HON CULTURE WARS:
REVERING AND REVILING THE VERNACULAR IN BALTIMORE AND BEYOND

A Dissertation in
American Studies
by
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Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

August 2015
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ABSTRACT

In this study, I examine the identity politics of defining local authenticity through the construction of urban traditions in Baltimore. Using the conceptual framework of vernacular stages, I examine how once stigmatized local forms, that is, the stigmatized vernacular, transform into the esteemed vernacular, local forms celebrated for their authentic rootedness. By examining the definition, adoption, commodification, and contestation of local forms of reputed authenticity, I unravel the meaning and implications of being a "local" in a fragmented American city. Perceiving their stigma and lack of political importance, Baltimoreans have contested the high culture or cosmopolitan definition of cities with the adoption of a vernacular image, thus turning a negative connotation into a positive one. “Hon”—the word and the image—acts to reinforce this value, but because of the contested nature of its associations, it has also become a magnet for criticism. Thus the difficult discourse on identity has shifted to more manageable battlegrounds like the Baltimore-Washington Parkway’s “Welcome to Baltimore, Hon” sign, the HonFest festival in Baltimore’s Hampden neighborhood, and Café Hon owner Denise Whiting’s trademarking of the word “HON.” Through three Baltimore case studies that combine an ethnographic approach with rhetorical analysis, I examine how the esteemed vernacular plays a daily, consequential role in the identity formation of Baltimoreans. In response to the globalization, commercialization, and modernization that most cultural observers argue characterize contemporary society, attachment to the local has become increasingly important. In the face of these trends, the local provides a stabilizing force, giving Americans a perceptible attachment to place in an otherwise detached, impersonal, and ever-changing world. In the face of these modern challenges, some argue that ethnicity or family is the primary hedge against globalization and massification. On the contrary, I demonstrate that Americans cling to local tradition—not an abstract, objectified phenomenon existing beyond the human mind, but through those expressions constantly recreated and reaffirmed in the present as authentic attachments to history and place. Whether real or imagined, there is a need for local attachment that results in a cultural construction of place.
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

Chapter 1. INTRODUCTION......................................................................................1

Chapter 2. THE BALTIMORE CONTEXT: FRAGMENTATION, AMBIGUITY, AND THE FRAYED CITY.................................................................50

Chapter 3. WELCOME TO BALTIMORE, HON: RACE, CLASS, URBAN AMERICAN FOLKLORE, AND THE CONTROVERSY OVER ‘HON’ AS A LOCAL IDENTITY MARKER...............................................................................112

Chapter 4. THE RISE OF THE HON IMAGE: NOSTALGIA, FESTIVAL, AND THE ESTEEMED VERNACULAR........................................................................182

Chapter 5. HON™: INTELLECTUAL PROPERTY, LOCAL IDENTITY, AND THE TRADEMARKING OF HON........................................................................251

EPILOGUE.............................................................................................................326

REFERENCES....................................................................................................336

NOTES................................................................................................................356
Chapter 1. INTRODUCTION

Baltimore was born into difficult circumstances. Set on the wealthy and powerful eastern seaboard of the United States, the city’s identity has always been nebulous. Philadelphia, just a hundred miles north, was the most important early American city. Although historically an industrial city, Baltimore’s heavy industry paled in comparison to Pittsburgh’s. Valuable as a port town when its ports were 200 miles further inland and on the Baltimore & Ohio Railroad, in the late twentieth and twenty-first centuries, shipping companies skip over Baltimore in favor of Newport News, Philadelphia, or New York. Baltimore does not star in popular culture like New York, nor does it wield the political power of Washington, D.C.

In fact, geographically, Baltimore’s location has been and remains ambiguous. Neither northern enough to be part of the Northeast nor southern enough to be a southern city, loyalties were divided during the Civil War, although it was known as a hotbed for Confederate sympathizers.¹ Too far east to be a rustbelt city, it is often left with the lukewarm designation of mid-Atlantic. So what then is Baltimore? And, even more importantly, what is a Baltimorean?

Baltimore is a city defined by its ambiguity, its fragmentation, and its oversight. These characteristics led to the construction of a distinct local culture, related to, but at the same, distinguished from surrounding cities, like Washington, D.C., Philadelphia, and New York. In this dissertation, I examine how residents, boosters, and outsiders construct an urban tradition in an attempt

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to answer the question, “What is Baltimore?” and “Who is a Baltimorean?” In some ways, this project is similar to American studies projects in the early and mid-twentieth century, which sought to answer the same questions about the United States and the American. Contemporary critics have lambasted that scholarship for its homogenizing and essentializing tendencies. In its place, I attempt to ground my research in an inductive approach to culture that examines particular instances rather than deducing from general assumptions an umbrella American identity. My focus is the politics of culture surrounding the discourse on these questions, with the local dialect Baltimorese and its primary signifier “hon” as both the catalyst for and the locus of the dialogue. The question addressed then is not truly “What is Baltimore?” or “Who is a Baltimorean?”, but how do residents propose, define, and consume markers of local authenticity to claim ownership over city culture? And why does it matter?

This project is not about the great American city of New York, or even the United States’s secondary cities like Los Angeles or Chicago. It is not about hip Miami, rising Phoenix, or idiosyncratic New Orleans. It is a story that could be set in any multicultural, postindustrial, fragmented twenty-first century American city. Baltimore does not stand as a symbol of the United States the way New York or Los Angeles do, but, on closer inspection, it proves to be more representative of the modern American urban experience. Generalizations here apply equally to Toledo, Albuquerque, Portland, Charleston, or Lowell. It is these
kinds of cities, representing the ordinary sort of places that most Americans live, that has not garnered proper scholarship.

As a case study, Baltimore is particularly expedient. First, it progresses through a number of eras. Some towns, like Maryland’s Port Tobacco, were extraordinarily influential in the early years of the United States, but are almost unknown now. Others, such as Los Angeles and Las Vegas, do not become important until the twentieth century. Baltimore chugs along for hundreds of years, known in some capacity for the entire lifespan of the United States. Second, Baltimore is foremost a port city. At one time, the second most popular disembarking point for American immigrants, Baltimore is both a long fragmented city and an important microcosm of American society at large. Third, Baltimore shares numerous characteristics with other industrial cities, especially other port cities and rustbelt cities. Lastly, and perhaps most importantly, like many other American cities, Baltimore is in a postindustrial era. Like many others, Baltimore’s economic infrastructure has shifted to a service and information economy. For those whose value system is rooted in an industrial economy and a working-class ethos, the dearth of industry causes an existential crisis questioning who the city and its residents are and what they stand for.

In this dissertation, I examine the identity politics of defining local authenticity via the construction of urban traditions in Baltimore. By examining the definition, adoption, commodification, and contestation of local forms of reputed authenticity, I hope to unravel the meaning and implications of what it
means to be a Baltimorean in a fragmented American city. My hypothesis is that perceiving their stigma and lack of political importance, Baltimoreans have contested the high culture or cosmopolitan definition of the city with the adoption of a vernacular image, thus turning a negative connotation into a positive one. “Hon” acts to reinforce this value, but because of the contested nature of its associations, it has been a magnet for criticism. Thus the difficult discourse on identity has shifted to more manageable battlegrounds like the Baltimore-Washington Parkway’s “Welcome to Baltimore, Hon” sign, the HonFest festival in Baltimore’s Hampden neighborhood, and Café Hon owner Denise Whiting’s trademarking of the word “hon.”

Problem Statement

In response to the globalization, commercialization, and modernization that most cultural observers argue characterizes contemporary society since at least the late twentieth century (Lears 1981, Barber 1996, Appadurai 1996, Friedman 2005, Zukin 2009), attachment to the local has become increasingly important. In the face of these trends, the local provides a stabilizing force, giving Americans a perceptible attachment to place in an otherwise detached, impersonal, and ever-changing world. In the face of these modern challenges, some might argue that ethnicity, family, or religion is the primary hedge against globalization and massification. On the contrary, I will attempt to demonstrate that Americans cling to local tradition—not an abstract, objectified phenomenon existing beyond the human mind, but through those expressions constantly
recreated and reaffirmed in the present as authentic attachments to history and place. Whether real or imagined, there is a need for local attachment that results in a cultural construction of place. The local “authentic” (also the genuine, the real, the true, the typical, or the “-ness”) gains prime importance in a fast-changing, vacillating world. Authenticity has been at the heart of the study of tradition for years, and the ability to label something “authentic” imbues that form and those connected to it with power in the sense of belonging. At the heart of my argument is that the formation of authenticity is not natural, findable, or freestanding apart from the human condition, but a constantly constructed label that values some expressive forms over others. As the “authentic” is so valuable, those modes of human expression labeled as such are not left to chance, but actively debated. By examining this dialectical discourse, one can observe the politics of culture as it plays out in the local and in everyday life. Following this approach, it is not merely the Great Men, the pivotal moments, and the national history that shape the world, but everyday men and women painting their world in a way that humanizes the landscape and connects them to it. The progression towards studying folklore in the city has been long, slow, and slippery. From Johann Herder’s dismissal of the urban rabble to Dorson’s question, “Is there a folk in the city?,” that implied a strangeness to the query, critics have been on unsure footing when considering urban vernacular forms. While folklorists work freely in the city in the twenty-first century, topics such as ethnic neighborhoods, bodegas, or street performances draw the most
scholarly attention. Complex urban American folklore (i.e., folklore rising directly out of the urban America experience), with a complete embrace for all its modernity, technology, industrialization, and commercialization, remains a fertile source of inquiry for modern folklorists (see Bronner 2014).

Urban folklore has limped along primarily in search of "transplanted" or "adapted" lore from immigrants or rural migrants rather than moving into the Dundesian realm of "folk ideas as units of [urban] worldview" (Dundes 1971). For example, folklorists have performed high-quality research studying the St. Paulinus Festival and the "dancing the giglio" in Brooklyn, New York, relating the practice to Italian antecedents and its adaptation to an urban setting (Sciorra 1989, Raspa 1991, Primeggia and Varacalli 1995, Porter 1995, Trudeau 2005). But folklorists have stopped short of asking the necessary corollary questions. How does "dancing the giglio" become part of a general Brooklyn lore? How does it shape the identity and attachment of Brooklymites, whether they are Italian or not?

Allowing for modernity in its entirety and acknowledging the problems inherent in generalizing above the individual level, what then is the role of vernacular culture in the formation of a local city identity? My answer is that residents look to and embrace vernacular culture as a way of rooting themselves to the local. But this formulation leaves much room for the intrusion of the political into the local. Struggles arise over the construction of the local vernacular and then again over the authenticity of particular forms within that
canon. It is through this dialectic that the politics of culture emerges and the importance of “ownership” over, or “rights to,” vernacular culture in the American city become central. The argument is not simply over the form but also the consequent images of these local forms in public space. This battle over public culture takes place in the midst of a supposed decline of public space (see Sennett 1992).

The Scholarship of Tradition and Modernity

Since the early twenty-first century, folklorists have begun to replace the opposition of tradition to modernity with the reconceptualization of tradition in, or as part of, modernity. At the beginning of organized inquiry into folklore in the nineteenth century, the scholars most interested in tradition lived in urban environs. Considering themselves part of progressive modern “civilization,” they associated tradition with the backward rural Other that inhabited the hinterlands of their nation. That said, urban folklore was not entirely ignored. Essays in early volumes of the Journal of American Folklore included Stewart Culin’s research on games played by Brooklyn boys and the Philadelphia chapter of the American Folklore Society’s guide to collecting in the city (Culin 1891). The focus here, however, was how relics managed to survive in the urban environment. Games were seen as survivals of ancient rituals or songs. Neighborhoods like Chinatowns appeared as the exotic in the progressive city (Culin 1887). Scholars did not yet consider the city as a place that generated its own folklore. In the second half of the twentieth century, folklorists did begin pursuing folkloric
materials that arose out of distinct urban environments (for example, see Bronner 1977 and Dargan and Zeitlin 1990).

While place studies is an established folklore domain, scholars have rejected the idea of a “regional consciousness,” preferring the cultural model of disparate locals inventing and contesting the “place” they inhabit through cultural forms on a daily basis. The idea of authenticity informs the local dialogue—how “real,” “true,” or “old” a cultural item, an event, or a reproduction is. It is the negotiation of what is authentic and who the authentic belongs to that informs ownership and belonging to a place. Scholars in the twenty-first century have moved beyond attempting to create a science of authenticity and tradition, where “specialists” connoisseur what is authentic tradition, how valuable it is, and to whom it belongs. Instead, folklorists identify forms important to communities, annotate them, and decipher how the tradition was created, how it changed to include or exclude certain groups, who changed it, and how the forms creation or perpetuation informs the cultural politics of place. In Baltimore, tradition exists openly within modernity, and the hon debate provide an overt opportunity for the negotiation and display of “authentic” Baltimore. Over the years, and through an assortment of stages, Baltimoreans have invoked the word and its associations to argue for what Baltimore was, what it is, what it should be, and who belongs to it.

In the 1960s and 1970s, excitement about the possibility of “urban folklore” sent shock waves through research conferences and folklore journals.
Some folklorists were looking for new hunting grounds for old rural traditions. Others sensed the possibility of the rise of new traditions, disconnected from a rural past and springing directly from urban conditions. While folklorists used the term “urban,” and originally used it in reference to the city, they often, in fact, meant “modern.” In industry, in ethnic cohabitation, and in the transformation of American life, the mid-twentieth century city was a site of modernity. When American folklorists argued for examining the urban, they were actually arguing for examining tradition in modernity. Dorson, for one, was aware of this, and perhaps partially responsible for the conflation. In his seminal “Is There a Folk in the City?,” he established the concept of “modern urban folklore” (Dorson 1970, 207, my emphasis). Additionally, Folklore in the Modern World (Dorson 1978), a publication that came out of the Conference on Folklore in the Modern World, has a distinct section on the “Folklore and the City,” indicating a symbolic equivalence between the urban and modern. A good example of the jumble between “urban” and “modern” is in the genre of urban legend. Originally referred to as “modern legends,” “modern urban legends,” or “modern belief tales,” the genre took on the name “urban legend” before eventually transitioning to “contemporary legend” (see Simpson 1998). An “urban legend” refers to modern folklore, in that it is a legend that emerges from modern conditions in response to psychological needs of the public. In contrast to many folklore genres, the contemporary legend genre’s connection to the present exceeds its relationship to the past. “Modern folklore” refers to emergent
traditions arising from contemporary conditions. The urban (and suburban) environment is one of the most important contemporary conditions of American society, but urban does not necessarily mean modern. Similarly, as Americans shifted towards urban and suburban living throughout the twentieth century, the urban and suburban condition became an important part of modern life.

The concepts of “urban folklore” and “modern folklore” are closely related in many folklorists’ minds, although it is important to carefully distinguish between the two. “Urban folklore” refers to the folklore of place, specifically the folklore of cities and concentrated towns. The U.S. Census Bureau does not classify “cities” but rather “urban areas.” The bureau’s definition of an urban area has changed over the decades. Since 1910, the bureau considered any incorporated place with a minimum population of 2,500 residents to be an urban place. As of 2010, the bureau differentiates between “Urbanized Areas” (50,000 or more residents) and “Urban Clusters” (between 2,500 and 50,000 residents). This may differ from the general American connotation of “city,” associated with a concentrated locality of material culture and a “cityscape.”

As the Census Bureau’s definition demonstrates, urban does not refer only to big city centers. It is a binary with rural, referring, much like the term urban legend, to the modern and the mainstream. With Baltimore as an example, this includes the city proper, the outskirts of the city, and the surrounding commuter neighborhoods. Folklore has never been an inherently rural enterprise. It was defined as such *de facto* because of the social position, biases, and motivations
of early folklorists. In the eighteenth and nineteenth century, the changing mode of production created a sharp contrast between the rural and the city. Folklore scholars were from the cities and defined rurality, antimodernity, and orality as central to folklore. But it was the groupness, the present-dayness, and continuity that drew their attention in the first place.

A discipline conceived to capture a disappearing subject matter could not be surprised to find itself in a perpetual existential crisis. But even more chilling, when folklorists made their forays into cities, they were shocked by what they could not find. Expert collectors and folk narrative scholars such as Richard Dorson and Linda Dégh declared the folktale dead in the American city. Industry management had cracked down on joking, making that too a dying genre, and the record player seemed to have replaced community singing. There were holdover beliefs from the migrants’ recent rural past, but these seemed to create strife rather than bonds in urban communities. Was folklore dying or was it changing under modern urban conditions? Even at these early times, folklorists noted folklore was probably stronger and more complex than ever. Folklorists would need to agree on their new quest and delineate the new modern genres before they would be able to conduct modern folklore research.

This realization transformed folklorists’ work in a number of ways. Some dedicated themselves to a new situational ethnography, an ethnography of speaking, and an ethnography of performance. Ethnography had been an important methodology prior to the new folkloristics. That ethnography connoted
the description of the total way of life of a group, usually isolated and homogenous. The analysis focused on the interrelations of different parts of life and the group’s cultural patterns and worldview. The situational ethnography encouraged by the new folkloristics devoted itself to the analysis of cultural scenes rather than cultures as a whole. The analysis examined the microfunction communication within a circumscribed scene. Many historiographers credit Clifford Geertz with popularizing, if not originating the idea of the microscene as a text to be read (for example, see Geertz 1973). Another anthropologist, Victor Turner, is also credited with formulating this new ethnographic approach, with attention to the process rather than the content of culture (see Turner 1970, 1982). Others transitioned their research to focus on all marginal groups, rural or urban, emphasizing the folk over the lore. Others shied away from the city, choosing those genres associated with the rural and the past, but with an existence in the present. Still others seem to have abandoned the complexity of the United States altogether, preferring to focus on non-American folklore.5 Another contingent chose neither the urban nor the rural, seeing the process of tradition as unencumbered by place in a modern context. In this view, culture was not tied to place but to people, who interacted to generate expressions, a paradigm shift inherent in the new folkloristics (Parades and Bauman 1972).

While some folklorists see folklore as modernist (see Bronner 1986, Blank & Howard 2013), many folklorists see the discipline of folklore as possessing an antimodern sentiment (see Ivey 2011). It is this thinking that has marginalized
the study of folklore by requiring respectable folklorists to pursue subjects that did not have the “taint” of modernity. The purist’s subjects bore little relationship to popular culture and mass media. As I will argue in three specific case studies, the folklore genres purloined, co-opted, transformed, and invented by agents of popular culture are, in fact, the most important folklore genres to study. As a nation shaped by commercialization and mass media, it should come as no surprise that those forms most valued by Americans would fall under their purview. American advanced consumer capitalism, a market driven economy, and the invisible hand will always look for, identify, and point to those forms most important to people. But as advertisement men learned to their chagrin throughout the twentieth century, Americans can only be manipulated to an extent. They must feel an underlying connection with their product.

I argue that modern America has not tolled a death knell for folklore, and in fact, Americans can find an abundance of folklore in the city. This folklore follows many of the same functions posited by folklorists decades ago: it has the verisimilitude of local authenticity, it promotes group cohesion at the local level, and it allows for expression of place through consumption. Rather than ignore (or despise) modern culture, folklorists have the opportunity to engage with it by deciphering how modernity influences folklore. This is not a study of folklore in popular culture, the folklore of popular culture, or even folklore and popular culture. I see folklore as one part of the modern condition. Folklorist can contribute to American studies scholarship by embracing the city, the urban,
modern, the commodified, and acknowledging that the folk, the popular, and the elite function within a single individual. The American city is a fertile field for forays into American folklore. The question is why the “place” of the city has not been explored more as a context that generates folklore. One possibility is the association of folklore with the vernacular and the city with the cosmopolitan. These cognitive categories clash in the consideration of urban American folklore in ways that they do not with occupations, ethnicity, religion or the folklore of mountains, rivers, or rural hamlets.

For at least half a century, scholars have inquired into the relationship between the practice of urban traditions and the modern American city. Much research has been completed on separate parts of the puzzle. But the research questions, the findings, and the implications have never been pulled together to make a larger statement about the importance of urban synthesis in the creation, maintenance, and perpetuation of distinct modern urban traditions and their relationship to identity politics in the United States.

**Folklore in the American City**

The most important early conversation in the history of urban folklore studies took place between 1968 and 1971, a time of great transition in folklore scholarship, American Studies scholarship, and the academy as a whole. Folklorist Ellen J. Steckert organized a symposium on urban folklore at Wayne State University in 1968. Prominent folklorists of the era attended, including Richard M. Dorson, Linda Dégh, D. K. Wilgus, and Roger Abrahams. The
conversation that began at the symposium continued in a special issue of the *Journal of American Folklore*. The special issue ultimately turned into *The Urban Experience and Folk Tradition*, edited by *Journal of American Folklore* editor Américo Paredes and symposium host Ellen J. Steckert. Contextualizing folklore scholarship in this era is essential to evaluate the future of the study of urban American folklore. The volume did not chart a distinctive approach to urban folklore as much as it verified that it could be a location for folklorists to find material. As Paredes pointed out, the essays “raised questions rather than answered them” (Paredes 1971, 13). This important moment in the history of urban folklore scholarship made few definitive statements or claims. Instead, it assessed assumptions that must be reconsidered in the face of a new research setting and posited hypotheses to be tested by future researchers. Paredes assured scholars the essays “major conclusions are signposts along the roads that research in urban folklore must follow” (Paredes 1971, 13).

The most important essay at the time, and the starting point for all future urban folklorists, was Richard Dorson’s exploratory “Is There a Folk in the City?” (Dorson 1970). Although folklorists, including his colleague Linda Dégh and his former student Ellen J. Steckert, had conducted research in the urban environment at the time of Dorson’s writing, there had been no sustained effort to theorize urban folklore. Steckert’s interest in urban folklore grew out of her faculty appointment in Detroit. Her interests seemed to focus on Appalachian transplants in urban settings. Alternatively, Dorson’s views were probably
influenced by his upbringing in New York City, which led to him asking more questions about the lore generated by the city. In his tripartite essay, Dorson approaches urban folklore from three angles. First, he establishes why folklorists should enter the city and how difficult they can expect the task to be. Second, he enters the city himself—two cities in fact. Dorson presents the results of a twenty-three day exploratory fieldtrip to the industrial cities of Gary, Indiana, and East Chicago, Indiana. Lastly, in the most important element of his research for future urban folklore researchers, Dorson presents ten “concepts of modern urban folklore.” It is these ten propositions that leave more questions posed than answered, but at the same time, they become the basis for the problems of urban folklore research to this day.

Although Dorson’s title comes in the form of a question, there is no question in his mind. There is a folk in the city, and they are worth the folklorist’s time and effort. But the forces of industrialization, modernization, and mass migration have made the urban folk a different creature than the folk found in the countryside. In fact, Dorson argues, folklorists can expect an even richer field experience than in their traditional rural and mountainous hunting grounds. Finding folklore in the city was exhilarating because it thrived in an unlikely place. For Dorson, this was a discovery that necessitated an expeditionary team (see Dorson 1978). The same forces of modernity that had transformed the United States into an urban and suburban society had also transformed folklore down to the genre level. Folklorists pursuing folklore in the city, therefore, had to
clarify the new American urban genres. Until then, folklorists would be searching for a known phenomenon without knowing its particularities.\(^8\)

By the time he began to pursue urban folklore, Dorson was a veteran fieldworker. He could lay claim to research in dozens of traditional folkloristic stomping grounds, including Michigan’s Upper Peninsula, the Missouri and Arkansas Ozarks, Maine maritime regions, and Louisiana Cajun country (see Dorson 1964 for a comprehensive example), from which he produced numerous publications. Because of his renown as a folklorist, his commitment to fieldwork, his love of the British folklorists (Dorson 1969a), and his vitriol for fakelore (Dorson 1976), it is a strong statement when Dorson argues that the city will be an even richer environment for the folklorist than the countryside. At the onset of his research, Dorson listed his purposes as threefold: “to ascertain if the folklorist could ply his trade in the city; to contrast the vitality of the traditions among the various ethnic and racial groups; and to observe the effect of life in an urban, industrial center upon these imported cultures” (Dorson 1970, 187). To these ends, it is his first and third goals, proof that folklorists can work in the city and a consideration of the influence of the urban environment on folklore, that give this preliminary research its lasting value as a statement for future folklore work.

Dorson’s collected materials that he presented still included traditional genres of legends, humor, and pranks, rather than evaluating the kinds of material that spoke the most for urban residents. In this early era, Dorson had to
defend against even the most basic criticisms, up to and including the propriety
of folklorists spending time in the city at all, and he wanted to show that the
genres folklorists found in the country could also be located in the city. Dorson’s
argument is that the study of folklore is ultimately the study of people, and,
therefore, folklorists must go where people go (Dorson 1970, 186). As
enlightened as Dorson was and as willing as he was to see the possibility of new
urban traditions, his readers can still sense shades of the rural, the ethnic, and
the marginal emanating from those topics he deems fit to cover.9 For example,
Dorson chooses Gary for his fieldwork site because it is an “ethnic” city (Dorson
1970, 186). At the same time, in the floor discussion that followed Dorson’s
paper at the 1968 symposium, Dorson enthusiastically supports studying the
folklore of both marginalized groups and mainstream, dominant groups (Paredes
& Steckert 1971, 61). Dorson was split between what he could intellectualize as
worthy and what he would pursue himself.

At the same time, in the third quarter of the twentieth century, there were
plenty of reasons to think urban folklore was not novel. The conditions of
poverty, illiteracy, and ethnic solidarity that characterized the peasant villages
beloved by folklorists had been imported into the American urban center.
Catalyzed by the urban milieu, the social problems had increased in both visibility
and intensity, to the point where the modern industrial city took on the sense of
“the urban jungle, crime-ridden, race-wrecked, and cultureless” (Dorson
1970,187). Complicating his research, Dorson’s acknowledges the “crime-ridden”
and the “race-wracked” city while dismissing the possibility of a cultureless urban folk. In fact, one point that all future researchers seem to agree on is that the American city only increases the complexity of culture.

As seminal as Dorson’s essay is, its greatest problem lies in what makes up the bulk of the essay. For the majority of the essay, Dorson presents his fieldwork findings based on ethnic categorizations (Negro, Serbian, Croatian, Greek, Mexican, and Puerto Rican) (Dorson 1970, 188-207). While Dorson was proud of his urban field research and saw it as central to answering the question of a folk in the city, his contemporaries pounced on the weakness of the approach. While undoubtedly requiring great time and energy, the report of his findings reads as a classic example of what Alan Dundes would, a decade later, call Dorson’s “disinclination to interpret the data he so assiduously gathered” (Dundes 1982, xvi). To Dorson’s great annoyance, Leonard Moss criticized this section harshly, scolding Dorson for his lack of theories and hypotheses that could orient future folklorists looking to him for guidance.

As a leading authority in the history of folklore and as a major folklorist, [Dorson] owes us much more than proof that folklore exists in the city. He owes us more than a series of vignettes and anecdotes, no matter how interesting they may be. Professor Dorson has avoided facile generalizations and for good reason; yet, he has also avoided the creation of genuine hypotheses that could lead to exciting and fertile research beyond the point of collecting and categorizing. (Moss 1971, 59)

The problem that Moss identified at an early stage was the fragmentary picture that ethnic folklore, studied as Dorson did, gave of the city’s folklore overall. It was not that ethnic folklore was an inappropriate pursuit. As Dorson found, there
was enough ethnic folklore in a few neighborhoods to last a folklorist a lifetime. But ethnic folklore alone failed to give a picture of the city’s folklore, even if every ethnic group was studied individually and the pieces pasted together.\textsuperscript{11} The complex relation of ethnic groups to their past, to other ethnic groups, and to the other folk groups each member belonged to (occupation especially) made urban American folklore greater than the sum of its ethnic parts. The ethnic equals urban equation negates the possibility a resident using folklore to navigate the space and develop identity. Emergent traditions were rising in this new American crucible, and Moss felt Dorson had glossed over these, content to bring the past methods of rural folklorists into the modern city. Others would go on to speculate on the phenomena the urban folklorist must now address, but at this earliest time period, Moss pointed to the “mechanism of retention” for tradition in the city, the “phenomenon of diffusion” into the city and then across it, and the “ethnic hybridizing” that must go on with so many groups in close proximity. This new folklore venture in the city would bring with it the need for a reconsideration of the folklorist’s theories and methods.

My research attempts to test Dorson’s hypotheses in Baltimore.\textsuperscript{12} The two hypotheses of central importance in my research are Dorson’s “Ethnic Separatism” and “Urban Synthesis.” Dorson’s concept of “Ethnic Separatism” extends from his rural field research to the city (Dorson 1970, 212). While many groups are brought together in the city, Dorson argues that far from the melting pot, most traditions do not cross cultural boundaries at all. It is only when an
individual physically crosses into another group’s culture through friendship or marriage that he or she will take on any of that group’s traditions.\textsuperscript{13} Dorson’s concept is most useful when seen in combination with the contrasting yet complementary idea of “Urban Synthesis” (Dorson 1970, 213). Although Dorson focuses on ethnic separatism in his preliminary research, it is “urban synthesis” that should be most compelling to budding urban folklorists. While ethnic groups “never penetrate each other’s folklore, or perhaps even each other’s homes, they do share the environment, the living experience, and perforce the lore of their abode” (Dorson 1970, 213). While all groups may be separated by the folklore of ethnicity, they are bounded by the folklore of place. While some exceptions may exist, a folklore emerges from the conditions of place that most of the city’s residents must survive.

Dorson chose Gary, Indiana as a model city, which shares many similarities, and some differences, with the site of my study, Baltimore, Maryland. In Gary and East Chicago, the new conditions turned the themes of group folklore towards “steel, crime, and the racial-ethnic mix” (Dorson 1970, 213). The lore of a folk group, it seemed, shifted under changing conditions, especially conditions as dramatic as a shift from rural countryside to industrial city. Baltimore too is defined by its urban conditions. Rather than steel, Baltimore’s themes are general blue-collar industry, crime, and the racial-ethnic mix. Like Gary, folk groups realigned under at least two shifts in Baltimore, the influx of
migrants into the city and then, again, under the flight out of the city, both in the twentieth century.

Dorson was a hard man to ignore, and for a time, scholars heeded his (and others) call to enter the city. Both Dorson and Dégh would publish subsequent research on urban folklore (Dorson 1981, Dégh 1985). Plenty of other scholars also pursued research on urban topics, but in retrospect, the library shelf looks less like continued contemplation of urban American folklore as a theoretical folklore concept, and more as genre studies within cities (for example, see Abrahams 1964, Bronner 1977, Wachs 1988). As far as locations, the literature is skewed heavily in favor of New York City (Miska and Posen 1983, Sciorra 1989, Gargulinski 2001, Murray 2001, Ragland 2001, Zeitlin and Harlow 2001). Associated with great American symbols of the United States like the Statue of Liberty, the Empire State Building, and the World Trade Center, New York is not itself a great representative of the average American city.

The most important statement following Dorson’s study came from Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, herself a New York folklorist. While she used New York City for her examples and concluded with a genre approach, Kirshenblatt-Gimblett attempted theoretical innovation. She assured folklorists that cities “offered a new frontier for exploring the indomitable will to make meaning, create value, and develop connoisseurship under the most exhilarating, as well as the most devastating, conditions” (Kirshenblatt-Gimblett 1983, 222). But while her approach was excellent for illuminating particular examples of folklore in the
city, it failed to tie these instances to what Charles Briggs and Amy Shuman referred to as “macro processes” (Briggs & Shuman 1993, 121). Urban folklore research is at its most useful when it allows scholars to decode a city’s informal cultural constructs by linking them to the larger sociocultural issues of the city.

**Place, Local Identity, and Conflict**

Scholars across the humanities have taken an interest in place studies. Although folklorists have argued variously that authenticity, art, tradition, and group are the keywords of folklore studies, attempting to grasp the “local” is another of folklorist’s central driving concepts. While the scope of the local ranges from study to study, many early scholars like the Grimms used folk materials in an attempt to define a place, a region, or a nation. Although *The Types of the Folktale: A Classification and Bibliography* and the global nature of folklore would show that the folktale was more international than local, it did not deter the worldwide quest to find, save, or salvage the distinctive local identity, especially in the face of the destructive force of industrial, modern, and global culture.

Where was this distinctive local feeling to be found, especially in a young country like the United States? American local color writers found it in regional and ethnic cultures across the United States. In his Tom Sawyer and Huckleberry Finn novels, Mark Twain captured middle and lower class southern whites as well as slaves and free blacks around Hannibal, Missouri. Joel Chandler Harris’s Uncle Remus tales reenacted southern antebellum slave folktales around Eatonton,
Georgia. And Zora Neale Hurston captured the vernacular of blacks around Eatonville, Florida during the Great Depression.

American folklorists continued this work into the mid-twentieth century. Many of these were fieldwork accounts that used folklore genres to capture a sense of place. These include Richard Dorson’s foray into Michigan’s Upper Peninsula (1952), Leonard Roberts’ work in the Appalachians (1954, 1955), and Vance Randolph’s longstanding association with the Ozarks (1951, 1952, 1955). Folklorists were showing a legitimate scholarly interest in American regional culture, and the folklorists’ methods and genres proved capable of exploring the local in new ways. Richard Dorson proposed an encyclopedia of American folk regions toward the end of his life (but never completed it). In American Studies, the Memphis meeting of the American Studies Association in the 1980s was on regionalism, but the topic lost traction in the 1990s. One possible impetus for place studies in the United States was the Bicentennial of American Independence. The event encouraged the incubation of many local projects, in contrast to the centennial, which was more oriented towards the national.

Folklorists’ interest in the local would continue unabated to the present day, although the field would see a distinct shift towards a new phenomenological approach to research. In comparison to Richard Dorson’s systematic study of Gary, Indiana, which hoped to assess the possibility of folklore in the city, to show how city folklore was distinctively American, and to reflect larger American themes, Henry Glassie headed to Ireland to see how the
local was conceptualized in one small Irish town (Glassie 1982). This conception of the study of local culture led to a number of important works that contemplated the sense (or “senses”) of place (see Nicolaisen 1991, Tuan 1991, Ryden 1993). The contrast shows the division in folkloric place studies between Dorson’s systematic us of folklore versus Glassie’s decidedly humanistic and impressionistic approach. Perhaps most influential of all was Clifford Geertz’s *Local Knowledge*, where Geertz tied local knowledge to the idea of culture (Geertz 1985).

Perhaps the most important statement of the 1990s on the local in the critical school of thought came in the Special Issue “Folklore and Cultural Studies.” In her essay, Amy Shuman called for “deconstructing” the essentializing notion of local culture (Shuman 1993). Using concepts derived from sociolinguistics, Shuman notes the “marked” nature of local culture, which is itself an invention. Marking local culture—even when done with noble intentions—functions to naturalize the local and to see the influence by the global, or as Shuman calls it, the larger-than-local, as an unnatural or corrupting influence, rather than seeing it as one more characteristic of culture that always has and always will be present.

Since the 1990s, place scholars have resituated their research to focus on the power dynamics inherent in the conception of place. Rather than focusing on what makes a place distinctive, researchers read the landscape for clues of how difference is contested in the construction of place. With conflict as the central
loci of research, scholars have looked at how race, gender, ethnicity, and economic concerns are contested in the conceptual construction of a landscape (Soja 1989, Foucault 1979, de Certeau 1984, Harvey 1990, McDowell 1999, Massey 1994, Kirshenblatt-Gimblett 1994). In addition to residents, who were the primary focus of earlier research, negotiation of place between tourists and locals has become of increasing importance (Bendix 1989, Fife 2004, Urry 1994). Rather than essentialize and romanticize a local folk, scholars now focus on how local culture is produced rather than attempting to “discover” it. This amounts to the politics of culture, as it has been studied for years (Whisnant 1983, Briggs and Shuman 1993, Kirshenblatt-Gimblett 1998), applied to the study of place.

Place has continued to be an active conversation in folklore circles into the twenty-first century. With place becoming central to social theory, researchers questioned whether folklorists could contribute to the study of place in the new millennium. In the Western Folklore special issue “Space, Place, Emergence,” a group of authors suggested that the emergent, contextual, and performative aspects of culture should apply equally to the study of place. Places are not found but enacted, “from text to process, from static entity to performance and event” (Gabbert and Jordan-Smith 2007, 220). Therefore, folklore is constantly in flux and like folklore, needs to be considered an emergent practice.

Place studies can be perceived as “reactionary,” particularly when researchers attempt to ascertain the character or “truth” of a given place. The increased mobility of Americans places the importance of local identity in
question. Conscious of this concern, the editors of “Space, Place, Emergence” urged scholars “not to take space and place for granted but instead to investigate their means of construction” (Gabbert & Jordan-Smith 2007, 2). In the twenty-first century, instead of searching for the unique, the authentic, or the idiosyncratic local, researchers “are concerned with how particular places come to be constructed, who gets to do the constructing, and in what kind of contexts” in a “salient category of struggle” (Gabbert & Jordan-Smith, 222). It is not homogeneity but the struggle that creates the sense(s) of place. Gabbert and Jordan-Smith insist that “whoever controls the rhetoric controls the discourse. By extension, whoever controls the production of meaning within a place controls the place itself, whether such meaning is realized verbally, iconographically, symbolically, onomastically, or through combined semiotic resources such as those embodied in ceremony and ritual” (Gabbert & Jordan-Smith, 223). In Baltimore, “hon” is the site of this discourse, and through it one can see the contested construction of Baltimore and Baltimoreans through the twentieth and into the twenty-first century.

Folklorists can contribute to the study of place by examining how residents use local tradition to construct visions of place and belonging that claim some and exclude others. In this study, I attempt to make the case that place is a prime identity, although it is not always acknowledge by the individual. As immigration and migration continue unabated in the United States, Americans have seized on the ability to use cultural traditions to construct a sense of place
where some belong and others do not. Traditions, especially traditions that are
said to belong to the “whole” community like signs, festivals, and dialects are
fertile sites for the exploration of honest expressions of ownership and
community in action, not veiled by the political correctness of the newspaper or
the doublespeak of the politician. Folklorists are not new to place studies, but
using local tradition, particularly ones recent in development and filled with the
“inauthenticities” of corporate sponsorship and government support, offers new
pathways to examine the construction of place through tradition.

**Authenticity, Fakelore, and Folklorism**

Authenticity is a central concept in the study of folklore and the
vernacular. The use of the term has shifted over the years, from the romantic
Johann Gottfried Herder’s belief that peasants or tradition-centered folk were the
authentic, poetic soul of the nation, to Richard Dorson’s association of folk
culture with the authentic over spurious popular culture, to the postmodern shift
from divisions of culture to representations of authenticity. In Baltimore and
other American cities in the late twentieth and early twenty first century, this is
not a theoretical concept trapped in the ivory tower. Whether expressed as
authenticity, “real” Baltimore, “true” Baltimore, or a place or person’s inherent
“Baltimorenness,” these are terms residents and tourists use to conceive of and
construct their daily world. In this dissertation, I analyze claims to local authentic
identity as a discursive formulation connected to claims of rootedness and
belonging to place.
Inquiry into authenticity began in the eighteenth-century Europe. Dissatisfaction with modernity, capitalism, and urbanization (the artifices of modern life) drove some intellectuals to call for a return to a more raw, more sensual, and more natural way of living. They sought inspiration in the art of peasant culture, especially ballads and folktales. Although not particularly interested in the peasants themselves, the spirit or volksgeist they saw infecting peasant creative expressions intrigued intellectuals. In response to the gloom they saw falling over civilization, intellectuals such as Johann Gottfried Herder called for poets to infuse their work with the raw authenticity of the volksgeist, eschewing the synthetic modes and affected airs of modernity and urban life. Herder’s enthusiasm for the volksgeist inspired the Sturm and Drang school, which would eventually transform into the romantic nationalism movement. In other areas of the world, similar quests for authenticity captured the attention of nations. James Macpherson’s Ossian poems in Scotland set off a maelstrom of interest in folk materials and received high praise from the romantics (Bealle 2003). Ireland had its W. B. Yeats, and Italy had Giambattista Vico. This, of course, became a prime example of how fabricated materials can appear incredibly “authentic.”

Some scholars have gone so far as to argue that Herder’s authenticity project invented the entire category of “folk,” influencing who and what folklorists studied for the next three hundred years (Bendix 1997). The specific interests of the period are especially notable. The romantics idolized the
aesthetic they saw in folk expression and endeavored to capture and imitate it; they did not idolize the folk themselves. In fact, they preferred the foregone, noble folk that they idealized in their minds over the tangible folk who they often characterized as superstitious, uncivilized, and primitive. Herder, for example, dismissed the urban lower classes entirely as a “rabble” (Baildam 1999, 85). The rural folk were moral and wholesome, but still not progressive. This volk spirit infused folk materials.

At the beginning of the nineteenth century, the next generation of folklore scholars, poets, travelers, and linguists, now influenced by rational enlightenment thought, considered the possibility of establishing authenticity through scientific principles. The lust for authenticity that the romantics had expressed in passionate, emotional language, the Grimms expressed in objective, scientific language. Herder had established the spirit of the folk as a romantic goal, but class bias, like Herder’s urban rabble, could not allow the peasants to hold sole ownership over such an important concept. To fight this possibility, the Grimms and others cast the folk as mere unconscious bearers of a tradition, and posited that civilization slowly corrupted these bearers. Researchers could trace the folk tradition back to its purer origins in a nobler past. Under their classist philosophy, communal creation in a primordial past allowed upper class intellectuals to stake an equal claim to the volksgeist they pursued.

The Transcendentalists may be the best-known scholars to work on the authenticity issue in the United States, but the closest relatives to the German
search for authenticity in the United States were the Harvard ballad scholars. The interest of Francis James Child, James Russell Lowell, Barrett Wendell, and George Lyman Kittredge in ballads showed the yearning for authenticity similar to the European model. Child’s 305 English and Scottish ballads are an example of folklorists studying material and simultaneously constructing a canon. Rather than honoring the folk for their creations, Lowell excluded them by definition, arguing that the thing that made authentic ballads so special was that “nobody made them.” (Lowell 1897, 51).

In the mid-twentieth century, in the relationship between folklore and authenticity, the next major challenge would come from Richard Dorson. Having carved a niche for folklore in the American academy, Dorson felt a need to defend it from spurious “fakelore,” and he waged war against attempted purveyors of commercial fakelore. Dorson defined fakelore as “spurious and synthetic writings under the claim that they are genuine folklore” (Dorson 1976). He expressed particular vitriol for Benjamin Botkin, one of the most popular “popular” folklorists of the day, and the tales of Paul Bunyan especially. Although Dorson’s war against fakelore would prove futile, Dorson was correct about Botkin. Botkin openly admitted that he fabricated materials, hoping to construct a “better” American folklore (Botkin 1944, xxv-xxvi). Regina Bendix points out the irony in Dorson’s own construction of the idea of “fakelore.” Bendix argues that “Dorson had used the dichotomy to point to folklore’s inherent authenticity and fakelore’s inherent inauthenticity, yet by applying standards of purity or
genuineness to the purportedly fake, Dorson rendered authenticity a matter of judgment rather than an inherent quality” (Bendix 1997, 192-194). Few challenged Dorson’s conception. Alan Dundes, instead of rejecting the idea of fakelore, attempted to expand on its value. Dundes argued that it was not pride but national or cultural inferiority that influenced fakelore, and that despite its origins, its importance in culture meant it deserved study with the same vigor and methods as folklore (Dundes 1985).

Although American and German scholarship is not always in close dialogue, the best response to the “fakelore” conversation would come from German scholars debating folklorismus, or the anglicized, folklorism. The impetus for the debate that would rage in Germany came in the wake of the experiences of National Socialism. The real world importance and debate over authenticity had proven their dangers. A close consideration of the rhetorical goals of folklore and of National Socialism showed a frighteningly similar quest. Both were interested in authenticity under the guise of “purity.” The time had come to question, reevaluate, and revise the German folklore canon. In Folk Culture in a World of Technology, Bausinger argued that because of misconceptions of folklore as pre-industrial, pre-technological, and pre-modern, folklorists had ignored most of modern folklore (Bausinger 1990). He urged folklorists to embrace, not reject, innovation.

But the most important contribution that resulted from this conversation was the concept of folklorismus or folklorism—that popular or commercial
material constructed out of folk components should be studied as a cultural phenomenon rather than being dismissed. This concept provided the most important rethinking of the canon in the twentieth century. Moser pithily referred to folklorism as “secondhand folklore,” but Regina Bendix argues that its true value was in forcing “debaters to recognize the constructed nature of folk cultural authenticity itself” (Bendix 1997, 176). Moser argued folklorism is “primarily commercially determined and deeply anchored in the tourism and entertainment industries, both increasingly important branches of the economy” (Moser 1962, 199). As a part of the new reflexivity of the discipline, Bendix argues that “from an initial dismissal of folklorism as the spurious and manipulated, historical research had forced folklorists to recognize the parallels between scholarly reconstructions of folk cultural good and societal efforts to construct aesthetic representations of folkness” (Bendix 1997, 185). The importance of folklorism and its rejection of authenticity, therefore, was that it drove the discipline towards “issues concerning political economy, politics of culture, and folklore in the marketplace,” and it did so long before American folklorists would begin considering such issues (Bendix 1997, 186). Calls for the study of the “ritualesque” (Santino 2009) and the “folkloresque” (Foster & Tolbert) are contemporary versions of this conversation. Simon Bronner has questioned if even this distinction is necessary considering both concepts boil down to practices that use “traditional knowledge” (Bronner 2014).
Although a number of scholars have made authenticity central to their work, the most important voice in the 1990s was Regina Bendix. In her magnum opus *In Search of Authenticity*, Bendix sought to show the centrality of the desire for “authenticity” in all of folklore scholarship. Her stated goal was to remove authenticity as the defining feature of folklore or the proper goal of the folklorist. Much like the criticisms of “tradition” in folklore scholarship, she saw authenticity as a concept that folklorists used to stake claims rather than as a concept that has received proper critical scrutiny (Bendix 1997, 216). Bendix implored folklorists to take a more reflexive position on how their work reverberates outside the academy, influencing the perceptions of culture.¹⁴ In this mindset, scholars like Dorson could not reject “popularizers” from pursuing and engaging with folk material. Quite the opposite, the folklore disciplinarians were but one more participant in the cultural flow that constructs the folk or vernacular canons. Through a “deconstructive lens” that focused on “language and ideology,” Bendix hoped to “undermine the social and political power of discourses on authenticity.” (Bendix 1997, 221, 226). Bendix urges folklorists instead to reorient themselves towards answering “why humans search for authenticity” and “acknowledging [its] constructed and deceptive nature” (Bendix 1997, 227-228). As part of this project, Bendix encourages folklorists to embrace market forces. Rather than the knee jerk reaction to reject anything that had been corrupted by economic influences as “inauthentic,” folklorists should accept that they alone do not choose what is important to people’s lives and how it
should be distributed. At its most dangerous, the mere concept of authenticity implies its opposite, that there are cultural expressions that are “fake, spurious, or even illegitimate” (Bendix 1997, 9).

A yearning for authenticity underlies the thirst for tradition in the modern world. Moving past models of culture that separate the authentic and the inauthentic, scholars can attempt to explain how certain traditions are made authentic and how others are cast as inauthentic. Understanding that an advanced consumer economy will attempt to co-opt the desire for tradition, authenticity can be seen as a shine that lures rather than a halo that sanctifies. In a world that feels ever more placeless, transitory, and manufactured, how Americans use tradition to grasp for rootedness through a consumption of authenticity may become the central research question for the folklorist in the twenty-first century. As the world becomes more global, more transnational, and more cosmopolitan, consumption of tradition and authenticity shows the continued desire to stake a claim in the local. What may seem blasphemous to past generations of folklorists now proves essential to the future of American folklore. The central question is not what is authentic but how forms are imbued with authenticity.

**The Invention of Tradition and the Politics of Culture**

Into the 1980s and 1990s, folklorists began the investigation of the invention, construction, and “traditionalizing” of folk materials. On the other hand, the passage of the American Folklife Preservation Act and advent of large-
scale, state and federally funded folklife programs and events brought on new challenges that required legal definitions of authentic folklore acceptable to legislators, but meshed poorly with the study of the invention of tradition. A method not suitable for all, studying the invention of tradition through the lens of the politics of culture is the most useful contribution folklorists can make to the American studies project in the twenty-first century.

Although Dell Hymes is most remembered for bringing the “ethnography of speaking” to the study of American folklore, in his 1974 presidential address to the American Folklore Society, he made one of the earliest American calls to view tradition as a verb.

Let us consider the notion, not simply as naming objects, traditions, but also, and more fundamentally, as naming a process. It seems in fact the case that every person and group, makes some effort to “traditionalize” aspects of its experience. To “traditionalize” would seem to be a universal need. Groups and persons differ, then, not in presence or absence of the traditional—there are none which do not “traditionalize”—but in the degree, and the form, of success in satisfying the universal need. (Hymes 1975, 353)

This is an early example of a call that would influence, rather than characterize, folklore research and the research of tradition in the 1980s and 1990s. Scholars began to examine and analyze how “authentic” traditions were constructed, acknowledged, and emerged in particular contexts, and other disciplines joined in. In the early stages, the most insightful analyses and commentaries came from outside the folklore discipline. Historians, anthropologists, and sociologists all contributed, sometimes without acknowledging folkloristic precedent. In 1983 historians Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger wrote the influential book
Invention of Tradition, which proffered the idea of the processes of constructing a tradition or putting the aura of traditionality around a relatively new tradition rather than an essentialistic, positivistic, or naturalistic view of tradition. Looking at the influence of Hobsbawm and Ranger a decade and a half later, Regina Bendix argued that Stuart Hall’s “residual culture” and Raymond Williams “selective tradition” had greater influence on folklorists, but I see Dell Hymes, Eric Hobsbawm, Terence Ranger, Richard Handler, Jocelyn Linnekin, and later David Whisnant as having the greatest influence over the concept of the construction of authenticity and tradition. Following these, Jane Becker and Neil Rosenberg also deserve credit for considering the consumer element in the invention of traditions (Becker 1998, Rosenberg 1993).

Although the Invention of Tradition remains frequently cited and esteemed, its most common criticism is that Eric Hobsbawm maintained a dichotomy between true “customs” and “invented traditions” (Hobsbawm 1983, 2). The most important response would come from anthropologists Jocelyn Linnekin and Richard Handler. Jocelyn Linnekin had been working on Hawaiian identity and insisted that “tradition is always made up in the present; the content of the past is modified and redefined according to modern significance” and Handler noticed the same in the Quebecois nationalist movement (Linnekin 1983, 212, Handler 1988). Together in their essay “Tradition, Genuine or Spurious,” the duo wrote that it was “impossible to separate spurious and genuine tradition, both empirically and theoretically” (Handler and Linnekin 1984). Inspired by the
Invention of Tradition and “Tradition, Genuine or Spurious,” a number of works came out exploring the invention of tradition.15

With a general consensus that, despite the best wishes of folklorists, folklore and politics were indelibly intertwined, folklorists realized that they had to pursue and critique the relationship between folklore and power. American folklorists had pursued this style of research for years, although always outside of the United States, especially in communist and fascist countries (see Dorson 1966, Oinas 1978). Alan Dundes had also considered the relationship, specifically between fakelore and politics, arguing that it was national or culture inferiority, not pride, which spurred the construction of fakelore (Dundes 1985). But few scholars had pointed their analytic lens at the construction of tradition in the United States and its untold social, political, and economic consequences.

In the 1970s and 1980s, Dell Hymes, Eric Hobsbawm, Terence Ranger, Richard Handler, and Jocelyn Linnekin all shook up the folklore discipline. Notably, they all came from outside folkloristics. In its history, it seems folkloristics frequently requires these outside voices to rouse disciplinarians from their stasis. In the 1980s and 1990s, American studies scholar David Whisnant and anthropologist Charles Briggs would use their freedom from rigid folkloric disciplinary constraints to push the boundaries of folkloristic inquiry and breath new life into a folkloristic discipline losing prestige as a result of contemporary theories, impulses, and inquiries. In All That Is Native & Fine: The Politics of Culture in an American Region, Whisnant argued that all collections, revivals, and
festivals are cultural interventions. He encouraged cultural scholars to “begin to understand the politics of culture—especially the role of formal institutions and forceful individuals in defining and shaping perspectives, values, tastes, and agendas for cultural change” (Whisnant 1985, 15)

In the 1990s, Charles Briggs and Amy Shuman saw “an examination of the ways in which traditionalizing (identifying aspects of the past as significant in the present) is a dynamic culture process” (Briggs & Shuman 1993, 109) as the new paradigm shift that moves folklorists away from romancing the tradition and towards understanding how people, objects, and events became “traditionalized.” Although Briggs and Shuman understood that this was the best direction for folkloristics, they were convinced that the discipline lacked “the theoretical, social, and political underpinnings of their participation in the production of modernity” and lamented that “theoretical advances are not emerging from within the discipline” (Briggs & Shuman 1993, 110). One important advancement that Briggs, Shuman, and the authors of this special issue noted was the importance of historical analysis in the future of folkloristics. The performance turn had led to research that was largely ahistorical, placing diachronic analysis above synchronic analysis. Folklorists such as Dan Ben-Amos seemed to reject tradition and time as an important touchstone of folklore (Ben-Amos 1971, 13). But an onslaught of theoretical statements in the 1980s pushed scholars to see that “characterizing cultural forms as ‘traditional’ constitutes a powerful means of imbuing them with social value and authority” and that
“traditions came to be seen more as products of a process of invention than as historical residues” (Briggs and Shuman 1993, 116). Studies in the 1980s and 1990s showed how “the process of traditionalizing culture thus emerges as a locus of strategies for empowering particular groups, rhetoric, and interests” (Briggs and Shuman 1993, 116). For example, see Handler 1988, Dorst 1989). In the past, folklorist attempted to peel away the layers of political agendas to find the “real” folklore at the core. But since the 1980s, folklorists have seen the political agenda as part and parcel of the folklore and the folklore as part of the political agenda. Rather than lessening the importance of “authentic” folklore, this theoretical framework increases the significance of folklore by allowing scholars to tie its processes and products to larger issues of ethnicity, race, class, gender, sexuality, age, nationalism, and indignity. An important element of the shift toward cultural studies in folklore is the understanding that the performance paradigm was inadequate for analyzing the sociopolitical processes necessary for answering the larger questions folklorists yearned to answer (Briggs and Shuman 1993, 121). Briggs and Shuman urge folklorists to pursue a “politics of folklore” that examines “the relationship between the cultural production of folklorists and its cultural politics” (Briggs & Shuman 1993, 126).

The call for a “politics of folklore” led to some worthwhile, tangible results. From the 1990s to the present, the discipline increased the production of scholarly inquiry into race, gender, and sexuality. In addition, the folklore discipline found its most reflexive moment, where everything from the disciplines
key terms (Feintuch 1995, Bendix 1997), to representation (Ritchie 1993), to reflexivity (Lawless 1992), and to the name of the discipline itself (Bendix 1998, Ben-Amos 1998, Kirshenblatt-Gimblett 1998, Oring 1998) were questioned. Although this led to a more reflexive discipline, it did not achieve the larger resonance that Biggs and Shuman had called for, most likely because folklorists had overestimated their own importance in the public discourse over folk and traditional materials. Instead of looking at a “politics of folklore” in the academy, I believe folklorists should pursue a “politics of tradition” in situ, unraveling how Americans use folklore and tradition as a means of power struggle. Taking on the “politics of folklore” in the field, not in the academy, is what will lead to “understanding concepts such as modernity, authenticity, or traditional cultural values”—this is the key contribution of folkloristics (Briggs and Shuman 1993, 128).

Scholars in the 1980s pushed the envelope by asking researchers to question how traditions are constructed. Scholars in the 1990s pushed folklorists to go further and ask who constructed traditions serve. In the modern era, “tradition” retains its mystic aura, providing a smoke screen behind which is found the deliberate invention and purposeful perpetuation. A close analysis of local processes sheds light on the sociopolitical processes that serve as the impetus for the construction and continuation of tradition. This close analysis leads to the idea of frame theory (see Bronner 2010), suggesting that folklore in a situation is relative to the group that “frames” it. While folklore has been
coined the love child of literature and anthropology and American studies the bastard of history and literature, the pursuit of American tradition in the twenty-first century—a worthy American studies goal—forces the folklorist to combine the methods of cultural history, cultural studies, and anthropology. This method allows scholars to examine the local scenes, while simultaneously understanding how “trivial” traditions such as these contribute directly to an understanding of the world and the individual’s place in it.

**Theory and Method**

Scholarly jeremiads have forecast the oncoming extinction of tradition under the threat of globalization, commercialization, and mass culture (see Glassie 1995, Ivey 2011). Nonetheless, many scholars working on “modern folklore” have arrived at the understanding that tradition and modernity are not binary opposites. Rather, they see tradition existing in modernity, and the question of how tradition validates or contests modernity is an area ripe for scholarly analysis. Rather than assuming a relict tradition that can be “found” on the American landscape, scholars now assess how tradition is made authentic or inauthentic and its relationship to power in the social structure. To ignore the turn toward performance theory risks receding to text-oriented salvage ethnographies that do much for nostalgia but little in the way of interpreting the meaning of American traditions. On the other hand, by analyzing the relationship of tradition to sociopolitical processes, folklorists can move beyond established
models and incorporate productive elements of cultural studies and practice theory.

It is a scholarly reduction of the literature to say folklorists could not imagine a folk in the city prior to Richard Dorson’s “Is There a Folk in the City?” But, while attempts to work in the city would not be rebuffed in the twenty-first century, it is also fair to say the city has not been the new frontier of research inviting many settlers that Kirshenblatt-Gimblett predicted. And the research that has been performed in the city, much as it was in the 1970s, still focuses on the rural, the ethnic, or the religious without focusing on the relationship of the body politic to the city. Much as Richard Dorson and Linda Dégh desired to do decades ago, I believe folklorists can write books about the folklore of the city as a whole, although instead of building the book piecemeal, researching the Poles, then the African Americans, then the Irish, then the Greeks, then the Italians, ad infinitum, I argue folklorist should begin with the traditional local forms that claim to speak for the whole city—in my Baltimore case, the folk speech “hon.” From this vantage point, scholars can examine whose voices are prevalent and whose voices are silenced. Instead of understanding the festival as the embodiment of a particular group, the “hon” reveals itself as a contested site of the politics of culture.

Attention to place crosses disciplinary boundaries, but how to pursue these interests has not always been clear. Ethnography has been an indispensable tool, and some folklorists, such as Henry Glassie, have
demonstrated how a phenomenological approach can be useful in understanding how locals make meaning in place (Glassie 1982). But authors in the 1980s and 1990s, particularly John Dorst, have pointed out the postmodern dilemmas in the ethnography of place (Dorst 1989). The ethnographer’s text is just one text in a series of texts, many self-generated by the place in question. In the postmodern moment, ethnographers cannot have the hubris to only consider their own texts and must take these self-generated texts seriously. In addition, other folklorists have argued that the folklore of place and locality has followed the same trajectory as other folklore genres—it has just been a late bloomer. In this way, many folklorists are just now moving past the essentialist text-oriented research methods and towards an enactment of place. The research question, therefore, is not “What is this place?,” but “What is this place today?,” “To whom is it this way?,” and “For whom is it this way?” By combining the influential folklore theory of enactment with contemporary strands of cultural studies, the “Welcome to Baltimore, Hon” sign, HonFest, and the trademarking of Hon become Baltimore texts (Geertz 1973), stories that (some) Baltimoreans tell about (some of) Baltimore (Mechling 1989).

For some, the study of American folklore and American tradition has slipped into triviality. What once was considered by the leaders of American studies (such as Richard Dorson and Tremaine McDowell) to be central to the American studies agenda has fallen by the wayside.\(^{16}\) In American studies, scholars have shifted away from the practice of culture that anthropologists and
folklorists prefer toward the representations of culture in the media. While these other culture scholars may not have the inherent interest in traditional materials that folklorists have, they are undoubtedly interested in modernity and the consequences of modernity. As the construction of tradition cannot occur outside of the construction of modernity, a close analysis of those forms construed as “traditional” gives insight into the evaluation of authenticity among the common man. And it is through these appraisals of authenticity that one finds a direct connection to rootedness, to nativeness, to legitimacy, to multiculturalism, and to a right to belong, all larger issues important to American studies.

Rather than see tradition as a static noun, opening up tradition as a verb, “traditionalizing” (Hymes 1975), allows folklorists to ask new research questions of staid folklore forms. Although Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger originally applied “invention” (perhaps better put as the “social construction”) only to certain traditions, understanding that all traditions are at one time invented and then constantly reinvented allows folklorists to ask provocative research question and seek nuanced answers that are not possible under other theoretical lenses. The invention of tradition necessitates pursuing a politics of culture, in this circumstance a politics of tradition, and in this instance, a politics of folk speech. Researchers can ask “Who invented this tradition?”, “Who benefits from the tradition?”, “Does the tradition validate or contest the social order?”, “Has the tradition changed over time?,” and “Has this change include or excluded diverse elements?” Folklore draws political attention to itself because it contrasts, and
therefore resists, the dominant context. Following the politics of culture surrounding the invention of tradition allows the researcher to evaluate the discourse revolving around the tradition, deduce how the tradition is used to claim ownership over a place or a time, and attempt to redefine that place in the image that group desires.

**So What?—Implications**

While glossing the importance of authenticity over the past several hundred years, folklorist Regina Bendix asked herself why authenticity proved to be such an all important topic for so long. The conclusion she came to was that “striving for selfhood is intertwined with the attempt to locate or articulate a more authentic existence, and this effort necessitated philosophical articulations that probed the nature of individual existence in the age of mechanical reproduction” (Bendix 1997, 18). In the era of advanced consumer culture and exponential technological advances, it is this striving for self, identity, rootedness, connections to others, to the past, and to a place that informs much of the lust for an authentic local vernacular culture. While it may be a departure from the missions of Johann Herder, the Grimms, and Francis James Child, and in some ways a departure from Richard Bauman, Dell Hymes, and Dan Ben-Amos, this conception of folklore and vernacular culture allows folklorists and cultural scholars to wade bravely into the cultural sphere, seeing all elements, all renditions, and all levels of culture labeled as “traditional,” “local,” or “authentic” as rightly in their domain and an excellent site for analyzing the critical role of
tradition in the modern world. Projects like these might take seriously expressive forms ranging from Philly Cheesesteaks to New Orleans jazz and from local superstitions to local costumes. The heart of these issues is a belief in the pure, the genuine, the authentic, and it is but a slippery slope from the rights to the cultural expressions of a city to the right to belong and on to the right to exist at all.

**Structure of the Project**

In Chapter 2, “The Baltimore Context: Fragmentation, Ambiguity, and the Frayed City,” I establish Baltimore’s social and political context as a fundamentally ambiguous place with a history driven by conflict. After demonstrating through historical example that Baltimore has been a frayed city since the eighteenth century, I examine the various attempts to unify the city under a common identity. After showing the general characterization of Baltimore throughout the twentieth and twenty-first century, I argue that the construction of citywide tradition is a powerful form of symbolic practice that residents enact in an attempt to define an authentic sense of place and identity and that participants reshape to negotiate a cognitive sense of identity and belonging. This chapter’s purpose is to describe the tone, mood, and setting under which the remaining chapters unfold.

In Chapter 3, “Welcome to Baltimore, Hon: Race, Class, Urban American Folklore, and the Controversy over ‘Hon’ as a Local Identity Marker,” I offer a linguistic background to the Baltimore dialect and its most symbolic term of
endearment, “hon,” and establish my theory of vernacular stages and the esteemed vernacular. I ask how such a minor, vernacular practice as stapling a placard to a highway welcome sign could embroil Baltimore in such passionate controversy. Using the story of Hon Man in Baltimore, I argue that “hon” in Baltimore during this era is transitioning between the stigmatized vernacular and the esteemed vernacular. While not necessary losing its working-class associations, “hon” allowed residents to perform local identity in a way that shows a yearning for an authentic sense of rootedness associated with blue-collar neighborhoods in Baltimore.

In Chapter 4, “The Rise of the Hon Image: Nostalgia, Festival, and the Esteemed Vernacular,” I chronicle HonFest and the rise of the Hon image in Baltimore. Since 1994, HonFest celebrates white, working-class kitsch and its idiosyncrasies in Baltimore. Some scholars see HonFest as honoring the hardworking blue-collar women of Baltimore. Others see it as a derogatory characterization by the gentrifying middle class of blue-collar culture in Baltimore. At HonFest, under the guise of a neighborhood festival hosted by a local business, issues at the intersection of race, class, and gender play out behind beehive hairdos and frilly boas. A careful consideration of HonFest shows various groups attempting to construct an image of “authentic Baltimoreans,” and then attaching themselves to this image, thus becoming rightful owners of the city.
In Chapter 5, “Hon™: Intellectual Property, Local Identity, and the
Trademarking of “Hon,” I examine the trademarking of “hon” in Baltimore.
Cultural property and intangible cultural heritage have been trendy topics among
scholars in the twenty-first century. Subjects of inquiry are frequently native
peoples or residents of ancient villages. In this chapter, I ask how these same
notions apply to working and middle class Americans in urban environments.
Using the dramatic story of the trademarking of the Baltimore term of
endearment “hon,” I argue for a reconceptualization of intangible cultural
property in modern urban America while simultaneously enumerating the new
challenges that arise when attempting to apply these same protections the
modern urban environment.
Chapter 2. THE BALTIMORE CONTEXT: FRAGMENTATION, AMBIGUITY, AND THE FRAYED CITY

On October 27, 1859, a rabble of members of civic clubs paraded into Monument Square, the social center of Baltimore in the mid-nineteenth century, for what Baltimore historian Matthew Page Andrews later called “the most remarkable political spectacle in the history of the city of Baltimore, and perhaps in the history of the city of any American municipality” (Andrews 1912, 159). Among them were the Rip Raps and the Ranters, the Black Snakes and the Red Necks, the Tigers, the Plug Uglies, and the Blood Tubs. Democrats and reformers called them gangs, but they called themselves political clubs. The rally was a response to the formation of the City Reform Association the previous year and the state elections that would be held the following week.17

The clubs entered in style, banging drums, shooting off fireworks, and waving banners. Chief among their symbols was the shoemaker’s awl. As former Baltimore police chief Jacob Frey remembers in his Reminiscences of Baltimore, the Italian stiletto elsewhere was the awl in Baltimore (Frey 1893, 99). The clubs sought to control polling stations, allowing only their own to vote. Tradition had not yet established the sanctity of the voting booth. Those attempting to partake in the blessed franchise had to walk to the polling station, colorful ballot in hand. In much of Baltimore, approaching with a Know-Nothing ballot brought forth calls to “Make way for the voter!” 18 A Democratic or Reform ballot, on the other hand, invited only misery and calls to “Meet him on the ice!” (Andrews 1912, 158). Gangs of “rowdies” surrounded each ward’s polling place, hailing from
various political clubs. These men were proponent of the Know-Nothing party. The party received its nickname because, when asked about their pro native-born, anti-immigrant, anti-Catholic, anti-Irish network, members would “know nothing.” With one polling station per ward, Know-Nothing political clubs could crowd the path to the ballot box, their awls tucked away. Any voter (native-born or not) foolish enough to attempt to cast a ballot for the opposing party found himself swarmed, pricked, and punctured to the point of retreat. Those who refused to leave the line risked succumbing to their wounds and becoming another of Baltimore’s regular Election Day deaths.\textsuperscript{19}

The banners and transparencies were equally threatening. They openly expressed the club’s aggressive intent.\textsuperscript{20} Newspapers deemed the most colorful unfit to print. One banner invited reformers to “Come up and Vote; There is Room for Awl.” Another assured the crowd that the “The Third Ward is Awl Right.” Yet another showed a man running, his pursuers thrusting an awl into him. The banners promised other violence as well. One club’s banner displayed a closed fist with the assurance that “With this we will do the work.” Another poetically promised “Reform Ticket and Reform Man—If you can vote, I’ll be Damned.” The Blood Tubs simply showed a bleeding head captioned “Head of a Reformer.” The Blood Tubs took their name from their favorite electioneering tactic. Rather than stab a Democratic voter, the Blood Tubs would capture the voter and carry him over to their “blood tub,” a barrel filled with fresh animal’s blood from the local butcher. After wringing a sponge over the voter’s head, the
Blood Tubs allowed the voter to escape. Seeing their neighbor drenched in blood and running for his life dissuaded the rest of the neighborhood from attempting to vote the Democratic ticket.

In Monument Square, the keynote address came from Congressman Henry Winter Davis, representative of Maryland’s 4th congressional district and one of the most respectable men in the city. Despite these credentials, Davis addressed the crowd with the four-foot awl literally hanging over his head, the banners and transparencies waving behind him, and the blacksmith cranking out awls in front of his podium. Davis condemned Democrats, berated reformers, and inflamed the passions of the crowd. Reformers suspected the Know Nothings intended to take the upcoming elections through fraud and violence. On the other hand, historian Seth Rockman reminds readers, while trying to explain mob actions in Baltimore, that the American democratic experiment was in its nascent stage (Rockman 2002, 64). The meaning of “the will of the people” had yet to be decided, and those outside Baltimore’s official institutions, like the Know-Nothing supporters, saw these aggressive public displays and physical resistance as the best opportunity to express their will.

The climax of Know-Nothing violence came during the November 2, 1859 election. This notorious Baltimore decade saw scores of Election Day deaths, fire company battles in the streets, and awls and blood tubs at polling stations. Baltimoreans were split; their social relations frayed. Baltimore needed a unifying force, but received a Civil War instead—one that would attempt to pull the city
asunder yet again. When Baltimoreans began making efforts in the late nineteenth century to unify the city, it is this century of discord that reformers remember, typified by this violent 1859 scene. Unity was not a vague theoretical concept in Baltimore. Its success or failure had real world ramifications for the future of life in the city.

**Thesis – Darning the Frayed City**

Baltimore was born out of conflicts between opposing groups, a fragmented, balkanized city. Baltimoreans have sought to solve Baltimore’s problems through public display for many years. Baltimore’s traditions are both an outgrowth of the city’s penchant for public display and a response to it. Proponents of these invented traditions have attempted to bring a cohesive identity to a fragmented, chaotic city. They have sought to create a sense of shared identity, although residents have contested that vision. In this study, drawing my examples from Baltimore, I argue that the construction of citywide tradition is a powerful form of symbolic practice that residents enact in an attempt to define an authentic sense of place and identity and that participants reshape to negotiate a cognitive sense of identity and belonging.

**Conflict as Baltimore’s Conceptual Framework**

Reading the prologue to Hamilton Owen’s 1941 *Baltimore on the Chesapeake*—widely regarded as the best first-half-of-the-twentieth century monograph on Baltimore’s history—is a strange experience. The Baltimore that Owens paints is oddly foreign and immediately familiar. His prose vacillates
between an objective, omniscient narrator of nineteenth century local histories and an eerily prescient soothsayer, forecasting the future of Baltimore.

Owens begins his book with a line so prescient, so universal, so applicable to modern day Baltimore, if it was not for the beige, time-worn pages and the crumbling spine, a reader might think Owens published his history today: “The story of Baltimore is a story of conflict. There is dichotomy in every aspect of its history, in every expression of its enterprise” (Owens 1941, 1). Despite the year after year, decade after decade, and century after century turbulence that has threatened to tear Baltimore apart at the seams, Owens sees one great reason for the city’s indomitable success: access to the Atlantic Ocean. Owens places the first great conflict, before owners and workers, before black and white, before Southern and Northern, in something more local, simpler, and perhaps, even more contentious: the planters versus the urban traders and workers (Owens 1941, 2). In a move familiar to Baltimore residents of the twenty-first century, successful Baltimore traders did not dream of improving their native town. Rather, as Owens puts it, “they often gave first thought to the great country estates they acquired on the wind-swept hills and in the pleasant valleys to the north and west” (Owens 1941, 2). And, in a great irony, these upwardly mobile traders “became gentlemen farmers and to that extent divorced themselves from those who were unable to leave the closely built-up streets” of Baltimore (Owens 1941, 2). This too, Owens tells us, continues in the early 1940s. This too, under new labels, continues in the twenty-first century. In the
twentieth and twenty-first centuries, Baltimoreans call these wind-swept hills and
pleasant valleys Baltimore County, Harford County, and Howard County.

So, too, does Owens note the great identity crisis, the in between of all
American in betweens, that has come to define Baltimore as indefinable. Slave-
owning tobacco planters ruled southern Maryland before the Civil War. These
men fervently supported the Confederacy. The lands to the north and west, on
the other hand, did not have the right soil for the time-intensive tobacco crop.
Their tillers grew wheat instead and had little need for slaves. These Marylanders
were Union men. As if drawn to conflict, the streets of Baltimore played host to a
microcosm of the Civil War.

Baltimore, the perpetual prisoner, is trapped between all of these cultures,
defined by all of them partly, none of them completely, and standing on its own
simultaneously. Beyond the juxtaposition of the “languid” south and the
“bustling” north, jockeying for position in a single city, Owens sees the
geographical conflict as “contin[uing] to rate, often inside the bosom of a single
individual” (Owens 1941, 3).

Owens presciently foresees the “conflict between the races,” his
contention that this has never been “an open conflict” revealing the age of the
book. At the time of his writing, Owens saw the “vast Negro population,”21 as a
“reservoir of unskilled labor” (Owens 1941, 3). In the coming decades, as the
white population flees to the suburbs and the African-American population
continues to grow, this conflict will boil over and hit its apotheosis during
Baltimore’s 1968 race riots. Although the white population has diminished and the violence tempered (interracial violence, anyway), the continued conflict between whites and African Americans reveals itself through the politics of culture in Baltimore on a daily basis.

In his short prologue, Owens turns his attention from the inner tensions and conflicts of Baltimore to the city’s lack of a discerning character. Owens notes many symbols that will still be familiar to residents and travelers in the twenty-first century: “the long rows of red brick houses with their usually gleaming white marble steps, “the benign influence of the sea,” Federal Hill, the harbor, and the rail yards—much the same as Baltimore’s authors will articulate half a century later. But it is perhaps what Owens does not see that is most important. He expects a visitor’s “first impression would be one of drabness” (Owens 1941, 4), that he would find the city out of date and ill kept. No Boston statehouse. No New York skyscrapers. Owens likes “to think that Baltimore’s ability to take its many conflicts as they come and to live, in spite of them, a casual and, on the whole, a charming life is due to the benign influence of the sea.” But he follows this with a more ambitious claim: “If that is true, then the harbor, despite its being so well hidden from the visitor, is Baltimore’s reason for being and its most significant achievement” (Owens 1941, 5). In a way, Owens’s theory was correct. Baltimore is a city riddled with conflict through its history, but through feast and through famine, Baltimore remained an east coast port
city, one with jobs, industry, and trade. No matter the conflict, these attributes made Baltimore a worthy home.

When it came time for Baltimoreans to make a “significant expression” with their city in the twentieth century, the city’s movers and shakers did choose the Inner Harbor as a symbol of their “significant achievement.” Although the Inner Harbor was a successful redevelopment project, it did not end Baltimore’s “story of conflict.” The Inner Harbor is emblematic of Baltimore’s story of conflict, its renovation was made possible only by Baltimore’s history of conflict, and the redevelopment itself has led to yet one more story of conflict.22

As I will argue, though, Owens’s “discerning visitor” will perceive only a few signs of this drama. Baltimore’s public depiction is split evenly between the maritime Inner Harbor and the blood-soaked inner city. Instead, the conflict rages in vernacular forms, unnoticeable to the discerning visitor, but of utmost importance to Baltimoreans seeking to carve a niche for themselves in a volatile and ever changing city. In such an environment, Baltimoreans compete for entitlement to and ownership of the city. Baltimoreans have made and remade Baltimore over the centuries, from the “empty city” to the “Charm City” to the city of Hons.

**What is Baltimore?**

Geographically, Baltimore’s setting remains ambiguous. Neither northern enough to be Northeast nor southern enough to be a southern city, and too far east to be a rustbelt city, Baltimore is left with the lukewarm designation of
Middle Atlantic. That is, the Middle Atlantic is the “remainder” or “left overs” after the stronger regions of New England and the South are identified. Folklorist Simon J. Bronner has noted that the Middle Atlantic is “the least conspicuous of America’s regions, both to outsiders and to its inhabitants” (Bronner 2006, 789). Maryland historian Robert J. Brugger referred to the entire state as possessing a “middle temperament” (Brugger 1988). An additional issue is whether the Middle Atlantic constitutes a region at all or is merely a conglomeration of states and localities. Unlike New England and the South, the Middle Atlantic region is often referred to as the Middle Atlantic “states.” Set in a vague region and in a middling state, what defines Baltimore? And who is a Baltimorean?

Ambiguity, fragmentation, and oversight define Baltimore. From these characteristics residents constructed a distinct local culture, related to but distinguished from surrounding big cities, such as Washington, D.C., Philadelphia, and New York. Its vague geographical location raises the question of its cultural location or identity. One approach to answering this question is to analyze the ways that residents, boosters, and outsiders construct local tradition to answer the difficult questions, “What is Baltimore?” and “Who is a Baltimorean?”

A city flummoxed by its contradictions, the succession of Baltimore’s historical events can be interpreted through a framework of attempting to come to an identity in the midst of competing forces. Like the north, Baltimore was interested in trade, mills, and heavy industry. But like the south, the city had an
aristocratic manor, and tobacco planters held sway. Like the north, Baltimore was a port city with a heavy influx of immigrants seeking employment. Like the south, the city had a large number of descendants of enslaved Africans. But like the north, these were primarily freemen (even though Maryland was a slave state).

Baltimore could boast of a bustling port and railroad line, but it frequently lacked local control. Lauded as the home of the author of the national anthem, Francis Scott Key, Baltimore was also home to Key’s daughter, Alice Key Pendleton, who wrote the poem “Southern Cross” supporting the Confederacy. Baltimore was so replete with fire companies that the men would fight for the right to put out fires, and yet much of the city burned anyway. Although no longer considered one of the United States’ most important cities, in the nineteenth century, Baltimore boasted the country’s second largest population, bested only by New York, and its port was the second busiest, bested only by Philadelphia. Baltimore shone in national politics as well. The city hosted national party conventions so frequently that journalists deemed Baltimore “Convention City.” In the 1850s, Baltimore experienced some of the worst political machines and electioneering anywhere in the United States, but progressive era reforms also took hold earlier than other cities. Baltimore was either an aristocratic city filled with blue-collar workers or a blue-collar city led by entrenched patricians.
The City Emerges

Colonists established Baltimore first as a port, the Port of Baltimore, and only later as Baltimore Town, and then as the City of Baltimore. In 1706, at Latitude 39.31 North, Longitude 76.62 West, merchants established Baltimore in north-central Maryland on the Patapsco River, a tributary to the Chesapeake Bay, to facilitate the tobacco trade. When it was established in 1729, Baltimore Town was but a few square miles on the harbor, only a tiny portion of present-day Baltimore city. In the twenty-first century, Baltimore is 92.1 square miles, including the harbor. Its boundaries are the north, east, and west are perfectly straight, but its southern reaches coil around the harbor and its surrounding land. The elevation of the city ranges from as low as sea level at the harbor to as high as 480 feet on the “hilltop” in northwest Baltimore. Baltimore is in the humid subtropical climate with average temperatures from the low to mid-thirties in the winter and from the mid- to high seventies in the summer. The average lows will dip below freezing in the winter and the average highs will approach the nineties in the summer.  

The United States Census estimates that in 2013 Baltimore was home to 620,961 residents. Since its incorporation as a city in 1797, Baltimore’s population rose every year until 1950. In its heyday, Baltimore was one of the largest cities in the United States. Its glory years as a prominent American city came in the antebellum period 1830-1860, where it was the second largest American city, second only to New York. After the Civil War, Philadelphia took
this spot, and Baltimore never regained it. Nonetheless, Baltimore remained among the United States’s ten largest cities until the 1980s. The city hit its population peak in the 1950s, with a population just under one million. Since then the population has declined every decade. In the first decade of the twenty-first century, the population declined by 4.6 percent. Baltimore made headline news in 2013 when it recorded its first population increase in over half a century, reporting a net gain of 762 new residents. Seeking to encourage this growth, the mayor initiated a campaign to increase Baltimore’s population by 10,000 new families.

Although the city’s population rank has decreased to 26th largest in the United States, Baltimore remains one of the largest cities in the vital Northeast and Middle Atlantic regions. By the census’s definitions of “Northeast” and “Middle Atlantic,” only New York, Philadelphia and Boston surpass Baltimore in the Northeast, and only New York, Philadelphia, and Washington, D.C. surpass Baltimore in the Middle Atlantic. The rise and fall of the city’s population does not correlate with the surrounding region’s fortunes. While Baltimore City’s population has steadily declined, the Baltimore metropolitan area’s population has steadily grown, now ranking as the 22nd largest in the United States. And, reaching further, the Baltimore-Washington Metropolitan area is the fourth largest in the United States with approximately 9.5 million residents.

For those longtime residents who chose to stay in the city, one notable statistic is the “length of stay since moving in.” In Philadelphia, Boston, or New
York, these rates are below or significantly below the state average. In Baltimore, this rate is significantly above the state average, confirming the analysis of some critics that “stability” is the vital characteristic of Baltimore neighborhoods (Beirne 1976, 84; Gadsby & Chidester 2005, 12). This statistic, while essential to understanding the characterization of Baltimore, applies only to the twentieth century. In the nineteenth century, movement from house to house and neighborhood to neighborhood was constant as immigrants arrived, settled, prospered, and flourished (see Hayward and Belfoure 1999; Hayward 2002).

Plurality of race and ethnicity has also been central to characterizations of Baltimore through the nineteenth, twentieth, and twenty-first centuries. While Maryland was technically a slave state, prior to the Civil War, Baltimore was home to the largest population of free blacks in the United States. And despite mid-nineteenth century Know-Nothing antagonism, Baltimore was a port town that encouraged European immigration, bringing in large numbers of Irish and German, and later Poles, Italians, Greeks, and Russian Jews (among many others). Although black and foreign-born residents constituted approximately 25 percent of the city population each, Baltimore remained majority white into the mid-twentieth century. As of 2012, Baltimore was 62.7 percent black (389,570 residents) and 28.1% white (174,508 residents). No other race has ever been prominent in the city, although there is a growing Hispanic population that makes up 4.4 percent (27,571 residents) of the city as of 2012.28 One large,
telling statistic has changed in the twenty-first century. Compared to other cities, and in stark contrast to its past, a large number of Baltimore residents speak English at home (91.6%).

Although half of the white population of Baltimore no longer identifies with any specific ethnicity, for those who do, the largest numbers are German (7.4%), followed by Irish (6.0%), English (3.2%), Italian (2.8%), Polish (2.8%), and Russian (.8%), which reflects the various waves of immigration from the eighteenth through the twentieth century. The remaining ethnicities cite French, Scottish, Scots-Irish, Dutch, Greek, Czech, Welsh, Ukrainian, Lithuanian, Swedish, Norwegian, and Hungarian heritage. In the late twentieth and early twenty-first century, the ethnic makeup of immigrants has changed, from European immigrants to Chinese, Indians, and Koreans. Considering Baltimore’s past as a port city that encouraged immigration—once the second largest port of entry for immigrants with a foreign-born constituting a quarter of the city’s population—the foreign-born population is presently miniscule, a mere 6.6%. This is lower than the Maryland average (14.3%) and lower than any of the surrounding big cities, including Philadelphia (12%), New York (37.6%), and Washington, D.C. (14.3%).

Although the impetus behind the building of an American city is usually trade and commerce, Baltimore residents are not wealthy. The estimated median household income in 2012 was $39,241, far below the comparatively wealthy Maryland median household income of $71,122. Per capita income in 2012 was a
paltry $23,457. Of its 646,449 residents, 24.8% live in poverty, including 12.1% of whites, 30.4% of blacks, and 23.3% of Latinos. Overall, Baltimore has a larger percentage of its population living in poverty than Washington, D.C. (18.2%) or New York (21.2%). Only Philadelphia (26.9%) supersedes Baltimore in residents living in poverty. Examining poverty among blacks and whites, the figures remain high, with both blacks (30.4%) and whites (13.1%) living at a higher rate of poverty than any surrounding big city except Philadelphia.\footnote{31}

The estimated median value of a house or condominium in Baltimore in 2012 was $150,000. This is low compared to the Maryland median of $279,000, but Baltimore has actually shown significant increase in property values since 2000 when the median house or condominium value was $69,900. While Baltimore’s cost of living may seem high compared to other parts of the country (105.9 out of an average of 100 on the cost of living index), it is significantly below other nearby cities, such as Washington, D.C. (125.4), New York (163.2), Boston (142.5). Only Philadelphia (104.6) is comparable.\footnote{32}

Although Baltimore has drawn workers for centuries through the promise of abundant jobs, unemployment is a problem. The current unemployment rate is above the state average. Much of this can be attributed to twentieth century deindustrialization. Industry has changed substantially since Baltimore’s incorporation. Founded as a port town, Baltimore boomed as a mill town. The city would later embrace heavy industry as well, and into the twentieth century, Baltimore maintained its reputation as a blue-collar town. Deindustrialization in
the twentieth century cost Baltimore tens of thousands of blue-collar jobs. After the decline of manufacturing and rail shipping, Baltimore was forced to shift to a service-based economy. The service economy now accounts for 90% of Baltimore’s jobs. As of 2012, Baltimore’s most common industries were construction (9%), education services (9%), professional, scientific, and technical services (8%), accommodation and food services (8%), health care (8%), public administration (8%), and administrative and support and waste management services (7%). The most common male occupations were truck drivers, management occupations, building cleaning and pest control workers, laborers and material movers, retail sales workers, and protective service workers. The most common female occupations were health aides, management, health technicians, teachers, building cleaning and pest control workers, counselors, social workers, and other community and social service specialists, and registered nurses.³³

Although Baltimore was a city on the rise that attracted acclaim in the nineteenth century,³⁴ the rotting wharves and derelict warehouses of the first half of the twentieth century did not induce much tourism. It is surprising, then, that tourism has become an important part of Baltimore’s economy. This tourism is primarily based around the Inner Harbor, a small but central part of the city. In 2013, 23.9 million visitors spent $5.15 billion in Baltimore, much of it in the Inner Harbor and the neighborhoods immediately surrounding it. Downtown Baltimore, often referred to as the Inner Harbor even several landlocked blocks
back, stands in sharp contrast to the dire poverty only blocks over in West Baltimore. In American Top 100 lists, Downtown Baltimore ranks #45 for most museums, #60 for most law offices, #63 for most medium-big companies, and #73 in highest average net capital gains. Despite being one of the nation’s largest cities, Baltimore fairs poorly with big business. No Fortune 500 companies call Baltimore home—a rare occurrence for a large American city. Only one other city in the United States, Buffalo, New York, has a National Football League franchise but no Fortune 500 companies. Even the much-maligned Detroit, Michigan, has eight Fortune 500 companies, and the much smaller Cleveland, Ohio, has two. Despite being the center of trade and commerce in the 19th century, Baltimore has been relegated to the status of “branch” city. Critics cite this as one of the reasons for Baltimore’s neglect. Baltimore’s companies emerge on the Fortune 1000 list, including Legg Mason, Under Armour, McCormick & Co, and T. Rowe Price. Johns Hopkins University and Johns Hopkins University Hospital, though, are currently the city’s biggest employers.

Lord Baltimore founded Maryland as a Catholic colony, and his namesake carries on that tradition. As of 2010, 52.1% of Baltimore residents identify as Catholic, a number even more notable considering the majority black population primarily attends Protestant churches. This strong Catholic demographic is well above the national average, but actually below both Philadelphia (60.7%) and New York (52.5%). What should be noted, however, is that Baltimore is
achieving equivalent numbers without a substantial Latino population. Catholic adherents in Baltimore are primarily of European origin, especially German, Irish, Polish, and Italian.\textsuperscript{37}

Baltimore is America’s largest “independent city.” An independent city is a city entirely separate from the surrounding counties. This is a rarity in the United States. Besides Virginia, who classifies all its cities as independent cities, there are only two others in the United States, St. Louis, Missouri, and Carson City, Nevada. Baltimore City is responsible for all of its own governance and services.

The residential areas of the city are formed on a grid pattern lined with tens of thousands of federal-style brick rowhouses, often with Formstone facades and white marble steps. Known as a “City of Neighborhoods,” Baltimore shares this designation with Philadelphia, Pittsburgh, and Cleveland. Neighborhoods offered strength and stability to ethnic groups, but also separated and insulated them from others. In the twenty-first century, well-known neighborhoods include Bolton Hill, Canton, Charles Village, Edmonson Village, Federal Hill, Greektown, Hampden, Highlandtown, Little Italy, Locust Point, Mount Vernon, Otterbein, Patterson Park, Pigtown, Pimlico, Reservoir Hill, and Roland Park. Baltimore is surrounded by a number of closely connected towns that, in other cities, would have likely been annexed a century ago. These include Lansdowne, Towson, Arbutus, Parkville, Dundalk, Glen Burnie, Pikesville, Catonsville, and Woodlawn.

Politics have always been important in Baltimore, and residents often came to blows in the streets over political opinion. Dozens of newspapers
circulated, earning Baltimore the designation “The City that Reads.” Whigs, Democrats, Know Nothings, Reformers, and Republicans have, at various times, held sway in Baltimore, but the Democratic Party has long been dominant. The most stunning example of Baltimore’s allegiance to the Democratic Party came in 1972. Baltimore’s native son, Republican Spiro Agnew, was running as Richard Nixon’s Vice President. Americans elected Nixon over George McGovern in one of the greatest landslides in American history. Nixon and Agnew took every state but Massachusetts and Washington, D.C. Baltimore, though, voted for McGovern. (Baltimore had not supported Agnew during Nixon’s first presidential campaign in 1968 either). Since then, Baltimore has been such a consistently blue city that presidential candidates do not bother to campaign there. Baltimore has not had a Republican representative in Congress since John Boynton Philip Clayton Hill in 1927. Maryland’s senators are usually Democrats with Baltimore roots. This applies to all three of the most recent United States Senators, Paul Sarbanes, Barbara Mikulski, and Ben Cardin. All three came from Maryland’s 3rd congressional district, which covers significant portions of Baltimore.

Within Baltimore, in the legislative branch, the Baltimore City Council governs Baltimore, with one member elected for each of the fourteen districts and a council president elected at-large. In the executive branch, Baltimore uses the “strong” mayor form, allotting the chief executive an unusual amount of unchecked power over budgetary matters and department heads. In the
judiciary branch, the Circuit Court for Baltimore City handles all of Baltimore’s family, juvenile, criminal, and civil cases.

The city has had a number of colorful, and now, sometimes ironic nicknames. At the beginning of the nineteenth century, Baltimore was dubbed the “Clipper City” for its speedy clipper ships that roamed the high seas, trading far and wide. It was these same ships, turned to privateering, that enraged the British and led to the War of 1812 and the Battle of Baltimore. In the mid-nineteenth century, journalists coined Baltimore “Convention City” because of its propensity to host the national political conventions of both parties. The ease of travel by both land (the Baltimore & Ohio Railroad) and sea (the harbor), its location between the north and the south, and its proximity to the nation’s capital made it a popular choice. From 1832 to 1852, Baltimore played host to the first six Democratic National Conventions. It hosted the Democrats again in 1860, 1872, and 1912. The city hosted the Whig National Convention in 1844, 1852, 1856 and the Republican National Convention in 1864. It also has hosted, at one time or another, the Anti-Mason Party, the National Republican Party, the Constitutional Union Party, and the Green Party.39

The same impetus that led to “Convention City” and later “Mobtown” also gave Baltimore its nom de plume, “The City that Reads.” In an era when all newspapers were instruments of political parties, Baltimore had dozens in circulation. In addition, although not a renowned literary center, Oliver Wendell Holmes argued that Baltimore produced all three of the most important American
poems of the nineteenth century ("The Star Spangled Banner," "The Raven," and "Maryland, My Maryland") (Andrews 1912, 145). In 1827, President John Quincy Adams gave Baltimore the moniker of "Monument City" for its many monuments to prominent Americans, including the original Washington Monument. Also known as the "City of Firsts," Baltimore lays claim to several notable innovations. Baltimore was home to the country's first railroad, the Baltimore & Ohio Railroad, the first telegraph, and the first electric streetcar. Baltimore's most bombastic boosters also mention the first use of gas, the first silk ribbon mill, the first water company, the first Methodist church, the first medical society, the first college of dental surgery, and the first lodge of Odd Fellows (Warren and Warren 1983).

In the early twenty-first century, Baltimore publicized its preferred alias of "Charm City." In the 1970s, marketers hoping to rebrand Baltimore invented the nickname. Originally, the charm in "Charm City" referred to the charms on charm bracelets (Bell 2007, 14-15). In the 1970s, tourists had few reasons to visit Baltimore, and these promoters hoped the charm bracelet would give them one. The marketing gimmick encouraged tourists to push through the sordid streets and decaying buildings, hopping from one official tourist attraction to the next collecting charms for a bracelet. The first day of the charm campaign, city garbage collectors had been on strike for ten days, and the streets stewed with refuse. The publicity stunt fizzled, but the "charm"—that is, "the power or quality of giving delight"—stuck. In all its seediness, quirkiness, and decay, there was something charming about Baltimore, especially compared to the surrounding big
cities. *Esquire* agreed, and in 1984, proclaimed William Donald Schaefer the best mayor in the United States and dubbed Baltimore “Renaissance City” for the revitalization underway in the Inner Harbor.

Baltimore has also received some negative nicknames in the twentieth century, including “Harm City,” “The Heroin Capital of America,” “The City that Bleeds,” and “Bodymore, Murdaland” due to the high per capita murder rate in the city, hitting its peak of violence in 1993 with 353 slayings. The vast majority of these murders are related to the drug trade, a point William Donald Schaefer was quick to make in defense of his beloved city. Baltimore ranks 33rd among the most deadly places in the United States. Although the murder rate has dropped substantially since its peak in the 1980s and 1990s (a low of 196 murders in 2011), Baltimore is still two to three times the national average in all varieties of violent and property crime. In addition, residents are referred to as (and sometimes refer to themselves by) the humorous folk demonym “Baltimorons,” referencing the city’s slack education accolades. Although Maryland is consistently ranked as the top public school system in the United States and the Baltimore-Washington metropolitan area is one of the most highly educated regions in the United States, 50 percent of Baltimoreans have a high school diploma or less, and Baltimore’s public schools are constantly mired in controversy. In response to all of the negative publicity, energetic and optimistic mayors like William Donald Schaefer and Martin O’Malley have attempted to devise a new image for the city with nicknames like “America’s
Comeback City,” “The Greatest City in the World,” and the ubiquitous park bench placard “Believe.”

An overview of Baltimore’s culture would be remiss without mentioning some of the popular symbols associated with Baltimore, both by outsiders and by Baltimoreans themselves. These including eating crabs (steamed and well dusted with Old Bay seasoning), drinking National Bohemian lager (“Natty Boh”), living in and among red brick rowhouses (always one word) with Formstone facades and gleaming polished white marble steps, referring to all persons as “hon,” and rooting for the local baseball franchise (the Baltimore Orioles or “dem O’s”). The Baltimore Orioles were one of the eight inaugural Major League Baseball clubs, and since 1992, the team plays in the beloved Oriole Park at Camden Yards. The Baltimore Ravens represent Baltimore in the National Football League. The Baltimore Colts held that honor from 1953 through 1984. That team fled Baltimore in the middle of the night to become the Indianapolis Colts. The Cleveland Browns moved to Baltimore in 1996 to become the Baltimore Ravens, and Baltimore regained a national football team. Sports critics questioned whether Baltimore could become a football town again, but the success of the Ravens has left no doubt. The Ravens won the Super Bowl in 2000 and 2012. Baltimore also hosts annually the Preakness Stakes, the second leg of the Triple Crown. The race is held every May at the Pimlico Race Course.

Although it was, and still is, a port town, since the renovation of the Inner Harbor, boating has become an important part of Baltimore culture. In the
nineteenth century, the Baltimore clipper ships made Baltimore famous and drew the ire of the British that led to the War of 1812. In the twenty-first century, the Inner Harbor is full of marinas docking private yachts. And while barges still steam into port, visitors are as likely to see kayakers as cargo chips. The Pride of Baltimore and later, the Pride of Baltimore II, twentieth century reproductions of Baltimore ships, sail the world serving as goodwill ambassadors. Baltimore is also home to a number of historic ships. Baltimore hosts the USS Constellation, the last Civil War era ship to remain afloat, the USS Torsk, the U.S. Navy submarine that holds the record for most dives, and the Coast Guard cutter Taney, the sole remaining U.S. warship to survive the Japanese attack at Pearl Harbor.

Although it must compete with the many prominent institutions throughout the Baltimore-Washington metropolitan area, Baltimore has its share of notable venues, historic districts, museums, and galleries. Baltimore is home to a number of prominent performance venues, including the 1st Mariner Arena, Camden Yards, and M&T Bank sports stadiums. Fell’s Point, Federal Hill, and Mount Vernon top Baltimore’s many historic districts. Harborplace in the Inner Harbor is one of Baltimore’s premier attractions. Tourists can also visit the Baltimore Museum of Arts, the Baltimore Museum of Industry, the National Cryptologic Museums, the Walters Art Museum, and the American Visionary Art Museum. Of historic interest, Baltimore is home to the Fort McHenry National Monument, the Edgar Allen Poe House, and the USS Constellation. Baltimore’s
neighborhood structure within a port town led to a number of excellent traditional markets, including Lexington Market, the Northeast Market, and Broadway Market.

Baltimore’s most famous native son is Babe Ruth. Others who were born in or spent a significant portion of their life in Baltimore include shamed politician Spiro Agnew, author of “The Star-Spangled Banner” Francis Scott Key, satirist H.L. Mencken, singer Billie Holiday, and cult filmmaker John Waters. In addition, Baltimore lays claim to television host Montell Williams, television producer David Simon, singer Sisqo, author Upton Sinclair, television host Mike Rowe, former heavyweight boxing champion Hasim Rahman, actress Jada Pinkett Smith, author Emily Post, politician Nancy Pelosi, poet Ogden Nash, past president of the NAACP Kweisi Mfume, Supreme Court Justice Thurgood Marshall, filmmaker Barry Levinson, sports analyst Mel Kiper, Jr., accused Soviet spy Alger Hiss, actor David Hasselhoff, radio personality Ira Glass, The Mamas & the Papas’ singer Cass Elliott, singer Adam Duritz, abolitionist Frederick Douglass, military author Tom Clancy, signer of the Declaration of Independence and Supreme Court Justice Samuel Chase, basketball player Muggsy Bogues, basketball player Carmelo Anthony, and entrepreneur David Abercrombie of Abercrombie & Fitch.

Although not as prevalent as Los Angeles or New York, there is filmmaking in Baltimore. John Waters, Barry Levinson, and David Simon form the holy trinity of Baltimore filmmakers. Born in the suburbs just beyond the city limits, John Waters, the King of Trash, has produced camp, cult, and trash films
based in Baltimore since he terrified the world with *Pink Flamingos* in 1972. All of Waters’s films are set in Baltimore. Barry Levinson works in the comedy-drama genre. While many of his films are set elsewhere (including the critically acclaimed *Rain Man* (1988), *Sleepers* (1996), and *Wag the Dog* (1997)), Levinson is well known for his “Baltimore Films,” based on his experiences growing up in a Russian Jewish neighborhood in mid-twentieth century Baltimore. The films in this loose tetralogy include *Diner* (1982), *Tin Men* (1987), *Avalon* (1990), and *Liberty Heights* (1999). David Simon was born in Silver Spring, Maryland, but spent his career as a journalist at the *Baltimore Sun*. Simon assisted Barry Levinson with the production of the critically acclaimed television series *Homicide: Life of the Street* (1993-1999), which was based on Simon’s popular police ethnography, *Homicide: A Year on the Killing Streets*. It was not until Simon was laid off from the *Sun* that he began to produce television full time. His first attempt, the HBO miniseries *The Corner* (2000), was based on of his and Edward Burns’ popular street ethnography *The Corner: A Year in the Life of an Inner-City Neighborhood* (1998). *The Corner* won an Emmy for outstanding miniseries, but it was *The Wire* (2002-2008) that would bring David Simon to prominence. A combination of his two previous books, Simon tapped his knowledge of Baltimore to weave an intricate tapestry of the Baltimore drug trade and its many intrigues. Critics ignored the show during its initial run, but it is now widely considered one of the greatest television shows of
all time, currently listed at number four on the Internet Movie Database’s “Highest Rated TV Series With At Least 5,000 Votes.”

Researchers can attempt to define Baltimore through statistics, demographics, and geographic boundaries. But like any place, defining quantitatively risks missing the city’s je ne sais quoi. Baltimore lacks the body of literature that cities like New York, Los Angeles, Chicago, and even Detroit and New Orleans have produced. Nonetheless, a number of writers have attempted to answer the difficult question, what makes Baltimore, Baltimore? In this section, I attempt to decipher the patterns found when discussing Baltimore as a place. I find that most writers attempt to define Baltimore through particular characteristics. These include its age, its location, its maritime setting, its ambiguous position between north and south, its prevalent food and drink, its distinctive landscape, its renowned neighborhood emphasis, its racial and ethnic divide, its blue-collar appeal, and its values, particularly the value of stability. I also examine the Baltimore sold in tourist literature, the Baltimore denigrated by detractors, and the Baltimore promoted by boosters.

What is “Baltimore”? Some have quipped that it is the “ingrown toenail of the East Coast” (Shivers 1995, xi). For example, in the mid-1960s, the Washington Post offered that Baltimore was “a seedy, mildly amusing hick town full of strip joints and peopled with crooked politicians” (Bartter et al. 1982, 259). Others have been a bit kinder, offering diplomatically, for example, that Baltimore is “considered something of a cultural backwater that mostly gets
ignored by tastemakers and trendsetters” (Lewis 2007). And some, like filmmaker and Baltimore local Barry Levinson, one of the city’s great boosters, argue that “Baltimore is a great, colorful city with great, colorful characters.” (Shivers 1995, 1).

What makes something a “Baltimore thing”? Some have attempted to define it purely quantitatively. For example, Letitia Stockett points to authors who champion Baltimore foremost as the leading exporter of straw hats and packed oysters. Stockett argues, “These two enterprises are worthy and profitable, but a knowledge of these facts will not help you understand this city any more truly than the study of those long lists of products once diligently conned in school gave you an inkling of Tunis, Singapore, and Wilkes-Barre” (Stockett 1997[1928], 17). Stockett would prefer to define Baltimore through particular, exemplary neighborhoods. Stockett’s first choice would be the Mount Vernon neighborhood. Mount Vernon, Stockett argues, “is the most characteristically Baltimore thing in the town. The oyster, packed or in his wild state, is not more typical” (Stockett 1997[1928], 18).

After pondering yet another quirky Baltimore episode where a municipal showdown nearly led to Baltimore’s zoo animals eating one another, Madison Smartt Bell wonders what makes Baltimore Baltimore, and when does something become a “Baltimore thing”? While not the same charm as found in Paris, or even New Orleans, Bell answers that it is this sort of incident that defines Baltimore and leads to its appeal. "This episode, with all its grotesque irony,
alongside the outcome that the zoo animals didn’t really eat each other and not too many people really got hurt, turns into a classic *Baltimore thing* (Bell 2007, 15, her emphasis). She goes on, “Weird, sometimes disturbingly so, but once you had come out safe on the far side of it, maybe kinda wonderful, too. Only in Baltimore…” “Baltimore had decided to embrace its peculiarities,” Bell writes, “in the way that a family members learns to cherish the oddities of its more peculiar members” (Bell 2007, 16). Baltimore was not posh Paris or trendy New York, but it was delightful in its idiosyncrasy. In any era, most tend to find something charming about Charm City.

In the promotional book *Baltimore Renaissance* in the chapter “What Makes Baltimore, Baltimore?” Ric Bartter, Stephen J. Gordon, Frederic Kelly, Mark Miller, Bernard Penner, Jake Slagle, Jr., and William Weiner set out to distill Baltimore’s essence. The authors begin with an apology: Baltimore’s complexity ensures the impossibility of pinpointing the “real Baltimore.” Nonetheless, the authors try, and what they produce is a list of prominent symbols (Bartter et al. 1982, 259-263). The Orioles, Harborplace, local characters, local musicians, The Block, Druid Hill Park, the markets, seafood, and Arrabers, these are important elements of “real Baltimore.” Surveying the seagulls, boats, yachts, office buildings, and pristine red brick rowhouses from the Inner Harbor, guidebook *Moon Baltimore* warns tourists that “it might seem that Baltimore is an easy place to figure out.” “But,” the guide cautions, “Baltimore is a wise survivor; it withstood challenges and took risks, and that’s why it has managed to not only
keep its footing but to reinvent itself” (Brown 2014, 18). With hopes of easy definitions off the table, what then are the defining characteristics of Baltimore?

Baltimore is diverse and complex. Nonetheless, critics have tried to harness its essence, and it is almost always through a survey of these symbols or characteristics that authors attempt to draw a representative portrait of Charm City. Commenting on an earlier Baltimore era, Fredrick Lewis argues that Baltimore’s symbols changed following the disastrous 1904 fire that wiped out the downtown. “The old Baltimore,” he writes, “the city of Charles I and the Calverts, of Jerome Bonaparte and his American bride, of Francis Scott Key and The Star-Spangled Banner—is a sentimental memory; but the new Baltimore with its coal piers and rolling mills and grain elevators is a stirring and not unpleasant reality” (Lewis 1983[1927], 5). Longtime Baltimore Sun columnist Gilbert Sandler argues that Baltimore’s most pervasive symbols in the late twentieth and twenty-first centuries are references to memories of the Baltimore of the past. He writes, “The Inner Harbor summons memories of the old waterfront,” and “the ongoing crab feast bring up stories of how big the crabs used to be; the new cheers for the home team recall the same cheers in the seasons past. It is as if an artist has painted a new work over an old one, only to discover that the old one has a way of showing through” (Sandler 2002, xv). Alexander D. Mitchell IV summarizes succinctly some of the symbols circulating in Baltimore in the twenty-first century, “certain charms manifest themselves no matter which neighborhood one walks in—the sprawling city parks, marble
rowhouse steps kept well polished by proud owners, wide tree-line boulevards, the unique art of landscape-painted window screens, authentic sailing fishing vessels and red tugboats docked beside cruise ships and private pleasure craft, horse-drawn ’a-rabber’ produce peddler carts, or even a formal sit-down banquet punctuated by the sound of wooden mallets breaking apart freshly-steamed crabs” (Mitchell 2002, 5).

Baltimore is an old place, older than the United States, and its history is rich in that sense, richer than its juvenile neighbors to the west. Gary L. Browne writes “Baltimore is one of the few major metropolitan centers in America whose roots extend far back into our colonial heritage” (Browne 1982, xii). Baltimore is also a distinguished maritime city. Even with the decline in port traffic, signs of Baltimore’s past connection to the sea abound. Frederick Lewis reminds readers that it was the clipper ships that “built up a wonderful prestige which were the foundations of the city’s present greatness” (Lewis 1983[1927], 3-4). Historic ships dock throughout the city, from Harborplace to the Legg Mason courtyard. Writing a decade before the revitalization of the Inner Harbor, Hamilton Owens argued, as mentioned earlier, that he likes “to think that Baltimore’s ability to take its many conflicts as they come and to live, in spite of them, a casual and, on the whole, a charming life is due to the benign influence of the sea” and that “if that is true, then the harbor, despite its being so well hidden from the visitor, is Baltimore’s reason for being and its most significant achievement” (Owens 1941, 5). Writers note Baltimoreans’ particular gastronomy, and much of this
comes from the influence of the sea. Frederick Lewis jokes “Baltimore is the only
city in the world that puts crab meat in its vegetable soup” (Lewis 1983[1927],
3). Reminiscing about moving to the Highlandtown neighborhood, folklorist
Elaine Eff’s memories seem to revolve around Baltimore’s seafood: “We cracked
crabs, drank National Boh at bull and oyster roasts, and marched in the I Am an
American Day Parade” (Eff 2013, 12). Steamed crabs, crab cakes, and Old Bay⁴⁸
seem to represent the culinary “taste” of Baltimore culture. From the clipper
ships to the tall ships, from crabbers to crab cakes, from the shipbuilders to the
stevedores, and from the blue-collar rowhouses in Locus Point to the million
dollar condominiums in Harborview, Baltimore pays heed to its maritime culture.

As Alexander D. Mitchell IV states bluntly, “Baltimore owes much of its
history to its location” (Mitchell 2002, 5). The fusion of northern and southern
cultures is a constant motif in Baltimore literature. Ogden Nash called Baltimore
the “the tip of the South and the toe of the North.”⁴⁹ Geoff Brown says it is a
“southern city in character, but another one in geography” (Brown 2014, 18).
Jessica I. Elfenbein, Thomas L. Hollowak, and Elizabeth M. Nix see the city as
“sit[ting] distinctively on the nation’s North-South divide and exhibit[ting] an
unusual combination of the characteristics of each region” (2011, xvii). Francis F.
Beirne sets the entire crux of his Baltimore biographical history on the allegory of
the Enoch Pratt Library (where he wrote much of the book). After explaining how
a New Englander (first librarian), a Southerner (donator of the portraits), and the
portraits of the Lords Baltimore all come together in Enoch Pratt Library, Beirne
writes, “Here, then, in the central hall of the Pratt, which hundreds of Baltimoreans visit daily, is visual evidence of a synthesis peculiar to Baltimore and to which it owes its strength, the fruitful collaboration of a Yankee and a Southerner against a British baronial background. This meeting of North and South in the hospitable climate of Baltimore began early and brought into action on the local scene the complementary qualities of these two disparate regions” (Beirne 1951, 13). Beirne points to the influx of southerners into Baltimore after the Civil War to explain Baltimore’s idiosyncratic relationship to the nation’s earliest important regions: “Whether or not it is due to the spirit of toleration fostered by the first Lord Propriety, New Englanders and Southerners have learned to get along in Baltimore. They live side by side and their children intermarry. They see good in each other. While New Englanders have excelled in finance and banking, the southerners have taken a prominent part in government and the law” (Beirne 1951, 20-21). To Beirne, the beauty of Baltimore is the artic bear living beside the saber-toothed tiger in peace.

Critics also evoke Baltimore’s distinctive landscape. When he first arrived in the city, Baltimore confused Frank R. Shivers, Jr. He remembers, “The whole backwards place looked like one of Italy’s old cities—grand but shabby” (Shivers 1995, xi). When Linda G. Rich arrived in Baltimore to take a teaching post at the Maryland Institute College of Art, she was preoccupied by the Baltimore landscape: “...I passed long blocks of pristinely maintained row houses. I was fascinated by the white marble steps that adorn the front entrances, the scenic,
painted window screens, and the lace-curtained front windows, which are individualized by the presences of religious icons, American flags, greeting cards, and flower arrangements—clues to the lives of the people who live inside” (Rich 1981, 9). These pristine red brick federal-era rowhouses are perhaps Baltimore’s defining landscape characteristic. Mary Ellen Hayward and Charles Belfoure write, “From any vista Baltimore overwhelms the viewer with tens of thousands of rowhouses. Seen from a moving automobile they seem to stretch forever, forming endlessly repeated miles of look-alike houses” (Hayward and Belfoure 1999, 2). Other cities have brick rowhouses—for instance, the style is a central feature of the Pennsylvania Town—but Hayward and Belfoure argue that, “It’s true that other American cities like Boston, Philadelphia, New York, Richmond, and St. Louis have rowhousing, but few other cities’ psyche and identity are so closely tied to this architectural form as Baltimore’s” (Hayward and Belfoure 1999, 2). Frederick Lewis sees the real character of the community happening behind this distinctive cultural landscape: “Behind these red-brick fronts and up those white marble steps there is a mellow social existence and an intellectual life so rich in culture and appreciation that it takes the visitor back to the days of the salon and the patron (Lewis 1983[1927], 5). Rowhouse vistas and rowhouse life define the Baltimore look and influence how Baltimoreans operate.

The neighborhood takes front and center in many elucidations of Baltimore, one of several American “City of Neighborhoods.” Ernest Smith, a
local and an expert on the Baltimore dialect, simply refers to them as the “tribes of Bawlmer” (Smith 1993, 1). Gary L. Browne calls the city’s neighborhoods “the bedrock of Baltimore” (Browne 1982, xii). Alexander D. Mitchell IV agrees that Baltimore does have charm, and that charm, he says, is its neighborhoods (Baltimore 2002, 5). And Henry “Grandpa” Snow, interviewed for Small Town Baltimore, explained how Baltimore’s neighborhoods gave a big city a small town feel. “There was a feeling among Baltimoreans,” he explained, “that they owned Baltimore—the way it was” (Sandler 2002, xiii).

While critics see Baltimore’s neighborhoods as pillars of community life, insular living has a downside. Critics note Baltimore’s racial and ethnic divisions, a challenge posed to all east coast American cities. In an official report on the state of Baltimore as it approached the new millennium, Peter L. Szanton observed that the “city of neighborhoods’ has paid for its boundaries in the coin of a highly segregated social and civic life...to a degree not characteristic of many U.S. cities” (Szanton 1986, 8). After explaining how “Baltimore’s Catholics, Protestants and Jews developed sharply isolated communities,” the report argues that “even ethnic white Catholics mixed little with each other” (Szanton 1986, 8). To this day, there are clearly defined Irish, Polish, Jewish, and African-American sections of town. The report does see some cause for hope: “As the traditional barriers have become more porous, a greater sense of common cause appears to have developed among the various still-separate Baltimore communities, together with a stronger loyalty to the city as a whole, and greater pride in it”
In addition to its ethnic divide, Baltimore has faced a stark racial divide since the early nineteenth century. Elizabeth Fee, Linda Shopes, and Linda Zeidman argue that this is a largely hidden history (1991, vii). Before the Civil War, Baltimore was home to the largest number of free blacks in the country, and originally, blacks and whites lived in the same alleys (Hayward 2002). Following the influx of newly freed blacks after the Civil War, city officials segregated blacks into small neighborhoods, mostly in West Baltimore. Segregated housing would continue through the Civil Rights era. When Baltimore shifted to a majority black town in the 1970s, blacks began to spread out to larger parts of the town. In the twenty-first century, there are still black (West and Northwest Baltimore) and white enclaves (South, Southeast, and Northeast Baltimore).

Critics and civilians alike declare Baltimore a “blue-collar” city. As most port towns rise around commerce and industry, most could be labeled as “blue collar.” Nonetheless, the city’s blue-collar designation, especially with its once blue-collar workers now employed in the service and information economy at a rate of 90%, merits examination. The aesthetic leaks overtly into the city’s perception of its culture. Russell H., for example, a native Baltimorean and seafood wholesaler, notes that in Baltimore, “We may not always say it right, but this is a town where even if you don’t know what we’re saying you know what we mean” (Quoted in Smith 1993, 1). Elizabeth Fee, Linda Shopes, and Linda Zeidman argue that despite its blue-collar reputation, Baltimore largely ignores its
labor history. They write, “Until recently, Baltimore has been a blue-collar city, a city of many laboring women and men and the few for whom they labored. Yet, with some welcome exceptions, its official history has been one of patriotism, war, and a few powerful white men” (1991, vii). On the other hand, and on the other side of the political spectrum, historian Kenneth D. Durr argues that Baltimore is indeed a blue-collar town, and a prescient one at that. Its blue-collar workers seem to be harbingers for working-class sentiment to come elsewhere. Durr notes particularly how “Baltimore was far ahead of the nation when it came to the era’s defining conflict—one staged by policymakers but waged by working whites and blacks—over the deteriorating institutions and the economic crumbs left over in the deindustrializing city” (Durr 2003, 4).

Critics see Baltimore possessing a distinctive set of values. These values often revolve around traditional American faith in the support of family and community institutions. In the late twentieth century, this faith is sometimes proposed in contrast to the prevailing post-modern ethos of individualism characteristic of the prosperous, global, and technologically me-oriented Generation X and Y. Linda G. Rich, new to the city, saw “the valued traditions of its people were evident everywhere: pride in home ownership, close family ties, hard work, and religious devotion” (Rich 1981, 9). At the time of his writing, Frederick Lewis still saw “a family and community solidarity worthy of the city’s glorious path” (Lewis 1983[1927], 5).
The value that receives the most attention is “stability.” “Mention change to a Baltimoreans,” Francis F. Beirne teases, “and he turns cold to the most inviting proposition” (Beirne 1951, 18). In defense, the author observes that “perhaps this quality of procrastination has saved the city from making costly mistakes” (Beirne 1951, 18). He tells the story of a delightful woman from Baltimore’s elite denied the chairwomanship of a prestigious benevolent society because she was not considered a Baltimorean. The woman had lived in Baltimore for over fifty years. Gentrification has been troubling because it is opposite of the community’s central value of stability. In the 1970s, historical geographer D. Randall Beirne, Francis F. Berine’s son, found families living in the same house or on the same block in one neighborhood for three to four generations (Beirne 1976, 84). More recently, archeologists David A. Gadsby and Robert Chidester classified “stability” as one of the defining values of Hampden, one of Baltimore’s quintessential neighborhoods (2007).

The idea of “stability” as a defining concept in Baltimore life is intriguing considering the rapid changes Baltimore has faced time and again. These include the rapid influx of free blacks following the Civil War, another influx of African Americans in the mid-twentieth century, and the revitalization of the Inner Harbor in the 1970s. The harbor renovation transformed Downtown Baltimore from a dank, derelict port to Maryland’s top tourist destination. Gilber Sandler, the author of the Baltimore Sun’s popular “Baltimore Glimpses” column, noticed that his column about past Baltimore life frequently received more responses
than the headline news. “Why do we so cherish our Baltimore nostalgia?” Sandler asks. He argues the city’s rapid change in spite of its overarching value of stability that has encouraged Baltimore’s yearning for its nostalgic past way of life. “Baltimore has moved so fast that there is so much that will never be again. It is the speed of the city’s change that lends such rich currency to its yesterdays” (Sandler 2002, xv, his emphasis).

Reviewing Baltimore’s native, touristic, and scholarly literature shows that Baltimore possesses a list of characteristics considered peculiar to and representative of the city. Of course, one should be cautious when relying on symbols to represent diverse places. As Olson puts it, “The outsider may find that this portrait does not match his private images of the city: baseball, softshell crabs, Eubie Blake at the piano, or Blaze Star on the Block” (Olson 1997, xiii). Baltimore is rowhouses and million dollar condominiums and high-rise project towers. It is crab cakes and pit beef and lake trout. It is the Battle of Baltimore, Francis Scott Key, and the “Star Spangled Banner” and it is the volunteer fire companies battling in the streets and police waging the War on Drugs. It lauds stability in the midst of rapid change. Even Baltimore’s characteristics are in conflict.

Baltimore is a prototypical American city. While New York, Los Angeles, and Chicago may receive the accolades as the great American cities, Baltimore is far more representative of the typical urban American experience in the nineteenth, twentieth, and twenty-first centuries. Antero Pietila writes, “Unlike
New York, Chicago, Detroit, Boston, Philadelphia, and Los Angeles, Baltimore is not usually a prominent part of the American urban narrative. It should be” (Pietila 2010, x). Olson suggests that “Baltimore is American, in its rhythm of building up and tearing down, swarming and dispersing, getting and spending, birthing and dying, sharing and competing” (Olson xiii). Gary L. Browne argues in “uniquely combining the old with the new, the city epitomizes dynamic urban America” (Browne 1982, xii). And Elfenbein, Hollowak, and Nix see Baltimore as “the prototypical American city: a scrappy factory and commercial center that had reached its productive height in the 1950s” (2011, xvii). At the same time, Baltimore is atypically prescient. Conflicts that will arise elsewhere frequently surface in Baltimore first. Examples range from the Civil War through Civil Rights and on to the harbor revitalization and urban pioneering. In this way “Baltimore is hardly typical” (Durr 2003, 4). Elfenbein, Hollowak, and Nix succinctly summarize Baltimore’s status in academia as an “under-researched East Coast industrial city” that deserves more scholarly attention because its emblematic and prophetic connections to the urban American experience (2011, xv-xvi).

Baltimore has taken on new characteristics as its downtown, central, and southeast neighborhoods gained prominence as desirable tourist destinations. For example, in the 2014 edition of Visit Baltimore magazine, Mayor Stephanie Rawlings-Blake promises (as Baltimore mayors have for half a century) that “there’s never been a better time to visit our beautiful, waterfront city as we continue to commemorate events of major historical significance to our nation.”
Mayor Rawlings-Blake is referring to the commemoration of the victorious Battle of Baltimore a full two hundred years ago. But, the mayor promises, Baltimore is more than the Battle of Baltimore, Fort McHenry, Francis Scott Key, and the “Star Spangled Banner.” The way the mayor promotes Baltimore speaks to the characteristics the city administration wants tourists to note. Baltimore is, she tells us, “a walkable city filled with world-class museums, attractions, performing arts, shopping, fine dining, historic sites and exciting events in our one-of-a-kind neighborhoods—which are easily accessible on foot, with our fast, friendly and free Charm City Circulator or via the water taxi. In Baltimore, you can always expect the unexpected and experience firsthand a big city with a small town feel.”

Baltimore’s tourism promoters frequently promise “authentic” experiences. Some places, the New Yorker’s Tony Hiss promises, “still anchor understandings of what it means to be a Baltimorean” (Quoted in Shivers 1). John Lewis sees this as the “hyper-regionalism” that makes Baltimore appear “all the more distinctive and real” (Lewis 2007). On the other hand, even workaday tourist guidebooks like Moon Handbooks Baltimore warn against taking Baltimore’s marketed appeal for granted. “The city,” the guide cautions, “is a far more complex place than this picture-postcard image reveals” (Brown 2014, 18). This honesty is unusual in Baltimore guidebooks, many of which prefer to bowdlerize and whitewash the city to fit into the ideal tourist experience. Even Moon, for example, reduces Baltimore into several picture postcard opportunities spread
throughout the fringes of Downtown Baltimore. Its map (3) and its “Where to Go” section (20-21) ignore the city’s African-American sections, which constitute the majority of Baltimore. The same could be said about the coverage of the town’s impoverished areas. Moon recommends, “You’ll need to wander along Fell’s Point’s bumpy ballast-stone streets, through Hampden’s independent shops, and among the magnificent architecture of Mount Vernon to start to understand it” (18). These neighborhoods are combination residential and commercial districts on the outskirts of Downtown Baltimore, with the exception of Hampden, a white enclave in northern Baltimore. Frank R. Shivers Jr.’s *Walking in Baltimore* takes a similar approach. While it offers the visitor twelve different Baltimore tours, each about the length of a morning or afternoon stroll, all twelve begin at the Constellation dock in the Inner Harbor (Shivers, 1995 xi-xiii). The tourist experience, in guide after guide, is a thorough combing of 10 percent of Baltimore. The tourist is ultimately offered a tour of gentrified Baltimore.

**Baltimore Pro and Con**

Not everyone loves Baltimore. F. Scott Fitzgerald once classified Baltimore as a city where “everything is civilized and gay and rotted and polite.”

*Washington Post* editors in the 1960s saw Baltimore as “a seedy, mildly amusing hick town full of strip joints and peopled with crooked politicians” (Quoted in Bartter et al. 1982, 259). Questioning the charm of Charm City, one disillusioned circuit court judge could only see “a rather uncharmed view of Baltimore”
Madison Smartt Bell, a lover of Baltimore, agrees that no one would find much charm in parts of the city, noting the poverty, crime, and despair there. She concludes that the “underclass lives in a parallel universe, cheek by jowl with Charm City...yet scarcely touching it, somehow. There are two cities in Baltimore” (Bell 2007, 18). Joseph Arnold, another Baltimore lover who feels the needs to explain why Baltimore fell into disgrace, points to Baltimore’s “remarkable paradox”— “How did a city that was Maryland’s greatest engine of prosperity and progress from the 1760s to the 1950s turn into its greatest failure by the 1990s?” (Arnold 2002, 4).

On the other hand, Baltimore did not take the name “The Greatest City in the World” without admirers. Writing in 1873, George Washington Howard saw his Baltimore hometown as ”one of the most delightful cities in the world” (Howard 1873, 33). He went on to enumerate its fine features,

Situated about the centre of the Atlantic coast, at the head of the Great Mediterranean Sea of America, it is equally removed from the intense cold of northern latitudes, and the blinding heat of our more tropical sisters of the South. An equable climate, soft, balmy, salubrious, and almost entirely free from the dense fogs which are the horror of the generality of cities adjacent to the seaboard, gives to it that healthy mean, which is seldom present along any of the water courses of this country or Europe. (33-34)

Others point to the delight of Baltimore at the beginning of the twenty-first century. Alexander D. Mitchell IV notes that Middle Atlantic residents have only recently begun to comprehend “the charms of moderately affordable housing in quaint, waterfront areas, or industrial buildings redeveloped into condominiums”
(Mitchell 2002, 5). Even the sober *Baltimore 2000* report references the “potent combination” of Baltimore’s half century of redevelopment:

Probably most important, Baltimore has become, at least for the well-to-do, a more attractive place to live. The magnet of the inner harbor, the redeveloped downtown, the strong neighborhood life, the relatively low cost of living, proximity to the Bay, an effective government, strong cultural institutions, a good transportation network, a growing stock of new and renovated middle- and upper-income housing, and a recovered sense of municipal pride: these make a potent combination. (Szanton 1986, 9)

*Moon Baltimore* highlights the national lists that rank Baltimore among the most “underrated” cities and the “hidden treasures” of the United States. Something encourages residents to stay: “Ask one of the many people who call Baltimore home. They’ll tell you that they wouldn’t dream of living anywhere else to pursue their lives, their art, and their dreams. They chose to be themselves, beholden to no one, here in the town by the water they call home” (Brown 2014, 19).

**Baltimore’s Historical Themes**

Parsing through Baltimore history, two important themes recur again and again. The first theme is the fragmented or frayed city. The parties and the battle lines change, but the underlying conflict remains. In the nineteenth century alone, Baltimore faced serious dilemmas that pitted city dwellers against rural residents, the east against the west, pro-war against anti-war, natives against immigrants, Democrats against Know Nothings, Irish against German, North against South, black against white, political machines against reformers, Catholics against Protestants, and owners against workers. Geographic ambiguity and internal conflict has always made Baltimore a combustible city.
The second theme is the Baltimore penchant for public display. These range from Baltimore’s notorious bawdy fairs in Colonial America to the city’s sesquicentennial celebrated in 1880. While Democrats, reformers, and others in political power deplored the mob action that led journalists to coin the city Mobtown, bawdy fairs, demonstrations, political rallies, parades, riots, and even battles were early exercises in American democracy. Lower-class Baltimoreans lacked institutional power, but had great power in numbers. Mass action was their best form of expression. As Seth Rockman explains, public display “created an alternative political space for common people to address issues of public policy and social justice” (Rockman 2002, 64).

The frayed city combined with a tradition of public expression anticipated Baltimore’s public spirit and proved the need for a uniting force. Throughout its history, Baltimore’s identity has been rife with ambiguity and fragmentation. Public display has been an important element of Baltimore life. The succession of events can be interpreted as attempts to form a uniting identity in the midst of competing forces.

John Smith first surveyed the land Americans call Baltimore in 1608, and Lord Baltimore began landing colonists in the vicinity as early as 1634. First established as a port, the Port of Baltimore became Baltimore Town in 1729; Baltimore Town became the City of Baltimore in 1796. Not immediately prosperous, by the time of its incorporation as a city, only the older and larger Philadelphia and New York surpassed Baltimore’s grandeur. Baltimore bustled
more and grew faster than Boston or Charleston. Built for the export of tobacco, the American product most in demand in Europe, wheat provided the grist for the city’s growth. The National Road paved the way for farmers to the west to transport their crops to mills in Baltimore. The Jones Falls powered Baltimore’s mills, and the mills sent the flour and meal to the harbor for shipping. Baltimore’s connection to the Midwest and to a port for northern, southern, and European trade put it in the best position in the United States (Arnold 4). Early Baltimoreans settled around the harbor. The road and the mills were essential, but the port gave Baltimore its raison d’être, regardless of the export.57

From its ideal position, Baltimore traded with the frontiers in Maryland, Pennsylvania, and Virginia. The National Road connected Baltimore to Ohio, opening endless opportunities for trade with the west. Critics often characterize Baltimore as a northern industrial city wrapped in a southern aristocratic climate, and many of the northern industrialists arrived in this era. At the time, Maryland’s largest intra-state competitor was Annapolis, the Proprietary Governorship. Once Annapolis lost that title following the American Revolution, Baltimore became the economic and social capital of Maryland. The Founding Fathers acknowledge Baltimore’s ascendancy. George Washington stayed in the city on trips between Mount Vernon and Philadelphia. He told English agriculturist Richard Parkinson, “Baltimore was and would be the risingest town in America, except the Federal city” (Parkinson 1805, 78).
The demand for wheat and flour in Europe and the West Indies caused a boom in Baltimore. Over fifty mills operated within a twenty-mile radius of the city, with twelve of them along the Jones Falls. Baltimore’s Lexington Market became the “gastronomic centre of the universe” (Bibbins 1912, 83). Rumbling down the National Road, Conestoga wagons brought Ohio Valley settlers their supplies, and in return the settlers shipped pork, lumber, and wheat to Baltimore. Writing in the early twentieth century, Bibbins claims “many of Baltimore’s older citizens vividly recall the days when Pennsylvania avenue was almost blocked with its long line of Conestoga wagons, with their sturdy Pennsylvania horses and their blue-frocked teamsters, moving slowly to inns” (1912, 130).

By 1801, Baltimore is already a diverse American city, a characteristic that is a source of the city’s character and a root of the city’s fragmentation. At this time, Baltimore had as many churches as all its other public buildings combined. It had one each for the “Quaker, English Presbyterian, German Calvinist, German Reformed, German Lutheran, Mennonist, and Baptist persuasions, two Protestant Episcopal, two Roman Catholic, and three Methodist” (Bibbins 1912, 86). Bibbins argues that “this number and diversity of places of worship is as significant as it has been characteristic of Baltimore ever since. It is the reflection of the welcoming influences which brought the early settlers to the region of the Patapsco where they could find freedom of worship as nowhere else, even in Maryland” (Bibbins 1912, 86).
In this era, the clipper ship built Baltimore. Designed for speed over bulk, these ships sailed the Seven Seas, trading with distant lands, outrunning privateers and British men-of-war, and privateering themselves when circumstances warranted. In fact, it was the Baltimore clipper ship that drew the ire of the British and sent their fury down on Baltimore, leading to the War of 1812’s Battle of Baltimore. England considered Baltimore to be a “nest of pirates” operating out of the Chesapeake, and they were well aware that Baltimore was responsible for many of its losses on the high seas (Owens 1941, 158-170).

What made Baltimore “The City that Reads” also contributed to its fragmentation. In an era when all newspapers represented political persuasions, dozens circulated in Baltimore. These included the Federal Gazette, The Patriot, Niles’ Register, The Saturday Visitor, The Baltimore American, and The Sun. During this era, Baltimore first revealed its penchant for public display. After Baltimore’s Federal Republican derided the impending War of 1812, an irate Baltimore mob sacked the newspaper’s building. When the stubborn Federal Republican reiterated its opposition several weeks later, the mob attacked the editor’s house, murdering him (Scharf 1874, 88-89).

When roads reigned supreme, Maryland and Virginia controlled trade to the west. But the advent of canals brought new competition from other regions. A Baltimore canal was not financially feasible. Baltimore’s proximity to the west and prosperity through trade were at risk. Baltimore conceived of a railroad running between Baltimore and Ohio. The first of its kind in the nation, by 1853,
the Baltimore & Ohio Railroad (commonly know as “the B&O”) stretched all the way to the Ohio River, making it the longest in the world.

Baltimore erected the nation’s first official monument to George Washington on July 4, 1815. Builders placed the monument in a rural part of Baltimore, fearing the towering obelisk would fall on houses or attracting lightning (Scharf 1874, 433, Bibbins 1912, 129). This rural area of Baltimore, Mount Vernon, would become the social center of Baltimore, one of its finest neighborhoods, and the setting of rallies and festivals. The first tradition attached to the Washington Monument came following the victorious Battle of Baltimore. Every year, on September 12, the battle’s survivors gathered around the monument in memorial (Bibbins 1912, 129).

Baltimore’s mob violence traces to at least the attack on the Federal Republican in 1812. But in the 1830s, a variety of troubles led to a series of mob actions. In 1832, bank troubles began in Baltimore. The failure of the Bank of Maryland in 1834 led to a severe riot in Baltimore that lasted three days, from August 6-9. The mob sought out and burned the homes of the bank’s former directors. The riot was one of the most violent in American history to that point, and authorities were unable to quell it. Mobs took to streets again for the “nunnery riot” (Scharf 1874, 499-500, Bibbins 1912, 141). A nun escaped the Carmelite nunnery on August 18, 1839 and sought protection at a neighboring house, claiming she had been abused. A mob assembled and threatened to torch
the nunnery. Not until doctors evaluated the nun and diagnosed her as insane did the mob relent, sparing the nunnery.

Between this era of civic unrest and the upcoming era of political unrest, Baltimore became “Convention City.” When national conventions replaced congressional caucuses and state conventions, Baltimore’s availability by rail and sail, its location midway between the north and south, and its proximity to Washington, D.C., made it the ideal city for national political conventions.

The era of Baltimore’s greatest eminence—America’s second largest city, second largest port, and second largest immigrant disembarking point—was also an era fraught with difficulties. Its fragmented ethnic groups and neighborhoods and its ambiguity as a northern and southern state created the chaos of the notorious 1850s in Baltimore. Riven with conflict, the era is a microcosm for the fractured living that defines Baltimore and a harbinger for the impending attempts to unify the discordant city through a common identity.

The violence began during the 1856 election season. On September 12, 1856, the first riot occurred. Rip-Raps and Wampanaogs besieged the Seventeenth Ward House on Light Street (Scharf 1874, 549, Andrews 1912, 155-6). On October 8, Baltimore held its municipal elections. Past elections brought violence, but the belligerents reached new levels this year by upgrading their weaponry in this era from brickbats and clubs to guns and cannons. The Know-Nothing party supported Thomas Swann in his bid for Mayor of Baltimore over the Democrats’ Robert C. Writing. In a legendary escalation of violence, the Rip-
Rap club and the New Market Fire Company squared off in a pitched infantry battle, while street fights erupted throughout the city. The polls closed, the parties carried off their dead, and Thomas Swann was declared Mayor of Baltimore (Scharf 1874, 548, Andrews 155-7).

National elections were held the following month. Baltimore was split into wards, and each ward had but one polling station, ensuring crowded conditions. Ruffians took advantage of the crowds to intimidate voters, pushing, shoving, and bullying political opponents. The shoemaker’s awl was out in full force, while ruffians outright beat and murdered others. In Baltimore’s Sixth Ward, known as “Limerick” for its large Irish Catholic (and, therefore, Democratic) constituency, a pitched battle erupted on Orleans Street near the Belair market (Scharf 551-2, Andrews 1912, 157-8). The Sixth and Seventh Ward Know Nothings fought the Sixth and Eight Ward Democrats for control of Limerick’s polling station. The Eighth Ward Democrats turned the tides of the battle when they unleashed a cannon in the streets of Baltimore. The Know Nothings made a hasty retreat, but soon returned with a swivel gun of their own. Men and boys fought for hours until darkness put an end to the violence. At the end of the fray, dozens of Baltimoreans lay dead. The Democrats had won the ward, but not the election.

Two years later, in the 1858 municipal elections, the Democratic Party could not even find a Democrat to nominate for Mayor. Circumstances compelled the party, instead, to nominate a “reform” candidate as their own (Scharf 1874, 565, Andrews 1912, 157-8). Maryland’s Democratic governor offered to send in
the state militia to stabilize Baltimore’s elections, but to no great surprise, he and
Know-Nothing Mayor Swann could not reach an agreement. Mayor Swann
preferred the Baltimore police force handle election security. At the time, the
police force consisted primarily of political appointees with strong party
affiliations. Matthew Page Andrews recounts the Democratic Party’s regard for
the election that year:

On the day of the election it was seen by all the better elements of
voters that the balloting was a mere mockery of that sacred
privilege of citizenship. Armed ruffians had complete charge of the
polls, and it was as much as life was worth to attempt to cast any
ballot but the Know-Nothings ticket, which was so marked with a
blue checked design that what little measure of secrecy was
provided for in the old style ballot was in the manner entirely done
away with. (Andrews 1912 158)

With Know-Nothings domination complete and no opponents to fight, the violence
actually decreased. Those few stubborn souls who attempted to cast ballots
against the Know Nothings were met swiftly with awl and blood tub. Sensing the
election’s futility, the Democrats’ candidate, A. P. Shutt, withdrew his name
midday, fearing for his supporters’ safety (Scharf 1874, 565-6, Andrews 1912,
158). Swann had won reelection with 19,149 votes out of 24,008 total ballots.
While the Know Nothings perched at the zenith of their power, their quick plunge
was now before them. Newspapers condemned the Know Nothings, pointing to
the reign of terror tarnishing the city’s reputation, stunting business, and
garnering the city the nickname “Mobtown,” a stunning fall from grace from
“Monument City” and “Convention City” (Andrews 1912, 158-9).
As the city fell to chaos, the Know Nothings began infighting, and the newspapers turned against them, the city’s mood swung towards reform. Even previously staunch Know-Nothing periodicals, like The Clipper and The American, switched alliances. Newspapers urged reformers to organize as expertly as the Know Nothings had. Reformers held a mass meeting on September 8, 1858, and, in response the Know Nothings held their mass rally in Monument Square on October 27, 1859, detailed at the beginning of the chapter. In the following elections, although the Know Nothings remained in power in Baltimore, voters in the rest of Maryland rejected them. The Maryland General Assembly declared the Baltimore elections invalid and refused to allow the Know Nothings to take their seats (Riley 1904, 366-7). Reformers began curing Baltimore’s election ills. The wards were divided into polling precincts, which allowed for less crowding and greater voter protection, and the police force was removed from city control and put under the direction of the state. At the next municipal elections, the voters elected a reform mayor. Know Nothing rule was at an end.

Baltimore’s triumph was short lived; new conflict was on the horizon. The Civil War’s bloodshed fell first on Baltimore’s soil. The city divided yet again. South of the Mason-Dixon line, Baltimore’s commercial and social relations had closer ties to the south than the north. Maryland was, in fact, a slave state, even if the peculiar institution was not central to Maryland life. More Marylanders identified as southerners than northerners. Other Baltimoreans defined themselves primarily as “anti-war,” perceiving the federal government as the
aggressor. President Abraham Lincoln was unpopular in Baltimore from the beginning, receiving only 1,100 of the 30,000 votes cast in the city’s 1860 presidential election. The Southern sympathizers organized into the “Minute Men” to conduct operations supporting the Confederacy.

On the other hand, in industry, manufacturing, and enterprise, Baltimore was more northern than southern. Baltimore looked and operated more like a northeastern American city than a southern one. Although in a slave state, Baltimore was home to more free blacks than any other city in the Union. Although not a majority, strong Unionists and fervent abolitionists operated in Baltimore. Many of these Northern supporters organized into the “National Volunteers” to conduct operations supporting the Union. Baltimore was closer to the federal city than any Northern city. For this reason, some Baltimoreans preferred to maintain friendly ties with Washington, D.C., and the nation’s capital demanded Baltimore remain friendly with it. From a purely pragmatic standpoint, Marylanders knew war was undesirable because any fight between North and South was sure to land in Maryland. Maryland was America’s first and preeminent border state.

Many Baltimoreans took a middling position. These persons favored union and slavery. That is, in their opinion, the United States should maintain the status quo. Although not necessarily Confederate supporters, they could be deemed Southern sympathizers. They opposed any attack on the South, preferring instead to appease the South and preserve the Union by maintaining
the status quo. Most Baltimoreans did not have much investment in slavery or abolition. Therefore, many thought less about loyalty to North or South and more about the intricate, complex webs of previously formed municipal political alliances (Towers 2002, 93). For example, Irish immigrant laborers cast their lot with the South rather than ally with their former Know-Nothing antagonists, who supported the North.

April 19, 1861, brought the Civil War’s first bloodshed and served as a harbinger for the tumult to come. Fort Sumter had fallen the previous week. Fragmented wartime allegiances, a past decade of tumult, and Marylanders rallying to defend their home frightened the federal government in Washington, D.C., fewer than forty miles to Baltimore’s southwest. Fearing for the safety of the nation’s capital after Virginia’s secession, President Lincoln sent for loyal troops. Massachusetts shipped the nascent Sixth Massachusetts Militia by train to defend Washington, D.C. All southbound trains to Washington, D.C., had to pass through Baltimore. From a Baltimorean’s perspective, the Massachusetts regiment’s mission was unclear. Some thought the Northern invasion had begun, while others were offended that the enemy thought he could pass through Maryland unmolested. Mayor George William Brown and Police Marshal George Proctor Kane, expecting trouble, made plans to ensure the troops safe passage through Baltimore.

No direct rail line connected Philadelphia to Washington, D.C. The Massachusetts regiment would ride the Philadelphia, Wilmington and Baltimore
Railroad to Baltimore’s President Street Station and then journey ten blocks to the Camden Street station to ride the Baltimore and Ohio Railroad to Washington, D.C. The original plan called for the soldiers to transfer from station to station via carriage. But as the horses pulled the regiment’s train cars down Pratt Street, a mob blocked their path. The soldiers stepped out of their carriages and continued on foot. Because the regiment had received word in Philadelphia that Baltimoreans would resist their passage, Colonel Edward F. Jones ordered the soldiers armed for the journey through Baltimore. The rules of engagement instructed the troops to ignore all missiles and projectiles thrown their way, but if fired upon, the soldiers were to return fire. The tepid rules of engagement led to one of the Civil War’s most memorable images—and perhaps the one that best symbolizes Baltimore’s role in the Civil War. From the outset, the crowd peppered the regiment’s rearguard with stones and bricks. As the Massachusetts regiment marched along Pratt Street towards the Camden Street station, some Southern sympathizers unfurled a Confederate flag and marched in front of them, obligating the Massachusetts regiment to march behind a Confederate flag. Both Unionists and Southern sympathizers were in the streets that day. Angered, the Northern partisans attacked the Southern standard bearer and attempted to destroy the flag. In turn, the greater portion of the mob attacked the Unionists. In retreat, the Unionists sought refuge behind the Massachusetts troops, bringing the violence into the regiment, intentionally or not. The inexperienced regiment panicked, and while commanders had ordered only to
fire if fired upon and then only at specific hostile targets, the unseasoned soldiers opened fire upon the crowd and sprinted for the Camden Street station. The battle lines were unclear, and chaos ensued. Marshal Kane, a Southern sympathizer himself, drew his pistol on the attacking mob and defended the Massachusetts troops, famously shouting, “Keep back, men, or I shoot!” (Andrews 1912, 177). The regiment made it to the train station, though not without losses. Four Massachusetts soldiers and twelve Baltimore civilians died in the fracas.

On April 26th, Mayor Brown ordered Baltimoreans lower their flags, be they national, state, or Confederate. Some citizens refused to take down the Stars and Stripes, including Judge Hugh L. Bonds. The judge of the criminal court, Bonds dismissed all charges against the rioters who attempted to thwart authorities endeavoring to remove the national flags on Federal Hill and in Fell’s Point (Andrews 1912, 182). On May 13, 1861, in a drenching downpour in the dark of night, General Benjamin Butler occupied Federal Hill. From this commanding vantage point, he pointed his artillery at Baltimore, effectively holding the city hostage for the remainder of the war. One legend says Butler threatened the first shot would be at the beloved Washington Monument (Owens 1941, 278). Another says General Butler aimed at the Maryland Building, thought to be a Confederate hotbed (Andrews 1912, 185). General Butler established martial law, arresting any Baltimore leader considered a Southern sympathizer. Union forces employed Know-Nothing ruffians, now out of work, to spy on and
harass secessionists and sympathizers (185). The federal government detained so many Baltimoreans in Fort McHenry that it became the “Bastile of Maryland” (Scharf 105). For example, Mayor Brown and Marshal Kane, both of whom had assisted the Massachusetts troops on Pratt Street, were arrested and jailed as Southern sympathizers.

The Civil War should have been disastrous for Baltimore because of its peculiar political leanings and unenviable geographic position, but through some great fortune, the city escaped intact. By 1870, the city had grown, in both white and black population, as white southerners and freed slaves migrated to Baltimore and immigrants continued to pour in.

Baltimore reached its apotheosis as a powerful American city in the antebellum period. The next era marks Baltimore’s transition from an early republican city to a modern American city. While the conflicts of town vs. country, Democrat vs. Know Nothing, and North vs. South had passed, the conflicts’ underlying symptoms remained. Specifically, ethnic, religious, and racial divisions kept Baltimore apart. Baltimore historian S. Z. Ammen sees the period 1875-1895 as Baltimore’s first attempt to unite the discordant city. While Ammen’s proclamation that “when it began, Baltimore was a congeries of villages; when it ended, it was a vigorous, self-contained civic organism with new life, new tastes, and new ambitions” overstates the success, it does encapsulate the era’s spirit (Ammen 1912, 241-2). I will argue in this era Baltimore first attempts to craft a “Baltimorean” identity to unite the city.
Public Display in Baltimore

Baltimore has had a festive public spirit since before the American Revolution. Baltimore was notorious for its bawdy fairs—so notorious, in fact, that the Committee of Observation asked them to shut down during the American Revolution.

The Committee of Observation for Baltimore County, reflecting on the many mischiefs and disorders usually attending the fairs held at Baltimore Town, and willing in all things strictly to observe the regulations of the Continental Congress, who, in the eighth resolution, have advised to discountenance and discourage every species of extravagance and dissipation, especially horseracing, cock-fighting, &c., have unanimously resolved to recommend it to the good people of this county, and do hereby earnestly request that they will not themselves, nor will suffer any of their families to attend, or in any wise encourage the approaching fair at Baltimore Town; and all persons are desired not to erect booths, or in any manner prepare for holding the said fair. We are persuaded the inhabitants of the town in particular will see the propriety of this measure, and the necessity of enforcing it, as the fairs have been a nuisance long before complained of by them, as serving no other purpose than debauching the morals of their children and servants, affording an opportunity for perpetrating thefts, encourage riots, drunkenness, gaming, and the vilest immoralities. (Scharf 1874, 525)

In his *Chronicles of Baltimore*, historian John Thomas Scarf writes that “the last fair was held on Mr. Howard’s grounds, between Liberty and Greene streets, where races were also run before the Revolution” (Scharf 1874, 71). Baltimore also held renowned for its agricultural fairs in the colonial era, the first dating to 1745 (Andrews 1912, 220). The Maryland Agricultural Society sponsored these agrarian festivals until the Civil War. The Maryland Fair, the agricultural fairs’ first successor, was held in
Baltimore *during* the war, as a means of brightening the beleaguered border city (Schoeberlein 2014). President Abraham Lincoln agreed to preside over the festival to make amends for his notorious 1861 clandestine flight through the city after Allan Pinkerton warned him of an assassination plot. Following the Civil War, Baltimore hosted ethnic festivals and religious and benevolent celebrations, but these displayed Baltimore’s fragmentation rather than unity.

The Baltimore Sesquicentennial and its successor, the Oriole Festival, heeded the zeitgeist of uniting the city and served as the first attempt to do so through the creation of a citywide tradition. Beginning in 1880, Baltimore endeavored to capture Baltimore’s penchant for public display through festival. On its 150th anniversary, Baltimore attempted to bring disparate Baltimore groups together as Baltimoreans for the Baltimore Sesquicentennial to celebrate their illustrious past and to prepare for the city’s future. The festival returned the following year as the Oriole Festival. The Oriole Festival only lasted three years, from 1881-1883, but the acclaimed festival and pageant proved that Baltimore was capable of more than ethnic and neighborhood celebrations (Ammen 1912, 255-258). Seen in its historical context, the Oriole Festival links the public demonstrations and street violence of mid-nineteenth century Baltimore with the couth and polite Flower Mart of the early twentieth century the grassroots-corporate hybrid that is the HonFest of twenty-first century.
Other American cities receive more attention, but Baltimore is both more typical of the American city experience and more distinctively American (a quarter African American, a quarter foreign born, northern and southern, urban and rural, connected to both east and west). The city needed a force that could bring together blacks, immigrants, working-class whites, middle class, patricians, and partisans of different political shades. Baltimorean had public expression in their fragmented city. Baltimore’s twentieth-century traditions would be a populist, but controlled, way of acknowledging and, to an extent, subverting this public sentiment.

Just three decades earlier, the Know Nothings had held their notorious rally in Monument Square in response to an earlier Reform rally. And the Reform rally had been held in response to the literal war raging for control of Baltimore. The City of Baltimore was frayed and tearing at the seams. While the violence has diminished, the underlying conflict continued into the twenty and twenty-first centuries. At Flower Mart at the Washington Monument, at the City Fair in the Inner Harbor, and at HonFest in Hampden, these rallies have turned into citywide festivals, festivals that implicitly and explicitly define “Baltimore” and the “Baltimorean.” When these public displays work, they incorporate Baltimore’s tradition of public expression in an effort that weaves together a discordant city. At their most successful, the citywide traditions shape and craft themselves to represent a diverse, ever-changing city. And when they fail, their failure shines a
light on long-lived, underlying assumptions that Baltimoreans have come to reject.
In the northbound lane of the Baltimore-Washington Parkway (Route 295), a mysterious man pulls to the shoulder of the 55 m.p.h. road. His graying hair pulled back in a short ponytail, the man wears navy blue dickies, black work shoes, and a tan jacket. He sports a small diamond stud in his left ear, big glasses, and a bandana facemask. In his right hand he holds a worn metal staple gun. Hidden in the trunk of his black station wagon, squirreled away in a paper bag beneath a pink quilt, is a white, laminated scroll. His stapler in his right hand and his laminated scroll in his left, he scampers up a small dirt mound to his final destination, the “Welcome to Baltimore” sign just south of Baltimore’s city limits. He unfurls his scroll to unveil a black laminated poster about one and a half feet by three feet. On the poster, in large, capital letters, etched and painted white, is the word HON. In front of him, the “Welcome to Baltimore” sign has three brown slats. The top slat reads “WELCOME TO” the middle slat reads “BALTIMORE” and the bottom slat is blank. Next to “BALTIMORE,” there is a rectangle in a slightly redder shade of brown where a vandal spray-painted the word “hon” some years ago. Eschewing vandalism and the previous artist’s placement, this man aims to staple the sign on the third slat, directly beneath the “I” in “BALTIMORE.” When he is sure he has the proper placement, he fires the stapler a dozen times. The tepid city sign now issues a warm “Welcome to Baltimore HON.” Although the man would like to see the addition made permanent, he knows the sign will have
a short lifespan. The Highway Administration has a strict anti-graffiti policy and an earnest road crew that rip the signs down almost as fast as the mystery man puts them up—by official policy, within twenty-four hours. But it is a futile effort. The “Hon Man” has boundless enthusiasm and a trunk full of HONS. He will be back by the end of the week.

In this chapter, I answer the question raised by this image of the Hon Man of how local culture is formed in a postindustrial American city. Using a case study of an invented Baltimore tradition in the twentieth century, I will explore broader issues of local identity in a globalizing world and contested claims for ownership of tradition arising from this symbolic representative of localness. In addition to tracing the invention and perpetuation of a local tradition, through rhetorical analysis of available sources, I unpack serious tensions of race, class, and gender lying beneath the surface of local festivity and fun.

Because these intriguing questions become raveled in the negotiated local fabric, the identification and construction of local tradition become a symbolic battlefield for issues of race, class, gender, identity, and belonging that cannot be fought or addressed in the open elsewhere. Local tradition, then, becomes a pseudo-battleground in the local culture wars. Sometimes these battles are unconscious, and sometimes they are overt. Although they are lay debates, they relate to academic notions of the construction of local and regional culture, nationalism, authenticity, heritage, and nostalgia. While to an outsider the debate over the use of “hon” on signs appears insignificant; it should be taken
seriously because it relates to larger issues about identity and the accessibility to culture. Indeed, a thesis in this chapter is that these contestable issues, hard to articulate in political forums, became channeled through the hon debate.

**Urban American Folklore and the Land-Language-Lore Complex in the Creation of Local Tradition**

The possibility of an urban folklore excited folklorists in the mid-twentieth century, but its study has faltered since the 1980s. One of the early urban folklore pioneers was Richard Dorson, also an esteemed American Studies scholar. Dorson wished to distinguish between “American folklore” and “folklore in America” as a distinction between traditions emerging from American conditions in the former and customs transplanted in America from elsewhere in the latter. Similarly, I, here, would like to distinguish between “folklore in urban America” and “urban American folklore.” Implicit in my argument throughout this chapter is that American folklorists have focused on a “folklore in urban America” rather than an “urban American folklore.” That is, folklorists have examined folklore found in the city rather than that folk forms arising distinctly from the American metropolitan experience.\(^{68}\) By acknowledging how the commercial, industrial city breeds folk forms that ring of Dorson’s “fakelore” (Dorson 1976), but by simultaneously heeding Dundes’s plea to pursue this phenomenon with the same vigor and the same tools (Dundes 1985), I will attempt to show the vitality and importance of urban American folklore in the twenty-first century beyond the smatterings of rural and immigrant folk arts celebrated by public folklorists working in the city. In this case study, I show through a Baltimore
example how local urban tradition is created and how it plays a pivotal role in creating a sense of belonging in a transient, globalizing world. A secondary issue in the binary of folklore in urban America and urban American folklore is the propriety of acknowledging and studying invented traditions (Hobsbawm & Ranger 1983). Many of the important local forms that could be considered “urban American folklore” also ring of Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger’s “invention of tradition” (Hobsbawm & Ranger 1983, introduction). Some folklorists would denigrate these forms as inauthentic (Dorson 1976), while others in the second half of the twentieth century argued for a constant reinvention of tradition as part of the folkloric process (Dundes 1985, Kirshenblatt-Gimblett 1998, Bendix 1997). My analysis will embrace both folklore and the invention of tradition as being essentially modern phenomena (Bronner 1986, Hobsbawm & Ranger 1983), and therefore, appropriate subjects in the analysis of “modern traditions,” despite the possibly paradoxical sound of the term.

A close examination of the role of local tradition and its proponents leads to surprising discoveries that align modern urban American folklore with the past search for a volksgeist, the soul of the people that would capture the values found in the folklore and redeem a people who had lost touch with their roots and their land. This was difficult in the United States, as America lacked an ancient history, singular racial stock, consistent geography, and a designated peasant class. In its place were a diverse, mobile people on an expanding
continent who regularly crossed cultural boundaries. The European model would need to be tinkered to meet the needs of the American experience. Folklorists did just that, although never adequately for the American urban experience. The phenomenon and pursuit of an urban American folklore (as distinguished from a folklore in urban America) is best understood as a combination of the early search for a national soul among folk materials combined with a commercial and mass media proclivity that has variously been called fakelore, folklure, folklorismus, invented tradition, and the folloresque. America’s urban centers are the country’s commercial hubs, and thus, it should not be surprising that urban American folklore takes on an especially commercial tinge. In a distinctively American turn, local tradition roots a young, transient people, and, in the best American tradition, can be voluntarily chosen, performed, or cast aside at will by newcomers and lifelong residents alike. In the United States, there is not so much a true Baltimorean, Bostonian, or New Yorker as there are accepted local traditions that can be tapped strategically, expediently, and voluntarily. This is the urban American folklore in the modern commercial, media-saturated American city.

An important folkloristic debate in the twentieth century was whether folklore should be used to encourage unity or to promote diversity. Although scholars like Richard Dorson in leadership positions within academe saw folklore as a potentially unifying force, later critics preferred to focus on how marginalized groups used tradition to resist the dominant American culture. In
the city, this ideological divide proved important because it colored what folklore forms could legitimately be pursued. Since the American Folklife Preservation Act of 1976, public folklorists, for example, have worked frequently in the city. Their particular goals and biases encouraged them to pursue ethnic, immigrant, and rural folklore in the city, with the goal of celebrating and promoting diversity.70

The site of my case study, Baltimore, had a city folklorist—Elaine Eff—who was interested in folklore distinctive to Baltimore. Much of Eff’s research, particularly her work on painted screens in Baltimore, endeavored to build a positive public image for Baltimore’s white, working-class neighborhoods (See Eff 2013). Academic folklorists, on the other hand, have primarily ignored the urban, but those who have ventured there have preferred to focus on minority groups and to use their research to empower the marginalized. Although their intentions are noble, through this lens, it is impossible to elaborate on the idea of an urban American folklore as Dorson would conceive it—folklore rising directly from the American metropolitan experience. What is left is a folklore in urban America.

Although the search for an urban American folklore may sound, on the surface, like a search for a unifying force that assimilates all urban residents, upon deeper inspection, this approach aids the multiculturalist project by showing how diverse communities adopt, reject, or modify constructed local tradition. In this chapter, I closely analyze the construction of a local tradition, residents’ strategic adoption, rejection, or modification of that local tradition, and the rhetoric surrounding the local tradition. My purpose is to exhibit how a
citywide tradition can be adopted, modified, or rejected by various metropolitan residents in an attempt to claim local roots in a transient, global America. By considering all communities in relation to a single citywide tradition, I demonstrate the important role urban folklore plays in orienting Americans to the local in the modern world.

A foundation for this inquiry is the seminal essay on the persistent echoes of romantic nationalism by Roger D. Abrahams in which he noted the “land-language-lore complex” (Abrahams 1993, 30). Although his argument was in reference to the history of the invention of a folk tradition in European nations, his thesis sheds light on the invention of tradition in urban America. In this overtly political system, Abrahams argued, a local folk tradition is constructed “to assert that there is something natural about the human community and its attachment to particular bodies of land” (1993, 5). The peasants, renamed “the folk,” became the embodiment and wisdom of the local population. Paradoxically, this construction of the folk and the overtures towards preservation assisted in the industrialization of the land and the social stratification of its people because citizens can always imagine the return to this rural, halcyon past while living their modern, industrialized lives (1993, 10). Folklorists, Abrahams argued, are in the best position to see this process at work and “comment on the production of the invented traditions and imagined communities by which national, regional, and local identities are formed and the landscape is sacralized, transformed into a homeland” (1993, 22). In Baltimore, the Hon Man, HonFest organizers, business
owners and other residents invoked the dialect Baltimorese, represented by the regionalism “hon,” in an attempt to tie people to place. The peasants, the folk, or in the case of Baltimore, the white, blue-collar residents, came to represent an authentic rootedness to a place for which others yearn. Through the invention and perpetuation of the “hon” tradition, residents constructed a local tradition that communities could tap to claim a natural connection to the city. Because some communities were left out, the implications of the construction of this tradition led to a rhetorical battle over its legitimacy as authentic and representative of a general Baltimore identity.

**Baltimore, the Stigmatized Vernacular, and the Identification of “Hon” as a Local Tradition**

Coined by folklorist Diane Goldstein and explored through a series of American Folklore Society panels ever since, the stigmatized vernacular refers to “those situations where not only are individuals stigmatized, but so are the vernaculars associated with them” (Goldstein 2012, 114). Influenced by Erving Goffman’s work on stigma (1963), Goldstein and her compatriots sought to understand “the cultural politics of stigma, that is, not only what is stigmatized by different groups, but also which resources people employ to manage the discrimination, prejudice, or oppression that can result from stigma” (Goldstein 2012, 115).

Although Goffman and his successors conception of stigma was primarily negative, twenty-first century critics do not perceive vernacular stigma as essentially positive or negative. They neutrally concentrate on the “vernacular
experience of the stigmatized” and the “analysis of the performance of stigma, the process of stigmatization, and the political representation of stigmatized populations” (Goldstein 2012, 116). For example, the conceptualization of the “stigmatized” vernacular dialectically leaves open the possibility of the “venerated vernacular,” or what I will prefer to call the “esteemed vernacular” (Goldstein 2012, 117).

The “vernacular” has become an important reconceptualization of how the local is approached in folklore. As in linguistics, in folkloristics the vernacular refers to claims of indigeneity. The rhetorical switch from primitive or low culture to vernacular culture by scholars such as Henry Glassie and Dell Hymes was meant to drop the negative connotations associated with the former. The vernacular represents the idea of local culture more than primitive or low culture, which suggests a level of culture. Nonetheless, the vernacular implies the colloquial or non-academic in its usage, as in “vernacular architecture.” The “vernacular” derives from the Latin “verna” meaning a slave raised in a Roman household—that is, the unofficial (non-Roman) living in the official (Roman) realm. As folklorist Robert Glenn Howard explains, “the vernacular is powerful because it can introduce something other than the institutional into an institutional realm” (Howard 2008, 205). The vernacular originated in language usage, which assisted sociolinguists like Dell Hymes interested in the ethnography of communication (for examples, see Hymes 1968, 1975). For Henry Glassie, in architecture the vernacular suggested a relationship to the
landscape, to the regional, and to “values alien to the academy” (Glassie 2000, 20; for example, see Glassie 2000). It has been challenged, however, by critics who argue “vernacular” obfuscates processes of tradition that “folk” provides and also avoids matters of class, race, and ethnicity, although these are implied in the relation of the vernacular to what is “standard.”

Goldstein and compatriots purposefully reproblematized the “vernacular” concept by adding the “stigmatized” modifier, hoping to reevaluate the concepts that are central to folklore studies. In my conception of the “esteemed vernacular,” it is the culture of the discreditable that becomes creditable, that is, those with some vernacular association who yearn for vernacular establishment. Goldstein argues that folklorists, as “the field most engaged with the positive values of the vernacular” are “in a good position to rethink the relationship between stigma and vernacularity” (2012, 118).

Other researchers of stigmatization, Amy Shuman and Carol Bohmer, point out that the history of folkloristics has always been a discourse between stigma and esteem. The folk were a stigmatized group seen as backwards and primitive, but their culture was considered to be “worth remembering and preserving” (Shuman & Bohmer 2012, 220). I hypothesize that a closer examination of the shift from an inconspicuous to a stigmatized to an esteemed vernacular will reveal issues underlying the folkloristic discipline and issues at the heart of culture and heritage in modern America. Shuman and Bohmer affirm what Stephen Stern called the “debasement of a once cherished folk” in the
1980s as endemic of a folkloristic dilemma. Shuman and Bohmer argue that “cherishing the folk” or esteeming their vernacular only “perpetuates stigma” (Shuman & Bohmer 2012, 221). I would add that it also does not guarantee the “folk” in question anything. Tangible elements of culture can be esteemed or “cherished” without any necessity of preserving the entire cultural ecosystem necessary to conserve that culture. In this paradox, I will demonstrate the importance of what I will call vernacular stages. In a homogenous, static community, the inconspicuous vernacular is overlooked. In the face of mobility and social contact, certain forms take on a vernacular stigma. What I will focus on in the remaining chapters is the third stage, when the stigmatized vernacular become associated less with social class and more with authentic local heritage, thus replacing the former stigma with a newfound esteem.

**Baltimorese and Vernacular Stages**

In a postindustrial world, I see vernacular culture transitioning through stages. Through these vernacular stages, I will attempt to demonstrate how largely unnoticed local culture transforms first to identify a socioeconomic class and the “stigmatized vernacular” and then goes on to become enshrined as part of the “esteemed vernacular.” This esteem, however, remains contested. As vernacular culture transitions from the stigmatized vernacular to the esteemed vernacular, in linguistic terms it becomes “enregistered,” not necessarily losing its relationship to the working-class, but becoming an identity marker, not of social class, but rather of authenticity, locality, place, and roots.
In my attempt to interpret the role of vernacular culture in Baltimore, I am influenced by sociolinguists who have done similar work with place and language. Linguistic research, particularly sociolinguistic research, has been influential in folkloristics for a few hundred years. To this, I am attempting to add Barbara Johnstone’s work on dialect and place, which combines Asif Agha’s concept of “enregisterment” with Michael Silverstein’s “orders of indexicality” (Agha 2003, Silverstein 2003, Johnstone et al. 2006, Johnstone 2009).

Sociolinguistic anthropologist Asif Agha coined the term “enregisterment” as “processes through which a linguistic repertoire becomes differentiable within a language as a socially recognized register of forms” (Agha 2003, 231). Agha was particularly interested in the Received Pronunciation (i.e., BBC English or the Queen’s English). What was once merely a Southeast England regional dialect became nationalized as the standard, proper, and correct form of British English, associated with wealth, aristocracy, and education. Agha’s idea of enregisterment can be readily applied to local vernacular culture. In other words more comfortable for non-linguists, Agha was examining how dialects transition from an inconspicuous vernacular to a stigmatized vernacular.

Michael Silverstein then contributed to the enregisterment dialogue by tying Charles Pierce’s idea of “index” to linguistic forms that hold “social meaning” (Silverstein 2003). Silverstein worked through three orders of indexicality that can be applied directly in an attempt to understand the centrality of “hon” in late twentieth and early twenty-first century Baltimore. Silverstein’s
first level of indexical meaning is “n-th-order indexical.” This is the point at which scholars may tie speech patterns to particular demographics or regions. While a linguist, a folklorist, or a demographer may partition the United States into sections based on this data, the forms that drive these partitions are not yet hearable to local speakers. Even if these speech patterns correlate highly with white, working-class men and women from blue-collar neighborhoods in Baltimore, this information at this order of indexicality is important only to the scholar. Removing the jargon, I will refer to this stage as the “inconspicuous vernacular.”

At Silverstein’s second order of indexicality, “n+1-th-order indexical,” native speech patterns become noticeable to local speakers. It is at this point that regional speech can be “enregistered,” that is, particular forms of vocabulary, grammar, and pronunciation become imbued with social meaning or become linked with social value. Those who reflexively understand the regional dialect and the standard manner of speech can use this skill to their benefit by smoothly switching between speech patterns based on environment. Because at this stage the local vernacular is associated with social class, education, and manners, a socially mobile local like a secretary can switch between the neutral speech pattern, avoiding the stigma of Baltimorese while in the office, and local speech while at home or in the neighborhood, avoiding the stigma of “selling out” while among her own community. Others, particularly working-class men, may recognize various speech patterns but eschew the learned speech patterns
and take pride in only speaking the local vernacular. I will refer to this vernacular stage as Goldstein’s “stigmatized vernacular.”

It is the third-order indexicality that will illuminate the importance of “hon” in Baltimore in the late twentieth and early twenty-first century, and it is only here that phenomena like Café Hon, Hon Man, HonFest, Hongate, and the Hon trademark controversy become possible. At this stage, highly noticeable local dialects become less associated with social class and more associated with an authentic sense of locality and place. Looking generally at Pittsburhese, particularly pronunciation and vocabulary, Johnstone describes third-order indexicality in Pittsburgh as when “people noticing the existence of second-order stylistic variation in Pittsburhers’ speech link the regional variant they are most likely to hear with Pittsburgh identity, drawing on the increasingly widely circulating idea that places and dialects are essentially linked (every place has a dialect). These people, who include Pittsburhers and non-Pittsburhers, use regional forms drawn from highly codified lists to perform local identity, often in ironic, semiserious ways” (Johnstone et al. 2006, 82-3). Whether from Pittsburgh or not, in this third stage, people can “perform local identity” in a way that both shows a yearning for an authentic sense of rootedness and shows an inclination for situating that authentic sense of rootedness in working-class, vernacular forms. I will refer to this vernacular stage as the “esteemed vernacular.” The hypothesis that the “esteemed vernacular” is a driving force behind modern
urban American tradition will be at the heart of the remaining chapters of this dissertation.

In my project, I fuse Agha’s “enregisterment,” Silverstein’s “orders of indexicality,” and Johnstone’s work on Pittburghese with folklorists who have been pursuing the sociopolitical motivations behind the creation of folklore and its use in creating a modern urban American folklore that connects people to place in a mobile, transient, globalizing America. I examine the vernacular (as the word is used by folklorists) and how the esteemed vernacular (i.e., “third-order indexicality”) has been used to create a sense of place, community, history, and nostalgia in a mobile, swiftly changing, postindustrial environment.

**The Baltimorese “Hon” as Esteemed Vernacular in Baltimore Local Identity**

In my case study, I will focus specifically on “hon” as emblematic of the esteemed vernacular in Baltimore. The Baltimore dialect, the term of endearment “hon,” and later, the proper noun “Hon” have been used to invent a distinctive Baltimorean tradition based on nostalgia for a close-knit community heritage that seems to be slipping away. Beginning in the 1990s, the word “hon,” rather than pointing to a particular type of working-class woman, invoked a place-based notion of authenticity and community for which Baltimore was (supposedly) once renowned, but appears to be receding behind urban barriers.

One of the oldest American cities, Baltimore has undergone vast changes since its founding in 1620. My particular interest lies in the culture of twentieth and twenty-first century Baltimore when the city became associated with a
“gritty” city in decline. Immigration and settlement patterns changed the city from the late nineteenth century through the mid-twentieth century, and, beginning in the 1990s and continuing through the present, residents have been complicit in the invention, delineation, and representation of a distinct Baltimore culture. Although there are many factors one could consider in an attempt to discern the representation of Baltimore culture, the Baltimore dialect known as Baltimorese (alternatively, Bawlamorese, Bawlmerese, or Balmerese), and in particular the term of endearment “hon,” brings out the entanglement of culture and politics. In this chapter, I examine how a common, widespread piece of vocabulary came to identify a socioeconomic class and the “stigmatized vernacular.” While maintaining some of these features, Baltimorese, and particularly “hon,” became “esteemed vernacular,” not necessarily losing its relationship to the working class, but becoming an identity marker, not of social class, but rather of authenticity, localness, place, and Baltimore roots.

Before forming their own notions about regional speech patterns, native speakers must first be able to “hear” their own dialect. Like a fish attempting to see the water, this is a near impossible task until the proper stimulus induces recognition. In twentieth-century Baltimore, there were two particular time periods that led to Baltimoreans hearing and noticing their own local culture. Following World War II, Appalachians flooded into Baltimore looking for jobs in the factories and on the docks. Then, as industry in Baltimore collapsed in the 1970s and 1980s, Baltimore experienced a second shift. Many white, working-
class Baltimoreans left Baltimore looking for work (many going only as far as the county line). Others stayed only to see the old neighborhood infused with African Americans, yuppies, “Back to the City” folks, and Washingtonians looking for cheaper housing (often parodied in John Waters films).

This shift in living patterns had two notable outcomes. First, it made older Baltimoreans recognize what was and had been a distinctive Baltimorean culture, in a new location far away or only in response to strange, new neighbors. Second, it made Baltimoreans yearn for the tight-knit, homogenous community of the past they saw passing before their eyes. It is in this context that the word “hon” takes on significance. Johnstone argues that geographic mobility causes dialect leveling but also increases popular attention to regional variation (Johnstone et al. 2006, 79). So while geographic isolation (or in Baltimore’s case, geographic stability) is the catalyst for the creation of regional speech patterns, it is the breakdown of geographic stability—that is geographic mobility—that allows native speakers to notice their speech patterns. It is only suiting, therefore, that by the time native speakers come to be able to speak about their speech patterns, a tragic nostalgia associated with a bygone era of community, togetherness, and close-knit ties took form. While the community reaches its low point in cohesion, it simultaneously hits its highpoint in psychological importance.

The Baltimore Dialect—Baltimorese, Hon, and the Inconspicuous Vernacular

During this vernacular stage, locals are not reflective about their local traditions. In this case in Baltimore, I am referring specifically to the local speech
tradition of Baltimores. This is not due to their ignorance, but rather due to the lack of proper stimuli to expose a difference between language types. Although specialists can make note of differences in vocabulary, grammar, and syntax, prior to widespread acknowledgement of distinctive speech patterns, the speech community remains as the inconspicuous vernacular.

It is important to note that, progressing from inconspicuous vernacular to the stigmatized vernacular and on to the esteemed vernacular, it appears that the subsequent stage never fully replaces the former, and the next stage is always on the cusp of its predecessor. In other words, although Baltimore has for decades now been in the esteemed vernacular stage in regards to its reflexivity, self-consciousness, and commodification of speech, using it as a marker of local identity, this esteemed vernacular appears to be reserved for particular words and pronunciations (e.g., hon, Bawlmer, downy o-shun, dem O’s), while ignoring others.

According to *The Atlas of North American English*, the Baltimore dialect is in the Mid-Atlantic or Atlantic Midland speech family and shares similarities with the Philadelphia dialect and the Wilmington dialect (Labov, Ash, & Boberg 2006, 236-9). According to linguist Hans Kurath’s classifications, the Maryland section of the Atlantic Midland shares linguistic traits with Central Pennsylvania, the Delaware Valley, and the Virginia Piedmont (Kurath 1949). What is referred to as the Baltimore dialect is in truth the white Baltimore dialect. African-American Baltimoreans have a distinct dialect of their own, more strongly inflected with
southern speech patterns. While the Baltimore dialect was born in South, East, and Southeast Baltimore, migration out of the city has diffused it to the surrounding counties: Baltimore County, Howard County, Harford County, Carroll County, and Anne Arundel County. It can also be found with some regularity west to Frederick, north to Elkton, east to Ocean City and south to Calvert County, although all three of these areas have their own distinct native dialect. The Philadelphia dialect is the closest relative to the Baltimore dialect, and together with Delaware and South Jersey, they make up the Atlantic Midland dialect. The two cities are distinctive for being the only two major ports on the Eastern Seaboard to not develop non-rhotic speech among English speakers.

Baltimore speech is characterized by sociolinguists as “a split short-\(a\) system and no vocalization of \(/r/\)” (Labov, Ash, and Boberg 2006, 236). It shares these characteristics with Philadelphia, Reading, Atlantic City, and Wilmington. Notably, despite local beliefs about Baltimoreanese, linguists claim Baltimore speech is nearly identical to Philadelphia speech. (This will be a consistent theme while studying Baltimore’s “distinctive” local traditions. Cynics will point out that the Baltimore dialect, the word “hon,” and the Hon image—and even specific parts of the Hon image like the beehive hairdo and the pink flamingo—are not distinctive to Baltimore.) In The Atlas of North American English, William Labov, Sharon Ash, and Charles Boberg see the two dialects similar to such a degree that they conclude “the data generated by the Telsur interviews do not show any substantial differences between Philadelphia and the neighboring cities of
Wilmington and Baltimore” except for Philadelphia’s unique “near merger of /e/ and /A/ before intervocalic /r/, and raising of /ey/ in non-final position” (Labov, Ash, and Boberg 2006, 238).

Appalachian speech, Tidewater speech, and the Delaware Valley have influenced Baltimore speech, as well as a constant influx of immigrant labor, imbuing it with a distinctive vocabulary and pronunciation. Although the first signs that Baltimore was advancing to the stigmatize vernacular stage came in 1960 with John Goodspeed’s *A Fairly Compleat Lexicon of Baltimoresese*, the academic idea that the Mid-Atlantic had distinctive regional speech patterns dates to at least 1889, the year the American Dialect Society was formed.

All of these characteristics speak to a specific geographic area, although all go beyond Baltimore City proper. The raising of the /oh/, for example, can be found as far north as Philadelphia and, due to early American migration patterns, even places in the Midwest. The clearest of the esteemed vernacular speech patterns and most closely associated with Baltimore, “hon” flows from the mouths of diner waitresses across Pennsylvania and New Jersey.

Surveying the Baltimore vernacular requires understanding the historical, economic, and social conditions that led to its emergence. Although an Eastern Seaboard port city rife with international trade, Baltimore has always been a city of tight-knit, ethnic, working-class neighborhoods. A longshoreman in South Baltimore, for example, had little need to leave his neighborhood. The Baltimore dialect formed through a unique combination of Appalachian, Tidewater, and
Delaware speech patterns, ethnic immigrant languages, and neighborhood isolation. As demonstrated by *A Fairly Compleat Lexicon of Baltimorese*, the transitional time period between the inconspicuous vernacular and the stigmatized vernacular appears to be the 1960s. Although linguists could correlate dialect with social class and location to this point, it was not yet generally used by the population for presenting or ascertaining identity. Notably, in addition to the beginning of the 1960s being the time period for *A Fairly Compleat Lexicon of Baltimorese*, it is also the period most identified with the “Hon,” the bouffant, cat-eyed, leopard spandex-sporting matron of Baltimore. Born in the neighborhood, raised in the neighborhood, schooled in the neighborhood, and churched in the neighborhood, Baltimoreans had little contact with those who spoke differently. And, lastly, the decade of the 1960s was the last halcyon moment before Baltimore faced rapid demographic change. Therefore, a process of a tight in-group formation both spawned a distinct dialect and lexicon, but also made it invisible to the population living it. The choice to throw off the Baltimore dialect would require knowledge of alternative ways of speaking, not something easy to come by in Baltimore in the first-half of the twentieth century. Although Baltimorese was demographically working class, it was not yet stigmatized as “blue collar.”

**The Recognition of the Stigmatized Vernacular and its Inversion to the Esteemed Vernacular**

In the early twenty-first century, Baltimorese is considered its own distinct dialect by natives and outsiders alike, with particular attention paid to just a few
of the regional words and pronunciations. But prior to becoming this way, the dialect had to first become noticeable, and therefore, useful. As Baltimores saw the stigmatized vernacular, the Baltimore dialect became useful as a tool of deduction (determining something about someone else) and exhibition (telling someone else something about yourself).

Linguists refer to “gritty city” dialects like Brooklynese, Pittsburghese, and Baltimoreses as “imagined” dialects, referencing Benedict Anderson’s (1991) use of the term. Baltimoreses is not a distinct language from any other form of regional English, and pronunciation, vocabulary, and grammar can vary greatly even within the group. Rather, there is a general pattern of speech that is discernable in the Baltimore region only when contrasted with other ways of speaking. Once contrasting speech groups are juxtaposed, social value can be assigned to one manner of speaking over the other.

In Baltimore, this moment came gradually over the course of the second half of the twentieth century. Geographic mobility sent some Baltimoresans out, especially those in the languishing, working-class trades of the city. It sent others in, particularly African Americans from other neighborhoods and, later, young, white urban professionals eager to return to the city. Additionally, social mobility and improved access to transportation sent native Baltimoresans across town, to interact outside of their once insular neighborhood confines. Baltimoreses was suddenly hearable by the native population. The stigmatized vernacular materialized through publications such as A Fairly Compleat Lexicon
of Baltimoresese (Goodspeed 1960), Basic Baltimoresese (Beard & Beard 1979), Basic Baltimoresese II (Beard & Ricigliano 1990), Hey Hon: How to Talk Like a Real Bawlamoron (Smith 1993), and Basic Baltimoresese III (Beard & Ricigliano 1999).

While many of the “-ese” dialects are associated with the working class, Baltimore’s strong, long-standing working-class heritage seems to have imbued the dialect even more strongly with working-class associations. Observing this same phenomenon in Pittsburgh, Barbara Johnstone comments, “In Pittsburgh, the same features that are in some situations, by some people, associated with uneducated, sloppy, or working-class speech can, in other situations and sometimes by other people, be associated with the city’s identity, with local pride and authenticity” and “over time, the indexical linkages between linguistic forms and social meanings can evolve so that one ideological scheme used to link forms and meanings can be replaced by another” (Johnstone et al. 2009, 160).

When ideology was first attached itself to Baltimore dialect, the connotation was certainly working class. For example, HonFest participants and “Welcome to Baltimore, Hon” podcast informants recount their parents purposely eschewing the Baltimore manner of speech as a necessary vessel for attainting middle class respectability. On the other hand, Baltimore, as a proud working-class city, can also take pride in a distinct working-class dialect. Baltimoreans can, have, and still do proudly maintain, or at least perform in the case of HonFest, Baltimoresese speech patterns as a sign of their loyal class allegiance.
When speech is a stigmatized vernacular, dialects can serve both as a signal of group solidarity and as a burdensome social stigma. It is particularly relevant here to note that what folklorists refer to as the “stigmatized vernacular” in the second phase will go on to be associated with “local authenticity” and boosterism in the third phase. As a good example of the period between the stigmatized and esteemed vernacular, take for example the coiner of the term “Baltimorese,” *Evening Sun* columnist John Goodspeed. Goodspeed had a fascination with Baltimore culture, if not a deep respect. Summarizing his career in a September 12, 2006 obituary, Jacques Kelly wrote, “From 1950 until he stepped down in 1967, Mr. Goodspeed chronicled the city, its habits and people in ‘Mr. Peep’s Diary,’ a weekday column that appeared under a sketch of the Baltimore skyline.” Goodspeed defined “Baltimorese” as “the spoken dialect of dyed-in-the-row-house, usually native, Baltimoreans and combines some of the best tonal qualities of Southern cracker, New York Brooklynese and Pennsylvania Dutch Singsong—with elements of London Cockney usage and assorted other influences including the Irish” (Goodspeed 1960). This quote displays elements of both the stigmatized vernacular and the esteemed vernacular. Goodspeed combined the English idiom “dyed-in-the-wool” with the image of the Baltimore rowhouse, the iconic nineteenth-century style townhouse found throughout working-class Baltimore, to create the portmanteau “dyed-in-the-row house.” Adjacent, he combined his idiomatic quip about working-class authenticity with
“usually native,” associating the working-class speakers of Baltimorese with the residents most linked to the place of Baltimore.

The 1960 pamphlet, *The Fairly Compleat Lexicon of Baltimorese*, made from entries in the Mr. Peep column of the *Evening Sun*, included a cartoon and a far-fetched, colorful anecdote. Barbara Johnstone, looking at newspaper articles about Pittsbourghese published in the same era, noted a similar trend: “Of the newspaper articles about local speech that began appearing regularly during the 1950s and 1960s, a large majority were feature articles, many appearing in the *Pittsburgh Press*’s Sunday Magazine section, segregated from the “real” news and accompanied by cartoon illustrations” (Johnstone et al. 2006, 95). The cartoon in *The Fairly Compleat Lexicon*, which looks like it would be right at home in the Sunday funnies, illustrates a Baltimorese legend told by Goodspeed:

The life of a Baltimore Army Lieutenant may have been saved by Baltimorese during the Battle of the Bulge in World War II. Military Police suspected him of being a German spy in American uniform (because such spies were plentiful in the sector), but an M.P. from Baltimore heard the lieutenant pronounce his hometown as “Balamer” and passed him as genuine. Only a native can naturally say it that way. (Goodspeed 1960).

In Pittsburgh, Johnstone argued “the inclusion of testimony by a dialectologist marks the beginning of a shift away from treating locally hearable speech forms exclusively as somewhat objectionable curiosities and toward enregistering and legitimizing” the speech patterns of the area as a “‘dialect’ linked explicitly, via its name, with place” (Johnstone et al. 2006, 95). A native of Texas and a writer for the *Evening Sun*, Goodspeed was one of the first to bring the Baltimore dialect
into the stigmatized vernacular phase. Although he titled his pamphlet a “lexicon” (i.e., the vocabulary of a group), of the 172 terms Goodspeed “defines,” not one of them is genuine vocabulary; Goodspeed focuses only on pronunciation. He was in a unique position to be able to hear the Baltimore dialect (as an outsider), to witness Baltimorese on a daily basis as a Baltimorean, and to be paid to consider it as a full-time, Evening Sun reporter. Goodspeed was in the language, but not of the language. While not disrespectful, Goodspeed clearly saw the dialect as an oddity, attached to the local working class who were natives of Baltimore, if not yet its true representatives. In retrospect, Carl Schoettler of the Baltimore Sun finds “Mr. Peep’s columns do read now like a prolonged elegy for a lost Baltimore.”74 A Fairly Compleat Lexicon of Baltimorese and the associated Mr. Peep columns (1951-1967) may be the “esteemed vernacular” in its most nascent form. Goodspeed’s assurances that his lexicon includes “many words submitted by Evening Sun readers” confirms Baltimorese was exiting the inconspicuous vernacular phase and perhaps entering the esteemed vernacular phase.

Goodspeed defined some Baltimorese classics including “arnjoos” (orange juice), “Balamer” (Baltimore), “dayon” (down), and “wooder” (water). Ironically, the one word he chose to exclude from his lexicon is the most iconic word associated with the Baltimore lexicon in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. “By the way, one word I do not think is Baltimore at all is ‘hon,’ h-o-n,” Goodspeed told Carl Schoettler in 2000. He explained, “Because I’ve heard
‘hon’ in Texas, in New York, Chicago a lot and in New Orleans. That’s four places other than Baltimore. It’s almost always spoken by women, usually working class, but not always, sometimes they’re educated women, too. But I don’t think it should be Baltimorean.”

**Hon as Baltimorean**

According to “You Don’t Say” columnist John E. McIntyre, the first instance of “hon” is a 1906 entry in *Dialect Notes*, a publication of the American Dialect Society. Under “A List of Words from Northwest Arkansas” reads “hon’ (hwn), n. Sweetheart, darling, baby. “Going to school, hon?” Very common in addressing children of a tender age.” Henry Louis Mencken, prominent Baltimorean and a student of American language, hardly mentions “hon” in his *American Language*. “Hon” receives one short reference as an example of “what philologists call the habit of clipping or back-formation—a sort of instinctive search, etymologically unsound, for short roots in long words” (Mencken 1921, 183-184).

Started by Frederick Cassidy in 1960, the massive *Dictionary of American Regional English* lists distinctly Baltimorean terms. The terms are “moving night” (similar to mischief night elsewhere) and multiple forms of arabbing (hucksters who sell fruits and vegetables from a horse-drawn cart). “Hon” is not among them. In fact, “hon” is not found anywhere in the dictionary’s six volumes. A more recent massive compendium, Green’s Dictionary of Slang, directs readers from “hon” to “honey.” Meaning “C” is “anyone or anything good of its kind,” and
Green lists “also hon” as a variant and claims it is “originally US.” “Hon” also appears in Wentworth and Flexner’s *Dictionary of American Slang* (1967) as a “term of endearment” (265) but not in reference to Baltimore. The *Routledge Dictionary of American Slang and Unconventional English* (2009), edited by Tom Dalzell, however, states that “hon” is a term of endearment and is “fiercely claimed by Baltimore, Maryland, as a Baltimore-coinage.” Dalzell gives 1906 as the first use but does not source it. Dalzell is likely referring to the 1906 issue of *Dialect Notes*, a publication of the American Dialect Society, noted by *Baltimore Sun* copyeditor John E. McIntyre in his November 7, 2011 *You Don’t Say* blog post “Hon hon-hum.” That entry, however, identifies “hon” as prevalent in northwest Arkansas.

The closest related term in *The Dictionary of American Regional English* is the noun “honey”: “used as a term of address to a male friend.” The dictionary quotes the Federal Writers Project’s 1938 *Delaware: A Guide to the First State* about a custom found in southern Delaware. There, “a young male visitor in certain parts of the country may be flabbergasted to hear himself addressed by an older man as ‘Honey.’” The dictionary also quotes John Fetterman’s 1967 *Stinking Creek: The Portrait of a Small Mountain Community in Appalachia*. In the southern Appalachians,

“Honey” is a word of friendship, like western cowboy’s “podner” or the soldier’s “buddy.” Big, powerful men, men who haul down logs and can fell a mule with a fist, use the word…it is a term whose origin nobody seems to know. As visit after visit goes by, the word is used more and more. “Come to the hoss trade if you care to, hon.” (Fetterman 1967, 90).
As linguists identify Appalachia and the Delaware Valley as two of the contributors to the Baltimore dialect (Kurath 1949, Britton and Faust 2012), this combination may explain the origin of the word “hon” in Baltimore. Those who say “hon” or are considered “Hons” may also have saltier connotations connected to other uses of the word “honey” as connected to slang for semen and vagina secretions (see Green 2011). In this chapter, one resident will write to the *Evening Sun* to complain about the sultry “slut” Hon adorning the “Welcome to Baltimore, HON” furniture billboard. In the following chapter, Hons are frequently characterized as “friendly” and “knowing how to have a good time,” and their spandex, animal print pants and indulgent make up and accessories can play into the stereotype of the cheap, working-class woman.

**“Welcome to Baltimore, Hon” Case Study**

The remainder of this chapter will focus on a case study of “hon” as representative of the esteemed vernacular in late twentieth and early twenty-first century Baltimore. As part of the land-language-lore complex, I will show how a piece of urban American folk speech is used in an attempt to create a local tradition that connects people to place. In the face of a rapidly changing city, “hon” will transition from the stigmatized vernacular associated with the lower class to an esteemed vernacular tied to local roots and city identity. “Hon” will serve both as Baltimore’s most prominent example of the esteemed vernacular and as a rhetorical battleground where issues of race, class, gender, and
belonging clash with conceptions of identity, heritage, and nostalgia over the attempt of civic leaders to construct a citywide local tradition.

**Hon Man, Hongate, and “Welcome to Baltimore, Hon”**

On the Baltimore-Washington Parkway, just south of Baltimore, a city limit sign in the median welcomes motorists to the City of Baltimore. Some American welcome signs are touristic and include information about local amenities. Some include the founding date, current population, and sister cities. Others use visual motifs of local icons for added allure. This Welcome to Baltimore sign, however, is purely informational, blandly and plainly demarcating the crossing of the Baltimore line.

In April 1991, a vandal or a luminary (opinions varied) snuck onto the median and spray-painted “hon” on to the “Welcome to Baltimore” sign. What could have been dismissed as yet more Baltimore graffiti picked up momentum when the *Baltimore Sun* composed a story on the sign. Although anyone traveling north on the Baltimore-Washington Parkway was sure to have seen the sign, it was famed Baltimore columnist Michael Olesker who first deigned the “Welcome to Baltimore, Hon” sign worthy of ink, praising “hon” as embodying the “soul” of Baltimore. In “Onna streets of Bawlamer, ‘hon’ is where heart is at,” Oleskers declared that this “poet with a paintbrush” had “the soul of the city pulsing through his or her veins.” He waxed on later that this particular artist had a “soul as reflective of Baltimore as crabs and beer or never getting over the loss of the Colts.” “‘Hon’ is the verbal emotional center of Baltimore,” Olesker
declared. “Even in a time of great social transition and political upheaval—where many of us are first learning to eat quiche, even though we’re still mispronouncing it—‘hon’ is still the common denominator of the mother tongue, a word that embraces all of us into the same community without asking first of name, rank, and zip code.” He continued to pour it on: “WELCOME TO BALTIMORE, HON is the essence of this city. It’s all about friendly unpretentiousness, and not taking ourselves too seriously, and it’s about home.”

Olsker even argued that this vernacular slogan instantly triumphs over the city’s official nicknames and slogans.

“WELCOME TO BALTIMORE, HON” talks to everybody with a heart that beats. It’s an automatic smile, a roadside hug for homeowners and tourists alike. For more than a decade now, the city has fiddled with nicknames and slogans that just didn’t make it: Charm City, Baltimore is Best, The City That Reads. All sound more like wishful thinking than a true reflection of the municipal character. This is a city uneasy putting on airs. Having shrugged off much of its historical municipal inferiority complex, it’s still a little uncomfortable getting dressed up for company. WELCOME TO BALTIMORE, HON says: We don’t think of you as company. We think of you as one of us, for as long as you feel like staying with us.”

Olesker concluded that “‘Hon’ is more our style, because it has no style. It’s not studied, it just sort of slips off the tongue. Is anybody at City Hall listening? If they are, do they understand they’ve just been handed a public relations gift from the gods? Welcome to your new city slogan, hons. Its as Bawlamer as you could get.”

Despite Olesker’s best efforts and aggrandizements, the “Hon” addition did not stand a chance. One of the Maryland State Highway Administration’s earnest
road crews had removed the “Hon” addition before Olesker’s column even made it to the printer." A spokesman for the Maryland State Highway Administration said, “We always remove graffiti as soon as possible. If we leave it up there, it will just encourage more.” Ostensibly lacking a Baltimore soul, or at least the city’s pulse, the director of Baltimore’s Department of Public Works agreed, “We’ve got to protect public property. This is a serious obligation.”

Responding to Olesker, another Sun columnist, Wiley A. Hall, III, an African American, offered the first official rebuttal in the impending “Welcome to Baltimore, Hon” fracas that would envelope Baltimore over the next few years. In the aptly named “Let me tell you about MY city,” Hall recounted his idea of the tradition and heritage of Baltimore—one quite different from Olesker’s. As an African American, he realized this would be a vastly different account than that of Michael Olesker’s and other white Baltimoreans—the central point of his piece. Hall remembered bid whist and double-deck pinochle, Mother Bethel African Methodist Episcopal church, summer snowballs for sale on the corner, the Left Bank jazz club, Frederick Douglass High School, Morgan State University, the Baltimore Afro-American and Pennsylvania Avenue. “There is a lot more to Baltimore’s soul than has been captured in the collected movies of John Waters and Barry Levinson,” Wiley declared. Seen from this perspective, “hon” is not the soul of the city. At best, it is exclusionary; at worst, subtle nostalgia for a more homogenous city. What Baltimore needs, Wiley argued, is “a slogan that captures the totality of the city—one that calls to mind the crab cakes and the
lake trout. One that embraces the warmth of those waitresses who greet their customers as ‘hon’ and the pain of those who weren’t allowed to eat there; the nostalgia for the old Baltimore and the hope that the new one will be ever better. ”

In the years immediately following the hon spray-paint incident and the subsequent debate, a few additional, important “hon” events occurred. In 1992, Café Hon opened its doors. In later years and later chapters, Café Hon and its own Denise Whiting will be at the center of the “hon” drama. But at the time, it was only noted as a quaint restaurant with a cute name. One reviewer wrote that the “small restaurant probably wouldn’t be getting so much publicity if it weren’t for its wonderful name.” The reviewer noted that Café Hon is a “homey little business” and that neighborhood residents stop by to chat with the owner. After a lukewarm review, the reviewer concluded “what Café Hon sets out to do, which is nothing very ambitious, it does pretty well,” noting that the owner should keep the floor better swept.

In 1993, Ernest Smith published Hey Hon!: How to Talk Like a Real Bawlamaron. A native of North Baltimore’s Waverly neighborhood, Smith’s opening line assures the reader “I come from blue collar Baltimore.” Smith goes on to explain that he is the son of a Pigtown machinist and shipfitter and the grandson of a Sparrows Point car shop rivet driver. Coming from this environment, Smith explains, he has been speaking Baltimorese since birth. Noting that Baltimorese seems to be fading away under the pressures of
television, assimilation, and the flight to the suburbs, Smith compiled his
Baltimorean-to-English dictionary in an attempt to “capture some of the sounds
and spirit of the tribe of Bawlmer” (Smith 1993, 1). Fearing for his own children’s
heritage and language skills, Smith notes that he relaxed “once they started to
call their mother “Hon” (Smith 1993, 1). In his book, Smith defines “hon” as
“Honey, dear, buddy, pal, and more” (Smith 1993, 44). As it will be part of later
debates, it is important to note Smith acknowledged “it is mostly white folks who
speak the Bawlmerese described in this book” (Smith 1993, 1). Smith told one
reviewer, “Bawlmerese is not universally Baltimorean. It’s blue collar, pretty
much Caucasian, with various ethnic qualities. It’s Highlandtown, it’s parts of
South Baltimore, Pigtown, Overlea, Rosedale, Hampden, most of the people who
worked at the Point, the markets, the docks.” These surrounding events show
that the rise of “hon” cannot be attributed to any one man or woman, but was
instead part of a larger city trend.

That said, throughout the 1990s, it was one man, Hon Man, who was the
impetus for most of the “Welcome to Baltimore, Hon” controversy. On April 6,
1993, WBAL-TV featured Hon Man in a minute long news segment. With the
Mission: Impossible theme song playing in the background, WBAL reported on
Hon Man’s “cultural” mission: “He’s a regular guy on an irregular mission: to
preserve a piece of Baltimore fading away. Armed with a stapler, he executes
with surgical precision his culture saving feat. The “Hon Man” cometh.” “I would
love to see this put in the sign permanently,” Hon Man told the station, “I think
its part of Baltimore.” Baltimore’s residents seemed to be split, at least from the sound bites. One woman cornered in the Inner Harbor asked incredulously, “Why do they keep putting that up there? It makes Baltimore look bad.” Another seemed to support exhibiting Baltimore’s personality: “We’re not just another place. We’re a place with a personality. And I think that sort of sets it across pretty well.” A third stopped on the Harbor Promenade was more neutral: “When I see that, I know I’m in Baltimore.” The State Highway Administration was not amused. “It’s a safety issue primarily, most and foremost. His safety and certainly the safety of our motorists,” a spokesman told WBAL. “And, also, it’s a money concern. We’d rather have our maintenance crew out there fixing a pothole.” But Hon Man saw it only as spreading joy: “As I drive past after putting the sign up, I just smile. I smile all the way to work.”

Months later, noticing the placard additions were no longer going up, Evening Sun columnist Dan Rodricks urged the mysterious Hon Man to renew his efforts. On November 29, 1993, Rodricks addressed the “civic sprite” directly, in a piece titled “We all love you, Hon it’s just not the same without you.” “You have many supporters, Hon,” Rodricks wrote. “All of us who believe in “Hon,” and what that little word means to Baltimore, implore you to continue your important work. We don’t want to know your name; we just want to know you are out there, keeping “Hon” alive. Don’t give up.” By the end of the day, the “HON” sign was back up.
For the next four months, Dan Rodricks was Hon Man’s leading proponent, nearly single-handedly keeping the story in the public eye. Rodricks had his first exclusive with “Hon Man” on December 1, 1993. Hon Man explained his recent absence of the sign as a reflection of his psychological state. “I’ve been under a lot of pressure at work the last couple of months,” Hon Man explained. “And I gotta be in a good mood to put that sign up. I gotta be happy. I’m basically a happy fellow. But I’ve been under a lot of pressure lately.”

It was revealed that Hon Man was not the first to modify the sign. When Olesker wrote the first glowing column, it was another vandal who had spray-painted “hon” on the sign. Hon Man was just a fan. Hon Man remembered, “It wasn’t me. It was somebody else. I saw that ‘Hon’ right after it went up and I almost drove off the road laughing so hard.”

A 59-year-old, teetotaling toiletpaper salesman, “Hon Man” enjoyed the joke so much, he decided to keep it going. One slow day at work, he began making his own ‘hon’ sign. “I didn’t think it should be painted on,” Hon Man said. He explained his artistic process. “I took out a rule and a Magic Marker and some paper and I made the letters for ‘Hon.’ And then I Xeroxed them and attached them, then I laminated them…” Hon Man then had a particular aesthetic standard for putting up the sign. “I never put it up at night,” Hon Man explained. “I went once at night and that place on the parkway, well, that’s not the kind of place you want to be at night. So I go during the day. People see me doing it,
some of them honk their horns. I staple the sign on. I center the ‘o’ in ‘Hon’ right below the ‘I’ in Baltimore.”

Hon Man pasted the signs on. The road crews peeled them off. Rinse and repeat. When asked why the crews were so zealous about removing the appendage, a State Highway Administration spokeswoman reaffirmed the official stance: “We have a very strict anti-graffiti policy. We think that his intentions may be sometimes misplaced.” The state has a policy that all graffiti must be removed within twenty-four hours. No matter how cute or folksy, allowing graffiti to stay up would be an implicit state sanctioning of graffiti. Asked if he was at all deterred by the highway crew’s vehemence in ripping down his signs, Hon Man responded, “No problem. I have a whole trunk full of Hons.”

When asked for his motivation early on, Hon Man’s response was innocuous and apolitical.

“Why do I do this? I like the mischief, I guess Look, I’m 59 years old, I sell toilet paper and janitorial supplies for a living, I’ve been married 39 years. I’m a conservative guy. I don’t drink, I don’t smoke. I play the Lotto once in a while. This is a thrill for me. This is my 15 minutes of glory, of fame.”

Later, when asked what “hon” meant to him, Hon Man told the Chicago Tribune,

“It’s fun. Hon makes people feel good. When I started hanging the Hon signs, I lost 90 pounds, pierced my ear and grew a ponytail. It was like letting the child in me out. People like it. They drive by and toot their horns. It puts a smile on your face. I think it’s good for Baltimore. It’s good for our image. It sets us apart. Hon is part of the vocabulary in certain parts of town.”

Evening Sun columnist Dan Rodricks continued to be the leading proponent of Hon Man and the “Welcome to Baltimore, Hon” sign for the next decade. He
began a one-man crusade to make Hon Man’s addendum permanent. Rodricks, who originally reported on Hon Man and the “Welcome to Baltimore Hon” sign at the beginning of December, fired the first salvo in the “Hongate” wars. His “Graffiti-bashing ‘Hon’ police could give lessons to militants” is worth citing at length, as this column (1) will inspire state legislators to hold in ransom one million dollars of Baltimore’s allotted highway funds until the sign is made permanent and (2) will spark passionate retorts from those who do not want “Hon” to represent Baltimore.

I hear in Hon Man’s voice the weary exasperation one might expect from a good-humored jester who has been beaten by the dull-headed dragoons he was trying to entertain. The goons are crushing Hon Man’s civic spirit. The boobocracy appears to be winning.

Every time Hon Man staples one of his laminated “Hon” signs to the “Welcome to Baltimore” greeting on the median strip of the Baltimore-Washington Parkway, some dim foot soldier for the Department of Transportation comes along and removes it. Some days, Hon Man attaches his three-letter word—the Bawlmeresque term of affection—to the wooden welcome sign, and it’s gone within hours. “They’re going full tilt against me,” Hon Man said Friday, his voice betraying fretted nerves and a broken heart.

What’s the big deal? What’s the harm? Why would anyone bother? I called DOT, and the official spokesperson rattled off the “official policy on graffiti.” And that policy calls for the removal of graffiti on any state property within 24 hours. And, as charming as the “Hon” sign might be, leaving it there would be “sanctioning graffiti.”

What horse hockey.

Hon Man doesn’t use spray paint. His sign, while unmistakably homemade, is not ugly. And, more importantly, his attempt to add provincial flavor to an otherwise dull sign—and to sweeten Baltimore’s greeting to visitors—seems to have won much favor
among tourists as well as the thousands of commuters who pass the welcome sign on the way into town each day. Barring the possibility that one zealous contra is conducting a personal campaign against Hon Man, there looms the greater possibility that some high-ranking state official, his forehead swelling with indignation, fired off an edict that Hon Man be stopped. I figure this big shot screamed at some midlevel public works suit, who turned around and screamed at some low-level roads crew boss, and that’s why Hon Man has to keep printing signs.

If that’s the case—and, until I hear otherwise, I think I’ll believe it—that state official, whoever he is, gets February’s Loathsome Sluggard Award. Ok, laughing boy, step forward to claim your prize.99

In February 1994, another “Welcome to Baltimore, HON!” sign appeared, this time along the Jones Falls Expressway. In addition to the greeting, the sign included a woman in a blond beehive hairdo sitting cross-legged in an office chair, holding a notepad. Hon Man was not responsible for this rather more ambitious signage. Instead, it was the brainchild of Steve Rosen, sales manager of Mark Downs Office Furniture in Cockeysville, a town to the north of Baltimore. The double entendre was on HON, both a local term of endearment and a nationally known office furniture company headquartered in Muscatine, Iowa. As Marks Down had been carrying HON furniture for several years at the time of the billboard’s erection, it is safe to assume the billboard is a sly reference to the Baltimore-Washington Parkway sign. The sign aroused its own controversy, this time, not for the addition of “hon,” but for the depiction of a “Hon.” One woman complained, “Who cares about a clever play on
words when it’s accompanied by an offensive image of some stereotypical
secretary-type lady looking a tad too seductive in her Mark Downs chair?
Forgive me if I’m wrong (my eyesight is shot), but that’s what it looks like
to me at 60 mph.” Another protested, “Just when it seems like secretaries
are finally making progress in getting taken seriously, there’s that
stereotype. Secretaries have to be word-processing whizzes who still
make half what male ‘administrative assistants’ make for the same work,
and they still get harassed, even with creeps like [Sen. Bob] Packwood
making the news.”

A couple weeks later, another woman wrote in to
object because “the woman depicted [on the billboard] looks blowsy and
boozy—a stereotype of the friendly, ‘low class’ [expletive deleted] who
might address you as ‘hon.’” While Rodricks quoted her in his column,
because she had been a Baltimorean for less than two years, Rodricks
dismissed her opinion immediately. Furthermore, he pointed out that her
understanding of the connotation of ‘hon’ was itself demeaning. Rodricks
admonished, “Hey, Liz—may I call you that?—you’re still new to
Baltimore; be careful how you refer to users of ‘hon.’”

Rodricks agreed the secretary came off as “ditzy,” and sensing that
gender disputes could hurt his campaign to make the “HON” addition
permanent, he took pains to distance the lowbrow images from the
sanctified “Welcome to Baltimore, Hon,” which at the time was making
serious headway in the local newspaper and radio realm and was gaining
a groundswell of support to be made permanent. In response to critics
who will later complain about such a trivial issue receiving so much
attention, Rodricks claimed that in 15 years of writing his Evening Sun
column, he had never received as many calls about any issue as he had
about the “Welcome to Baltimore, Hon” sign. Most of the callers were
women, he said, and all but two callers had supported making the
“Welcome to Baltimore, Hon” sign on the Baltimore-Washington Parkway
permanent. Additionally, WWLG’s Ken Jackson had administered a listener
survey on his midday “Legends Radio” show, and received only yeses. 101

Continuing to use his “This Just In” column as a platform for
promoting a permanent “HON” addition to the Welcome to Baltimore sign,
Rodricks announced, on February 16, 1994, that plenty of others
continued to want to see the sign made permanent. Rodricks sometimes
posted his office phone number in his “This Just In” column and also
received mail, putting him in frequent contact with the Baltimore
community. Rodricks reported that he had heard from many a
Baltimorean who agreed that the “HON” appendage should be made
permanent: “My mail, oral and written, indicates overwhelming approval
of the idea. Readers think it’s time to give the secretive Hon Man a break
from having to staple the three-letter term of endearment to the wooden
welcome sign. They think we should incorporate ‘Hon’ into the sign at the
city limits.” One caller from Roland Park, an upscale Baltimore
neighborhood, argued, “‘Hon’ typifies who we are. It shows we have a sense of humor and strong civic spirit.”

A transplant spoke positively of how “hi, hon” was equivalent to her native Texas “howdy, y’all.” Café Hon owner Denise Whiting, an unknown entity at this time, although with obvious affection for “hon,” added “‘Welcome to Baltimore, Hon’ is reflective of our sense of humor and strong civic spirit.” Whiting printed petitions, written in Baltimorese (“yous’ guys who keep terrin’ down...”), calling for either an end to the ripping down of Hon Man’s sign or the creation of a new, permanent “Welcome to Baltimore, Hon” sign. Local artists had offered to design the new sign, and a local sign maker had offered to build it, all pro bono publico.

Taking on a life of its own, the debate over the esteemed vernacular showed its importance by taking on serious political implications. Baltimore City Councilman Timothy D. Murphy, who represents white, working-class South Baltimore, drafted an ordinance to change “Welcome to Baltimore” to “Welcome to Baltimore, Hon.” But, much more dramatically, in Annapolis, on March 9, 1994, State Senator Barbara A. Hoffman introduced an amendment to the state budget that would withhold one million dollars earmarked for Baltimore highways unless Mayor Kurt L. Schmoke made the “Hon” addition to the “Welcome to Baltimore, Hon” sign permanent. The amendment read, “The Mayor and City Council shall notify the budget committees upon completion of the signage modifications and shall submit an 8-by-10-inch color photograph, suitable for
framing, to the committees.” Sen. Hoffman hoped that her amendment would amend the already existing sign by adding a permanent hon placard, alleviating the necessity of constructing a wholly new one.  

Sen. Barbara A. Hoffman was a Baltimore Democrat whose District 42 covers parts of North and Northwest Baltimore, including Hampden, and Baltimore County north of the city. As of the 1990 census, Sen. Hoffman’s 42nd district was 84 percent white. The senator said of “Hon” and the amendment, “It’s a good old neutral term. We thought it might be a good idea to encumber some of the city’s money until the mayor develops a sense of humor.” On March 16, 1994, the Maryland Senate, by voice vote, adopted the amendment.

Sen. Larry Young, also a Democrat, but representing Baltimore’s African-American 44th district, was incredulous. Two days later, Larry Young had his answer. If there was to be a “Welcome to Baltimore, Hon!” sign, he announced on the Senate floor, there would have to be a “Welcome to Baltimore, Bro!” sign too. “If they really want humor, let’s make it fair,” Sen. Young challenged. Sen. Young said he had received 30-40 complaints from his majority black 44th district constituents in his majority black city. As of the 1990 census, Sen. Young’s 44th district was 79 percent black.

Encouraged by all of this publicity, the Hon Man increased his efforts, hanging the sign three times the following Tuesday alone. The dutiful road crews ripped it down three times as well. Hon Man promised to end his campaign and reveal his identity as soon as the Hon addition was made permanent. Forced into the
fray, Baltimore Mayor Kurt Schmoke invited “Hon Man” to a “Hon” summit. “I would really love to meet the ‘Hon Man’ and talk this matter out,” said the always-diplomatic Kurt Schmoke. He continued, “God bless him. I just hope he doesn’t get hit in traffic.” Immediately after hearing of the Mayor’s request, Hon Man told his media contact, Baltimore Sun columnist Dan Rodricks, that he would love to meet with the mayor as soon as possible and recommended Café Hon in Hampden as the meeting spot. Ever the diplomat, the mayor was forced to walk on eggshells on the issue because of passionate supporters on both sides. “In some ways, it’s kind of light and funny,” Schmoke said. “But there are some real strong views out there. Some people think it’s patronizing.”

Some refused to see the larger political implications at play in the construction of the sign, dismissing the issue entirely. Councilman Anthony J. Ambridge, a white 2nd District Democrat who represented part of Northeast Baltimore, said “It’s cute, but there are so many more important issues to trouble ourselves with.” Melvin Stukes, a black 6th District Democrat who represented Northwest Baltimore, was more brusque. He snapped, “Believe me, no one is paying too much damn attention.”

Others were staunchly opposed to the “hon” addition. On March 22, 1994, in “‘Hon’ Ain’t Fun for Everyone,” Ann G. Sjoerdsma wrote “‘Hon,’ alleged by some (transplants and outsiders, mostly) to be “cute,” “quaint,” “folksy,” and “colorful” Bawlamerese, is an exclusionary term. It is used nearly exclusively by whites, and by only some whites, generally in blue-collar neighborhoods in South and
East Baltimore. And it has sexist overtones.” Certain that the mysterious Hon Man is a county-living white man for whom “hon” evokes nostalgic images of genial Baltimore grannies, Sjoerdsma argued that ‘hon’ “limits, rather than characterizes, the Baltimore that I know and love.” She went on, “And I wonder at Hon Man’s conscious and deliberate decision to exclude, however inadvertently, black Baltimoreans, the majority, as he persistently seeks to define the identity and spirit of Baltimore.” Sjoerdsma argued that it is not Baltimore’s “insular neighborhoods” that make it special, but its “collective energy and spirit,” and that “the city should never be limited by stereotype, folksy, funky, or otherwise.”

But the proponents seemed to think “collective energy and spirit” in the face of insular neighborhoods and depressed living conditions was what the spirit of “Hon” invokes. Since “collective energy and spirit” is intangible, for supporters, “Hon” seemed to be a linguistic manifestation of the goodness of Baltimore. At this point, working-class residents were not complaining of a lampooning of their culture; rather, working-class whites seem to be some of the sign’s main proponents.

One is able to get a sense of the community reaction at the time because residents responded to Sjoerdsma’s charge in the “Letters to the Editor” column. Baltimore resident Jay S. Weamer wrote a “Letter to the Editor” in response, stating “’Hon’ is a friendly, simple expression. Overly sensitive people bring the black or white, male or female issues into the picture. I don’t think the ‘Hon Man’
had any thoughts about this. He probably was and is just being friendly to people entering the city. Rodricks offered a direct response to the controversy that had begun to swirl around the hon sign.

The phenomenon has been described, I think perfectly, as “the homogenization of the provinces.” It’s what happens to communities when their local character and culture become neutralized by pop culture, mass communication and the franchising of institutions, small and large. Without efforts to preserve and celebrate the local culture—we’re up against Disney, McDonald’s and the omnipresent force of television—each town and each city ultimately could lose its identity.

Arnold Zwy, long ago a columnist for the City Paper, once remarked that he loved Baltimore because it wasn’t Washington, wasn’t New York. And Arnie appreciated that, within this region, there was enough culture diversity to satisfy most anyone who enjoys life in a land of unpredictable and unpretentious delights.

“Hon” fits into this. A term of endearment, that’s all, and something that makes Baltimore a bit different from Someplace Else. It might not be part of everybody’s greeting—whoever said it was?—but it was poured into the pot a long time ago and survives as a provincialism that distinguished this city and the communities adjoining it from all other metropolitan areas. You can hear, “You want fries with that?” anywhere in the United States. Only near Baltimore did I hear, “You want fries with that, hon?”

So before the effort to make “hon” part of one greeting at one entrance to Baltimore gets crunched by the political correctness police, remember: Like it or not, it’s part of this community’s tradition and culture, as much as snow panic in winter, bull roasts in spring, snowball stands and produce trucks in summer, streets filled with kids in new clothes at Easter, marble steps, painted tires filled with petunias, the pride felt for Brooks and Frank. And not only is it harmless—pardon me if this sounds insensitive, but I can’t imagine that anyone who used “hon” ever meant it as a put-down—it is actually a way to give people a smile on their way from the airport.
And I’ll tell you this, friends: “Hon” is one of many things that made this guy feel instantly welcomed when he moved to the Queen City of the Patapsco Drainage Basin half his life ago. A panel of experts weighed in on the indigeneity of “hon” to Baltimore, and the subsequent article landed on the *Baltimore Sun*’s front page. The general consensus was that “hon” was not unique to Baltimore, now or in the past. Columnist Richard O’Mara asked, “How could such a little word cause such a big shlemozzle? Why is Charm City at odds with itself over an informal courtesy title, bestowed for the most part at the benign discretion of waitresses in greasy spoon restaurants from Locust Point to Highlandtown and beyond? What is there to say about ‘hon’?” O’Mara pointed out that many Baltimoreans think the term is unique to Baltimore, and many also believe the term is equally beloved across Baltimore. For example, Waterfront Hotel owner Chester Tokarski claimed he had never heard anyone say “hon” outside of Baltimore. Maryland Administrative Board of Election Laws administrator Gene M. Raynor assured O’Mara that “I’ve traveled to all parts of the globe. I haven’t heard it anywhere but Baltimore.” While “a wonderful word,” Raynor had to admit that it was not a citywide term. “I’ve heard it used by black people but not frequently. I think black people prefer honey.”

In contrast, all of the “experts” denied hon’s Baltimore distinctiveness. Baltimore historian Joseph L. Arnold went on record saying, “I never thought of it being peculiar to Baltimore. I heard it in the Middle West growing up.”
historian Frank Shivers told O’Mara that “I hear ‘hon’ in other places; I’m sure it’s not indigenous.”

But Baltimorean’s continued to hold the word up as an exemplum of local culture. For example, even years later, hearing someone from somewhere else say “hon” will warrant a posting in the local paper: “And speaking of that Hon business and whether it’s a distinctively Baltimore thing again we hear from Amalfitano: ‘I was on the telephone, trying to reach somebody in the city government of Kansas City, Kan.—don’t ask me why, it’s a long story—when a very friendly operator nearly knocked me out my chair. ‘Wait a minute, hon,’ she said. After recovering, I asked her if she was from Baltimore. ‘No.’ she says, ‘we just like to be nice to people out here.’”

The more O’Mara investigated, the more complicated “hon” became. Not all African Americans were opposed to “hon.” Baltimore bank security guard Eric Williamson, an African American, claimed he had never heard the term. “No waitress ever called me that. We never use it. We never hear it.” Baltimore receptionist Bernice Murray, on the other hand, said “hon” was “endearing.” Parking control agent Esther Jones, who is African American, relayed two stories from her life that showed the complexity of the word. During roll call, a black parking control agent ended his presentation with “honey.” His white supervisor scolded the agent, encouraging him to use the more appropriate “hon.” “That’s not a word in our vocabulary,” the agent had responded. Additionally, parking agent Esther Jones’ sister was married to a white man who said “hon” all the
time. But there seemed to be implicit rules in the invocation of “hon.” “He uses it with her, and with all of us,” Jone explained. The rules seemed more complex for her sister. “She only uses it when speaking to him.”

Reporters had repeatedly asked the librarians in the Enoch Pratt Library’s Maryland Room to get to the bottom of the “hon” matter. The staff had been unable to find an exact or distinctive origin for the term. “It comes from the people who are moving into the older neighborhoods, like Canton,” John Sondheim, head of the Maryland Room, deduced. “We are all becoming more tied to Baltimores. There is something classy about being déclassé.”

Baltimore historian Frank Shivers suggested “hon” had become “blue collar chic,” one example of newcomers and middle class attempting to embrace Baltimore’s working-class culture and traditions.

Beyond supporting “hon,” others vehemently opposed opposing “hon.” After a speech at Johns Hopkins University, a mystery man handed Mayor Schmoke a cylinder and hurried off. Inside was a “hon” poster emblazoned with the word “Remember.”

_Baltimore Sun_ columnist Michael Olesker scolded all involved for having “taken a smile and knocked out most of its teeth.” Rebutting the university professors who denied Baltimore owned “hon,” Olesker argued that even if others used the term, only Baltimoresans felt a special connection to it. “No [other] community has ever considered pasting “hon” on its highway welcome signs,” Olesker reminded his readers, “or had such a tortured, hand-wringing, anguished time deciding whether such a move would be politically
appropriate.” Olesker offered the strongest rebuttal to Sjoerdsmma’s “hon” critique. While most agreed white Baltimoreans say “hon,” Olesker pointed out that “hon” can address anyone of any age, gender, nationality, or creed. Seen for this perspective, “hon” is as inclusive a word as there is.

In regards to authenticity, the question was not whether the word was part of a living tradition. Any walk around Baltimore proved the term was still in wide use. The question, instead, was about the newcomers and the nouveau riche adopting the term in an attempt to ingratiate themselves or remind others of their roots. In fact, acknowledging the city’s vast diversity (Polish, Irish, Italian, Greek, Yiddish, Korean, etc.), Olesker hypothesized that perhaps the city’s diversity was the reason Baltimore needed “hon,” because no other expression has “quite that distinctive Baltimore flavor of “hon.”

A couple days later, Baltimore Sun columnist Wiley A. Hall again responded to Olesker with caution, agreeing that the hon hoopla had gotten out of hand, but whereas Olesker had questioned why some were so insistent on keeping “Hon” off the sign, Hall wondered why some were so insistent about putting it on?

Why insist that “hon” reflects the soul of this city when a significant portion of the population says it does not? Why insist that the endearment is charming and cute when so many of us are not amused? What hidden, inner needs are you trying to satisfy here? Are you like cats, insisting on marking a territory as your own, heedless of the need to share? Yeah. I think you are like cats. I think you are marking your territory. I think that in some deep, dark, buried niche of your souls you do not want to share this town.
Wiley supported the rebel Hon Man originally. It was only when the surrounding political rhetoric began to fly that he reassessed his position. Supporters were using the hon sign controversy to stoke the flames of nostalgia for Baltimore’s mythical past.

People in this town began waxing poetic about the social significance of ‘hon’; about how the endearment captures the soul of this city; how it recalls the golden age of Baltimore, when this was a city of neighborhoods and neighbors; when this was a good, honest, loveable, no-nonsense, hard-working, blue-collar town of colorful ethnics who spoke something called “Bawlamerese.”

Hall considered “this romantic hankering for the golden age of Baltimore mildly offensive ‘cause it just ain’t so. This good, old working-class town had a mean streak in it that was a mile wide and a couple of fathoms deep.” In the face of Baltimore’s long history of racism, classism, and sexism, Hall preferred to see Baltimore celebrate a possible multicultural future rather than a nonexistent mythical past.

But Rodricks, too, saw sociopolitical importance in supporting the “hon” addition. In a globalizing world, Rodricks argued, American cities need to safeguard their distinguishing local traditions. “Americans have become so homogenized,” Rodricks told the Chicago Tribune, “You can go to any city and read the same USA Today, eat in the same restaurants, listen to the same talk show. Americans are living at bland’s end, rather than land’s end. The local culture is vanishing. That’s part of why I cling to these things and why we’re trying to keep an anachronism alive. It’s what distinguished Baltimore from Cleveland, Chicago from Minneapolis.”
The *Baltimore Sun* editorial “Honed to Death,” published on April 2, 1994, begged Baltimoreans (and state legislators) to keep their heads and see the middle ground. The *Sun* weighed the pros and cons before making a recommendation. Hon is “a quirky innocent colloquialism that Baltimoreans have embraced as their own,” “the ever-present greeting at any eastside greasy spoon,” and “a versatile sprite of a syllable that can be both motherly and flirtatious.” Hon is not “condescending,” “everyone’s cup of tea,” or “distinctly Baltimorean.” What “hon” should *not* be, the *Sun* opined, is “a political football [wielded] by legislators who think they’re being cute by threatening to withhold funding if the city doesn’t put ‘hon’ on a highway welcome sign” or “an arrogant call to arms in some pseudo-cultural war over the heart and soul of true Baltimore.” Instead, the *Sun* recommended “hon” maintain its vernacularity,

Hon should: Remain what it has long been, an unpretentious, little pinch of a term. Like a joke told too often, once ‘hon’ becomes an adopted municipal symbol, it loses its spontaneity, and its appeal. You can’t eat crabs in dress clothes or buy a Maryland snowball in the freezer section of your supermarket. Fuss over hon, illuminate it on the interstate and it’s no longer an unaffected, no-nonsense slice of life. For goodness sake, leave hon be.

At the beginning of April, Mayor Schmoke made good on his promise to hold a summit with Hon Man. Hon Man and his wife met with Mayor Schmoke in his office at City Hall for a conversation that was both “pleasant” and “uneventful.” They discussed the happiness it brought some and the unease it brought others. For his part, Hon Man admitted he did not realize anyone could construe “hon” as demeaning, belittling, or offensive. “I meant nothing by it but
a way to make people smile,” Hon Man explained defensively. All parties agreed that the legislative tumult had lessened the enjoyment. Months later, Hon Man remembered, “[The mayor] was very cordial,” Hon Man said, “He said to keep hanging the sign, just to be careful and not to get hit in traffic.”

In Hon Man’s defense, Rodricks quoted a few of the uplifting letters that had continued flooding in in support of the “Welcome to Baltimore, Hon” sign. One Severna Park woman wrote in to tell of the instant relief the sign provided her. “I was going to St. Joseph’s Hospital to see a relative and was extremely down. And then I saw the sign and it made my day, and I thought, gee, things really aren’t that bad.” Another Anne Arundel County woman, formerly of Baltimore, wrote in telling of a very similar experience. She was driving the Baltimore-Washington Parkway on route to Johns Hopkins University to attend her 16-month old daughter’s open-heart surgery when she spotted the “Welcome to Baltimore, Hon” sign. “Just tell Hon Man thanks for making me feel at home.”

John T. Gurney III wrote a letter to the editor that appeared on April 7, 1994. After establishing his legitimacy to speak on Baltimore issues because he is a “native Baltimorean whose forebears have lived in or around Baltimore since 1820s,” Gurney argued that “just because this term is near and dear to a minority of Baltimoreans is no reason for placing it on a sign which would speak for all residents of Baltimore.” But what seems most important in this letter to the editor is the back and forth accusations of triviality. Gurney was incensed by the radio host who told “hon” detractors to “lighten up.” But the criticism goes
both ways. Gurney exhorted the city to “move on to more important concerns for
the City of Baltimore than the persistent but juvenile wishes of a minority of her
citizens.” Everyone was upset, but no one was willing to give the issue its proper
due as “important.” While John T. Gurney III and Councilmen Anthony J.
Ambridge and Melvin Stukes proclaimed the issue inconsequential and urge the
public and the politicians to move on to more important issues, they missed the
symbolic importance embedded in “hon” and the many vitally important issues
represented by this symbolic word, more important to Baltimoreans that many of
the other day-to-day affairs of the city council or the state legislature.155

Pointing to what I have called the transition from an inconspicuous to a
stigmatized to an esteemed vernacular, Andrew Ratner, himself a Baltimore
transplant from Yonkers, hypothesized that the passion behind the “hon” debate
came from deeply-felt anxiety over Baltimore’s rapidly changing culture.

Baltimore and Central Maryland are in a unique position. It is one of the most
transient areas in the country (nearby Pennsylvania, on the other hand, is one of
the least transient areas), and it has grown faster than almost any other East
Coast state (the exceptions being Florida and the smaller Delaware and New
Hampshire).

The debate over Maryland roots can get nasty in media hype over
who can properly appreciate “hon,” the folksy welcome of
Bawlamer waitresses; in complaints about the sold-out popularity
of Camden Yards; in political races when the candidate isn’t
Maryland-bred. But the chances, while discomforting to many born
here, are for the good. Maryland’s a vibrant place, economically
and culturally. People want to live here. Maryland has a tradition, in
fact, of embracing transplants...we immigrant Marylanders learn to
love the sweet meat of the crab and going “downy ayshun,” and become as proud of the Orioles as if we had cheered all those pennant years—even if we did once peer into an 18-inch Zenith trying to figure out where’s Baltimore.\(^{156}\)

On May 9, 1994, two state troopers caught Hon Man in the act of stapling. “You know that’s defacing property,” one trooper scolded, smiling and laughing at the same time. “I know,” agreed Hon Man, before promising to retire from hanging his laminated addendums.\(^{157}\) A man of his word, Hon Man honored his vow for three full months, during which time he told Dan Rodricks “I’m having terrible withdrawal pains.”\(^{158}\) On August 13, 1994, Hon Man’s will broke, and he reattached his infamous “Hon” placard. “I could resist no longer,” Hon Man said. The highway administration had the “Hon” removed by Monday.\(^{159}\)

It is around this era that “hon” began to transition from a linguistic term of endearment to a rhetorical label for a particular type of Baltimore woman. Denise Whiting, the owner of Hampden’s Café Hon, was, naturally, a strong proponent of “Hon Man” and making his revision permanent. Whiting told the Chicago Tribune “Look, it’s not meant to be sexual or demeaning. It’s fun...A man is a hon. A woman is a hon. Hon is fun, and there’s so much out there that’s not fun.”\(^{160}\) Turning to the marketing perspective, Whiting argued, “Look what ‘I Love New York’ did for that city. It’s a good way to promote tourism for Baltimore. The whole Hon thing is gaining momentum.” Notably, following Hongate, Denise Whiting and Café Hon sponsored the first annual Baltimore’s Best Hon Contest. On May 18, 1994, Dan Rodricks carried the call in his “This Just In” column. “This is a fun way to honor and appreciate Baltimore’s working
women,” Whiting explained. “I’m talking about women who wear uniforms to work, or really any working woman, including moms.” The winner was “a forklift operator with a tall, dark beehive hairdo implanted with plastic forks and spoons and green bubble gum that matched her dress and heels.”\textsuperscript{161} As seen here, the HonFest controversy (see chapter 4) is, at the very least, an older, longer lasting, deeper controversy that began as early as the 1990s.

The idea of “hon” being not just a popular local term of endearment but an actual type of woman continued to take shape with Laura Lippman’s May 27, 1994 article “The Original ‘Hon’,” a profile of Baltimore waitress Jean Lawson, retiring after 49 years of full-time serving. Her last boss, George Alatzas, told Lippman, “She’s an era in herself, she’s old Baltimore. If there’s a ‘professional’ in this business, she’s it. There just aren’t that many any more. She’s the original ‘hon’.” Dan Rodricks, too, encouraged the “Hon” as a type of person when he profiled the saintly Beth Meyer in “Feeding other people’s meters nearly gets a hon arrested.” “She’s a 30-year-old volunteer with the Baltimore Health Department who works with you mothers,” Rodricks cooed. “She loves the city. She loves people. She’s idealistic and enthusiastic. Her cup runneth over with the spirit of Christmas.” This kindhearted Baltimore “Hon” was threatened with arrest when, filled with Christmas joy, she fed the nearly-expired meters for eight cars near Harborplace.

Hon Man had been a folk hero for a couple years, but Baltimoreans began openly referring to him as one, ironically, right around the time that he began
commodifying his product. Mike Giuliano alerted readers to “keep an eye out for...the elusive urban folk hero known as the ‘Hon Man,’ who will have T-shirts and mugs for sale.” Hon Man was “deliberately vague” as to whether it would be he who hocked hon wares at the festival booth or a stand in “Hon Person.”

Journalist Michael Olesker, covering the festival, noted passing a festivalgoer clad in a “Welcome to Baltimore, Hon” baseball cap. Sponsored by the Preservation Society, it may seem odd that a Baltimore “non-profit organization dedicated to preserving the 18th and 19th century architectural treasures of Fell’s Point and Federal Hill” would host Hon Man. The proceeds from the fair went to “protect the architectural integrity” of the neighborhoods. But on closer inspection, the two prove surprisingly compatible. From his and his proponent’s rhetoric, it is clear that Hon Man and others see themselves conducting a similar mission to protect the integrity of Baltimore’s intangible cultural heritage. Olekser, an early Hon Man proponent, wrote in praise of the festival in much the same way that he wrote in praise of the “Welcome to Baltimore, Hon” sign. Olesker opined that the festival was the embodiment of “why so many of us hold on, why so many resist the various pressures to flee to the counties.”

On November 4, 1994, Rodricks received a phone call. “This is Hon Man,” the caller said. “Someone spray-painted ‘Hon’ on the welcome sign, and I’m sick about it.” By the following summer, the Hon Man era was singing its swan song. Dan Rodricks received calls and letters from concerned citizens who noticed a severe lack of hon signs being tacked to the “Welcome to Baltimore”
sign. Rodricks reported that Hon Man now drove a cab in Baltimore County, putting him out of the vicinity of the “Welcome to Baltimore” sign. Hon Man, too, sounded like he had lost his passion. He only found himself on the Baltimore-Washington Parkway, sans passengers, occasionally. Even then, “If traffic is heavy,” Hon Man said, “I don’t pull over. If traffic isn’t too bad, I might stop and attach a sign. I’m down to my last 24 ‘HON’ signs.”

Hon Man had continued his move into merchandizing, although the venture appeared half-hearted—he could not remember all of the names of the few locations that sold his T-shirts. Hon Man’s true love, it seems, was always the act of stapling the “hon,” not the selling of it. But Hon Man will not be soon forgotten. WBAL and others refer to him as a “folk hero,” spreading notice of his work across the country. In fact, partially due to Hon Man’s efforts, the New York Times travel section profiled Baltimore, describing it as a distinctive city full of character.

Baltimore definitely does not inspire that just-got-off-the-Interstate-and-could-be-anywhere state of mind. French fries drenched in gravy are a local specialty, as is calling people “hon,” as in “More fries, hon?” Last year, a hon enthusiast who came to be known as Hon Man repeatedly spray-painted the sign at the edge of the city, which said “Welcome to Baltimore, Hon” after he got through with it. He was invited to meet the mayor.

Although frequently derided as trivial, the psychological importance of the “Welcome to Baltimore, Hon” sign and the idea that it can redeem Baltimore endured as a steady theme for the remainder of the decade, and into the next century, as Hon Man continued to sporadically hang his sign. In the spring of 1996, Baltimore erected a new welcome sign on another major throughway,
Interstate 83, at a cost of $5,000. Rather than add a piece of folk speech, the city opted for the Seal of Baltimore. When the sign went up bare because the seal was not yet ready, the *Baltimore Sun* lamented, “Where’s the Hon man when you need him?”\(^\text{171}\)

The addition of a “Hon” sign would continue to garner notice in the local papers for the rest of Hon Man’s life. Following a sighting after a long hiatus, Dan Rodricks speculated, “Looks like he’s attempting to quietly revive his role as good-natured vandal.”\(^\text{172}\) Nearly a year later, Rodricks noted another Hon sign appearance. Hon Man’s addendum had been conspicuously absent for most of the year, and even media handler Rodricks was unsure of Hon Man’s status or whereabouts.\(^\text{173}\)

Beginning in April 1999 and continuing through the September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks, Hon Man and his hon placards took on a psychological importance. Beyond debates over whether the sign should be made permanent, commentators began a romantic yearning for what the hon sign represented, portraying it as a cure to physical, psychological, and social ills. Kathy Dowell and her husband, for example, had been driving to Baltimore on the Baltimore-Washington Parkway for pancreatic cancer treatments for a couple years. Dowell said of the sign, “Every day we get into the car, we play a little game: What’s the temperature going to be on the Steel and Wire Products Col. Building, and will Hon Man say hello on the sign?...Even when the [sign] is down, it’s fun to see the staples left behind and know someone was taking the time to go out there
again and again. Some days I don’t feel well and any little thing can make my
day.”

Upon the election of Martin O’Malley, columnist Michael Olesker used the
opportunity of the inauguration of the first white mayor in a decade and a half to
call for new legislation and a new approach to municipal government. The
“Welcome to Baltimore, Hon” sign played a central role in his conception of a
new day. “Now the time has come to turn this around,” Olesker wrote. “The
mayoral administration of Martin O’Malley moves into office in the next 10 days,
looking to shed the dreariness of the last 10 years. It begins with a simple step.
Lighten up. Embrace the city’s idiosyncrasies, the things that make us unique—and
run with them.” Olesker was referring to the hon sign, as he glossed the
trials and tribulations of the placard and its stapling folk hero. In some ways, he
appeared to argue for “hon” as a city-unifying force. “Yes, ‘hon’ is mostly a white
expression,” he wrote, “and, to be accurate, only certain whites, mainly out of
the working-class eastern and southern parts of the city use it—so harmlessly,
and with such warmth and affection over so many years, that many others have
adopted it as their own good-nature patois.” For example, earlier in the decade,
some had argued that a “Welcome to Baltimore, Hon” sign would only be
appropriate if Baltimore also erected equivalent signs representing Baltimore’s
other ethnicities. Making what amounts to an assimilation argument, Olesker
urged Baltimore to erect welcome signs in Italian, Polish, Greek, Yiddish, etc, and
then add a “hon” onto those too.
In the wake of the September 11, 2001 attacks, Hon Man (or a copycat) affixed the “hon” addition the parkway sign once again. This time, the placard remained for several days. Some saw it as an acknowledgement by the city of the importance of close community ties in the face of tragedy. When the road crews finally tore it down several days later, Dan Rodricks lamented, "These days, how anyone can remove anything that gives us a smile—anywhere, at any time—is beyond me."\(^{176}\) He went on, “Hon Man, please know that someone appreciates your efforts.”\(^{177}\)

In February 2002, National Public Radio found Hon Man in his Northwest Baltimore apartment for his first recorded interview in nearly a decade. He continued to hide his true identity. Calling him a “legendary Baltimore figure,” NPR interviewed both Hon Man and his bemused wife. How do passersby react when they see you hang the sign, the interviewer asked? “They go by, and they toot their horns,” Hon Man said, “I get a toot almost every time I’m down there during the day.”\(^{178}\)

Throughout the latter 1990s, Hon Man had been battling illness. In March 2002, doctors diagnosed the 67-year-old Hon Man with non-Hodgkin’s lymphoma, necessitating a forced retirement to his “hon” additions. There were rumors that his 39-year-old son, “Hon Son,” would carry on the family tradition. Kept from behind the wheel by his illness, Hon Man had not managed to hang a hon sign since his diagnosis. On August 17, 2002, Hon Man drove for the first time since March. His first destination was the Welcome to Baltimore sign on the
Baltimore-Washington Parkway to hang another “hon” sign. As a tribute to Hon Man’s body of work and in solidarity with his terminal illness, Rodricks called on the “usual suspects” to leave the sign up this time. 179 “Let’s see that it stays,” Rodrick urged, “Let’s have a little respect.” 180 “Hon” could now be a matter of life and death. “Posting the sign keeps Hon Man happy and healthy,” Rodricks wrote. 181 “In a strange way, it’s probably a good thing the Hon Man contras remove the placards. I’m just asking for a longer-than-usual interval between counterattacks.” 182

**Symbolic Battlefield in Baltimore**

In Baltimore, one term, “hon,” taken from and symbolizing the larger local dialect known as Baltimorese, became a symbolic battlefield for issues of race, class, gender, identity, and belonging. Far outside of the ivory tower and in common parlance, Baltimoreans took up near-academic debates about local culture, authenticity, heritage, and nostalgia. While some politicians, residents, and commentators wanted to dismiss the fracas as trivial, the attention the issue received coincided with the symbolic significance that Baltimoreans implicitly understood. In the land-language-lore complex, the owner of the local language has the best claim to cultural ownership of the land. The debate over the “hon” sign was not a silly diversion, but a cultural battle over who could lay natural claim to Baltimore. Notably, this search for a representative local tradition to empower a struggling, underappreciated city through difficult times mirrored, at the local level, the same impetus that motivated Jacob and Wilhelm Grimm in the
German principalities, James MacPherson in Scotland, and Elias Lönnrot in Finland.

While the Grimms, MacPherson, and Lönnrot used national folktale collections and epics and cities like New Orleans and New York attract visitors with historical and ethnic themes suggesting an “exoterism,” Baltimore, alternatively, exudes a distinct urban American folklore that in the emerging discourse appears linguistic and therefore esoteric. Because of concerns over the authenticity of folklore, folklorists have been hesitant about pursuing “urban American folklore,” but this case study shows the significance of considering urban American folk forms like folk speech in the pursuit of political and symbolic values. Because of the heterogeneity of American urban populations, urban American folklore takes on a variety of meanings. While all residents of the Baltimore metropolitan area constitute one community, the competing and intermingling communities within that group also jockey for position through local vernacular esteem.

In fact, this approach might be one step towards solving the conundrum of folklore in America. Richard M. Dorson was aware of the many voices on the American landscape but saw a national folklore of heroes and historical sagas as a unifying force for these many American peoples. Twenty-first century scholars are more likely to see the many voices as resistant to an overarching American metanarrative. In the urban American folklore of the Baltimore metropolitan area, and perhaps in the nation at large, folklore appears instead to follow a
consumer culture model, where residents can voluntarily consume, resist, or modify symbolic local forms in an attempt to lay claim to the local. While folklore maintains its class connotations—“hon” originated in blue-collar neighborhoods—the possibility of hon as an identifier of localness appears to transcend class boundaries (but not racial ones). White, blue-collar Baltimoreans, at the time, supported an attempt to “retake” ground that had been ceded to African Americans and yuppies over the past half century. White yuppies, for the most part, also supported the move because it provided a tangible opportunity to grasp the local. African Americans, on the other hand, generally did not support “hon” as a legitimate local tradition. Doing so would have conceded that white Baltimoreans had the stronger cultural connection to the city, even with African Americans now the majority residents of the city.

This case study further exhibits why urban folklore in the United States would be better classified as metropolitan folklore, as the city limits had little influence over who was interested in the “Welcome to Baltimore, Hon” sign. Many of those most deeply invested in the sign were no longer technically Baltimore city residents, but remained in a sphere of Baltimore influence where “hon” took on specific meanings directly related to place. Baltimore remained an economic, cultural, and symbolic hub for residents of the Baltimore metropolitan area. The city-county dynamics also expose racial tensions implicit in the debate, as African Americans are a strong majority in the City of Baltimore, but whites remain a majority in the Baltimore metropolitan area.
Does “hon” count as Dorson’s fakelore or Hobsbawn’s “invented tradition”? Dorson would probably be more concerned with the political use of “hon” than with its labeling as “folk speech.” Hobsbawm would see politics as being at the center of any “invention.” In this controversy, one sees the earliest chapters of hon’s transition in to “Hon,” Baltimore’s female folk hero or comic demigod (chronicled in the next chapter), which would undoubtedly meet Dorson’s definition of fakelore. Regardless of the fakelore argument, the “hon” tradition in Baltimore seems to follow Dundes’s inferiority complex thesis that small countries (or cities in this case) suffering from poor self images are particularly active in using folklore to promote themselves and allow them to reflect about, and debate, their identity. In Baltimore, a city with a well-documented, century-long inferiority complex, “hon,” and in the next chapter, ‘Hon,’ were deployed to distinguish and redeem a location in the midst of the competing East Coast cities of Washington, D.C., Philadelphia, and New York.

Baltimore’s “hon” follows Abraham’s conception of the land-language-lore complex that seeks to create a “natural” connection between an imagined group and a recently demarcated political boundary. If the United States represents the epitome of an overindustrialized, and, now, postindustrial landscape, “hon” helps redeem a sacred homeland by referring not to the vacant buildings and shuttered plants, but instead to a nostalgia for an neighborly, folksy, down-to-earth city. While there was some stigma associated with “hon” in the 1990s (the complaints about racial, gender, and class connotations and the general
association of “hon” with diner-waitress speak) and in the past (informant recollections of their parents trying to eliminate their Baltimorese), in many ways, “hon” has entered the esteemed vernacular. Baltimoreans use “hon” in speech, on merchandise, and on highway signs to make Johnstone’s “self-conscious regional identity claims.” In response to Baltimore’s conflicted, volatile past, folklore in the mode of the “esteemed vernacular” has been one attempt to connect residents to the local in a transient world.

Throughout the 1990s, the arguments over “hon” had been primarily about race, class, and distinctiveness. The gender implications of “hon” received some mention, but were not central to the controversy. Beginning with the “Hon Arrest” and continuing into criticism of HonFest and the Hon image in the 2000s, gender will take on an important dimension of the argument. The Hon Arrest in August 1999 and the subsequent lawsuit function as harbingers of this coming dynamic.

On the morning of August 22, 1999, 42-year-old systems analyst and Baltimorean Frank J. Iula, Jr. and his three children were on their way to Ocean City, a Baltimorean’s vacation destination of choice. Iula was hauling down the Route 50, pushing his Chevy Malibu close to 80 miles per hour. At 9:40 a.m., near Route 346 in Berlin, 32-year-old Maryland State Police Trooper Kelly A. Austin clocked Iula’s Malibu traveling 78 m.p.h. in a 55 m.p.h. zone. Trooper Austin pulled Iula over and requested license and registration. But before Iula could retrieve his card, Trooper Austin returned to her cruiser. Iula decided to
get out of the car and deliver the items to Austin. Although later accounts of her motivations would vary, either out of fear for her safety, fear for Iula’s safety, or anger over Iula’s disregard for standard traffic stop procedure, Austin ordered Iula back to his car.\textsuperscript{184}

Iula was two and a half hours and the Chesapeake Bay away from Baltimore, but Baltimore was still with Iula. Instead of returning to his car, Iula assured Trooper Austin that he just wanted to give her his license and registration, “hon.” According to Iula, at the drop of the word, Iula found himself handcuffed, arrested, and propped on the hood of his car. Trooper Austin ran Iula’s license and registration and returned to Iula’s car minutes later. Iula tried to explain himself, but again dropped a “hon” in there. At this moment, according to Iula, Austin became “livid” and tossed Iula in the back of her squad car.\textsuperscript{185} Iula spent the next six hours at the Berlin, Maryland trooper barracks. Trooper Austin charged Iula with “failure to obey a reasonable and lawful order” and “obstructing and hindering.”\textsuperscript{186}

The Worchester County state’s attorney’s office dropped the charges on October 1, 1999.\textsuperscript{187} In June 2000, Iula filed a $500,000 lawsuit against the Maryland State Police, Trooper Kelly Austin, and Trooper Peter Kondan. The suit claimed state constitutional violations, assault and battery, conspiracy, defamation, excessive force, false arrest, false imprisonment, and malicious prosecution.\textsuperscript{188} “She was offended because I used the word ‘Hon’ and she thought I was degrading her,” Iula said. “I didn’t mean to be demeaning. ‘Hon’ is
a normal word, a pleasantry.” In court papers, Iula’s lawyer argued “hon is “common parlance in Baltimore County.”

Trooper Austin claimed “hon” had nothing to do with the arrest, maintaining that the arrest was for denying the officer’s lawful orders. In court papers, Trooper Austin said Iula was “a lot bigger than her.” The uncooperative Iula, Trooper Austin claimed, spurned three orders to return to his car. “Mr. Iula refused to get back into his vehicle and continued yelling and screaming and coming towards me,” Trooper Austin wrote in her report. “He had a smirk while he handed me his license and registration.” An out-of-state woman pulled over on the other side of Route 50 corroborated Trooper Austin’s version of the events. “Generally, he kept threatening her in a hostile and threatening manner.” Iula, on the other hand, claimed he was merely frightened by Trooper Austin’s reaction to being called “hon.” “I thought she was going to pull her pistol,” Iula recalled, “and I was yelling for people to call other police for help.”

The jury trial began nearly two and half years later, in February 2003. The jury’s verdict came back in favor of the defendants. A Maryland State Police press release cheered “Troopers Vindicated in Alleged ‘Hon’ Arrest.” This is proof, the press release declared, that “The plaintiff was arrested on legitimate criminal charges and not because he had called the trooper ‘hon.’” Iula said he intended to appeal the decision.
In this case, “hon” took on multiple meanings based on the geographic and gender profile of those involved. While “hon” will remain an important part of folk speech representative of local identity, the word will also increasingly take on gender implications as it transitions to the female “Hon.” The question of whether these implications honor Baltimore’s working-class heritage (the esteemed vernacular) or lampoon Baltimore’s blue-collar kitsch (the stigmatized vernacular) will be the driving force behind the next debate.

In this chapter, I observed that one word, “hon,” representing the local dialect, Baltimorese, took on political importance as an anonymous local waged a campaign to have the “hon” addendum added permanently to the “Welcome to Baltimore” sign on the Baltimore-Washington Parkway. I argued that this political discourse raised just below the surface of decisions whether or not to embrace “hon,” a psychological and cultural question of what Baltimore, laying in the shadows of larger, more celebrated cities, would represent in a new era signaled by the turn of the twenty-first century. This question was found not to be easily answered and evoked tensions that became channeled into the enactment of festivals around the stigmatized vernacular. In the next chapter, the term “hon” transitions to a type of person, “the Hon.” A modern, urban version of an American folk hero or local comic demigod, Dorson would rail against the Hon as pure, commercial fakelore, but I take a position that it is worthy of analysis as folklorism or invented tradition. The Hon seems to follow Dundes argument that the idea of folklore arises to meet the needs of inferiority complexes. I will
demonstrate, through a pastiche of local culture, popular culture, and pure imagination, how the birth of a distinctive woman, the Hon, in a conflicted, gentrifying world, embodies the nostalgia for a stable, white, blue-collar city of neighborhoods.
Charlene Osborne’s blonde beehive hairdo is nearly two feet tall, or two feet closer to heaven, as they say, resting on top of her already prodigious six-foot frame. Her cat-eye glasses and dice earrings reference working-class Baltimore women of the 1950s and 1960s. Her skirt is a painted screen, a reference to Baltimore’s unique local folk art. On it, Charlene has hand painted a pink flamingo, a bird that has come to represent Baltimore’s quirks in John Waters Pink Flamingos and on the front of Café Hon. A pink flamingo handbag is draped daintily over her forearm. Charlene remembered proudly, “my ensemble made me look like a giant pink flamingo from front and back” (Osborne 2010, 14). Covering her forearms all the way to her elbows are pink evening gloves, referencing her place in Baltimore’s pseudo-beauty pageant, HonFest’s Best Hon contest. Around her are numerous other coiffed, bouffant Hons, in pink and leopard print tops and pants, in frilly magenta and scarlet boas, in housecoats and muumuus and cat-eyed glasses in green, blue, purple, and pink. Charlene was born in Dundalk, Maryland in the 1960s. While not technically Baltimore, Dundalk is considered as working-class white as anywhere in Baltimore. The town is one of Baltimore’s inner-ring suburbs, and shares a border with Southeast Baltimore. A child of the 1960s, Charlene will call up the memories of the women from her childhood when she makes her pitch for Baltimore’s Best Hon 2009. While each woman’s talent varies, any respectable contestant must...
speak Baltimorese, the local white working-class Baltimore dialect, and embrace the traditions of the town.

Charlene is a bit of a bard, writing her own poems to recount on stage.

The previous year, she performed the shorter “HonFest”:

Roses is Red.
Violets is Blue.

Highlandtown’s where Hons come from and Dundalk is too.

East Bawlmer blooms Hons
Like spring time does flowers.

Thank God for Hampden
For making HonFest ours!

In her blonde beehive hairdo and her painted screen skirt, Charlene takes the stage again in 2009. In a focused, energetic style, Charlene lays down the new limerick she has written for just this occasion. In an over-the-top Baltimore dialect that combines that patter of Philadelphia, Appalachia, the South, and the Eastern Shore, she begins “Blessed”:

There once was a Hon from Dundalk.
They said she spoke funny Bawlmer talk.
She looked like a flamingo,
And Kept hollerin’, “BINGO”!
And her beehive was high as a beanstalk.

This is Charlene’s third competition. In her first in 2005, she had been the belle of the ball in the streets. Including her platform boots and oversized parasol, her full get-up craned to fourteen feet high. All day she had posed for pictures with adults, with children, and with reveler’s babies. On stage, however,
under the scrutiny of Judge Judy (Café Hon owner Denise Whiting’s mother) and two other Hon judges, she had not done well. The judges have specific aesthetic standards, and it turns out wigs are a faux pas in the Best Hon competition. Pink blouses and leopard skin spandex are revered, but wigs are considered tacky. Nonetheless, that night, Charlene lay in her tub, sore and blistered, and sobbed. HonFest had been one of the most meaningful and rewarding days of her life. HonFest contestants do not claim to be exact representations of the city’s blue-collar women. No one participates uncostumed. For example, in costume Charlene is not Charlene Osborne, CADD designer for a traffic-engineering firm; she is Blaze Cher, a reference to Blaze Starr, Baltimore’s notorious burlesque dancer and exotic entrepreneur. But several have come close. Baltimore’s Best Hon 2003 went to Rita of Highlandtown, who revolutionized the competition by wearing a housecoat and curlers, which, she remembered “sparking dozens of people to tell her that she reminded them of their (insert relative name here)” (Osborne 2010, 86). Rita had attended based on her daughter Heidi’s recommendation, who had told her that “There’s this contest where people dress up and act like you and the ladies from the neighborhood. You can’t lose” (Osborne 2010, 86). Although Heidi is both a high school and college graduate, Rita says the proudest moment of her life was the following year, when Heidi played “Take Me Out to the Ballgame” on a homemade xylophone made of National Bohemian bottles and was crowned Best Hon 2004, succeeding her mother. Heidi says it was only when she went away to college that she realized
not everyone “wore housecoats, went to the grocery store with their hair in curlers, religiously went to Bingo, and spoke with an unusual pronunciation of ‘o’” and that she realized that “it was truly an honor to have spent such time amongst a Baltimore treasure” (Osborne 2010, 86).

In 2009, 78-year-old Agnes “Punkin” Hurley, Baltimore’s Best Hon 2008, crowned Charlene as Baltimore’s Best Hon 2009, draping a hot pink sash across her chest and placing a sparkling tiara on her beehive coiffure. Denise Whiting presented Charlene with cruise tickets, Pompeian olive oil, and a suitcase with a “B’lieve, Hon” bumper sticker stamped on the front. Charlene spent the next year using her title and persona to support good causes like the Special Olympics and also making appearances at Baltimore’s most Baltimorean events and venues, including an Orioles baseball game, a Ravens football game, duckpin bowling, a protest in front of City Hall, Miracle on 34th Street, and a trip to Ocean City, Maryland. The remainder of this chapter will attempt to decipher the contested larger meaning behind the anecdote just presented.

**Folklore and Fakelore in Urban America**

An important twentieth century American folklore debate was whether the American land produced a distinct American folklore. The thinking was that closeness to a pastoral landscape fostered a stability and continuity commensurate with folklore; people in the country, adherents to this theory held, relied on each other socially and on folk wisdom to supply their needs. The city encouraged individualism and was thought to change too rapidly to generate
folklore. In Baltimore, there is a distinctive landscape and a distinct lack of nature. Can an American folklore grow out of that? In this chapter, I will show that it can, but its dynamic, particularly its entanglement with consumer culture, will differentiate it from American rural folklore. I continue to explore the possibility of an urban American folklore, an urban folklore that arises directly from the American urban experience. In this view, cities are places that suggest a local identity and have precedents that affect cultural expressions in the present. Urban folk socially interact with other on many levels and become familiar with collectively shared language, narratives, and customs through everyday experience.

For folklorists, products of consumer culture were often suspect because of the view that they were not authentic, that is, arising from the social interaction of a group, but instead, fabricated by corporate executives and advertisers. As I showed in the last chapter, folklorists often derided commercial and governmental representations based upon folklore as fake and, with World War II propaganda in mind, even dangerous. Dorson defined fakelore as “the presentation of spurious and synthetic writings under the claim that they are genuine folklore” (Dorson 1969b, 60). He particularly opposed commercial, jingoistic figures hailed as American folk heroes like Paul Bunyan and Pecos Bill. Although few scholars countered Dorson’s views on fakelore during his lifetime, after his death, Dorson’s former student Alan Dundes disagreed with Dorson, not on the creation of fakelore, but on how folklorists should approach it. Dundes
argued “the existence of fakelore has been intricately and inseparably involved with the study of folklore from its very beginnings at the end of the eighteenth century” (Dundes 1985, 6). Using the examples of Ossian, the Grimm’s Household Tales, and the Kalevala, Dundes alleviated some of the scorn Dorson had heaped on Paul Bunyan as a supposed American folk hero. Because folklorists cannot choose the lore that Americans embrace and because the figures the general public perceive as folklore are as important as what scholars legitimate as genuine folklore, Dundes urged folklorists to treat fakelore as seriously as folklore. There is “indisputably a need to invent tradition. And not just invent tradition, but to label it tradition,” Dundes argued (1985, 11).

Important for the argument that I will set forth in this chapter, Dundes noted that in all instances of nineteenth century fakelore, the country in question was suffering from a national inferiority complex (Dundes 1985, 12). When the culture in question is threatened by the superiority of another (Sweden for the Finns, France for the Germans, England for the Scottish), they seek a tradition. I argued in the Baltimore Context chapter that part of understanding Baltimore required analyzing and contextualizing its relationship to the other big cities in the Northeast. As a little big city that has fallen on hard times since the 1970s, Baltimore is in the midst of a local inferiority complex.

Enter the Baltimore Hon. In many ways, Baltimore’s Hon image is similar to the American folk heroes of yore, reminiscent of Dorson’s “American Comic Demigods”: hard-working, kind, of the people, down-to-earth, and independent
While Dorson despised the commercially fabricated Paul Bunyan, Dundes pointed out that Dorson’s criticism is primarily a matter of origins rather than function. As far as function, Dundes sees fakelore filling “a national, psychological need: namely, to assert one’s national identity, especially in a time of crisis, and to instill pride in that identity” (Dundes 1985, 13). Further, he explained why fakelore seems to be invented, “where folklore is deemed lacking or insufficient,” Dundes argued, creative people “fill the void” by “creating a national epic or national ‘folk’ hero *ex nihilo* if necessary” or, more common, “embroider and inflate fragments of folklore into folkloristic fabrications” (Dundes 1985, 13).

An earlier, related concept developed in Germany was *folklorismus* or folklorism, popular or commercial materials constructed out of folk components studied as a cultural phenomenon. Folklore historiographer Regina Bendix argued that folklorism’s true value was in forcing “debaters to recognize the constructed nature of folk cultural authenticity itself” (Bendix 1997, 176). Hans Moser argued folklorism is “primarily commercially determined and deeply anchored in the tourism and entertainment industries, both increasingly important branches of the economy” (Moser 1962, 199). As a part of the new reflexivity of the discipline, Bendix argued that “from an initial dismissal of folklorism as the spurious and manipulated, historical research had forced folklorists to recognize the parallels between scholarly reconstructions of folk cultural good and societal efforts to construct aesthetic representations of folkness” (Bendix 1997, 185).
The importance of folklorism and its rejection of authenticity, therefore, was that it drove the discipline towards “issues concerning political economy, politics of culture, and folklore in the marketplace,” and it did so long before American folklorists would begin considering such issues (Bendix 1997, 186).

Similarly, in the 1980s, folklorists continue to examine and analyze how “authentic” traditions were constructed, acknowledged, and emerged in particular contexts, as did other disciplines. Historians, anthropologists, and sociologists all contributed, sometimes without acknowledging folkloristic precedent. In 1983 historians Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger released the influential book *Invention of Tradition* (1983), which proffered the idea of the processes of constructing a tradition or putting the aura of traditionality around a relatively new tradition rather than taking an essentialistic, positivistic, or naturalistic view of tradition.

A related twentieth-century debate was over the role of mass media in relation to folklore. Some argued that mass media defiled and displaced folklore, while others argued that it adapted, encouraged, and spread folklore (Dégh 1994). While some purists prefer to reject any folklore tainted by commercialism, an intermingling with folklore may be one of the distinctive characteristics of American folklore. In urban folklore in the Baltimore metropolitan area, and perhaps in the nation at large, folklore appears to blend with a consumer culture model, where residents can voluntarily consume, resist, or modify symbolic local forms in an attempt to lay claim to the local. In a postindustrial society, the
accumulation and arrangement of consumer goods compensates for a lack of production or craftsmanship by residents. Simon J. Bronner refers to this as “consumership,” resulting in new hybridized cultural forms (Bronner 1986a, 1-22; see also Bronner 1986b). Following the American value of democracy through the free market and distinguishing American folklore from the folklore of other countries, some twenty-first century American scholars are willing to see tradition as a choice rather than a yoke (for example, see Bronner 2011). For example, it will be worth noting, HonFest gives native Baltimoreans and transplants alike the opportunity to perform their Baltimore identity. While fervent nationalism has been linked to war mongering and anti-intellectualism, no similar connotation has formed about American city pride, allowing for unabashed performances of locality in modern American culture.

Commercialism in folklore is sacrilegious to some traditionalist. While folklorists lean towards the progressive and multicultural, consumer culture leans toward the conservative, the mainstream, and the status quo, and allowing commercialism into the equation would taint the purity of the discipline’s materials, one of Dorson’s primary concerns over fakelore. But refusing to acknowledge the commercial end of folklore ignores much of the folklore at its most dynamic, particularly in the city. As folklorist John Dorst noted in Chadd’s Ford, Pennsylvania, individuals and advanced consumer capitalism at times perform the folklorist’s former role (Dorst 1989). In his case study, Dorst examined how advanced consumer capitalism had penetrated folklore to such an
extent that, businesses, rather than folklorists, made it their duty to discover and display “tradition.” Jack Santino weaves a similar argument in his consideration of advance consumer culture influencing and perpetuating American calendar customs (Santino 1996).

A number of folklorists have commented on how tradition and heritage can be peddled, not always nefariously, through the free market. Folklorist Simon J. Bronner has noted that, “because folklore gave tradition its form and expression, it permitted reproduction in the public marketplace. Traditions could be peddled, adapted, and invented to legitimate behavior represented in campaigns ranging widely from ‘traditional values’ to ‘gay rights’” (Bronner 2002, 57). Barbara Kirshenbatt-Gimblett, commenting on the creation of a heritage industry, noted that heritage is not simply the preservation of the old, but also the creation of something new. This creation of the new out of the old can be particularly valuable in the modern world, because “heritage” adds renewed economic value to places that have lost their economic value or imbues value into places that were never profitable. As Kirshenblatt-Gimblett puts it, “Dying economies stage their own rebirth as displays of what they once were, sometimes before the body is cold” (Kirshenblatt-Gimblett 1998, 151). In many ways, HonFest is one of Kirshenblatt-Gimblett’s “purpose-built tourist attractions” because it represents and commodifies a people while simultaneously insulating the spectators from those people. Rather than exporting a good, heritage locations import the tourist, and through this, “heritage becomes an instrument
of urban redevelopment” (Kirshenblatt-Gimblett 1998, 155). The criticism in Baltimore arises from putting a culture on display before it is extinguished (Kirshenblatt-Gimblett 1998, 165).

Barbara Johnstone undertook a similar case study in Pittsburgh. She noted the commodification of a blue-collar dialect in Pittsburgh, where one can buy “yinz” T-shirts (Johnstone 2009). Whether from Pittsburgh or not, buying the esteemed vernacular allows residents and tourists to “perform local identity” in a way that both shows a yearning for an authentic sense of rootedness and shows an inclination for situating that authentic sense of rootedness in working-class, vernacular forms. In Pittsburgh, “yinz” T-shirts are used to “project localness” and “evoke local pride and nostalgia,” even among populations who are not directly connected to that working-class tradition (Johnstone 2009). These pieces of vernacular speech are then combined with other pieces of local pride (in Baltimore, the same phenomenon occurs through the connection of the Hon to pink flamingos, National Bohemian beer, and blue crabs).

The Festival and the Fair

The word *festival* comes to us form the Latin *festum*, the plural form of the noun “feast,” indicating a period of feasting and merriment. In modern English, the word can refer to several cultural phenomena, ranging from a holiday observance to a celebration in honor of a person, event, area, art form or staple crop to a film or folk festival to a county fair.
Festival is one of the folklorist’s oldest genres. For example, in 1888, in the first issue of the *Journal of American Folklore*, the “Folk-Lore Scrap-Book” reported on “The Festival of the Sacrifice of the White Dog” on the Onondaga reservation in New York (Folk-Lore Scrap-Book 1888). While festival can take on a number of meanings to the common man, Alessandro Falassi explains that festivals “commonly means a periodically recurrent, social occasion in which, through a multiplicity of forms and a series of coordinated events, participate directly or indirectly and to various degrees, all members of a whole community, united by ethnic, linguistic, religious, historical bonds, and sharing a worldview” (Falassi 1987, 2).

Sifting through the vast literature on festival, the interested scholar will note a general preference among folklorists. While not outright rejecting the marketplace, folklorists seem to strongly prefer festivals that do not reveal overt links to corporate sponsors, business interests, and local chambers of commerce. The pages of the most prestigious folklore journals, as well as the most influential collections, like Victor Turner’s *Celebration* (1982) and Alessandro Falassi’s *Time Out of Time* (1987), lean heavily towards festivals that appear native, ancient, or otherwise disconnected from modernity. Carnival is the prime example (see Abrahams 1972, Crowley 1999, Lindahl 1996, Elliot 1999). Similar to other folklore genres, the festivals that drew folkloristic attention appeared imbued with an inherent authenticity, and folklorists sought to capture this “authentic” essence, especially in the face of a hostile modernity. In addition to
these, folklorists have been drawn to big festivals, like Mardi Gras in Louisiana and Halloween across the United States (Ancelet 2001, Ware 2007, Santino 1994). Lost in the middle was the most common neighborhood festival, not ancient enough to be revered, not large enough to be a spectacle, but common enough to hold some relation to most Americans’ lives. As a result, the United States is not to have a strong festival culture, but it may be that American festivals are fundamentally different than other countries.

Modern folklorists have also begun to see the importance of understanding rather than rejecting market influences on modern festivals. In 1978, John A. Gutowski suggested Americans had a penchant for “protofestivals”—local celebrations where a community puts its private traditions up for public display (Gutowski 1978). At these festivals, Gutowski found that “folk symbols, folk naming practices, and other collective representations of community identity perpetuate the festival’s commemorative function” (Gutowski 1978, 113). Regina Bendix examined how tourism and economic motives influenced “authentic” displays of folklore at several festivals in the resort town of Interlaken, Switzerland. In contrast to the presiding view, Bendix argued that an influx of tourists did not corrupt local tradition. Rather, it gave locals the opportunity, the impetus, and the motivation to display their preferred version of local culture to outsiders (Bendix 1989).

The 1970s, 1980s, and 1990s were prolific decades for festival research. Victor Turner’s *Celebration* and Alessandro Falassi’s *Time Out of Time* presented

As with other genres, scholarly inquiry into festival continued to change and develop. While maintaining an interest in performance, Dorothy Noyes, for example, investigated the politics of festival of dancing the Patum in Catalonia, Spain (Noyes 2003). Embracing the relationship between commerce and festival, Leslie Prosterman studied the midwestern county fair, an American agricultural festival typical throughout the United States, but one that featured formal organizing committees and corporate sponsorships not usually associated with folk festivals (Prosterman 1995). John Dorst documented how the festival (and therefore, out of necessity, the ethnographer) had taken a postmodern turn in Chadds Ford Days, a festival celebrating the carefully invented history and tradition of an affluent community (Dorst 1989). In the twenty-first century, Lisa Gabbert researched the Winter Carnival in McCall, Idaho, an event popular in the town, but supported mostly by the local chamber of commerce (Gabbert 2011).
Of interest to folklorists from the beginning, festival scholarship has changed with the times. Folklorists began their studies fascinated with the otherness and authenticity of festival or concerned for its disappearance. Scholars such as Richard Bauman and Roger Abrahams took festival studies in the performance direction, and twenty-first century scholarship has attempted to unpack the discourse of power inherent in the construction and maintenance of community festivals. One of the most complex and universal of human traditions, festival provides a peak into the creation and maintenance of a sense of community under threat of a globalizing world. While folklorists expanded the types of festival worthy of scholarly investigation, there exists a wealth of local community festivals that deserve proper investigations from scholars equipped with a folkloristic toolbox. By investigating HonFest in Baltimore in the late twentieth and early twenty-first century, I intend to show how festival functions as a text allowing scholars to unravel the festival’s definition of place in American cities.

The folklorist’s scale has been too broad or too narrow to consistently notice festivals like HonFest. Folklorists have spent barrels of ink on Halloween, Mardi Gras, and mummer’s parades and given plenty of attention to small festivals dedicated to foods, neighborhoods, and ethnicities. But folklorists have not yet fully investigated the relationship between the festival form, the city, and its many sponsors, organizers, and champions. In the desire for a connection to an authentic sense of place, Baltimoreans seek out tradition in the face of the
onslaught of modernity. Rather than judging the authentic and worthy and the inauthentic and unworthy, culture scholars can analyze tradition by inquiring into its builders, its maintenance men, and its public relations machine. What cues do they send about what the town is, who built it, and who belongs? Festivals predate written record and span the globe. In a fast moving, multicultural world, the community festival is a story that locals tell themselves about themselves.

**HonFest Studies**

Academic interest in HonFest has been primarily pursued by a small number of academics who fall clearly into two camps. The first camp consists of applied archaeologists David A. Gadsby, Robert C. Chidester, and Paul A. Shackel, who were involved in the Hampden Community Archaeology Project (Gadsby & Chidester 2007, Shackel and Gadsby 2008, Chidester 2009, Gadsby 2011). While the Hampden neighborhood, not HonFest specifically, is at the center of their work, Gadsby, Chidester, and Shackel consistently comment on the relationship (or lack thereof) of Hampden and HonFest. These scholars argued that HonFest lampoons working-class culture, and through the tool of HonFest, the middle class appropriates the working-class “heritage” of the neighborhood while erasing its working-class history.

The direction of development seems to be headed toward the latter, however, and as developers and merchants march gentrification forward, a new symbolic economy based around the neighborhood’s working-class image has begun to evolve. Public festivals, restaurants, and shops on Hampden’s main street lampoon an imaginary blue-collar experience by disseminating inaccurate and cartoonlike images of working-class men and women. They capitalize on the “kitsch” of working-class lives and
homes and parody the tastes and styles of working-class people in public performances. In this new Hampden, working-class people are abstracted, sketched as cartoons, and relegated to the no-man’s-land of Hampden’s working past. They are thus safe and unthreatening, but retain an illusion of authenticity.\(^{198}\) (Gadsby and Chidester 2007)

The second camp has a single, but compelling, proponent, public historian Mary Rizzo (Rizzo 2008, 2010). Unlike Gadsby, Chidester, and Shackel, HonFest is Rizzo’s main interest, with the Hampden neighborhood an important background and context for the interpersonal play found at the festival. In her early work, Rizzo argued that HonFest honored (or, as she puts its, “hon-ours”), hardworking, blue-collar women. Café Hon owner and festival organizer Denise Whiting echoed that the purpose of HonFest is to “honor and appreciate the working women of Baltimore.”\(^{199}\) In subsequent work, Rizzo became more critical of HonFest (although never as critical as Gadsby, Chidester, and Shackel). She argued that “in honoring and appreciating the ‘working women’ of Baltimore, Hon Fest commodifies nostalgia for an imagined past of racial and class homogeneity through connections with a nurturing feminine figure” (2008, 266).

**Thesis**

In this chapter, I form a third argument for the place of HonFest in Baltimore life. Looking at HonFest in the context of the discordant city in nineteenth-century Baltimore and in relation to other Baltimore festivals, I argue that HonFest is an attempt to create the ideal city on an isolated island amid a city in turmoil. Hampden seems to have become a figurative stage (which
includes a literal stage during HonFest) and a battleground where city dwellers can fight over what Baltimore is and what it means to be a Baltimorean.

The choice of Hampden for this battleground is peculiar as Hampden was a latecomer to Baltimore and is geographically disconnected from the gleam of the Inner Harbor, the posh gentrification of southeast Baltimore, or the chaos of West Baltimore. But, this might be the reason that Hampden has become the battleground. Hampden is a clean slate to which others can mold their ideas of the city. Despite its skewed racial demographics, Hampden is a microcosm for Baltimore at large. Other areas like West Baltimore are too crumbled, neighborhoods like Fell’s Point and Federal Hill already too gentrified, and neighborhoods like Locust Point not gentrified enough.

When I argue that Baltimore is attempting to create the ideal city, I do not mean some sort of utopian city. Rather, I contend that Baltimore is attempting to create the best city possible. That is, the best city possible in the Baltimore context of “grittiness” and being in the shadows of larger nearby “cosmopolitan” cities. A Baltimore film and television metaphor may help to elucidate my point. This seems appropriate, as the media I will list has been influential on Baltimore’s depiction, reflection, and characterization of itself. Regardless, though, of how influential the three have been, each artist reflects a particular zeitgeist at work in the city.  

Baltimore’s first important filmmaker was John Waters. All of his films are set in Baltimore and most of them are set in North Baltimore along the Jones
Falls Expressway. Waters’s films are known to be quirky, campy, trashy, zany, and fun. Incidentally, Baltimore is known to be quirky, campy, trashy, zany, and fun. The Landor Associates 2005 report to the Baltimore City Council, hired in 2005 to help draft a strategy to rebrand Baltimore, referred to this as the “Hon factor.” City residents themselves said they believe they are “quirky,” “funky,” “off-kilter,” “hilarious,” “bizarre,” and “a little off-center.” This can be a good thing as John Lewis in “John Waters Inc.” argues that “as the nation becomes increasingly homogenized, such hyper-regionalism seems all the more distinctive and real,” leading to critic Gary Indiana referring to Baltimore’s depiction as “more authentic than the ‘big’ cultures of New York or Los Angeles, where fewer and fewer genuine local identities survive the many cycles of gentrification.”

Whether this is art imitating life or life imitating art, in the face of the big, supposedly cosmopolitan, “elite” cities of Washington, D.C., and New York, Baltimore saw this as a distinguishing characteristic, something that could be played up to differentiate the charming life in Baltimore versus the sanitized tower and apartment life in the Washington metropolitan area.

Baltimore’s second important filmmaker was Barry Levinson. Levinson also filmed in white parts of Baltimore, but rather than focusing on quirk, Levinson focused on nostalgia, another characteristic of Baltimore life. Levinson’s Baltimore film tetralogy, Diner, Liberty Heights, Avalon, and Tin Men, all look to Baltimore’s “glorious” past, before the 1968 Baltimore riots, before deindustrialization, and before white flight to the suburbs would drop Baltimore’s
population by almost half a million in only half a decade. This is the Baltimore that many, especially working-class whites and the middle class in general, want to remember. Gilbert Sandler wrote specifically about the penchant of Baltimoreans for nostalgia. He reported in his *Baltimore Sun* column “Baltimore Glimpses” that Baltimore’s past life would regularly outdo the headline news for most reader response. (Similarly, Rodricks reports his “Welcome to Baltimore, Hon” received more reader response than any other topic he covered in 15 years).

Baltimore’s third important filmmaker is David Simon. David Simon’s work, *The Corner* and *The Wire*, has focused on the violence, corruption, and decay prevalent throughout Baltimore in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. This is the Baltimore of the 1980s and 1990s that lost 120,000 residents and saw its industry erode, leaving blue-collar workers without blue-collar jobs. It saw the destruction of neighborhoods and the epidemic of drugs. It saw a decimated school system and the crumbling of historically African-American neighborhoods, all with a city, state, and federally funded glean shining from the Inner Harbor. This is the Baltimore residents see around them and the Baltimore that they fear coming in the future.

The symbolic importance of HonFest, then, is that it rejects the violence, corruption, and decay of David Simon while embracing the quirk and camp of John Waters melded with the nostalgia of Barry Levinson. Because of this, I do not see HonFest being a commentary specifically on Hampden. The festival
seems to have citywide implications, and looking at the participation by festivalgoers, by the accounts of detractors, proponents, and my own fieldwork, festivalgoers are primarily people with a connection to Baltimore, but not current residents of the neighborhood. Lacking other outlets or venues for interpreting Baltimore’s past, defining Baltimore’s present, and prophesizing Baltimore’s future, HonFest has become the locus of Baltimore’s need for an identity in the face of crisis. I find the business aspect to be less important than other authors. While organizers Denise Whiting and Café Hon set the structure of the festival, it is grassroots participation that makes HonFest visually and emotionally appealing. What Baltimoreans have locked into is a contested battleground to redefine and reimagine a positive Baltimore identity in the twenty-first century.

The politics of HonFest show an attraction to the rootedness and authenticity of working-class whites while simultaneously recasting Baltimore to dismiss its majority black population (and also dismissing the original models of the Hon image). The festival gives up the hope of unity in favor of promoting particular neighborhoods as the “ideal” Baltimore and Baltimoreans. Of course, one should note, from the Baltimore’s Best Hon designation and the performances of the contestants, this festival is about white, blue-collar Baltimoreans and their neighborhoods, not Hampden specifically. Hampden is just one of these neighborhoods. Ethnic and religious neighborhood festivals had been done before, but with the aim of displaying pride, group cohesion, and
belonging rather than in promoting the idea of a proper Baltimorean, which is what HonFest does (a Hon is not any particular ethnicity or religion).

Much of this happens through HonFest in the late twentieth and twenty-first centuries, which raises the question of its origins, and particularly the rhetorical significance of “hon.” This one innocent-looking word, heard across the country, has come to symbolize and encapsulate race, class, and gender in Baltimore. While some will denigrate anything “hon” as the epitome of sensationalized triviality taking precedence over important matters, in cultural terms the “Hon” debate is something much larger, much more important than any single issue. The HonFest controversy is a stand in for this older, longer lasting, deeper controversy that started in 1991. Its roots go back to at least the mid-twentieth century, although echoes can be found as far back as the Know-Nothing rally of the 1850s.

**Hampden, Old and New**

Although I argue that the Hon is a citywide image, the setting for Café Hon and HonFest is the distinctive Baltimore neighborhood of Hampden. Hampden is a neighborhood in Baltimore that in the twenty-first century is best known for West 36th Street or “the Avenue.” But Hampden’s true origins are far to the west, where it was established around grist and cotton mills. The mills have since vanished, but the neighborhood retains a small-town feel, making it a unique and desirable location for Baltimore’s new middle-class population. Fleeing the depressed farming economy from the end of the Civil War through
World War II, tens of millions of Americans moved into cities seeking work in the local industries (Beirne 1982). Thousands of these migrants moved into Hampden.

In the eighteenth century, Hampden became the center of grain-milling, taking advantage of the Jones Falls. The mills grew steadily, first as flourmills and then as cotton mills. For a good part of the nineteenth century, these were not so much company-owned milltowns as villages clustered around a mill. As the mills consolidated and the country went into depression, thousands flocked to the Baltimore area, and Hampden became one of biggest employers in the country (Beirne 1982). Many of the migrants were from rural Maryland, Pennsylvania, Virginia, and West Virginia, giving up their long established way of life for a chance at a steady paycheck in the mills. Longtime resident and local historian Bill Harvey argued the origins of the unique character of this big city, “small town” neighborhood came from its “geographic isolation from the rest of the city” and that local people feared the “imagined onslaught from ‘the city’ and the immigrants and blacks who lived there” (Harvey 1993, 44).

Baltimore annexed Hampden in 1888, but many residents still think of their neighborhood as “a distinct community with closer ties to ‘up the country’ than to city neighborhoods like ethnic Highlandtown or black Johnston Square” (Harvey 1993, 44). Taking note as late as 1923, the Baltimore Evening Sun opened its November 28 edition with the headline “Woodberry Area Hardly Touched by City Advance: District, Including Hampden, Much As It Was 50 Years

From the end of the Civil War through 1923, Hampden flourished as a milltown. Labor strikes were not unheard of, but the industry was prosperous and the demands, therefore, permissible. This came to a screeching halt in 1923, when, in an effort to resist the reimplementation of the ten-hour day, the Hampden-Woodberry millworkers held one of the biggest strikes in the country (Beirne 1982, Harvey 1993, Shackel and Gadsby 2008). The owners refused to budge, and the consequences of the strike went far beyond the loss of eight weeks of paychecks. The strike would be the catalyst for the relocation of the mills to the south, where cheap, non-union labor was more readily available.

As proof that Hampden’s blue-collar workers have a cultural and historical heritage narrative distinct from the labor historian, ethnographers have found the disastrous 1923 strike has not just been reimagined in the Hampdenite mind. It has been completely erased (Harvey 1993, 48). The Baltimore Neighborhood Heritage Project (see Shopes 1986) conducted dozens of interviews with residents alive in 1923, some of them working in the mills at the time. Not a single resident could (or would) recall the 1923 strike, even though, for the labor historian, it is *the* pivotal Hampden event of the twentieth century. The Old Hampden narrative, it seems, leans towards one of benevolent paternalism, even after the failed strike, the nasty confrontation with owners, and the decline of the mills. According to David Gadsby, “Hampden’s contemporary historical
memory currently honors its paternalist past, which remains inscribed into the landscape through churches, grand homes, and massive textile mills” (2011). Called by another Baltimore writer euphemistically “industrial linkages,” paternalism refers to methods the mill owners employed to maintain control over their works outside of the mills (Beirne 1976, 62-65). These include building and renting worker housing, subsidizing community churches, hiring worker’s family members, and tacitly agreeing to exclude Jews, Eastern Europeans, and, most importantly, African Americans, in exchange for a peaceful workforce (Harvey 1993, 46).

Although there was labor unrest during the heyday of the mills, the overriding narrative of Old Hampden seems to be one of mutual respect between the owners and the workers. For example, Paul Shackel and David Gadsby point out that “a sense of paternalism also meant the workers often overlooked work-related hazards” and blamed accidents on the workers rather than the owners (2008). Proof can be found in the many interviews collected for the Baltimore Neighborhood Heritage Project, where interviewees can recall plenty of work accidents, but always blame the worker for the mishap. Even at more recent community workshops sponsored by the Hampden Community Archaeology Project, Shackel and Gadsby remember the community moderator scolding Gadsby for criticizing the mill’s paternalistic system of control, asserting that “the mill owners were kind and gentle leaders who built this town and [Gadsby had] no business defaming their character” (2008). Holding the moderator in
contempt, Shackel and Gadsby denounced her as a middle class thinker, even after explaining earlier that Old Hampden residents (i.e., long-term, working-class) were hand picked to moderate the workshops (2008).

In fact, a haze of paternalism seems to influence much of Old Hampden’s narratives, infuriating the labor historian and confusing many of the scholar-activists attempting to do radical bottom-up history through oral history and community partnership programs such as the Baltimore Neighborhood Heritage Project and the Hampden Community Archeology Project. Although there were plenty of hardships in Hampden, compared to their previous lives, Hampdenites felt they were living well. As a Baltimore Neighborhood Heritage Project interviewee told Bill Harvey, “I thought, ‘This place looks so prosperous and all compared to what we had there.’ People dressed nice and coming home from work and, my God, here you got a job. We thought you were in paradise here when we seen everybody working and everything. It was really nice. Oh God, we thought we were good” (1993).

Although the mills declined after 1923, until the 1960s, they continued to be Hampden’s biggest employer. But even as the mills began to vanish into the twentieth century, Hampden found itself in a unique position. Elsewhere, when the mills left a milltown, the workers left too. Hampden, on the other hand, was not only near a city, but by the mid-twentieth century, it was in the center of a city. Shuttered mills no longer necessitated a move. Laborers could attempt to find work elsewhere in Baltimore while maintaining their old community ties.
The 1970s and 1980s beckoned new changes to the demographics of the old neighborhood. Young adults found it harder than their parents to find steady, good paying blue-collar jobs in Baltimore, forcing some of them to look elsewhere. White, middle-class outsiders, on the other hand, were attracted to Baltimore. Statistically, the area has a lower crime rate than other neighborhoods near the center of Baltimore, and more cynically, it is seen as a white haven in a city that is over sixty percent black.

As the United States shifted from production to consumption, a parallel shift followed in Hampden. The shutdowns forced some mill workers to find work elsewhere. Others, however, “set up businesses in the community—pharmacies, beauty parlors, grocery stores, and so forth,” which Robert Chidester and David Gadsby see as the “first phase in the transformation of Hampden-Woodberry’s economy into one driven by consumption” (2010). After the collapse of industry, developers took an interest in Hampden, creating studios and offices. As the neighborhood began to attract a more affluent population, housing prices began to rise. Gentrification was especially troubling in Hampden, as it was the opposite of the community’s central value: stability. For example, in the 1970s, historical geographer Randall Beirne found families living in the same house or on the same block in Hampden for three to four generations (Beirne 1976, 84). The irony is the new middle class gentrifiers seem to value Hampden for its working-class authenticity, while at the same time forcing those residents out of the neighborhood. As Chidester and Gadsby argue, in this mindset “places become
worth something not because they are associated with a particular person or event, but because they have ‘something about them,’ a ‘character’ or ‘style’ that speaks to the aesthetic sensibilities of middle-class gentrifiers” (Chidester and Gadsby 2010). In Hampden, I argue this “something about them” is a sense of authenticity that the working class exudes in the eyes of the middle class. But rather than seek out the residents, the middle class seems to find authenticity both contagious and conjurable. By contagious, in this instance I mean the idea that a place remains “authentic” even when the people who made that place leave (by choice or by force). By conjurable, I mean the middle class believes it can invoke the authentic blue-collar Hampdenite experience several times a year through the safe frame of consumer culture rather than through association with their working-class neighbors.

In this vein, business owners began to see new possibilities for the Avenue (Hampden’s main business thoroughfare). Instead of providing services for the neighborhood, the Avenue targeted the tourist and the new resident with pricy boutiques and working-class themed restaurants. In their push for gentrification, Chidester and Gadsby see “a new symbolic economy based around the neighborhood’s traditional working-class image” (2010). Seeing more serious implications in this, they decry events such as HonFest “publicly ‘celebrating’ a version of working-class culture that never existed here,” ignoring the true labor history of the neighborhood, and showing that “the everyday realities of working-class existence have become invisible to those who do not share in them.” In an
earlier article, the same authors saw Hampden as transforming “into a caricature of itself,” somewhere “between the ‘genuine article’ of a working-class neighborhood” and “a complete fake” (2007). Taking a sharp stand, they saw this new “symbolic economy based on the working-class images” as “lampoon[ing] an imaginary blue-collar experience by disseminating inaccurate and cartoonlike images of working-class men and women,” “parodying the tastes and styles of working-class people,” and ultimately dismissing them to “the no-man’s-land of Hampden’s working past.” Using a combination of field observations and rhetorical analysis, I will argue for a nuanced position. I argue the deeper meaning of HonFest and the Hon image is its rejection of a sordid Baltimore present in favor of a nostalgia for a quirky, idiosyncratic Baltimore associated with a white, working-class past.

To test this thesis, I conducted firsthand ethnographic observation of HonFest. Hoping for a new perspective, my stated objective was two fold. First, I wanted to reveal how HonFest participants spoke of the festival and gave meaning to the performances. Second, I wanted to closely examining the layout and construction of the festival site itself to see what hidden meanings it would reveal.

**Field Observations**

On a warm, sunny morning, I park in Johns Hopkins University’s garage and walk towards the HonFest festival. I greet Hampden resident sitting on porches as I walk and note that they do not return my greetings. I walk past one
of Baltimore’s ubiquitous wooden benches, inscribed with its new slogan, “The Greatest City in America.” I see a purple pink flamingo in one yard, combining Baltimore pride for the pink flamingo and the Baltimore Ravens.205 When I arrive on 36th Street, the festival is only just beginning, but there are already plenty of Hons milling around the Avenue. At makeshift street salons, beauticians are styling beehives on top of women’s heads. In the pink “Glamour Lounge,” stylists from Kumbaya, a Hampden hair salon, craft beehives for $20 per head. “The higher the hair, the closer to heaven,” one of the stylists tells me. Although the entire festival exists to make money, in the Glamour Lounge, the stylists are almost nonchalant about it, asking customers to stick their $20 in a jar. It is as if they are trying to say the day is really about the look, and everything else is secondary. The chairs in the Glamour Lounge are pink and cushy and the floor (in the middle of the street) is carpeted. The stylists spray every piece of hair with Aqua Net, and the whole head is riddled with hairpins, with the goal of a hairdo that will stay in place for a full week.206 A Baltimore Hon will wrap toilet paper around her hair before bed to preserve her beehive.Traditionally, ladies would have to go back to the salon to have the hair taken down. One hairdresser tells me she has been styling beehives at HonFest for fourteen years. What do you think about the criticism the festival has received, I ask her? Ignore it, she says. HonFest is “so much fun.” It is a great way to spend a summer day outside. Who goes to HonFest, I ask her? Everyone goes to HonFest, she tells
me, but white, blue-collar women have the most fun. I thank her for the 
conversation, and she tells me to be sure not to miss the Little Miss Hon contest.

Festival participants seem to range from six to sixty. Cameras flash 
everywhere as Hons meet, exchange Bawlmerse, and document the memory 
with their camera phones. The mood feels to me like a combination of Mardi 
Gras and Halloween. The first Hon I speak to has black lycra pants, an animal 
skin jacket, red glasses that match her red high heeled shoes, and a beehive 
adorned with half a dozen National Bohemian beer cans. A smaller Hon, about to 
go on stage for the Little Miss Hon contest, reminds me of a Dr. Seuss character 
in a blue beehive wig, yellow cat-eye glasses, and a pink skirt. For those who 
came without costume, frilly boas and cat-eye glasses are for sale for $10 each. 

One of three HonFest stages, I see the Best Hon Contest stage is set and 
ready for the Hons. Colorful pedestals and frilly boas hang from its four corners. 
The show will not start for a few hours, but an audience is already gathering in 
the black plastic chairs. At HonFest, there is the scheduled show on the stage, 
and then there is the impromptu show on the street. As any adult woman can 
participate in either, the scenes are remarkably similar. Cuteness overwhelms me 
as I take a seat in front of the Little Miss Hon Stage. Young girls dressed in Hon 
regalia take the center of the stage one at a time to answer Bawlmer questions 
in their best Bawlmerse. The girl’s outfits are even more outrageous than the 
adults, as they seem to have less regard for the unspoken Hon aesthetic. These 
include Pink frilly dresses, oversized orange scarves, 1950s house dresses, a
Little Miss Muppet costume, the Dr. Seuss character I saw earlier, a diner
waitress uniformed in pink, with matching wig, serving Natty Boh and pink
flamingos, and another is dressed as a Native American. The master of
ceremonies evokes the Hon persona but does not have on any of the
stereotypical Hon garb. Instead, she is a devotion to National Bohemian beer,
from her shirt to her earrings. She announces that all of the Little Miss Hon
participants are winners.

After the Little Miss Hon Contest, I continue walking down the Avenue,
checking on the local establishments. Baltimore floods my senses. Well, perhaps
not Baltimore, but Bawlmerese and the Baltimoresque. Pink flamingos, blue
crabs, Natty Boh, Hons. It is all the more jarring when I hit “Philly’s Best,”
offering pizza, subs, Indian food, “and more.” They are clearly not participating
in the street festival, but they are open for business. Next to them is Thai food,
and a little further down, I find a man tying balloon animals for children. Yes, he
tells me, he does pink flamingos. The street is starting to get crowded, and I am
trying to make an assessment of who is here. As a scholar, I am hoping to
clearly demarcate who is here, who this festival is serving, and therefore, how it
can be interpreted. This proves impossible. Unattired, upper middle class families
push past me, infants in strollers. Women on the streets and in the Hon Bar
assure me of their staunch blue-collar roots and their distant Baltimore heritage.
And friendly derelicts sit just beyond the crowds, watching the foot traffic and
taking advantage of a day of unenforced open container laws. The crowd seems
far from homogenous. The only person I cannot seem to find is a Hampdenite. There are plenty of Baltimore residents, and lots who tell me they used to be from Hampden or their grandparents lived in Hampden.

I notice quite a few women in pink T-shirts. I stop one to ask her about it. She tells me she is Café Hon owner Denise Whiting’s niece. Anyone in a pink T-shirt is either a Whiting family member or a volunteer. I ask her about the festival. Denise considers HonFest to be a family event, she tells me. In addition to Denise Whiting, HonFest is run by her three sisters, their children, and their grandchildren. Denise’s mother, Judge Judy, has been a Best Hon Contest judge from the beginning. Denise started the festival as the Best Hon Contest in front of her store to drum up business. It was such a hit, it expanded dramatically.

"Does Denise live in Hampden?" I ask curiously. "No." None of the Whitings live in Hampden.

As midday approaches, I am hungry, and I decide I want the real Baltimore culinary experience. I wander over to Café Hon to have a real Baltimore meal. Café Hon is not hard to find as its fire exit is famously adorned with a 3-story pink flamingo that was once at the center of a city ordinance turned local heritage dispute called Flamingogate. Above the flamingo, I notice the addition of the one eyed, thickly mustached Natty Boh mascot. Below, directly next door, is a life-sized Elvis statue, mid-dance. As I attempt to find a table, I realize lunch at Café Hon at HonFest at noon is a popular choice. As I stand in line, I meet my first African-American Hon and my first drag queen Hon.
The African-American Hon tells me she loves Baltimore’s neighborhood spirit. The wait for a table is too long, so I grab a counter seat instead. The walls and counter are bright green, and there are little pots of flowers everywhere. There is only one other gentleman at the counter, and when I ask why he is at HonFest, he tells me brusquely that he is here “for lunch,” so I decide to check the scene in the Hon Bar instead. The crowd in the bar is an eclectic mix. Next to the door is a group in pink, Dr. Seuss-esque beehives. Beside them is an unadorned family that just wants sustenance. At the bar, a line of people are dug in for a day of day drinking. I saddle up to the bar, where I find a stuffed pink flamingo and a papier-mâché RCA dog staring down at me from the liquor shelf. The menu is a special menu for the two-day festival. “What’s good?” I ask Chris the bartender. Chris is a contrast among himself. He has heavily tattooed arms and limping earlobes from extracted expanders. But the rest of him is groomed like he is about to walk into a Wall Street office. The burgers, he tells me. I order a crab cake. “What’s the deal with this ‘Natty Boh’?” I ask Chris, playing ignorant. Natty Boh is National Bohemian beer, he tells me. It was brewed in Baltimore for 120 years. The Natty Boh man still winks at Baltimoreans from atop the old brewery, even though the beer is brewed in Milwaukee now. “Some people put Old Bay in it,” Chris tells me. I am incredulous. I have lived in Maryland most of my life, and I have never heard of this tradition. He points to the lady next to me, who is shaking Old Bay into her draught. “What’s that about?” I ask her. She turns to me. She has short brown hair, bad teeth, and a carpal tunnel brace on
her arm. She tells me her parents taught her to shake Old Bay into her beer. A cold beer with Old Bay is the perfect summer drink, she tells me. Are you from Hampden, I ask? “No, hon.” Her family was from Hampden, she assures me, but her father wanted to be a farmer. They moved to Frederick where he could farm. She attends the festival and “knows the tradition.” She watched her dad shake Old Bay into his beer, and now she shakes Old Bay into hers. Now at family reunions, both sides criticize the other side for how funny they talk.

The Old Bay-in-the-beer lady is with a group of friends, and I ask them what they think of the festival. The festival needs more babes, they tell me. Babes, I ask? Do you mean attractive women? No, babes, like Babe Ruth, they say. Young men in Baltimore used to be called babe, like Babe Ruth. For some reason, “babe” disappeared and “hon” remained. I asked what they thought the point of the festival was? One of ladies tells me, “This is a fun festival, not a stuck up festival like in Alexandria or other areas.” After finishing my crab cake, I pay my bill and turn to leave. An idea strikes me, I pause, and turn back to Chris. “Hey, Chris, where are you from?” Right here, he tells me. Hampden. 34th Street. I celebrate quietly. I turn to walk away. I say goodbye to my newfound lady friends. “Have fun, hon,” they reply.

Across the street from Café Hon is HONtown, the one stop retail for all things Hon, located, as the shop’s sign says, in “Bawlmer, Murlin.” I walk up to the “Bawlmer’s Best Hon Contestant Registration.” The tent’s poles have been wrapped in frilly, hot pink boas. “Can men enter?” I ask. “Sorry, hon, women
only." The line for beehive hairdos has increased. Those seated in salon chairs and those waiting in line drink copious amounts of alcohol while waiting. I meet another drag queen Hon in the street. He is over six feet tall, muscled, and dressed in Baltimore Orioles gear from hat to boot, including orange daisy duke shorts and an orange midriff shirt. Blond curls flow from beneath a black and orange Orioles baseball cap. I meet another African-American Hon further down the street. Compared to the other Hons, she looks elegant rather than garish. Under a subdued beehive, she wears a turquoise sundress with a pink sash and white pearls on her wrist. She is posing for pictures with a gentleman who is in Baltimore Ravens gear from his combat boots up to his navy officer’s cap.

I am trying to determine who lives here, who works here, and who is a reveler. I ask a few men drinking on a white marble stoop if they live here. “Nope, just sitting.” Some of the businesses have dressed up for the occasion. One otherwise unexceptional shop has put two pink flamingos in the foliage above its door, and another in its potted plant beside the stoop. Many of the shops on Hampden Avenue could be referred to as hippie or Bohemian. There are stylists, tattoo shops, restaurants, pottery shops, and a bikram yoga studio. The festival feels part Bohemian avenue, part street carnival, and part boardwalk.

I want to see who, besides Denise Whiting, is cashing in on the Hon image, so I take a walk among the vendors. In the Glamour Lounge one can buy everything necessary to instantly transform into a Hon. At another booth, one
man sells elaborate, colorful greeting cards of Hon women for $3 a piece (or 8 for $20). The artist lives in Arbutus, an inner-ring suburb of Baltimore with close cultural connections to the city. His grandmother was a Hampden artist named Blanche. At another stand, the Hon image is not for sale, but the selection shows the connection to Baltimore’s other mascots. The man hocks Baltimore T-shirts featuring the National Bohemian one-eyed, mustached mascot, the Baltimore Orioles oriole, the Baltimore Ravens raven, and the University of Maryland’s terrapin (not technically a Baltimore team), in many of them, all together, often in Maryland colors, with a Maryland flag or some other identifying feature like Russell Street. A point of contention in Baltimore has been whether or not Denise Whiting sold out HonFest. While HonFest (originally just the Best Hon Contest) has been a marketing event for Café Hon from the beginning, behind all of the Natty Boh signage, Barcardi is the true sponsor of the event (along with National Bohemian, the Maryland Lottery, M&T Bank, and Hampden merchants). One place where the Bacardi sponsorship is obvious is in the prominent Bacardi Flamingo Lounge. Although there are plenty of restaurants lining the Avenue, much of the food action seems to be in the street. Here, HonFest seems to be part carnival/county fair and part Maryland/Baltimore proponent. Vendors hock blooming onions, cotton candy, and grilled cheese. But they also sell crab cakes, pit beef, and National Bohemian.

Music 4 Vets, a non-profit, is selling Hon and Bawlmer themed guitars, including an electric pink flamingo guitar. The Tyanna Foundation, a breast
cancer awareness and prevention organization founded in Baltimore, is tying their awareness message to the HonFest theme. Under a tent with frilly pink boas and pink flamingos, they wear shirts that encourage “Keep Motor Boating ALIVE” and “Save the Girls.” Bands play throughout the day. Some seem to be generic rock bands invited because street festivals are supposed to have bands. But others devote themselves to the Baltimore experience. HonFest’s Master of Ceremonies, David DeBoy, spews a constant stream of Bawlmerse and then performs his local hit “Crabs for Christmas” in a Baltimore Orioles shirt that flaps open. In front of the band, under frilly, neon Dr. Seuss umbrellas with red brick rowhouses behind them, festivalgoers escape the sun and listen to the loud music. At the end of the festival street, St. Luke’s Evangelical Lutheran Church sits elegantly, its handsome stone countenance in sharp contrast to the gaudy colors passing before it. Directly out front Bacardi has set up a frozen drink stand. But the church does not reject the festivities; instead, it chooses to embrace them. “PEACE Be With You, Hon!” the sign says, reminding festivalgoers that Sunday Worship begins at 10 a.m. and that all are welcome. Across the street, I run into the Natty Boh mascot himself, wandering the Avenue, taking photographs with revelers.

Hanging in the street with his son, I run into the proudest Baltimorean I have ever met. He used to live in Hampden with his grandparents, and he has now returned to show his elementary school aged son his old neighborhood, which he loves. He has literally made Baltimore a part of himself. He has
tattooed every Baltimore icon onto his body. At the top of his left arm, where a World War II sailor would have had an anchor, he has a Hon. The Hon is in subdued colors, but full of personality. She is chewing bubble gum, blowing a bubble. She has a brown beehive, large but not outrageous, and she wears white cat-eye sunglasses, ones that look like they were picked from an eyeglass shop, not a costume shop. Beneath the Hon swirl Baltimore’s other icons: a blue crab, Old Bay, the Natty Boh guy, the Utz potato chips girl, Domino Sugars, a Baltimore Oriole standing on a number five (Brooks Robinson’s retired number), the Baltimore Colts mascot, a pink flamingo, a raven (Poe’s raven rather than the Baltimore Ravens), the Interstate 695 sign, the words “Charm City,” and an outline of the state of Maryland as the Maryland flag. And what is your name, I ask his son? “Brooks,” he tells me. Before I leave, I point out that despite the Natty Boh tattoo on his arm, the man is drinking a 16 oz. Pabst Blue Ribbon. He shrugs. “It’s cheaper.”

By 2 p.m., I am sensing the crowd’s intoxication. While I grab a seat for the Best Hon contest, a Hon walks up and purposely gyrates her buttocks inches from my face. Why do you come to HonFest, I ask her? “Because it’s fun, hon!” she says and sidles away. Although HonFest is under-researched, it is certainly not under-photographed. Photographers abound, giddy with the color, sass, and personality that surround them.

It is time for the main event. The Best Hon Contest begins with Sherry Myers, Café Hon waitress, singing the national anthem followed by the pledge of
allegiance. Councilman Nick Mosley, 7th District, gets on stage and calls “Hampden, USA” one of the greatest neighborhoods in the United States. “Hon is in your soul,” the MC announces to the crowd. A bald Elvis impersonator marches the contestants up one at a time for their interviews to assess their Hon credibility. The contestants wear frilly pink boas, cat-eye glasses with rhinestones, stretch pants, animal print, housedresses, and gaudy accessories. The beehive hairdo is ubiquitous. Some are real, and some are wigs. Even though the judges frown upon wigs, wig-wearers have won in the past. The wigs vary in color, ranging from natural blond to neon pink.

The general pattern that emerges from the interviews is that Hons are hard-working women, Hons like to have a good time, Hons support local businesses, Hons “keep it classy,” and Hons drink National Bohemian beer. Hons love crabs, the Orioles, and the Ravens (the hometown teams), and Aqua Net (used in Hairspray). They wear pink (pink flamingos), orange (Orioles), and purple (Ravens). Women who enter the contest from beyond the Baltimore Metropolitan Area are referred to as “imported Hons.”

The Best Hon contestants are asked questions where they are given the opportunity to combine a Bawlmer accent, Bawlmer knowledge, and a little humor.

Where’s the best place to buy underwear?
“Second Time Around. Have you been there?”

Your first pair of colored underwear, which color did you get?
“Leopard.”
What does it take to be a great Hon?
“A great Hon has personality and great make-up.”
Another says, “Hons are intelligent and beautiful and up here today.”

What does B.Y.O.B. stand for?
“Bring Your Own Old Bay.”

“Why come to HonFest?”
“Hard-working women, big hair, and tons of fun.”
Or later, “I live down the street so I need to come out and be with my folk.”

What’s the best summer dinner?
“Natty Boh and a crab cake *sammidge* on the front porch steps.”

What was your favorite childhood outfit?
“O’s T-shirt and cutoffs.”

“What type of perfume are you wearing?”
“Jean Nate. Helps with the mosquitos.”

“What do you do if your bowling shoes stink?”
“You use baking soda then if it doesn’t work you use Jean Nate.”

What do you do with Bisquick?
“Fill the cracks in the sidewalk. Put some in there and it gets real hard like concrete.”

The MC orders, “March around ladies so we can see what you’ve got!”

While the judges tabulate the top ten, the organizers play a game with the audience. They throw bingo balls into the audience, and whoever catches a ball has to go on stage. On the stage, the audience member is given a word in Bawlmerese, and they must use it properly in a sentence.

“Tard.”
“I’m a little *tard* today.”

“Flare.”
“I brought you *flares* from my garden.”
“LiddleItly.”
“He took me out to eat in LiddleItly.”

The judges turn their scorecards in. As would be expected at the inverse of a beauty pageant, all of the young, attractive women, even the ones who did well in their interviews, are eliminated. The ten finalists are frumpy, overweight women over forty (similar to the judges table). The top ten are contractually obligated to return for the finale the next day. The next day, Stacy Hurley is declared Baltimore’s Best Hon. This year, the prize includes a gift basket of prizes worth over a thousand dollars.

Additional food stations and drink trucks have set up just beyond the festival boundaries to try to siphon off extra business. One is an old school bus, painted in psychedelic colors, reminiscent of the Merry Pranksters’ bus. On my walk back to the Johns Hopkins University parking garage, I notice that Hampdenites have set up yard sales to take advantage of the foot traffic. While most of the residents ignore my greetings, I find one man selling T-shirts from his porch. It is a white T-shirt with a big black rat and the word Baltimore. “What is that about?” I ask him. “Baltimore,” he tells me. It is full of damn rats, so I decided to put them on a shirt.” “Are they selling well?” Rats are cool now, he laughs.

**The Rise of the Hon**

What was the meaning of this festival as revealed in ethnographic observation? The conversations and practices I documented reveal that the
festival is a location, or “play frame”—to cite the folkloristic concept of a subaltern space in which behaviors outside that frame can be reversed and mocked, and inside the frame cultural expressions build solidarity—for Baltimoreans to create a current, idealized identity out of a romantic, nostalgic past (Bronner 2010). The folk speech of “hon” transitions into the female Hon. For some onlookers, the Hon is a folk hero who symbolizes hard-working women, strong communities, and Baltimore’s idiosyncrasies. For others, it is either a mischaracterization of Baltimore’s working class or the attempt to romanticize the white, working-class past in favor of the African-American present.

An essential starting point to unpacking HonFest is a closer look at John Waters’s most successful film, Hairspray (1988). Born near Baltimore in 1946, Baltimore filmmaker John Waters embraced Baltimore’s quirks in a way few others had. In 1988, Waters released Hairspray. Set in Baltimore in the 1960s, Tracy Turnblad and other beehived Baltimoreans endeavored to integrate a televised dancing show. Although never referred to as Hons, the big haired women who set the canon for HonFest are seen throughout. In fact, in many ways, HonFest is an unattributed Hairspray fan convention, although because the iconography has gone beyond the movie and into “tradition,” attendees can reference previous HonFests rather than Hairspray directly.

There are some ironies here. While HonFest will operate as the manifestation of nostalgia for a white, blue-collar Baltimore, that is not how the Hon is presented in Hairspray. The hero Tracy Turnblad certainly comes from a
blue-collar family. “White trash—plain and simple,” she’s called in one scene. And her mother, played by drag queen Divine, is the paradigm of the more garish Hon costumes seen at HonFest beginning in the 1990s (“Fetch my diet pills, would’ya, hon?”). On the other hand, the antagonist of the film, Velma Von Tussle, is an aristocratic Baltimorean. Her appearance is perhaps the most similar to the Hon at HonFest. And lastly, not only are there black Hons, but the black Hons form the crux of the film, as the main conflict rests on whether or not the Corny Collins Show will integrate.

Commenting on Hairspray upon its Broadway revival, the Baltimore Sun wrote, “Sure, it’s a myth. It takes us back to 1962, and a backward Baltimore that expunges its segregated past and in the end gets race relations right. Ok it didn’t happen that way. To heck with history. The myth’s more fun.” In this nostalgic version of Baltimore, “All is right in this world—and the world is Baltimore.”

In 1992, Hampden was not yet on the rebound. The Avenue, the center of commerce in Hampden, was still plagued with vacant storefronts. That year, part-time caterer Denise Whiting opened “Café Hon,” a small restaurant. Critics gave the restaurant lukewarm reviews. “Café Hon has its virtues,” Elizabeth Large wrote, but there are plenty of other places that offer good hamburgers and cheap prices.” It was the name, Large contended, that was responsible for the restaurant’s notoriety. It would not have received so much publicity if it were not for the “wonderful name.” Café Hon was cute. “Cute little
tables,” “cute little prints on the walls,” and cute floral tablecloths. It is also worth noting, at this time, that the “homey little business” seemed to have the neighborhood’s support. In fact, so many locals were stopping into chat that Large notes the geniality was slowing down the table service. At the time, diners could expect a full meal for under five dollars. Later, Café Hon will be considered expensive compared to Old Hampden restaurants like Mike’s.\textsuperscript{211} “What Café Hon sets out to do,” Large concluded, “it does pretty well.”\textsuperscript{212}

Earlier in the year, Whiting had begun a Baltimorese petition to make the Hon Man’s “Welcome to Baltimore, Hon” sign on the Baltimore-Washington Parkway permanent. To promote her new restaurant and to show solidarity with “Hon Man” and the “Welcome to Baltimore, Hon” proponents, Whiting sponsored the first ever “Baltimore’s Best Hon Contest” on Saturday, June 4, 1994, in front of her Hampden restaurant. “This is a fun way to honor and appreciate Baltimore’s working women,” Whiting said. “I’m talking about women who wear uniforms to work, or really any working women, including moms.” In its nascent stages, the contest judges were looking for “best hairdo, best baked goods and best uniform.”\textsuperscript{213}

In 1995, Café Hon moved across the street to a larger space. Symbolic of both the revitalization of the Avenue and impending complaints about gentrification and Old Hampden versus New Hampden, Café Hon took the space of a hardware store that had operated on the Avenue since 1873.\textsuperscript{214} In May 1996, Maryland Governor Paris Glendening spent the afternoon with state and
local officials touring Hampden. The formerly struggling neighborhood had improved dramatically over the past two years, opening two dozen new businesses, partially spurred by a state loan initiative that encouraged revitalization of old urban neighborhoods. Glendening checked in at Café Hon, the recipient of a $146,000 state loan. Dressed in a beehive hairdo, cat-eye glasses, lipstick that matched her fingernails, a dice bracelet, and a pink polyester sweater—what the *Baltimore Sun* referred to as “Hampden’s traditional ethnic costume”—waitress Stella Gambino greeted Governor Glendening at Café Hon. “Hi Goob,” the Café Hon waitress welcomed. “I’ve heard you’re revitalizing the neighborhood. You might want to start in my closet.”

Throughout the second half of the 1990s, “hon” continued to transition from the term of address, “hon,” to a type of person, the Baltimore “Hon.” In 1996, for example, the *Baltimore Sun's* fashion editor, Vida Roberts offered an elaborate, mostly positive description of how a Hon dressed. The subtitle of her article, “Treasure those Baltimore ladies who call you ‘hon,’ hon. Because they’re a vanishing treasure characterized by hearts of gold—and some other traits you can’t miss” is reminiscent of the eleventh hour ethnography of folkloristics’ past. Although her article was in standard paragraph form, boiled down to the essentials, Roberts article listed twenty ways to pass as a Hon.

1) A hon’s greatest enemy is dirt...Some hons dust the front steps daily and scrub them once a week.
2) A hon’s greatest joy is socializing, and she dresses for the occasion. She will wear hearts in her ears on Valentine’s Day, pumpkin pins on Halloween, flashing lights and glitter on her Christmas sweat-shirt.
3) For a festive wedding, she may match bag and shoes in pink, ditto for ears, neck and bracelet.
4) She may go out with her hair in pin curls, even to church, as long as they’re covered by a babushka. Never to a viewing, however; funerals require a full comb-out.
5) Old hons have a standing appointment at the neighborhood beauty shop, even if it’s only to drop off the wiglet for a pouf and fluff.
6) Hons are not fooled by fancy-shmantzy. They don’t voluminize; they Dippity-Do. They don’t know from Chanel. The Avon lady, also known as Louise-from-first-grade-at-St. Thomas Aquinas, is the purveyor of lipstick and cologne.
7) Hons don’t waste. They saved those pretty Avon bottles and powder boxes, which have now achieved collectibles status.
8) Hons are free with fashion advice.
9) Sit on the bus bench on 36th Street, and you can learn to cut a hole in your shoes to relieve a bunion, sleep on a satin pillow to preserve your hairdo, and sprinkle baking soda into your sneakers to keep feet from being stinky.
10) Hons appreciate quality. It has to be Tupperware, and homey hons all have the portable cake-carrier, which is kept moving through bake sales, potlucks, birthdays and lodge reunions.
11) Hons are sticklers for etiquette. For them, everybody on earth is another hon except older friends and neighbors. From their first sentence, they are taught that adults are to be addressed as Miss Mary or Mister Joe, and these courtesy titles are carried through a life-time. They may, however, be combined as in Miss Mary, hon.
12) Hons don’t adopt big retrievers, which shed: they prefer cock-a-poos, poodles, and peke-a-poos, which don’t. Hon dogs go to the grooming parlor almost as often as a hon does and have their nails done.
13) Hons favor ankle bracelets and tattoos, but never on the same ankle.
14) Hons can pick a dozen crabs without chipping their nail extensions.
15) Hons don’t wear tube-tops before Easter or after Halloween.
16) Hons believe eyeglasses are jewelry; sight is a secondary consideration.
17) Hons drink Pabst, Natty Boh or Seagram-and-Seven. Any hon caught asking for chardonnay would be drummed out of the Legion hall.
18) Hons love Lycra because it can stretch through a bully and oyster roast.

19) Hons wear their glamour-photo makeup through the day and into the evening.
20) Hons always return a smile.²²¹

Roberts’ article was a clear transition toward the Hon as a type of woman, although she was not yet at the point where she was ready to capitalize the word Hon.

Many residents were part of the creation of the Hon image. In addition to John Waters, Café Hon, HonFest, HometownGirl (a Hampden retail store specializing in Baltimore merchandise), and the Baltimore Ravens (covered later in this chapter), Essex native, Maryland Institute College of Art Graduate, and freelance illustrator Glen Hibline found success drawing acrylic representations of Hon. The son and grandson of women who fit the Hon image, Hibline went into the greeting card business in 1999, aptly named “Hey Hon.” Marketed throughout Baltimore and online for $6 per card, Hibline sold thousands to Baltimoreans and to the Baltimore diaspora. Stephanie Shapiro wrote the cards “make light of the Hon stereotype without making too much fun.”²²² A nod to Baltimore’s style, Hilbine called his cards “wonderfully tacky.” “I represent [the Hon] in the best way [she] can be represented,” Hibline said. But, he cautioned, he only illustrated Hons; he did not represent them; “I let [the Hons] do the talking.”

Hibline’s rise as a Hon artist and the reception of his work appear emblematic of Baltimore’s style, if not peculiar to it. At his day job, Hibline was a studio assistant for Baltimore artist Sandy Magsamen, artist and proprietor of a
line of kitsch ceramic gift tiles. Influenced by Magsamen Hilbine continued to fuse art and commercialism in Hon photo albums, magnets, journals, ornaments, stationary, and T-shirts. He even developed an African-American Hon image, reminiscent of the Supremes, and a male Hon, with a Hawaiian shirt and a pompadour. As a sign of his acceptance in both the art community and the commercial world, Baltimore’s American Visionary Art Museum displays his postcards, albeit in its gift shop.223

In 2002, another MICA graduate also drew inspiration from and contributed to the creation of the Hon image. Brandon Welch staged “Welcome to Baltimore, Hon,” which he billed as “an examination of Baltimore’s national ‘white-trash’ image.”224 In its coverage, the Baltimore Sun said “Welcome to Baltimore, Hon” was “stronger on image than examination” and pointed out that the “prevailing national image” that Welch sets out to examine was “white and blue-collar.”225 Among other characters, Welch’s play featured a curler-ridden, chain-smoking, Bawlmerese-spewing Hon named Mum-Mum. Covering the opening of “Welcome to Baltimore, Hon,” Arthur Hirsch wrote, “In the spirit of civic pride and free enterprise, businesses like Café Hon in Hampden have elevated the white matron with the beehive and retro eyeglasses to something approaching a municipal logo,” also noting the lack of an equivalent black popular image in a majority black city.226 When Welch revived his “Welcome to Baltimore, Hon” play in 2003, Sarah Schaffer used the opportunity to reconsider the Hon image. She wrote, “To some locals, it symbolizes Baltimore’s friendly
working-class reputation. To others, it’s just a reminder that the bayside port is still backed with Waters-esque characters.” Welch defended his play, promising that his scenes and characters came from years of fieldwork across Baltimore. “I didn’t do it to just make fun of people’s accents and the neighborhoods they come from,” Welch said. The play, he insisted, is meant to explore issues of class and give a voice to Baltimore’s marginalized populations.

At different times, different characteristics have been seen as essential to the Hon image. One glance at HonFest proves that big hair is now central to the idea of Hon-ness. John Waters famously once said “hair is politics in Baltimore.” At HonFest, organizers developed the proverb, “The higher the hair, the closer to heaven.” In 2002, newly crowned Baltimore’s Best Hon Jackie Garcia explained her win by pointing to her hair. “I’m sure it was my hair,” she said. “You got to have big hair to be a hon.” In the face of criticism that HonFest was becoming cartoonish mockery, Randi Rom, the 2002 HonFest spokeswoman, denied that the Hon image was exploitative. The Hon, she said, is “like what you remember from hanging out at your grandma’s. It’s really not exploitation. The whole idea is to pay tribute to these people.” In fact, according to Rom, Hon does not even represent an exact image, time period, or type of person. “Hon is a state of mind,” Rom said. Similarly, in 2005, Best Hon Contest judge Janet Trimble declared “attitude is what makes a hon.”

In 2003, Danielle Lynch decided to enter the Best Hon Contest for the first time as Danni Girl, the Irish Hon. A 37-year old, white collar Northrup
Grumman employee seemed an unlikely candidate to embody Baltimore’s tribute to working-class women, but Lynch was proof of the transformative powers of the Hon image. A bartender who heard Lynch’s fluency in Bawlmerse had encouraged Lynch to enter the Best Hon Contest, and Lynch took up the challenge. Lynch did not stumble into the contest blindly or test the waters for a year with rhinestone glasses and a boa. On her first attempt, Lynch spent months assembling her costume and creating her Hon identity. “I’ve just put my heart and soul into this,” Lynch said. “It has completely taken over my mind.”

Rather than accentuate her own identity, Lynch used the opportunity to create a whole new identity. She practiced her Bawlmerse while rehearsing the details of Danni Girl’s life. “I’m very big on character depth,” Lynch said, “It’s the little things, the little nuances of the character” that make her Hon a three-dimensional character. For Lynch, the Best Hon Contest was more than a faux beauty pageant. Lynch had left Baltimore for years before returning to a small rowhouse in South Baltimore, and now, the Best Hon Contest was about reconnecting with her roots. “It feels good to be a part of the community,” she reflected.

A notable Hon first occurred in 2005. While there was, of course, a 1960s, working-class male counterpart to the female “Hon,” and men in Baltimore say “hon” too, Denise Whiting has crafted the Hon as a woman. In her original Best Hon contest announcement, Whiting had said, “This is a fun way to honor and appreciate Baltimore’s working women” (emphasis added). At the time of
this writing, HonFest’s official “Top Ten Things You Should Know About Being Baltimore’s Best Hon” still states “Our mission: ‘Honor the Working Women of America’. We honor WOMEN.” But the association with cross-dressing and the legacy of John Water’s Divine, a drag queen who frequently performed as an exaggerated Hon, including in the important Hon precursor, *Hairspray*, allowed for alternative interpretations of the Hon style. Gender bending began at HonFest, with, of all people, a 68-year-old father with no history of cross-dressing. Ken Coppersmith attended HonFest with his family. His daughter had assured him that “everyone” dressed up at HonFest. Not wanting to stand out, Coppersmith sported a floral housedress and pink sandals topped with a pink shower cap covering his rollers. On that day, Whiting said, “A hon is a man, a hon is a woman, it’s a term of endearment. Hon is a feeling that you have in your heart. There’s something about putting on a feather boa, and cat’s eye glasses, or Elvis sunglasses, that gives people permission to have fun.”

Since his upset victory in 2000, Baltimore Mayor Martin O’Malley had made it his mission to change the perception of Baltimore. Two of his early initiatives were to change the city’s slogan from “The City That Reads” to “The Greatest City in the World” and to festoon every bench and trashcan in the city with the ubiquitous “Believe.” But a horrendous murder rate and a national portrayal on *The Wire* as a center of drugs, crime, violence, and corruption had done little to improve the city’s image. As the official commissioned report would later state, reminiscent of Dundes’s inferiority complex thesis, “Baltimore is
plagued by negative press and harmful characterizations by the media, resulting in an *inferiority complex* 237 (emphasis added). O’Malley and the City Council brought it branding strategy experts Landor Associates to change the image of the city and improve nationwide perception. Instead of attempting to compete directly with New York, Washington, D.C., Orlando, or Las Vegas, the report encouraged Baltimore to play up its downhome, authentic characteristics, what it referred to as “the Hon factor”. This factor brings a small town feel to a big city, something not to be found in Washington, D.C., or New York. The residents surveyed had spoke positively of Baltimoreans as “quirky,” “funky,” “off-kilter,” “hilarious,” “bizarre,” and “a little-off center.” 238

The rebranding attempt stirred the Baltimore population. On November 14, 2005, half of the *Baltimore Sun*’s letters to the editor address the rebranding. The response was almost wholly negative. The general consensus was that it would be best to include Baltimoreans in the rebranding efforts, rather than slick out-of-town suits. Herman Heyn pointed out that the $500,000 contract could have been the prize for a contest for the Baltimorean with the best idea. Another offered, “Baltimore: Home of the Brave,” both a reference to the Star Spangled Banner and a double entendre for those who chose to remain in the crime-ridden city. Waleed Hazbun pointed out the potential dangers of rebranding, which could sweep problematic issues under the rug rather than address them. Much as I interpreted “Welcome to Baltimore, Hon,” Hazbun seems to see Baltimore’s image as an important cultural battleground, one that reflects the prevailing
sentiment of the city. If whitewashed, it loses its importance. After Baltimore chose the new slogan “Get in on it,” at the next HonFest, Denise Whiting declared that the slogan should have been “Get in on it, Hon.”

The Hon image even entered the Baltimore County Public School System. Baltimore Highlands Elementary School art teacher Lee Ann Roman conceived of a Hon art project after attending HonFest in 2005. After the festival, Roman stopped in at Café Hon to talk to Denise Whiting about the possibility of displaying a few of her students’ best drawings as motivation. Whiting was so enthusiastic, she not only agreed but encouraged Roman to let her display them all. The Baltimore Highlands Elementary School third-graders in southwest Baltimore County began working on their drawings with the goal of having them hung in Café Hon. The drawings were two-dimensional in colored marker and adorned with three-dimensional hair. The project proved popular, especially with female students. The art classes also included cultural lessons. Barnhardt reported, “The girls, especially, in Roman’s classes also enjoyed learning various Bawlmerese phrases used by hons,” especially “turlet” (i.e., toilet). Although enthusiastic, the young generation in Southwest Baltimore County was not necessarily familiar with the Baltimore Hon beyond their classroom project. Student Ashley Hawrysch had seen exactly one of these women in her nine years. She remembered, “When I was 3, I saw a hon. I think we were at Kings Dominion. When my dad said, ‘She’s a hon,’ I thought he meant a short person.” While the project did not intentionally mock the Hon, instilling respect for local
tradition did not seem to be a hallmark of the lessons. Asked what she thought of the project, third-grader Anjae White gave it a positive review, "I like making wacky hair and wacky clothes and wacky shoes."\textsuperscript{242}

By the early twenty-first century, the Hon image was well established, but its meaning and value were still up for debate. Through rhetorical analysis, I find underlying paradoxical expressions of the Hon as a demeaning rendition of the stigmatized vernacular, and simultaneously as a good, endearing image for local distinction and pride.

**The Discourse over the Hon Image as a Symbol of Local Identity: Lampooning the Stigmatized Vernacular or Celebrating the Esteemed Vernacular?**

In the early stages of Café Hon’s development, *Evening Sun* columnist Dan Rodricks announced in his “The Things People Say” that he overheard someone at Café Hon say about Café Hon, “It’s exotic, one more weird, yuppy Baltimore thing to be studied. I like it. But, you know, it’s only faux Hon.”\textsuperscript{243}

Some will argue the Hon image is pulled from 1960s Baltimore, others that it is taken wholesale from John Waters, and still others that it is completely imagined, but there was certainly commentary on Baltimore’s dowdy, kitsch aesthetics well before HonFest became a symbol of the city. For an early example, a tourist wrote on a postcard to a friend in 1912, “Have been looking throughout the shops this evening to kill time. There are some dandy men’s furnishings shops, but the natives don’t seem to take advantage of them.”\textsuperscript{244} In 1996, while HonFest was still in its nascent stage, Jacques Kelly in his column...
“Jacques Kelly’s Baltimore” lambasted Baltimore fashion as “dowdy and proud.”

“Clothing here is often frumpy, hard on the eyes, not flattering and downright funny,” he wrote. “When you scan a room full of “Baltimoreans out for a night on the town, a sense of humor helps.” He continued, “Part of Baltimore’s charm is that it is such an unpretentious place. Clothes really are not taken too seriously. And spending a lot of money on clothes is not considered good form.” He speculated, “It seems to me that Baltimoreans like their clothes to be durable and fashion-free. They like them to last. They admire practicality. Age is never considered a drawback. If it fits, it’s ok to wear. Even if it doesn’t, it’s OK, too.”

Fashion editor Vida Roberts took the polar opposite stance. In a column published days before the annual HonFest, her column read like an early “Hon” manifesto, bolstering the pro-Hon images.

Baltimore’s Hons are a marvel. Their style may be pink-collar, blue-collar, or housedress, but hey, who cares? Under those festive, double-knit, stretch tops beat hearts of gold. Out-of-towners and social climbers may cringe when their sensibilities and space are invaded by a honest-to-goodness Hon. “What’re you having, hon?” at the seafood place. “How you doin’, hon?” at the checkout. “Small bills, hon?” at the bank. They should cherish every “hon” tossed their ways because real bingo-playing, dirt-chasing, church-going, wise-cracking hons are a vanishing treasure. In the interest of hon awareness and preservation of hon style, Denise Whiting, owner of Café Hon in Hampden, is staging the third annual Baltimore’s Best Hon Contest tomorrow. All in fun, hon. Whiting is in the vanguard of understanding and capitalizing on hon charm, which can be elusive. The young ones are just beginning to understand that grandma’s plastic pop-it beads had a certain panache. Real hons would call them pretty.
Roberts made an effort to add feminist and maternalistic connotations to the “Hon” phenomenon. For example, she argued “big hair alone does not a hon make; a real hon has a generous spirit as big as her beehive. It’s her willingness to scrub, hug, scold and help family and her neighbors that singles her out.” This connotation of the motherly Hon seems to have been created to give the “Hon” image positive connotation, in contrast with the “slutty” Hon that some perceived on the “Welcome to Baltimore HON” furniture billboard chronicled in the last chapter. In addition, one can see the romanticism and nostalgia at play, reminiscing back to the time when neighbors looked out for and assisted one another.

Roberts made one strange claim in her piece that is important in an attempt to decipher the Hon image. She castigated John Waters and what he did with Baltimore’s local identifiers: “That Parkville John Waters—may his underwear turn tattletale gray—made a mockery of Pink Flamingos, Hairspray, and Polyester, all the things hons hold dear.” “It’s a bet no self-respecting hons ever saw a John Waters production,” Roberts continued, “and it’s just as well. Hons go to movies; they have no use for film.” Although all Waters films have a “camp” tone, it is more accurate to say that his filmography deitized pink flamingos, hairspray, polyester, and the Hon image. Although Waters was working with long-standing Baltimore source material, his work drew attention and self-reflection to Baltimore’s quirky local traditions.
In the interpretation of vernaculars, two people, even two relatives, can interpret the same vernacular phenomenon as either stigmatized or esteemed. For example, one Best Hon Contest winner, Sharon Gill, “vowed to do her best to help every hon feel proud.” Or, in other words, encourage others to embrace the stigmatized vernacular as the esteemed vernacular. Gill’s potential targets included her own mother, a Hampdenite and a Hon that Gill said was “living in denial” and did not understand why Gill wanted to embrace the neighborhood’s quirks. Notably, Gill lived in Harford County and commuted to Baltimore for work, while her mother continued to live in Baltimore. In my theoretical configuration, Gill, living at a distance, embraced the “Hon” as the esteemed vernacular, a source keeping her connected to her roots and to Baltimore. Her mother, on the other hand, continued to live in Baltimore in a blue-collar neighborhood, needed no additional claims to authenticity or Baltimore roots, and rejected the same phenomenon as the stigmatized vernacular.

This same paradox was at play in the Baltimore Best Hon Contest even among the contestants. The contest itself is both a consequence of Hampden gentrification—which Denise Whiting is a part of, perhaps even the catalyst—and, at best, a benign characterization of white, working-class women from the 1950s and 1960s. But, at the same time, the Best Hon Contest has become a venue for opposing the gentrification of Hampden, not just in protest from the street, but within the contest itself, from devoted, beehived contestants. Pamela Foresman, 1997’s Baltimore’s Best Hon, for example, used the stage to call for
an end to the gentrification and yuppification of Hampden. She declared “Natty Boh”\textsuperscript{251} beer better than a “raspberry wheat” microbrew and pulled a duckpin bowling ball from a bowling ball bag to “demonstrate her commitment to the fading traditions of the working-class city.”\textsuperscript{252} Susan Hodges, a proud HonFest participant who declared herself “working-class and damn proud of that,” remembered her mother, a single parent and a dog groomer, herself a Hon, purposely tried to stomp the Hon out of her daughter. “My mother tried to squash it out of me, but she failed miserably, Hon,” Hodges said.\textsuperscript{253}

Perhaps the best example of how the stigmatized vernacular can transform into a commodified esteemed vernacular began at the 1998 HonFest and climaxed on the 2000 Best Hon Contest stage. Neither being from Baltimore nor arriving in costume is mandatory for HonFest participation. The commodification of Hon allows anyone to connect with the Hon tradition through the marketplace. Two middle schoolers perhaps serve as the best example of the commodification at Hon Fest. Best friends Chiari Lattanzi and Leah Platek lived “outside Towson.”\textsuperscript{254} Chiari’s mother, Karen Lattanzi had been raised in Baltimore’s northeast Northwood neighborhood. “I took radio in college, and I heard myself on tape. I was horrified,” Karen Lattanzi recalled. She decided to shed her Baltimore accent, the stigmatized vernacular. But at HonFest, Karen was proud of her daughter Chiari’s embrace of Baltimore’s tradition. Chiari was obviously interested too. In a soaring beehive with rhinestone pins and a flora shirt, Chiari wandered the Avenue, spewing a steady stream of “Hey, Hon.”
night, Karen showed Chiari how to wrap her hair in toilet paper to preserve the beehive for another day. “She enjoys sharing with Chiari the traditions that she learned as a girl,” wrote JoAnna Daemmrich. But what about Chiari’s friend Leah Platek? Also from “outside Towson,” Leah arrived at HonFest dressed as she would any other day. But, luckily, she was able to quickly remedy her mistake. Right there on the Avenue, she bought a platinum-blond wig from Café Hon and cat-eye glasses at Gallo. By the end of the day, the two girls had received the honorific of the “Honettes” and the “Honchkins,” after they drew attention by singing Celine Dion’s “My Heart Will Go On” in such stunning Baltimorese that Denise Whiting herself called for an encore, twice.\textsuperscript{255} In fact, Chiari Lattanzi returned to HonFest a mere two years later, then thirteen, and won the Best Hon Contest. “I am so proud,” mother Karen Lattanzi gleamed that day, “I remember my girlfriend’s mother looked much like my daughter. My mother was not that cool. I was really envious.” “I feel like Miss America,” Chiari said, dressed in eye-shadow, leather pants, a purple polyester top, and a beehive half a foot high.\textsuperscript{256}

In 1998, the \textit{Baltimore Sun} ran its first critical article about the Best Hon Contest. While still generally positive about Café Hon, HonFest, the Best Hon Contest, and Hampden gentrification in general, there were hints of unrest that bubbled beneath the puff piece.\textsuperscript{257} Compared to Vida Robert’s earlier article, the column was an outright rebuke. Questioning the Best Hon Contest, Stephanie Shapiro asked, “Are we talking about old best Hons or new best Hons? And are we talking real Hons or pHon-y Hons? Authenticity is just one concern so is faith.
The ‘Hon,’ of course, is a beloved Baltimore image, saucy, sage, and imposing in her glorious up-to-the-sky hairdo. Are Hons native to Baltimore? Are there not Hons in Peoria or Cleveland?” Shapiro’s answer is equally important when considering that the symbolic importance of Hon is that it represents a yearning for an idealized past that stands in stark contrast to present day Baltimore: “This is not a question we like to dwell on, because Baltimoreans need something to believe in, even if it’s just big hair.”

By 1998, the prize had swelled to $500 in gift certificates, and residents began to note the implications of the prizes. Although “turlet” seats, hair spray, and other working-class symbols had been distributed as prizes in the past, the monetary allotment to local retail establishments was entirely skewed towards a certain segment of Hampden. “Not old Hampden businesses, for the most part,” Shapiro wrote, “but new Hampden businesses, where a box of fancy olive oils can set you back $40, and a dresser knob can cost $25.” The gift certificates were not $500 to Hampden’s blue-collar mainstays like Mike’s Diner, Murphy’s 5 & 10, Bobbi’s Unisex Hair Salon, or Readings by Sister Patricia. The prize was redeemable in the new, hip, trendy new small businesses that have come to the neighborhood, like Fat Elvis, S’getti Gourmet, and Mud and Metal.

The Baltimore Hon image continued to receive mixed reviews throughout the year. On Monday, August 24, 1998, the Baltimore Ravens hosted the Philadelphia Eagles in their new stadium, the Ravens Stadium at Camden Yards (now M&T Bank Stadium). There had been some concern over fan behavior, and
the team’s front office sought a fun strategy to request that fans behave. “We had run an announcement early on fan behavior and we wanted to make a little light of it, not just a general announcement like we had at Memorial Stadium,” John Model, the Raven’s entertainment producer, said. Vice President for Public and Community Relations Kevin Byrne said the goal was to create “a fun way of telling people not to be jerks, and we wanted to blend in a little of Baltimore in the message.” The Ravens created a 30-second segment “Dolores the Neighbor’s rules for fan behavior,” featuring a stereotypical Hon, Dolores—played by Theresa Abato, local Baltimorean and the Ravens premium services director—speaking Baltimorese, doing stereotypical Baltimore things, and instructing the fans on proper fan etiquette.

“No smokin’ in the stands or baffrooms,” the beehived Dolores said, her rules displayed on the screen in Baltimorese, “No throwin’ nuttin’ in the seats.” At the end of the segment, she smashed steamed crabs with a crab mallet, threatening to do the same to any fan who misbehaves. A chorus of boos rained down on Dolores, and the team immediately received complaints from offended fans. “We have had some complaints about it, that it is knocking the city,” John Modell admitted, promising that the team had no such intentions, and merely wanted to address fan behavior concerns in a light and unique way. “They just need to get rid of her,” Rosedale resident Mike Schiavone said, “There’s just really no need for it. The Ravens responded quickly to the community’s negative response. “We’re not going to run something that the
fans are going to boo. If they don’t like it, then we’re not going to run it,” Modell promised. The Ravens canceled the segment the same day it premiered.266

At the 2000 Best Hon Contest, the Hon contestants were asked if the festival honored or lampooned Baltimore’s working women. The contestants were adamant that their costume, their performance, and the festival all honored the hard-working women of Baltimore’s past. “The working women of yesteryear, the woman behind the Woolworth’s counter, the waitresses at the lunch counter, they had lots of style, of class,” said Pamela Messari, a former Best Hon winner and Baltimore native.267 Although some see HonFest as the commodification of blue-collar culture, Hampden small business owner and festival sponsor Mary Pat Andrea, owner of Hometown Girl, the epitome of the commodification of Baltimore kitsch, saw HonFest as celebrating the uniqueness and idiosyncrasy of Baltimore. “Everything is so malled and chain-stored and the same everywhere, and then you come to a neighborhood like Hampden and it’s really unique. People kind of take it for granted, but we’ll lose it if we take it for granted.”268

On Friday, May 23, 2003, Café Hon was the target of a “Clark Raid”. This was notable because it showed Café Hon and Denise Whiting’s good standing in the community at the time. Dan Rodricks, an ally from the “Welcome to Baltimore, Hon” fracas but who would later become an adversary with the Hon trademark fiasco (chapter 5), wrote an indignant article over Café Hon’s abuse by police. Rodricks wrote glowingly of Whiting as the “winner of numerous accolades and
tons of publicity over the years since she established Café Hon on 36th Street in Hampden.\textsuperscript{269}

Beyond leaping to the defense of Café Hon, Dan Rodricks had been a longtime leading proponent of “hon,” but his efforts leaned towards the term of endearment, especially placing it on the Baltimore-Washington Parkway sign, not “Hon,” the developing stereotypical image of a working-class Baltimore woman. He seemed to make the transition in his 2004 article “There’s no hon in ‘Male/Female’ sculpture.”\textsuperscript{270} Taking issue with the depiction and representation of the local, Rodricks decried the new 50-foot statue outside Penn Station. Surrealist art constructed by a non-Baltimorean, Rodricks lamented that “there’s nothing of Baltimore here.” The towering aluminum sculpture was supposed to represent the intersecting of man and woman. Rodricks complained, “They could have put a Hon Fest beehive on the woman’s head.” Like the “hon” on the parkway sign, for Rodricks, “Hon” is local, idiosyncratic, and properly reflective of Baltimore. “A giant likeness of Divine, surrounded by pink flamingos, would have been a lot more appropriate, my friends,” Rodricks concluded.\textsuperscript{271}

In 2007, Madison Park called HonFest “a celebration of Baltimore’s idiosyncratic cultural heritage,”\textsuperscript{272} continuing that it “pays homage to Baltimore’s flash retro fashion tradition.”\textsuperscript{273} Denise Whiting said of HonFest that same year, “This event is to just have fun and not think about politics, BG&E and gas prices. It’s to step outside of yourself for a day, to dress up and enjoy.”\textsuperscript{274} Randi Rom,
now the HonFest event director, delivered the familiar refrain, “We’re just celebrating the working women of Baltimore.”

On the other hand, as HonFest’s attendees multiplied, so did its critics. Sam Sessa reported, “Some Hampden dwellers, local fashionistas, and even John Waters—who helped perpetuate the image of the Hon as a Baltimore icon—are fed up with the 50,000 strong festival that began as a simple beauty pageant.”

Revelers still far outweighed dissenters, but there were enough critics to ignite boycotts and protests of the festival. Although he kept his article’s tone neutral for the paper, years later, Sessa mentioned in the comment section of a “The City That Breeds” blog post that “A few years ago, I did a piece about how Honfest is hated by the locals, who see it as gimmicky, and loved by tourists.”

For example, 65-year old Bill Brewer, a life-long Hampden resident, planned to get out of the city before the onslaught of festivalgoers. “It’s hard to articulate stupid. It means nothing. It serves no purpose,” Brewer said. Even John Waters, in some ways the man who “discovered” the Hon image, rejected it. “To me, it’s used up,” Waters said of the Hon. It’s condescending now. The people that celebrate it are not from it. I feel that in some weird way they’re looking slightly down on it. I only celebrate something I can look up to.” (John Waters later called Whiting apologized for his criticism.) While the HonFest organizers make a rhetorical point every year that the Hon is a living tradition, Waters, for one, disagreed. “I used to say, ‘Come to Baltimore and you would see people with those hairdos.’ You no longer see that. They’re dead or in nursing
homes.” Hair stylist April Camlin agreed, arguing HonFest “doesn’t really express anything that is creative about Baltimore. There are a lot of really great things that are coming out of Baltimore right now. And so much of what the country sees is this Hon stereotype we try to project for some reason.”

Benn Ray, Atomic Bookstore owner and president of the Hampden Village Merchants Association, defended Denise Whiting in the face of this criticism. “Some people feel as though you have an upper-middle-class suburban group of people that are mocking a working-class Baltimore demographic. But honestly, being at Honfest, I see just as many working-class people enjoying it as suburbanites.”

In fact, just like Baltimorese, the word “hon,” and the Hon image, critics argued that the beehive hairdo, the crux of the Hon image, was not distinctly Baltimorean. Margaret Vinci Heldt invented the beehive in Illinois in 1960. When challenged as to the Baltimore Hon’s local distinctiveness, Whiting seemed to take yet another position. “Hon is universal. It’s a universal term of endearment. It’s not something that’s unique to Baltimore. We just happen to celebrate it.”

The Baltimore Area Convention and Visitors Association denied that “the Hon” was a Baltimore tourist draw at all or on the average tourist’s radar. They claimed tourists are primarily interested in strolling through the Inner Harbor, visiting historic neighborhoods, and feasting of steamed crabs. The Association told the Baltimore Sun, “If you do a survey with visitors and you ask them, Hons wouldn’t rank...Hons wouldn’t even be on the radar screen...It’s not
something that people think of, and it’s not as if visitors come in the Visitors Center and say, ‘Where’s the Hon?’ While his comment was meant to downplay the importance of the Hon phenomenon in Baltimore, in some ways, it makes HonFest even more locally important. According to the tourist bureau, this is not a tourist festival. It is a show by Baltimoreans for Baltimoreans, even if it is only organized by a select few and only appreciated by some others.

A rhetoric of tradition pervaded HonFest in the late twentieth century. Although HonFest was undeniably an invented tradition, there was discernable rhetoric about its traditionality. Sometimes it was the “Hon” that’s referred to as the tradition, and sometimes it is the festival itself. For example, at HonFest 2009, Best Hon Contest finalist Noelle Mack said, “The young ‘hons’ are bringing it back.” She continued, “Once everything fades away with the older hons, we want to keep the tradition going.”

That year, the Best Hon Contest’s top honors went to “Mary Ellen Wade, a New Jersey transplant who had lived in Baltimore for a little more than two years.” She had “pieced together a yellow MOD-style dress, a leopard scarf, oversized white sunglasses, white gloves and a fitted black jacket to win the competition.” Despite the newcomer’s win, Whiting referred to HonFest as a “community festival.” “The genius of Honfest is, it gives people permission to have fun and lets them step outside themselves for a moment,” Whiting said. “They can let their defenses down and be the person they are inside—the genuine person who has heritage in their heart” (my emphasis).
The Hon as Urban Folklore

The Hon is an example of urban American folklore, folklore that arises to meet the needs of the urban American landscape. In this case, Baltimoreans use the Hon to create a preferable Baltimore present out of a white, blue-collar past. Grasping for heritage, Baltimoreans recreate a new past through a tradition, as they perceive it, that meets the needs of the present. Although Dorson might consider the Hon fakelore, the Hon seems to fulfill many of the same roles of his authentic American folk heroes. Like Paul Bunyan, denying the possibility of the Hon as a legitimate folk hero would be denying her based on origins rather than function or content. The Hon image was bolstered by and has become entwined with commercialism and the mass media. In this way, Dorson would celebrate the Hon as an example of “American folklore” as opposed to “folklore in America.” Dorson had argued that boosterism “belongs with salesmanship, promotionalism, huckstering, advertising, the big sell and the soft sell, with antecedents in the frontier boast of the backwoodsman and the glib talk of the Yankee peddler, as an essential trait of the American character” (Dorson 1978, 182). HonFest seems to be in this tradition of American boosterism. Rather than deny the Hon because of this, its sponsorship by the free market seems to be a sign of the Hon’s importance in modern American urban culture. The Hon is one unusual example, or perhaps an indication of a pattern of culture found in American “gritty” cities. The stigmatized vernacular transforms into the esteemed
vernacular when a past image takes on the connotations of local roots, local pride, and local authenticity.
Like the Baltimore dialect, the word “hon,” the Hon image, and the beehive, the pink flamingo is another symbol of Baltimore that is not unique to Baltimore. The plastic pink flamingo is native not to Baltimore nor Florida but rather Leominster, Massachusetts, the “Plastics Capital of the World.” In 1957, Union Products hired sculptor Don Featherstone to sculpt a plastic pink flamingo. In post-World War II suburbia, the pink flamingos provided decoration to differentiate otherwise identical houses. The artist remembers, “You had to mark your house somehow. A woman could pick up a flamingo at the store and come home with a piece of tropical elegance under her arm to change her humdrum house.”

But in the 1960s, the counter culture rejected synthetic plastics in favor of natural fibers and neon colors in favor of earthen hues. The pink flamingo was anathema, and it was tacky. But then, Abigail Tucker writes, “phoenixlike, the flamingos rose from its ashes.” Celebrity artists such as Andy Warhol embraced the lowbrow and mass culture, and John Waters’s Pink Flamingo debuted in 1972. The film was not about pink flamingos in any substantive way, but there were extended shots of a plastic pink flamingo that adorned the protagonists’ trailer. While John Waters drew inspiration from Baltimore and set the film in Baltimore, through this reciprocal relationship, he also inspired Baltimore’s fascination with the pink flamingo.
In the 1980s, the plastic pink flamingo transitioned from sincere blue-collar yard art to upper middle class tongue-in-cheek. Tucker wrote, “The bird became a sort of plastic punch line, and, at worst, a way of hinting at one’s own good taste by reveling in the bad taste of others.” Although he was one of the catalysts for the movement, John Waters rejected the middle class, tongue-in-cheek kitsch of the pink flamingos in the 1980s and on. “It’s a classist thing,” Waters said. “People like them in a way that’s not original anymore.”

In 2002, Denise Whiting commissioned Randall Gornwich, a graduate of the Maryland Institute College of Art, to construct a giant, three-story, thirty-foot pink flamingo for her storefront. A local artist with clocks made out of ironing boards hanging in Baltimore restaurants, Gornwich made the ten-meter bird of wood, glue, chicken wire, bed sheets, and latex paint (to protect it from the elements). It was attached to the steel fire escape on the front of Café Hon. Denise Whiting unveiled the pink flamingo at the mayor’s annual Christmas parade in 2002. Dan Rodricks, longtime Hon Man champion, wrote approvingly: “Here we are, trying to wake up from our long, postindustrial urban nightmare, trying to remain a vibrant hub of the mid-Atlantic—indeed, the Queen City of the Patapsco Drainage Basin—and what we need is a 30-foot pink flamingo.”

Over a few years, the flamingo became a symbol of Hampden—the new Hampden at least, and for some, it became a symbol of Baltimore. Attention to the pink flamingo, and specifically Café Hon’s pink flamingo’s status as a Baltimore icon, peaked on September 29, 2009, when the New York Times travel
section featured Baltimore, “36 Hours in Baltimore,” with a photograph of the pink flamingo sculpture perched at the top of the article. In fact, the author Joshua Kurlantzick attempted to use the pink flamingo as proof of a developing Baltimore counternarrative that challenged the crimes, corruption, drugs, and decay narrative that had plagued Baltimore for decades. While Hampden is only one part of the “36 Hours in Baltimore” article, it seems to embody the essence of what Kurlantzick is trying to argue in his opening.

If you watch HBO’s police drama “The Wire,” you might think that Baltimore is filled with drug dealers and crime ringleaders. But in truth, the city has attracted a different breed of misfits: artists. Lured by cheap rents and warehouse spaces, artists and photographers have flocked there to claim the city as their own. Once rough neighborhoods like Hampden and Highlandtown have been taken over in recent years by studios, galleries and performance spaces. Crab joints and sports bars now share the cobblestone streets with fancy cafés and tapas restaurants. But against this backdrop, there are still the beehive hairdos and wacky museums that give so-called Charm City its nickname.

Ironically and paradoxically, this article both confirmed the pink flamingo’s iconic status and threatened it with extinction. In September 2009, several days before the article ran, an inspector from Baltimore City’s Department of General Services told Denise Whiting, Café Hon’s owner, that her flamingo blocked the public right of way, and that she must either remove it or pay an $800 annual fee for a minor privilege permit. In addition, she was ordered to pay minor privilege backfines accrued over the past seven years. Cathy Powell of the City Department of General Services said in addition to being a sign, and thus requiring the fee, the flamingo also needs to be safe, properly positioned, and
not a threat to pedestrians passing underneath. Powell hinted that her inspectors did not patrol for this sort of violation, and that inspection was almost always in response to complaints.

Whiting promised to fight the ordinance, which she claimed was not a sign but “public art.” She continued, “I had artists come in and make these pieces. They are not advertisements. There is no lettering. I was supporting local art. I started doing this when Hampden wasn’t quite there yet.” Whiting explained, “It never crossed my mind I’d need a permit.” Then she questioned, “Are there permits for all the sculptures around the harbor? Is there a permit for the statue in front of Penn Station?” And, more importantly, Whiting deemed it a “hallmark of Baltimore” and “part of the Baltimore landscape.” “That bird ain’t flying away, hon,” she told the local news station in her best Bawlmerese.

City residents came to defense of Denise Whiting and the pink flamingo. “I think I feel a movement coming,” Whiting joked in one informal interview posted to YouTube. “And it ain’t bird doo, hon. I’m going to start a petition to save the flamingo.” Glenn McNatt, an African-American art critic and editorialist for the Baltimore Sun, wrote an editorial in the Baltimore Sun in support of the pink flamingo. He wrote, “There’s no need to pretend this lock-necked fowl is great art. It’s pure kitsch, as it was intended to be. Kitsch is the opposite of the complex, difficult, provocative and occasionally infuriating art in museums. It’s art for everyday people going about their everyday business, which is what folks tend to do down on the Avenue in Hampden.” McNatt went
on, “That’s why Hampden’s Big Bird should be preserved, if only as a memento
of a certain wacko sensibility dear to Baltimorans hearts...Pink flamingos are as
much a part of this city’s distinctive visual aesthetic as are multi-colored
Christmas tree lights and statues of William Donald Schaefer by the Harbor.”
Unlike the Hon image, the pink flamingo seems to cross-racial boundaries, if not
class boundaries. “That’s a landmark. It’s been there for I don’t know how long,”
said one exasperated African-American woman interview by the WBAL news
station. “I’m terribly disappointed,” said another. “The flamingo has been such
a feature in Hampden for so long.”
Radio broadcasters defended the rights of the pink flamingo as well.
Mickey and Spiegel of Baltimore’s 98Rock’s (WIYY) Mickey, Amelia, & Spiegel
morning show were early, outspoken supporters. “It’s part of the Hampden
landscape,” they said. “When the New York Times wrote about Baltimore, the
picture they chose was the pink flamingo.” “Even Baltimore City Police
Commissioner Frederick H. Bealefeld III came out in favor of the bird.
At dawn on Tuesday October 20, 2009, three days before the October 23
permit deadline, Whiting relented. She and a team of volunteers dismantled the
pink flamingo. Artist Randall Gornowich, who stood on the fire exit, using a rope
to lower the pink flamingo, said about the experience, “It was like lowering a
casket into a hole.” Whiting said she had called ten different Baltimore city
departments in an attempt to save the pink flamingo, but none would be
convinced. “The city doesn’t want it. It’s an unwanted bird,” Whiting told WBAL
in an interview in front of her now flamingoless restaurant. “I’m not going to fight City Hall,” she explained, “I’m just going to take it down.” In front of her, the flamingo’s extremities sat on the curb in a pink heap. Whiting would only say the rest of the bird had “gone in hibernation.”

There was a bit of a veiled threat behind Whiting’s words, as if she knew the city would realize it needed her flamingo. “If the city wants the bird back up,” Whiting explained, “if the city wants this really fun icon that says ‘hey, we’re a fun city, come visit us,’ you know, they’re going to have to help me put it back up.”

Whiting was correct, and even at the time the flamingo came down, city officials, including the mayor, were scrambling behind the scenes to save the flamingo. In its eulogy, the WBAL evening news said, the pink flamingo had “become an icon of sorts, a symbol of the renaissance of the neighborhood.” The Baltimore Sun reported “sad news today.” And Cheryl Taragin of the Baltimore Examiner lamented the death of the pink flamingo that had “served as a beacon of Bawlmer for the past seven years.” From a business perspective, another Hampden small business owner regretted the loss of a great marketing tool. “It was a great promotional symbol,” Carmen Brock said. “It was fun, easygoing, witty, and clever.”

On the other hand, some of the class strife bubbling just beneath the surface also appeared. Charles “Chick” Nott, a blue-collar local who had just stepped outside of a Hampden bar, Frazier’s on the Avenue, told WBAL, “She
tries to control everything,” denying that the pink flamingo was a symbol of Hampden. She “caters to Roland Park, Towson, Charles Village and Ruxton,” Nott complained. “To me, Café Hon is more not for Hampden.” In fact, the comments on the news articles and blog posts during the controversy followed a general pattern. People from Hampden, especially longtime residents, do not like Café Hon, HonFest, or Denise Whiting. People from other neighborhoods in Baltimore and especially people from the surrounding counties with a past connection to Baltimore love Café Hon, HonFest, Denise Whiting, and the flamingo, and consider it a cultural icon.316

Evan the Mayor, blogger for The City That Breeds, explained, in the comment section to his own article, his defense of Café Hon: “Yeah I understand people's gripes with the concept and execution of Hon Fest - to a certain degree. They for some reason hate the idea of marketing Baltimore kitsch and they don't want it in their precious neighborhood, but quite frankly the Hampden we see now is, oh, like 40000 times better than it was in the 80s. Most transplants don't know that. Cafe Hon (including that big dumb flamingo), Atomic Books and all the other fair trade Peruvian hand made basket stores (or whatever the hell else is around there) have done WONDERS for the neighborhood.”317 In an interview, Whiting revealed how she perceived her role in Baltimore, perhaps more honestly than the prepared maxims she delivers each HonFest: “It’s individuals like myself who create these images that make Baltimore not like anywhere else in the USA. I am political in a way. I’m trying to celebrate Baltimore’s uniqueness, and there
are always going to be people who won’t like this.”\textsuperscript{318} It is also worth noting she specifically said \textit{Baltimore’s} uniqueness, not Hampden. Her project is a citywide project, not neighborhood specific.

The Internet offers new data sources and new methodological possibilities for this type of research. Hearing from local residents in the Hon Man era meant mining newspapers for quotes, sound off sections, and letters to the editor. With the advent of Facebook, community members were able to make their voices heard through comment sections, message boards, and Facebook pages. For example, one great groundswell of support came on artist Randall Gornowich’s “Give Baltimore the Bird” Facebook page.\textsuperscript{319}

Katie Lilly, October 21, 2009, “Do you know how much money needs to be raised to pay for the permit? Let’s have a car wash on the Avenue!”

Jack Burkert, October 21, 2009, “a landmark is NOT a sign, so back off tax assessor, and let our city live...”

Andrew Wagner, October 21, 2009, “Leave it to the city of Baltimore to wait 7 years until something becomes a ‘landmark’ and then decide to impose at [sic] tax.”

Debbie Pepper Howard, October 21, 2009, “Whatever you need us to do- we are there!! I’ll round up the HONS!!!”

Jenn Robbins, October 21, 2009, “They want to tax the flamingo...but aren’t all those TACKY crabs still all around town??!!”

Robert C. Greb, October 21, 2009, “where can you buy the pink lawn ornaments now? Everyone should put one in their yards as a protest............

Dawn Worley, October 22, 2009, “Goin downy av’nue wont be the same Hon.”
Sabrina Ann, October 22, 2009, “R.I.P. Pink Flamingo, so sorry to see you go, we are all going to miss you. I guess Baltimore would rather be known for their murder rate then a big pink flamingo:(“

Rita Moore, October 22, 2009, “As one of Baltimore [sic] Best Hons it bring [sic] tears to my eyes. I rode in several Christmas parades along with several of Baltimore [sic] Mayors it is amazing that they didn’t have a problem with the big bird as a Baltimore landmark then. Is Mr NatieBo next to get axe? I coordinate patients to come from all over the world and Mr Pink Flamingo is on the top of the list for people to see. Denise brought back a neighborhood that was deteriorating to a thriving community and for this she should pay another price. Maybe you should be worring [sic] about the rat problem and all of the trash in other neighborhoods. Rita Moore Queen Hon 2003”

Shannon Knight, October 23, 2009, “It just ain’t Charm City without Big Pink!!”

Terri Thomas, October 23, 2009, What’s the BIG DEAL about keeping The Bird? BRING it BACK; it’s part of HISTORY!”

Kathy Marie, October 23, 2009, “That flamingo was an icon, that represents our bawlmares. People comment how we have our own little lingo here, and I am a proud Bawlmer HON”

Lisa Jackson Maempel, October 23, 2009, “Bring back da bird! The Hampden skyline on the avenue will look naked without her.”

Angela Nichole, October 24, 2009, “Charm City is now a little less charming without Big Pink!”

Dianne Denton Nowicki, October 26, 2009, “I loved that bird! I’ve brought visitors down to see that bird! I want that bird back!”

Denise Whiting, October 27, 2009, “I love the way you use your voices for positive change.”

Randall Gornowich, October 30, 2009, “BIG and REFINED and SMOOTH and SHINY and ALL ABOUT BAWLMER HON! I should be waxing my “BIG PINK” by Monday.”
Marianne Szabelski, November 10, 2009, “I just feel something missing when I drive by…I can’t wait for her return! To all those involved…you are awesome! Thanks for helping out this little piece of Bawlmer, Hon!”

After Denise Whiting relented and removed the Pink Flamingo, Baltimore radio station 98Rock’s Mickey and Amelia began to plan a Flamingo Protest Live Broadcast to be held in front of City Hall the following week. Among comments like “FREE THE FLAMINGO!!!” and “Mass Flamingo-ing! Flamingo’s everywhere!!!!!!!!,” Chris Lynch on October 21, 2009 at 12:49 p.m. recommended, “Why don’t you ‘Flock’ City Hall? There’s a company you can hire…and they will put as many as you order…pink flamingos in the grass of the property…” This idea provided the seed for the eventual protest. At this point, it is worth noting how incredible this protest really is. The 98Rock radio station and other Baltimoreans with no direct connection or monetary investment in Café Hon were willing to protest on behalf of a business owner—one who, seen most cynically, did not want to pay for a required city permit. But Baltimoreans are willing to rally on her behalf because they see the pink flamingo as part of their collective identity, and therefore, representing them and their city.

The city had told WBAL earlier that they were working behind the scenes to try to help Whiting save her pink flamingo, and on October 22, 2009, Mayor Sheila Dixon made several statements that confirm this. “I know probably my agencies are not going to like my comments, but I was really disappointed that we didn’t reach out to the flamingo and work with the owner,” the mayor said.
Around the same time, Whiting noted the complex relationship between private property and cultural property, “It’s really the people’s flamingo,” Whiting said. On October 27, 2009, a rainy Tuesday morning, before the break of dawn, a flock of 1,300 plastic pink flamingos landed on War Memorial Plaza in front of City Hall. Despite the rain, the early hour, and the weekday date, fifty supporters attended 98Rock’s “Flock to City Hall” rally. 98Rock’s morning radio hosts Mickey and Amelia brought Mayor Dixon and Café Hon owner Denise Whiting together. While Mickey, Dixon, and Whiting hashed out the flamingo controversy, 2009 Baltimore’s Best Hon Blaze Char (aka Charlene Osborne) stood holding a pink, frilly umbrella over Whiting’s head, protecting her form the drizzle. “Our protest, I believe, is what forced the issue,” Mickey said at the summit. “Well, actually, no, it wasn’t your protest,” the Mayor retorted. “You won’t give me any credit, will you, Mayor?” Mickey joked. “No, uh-uh,” said the mayor, shaking her head.

Denise Whiting and the mayor agreed to a comprehensive review of minor privilege permits for all small businesses and the placement of a “Hampden Exit 9A” sign on Interstate 83, the Jones Falls Expressway, directing traffic to Hampden. In a statement later, the mayor explained her decision. “It is an icon,” the mayor agreed. “It is...part of what Baltimore is made of.”

“I am thrilled with what went down today with the mayor,” Whiting said, following the event. Who the victory was for, though, seemed to have changed. "I think it was a victory for all of the small businesses of Baltimore."
Elsewhere, Whiting said “the big bird was a symbol of small businesses that make the city vibrant.”

The permit fee was based on calculated squared footage. By using “different geometry,” that is, measuring the bird as a triangle rather than a rectangle, the Department of General Services reduced the square footage and, thereby, cut the annual minor privilege permit fee in half to $400 per year.

The following day, the result made national news. The USA Today chose the story as the Maryland news of the day in its “Across the USA News from every state.”

Rather than reassemble the old pink flamingo, Whiting commissioned a new one. Local artist Randall Gornowich, the original artist, was chosen to construct the new pink flamingo. “It felt like something was missing,” Whiting said of the weeks that the flamingo had been down. On the night of Wednesday, November 18, 2009, Mayor Dixon, while on trial for perjury, theft, and misconduct charges that would eventually cost the mayor her job, attended the unveiling celebration in one of her last public appearances. It was the mayor who, to the backdrop of music and searchlights, pulled the pink feather boa that dropped the black plastic shroud to unveil the new pink flamingo to several hundred onlookers and supporters crowded onto the Avenue.

This time, artist Randall Gornowich eschewed the chicken wire and bed sheets in favor of a shiny, fiberglass pink flamingo. “She’s a fantastic bird,” Gornowich said, “She’s going to stay perched here for a while.”

Denise Whiting
began calling 2010 "The Year of the Bird." Covering the 2010 HonFest, Sam Sessa wrote, "Usually, Honfest is a celebration of kitsch, from beehives to cat’s-eye glasses. This weekend, the annual Hampden festival will be honoring a different Baltimore icon. ‘It was all about the beehive,’’ said Honfest founder Denise Whiting. ‘This year, it’s all about the bird.’"

This was the pinnacle of Café Hon’s popularity. By the end of this same year, the Hon trademark drama will be at a fervor. But for a while anyway, Denise Whiting was on top of the world. Hampden went from a shabby row of derelict businesses to the hip, gentrified center of small business and renewal in Baltimore. She received visits from the governor, her restaurant went from a small diner receiving lukewarm reviews to one photographed in the *New York Times*, she expanded beyond Hon Café to operate HONtown and The Hon Bar, the city and the mayor rallied around her Pink Flamingo, and then the Best Hon Contest, in the 1990s a small promotional tool held in front of her restaurant, became the three-day megaevent HonFest, stretching across the Avenue and overflowing into Roosevelt Park and welcoming over 60,000 revelers.

Of the future of HonFest, Whiting said, "I cannot tell you what lies in the future of Honfest, because it creates itself. I am merely the administrator." She continued, "I feel very blessed and honored to be an ambassador for Baltimore and show people from other cities and countries what a beautiful town we come from. I’m honored to say I was born here. And I love Baltimore, Hon."
The case above and the case below, coined “flamingogate” and “hontroversy” in the blogosphere, raise fundamental questions about ownership of local culture. In the case of the pink flamingo, Baltimore residents expressed a sense of collective ownership of the pink flamingo as a city icon, and its owner, Denise Whiting, appeared to agree that the flamingo belonged to the city’s residents. Later the same year, this fundamental question of cultural ownership was tested again when it was revealed that Denise Whiting trademarked the local term of endearment, “hon.” Who owns the esteemed vernacular, can it be protected, and what are its implications for the public domain?

**Who Owns Folklore?**

In 1962, Gershon Legman posed a simple but unexplored question in *Western Folklore’s “Folklore Fillers” section. He asked, “Who owns folklore?”* (Legman 1962). Gershon was writing out of concern over Alan Lomax’s copyright claims on the title page of *The Folk Songs of North America*. While the origins of most of the songs were disputable or untraceable, one person who certainly did not own the songs was Alan Lomax. Or did he? I said that this was an unexplored question, but, assuming the question comes down to origins, it had really been explored furtively in the “ballad wars”—a scholarly dispute that pitted communal creation against individual creation. More accurately, Legman’s question had not been explored in the modern American legal context. While no community could place a copyright on its traditional music, Lomax, by virtue of collecting and publishing, could. That is not to say Lomax would attempt to block
others from using or publishing the songs included in his collection, but he claimed he could: “warning is hereby given that most of the songs in this volume are protected by copyright.”

In his rejoinder to Legman’s article, Charles Seeger was the first to call for a commission operated by American folklore societies to monitor folk song usage, with the royalties paying for the protection of the public domain (Seeger 1962, 97). One of the first to test the proposition of an official infrastructure was Bolivia. Legman had observed that “the discovery that folklore was worth money—not very much money, admittedly” had “blur[red] the serious moral question involved in collecting the folk songs and folklore or largely unpaid informants” (Legman 1962, 1). Simon and Garfunkel would challenge even this statement when their Bridge Over Troubled Water topped billboards and won the Grammy Award for Album of the Year. One of the tracks on that album was “El Condor Pasa,” an Andean folksong. The Bolivian government objected to how its “national” folk music had been used. Unlike Seeger, Bolivia was not hoping to protect the public domain. It was seeking recompense. In 1973, the Bolivian president composed a letter to the United Nations urging greater protection for intangible traditional culture. It would take thirty years, but in 2003, the United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization passed the “Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage.” The United States has not ratified this convention, but it has sparked much of the ongoing scholarly conversation on folklore as intellectual property, even before its passage.
As early as 1983, Alan Jabbour, the Director of the American Folklife Center, suggested that that the problem of the legal conception of the community ownership of folklore was that it exists somewhere between individual rights and property rights, a “radical idea” in Western thought (Jabbour 1983). In New Mexico, state courts accepted the idea of community ownership of a tradition in the “Portal case,” allowing only persons registered as Native Americans to sell arts and crafts under the Portal of the Palace of the Governors, connected to the Museum of New Mexico (Evans-Pritchard 1987). But even here, the ruling had been complex and ultimately flawed. The categorization included too many and too few materials. Under the law, native tribes of Canada or the Northeast were free to sell under the Portal, whereas an Anglo-American New Mexican artists who has apprenticed under a Hopi master artist were not.

Scholars in a number of disciplines have formulated proposals to protect the intangible cultural property of traditional groups. In fact, so vigorous has been the scholarship that a veritable discipline and several scholarly journals have arisen with this very goal as their genesis. I will focus here only on those most closely connected to the discipline of folklore and the protection of folklore and folk artists.

For anthropologist Michael F. Brown, by 1998, the challenges of intangible cultural property had split into rhetorical camps (Brown 1998). The most popular were the romantic idealists who demanded the First World return its stolen
property to indigenous people (Brown 1998, 195). Brown encouraged scholars to take a more realist approach to their analysis of intangible cultural property claims. He called for decisions to be made on a case-by-case basis, rather than the implementation of any sort of monolithic legislation (Brown 1998, 204-6).

Brown was particularly perplexed by critics who accused appropriators of both theft and inauthenticity simultaneously (Brown 1998, 201-2). Logically, the charge would have to be one or the other, but as the Baltimore case will prove, complainants frequently cited both.

Folklorists, often marginalized, have been invited to the table to help concoct intangible cultural property legislation, both for the original “Draft Treaty for the Protection of Expressions of Folklore Against Illicit Exploitation and Other Prejudicial Actions” and then later “Recommendation on the Safeguarding of Traditional Culture and Folklore,” and even the latest “Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage.” One of these original folklorists was Lauri Honko, distinguished European folklorist and member of the Folklore Fellows. As is frequently the case, folklore theory did not blend well with legal needs. While the United Nations’ lawyers were eager to develop laws to protect folklore, they required a definition of authentic folklore from which they could draft prudent legislation. Specifically, they needed a definition that fit into Western legal thought. Instead, Honko offered the accepted theoretical folklore answer: “First, since variation is the life substance of folklore, there is no master copy of a product of folklore from which all its variants could be derived. Second,
I pointed out the tradition community as the prime holder of rights and ownership, not the individual performer who never claims to have invented the folkloric piece he performs” (Honko 2001). The end result was legislation that may be cheered by those desperate to protect groups they perceive as exploited, but that has fearsome potential consequence for the function and transmission of folklore. The Draft Treaty has two primary statements. First, the use of folklore must be authorized, and if there was to be profit, part of the profit had to go to the source. Second, unauthorized use or misuse was considered criminal and, therefore, demanded criminal prosecution. In his recommendation, Honko leaned toward the bureaucratic divide. The Draft Treaty called for a “competent authority” to oversee folklore, although it left open who that competent authority is. Honko argued that folklore archives were the best choice for the competent authority. From here, “a well-functioning and clearly coded infrastructure represents the best guarantee for the enforcement of copyright and other rights actualised through the secondary use of expressions of folklore” (Honko 2001).

This call for bureaucratization of folklore proved to be pervasive.

For example, in 2004, Sandy Rikoon called for the “legal recognition and legitimation of communities of peoples' sovereignty over their own knowledge and folklore,” that is, “a system that provides real authority for knowledge communities and legal recognition for self-defined systems (formal and informal) of community cultural conservation” (Rikoon 2004, 333). Rikoon would put the decision-making power in the hands of the groups to whom the folklore or
traditional knowledge belongs. To the well-meaning folklorists who advocated for the groups they study, this position was hard to resist. It had echoes of Jabbour two decades earlier ("...without adequate safeguards to ensure that the source-group itself for the expression of folklore has some say in the matter, the concept of folklore protection is disquieting" (Jabbour 1983). But its idealism does not take into account human nature. Although Rikoon was admittedly writing with biopiracy in mind—and thought of giving tribes the legal power to fight back against pharmaceutical companies is enticing—his proposition was still ultimately what Noyes categorized as bad theory turning into bad policy (Noyes 2006, 44). Rikoon posited at least two points in this formulation that would be rejected by most folklorists not blinded by idealism: (1) The idea that there is one confirmed source community who can lay exclusive claim to any given folkloric phenomenon; (2) That within this community there will be consensus about proper form and conduct, use and ownership, and prestige and compensation of folklore.

Rikoon’s essay was in fact a rejoinder to Valdimar Hafstein’s “Politics of Origins: Collective Creation Revisited” (2004). In this essay, Hafstein came closer to the intangible cultural property protection that I will propose for urban American folklore. At the time of Hafstein’s writing, the “Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage” was still primarily a non-American proposition, but it was an American who became the point of departure for Hafstein’s observations on copyrighting folklore and social
creativity. In response to the WIPO’s report that folklore “is generally understood as being the result of creation and innovation by a collective originator: the community” (WIPO 2002, 31), Linda Lourie of the United States Patent and Trademark Office derided the idea of communal creation as a folly of nineteenth century romanticism, arguing that folklore is “always individually created and then adopted by communities” (quoted in Hafstein 2006, 300). Unfortunately for folklorists agitating for “community” rights, Lourie is guilty of nothing more than referencing folklorists’ own disciplinary textbooks. During the “ballad wars” of the early twentieth century, some scholars argued for the “communal creation” of ballads. Later ballad scholars, such as Cecil Sharp and Phillips Barry, rejected communal creation in favor of individual creation and “communal re-creation.” In this view, a single artist, such as a wandering minstrel, first constructed the ballad individually. The community then adopted and modified popular ballads, imbuing them with standard folk traits.

In this instance, the legal system is flawed, but it is flawed because of faulty theoretical notions of creativity as a solitary flash of genius. Under this formulation, Andeans, Pygmies, and Bushmen cannot own their folklore but when co-opted, Paul Simon, Britney Spears, and the Pfizer Corporation can. Much as I will claim later, Hafstein called not for the creation of regulatory folklore bureaucracies, but instead the reconsideration of creativity at large. “Rather than claim a measure of originality for folklore,” Hafstein argued, “we should repudiate originality itself and embrace instead a social concept of
creativity, along the lines of theories of intertextuality and distributed innovation” (Hafstein 2004, 309). Hafstein urged a reconsideration of the origins of folklore that are more honest to the folkloric process and more useful for the formulation of folklore policy. Hafstein concludes, “I propose instead a social conception of creativity. Far from distancing folklore from the categories of discourse and practice, this concept underlines their common dynamic: communal origination through individual recreation” (Hafstein 2004, 310). Hafstein was beginning to push the conversation in a new direction. At its core, this is not about policy that can protect folklore, but instead about how folklore can change policy.

In 2006, Dorothy Noyes published “The Judgment of Solomon,” a metaphor for the protection of traditional knowledge. Noyes urged caution as legislative bodies begin to implement policies meant to give local control to a community’s folklore. In the protection language, folklore belonged to a “community,” usually a marginalized group. This, of course, was a reification of an ideal, as imagined communities (Anderson 1982) actually function more like networks (Noyes 2003a). Noyes used the Catalanian Patum—and I will use the Baltimoreans “hon”—to demonstrate how at the local level the implementation of folklore is as much about “the collective renegotiation of intracommunity conflict” as it is about a homogenous group identity (Noyes 2006, 28). In the modern world, authentic culture is a commodity, one that the upper and middle classes often rely on the working and lower classes to provide. Because of the profit margin any “local control” is likely to turn a once dynamic tradition into a static,
shadowy bureaucracy “of a twice-removed and very small subgroup, whose representative status is unclear” (Noyes 2006, 34). Noyes highlights the challenges of what I refer to as the transition from the stigmatized vernacular to the esteemed vernacular:

The difficulty of this achievement increases and the sources of competition intensify when outsiders begin to pay attention to this local folklore. Now folklore presents political and economic opportunities. It creates opportunities for the community as a whole to improve its fortunes, but simultaneously offers opportunities for individual advancement. The intellectual who can interpret local culture to the metropolis in ideologically attractive terms, the artist who is singled out as a master, the patron who can claim to have preserved an age-old tradition for posterity, can all be taken up and celebrated by enthusiastic metropolitans with little local knowledge, and their self-representations are unlikely ever to be questioned. (Noyes 2006, 38)

Noyes observed that current intellectual property law had trouble handling literary communal creativity, let alone processes as complex as the folk arts (Noyes 2006, 44). To this point, many folklorists were so desperate for a stronger voice that they were willing to work within an avowedly inadequate system. One possibility that few folklorists have suggested as an alternative means of governance is applying folklore theory to expand the conception of the public domain.

**The Esteemed Vernacular, Intellectual Property, and the Public Domain**

One of the challenges of a transition from the stigmatized vernacular to an esteemed vernacular is that the transition fundamentally changes the social and economic motivation behind the production of folklore. What I will suggest in this chapter is that folklorists should avoid the temptation of advocating for copyright
protection for folklore and “traditional communities,” righteous as those aims may be. Instead, folklorists could use their accumulated disciplinary knowledge of communal creativity to challenge flawed intellectual property laws, increase the public domain, and promote the cultural commons. These are foremost conversations in the digital age.

Most folkloristic arguments meant to protect intellectual cultural property are fundamentally flawed. As Noyes has noted, folklorists are so pleased to have a seat at that table that they are willing to make policy out of bad theory, in hopes that the end will justify the means, that folklorist’s voices will be heard, and that they are serving underserved communities. These propositions require complex bureaucracies that will make official decisions about avowedly unofficial culture, or they cede control completely to the “community.”

Each scholar surveyed would hypothetically attempt to protect “hon” intellectual cultural property rights in Baltimore in a different way. Charles Seeger would ask the American Folklore Society to curate a list of folk speech to ensure those words stay in the public domain. Lauri Honko would prefer the local folklore archive oversee the appropriate ownership of “hon.” UNESCO would draft legislation that requires permits to use folklore and criminalizes its misuse, shutting down Café Hon and prosecuting Denise Whiting. Sandy Rikoon would ask for control of the use of the word to be handed directly to Baltimoreans, or perhaps to Hampdenites.
In the American urban context, the folly of these propositions comes through. Denise Whiting should be allowed to use “hon,” but she should not be allowed to restrict anyone else’s use of it. The word’s power comes from its resonance in the local linguistic commons. The public domain includes inconspicuous, stigmatized, and esteemed vernacular forms, and the esteemed vernaculars, like hon, are most desirable because they are potentially profitable. While anyone is free to use these forms strategically, expediently, and voluntarily, they remain in the commons. In fact, from this perspective, it is Hafstein and Noyes who offer the best suggestions for future action. Following Noyes’s maxim “good policy cannot be made from bad theory” (2006, 44, original emphasis), which can reworded as good “policy requires good theory,” Hafstein makes the elegant theoretical proposal of “communal origination through individual re-creation,” although it will require additional work to see how this could be put into legal action. In the Baltimore context, Hafstein’s argument is a step towards legitimating and defending the public domain, by protecting it as a common grounds for creativity and innovation while denying that anything taken from its realm can be referred to as a solitary stroke of genius. In this chapter, via case study, I suggest that folklore is best understood as part of the public domain of a community, broadly conceived, and that rather than attempting to make folk culture fit into intellectual property laws, intellectual property laws should be reformed to meet the needs of other types of knowledge and creativity, like folk culture.
Before I begin my Baltimore case study, I would like to give a basic overview of intellectual property, to distinguish between copyright and trademark, to explain how copyright can be misused, such as with copyfraud, and to give an overview of the various extremes of opposition to copyright law and arguments for modifying or abolishing copyright law.

Intellectual property is a recent idea, beginning with the British Statute of Anne (1710). The term refers to creations of the mind, such as music, literature, discoveries, and other artistic works. Intellectual property is *intangible* property, a word also used in “intangible cultural heritage.” Although copyright is a relatively recent concept, in the United States, it is the same age as the country itself. The U.S. Constitution gives Congress the power “To promote the Progress of Science and useful Arts, by securing for limited Times to Authors and Inventors the exclusive Right to their respective Writings and Discoveries.”

Two specific types of intellectual property rights are important in this chapter, copyright and trademark. According to the U.S. Copyright Office, copyright is “A form of protection provided by the laws of the United States for ‘original works of authorship’, including literary, dramatic, musical, architectural, cartographic, choreographic, pantomimic, pictorial, graphic, sculptural, and audiovisual creations.” It warns that “names, titles, short phrases, slogans, [and] familiar phrases...are not subject to copyright.” According to the U.S. Patent Office, trademark is “any word, name, symbol, or device, or any combination thereof...used by a person...to identify and distinguish his or her goods, including...
a unique product, from those manufactured or sold by others and to indicate the source of the goods, even if that source is unknown.” Trademarks are used for branding.\textsuperscript{339} When these rights are violated, the legal term is “infringement.”\textsuperscript{340} Copyright infringement, also called piracy, occurs when someone “violates any of the exclusive rights of the copyright owner.”\textsuperscript{341} Trademark infringement occurs when “the use by another of the same or a similar mark that violates the prior trademark rights of another in the jurisdiction where such use occurs.”\textsuperscript{342}

Originally, the point of intellectual property was to give minimal protections purely to encourage progress and innovation. Only in the late twentieth century did intellectual property turn to a legal means of attempting to secure exclusive rights over profitable works in perpetuity. For example, Sen. Orrin Hatch lamented that George Gershwin’s \textit{Rhapsody in Blue} would soon fall into the public domain and encouraged his colleagues to extend copyright protections. His rhetoric construed the public domain as a dark abyss of destruction rather than the commons available for creativity. Taken to the extreme, strong proponents of intellectual property frequently attempt to oppose reform and hinder change by controlling the distribution of information and disallowing discussion.

A strong counter movement has formed seeking to curtail or abolish intellectual property rights. These groups range from file sharing activities to professional economists. Most of the arguments stem from a general argument that copyright does little to benefit society, enriching a few while stifling
creativity for many. While copyright was originally meant to encourage productivity and creativity, recent studies show it actually does the exact opposite (Scherer 2004, Boldrin & Levine 2008). Economists Michele Boldrin and David K. Levine argue what is called “intellectual property” is “an intellectual monopoly that hinders rather than helps the competitive free market regime that has delivered wealth and innovation to our doorsteps” (Boldrin & Levine 2008). Similarly, despite perceived wisdom to the contrary, there is not proof that copyright benefits a society economically (Hoffner 2012). Philosophically, others are opposed to the idea of creating artificial scarcity. Theft of physical property leaves the victim without the original item. Infringing copyright has no effect on the victim’s ability to use the original item.

The fundamental problem is with the conception of authorship and creativity. The idea of the author is assumed to be universal across culture and across time, although it is, in fact, a Western idea that arose around the industrial revolution. The idea of “author” prioritizes one particular process of knowledge production based on individual genius and individual ownership, which takes precedence over community knowledge (if such a phenomenon can be shown to exist). Born out of the industrial revolution, it is also fundamentally profit driven. It assumes that without restrictive copyrights, artists would cease to create, ignoring the many artists who continue to create with little chance of ever making significant royalties.
Copyfraud is a form of copyright misuse by which individuals and institutions claim copyright ownership of content in the public domain (Mazzone 2006). In this chapter, Baltimoreans accuse Whiting of copyfraud. Although Whiting only had a trademark, as Whiting acted as if she had a copyright on “hon,” Baltimoreans were not completely incorrect. Copyfraud is often successful because laws criminalizing false copyrights claims are weak, scant, poorly enforced, and rely on expensive legal advice (Mazzone 2006). A prominent example currently in the news is Warner/Chappell music who has been sued for copyfraud, claiming false ownership of “Happy Birthday” for decades. In regards to folklore, it is likely the copyright claimant does have some claim to the intangible cultural property, but no more than many others.

There are alternatives. I argue that the best alternative is not the messy attaching of perpetual intangible cultural property rights to idealized, imagined “communities,” but instead an energetic expansion and robust defense of the public domain and the creative commons. The commons are the cultural and natural resources accessible to all members of a society, including natural materials such as air, water, and a habitable earth. These resources are held in common, not owned privately. The commons comes from the English legal term “common land,” colloquially known as the commons. Unfortunately, we have come to know this from the “Tragedy of the Commons” — now common wisdom in economics. This, of course, refers to finite (or “rivalrous”) tangible land. Intangible cultural property is infinite (or “non-rivalrous”), and thus many can
use it without impeding on others’ rights. It has been popularized, however, by Wikipedia Commons as a source for public domain materials.

The public domain is the accepted term in English for an intangible creative commons. The concept dates at least to Roman law and *res publicae*, those things owned by all citizens. A work enters (or to use the more slanderous term, “falls”) into the public domain when its intellectual property rights have expired, been forfeited, or are deemed inapplicable. The public domain is often rhetorically conceived as a negative space (in the artistic sense, the opposite of a positive space). But the public domain has great potential to be the opposite, public domain David Lange reimagined as “a place of sanctuary for individual creative expression, a sanctuary conferring affirmative protection against the forces of private appropriation that threatened such expression” (Lange 2003).

**The Trademarking of “HON” Case Study**

In the nineteenth century, journalists dubbed Baltimore “Mobtown” for its aggressive public responses to bank failures, immigrants, and corrupt political systems. In the twenty-first century, Mobtown would have a similar response over intellectual property rights. While some derided it as a “manufactured controversy,” the resulting case appeared to be closer to “an authentic, grassroots howl of protest” through which Baltimoreans displayed “genuine, sustained outraged.” Who owns “hon”? The word is a classic term of endearment heard throughout the country, but with special attachments to
Baltimore. But according to Denise Whiting, her attorney, and a few supporters in 2010 and 2011, since at least 2005, Denise Whiting owned the word.

In 1991, Denise Whiting was a single mother from the Baltimore metropolitan area, recently divorced, with a business school background and some catering experience. Driving through the Hampden neighborhood one day, she saw a restaurant for rent and inquired. She bargained the rent down to $700 per month, and Café Hon was born. Whiting’s esteem in Baltimore grew gradually. The earliest manifestation of the restaurant received only a lukewarm review from the local paper. But Whiting proved herself a capable marketer. She held the first Baltimore’s Best Hon Contest in 1994, inspired by the Hon Man’s actions on the parkway. The festival became an annual event named “HonFest” a couple years later, with the Baltimore’s Best Hon Contest the festival’s crowning jewel (see chapter 4). HonFest expanded from one day to two days to three. In the process, Café Hon took on notoriety, if more for its image than its food. Similarly, Whiting expanded from Café Hon to Hon Bar next door to HONtown across the street. The New York Times featured Café Hon’s gargantuan pink flamingo adorning the front of the restaurant in its Baltimore travel article. Around this same era, the city notified Whiting that her Pink Flamingo required a minor privilege permit. This would cost her $800 per year, plus thousands in back taxes. Incredibly, as detailed in the prologue, the city, perceiving the pink flamingo as a Baltimore cultural icon and as part of the Baltimorean collective identity, literally rallied to Whiting’s side, staging a protest
in front of City Hall. The mayor herself backed the pink flamingo, the city found ways to reduce the fee, and a new, refurbished pink flamingo returned to roost on the front of Café Hon.

It was Whiting’s unceasing desire for expansion that nearly led to her downfall. On December 8, 2010, Whiting was attempting to drum up publicity for her new endeavor, HONtown, a Baltimore kitsch gift shop that would replace the previous Baltimore kitsch gift shop, Hometown Girl. The trouble began when Whiting told Larry Perl of the Baltimore Messenger, a weekly with a relatively small circulation, that she had decided to “continue establishing the ‘hon’ brand, through products and through merchandise.”349 If she had ended her comments there, “hontroversy” may have never happened. It is what she said next, an almost offhand comment, that spurred the Baltimore Sun’s Jill Rosen to investigate further and boiled Baltimorean’s blood for the next year. Whiting boasted she had trademarked the word “hon.” Whiting bragged, when the Maryland Transit Administration wanted to add a “hon” theme to its CharmCard campaign, it had to seek a licensing agreement with her.350 “I don’t know if you’ve noticed, but ‘hon’ is branding the city,” Whiting gloated. “The city is accepting its brand and embracing its heritage.”351

The “hon” trademark was not the central issue in Larry Perl’s column. He titled the piece “Hometown Girl on the Avenue in Hampden to Reopen as HONtown” and focused on the business prospects of HONtown. But Jill Rosen of the Baltimore Sun zeroed in on the “hon” trademark comment and began
investigating for a follow-up story. The following day, in the *Baltimore Sun*, Baltimore’s leading newspaper (with a much larger circulation), the headline announced “Sorry, Hon, it’s trademarked: Café owner owns right to word.” Rosen began, “Denise Whiting has not only built her life around the fabled Balmer Hon, opening Café Hon and founding the city’s annual Honfest—she’s helped to make the three-letter term of endearment a household word around town. Now she owns it.” Whiting did not mince words. “I took ownership of it,” Whiting told Rosen. In the interview, Whiting did little to appease concern, instead coming off as heavy-handed with her trademark claims. She proudly recalled bullying a Baltimore-Washington International Airport merchant into handing over his inventory. He had been selling “hon” wares, ranging from pins and magnets to shirts and shot glasses. “I had a meeting with him and said you have to give me all the merchandise,” Whiting recalled. “It was a ton of merchandise.” The Maryland Transit Administration tidbit also proved true. The CharmCard advertising campaign would feature 2009 Baltimore’s Best Hon winner Charlene Osborne (see Chapter 4 prologue) and the slogan “Get yours, Hon.” According to Rosen, the MTA had obtained permission from Whiting to use the word. “She didn’t charge them money,” Rosen wrote, “but she did insist on approving each individual ad, poster and television commercial.” Rosen observed that many Baltimoreans would object to the idea that anyone could own “hon.” “What’s next?” Rosen asked. “Trying to own Charm City’s charm, its red bricks or the fresh-baked smell that wafts over Southeast Baltimore from the H&S
Whiting was not necessarily stopping others from using “hon,” but they would have to secure her permission first.

For instance, if Baltimore’s tourism bureau wanted to adapt its slogan from “Get in on it” to “Get in on it, Hon,” or something like that, it would have to negotiate with Whiting, according to her lawyer. “We’d have to see about that,” she says.

If the city did one day come to her, wanting to use Hon in a tourism campaign, she said she’d be willing to let them run with it—if they built a parking lot in the busy Hampden shopping corridor.³⁵⁵

During the “Welcome to Baltimore, Hon” sign dispute, media sound bites first came from passersby and men-on-the-street. Only later would local politicians get involved. Rosen faced no similar challenge in this story. Notable Baltimoreans immediately went on record with their objections. Benn Ray, Hampden business owner of the prominent Atomic Books and president of the Hampden Village Merchants Association said, “I understand her need and desire to own and trademark Café Hon. But no one woman is Hon. Nor should anyone own it. It belongs to the city of Baltimore.”³⁵⁶ Similarly, Mike Evitts, spokesman for Downtown Partnership, gave an uncharacteristically impassioned reply for a professional public relations expert: “Are you kidding? You can’t do that. That’s like trade-marking the word ‘sweetheart.’” He continued, “In the civic sense, it’s un-ownable. It’s not something you can litigate over; it’s a state of being.”³⁵⁷ James B. Astrachan, a Baltimore intellectual property attorney who will write on the case more extensively later, objected immediately: “She’s taken the vernacular and is trying to create proprietary rights, and that’s just wrong. That
is a word that really ought to belong to everybody. Despite the fact that there is a registration, the courts have discretion to enforce trademark laws. How many people know she’s the source of ‘hon’ when every waitress in the city who plops down a piece of pie in front of you says, ‘Enjoy this, hon.”


The possibility of the vernacular response had fundamentally changed since the “Welcome to Baltimore, Hon” sign controversy. In the 1990s, residents were forced to send their opinion through official institutions such as newspapers, radio shows, and politicians. By 2010, Baltimoreans had access to communication platforms that could be used to directly protest Whiting’s appropriation of “hon.” Twitter accounts were registered (e.g., @CafakeHon, @NotCafeHon), Facebook group pages formed (e.g., “No One Owns Hon, Hon”),
and horrendous Café Hon reviews were posted to Yelp, Urbanspoon, and TripAdvisor. On Yelp on December 10, 2010, for example, Miss Mobtown in a one star review wrote, “Horrible service, overpriced and deeply uninspired food...and now the owner has gone and trademarked the word ‘hon’,
shamelessly capitalizing on tradition and charm inherent to Baltimore. Avoid at all costs.” The “No one owns HON, hon” Facebook page would quickly garner more fans than Café Hon itself. Similar to the campaign to defend President Barack Obama against attacks based on his middle name, where Facebook supporters changed their middle name to “Hussein,” many Baltimoreans on Facebook changed their middle name to “Hon.” Bloggers took to their blogs to denounce Denise Whiting and Café Hon (e.g., Welcome to Baltimore, Hon, The City that Breeds, Baltimore or Less, Baltimore Brew, etc.). And perhaps more than anywhere, the war raged in the comment sections of “hon” newspaper articles and blog posts (The City that Breeds called it the “Ultimate Flame War”). One bard even penned the parody “12 Days of Copyright” (e.g., “On the fourth day of Christmas, copyright by me, four formstones, three Poe poems, two crab cakes and a ditty by Francis Scott Key.”) Some resorted to vernacular material culture parodying Denise Whiting’s beloved HON stickers. Stickers littered the avenue ranging from brilliantly subversive (the upside down HON—“NOH”—pHONy, CON, etc.) to downright vulgar (“fuck you hon”). The popular @NotCafeHon Twitter account created a Christmas card, using the photo-op photograph of now-disgraced Mayor Sheila Dixon and Denise Whiting at the
unveiling of the new Pink Flamingo. Since the photograph was taken, Dixon had been jettisoned from office and barely avoided jail time for stealing gift certificates meant for a local children’s charity. The card read, “Merry Christmas from a disgraced woman who stole from Baltimore… and Sheila Dixon.”

Public outrage about the trademarking of “hon” compelled the *Baltimore Sun* to publish a formal editorial on the topic, aptly summarized in its title, “A Trademark Too Far.” The commentary starts comically enough. The *Sun* began, “For the purposes of this editorial, we will refrain from using a three-letter expression in common parlance among Baltimoreans, particularly those of the waitressing profession, that starts with an “H,” ends in an “N” and has an “uh” in the middle. We apologize for any inconvenience this may cause to readers, but we would not want Café You-Know-What owner Denise Whiting to demand we turn over the entire press run of the newspaper, as she did with some unfortunate soul who was selling H-word paraphernalia at the airport a few years ago.” But then its tone becomes a more serious. The *Sun* remembered how Baltimoreans had flocked to Café Hon’s defense during Flamingogate, “not because of something she created but because they saw her as celebrating and nurturing something that is part of the collective, community psyche.” After avoiding using the word throughout the column, the *Sun* addressed Whiting directly, “Get real, hon.”

Legally, the “hon” dispute was over a trademark, a word or symbol registered to distinguish one company’s product from another’s. But the rhetoric
on all sides, from Whiting’s “I took ownership of it”\textsuperscript{367} to the MTA’s asking permission to use “hon” to the words of the dissenters (e.g., “No One Owns Hon, Hon”), shows that this was an argument closer to copyright, the exclusive legal right to profit from a creation for a set period of time.

Stories began to emerge about Whiting’s past nefarious trademark enforcement, one that on closer examination looked eerily akin to copyright enforcement. In the BWI incident, Whiting was not concerned that customers would mistake the BWI vendor’s inferior product for her own brand (the purpose of a trademark). Her concern was that the vendor was not selling her stickers and her merchandise, leading to her profit (the purpose of a copyright). For proof of this, Whiting admitted she was willing to continue to work with the vendor so long as he sold her merchandise.\textsuperscript{368} This was not a solitary incident. In 2005, Whiting’s attorney Kathryn Miller Goldman sent a cease-and-desist letter to the Thanks, Hon! gift shop in Towson, Maryland. At the time, Whiting did not have a trademark for “hon” in relation to retail stores (she would apply for one the following year) and did not own a retail store herself (she purchased HONTown five years later, in 2010). Whiting would later claim that she had started the “Hon Boutique” in her restaurant but admitted that she had no documentation to prove this.\textsuperscript{369}

Whiting’s lawyer, Goldman, began the cease-and-desist letter with a very general and ambiguous “Café Hon is the owner of the federally registered trademark HON.” The lawyer continued, “Over the years, the Mark has been
used by the Café Hon to identify its goods and services and to distinguish them from those sold by others.” A closer inspection of Café Hon and HonFest proves this line to be false. Whiting attempted to commodify the word “hon” and the “Hon” image, but she never developed them into a brand that would distinguish hers from another. Rather, she relied on the previously existing prevalence, familiarity, distinctiveness, and community appeal of the word to lend relevance and power to her product. The issue gets even thornier in the opening paragraph’s final claim: “Such use includes restaurant services and retail services for gifts and novelties including clothing, paper goods, note cards, greeting cards, gift bags, etc.” At the date of the letter, this statement was false. Café Hon had filed for, but not yet received, the HON trademark for “paper goods” and “clothing.” There was nothing about restaurants services or retail services, the two primary claims in this cease-and-desist letter. This is significant not because of the nuances of trademark law, but because it shows that what was registered as a very limited trademark was, in fact, conceived by Whiting, her lawyers, and the general public as a copyright, that is, exclusive rights to profit from the word “hon.” The letter threatens, “Café Hon has discovered that you have begun to use the Mark as a trade name to promote your retail gift shop. We are hopeful that you will change the name of your entity, operate under a different name and abandon all confusing domain names, so that the Café Hon will not have to take action against you.” Goldman also claimed, “Because it is inherently distinctive, the Mark is entitled to a high degree of protection.” This
will also prove false, as the trademark is a word taken from the “linguistic commons” in black capital letters, no particular style or font. The one thing that makes the trademark desirable is that it is not distinctive at all. It is common.

Thanks, Hon! co-owner Brenda Prevas told Bruce Goldfarb that the store’s name was inspired by the British gift shop “Thanks, Darling.” When they named the store, they told Bruce Goldfarb, ”she and her partners thought HON was in the public domain.” After receiving the cease-and-desist letter, Thanks, Hon! was between a metaphorical rock and a hard place. They had just opened and spent most of their budget on merchandise and signage. “Changing our name would have been so cost prohibitive as to put us out of business,” Prevas remembered. On the other hand, an attorney advised the owners that a trademark war could cost upwards of $20,000, which would also bankrupt them. Their attorney recommended a meeting and an out-of-court settlement. At the meeting, Prevas remembered Whiting said, “This is nothing personal, it’s just business. If the City of Baltimore wanted to use the word “hon,” I’d sue them too.” Similar to the airport incident, Whiting agreed to continue to allow the business to operate so long as it sold her merchandise. (Again, this is a copyright claim, not a trademark claim). Whiting had no trademark relating to retail, she sold only a few stickers and trinkets out of her restaurant, and HONtown would not open for another half a decade. In fact, as Astrachan points out, Whiting may have committed intellectual property fraud in 2006 when she filed for her trademark. The form requires a sworn affirmation, under penalty
of perjury, that “to the best of his/her knowledge and belief no other person, firm, corporation, or association has the right to use the mark in commerce.” Whiting knew of at least the places listed above, plus Hon Man, who she had supported a decade before.

Even more appalling for some, in 2010, Whiting charged the SEARCH Foundation, a non-profit that assists special event professionals in times of crisis, $25 to throw a Hon-themed party in Baltimore. Whiting said she charged the nominal fee “for the sake of preserving the integrity of Café Hon’s trademarking in the context of restaurant and catering service.” In fairness to Whiting, she also donated merchandise and props to the event, but in the court of public opinion, the damage was done. Baltimoreans saw a threat to anyone who used the word “hon” or the “Hon” image.

In fact, Charlene Osborne had felt this wrath firsthand. One unfortunate victim of poor timing was Baltimore’s Best Hon 2009, who had just completed her book *My Year as Baltimore’s Best Hon*, and was now doing book publicity events. With her face not only on the new Maryland Transit Administration CharmCard, and the commercial promoting it, but also plastered on the side of Baltimore’s buses, Blaze Char should have been a local celebrity. Instead, she was the target of vague hostility. Osborne sat alone at her book-signing table at the Greeting & Readings bookstore, customers ignoring her and hurrying past. Finally one confronted her. “Are you the one who copyrighted the word ‘Hon’?” the woman asked in an accusatory tone. “No,” Osborne promised. The mood
lightened instantly, and the woman flipped through Osborne’s book. In the commercial, “Straight Outta’ Charm School,” viewers saw Osborne in full Blaze Char regalia, walking the red brick and marble step streets of Baltimore. “Hi Hon,” Blaze Char says to an African-American Hon tending a pink flamingo infested sidewalk garden. In impeccable Baltimoresse, Blaze Char enumerates the virtues of the CharmCard. On a version published to Vimeo, the video producer mentions “these characters were by far the most popular with the public.”

Since winning the Best Hon Contest, Osborne had been involved in a whirlwind set of appearances at benefits, galas, and other charitable events. Besides the MTA Charm Card campaign, Osborne had never asked for compensation. The idea crossed her mind for a flamboyant coffee table book documenting her year as Baltimore’s Best Hon. She would write the text herself, organize a team a photographers to follow her around, and self-publish. In December 2009, at the “Night of 100 Elvises” charity event to benefit the Johns Hopkins Children’s Center, Whiting noticed Osborne’s photographers. Osborne told Whiting about the book idea. Osborne told Bruce Goldfarb Whiting responded, “What book? I’ve always wanted to do a book. You have to talk to me.” She seemed jealous that somebody was going to do a project about Hon that she did not initiate. From that moment on, I was a target.” Osborne had to hire an attorney and negotiate with Whiting and Whiting’s attorney. For example, Osborne wanted to name the book It’s a Honderful Life, but Whiting told her, “You can’t do that. I own that.” “She was intimidating me into feeling
like she has a right to have a say,” Osborne told Goldfarb. Osborne objected, “It’s my story. It’s a documentary about my year. Only I can write that. I had to fight for that right.” Whiting also demanded to oversee the MTA CharmCard campaign. Osborne said, Whiting “told them she represented me and they had to go through her.” Whiting had told Osborne, “Charlene, I created you, I launched you and I own you. I am like Walt Disney and you are my Minnie Mouse.”

The reason that a trademark can be treated as a copyright, and one of the main reasons the issue is significant, is because of the nature of cease-and-desist letters. Those with the wealth to hold attorneys on retainer can wield cease-and-desist letters like intellectual property espantoons. A standard cease-and-desist letter orders the target to stop what they are doing or face dire consequences. Regardless of the proprietary claim, if the target does not give in to the demands, they have to retain legal counsel, which regardless of the outcome of the case can quickly escalate to the tens of thousands of dollars. The system inherently favors the wealthy. The legal distinction between trademark and copyright are less important than the vernacular understanding of intellectual property ownership.

Under Whiting’s watchful eye, quite a few Baltimorean businesses, organizations, and enterprises were in danger. These included The Hons softball team, the blog “Bon Appetite Hon,” the blog “Welcome to Baltimore, Hon,” the lindyhoppers Hi-De-Hon, the literary magazine Smile, Hon, You’re in Baltimore,
Charlene Osborne and her appearances as Blaze Char, Baltimore’s Best Hon 2009, and dozens of makeshift entrepreneurs who had printed T-shirts for street sales emblazoned with “Hey, Hon” and “Welcome to Baltimore, Hon.” In addition, anyone who wanted to add a portmanteau menu item like a “Honwich” or a “Hon Bun” would have to seek Denise Whiting’s approval first.

After his first article had (via Jill Rosen) set off a major upheaval, Larry Perl followed up with Denise Whiting and gave her a chance to defend herself. Denise Whiting’s attempt to come off as a benevolent trademark owner only fanned the flames. “Am I going to go after everybody that uses the word ‘hon’? No,” Whiting said. But if anyone tries to sell “hon” merchandise, “I’ll sue their pants off,” Whiting promised. In response, Dan Rodricks, Hon Man’s most vocal supporter and one of Whiting’s biggest supporters during Flamingogate, wrote “You don’t own me, hon,” calling Whiting’s move a “crass effort to control use of a Baltimore regionalism.” “You can’t own something that doesn’t belong to you,” Rodricks argued, “You shouldn’t be allowed to control use of something that has been in use by Baltimore’s extended family for years.” Rodricks still celebrated Whiting’s original mission, “countering the ‘homogenization of the provinces,’ which is what happens to communities when their local character gets crushed by pop culture, mass communication and franchise marketing.” But Rodricks argued that with the trademark, Whiting was in fact doing the exact opposite, attempting to commercialize (and for her own benefit only) the distinctive local.
One enraged local was freelance writer Rafael Alvarez, a freelance writer and former *Sun* reporter, but who asked to be referred to as “a local-born writer who has covered the authentic ‘hons’ and their families in Baltimore for 30 years.”

“This is what Disneyland hons don’t understand,” Alvarez complained. “A real ‘hon’ has no sense of irony about Baltimore they just ARE.”

Much like the heritage debates, Alvarez complained that Whiting would not let “hon” evolve. In real Baltimore, Hons endure, he argued, but they have changed.

Even voices generally at the periphery of such matters felt they needed to comment on the situation. One example was 89.7 WTMD, an NPR affiliate located at Towson University. General manager Stephen Yasko wrote in an editorial, “We keep trying to figure out why we, and thousands of others, feel anger and contempt for Ms. Whiting, owner of Café Hon in Hampden.” Yasko lamented the feeling of theft that accompanied the controversy. He explained, “What angers people most is she is using a concept that predates her restaurant. Ms. Whiting didn’t invent the Baltimore Hon. The images, emotions and memories encapsulated in these three letters are the very heart and soul of our city.”

Denying that the rage was born of envy, *Smile, You’re in Baltimore, Hon* editor William Tandy argued, “The collective, citywide anger over what many see as a brazen attempt to monopolize a facet of Baltimore’s identity says there’s much more to it than that. No, Ms. Whiting—they don’t envy you; rather, they are appalled that such a thing would have occurred to you in the first place.”
Even Whiting’s supporters disliked her. J.M. Giordano of *Gutter Magazine*, for example, rejected Baltimore “tradition” as celebrating a beleaguered past rather than looking toward a better future. “Yes. Denise Whiting’s trademarking the word Hon is the best thing to happen to Baltimore,” Giordano cheered. “Words like “Hon” and “Balwmer” are old words for old people and with her move to copyright the word ‘hon’ Whiting is thankfully keeping it that way.” He advised Baltimoreans to “let her have her word, her stickers, her image, her ‘restaurant’ and her festival. Pretty soon, Whiting and her ilk will be relegated to section of the Maryland Historical Society with the plaque: ‘A quaint symbol of Baltimore that died out in 2010.”

Larry Perl interviewed Denise Whiting yet again on December 14, 2010. By this point, Whiting had become belligerent. “It’s basically unchallengeable, according to my attorney,” Denise Whiting said. “Go ahead and challenge me, is what I say.” Whiting’s lawyer, Baltimore intellectual property attorney Kathryn Miller Goldman, added, “John Q. Public can’t do anything, “It’s about branding and business and marketing.”

By December 16, the fire of controversy was still burning (assisted by Whiting adding fuel to it in her interviews), and Whiting was forced to pen an essay for the *Baltimore Sun*. (Apology expert John Kador will later write in his blog *Apology Matters* that this is one of the worst apologies he has ever seen). She wrote, “I have lived here all of my life. I am fully aware that I did not invent the word “hon,” but I did name my first restaurant in 1992 “It’s a Café, Hon,”
which easily shortened to Café Hon. We organized and identified elements of “Hon culture” in Hampden, and others joined us to make “The Avenue” a popular commercial, artsy area.\textsuperscript{401} She defended, “All my company was trying to do by trademarking the commercial use of “Hon” was to protect it from merchandise knock-offs and poachers who wanted to capitalize on the commercial side of the concept enhancement work we had done. It was not meant to in any way take possession of the word or the culture from the public.”\textsuperscript{402}

Benn Ray, president of the Hampden’s Merchant Association and proprietor of Atomic Books (where John Waters picks up his fan mail), summed up both sides of the controversy in his “What We Talk About When We Talk About Hon™” blog post on Mobtown Shank.\textsuperscript{403} (Although his tone is neutral, he derisively includes the trademark in every “hon” utterance.) The article would be often cited throughout the controversy, but its most important observation was a personal anecdote showing how the controversy was changing the meaning and value of the word “hon.” Ray wrote, “As Baltimore’s HON™trovery marches insistently into week #3, I’d like [to] take a moment to point out a few things I’ve noticed above the fascinating conversation we, as a city/state/region, are having over private ownership of a public concept.”\textsuperscript{404} Ray remembered after moving to Baltimore he felt a “weird sense of pride” when he would see Hon Man’s sign on the Baltimore-Washington Parkway. "Here is," Ray thought, "something that makes my city unique. And it's so important that someone is willing to continue a sustained act of vandalism to make a point." He continued,
“I had no idea that nearly 20 years later a local business person would try to take the word out of the public domain for private commercial use.” Now, Ray wrote, “when I drive past the BW Parkway sign and notice a "HON" affixed to it (a couple weeks ago, I noticed the "HON" was back on the sign), I don't feel pride. I just feel sad. Oddly, a little embarrassed. And mildly annoyed.”

The Hon protest was scheduled for Sunday, December 18, on the sidewalk in front of HONtown. The weather was cold, but the protest still drew dozens of people. Attendees claimed the mood was festive rather than angry. “The idea—the very idea!—that one woman could legally own a word so deeply entrenched in Baltimore’s lexicon, a term that seems to touch on the city’s very blue-collar, audacious essence, did not sit very well with many Baltimoreans,” Rosen, who first broke the story, wrote.

Protestors carried signs such as “YOU CAN’T TRADEMARK OUR CULTURE HON,” “BOYCOTT CAFÉ HON NO….so we can go home and watch the Ravens like we oughta,” and “HONICIDE: LIFE ON 36th St.” (all intertextual references to other Baltimore culture). Rafael Alvarez handed out a circular comparing Whiting to “Robert Irsay in a dress.” Café Hon employees came out to defend Denise Whiting and hand out “hon” trademark fact sheets. Of the demonstrators, Rosen wrote, “At the demonstration in Hampden, most protesters questioned say they wanted to make a statement about greed—but even more about what they perceived as the unfairness of an individual trying to claim something they think belongs to the city as a whole.”

Steve Akers, the protest’s organizer, lamented, “they’ve taken the word away
from us. They’re making money off of a culture that’s not theirs. It’s my grandmother’s and my mom’s.411 Asked if it was worth standing out in the cold. Steven Akers, rally organizer, said “Yeah, it was worth it. I was defending our culture.”412 “We’re not ok with anyone owning the word Hon and claiming it,” he continued, “That’s not hers. That belongs to the people of Baltimore.”413 Even more upsetting for Akers was that Whiting did not appear to even understand what all the consternation was about.414 Jack Purdy, a ten-year resident of Hampden said, “This three-letter word is so deeply associate with Baltimore. She wants to turn an honest, working-class image into a tourist-park sort of thing.”415 Ken Gruz agreed, “Everyone in the city thought it was theirs. Now someone is say ‘It’s mine.’”416 Baltimore Sun copyeditor and local contrarian John E. McIntyre, who decided to stop by Café Hon on the day of the protest for blueberry pancakes and coffee, claimed he overheard a Hampdenite explain the protestors to his son, “None of those people actually live here. Why don’t they demonstrate for something?”417 Of course, I will argue that this is a Baltimore wide argument, not neighborhood specific.

The year before, Whiting had been so popular that the city had rallied to allow her to keep her pink flamingo. Now her critics were everywhere. Some people questioned Whiting’s legitimacy, pointing to her upbringing in Anne Arundel County.418 On the day of the protest, Whiting wrote another column for the Baltimore Sun, declaring the “trademark was about protecting a business, not co-opting a Baltimore tradition.” She admitted that the morale of her 54
employees "took quite a hit from all the frustration vented last week, on these pages and elsewhere, about our trademarks." She also confessed that she had "exaggerated and mischaracterized the meaning of these trademarks to a few reporters last week, and now, understandably, I stand accused of ’stealing’ a term of endearment long associated with my native town." Whiting was almost ready to make a concession. She wrote, "I hear you, Baltimore. Some of you think that I believe I ‘own’ the word ‘hon.’ Well, of course I don’t own it, and I didn’t invent it...It was not meant to take possession of the word or the culture from the public."

Whiting realized she would have to offer more of a response. Unfortunately, every time Whiting attempted to throw water on the fire, her effort only fueled more controversy. In an interview with a WBAL radio host who introduced the issue as "Denise Whiting, owner of Café Hon, now owns the rights to the word hon, H-O-N. She’s copyrighted it." In a voice usually reserved for felons and traitors, the host asked how it felt being compared to Robert Irsay? Clearly irritated at her fall from grace, Whiting responded, "I am not Robert Irsay, and I did not take the word from Baltimore. I cannot steal a culture. I cannot steal a Baltimore euphemism. I am protecting my legal rights as a business owner to own a trademark. That is it." When the host attempted to assess to what extent Whiting would enforce her copyright, Whiting continued to use the rhetoric of “protecting” the word: "If somebody was going to do something awful with it, I might take issue with that." Baltimoreans were also
annoyed with how much credit Whiting was giving herself with inventing and propagating a Baltimore tradition. “It wasn’t that big of a deal,” Whiting remembered of “hon” in the pre-Whiting days. She offered, “People said the word hon...But until I had Café Hon and then created HonFest...It wasn’t until we really started celebrating it in Baltimore. HonFest really put it out there nationally in the public eye.™26 “We can still use the word?” the announcer questioned. Whiting implored, “I beg everyone. Please use the word. Please put it up on the parkway. I love it on the parkway. It’s a word that belongs to Baltimore. It doesn’t belong to Denise Whiting.” But she still had a caveat: “On an oval it belongs to Denise Whiting. As a trademark, it belongs to Denise Whiting.”™27

The next day, on another radio appearance, this time Mickey, Amelia & Spiegel (the organizers of the pink flamingo rally), Mickey Cucchilea asked if the simple printing of the word hon on a T-shirt was enough to violate her trademark. “Answer this question straight...I want to make a T-shirt that says ‘Laugh, Hon’...or ‘My Baltimore, Hon.’ Are you gonna sue that person?” Whiting answered, “As long as you’re not mass-producing them...If somebody’s going to produce 5,000 of them for mass-production...I’m going to take a look at it. I’ll be honest with you. But if somebody’s going to produce a small quantity of Hon something I’m not gonna...I can’t police that sort of thing.”™28 Mickey countered, “But you do realize then, that’s what you have to be honest about...then you do own the word ‘hon.’™29 Whiting continued to rely on her rhetoric as “protector” of hon: “…If somebody produces a T-shirt that is really derogatory, and really
horrible, and presents the city in an awful way, would that be fair? If it’s something that’s derogatory that’s out there, I wouldn’t want Baltimore to be portrayed in the negative."

On January 3, 2011, John E. McIntyre wrote a “Wrapping Up” column for his You Don’t Say blog and included controversy in it. His prediction for 2011: “Ms. Whiting will continue to draw customers, and the noise about her will subside as some other non-issue attracts the attention of those who like to feel aggrieved.” McIntyre could not have been more wrong. On the same day, National Public Radio ran a feature story on controversy, “Baltimoreans to Businesswoman: Not So Fast, Hon,” putting the controversy in the national spotlight. “It absolutely belongs to everyone in Baltimore,” Denise Whiting told NPR, “I cannot take away noncommercial use of the word. The trademark has to do with commerce.”

Enter Bruce Goldfarb, proprietor of the “Welcome to Baltimore, Hon” blog and concerned Baltimorean (Catonsvillian, technically). Goldfarb remembered discussions with others that had included a bevy of suggestions, “including transferring the trademark to a nonprofit organization that would act as some kind of clearinghouse.” He knew this would not work. As Whiting was wielding her might through the legal arena, Goldfarb figured he would have to do the same. He would have to fight trademark law with trademark law. It would have been expensive to sue Whiting, as the plaintiff in a case has to establish the validity of the complaint. On the other hand, trademark cases are cheaper to
defend.\textsuperscript{435} Whiting’s case had serious flaws, and it was clear Whiting had been making excessive and inappropriate trademark claims.\textsuperscript{436} Goldfarb wrote in retrospect, “A trademark is supposed to identify the source of a product or service. But there was no HON-branded product—no Hon beer or Hon brand frozen meatloaf dinners. Just the word itself printed on a sticker.”\textsuperscript{437} A trademark has to be used to delineate a product or service, as it is with HON office furniture. As Goldfarb explained his actions a couple years later, “If there were a way to lure Whiting into bringing a lawsuit, as plaintiff the burden of proof would be on her to prove that the trademark was registered and used properly. The consensus was that Whiting would lose, hands down.”\textsuperscript{438} So Goldfarb prepared to “infringe” on Whiting’s “hon trademark. He created an online store on Printfection that sold HON mugs.\textsuperscript{439} Bruce Goldfarb’s mug was a simple white coffee mug with HON in red letters, $10.99. The product information read “100% of the net proceeds from the HON mug are donated to the Maryland Food Bank. Not affiliated in any way with Café Hon, Hontown or Honfest.”

In conjunction, Bruce Goldfarb published the “Hon Manifesto” on his “Welcome to Baltimore, Hon” blog. Goldfarb remembers, “The ‘Hon Manifesto’ was intended to put the issue into context, to explain why the trademarks are invalid, and to provoke movement toward a legal resolution.”\textsuperscript{440} Goldfarb makes three primary claims in his Hon Manifesto. (1) Denise Whiting’s “hon” trademark claim matters because it does have the potential to hurt people. In his words, “Whiting’s claim to exclusive commercial rights to ‘hon’ unreasonable inhibits
speech and restrains business.\(^{441}\) (2) Goldfarb showed that creativity in the Hon endeavor has been done far from the solitary stroke of genius, and is itself highly intertextual.\(^{442}\) Whiting was concerned about people poaching her creations. “Whiting’s entire shtick is based on John Waters’ films,” Goldfarb argued, “It’s safe to say that if there were no Waters films, there probably would be no Café Hon, Honfest or Hontown. If anybody is knocking off, poaching and capitalizing on the creative works of others, it’s Whiting.”\(^{443}\) In addition, even the “HON” sticker, probably Whiting’s sincerest intellectual property claim, appeared to be taken almost wholesale from James Douglas’s OBX stickers that premiered in the 1990s. (3) Denise Whiting’s “hon” trademark is illegitimate and can be beaten through the legal system.\(^{444}\) Goldfarb argued, “For Whiting’s trademark to be valid, her “Hon” must mean something distinctly different from our hon—the Baltimore hon, the term of endearment hon—that refers exclusively to a business, product or service.\(^{445}\) But Whiting had never used “hon” in that way. She used it as content rather than branding. Goldfarb wrote, “Whiting has never attempted to give any other meaning to hon. There’s no distinction between her hon and our hon. She promotes—and sells—the word in its common generic meaning as a term of endearment. The word is the product” (emphasis added).\(^{446}\) The Manifesto concluded, “The word is, and always has been, in the public domain. Hon is owned by nobody. Hon can be used by any person for any purpose—commercial or otherwise.\(^{447}\)
On Jan. 4, 2011, the *Baltimore Sun* ran a headline “Catonsville man challenges Hon trademark.” The article laid out the damned if she does, damned if she does not approach to battling Whiting’s “hon” trademark. Either Whiting sued Goldfarb, and she had to pay for an expensive case that she had a good chance of losing, or she did not sue, and Goldfarb could legitimately petition for a cancellation of the “hon” trademark. Whiting was trapped. “I have absolutely no comment,” Whiting told Jill Rosen (the *Baltimore Sun* journalist who had started the controversy). For Goldfarb this was “a legal issue about trademark,” one that “affects the free expression of a lot of local people” (including him).

Others began to do the same with their Hon products. The same day as the newspaper article, Baltimorean Kyle Vallecillo (a law student in Baltimore at the time) filed for a HON copyright for “providing advice and information to adult family members on appropriate entertainment and leisure activities for younger family members; Providing an Internet website portal in the field of entertainment, cultural and sporting events.” Similar to Goldfarb, “Bill Hon” (probably a pseudonym) began selling bawdy HON mugs and T-shirts on Printfection. Both played on Whiting’s oval HON stickers. One reads HON but above it in small print FUCK YOU and below it AND YOUR TRADEMARK. The other simply reads CON. Elsewhere, a Hon Man imitator continued to hang the HON sign on the Baltimore-Washington Parkway. On Jan. 6, Meredith McFall began selling silk-screened Honbelieveable shirts on Etsy.
Hey Hons!

I’m a local designer that is passionate about my city, and my feeling on the subject is that actions speak louder than words. This is a call to all artists and designers in the city to take back “ownership” of our word. She might go after one or two of us if we stand alone but does she have the funds to take on hundreds? I bear no ill will against Ms. Whiting, and I don’t have any problem with Café Hon or HONtown, but I don’t think anyone can own “hon” itself!

SO...here’s my contribution: HonBelievable shirts hand silk screened by me. There will be a limited quantity available so I will be taking orders on Etsy: http://www.etsy.com/listing/65456678/honbelieveable-tshirt $15 per shirt. The first person who tells me what charity Ms. Whiting charged or the use of “Hon” gets a second shirt, and I will donate a dollar per shirt to that charity.  

Whiting was forced to hire a new attorney, Ned T. Himmelrich, also a Baltimore intellectual property lawyer. The Baltimore Business Journal carried Whiting’s new statement (advised by her new public relations consultant, Paul Jaskunas) and her attorney’s preface, “There has been a lot said based on misinformation and people have formed opinions based on this information. She [Whiting] wants to be clear her original statement was broader than it should’ve been. “I apologize to everyone in Baltimore for misspeaking. Many of my fellow citizens are clearly upset and worried that our trademark position means they can’t use the word as they wish,” Whiting said. “I’m sorry for creating the impression that I can stop people from using the word, and for causing such an outcry here.” Whiting continued, “No one can own a word or stop people from saying it or using it, but I know that some things I said to reporters have many people thinking that I do ‘own’ it—or at least I think I do. That’s simply not the
case. I know that my trademark is limited in scope and I have failed to convey that in recent comments to the media." She also “pledge[d] to be a responsible trademark holder and exercise her trademark rights only to the extent that there would be brand confusion if she were to act otherwise.”

Unmentioned throughout all of this is that her attorney had filed for a “Section 15” affidavit, attempting to elevate the “HON” trademark status to “incontestable.”

The extent to which Whiting was failing to gauge outrage became material for usually restrained Baltimore Sun news reporters, who pointed out that Whiting had essentially been allowed to have the same weak apology in the paper three times. Laura Vozella wrote she believed Whiting was sorry, “Not sorry that she trademarked the town’s classic term of endearment. Just sorry that she spoke about it so clumsily that her adopted hometown came to think of her as greedy. And sorry that nobody seemed to be listening a month ago, when she made basically the same apology in a letter to the editor in The Baltimore Sun.” Later the same day, Whiting posted a similar statement to the Café Hon Facebook page, minus the mea culpa. While maintaining her exclusive intellectual property rights over “HON,” she paradoxically ended the post with “HON for ALL!”

The war continued to rage on the Internet, pitting Baltimoreans and past Baltimoreans against Whiting, her friends, and her relatives. Whiting attempted to fix her public relations woes by allowing the City Paper to conduct an
interview in her home breakfast nook, with her son Thomas and her public relations consultant Paul Jaskunas at her side. (This was followed by a second hour, days later, in Café Hon.) The article, titled “Denise Whiting has a PR problem. Here’s Why,” rather than mending her image, became the pinnacle of the flame war in the comment section. The City that Breeds featured a post focused only on the comment section, noting it was perhaps “The Ultimate Flame War.” The boycott seemed to be effective. People were reporting empty tables and idle waitresses at Café Hon. The restaurant was in the awkward and paradoxical position of being a restaurant celebrating the local that locals refused to attend.

The backlash began in December, escalated in January, and spilled into February. By April, besides the HON special issue of Smile, Hon, You’re in Baltimore (which, like all print publications, operated on a delayed time schedule), one might almost think the issue had blown over. In fact, the Baltimore Sun restaurant critic Rob Kasper, knowing the community circumstances, even had the guile to go into Café Hon and give the restaurant a good review. “Café Hon is hard not to like,” his headline reads, with the subtitle, “The décor is theatrical, but the food is real and flavorful.” “Maybe not everyone in Hampden is fond of Café Hon,” wrote Kasper, “But for a casual (if kitschy) restaurant, I found the food good and the service smooth.” He gave the restaurant three out of a possible four stars in all categories, food, service, and atmosphere. Whiting had not solved anything and the community still
despised her, but there seemed to be a chance that the controversy would blow over.

Then Whiting decided to send out HonFest fliers. Despite her earlier proclamations of her intent to be a respectful trademark holder, in mid-May 2011, Whiting distributed her “Rules of Honfest” flier to other Hampden businesses, merchants, and potential street vendors. The flier ordered, “Prohibited items include any and all items or products that may infringe on the Federally registered trademarked logo and names of HONfest, Café HON, Baltimore’s Best HON, HONtown, or Hon.” This included in outdoors spaces immediately in front of Avenue merchants’ shops (plus a $100 registration fee). Jill Rosen reported that “Hampden merchants were taken aback this week to receive a list of things Honfest vendors would be prohibited from selling or saying. No politics. No religion. Nothing bearing the Honfest logo. Nothing that would infringe on the various Hon trademarks. And what chapped folks the most: no cat’s-eye glasses.” Whiting appeared to be claiming ownership not only of the word “hon,” but of all accessories associated with the Hon image too.

A discussion of protesting HonFest immediately followed. Rosalind Elis Heid wrote a letter to the Baltimore Sun complaining, “The ‘Honfascism’ of Honfest is repugnant. An anti-hon protest is in order.” Steve Akers, the original rally organizer, promised to protest, even if he had to do it by himself. The day before HonFest, the Baltimore Sun reported that 2009 Baltimore Best Hon Blaze Char would be one of the boycotters. “I consider myself a hon, raised by a real
hon in Dundalk, which is hon territory,” Osborne said, “But I do not support the 
trademarking of the word and the strict handling of all things hon—it’s very un-
hon.” Osborne continued, “I’m making a statement by not being there. I’m not 
going to burn my beehive or anything, but...the whole festival has lost its charm 
for me.” Osborne added that “a dozen or so” other Hons would be doing the 
same. When she was asked about the boycott, Whiting argued it was just the 
opposite. “It’s really become part of the fabric of Baltimore, part of the fabric of 
Hampden,” Whiting told Rosen. “It’s how we celebrate our heritage and our 
culture, and it’s just become part of Baltimore.”

The festival’s crowds were smaller than usual, about 40,000 from the 
previous 60 to 65,000. There was no picket line, but there were tokens of 
protest. Some revelers purposely brought their cat-eye glasses from outside the 
festival. Down the street near the intersection of 36th St. and Keswick Rd., a man 
sold HON shirts from his porch. “HON: I invented it” and “It’s all bout the money 
HON.” And Denise Whiting accused Steve Akers of yelling “No one owns hon” 
into Café Hon and scaring customers. Despite promising at New Year’s that he 
was done with hontroversy, and continuously heaping scorn on anyone 
interested in it, McIntyre continued to blog about hontroversy. He summed up 
that the protestors, boycotters, and anti-hon dissidents were “a group of people 
who are attempting to organize to damage, and perhaps destroy, a woman’s 
business because they dislike her personally.” This seems like an unfair 
assessment. Baltimoreans were so supportive of Whiting in 2009-10 that they
rallied for her so she would not have to pay her pink flamingo minor privilege fee. McIntyre contended that “I don’t see than [sic] anyone has been injured by the trademarking or by the Honfest activities.” Whether or not that is true in the present, any acrimony seems to come from Whiting’s handling of the “hon” trademark, not previous disdain. Although McIntyre had written that he sensed no appreciable effect of the boycott on the festival, the Baltimore Business Journal estimated a 33 percent drop in attendance from the previous year. “Score one for the anti-hons,” McIntyre had to admit. “The event went on but was diminished.”

The next couple of days, the Baltimore Sun ran letters to the editor supporting Denise Whiting and Café Hon: “Hampden owes a lot to Denise Whiting,” “Honfest success a tribute to Denise Whiting,” and “Denise Whiting laid the groundwork for Hampden rebirth.” But there were still the rebukes. Grace Park compares Denise Whiting’s trademarking of “hon” to the Grinch attempting to steal Christmas. But for Baltimore, like Whoville, Park argues “hon” goes beyond any tangible object. What makes “hon” special is its intangible essence, and that cannot be trademarked.

On June 20, 2011, the Circuit Court for Baltimore City granted Denise Whiting a restraining order against Steven Akers, the organizer of the “hon” protests, barring him from being near her businesses, contacting her, or harassing her. Whiting wrote in the request that “Our customers and staff at Café Hon, Hon Bar and Hontown are in fear of Steven Akers and his harassing,
terrorizing, unpredictable, obsessive, stalkerlike behavior.\textsuperscript{487} Allegedly, at HonFest, Akers stuck his head in the Café Hon door and yelled “No one owns Hon.” When asked about the incident, Akers denied it and said he was “just passing out flyers.”\textsuperscript{488} Regardless of what had happened, this “trivial” dispute was proving to have real world consequences.

In October 2011, newspapers reported that celebrity chef Gordon Ramsay was bringing his \textit{Kitchen Nightmares} to Baltimore, and he intended to feature Café Hon.\textsuperscript{489} Hon trademark protestors were ecstatic, not for Café Hon’s chance at the limelight, but rather because the majority of restaurants featured on \textit{Kitchen Nightmares} close soon after. Restaurants selected for the show were invariably failing, either from poor food, poor service, or a poor business model. Whiting had insisted controversy had not had any effect on her business,\textsuperscript{490} but this moved seemed to prove the opposite. Whiting later admitted that her business had declined by 25 percent, and that she had to sell her IRAs to make payroll.\textsuperscript{491} Even more dangerous culturally, critics like Goldfarb worried Café Hon could be shuttered while Denise Whiting continued to hold the trademark to “HON.” In this case, Whiting would still hold the trademark, but protestors would no longer have a target.

HON protest organizers began receiving emails from Hayden Mauk, the producer of \textit{Kitchen Nightmares}. Chef Gordon Ramsay wanted to hold a community meeting with all of those most invested in the HON trademark controversy in the community. The focus group would meet with Ramsay to air
their grievances, as one part of the show. The meeting would not include Denise Whiting. In fact, she would not even know about it. Although the product would turn into a Fox reality television show, the conduct of the meeting was an authentic focus group. Participants were given no instructions on what to say or how to behave. Although Ramsay could not even pronounce “hon” when he first arrived in Baltimore, at the focus group, he facilitated an hour-long discussion where he showed a mastery of the hon trademark issue. Goldfarb remembers, “Among the group, nobody disputed that Whiting was entitled to exclusive use of the word for her restaurant and to keep competing restaurants from using it. But claiming any kind of rights beyond that poses serious problems to the larger community.” When Ramsay asked what Whiting had to do to survive, it is Goldfarb’s answer that is worth noting. Goldfarb responded, “She has to walk away from the trademark. She has to abandon it, give up all claim to it. Say it was a mistake; she doesn’t own it. It doesn’t belong to anybody.”

Little did the group know that Denise Whiting had been listening in from an SUV parked outside the hotel. When Ramsay walked out, he confronted Whiting with the cease-and-desist letter she had sent to Thanks, Hon! “You did send out letters where people were absolutely freaking out. When you threaten people, or they feel threatened, they’re going to revolt,” Ramsay accused. “You realize you made a mistake? You have to do something. You have to take responsibility and make a gesture. Do you agree?” he asked. “I absolutely agree,” Whiting said.
The next day, Monday morning, Whiting went on the *Jojo and Reagan Show*. She announced she was canceling her trademark. Whiting looked and sounded contrite, although her words betrayed her. “It’s just a word,” she said. Whiting still did not seem to understand the fervor, although she at least figured out how to end it. “I’ll take it off the register,” Whiting promised. “It was never mine to have in the first place.” Whiting gave another statement at a press conference in front of Café Hon. “I am sorry for the animosity and the hatred and everything that trademarking a word has done,” Whiting said. “Trademarking the word has not only almost killed me but has just about killed the business.”

Ramsay even did Whiting a favor by assuring the crowd that cancelling the trademark was Whiting’s idea. “Everyone needs to cash in on the success of the word ‘hon,’” Ramsay urged. “It’s not something to be exploited in a way that becomes greed.” He even encouraged Whiting to turn HONtown into a store dedicated to the community where all proceeds benefited a local charity. The *Surf*’s food blogger Richard Gorelick wrote that Whiting told him that it was specifically the focus group, not Gordon Ramsay, that changed her mind.

Whiting did as promised. She cancelled both of her trademarks of “hon.” (She kept the trademarks for Café Hon and HonFest, which caused no controversy). Rafael Alvarez saw too much opportunism in the apology, noting, “Denise wouldn’t listen to us—the people who live here—but she had a change of
heart in front of someone who will put her exploitation of real Baltimoreans in several million living rooms.\(^{501}\)

Most people, though, seemed ready to forgive. James B. Astrachan, the Baltimore trademark attorney who had been one of Whiting’s first critics, said “She’s not an ax murderer. I think this will go a long way in settling this silly matter.”\(^{502}\) The *Baltimore Sun* wrote an editorial, “Apology accepted, hon.” The editorial warned, “It’s going to take some time for Ms. Whiting to erase the ill will she needlessly brought on herself,” but ultimately concludes “the essence of hon-dom is not cynical or calculating. It is trusting and accepting—so much so that its very linguistic basis rests on assuming kinship with total strangers. If Ms. Whiting’s handling of the situation up to this point betrayed a serious misunderstanding of the culture her businesses supposedly celebrate, so too would a municipal thirst for vengeance. That doesn’t mean we should forget the whole incident happened, but it does mean that she should get the opportunity to demonstrate that her apology is genuine. She needs to go back to quietly running her business, and she needs to give up on her draconian rules for Honfest and other attempts to pretend ownership of the word or concept of “hon.” If she does, we should accept her apology and move on. It’s the hon thing to do.”\(^{503}\) Goldfarb agreed, “It’s good for everybody. It’s all gone. It’s not an issue if she’s good to her word. The word will be liberated in the public domain the way it should be for anybody to use anyway they want.”\(^{504}\) At their truce meal, Whiting told Goldfarb that hontroversy was one of the worst
experiences of her life, and that she barely made any money off of the HON merchandise anyway. “It’s nickels and dimes,” she told Goldfarb, “It almost cost me everything.” After the meal, Goldfarb and Whiting hugged and took a selfie. *Baltimore Sun* restaurant critic Richard Gorelick even reported that he thought Gordon Ramsay had improved the Café Hon menu.

After the hoopla of Whiting agreeing to cancel the trademark, the *Kitchen Nightmare*’s episode was almost an afterthought. The episode aired on February 24, 2012. As far as any major groundswell of support, hontroversy seemed over. Then Jill Rosen, who had started it all, reported one last time. Whiting’s attorney had, indeed, canceled all of her “HON” registrations. She had been true to her word. But in preparation for HonFest 2012, she circulated her regular flier.

NOTE: All items sold at Honfest 2012 must be legal and within the family-oriented nature of the event. Prohibited items included counterfeit designed clothing or handbags, tee-shirts, cat eyed sunglasses, weapons of any kind, including knives; or other items which infringe on a registered trademark. This include the HONfest, Café HON, HONtown and HON trademark; you may not sell products bearing the festival’s name or logo without prior written permission—this include previous years tee-shirts. Should you be caught with counterfeit items, the police will confiscate your inventory and eject you from the festival and you will be barred from attending future festivals. (emphasis added).

Café Hon staff claimed it was a mistake. An employee had accidently circulated last year’s flier. Now that Baltimore moved on, the *Baltimore Sun* wondered via headline, “With hon-troversy over, will HonFest flourish?” Whiting said yes. She told Peiser, “We have heard from an overwhelming number of our neighbors since the ‘Kitchen Nightmares’ experience...generally, most everyone
who objected to the initial trade-marking have embraced our efforts to put the issue behind us." Hampden residents were not sure. "I think many people were angry, particularly the longer term residents of Hampden who are actual ‘hons.’ It seems like a breach of community goodwill that might take a while to forgive,” said Hampdenite Michele Romolini. As of 2015, Café Hon and HonFest are both in operation, although Whiting has not regained the stature she had at the time of Flamingogate.

HON Lessons

There seems to be a paradox to the possible ownership of "hon.” The reason the term had currency was because of its imbued sense of authenticity and connection to Baltimore. Whiting referred to it as part of the city’s heritage, yet she claimed private ownership of a collective, public, community heritage. At the same time, there may be an equally strong paradox at being upset at Denise Whiting for trademarking "hon.” Some vilified Whiting for commodifying a community word, and others attacked her for promoting a fake, inauthentic commercial culture. But, more importantly, and as Michael Brown noted (1998), some, many even, excoriated Whiting for both. While she can certainly do one or the other, is it really fair to accuse her of both simultaneously? If what she is stealing is inauthentic, is it really stealing? If it is inauthentic, why would anyone care if she steals it?

Perhaps this is the hazard of inventing a commercial tradition. Public historian Mary Rizzo, who had conducted research on HonFest for years, wrote a
guest column in the *Baltimore Sun* to say what no one else had dared to say.

“Here’s the irony of the Hon trademark debacle,” Rizzo wrote, “Denise Whiting is right—to a degree. She’s the one who put the word next to the image of the beehived, rhinestoned and blue-eyeshadowed caricature that has become prevalent in Baltimore.”\(^{511}\) Whiting certainly did not invent the word—it would have been far less valuable if she did—and she did not invent the Hon image either—if that credit belongs to anyone, it is John Waters, but Rizzo, and Whiting, may be correct. Whiting was one of the first to meld the idea of “hon” and the image of the “Hon.” She was not the only one (as I documented in chapter 3 and 4), but one of the early ones. As Rizzo wrote, and my own research underscores, “While ‘hon’ had been used in the vernacular as a term of endearment, there is no real evidence that anyone ever referred to themselves or anyone else as a capital-H Hon before she made it the name of her restaurant.”\(^{512}\) There is evidence to support this view during the hontroversy. For example, Whiting admitted early on that “hon” predates her, but she claimed that she was the first to celebrate it and bring it into the mainstream.\(^{513}\) Similarly, former resident Crystal Callahan remembered that her Grandma Helen “was pretty much a hon before I knew what a hon was. Bouffant. Slippers. On the front porch talking to the neighbors.”\(^{514}\) Essentially what Whiting did was take a word from the vernacular and use it to designate the same people who use it in their daily speech. In this way, Whiting “discovered” the Hons by naming them, and then by celebrating them, that is, moving them from the
stigmatized vernacular to the esteemed vernacular. The unavoidable challenge that Whiting confronted was finding a way to claim private ownership over a phenomenon that is only desirable because of its community connections and attachment to a collective identity. This, then, is both the beauty of and the hazard of inventing a commercial tradition. While it can make the product desirable because it is connected to a collective identity, that same community connected to the invented tradition, if the tradition has any saliency, will always want to claim at least partial ownership of the tradition. If they did not, it would be because the product had lost resonance with the community. “Flamingogate” was an example of how a business owner could benefit when the community considered the business to also be a part of the neighborhood’s collective identity. The counterpoint lies in controversy. As Rizzo concluded, “Ms. Whiting is right. She made the Hon what it is, but to try to control its use is also to bankrupt it.”\textsuperscript{515} So, perhaps, this is the real challenge business owners can take away from this case. How do you encourage the community to invest in a “community” product without also taking local ownership of it?

The case study also has value for those involved in legal studies. In the vernacular, law matters, but nuances do not. It is the general conception of the law and its authority that holds power. There was little distinction among the general public, among the trademark holder, and at times, even among lawyers, over the subtle differences between copyright and trademark. What mattered were competing conceptions of ownership and the demands for free expression.
Trademark attorneys, too, seemed intrigued by the case. Although trademark law has a long history of research, trademark attorneys confirmed that what they were seeing here, disputes over trademarking the vernacular, were almost uncharted territory. Intellectual property attorney and blogger E. Scott Johnson pointed out how words and phrases like darling, hockey moms, big dog, bad boy, let’s get it on, and life’s a beach had all been trademarked, and no one ever complained. In that way, hontroversy was unique, with only a couple exceptions (most notably, “The Last Best Place” and “Occupy Wall Street”).

When it comes to discussions of how to protect intangible cultural property, the same ideas arise in very different venues. For example, several scholars I reviewed at the beginning of the chapter supported finding ways to invest the communities responsible for a tradition with the intellectual cultural property rights. In Baltimore, in backroom discussions, some of Goldfarb’s confidantes wanted to create a non-profit that would hold the rights to “hon” to be sure they were used properly. Goldfarb remembered the idea as “a nonprofit organization that would act as some kind of clearinghouse” for “hon.” But this was not the direction that was ultimately pursued.

What this case study seems to prove is that Hafstein’s notion of social creativity and intertextuality is more than a theoretical, ivory tower notion (2004). It is demonstrably the way that creative folk invention in the world operates. For example, much like Hafstein, a review of even the creation of “hon” and “Hon” shows that creativity in the endeavor was far from a solitary
stroke of genius, and instead proves highly intertextual. The case underscores the emotional as well as cultural tie of “hon” to Baltimore. The word went beyond celebrity culture (e.g., John Waters) and into the “embodiment” of an identity, ironically through a spoken word. Through Whiting, the word became associated with the image, but through the community, the embodied image then became associated with a rooted, blue-collar identity.

Whiting was concerned about people poaching her creations, but Goldfarb pointed out that many saw Denise Whiting as poaching John Waters, his star actor Divine, and his art director Vince Peranio. Goldfarb argued vehemently, “Whiting’s entire shtick is based on John Waters’ films. It’s safe to say that if there were no Waters films, there probably would be no Café Hon, Honfest or Hontown. If anybody is knocking off, poaching and capitalizing on the creative works of others, it’s Whiting.” But John Waters and Vince Peranio refused to take credit for Hon culture, preferring to credit the inspiration to life in Baltimore. To use Goldfarbs metaphor, hon is “part of Baltimore’s linguistic fabric.”

The same seems to apply to the HON oval, another highly “intertextual” piece (critics like Goldfarb might say “derivative”). Goldfarb points out that Whiting took this idea from restaurant owner James Douglas, who operated Chili Peppers in Kill Devil Hills, North Carolina. In 1994, Douglas created the oval OBX sticker that became ubiquitous on trunks throughout the 1990s. He attempted to trademark his creation, but the U.S. Patent and Trademark
Office would not let him trademark the oval, which is an international sign. Instead, Douglas trademarked OBX. But when Douglas attempted to sue OB Xtreme, the courts ruled against him. The letters were ruled to be too generic to trademark. The court thought OBX was a general descriptor for the Outer Banks and did not sufficiently identify Douglas’s unique brand. On appeal, the United States Court of Appeals for the Fourth Circuit Court upheld the decision. The court wrote, “the law also protects the ‘linguistic commons’ by denying mark holders an exclusive interest in words that do not identify goodwill attached to products or product sources but rather are used for their common meaning or meanings not indicative of products and product sources.” HON was a play on a product that was itself ruled too reliant on the commons to be considered private intellectual property.

If it is the case that invention is more re-creation based on community creation rather than solitary strokes of genius, one course of action is to reform notions of intellectual property and the public domain to meet the needs of creative communities, rather than attempt to pigeonhole creative communities into modern, albeit antiquated, intellectual property laws.

**Folklore as the Public Domain**

As a result of this case study, a few questions can be answered, at least in the urban American context. Who owns folklore? The answer seems to be either no one or everyone. Perhaps Aristotle stated it best in his polemic against the Polis of Platon: “everybody’s property is nobody’s property.” While Whiting has
the right to file a trademark in defense of a brand (i.e., the “HON” brand), she
did not have a legal right nor did the community see her as having a cultural
right to copyright “Hon.” That is not to say Whiting did not desire to copyright
“Hon.” But she fell into a folkloric quagmire, where the power of the word
derived from its connection to the community. Attempting to claim exclusive
ownership over a word whose dynamism comes from its relevance and
connection to the community is illogical, counterintuitive, and (as Whiting
learned) bad for business.

Trademarks and copyrights are fundamentally different (although in the
court of public opinion, the nuance did not seem to matter. They were both seen
as claims to exclusive ownership). Trademarking of folk speech is permissible so
long as it is used to do what trademark is intended to do, that is, create a
recognizable sign, design, or impression that distinguishes one’s products from
competitors. Copyrighting folk speech, on the other hand, is by definition
impossible under current law because copyright exists to give exclusive rights to
the original creator of a work for a limited period of time. Under current laws, the
only time folk speech could be legally copyrighted is when it was copyrighted
prior to entering folk speech (e.g., catchy commercial quotes like “Where’s the
Beef?” and “Priceless”).

The fear is that because of the inadequacy of the law’s understanding of
the artistic process, especially communal creation, the law is often applied
incorrectly. In these cases, individual creation can be ascribed to communally
created forms. This is copyright misuse, specifically copyfraud (Mazzone 2006). The best response is for folklorists to use their disciplinary knowledge to (1) explain the creative process and (2) carve out a healthy public domain as a positive space for humanity's creative works.

While communal creations cannot be copyrighted by groups, as some folklorists would hope, they should not be copyrightable by individuals or businesses either. That said, some will attempt to do so, and individuals or businesses have an infinitely better chance at securing a copyright for these forms than any community. I suggest, then, that it is not copyrights for community that folklorists should seek, but a robust defense of the public domain. From this perspective, Charles Seeger's 1962 proposal is closest to the best suggestion for the future. He encouraged folklore societies to create lists to enumerate the property of the public domain, with the royalties going to defend the public domain. I propose two amendments based on subsequent advancements in folklore theory and my own Baltimore case study. (1) Drop the royalties in exchange for an understanding that the public domain is a renewable commons, open to use by all. (2) As the discipline has moved from lists to processes, show that the folklorist's enumeration of the public domain goes from lists to processes. Copyright is meant to give authors, artists, and inventors exclusive rights to royalties for a limited time to encourage productivity and increase economic incentives, thus promoting progress and innovation. Like academic publishing, folklore has proven that it proliferates for reasons other
than royalties. Ample space should be made to see American folklore held safely in the public domain.

This position stands with folklore practitioners, allowing them to continue to use and enjoy their (or others) folklore as they will. Of course, it leaves open plenty of opportunities for folklorists who would like to do more. It does not, as Jabbour wished, “ensure that the source-group itself for the expression of folklore has some say in the matter” (Jabbour 1983). It does not, as Rikoon wished, “provide real authority for knowledge communities and legal recognition for self-defined systems (formal and informal) of community cultural conservation” (Rikoon 2006, 333). It does not give any “competent authority” (Honko 2001) the choice to decide anything, except for the practitioners and consumers of a given tradition. And it certainly does not require permission from anyone or any particular respect for a tradition. It does not even operate on Brown’s staid case-by-case recommendation. Folklore critics will claim this approach does nothing, and they would be correct to an extent. It gives ownership to no one, and therefore to everyone.

What it does do is begin to position folkloric disciplinary knowledge of creation as central to understanding the original author. Most beyond the business interests involved would agree that Hopi traditional art, Pygmy song, or tribal medicine should not be owned by a corporation. I suggest that they should not be owned by anyone, the Hopi, Pygmy, or tribe included. I began by arguing for a reconsideration of intellectual property law in general. This is one of the
prime functions folklorists can offer American and international law in the
twenty-first century. Folklorists have pushed beyond their traditional boundaries
and begun to explore how objects of “popular culture” such as novels, comic
books, television, and films are folkloric in nature, in that they follow our folkloric
processes. That is, they result from “communal origination through individual
recreation.” The fight for the public domain is a fight worth waging. Traditional
protected forms of song, dance, and narrative are good, winnable cases, but
there is opportunity to do more, to establish communal creation as fundamental,
even in a modern, individualistic world.
EPILOGUE

The Baltimore-Washington Parkway and the Hampden neighborhood have been the primary sites of this study, but the phenomenon of localized identity formation centered on vernacular culture challenged by image-conscious officials represents Baltimore in general. Similarly, while this study has been primarily Baltimore based, the ideas presented here apply to gritty cities across the United States. Despite Hampden’s trendy popularity, the neighborhood pales as a tourist attraction in comparison to Baltimore’s Inner Harbor. To conclude this study, I propose a stroll on the Harbor Promenade to observe the coexistence of the stigmatized vernacular and the esteemed vernacular in the heart of downtown Baltimore, the site of Baltimore’s “renaissance.” Here, the stigmatized vernacular embodies the postindustrial economy while the esteemed vernacular provides a sense of place in the transient, global world that the same postindustrial economy has created. In other words, look at Baltimore ethnographically through a native’s cat-eye glasses.

For most visitors, a trip to Baltimore means a visit to the Baltimore waterfront. The Baltimore Waterfront Promenade stretches seven miles, hugging the city’s harbor shoreline and weaving in and out its many nooks and crannies. After a day in Baltimore, entering the harbor walk is like entering another world. The grit and grime of an east coast city washes away, replaced by gulls, fisherman, and sprawling marinas. The gulls cry as they swoop over eighteenth century sloops moored in a shimmering port. Joggers and walkers hustle by over
the red brick pavement. In the distance, the skyline rises as it shoots across the waterfront. Looking across the water, buildings ring the harbor. Docked beside its shore, hundreds of modern boats sit idle. Entering from the Canton Waterfront Park on the far east side of the city, Baltimore’s predominant visual motif, crumbling factories and warehouses, floods the visitor’s senses, highlighting the postindustrial state of the city. The water laps against the docks, while the faint buzz of automobiles can still be heard in the distance. Upper middle class residents lounge in gated pool decks overlooking the harbor. In the background loom their apartments—large industrial warehouses converted into high-priced condominiums.

In front and for the next five miles sprawls yacht club after yacht club, their docks bobbing deep out into the harbor. From this vista, strollers can look across to Fort McHenry, and see the reproduction of the massive American flag that inspired Francis Scott Key fluttering in the breeze. Sweeping northward, the eye finds remnants of a once thriving industrial city now resting as crumbling grave markers of a past way of life. Smoke stacks, silos, and warehouses shoot into the air, placed strategically near the Baltimore & Ohio railroad. On closer inspection, some have been converted for reuse, turned from a grain pier to The Grain Pier apartments, from a silo to The Silo apartments. Rising above all, visible from every point on the Waterfront Promenade, is the Legg Mason building named for the prominent American-based global investment management firm.
Continuing along the Harbor Promenade, the harbor shows its unrelenting attraction to new arrivals. Apartment buildings and condominiums pile up just beyond the path. In a few of the pricy spots, architects have constructed upper middle class imitations of the redbrick rowhouses so common throughout the city. Young urban professionals relax and breakfast on their back decks, specially designed to hide them from their neighbors, who are doing the same. Just one block behind these stand the original nineteenth-century rowhouses that these structures imitate.

The closer one gets to Harborplace, the more Baltimore announces itself as “Baltimore” to passing spectators. The first unofficial marker is in Fells Point, where tourists can stop for pictures with a large wooden blue crab. A mainstay of the Chesapeake economy, the irony almost leaks from the sign on the nearby building that announces “FISHING & CRABBING ARE PROHIBITED.” Only adding to the irony is that this building is The Inn at Henderson’s Wharf, a hotel repurposed from a fisherman’s warehouse. Reaching Fell’s Point, the promenade begins to bustle for the first time. Water taxis, one of the most inefficient but picturesque ways to travel in the city, stop for passengers headed to Fort McHenry, Harborplace, and Canton. Jutting out into the harbor, the City Pier Broadway, now a repurposed police station, embodies the decaying nautical feel of the neighborhood. Turning the corner, strollers are launched from the tranquil harbor neighborhoods into cartoonesque Baltimore. The Rubicon marking this
transition is the “Urban Pirates” tent, a chartered hourly cruise aboard a pirate ship featuring “Family Adventures & Adult B.Y.O.Grog Cruises.”

In this neighborhood as old as Baltimore, stores from Thames Street up South Broadway and on to the many cross streets push fresh seafood and crab cakes, and the streets always bustle. Continuing on towards Harbor East, the repurposed wharfs become more frequent, their restaurants also promising fresh seafood and crab cakes. On the abandoned piers, now covered with manicured grass, families lounge and play catch. Complementing the urban fishing in Canton Waterfront Park, some resolute crabbers have taken to illicit crabbing off of the wooden bridges along the promenade. Inconspicuous, their lines are almost imperceptible tied to the bridge and dropping down into the water, attached to bobbing metal cages.

Proceeding through Fell’s Point into Harbor East, one encounters a large, dark, imposing building, its brown brick and black windows displaying an imperceptible personality. The building is financial services giant Morgan Stanley’s Baltimore branch office, and it sets a classic Baltimore contrast with the rustic 25-foot sailboat dry-docked immediately in front of the building. Heading into Harbor East, the bustle takes on a Manhattan-tone, the joggers and loungers giving way to hurried men and harried mothers talking on cell phones and pushing double-seated strollers.

Approaching the Inner Harbor, the promenade begins to feel like a tourist destination. Its symbolic beginning is the comparatively calm Seven-Foot Knoll
Lighthouse, a screwpile structure originally located fifteen miles south at the outer entrance to Baltimore’s busy harbor. Now officially out of use, Baltimore removed the lighthouse from its original location, placing it in the Inner Harbor as a popular reminder of the city’s industrial and maritime past. The Inner Harbor crowds hit their crescendo at the Power Plant, and the buzz does not cease until Baltimore Beach in Federal Hill. Repurposed as a chain store strip mall, the once industrial Power Plant is now home to Philips Seafood Restaurant, Barnes & Noble, and the Hard Rock Café. From the Power Plant to the Maryland Science Center, Baltimore’s renaissance has turned the Inner Harbor from a port to a combination outdoor mall, amusement park, and maritime shrine. Historic Ships mingle with dragon peddle boats while wayside markers recount Baltimore’s glory days.

The first reprieve from the crowded walkways comes in the distance, at Baltimore Beach, where young adults play volleyball to the soundtrack of Dispatch and Jack Johnson, with Federal Hill in the background. At the end of the Inner Harbor, a painted parking garage encourages pedestrians to keep walking another mile on the Harbor Promenade. Heading into the Harborview community, the new area of the promenade, the path takes on the feel of a middle-class timeshare vacation resort. Condos pile upon condos on both sides of the path, their protruding balconies and flat, habitable roofs revealing their outdoor orientation. In front of every complex is another marina, another yacht club, another dock. The condos here are not fancy enough to consider exclusive,
nor are they old enough to consider vintage (they are younger than even the Inner Harbor). Rather, they take on a sense of Disneyfication, one so all encompassing that it would be easy to forget that this is one of the roughest, grittiest cities in the United States.

One of the great ironies of present day Baltimore is that despite the orientation towards the harbor and the desire to be in the presence of the remnants of its blue-collar, industrial, and maritime past, the promenade stops at the very point where Baltimore’s industrial and blue-collar roots are most prominent and most present today. Although there are sporadic waterfront promenade points in South Baltimore, most of the rest of the promenade from Federal Hill through Locus Point to Fort McHenry, pedestrians are sent on an off-harbor hike down Key Highway. The way is unmarked and unofficial, making it primarily untraversed by all but the most local of locals. This trek takes walkers past the Baltimore Museum of Industry, the Ship Repair Corps, the Dominos Sugar plant, the International Longshoremen’s Association’s several Baltimore outposts, the old silo, the Baltimore & Ohio railroad, and finally into the Fort McHenry National Monument and Historic Shrines. Still a living blue-collar section of Baltimore, the area receives only the stigma and none of the esteem.

Recounting the development of the Inner Harbor in “The Inner Harbor Story,” Martin L. Millspaugh, the chief executive of the Charles Center–Inner Harbor Management, Inc., begins by harkening back to the days before the “revitalization” of the Baltimore waterfront: “it is hard to remember now that this
same Inner Harbor is the focal point of an old Rustbelt city that, in the 1950s and 1960s, was considered D.O.A. by travel agents; was described by native son H.L. Mencken as ‘the ruins of a once great medieval city’; and was the source of a collective inferiority complex shared by almost 1 million, mostly blue-collar citizens’ (Millspaugh 2003, 36). Baltimore’s “renaissance” began in 1954 when, as a result of a wave of white and black flight to the suburbs, Baltimore business and political leaders sought to reverse a decline in property values and tax revenues. The success of the One Charles Center renovation experiment was enough to prod revitalization of the downtown waterfront, an area eight times larger. Shipping had abandoned the Inner Harbor, and because of it, the businesses on the waterfront had too. As Millspaugh remembers brightly, “There was an opportunity crying out for new users to capitalize on the waterfront’s natural ambience, right at the doorstep of downtown” (2003, 37). Although it had been used in the past, it was no longer an active port. Instead, the committee realized that they needed to bring in maritime attractions, as well as create docks, piers, and marinas that would encourage recreational use of the harbor. Under new, energetic Mayor William Donald Schaefer, the waterfront became the host of festivals and neighborhood events. The city fair held at the Inner Harbor attracted over a million participants. Millspaugh reflected in 2003 that by 1975, “there was a change in the citizens’ feelings about their city—going from a collective inferiority complex to a strong surge of civic pride” (Millspaugh
2003, 39). In other words, through revitalization, Baltimoreans elevated the stigmatized vernacular to the esteemed vernacular.

No one caught the mythology—that sacred narrative—constructed around the renovation of Harborplace as early or well as Grant Kester in his essay “A Survivor’s Guide to Baltimore’s Renaissance.” Writing a decade after Harborplace’s ribbon cutting, Kester began his essay,

For the people of Baltimore one word, one image instantly evokes the city’s rebirth from the ashes of neglect and decay: Harborplace. In few other American cities has the vast and complicated process of urban redevelopment been so clearly embodied in a single structure. And in few other American cities has the idea of an urban ‘renaissance’ been so successfully implanted in the public imagination. In Harborplace the story of Baltimore in the 1970s and 1980s is rewritten as a fairy tale in which heroic political leaders and visionary urbanists united to transform the ‘rat infested wharves’ of a dying rust-belt city into a “shimmering crystal palace” of tourism and consumption. This particular version of Baltimore’s renaissance story has been obsessively repeated in glossy promotional brochures and breathless magazine articles since Harborplace opened almost ten years ago. (Kester 1990, 18-19)

The development of the Inner Harbor, the shining moment for Baltimore’s renaissance, is the metaphor with which I would like to conclude my study of Baltimore and the esteemed vernacular. In its current state, the Inner Harbor is not original or preserved—it is not even old—but it has been literally and figuratively constructed as a symbol of Baltimore. The mystique of the Inner Harbor is largely based around its connection to Baltimore’s “working” past—maritime, port, and industrial. Ironically, though, the development in its “renaissance” stage not only pushes away the originators of this culture; it essentially prohibits them. (An excellent example of this is the “no crabbing” next
to the large statue of the blue crab on the Waterfront Promenade in the Fell’s Point neighborhood. Patrons enjoy the preservation of the material remnants of this past culture (wharfs, warehouses, silos), imitation of its ephemeral elements (language, image, costume), and allusions to it generally (crabbing, fishing, lighthouses, old ships, railroads, industry), while those people responsible for it are unnecessary. What is born out in Baltimore is a desire, a craving, a lust for the rootedness and authenticity of working-class culture without the need for the blue-collar occupations, people, or difficulties involved in working with them. While the original culture is no longer economically viable, a reproduction of it has been commodified, commercialized, and marketed for tourists and local residents alike.

The stigmatized vernacular and the esteemed vernacular coexist in the Inner Harbor, just as they do throughout Baltimore. In Baltimore, “hon” is the most prominent example of a once stigmatized form that has transitioned into the esteemed vernacular. In the 1990s, “hon” stood in for a folksy local distinctiveness, while it was also contested for its assumptions about race, class, and gender. As its esteem continued, with the assistance of consumer culture, “hon” became “Hon.” Not any one particular person but a persona embodied by many, the “Hon” became a sort of mascot for Baltimore. At HonFest participants revered the image, while others in Baltimore reviled the characterization of Baltimore’s fading working class. Whether “hon” is “authentic” or “inauthentic” Baltimore vernacular, city residents confirmed their deeply felt attachment to the
word when Denise Whiting of Café Hon attempted to trademark it. In an unusual case, the community demanded (and eventually was awarded) the return of that esteemed vernacular to the linguistic commons.

For America’s gritty cities, this is the twenty-first century reality. Without a national reputation for their city, residents construct canons of local authenticity out of the formerly stigmatized vernacular. In a globalizing world, these forms offer the means to strategically, expediently, and voluntarily embrace local identity. This is present-day urban American folklore, folklore that arises directly out of the American metropolitan experience. It is an area ripe for research that has been considered but never fully pursued. As shown in my case studies, the transition from the stigmatized vernacular to the esteemed vernacular reveals sociopolitical repercussions. Culture wars are waged, often symbolic of larger concerns. By examining the push and pull between the stigmatized vernacular and the esteemed vernacular, observers can unravel issues of race, class, gender, and indigeneity that speak to concepts of power, consumerism, and community agency. The culture of the city, as viewed through a native’s cat-eye (that is, ethnographic and folkloristic) lens, needs to be seen and understood, hon!
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NOTES

1 In fact, there was a plot to assassinate Abraham Lincoln while passing through Baltimore on the way to his inauguration (see Stashower 2013).
2 Whether or not one considers Baltimore part of the rustbelt, it certainly shares the characteristics of a rustbelt city.
3 Dorson, for one, was aware of this. Or perhaps he’s partially responsible for the confusion. In his seminal “Is There a Folk in the City?,” he establishes concepts of “modern urban folklore” (Dorson, 1970, 207 my emphasis).
5 I think this is a fair assessment. Over the past decade, research articles in the Journal of American Folklore skew heavily towards non-American research.
7 I choose to begin my selective review of the most important urban folklore literature at this point. I do so because, in my opinion, the folkloristic work that follows all responds to and expands on this key moment in American folklore history. That’s not to say that this was the first attempt at urban folklore. Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett traces the collection of urban folklore in London all the way back to the sixteenth century (Kirshenblatt-Gimblett 1983). Frank de Caro identified two amateur folklorists, Henry Mayhew and Charles Hindley, doing urban folklore research in Victorian London (de Caro 1968, 1). In the United States, William Wells Newell looked at urban children’s games in 1906. As far as full books and monographs, Benjamin Botkin published Sidewalks of America in 1954 and New York City Folklore in 1956, and Roger Abrahams published Down in the Jungle in 1964.
8 For a similar challenge in children’s folklore, compare this to Sue Samuelson’s charting of the “Distinctive Genres of Adolescent Folklore” in Samuelson 1995.
9 The exact same can be said for Linda Degh’s urban work.
10 An exasperated Dorson responded that Moss’s comments were so mistaken and immaterial as to leave him “for once…reduced to shocked speechlessness” (Dorson 1971).
11 This is actually exactly what Linda Degh and Richard Dorson proposed to do, in the form of a book.
12 Both Dorson and Degh had pursued many traditional folklore projects by the time they entered the city as fieldworkers. Armed with these experiences, both came looking for traditional folklore genres: legends, folktales, jokes, songs, proverbs, and beliefs. While the search for these did not yield great results, it did convince Dorson of his first concept, the “Paucity of Conventional Folklore” (Dorson 1970, 207). Dorson noticed that folklore genres had transformed under urban conditions, as had the themes these new forms of folklore spoke to. The
ability in just a few years for occupational lore to replace ethnic lore in the city shocked Dorson. Although ethnicity remained important, work and place came to the forefront of the group’s folklore.

This was not to say that the city lacked folklore. Traditional genres were scarce, but the city abounded in other traditions, or a “Richness of cultural traditions and personal histories” (Dorson 1970, 208). In the past, Dorson had not only worked in traditional locations, he had also pursued traditional verbal folklore genres. He admirably admits that he may have “largely overlooked other kinds and forms of cultural traditions less easy to report” (Dorson 1970, 208). Dorson was finding that the genre approach was not up to the task of contemplating modern urban folklore. Urban folklorists were left with yet another task. They would have to determine which folklore forms flourished in the city. While marchen appeared extinct, Dorson and Degh hypothesized that the personal history has replaced this genre one-for-one in the modern city. While Dorson wanted jokes and folktales, he found “precious oral narratives dealing with a series of great folk movements” (Dorson 1970, 209). At the time a domain of the demographer, Dorson encouraged folklorists to pursue mass migration, as they were the ones who could explain it “in terms of humanity as well as mass statistics (Dorson 1970, 209).

One of the important and early discoveries that would play an even greater role than Dorson realized was “The Role of the Book” (Dorson 1970, 209). Although the written word did not play the role in urban communities that it did in academia, references to books were nonetheless important. Time after time, urban groups made “references to, demonstration of, and sometimes even the bestowal of a cherished tome” about their people (Dorson 1970, 209-10). The book did not replace folk tradition as its text was not necessarily read or seen as the primary importance of the book. Instead the book was a tangible reference to ethnic pride and the group’s cultural tradition. Dorson was noticing an early instance of the importance of popular culture and mass media in urban folklore. Although still controversial, folklorist would go on to show the dynamic interplay of folklore with mass media and popular culture in twentieth century America. One of the defining characteristics of twentieth and twenty-first century folklore is its close relationship with other modes of culture.

13 This is similar to Degh’s idea of conduits that she would articulate a couple years later (Degh and Vazsonyi 1975).

14 While I agree with Bendix’s sentiment, I would argue that folklore’s (the discipline) theories don’t usually enter the public domain. They do not even enter the academic domain outside of the discipline (for example, see Shils 1981). Folklorists have to look at how folklore and tradition are constructed without them.

The American Studies Association 2013 annual meeting program’s Session Subject Index listed only three papers under “folklore.”

Accounts of the rally can be found in the October 28, 1859 edition of Baltimore’s newspapers. One good account comes from Clifton W. Tayleure of the Baltimore Clipper. The event is also recounted in Scharf 1881, 574; Riley 1904, 368, Andrews 1912, 159-160; Owens 1941, 263-264.

Although they are known to history as the Know Nothing Party, their official name was the “American Party.”

Today, Edgar Allan Poe is the best-remembered Election Day death.

The colorful slogans are enumerated in Scharf 1881, 574; Riley 1904, 368; Andrews 1912, 159-160; Grimsted 1998, 238.

The African-American population has grown significantly since Owen’s writing.

For more on this, see Chapter 4.


http://www.weather.gov/media/lwx/climate/bwitemps.pdf

United States Census Bureau State & County QuickFacts, Population, 2013 estimate

City-Data, Baltimore, Maryland, “Population change since 2000”


City-Data, Baltimore, Maryland, “Baltimore compared to Maryland state average” http://www.city-data.com/city/Baltimore-Maryland.html

City-Data, Baltimore, Maryland, “Races in Baltimore, MD” http://www.city-data.com/city/Baltimore-Maryland.html

City-Data, Baltimore, Maryland, “English Speakers - Total” http://www.city-data.com/races/races-Baltimore-Maryland.html

City-Data, Baltimore, Maryland, “Races in Baltimore, Maryland (MD) Detailed Stats: Ancestries, Foreign born residents, place of birth” http://www.city-data.com/races/races-Baltimore-Maryland.html

City-Data, Baltimore, Maryland, “Estimated median household income in 2012” and “Percentage of residents living in poverty in 2012” http://www.city-data.com/city/Baltimore-Maryland.html

City-Data, Baltimore, Maryland, “Estimated median house or condo value in 2012” http://www.city-data.com/city/Baltimore-Maryland.html


It was held in high esteem by no less than George Washington and the Marquis de Lafayette.

City-Data, Baltimore, Maryland, “Baltimore on our top lists” http://www.city-data.com/city/Baltimore-Maryland.html
Baltimore hosted the Green Party convention in the 21st century, not the 19th. This nickname was popularized by real street graffiti featured in the opening credits of the HBO television series *The Wire*.

If it had the same population as New York, New York, Baltimore would have clocked nearly 4,000 murders in 1993. (New York reported 1,960 homicides that year.)

Also see Baltimore local Ernest Smith’s *Hey Hon!: How to Talk Like a Real Bawlamoron*.

For an example of the accolades Maryland receives for its public school system, see “Maryland schools ranked number one—again,” *Washington Post*, January 12, 2012. The level of individual educational attainment can be found on United States Census Bureau’s Table 233 “Educational Attainment by State.” More Marylander hold advanced degrees than any state but Massachusetts.

The Pride of Baltimore was lost at sea on May 14, 1986.

Internet Movie Database, “Highest Rate TV Series With At Least 5,000 Votes,” http://www.imdb.com/search/title?num_votes=5000,&sort=user_rating,desc&title_type=tv_series

Known as “hucksters” elsewhere, arrabers are horse drawn carriages that sell fruits and vegetables.

Old Bay Seasoning is McCormick & Company’s ubiquitous brand of Chesapeake Bay salt seasoning. It tops everything from crab cakes to French fries.

Nash’s couplet continues “It constantly teeters back and forth.”

The preceding author spells the term incorrectly. In Baltimore it is “rowhouse,” invariably one word.

Baltimore shares this designation with Philadelphia, Pittsburgh, Chicago, Lancaster, and Cleveland.

“Blue collar” can at times be polite code for “dowdy” or “depressed.”


Hiss is referring specifically to the work of Baltimore filmmaker John Waters.

This quote comes from a letter written to his North Carolina secretary in 1936. In the quote, Fitzgerald was being self-deprecating, explaining that these Baltimore attributes make Baltimore ideal for him. He states earlier “I love Baltimore more than I thought.” Fitzgerald lived in Baltimore for five years in the 1930s.
For accounts of Early Baltimore, see Hall 1912, 9-60, Owens 1941, 7-80, Olson 1997, 1-40.

A version of the market still stands in Downtown Baltimore.

Octogenarian Sam Smith, a hero of the War of 1812, eventually put down the mob.

These were Know Nothing or “American” political clubs that disdained immigrants and their complicity in Baltimore’s political machine.

Essentially, a flexible cannon.

Accounts of the rally can be found in the October 28, 1859 edition of Baltimore’s newspapers. One good account comes from Clifton W. Tayleure of the Baltimore Clipper. The event is also recounted in Scharf 1881, 574; Riley 1904, 368, Andrews 1912, 159-160; Owens 1941, 263-264.

There is voluminous literature on Baltimore’s role in the Civil War. For a basic overview, see Scharf 1881, 126-66, Andrews 1912, 165-237, and Owens 1941 271-87. There are also a number of books about specific Baltimore incidents during the Civil War. For the plot to assassinate Lincoln in Baltimore (“The Baltimore Plot”), see Stashower 2013. For the Pratt Street Riot, see Ezratty 2010.

Fort Sumter fell, but no soldier did.

In addition to newspaper coverage, the Pratt Street Riot has been chronicled in a number of secondary sources. For a general overview, see Scharf 1881, 788-791 or Andrews 1912, 173-180. For a first hand reminiscence by Mayor George William Brown, see Brown 1887. For a more recent and popular treatment, see Ezratty 2010.

The Oriole Festival as sometimes alternatively referred to as the Festival of the Oriole or the Oriole Celebration. The Oriole is the Maryland state bird and one of the mascots of Baltimore, not because it is native to Baltimore, which for the most part it is not, but rather because its orange and black coloring is similar to Lord Baltimore’s coat of arms.

It even received a September 13, 1882 write up in the New York Times. The author says the festival was “celebrated to-day with more than usual ceremony and display.”

I would have preferred the term to be “metropolitan folklore” to refer to all who live in the cultural boundaries of a city, regardless of its political boundaries. I believe urban folklore encompasses more than the “city folk.” As of 2010, 80.7% of Americans live in metropolitan areas, although the majority live in the suburbs rather than the city center.

This is important to note because local tradition can be temporary, invoked at certain times. This can be satisfying but it can also bring out the fragility of the identity because it is not as obvious in a mobile society as national, ethnic, and other identities.

For proof, see the master folk artists selected in Pennsylvania, Maryland, and New Jersey in the twenty-first century.
Many of the early contributors to the discipline were philologists. The Grimms are a prominent example. The trend of structural analysis and its application to folklore was largely influence by structural linguistics (see Glassie 1975); and Dell Hymes changed the entire direction of the discipline for over a decade (see Hymes 1975).

Other linguistic explanations of the Baltimorean dialect: “It features an “extreme fronting of /ow/ and /aw/, as well as /uw/.” Of particular interest to our search for the meaning of “hon,” Labov points out that the phonological unity that we find in Baltimore, Wilmington, and Philadelphia is not reflected in the lexical patterning, where Baltimore often falls outside of the Philadelphia area.” One of the defining characteristics of Baltimore speech is “the fronting of back upgliding vowels except before liquids /r/ and /l/” (Phono Atlas). “For /uw/, almost every vowel is front of the center line, including /uw/ after non-coronal, except the vowels before /l/, show in bold. There is no significant distinction between /iw/ and /uw/ allophones. The /ow/ vowel is fully centralized, and a number of tokens are well front of center.” “The fronting of /aw/ is much more extreme in [Baltimore] than in New York.” “The front upgliding vowels are divided into those in word-final position (iyF, eyF) and those before consonants (iyC, eyC). It is evident from the mean positions that there is a sizeable difference between these environments for both vowels, but it is seen most dramatically with /ey/. As Tucker (1944) first reported, the /eyF/ tokens are open, almost in low position, while /eyC/ tones are peripheral upper mid, overlapping both /iyF/ and /iyC/. The two allophones have become further separated over time; apparent time distribution show a strong shift upward and frontward of /eyC/, while /eyF/ has remained open. There’s “a parallel distinction of /ay/ before voiceless consonants (ayO) and before voiced and finally (ayV). Here the preconsonantal raising is restricted to vowels before voiceless consonants, as in Canadian raising. Like, fight, diaper are in mid position, while /ay/ in Friday and tile is low. (Labov, Ash, and Boberg 2006).


Ibid.

Publication listed elsewhere as 1890.


Ibid.

Ibid.

The highway administration was tipped off by a photograph of the sign on the front page of the Baltimore Sun's Maryland section, April 23, 1991.


Ibid.

According to the U.S. Patent Office, Café Hon’s trademark was filed on May 11, 1992. The review I refer to is Elizabeth Large, “Café Hon doesn’t offer much out of the ordinary, but the name is cute”, Baltimore Sun, June 26, 1992.

The reviewer was Michael Olesker, “Hey Hon! Yew, Too, Can Talk in Bawlmerse” Baltimore Sun, March 9, 1993.

Dan Rodricks, “We All Love You, Hon It’s Just Not the Same Without You,” Evening Sun, November 29, 1993.

The mayoral seems to instruct the road crews to remove the “hon” sign. At the very least, he does not instruct them to leave it up.

JoAnna Daemmrich, “Mayor invites ‘Hon Man’ to a Bawlamer summit, Sun Papers, March 18, 1994.

Dan Rodricks, “This Just In…” Evening Sun, December 1, 2003.

Dan Rodricks was alleged to have sexually assaulted as many as ten women.

Dan Rodricks, “This Just In…” Evening Sun, February 18, 1994.

Dan Rodricks, “This Just In…” Evening Sun, February 16, 1994.

Dan Rodricks, “This Just In…” Evening Sun, February 23, 1994.


In Baltimore, there is a strong binary between county and city life. Many middle class and upper middle class residents reside in the county and commute to the city for work. In this way, these residents take advantage of the city’s opportunities while avoiding its challenges. While this lifestyle is a dream of many who feel trapped in the city, it is also grounds for derision among those who consider themselves to be authentic city residents.

Although not much is known about Hon Man, his handler, Evening Sun’s Dan Rodricks, rebutted that Hon Man lives and works in the City of Baltimore; Dan Rodricks, “This Just In…” Evening Sun, March 25, 1994. We will learn years later, in Hon Man’s NPR interview, that he lives in an apartment in Northeast Baltimore.


Letters to the Editor, Baltimore Sun, April 5, 1994.

Dan Rodricks, “This Just In…” Evening Sun, March 25, 1994.


Found in Dan Rodricks, “This Just In…” Evening Sun, October 13, 1997.


Oddly enough, his sign off lists his residence as Pasadena, Maryland, a town a half an hour south of Baltimore, and slightly closer to Annapolis than Baltimore. He would drive past the sign on his way to the city, though.

The radio host’s criticism is similar to Sen. Barbara Hoffman, who wants the mayor to “develop a sense of humor.”

Dan Rodricks, “This Just In...” *Evening Sun*, April 4, 1994.


Notably, those quoted here and earlier are not current residents of Baltimore.


Dan Rodricks, “This Just In...” *Evening Sun*, May 18, 1994.

Dan Rodricks, “This Just In...” *Evening Sun*, August 17, 1994.


Dan Rodricks, “This Just In...” *Evening Sun*, October 7, 1994.


Remember, Hon Man is opposed to making the sign permanent without city approval. Until then, he is willing to exchange his sweat for an impermanent sign. Like folklore, he has to keep the tradition alive through repetition. Dan Rodricks, “This Just In...” *Evening Sun*, November 4, 1994.

Dan Rodricks, “This Just In...” *Evening Sun*, August 9, 1995.

Intrepid Commuter, Baltimore Sun, May 6, 1996.

Dan Rodricks, “This Just In...” Baltimore Sun, April 23, 1997.

Dan Rodricks, “This Just In...” Baltimore Sun, January 27, 1998.

Dan Rodricks, “This Just In...” Baltimore Sun, April 28, 1999.


Dan Rodricks, “This Just In...” Baltimore Sun, November 5, 2001.

Ibid.

NPR Interview, February 2, 2002.

Dan Rodricks, “This Just In...” Baltimore Sun, August 19, 2002.

Ibid.

Ibid.

Ibid.

Ibid.

Newspapers listed Iula as being from Arbutus, an inner-ring of Baltimore’s suburbs in Baltimore County, just southwest of the city line. Arbutus has a strong cultural connection to Baltimore City, and Baltimore historian Joseph Arnold argued it would be illogical to disconnect the surrounding Baltimore County with Baltimore City. Nonetheless, Maryland Judiciary Case Search lists Iula’s address as 4402 Highview Ave., Baltimore, MD at the time of the arrest and at the time of the lawsuit. That address is approximately a mile beyond the Baltimore city limits.


According to lawsuit documents. See District Court for Worcester County, Criminal System. Case Number: 1I00011404.


Ibid.

See Circuit Court for Baltimore County, Civil System, “Iula vs Maryland State Police Dept, et al.” Case Number 03C00005562.


Ibid.

Ibid.

Ibid.

Ibid.

Ibid.


For more on Baltimore’s paint screen tradition, see Eff 2013.
For more see Dorson 1970, my extensive treatment of Dorson’s ideas on folklore in the city in Chapter 1, and Simon Bronner’s argument that folklore has “naturalistic” connotations in Bronner 2009.

This argument is repeated in Shackel and Gadsby 2008, Chidester and Gadsby 2009, and Gadsby 2011.


Ibid.

This is, in fact, how Letitia Stockett (Stockett 1997[1928]) claimed she would prefer Baltimore to be defined, through individual, ideal neighborhoods. She picked Mount Vernon.

It is worth noting that the “raven” image also fits into the “dark,” “gritty” persona of the city. They are usually viewed as birds of ill omen. Compared to noble eagles or godly doves, Ravens are stigmatized birds.

Penn State Harrisburg graduate student Julia Morrow’s in progress master’s thesis on bobbed hair suggests that cut hair became associated with cosmopolitan “beauty culture” after the 1930s. In this binary, big hair is left as southern or vernacular.


Denise Whiting trademarks the restaurant on May 11, 1992.

Elizabeth Large, “Café Hon Doesn’t Offer Much Out of the Ordinary, but the Name is Cute,” Sun Papers, June 26, 1992.

Mike’s later becomes the Lunch Box.

Elizabeth Large, “Café Hon Doesn’t Offer Much Out of the Ordinary, but the Name is Cute,” Sun Papers, June 26, 1992.


Elizabeth Large, “Café Hon May be Moving Across the Street,” Sun Papers, December 30, 1994.


All words belong to Vida Roberts. The assembling into a list of twenty points is my creation, Vida Roberts, “Hon Heaven Culture: Treasure those Baltimore Ladies who Call You ‘Hon,’” Hon. Because They’re a Vanishing Treasure
Characterized by Hearts of Gold—and Some Other Traits you Can’t Miss,”
*Baltimore Sun*, June 7, 1996.

217 The white marble stoop. This again refers to “hons” as purveyors of local
culture.

218 This continues the theme of Hons doing local things.

219 This is another example of Hons participating in local culture. And despite
their femininity, they also have a masculine streak.

220 And even more instances of Hons taking part in local culture.

221 She ends with Hons as maternal.


223 Ibid.

224 Arthur Hirsch, “Actor’s Show the Result of Wandering Eyes,” *Baltimore Sun*,
April 3, 2002.

225 Ibid.

226 This is not completely true. African Americans are portrayed as Hons in
*Hairspray*, on greeting cards, at HonFest, and in Charm Card commercials.


228 M. Dion Thompson, “A Hon’s Higher Calling,” *Baltimore Sun*, June 9, 2002

229 Ibid.

230 Anica Bulter, “Hampden Celebration Brings Out the Inner Hon in Almost
Everyone,” *Baltimore Sun*, June 12, 2005


232 Ibid.

233 Ibid.

234 Ibid.

235 In fact, Ann Sjoersdma will complain about this specifically in her essay.

236 Anica Bulter, “Hampden Celebration Brings Out the Onner Hon in Almost
Everyone,” *Baltimore Sun*, June 12, 2005

November 8, 2005.

238 Ibid.


240 Jill Rosen, “Sorry, Hon, it’s trademarked: Café Owner Owns Rights to Word,”
*Baltimore Sun*, December 9, 2010.

241 Laura Barnhardt, “Kids’ Artwork Pays Homage to a City Icon,” *Baltimore Sun*,

242 Ibid.


244 Quoted in Jacques Kelly, “Fashionable Folks? Not Here, Hon,” *Baltimore Sun*,
January 7, 1996.

245 Jacques Kelly, “Fashionable Folks? Not Here, Hon,” *Baltimore Sun*, January 7,
1996.

Note that she is pointing out that John Waters is not really from Baltimore. He is a “county” boy.

That is, Hons are “down to earth,” blue-collar, working people. They are not snobs, like those yuppies she sees moving into Baltimore.


This used to be a beer brewed in Baltimore. It is now brewed elsewhere, but still considered Baltimorean.

Bowling is considered a working-class sport, and duckpin bowling is a Baltimore regional specialty.


Towson itself is a town outside Baltimore, on its northern border.


Stephanie Shapiro, “$500 Doesn’t Get You What It Once Did, Hon Contest: It’ll Be a New Day When the Traditional Winner Lets that Big Hair Down on the Avenue in Hampden,” *Baltimore Sun*, June 6, 1998.


Dan Rodricks, “This Just In...” *Baltimore Sun*, June 9, 2003

Dan Rodricks, “This Just In...” *Baltimore Sun*, June 10, 2004

Ibid.

Ibid.


Ibid.

I learned this information from Denise Whiting’s personal assistant Beth Pardoe.


Ibid.

Ibid.


Ibid.


Ibid.


Ibid.

Ibid.

Ibid.

Dan Rodricks, “This Just In…” *Evening Sun*, December 6, 2002.


“Café Hon Flamingo Taken Down,” *WBAL*, October 20, 2009.


Jacques Kelly and Annie Linskey, “Dixon Wants to Help Café Hon Owner Get Flamingo Back Up,” *Baltimore Sun*, October 22, 2009, It is later revealed that it was a fellow member of the Hampden Village Merchants Association that filed the complaint.

Ibid.

307 Ibid.
308 “Café Hon Flamingo Taken Down,” WBAL, October 20, 2009.
309 Ibid.
310 Stephanie Hanes, “Baltimore: At City Hall this Fall, Talk Was of Flamingogate” Christian Science Monitor, November 27, 2009.
312 “Café Hon Flamingo Taken Down,” WBAL, October 20, 2009.
317 Ibid.
319 This is recorded as written, typos and all.
321 Ibid., This statement about local cultural property will become important again during the Hon trademark fiasco
324 Ibid.
325 Ibid.
327 Ibid.

Ibid.

Ibid.


The discipline I refer to is critical heritage studies and the journals I refer to include *International Journal of Intangible Heritage* and the *International Journal of Cultural Property*.

The concept of “community” itself is highly problematic in the modern context. See, for example, Benedict 1982 and Noyes 2003a.

Which folklore archive would that be, the dusty boxes at the University of Maryland? The American Folklife Center staff who, in Washington, DC, are geographically close but culturally far from Baltimore?

For an analysis of courtroom examples of the “cultural defense,” see Renteln 2004.

“U.S. Copyright Office Definitions,” U.S. Copyright Office,


For a related example that examines the cultural politics of branding a tradition, see Scher 2002.

Section 1202, “Use of Subject Matter as Trademark,” *Trademark Manual of Examining Procedure*.


“Fact Sheets Protecting a Trademark,” International Trademark Association,


Elizabeth Large, “Café Hon Doesn’t Offer Much Out of the Ordinary, but the Name is Cute,” *Baltimore Sun*, June 26, 1992.

Since the “hon” controversy, it is now back down to two days.

It did not, however, mention Café Hon.


Ibid.

Ibid.


Ibid.


Dan Rodricks, “This Just In...” *Evening Sun*, February 23, 1994.

Denise Whiting, “‘HONtrovery’ Background Information,” posted to “Café Hon” Facebook page, January 19, 2011.


Ibid.

Ibid.

Ibid.

Ibid.


Ibid.


Ibid.


Ibid.

Ibid.


Ibid.


Ibid.

Ibid.

Ibid.


Ibid.


Ibid.

Ibid.

Ibid.


Ibid.


Ibid.

Ibid.

Robert Irsay was the owner of the Baltimore Colts. He fled the city in the middle of the night, moving the team to Indianapolis. Ever since, he has been public enemy number one in Baltimore. It is not unusual to see Baltimoreans post pictures on social media urinating on Irsay’s Indianapolis grave.

Ibid.

Ibid.

Ibid.

Ibid.

Ibid.

Ibid.

Ibid.

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Ibid.

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Ibid.

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442 Ibid.
443 Ibid.
444 Ibid.
445 Ibid.
446 Ibid.
447 Ibid.
450 “Hon” trademark for providing advice and information to adult family members on appropriate entertainment and leisure activities for younger family members; Providing an Internet website portal in the field of entertainment, cultural and sporting events, U.S. Patent and Trademark Office Serial Number 85210525.
452 Meredith McFall Kerr, posted to “Boycott Café Hon” Facebook page, January 6, 2011.
455 Ibid.
456 Ibid.
457 Ibid.
460 Denise Whiting, “HONtroversy’ Background Information,” posted to “Café Hon” Facebook page, January 19, 2011.
464 Ibid.
465 Ibid.
467 Ibid.
468 Ibid.


Ibid.

Ibid.

Ibid.

Ibid.

Ibid.

Ibid.

Ibid.

Ibid.

Ibid.

Ibid.

Ibid.


“Apology Accepted, Hon,” *Baltimore Sun*, November 8, 2011.


“Apology Accepted, Hon,” *Baltimore Sun*, November 8, 2011.


Ibid.


Ibid.


Ibid.


Ibid.


Ibid.

Ibid.

Ibid.

Ibid.

This dissertation was completed prior to the tragic death of Freddie Gray and the subsequent unrest in Baltimore. A pivotal event in the response was the April 25, 2015 march from Baltimore City Hall to the Inner Harbor, as the public face
of Baltimore. During the event, 34 people were arrested. Although the ultimate outcome is still uncertain, “hon” has played a rhetorical role in the press, where “hon” is trumpeted as the epitome of Baltimore. For instance, see Steve Inskeep’s National Public Radio piece on April 29, 2015, “Baltimore Is Not Ferguson. Here’s What it Really Is,” which includes the opening line “Baltimore is usually a friendly city, where strangers are often addressed as “hon.””
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