any individual" (1999, 69). Mapping the projection of the individual's fantasy into the public realm (in a friendship group, for example) and the introjection of public fantasies into the private psyche would force the folklorist to pay more particular attention to the cultural fantasies consumed by the individual.

This insight that the individual's particular experience of culture means that "different people in a culture might experience cultural meanings in different ways" (1999, 147) echoes the views above (e.g., Boulding, also Wallace) that people do not "share culture" as internal maps for navigating cultural scenes. Rather, individuals "share" a range of public fantasies, some of which they internalize and some of which they do not.

Chodorow draws our attention to emotions (the unconscious biological state) and feelings (the conscious experience triggered by the emotion) as primary materials for both projection and introjection.

She seeks to describe an “anthropology of self and feelings” (1999, 131), allying herself with the “anthropology of experience” pursued by Victor Turner and Edward Bruner (1986).

MARY DOUGLAS, 1966, *PURITY AND DANGER: AN ANALYSIS OF THE CONCEPTS OF POLLUTION AND TABOO* (LONDON: ROUTLEDGE AND KEGAN PAUL)

I am unsure whether I read this Douglas book or Barbara Babcock-Abrahams’s article “Why Frogs are Good to Think and Dirt is Good to Reflect On” (1975) first, but they both played a role in giving me an interpretive handle on the importance of symbolic “dirt,” matter out of place, in so much of the symbolic behavior we call folklore. This book links bodylore and ritual, but also play. Douglas’s *Natural Symbols* (1973) is another good candidate for this list, but I think *Purity and Danger* leads us to richer insights into the power of liminal things and the drive in the human psyche to resolve the ambiguity of liminal things (and experiences).

ANNA FREUD, 1937 [2018], *THE EGO AND THE MECHANISM OF DEFENCE* (LONDON: HOGARTH PRESS AND ROUTLEDGE)

This is the oldest book on my list, and I certainly could have pointed here to any of her father’s books—most likely *The Interpretation of Dreams* (1965 [1905]), the book familiar to folklorists if they entertain psychoanalytic interpretations of folklore and mythology at all. Instead, I recommend this book by Freud’s daughter for its elaboration of her father’s ideas about the defense mechanisms the ego deploys in its management of the demands of the id and the unconscious “repressed instinctual impulses, affects, and fantasies” (1937 [2018], 3) that rise to the surface, threatening to disturb everyday life. Whereas the ego operates on the reality principle, in the id the “primary process prevails,” the drive to derive pleasure (1937 [2018], 7). In this book, Anna Freud fleshes out her father’s mention of defense mechanisms with a catalogue of defense mechanisms the ego draws upon to keep disturbing instincts at bay, primarily sexual and aggressive instincts, both of which, if expressed openly, can damage the

cohesiveness of the group.

Reading Anna's book made me realize that we might consider all of the symbolic acts we call folklore defense mechanisms meant to control unwanted and destructive impulses and thoughts. That is a bold claim, but the more I thought about it, the more I could see in a number of examples of folklore performances the usefulness of a single defense mechanism or more than one in concert with the ego's management of the id. "When repudiating the claims of instinct," writes Anna, the ego must address the emotions and feelings (the affects) associated with those instinctual impulses (1937 [2018], 32). "Love, longing, jealousy, mortification, pain, and mourning" accompany sexual impulses while "hatred, anger, and rage" accompany aggressive impulses (1937 [2018], 32). It is worth entertaining the idea that all of the traditional symbolic acts we call folklore are manifestations of defense mechanisms in response to sexual and/or aggressive impulses driven by the id. This view reminds me of Roger Abrahams's (1968) point that so many short form folk performances function to allay social or psychological anxiety (even fear).

Brian Sutton-Smith makes a similar claim when he shows how the secondary emotions on display in games appear to keep primary emotions under control (2017), which led me to claim that perhaps a key function of all folklore is to make our emotions visible to others and to ourselves (Mechling 2019). In fact, Anna cites Melanie Klein's play technique in the psychoanalysis of children as the most useful access point to the unconscious of the child (1937 [2018], 38).

Anna discusses nine defense mechanisms and examines actual case studies of hers and others, focusing particularly on children's fantasies (dreams, stories, and play) as examples of defense mechanisms against sexual and aggressive thoughts and impulses. In my own work I have found a few of the mechanisms (repression, reaction formation, projection, introjection, reversal) very useful in puzzling out the meanings of observable symbolic behavior, such as my analysis of the social masochism involved in male hazing (Mechling 2021).

Of special interest to those who study the folklore of children and adolescents are Anna's chapters on the role of defense mechanisms in puberty, at a moment when the sexual and aggressive instincts are so much more powerful than the still-developing ego (1937 [2018], 137–172). She uses the word "dread" to describe the pubescent's re-

sponse to the strength of the sexual and aggressive instincts, an apt descriptor (1937 [2018], 166).

The reader should not assume that Anna's analysis of defense mechanisms applies only to children and adolescents. The hormones of puberty and adolescence certainly create new and dreadful instincts during a period of life when the pleasure drives of the amygdala far outrun the slowly developing frontal cortex in the brain (see Sapolsky, below). At the same time, trying defenses against those instincts, the young person makes new attachments and explores friendships, which both displace libidinal energies and provide new objects of sexual fantasy. The challenges of close friendships for adults resemble the challenges in youth, as men and women must navigate the complex feelings of close friendships, both opposite sex and same sex.

BARBARA G. MYERHOFF, 1979, *NUMBER OUR DAYS* (NEW YORK: DUTTON)

I could have chosen any of the very fine books and essays by Myerhoff on ritual (e.g., *Peyote Hunt*, 1974), but I very much admire *Number Our Days* as an example of reflexive ethnography, as she turns her interpretive skills back on herself, and she is very frank about her feelings and motives for studying a community of Jewish older people at a Jewish senior center in Los Angeles. She anticipates that she will be an "old Jewish woman" someday (alas, she died much too young).

Her description of the center and its members is both touching and funny. She admits that sometimes she does not like these people, with their petty arguments and their occasional selfishness. She feels guilty expressing that occasional dislike; I have encountered only one other ethnographer who admits he does not like his informant.

Myerhoff's narrative strategies impress me so much I adopted a specific strategy she employs in her text for my 2001 book *On My Honor: Boys Scouts and the Making of American Youth*. Myerhoff decides she needs to learn Yiddish to understand all the conversations she was witnessing at the center, so she approaches Schmuel, a Jewish man about the same age as those at the Center but who is

disdainful of those folks. He gives Myerhoff lessons in Yiddish, but he is also her sounding board for what she is seeing and hearing as she struggles to make interpretive sense of it all. She often explains to Schmuel clearly and without jargon whatever anthropological theory or idea she is trying out in order to understand the interpersonal dynamics at the center, and Schmuel offers his own interpretations. The narrative strategy I admire here is Myerhoff's "smuggling" anthropological theory and ideas into the book by using them in her conversations with Schmuel.

I used the book in both the "American Folklore and Folklife" and the "Religion in American Lives" courses I taught both as large lecture courses and as honors seminars for first-year students. In these courses, I asked the students "do you think Schmuel is a real person?" Their eyes opened in surprise, disbelief, and maybe a bit of panic. "What if Myerhoff invents the character of Schmuel in order to add some theory and ideas into the book?" I continued. "And does it matter?"

Of course, I knew that I was challenging their assumption that a teacher would not assign a book with such a "trick" in the narrative. Can't one trust a book's narrative? Sure, there are novels and memoirs that play with the reader's trust (e.g., John Crawford's 2005 Iraq war memoir *The Last True Story I will Ever Tell*), but *Number Our Days* is nonfiction. What else are you not telling us, Professor Mechling?

That leads to what I consider a fruitful discussion about writing, narrative devices, and more. After 2001, I would tell students that I did something like that in my Boy Scout book. I admit at the outset that my narrative of a two weeks' summer encampment by a California troop high in the Sierra Nevada is a composite of many things I observed over twenty years of camping with the troop. The book is a fiction, in that sense, something "made up," but I also assure the reader that everything in the book is "true."

Myerhoff's book inspired me to use the staff campfire conversation after the boys bedded down to do my own "smuggling" into the book ideas from the social sciences and psychoanalysis through conversations with the other adult men at camp, trying out interpretations for that audience, who pretty much bought everything except the psychoanalytic interpretations (not surprising).

What reading *Number Our Days* made me realize is that well-writ-

ten fiction and well-written ethnography are not much different. Some fiction reads like good ethnography; I would say that Stephen King's novella *The Body* (1982), the basis for the 1986 film *Stand By Me*, is the best ethnography of the friendship group of twelve-year-old boys I have read. Brian Sutton-Smith, the developmental psychologist and folklorist of the lives of children and adolescents, began his career writing novels about a friendship group of boys in his hometown in New Zealand (Sutton-Smith 1950, 1961, 1976). The American Folklore Society even has a "Creative Writing and Storytelling" Section.

What is gained or lost if we read *Number Our Days* as a novel rather than a "true" ethnography? Some folklorists will chafe at that question, holding tight to the notion that folkloristics is "scientific," with no room for fiction. Geertz (1973) insists that interpretive anthropology (including folklore studies, I would say) is scientific, but it is an inductive rather than a deductive science, more like "clinical inference" in medicine than anything else. The best novelists and short story writers and playwrights approach human experience much like the clinical diagnostician, observing human behavior and making up a story to make best sense of that behavior. Creative writing is not science, but its observation of the human condition can be as insightful as the best writing by anthropologists, sociologists, folklorists, historians, and psychologists.

To return to the question, does it matter if Schmucl is real or not? No.

ROBERT SAPOLSKY, 2018, *BEHAVE: THE BIOLOGY OF HUMANS AT OUR BEST AND WORST* (NEW YORK: PENGUIN BOOKS)

It takes a special kind of nerve to recommend that folklorists read this 790-page book by a neuroscientist who also has expertise in primatology, two fields which, in my view, offer the most interesting ideas to folklorists for understanding the symbolic behavior we call folklore. I could have recommended reading some key neuroscientists who discuss the brain and emotions (e.g., Damasio 2000; LeDoux 1996) and some key primatologists who examine what the study of primates teaches us about human empathy (e.g., de Waal 2009), but Sapolsky's dual expertise provides a comprehensive and readable introduction to

current understanding of the primate brain (we are primates too) and behavior.

Around 2019 or so, a few folklorists who were crossing disciplinary lines to see what the natural sciences might contribute to folkloristics formed the “Science and Folklore” interest section of the American Folklore Society as a gathering place for folklorists interested in the approach and any “fellow travelers” from science. Some folklorists, for example, see in neuroscience (especially the science of the brain and the mind) possible clues pertaining to how people form and cling to false belief (Shermer 2011). Some look to technological advances in brain science for insights into what is happening in the brain when we tell or hear stories (Armstrong 2020). Brandon Barker and Claiborne Rice consult the cognitive sciences in order to understand the *Folk Illusions* (2019) they find in children’s play. I see Sapolsky’s book as crucial in the folklorists’ exploration of the ways biology and culture, nature and nurture, interact in the creation of symbolic acts we call folklore. I would be a fool to try to summarize the book in one thousand words, but here are some important highlights for folklorists.

Sapolsky begins with the brain, of course, and early in the book he makes clear the puzzle of human aggression and violence, but (as the subtitle of his book avers) he is also interested in human behavior at its best. He asks what the biological bases of “cooperation, affiliation, reconciliation, empathy, and altruism” are (2018, 3). These are all important behaviors to consider in the study of folklore. His interest in aggression echoes the point made by Anna Freud and others that the two sorts of thoughts and impulses arising in youth and continuing throughout life are sex and aggression, and Sapolsky tells us that “both sex and aggression activate the sympathetic nervous system” (2018, 43).

As a primatologist, Sapolsky reminds us that we humans are animals, and that the line between us and other primates is not neat (see Mechling 2023 on some of this history). Moreover, the human brain is extremely malleable; our embodied experiences teach the brain as much as the brain teaches our bodies. Everyday experiences (folklore) add to the flexibility of the brain.

As a scholar who studies the folklore of children and adolescents, I have found very useful the neurologist’s point that the amygdala and

the entire limbic system of which it is a central organ are crucial to the impulses leading to aggression and sexual behavior. The psychoanalyst would say the limbic system operates from the pleasure principle, whereas the prefrontal cortex provides rational control (the reality principle) of the impulses. The problem is that the amygdala matures far faster in the brain than does the frontal cortex (as late as age twenty-four or so), leading adolescents into impulsive and risky behavior.

Sapolsky warns against a “false dichotomy” between cognition and emotion (2018, 54), a key point made by Chodorow and others. Sapolsky’s experience as a primatologist doubtless leads to his attention to the communication of emotion between actors, as other primates have only their bodies to communicate mood and emotions—crucial for group bonding and avoiding conflict. We humans also do a lot of communication of moods and emotions with our bodies, and my ethnographic work with adolescent boys affirms the importance of body signals among a male friendship group that does not talk much about their moods and emotions.

In an earlier book *The Trouble With Testosterone* (1997), Sapolsky makes the detailed case that human aggression and violence have both biological and social roots (chimps can be quite aggressive and violent). He picks up that argument in *Behave*, challenging the popular notion that increased testosterone increases aggression. In fact, he argues that testosterone “promotes prosociality in the right setting” (2018, 107). Testosterone, along with other hormones like oxytocin (the “love hormone”), can drive bonding and empathy (see de Waal 2009 on empathy in chimps). Significantly, both physical aggression and sex flood the brain with the same cocktail of hormones.

Sapolsky joins others on this list of essential books in seeing play as a rich interaction site for learning a range of solitary and social behaviors necessary for peaceful bonding in the family and in larger groups. Play is as important in human development as it is in other primates (recall that Bateson arrived at his frame theory of play and fantasy while watching mammals play at the zoo). Sapolsky also spotlights altruism and empathy as emotion-based behaviors crucial to avoiding violence (2018, 521–541).

I have had to skip over much of what Sapolsky has to say, but I leave the reader with this claim. The “new frontier” for folklorists is

and should be an understanding of the brain, along with its neurology and endocrinology, toward analysis of the symbolic acts we call folklore. Sapolsky's *Behave* is a good place to start.

HERE ENDETH THE LESSON

In the Episcopalian *Book of Common Prayer*, this phrase follows public readings from the Bible in a service. That seems an appropriate phrase to conclude the reading assignments I have given my fellow folklorists.

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2023 WAYLAND D. HAND PRIZE RECIPIENTS

The History and Folklore Section of the American Folklore Society annually awards the Wayland D. Hand Prize for an outstanding book that combines historical and folkloristic perspectives. The prize honors Wayland D. Hand (1907–1986) who served as president of the American Folklore Society (AFS) and in his teaching and scholarship encouraged the integration of historical and folkloristic research. For a list of past winners, visit <https://americanfolkloresociety.org/our-work/prizes/wayland-d-hand-prize/>.

The finalists for this year's Wayland D. Hand Prize were:

Sarah Covington, 2022, *The Devil from Over the Sea: Remembering & Forgetting Oliver Cromwell in Ireland*. Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press.

Kristina R. Gaddy, 2022, *Well of Souls: Uncovering the Banjo's Hidden History*. New York: W. W. Norton.

John M. Shaw, 2022, *Following the Drums: African American Fife & Drum Music in Tennessee*. Jackson, MS: University Press of Mississippi.

Steve Siporin, 2022, *The Befana Is Returning: The Story of a Tuscan Festival*. Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Press.

From which, the Selection Committee chose:

Steve Siporin's *The Befana Is Returning: The Story of a Tuscan Festival*, published by the University of Wisconsin Press (2022).

The Committee felt that Dr. Siporin's description of the centuries-old mumming tradition of the Befanata centered in the small rural town of Pitigliano (population approximately 4,000) in Southern Tuscany, Italy, was a significant advance in addressing the relationship between history, tradition, and performance in contemporary folk

studies. Through an historical ethnography of the Befanat—a kindly old woman or grandmotherly witch who delivers toys, candies, and giftst—Dr. Siporin offers keen insights into her character and role in promoting community, into the deep symbolism of foods given to the revelers, and into the characteristics of the songs and narratives associated with the festive custom. Siporin's crisp writing captures the immediate experiences of performers and audiences in action, allowing the reader to experience the festive moment as a system of living relationships in which folk performance, tradition, and local history intersect to represent tradition as it passes from quaint survival to a past preserved in amber to an ongoing part of Pitigliano's everyday life.

Steve Siporin

EXCERPT FROM WAYLAND D. HAND PRIZE WINNER *THE BEFANA IS RETURNING: THE STORY OF A TUSCAN FESTIVAL*

CHAPTER FOUR

FOOD: THE INTOLERABLE TORMENT OF HUNGER

Our land is called poverty, where one does the dance of hunger.

—Lullaby from Apulia

La Befana è poverina
lèi non ha salciccia e pane
per i figli che hanno fame
va cercando da mangiar.

The Befana is poor.
She doesn't have sausage and bread
for her children who are hungry.
She is searching for something to eat.

—“La Befana”

Chronic hunger, a fact of everyday life for centuries, was one of the generating and sustaining forces behind the Befanata. Folklorist Nevia Grazzini considers the reciprocal exchange of song and other entertainment for food to be among the Befanata's oldest elements (1995, 25–26). Alessandro Sistri says that begging represents the nucleus of the entire ritual (1996, 36).¹ In fact, I could find no Befanata tradition, historical or contemporary, that did not dispense food, or at least drink, following a performance featuring song and sometimes a skit.

Preparation of the food to be shared with squad members requires a major effort on the part of the hosts. Before I observed a Befanata for the first time, I witnessed the loving, labor-intensive food prepa-

From *The Befana is Returning: The Story of a Tuscan Festival* by Steve Siporin. Reprinted by permission of the University of Wisconsin Press. © 2022 by the Board of Regents of the University of Wisconsin System. All rights reserved. Images have been omitted but can be found in the full book.

Siporin, Steve. 2023. “Excerpt from Wayland D. Hand Prize Winner *The Befana Is Rising: The Story of a Tuscan Festival*.” *TFH: The Journal of History and Folklore* 39 & 40: 88–119.

ration that is part of the custom. Three generations of women in one household—Elisa (mother and grandmother), Angela (daughter and mother), and Martina (daughter and granddaughter)—spent several days preparing food to be served (pizza, focaccia, sandwiches, and an array of cakes and tarts) as well as food packages to be carried away (including homemade sausages and wine). Over the course of the Epiphany eve that followed, seven groups totaling about 150 performers were fed by the Nizzis. Each group was also given a package of food to put in its basket when it left. Because the sausages and wine were products of the Nizzis' own land and labor, it could be said that their preparations had actually begun months earlier and had also involved Angela's husband, Roberto. One would have to multiply this kind of food preparation by the number of homes that host Befana squads on Epiphany eve to get a vision of what getting ready for the *gran festa* means in the Pitigliano countryside.

The amount of expense and effort undertaken by so many households might seem to indicate that food is the main point of the Befanata. Anthropologists of the school of Marvin Harris are likely to agree. Their functionalist, materialist approach emphasizes the "hard-nosed," practical economics behind a society's food culture, especially formal and informal rules of consumption (Harris 1985 [1996]). Befanata squads certainly appreciate good food and drink, and no doubt these refreshments fuel the exuberance and generosity of the evening. But it is hard to believe that the necessity and pleasure of food alone adequately explain its prominence in the Befanata; food's symbolic value is important, too. In contrast to Harris, anthropologists like Mary Douglas, her successors, and others emphasize the symbolic in their commentaries on culture-based eating behavior (Douglas 1966, 1975, 1997).² Both types of perspectives are needed to understand the food dimension of the Befanata because food is central to the event for both practical and symbolic reasons. I will address the practical aspects here and the symbolic aspects in depth mainly in chapter 8. But it is good to keep in mind that the material and the symbolic dimensions of food in the Befanata are not really separate because the symbolic meaning stems from the material hunger it subtly remembers.

NECESSITY AND DIGNITY

Lest anyone should think the food shared in the Befanata, even in the recent past, was *only* symbolic, it is worth noting that there was an unspoken rule, based on economic status, about who could join a squad. Angelo Biondi writes that in the Befanata of Montevitozzo (twelve miles north of Pitigliano), “the significance of the redistribution of goods through begging is extremely clear; actually, among the families that were well-off, sons were severely prohibited from going out to sing the Befana, which was reserved instead for the most needy” (1981, 69).³

The prohibition was not because the “well-off” families looked down on the custom but because the custom was reserved for the poor, those who really lacked eggs and meat and other foods. It was the *right* of the poor, as the language of their songs makes clear, to expect (and if necessary to demand) generous amounts of the most-valued foods. Ferretti writes that “a great deal of testimony, particularly from the Mount Amiata area [twenty-eight miles north of Pitigliano] speaks of the Befana squads as being formed from the poorest people, who couldn’t even allow themselves meat nor did they possess a pig to slaughter” (1981b, 24n21).⁴

The Befanata created a way they could receive needed food *in exchange* for entertainment, an equal exchange that preserved their dignity.⁵ The same principles applied to house visits: Befana squads avoided the homes of the poorest people not only because they didn’t have anything to offer in exchange but also to avoid humiliating them (Carli 1996, 167).⁶ When the befanotti in the Garfagnana region (190 miles northwest of Pitigliano) made plans for their Befanata, they determined “whether, because of acute poverty, there were some families to whom they would not sing the Befana.”⁷ But they might return to such families after the Befanata to give them part of what they had collected (Rossi 1966, 156 and 162).

The prohibition against the “well-off” forming squads, or even the sense that the custom is for the poor, no longer exists, making way for a less materialist and more symbolic level of meaning.

CHRONIC HUNGER

Bruno Pampanini, who took part in the Befanata before World War II, recalled with great affection the American soldiers who passed through Pitigliano in 1944 and tossed loaves of good bread from their trucks to the local people (2001). They were starving, yet again, under the German occupation, depending on barely edible bread to survive. Hunger was exacerbated by the war, but it had lurked at the edges of everyday life for centuries and reemerged with every disruption. Gesualdo Damiani, a peasant born in 1904, remembered “times in which a single egg was precious” (qtd. in Ferretti 1981a, n.p.).⁸ He was not talking about the war years but about the first half of the twentieth century in lower Tuscany in general. The regular diet in Sorano (six miles northeast of Pitigliano) was anemic: “We were always hungry because there was no substance to what we ate. In the morning when my father got up...he would say, ‘Hey get up and put the pot on for the polenta.’ And what did you eat it with? You would fry up an onion. By the time we ate our bean or bread and onion soup in the evening, we were dying of hunger, and then it never was really satisfied” (an informant named Assunta in Warren 2017, 56).

Mariano Fresta, writing about the Val d’Orcia (thirty-seven miles north of Pitigliano) during the first half of the twentieth century, says, “One must remember that the portions were never satisfying. Some families got up to twelve portions from one chicken; likewise, sometimes two people had to share one egg” (2003, 123–139).⁹

Hunger and malnutrition were endemic in Italy for centuries, in some places even into the second half of the twentieth century.¹⁰ The lack of adequate nutrition could be extreme, traumatic, and deadly; its long-term effects damaged public health severely. One attempt to solve the fundamental problem of widespread caloric deficits was the introduction of corn (maize), an import from North America, already in widespread use by the 1530s. It was eaten as polenta, as it is to the present day (Nabhan 1993, 99). But this “solution” created a new nutritional problem—pellagra, a severe vitamin deficiency that could lead to death. The illness was caused by overdependence on a single crop and ways of preparing it that failed to unlock its nutrients, especially niacin (Nabhan 1993, 103–109). In Sereni’s view, the introduction and ensuing widespread cultivation of corn only increased the peasants’ undernourishment and furthered their exploitation (1997,

181).

Perhaps because today Italy is thought of as a cornucopia of delicious and nutritious food in endless quantity, variety, and excellence, it is hard to realize that until a short time ago, Italy was a land of hunger and famine, of dietary privation and nutritional deficiency for many. The contemporary formula "Italy equals food" ("Eataly") is the obverse of an older and much longer-lasting formula, "Italy equals hunger."¹¹ For centuries, Italy was a place where food fantasies often substituted for actual food, and where economic systems and class interfered with adequate nutrition even more than bad weather and crop failure (on food fantasies, see Del Giudice 2001, 11–63; on structural barriers to adequate nutrition, see Diner 2001, especially chapter 3, "'The Bread Is Soft': Italian Foodways, American Abundance"). The shameful oxymoron of bountiful agriculture made possible by the labor of desperately poor peasants had already been remarked upon in seventeenth-century Pitigliano (see Paffetti 1636).

But on the eve of Epiphany, poor members of the community could go from house to house to request food without being regarded as beggars. Rather, what transpired was considered an exchange—entertainment in the form of hilarious costume, witty quips, dancing, music (in some places also a skit), and imaginary gifts (described in the Befana song) in exchange for the food that could keep hunger at bay a while longer.

It was winter, the beginning of the leanest time of the year, especially for those without means. But Epiphany eve was not the only moment during the season to come when hunger could be ameliorated, if only temporarily, through performance, and the Befanata was not the only opportunity. There were other holidays during the period that ran from deep winter until the end of spring when itinerant begging rituals could be practiced.

At present in Tuscany, itinerant begging rituals may be celebrated on two other major occasions: Mid-Lent (*Mezza-Quaresima*), and May Day (*Maggiolata*).¹² But in the countryside around Pitigliano, the Befanata of Epiphany is the only one that is observed today. The lack of other sanctioned begging days locally may mean that as times improved and the practical, materialist function of the custom lessened, the number of begging days decreased. This perhaps allowed the symbolic dimensions of the food exchange to develop even more

and become more dominant. But we should not assume that the symbolic functions were not present or were secondary in the past. (Biondi goes so far as to say that gaining food was never the top goal of the ritual. According to him, the most important priorities were always human rapport and avoiding humiliation of the poor (Biondi 2007).¹³ Roberto Nizzi echoes Biondi's point, saying, "Above all, you have to celebrate" (2001)).¹⁴

Nevertheless, if the hunger-quelling function has retreated and the symbolic dimension has grown, it may make sense that the custom of multiple begging opportunities on several begging days over the course of the lean season would have been reduced to one opportunity on one day. Symbolic meaning gains power and impact by being compressed and concentrated in one annual event rather than being diffused over several. While the practical necessity of acquiring food was better served by multiple occasions, food symbolism is better served by the focus and coherence of a single occasion.

Food symbolism in the Befanata has several layers. One is the memory of centuries of hunger, subtly embedded in the songs, words, and actions of the magical night. The "intolerable torment of hunger" haunts the Befanata (Camporesi 1989, 103). But before learning how the Befanata reflects and preserves this memory, we need to take a moment to get a concrete sense of the hunger and starvation that the Befanata references.

TRAUMA

The British historian Roy Porter introduces Piero Camporesi's *Bread of Dreams*, a portrait of hunger and starvation in sixteenth- to eighteenth-century Europe, with these words: "What moved the masses most in the societies of five or three hundred years ago? It was not, *au fond*, politics or religion, or art or ideas, or even sexuality, argues Camporesi. It was, above all hunger and the urgent need to relieve it through food" (Porter 1989, 8).

Camporesi presents terrifying descriptions of famine, disease, and starvation in Italy and elsewhere in Europe during the sixteenth to the eighteenth centuries, gleaned from a variety of unusual sources, to reveal a frightening world. The numbers alone are staggering.

A 1608 source, for example, describes a “famine in Bologna and the surrounding countryside in 1590 [that] was thought at the time to have killed 40,000 people from starvation” (Viziani 1608, 138; qtd. in Camporesi 1989, 86). A citation from France, dated 1683, graphically describes people dying from hunger, the “disease of wretchedness”: there were “some thousands of poor people, with blackened and bruised faces, subdued like skeletons, the majority leaning on crutches and dragging themselves along as best they could to ask for a piece of bread” (Delumeau 1973, 163; qtd. in Camporesi 1989, 27). Camporesi quotes other eyewitness descriptions from seventeenth-century Italy: “[The beggars] were no longer seen one by one, but they actually went about in swarms, old wretches falling from hunger...An incredible quantity of sick people who—persuaded or shown that by waiting to be assisted in their hovels and on the straw of their kennels they would die of hunger before their fever or sores killed them—dragged themselves like so many skeletons, expiring in the public streets, in order to see whether horror and nausea would serve as a better exhortation than charity and faith” (Magalotti 1693, 19–20).¹⁵

Camporesi tells us that “desperate forms of cannibalism were not infrequent in western Europe of the seventeenth century” (1989, 40). He quotes a contemporaneous witness who says, “We would not dare to say if we had not seen it...Several inhabitants...ate their own arms and hands and died in despair” (Delumeau 1973, 164; qtd. in Camporesi 1989, 40). Camporesi adds, “Self-devourment was certainly not unknown in Italy either” (1989, 40).

These horrific descriptions shock us, and, if they are not enough, Camporesi provides many more examples with their gruesome details. But as hypnotic as the horror can be, he does not lose sight of the underlying humanity of the victims, which is obscured by their inhuman appearance as starvation and dying disfigure them. Camporesi quotes a poetic lament from 1587, evoking the pathos of widespread poverty, hunger, and the cold weather that makes everything worse:

Quanti son che vendut'hanno	How many are there who have sold
Fin la penna de' suoi letti'	Even the feathers of their beds;
Quanti ancor cercando vanno	How many more go searching
Alle porte, agli altrui tetti;	At doors, under the roofs of oth-

	ers;
Quanti scalzi fanciulletti	How many shoeless little children
Vanno attorno mendicando	Go around begging,
Sotto i portici tremando	Under the porticoes, shaking
Per sto freddo disonesto	Because of this unfair cold.
("Lamento..." 1967, 116).	

Leaving home to search and beg for food may have sometimes been an excuse that hid the even more painful and despairing desire to escape witnessing the death by starvation of one's own children: in Modena in 1601, "the poor, in order to avoid seeing their children die of hunger, set out into the world struggling" (Vicini 1911, 176).¹⁶

"HER CHILDREN WHO ARE HUNGRY"

These passages might give the reader some notion—although, mercifully, only an intellectual notion—of the horrors of hunger and starvation that were part of the collective memory of Italians and other Europeans. Unexpectedly, the Befanata echoes some of the specific details of those terrible times. The vagabond's search for food that is alluded to in these passages—the "searching / At doors, under the roofs of others"—reverberates centuries later in what the Befana and her troupe does: wandering, begging, and even leaving (imaginary) children behind. The Befanata, after all, is an "*itinerant, begging ritual*." In every Befanata, the Befana herself is a wanderer, a mother who approaches each home begging for food, implicitly and sometimes explicitly, for her hungry children:

La Befana è poverina	The Befana is poor.
lèi non ha salciccia e pane	She doesn't have sausage and bread
per i figli che hanno fame	for her children who are hungry.
va cercando da mangiar. ¹⁷	She goes searching for something to eat.

The version of the Befana song from Montevitozzo, a tiny hamlet of about one hundred people twelve miles north of Pitigliano, informs

the hosts that the Befana's children are asleep and that she has come to find food for them:

La Befana fa ritorno
dalle parti dei confini
addormenta i suoi bambini
e va in cerca di mangià
(Biondi 1981, 82).¹⁸

The Befana is returning
from the borderlands.
She has put her children to sleep,
and she's searching for food.

In the countryside surrounding Sovana, a town five miles northwest of Pitigliano, and extending from there to Montebuono (another six miles to the north), the ritual in which the company entered the house had a special feature that consisted of a fixed dialogue between the Befana and the inhabitants of the house. This dialogue also emphasized the Befana's children. The Befana knocked at the door, and those inside responded:

"Who is it?"
"The Befana."
"Where are you coming from?"
"From La Verna."¹⁹
"And how many children do you have?"
"One hundred."
"Are you cold?"
Everyone: "Brrr, brrr..."
"Then come in" (Biondi 1981, 67).²⁰

Here we also have the cold, as in the 1587 lament cited above. This confluence between the texts is not because of a direct, lineal connection between the lament and the Befanata script but because hunger and cold were grave, familiar threats to life in Italy for centuries; they left scars, if not open wounds, and they were not forgotten. One of the functions of ritual is to maintain memories, including painful memories. The Befanata reminds everyone in its subtle, between-the-lines way that hunger and starvation are never impossible and cannot be permanently banished.

HUNGER IN ITALIAN FOLK LITERATURE

The Befanata is of a piece with other folk transformations of hunger and starvation into literature, art, and ritual. Magical folktales, for instance, through fantasy, bring a kind of vicarious “relief” from hunger. They are part of the “reservoir of fantasies of the poor classes” throughout the world (Camporesi 1989, 149). In Italy the oral performance of folktales was part of the everyday life of the rural poor for centuries. We have already encountered the Italian storytelling tradition in the *veglia*, discussed in chapter 3 (see Falassi 1980).

Folktales in general offer their audiences vicarious wish fulfillment, and one of the most common wishes fulfilled in Italian folktales is simply to eat when hungry, to have adequate food. As folklorist Luisa Del Giudice writes, “In the Italian tradition, many are the magic tablecloths, sacks, or pots which produce food whenever asked to do so” (2001, 48). The rewards given the heroine in a tale told by an Italian immigrant in Detroit, for instance, are fine clothes and a “bounteous meal”—precisely what was lacking not only in the life of the fictional heroine of the tale, but in the life of the teller when she was a girl in northern Italy (“The Cats under the Sea” told by Clementina Todesco in Mathias and Raspa 1985, 95–102). Not only gold coins and jewels but food and clothing are the typical rewards for proper behavior in the magical moral world of folktales; examples could be cited endlessly. Many tales come to a close not just with the words “they lived happily ever after” but with extravagant wedding feasts. Perhaps, for a perennially hungry audience, they lived happily ever after partly because they *ate* happily ever after. In an Italian version of the universally popular “Hansel and Gretel”—a story in which starvation motivates the action and menacing cannibalism also plays a key part—the house that draws the two children in is not made of gingerbread and candy but is “filled to the brim with delicious sausages, hams, salami, breads, and all types of wonderful foods. The children went in and ate and ate” (Agonito 1967, 58).²¹ As we will soon see, these particular foods (first and foremost, sausages, hams, and salami) are constantly requested in the Befana songs and regularly provided the revelers by the Befanata hosts. The number of Italian folktales in which the action turns on food and hunger is astounding, as one may

realize reading Italo Calvino's anthology of tales from Italian oral tradition (Calvino 1980).²²

CUCCAGNA

Besides uncounted folktales, there is another "folk literary" tradition that correlates food-wise with the Befanata—the fantasy known as the Land of Cuccagna, an imaginary "gastronomic utopia" where "rivers flow with wine, houses have walls of sausage and cheese, roast chickens fall from the sky, fish jump out of the pond and into your arms... And right in the center of this land is a huge mountain of cheese. A cauldron sits on top and *maccheroni* and *tortellini* spew forth all day long, roll down the Parmesan mountain and land in a pool of rich capon broth... Hens lay 200 eggs a day... If you are hungry and tired, my friend, forget your salads and vegetables, and come with me to the Land of Cuccagna" (from a Neapolitan broadside from 1715 as paraphrased in Del Giudice 2001, 11; for a major earlier work on Cuccagna, see Cocchiara 1956).

In Cuccagna (or Bengodi—the Land of Pleasure—as Boccaccio called it in the fourteenth century), "macaroni falls from heaven like edible rain; the earth, no longer worked, miraculously produces pre-cooked foods; the trees do not toss down buds and leaves, but hams and clothes; the animals, their own butchers, spontaneously roast themselves for the comfort of men's stomachs. Work is abolished" (Camporesi 1989, 80; Montanari 2009, 43 and 76).²³

It is important to recall Cuccagna in relation to food in the Befanata not only because they both testify indirectly to a history of hunger but also because they both focus on the same foods and for the same reasons. The Cuccagna tradition is part of the cultural context of the Befanata, and Cuccagna-esque motifs actually arise in association with Epiphany eve in some places, as we will see. Cuccagna is an elaborate, unbridled food fantasy that points to its opposite, the stark reality of perpetual hunger (Del Giudice 2001, 12). Substituting plenty for hunger, a bold and clever inversion, the Cuccagna of folk tradition imaginatively exposes the same centuries-long reality of food shortage that Camporesi illustrates through the horrors of factual history and the Befanata references in its customs. As Del Giudice

puts it, “the Land of *Plenty* inversely reflects the Land of *Hunger*” (Del Giudice 2001, 12). Or as Montanari writes, “Hunger inspires gastronomic dreams” (2009, 77). There is also an important difference between the Land of Cuccagna and the Befanata. Cuccagna offered an endless virtual banquet as a substitute for the real thing. The Befanata, however, delivered the real thing, if only for a short time. Although the quantity of Cuccagna-esque foods gathered on Epiphany eve was not unlimited, as in Cuccagna, it was substantial and, most importantly, not imaginary.

What the Befanata and Cuccagna have in common, of course, is a shared “menu.” The “diet” the Land of Cuccagna features consists of precisely the most sought-after Befanata foods—salami, prosciutto, sausage, fowl, cheese, and eggs—calorie-rich foods high in protein and fat.²⁴ These foods were the most desirable yet least available to the poor of Italy. The desirability of such foods *for health reasons* (avoidance of starvation and malnutrition) and for the calories needed for physical work and body heat in winter and spring may be hard for many to comprehend today. As Montanari puts it, “in all traditional societies, unlike today, fat was not an enemy to be avoided, but rather a respected and appreciated friend. The difference between the two perspectives, very simply, is the difference between hunger and plenty...The possibility of eating copiously and regularly was reserved for the few. This is why ‘fat’ never had a negative connotation” (2009, 100).

Indeed, for many years, “Italians [were] ‘vegetarian by necessity and not by choice’” (Pellegrini 1962, 24). As one Italian immigrant to the United States put it, “Over there [in Italy], if you had a piece of fat, you was lucky, and boy, it tasted good” (Peter Mossini qtd. in Coan 1997, 44). In 1900, another Italian immigrant wrote in a letter to those left behind, “Here I eat meat three times a day, not three times a year!” (letter from Alessandro Ranciglio qtd. in Mormino 1986, 43). Such a possibility must have seemed fantastic to those “back home” because for the Italian poor at that time, the statement about eating meat “three times a year” could have been literally true. In fact, an immigrant to America remarked that in his hometown in Sicily, peasants were given meat three times a year, on three major holidays (Valletta 1968, 23). The meat was provided by the biggest local landowner (Diner 2001, 43). Tuscany was different from Sicily

in many ways, but the custom of providing the poor with food (especially meat) on particularly important religious feasts was something both regions had in common. However, the means of doing so were entirely different. In Sicily it appears that food was distributed directly by wealthy landowners in a public show of piety, beneficence, and power that was humiliating to the recipients. In Tuscany the channel of food redistribution was the Befanata and other begging rituals; food came from neighbors who often were peasants themselves, just not the poorest. If indeed this contrast can be generalized, it becomes even clearer how the Befanata protected the dignity of the poor by turning begging into exchange.

In broadsides and songs, Cuccagna was presented as a *place*, but in some local Epiphany eve beliefs Cuccagna could also be imagined as a *time*. Epiphany eve was the Night of Cuccagna, and it was nearby: "Thus on that magical night, filled with enchantments, wonders and incredible marvels, the walls of the houses in the country and in town could even turn into cheese or ricotta, while the bed sheets could become lasagna noodles. Scrap iron, chains, and locks on the doors and windows could be transformed into pieces of sausage or salamis or other good things. Water could be transformed into wine or the purest olive oil and that was true for brooks, streams, rivers, springs, and wells" (Mauri 1989, 43).²⁵

On this night the fantasy was said to unfold right where you lived. In reality the good food that could be gathered through the Befanata was as close to Cuccagna as anyone could get, and perhaps the fantasy transformation of bed sheets, chains, and water into lasagna noodles, sausage, and wine was a poetic way of paying homage to the Befanata, for it really did deliver the goods. What could be eaten and gathered in one night might not seem significant to those of us who are well fed every day; but to have a full stomach and a good meal in the midst of a long stretch of meager nourishment is significant to those who often go hungry. We have already heard testimony in which a single egg or even a "piece of fat" was significant.²⁶ As historian Roy Porter writes, "Lenten living was a cruel and perpetual necessity as much as an act of Christian holiness, in which a public feast could be the apogee of a lifetime's aspirations" (Porter 1989, 9).

CICCIA! CICCIA!

As we have seen, the desired foods are remarkably consistent, whether in Cuccagna fantasies, folktales, or Befanate. They were and still are pork products (especially sausages) eggs, wine, and cheese.²⁷ Sausage is not only rich in flavor but, as already noted, high in protein and fat, necessary elements consistently lacking in the diet of the poor. Members of the Befana squads might shout *ciccìa, ciccìa!* (“meat, meat!” or “fat, fat!”) in the presence of their hosts; in other words, they would request the fat flesh of the pig.²⁸ In at least one area, the singing of “La Befana” usually ends with squad members exclaiming *ciccio, ciccio* (Biondi 1981, 89–90n3).²⁹ Sometimes they pointed at sausages, salamis, and prosciuttos hanging from the kitchen ceiling as they shouted “ciccio” because until recently, that was where preserved meat was often “stored.” In what seems to have been part of another set dialogue, in Elmo (seven miles northeast of Pitigliano), the Befana says, “Beautiful young mistress, give me a little bread, a little sausage for my children, look at how much you have up there” (from the recollection of Pippi Piero, from Elmo, in Biondi 1981, 73n4).³⁰ She is pointing to the ceiling as she says these words.

Although in the Pitigliano area the person who carries the donated foods in a basket is usually called the *pagneraio* (from the Italian *paniere*, bread), he can also be called the *cicciaio*, a word that refers, maybe optimistically and auspiciously, to *ciccìa*, the most important food he hopes to gather in quantity. Enzo Giuliani, who has been a member of Befana squads for many years, as was his father, told me that the person who carried the foods was sometimes called the *carnaio*. This word, too, derives from the type of food (*carne*, or meat) that he hoped to collect.³¹ The *pagneraio* was often the most robust of the *befanotti* (as was the case in the groups with which I traveled) because he was tasked with defending what was gathered in his basket from attacks by other Befana squads. This function is no longer necessary, but it is remembered and honored in the choice of a strong man as *pagneraio*.³² Biondi mentions one man, Guglielmo Biagetti, who served as *pagneraio* in Elmo (seven miles north of Pitigliano) for many years in the early twentieth century “because he was tough on whoever tried to swipe the sausage; to have collected more *ciccio*

than other groups was an occasion for bragging; to have collected less was, on the other hand an occasion for teasing among the Befane” (Biondi 1981, 73n5).³³ One reason the Pitigliano Befana squads visited houses in the surrounding countryside rather than within the town of Pitigliano (where, since it was a town, there was little distance between houses and thus many more houses could have been reached in a shorter time, resulting in larger amounts of food) was that animals raised for consumption, especially pigs, were not kept in town and thus there was little possibility of collecting pork in town (Biondi 1981, 75n20).

There are also seasonal, calendrical reasons why *ciccia* was what the Befana squads sought. Epiphany is the beginning of Carnevale (*carne vale* meaning “remove meat” or “farewell to meat”). Since meat cannot be eaten for the forty days of Lent that follow the end of Carnevale, meat is sought increasingly through the climactic moment of Martedì Grasso (Mardi Gras or Fat Tuesday, another reference to *ciccia*, fat meat). For some, it is a matter of “get it while you can.”

Providing the befanotti with pork products also fits Tuscany’s customary agricultural ecology. November and December are the months when year-old pigs are butchered. If there is ever an abundance of fresh and freshly preserved pork, it is during these months and January. Eraldo Baldini, writing about the “special and predominant role regarding the meats of the pig” in the Befanata song and ritual in the adjacent Emilia-Romagna region, notes “the temporary, large availability of fresh pork...during the days around the sixth of January” (1996, 21).³⁴ Many peasants had a yearling pig or two of their own to slaughter, but those who were too poor to own even a single pig had no source of meat or other major source of protein and fat, which was all the more necessary and desirable during the cold months of winter, when other fresh foods, including most fruits and vegetables, were also unavailable. Michele, from Sorano, said that his family “would survive the winter with the meat of the pig” (“Michele” is an anonymous interviewee qtd. in Warren 2017, 64).

BEGGARS CAN BE CHOOSERS

Wherever we find them, costumed squads that visit by night expect

refreshment from their hosts. In both Ireland and Italy, the squads would also gather the means for another, later occasion—a Mummer's Ball or a cenone. Irish mummers would request money from their hosts: "Money I want, money I crave. / If you don't give me money, / I'll sweep yous all to your grave" (Glassie 1975, 72). Italian befanotti would request the foods they would eat at their party a few days later. In Scandinavian Twelfth Night (Epiphany) mumming, it seems that sweet treats, apples, and nuts, carried away in a basket, were generally the norm, although alcohol could also play a part (see Gunnell 2007).

Sometimes the final verses of the Befana song make the request for the most-valued foods, in generous amounts, quite clear, specific, and even pointed:

La Befana non vi chiede
vi ringrazia e prende tutto

vino pane anche il prosciutto
la salsiccia e l'ova ancor.³⁵

Siam contenti di due uova
cacio, un pollo e del prosciutto;
a ccettiamo proprio tutto
purchè venga dal buon cor.³⁶

E non fate come Golo
che ci ha dato un ovo solo.³⁷

The Befana doesn't beg;
she thanks you and takes every-
thing—

wine, bread, the prosciutto too,
sausage and eggs besides.

We're happy with a couple of
eggs,
cheese, a chicken and some
prosciutto;
we'll accept anything
that comes from a good heart.

And don't act like Golo
who gave us only a single egg.

The request can appear as a quid pro quo:

Se me dai la salsicella
te la canto la Pasquarella.³⁸

Se ci date del maiale
pregheremo pel porcello
che vi venga grasso e bello

If you give me sausage,
I'll sing you the Pasquarella.

If you give us of the pig,
we'll pray for the piglet,
that it may grow fat and fine,

e castagne in quantità.³⁹

and lots of chestnuts.

The direct request not just for food but specifically for pork products is an old part of the custom as this Pasquella (as the Befanata is known in the Emilia-Romagna region) song from the early nineteenth century illustrates:

Da lontano abbitam saputo
che amazzao il porco avete,
qualche cosa ci darete
o salcicia o mortadella.
Viva, viva la Pasquella!
(Tassoni 1973, 301).⁴⁰

From far away we knew
that you have slaughtered a pig.
Give us something,
sausage or mortadella.
Long live Pasquella!

In places where the Befana song is followed by a skit, the food request may be made in indirect comic fashion. A character dressed as a buffoonish doctor is called upon to help the Befana, who has fallen down. Her temperature is taken with a yardstick (actually a meter stick), and the doctor announces that she needs a medicine made of dozens of eggs and meters of sausage: “The old man [the Befana’s husband] presents the prescription to the master of the house and waits for what is offered” (Ferretti 1981b, 12–13).⁴¹ Phrases like “dozens of eggs” and “meters of sausage,” besides the yardstick thermometer, contribute to the suggestive, carnivalesque comedy of the skit; but in the context of the Befanata, the mention of eggs and sausages is also a reminder and request for precisely the food gifts that are most desired and expected.⁴² And of course, one can’t refuse a remedy to an injured person, especially a weak old woman.

BLESSINGS AND CURSES

The Befana’s auspicious blessings for the family, its domestic animals, and its crops may be offered in the Befana song’s concluding lyrics. The Mancioccos claim that today’s blessings in song originated in the ancients’ desire to receive their ancestors’ promise of fertility and life by propitiating their ancestors and avoiding offending them. Similarly, today’s troupes of singers, the befanotti, perhaps

the modern equivalent and transformation of the ancients' returning ancestors, bless their hosts, encouraging them to be generous so that all will go well with them in the course of the coming year. Versions of "La Befana" include such blessings:

Vi si dà la buonanotte
e la pace sia con voi
la salute a noi e voi
e il buon Dio vi aiuterà.⁴³

We say goodnight to you,
and may peace be with you,
may health be with us and you,
and may the good God help you.

Lo benedisco lo fiore di grano
vi damo la bonanotte
e ce ne andiamo.⁴⁴

I bless the wheat.
We say good night to you
and we leave.

Se qualcosa a noi darete
averete la benedizione
per la prossima stagione
grano e vino in quantità.⁴⁵

If you give us something
you will have our blessing
for the next season:
plenty of wheat and wine.

In blessing the poor (i.e., the Befana squad) with generous gifts of food, the family brings blessings upon itself to be realized in the form of agricultural success. But if the host family does not share with the squad, the family loses the squad's blessings, incurring possible negative consequences. In some songs this threat is indirect but implicit:

Se ci date poi dell'ova
pregherem pe le galline
dalla volpe e le faine
ve le possa liberà.⁴⁶

If, then, you give us some eggs,
we'll pray for your hens,
that from the fox and the weasels
they will be free.

Se ci date del prosciutto
pregheremo pel porcello
che vi venga grasso e bello
e la ghianda sia per tutto.

If you give us some prosciutto,
we'll pray for the young pig,
that he'll grow to be fat and fine,
and acorns will be everywhere.

Se ci date anche un quartino
pregheremo per la vigna

If you also give us a quarter liter
[of wine]
we'll pray for the grape vines,

che lontana stia la tigna	that the ringworm will be kept far away,
e ben colmo venga il tino. ⁴⁷	and the vats will be completely full.

Notice that in these songs the foods that are requested and the food sources that are threatened are directly connected. If eggs are requested and are forthcoming, the host's chickens will be protected; if sausages are requested and are provided, the host's pigs will prosper; if wine is requested and provided, the grape vines will be protected from disease and will be productive. These direct connections make the hosts' responsibility for the output of their farm via generosity to the Befana squad immediate, concrete, and clear. The relationship between what you give and what you get is unmistakable, though stated politely and positively in these particular songs.

At other times, as in the following texts, the threat is negative and explicit: if you *don't* give us what is expected, there will be negative consequences. Or, alternately, such threats may be understood to be part of the teasing, including pranks, that goes on during the Befanata rather than actual, attempted intimidation (Ferretti 1981b, 21).⁴⁸ Nevertheless, the threats in some of the following verses were once warnings or at least protests meant to cajole the hosts into giving more. "A pitch for charity with an undercurrent of extortion" is how Carl Lindahl puts it in describing begging in the Cajun country Mardi Gras (2004, 136). As Biondi says of one stanza that threatens the hosts' swine with the *rossino* disease (below), "This strophe was sung only to families that didn't give anything or too little" (1981, 88).⁴⁹

Se la Befana non busca il ciccio	If the Befana doesn't get the ciccio,
buttare la vogliamo in un roghiccio.	we'll want to throw her in a ditch.
Se la Befana non busca l'ova	If the Befana doesn't get eggs,
buttare la vogliamo nella gora.	we'll want to throw her in the canal.
Se la Befana non busca gnente	If the Befana doesn't get any-

thing

buttare la vogliamo nella Lente.⁵⁰ we'll want to throw her in the
Lente.

In these lines, sung by the befanotti, it appears as if the Befana is their hostage, and they are shaming the hosts, saying, in effect, if you don't give these things to the Befana (i.e., to us, the squad), she could be the one to pay for it. And you will be cursed for what you have caused her.⁵¹ The request is now a demand, and the alternatives to generosity are stark:

Se qualcosa a noi ci date	If you give us something,
pregherem per il porcello	we'll pray for your young pig,
che un altr'anno venga bello	that it will come out fine once
again e Sant'Antonio lo salverà.	and Saint Anthony will protect
	it.

E se niente a noi ci date	And if you give us nothing,
pregherem per il suino	we will pray for the swine,
che gli venga il mal rossino	that it gets the rossino disease,
e S. Antonio lo facci crepà. ⁵²	and Saint Anthony will make it
	die.

The prominence of Saint Anthony the Abbot in this and similar verses rather than some other saint merits a brief explanation. This Saint Anthony is the patron saint and protector of animals, especially pigs. In addition, he is often appealed to for cures for infectious diseases, particularly diseases of the skin. His day is January 17, only eleven days after Epiphany. January 17 was also once celebrated as a begging ritual in some places, especially in the Abruzzo region, southeast of Tuscany (Leydi 1973, 87). The folk celebration of Sant'Antonio Abate followed the same pattern as the Befanata: in response to the traditional song for Sant'Antonio, the singers and musicians "would receive, in return, various gifts, but above all products from the butchering of the pig" (Leydi 1973, 87).⁵³ Like Epiphany, Saint Anthony's day fits within the seasonal time frame in which "excess" pork is available and especially desirable from the point of view of caloric need. Sant'Antonio Abate is also called "Sant'Antonio del

porcello” (Saint Anthony of the Pig), and in his iconography he is accompanied by a pig. Sometimes he is considered the husband of the Befana.

The sung curses that were invoked to manipulate ungenerous hosts could reach a devastating and all-encompassing extreme:

La volpe vi entrasse nel pollaio	May the fox enter your chicken coop
e vi mangiasse tutte le galline	and eat all your chickens.
la tignola v'entrasse nel granaio	May the moth enter your grana- ry,
l'acetone nelle bestie vacche	may acetone enter the cattle,
a voi un'accidente che vi piglia	and may an accident befall you,
capo di casa e tutta la famiglia. ⁵⁴	head of the household, and the entire family.

Behind the expectation of reciprocity lay the possibility of a serious curse, a kind of blackmail directed at those who might not live up to their community obligation to share and think of others, especially the less fortunate. Running through the songs was a thread (sometimes implicit and sometimes explicit) about misfortune as likely payback to those who were not generous in sharing food with the Befana and her company. There was a fitting symmetry to the curse: if you don't share your food, you will lose it. The threat of being cursed may have derived from the oldest layers of the custom, from the attributes of the powerful ancient figure who evolved to become the Befana. Another possibility is that the threat of a curse derives from that goddess's opposite, the Befana as a downtrodden figure exemplifying poverty and possessing the mysterious powers of the weak and disenfranchised. It is not hard to see the exchange as an ethical transaction, a mandate expressed and realized not abstractly but with the concreteness of custom as well. But in any case, because of a hard-to-define belief or a mix of attitudes—call it superstition or circumspection, moral reflection or prudence—the threat has potency even today, perhaps in the spirit of a joke, but in the mode of “kidding on the square.”

NOTES

¹ The Befanata is called “La Pasquella” in parts of the Emilia-Romagna and Abruzzo regions.

² Many other scholars pursue symbolic interpretations of food, and the literature is vast. Several influential examples are Barthes 1997; Brown and Mussel, eds. 1984; Lévi-Strauss 1997; Montanari 2006; Soler 1997.

³ “Qui il significato di redistribuzione dei beni attraverso la questua è chiarissimo; infatti nelle famiglie benestanti si proibiva severamente ai figli di andare a cantare la Befana, riservata invece ai più bisognosi.” Biondi reiterated this point to me several times in conversation and in a tape-recorded interview (2007).

⁴ “Molte testimonianze, soprattutto sull’Amiata, parlano delle squadre della Befana come formate dalla gente più povera, che magari non poteva permettersi la carne né possedeva un maiale da macellare.”

⁵ Angelo Biondi, personal communication, December 17, 2006.

⁶ “The group didn’t stop at the homes of day laborers, because they were well known to be poor families” (“Nelle case dei braccianti il gruppo non si fermava, essendo notoriamente famiglie povere”). The reference here is to the custom in Villa Inferno San Andrea, near Cervia (170 miles northeast of Pitigliano) and other locations in the area.

⁷ “Se c’era, a causa di una povertà acuta, qualche famiglia a cui non cantare la Befana.”

⁸ “Erano tempi in cui un solo uovo era prezioso.”

⁹ “Bisogna ricordare che le porzioni non erano mai soddisfacenti: in qualche famiglia da un pollo si ricavano perfino dodici porzioni; così, talora, con un uovo dovevano mangiare due persone.”

¹⁰ And, of course, in Europe this was true not only in Italy. Dorothy Noyes writes that “Berga [in Catalonia] was hungry in living memory, had always been hungry... Festivals in Berga were occasions to distribute food to the poor until the mid-twentieth century (2003, 153).

¹¹ The brand name “Eataly” catches the idea perfectly, even if it is an awkward, inappropriate coinage. It refers to a worldwide food conglomerate that features restaurants, bakeries, retail products, bars, and even cooking schools.

¹² See chapter 2 for more on these days and a more complete list of other begging days in Noyes 2003.

¹³ Biondi grew up in Sorano, six miles northeast of Pitigliano, and in the nearby countryside.

¹⁴ “Inanzi tutto si deve fare festa.”

¹⁵ “Si tratta che non si vede vano più a uno a uno, ma andavano effettivamente a sciami, vecchi miserabili cascanti di fame...una quantità incredibile di malati che perusasi, o chiariti che ad aspettar d’esser soccorsi nelle loro stamberghe, e su la paglia de’ lor canili sarebbon prima morti della fame che della febbre o delle piaghe, si strascicavano come tanti scheletri spiranti per le pubbliche strade, per veder se l’orrore, e la nausea servisser loro di miglior raccomandazione che la carità, e la fede.” The translation is from Camporesi 1989, 180.

¹⁶ “li poveri, per non vedere li figli morire dalla fame se ne vanno per il mondo malabando.” Another example is the following account: “A few days ago [April 1601] in the town of Reggio...a peasant, along with his wife, so as not to see their three sons perish from hunger in front of their eyes, locked them in the house and set out in the name of heaven. After three days had passed the neighbours, not having seen them, decided to knock down the door, which they did. And they found two of the sons dead, and the third dying with straw in his mouth, and on the fire there was a pot with straw inside which was being boiled in order to make it softer for eating” (Vicini 1911, 177). The translation is from Camporesi 1989, 85.

¹⁷ From “La Befana” as sung in Collecchio, forty miles west of Pitigliano. Quoted in Ferretti 1981b, 42.

¹⁸ Stanzas with the same theme—the idea that the Befana has put her children to sleep and is searching for food for them—are sung in at least two other towns in the area (Ferretti 1981b, 40 and 42).

¹⁹ La Verna is the site of a monastery in the Apennine mountains in northeast Tuscany where Saint Francis of Assisi lived, and it is strongly identified with him. La Verna is at a high elevation and is very cold—symbolically, the coldest place one could imagine (Biondi 2007).

²⁰ “Chi è?”

“La Befana.”

“Da dove venite?”

“Dalla Verna.”

“E quanti figli avete?”

“Cento.”

“Avete freddo?”

e tutti: “Brrrr, brrrr...”

“Allora entrate.”

²¹ Note that in Hansel and Gretel the parents separate themselves from their starving

children, as in some of the actual historical instances of famine and mass starvation referenced by Camporesi and cited above. Also note that in this particular text, the villain is a hungry bear rather than a witch, the usual villain of the Hansel and Gretel story. The bear as a symbol of an appetite that threatens to destroy may further intensify the undercurrent of hunger that haunts the tale. This text is an example of tale type 327, the Children and the Ogre, in the Aarne-Thompson-Uther folktale classification system. See Uther 2004, 284–286.

²² The original Italian book is *Fiabe italiane raccolte dalla tradizione popolare durante gli ultimi cento anni e trascritte in lingua dai vari dialetti da Italo Calvino* (Calvino 1956 [1993]). Although the book has been criticized for Calvino's rewriting of texts that were originally collected from oral sources, it should be pointed out that, to his credit, he identifies the specific changes he made to the texts and contributes significantly by making a large number of Italian folktales readily accessible to Italian speakers (the texts were originally in Italy's many dialects). Thanks to George Martin's translation, they are also available to English speakers.

²³ Other nations with their own histories of hunger imagine their own traditional gastronomic utopias, with foods reflective of their unique, culture-based, dietary preferences: "Cockaigne/Lubberland (England), Schlaraffenland (Germany), Cocagne/Panigons (France), or Oleana (Norway)" (Del Giudice 2001, 12).

²⁴ "The high frequency of cheese and meat make protein and animal fats the most prevalent feature of Cuccagna. Rarely are vegetables mentioned" (Del Giudice 2001, 13). The broadside Del Giudice paraphrased, quoted above, tells the reader specifically to "forget your salads and vegetables."

²⁵ "Così in quella notte magica, piena d'incanti, prodigi, e incredibili meraviglie, le mura delle case di paesi e città potevano anche diventare di cacio o ricotta, mentre le lenzuola nei letti potevano diventare lasagne. Ferraglie, catene, serrature di usci e finestre, potevano trasformarsi in rocchi di salsiccia o in salamini e altre buone cose. L'acqua poteva trasformarsi in vino o in purissimo olio e ciò valeva per ruscelli, torrenti, fiumi, sorgenti o fontane."

²⁶ Another example is a comment by Giuseppe (Beppe) Cini, who traveled with a squad in the late 1930s when he was a boy and later recalled, "Half a sausage was already something." Field journal, January 12, 2010.

²⁷ Nevertheless, in some areas—though not near Pitigliano—the expected foods were nuts, dried fruits, oranges, and sweets. See Giannini 1893, 92; Manciocco and Manciocco 2006, 95; Priore, 1985, 8; Rossi 1966, 155; Toschi 1963, 248–249. Nuts, like meat and eggs, are rich in protein and fat, and dried fruit offers concentrated calories. The 2006 film *Golden Door* (Nuovomondo [New world] is the original Italian title) visualizes immigrants' predeparture dreams of America with images of gigantic vegetables and people swimming in milk (Cialese 2006). I think that the filmmakers got the folk tradition wrong, if that is what they were striving for. Giant vegetables and abundant milk do not correspond to the rather consistent ingredient lists of the Cuccagna fantasy, folktales, and Befanata requests. What the film's foods and the traditional food

fantasies do have in common is their tall-tale-like exaggeration.

²⁸ As reported in Ferretti 1981b, 39, for example, where the word is spelled as *cicciu* (i.e., in dialect). It can also be spelled as *ciccio*, which usually means “chubby.” The root word comprises the last two syllables of *salciccia* (sal-cic-cia), sausage, a common pronunciation and spelling of standard Italian *salsiccia*, which combines *sal* (or *sale*, salt) with *ciccia* (fat meat or fat). These, along with spices, and with salt acting as a preservative, are the basic ingredients of sausage and other cured meats.

²⁹ This version is sung at San Giovanni delle Contee (fourteen miles northeast of Pitigliano) and was recorded by Biondi from Aroldo Parrini.

³⁰ “Padroncina bella, mi dia un po’ di pane, un po’ di salsiccia pe mi figlioli, vedi quanta ce n’ha su in cima.”

³¹ Field journal, March 6, 2007. For other names of the *pagneraio*, his importance and liminal character, see chapter 6, the section titled “The Befana’s Family.”

³² In a New Year’s mumming tradition on the Orkney Islands, a parallel figure called a “Carrying Horse” functioned in a similar way: “The carrying horse...was a marked man, selected for his strength. His duty was to carry a *caisie* [straw basket] or a *wino-cubbie*, in which were gathered all the eatables received on their house to house visitation” (Firth 1922 [1974], 124).

³³ “All’Elmo fu a lungo ‘pagneraio’ Gugli elmo Biagetti (cl. 1916) perché era duro a fassi fregà la *salciccia*; l’aver raccolto più ‘ciccio’ era occasione di vanto, l’averne raccolto meno era, viceversa, occasione di sfottimento tra le Befane.”

³⁴ “Un ruolo particolare e predominante riguarda le carni di maiale” and “la momentanea grande disponibilità di carni suine fresche...nei giorni attorno al 6 di gennaio.”

³⁵ From “La Befana” as performed in Grosseto in 1981. Originally the text is from Castagnolo, 147 miles northwest of Pitigliano. Quoted in Ferretti 1981b, 45.

³⁶ From “La Befana” as performed in Grosseto, 1981. Originally the text is from Porona, forty-three miles northwest of Pitigliano. In Porona, singing this version was a tradition that ended in the 1950s. Quoted in Ferretti 1981b, 55.

³⁷ From “La Befana” as sung in Elmo (seven miles north of Pitigliano), and quoted in Biondi 1981, 85.

³⁸ From “La Pasquarella” as sung in the Abruzzo region to the south and east of Tuscany, where the Befana song is called the *Pasquarella*, and quoted in Lancellotti 1951, 93. Another text from the Marche region, to the east of Tuscany and Umbria, is equally explicit:

Se mi dai la *sarcicetta*
oppur la *costarella*

If you give me sausage
or else cutlets

te la conto la Pasquella	I'll sing you the Pasquella,
la Pasquella armoniosa.	the harmonious Pasquella.

(Eustacchi-Nardi 1958, 100).

³⁹ From "La Befana" as sung in Marroneto (fifty miles north of Pitigliano), recorded in 1996, and quoted in Galli 1996.

⁴⁰ The verbal formula of the first two lines remains unchanged and popular in the same area two hundred years later:

Da lontano l'abbiamo saputo	From far away we knew
che il maiale l'avete ammazzato,	that you have slaughtered a pig
e se non ci date niente	And if you don't give us anything
che vi piglia un accidente!	may an accident befall you!

(The Pasquella song as sung in Cervia [in the Emilia-Romagna region]). (Carli 1996, 53).

⁴¹ "Il Vecchio presenta la ricetta al padrone di casa e aspetta le offerte."

⁴² The skit with a doctor and a comical cure recalls the Irish mumming tradition documented by Glassie in which a cartoonish doctor is called upon to revive a man (in the Catholic versions, Saint Patrick, who has just been slain). The doctor's prescription in the Irish tradition is equally absurd: "The filliciefee of a bumbee, / And the thunder nouns of a creepie stool, / All boiled up in a woodenleatheriron pot, / Let that be given to him fourteen fortnights before day, / And if that doesn't cure'im, I'll ask no pay" (Glassie 1975, 43).

⁴³ Tape-recorded performance, January 5–6, 2001, near Pitigliano, cassette tape 2001-SS-002.

⁴⁴ Tape-recorded performance, January 5–6, 2001, near Pitigliano, cassette tape 2001-SS-002.

⁴⁵ From "La Befana" as sung in Collecchio (forty miles west of Pitigliano), and quoted in Ferretti 1981b, 16.

⁴⁶ From "La Befana" as sung in Marroneto (fifty miles north of Pitigliano), and quoted in Ferretti 1981b, 49.

⁴⁷ From the text of the Befana tradition known as the "Trenta Giovane" (Thirty Youths), sung in the area near Castel del Piano on Mount Amiata, about thirty-one miles north of Pitigliano, quoted in Ferretti 1981b, 23.

⁴⁸ Ferretti mentions that "in some cases the pranks were reciprocated like when, at Castell'Azzara after the preparation of the meat of the butchered pig, a fake sausage, filled with sawdust, was made to give to the Befana squad" ("In qualche caso gli scher-

zi erano reciproci come quando a Castellazzara, dopo la confezionatura della carne del maiale macellato, si faceva una falsa salciccia, ripiena di segatura, da donare alla squadra della Befana”).

⁴⁹ “Si cantava questa strofa solo alle famiglie che non davano niente o troppo poco.”

⁵⁰ The Lente is a local river. Local geographic references are rare in the Befana songs. This text is from Sorano (six miles northeast of Pitigliano) and is cited in Biondi 1981, 80. Biondi considers the partial text he reproduces to be part of “an old song.”

⁵¹ For more on the Befana as victim, see chapter 6, “The Befana and Her Cohort.”

⁵² From “La Befana” as sung near Cerreto, six miles northeast of Pitigliano, and quoted in Biondi 1981, 83.

⁵³ “Ricevano, in compenso, vari doni, ma soprattutto prodotti della macellazione del maiale.”

⁵⁴ This passage from “La Befana” was collected from Tecla Rosati of Montemerano, thirteen miles west of Pitigliano, and quoted in Biondi 1981, 99.

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