

The Pennsylvania State University

The Graduate School

School of Humanities

POSTHUM(OR)OUS:

THE FOLK RESPONSE TO MASS-MEDIATED DISASTERS IN THE DIGITAL AGE

A Dissertation in

American Studies

by

Trevor J. Blank

© 2011 Trevor J. Blank

Submitted in Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements
for the Degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

May 2011

The dissertation of Trevor J. Blank was reviewed and approved* by the following:

Simon J. Bronner
Distinguished Professor of American Studies and Folklore
Director, Doctoral Program in American Studies
Coordinator, American Studies Program
Dissertation Adviser
Chair of Committee

Michael Barton
Professor of American Studies and Social Sciences
Center for Pennsylvania Culture Studies

Charles Kupfer
Associate Professor of American Studies and History

Girish Subramanian
Professor of Information Systems

*Signatures are on file in the Graduate School.

ABSTRACT

Today, Americans are raised to seek and sustain intimacy with others through the use of computer-mediated communication. As a result, American society is becoming gradually more addicted to the convenient accessibility of satisfying content and the opportunities for expressive exchange. To be sure, people inherently need to feel connected or united with others in some way. New media technologies deeply fulfill these needs by providing users an expansive forum for humorous, combative, or intellectual communicative exchanges—especially in times of social anxiety or forced emotional suppression.

More so than other events, shocking news of death, disaster, and scandal invite humorous vernacular expression on the Internet when repetitively consumed via mass media outlets. The Internet propels the diffusion of humor about tragedies to many people that would not have been included in previous years. Considering that the Digital Age's accessibility and interactivity now prohibit most stories, jokes, or regional behaviors from remaining exclusive to their originating contexts, it is essential that we examine the new ways that people respond to media disasters in contemporary society, and how cyberspace became the "go-to" format for vernacular expression.

By comparing the pre-Internet contexts of local, regional, and national responses to disaster with the trends of vernacular expression in today's new media-driven society and popular culture, this dissertation shows that the global reach of cyberspace has irrevocably extended itself into the ways that modern society expresses itself and underscore the implications that this has for the trajectory of contemporary folklore studies. Most importantly, this work demonstrates that the allure of the Internet (as a locus of vernacular expression) comes from not only its widespread accessibility, but because it eases the growing trend of physical detachment from the analog world that cyberspace has made commonplace in the lives of working people.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

LIST OF FIGURES.....	vi
PREFACE.....	vii
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS.....	xxviii
CHAPTER 1. INTRODUCTION.....	1
1.1. Cyberspace, Technology, and Mass Media in the Twenty-First Century.....	1
1.2. The Cultural Inventory as Storehouse for Folk Knowledge.....	4
1.3. Humor, Disaster, and the Cognitive Organization of Mass-Mediated Folklore.....	7
1.4. Perceptions of Folk Culture and Technology in the Digital Age.....	13
CHAPTER 2. SEARCHING FOR CONNECTIONS: HOW AND WHY WE USE NEW MEDIA FOR VERNACULAR EXPRESSION.....	19
2.1. Technology and the Transmission of Knowledge.....	20
2.2. The Hybridization of Analog and Digital Expressive Behaviors.....	25
2.3. The Normalization of Death in Popular Culture and Mass Media.....	27
CHAPTER 3. THE EVOLUTION OF HUMOR AND MASS-MEDIATED DISASTERS IN THE TWENTIETH AND EARLY TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY.....	33
3.1. Pre-Internet Responses to Tragedy: The Three Mile Island Accident.....	33
3.2. The Challenger Disaster Joke Cycle.....	43
3.3. Vernacular Expression and the Emergence of the Internet: 9/11 and Other Disasters.....	46
CHAPTER 4. “INTIMATE STRANGERS”: THE FOLK RESPONSE TO CELEBRITY DEATH AND FALLS FROM GRACE.....	54
4.1. Imaginary Social Worlds and Celebrity Culture Consumption.....	57
4.2. Simulative Social Worlds and the Response to Mass Media.....	64
CHAPTER 5. FROM SPORTS HERO TO SUPER VILLAIN; OR, HOW TIGER WOODS WRECKED HIS CAR(EER).....	70
5.1. The Beginning of the End: Tiger Woods’ Crash as Impetus for Public Discourse.....	71
5.2. Humor, Betrayal, and the Meaning of the Burgeoning Folk Response to Tiger Woods.....	73
5.3. Oral and Digital Variations on Tiger Woods Humor: Proverbs, Riddles, Photoshops, and Narratives.....	75
5.4. Contexts, Cultural Inventories, and Traditionality in the Evolution of Woods Humor.....	79
5.5. Tiger Woods and the Function of Humorous Expression.....	82
CHAPTER 6. MICHAEL JACKSON AND THE HUMOR OF DEATH.....	86
6.1. Mass Media and Hybridized Performance in the Folk Response to Death.....	88
6.2. Joke Types, Variations, and Meaning.....	92
6.3. The Function of Humor in the Bereavement of Celebrities.....	102

CHAPTER 7. CONCLUSION.....	105
7.1. Laughing to Death: Tradition, Vernacular Expression, and American Culture in the Digital Age.....	105
7.2. Predictions on Future Trajectories of Vernacular Expression and New Media.....	116
BIBLIOGRAPHY.....	120
NOTES.....	139

LIST OF FIGURES

Figure 1: Benjamin Franklin’s “Join, or Die” Political Cartoon.....	21
Figure 2: Three Mile Island Mushroom Cloud Imagery.....	37
Figure 3: Another Example of TMI Photocopylore in Circulation Following Accident.....	39
Figure 4: A T-Shirt created during a Dickinson College (Carlisle, PA) Design Competition.....	40
Figure 5: “Canned radiation” – TMI Ephemera created locally.....	40
Figure 6: <i>React-or: A Radiating Experience</i> Board Game.....	41
Figure 7: Three Mile Island Novelty Lamp.....	41
Figure 8: New Design for Rebuilding the World Trade Center.....	50
Figure 9: Presidents George H.W. Bush and George “Dubya” Go Fishing in New Orleans.....	51
Figure 10: The Death of Aquaman: Digital Folk Art Takes Aim at BP.....	51
Figure 11: The BP Oil Spill Kills Mario... and his Underwater Enemies.....	52
Figure 12: Image from Circulating Email Attachment Titled “Tiger Woods’ Christmas Card”....	78

PREFACE

In America, where close-knit communities and neighborhood barbecues are romanticized, idealized, and mythologized components of regional livelihood, the reality of individualism and isolationism has become a mainstay of American culture. As a result, self-sufficiency has been symbolically imprinted as a defining trait in the folk conceptualization of the American dream and “spirit” for decades (see Cullen 2004). Nevertheless, as political scientist Robert Putnam argues in *Bowling Alone* (2000), the supposed decline of communal relationships and physical group activities within modern society suggest an abandonment of “traditional” American values such as physical togetherness with friends, the gregarious pursuit of family time outside of the home, or communal involvement in civic activities. Have Americans dramatically altered the ways that they meaningfully connect with others over the last century? And if so, is technological progress to blame?

This dissertation demonstrates that the global reach of new media, particularly the Internet, has now irrevocably extended itself into the ways that modern society expresses itself. To illustrate this, I examine the evolution of the humorous visual and especially narrative folk responses to death, disaster, and scandal as they have emerged in technologically mediated expressive communications over time. In doing so, I contend that as a locus of vernacular (or indigenous, “folk”) expression, the allure of the Internet comes from its widespread accessibility, and the ability to digitally compensate for individuals’ physical detachment within the physical world by providing a unique combination of instantaneity, simultaneity, and heterogeneity. The research presented herein is not intended as a mere survey. I offer a series of case studies which show the explanatory potential of using folkloristic tools to analyze expressive responses to death, disaster, and scandal. Principally, I hope to draw attention to the significant ways in

which folk and mass culture have evolved throughout the twentieth and twenty-first century, and demonstrate the importance of technologically mediated communication devices for self-expression, especially through the circulation of humorous rhetoric and artistic creations online.

The central point remains that we now “are moving away from a world in which some produce and many consume media toward one in which everyone has a more active stake in the culture that is produced” (Jenkins et al. 2009, 12). When collectively observed, the technologically influenced cultural patterns constitute the presence of a significant historical time: the *Digital Age*. The distinctiveness of this era became increasingly obvious to pundits who witnessed the progressive sophistication and miniaturization of the personal computer and other broadcasting technologies throughout the 1970s and ‘80s (see Ceruzzi 2003; Hafner 1998; Ornstein 2002; Ryan 2010). The clunky analog machines that once took up entire rooms have given way to the laptops and cellular phones of today that are capable of limitless communicative possibilities. But en route to realizing this pocket-sized Digital Age, no technological medium has been more influential on than the World Wide Web, which almost single-handedly facilitated the assimilation of computer-mediated technology into the daily lives of most Americans by the early 2000s.

Amazingly (or so it now seems), the Internet was not originally designed to serve as a vast digital forum for vernacular expression and social networking, but rather to accommodate the research and communication needs of scientists, academics, and military personnel. The development of the technological interfaces that would ultimately lead to the emergence of the Digital Age began during the Cold War under the U.S. Department of Defense’s Advanced Research Projects Agency Network (ARPANET) program, which was created in direct response to the Soviet Union’s launching of Sputnik. Beginning in 1958, ARPANET served the military

and academic researchers as a means of communication and as a command tool for defense operations. Email technology was created in 1970, and by the 1980s people were interacting online through bulletin boards (discussion groups), MUDs (multiuser dungeons), and the WELL (Whole Earth 'Lectronic Link), a social network composed of Internet users from across the globe; later, Internet Relay Chat (IRC) followed (Hafner and Lyon 1998). In 1989, English computer scientist Timothy Berners-Lee developed HyperText Markup Language (HTML), which operated web browsing programs that would eventually allow the Internet to expand from a primarily academic and militaristic forum into the worldwide phenomenon it is today with limitless boundaries for information retrieval and vernacular expression. Indeed, the very character of the Internet has thematically evolved from being a closed and exclusive venue to an open and democratic place where symbolic interaction flourishes.

The widespread adoption and continued improvement of computer-mediated technologies into the present has had far-reaching effects on the ways that many people now interact with peers on a day-to-day basis. The Digital Age forges on today; its main identifying feature can be found in Americans' perpetual reliance on computer technology for organizing and informing their lives. Just as the Industrial Age fundamentally redefined American life and the ways that people went about engaging their society, the Digital Age has also ushered in tremendous changes in the ways that people conceptualize the life course, human interaction, and self-reliance—primarily through the adoption of simulative venues for symbolic interaction which frequently mask the social contexts and prerogatives of participants.

Outside of social networking sites and online community gatherings that prize personal sharing and actively attempt to replicate the social mechanics of face-to-face decorum, the constructs of race, ethnicity, gender, age, and appearance are ambiguous. The seemingly

democratic presentation and inborn autonomy of the Internet suggests an expansion of social groups and looser restrictions to their entry. Many people use the Internet to vibrantly and proudly express themselves through folk art or by posting to discussion forums with a screen name or “handle” which conveys their personality and/or interests (see Aldred 2010; Booth 2008; Foote 2007; Stallabrass 2003). So while the proverb “seeing is believing” may be important to the social categorizations of analog folklore, it is far less important on the Internet.

Relationships forged in interactive environments online are not always one-sided or impersonal. On the contrary, as Barbara Warnick notes, rhetoric “functions as ubiquitously on the World Wide Web as it does in other communication environments” (2007, 121). In deep-rooted digital communities, people come to know each other through the established rapport between each others’ input to the online dialogue and efforts toward group cohesion. Above all, these interactions are defined by the active *sharing* between participants through symbolic gestures encoded with narratives, visual contributions, or other expressive rhetoric.

Without question, the emergence of the World Wide Web in the 1990s created the need for social and cultural adaptations to the unfamiliar nuances of digitized, computer-mediated communications. However, as evidenced by the hiccups seen during the integrations of radio, television, and cinematic media outlets throughout the twentieth century, such a challenge was to be expected. When times change and the “old time way of life” appears to fade, people engage the dominant culture and make their own modifications to incorporate or other outsider influences in their lives en route to producing a new, hybridized vernacular that engages the multifaceted contexts of an individuals’ creative expression or engagement with society (see Bronner 2004, 2009; Dégh 1994; Jenkins 2008). Of course, there have been and there always will be those who

resist change, just as there are people today who prefer playing checkers in a public space over checking their email in cyberspace.

The “voice of the people”—the folk—is represented today by the merger of two distinct expressive venues: one based in the physical world, the other in a digital one. Where there were once separate mediums that produced specific media content, now both analog and digital venues can interchangeably share content in similar forms. The merging of formerly oral and/or visual means of transmission with digital interface is called “media convergence,” and it is a pervasive characteristic of how information is shared and organized in the Digital Age. Communications scholar Henry Jenkins (2008) has shown that new media and other accompanying, increasingly sophisticated technologies are not simply replacing old forms of media, but developing a newfangled means of interacting with them altogether in what he calls a “convergence culture.” This convergence culture, Jenkins holds, is not simply just a technological revolution, but is rather the marker of a cultural shift—one that is dependent on participatory culture in order to maintain the cohesiveness of community and perceived social harmony. In the process of juxtaposing folk culture (the everyday life of localized, tradition-bound groups) within mass society, there is often conflict in ascertaining authenticity and the appropriate folk correlations and derivations that constitute its place in the historical context (Bronner 2004; see also Bendix 1997).

The instant gratification of feeling a part of a greater, widespread phenomenon allows users to alleviate their anxieties directly and in ways that they may not be able to do so in the physical world. Furthermore, the accessibility of the Internet allows for greater participation from widespread demographic groups and beckons users to offer more authentic representations of their sentiments or frustrations about analog media discourses. At the heart of the response to

media-induced anxieties is the recitation and sharing of *folklore*—but what exactly is that, and why does it matter?

Many people incorrectly conceptualize folklore as mere fairy tales, old wives' gossip, or urban legends. While it is true that these genres are examples of folklore, their popularity often obscures what the term actually represents. In essence, folklore is the traditional knowledge of an individual and/or their community that is acquired through oral, print, or mediated communication. What makes something “traditional” is not its origin or the influence of time, but rather continuities and consistencies that allow a person or group to perceive expressions *as* traditional, locally derived, or community generated (Howard 2008a, 201; see also Georges and Jones 1995).

The word “folklore” is derived from the German *Volkskunde* or “knowledge of the folk.” It is a compound of two words: “folk” for people, and “lore” for the inherited or cultural knowledge that they have acquired from tradition. The “folk” have been defined by the late scholar Alan Dundes as “*any group whatsoever* who share at least one common factor” in any social grouping (Dundes 1980, 6-7; emphasis in original); usually the linking factor is shared between two or more individuals (Oring 1984a), but can also be composed of individual through “solo” folklore as well (see Mechling 2006). Of course, Dundes’ original definition of “folk” was conceived with face-to-face interaction in mind. Yet, today’s new media devices allow for people to digitally cohort online with the same expressive range that they would in-person. So while our understanding of the “folk” and their culture remains mostly intact, the general consensus about what actually constitutes “folklore” has been undergoing revision and reinterpretation for some time.

Folklore studies from the Brothers Grimm in the early nineteenth century and new scholars in the twentieth century emphasized oral transmission (often by non-literate persons) of expressive speech as the content of folklore. Noteworthy folklorist William Wells Newell believed that “technology, specifically print, produces the social distinction between high and low that generates folklore,” and further concluded that “genuine” folklore was that which escaped print (Newell 1883, v). These views were carried for over a half-century by scholars until the likes of Richard Dorson (1970) sought to update the definition of folklore for what he called “the modern world,” and other enterprising folklorists like Alan Dundes and Carl Pagter published a series of popular books on photocopied humor of so-called “urban folklore from the paperwork empire” in which they argued against a definition based on oral transmission or the absence of technology (Dundes and Pagter 1978, 1989, 1991b, 1996). As some scholars graciously or reluctantly accepted these inclusions, newer technologies became widely adopted by ordinary people. Nevertheless, many folklorists remain skeptical.

The presence of technology does *not* diminish the validity of folkloric materials. Over time, fax machines, photocopiers, and eventually primitive email and “bulletin board” discussion lists all managed to lay the groundwork for many of the folkloric expressive forms that we see online today (see Michael 1995; Preston 1994; Roemer 1994). For example, the rhetorical motifs found in the “pre-Internet” circulation of technologically mediated folklore such as “Xerox humor” (once a mainstay of communal workspaces and discussed at greater length in chapter 3) resurfaced in the form of forwarded chain emails that similarly circulate without the knowledge of the originating authorial source and frequently contain manipulated pictures, cheeky folk wisdom, or urban legends. So folklore is not necessarily a study of the past (or cultural “survivals”), but rather the study of traditional beliefs and practices, conventional

knowledge, and expressive patterns as they surface in contemporary society. How these traditions are received and subsequently change or remain the same over time is of central concern to folklorists, and the study of this phenomena also includes a consideration of historical contexts and how they served to shape and mediate the passing of tradition (see Bronner 1998).

If folklore can be conceptually defined by its transmission, it can operationally be defined by its pattern of *repetition and variation* (also called “multiple variation”), a key concept for explaining changes observed in patterns of folkloric expression over time. In essence, repetition and variation refer to multiple existences and replications of folkloric materials across space and time. After all, as folklore disseminates it is repeated, revised, and reinterpreted before shifting into new contexts where it obtains new meaning among new actors, which regularly leads to multiple variations of a single text (Dégh and Vázsonyi 1975; see also Dundes 1999).

All ideas, symbolic interactions, and expressive behaviors must go through a social and communicative process by which they are conceived, interpreted, and subsequently repeated and/or vary (see Levine 1988, 33). This may be distinguished as a *folk process* because it is a learned expressive behavioral pattern that has been honed over generations in order to establish social conventions for knowledge sharing and the encoding of contextual values assigned within a particular community. More explicitly, the folk process can be classified as the means by which an individual and/or their community interpret and react to information accrual in the course of advancing their social progression or education. *Folkloristics* is the academic study of folklore in a variety of social, cultural, and other performative or expressive contexts (Georges and Jones 1995).[†]

[†] For a thoughtful overview of the folklore discipline’s formation and initial aims, see Bronner (2002a). For more in-depth, analytical treatments and historiographies, see Bronner (1986), as well as Abrahams (1968a); Bascom (1954); Ben-Amos (1971); Burns (1977); and Oring (1976) for paradigmatic summations of folklore throughout the twentieth century.

Like *folklore*, **humor** is not simply a genre, but rather a theme of material considered to be “funny” or amusing within the context or performance in which it is transmitted to an audience. These can take the form of jokes, anecdotes, riddles, gesturing, comics, narrative comedy, wordplay, witty rhetoric, or silly artwork, just to name a few types. Again, the context of transmission may influence the materials’ reception. “Flipping the bird” to someone may convey directed anger, but it can also be used to playfully rebuff a peer’s teasing in the course of a conversation; this speaks to the fact that the dynamics of humor may vary across analog and digital mediums. However, in both venues the sharing or performance of humor often enables individuals with the ability to rhetorically test their own compatibility with peers.

Many forms of humor can be categorized as predominantly sexual and aggressive in its intentions. According to Sigmund Freud, humor allows people to “evade restrictions and open sources of pleasure that have become inaccessible” due to repression, social constraints, or contextual circumstances (1905, 103; see also Dundes 1987b; Oring 1984b). Humor affords people the freedom to express sentiments and thoughts that may be otherwise considered socially reprehensible. Thus, jokesters bypass or dismiss expected conventions of “appropriate behavior” by rhetorically rejecting the seriousness of occasions that would typically be considered disheartening.

One of the primary reasons for joking about morbid topics such as disasters, tragedies, or death is the desire to “speak the last word” about unspeakable events, often in rhetorical opposition to the inescapable, repetitive narratives espoused by media outlets (Ellis 2001, 8). Indeed, as sociologist Christie Davies explains, “the flourishing of jokes about *specific shocking events* in the last thirty years or so *is a product* of the rise of mass media and of the direct, dogmatic and yet ambiguous and paradoxical way in which accidents and disasters are presented

to the public by the media” (1999, 255; emphasis in original). The Internet venue affords users the freedom to counter such hegemonic reportage tactics without the looming threat of physical confrontation or fear of damaging their “real world” reputations if they speak out. The robust commentarial discourse online is a safe place for users to engage or experiment in a dialogue with other like-minded individuals; or, conversely, users may vivaciously spar with one another in a playfully aggressive and instigative manner. Humor is a major tool within Internet users’ expressive arsenal.

Mobile communications—not just the World Wide Web in wireless form, but text messaging, streaming newsfeeds, and cell phones—symbolize the modern connection to society. People still line up for hours (and sometimes even days) awaiting the release of a new iPhone or video game system in the hopes of consuming the latest and greatest. Is the motivation to buy new techie gear charged with the desire to achieve symbolic status in one’s social network, or is it more basic than this? Could it be that the true motivation lies from within the individual and their desire to connect to others in the most efficient and sexy way possible? The material culture of the technological object surely serves as projection of one’s desired presentation of self, but the *use* of the medium is characterized by the individual’s interaction with others. At the end of the day, consumption only goes so far—devices must serve a purpose or lose their relevancy. In actuality, the dynamics of the expressive mediums are the main attraction.

Computer-mediated communication in the Digital Age boasts such far-reaching influence by perpetually enhancing the interfacial aspects most cherished by users, chiefly: *speed* (instantaneity), *connection* (simultaneity), and *choice* (heterogeneity). From a tradition-centered and historical perspective, these desirable traits can be traced to the emergent attitudes about the technology that surfaced after World War II (Lowe 1983; see also Bronner 1986). Nevertheless,

new devices that stretch the limits of functionality *do* carry aesthetic value as material objects, while also possessing social power through semiotic transference of the individual's symbolic connectedness with the surrounding world. Actually utilizing appropriate technological devices en route to a greater digital experience is the ultimate prize.

The mainstream support for greater speed, connectivity, and choice among Internet users has culminated in a registry of values about what communicative technological devices should and should not be—including how they should be engaged by individuals while in use. When adopted, these dominant attitudes and expectations of the digital experience reflect a social construction of a digitized *folk system*—a cultural domain that is regulated by the common practices and reinforced behavioral expectations as determined, modeled, and accepted by the people who make up the Internet community's constituency themselves. These folk systems provide a semblance of social belonging, but more importantly convey a sense of tradition within modernity.

The user-facilitated dynamics of folk systems may contribute toward a *folk web*—online participatory media that is regulated by amateur users (such as discussion forums and blogs). As a result of the digital folk system and its ability to model behavioral expectations therein, the unwritten philosophies of Internet folklore grow to dictate online decorum (or “Netiquette,” as earlier Internet users called it) and influence how one should best participate or navigate the consummation of relationships online, either generally or in the context of a single site or web-based community. The governing rules will vary between competing social groups that have organized online.

With a clearer picture of folklore in place, I hope that the prevalent theoretical orientation from which I derive my analysis is more transparent. However, before my research and analysis

can be most efficiently presented in the ensuing chapters of this dissertation, there are several other crucial terms, concepts, and methodologies that merit explanation in order to properly inform the context of this research and provide insight into my rationale for undertaking this project in the first place. The first terms that I wish to explain are *digital natives* and *digital immigrants*.

In 2001, educator Marc Prensky coined the term “digital native” to conceptualize those individuals who were born after 1980 and thus had been inherently subjected to the social influences of burgeoning communicative technologies throughout their lives (Prensky 2001a, 2001b). In essence, these “native” individuals have never known a world in which technology, broadly construed, has not been a major source of entertainment, information, and communicative expression. Prensky also offered the term “digital immigrants” to identify those who were not *born* into the generation that welcomed the Internet from the moment they arrived on Earth, but nevertheless adapted to the influence of digital technology by either avoiding, accepting, or adopting it (see also Long 2005; McNeill 2009). By this definition, the first citizens of the Internet were digital immigrants (Baym 1993, 1995; Dorst 1990; Healy 1997; Hine 2000; Rheingold 2000; Turner 2008; see also Bennett, Maton, and Kervin 2008).

The terms “digital native” and “digital immigrant” may appear to be contentious—after all, there appears to be an implicit connotation of one group being superior to another. However, these terms are merely meant to represent a generational divide and not assess an ageist value judgment. Rhetoric aside, the reality is that younger generations are socialized into a world where continuous digital interconnectivity is prized. The widespread availability of new media and computer-mediated communication has fundamentally changed the ways in which people connect to the outside world and conceptualize their own personal worlds: instead of calling for

directions to a local restaurant, people can now find the address online, enter it into their mobile device, and get step-by-step directions without bringing an external party into the process.

Instead of waiting for their parents to finish the newspaper, children now must wait for their parents to check their email. Instead of finding a stash of pornographic magazines nestled between their teenage son's mattress, parents must now eyeball computer files and Internet caches for clues on their child's naughty web-browsing habits. The culture continues to change.

While younger generations are immersed into this techno-savvy world from day one, the older generations that facilitated its growth in the first place have had to adapt to the increasingly fast and sophisticated pace set by the new generation of digital participants. I use the terms "digital native" and "immigrant" not to suggest an intellectual rift between those born before or after 1980, but rather to demarcate the "digital divide," after which technology became increasingly important (and eventually inseparable) in the social lives of Americans.

Throughout this work I employ the terms *analog* and *digital* to distinguish folkloric characteristics that are derived from the pre-Internet and current new media contexts, respectively. "Analog" is particularly sticky in that its historical context accurately implies a connection to the physical world, namely older broadcast mediums like television; for this reason, I also occasionally use "analog" to identify folklore that is rooted in "real world" or non-digital interactions. These are important terms to distinguish, as everything that is digitized has roots in the physical world, both in behavioral context as well as practice. After all, we all use analog equipment like computer monitors and keyboards to reach the digital expressive forum. It is essential to remember that there is always a human behind vernacular expression in new media contexts. In addition, we cannot understand the digital without first understanding its connection to the analog, both in its historical and pre-Internet sense as well as its modern usage

as a description of “real world” interaction. Hence, the hybridization of folkloric behavior is a primary concern that I address throughout this work.

Readers may also note my occasional usage of the terms *emic* and *etic*. These are two terms that are used in the humanities and social sciences to articulate how human behavior is reported by scholars. “Emic” refers to content that is consciously or subconsciously meaningful to the individual, and the informants’ verbal or behavioral actions are interpreted and reported in ways that reflect an accurate “insider” perspective held by the culture or group that is being studied. The data that I refer to as having an “emic” context is meant to reflect the views and identity that is embodied while also underscoring its folk interactions and communally derived values. In these cases, I attempt to reveal how an individual within a particular context would explain their motivations. An “etic” account is the objective interpretations of a researcher, such as my prerogative to categorize or analyze cultural patterns that I observe in analog, digital, or hybridized contexts.

To illustrate the differences between emic and etic, I would like to use the example of a participant in an online forum who purposely posts nasty things and explains that their rationale for doing this was “to have fun.” This informant’s claim would be considered *emic*, as it came directly from them and rhetorically represents their relationship to the communicative event. Additionally, subsequent forum responses by other participants who lambast the user’s nasty rhetoric would also be emic. However, if I (as a researcher) were to analyze this interaction and conclude that it was simply an attempt to rhetorically seek out other like-minded individuals with disdain for a particular forum topic, this would be an *etic* account, since my interpretation is grounded in the analysis of a group’s interaction and not derived from their own vocalized assertions.

Having objectively described the subject matter of this dissertation, it is only appropriate that I declare my own, subjective intentions. Where do I, as an author, fit into this study? Why do I care? And given that my research is firmly entrenched in the study of new media and other emergent forms of folklore, why am I writing a *book*-like manuscript instead of a newfangled, eSomething?

It is prudent to note that just as there are digital immigrants who reject or only begrudgingly adopt new media for communication and connectivity, not all digital natives are technological purists. Personally, I am a technological enthusiast; I in no way reject folklore from the “real world” (including contemporary folklore), but I will likely always favor the tangibility of holding a good book in my hands to reading one on a *Nook* or *Kindle*. I firmly believe that new media technologies (especially the Internet and mobile devices) invite and facilitate the transmission of the most current and ubiquitous folklore in circulation, but I am also cognizant of the fact that there is no time since digitization became possible that any given behavior or text online is a merger between analog and digital folklore forms. Indeed, the Internet supports and modifies the folk process by combining the familiarity of analog practices to the conveniences and conventions of online interaction. The process of creation comes more into public view and is open for commentary whereas in the analog world, the product is less susceptible to communal commentary without direct solicitation. Issues of public and private domain are perpetually brought to the fore.

But to refocus once again, why have I chosen to study this topic in the first place?

I am a digital native; I am a member of the generation which bore witness to the dawning of the Digital Age as it unfolded, evolved, and became a fixture of global society (Palvrey and Gasser 2008; Prensky 2001a; Tapscott 1999; Weber and Dixon 2007). Growing up, I

experienced the unmistakable headaches induced by the droning hiss of a modem connecting, illegally downloaded music and movies into all hours of the night and cruised for (and found) “Internet girlfriends” on AOL Instant Messenger. I received hundreds of emails that contained jokes, manipulated pictures, and requests for forwarding. I was read the sanctimonious pontifications of amateur bloggers and laughed at the rhetoric of performance found on the individual user-pages of Facebook, MySpace, and *Wikipedia*. I gazed in amazement as the clunky computer that once took up my father’s office in 1984 became exponentially more powerful, compact, and connected to the surrounding world in the form of laptops, Blackberries, or the latest model of the iPod, iPhone, and iPad. All of this took place in the last three decades, and every generation following mine will also be composed of digital natives who witness the continuing evolution of technology around them.

Even though I was born after Prensky’s digital divide, the ways that people are using technology to express themselves nowadays—especially newer generations of participants—is under constant revision. I am interested in how the digital divide has influenced or complicated the ways in which folklore is transmitted and interpreted. This requires a long-term commitment to the continual study of new media, but the reality is that a lag time exists between a current event and the publication of a scholarly work. Even the “new” collected materials from this study will be quickly outdated as new forms and behaviors emerge online and through new media outlets. Furthermore, it is difficult to categorize or predict the exact methods by which an individual will communicate with others following a media disaster.

Methodologically, throughout this work I examine vernacular expression and the humorous discourse online as users encounter them: in various blogs, discussion forums, chat rooms, artistic sites and message boards. I collect and report data collected on formal news sites

(like newsweek.com or cnn.com) and commercial/ entertainment/ satire sites (such as tmz.com, theonion.com, and ebaumsworld.com), as well as individually moderated or locally conceived online venues and visual-oriented sites of expression such as YouTube.com. In doing so, I look back specifically to potent moments in time surrounding tragedies and cultural scenes in an effort to explain the patterns of humor diffusion, the folk responses to the appropriateness of the humor's content, and how joke construction and content varied between the physical and digital worlds. I distinguish whether the websites are *static* (stable or unchanging in their display of content, such as in a list or group of information that act like an archive) or *dynamic* (ever-changing and malleable; soliciting participation, reception, and responses in real-time). Although dynamic sites may ultimately become static after their relevancy has waned, the identification of contextual, Internet-based humor is crucial to accurately reporting and interpreting data on its dissemination and meaning (Laineste 2003).

While patterns regarding the *content* of humorous narratives are distinguishable over time, the *means* of communicating vernacular expression are in a state of constant flux. Technological ingenuity, coupled with the eager consumption and demand for increasingly complex devices that afford seamless connectivity to the Internet, complicates the definitive summation of the tools utilized by online participants. This is an impossible hurdle to overcome, but I nevertheless present my data in an effort to showcase the trajectory of folklore in the Digital Age with the hopes that such reportage will help future scholars to better contextualize their data and synthesize their approaches while simultaneously chronicling and interpreting the overarching components of popular culture.

In case it was not abundantly clear, my academic background is in folklore and American Studies. I interpret cultural patterns and expressive behaviors through this lens, and more

specifically from an Americanist perspective. This is my announced bias, and though I strive to be objective, my interpretations are informed by this intellectual purview. Unapologetically, this dissertation emphasizes the relevancy of mass-mediated disasters from an Americanist perspective. It is my hope that this work demonstrates one of the innumerable possibilities for future scholarship that is capable of juxtaposing the study of American culture and society in a productive dialogue regarding issues of mutual concern on the global stage. While I focus primarily on the responses to media events from within the borders of the United States and derive my observations from predominantly American informants, I believe that my methods and general observations on the contemporary patterns of vernacular expression online may be expanded upon in cross-cultural perspectives (see Ellis 2003). It bears noting that the United States ranks only behind China as the country with the most Internet users and boasts a 77.3% penetration rate among its citizens (Internet World Stats: <http://www.internetworldstats.com/top20.htm>; accessed 28 October 2010).

Following the introduction, *Posthum(or)ous* begins with chapter 2, “Searching for Connections,” in which I discuss the ways that new media now competes with other mediums to elicit folk responses and the historical contexts that facilitate contemporary traditions. In an effort to document the analog precedents regarding the folk responses to media disasters, and in order to provide the historical context about the folk responses to tragedy, I next examine media disasters in their analog, “real-world” contexts from local, regional, and national perspectives in chapter 3, “The Evolution of Humor and Mass-Mediated Disasters in the Twentieth and Early Twenty-First Century.” I begin by profiling the humor, narratives, and mediated responses from a variety of media disasters that occurred before the Internet was a popular mode of communication, namely the near-catastrophic accident at the Three Mile Island (TMI) nuclear

plant near Harrisburg, Pennsylvania in 1979, and the Challenger space shuttle disaster. By revisiting these early examples of media-influenced folk humor, I aim to illustrate the historical precedence for which contemporary vernacular expression is derived. I map out the chronology of Web-based humor forms and traditions and how they have evolved since their debut in the text and frame laden interface of the Web 1.0 era. I then showcase the evolution of vernacular expression to mediated stimuli by first exploring the most-documented media disaster which garnered folk responses on the Internet: the terrorist attacks of September 11th.

A mass-mediated disaster does not necessarily have to include a grandiose tragedy in order to trigger the psychological response patterns observed in the wake of large-scale disasters. In fact, any continuously reported, oversaturated news story that mirrors the same feelings of heightened anxiety and inescapability that often accompany the media coverage of a domestic tragedy can spark the same kinds of creative reactions that a massacre or natural disaster may elicit in contemporary folk culture, especially when the news event is perceived as shocking or disconcerting—even if the actual story is unrelated to a large-scale event.

To this end, chapter 4, “‘Intimate Strangers’: The Folk Response to Celebrity Death and Falls from Grace” documents contemporary examples of the folk response to media disasters on the World Wide Web through the lens of celebrity culture. While celebrities and the folk response to tragedy may not appear to be related on the surface, this chapter contemplates how individuals create imaginary pseudo-relationships with celebrities in order to simulate greater connectivity with the surrounding world while soothing their own feelings of disconnectedness from their peers. I argue that the psychological function of such practices is analogous to the cognitive dissonance that people often experience during and after a traumatic event takes place (usually while attempting to soften the impact of the harrowing reality that surrounds them). The

documentation of these patterns serves to fortify this dissertation's argumentation regarding the psychological need to create humor in the face of psychological stress.

Celebrities are humanized through joking (see Barrick 1982), and so I use them as a thematic reference point which reveals the ways people vocalize their opinions through the Internet. In transitioning from a broader review of celebrity culture, I divert my analysis toward two specific folk response patterns and repertoires that surfaced in reaction to the erosion of support for once-revered celebrities such as golf pro Tiger Woods and music icon Michael Jackson. In many ways, the humorous narratives that surfaced in the wake of these celebrities' falls from grace helped to draw the dividing lines of taste and set the stage for a contentious, rhetorical battleground of vernacular expression in cyberspace. In chapter 5, "From Sports Hero to Super Villain," I interpret the meaning and function of humor created in response to news reportage on the graphic details about the extramarital exploits of golf pro Tiger Woods and the impact of his actions on his public persona. I conclude my analysis of celebrity humor and culture online with chapter 6, "Michael Jackson and the Humor of Death," in which I analyze the folk response to the King of Pop's death in the days and months following its announcement, and hypothesize as to how the posthumous parodies aimed at Jackson were influenced by the contextual events in popular culture that happened to occur around the same time that he passed away.

Having interpreted several specific humor cycles on the Internet, I conclude this dissertation with chapter 7 by discussing the notion of the Internet as a *cyberspace*. I discuss what kind of place it is, particularly to American users who engage in humor and other folkloric practices, and how the folk conceptualization of such meaningful, digitized convergence seemingly contributes to a simulative, "open" frontier for which different vernacular and corporate forces compete to dominate. In answering these questions, I summarize the larger points made throughout the dissertation

regarding the importance of studying vernacular expression in cyberspace and its applicability in the study of contemporary folk cultures. Additionally, I suggest new avenues for future studies and reiterate the importance of understanding humor as a part of the folk process and the larger expressive behaviors at-work.

I am aware that I may be susceptible to criticism for focusing my research on a subversive topic such as death humor in cyberspace due to its controversial materials. While my research explores some taboo areas of folklore in contemporary society, I have taken great care to faithfully represent the various ways that people respond to media disasters in the digital world. As a result, the data is not always classy or politically correct, but it is nevertheless accurate and representative of emergent trends in vernacular expression. Some of the humor and narratives that I analyze are irreverent or just plain mean; others are sad, shocking, or bittersweet.

The title for this dissertation, *Posthum(or)ous*, is more than a simple play on words. Although the title does connote this work's focus on the intersection of death and humor, it also contains reference to the most recognizable means of communicating humor online: through *posting* on a message board or forum. Engaging in participatory culture, either directly or through "lurking," is one of the most viable ways to make one's voice heard online today. At the end of the day, whether you are a digital native or digital immigrant, my interpretation and analysis of contemporary vernacular expression demonstrates the new ways that people interact with Internet technologies.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Writer and humorist Robert Benchley once quipped that “defining and analyzing humor is a pastime of humorless people.” While the study of disaster may not be the most cheery subject on the surface, this project has been a labor of sheer happiness. However, between the many hours of solitude that I spent in the dark corners of libraries or sifting through endless scholarly articles at the office, there were many people donated who their time, energy, and kindness to me in the process of completing this dissertation. I am honored to count them as friends.

First and foremost, my wife and soul mate, Angelina, has been a constant source of love, happiness, and humor since we met, and I am so grateful to have her as my partner and pillar of support. Her unwavering enthusiasm for my work—even after the many hours, days, and nights that I spent plugging away at it in an empty, lonely corner of our home—has been a welcome and wonderful reprieve from the grind. My parents, Bruce and Anita, my sister, Natalie, and my fantastic in-laws, Phil, Laura, and Christy Sanfilippo, have all been great (as usual) and have supported me and provided many days of pleasant distraction. Also, of course, my delightful Beagle/ Brittany mix, Penny, has always offered her affection whenever I felt frazzled.

I wish to thank and recognize my mentor, Simon J. Bronner—to whom this work is dedicated—whose guidance, patience, and generosity has been invaluable during the completion of this research. Simon has been instrumental in shaping the trajectory of my research interests, and I am thankful for his interest and commitment to deepening my understanding and appreciation for the study of American folklore and folklife. Above all, he has played a crucial role in my intellectual development and has shown great faith in my numerous projects, even those that fell within the outskirts of typical scholarly inquiry. I am grateful for his support, and

I know that any student would be lucky to call him a friend and mentor. I am also indebted to my dissertation committee members Michael Barton, Charles Kupfer, and Girish Subramanian for their service, dedication, and helpful suggestions throughout the completion of this project.

There is no doubt in my mind that this work could not have been successfully completed without the astute eye and rational opinions of several outstanding scholars who graciously donated their time in reviewing several early versions of chapters within this work. As such, I would like to extend a special thank you to my friends and colleagues Erika Brady, Rebekah Burchfield, Celia Cain, Jennifer Dutch, Elaine Eff, Craig Gill, Sandra Grady, Spencer Lincoln Green, Julia Kelso, Laurie Matheson, Judith McCulloh, Mark Miyake, and Leonard Primiano. I owe a special thank you to Elizabeth Tucker, who really went above and beyond in extending her time and generosity to both my project in both this endeavor as well as other scholarly pursuits. I am also grateful to Charley Camp, Patrick Clarke, Gary Alan Fine, Stephen Olbrys Gencarella, John Haddad, Lindsay Harlow, Robert Glenn Howard, Michael Owen Jones, Lynne S. McNeill, Montana Miller, Steve Stanzak, and Jeff Tolbert for their time and useful comments on early ideas and trajectories that have permeated this dissertation.

At the ripe old age of ten, I can recall promising myself that I would someday only pursue a career in a line of work that could make me truly happy. Nearly two decades later, I am so thankful and honored to have found such a calling in the study of folklore. Many of my students smile from ear to ear when I tell them about the work of folklorists, and it is a true privilege to be a member of this discipline. For this project, and for the many that preceded it (and those that will follow), I owe a debt of gratitude to the American Folklore Society and its constituents. The organization's enthusiastic support of my research at conferences and workshops has invaluable for the completion of this manuscript. The challenging and thought-

provoking conversations that took place during annual meetings and other allied events have been incredibly beneficial.

In some ways, many of the chapters for this dissertation were approached as “mini research projects,” and numerous colleagues are due thanks for their support and advice in the development of this work. Some case studies struck closer to the heart than others. I completed my Ph.D. at Penn State Harrisburg, which is located in Middletown, Pennsylvania—less than a few miles from Three Mile Island—and as such, a considerable amount of personal stake (both for my program and myself, as well as the people of the surrounding community) was invested in the respectful unpacking of Three Mile Island folklore, retrospectively. In researching and collecting information on the accident and the aftermath, I am indebted to the incredible staff at the Pennsylvania State University Harrisburg library, especially Heidi Abbey, Alan E. Mays, and Fay Youngmark, for their time, effort, and enthusiasm in helping me uncover and/or duplicate delicate artifacts stemming from the Three Mile Island accident. Folklorist Yvonne Milspaw was generous with her time and knowledge of Three Mile Island folklore and humor.

There are many good folks who have been a joy to know and work with before, during, and after the completion of this project whom I would like to recognize: Jennie Adams, John Alley, Cathy and Ronald Baker, Warren Belasco, Gabi Berlinger, Donald Allport Bird, Ian Brodie, Ella Dowell, Ellen Dwyer, Susan Eckelmann, Bill Ellis, Lisa Gabbert, Kurt Gegenhuber, Joseph Goodwin, Nicholas Gotwalt, Jonathan Gray, Fredara Hadley, John Heflin, Suzanne Godsby Ingalsbe, Alex Janevski, Pat Johnson, Merrill Kaplan, Jen Laherty, Zach Langley, Mark Layser, Justin Levy, Tim Lloyd, Joanne Magee, John H. McDowell, Jim McMahan, Carol McQuiggan, Jay Mechling, Amy Milligan, Selina Morales, Elliott Oring, Ed Orser, Susan Ortman, Jodine Perkins, David Puglia, Sheila Rohrer, Jared Rife, Katie Robinson, Kate

Schramm, Jim Seaver, Amanda Sikarskie, Moira Smith, Tok Thompson, Kristiana Willsey, and Adam Zolkover. Without them, this work would have been a much more lonesome task to complete.

Last, but certainly not least, I wish to also express my gratitude to Sheila Leary and the wonderful staff at the University of Wisconsin Press for their time and dedication to the continued development and successful completion of this manuscript. I am humbled to have been selected by the press to participate in the Folklore in a Multicultural World series and honored to present my findings under such auspices. It has been a tremendous privilege to work with them, and I am certain that the end result has greatly benefited from their guiding hand.

DEDICATION

This dissertation is dedicated to Simon J. Bronner—my friend, mentor, and advisor—for his unwavering enthusiasm and support of all of my academic endeavors. Without a doubt, he has been the most inspirational and influential individual that I have ever had the privilege to work with, and I am forever indebted to his kindness and generosity throughout my time at Penn State Harrisburg and beyond.

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

1.1. Cyberspace, Technology, and Mass Media in the Twenty-First Century

June 25th, 2009, began as a normal day. I was in Bloomington, Indiana, teaching an introductory folklore class (cleverly disguised as a sociology course) for the local community college. About an hour into our discussion, one of my students' phones began to vibrate loudly. I leveled him with a stern "teacher's glare" as he silenced his phone, but not even a minute later his phone vibrated again—and this time he checked it right in front of me. Before I had the chance to dropkick him for disrupting class, he raised his hand and sheepishly stammered, "I don't mean to interrupt... but I just got a text that Michael Jackson died." Audible gasps could be heard throughout the class, followed almost immediately by personal commentaries on the nature of the situation being disheartening, untimely, unfortunate, or—in some cases—quite humorous. Within seconds of the news first breaking, my classroom devolved into a late-night comedy forum: "They're gonna need a jackhammer to do the autopsy on his plastic ass," exclaimed one student. "I wonder if anyone will moonwalk past the casket for good luck," offered another.

Before even two minutes had passed from the initial interruption, something fascinating took place in my classroom: as if witnessing a virus spread, another student's phone vibrated. Then another. And then another. Within five minutes, all but one of my fifteen students' phones had vibrated and all of them reported receiving text messages that relayed that Michael Jackson had died. At that moment I realized that I was witnessing a unique moment of folkloric dissemination made possible by the Digital Age.

I suspended our class lesson and took to the Internet with my students to see if we could

be the first to report of Michael Jackson's passing on the folk-moderated digital encyclopedia, *Wikipedia*. However, by the time the page loaded we were surprised to find that a full, detailed article had already been posted with a userbox caveat noting that the article "refers to a person who has recently died. Some information, such as that pertaining to the circumstances of the person's death and surrounding events, may change as more facts become known."¹ A quick trip to Google thereafter with the search criteria "Michael Jackson" nearly froze the computer—it was later confirmed by researchers that the news of Jackson's passing had spread so quickly that the immense swell of participants seeking information on the Web had caused the infrastructure to slow to a crawl, nearly "breaking" the Internet and disrupting numerous websites and electronic media sites and services such as *Twitter* and Google News (Rawlinson and Hunt 2009).² As it turned out, June 25th, 2009, was a memorable day after all.

My experience and my students' experiences in the moments following the death of Michael Jackson exemplify contemporary American culture's high-tech, fast-paced behavioral response to salacious or tragic stories that hit the newsfeed. Today, people are perpetually connected to the digital format. Information constantly flows to users and there is never a break in coverage. From 24-hour news stations and Internet news sites to information collected from friends' *Twitter* updates and personal text-messages, a major news story never stays unnoticed or uncommented upon for long.

Sociologist David Riesman posited in his classic work, *The Lonely Crowd* (1950), that "American character" has shifted from being tradition-directed (guided by the predominant values and practices of previous generations) to inner-directed (guided by an "internal gyroscope" that promotes the individual to define their own set of values). Following the Industrial Revolution, an economically stable "middle class" emerged in America which caused

individuals to migrate toward an “other-directed” mentality guided by the need to meaningfully relate to (or distinguish oneself from) peers. While earlier generations were said to have been motivated by the need to produce and conserve scarce materials, the other-directed society was motivated by the need to consume as act of social participation. Material acquisitions and outward expressions of creativity symbolized the individuals’ connection with mass society.

Even though some traditions may no longer guide specific modes of social interaction, they nevertheless inform the ways that vernacular expression manifests itself in modern society. As older patterns of socialization fade, they inevitably reemerge in modified ways. Computer-mediated communication technologies provide users guided by tradition-, inner-, or other-directed personalities with a forum that can adapt to their individual needs for symbolic expression while providing a simulated sense of connectivity to the outside world. People inherently need to feel connected or united with others in some way—especially in times of social anxiety or forced emotional suppression—and the Internet and other new media technologies deeply fulfill these needs. At its best, this technology provides an expansive forum for humorous, combative, or intellectual communicative exchanges and other rhetoric that help participants to feel as though they are a part of something meaningful.

Communications scholar Marshall McLuhan (1964; 1967) famously suggested that there are perceptive differences between forms of “hot” media (that which demand viewers’ visual attention but do not require active participation, as with watching a movie) and “cool” media (that which requires audiences’ deeper, conscious participation, such as reading a book). The Internet combines “hot” and “cool” cognitive stimulation by juxtaposing the medium’s visuality with the highly interactive textual and artistic outlets, like with *YouTube* (which combines audio-visual stimuli with the ability to comment on posted material or other user comments). In oral

traditions of “tasteless” or “gross” humor before the Digital Age, the majority of jokesters were male adolescents (Bronner 1985; see also Blank 2010; Bronner 1995; Fine and Johnson 1980; Leary 1977; Oring 1992; Samuelson 1995; Smyth 1986); in work environments, technologically mediated folklore was often circulated anonymously but consumed by a diverse crowd (Barrick 1972; Dundes and Pagter 1978; Preston 1994). However, due to the Internet’s pseudonymous interface and widespread accessibility, such limitations are practically nonexistent today. The symbolic interactions between online participants are perceived by users as being more democratized and capable of circumventing corporate influence.³ Consequently, the online venue now serves as a key breeding ground for folkloric dissemination by providing greater accessibility for users to engage and circulate traditional expressive forms in newfangled ways.

But how and why does the Internet facilitate such vast digital symbolic interaction today? Moreover, how do folkloric texts differ from (or preserve) the ways in which individuals and their communities would respond to death, disaster, and scandal *before* the Digital Age? And what does all of this suggest about the function of folklore in times of peril? The context of the medium through which symbolic communication takes place is undoubtedly important, but the *behavioral* component of communication—the sub-texts of interactive rhetoric; the motivations behind a person’s willingness to engage an online community at 4 a.m. while their whole family sleeps; and the ways that symbolic interaction results in semiotic translations from one domain to another—reveal the most salient information about people and expressive tendencies today.

1.2. The Cultural Inventory as Storehouse for Folk Knowledge

In most of our social relationships, we have a choice of whom we associate with. We decide our preferences for the kinds of entertainment that we find pleasurable, just as we decide upon the educational or career trajectory that seems suitable for our goals in life. All of these

choices reflect our own intrinsic values, but also speak to our greater need for social interaction. We do this because it is human nature to desire connectivity with other people, to build relationships, and to contribute toward a valuable existence within society. In fact, the absence of such desire is often treated as a sign of psychological disruption. We are socially conditioned to accept or pursue these tasks as social beings. Our memories of these pursuits and our interactions that form as resulting constructs make up the master narratives of our lives. In short, we strive to cultivate a meaningful existence through symbolic positioning of our memories and management of social relationships, socioeconomic statuses, and our roles within our communities as markers of self-worth and measurement of accomplishment toward the goal of productivity. These markers for success are contextual and vary depending on individual experiences and/or community expectations, which are often steeped in a lineage of tradition that provides quiet stability.

In our everyday interactions, even those with strangers, we bring all of our social and contextual baggage with us for better or worse. Our word choices and pronunciations, our jokes, our ideas of good taste, our beliefs in appropriate displays of public affection, our political ideologies, our favorite songs, our expectations of how to treat one another or how to handle a disagreement—all of these preferences, expectations, and actions that they produce are a result of our experiences and the contextual, social influences that have been bestowed upon us. The individual's view of the world and how they fit into it is informed by their notion of the meaningful traditions to which they belong.

The values and expectations that we assign to a given entity or idea reflect the worldviews we have individually accumulated and nurturing throughout a lifetime's worth of symbolic interaction with peers, folk and popular culture, and the mass media (Vygotsky 1978;

see also Berger and Luckmann 1966, Dundes 1971). The subconscious acquisition of the cultural symbols and meanings, value determinations, and accumulated folk knowledge that constitutes our perception of the world accrues as we engage the surrounding world. When recalled from memory, these symbols, meanings, and events inform our *cultural inventory*, or the contextual frame of reference which consists of ideas, values, beliefs, and experiences (both personal and fabricated through symbolic interaction with a variety of mediums). It is a cognitive storehouse of knowledge that compartmentalizes memories and values assigned to the meaningful symbols in culture and society.

In practice, the cultural inventory serves as a psychological filter for interpreting communicative events; oftentimes it is shaped by the intersection of folk and popular culture, and consequently contains referential ties to film, television, or religion as a means to make sense of social situations and public personas. Much like browsing through a catalog, we attach values to images, motifs, themes, found in quasi-similar materials from folk and popular culture. When a news story of a child's frightful race down a steep mountain in an effort to escape the path of a large, tumbling boulder, we might instantly remember a scene from *Raiders of the Lost Ark* (1981) to provide some sense of connection or understanding to the story itself. As a result, we also manage to dilute the seriousness of the actual event's near-tragic conclusion via a neatly packaged play frame that relies on the fantastical, fictional symbol of reference to neutralize our instinctive emotional response. But what happens if we are not able to brush off the seriousness of a tragedy through using our cultural inventory? Or worse, what if the only images that we can invoke to forge a cognitive connection with an unfolding event are unsettling or gruesome? Can our knowledge of popular culture motifs or other symbolic imagery from the mass media actually *impede* our pursuit of tempering the stress of an unfolding disaster?

1.3. Humor, Disaster, and the Cognitive Organization of Mass-Mediated Folklore

Jim Morrison, legendary front man of the '60s rock group *The Doors* once said that “whoever controls the media, controls the mind.” Cynicism aside, there is some truth to the statement in that (generally speaking) the mass media’s coverage of disaster is greatly disproportionate to the amount of “straight news” stories that are reported (Singer and Endremy 1993; see also Barton 1998). When reportage of a crisis or tragedy becomes inescapable, a chain reaction of narrative dissemination invades the cognitive awareness of the majority of American citizens. The phenomenon of a “media disaster” (or mass-mediated disaster) takes place and invites media viewers to consume and reproduce sentiments about the event to others quickly (Ellis 2001). Informed citizens are expected to symbolically express their solidarity with those affected by the pending crisis through showing emotion, engaging in rhetorical exchange, or by donating time and money toward a resolution or comparable alleviatory effort. Such intense media coverage has spawned notable psychological repercussions such as “media disaster syndrome” (Wolfenstein and Kliman 1965) whereby viewers cannot escape the news story and thus are forced to cope through finding solace in symbolic interaction or connectivity with others.

Perhaps one of the most important yet underappreciated aspects of the Internet venue during tumultuous times is its *liminality*—an ambivalent state of existence that is neither physical nor truly intangible (V. Turner 1974; see also Jones, Zagacki, and Lewis 2007).⁴ Users on the Internet are “betwixt and between” modes of corporeality and intangibility by the very nature of the venue’s simulative interface. Thus, according to philosopher Jean Baudrillard (1995), what constitutes “reality” is only that which the individual cognitively perceives to be

real—a task that is becoming increasingly difficult due to the overreliance on the media for assigning symbols to replace concrete ideas and practices.⁵

The expressive forums found throughout the Internet foster a sense of belonging and connection to the outside world. Many online communities facilitate what Henry Jenkins has referred to as a *participatory culture*, or “a culture with relatively low barriers to artistic expression and civic engagement, strong support for creating and sharing creations, and some type of informal mentorship whereby experienced participants pass along knowledge to novices,” adding that these are places where “members also believe their contributions matter and feel some degree of social connection with one another (at the least, members care about others’ opinions of what they have created)” (Jenkins et al. 2009, xi; see also Howard 2008b; Jenkins 2006, 2008).

Media disasters can occur following a nationally televised tragedy (as with the Challenger space shuttle disaster), a terrorist attack (as was the case after 9/11), a natural disaster (after Hurricane Katrina), or even following the death of an internationally renowned celebrity, such as entertainers Elvis Presley or Michael Jackson (see Couldry, Hepp, and Kotz 2009). Significant social changes that are ongoing (as was the case with the Civil Rights and Women’s Liberation movements during the Vietnam era) are also quite capable of stirring a vibrant public discourse about issues that concern Americans. As media consumers reach critical mass they seek common ground with the surrounding world, often in rejection of the emotional hegemony of commercial media outlets.

What society takes most seriously—death—also leads ironically to the predominant theme of humor, and in the construction of humor about death, the role of the living is most frequently at issue. The paradox of life (namely that it must end) often informs the folk response

to disaster and tragedy (see Narváez 2003). As folklorist Willie Smyth articulates, jokes “may function to discharge the psychic energy connected with [death] by providing a channel through which the anxiety attached to a thought of a catastrophic event may be diverted” (1986, 254). Thus, in the wake of an emotionally traumatic event the combination of the two opposing themes helps to release anxieties about mortality by making a serious topic into a pleasurable one. Joking gives people the ability to withstand the stress of tragic events while enabling mass culture to resist the constraints of the emotional control imposed by the media following a tragedy. Humorous expression and other symbolic rhetoric often surfaces in order to alleviate the tensions which may arise from the social anxieties at hand. But why else does this happen?

Christie Davies suggests that the “driving force behind the popularity of disaster jokes is the emotional hegemony [or total dominance over a medium] enjoyed by those controlling television, who feel able to tell viewers what to feel” (2003, 26). Viewers deliberately take to the Internet in direct opposition to the sentiments conveyed through traditional telecommunicated media outlets in an effort to express their anxieties and to alleviate the stresses conjured up by media oversaturation through the use of humor and narrative transmission. To this end, the increased institutionalization of the grieving process becomes inexorably linked with the folk resentment over the ways in which we learn about “bad news” (Ellis 2001, 3; see also Oring 1987, Simons 1986).

More than most psychological defense mechanisms jokes require a delicate balance between the sensibilities of the audience and the joke-teller (Fine 1988, 177). Folklorist Moira Smith notes that “those who tell a joke must balance the potential benefits they stand to reap by provoking mirth with the social risk of telling an unfunny or sick joke” (1990, 96). Joke-telling involves the calculated risk of performing humor litigiously in an effort to yield positive

feedback. The level of success often corresponds to the proximity of the audience to the subject of ridicule. But as with the earlier technologically mediated communication devices from the paperwork empire, the purveyors of folkloric expression on the Internet are also often anonymously authored. Similarly, online discourse encourages the circulation of bawdy humor unhindered by the coded expectations of social decorum.

In addition to regular joke-tellers, hatemongering entities have at times organized online under the guise of cleverly devised web sites that espouse racist and xenophobic humorous and inflammatory rhetoric (see Blank 2009c). But more generally, ethnic jokes that were once taciturnly shared in the analog world now appear on numerous formal joke sites, not to mention the comments section of “regular” websites that do not even seek out such dialogue.

The transposition of jokes from older joke contexts (both in terms of origin, as well as the antecedent intention for its comedic effect) demonstrates the traditionality of hybridized folklore in the Digital Age. For example, the joke, “What do they call a [black person] with a Ph.D. in Mississippi?” (the answer: “Nigger”) first surfaced during the Civil Rights era in response to whites’ anxiety about ongoing social change (see Abrahams and Dundes 1969, 238; Dundes 1987a; Kennedy 2003, 29; Lewis 2006, 117; Oring 1992, 18). However, through repetition and variation, this joke resurfaced online in slightly revised iterations after Harvard professor Henry Louis Gates, an African-American, was arrested under the suspicion of burglary and disorderly conduct while unsuccessfully attempting to enter his own home in July 2009 (Thompson 2009).

Gates’ reputation as a respected scholar garnered media scrutiny to his arrest, but his accusations of racial profiling against the arresting officers of the Cambridge (Massachusetts) Police Department really got things rolling. The story of Gates’ arrest, coupled with the ongoing media attention paid to the relatively recent inauguration of the first black president, Barack

Obama, encouraged media pundits to ruminate about racial tensions in America and the current status of African-Americans within society. Thus, the motivation informing the original joke—to alleviate white anxiety over black empowerment through derogatory humor—was updated to accommodate new and resurfacing anxieties about race and the sympathetic treatment of minorities in the media.

The reintegration of analog folklore into the digital medium is a frequent occurrence in contemporary society. The traditions of older materials find new value in the present and are thereupon adopted as a hybridized entity. But more germane to this dissertation is the fact that all of the folkloric expressions that materialize after a tragedy provide some sort of pleasure or relief for those who engage in their dissemination or collection. After all, when the threat of death, harm, or loss looms, people instinctively seek out psychological outlets to affirm that they are not alone in their distress, and to find ways to cope with the mounting pressures that surround them. New media technology helps to calm such pressures.

By closely following a significant disaster or world event, media consumers establish a sense of stability from their newfound awareness, which they then use to anticipate or rationalize the causational anxieties which may surface in times of peril. However, when analog news operations fall short of providing such comfort through their broadcasts (or conversely, when they devote *too* much time to a single news story and flood their programs with recycled facts that fail to advance the current state of knowledge), people individually seek out information through the use of technology in an attempt to make sense of the world as it changes—on their own terms.

Prior to the Internet's existence, most technologically mediated communicative receptions in mass society were passively disseminated; that is, they did not usually host

contemporaneous expressive interactions like instant messaging or texting, but rather a sender and a receiver who need not directly communicate to convey a message. Despite this, the pervasiveness of television news and “live” reporting promoted a sense of simultaneity for viewers who were symbolically connecting to the events unfolding on the screen. Thus, the burgeoning Internet’s most profound feature was its tremendous interactive content and the implicit idea that every person could be his or her own broadcaster. Rather expectedly, then, the interactivity of the online medium can become a powerful, personalized instrument of expression; almost anyone can assume the role of an amateur journalist or pundit. Participants’ rhetorical investment in shaping the narrative of an ongoing news event inculcates a semblance of communal unity and connectivity amid an uncertain aftermath. The perpetual and ubiquitous availability of the Internet is a cultural “night light”—comforting those who seek the calming glow of its companionship in times of darkness and confusion.

The Internet propels the diffusion of humor about tragedies to many people who would not have been included in previous years. Disaster becomes immediate and accelerates rather than defuses the psychological need to create humor. In the absence of the social cues or communal approval that is customary to the physical realm, one must go to greater lengths to symbolically show their solidarity with their digital comrades, especially after a news event penetrates the fabric of an online community’s perceived reach.

Disasters also provide a great case study of “folk process” because of the commentary and often ritualized elaboration (whether in mourning or humor) that they elicit. When mass-mediated disasters appear, people use the Internet and other new media devices in order to not only acquire new information on the situation at-hand, but also to release their psychological angst and forge a symbolic unity through simulated interactivity online. Folklore is a vehicle for

expression, and it lends itself to the ensuing discourse following an accident or disaster because community generated humor, rumors, narratives, and other symbolic creations are used in the response to a perceived crises. These symbolic, often humorous interactions—which are influenced by information and observed behaviors derived from the individual’s absorption of folk and popular culture—reflexively project the nuances of human behavior in the response to social anxiety (see Correll 1997).

The response to disaster also provides credence to the theory that folklore serves as a means of escape, validation, education, and social control, with the goal of stabilizing society (Bascom 1954; see also Oring 1976). The transmission of folklore—traditional knowledge, beliefs, and customs—is no longer limited to vertical knowledge hierarchies which require a “handing down” or “handing up” of information through oral tradition or literature in order for information to pass. The remote and disembodied nature of cyberspace encourages and expects a democratic, *horizontal* diffusion of folk culture in which all participants are capable of forging a unique niche within their respective communities. Thus, folklore on the Internet reveals keen insights into the cultural ramifications of the Digital Age.

1.4. Perceptions of Folk Culture and Technology in the Digital Age

Alan Dundes made scholarly waves in 1977 by declaring that “technology isn’t stamping out folklore; rather it is becoming a vital factor in the transmission of folklore” (1980, 17) and challenged folklorists to explore content that existed outside of orality. Nevertheless, critics such as Susan Behuniak-Long raised the question as to “whether technology, in eliminating the traditional way of doing things, fails to fully replicate all the social functions of the previous method” (1994, 152). Some folklorists worried that technology would only impede the dissemination of “true” folkloric content, while others vocalized their doubts that the Internet-

derived expression even follows a folkloric process to begin with (see Dorst 1990). For example, in analyzing Internet-based humor, Elliott Oring comments that

A Web site for humor is not like the oral repertoire of an individual or group. Oral tradition operates editorially. Those jokes that do not meet the standards of an individual or group tend to be transformed or eliminated from the repertoire. The site may be managed for quantity rather than quality. It is an accumulation that may not reflect the aesthetics or ideology of any individual or group. Consequently, anything that might qualify as... humor might be posted at the site (2003, 139).

Oring presumes an analog definition of folkloric creation in oral transmission, but the aggregation of material—what Simon Bronner (2009) describes as the analytic or digital definition of folklore in repetition and variation—provides an important cultural practice in everyday life. Furthermore, as Kirshenblatt-Gimblett notes: “the very technologies that threaten to displace oral traditions are also the instruments for preserving them” (1995, 70).

Of course, the fear of cultural displacement via mass culture is nothing new (see Levine 1988, 8). Pundits predicted that radio technology would destroy traditions,⁶ but the medium instead helped reinforce some dynamics of storytelling and introduced listeners to folk music. Let us not forget that the government’s decision to begin regulating radio broadcasting in 1912 spurred the creation of “underground radio” stations that illegally broadcast their own “pirate” signal (see J. Walker 2004). The introduction of the television only added further speculation that broadcast technology would spell doom for folk culture.

Writing in 1961, historian Daniel Boorstin lamented that American society had “witnessed the decline of the ‘folk’ and the rise of the ‘mass’,” adding that “While the folk

created heroes, the mass could only look and listen for them...The folk had a universe of its own creation...The mass lives in a very different fantasy world” (56). Countering this view is a theory that mass culture *uses* folk culture, and “folk culture mutates in a world of technology” (Kirshenblatt-Gimblett 1998, 307). Regardless, many contemporary folklorists have largely ignored the folkloric patterns of expression online until recently (Blank 2009b; Foote 2007; Frank 2011). More work is needed.

While the early days of the Internet were used primarily by academics, computer geeks, and the military for communication and information sharing, the participants’ demographics are now usually unknown without additional context or clues provided by the individual themselves. As such, one might argue that the identification of “folkness” via a technological medium (such as the Internet) is presumptuous, or worse, inherently “non-folk” since it requires some technical prowess with computer-mediated communication in order to be engaged. However, there is an inborn “folk” presence in cyberspace by virtue of the fact that people are behind every symbolic interaction that takes place online and through new media technology. The technology is merely a conduit for expression—even if folklore scholars have been slow to fully acknowledge this.

The tremendous influence of the Internet and other new media technology on information dissemination should not be deterred by the preposterous argument that the online medium is supposed inaccessible to members of the lower stratum of society. As Linda Dégh writes: “mass media liberated folklore from its earlier confinement to the so-called lower layers of society and from the prejudice... that stigmatized it” (1994, 2). The Internet is *not* an elite medium. Beyond the home or work environment, it is readily available at schools, public libraries—even a tradition-centered folk group such as the Amish use the Internet to communicate occasionally through email and listserv!⁷

To be sure, early Internet users in America were predominantly white and middle-class, but this is no longer the case. In fact, current demographic data about Internet usage suggests that the medium is attracting an increasingly diverse group of individuals to participate, which seems to indicate the presence of a more-accurate projection of dominant contemporary motifs and ideals in American culture: 79% of adult men and women in the United States are regular Internet users. From a racial demographic perspective, 80% of white adults, 71% of black adults, and 82% of Hispanic adults use the Internet. 95% of people age 18-29, 87% of those 30-49, 78% of those 50-64, and 42% of those over 65 use the Internet. Families with a household income of under \$30,000 yield a 64% Internet participation rate; \$30,000-\$49,999, 84%; \$50,000-\$74,999, 89%; and households with over \$75,000 income have a 95% participation rate.⁸ These percentages have risen dramatically since such data was regularly collected beginning in 1995, and call attention to the penetration of new media technology into the social lives of the majority of Americans, rich and poor; young and old; male and female; black, white, and Hispanic. The Internet is used for utilities by adults but can be an instrument of play for children and adults alike, although more youth use it for play and social networking (see Tucker 2008). Even if the online medium appears to be dominated by a youthful culture, it is still being utilized by people from all walks of life in America.⁹

Considering that the Digital Age's accessibility and interactivity now prohibit most stories, jokes, or regional behaviors from remaining exclusive to their emic contexts, it is essential that we examine the new ways that people respond to media disasters in contemporary society and contemplate how cyberspace has become the go-to format for vernacular expression. Today, Americans are raised to seek and sustain intimacy with others through the use of computer-mediated communication. Social networking, texting, and online games are now

among the most prevalent means of developing interpersonal communication skills and maintaining relationships with peers. Friends and family stay in touch with each other throughout the day by sending 144-character messages, or share pictures and stories about their recent activities on *Facebook* or *Twitter*. As a result of this pervasive telegraphic connectivity with others, we are becoming gradually more addicted to the convenient accessibility of satisfying content and the opportunities for expressive exchange.

As of 2010, the average person now spends up to thirty-one hours per week on the Internet; six out of every ten people get the news digitally every day, and at least one-third of Internet users post an update about their status or personal goings-on at least once a week through a social networking medium such as *Facebook* or *Twitter* (Lardinois 2010; Rainie and Purcell 2010). This again suggests that one's physical detachment from their analog communities is being supplanted by a greater psychological attachment to others through the digital format, but questions remain. But what are the cultural and psychological implications of such immense connectivity when extrapolated to the never-ending onslaught of information dissemination and retrieval that occurs in contemporary American culture? And what does it mean when these channels are tapped in the response to a crisis or unsavory news?

The Digital Age has made the neighborhood playground of old into a limitless, virtual one. Regardless of the new location, the social desire to connect with other like-minded individuals remains palpable. Be that as it may, it is imperative to understand how such a self-regulatory expressive venue manages and influences the humorous folk responses to stories of death, disaster, or scandal. New media technology will only become more sophisticated in coming years. Documenting how these technologies impact human behavior is vital for fully recording and contextualizing the ways that people take part in a digitized, global society over

time.

Without question, technology has fundamentally altered the ways in which people express themselves, as well as the ways that people negotiate the presentation of their identities in contemporary society (see Gray 2009). The study of how people respond to tragedy with humor *now*, in the Digital Age—with all of its methodological constraints and benefits, the complex questions that it inspires about how we express ourselves in contemporary society, and the convergent behaviors that hybridize the very displays of community and identity that folklorists have examined for decades—has immediate value and currency in the study of human communication. This dissertation challenges the conventional wisdom regarding the scholastic validity of cyberethnography and the data it yields, but more importantly brings much-needed attention to the study of folklore and the Internet with the hopes of opening the door to larger, contextual works that have yet to be penned.

If we collectively interpret the interactive contexts that encourage users' symbolic interactions online, our understanding of expressive culture just may be enlightened to a greater degree. In the end, my greatest hope for the research herein is its future potential as a record of a salient moment in American culture and society.

CHAPTER 2

SEARCHING FOR CONNECTIONS: HOW AND WHY WE USE NEW MEDIA FOR VERNACULAR EXPRESSION

For the first few years of my life I struggled to contort my lips into the shapes that would allow me to pronounce the official name for one of the first “toys” that I came to know and understand as a human being. Despite my developmental limitations, I would point to the bulky machine in my father’s office while repeatedly uttering one of the first words that came from my mouth, “ahkaboo.” While I have no actual memory of doing such things, I have seen the home videos from my childhood where I—a shaggy-haired little boy in a Michael Jackson tee shirt and red corduroy pants—points at the whirling lights, looking back at the camera with a cheesy grin, enamored by the glowing green phosphorous on the screen towering above my head and fascinated with the screeching sounds coming from an old dot-matrix printer. My parents came to realize that my pointing and repetition of “ahkaboo” was an infantile attempt at saying “computer.”

As a digital native, to use Prensky’s term, I do not need to actually remember these events to know that computers have always been an integral part of my education, socialization, and development. Over time, my simple “ahkaboo” machine grew in importance—for information dissemination, mail, news, and work. It became an appliance every bit as important in my world as the refrigerator or television. Computer technology has profoundly influenced the ways that the world conducts its personal and commercial business. Digital natives and immigrants alike have become accustomed to the instantaneity and limitless barriers surrounding entertainment that is currently available at their fingertips.

Indubitably, the road to creating the modern day Internet technology we know today began long before I was born. However, before we can fully understand the influence of mass media on vernacular expression in the Digital Age, it is necessary to first broach upon the historical contexts from which contemporary computer-mediated communications have emerged as they influence and inform the folk response to death, disaster, and scandal. Doing so helps to ascertain technology's influence on the ways that people now attempt to acquire knowledge and emotional connectivity with others—especially in times of social anxiety.

2.1. Technology and the Transmission of Knowledge

The twenty-first century cultural phenomenon of unimpeded connectivity and the constant barrage of information dissemination is arguably unique. Nevertheless, the expressive forms that emerge in response to information retrieval have distinguishable roots in the past. Before the Internet and new media changed the ways that society conceptualized boundaries of community, human connectivity, and knowledge, television and radio complicated the ways that people retrieved news and information by asserting hegemonic control over the emotionality of the news. Before that, newspapers and other print media reigned supreme in juxtaposition with the dissemination and acquisition of knowledge through oral tradition. But even these technologies owe their power to technological innovation throughout history.

In the grandest sense of the word, Johannes Gutenberg's introduction of the modern printing press in 1439 revolutionized the way that information and knowledge was subsequently shared and passed through textual replication. By the late fifteenth century, early news sheets (or broadsides) were surfacing in Germany, and more books were entering the marketplace throughout the major cities of Europe. In colonial America, British rulers were suppressing early efforts to create a widely read news publication. However, by the eve of the Revolutionary War

several newspapers (**Fig. 1**) were able to garner support for independence (see Emery 1978). Indeed, the freedom of the press was a major component of the United States' Bill of Rights (ratified in 1791), and the medium's use as a purveyor of news, opinion, and symbolism made it a vital institution in the development of early American ideology.

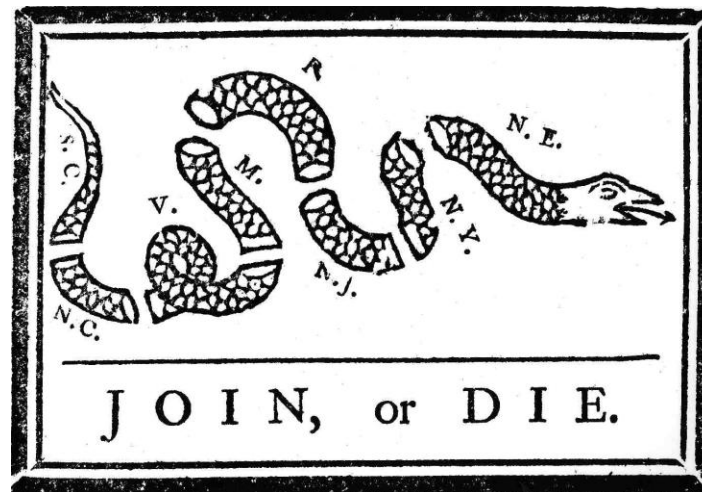


Figure 1: Benjamin Franklin's "Join, or Die" Political Cartoon, calling for colonial unity against British rule.

In the years to follow, American technological progress boomed in step with westward expansion during the Jacksonian Age. In addition to the tremendous increase in modes of transportation—namely the transcontinental railroad—as well as better roads and water passages, the invention of the steam-powered rotary press and the introduction of the electric telegraph significantly improved and empowered communication technology. Domestic and global communication became a reality. Interchangeable, standardized parts, or the “American system of manufactures,” influenced the development of machine technology such as the sewing machine and other mechanized tools by intentionally designing them to be capable of using parts that could be swapped in or out, which made any repairs or modifications to a machine significantly cheaper. This also hastened the advancement of communication technologies that were dependent on intricate, cooperative mechanics in order to operate efficiently (Hounsell

1984).¹⁰ Most importantly, the growing association of information technology with the promotion of popular freedom held mass appeal (see Barth 1982; Boorstin 1974).

With technological progress came greater accessibility to information for many Americans, especially those who lived in urban centers. Newspapers had to distinguish themselves as reliable and entertaining in order to remain of interest to potential readers. Certainly, the attraction to salacious news stories and glamorized narratives found in today's mass-mediated society is a cultural reverberation of the sensationalist reporting tactics utilized by competing newspaper and magazine publishers, dime novelists, and "trash literature" which popularly circulated beginning in the 1830s and '40s (see Goetzmann 2009). Perhaps most famously, William Randolph Hearst and Joseph Pulitzer's printing of so-called "yellow journalism" raised the stakes of news stories by blurring the boundaries of fact and sensationalism through dramatic prose that incited hostility toward Spain (prior to the Spanish-American War) with stories of their colonial atrocities (Peceny 1997). Indeed, Hearst and Pulitzer's approaches—rooted in storytelling and the pleasure derived from the intelligent unpacking of a representative narrative—had a lasting impact on reporting and the organization of media events in the press during this era (Campbell 2003, 2006; Whyte 2009).

Before World War I, American news stories were written and presented in a way that could be described as "emotional," and often included gory details with strong attention to the narrative element of a news story instead of just delivering the facts (see Barton 1998). The newspapers of the late nineteenth century (and later the radio broadcasts of the early to mid-twentieth century) resembled our modern day op-ed column in that they sought to engage larger issues through a representative, symbolic conduit. They were meant to represent the voice of the folk by using rhetoric as an emotional connecting point which linked readers to a shared

ideological community. It was not until after the war that newspapers became more corporatized and predominantly moved toward the reportage of “straight news” stories that practiced restraint in sharing the unsavory nuances of a story. Emotionality and sensationalism was left to the burgeoning radio and television mediums.

By the mid-twentieth century, television broadcasting supplanted the newspaper as the predominant means of information retrieval and entertainment in American culture. With the television medium came a new opportunity for emotional solicitation and influence that was more visual and palpable than ever before. Before the Vietnam War, disaster events that reached national audiences via the media caused feelings of detached horror, such as the Hindenburg disaster, the bombing of Pearl Harbor, or the assassination of John F. Kennedy. In the case of the Kennedy assassination, television news coverage sparked conspiracy theories and brought the reality and finality of death to the fore through an overflow of narrative accounts and journalistic storytelling angles (see Yarbrough 1998).

Burgeoning technology of the twentieth century complicated collections and their interpretation. As historian Warren Susman notes, American history “increasingly had to confront the changing forms in which experience was expressed—often rapid change because of technological innovation” (1984, 234). Newer expressive mediums were emerging by the turn of the twentieth century that would take the place of the once-sensationalist newspapers. Newscasts and dramatizations were on the radio, moving images and newsreels entertained Americans at the movie theater, and the introduction of the television additionally contributed to the visual ways in which information was being disseminated, consumed, and subsequently converted into their expressive projections of nascent cultural values. The visuality of the television medium, in

particular, can be credited with influencing the dynamics of computer-mediated communications and current expectations of information accessibility.

The emotionality of the folk response to disasters that was once represented in the prose of the newspaper medium is now a staple of the communicative exchanges that take place on the Internet (see Bird 1976). In the past, newspapers would often contain performative rhetoric that encouraged the spread of rumors, legends, and other “unbelievable” tales of gruesomeness. This was particularly true of shocking news stories, such as reports about the exploits of serial killers Jeffrey Dahmer (Tithecott 1997) and Ed Gein (Mitchell 1979); or even the supposedly celebratory reactions by a group of Michigianian Arabs after 9/11 (Langlois 2005). Then, as they do now, folk beliefs about the news stories themselves, as well as the ways that they were reported, made their way into coinciding folkloric texts (see Fine 1992; Fine and Ellis 2010). The major difference is that the digital reportage of the news has supplanted print media as the greatest source of information available for acquisition.

Taking a journalistic viewpoint on the production of humor and folklore in response to media-reported tragedies, folklorist Russell Frank notes that humorous narratives stemming from viewers’ observations about the news “may be a response to how that story is told... as much as it is a response to the occurrence itself” (2004, 639; see also Brunvand 2001). However, unlike the newspaper and radio outlets that aimed to speak on the people’s behalf, new media technology now affords people the opportunity to speak back—and for themselves.

The very nature of folklore is predicated on the amalgamation of traditional knowledge through imitation, variation, and innovation. The widespread acceptance of the Internet as a communicative tool has only further demonstrated the behavioral hybridization of analog and digital folk processes. Such a merger supports the notion of a “folk” web, but more importantly

demonstrates how analog and digital hybridization shows agency by users instead of passive consumption.

2.2. The Hybridization of Analog and Digital Expressive Behaviors

Communications guru Howard Rheingold proclaims that the “most profoundly transformative potential of connecting human social proclivities to the efficiency of information technology is the chance to do new things together, the potential for cooperating on scales and in ways never before possible” (2003, 114). The Internet medium’s amalgamation of analog and digital culture in an imagined space underscores the heterogeneous nature of computer-mediated communications. Numerous people adopt pseudo-identities on the Internet in order to explore fantasies, to protect their reputations in the physical world, or even to enter a state of play with their identity (see Aldred 2010; Booth 2008).

A website or online community where both parties willingly enter may serve as an assumed common ground, though not always.¹¹ More importantly, the connections made online are seen as real and more immediate, and the residual impact of the human desire to connect quickly coalesces around blogs and virtual communities—hardening the influence of symbolic behavior—in ways that the physical world cannot similarly construct without more time to ferment. Essentially, the blurring of public and private spheres online help to speed along the process of acquiring trust and camaraderie with other people and to circumvent the physical world’s usual reluctance to delve into private matters with unfamiliar public audiences.

The interpretation of expressive interactions—both by the recipient and the outside observer—are filtered by the contextual differences between the mediums; this ultimately results in behavioral overlap that is a hybridization of analog and digital forms. Folklorist and communications scholar Robert Glenn Howard defines *hybrid* as an “analytic term referring to a

cultural form, expressive behavior, or identity that exhibits features thought to originate from two or more distinct realms” (Howard 2010; see also Kapchan 1993; Kapchan and Strong 1999).

But what is its social function in the context of the Digital Age? According to anthropologist Brian Stross, hybridization occurs in order to

fulfill environmentally sanctioned functions, to fill contextual needs, or to take advantage of opportunities created by new situations. If the environment changes... humans seem to devise new forms and formats... with new parameters, new needs, and new opportunities. The hybrid forms that fill new niches in the environment are usually designed, and certainly selected for or against on the basis of their exhibited characteristics, which are usually advantageous over, in this sense superior to, characteristics of either “parent” (1999, 261).

In other words, hybridization helps people to “catch up” and adapt to the progressing culture by merging the old and familiar with the emergent capabilities of a new medium. An air of authority is attached to hybridized interactions, which also instills a sense of empowerment linked to the notion that hybridization breeds a stronger, superior relationship to (and representation of) expressive behavior than a non-hybridized version (see Howard 2008b).¹²

Social engagement online remains analogous to the dynamics of a neighborhood in the physical world. When participating in a virtual community, the same rules from users’ analog lives typically apply when interacting with their digital neighbors—participants seek to cultivate their imagined space and treat it as if it were their own lawn. Like any folk architecture that is built in the physical world, amateur website-builders must also utilize cues from their surroundings and imitate the patterns that they see in order to find a peaceable dwelling for their

simulated residency online. Like a “real” neighborhood, a digital one may feature some occupants who get creative with their self-expression. Others may conform to contextually expected notions of presentation. Folk knowledge about web aesthetics becomes the user’s default frame of reference to begin their approach to self-presentation online. Those who use site-building templates are not all that different from someone who hires a construction team to build their dream house. And like analog residential properties, the owner of a website is expected to maintain their space or face reprimand or ridicule from the community as being outdated or ignorant. Either way, the motivations that influence aesthetic choices in analog and digital formats are essentially the same. The psychological pay-off is similar, with varying levels of exuberance depending on the individual’s preference for analog or digital interaction.¹³

Digital interactions usually model, then modify analog modes of expressive interaction. Ultimately, users’ success in adapting to the digital medium is reliant on their ability to transpose analog traditions into their digitized persona. Mass media is an outgrowth of modern industrialization, from broadcasting to broadband, and the way that we respond to disaster and tragedy is a reflection on the blending of folk and mass culture over time. While the Internet and mobile communications have not always existed, death and tragedy has accompanied civilization since the dawn of man. Grieving rituals, collective behavior, and the folk response to emotional stimuli has undergone evolution as contexts have changed. Death, it might be said, is no joke, but facing its actual seriousness through vernacular expression helps people to get by and go forward in their lives. Computer-mediated communication helps to provide such release.

2.3. The Normalization of Death in Popular Culture and Mass Media

Throughout American history, the cultural response to disaster or threats of harm has yielded a very strong march toward symbolic gestures that resonate as steps of dealing with the

issues at hand. This has taken place in the form of building bomb shelters during the Cold War, donating blood after 9/11, or the Department of Homeland Security's suggestion for homeowners to purchase duct tape in order to be capable of somehow sealing their dwellings from potential toxins out in the surrounding world should a hypothetical biological attack take place. There is a calming power in these symbolic actions because they project a sense of control over potentially grim or life-ending circumstances.

The over-reportage of shocking news is a hallmark of contemporary American mass media. Television networks pull no punches as they vie for prospective viewers' attention, and while some viewers vocalize discontent over the newscasts' emotional blitzkrieg, most clamor for the all-encompassing coverage in the wake of a grievous calamity or scandal (Wenger et al 1975, 1986). Instead of idly witnessing a news story unfold, motivated participants are now capable of directly influencing how information is disseminated, received, or even subsequently conceptualized by others. And before the newspaper even arrives at the doorstep or the commercial break ends on a news channel, techno-savvy media consumers can now exploit the vast retrieving capabilities of the Internet to find immediate answers for the many probing questions that may be generated in response to a crisis.

From natural disasters and terrorism to the death or falls from grace of a celebrity, new media technology is utilized in order to provide a forum for public discourse. Global participation in computer-mediated communication continues to grow in our techno-savvy world, and the gruesome realities of many worldwide disasters or disheartening stories are made easily accessible in graphic detail, often with overwhelming statistical, visual, and narrative accompaniment to digest. Naturally, the subject of death has become an increasingly acceptable topic for use in popular culture and casual conversation.

The Latin proverb “*Mors Certa, Vita Incerta*” translates to “death is certain, life is not.” This adage projects a worldview that emphasizes living life to the fullest while downplaying the seriousness of death. In this “spirit,” death is now used in the marketing of a commodity or even promoted as a positive, quirky thing. Some tasty desserts are named “death by chocolate” without reproach; a film like *Weekend at Bernie’s* (1989) is able to be appreciated for its camp value to mass audiences; earlier, the catchphrase “I ain’t afraid of no ghost” from Ray Parker, Jr.’s song on the *Ghostbusters* (1984) soundtrack, or Michael Jackson’s epic music video *Thriller* (1983) made deathly things something to sing about. Even today, the lead protagonist of the popular Showtime television series, *Dexter*, is a serial killer whom the audience cheers on instead of shuns. Video games like the *Grand Theft Auto* franchise glorify the opportunity to mercilessly beat and kill random people in urban environments (see Miller 2008). And yet playing these games or enjoying fictional shows that casually depict death or violence is not a warning sign of sociopathic tendencies, but rather an indicator of a mind at play. The same suspension of emotion and reasoning that is tapped while enjoying these activities is also used as a defense mechanism in times of peril (see Bryant 2003). Humor and other forms of vernacular expression serve as ammunition for the outward expression of creativity.

Death and tragedy conjure up a lot of different emotions for the most people. Analog precedents abound for the folk response to tragedy, but the burgeoning patterns of *online* behavior have been rapidly accumulating since the 1990s and especially following the terrorist attacks of September 11th, 2001. Without a doubt, avoiding the social and psychological impact of the unwavering graphicness of the news is nearly impossible. In essence, the Internet invites participation—especially following a traumatic event—because there are fewer outlets for psychological release or symbolic gesturing in the physical world due to greater opportunities for

self-entertainment via new media.

At first glance, the mockery of death through vernacular expression may appear to be a counterintuitive strategy for quelling internal anxiety following a tragic event. On the other hand, symbolic expression serves to make seemingly inappropriate topics of conversation into pleasurable ones—a major function of humorous expression.¹⁴ Engaging in the telling or enjoyment of death humor creates a rhetorical sense of defiance (and even denial) against the bonds of our inevitable mortality. And more importantly, the humorous responses, personal narratives, and material productions that emerge in the wake of disaster are engendered with answers about the ways that people respond to highly stressful situations through folklore. But what role has the media played in catalyzing this emergence of death into the anxiety-laden folkloric expressions that follow disasters today?

The aura of death was greatly diluted by the prolonged and incessantly graphic media coverage of the Vietnam War, which effectively neutered the emotional impact of death by desensitizing viewers to its occurrence (see Kears 1989, 385). Media coverage brought the tragedy of death into our living rooms in ways that the print reports of World War I or the newsreels of World War II could not. The disconnect between the images on the screen and the viewers at home created a mental buffer. A sense of cognitive delusion helped to facilitate a continued dissociation between the real finality of death and the individual's own perception of mortality. Accordingly, death themes became more widely adopted into mainstream folklore repertoires in order to mock or defuse the anxieties associated with its presence. This is not to say that death was wholly avoided in the public discourse before the Vietnam era; it was simply more acceptable to openly discuss or mock in subsequent years as a symptom of the media's chronicling of the war. This has been interpreted by some scholars who note the popularity of

the era's emergent "dead baby" jokes that coincided with the legalization of abortions in the United States (Dundes 1979), or the "Auschwitz" jokes that emerged following the airing of the popular 1978 television mini-series, *The Holocaust*, which dramatized the struggles of a Jewish family as they struggled to endure Nazi oppression and extermination (Dundes and Hauschild 1983; see also Barrick 1980; Dundes 1987a; Linke and Dundes 1988; Oring 1983).¹⁵

As a consequence of the mass media's normalization of death and dismemberment during the Vietnam era, we now conceptualize "real" tragedies in the way that we are best equipped to relate: through our own extensive cultural inventories that are informed by folk and popular culture. Once the façade of death denial begins to crumble—such as when a disaster strikes and we are not permitted to dismiss its realness through rhetoric—people converge in meaningfully symbolic ways in order to make sense of their shifting emotions and sense of grounding in the world. And when an actual disaster or tragedy is at hand, humor and narratives that connect to others' experience are shared in order to demonstrate communal solidarity or to temper the emotionality of the event. Nevertheless, it bears noting that people have acquired the means to express themselves via technology long before the emergence of Web 2.0, yet often in ways that share many of the same attributes as the jokes, narratives, and software-edited (or "Photoshopped") artwork seen circulating online today.¹⁶

The fear of imminent death is composed of six distinguishing features: fears of dependency or loss of control; isolation and loneliness; pain; physical disfigurement; loss of dignity; and the unknown (Kearl 1989, 487-88). Denial is carried out by symbolic actions and interactions, both through narrative discourse and most visibly, through attempts at problem solving. Rejecting the seriousness of death does not necessarily require a blatant dismissal of an event's realness. The process of displacement by which the disturbing quality of death is

compensated for by another activity or symbolic action (such as cooking with kneading, or carving, or compiling an oral history) is often found to be soothing by mourners. In alleviating the emotional weight of death, the Internet enables the perpetuation of cognitive denial in that its simulative liminality helps to suspend the full force of reality. Because we feel truly connected to our digital expressions, we can also take in a small bit of comfort in knowing that (beyond computer viruses and electrical outages at home) that we are still here; we are still connected to our fellow humans.

So what do these shifting currents of expressive behavior in the response to disaster *mean*, and how are they influenced by folklore? More importantly, why do they matter? In order to fully demonstrate the traditionality of contemporary digital folklore, it is imperative to closely scrutinize the telecommunicated modes of symbolic expression that preceded the widespread adoption of the Internet as a communicative tool. Furthermore, it is necessary to consider the historical contexts of several noteworthy events that influenced the dissemination of folkloric materials via pre-Internet technology in order to identify comparable expressive motifs between the past and the present. These factors help to demonstrate the power of repetition and variation, even across different expressive mediums over time. As the next chapter shows, they provide a comparative baseline of mass-mediated disasters from before the Digital Age, and connote the traditionality of contemporary hybridized folklore.

CHAPTER 3

THE EVOLUTION OF HUMOR AND MASS-MEDIATED DISASTERS IN THE TWENTIETH AND EARLY TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY

The Three Mile Island Accident and N.A.S.A.'s Challenger space shuttle disaster are among the two most notable catastrophes to occur in the United States between the end of the media-saturated Vietnam era and the emergence of modern-day Internet technology. By comparison, the highly visualized and narrative responses found online in the ensuing days and months after the terrorist attacks of September 11th, 2001 (hereafter "9/11"), reveal correlative traditions which suggest a linking influence of the mass media in the folk response to disaster.

In building off of the previous chapter, I would like to provide a historical reference point for understanding the evolution of contemporary disaster responses via an overview of the regional and widespread circulation of humor, photocopylore, and material culture in the folk responses to the Three Mile Island Accident of 1979 and the Challenger Disaster of 1986. As a transition into a discussion of contemporary vernacular expressive culture and to provide a comparative example of the Internet's early life as a medium of expression, I briefly discuss the folklore associated with several major news stories as they surfaced during the Web 1.0 era and conclude with an overview of Web 2.0 and the expressive responses to 9/11, as well as their influence on the folk response to subsequent mass-mediated disasters.

3.1. Pre-Internet Responses to Tragedy: The Three Mile Island Accident

For many people today, the initialism "T.M.I." stands for "too much information." For the people of central Pennsylvania, the letters have stood for something else: Three Mile Island. Beyond the TMI initialism lies a greater symbolic meaning for central Pennsylvanians, one that

oozes a multitude of emotions in response to the memories and subsequent folk responses to the near-catastrophic accident at the nuclear power plant that took place on March 28th, 1979. The story of the partial core meltdown at Three Mile Island is both a cautionary tale and an intriguing, comparative example of how journalists and regular people responded to the threat of obliteration before the instantaneity of Internet communication was available, and underscores the former limitations that surrounded the dissemination of regional folklore.

The United States were in difficult economic times during the late-1970s. As a result of a global fuel shortage, oil prices had risen from \$3.00 to \$30.00 per barrel in just under seven years (Ivory 2007, 133). In an effort to curb American dependency on foreign oil and in order to promote autonomous energy production domestically, pundits hailed nuclear energy as the latest, greatest, and cheapest means for solving America's energy crisis. Construction on the Three Mile Island nuclear plant began in September 1974. At its opening in December 1978, TMI was considered to be a state-of-the-art facility. Despite a sharp debate throughout the country over the safety and viability of nuclear energy, many local residents expressed optimism at central Pennsylvania's leap into the future (Leppzer 1980, 62-65).

At 4 a.m. on the morning of March 28, 1979, a series of mechanical and human errors resulted in a partial meltdown of the Unit 2 pressurized reactor at the Three Mile Island (TMI) nuclear facility near Harrisburg, Pennsylvania (Walker 2006). The infamous accident took place less than five months after TMI began commercial operations—forever altering the region's view of nuclear energy and government bureaucracy. The company that operated the plant, Metropolitan Edison, excelled at mishandling all public relations and flustered the public during a series of tense, uninformative, and fabricated press conferences. Peoples' trust in technology, government, and the media were understandably shaken. In an effort to circumvent and thwart

the continued influence of corporate entities in their personal lives, folklore emerged as a means of relieving the tremendous tensions surrounding the region. While the uncertain situation was ultimately remedied through intervention from the federal government, the events and aftermath of the accident at Three Mile Island served as perfect breeding grounds for folkloric production and dissemination. In what was the greatest nuclear disaster in the history of the United States, the Three Mile Island accident came to symbolize the heated debate over the safety of nuclear energy that weighed so heavily on the minds of many Americans at the time.

As with many major headlines, reporters descended on the areas surrounding Three Mile Island immediately after the story broke. Information was hard to come by, and local officials were wrestling with ways to curb panic while seeking a way to prevent nuclear meltdown. Early reports from Three Mile Island were “concerned with describing the extent of the radiation venting, the degree of danger resulting from exposure to it, and what went wrong in the first place,” but the focus quickly shifted to the emotional stress of individuals living within a twenty-five mile radius of the plant as the crisis lingered on without resolution (Fischer 1994, 27).

The residents of areas surrounding Three Mile Island referenced their cultural inventory in order to process the events that were unfolding around them, including the foreign intrusion of the media, random “experts,” and curious gawkers who drifted into town. Lonna Malmsheimer notes that people responded to Three Mile Island by conceptualizing and interpreting the chaos around them in fantastical terms, with specific correlations drawn to popular culture such as television and especially motion pictures:

Many informants reported a wide-ranging search for analogies. In this search the individual sorted through the cultural inventory of experience, both actual and vicarious, both historical and fictive, as if these various

models of thought and behavior were of the same kind in terms of their relevance and reliability... Such “loose” thinking is a continuous source of creative adaptation and is also *characteristic of the mind at play*... science fictions and images, historical narrative and images, and previous actual experiences came to mind and were used in attempts to *normalize the situation* (Malmshemer 1986, 38; emphasis added).

In Middletown, Pennsylvania—one of the boroughs in close proximity to Three Mile Island—the lone movie theater in town (which runs only one film at a time) happened to be showing *The China Syndrome*, which portrays the chilling consequences of a nuclear plant meltdown (Del Tredici 1980). Coincidentally, the film had been released in theaters less than two weeks before the accident occurred. Needless to say, popular culture was poised to be included in the folkloric “fallout” from TMI.

To be sure, our cultural inventories are made up of images that symbolically encapsulate an idea or event; these images are drawn from our interaction with mass-mediated information and visual data. In the case of Three Mile Island, there was considerable imagery associated with nuclear energy going wrong, and it clearly fueled the folk response. In the absence of information or symbolic communal solidarity, people turned to their cultural inventories for guidance, which led directly to a particularly salient symbol: a nuclear mushroom cloud.

According to Robert Lifton, the images of destruction stemming from the bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki during World War II directly inform the modern consciousness by permeating traditional boundaries of destruction and eroding conventions of literal or metaphorical immortality (Lifton 1968, 1969, 1979, 1982). The crisis at Three Mile Island not only invoked the destructive imagery of Hiroshima, but it “forced individuals to remember the

bombing... and led them to confront, if not resolve, their fears of human extinction and the destruction of all nature” (Malmshemer 1986, 40). Indeed, as false rumors spread of a hydrogen bubble forming inside of one of the cooling towers during the crisis, many people reported imagining visions of an atomic mushroom cloud, even though it was a scientific impossibility. Before long, photocopylore emerged to reflect these concerns (**Fig. 2**).



Figure 2: Three Mile Island Mushroom Cloud Imagery
(Caption reads “Oh, shit... there goes the weekend!”)

This example of humorous photocopylore was in circulation over the ensuing months and years following the accident at TMI. Note the imagery of the mushroom cloud as a symbol of cultural inventory on nuclear disaster (a reference to the bombing Hiroshima, as discussed previously in this chapter). This particular example was originally copied on November 28, 1988. Courtesy of the Archives of Folklore and Ethnography, Penn State Harrisburg.

Generally speaking, Xerox- or photocopylore was meant to be used for rhetorically countering

the propriety of corporate environments through the use of anonymously circulated materials which often lampooned the rigors of being an employee or joked about taboo subjects like race, gender, and sex (see Dundes and Pagter 1978, 1987, 1991b, 1996; Hatch and Jones 1997; Michael 1995; Preston 1974, 1994; Roemer 1994).¹⁷ Copy and fax machines were used to duplicate and/or send these hand-drawn, amateurish materials before they were posted on the individual walls or communal bulletin boards of a workplace. The content was sometimes graphic and crude, but was nevertheless meant to elicit laughter or amusement in a restrictive social setting. The anonymity of the texts' original creator removed accountability, and because they bypassed social restrictions of expected "professional" decorum, humorous texts could be displayed or passed along from one individual to another at the office without reproach. In many ways, these fax and photocopied texts strongly resemble the visual intentions and distribution patterns of today's Photoshopped humor, which not only suggests traditionality, but further supports the notion that technology stimulates—and does *not* diminish—folkloric expression.¹⁸

To be sure, photocopied humor was in modest circulation during and after the Three Mile Island Accident, and many materials poked fun at the incompetency of Met. Ed. and their handling of the accident, as well as wordplay and humor about the destruction of nearby land (**Fig. 3**). However, the most prevalent means of vernacular expression amongst residents of the area (outside of sharing jokes, rumors, and personal experience narratives) could be seen in the creation of unique T-shirts, games, and other ephemera (**Fig. 4-7**).



Figure 3: Another Example of TMI Photocopylore in Circulation Following Accident. This mock advertisement was found in circulation on November 28, 1988. Courtesy of the Archives of Folklore and Ethnography, Penn State Harrisburg.



Figure 4: A T-Shirt created during a Dickinson College (Carlisle, PA) design competition.

The shirt reads: “Squeeze Me, I Radiate/ Kiss Me, I Meltdown: 3 Mile Island/ Middletown, PA.”

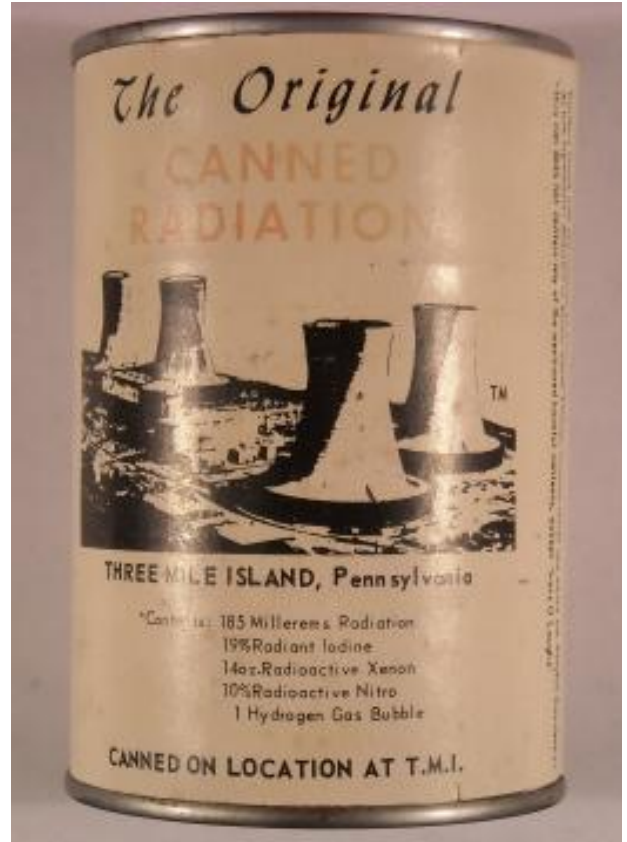


Figure 5: “Canned radiation.” TMI Ephemera created locally.

This item could be purchased as gag gift at general stores within a thirty mile radius of Three Mile Island following the accident.

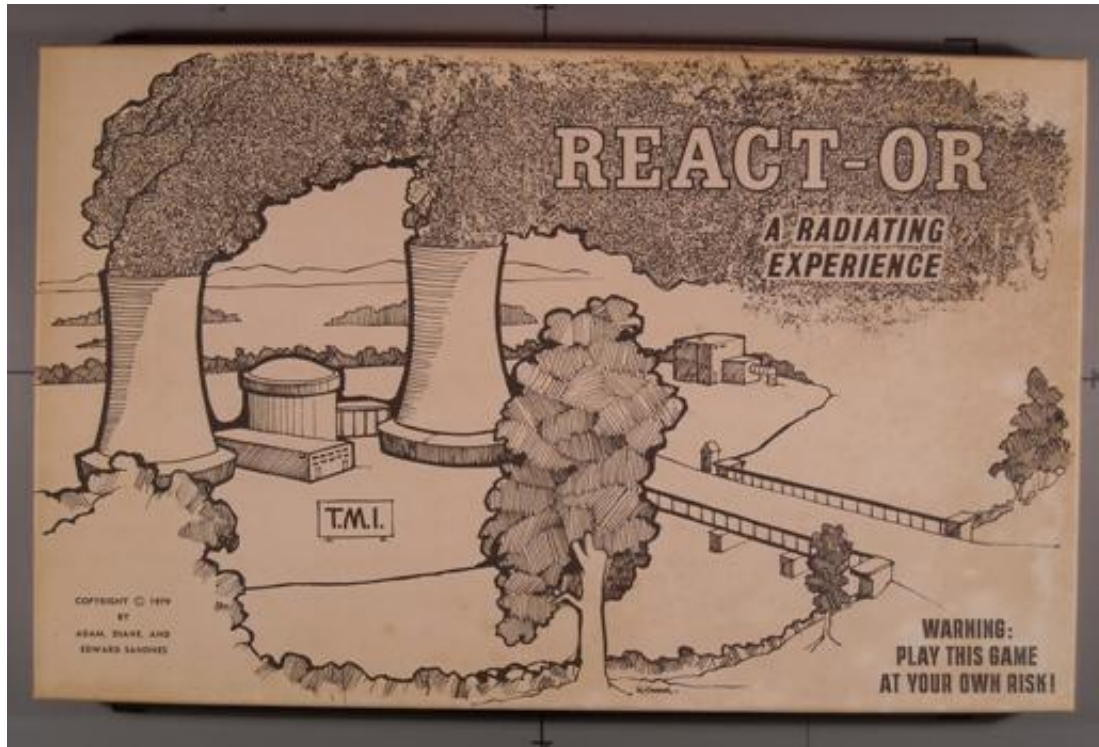


Figure 6: *React-or: A Radiating Experience* board game. A Monopoly-like board game created by central Pennsylvania residents Adam, Diane, and Edward Sandnes in 1980.



Figure 7: Three Mile Island Novelty Lamp.

The base of the lamp is modeled after TMI's reactor towers; lampshade (not pictured) contains image of Three Mile Island in its entirety. This item of ephemera was available in the months following the accident (in addition to reactor-shaped cups and mugs) at local businesses within a thirty mile radius of the nuclear plant.

During and after the Three Mile Island accident, people had access to communication technology that connected them with others, but as regional folklorists noted, many of the circulating jokes or narratives did not usually leave the region (Kassovic 1981). Among the most popular in circulation¹⁹ were:

Q: What's the five-day forecast for Harrisburg, Pennsylvania?

A: Two days.

[Variations also added "...with temperatures reaching 3000 degrees" or "Cloudy with a 40% chance of survival."]

Q: What melts on the ground, but not in your hand?

A: Hershey, Pennsylvania. (Home to the Hershey chocolate factory)

Q: What does TMI stand for?

A: Too many idiots.

Many of the jokes play on the proximity of other towns within a short radius of Harrisburg, or hint at embitterment against Metropolitan Edison. However, deeper projections of anxiety could be seen in the personal narratives and rumors that surfaced soon after the crisis was resolved.

In lieu of being at the scene of an accident or natural disaster, people must rely on the reportage of others to define their perceptions of the event. If high standards for accuracy are not met, rumor-mongering and other folkloric creations can be expected to fill in the blanks. In the months to follow the Three Mile Island accident, many people reported having nightmares or extreme spikes of anxiety over the possible side effects of radiation exposure in the aftermath of the Three Mile Island Accident (Leppzer 1980, 12-16; 21-50). Moreover, Met. Ed.'s suspicious determination to keep internal matters under wraps led some to believe that they were fabricating their risk assessments or blatantly covering up reportage of their incompetency.

Among the people of the Harrisburg metropolitan area, the lack of verifiable information served as ideal breeding grounds for rumor diffusion. News of animal mutations and deaths, record levels of abortions at Harrisburg area hospitals, and increased instances of cancer

abounded (Del Tredici 1980; Leppzer 1980). People reported greater instances of animal mutations and deaths, human abortions, and cancer cases because *that was the expected result of exposure to radiation*. Films like *The Day After* (1983) and other popular media helped to enhance the reality of this fiction, and served as a folkloric conduit.

Today, when a tragedy penetrates national news coverage—even for a brief period—regional folklore does not remain regional. A vast network of bloggers, commentators, unaffiliated participants, and journalists descend on stories, extract and comment, and ultimately archive them all over the Internet, where they remain until they are deleted by a site administrator, if ever. When the Three Mile Island accident left the national spotlight and returned to being an exclusively regional news story, the events only remained palpable and salient in regional folklore circles. This simply does not happen anymore.²⁰

Meaningful community interaction and symbolic unity was difficult to establish amid the misinformation, confusion, and general uncertainty that loomed over the situation at Three Mile Island. To cope with the anxiety, residents near Three Mile Island coped with the anxiety by looking inward in order to create an outward expression of creativity. Taken collectively with the collection of oral narratives, circulating jokes, or other parodic artwork found among groups of people, TMI folklore clearly demonstrates the same transmission patterns and traditional expressive modes as materials found in contemporary circulation. The elements of structure, calculated intent, and purposeful dissemination are of the same ilk and suggest a connecting lineage between past and present material.

3.2. The Challenger Disaster Joke Cycle

Long before Web 2.0 bedazzled users with lightning-fast communicative channels, the dialectics of television broadcasting inspired the humorous folk responses to disasters. One of

the first mass-mediated disasters to be extensively studied by folklorists was the Challenger Disaster, which occurred on January 28th, 1986 as a N.A.S.A. (National Aeronautics and Space Administration) space shuttle exploded shortly after liftoff, killing all seven crew members, including civilian Christa McAuliffe (who was slated to become the first teacher in space)

Adding to the shock and consternation of the fatal explosion was the fact that the accident was broadcast live on CNN and was being shown at countless schools across the United States in recognition of McAuliffe's involvement with N.A.S.A.'s "Teacher in Space Project." When the space shuttle exploded, communications scholars estimated that news of the accident had disseminated faster than any other American news event since the deaths of Presidents Franklin Delano Roosevelt and John F. Kennedy—as well as the troubling reality that more children than adults may have witnessed the event while at school that day (Wright et al. 1989, 27). "Sick" humor about the event quickly arrived within a matter of weeks and was widely circulated for over three months (Ellis 1991; Simons 1986).

In the ensuing media coverage, Christa McAuliffe's death attracted the most attention due to her non-astronaut status and largely symbolic, nontechnical role in the shuttle mission. Expectedly, McAuliffe was also the lone crewmember to be singled out in joke cycles by name while the "other astronauts" faded into generic anonymity. The rhetoric behind many of the Challenger jokes were aimed at capitalizing on the media's focus on McAuliffe. However, they additionally connote an acknowledgment of the fact that she was "one of us"—a civilian—and that her placement on the mission was a foolhardy attempt for publicity, not aeronautic ingenuity. Other jokes included elements of wordplay and double-entendres (predominantly using the organization of a riddle formula). Commercial products were also incorporated into several of the jokes' punch line.²¹ Like the humor stemming from other mass-mediated disasters,

most (if not all) of the Challenger jokes were rhetorically aimed at the media's attempt to influence viewers' emotional sentiments and interpretations of the explosion. Some of the most popular jokes in circulation included:

Q: What does N.A.S.A. stand for?

A: Need another seven astronauts

[Variation: Now accepting seven applications]

Q: What did Christa McAuliffe tell her husband when she left to go to Florida?

A: You feed the dog, I'll feed the fish.

Q: What color were Christa McAuliffe's eyes?

A: Blue. One blew this way, one blew that way.

Q: What were Christa McAuliffe's last words?

A: What's this red button for?

Q: What was the last thing to go through Christa McAuliffe's mind?

A: The control panel.

[Variations: The fuselage; her asshole, etc.]

Q: How did they know Christa McAuliffe had dandruff?

A: Her "head and shoulders" washed up on shore.

Q: Why do they drink *Pepsi* at N.A.S.A.?

A: Because they can't get *7-Up*.

Q: What was the last thing said on the Challenger?

A: I want a light... No, I meant a *Bud Light*!

As these examples indicate, the subject of death had clearly become approachable in folklore, especially through its incorporation into humor and other fictionalized narratives. Note that many of the jokes even play with the finality of death by drawing attention to the "last" words and actions of the astronauts.²² Others have interpreted it in terms of a continuation of jokes about women in the workforce (see Smyth 1986).

By sharing Challenger Disaster humor, joke tellers (and listeners) tapped into their cultural inventories in order to encode and decode intricate bits of rhetoric about popular culture,

consumerism, and knowledge about the news event itself. Their navigation of this cultural inventory, juxtaposed with a desire to control the narrative power of a mass-mediated disaster yielded colorful collections at the time of the explosion. The lasting impact of these materials, however, has been their influence on subsequent joke cycles by encouraging people to mock death and rhetorically chastise the role of the media in our understanding of a tragic event. As the following section shows, Web 1.0 and eventually Web 2.0 expressive interfaces would host a wealth of materials that evolved from the traditions that came to light during the Challenger Disaster.

3.3. Vernacular Expression and the Emergence of the Internet: 9/11 and Other News

The 1990s were a crucial time in the Internet's development as a communications powerhouse. The archived online forum discussions, jokes, and opinion posts about events like the O.J. Simpson trial, Columbine massacre, and the death of Princess Diana represent early folk experimentations with hybridizing analog and digital cultures.

I was all of seventeen years old when the terrorist attacks of 9/11 took place. It is a day that is forever etched into my memory. I remember that clear, blue Tuesday morning like it was yesterday: having manipulated my guidance counselor into allowing me to take a breezy “consumer math” class during my senior year of high school—a class that taught sleepy or unmotivated 12th graders how to balance a checkbook instead of rousing them to find the value of X in any given scenario—I remember going over the eccentricities of calculating a tip when an announcement came over the school's P.A. system around 9:30am. With a calm, monotone delivery, the principal stated that the Twin Towers and Pentagon had been hit with planes that were hijacked by terrorists. Our teacher tried in vain to bring the class back to the lesson at-

hand, but everyone else was more concerned with finding out what had happened. In an instant, it seemed, the world had changed before our very eyes.

I grew up in Damascus, Maryland, a suburb of Washington, D.C., and the news of an attack taking place in two of the eastern seaboard's most vibrant economic and political hubs (in addition to the close distance of the attacks to our families and personal lives) made the disaster all the more palpable to everyone taking in the news as it unfolded. In the halls of my own high school one of the first things that emerged in the moments following the announcement of the attacks were not only displays of grief, fear, or anger, but most predominantly: humor. As we were being quickly bused home due to safety concerns, I heard a gruff student yell at one of my peers of Arabian descent, "Hey, tell your uncles 'thanks' for getting us out of school early," followed by a chorus of chuckles—and this was before we even fully knew who was responsible for the attacks or what had even happened in full. "Looks like we're gonna smoke us some camels, boys," remarked another, invoking—perhaps subconsciously—the previously circulating folk humor collected during the Gulf War (see Dundes and Pagter 1991a).

Like so many others, I turned to the television for answers. Following a less-than-comforting declaration by President George W. Bush that the United States had been attacked by a "faceless coward," new details started to trickle in. My shift at a local grocery store began at 3pm that day, and I watched as many Washingtonians who lived in my community came to buy up supplies and morosely walk about with a thousand-mile stare. "The end is near," one man grimly uttered to me, "You better get right with God, son. There might not be much time left." Others pointed out the deafening silence in the sky. I remember looking up and not seeing a single plane in flight for the first time in my life. Looking past the ripples in the clouds, I could

sense the tension in the air as my neighbors quietly awaited answers for questions that had yet to form.

In addition to the iconic visual markers that were branded onto the public's consciousness during subsequent media reportage, my recollection of September 11th is quite vivid and personalized. I clearly remember the inflection of voices that I heard, the colors that I saw, the emotions that I felt, the people whom I encountered, the things that were said, and of course the linear progression of the day itself. However, the ability to recall the nuances of *my* day on 9/11 is not a unique gift. These recollections are examples of "flashbulb memories," which—very much like a camera—vividly capture the visual, aural, and other sensitive elements of an individual's whereabouts and their subsequent actions as they coincide with (and respond to) a significant historical moment (Brown and Kulick 1977). As a major event unfolds, the capturing and storage of flashbulb memories is triggered by intersecting elements of surprise, emotional intensity, and the perception of consequentiality, or how the event will impact history (see Kirshenblatt-Gimblett 2003). For example, many people have (and still can) vividly recall exactly what they were doing and how they felt when they learned that President John F. Kennedy had been assassinated in 1963 (Wolfenstein and Kliman 1965) or when the Challenger space shuttle exploded (Ellis 1991; Smyth 1986).

In the days and months following 9/11, media coverage of the aftermath aired round-the-clock as the era welcomed unprecedented, uninterrupted 24-hour news coverage which influenced how the event was interpreted by average viewers. On television and online, image after grisly image was repeatedly shown from new angles; side shots of personal narratives from the scene abounded; images of planes striking the Twin Towers and footage of people running for their lives or jumping to their deaths filled the screen. Viewers were forced to re-witness the

horror over and over again, making the tension feel every bit as impactful in locations far from the scenes of disaster as it was for those living near them (see Blank 2009c). The bombardment of the ensuing news reportage, coupled with high anxiety over the looming confusion significantly influenced the folklore that would emerge from the ashes of the World Trade Center, Pentagon, and United Airlines Flight 93.

By 2001, the Internet medium had sufficiently developed to the point where most analog expressive materials could be faithfully replicated and transcribed online without sacrificing authorial involvement in the process of creation and dissemination—*or* corrupting the integrity of the intentions behind their expressions. As such, many people took to the Internet to reflect and commentate about the attacks with others, which yielded a voluminous display of vernacular expression. Photoshopped images of the World Trade Center, narrative accounts of survivors and witnesses, or the sharing of numerous jokes aimed at terrorists or the events themselves circulated ubiquitously. Like other mass-mediated disasters such as the Challenger space shuttle explosion, people sought reprieve from the hegemonic gatekeepers of information in the media through interaction within the folk-moderated dwellings of cyberspace.

After 9/11—as with many major disasters—Americans took care to symbolically show their unity with those directly affected by the tragedy, either through donations of time, money, or self, displaying visual or textual symbols of solidarity such as a supportive bumper stickers or signs, an article of clothing, a flag, or something along those lines. Online, numerous images of the Twin Towers were manipulated to rhetorically assert the resilience of the U.S.A. (**Fig. 8**) or portrayed the maiming of al-Qaeda terrorist Osama bin Laden.

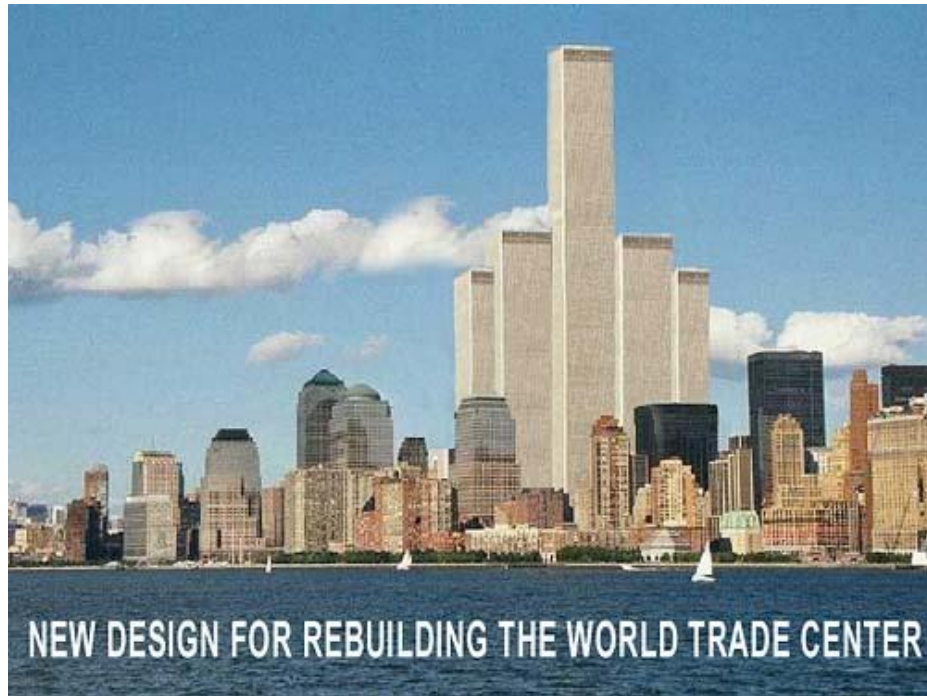


Figure 8: New Design for Rebuilding the World Trade Center
Obviously, the message of this “design” is a giant “fuck you” to terrorists. America always comes back bigger and better!

The highly visual response to 9/11 bled into subsequent disaster responses such as those seen during Hurricane Katrina, most famously in a widely circulating Photoshopped image that shows President George W. Bush and his father fishing in flooded New Orleans (**Fig. 9**). Such images were easily accessible on the Internet (see Ellis 2003; Frank 2004, 2009), and these artistic expressions helped to inform and establish the folkloric precedent for responding to subsequent large-scale disasters such as the BP Oil Spill-inspired folk art which display expressive motifs which may be classified as traditional (**Fig. 10 and 11**).



Figure 9: Presidents George H.W. Bush and George “Dubya” Go Fishing in New Orleans. This popularly circulated photo is a rhetorical ploy aimed at criticizing the slow federal response in aiding victims of Hurricane Katrina. Further, it teases out the perception that President George W. Bush was more interested in leisure time than helping the victims of Katrina.



Figure 10:
The Death of Aquaman:
Digital Folk Art Takes Aim at BP

This illustration was originally created by Nick Cardy and subsequently Photoshopped by New Jersey artist Rob Kelly who hosts the blog, *The Aquaman Shrine* (www.aquamanshrine.com). In this fictional comic book cover, legendary superhero (and all-around underwater action enthusiast) “Aquaman” succumbs to the effects of the massive BP Oil Spill in the Gulf of Mexico that began in April 2010 and went unsuccessfully treated for months afterward. Shortly after this image was posted on Kelly’s blog on May 22nd, 2010 (<http://www.aquamanshrine.com/2010/05/sg.html>), it quickly went viral and was widely distributed via email and numerous other news and pop culture-oriented websites. Furthermore, it was overwhelmingly applauded for its timely and cleverly packaged critique of the concurrent fallout from the oil spill.



Figure 11: The BP Oil Spill Kills Mario... and his Underwater Enemies

In this cleverly manipulated image by artist Shane Parker, the popular video game franchise *Mario*—which often features underwater levels that require navigating around enemy obstacles—is used to poke fun at BP for their role in creating the major ecological disaster in the Gulf of Mexico. The iconic “green pipe” that usually takes Mario onto the next successive stage of a level during gameplay has been transformed into a source of his demise.

The new convenience and accessibility of information retrieval via the Internet turned telecommunicated media into a double-edged sword following a media disaster. By providing large quantities of information in a short amount of time, a chain-like reaction of information dispersal quickly appears in a way that is folkloric in its patterns of diffusion. With this in mind, it should not be surprising to note that fewer than fifty jokes regarding the *Challenger* space shuttle disaster were recorded at the time of its occurrence (Oring 1992; Smyth 1986), whereas over one-hundred and fifty O.J. Simpson jokes about the alleged murder of his spouse and her boyfriend emerged as the Internet began to take off as an accepted medium for folkloric transmission in the mid-1990s (Lamb 1994); and over three-hundred jokes about the death of Princess Diana surfaced in 1998, due in large part to the growing accessibility, convenience, and popularity of the World Wide Web (Davies 2003, 29).

In addition the preexisting means of communication before the Internet became a household fixture, Web 1.0 encouraged people to textually communicate through posting on online bulletin boards and listservs or facilitating discussions in chat rooms such as Internet Relay Chat (IRC). While heavily text-oriented and aesthetically limited, the interface nevertheless established a base structure from which the more advanced platform could exploit. With the greater sophistication of Web 2.0 came a major shift in the expressive culture of the Internet towards the highly visual, interactive, and streamlined. The new traditions of Photoshopping; YouTube mash-ups; blogs; and elaborate discussion forums took hold. However, the potential of the Internet medium for vernacular expression was not fully exposed until one fateful September day in 2001.

At first glance, venturing into the online world to relieve stress in times of anxiety or make social connections with strangers may appear to be an escape from reality. However, this virtual “escape” is simply an alternative (albeit structurally different) simulated reality—one that is more pliable and capable of meeting individual needs with instant gratification. Surely, this circumvention of restrictive social environments is enticing in times of communal anxiety. This freedom affords individuals the ability to protest or mock hegemonic forces in their lives such as the corporate office, educational institutions, the mass media, or their government. Understanding *how* and *why* people use technology to process their feelings or diffuse anxiety is of paramount importance. Because laughter is a predominantly social, not biological phenomenon (Provine 2000), the interactivity of the Internet medium is of tremendous value in processing ideas about tumultuous events or people. The following chapter contemplates these factors through an examination of the folk sentiments regarding the media’s coverage of celebrities and their personal lives.

CHAPTER 4

“INTIMATE STRANGERS”: THE FOLK RESPONSE TO CELEBRITY DEATH AND FALLS FROM GRACE

Up until this point, this dissertation has spoken at great length about mass-mediated disasters, the human need for connectivity, and the historical contexts through which vernacular expression has been facilitated by mass media in the response to tragedy. But how does celebrity and folk culture meaningfully intersect within society, and why does it matter? Surprisingly, celebrity culture provides compelling evidence for how new media technologies influence folkloric dissemination after a death, tragedy, or scandal breaks. Juicy stories on superstars’ scandals or reportage on domestic natural disasters have attracted folklore in the form of rumors, cautionary tales, or jokes in years past, but the mainstream acceptance of the Internet as a communications tool complicates previous notions about the nature of narrative transmission.

This chapter examines the American infatuation with celebrities and the observable consequences that celebrities face when a pre-determined image of their persona disintegrates. In particular, I explore the folk conceptualization of celebrities and how the mass media facilitates both the construction and deconstruction of these suppositions. By examining the folk response to media coverage of celebrities in tabloids and on the Internet, I argue that communal ideals are in part socially constructed through symbolic interaction. Celebrity culture provides a salient window into the folk process in times of anxiety, as a star’s fall from grace or involvement in a scandal is often presented similarly to large-scale tragedies and disasters in the mass media, thus evoking similar responses.

Many joke tellers and their audiences reaffirm societal expectations of behavior and fidelity by using celebrities as symbols for overarching values and causes that they wish to

emulate. When a celebrity symbolically engenders particular values or standards, most violations of the aims that they represent will result in rhetorical denigration within individual cultural inventories and imaginary social worlds. Doing so protects the balance, morality, and integrity of the individual's worldview. While celebrity *faux pas* may not be equitable to the terrorist attacks of September 11th or the chaotic aftermath of Hurricane Katrina, the subsequent process of vernacular expression is nearly identical in the Digital Age. Just as the response to large-scale disasters reveal cultural anxieties, prejudices, rumors, beliefs, and a pendulum of opinions as individuals make sense of the chaos and reassure themselves (see Fine 1992), the folk response to celebrities reveal a similar social function as a mediator and conduit of imaginary social relationships.

The word “celebrity” is derived from the Latin word *celebritas*, meaning “fame” or “renown.” Historian Daniel Boorstin famously defined our modern understanding of a celebrity succinctly as “*a person who is known for his well-knownness*” (1961, 57; emphasis in original). However, historically speaking, the modern conceptualization of celebrity has evolved from the archaic conceptualization of “renown,” or the esteemed reputation of monarchs and the virility of statesmen, created largely from the spectacle of their public appearances and decrees (Inglis 2010; see also Fine 2001). Indeed, early conceptualizations of what we would now call “celebrity” were attached to the most accomplished or politically powerful individuals—more importantly, to those with an active and visible role within their community or nation. This model of renown crossed the Atlantic Ocean from Europe to colonial America, and the earliest American “real-life” folk heroes (such as George Washington, Benjamin Franklin, and Betsy Ross) have engendered an authoritative recollection in history as symbols of model stature, ability, and notoriety for their personal feats. Undoubtedly, some of their feats were embellished

and circulated through folklore during their lives, and these feats surely underwent revision and reinterpretation over the years.²³ Be that as it may, the narrative of these individuals' importance to early America's symbolic identity has made them revered figures even in the present.

The emergence of Hollywood's "star system," which lasted until the 1940s, witnessed the practice of film studios creating new names and identities for attractive actors in an effort to glamorize their public personas and emphasize their image over talent; this helped to shift perceptions of celebrity into more aesthetic territory (see McDonald 2001). Public figures had to balance their ideological stances and personal quirks with the ability to connect with their audiences, while also developing a public persona and general "image" to maintain—the emphasis on the visual marked a stark change in the symbolic values assigned to such famous individuals. These individuals were received in aesthetic and symbolic terms, and were judged by their ability to performatively conform to the socially constructed values and expectations of those who admired them.

By the 1960s and '70s, many households owned a television set and the nightly news consequently invaded the living rooms of everyday people for the first time ever on a large scale. Thanks to the widespread adoption of the home television set, the shock of President Kennedy's assassination, the horrors of the Vietnam War, and the disappointment of the Watergate scandal were palpable images, narratives, and memories for the average American. Within the context of an unsettled world, American society was rocked by the angst and social upheaval of a changing culture. Visual reportage covered everything going right, and especially what was going *wrong*. At the movie theater or at home with their television sets, people became emotionally connected to the individuals who appeared before them. The celebrities who emerged during this era not

only provided a reprieve from the very real, grim images that were invading viewers' cultural inventories, but also acted as fantastical symbols that provided quiet comfort in uncertain times.

Today, the threshold for celebrity status has evolved to recognize individuals who do not acquire fame or renown through their symbolic leadership or cultural benefit to mass society, but rather through their recognizable presence in popular culture. As a result, select individuals who have talent in an area of public interest—sports, film and television, or music, for example—are now able to achieve a revered status previously reserved for heads of state, revolutionaries, and social pioneers. More importantly, the transformation into a “celebrity” can take place in a relatively short amount of time. The never-ending rush of consumerism in American culture allows for performers and athletes to be quickly swept up into the fray of popular culture; they become commodities that are packaged, sold, and consumed.²⁴ But more than that, these individuals become our “intimate strangers”—those whom we know, but in reality do *not* know.

4.1. Imaginary Social Worlds and Celebrity Culture Consumption

Due to the onslaught of gossip columns, magazines, tabloids, television programs (both satirical and genuine), Web-based news dissemination, and now even more ubiquitously through amateur and professional blogging, every detail of celebrity culture is filtered, scrutinized, and presented through a vast web of opinion, manipulation, and perpetual exchange. Celebrities are treated as if they are our neighbors; ordinary folks whom we know personally or intimately, as well as professionally.²⁵ From gossip magazines to TMZ.com, narratives of celebrities “gone wild” abound in numerous forms of popular media, often glamorizing their seemingly deliberate social deviance. Some entertainment magazines publish pictures of celebrities without make-up or display shots of them doing “normal” things in order to prove that they really “are just like us,” while others look to get “dirt” on celebrities. Such exposure embeds within the public an

inordinate amount of knowledge about many celebrities' film and television projects, as well as personal information about their individual hobbies, humanitarian causes in which they participate, their sex lives, or even their proclivity for adopting children from third-world countries. Celebrities are aware of such headline-grabbing motifs, too, and seem to frequently invoke the pop culture proverb, "there's no such thing as bad publicity," in having their publicists—media specialists by trade—manipulating paparazzi and fans to follow their supposedly glamorous lives. Our cultural inventories are flooded with data. As anthropologist John L. Caughey (1984) observes,

Media figures play significant roles in both memories and anticipations. In memories, the individual often replays segments from past media productions he or she has witnessed. Fans often do this deliberately, and typically they can recall their favorite scenes in the most vivid detail. Most informants also regularly experience spontaneous stream-of-consciousness replays of past media scenes. Often an environmental perception will suggest a media image and lead the individual's consciousness inward into a recall of social scenes from a book, newspaper, or movie (136).

Recall for a moment the constellation of celebrities or famous individuals whose résumés, personalities, or public personas are easily retrieved from your own cultural inventory. Think of actors, athletes, musicians, authors, columnists, television personalities (from news anchors and talk show hosts to infomercial pitchmen and evangelists), businessmen, entrepreneurs, inventors, and politicians whom you can recollect. In conjunction with the cultural inventory, these individuals make up our artificial or "*imaginary*" *social worlds*—the interpersonal links that we make with public figures, celebrities, and other people whom we do not know in our personal

lives but nevertheless interact with frequently due a rapport developed through mass-mediated outlets.

The amount of individuals who make up our imaginary social worlds often include several times as many persons as those in our “real” social worlds, which are composed of friends, family, and acquaintances (Caughey 1984, 32). As odd as it may seem, “imaginary” relationships actually serve an important function as a means of conceptualizing, as well as cognitively prioritizing and organizing the desirable qualities that we hope to emulate and invite into our social lives. While we do not actually know the famous individuals who litter our cultural inventories and social worlds in the same way that we know a spouse or a close friend, we paradoxically *do* know them. Rhetorically (just as a real friend might), they make us laugh, they report on our constituents, or they find common ground and validate our worldviews in a public forum through their actions or publicized ideologies. They are real, living people with real experiences, and in a peculiar way, they do appear to be a part of our lives. As Richard Schickel notes:

Most of us retain, in most of our private and professional dealings with people we don't actually know, a sense of their otherness, a decent wariness that protects both ourselves and the stranger from intrusion. But that shyness... is not operative when we are dealing with celebrities. Thanks to television and the rest of the media we *know* them, or think we do. To a greater or lesser degree, we have internalized them, unconsciously made them a part of our consciousness, just as if they were, in fact, friends (Schickel 1985, 4).

In other words, while we may intentionally avoid a full-fledged relationship with a co-worker who has peripheral, matching interests (but lacks the promise of mutual compatibility necessary

for a sustained friendship), we actively nurture a psychological connection to celebrities in a very real and personal way—even though they are not active or physically present in our lives.²⁶ In the pursuit of meaningful connections with other humans, celebrity culture provides an alternate avenue for achieving intimacy. More to the point, in the absence of physical connectivity, imaginary social relationships help to compensate for the lack of meaningful, symbolic contact in the analog, or physical world.²⁷

An exemplary case of the folk response to a celebrity who maintained an imaginary social relationship with many people can be observed in the passing of Gary Coleman on May 28th, 2010. Like the folklore that appeared after the Challenger Disaster, the Internet provided the means for people to process the loss of person with whom they had an imaginary social relationship—often with rhetoric that incorporated knowledge from their cultural inventories (about his career, the context of his death, or his physical attributes/ limitations). Some representative examples in online circulation shortly following news of his passing:

Today, flags will not be flown at half-staff, but at 4 feet 8 inches off the ground.

I'm observing a half-moment of silence for Gary Coleman.

...Such a short lived life.

Before he died, Actor Gary Coleman was released from a Utah jail after being arrested on a warrant for failing to appear in court. The court regrets the error and promises to give Coleman a milk crate to stand on next time.

A week before his death, Utah police say actor Gary Coleman hit a man with his pickup after an argument at a bowling alley...after getting out of his truck, Coleman continued beating the man with one of the dozen Los Angeles phone books he was sitting on to see over the dashboard.

Gary Coleman's passing proves once again that it's better to be dead than in Utah.

Gary Coleman, former child star, has died at the age of 42. Doctors blame his death on complications from "different strokes" [the television show in which Coleman starred earlier in his career].

Gary Coleman? I sure did like his coolers, tents, lanterns and camp stoves. He will be missed.

As these examples indicate, Gary Coleman's death attracted rather mean-spirited humor that made fun of his size, acting resume, and erratic personal life. In the socially ascribed hierarchy of celebrities and their perceived value to popular culture and the imaginary social worlds of their admirers, Coleman was not as particularly valued in comparison to his contemporaries like Michael Jackson or Farrah Fawcett—hence the significant rhetorical differences between the joke repertoires that circulated after their respective deaths.²⁸

My use of the word “imaginary” is not meant to denote a value judgment on the appropriateness of such relationships. Moreover, I do not mean to use “imaginary” or “simulative” to suggest that there is a lack of meaning in place. In fact, many of these artificial relationships are quite real and meaningful to the individuals. When describing such pseudo-connections to celebrities, I use terms such as imagined, illusion, or fantasy social worlds and relationships interchangeably throughout to signify associations that are not forged from casual interaction among peers in the analog world; however, I am generally referring to the same thing. I should clarify that the fantasy of imaginary social relationships is often a considerably personal process, “both because it is a private experience that takes place within the individual's mind, and because it is the product of the individual's psychological needs” (Caughey 1984, 163). Celebrities and media figures are often the object of such relationships because they are easy to enter and the rules of maintenance (or abandonment) are elastic and individualized.

This talk of “imaginary social relationships” or intricate, one-sided fantasies that involve celebrities may sound pathological, but they are not (Caughey 1984; see also Dixon 1999; Inglis 2010; Marshall 2006; Schickel 1985). For example, imagine a person who loyally tunes into the

local news to catch the five-day forecast every night at 6pm. This display of loyalty to a single meteorologist exemplifies an inherently artificial relationship. Perhaps because the weatherman has proven to be accurate in his or her previous forecasts (or because he or she has a pleasant delivery), the viewer at home develops a rapport with this individual, noting that this person is someone who can be trusted or counted on as they go about making plans. The meteorologist is aware of a general viewership, but they do not reciprocate the intimate relationship with the individual viewer. Nevertheless, the viewer at home continues to frequent the local news station at 6pm in order to see what their reliable acquaintance has to say. It is not crazy to model such behavior, and indeed many people follow the same routine with their own trusty meteorologist.

To be sure, a rapport with “intimate strangers” is present in many rhetorical interactions with celebrities and public figures found in the media’s crosshairs. Such a rapport can be observed when individuals dress as a character or attempt to embody a celebrity’s essence; wears a favorite athlete’s jersey²⁹; when an amateur garage band covers a popular song; when video game enthusiasts channel rock stardom in *Guitar Hero*; when someone imitates or quotes dialogue from their favorite movie or television programs; or when someone sexually fantasizes about a celebrity whom they find attractive. These are not examples of pathological behavior, but rather examples of a mind at play—or in a state of suspended reality that gives pleasure—and serves to ease the sterility or complexities of day to day life. This kind of fantasy is a cultural phenomenon that “reflects individual desires, but only as these have been shaped, twisted, and structured by social and cultural forces” (Caughey 1984, 163). Thus, imagined social relationships with celebrities and media personalities are not only common and normal, but functional as a means of refining the illusion of connectivity to the outside world. In sum, these pseudo-relationships are valuable as a psychological simulation of intimacy in the Digital Age.

Of course, there *are* more extreme examples of fantasized relationships with celebrities or media figures that are most certainly pathological (see Caughey 1984, 1-7; Schickel 1985). Mark David Chapman was obsessed with John Lennon's music career and grew angry at interview comments that he made, as well as the nuances of his music, and ultimately killed him in December 1980. John Hinckley, Jr., Ronald Reagan's would-be assassin, was obsessed with Jodie Foster after seeing her portrayal of a teenage prostitute in *Taxi Driver* (1976) and sought meaningful, "real" contact with her, and even stalked her at times. When these tactics failed to garner her attention, he resorted to even more outlandish means of "winning her affection and love," and sent numerous letters and gifts to her (Schickel 1985). Beyond these specific examples there are many cases in which individuals have stalked, attacked, or even murdered celebrities (or committed suicide as part of a morbid fantasy). My point here is that while pathological cases of imagined celebrity relationships exist, it is crucial to understand that most people have healthy (albeit dissonant and fantastical) relationships with individuals whom they have never met in person. This is very common in American culture.

At the end of the day many celebrities also serve as a different kind of symbol: extended family. Just as we are quick to let a beloved aunt off the hook for a bad deed or conversely lambast a rival sibling over the slightest trespass, we conceptualize celebrities with similar compartmentalization. The bad ones can never do right; the loved ones, unless unequivocally proven to be otherwise, are often infallible. Like family, celebrities who fall from grace or pass away also require a sense of closure for the individuals who have followed them. Redemption—whether through the celebrity's apologetic actions and rhetoric, or a posthumous revision of their memory by mourners—is often sought as a key component of their narrative transformation

when their symbolic persona evolves. Celebrity “comeback” stories always play well in the public eye as they represent growth through humility, renewal, reintegration, and perseverance.

When the ideals of an imaginary relationship are infringed upon, disrupted, or otherwise truncated (either by the object of fantasy’s actions or outside influence), the illusion becomes unstable and creates an emotional reverberation that forces the imagining individual to act out. In these cases, the Internet and other new media devices serve as a breeding ground for vernacular expression in response to celebrity culture. Of course, this can also be seen online in the folk response to many other newsworthy happenings—including disaster, tragedy, politically charged debates, or even gossip column “comment” sections—because of the widespread availability and instantaneity of digital technology as mediums for computer-mediated communication.

The digital interactions that stem from a shared interest (or revulsion) about a particular topic, event, or person often yield a different kind of relationship structure than the comparably “imaginary” construct between an individual and a celebrity or public figure whom they admire. Thus, a terminological distinction may serve to distinguish these relationships from those that are forged online between mutually committed parties, but nevertheless also lack the corporeality of face-to-face or in-person intimacy.

4.2. Simulative Social Worlds and the Response to Mass Media

The patterns of community-building and online vernacular expression that are forged between individuals in shared online space represent the cultivation of *simulative social worlds*. In contrast to imaginary social worlds, which are inherently one-sided in that they do not elicit two-way communication between a public figure and the admiring individual, simulative social worlds signify relationships that are created, maintained, and fostered through online interaction

between fellow Internet users.³⁰ The interactions that take place in the online venues where meaningful expression and dialogue occur—blogs, forums, website comment sections, online gaming, etc.—allow for a communicative exchange which feature a reciprocal communicator-receiver dynamic. Artificial personal connections to celebrities and public figures are peripheral and internally regulated. By contrast, simulative social connections online allow for emotional validation regarding the investment of a fellow user’s time, energy, and/or trust by using the computer as a mediatory agent. Even though there is not a physical element to the communal discourse or individual conversations, the emotional connection remains palpable.

Although they are not corporeal, Internet and new media technologies serve a similar psychological function as imaginary social relationships in that they also simulate relationships with other people. Participants converge on the same cyber-terrain and are able to interact in real time, often with the intention of expressing themselves either rhetorically or in an effort to contribute to an online community’s familial environment. The relationship-building patterns forged through online vernacular expression and symbolic interaction can either be brief and ancillary (as with a harmless “flame war,” or in earnest replies to ongoing comments), or conversely, rather intimate and prolonged, with deep communal connections, traditions, and expectations within the context of a shared online venue.

When the communicative exchange opportunity afforded by computer-mediated communication intersects with the need to comment on the newsworthy actions of celebrities (for better or worse), the biases of the individuals’ imaginary social relationships with celebrities comes to the fore and merges with the nuances of the simulative social worlds entrenched online. It is here—juxtaposed between the simulative contexts of an online venue and the individual users’ own external, imaginary social world—where the importance of imaginary social

relationships become most clear and indeed reveal a great deal about how people construct meaningful connections with others in mass society.

Just as one might defend a friend over an unjust attack, some Internet users will rhetorically announce their loyalty to a beloved celebrity through dismissive dialogue or defensive communication following a controversial news story. Others (perhaps subconsciously testing their peers' like-minded dissatisfaction with a celebrity's deviance) lash out, sometimes humorously or satirically, other times seriously or viciously. In a virtual world where a digital barrier protects users from physical confrontation and harm or social repercussions in their "real" lives, people are able to openly express themselves in a multitude of ways. Given their perception of safety and perceived distance, it stands to reason that many interactions found online may be more genuine than those amongst a group of amicable colleagues reacting to a news story, and thus more indicative of the true folk response to mass media.

Online, folk values are reestablished through symbolic rhetoric and interaction, and the celebrity under scrutiny is collectively othered as deviant and unworthy of admiration. Groupthink emerges and attempts to reaffirm the online community's moral compass. The lack of an individual's conformity to the group's mood elicits communal scorn. Of course, the failure for an individual to separate themselves from the illusion of intimacy results in a deeper degree of emotional investment in their betrothed celebrity's stature remaining respectable—and denial when this image is destroyed. As Caughey notes, a parasocial relationship with an admired figure—whether through books, television, records, or imagination—is often felt to be subjectively beneficial, but that when an admired figure dies, "the person [who admires the celebrity] feels the loss of both friend and mentor" (1984, 66). These emotional responses

resemble the loss of a “real” friend, which underscores the true realness of imaginary social relationships for the individual.

Celebrities are expected to embody the best standards of society. They operate in a guarded social bubble where their relationships to “regular” individuals are one-sided and impersonal, yet placed on a pedestal where expectation for unwavering, socially acceptable behavior is common. When we encounter people or hear about behaviors or ideas that run counter to our individual notions of right and wrong, good and bad, and so on, we tend to dismiss or reject these people or ideas; in some cases, we even ostracize them in order to create social distance while rhetorically affirming our predetermined values as superior. Some of these dismissals are tacit, while others are public or even performatively undertaken. In these latter cases, a window of opportunity opens for an individual to express their values and cast a metaphorical fishing line into the throws of society, reeling in those who agree with the bait. On the Internet, however, the lack of physicality provides a social buffer for vernacular expression and allows users to do this ideological “fishing” for camaraderie or perhaps even some intentional sparring, just like someone in the analog world may seek out a bar fight.

When a living celebrity reveals themselves in a newly negative light, a betrayal is felt and reconciliation is needed before slanderous or dismissive responses can fade. When a celebrity dies, an admiring individual is forced to reexamine their feelings about an imaginary relationship with the figure, especially if formal redemption efforts have not taken place, because their relationship is symbolically severed. The cultural loss is a personal one for the individual with emotional ties to the media figure. The emotional responses to celebrities’ lives are not limited to instances of death. In fact, any instance in which a once-esteemed media figure comes under

fire can elicit result in emotional responses that would be expected of a betrayal in one's personal circle.

The folk response to celebrity culture reveals the rhetorical markers for societal beliefs and expectations about the individuals whom they often emulate. In doing so, they articulate the folk conceptualization of normalcy and decency. More importantly, these responses demonstrate a projection of the individual's own subconscious values and helps to cement their own ideas as being morally sound. While expressing themselves in a way that elicits feelings of connectivity and intimacy with others via the online venue, individuals are able to compensate for the disruption to their imagined social relationship.

Like traditional media disasters, celebrities often attract the ire of the public when their level of exposure becomes oversaturated in the media or when their bad behavior crosses the line of social taboos with regards to perversion, fidelity, mental illness, or social deviance. This can be seen in the increasingly negative and dismissive treatment in the media of such celebrities as socialite Paris Hilton, actress Lindsay Lohan, singer Britney Spears, and reality television star Kate Gosselin (of *Jon and Kate Plus 8*). Some celebrity couples have also attracted misgivings from the overexposure of their public affection and were even assigned such abbreviating monikers as "Bennifer" (actor Ben Affleck and singer Jennifer Lopez), "Brangelina," (actors Brad Pitt and Angelina Jolie) and "TomKat" (actors Tom Cruise and Katie Holmes). Beyond overexposure, celebrity deviance has also attracted backlash, as in the case of musician John Mayer's comments on his perception among African Americans (see Cwynar 2010) or the fallout from Michael Richards' use of the "N" word at an audience member during a 2009 comedy show.

A fundamental shift in the focus of celebrity coverage and its subsequent reception transcends simple gawking and prodding into their antics and instead goes deeper psychologically for the telecommunicated media's audience. The audience responds to the seriousness of the celebrity's behavior by projecting their own anxieties about eccentric, criminal, or deviant behaviors into the performance and dissemination of humor. Not only is this data richly evocative of the influence of popular culture on ideas about mental health in society, it also demonstrates how the socially conceived means of information dissemination manifest in contemporary culture. Chapters 5 and 6 of this work are dedicated to two detailed case studies that further illustrate these claims.

CHAPTER 5

FROM SPORTS HERO TO SUPER VILLAIN; OR, HOW TIGER WOODS WRECKED HIS CAR(EER)

There was a time when professional golfer Eldrick “Tiger” Woods could do no wrong. In the minds of many adoring fans and respected sports commentators he was an exemplary professional with sound moral credentials. From his early career through 2009, the charming and handsome athlete was recruited to endorse such high profile products as *Nike* shoes and *Gatorade* sports drinks, as well as golf equipment and apparel. He eventually created his own line of clothing and even sponsored a popular video game franchise bearing his name and likeness. In addition to the admirable persona that Woods and his public relations team promoted, the fact remains that he was actually an immensely talented and entertaining athlete who broke numerous professional golfing records before reaching age twenty-five. As a biracial individual of African-American and Thai heritage, Woods was also portrayed in the media as a groundbreaking figure to the predominantly white sport of golf, and applauded as a positive role model for children and minorities. Above all, Tiger Woods’ success as a golfer and pop culture icon enticed new fans to finally follow a sport that had long been mocked as painstakingly dull to watch alone. In other words, Woods not only raised his own profile through playing golf, but he managed singlehandedly to raise the profile of the *entire* sport in the consciousness of the American people.

Tiger Woods’ star rose as Major League Baseball was embroiled in an era of public scrutiny due to allegations of rampant steroid abuse among players. Additionally, the National Football League was criticized by fans for employing several former criminals, most notably the dog killing quarterback, Michael Vick. Amid the controversy in two of America’s most beloved

sports, Tiger Woods remained a positive symbol that stood in stark contrast to the boisterous and excessive reputations attributed to his athletic contemporaries. To many fans and members of the media, he was infallible. By daybreak on November 27th, 2009, all of that changed. The media frenzy that followed Woods' fateful Thanksgiving accident would have long-reaching ramifications on his public persona and the ways that he was subsequently received by admirers.

This chapter discusses the ascendance and subsequent dissolution of Tiger Woods' status as an admired symbol in the imaginary social worlds of sports fans and media consumers.

Through the case study of Tiger Woods' fall from grace, I explore how celebrity "heroes" can quickly become villains in the public eye, and show through collected humor and folk narratives precisely how the Internet has served as a hotly contested and energetic battleground of public relations. In my analysis of these responses, I demonstrate how the Tiger Woods saga provides insight into how people organize, reinforce, and protect the integrity of their imaginary social worlds through symbolic interaction and the sharing of humor in Internet contexts. Most importantly, I interpret the folk responses found online in the weeks and months following Woods' bizarre car accident incident (which ultimately led to the revelation of his numerous extramarital affairs and unstable personal life) in order to demonstrate that the mass media treats certain celebrity scandals as disasters, which in turn invite the kind of colorful responses that follow death and disaster, and reveal symbolic expositions on the human condition.

5.1. The Beginning of the End: Tiger Woods' Crash as Impetus for Public Discourse

Shortly after 4:30 a.m. on Thanksgiving night, 2009, news broke that Tiger Woods had been involved in a "serious" car accident in which he wrecked his Cadillac Escalade into both a fire hydrant and a tree just outside of the driveway to his Florida home.³¹ Local reporters broadcasted the news that Woods was being treated at an area hospital after suffering facial

lacerations and bruising from the collision, but the evidence of the airbags not deploying indicated that his vehicle had not been traveling over thirty-three miles per hour upon impact. During the scramble for the complete scoop, newscasters reported that neighbors witnessed Woods' wife hitting the wrecked car with a golf club—even breaking the back window—apparently in a “heroic” effort to free him from the vehicle after striking a tree.

At first blush, some people took the story at face value as a true accident and showed ample concern for Woods' well-being. However, it was soon clear that something was “off.” People began to wonder: why was Tiger Woods out driving at 2:25 in the morning (on a holiday, no less)? How did he manage to wreck a car in his own driveway? And why did his wife need to use a golf club in order to “save” him? There were more questions than answers.

Within a matter of days, the juicy details came out: Woods and his spouse, Swedish model Elin Nordegren, had apparently been arguing before the car accident about an undisclosed family matter. She had scratched his face during the confrontation (causing the lacerations reported from the accident), which caused Woods to quickly flee his home in an attempt to evade his wife's attack with a golf club before crashing his vehicle (Cook 2009). Rumors began to surface that Woods had been under the influence of painkillers during the crash, but more damning, however, was the November 28th (2009) article in the *National Enquirer*—which has never been regarded as a bastion of prestigious journalism—alleging that the crash-inducing confrontation between Woods and his wife was sparked by the revelation of extramarital affairs with a mistress by the name of Rachel Uchitel.³²

Woods attempted damage control through a lackluster press conference in which he asked for privacy and decorum from the media and fans while he tended to his private family issues. No doubt to the chagrin of his public relations team, Woods' aloof delivery and

defensive rhetoric only fueled outsider curiosity and riled media pundits who continued to follow the story. The story simply would not—*could not*—go away.

The public at-large and the media were intrigued by the ongoing scrutiny as the full story unfolded, especially because the burgeoning allegations ran counter to Woods' reputation as one of the "good guys" in the sports world. When it was confirmed by multiple news reports that the cause of the argument that led to the accident was indeed a result of Woods' infidelity, the revered image of the indomitable golf hero quickly began to dissolve. In short order, news conduits (from blogs to broadcast television) ran updated coverage noting that Tiger Woods had indeed engaged in extramarital affairs with not one, but nearly a dozen women.

By August and September 2010, several reports (including some by the *National Enquirer*) were claiming that Tiger Woods had affairs with as many as one hundred and twenty women over a five year span during his marriage. Of course, the numbers may be grossly exaggerated, but this is not the point. I bring them up here in order to illustrate the symbolic clout of infidelity in the discourse of reimagining Tiger Woods' public persona. The number of alleged mistresses is not significant as they merely serve as a numerated symbol of Woods' blatant disregard for his family's welfare. These figures also draw attention to his piggish, selfish, and thoughtless actions while skirting his responsibilities as a husband and father.³³

5.2. Humor, Betrayal, and the Meaning of the Burgeoning Folk Response to Tiger Woods

The reportage of numerous extramarital affairs (beyond those which surfaced immediately following the car accident that sparked the news story) serves as an underhanded reminder to the public of just how scummy Tiger Woods allegedly was during his marriage, regardless of his public reckoning and efforts to reclaim his honor as an athlete and celebrity. In essence, reports of Woods' sexual conquests help to subjugate his campaign for reacceptance

into popular culture as a likeable figure while reinforcing his status as a pariah, branded by a history of unsavory psychological baggage.

Not surprisingly, many fans felt angry, betrayed, and disgusted by the scandalous details that surfaced of Woods' swanky Las Vegas hookups with exotic dancers, racy text messages to mistresses, and his bumbling attempts to cover his tracks after committing adultery.³⁴ The shocking contents of these news items—namely the extent of Woods' countless indiscretions—wholeheartedly debunked and destroyed the affable and wholesome persona that Woods had cultivated throughout his career as a professional golfer. The rapid loss of approval caused a social vacuum among followers and persons knowledgeable of Woods' career or iconic pop culture relevance. As a result, humorous anecdotes quickly arrived after it was evident that the Tiger Woods car crash went much deeper than the accident. In doing so, they served to ease the transition of trading a positive symbol in many individuals' imaginary social worlds (and cultural inventories) for a negative one.

Unlike a traditional media disaster (like Hurricane Katrina) or a single, shocking event that attracts an elongated, quasi-media disaster (such as coverage on the death of Michael Jackson), the media spectacle that followed the Tiger Woods' saga had to circulate and interpret the new information that was presented *immediately* upon their arrival. There was no crushing impact of a single tragedy, followed by continuous coverage. Instead, the reportage of the Tiger Woods saga was very similar to the kinds of media coverage seen during the O.J. Simpson trial, which thrived off the minutia from daily court proceedings while being dramatized in the context of a gruesome back story and murder allegations against a previously respected sports celebrity. One of the major differences in the evolving folk response to the Tiger Woods' story was the greater sophistication and widespread availability of the Internet as a tool of expression.³⁵ While

early means of computer-mediated communication (such as listservs and basic email applications) were available and indeed utilized during and after the O.J. Simpson trial for humorous expression, they were unable to connect users to a vast, omnipotent network of information and vernacular expression in the ways that the Internet now offers users today.³⁶ A closer example may be found in the media coverage following reports of infidelity by basketball player Kobe Bryant.

Like other folk responses to major news events of the 21st century, the predominant method of Tiger Woods joke and narrative circulation took place via email and in online discussion forums, especially in the “comments” section of news sites that reported on the evolving story as new information became available. Beyond one major example, Photoshopped humor was not a principal component of the humorous folk response to the Tiger Woods saga as it had been in the wake of 9/11 and ensuing devastation left by Hurricane Katrina. Instead, wordplay humor, golf jokes, misogynist rhetoric, and narratives about Tiger Woods became a major source of entertainment and helped to frame just how far (and how fast) Tiger Woods had fallen in the public eye.

5.3. Oral and Digital Variations on Tiger Woods Humor: Proverbs, Riddles, Photoshops, and Narratives

In retrospect, many of the jokes that entered into oral and electronic circulation during the height of the Tiger Woods scandal’s media saturation (from November 2009 to February 2010) exemplify the ways in which joke tellers creatively tailor their humor and delivery toward the interpretation and re-contextualization of news events as they unfold. Jokes began to appear the day after the news broke.³⁷ Some of the earliest jokes that appeared online after news of the

accident broke use wordplay rather than the “bite” of content-driven incongruity. For example [collected November 27, 2009—only one day after the accident took place]:

Tiger Woods crashed into a fire hydrant and a tree. He couldn't decide between a wood and an iron.

Tiger Woods is so rich that he owns lots of expensive cars. Now he has a hole in one.

Tiger Woods wasn't seriously injured in the crash, but he's still below par.

Q: What's the difference between a car and a golf ball?

A: Tiger can drive a ball 400 yards.

The jokes are punchy, but not particularly cutting. If anything they poke fun at the absurdity and foolishness of the fact that Tiger Woods managed to crash his car before leaving his own driveway—a task that at first appears difficult to replicate unintentionally. The structure of the joke is in the form of a folk riddle; the narrative organization represents the survival of an accepted formula for the successful telling of a joke. In delivery, the sharp wordplay merges descriptions of terminology from Woods' profession that elicit the desired humorous effect in response to the risqué implications encoded in the prose. Above all, the jokes make light of the car crash.³⁸ However, as more details surfaced about the causation of the Thanksgiving night incident—namely the revelation of Woods' marital tensions and particularly the golf club attack perpetrated by Tiger's wife, Elin—the bite of the jokes stepped up a notch as well because their rhetoric draws attention to action rather than linguistic turns:

Q: What were Tiger Woods and his wife doing out at 2:30 in the morning?

A: They were out clubbing.

Q: Why did Tiger Woods' wife come after him with a 5-iron?

A: Because he really “teed” her off.

Elin has done something that [competing pro golfer] Phil Mickelson never has: beat Tiger Woods with a 9-iron.

[Collected November 28, 2009].

The humor serves to turn the seriousness of the unfolding news story—the infidelity, violence, and family discord—into a pleasurable narrative. The earliest jokes in circulation made light of the car accident news story before the subsequent details of infidelity had surfaced. By contrast, the newer jokes disclose that the tellers are the story’s new developments as evidenced by the introduction of Woods’ wife into the narrative, yet they maintain the delivery dynamics of the earlier joke examples. In particular, the humor shifts its attention to the actions of Woods’ wife, Elin, especially regarding her role in causing the car accident. Two examples that surfaced around December 1st, 2009, were:

Q: What does Tiger Woods and a baby seal have in common?

A: They have both been clubbed in the head by Norwegians.

Q: What song does Tiger Woods have stuck in his head?

A: “Norwegian Wood.”

While these jokes bring Woods’ spouse to the fore, they do so in an attempt to draw connections to their audiences’ cultural inventories. Simultaneously, they mock her status as a foreigner in the United States by playing off of her Scandinavian heritage, even though she is actually *Swedish* instead of the cited “Norwegian.” The newer jokes reveal structural evidence of repetition and variation, mediated by the changing contexts of the news. A representative example of this comes from the lone Photoshopped image about Tiger Woods as his situation began to attract widespread circulation during the controversy. Perhaps the most popular image to appear (and ultimately “go viral”) was a mock Christmas card that was playfully billed as being sent by the artistically enhanced individuals whose picture appeared on the card: a battered Tiger Woods and his slap-happy wife, Elin (**Fig. 13**).



Figure 13: Image from a circulating email attachment titled “Tiger Woods’ Christmas Card.” This widely circulated Photoshop captures the essence of the then-burgeoning news story. By the time that this image had reached over a million views—within a matter of days from its first transmission online—the public had already begun to turn on Woods.

The mock Christmas card was widely circulated via forwarded emails and the Web during December 2009, purposely (and humorously) coinciding with the time of year in which many people traditionally send holiday cards to friends and extended family that often feature a portrait of their own immediate family (Santino 1995). The holiday ritual of sending a card and family portrait to loved ones during December is also occasionally accompanied with the sending of an “update letter” that fills in recipients on the sending family’s year in review (such as activities, job news, exciting revelations, etc.). Email appears to be replacing the physical exchange of such fodder as it is a cheaper, faster, and equally effective means of achieving the desired symbolic gesture of yearly tides and connectivity to an extended network of meaningful individuals. Nevertheless, the tradition remains viable, even if hybridized between the analog and digital mediums. An anonymous, clever (but likely amateur³⁹) artist took note of this stable

holiday tradition and proceeded to manipulate a regular picture of Woods and his wife in order to create an artistic output that rhetorically embodied and encapsulated the major visual and narrative markers of the news event, namely the befuddling imagery of a jilted, golf club-toting wife, and an injured, besmirched celebrity athlete.⁴⁰

The Photoshopped Christmas card embeds humor in the mockery of the real-life media nightmare that Tiger Woods and his family were facing. Moreover, the intentional perversion of the holiday card tradition makes light of the practice as an awkward or archaic gesture while simultaneously invoking its components in order to have an effect as a cheeky rhetorical device. Variations upon the Christmas card's presentation appeared throughout the peak lifespan of the image's circulation. Other Web-based folk artists modified the "original" Photoshopped image in order to adorn the couple with more-festive holiday apparel, and in at least one case a variation showcased a frame surrounding the original image while printing "Merry Christmas from the Woods Family!" in vibrant colors.

5.4. Contexts, Cultural Inventories, and Traditionality in the Evolution of Woods Humor

While the earliest jokes focused on the foolishness of Tiger Woods' driveway car crash (and were accordingly aimed directly at him alone), then shifted to mock the enraged actions of his spouse, the third wave of jokes refocused their energies at Woods' actions and began to appear less than five days after the *National Enquirer* story broke (which had subsequently prompted several other mistresses to come forward). Once again, the humor tapped into the new proof of Tiger Woods' rampant adultery while again mixing golf terminology, wordplay, and joke formulas for the desired humorous effect [Collected December 1-3, 2009]:

A lion would not cheat, but a tiger would. [Wordplay proverb]

Q: What did Tiger Woods change his first name to?

A: Cheetah.

Q: What is Tiger Woods' handicap?

A: White women.

Q: How did Tiger Woods keep track of what hole he was on?

A: By the tattoo on her back.⁴¹

Like some elements of the Challenger Disaster joke cycle, other riddles mock Woods'

commodified connection to advertising and endorsements:

Q: What is Nike's new slogan?

A: Just did it. [Collected December 15, 2009]

Q: Who is Tiger Woods' new sponsor?

A: Durex [condoms]. [Collected December 19, 2009]

KFC is coming out with a Tiger Woods meal: it features white breasts only.

[Collected January 6, 2010]

If Tiger Woods isn't careful, he's going to get GatorAIDS... or the "golf clap".⁴²

[Collected January 13, 2010]

Many of the jokes about Tiger Woods also expose insight into the joke tellers' cultural inventory, which helps to explain how it informs their creative processes. For example, the following joke displays an acute juxtaposition of popular culture knowledge with an edgy hook for shock and humorous value:

Q: What is the difference between Tiger Woods and Magic Johnson?

A: HIV. [Collected December 19, 2009].

The "shock" value of the insensitivity from the folk riddle is meant to surprise the audience into laughter due to its blatant and somewhat morbid thoughtlessness.

These joke examples support the incongruity theory of humor which, according to Elliott Oring (1987), suggests that jokes are predicated on the perception of appropriate social incongruities and that the appropriate incongruities are at the are the locus of a joke's base

meaning. A joke may thusly carry a variety of meanings in contextual performances as derived by the motives by the joke-teller (279).⁴³ For those who tell or listen to risqué humor, the “extreme incongruity between an expectation of what is acceptable and appropriate and the actual response” contributes to the perception of the humor’s value (Bronner 1985, 43). In this case, the humorous anecdotes about infidelity demarcate Woods’ behavior as inappropriate; they also project the individual joke tellers’ reverence for the concept of loyalty by rhetorically voicing their support for the concept of monogamy. Other circulating humor examples also show a structural marker of repeated, variable folklore at work, such as:

Q: What’s the difference between Tiger Woods and Santa Claus?⁴⁴

A: Santa only comes once a year [Collected online, June 2, 2010].

The invocation of Santa Claus (in the joke setup) reveals the traditionality of the humor—not just because of the riddle formulas’ accepted value as an organizational tool for delivery, but because of the usage of past oral traditions in the prose itself. A longtime Santa joke in oral tradition goes, “Why does Santa have such a big sack?” The answer, “Because he only comes once a year,” is meant to be crude by playing on the words’ double-meanings while also serving to undermine the intended purity of Christmas proverbs and carols that also use the punch line as a narrative hook. These particular examples show the performers’ awareness—be it consciously or subconsciously—of past folkloric forms.

Riddle-type jokes were not the only folkloric form invoked in order to humorously conceptualize the Tiger Woods incident. Narrative stories were also circulated on the Internet, and they also revealed repetition and variation in their content. The following narrative is actually a revision of a humorous narrative about Bill Clinton that was in circulation during and after news about the Monica Lewinsky scandal had surfaced (see Oring 2003):

The Pope and Tiger Woods died on the same day and because of an administrative mix up the Pope went to Hell and Tiger Woods went to Heaven. The Pope explains the situation to the administrative clerk in Hell, and after checking the paperwork admits that there is an error. “However,” the clerk explains, “it will be 24 hours before it can be rectified.”

The next day the Pope is called and Hell’s staff bids him farewell. On the way up, the Pope meets Tiger Woods coming down from Heaven and they stop to have a chat.

“Sorry about the mix up,” apologizes the Pope.

“No problem,” replies Tiger Woods.

The Pope says, “I am really anxious to get to heaven.”

Tiger asks, “Why is that?”

The Pope responds, “All my life I have wanted to meet the Virgin Mary.”

Tiger smiles and says, “You’re a day late.” [Collected August 9, 2010].

Of course, this narrative was not the only one to be recycled from those circulating during the Clinton-Lewinsky scandal. Nevertheless, it reveals a deeper performative aura that attracts listeners to invest their time into the punch line.⁴⁵

5.5. Tiger Woods and the Function of Humorous Expression

In the “Healthwise” section of the April 2010 issue of *O’ the Oprah Magazine*, a small advice bubble discusses the benefits of gossiping, arguing that

Gossiping can solidify friendships and strengthen your moral compass—so long as you’re judicious about what you say and whom you say it to (dishing about Tiger Woods’s latest mistress with your best friend: yes, spreading false rumors about your best friend: yes; spreading false rumors about your boss to half of the office: no). Sharing juicy information with friends strengthens social bonds, and

experts say gossip also informs us about what is acceptable and unacceptable behavior (108).

Gary Alan Fine and Bill Ellis (2010) note that gossiping and rumor-mongering provide “an opportunity for people and communities to explore how their nation is changing” and help to make sense of the individual’s surrounding world (3). In the case of Tiger Woods, rumors and other jocular rhetoric serve to not only project and process the changing worldviews of the tellers and passers as their imagined relationship with Woods undergoes revision, but also to subconsciously construct a feeling of self-superiority within the audience. In commentating on celebrity behavior, joke tellers are able to circumvent or bend the boundaries of taste by rhetorically projecting their own values and perceptions about the actions. So while it may be inappropriate to joke with co-workers about sex or genitalia, the context of a media event like the Tiger Woods’ scandal not only elicits performative entertainment at his expense, but also opens up a playful dialogue about otherwise taboo subjects under the subconscious guise of camaraderie and relationship building.⁴⁶

By framing Woods’ actions as deviant and repulsive, the humor reinforces socially assigned behavioral expectations and puts pressure on general conceptualizations of gender roles. Within the circulated humor, males (embodied by Tiger Woods) are rhetorically stereotyped as weak, slovenly imps who think with their genitalia. Women (embodied by Elin Nordegren) are rhetorically commended by joke purveyors for her invocation of a masculine, violent response to punish her partner’s deviance.⁴⁷ Woods is thus symbolically castrated through the various humorous anecdotes that reference venereal disease, sexual excess, and Woods’ own failure to uphold monogamy in his marriage (another sexualized psychological symbol). By removing his figurative genitalia, he is left symbolically powerless—in effect, eviscerated within the

imaginary social worlds of his former followers. The transition from hero to villain becomes easier to handle. This transformative symbolic process happens with many other scandals or falls from grace.

The humorous response to Tiger Woods' actions were not only crafted and disseminated in order to rhetorically punish his actions. They were also tacitly retaliating against the false character of Woods as blindly propagated by the media. Rather than accept Woods' actions as a disappointing lapse of judgment, media consumers assigned blame to the entities who endeared him to them in the first place. In the eyes of viewers, the media and its conglomerates that hosted the commercial products which sought his endorsements, the sport that hosted him as their poster child, and the general glossy image that was upheld by the media as a whole were responsible. Further, media consumers' internal knowledge of the fact that Woods was in fact not a "real" friend of theirs, but an "imaginary" figure in their lives, also riled their reactions to his behavior. This again demonstrates how people use to humor to retaliate against the emotional hegemony of the media following a disaster in that they were expressing anger over being duped into a superficial idolization of a celebrity.

While the Tiger Woods saga may appear to stretch the definition of "mass-mediated disaster" I should reiterate that I am using the term in reference to any news event that attracts widespread media coverage, oversaturates media outlets, and is adopted into the folk discourse through symbolic interaction. Additionally, in this case there is rhetorically a treatment of it as disaster in references to Woods's "meltdown," "breakdown," "explosion," or "fall." Media reported the original incident as a potentially fatal accident, and afterward as a disaster for his reputation. The slew of artistic and narrative responses to reports of Tiger Woods' infidelity exemplify how the Internet is primarily used as a simulated community where personally

satisfying symbolic interaction can take place in ways that cannot always be achieved in the physical world. Additionally, the study of Tiger Woods' scandal provides another perspective on the folk response to a mediated tragedy that is not related to death, but instead related to the value of living life a particular way and reaffirming certain folk values.

The Internet "preserves" folkloric material longer than oral tradition. Tiger Woods humor lodges on the Internet like a visual archive, and even though the jokes may fade in oral circulation, websites and other forums (some static, others still dynamic) persist in hosting Woods-related humor for a long time thereafter. While archived materials may lose their "freshness" to some folklorists seeking to understand an event's historical context, they nevertheless provide textual data from a once-potent moment of time. If collected in the process of their dissemination (as with many comments' sections to formal and informal news sites), these texts reveal much about the folk response to a particular event, as I have attempted to demonstrate here. In the final chapter to this work, I expand upon the applications of the Tiger Woods case study through an exploration as to how celebrity deaths recontextualize the memorialization process and complicate the folk response to such events.

CHAPTER 6

MICHAEL JACKSON AND THE HUMOR OF DEATH⁴⁸

By any measure, Michael Jackson—“the King of Pop,” “the Gloved One,” “Wacko Jacko,” whatever you want to call him—was a cultural icon. As the best-selling artist of all time, the complex musical and pop culture phenomenon left a tremendous legacy after his passing in June 2009 and a wealth of cultural reverberations from his career and sensationalized personal life. An estimated one *billion* people witnessed the broadcast of Michael Jackson’s funeral on television (Bucci and Wood 2009). In print, radio, Internet, and other media circles, Jackson accumulated an eclectic corpus of fans, enemies, critics, and colleagues who obsessed about every detail of his existence from nuanced accounts of his eccentric personal habits to serious allegations of child sexual abuse at his Neverland Ranch. In other words, Jackson had always attracted folklore—even long before he died. The Internet provided even greater traction for vernacular expression about his celebrity persona.

The folk response to the news of Michael Jackson’s death is particularly relevant for showing how the Internet plays a crucial and influential role in mediating and alleviating peoples’ anxieties about death. As such, I examine how these responses indicate a folk revision of the symbolic values attached to Jackson during his life, and how (through the ritual of narrative exchange and memorialization) they sought to posthum(or)usly shape the singer’s legacy (see Sofka 2009). I document the various jokes and posthumous narratives pertaining to Michael Jackson, and I extrapolate the behavioral patterns of memorialization practices that surfaced in the days and months immediately following his passing. In doing so, I suggest the psychological processes that take place after a depressing news story becomes a quasi-media disaster underscore the importance of vernacular expression for individuals who are entrenched in the media storm.

As my personal narrative from the introduction suggests, “Jacko” death humor emerged on the Internet within minutes and hours following the announcement of his passing. They peaked within a week of his passing before slowly fading over several months alongside the oral renditions of Michael Jackson humor. To date, several hundred Michael Jackson death jokes have circulated, although many of the circulating Jackson jokes initially found on the Internet were often recognizable as being a part of the oral traditions previously examined by humor scholars. In particular, Jackson jokes adopted the popularized and prototypical formulas seen in the aforementioned Three Mile Island, Challenger Disaster, and 9/11 joke cycles, which included elements of wordplay, riddles, or the juxtaposition of commercialism within the humorous texts to trigger the notation of incongruity among audiences. Other jokes, such as one created after the assassination of John Lennon (Q: What’s the only way that the Beatles will have a reunion now? A: Three bullets.) could be seen as evidence of repetition and variation—thus, *traditionality*—in jokes like “What’s the only way that the Jackson 5 will have a reunion?” The answer: “Four bullets.”

In death, Michael Jackson was memorialized, mythologized, and parodied in folkloric and media-initiated contexts. His collectively constructed postself was shaped through carefully selected images, stories, and public vigils in a variety of outlets in order to “keep his memory alive”.⁴⁹ Formally regulated media venues such as television and radio took special care to ensure that Jackson’s funeral and other extended coverage of his life and death was sensitive to the contentious nature of Jackson’s social reputation. Telecommunicated media typically chose to forgo reportage of the more unsavory narratives of Jackson’s legal woes and instead stuck to the politically correct discourse of positive remembrance.

As Simon Bronner observes in a study comparing televised reports of a celebrity death to folkloric commentaries, television “takes on an important role in this drama as a common source

of mass-cultural images and phrases” but avoids answering spectator questions which are incorporated into folk humor of the victim’s interpersonal relations (1988, 87). Bronner’s study was of orally transmitted commentaries primarily among adolescents in a confined geographic region. Arguably, the Jackson joke cycle exaggerated the process he described by being globally diffused on the Internet. The Jackson cycle also took on distinctive characteristics as a form that moved back and forth between oral and Internet transmitted communication as a hybridized vernacular expressive pattern.

Jackson’s posthumous persona was stripped from the context of formal media by consumers and subsequently broadcast throughout the folk-moderated dwellings of cyberspace. In a variety of Internet forums, websites, and blogs, Jackson became the subject of graphic lampooning or, conversely, vehement defense from supporters. In the quasi-formal venues of the Internet, such as gossip sites or other purported news sites, the protocol of reportage followed more closely to that of traditional televised coverage. Most computer-mediated communication, however, often directly engaged and challenged the boundaries of good taste and contested the appropriate means of grieving, remembering, and reimagining the posthumous persona of Michael Jackson in opposition to the prescribed sentiments found on television and radio. Above all, it is important to note that the death of Michael Jackson was first reported on the Internet,⁵⁰ and as such the cyberspace venue should serve as the starting point for a comparative examination of the rhetorical strategies employed in the amalgamation of humor that his death spawned or influenced.

6.1. Mass Media and Hybridized Performance in the Folk Response to Jackson’s Death

Due to his “super-celebrity” status,⁵¹ the folk response to Jackson’s death was more pervasive and tenuous than the circulating humor about other celebrity deaths that had occurred

around the same time. And although many other stars may have achieved great fame and fortune, few will actually penetrate the cultural inventories of nearly every corner of the Earth in the way that Michael Jackson did. From his childhood until death, spanning over fifty years, Michael Jackson was mobbed everywhere he went, and the media attention that he garnered (both positive and negative) was scrutinized on a level only a handful of other stars could attract. So while the latest boy band sensations or teenage heartthrobs may have flocks of fans and paparazzi follow them wherever they go today, it is unlikely that they will maintain the same level of stardom for many decades to come, especially when their fans grow older and realize that the majority of their music is not only horrible, but that the performers often do not individually contribute anything to their laughable “creative” outputs.⁵²

Whereas numerous television programs and radio broadcasts meticulously reported on the death of Michael Jackson, the Internet managed to act simultaneously as a forum for the dissemination of news reportage and personal reactions to his death, in a sense producing a living archive of the entire event as it unfolded. Again, the imaginary, liminal space that the Internet provides acts as a conduit for the exchange of information, a meeting place for those drawn together by the perceived communal tragedy. Liminality provides psychologically protective distance by allowing users to create an emotional buffer from the seriousness of the ongoing news. The Internet’s simulation of community following Jackson’s passing helped to ease the acceptance of his death in a manner that also protected users from embarrassment over having an emotional reaction to the news. Furthermore, the hybridization of culture again provided guidance in navigating the emotionality of the situation at-hand.

A latency period for humor is typically observed following tragedies whereby people forgo telling jokes about the event (see Ellis 2001; 2003). However, the Michael Jackson joke

cycle did not appear to yield to these social expectations in cyberspace. There are several contributing reasons that may account for why Jackson humor emerged more quickly online than other death humor that has historically followed media disasters. First, there was a preexisting repertoire of numerous Michael Jackson jokes before his death, and in many cases their formulas—often loosely based on the motifs discussed through this work—were quickly recycled to cater to the news. Second, the Internet—now even *more* accessible and utilized than ever before—offered greater anonymity and flexibility that masked the consequences of disregarding the expected latency period. Third, the public persona of Michael Jackson was a spectacle that was mediated by cultural attraction and fascination to the multilayered ambiguities of Jackson’s identity, which all-at-once complicated questions of race, sexual orientation, age, and even gender throughout his public career due in part to his ever-changing image, plastic surgery foibles, and encouraged the facilitation of folkloric speculation on his character and eccentricities (Gómez-Barris and Gray 2006; Graham-Smith 2008). But these were not the only reasons.

The public at-large was naturally more curious about the postmortem identity of Jackson as a potential clue to his ambiguous physical presence; the meta-awareness of this may have sparked humor in some circles. Furthermore, the widespread suspicion of Jackson’s guilt in the molestation of several boys (including a cancer patient), likely loosened social restrictions on expectations of allowing a latency period.⁵³ Last, and perhaps most importantly, popular culture observers were reeling from the death of several celebrities within a short period of time during the summer of 2009, resulting in Jackson-related death humor to have a shorter latency period than typically expected of such events. The influx of celebrity deaths acted twofold: first, they psychologically perturbed the greater population, which resulted in the encouragement of new

celebrity jokes to permeate for longer periods of time than previous joke cycles in order to ease the growing sense of chaos surrounding the multitude of deaths. In doing so, joke-tellers and their audiences were able to relieve internal anxieties about their own mortality.⁵⁴

The lack of death humor in cyberspace about celebrities who died in close to the time of Michael Jackson likely explains just *why* humor about Jackson's death did not yield to the established latency conventions. While the single event of Michael Jackson's passing may have constituted a "mass-mediated disaster" given the oversaturation of televised coverage about his life and death and his larger-than-life public persona, the psychological impact of numerous celebrities perishing so close to one another undoubtedly caused increased anxiety and confusion. Actors and showmen such as Dom DeLuise (May 4th), David Carradine (June 3rd), and Ed McMahon (June 23rd) all passed away within a month or so of each other in 2009. Their deaths began to draw attention to the growing numbers of celebrity deaths that had been taking place. In some cases jokes emerged on the Internet, but they usually appeared sparingly, and were even more uncommon in oral traditions. Farrah Fawcett and Michael Jackson both passed within hours of each other on the same day (June 25th), and their deaths were shortly followed by the passing of television ad spokesman Billy Mays (June 28th), American football star Steve McNair (July 4th), and legendary television anchor Walter Cronkite (July 17th).⁵⁵

On the Internet, death humor about celebrities who died *before* Michael Jackson adhered to the decorum expected of a latency period. Even jokes about actor David Carradine, who received the most news coverage after supposedly dying of autoerotic asphyxiation, did not encourage the immediate influx of online humor that Jackson spurred following his death. It is fathomable that the public collectively interpreted Michael Jackson's passing to be a part of the greater influx of celebrity deaths. Thus, while a latency period for individual Michael Jackson

death humor did not appear to have existed in cyberspace on the surface, the reality is that the notion of true latency was likely blurred by the successive deaths of other high-profile stars before Jackson, which caused him to be absorbed into the latency period appropriated to members of the burgeoning “dead celebrity” folk group.

By the time of the time of Jackson’s death, the period of public decorum had already passed in the public’s mind, and the acceptance of celebrity death humor was consequently more prevalent. The social tensions about celebrity death humor were already waning by the time the announcement of Jackson’s death was made public. However, as a symbol of many things both good and bad, the posthumous persona of Jackson became a social piñata for the release of anxieties embodied by the rash of celebrity deaths. More specifically, the complex interpretation of Jackson—the human being—in popular culture also needed to be reconciled with the social need for closure.

6.2. Joke Types, Variations, and Meaning

Unlike oral traditions where jokesters have to account for social decorum, users in cyberspace commented more immediately and more extensively about aspects of Jackson’s public persona, especially the accusations of child molestation that preceded his death.⁵⁶ Some examples of the most popular Michael Jackson jokes (collected June 25-29, 2009) that were found on message boards, forwarded emails,⁵⁷ and humor websites include:

Reports that Michael Jackson died of a heart attack are incorrect. In fact, he went to the children’s hospital and had a stroke.

Prior to his death, Michael Jackson had requested a sea burial... strapped to 2 buoys.

At the time of Jacko’s death he was trying to quit the Cub Scouts...he was down to ONE pack a day!

At the autopsy they found children's underwear strapped to Michael Jackson's upper arm. According to his doctors it is just a patch as he's been trying to quit for a while.

Michael Jackson has died from a heart attack by the age of 50. It's the first time he's been fucked by anything older than 12!

Apparently Jackson has requested in his will that his ashes be placed inside an 'etch-a-sketch'... so even after his death, kids can continue to play and fiddle with him.

MJ's dying wish was for his body to be melted down into LEGOs. This way the kids can play with him for a change.

People are wanting MJ's coffin to be left open before they bury him so that kids can see him stiff for one last time.

These jokes appear to reveal cultural values by emphasizing the innocent playfulness of childhood as well as the abuse of that innocence. The comedic formulas conform to a socially constructed prototypical structure that challenges the accepted social conventions of political correctness following the announcement of a death. Not only are many of them meant to remind audiences of Jackson's alleged sexual abuse of minors, but they are also meant to be somewhat absurdist in their presentation so as to elicit a pleasurable response from listeners. The double meaning of these examples supports the incongruity theory of humor (see Morreall 1983; Oring 1987, 2003).

It is important to emphasize that the joke-tellers in the aforementioned examples (and many of the other circulating Jackson jokes) use historical contexts to make the joke more relevant and effective for audience reception. The prior knowledge of existing allegations about Jackson's sexual abuse of children is central to understanding the joke-teller's motives and humor. On one level, the wordplay is meant to be humorous, but the central critique encoded in the joke is further admonishment for Jackson's alleged predatory sexual behaviors *by* the joke-teller themselves. Gratification for the joke-teller and the audience is related to the level of

awareness about the overarching themes and context of the joke topic's public and private personas, as well as other social contexts, such as other celebrities' death or worsening health (Lamb 1994, 227).

Jokes often serve as means to test and endorse cultural values following tense events by going against the grain of expected social decorum (Ellis 2001, 8). Cyberspace makes this not only accessible, but expected. Michael Jackson was singled out for humor not only because of the opportunity for creative expression, but to convey certain values about his character and how that character should be remembered or revered in the public's perception and memory. In serving this social function, the "folk riddle" was one of several categories/ formulas of humor that emerged following Jackson's death:

Q: What's the difference between Michael Jackson and Farrah Fawcett?

A: About three hours. (Collected June 25, 2009)

Q: Why did Michael Jackson die on the same day as Farrah Fawcett?

A: He didn't want her to be the only white woman grabbing all the headlines. (Collected June 25, 2009)

Curiously, Farrah Fawcett's family and fans were angry that Jackson's death coverage completely overshadowed many public memorials and news coverage about her life and death. Still, Fawcett was not the only celebrity who was incorporated into Michael Jackson death humor:

Q: What's the difference between Michael Jackson and the Jonas Brothers?

A: The Jonas Brothers will be playing gigs in August. [The performers' identity varies in the joke cycles to include any popular living, actively touring (and predominantly younger and newer) musicians—popular examples included Fergie, Britney Spears, or Miley Cyrus, etc.] (Collected June 27, 2009)

Q: What did Ed McMahon and Michael Jackson have in common?

A: Ed always said "Here's Johnny..." and Michael always said "*Where's Johnny...?*" (Collected June 29, 2009)

As reverberations from the abundance of celebrity deaths unfolded throughout the summer, joke-tellers incorporated awareness of the health of living celebrities, such as the revelation that actor Patrick Swayze had terminal cancer. Before long, the folk riddles found on the Internet mutated into the oral telling of Jackson jokes as they related to other celebrity death humor:⁵⁸

Q: What are Farrah Fawcett and Michael Jackson getting for Christmas?

A: Patrick Swayze. (Collected orally⁵⁹ August 10, 2009).

Other jokes quickly emerged in the folk riddle pattern, again employing wordplay with double-meaning and contextual jokes related to elements of Jackson's public persona, both as a musician and as a figure of media scrutiny⁶⁰:

Q: What were Michael Jackson's last words during his heart attack?

A: EEEEEEEHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEE!!!!!!
(Collected June 25, 2009).

Q: Why did Michael Jackson go to Hell?

A: Because he was "Bad." (Collected June 26, 2009).

Q: What was the cause of Michael Jackson's death?

A: "Human Nature." (Collected June 28, 2009).

Q: What's the difference between Michael Jackson and Disney films?

A: Disney films can still touch kids. (Collected July 1, 2009).

In addition to the "folk riddle," other recognizable joke categories included rhetorical questions about his death; jokes that incorporated other celebrities or their deaths; incidental humor based on events from Jackson's music career; wordplay about Jackson's songs and lyrics; jokes about Jackson's pre and post-mortem appearance; and *especially* jokes about his alleged sexual attraction to children. These jokes appeared in a variety of forums, with a substantial amount arriving in the form of witty stories (Collected June 25, 2009 to July 8, 2009):

Farrah Fawcett got to heaven God said to her: "Farrah, because you have been such a good person throughout your life I will give you one wish."

Farrah thought about this and replied: “God, I only want one thing and that is for the children of the world to be safe.” God agreed to Farrah’s wish and killed Michael Jackson.

Toxicology report is out. It seems Michael Jackson died from an allergic reaction after eating some 12 year old nuts. [Variations include “10 year old wieners” as the food poisoning culprit; also, the age of the purported food items vary]

Madonna has paid her respects to the Jackson family - and asked how much they want for the kids... [Variations include “Angelina Jolie” and other celebrities who have adopted several children from around the world.]

MJ’s cardiac arrest was brought about when he found out that Boyz 2 Men were a boy band and not a delivery service. [Variations include differentiations in the cause of death, including suicide, stroke, or heart attack, among others.]

EMTs arriving on the scene said that they could have saved Michael Jackson, but couldn’t get into the driveway because it was blocked by his Big Wheels.

Again, as with other circulating jokes, context—particularly the public knowledge of Jackson’s allegedly sordid or rumored past—is central to the teller and audience’s satisfaction with the joke. This is especially true of jokes that integrate Jackson’s lyrics and song titles into their punch-lines:

There are unconfirmed reports of people hearing “Thriller” playing backwards from the morgue - Apparently he’s de-composing.

As Jacko was fighting for his life in the ambulance, the doctor said, “I think we should start CPR!” The Paramedics said, “No we should start heart massage!” The Driver said, “No we should start an adrenaline drip!” Then Jacko, gasping for breath said, “You Wanna Be Startin’ Something!”

There will be a post-mortem today to determine which was the cause of death: A) Sunshine, B) Moonlight, C) Good Times, or D) The Boogie.

After Michael Jackson’s death, they were unsure what to put on the death certificate. In the end, one doctor pointed out that it doesn’t really matter if he’s “Black or White.”

Michael Jackson gets to the gates of heaven and God says to him: 'I cannot decide if you are black or white, so just beat it'.

To all the Michael Jackson fans, when you're laying in bed tonight, as a tribute to Michael, JUST BEAT IT.

Others incorporate manipulated proverbs to commentate on Jackson's appearance:

Like Michael Jackson always said: "Live fast, die young, leave a vaguely Vietnamese looking woman's corpse"

While others joke more directly about Jackson's plastic surgery foibles:

Paramedics at the scene report that Michael Jackson never got his color back.

Early reports are that the hospital does not know what to do with the body, as plastic recycling is not collected until next Thursday.

I genuinely feel sorry for Michael Jackson's family. The decision to bury, cremate, or recycle cannot be an easy choice to make.

Of course, Michael Jackson's physical appearance was not the only target of humorous expression. Some Michael Jackson jokes that existed before his death were recycled with new meanings or additional folk commentary, such as: "MJ won't burn in Hell; he'll melt," referring to Jackson's plastic surgery, to which a commenter on an Internet message board replied: "Well, at least he has practice burning," creating a meta-joke by referencing the fact that Jackson was severely burned during the filming of a 1984 Pepsi commercial. Another folk riddle of previous oral traditions reprinted online after Jackson's death appeared:

Q: What's the difference between MJ and Casper?

A: One's white and scary, and the other's a ghost.

To which a commenter on a message board jokingly replied: "...well, I guess not anymore." Or another example that I collected on July 6, 2009:

Q: Why did Michael Jackson die at 3:15?

A: It's when the big hand touches the little hand.

In oral traditions prior to Jackson's death, this folk riddle also had a previously popular incarnation that was brought to my attention when I witnessed several commentaries surface in response to the modified version's telling at a bar in Bloomington, Indiana: "No, no—it's supposed to be 'what time did the children take a nap at the Neverland Ranch?' Then you say, '3:15; when the big hand touches the little hand'." For the commentator, the previously existing version of the joke was the "right" one; the application of prior oral traditions to new Jackson death humor seemed incorrect, or at least confusing.⁶¹

Stressing the psychological motivation for generating humor (and relevant to note here), Alan Dundes and Carl Pagter assert that "stressful and traumatic events of national or international scope often stimulate the generation of new folklore—although the new folklore may turn out to be old folklore in disguise" (1991, 303). Like the Tiger Woods narratives that invoke patterns found in Bill Clinton joke cycles, one can observe this process with a McDonald's joke that circulated following Jackson's death (which seems to suggest a linking of two icons from popular culture into symbolic equivalents):

Out of respect, McDonalds has released the McJackson burger: 50 year old meat between 10 year old buns. (Collected June 26, 2009) [Variations include calling the burger the "McMichael" or "The Thriller Burger," with the ages of the "buns" varying.]

The "Michael Jackson burger" jokes actually derived from a pre-existing Jackson joke of the mid 1990s:

McDonald's is bringing out a new burger: the "Michael Jackson Burger"... It has 35 year old meat inside 5 year old buns (Circulating in 1994).

This particular joke cycle (both in its original and newly imagined form) appears to be directed both at Michael Jackson, the accused pedophile, and also at McDonald's, the fast food conglomerate. The incorporation of a fast food chain into the joke supports this assertion, but

also underscores the consumer's awareness of commercial oversaturation by the McDonald's corporation. Thus, the joke is a rebuke of the omnipresent media coverage about Jackson's death while tacitly admonishing McDonald's for its hyper-extended presence in the contested telecommunication medium and the posthumous joke as well as the joke from the 1990s pay special attention to Jackson's age in an effort to seemingly "date" the cultural relevance of the swipe. The incorporation of commercialized elements in juxtaposition with the main tragedy-derived joke fodder is not a new phenomenon. Willie Smyth notes that by "symbolically reducing the disaster to the level of a television commercial and showing the joke-tellers' ultimate dependence on media language, the jokes also reflect the degree to which people are controlled by the images broadcast over the airways" (1986, 260). In this way, joking also reaffirms the collective dissonance between the audience and the commercial hegemonic forces they are combating in their retreat to cyberspace.⁶²

While there was already an existing archive of Michael Jackson jokes in circulation on several humor websites, several specialized "Jacko" death humor websites arrived shortly after Jackson's death was made public. Many of these websites housed the earliest humor about Jackson's death, and even non-specialized joke sites began to host blogs about the circulating jokes within days of the news breaking. For example, take Yankeesdaily.com, a baseball blog site that was taken over by a single, wildly popular post on Michael Jackson jokes during the summer of 2009.⁶³ The site is not significant as a rhetorical text for the jokes that it hosted about Jackson's death in and of itself per se, but rather for the tacit jockeying for social position in the response forums by users brought together by Jackson's death. Moreover, unlike its specialized, humor-oriented website brethren like deadmichaeljacksonjokes.com (which appeared less than 24 hours after Jackson's passing but is now defunct), the Yankees Daily blog is still as active as

it was during the heightened joke dispersal period.⁶⁴ It is currently patronized by persons who are likely unaware that such a joke database exists within its pages without a specialized search since the site returned to its original function, catering to a more generalized sports audience interested in the New York Yankees.

In examining Web-based humor about former President Bill Clinton, Elliott Oring (2003) has identified six major categories of identification that can be extrapolated to organize the typical responses found on Internet humor message boards such as the one originally featured on the Yankees Daily blog: *indexical* responses, which have an authentic “voice of the people” response used to reflect mainstream attitudes); *distracting* responses, which relay the enjoyment of joke while expressing that there is “a disjunction between the humor of the jokes and the reality to which they allude”; *tendentious* responses, which see the jokes as “aggressions and appreciate them as such”; *offensive* responses, which regard the joking as hostile and offensive; *harmless* responses, which regard the joking as simply “just jokes”—that they are basically harmless; and *perilous* responses, which warn of the consequences for partaking in joking by sharing folk wisdom that encourages appreciation or decorum for the subject of ridicule (Oring 2003, 135-37). Many of the categories outlined by Oring were readily identifiable in the earliest messages posted on the Yankees Daily blog [all text is *sic*; collected June 26 to July 3, 2009]:

...that’s just not funny. I love a good joke and a sick joke but that isn’t either!

Fucking hilarious. Well done all.

This is sick. When your fucking mothers die let me make jokes about how much of a dumb bitch she was for making dumb ass kids who take the time out to make fun of a dead person and racism as well

I think it’s hilarious that people are so sensitive...

In all of these cases and throughout much of the site, the posted responses on the death and

treatment of Michael Jackson's memorialization included a variety of participants. As Oring notes, the "individuals willing to register their opinions on the Web tend to be those with strong, well-defined views and a willingness to express them publicly" (2003, 135). This appears to be the case with the Yankees Daily blog—there were twinges of satire, genuine disgust, admonishment, and sarcasm all at war with one another. Of course, in addition to the responses that revealed the complex emotions stemming from anxiety over the death of a cultural icon (or in some cases actual celebration of the death of a "sick pedophile"), the site also acted as a conduit for posting and retelling jokes, and many of the jokes found on the site were repeated several times on the same message board thread and eventually onto other sites, or imported from other sites. In the absence of jokes, there was "flaming" between posters,⁶⁵ with accusations of unoriginality or just simply critiquing their peers' lack of joke-telling abilities, such as with the following example:

Sean S [responding to another user's post],
Someone is a little cranky today...by the way, next time you try and insult me, why don't you try and use some capital letters, I hear typing in caps makes you appear cooler to your cyber-friends.

Half these jokes aren't even funny, and to be honest I laughed more at [another user's] comment than all of these jokes combined.

If you're going to insult probably the most original man alive (now dead), you need some originality. The paedophilia jokes stopped being funny in the year 2000.

What's the difference between Michael Jackson and this website?
Michael Jackson had talent and originality.

What's the difference between Michael Jackson and his tired Paedophilia jokes that have been circulating the Internet for years?
Michael Jackson died in 2009, the Paedophile jokes didn't.

Oh, and by the way, I love how you posted Michael Jackson jokes on a blog which only appears to post about baseball. I totally get the correlation between the two, considering Michael Jackson and The Yankees both love to play with balls.

This example shows the satirical and sarcastic responses that can surface in the wake of contentious death humor that mocks folk forms. The response is purposely brazen and directly challenges a previous poster's reasoning behind spreading Michael Jackson death humor. Many of the jokes collected about Michael Jackson show participants' awareness of his professional career and his iconic status in popular culture.

Michael Jackson's evolution as a pop icon had two distinct phases. While he has always garnered attention for his eccentricity during his adult years, Jackson's later career was forever overshadowed by the allegations of child sexual abuse in 1993 and later in 2003. It is possible that the fans who grew to "know" Michael Jackson before these allegations (through his music, most likely) were more likely to defend his legacy online. Others, such as younger generations who came to know Michael Jackson through popular culture as a social pariah (rather than through his creative outputs), had less incentive to pay respect to social decorum, especially given the sordid nature of the alleged sexual abuse of minors. The dichotomy of folk reactions may reveal the contextual experience of Internet users and suggest a demarcation of one's status as a digital native or immigrant. In the final analysis, it is impossible to determine the social and historical contexts from which all of these folk responders operated.

6.3. The Function of Humor in the Bereavement of Celebrities

The collection of Michael Jackson humor serves as a notable example of celebrity humor about death or social deviance that the past several years have yielded in folk and popular culture. While the aforementioned examples are not exhaustive in their scope, they represent the circulating genres and meter of humor that Jackson's death invoked. More than anything, the dichotomy of congratulatory versus defensive responses to the posting of Michael Jackson death humor suggests a cultural "split" in the ways that people use the Internet to release anxiety.

Following a tragic event, there are those people who use the Internet in an attempt to simulate connectivity following a perceived communal loss through symbolic gestures of unity (by invoking proverbs or phrases), or by utilizing the cyber venue to disrupt communal coalescence through derisive behavior. In the end, though, the desire is the same: whether gratuitous or kind in their rhetoric, people go online to feel connected to others in some way. Even those who *lurk*—or those who do not participate themselves in online participatory culture and absorb information as silent observers—are a part of the globally connected discussion. Despite fears that the Internet would alienate individuals and keep them isolated, the folk evidence I have amassed throughout this dissertation shows social connection in other ways besides social networking. Regardless of the means, the fact remains that cyberspace—which involuntarily connects every person with access to a modern technological device at all times—“solves” the human desire to be a part of something larger than oneself, even if it is at a subconscious level. As the humor about Michael Jackson indicates, joke-tellers and their audience convey their cultural attitudes and contexts through their responses to the circulating dialogue themselves.

The passing of Michael Jackson is a particularly provocative case study of the folk response to celebrity death. In many ways, Michael Jackson’s celebrity cannot be categorized in the same way as other so-called “A-list”⁶⁶ stars such as actors Robert Downey Jr., or Tom Cruise, or “B-list” celebrities such as Gary Coleman—all of whom have garnered their fair share of mockery, teasing, or other unwanted attention throughout their careers. The reaction to Jackson’s death represents the extreme folk response wherein the reality of death was so unsettling that tremendous, symbolic displays of grief were present, as seen in the worldwide vigils; tributary concerts and media releases; and other forms of memorialized textual and

material homage online, as well as at the physical settings of significance from Jackson's life and career.

Conversely, in the absence of the grief response or the expectation of observed decorum, the extreme opposite reaction—that of dark and extreme humor—was expressed by individuals in order to thwart the emotional hegemony of the death event as seen in the media and also in order to quell the emotional weight that its reverberations caused.⁶⁷ These responses, however different in their content and audience, serve a similar purpose: to rhetorically connect with other like-minded people. Indeed, this is why celebrity culture is such a pertinent example of how people use experience to create, maintain, and idealize social relationships.

CHAPTER 7

CONCLUSION

7.1. Laughing to Death: Tradition, Vernacular Expression, and American Culture in the Digital Age

Throughout the course of this dissertation, I have examined the meanings and contexts behind the patterns of humorous responses to several mass-mediated disasters from throughout contemporary American history. But when examined collectively, what do these case studies reveal about modern society in the Digital Age and its attitudes toward death? And how has technology facilitated cultural production within society through the use of tradition?

It is human nature to attempt to make sense of a senseless situation. To be sure, a great deal of the response to disaster or tragedy is rooted in the desire to reach a point of emotional stability and neutrality whereby the events at-hand do not carry the heavy emotional burden that they did upon first impact (see Wuthnow 2010). However, the most pressing need for folk humor and other narratives in times of peril comes from the fact that it brings people together to engage with fellow human beings. Expressive humor confronts death through a process of desensitization and symbolic interaction. By responding to death instantaneously, users harness the new features of technology even as they adapt the oral traditions from the analog world into the digital environment.

In contemporary society, people still seek meaningful connections with others and strive to circumvent restrictions on their pursuit of emotional stimulation and interpersonal relationships. Throughout the twentieth century, the dissemination of folklore has been perpetually adapted by techno-savvy users eager to exploit emergent means of communicative expression offering newfangled modes of vernacular expression and civic engagement. Online

interaction allows for the release of collective anxiety through meaningful symbolic communication, which also provides the opportunity to circumvent the constraints of an increasingly individualistic American society. Almost instinctively, people flock to their *Facebook* page or a news site to relate their emotional experiences with others. The Internet helps to simulate—and thus stimulate—social interaction between individuals from all over the world that jointly converge in shared virtual space. Where actual and imaginary barriers once stood, people are able to now interact more freely, undeterred by the constraints of geography or other restrictive social mores.

The folk response to disaster is partially a result of seeking control in a situation that appears chaotic, potentially fatal, or antithetical to dominant ideals (Gillin 1962). Consequently, the Internet has become a hybridized and ritualized space that hosts the symbolic contexts of participants within its virtual walls. By tapping into folkloric forms with analog precedents (including earlier technological devices), the Internet provides familiarity and accessibility to limitless information. No one is left in the dark. In the context of a tragedy, the online venue serves as a symbolic place for collective rejuvenation while serving the intrinsic desires of the individual. The “American brand” of humor can be uniquely identified following these events in form of vengeful or spiteful rhetoric that cleverly interweaves contextual elements of popular culture under layers of wordplay trickery and clear understanding of how to effectively push the boundaries of others’ threshold for acceptable conversation fodder. On the whole, American texts seem to be more aggressive and dismissive of the opposing forces, and users are likely to stand by their positions, even if unpopular.

As sociologists Peter Berger and Thomas Luckmann assert, the “most important vehicle of reality-maintenance is conversation” (1966, 152-53; see also Abrahams 1968b; Caughey

1984, 119-56). Conversation and connectivity with others affirm that we are in fact alive and well, even if we feel wounded inside. Accordingly, folkloric expression on the Internet helps people to establish a common ground with others and reassure themselves that they are not alone to face an unknown future by themselves. More so than other communicative portals, the Internet appeals to people because it allows users to be “alone together,” where they can connect socially while maintaining a degree of remoteness and protection through anonymity or perceptions of social distance. In essence, users can be idealized “self-reliant Americans” who only need themselves while fulfilling their innate desire to connect with others. Here, too, it should be noted that connectivity holds a double-meaning, both electronic and social. The compensatory value of communicating with others in times of social anxiety cannot be ignored—especially if the troubling event is promulgated by a groundswell of gratuitous media coverage. After all, the absence of intimacy with “real” people already encourages imaginary relationships and false senses of intimacy with celebrities and other public figures in service to suspending feelings of loneliness or disconnectedness.

The paradox of being “alone together” via new media technology should not be glossed over or simplified. Digital participants exploit the illusion of social distance online in order to “perform” an identity in the frame of the Internet venue. In doing so, users fulfill their desire for human connectivity while reinforcing their own admiration for the idea of the independent and self-sufficient individual. Even when participants interact with media online—be it video games, chat rooms, or posting to discussion threads—at least some part of them *knows* that other people are doing the same things as they are. Whether or not they visit a website with the goal of simply retrieving information for their own, personal use, the fact remains that a person (who cared enough to compile the sought-after data) made it available for them online to download.

Chances are, someone else is out there doing the same thing, maybe even at the same time. Surely there is some satisfaction in knowing that are a part of something larger than ourselves. So while the Internet medium *physically* isolates us, it *cognitively* links us together into Marshall McLuhan's (1964; 1967) vision of a "global village" that operates like a collaborative central nervous system.

Navigating the digital world helps users to make sense out of their collective experiences and commune with other humans, among the most basic of social needs. Emotional connectivity between fellow human beings is transmitted and collectively shared across the ever-blurring boundaries of space and place online. This navigation of the digitized folk system is a major component of how Americans are socialized and how both they and their digital immigrant brethren socially and emotionally connect with the outside world (see Turkle 2005). Instead of gathering a group of friends together to talk about the latest gossip or to vent frustrations about a celebrity's death, people can now paradoxically be left unbothered by familiar faces from their daily lives, yet still manage to engage the whole world in a virtual, imagined space online.

The popularization of social networking sites such as *Facebook* have complicated the previous restrictions of imagined personal space, including issues of public and private sharing. Other applications or game-based websites (such as Facebook's social networking site for kids, *Togetherville*) essentially encourage and train youth to cohort online, thereby implying a socialization process into the Internet as a tradition. Nowadays, children and adults alike can not only manage crops, raise animals, and maintain a barn through the popular "Farmville" Facebook application online, but they can send, create, and/or receive gifts through the medium and others like it. Some digital "gifts" even require payment to be sent. Nevertheless, the lack of physicality in a virtual "gift bear" avatar does not disqualify it as a material object as the

recipient interprets and engages the digitized gesture. From a sender's perspective, the gift is meant to convey the same thoughtfulness and provide a psychological boost just as it would in a "real world" exchange, albeit in a more informal way. These tensions are again unique social hurdles facing participants in the Digital Age.

As Internet scholar Sherri Turkle offers: "At each point in our lives, we seek to project ourselves into the world... [and] the computer offers us new opportunities as a medium that embodies our ideas and expresses our diversity" (1995, 31). It can also be said that the computer serves as our faithful companion during the hunt for news and gossip online about things that matter to us. Computer-mediated communication such as the Internet provides a means for individuals to develop tools for their own psychological well-being in the postmodern era. As people aim to project themselves into their social world, new media allows for unprecedented access to range of simulative expressions across a limitless medium.

Given the disembodied nature of online interaction it may be easy to forget that there is nearly always a real, live human being behind every digital communication. Online, tradition can be symbolized through aesthetic or textual proclivities that frequent the domain's communicative discourse, such as the invocation of commonly used phrases or distinctive lingo, or the use of a representative tagged picture that is shared among users and assigned meaning. Thus, the "folk" web can be visual, textual, and symbolic all at once. This is the point; the Internet and modern technology are not displacing the traditions of folk culture. Instead, they are *hybridizing* expressive behavior by fusing the simulation of connectivity with the individual's psychological need to connect with others. The interactive environment online provides a virtualized rendering of analog communication dynamics—news sites are frequently organized like a slightly modified version of a "real" newspaper, for example—which, through the

incorporation of aesthetic and organizational traditions derived from older analog material patterns, instills a sense of familiarity that may guide the browsing experiences of new and experienced users alike.

Richard Bauman and Charles L. Briggs point out that tradition “has been reportedly on the verge of dying for more than three centuries.” Nonetheless, they offer, tradition “continues to provide useful means of producing and legitimizing new modernist projects, sets of legislators, and schemes of social inequality” (2003, 306). With the click of a button a narrative reaches thousands—potentially millions—of people through a complex network of information diffusion facilitated by new media technology. Community *and* tradition are both alive and well in the twenty-first century, albeit in ways that may be unseen to the eyes of uninitiated digital immigrants (see Jenkins 2008; Prensky 2001a, 2001b, 2004, 2006, 2007; Tapscott 2008). Technology provides the means to an end. On discussion forums, blogs, and news sites of all stripes, participants can now add *their* views about others’ take on an event, or write their own posts—inserting their own editorial opinions—while managing to engage in a productive dialogue along the way. Their digital interactions augment or contrarily decry the sensationalist reporting tactics of “official” or corporate media outlets that hegemonize the emotional response to disaster.

Following a mass-mediated disaster, cyberspace becomes a venue of refuge for the anxious public by acting as an interconnected conduit of folkloric dissemination. Participants are empowered by the simulation of community. Some users reinforce the superiority of their ideals in conjunction with groupthink and other rhetorical exchanges. This dynamic underscores a major benefit of online interaction (versus face-to-face communication) for users: it is perceived as being more egalitarian, which in turn attracts participants wishing to circumvent corporate

influences or emotionally hegemonic media coverage. However, as rhetorician Barbara Warnick points out, the Internet venue is not quite as autonomous or circumventive as some users may believe:

Nineteenth and twentieth century theories of rhetorical influence emphasized the role of a text's author in crafting messages stylistically suited to the audience and milieu of a speech or printed text... Instead, [today] they are made up of the efforts of programmers, designers, writers, and planners. With the exception of blogs and individual sites, many major Web sites with substantial audiences are corporately authored... critics must move away from the idea of the 'work' and designed and authored by a single individual to the idea of the 'text' as part of a larger system of hyperlinked and coproduced sites... Not only are users influenced by media elements such as hyperlink patterns, display technologies, and design elements, but they are also influenced by the content of what is said and how it is said in the text as written and communicated (2007, 122).

In sum, even when users attempt to avoid corporate influence or reject the media's attempt at emotional hegemony following a disaster, their cultural inventories (as demonstrated by their subsequent symbolic interactions) usually reveal a detailed awareness of the very forces that they perceive as threatening. So while a full escape from corporate influence may be technically impossible (even online), the Internet nevertheless allows greater freedom for expelling one's thoughts, a perk that lends itself well after a shocking news event takes place.

Due to the unquestionable ubiquity of the Internet in American society, it stands to reason that nearly all folklore originating in cyberspace will inevitably penetrate the boundaries of orality, and vice versa. The true difference in narrative formation and transmission between

electronic and analog folklore is in the *timing* and *context* of delivery. The pseudo-democratized venue of the Internet may elicit authentic and raw responses more quickly than traditional oral forms of humor, but ultimately the sentiments expressed online will reach the physical world, with or without modification.⁶⁸ That is to say that the interchangeability of folklore, especially narratives such as jokes and urban legends, is not exclusive to either format; rather, their diffusion and the audience's perception of their origin are immaterial once they are shared. The text itself is what matters, but the context nevertheless reveals much—especially in a hybridized culture.

The transition from an analog to digital medium—which requires the shifting visual contexts of three-dimensions to two-dimensions—is an inherently hybridized process (see Moore, Gathman, and Ducheneau 2009). The hybridization of folk culture between analog and digital realms occurs through users' adaptation and the reinforcement of emic traditions encountered by users as they explore cyberspace. In theory, analog and digital vernacular expression begins with similar motivations. Users seek both fruitful communication as well as the reaffirmation of their own preconceived notions of acceptable social, moral, or ideological beliefs.⁶⁹

On the flipside, the remote and disembodied physical presence in cyberspace influences some users to experiment with abrasive communication in an attempt to rile others “for fun”—perhaps like an outlaw on the American frontier. Online, people can experiment with social taboos about contentious subject matters like death or ethnicity without fear of reprisal or condemnation in their personal lives, especially if they use an avatar, screen-name, or other true-identity masking tools to “smear” or textually spar with fellow Internet users (see Bronner 2009). The anonymity provided by the physical separation from peers makes the perception of social

distance greater online, which often allows users to express controversial viewpoints or simply engage more openly in a dialogue with others than may be the case in the analog world (Bargh, McKenna, and Fitzsimons 2002). Sounding off or acting abrasively in cyberspace may attract scorn or teasing in online formats—just as this behavior may do so in the physical world—but once the user logs off and returns to their analog domain, their social capital usually remains intact. The Internet helps people to alleviate anxieties with others in a low-risk environment that usually cannot damage a user’s credibility or social capital in their physical lives. By blurring notions of the private and public sphere, the individual is able to reach out into ambiguous virtual terrain without consequence and ultimately make social connections with others in a setting of perceived intimacy (see Lieber 2010).

In any case, the online venue offers a larger platform for connecting with other individuals while still managing to provide an outlet for the user’s own expressive behaviors. More than that, it allows participants to transfer their “real world” behavioral tendencies and needs into a simulative environment that is able to provide faster (and possibly greater) returns on their investment of time and energy (Bronner 2009; Jones 1997; Wehmeyer and Noonan 2009; Wojcik 2009; see also Bronner 2002a, 56-64; Stallabrass 2003). Most of all, these expressive patterns suggest that “tradition” is indeed being strategically invoked to navigate the digital landscape, both by using analog precedential correlates for initial guidance and through subsequent, amalgamated choices that yield a new hybrid construct. The resultant hybridization of culture serves a social purpose beyond connectivity in a digital format; it not only helps users to navigate burgeoning social processes, but also assists them in finding greater solace and understanding of their analog lives (see Turkle 1995, 263).

In many ways, the Internet is an “electronic frontier,” and one that for many Americans seems to psychologically embody the often-mythologized “exceptional” characteristics outlined in Frederick Jackson Turner’s 1893 “frontier thesis” that are supposedly unique to U.S. citizens.⁷⁰ Of course, the Internet is not owned nor influenced solely by Americans. However, I contend that as a collective body of users, Americans conceptualize their relationship and general attachment to the Internet in ethnocentric terms. For these users, the restless ambition and rugged individualism of Americans can be seen in the entrepreneurial spirit of capitalistic, folk-moderated ventures like Craigslist; or perhaps in the thrill of facing danger and uncertainty while “surfing the Web” amid greater anonymity through unmonitored interaction and boundless exploration opportunities; or by invoking an outlaw’s persona or vigilantism, as seen in heated debates online or especially in hacker culture (McLure 2000; see also Bronner 2009; Jennings 1990). If these characteristics are truly indicative of many Americans, the Internet can be interpreted as a limitless virtual playground for reinforcing the superiority of the self-centric American spirit while also fulfilling social needs as a communicative outlet.

Just as Americans turned to conquering industrialization and “the machine” after the American frontier was populated, they have once again searched for a new frontier to conquer (Marx 1964). According to popular culture (namely *Star Trek*), outer “space” was to be the final frontier. However, “cyberspace” has turned out to be simply the *next* frontier of what will undoubtedly be a continued psychological process of conquering and civilizing the unknown. The frontier, like most meaningful things, is yet another symbol for optimistic, often utopian ideals. However, in the electronic frontier, new arrivals and “old-timers” come together to cultivate a true folk community that evolves with analog society (Rheingold 2000; Jenkins 2008).

The digital realm is perpetually reflexive of the analog world, but its implications on socialization and the life course have yet to be fully explored. As the individual's conceptualization of tradition is the linking factor between analog and digital culture, we must also consider how the very notion of tradition is evolving due to greater connectivity with fellow humans because of the Digital Age. The openness of electronic frontier is of particular relevance here because *cyberspace* symbolically transforms into a rhetorical forum for users where almost "anything goes." Participants can browse freely, unimpeded by the constraints of outside influence and engage or avoid corporate influences however they so choose. In doing so, a binary is established between the folk and corporate web.

The *praxis*, or the cultural practices and processes that symbolize socially shared ways of thinking, suggest that tradition is used as an adaptive strategy in making sense of the individual's social world (Bronner 1988a; 2004).⁷¹ Traditions of community-building and relationship maintenance are now also under revision and reconsideration due to the ubiquity of new media technology. Virtual communities are created and maintained through a process of inclusion, sharing, and other communicative engagement with both the established group members as well as new arrivals, lurkers, and passersby (see Baym 1999; Rheingold 2000, 2003). These practices represent a divergence in analog and digital patterns of knowledge sharing that also showcase how hybridization has influenced the ways that people seek out information and learn from one another. The actions attached to practices considered everyday and associated with virtualization, such as "logging on," "browsing," "surfing," and "networking" become, in fact, "traditional."

In the online realm the individual's tie to the community's tradition is psychologically amplified (see Katz et al 2004). In contrast to oral tradition or other analog expressive

interactions where information is “handed up” or “handed down” through a vertical hierarchy of information passage, the digital environment welcomes a horizontal (and seemingly democratic) means of knowledge sharing where information is “handed across” and without constraints to time, space, or context. Information retrieval is so easily accessible that it has become routinized. Thus, it is often taken for granted how the sharing of traditional knowledge is greatly influenced by mass media technology.

So what does the future hold?

7.2. Predictions on Future Trajectories of Vernacular Expression and New Media

Throughout the twentieth century, scholars have observed that social networks are supposedly weakest after age forty (see Brandes 1985). At this time in one’s life, meaningful friendships are often diminished or dwindling, and interpersonal discord is often reported. In fact, this is such a common tale that our society has created and identified a rite of passage to facilitate the transition into “older adulthood”: the mid-life crisis. The ritual of the mid-life crisis is often lampooned in popular culture by mocking expected behaviors—the purchasing of a “vanity item” like a fancy car or getting hair transplants to compensate for baldness, or perhaps getting a divorce in an effort to find intimacy with younger partners. However, the ritual is most often invoked to solidify the individual’s concept of friends and family in a time of internal anxiety marked by a perception of social disconnectedness. If this rite of passage is a tradition of “analog” culture, what then can we expect from the Digital Age in altering this cultural phenomenon? With the immense connectivity of new media technology, will future generations have any use for such a rite of passage? Or will they be *so* interpersonally connected through social networking and computer-mediated communication that the mid-life crisis will fade away from our culture’s psychological processing of the life course? Although the Internet is rather

youth-oriented (see Bronner 2009), the fact remains that today's youths will be tomorrow's middle-aged Internet users who will test the potential agelessness of social networking.

Through the hybridization of behavioral forms and knowledge dissemination across analog and digital vernacular expressive venues, a new communicatory construct is created that embodies the amalgamation of behaviors across culture, regardless of analog or digital context. In this sense, "hybridization" exemplifies the intersection of repetition and variation with the shifting meanings of space, place, and context that occurs when people engage in symbolic interaction online. Throughout this process, individuals use their conceptualization of tradition to guide to their actions. This notion of tradition provides an interpretative grounding, or contextual fulcrum, for how they will perceive and in turn reciprocate symbolic interactions. Essentially, tradition is used in the symbolic construction of the self (Jones 2000). Technology serves in the individual's symbolic construction of modernity, and visual cues from the digital medium capture the expressive patterns which represent dominant aesthetic ideals of the hybridized culture.

Although I contend in this dissertation that American society has fundamentally shifted toward a preference for simulated connectivity over exclusively analog interaction (through the hybridization of expressive behavior), I would like to think that the ultimate choice for how people live out their lives online is still firmly in their own control. Nevertheless, I predict that future generations will be increasingly immersed into a mass-mediated society and that as a result, the differences between analog and digital cultures will eventually be "virtually" indistinguishable.

Every future generation henceforth will inherently be composed of "digital natives." Grim and dismissive though it may seem, the fact remains that it is only a matter of time before

“digital immigrants” will no longer exist, and there will be no need for a semantic distinction between the two groups. Everyone will be born into a culture where digital connectivity and pervasive social networking is the norm. We are pretty much there already, and so it will be ever increasingly important for students of folklore and cultural studies to remain engaged with the medium in order to ascertain the continued evolution of hybridized behaviors.

This prognosis may appear scary to some—especially to those who have a special reverence for “folksy” or “old-timey” stuff. I do not mean to suggest that the bucolic landscapes of America will be converted into something out of *Blade Runner* or *Minority Report* (see, there I go using my cultural inventory to imagine a future aesthetic!). It is very likely that many of the more old-fashioned conceptualizations of folk culture will remain intact or adjust to the pressures of modernity in order to survive, much as it already has throughout history. Just as we now look to the analog for cues on how to interpret the digital, so too will we again look to the past as our culture evolves. We will continue to use tradition as a guide for making sense of the world.

Like language acquisition, future generations will have the advantage of being born into a culture where an early start will yield lasting results on the learner and how they subsequently interpret their social worlds. Developing brains are more easily habituated than adult brains for the task of juggling multiple portals of social interaction and connectivity through technology (Richtel 2010). Such multi-tasking is now a part of the socialization process in American society. Now, more than ever, we can see concrete evidence that technology is in fact the “vital factor in the transmission of folklore” that Alan Dundes first suggested in 1977 (and hinted at long before). If five-year-olds today can text message their grandma faster than most adults who have had the technology in hand for *years*, imagine what lies ahead!

But more than anything, I believe that the future is *exciting*. I am often teased by my colleagues for such optimism regarding the possibilities afforded by Internet and new media technology. To be fair, such optimism was more of the norm around the time of the transition from Web 1.0 to Web 2.0 in the early 1990s than it is now. Some believe that there may even be an insidious element to interaction in online spaces (see Zukin 2005); they worry that the unassuming “folk” will be exploited by corporate influences as they were during the Gilded Age (Trachtenberg 1982).⁷² I may be naïve, but I believe in the folk. I believe that despite the changing tides of culture—now and in the future—we will adapt and seek out meaning in our everyday endeavors. Our values and communicative systems will shine through and prevail with integrity. Such a progression is a hallmark of the human condition, and we will continue to adapt.

In the end, however different we may be—now or later—we are all a part of the same social universe. While humor is often the vehicle of choice for engaging the boundless digital world in times of peril (or boredom, for that matter), it is actually *people* who are the true conduits of meaningful expression and their interpretation. However the future may unfold, we should never forget that this is where our study of human nature should always begin and end.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Abrahams, Roger D. 1968a. "Introductory Remarks to a Rhetorical Theory of Folklore." *Journal of American Folklore* 81(320): 143-58.
- _____. 1968b. "A Rhetoric of Everyday Life: Traditional Conversational Genres." *Southern Folklore Quarterly* 32: 44-59.
- _____. 2006 [1964]. *Deep Down in the Jungle: Black American Folklore from the Streets of Philadelphia*. Piscataway, NJ: Aldine Transaction.
- Abrahams, Roger D., and Alan Dundes. 1969. "On Elephantasy and Elephanticide." *Psychoanalytic Review* 56(2): 225-41.
- Aldred, B. Grantham. 2010. "Identity in 10,000 Pixels: LiveJournal Userpics and Fractured Selves in Web 2.0." *New Directions in Folklore* 8(1/2): 6-35.
- Almog, Joseph. 2005. *What Am I? Descartes and the Mind-Body Problem*. London, U.K.: Oxford University Press.
- Baker, Ronald L. and Simon J. Bronner. 2003. "'Letting Out Little Jack': Sex and Aggression in Manly Recitations." In *Manly Traditions: The Folk Roots of American Masculinities*, ed. Simon J. Bronner, pp. 315-50. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.
- Bargh, John A., Katelyn Y.A. McKenna, and Grainne M. Fitzsimons. 2002. "Can You See the Real Me? Activation and Expression of the 'True Self' on the Internet." *Journal of Social Issues* 58: 33-48.
- Barth, Gunther. 1982 [1980]. *City People: The Rise of Modern City Culture in Nineteenth-Century America*. Cambridge, UK: Oxford University Press.
- Barton, Michael. 1998. "Journalistic Gore: Disaster Reporting and Emotional Discourse in the *New York Times*, 1852-1956." In *An Emotional History of the United States*, eds., Peter N. Stearns and Jan Lewis, pp. 155-72. New York: New York University Press.
- Bascom, William. 1954. "Four Functions of Folklore." *Journal of American Folklore* 67: 333-49.
- Barrick, Mac E. 1972. "The Typescript Broadside." *Keystone Folklore Quarterly* 15: 27-38.
- _____. 1980. "The Helen Keller Joke Cycle." *Journal of American Folklore* 93: 441-49.
- _____. 1982. "Celebrity Sick Jokes." *Maledicta: International Journal of Verbal Aggression* 6: 57-62.
- Bates, Claire. 2009. "How Michael Jackson's death shut down Twitter, brought chaos to Google... and 'killed off' Jeff Goldblum." Daily Mail Online (UK).

- <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/sciencetech/article-1195651/How-Michael-Jacksons-death-shut-Twitter-overwhelmed-Google--killed-Jeff-Goldblum.html#ixzz0XLS10JLe>. (June 26, 2009). Accessed November 19, 2009.
- Baudrillard, Jean (Sheila Faria Glaser, trans). 1995. *Simulacra and Simulation*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press.
- Bauman, Richard, and Charles L. Briggs. 2003. *Voices of Modernity: Language Ideologies and the Politics of Inequality*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.
- Baym, Nancy K. 1993. "Interpreting Soap Operas and Creating Community: Inside a Computer-Mediated Fan Culture." *Journal of Folklore Research* 30: 143-77.
- _____. 1995. "The Performance of Humor in Computer-Mediated Communication." *Journal of Computer Mediated Communication* 1(2).
<http://jcmc.indiana.edu/vol1/issue2/baym.html>. Accessed 14 March 2010.
- _____. 1999. *Tune In, Log On: Soaps, Fandom, and Online Community*. Newbury Park, CA: Sage Publications.
- Behuniak-Long, Susan. 1994. "Preserving the Social Fabric: Quilting in a Technological World." In *Quilt Culture: Tracing the Pattern*, eds. Torsney, Cheryl B. and Judy Elsley, pp. 151-68. Columbia: University of Missouri Press.
- Belasco, Warren J. 1997 [1979]. *Americans on the Road: From Autocamp to Motel, 1910-1945*. Baltimore, MD: The Johns Hopkins University Press.
- Ben-Amos, Dan. 1971. "Toward a Definition of Folklore in Context." *Journal of American Folklore* 84: 3-15.
- Bendix, Regina. 1997. *In Search of Authenticity: The Formation of Folklore Studies*. Madison: University of Wisconsin Press.
- Bennett, Sue, Karl Maton, Lisa Kervin. 2008. "The 'Digital Natives' Debate: A Critical Review of the Evidence." *British Journal of Educational Technology* 39(5): 775-86.
- Berger, Peter and Thomas Luckmann. 1966. *The Social Construction of Reality*. New York: Anchor Books.
- Bird, Allyson. 2006. "Teens Immortalize Friends on MySpace." *Miami Herald*, October 9, 2006.
- Bird, Donald Allport. 1976. "A Theory for Folklore in Mass Media: Traditional Patterns in the Mass Media." *Southern Folklore Quarterly* 40: 285-305.
- Blackmore, Susan. 2000. *The Meme Machine*. London, UK: Oxford University Press.
- Blank, Trevor J. 2009a. "Toward a Conceptual Framework for the Study of Folklore and the Internet," in Trevor J. Blank, ed., *Folklore and the Internet: Vernacular Expression in a*

- Digital World*. Logan: Utah State University Press: 1-20.
- _____, ed. 2009b. *Folklore and the Internet: Vernacular Expression in a Digital World*. Logan: Utah State University Press.
- _____. 2009c. "Fieldwork, Memory, and the Impact of 9/11 on an Eastern Tennessee Klansman: A Folklorist's Reflection." *Voices: The Journal of New York Folklore* 35 (3/4): 23-27.
- _____. 2009d. "Moonwalking in the Digital Graveyard: Diversions in Oral and Electronic Humor Regarding the Death of Michael Jackson." *Midwestern Folklore* 35(2): 71-90.
- _____. 2010. "Cheeky Behavior: The Meaning and Function of 'Fartlore' in Childhood and Adolescence." *Children's Folklore Review* 32: 61-85.
- Boorstin, Daniel. 1974 [1958]. *The Americans: The Democratic Experience*. New York: Vintage Books.
- _____. 1987 [1961]. *The Image: A Guide to Pseudo-Events in America*. New York: Vintage Books.
- Booth, Paul. 2008. "Rereading Fandom: MySpace Character Personas and Narrative Identification." *Critical Studies in Media Communication* 25(5): 514-36.
- Brandes, Stanley H. 1985. *Forty: The Age and Symbol*. Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press.
- Bronner, Simon J. 1985. "'What's Grosser Than Gross?' New Sick Joke Cycles." *Midwestern Journal of Language and Lore* 11:39-49.
- _____. 1986. *American Folklore Studies: An Intellectual History*. Lawrence: University Press of Kansas.
- _____. 1988a. "Art, Performance, and Praxis: The Rhetoric of Contemporary Folklore Studies." *Western Folklore* 47:75-101.
- _____. 1988b. "Political Suicide: The Budd Dwyer Joke Cycle and the Humor of Disaster." *Midwestern Folklore* 14: 81-90.
- _____. 1995. *Piled Higher and Deeper: The Folklore of Student Life*. Atlanta, GA: August House Publishing.
- _____. 1998. *Following Tradition*. Logan: Utah State University Press.
- _____. 2002a. *Folk Nation: Folklore in the Creation of American Tradition*. Wilmington, DE: SR Books.
- _____, ed. 2003. *Manly Traditions: The Folk Roots of American Masculinities*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.

- _____. 2004. *Grasping Things: Folk Material Culture and Mass Society*. Lexington: University Press of Kentucky.
- _____, ed. 2007. *The Meaning of Folklore: The Analytical Essays of Alan Dundes*. Logan: Utah State University Press.
- _____. 2008. *Killing Tradition: Inside Hunting and Animal Rights Controversies*. Lexington: University Press of Kentucky.
- _____. 2009. "Digitizing and Virtualizing Folklore." *Folklore and the Internet: Vernacular Expression in a Digital World*, ed. Trevor J. Blank, pp. 21-66. Logan: Utah State University Press.
- Brown, Roger William, and James Kulick. 1977. "Flashbulb Memories." *Cognition* 5(1): 73-99.
- Bruns, Axel and Joanna Jacobs, eds. 2006. *Uses of Blogs*. New York: Peter Lang Publishing.
- Brunvand, Jan Harold. 1981. *The Vanishing Hitchhiker: Urban Legends and their Meanings*. New York: W.W. Norton & Co.
- _____. 2001. "Folklore in the News (and Incidentally, on the Net)." *Western Folklore* 60(1): 47-76.
- Bryant, Clifton D, ed. 2003. *The Handbook of Death and Dying*. Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications.
- Bucci, Paul and Graeme Wood. 2009. "Michael Jackson RIP: One Billion People Estimated Watching for Gold-Plated Casket at Memorial Service," Vancouver Sun. <http://www.vancouversun.com/Entertainment/Michael+Jackson+billion+people+estimate+d+watching+gold+plated+casket+memorial+service/1767503/story.html> (July 7, 2009). Accessed October 31, 2009.
- Burgess, Jean and Joshua Green, eds. 2009. *YouTube: Online Video and Participatory Culture*. Cambridge, UK: Polity Press.
- Burns, Thomas A. 1977. "Folkloristics: A Conception of Theory." *Western Folklore* 36: 109-34.
- Campbell, W. Joseph. 2003. *Yellow Journalism: Puncturing the Myths, Defining the Legacies*. Westport, CT: Praeger Publishing.
- _____. 2006. *The Year That Defined American Journalism: 1897 and the Clash of the Paradigms*. New York, Routledge Press.
- Carroll, Patty. 2005. *Living the Life: The World of Elvis Tribute Artists*. Burlington, VT: Verve Editions.
- Camporesi, Valeria. 2002. *Mass Culture and National Traditions: The B.B.C. and American Broadcasting, 1922-1954*. Florence, Italy: European Academic Press Publishing.

- Caughey, John. 1984. *Imaginary Social Worlds*. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press.
- Ceruzzi, Paul E. 2003. *A History of Modern Computing* (2nd edition). Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.
- Chayko, Mary. 2008. *Portable Communities: The Social Dynamics of Online and Mobile Connectedness*. Albany: State University of New York Press.
- Clark, Jennifer and Majella Franzmann. 2006. "Authority from Grief, Presence and Place in the Making of Roadside Memorials." *Death Studies* 30(6): 579-99.
- Cohen, Stanley. 2001. *States of Denial: Knowing About Atrocities and Suffering*. Cambridge, UK: Polity Press.
- Correll, Timothy Corrigan. 1997. "Associative Context and Joke Visualization." *Western Folklore* 56(3/4): 317-30.
- Cook, John. 2009. "How Tiger Woods Spent Thanksgiving: A Re-Cap of His Car Crash Story So Far." *Gawker.com* (30 November 2009). <http://gawker.com/5415269/how-tiger-woods-spent-thanksgiving-a-recap-of-his-car-crash-story-so-far>. Retrieved 15 September 2010.
- Couldry, Nick, Andrea Hepp, and Fredrich Kotz, eds. 2009. *Media Events in a Global Age*. New York: Routledge Press.
- Cullen, Jim. 2002. *The Art of Democracy: A Concise History of Popular Culture in the United States*. New York: Monthly Review Press.
- _____. 2004. *The American Dream: A Short History of an Idea that Shaped the Nation*. London, UK: Oxford University Press.
- Cwynar, Christopher. 2010. "Dear John: On the Meta-Celebrity's Misguided Attempt to be Clever." *Antenna: Responses to Media and Culture*. 19 February 2010. <http://blog.commarts.wisc.edu/2010/02/19/dear-john-on-the-meta-celebrity-misguided-attempt-to-be-clever/>. Accessed 18 September 2010.
- Damphousse, Kelly R., Kristen S. Hefley, Brent L. Smith. 2003. "Creating Memories: Exploring How Narratives Help Define the Memorialization of Tragedy." *Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the American Sociological Association; Atlanta Hilton Hotel, Atlanta, GA*.
- Davies, Christie. 1999. "Jokes on the Death of Diana." In *The Mourning for Diana*, ed. Tony Walter, pp. 253-68. Oxford, UK: Berg Publishers.
- _____. 2003. "Jokes That Follow Mass-Mediated Disasters in a Global Electronic Age." In *Of Corpse: Death and Humor in Folklore and Popular Culture*, ed. Peter Narváez, pp. 15-34. Logan: Utah State University Press.

- Deetz, James. 1996. *In Small Things Forgotten: An Archaeology of Early American Life*. New York: Anchor Books.
- Dégh, Linda. 1994. *American Folklore and the Mass Media*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.
- _____. 1997. "Conduit Theory/Multiconduit Theory." In *Folklore: An Encyclopedia of Beliefs, Customs, Tales, Music, and Art*, ed. Thomas A. Green, pp. 142-44. Santa Barbara, CA: ABC-CLIO.
- Dégh, Linda, and Andrew Vázsonyi. 1975. "The Hypothesis of Multi-Conduit Transmission of Folklore." In *Folklore: Performance and Communication*, eds. Dan Ben-Amos and Kenneth Goldstein, pp. 207-52. The Hague: Mouton.
- Del Tredici, Robert. 1980. *The People of Three Mile Island*. New York: Random House, Inc.
- Dennett, Daniel C. 1990. "Memes and the Exploitation of Imagination." *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 48: 127-35.
- Descartes, René. 2009. *Meditations on First Philosophy: In Which the Existence of God and the Distinction of the Soul from the Body Are Demonstrated*. Charleston, SC: CreateSpace Publishing.
- Dixon, Wheeler Winston. 1999. *Disaster and Memory: Celebrity Culture and the Crisis of Hollywood Cinema*. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Dobler, Robert. 2009. "Ghosts in the Machine: Mourning the MySpace Dead." In *Folklore and the Internet: Vernacular Expression in a Digital World*, ed. Trevor J. Blank, pp. 175-93. Logan: Utah State University Press.
- Dorson, Richard M. 1970. "Is There a Folk in the City?" *Journal of American Folklore* 83(328):185-216.
- _____. 1976. *Folklore and Fakelore: Essays Toward a Discipline of Folk Studies*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Dorst, John. 1990. "Tags and Burners, Cycles and Networks: Folklore in the Teletronic Age," *Journal of Folklore Research* 27(3):179-90.
- Dundes, Alan. 1966. "The American Concept of Folklore." *Journal of the Folklore Institute* 3(3): 226-49.
- _____. 1968. "Here I Sit—A Study of American Latrinalia." *Papers of the Kroeber Anthropological Society* 34: 91-105.
- _____. 1971. "Folk Ideas as Units of Worldview." *Journal of American Folklore* 84:93-103.
- _____. 1976. "Projection in Folklore: A Plea for Psychoanalytic Semiotics." *MLN* 91:

1500-33.

- _____. 1979. "The Dead Baby Joke Cycle." *Western Folklore* 38(3): 145-57.
- _____. 1980. "Who are the Folk?" In *Interpreting Folklore*, Alan Dundes, ed. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.
- _____. 1987a. *Cracking Jokes: Studies of Sick Humor Cycles and Stereotypes*. Berkeley, CA: Ten Speed Press.
- _____. 1987b. *Parsing Through Customs: Essays by a Freudian Folklorist*. Madison: University of Wisconsin Press.
- _____. 1999. *Holy Writ as Oral Lit: The Bible as Folklore*. Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield Publishers, Inc.
- Dundes, Alan, and Thomas Hauschild. 1983. "Auschwitz Jokes." *Western Folklore* 42(4): 249-60.
- Dundes, Alan, and Carl R. Pagter. 1978 [1975]. *Work Hard and You Shall Be Rewarded: Urban Folklore from the Paperwork Empire*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.
- _____. 1987. *When You're Up to Your Ass in Alligators: More Urban Folklore from the Paperwork Empire*. Detroit: Wayne State University Press.
- _____. 1991a. "The Mobile SCUD Missile Launcher and Other Persian Gulf Warlore: An American Folk Image of Saddam Hussein's Iraq." *Western Folklore* 50(3): 303-22.
- _____. 1991b. *Never Try to Teach a Pig to Sing: Still More Urban Folklore from the Paperwork Empire*. Detroit: Wayne State University Press.
- _____. 1996. *Sometimes the Dragon Wins: Yet More Urban Folklore from the paperwork Empire*. Syracuse: Syracuse University Press.
- Durkin, Keith F. 2003. "Death, Dying, and the Dead in Popular Culture." In *Handbook of Death and Dying*, ed. Clifton D. Bryant, pp. 43-49. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.
- Ellis, Bill. 1991. "The Last Thing Said... The Challenger Disaster Jokes and Closure." *International Folklore Review* 8: 110-24.
- _____. 2001. "A Model for Collecting and Interpreting World Trade Center Disaster Jokes," *New Directions in Folklore*, October 5, 2001 (<https://scholarworks.iu.edu/dspace/handle/2022/7195>). Accessed July 10, 2009.
- _____. 2003. "Making a Big Apple Crumble: The Role of Humor in Constructing a Global Response to Disaster," in Peter Narváez, ed., *Of Corpse: Death and Humor in Folklore and Popular Culture*: 35-82. Earlier version published in *New Directions in Folklore*,

June 6, 2002 (<https://scholarworks.iu.edu/dspace/handle/2022/6911>).

- Emery, Edwin. 1978 [1972]. *The Press and America: An Interpretive History of the Mass Media*. Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 4th edition.
- Field, Nigel P. and Charles Filanosky. 2010. "Continuing Bonds, Risk Factors for Complicated Grief, and Adjustment to Bereavement." *Death Studies* 34(1): 1-29.
- Fine, Gary Alan. 1988. "Dying for a Laugh: Negotiating Risk and Creating Personas in the Humor of Mushroom Collectors." *Western Folklore* 47(3): 177-94.
- _____. 1992. *Manufacturing Tales: Sex, Money, and Contemporary Legends*. Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press.
- _____. 2001. *Difficult Reputations: Collective Memories of the Evil, Inept, and Controversial*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.
- Fine, Gary Alan, and Bruce Noel Johnson. 1980. "The Promiscuous Cheerleader: An Adolescent Male Belief Legend." *Western Folklore* 39: 120-29.
- Fine, Gary Alan, and Bill Ellis. 2010. *The Global Grapevine: Why Rumors of Terrorism, Immigration, and Trade Matter*. London, UK: Oxford University Press.
- Fischer, Henry W. 1994. *Response to Disaster: Fact Versus Fiction and Its Perpetuation*. Lanham, MD: University Press of America.
- Foot, Kirsten, Barbara Warnick, Steven M. Schneider. 2005. "Web-based Memorializing after September 11: Toward a Conceptual Framework." *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication* 11(1). <http://jcmc.indiana.edu/vol11/issue1/foot.html>. Accessed 6 April 2010.
- Foote, Monica. 2007. "Userpicks: Cyber Folk Art in the 21st Century." *Folklore Forum* 37(1): 27-38.
- Frank, Russell. 2004. "When the Going Gets Tough, the Tough Go Photoshopping: September 11 and the Newslore of Vengeance and Victimization." *New Media & Society* 6(5): 633-58.
- _____. 2009. "The Forward as Folklore: Studying E-Mailed Humor," in Trevor J. Blank, ed., *Folklore and the Internet: Vernacular Expression in a Digital World*. Logan: Utah State University Press: 98-122.
- _____. 2011. *Newslore: Contemporary Folklore on the Internet*. Jackson and Oxford: University Press of Mississippi.
- Fraser, Benson P. and William J. Brown. 2002. "Media, Celebrities, and Social Influence: Identification with Elvis Presley." *Mass Communication and Society* 5(2):183-206.

- Freud, Sigmund. 1960 [1905]. *Jokes and Their Relationship to the Unconscious*. New York: W.W. Norton and Co., 1960.
- Gaignebet, Claude. 1974. *Le Folklore Obscène des Enfants* (The Obscene Folklore of Children). Paris, France: G.P. Maisonneuve et Larose.
- Geser, Hans. 1998. "Yours Virtually Forever: Death Memorials and Remembrance Sites in the WWW." *Sociology in Switzerland Online Publications*. http://socio.ch/intcom/t_hgeser07.htm. Accessed 15 April 2010.
- Georges, Robert A. and Michael Owen Jones. 1995. *Folkloristics: An Introduction*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.
- Gillin, John P. 1962. "Theoretical Possibilities of Induced Sociocultural Collapse." In *Man and Society in Disaster*, eds. George W. Baker and Dwight W. Chapman, pp. 385-404. New York: Basic Books.
- Glassie, Henry. 1968. *Pattern in the Material Folk Culture of the Eastern United States*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press.
- Glassner, Barry. 2000. *The Culture of Fear: Why Americans are Afraid of the Wrong Things*. New York: Basic Books.
- Goetzmann, William H. 2009. *Beyond the Revolution: A History of American Thought from Paine to Pragmatism*. New York: Basic Books.
- Gómez-Barris, Macaerna and Herman Gray. 2006. "Michael Jackson, Television, and Post-Op Disasters." *Television and New Media* 7: 40-51.
- Goodwin, Joseph P. 2001. "A Supplemental Update to: Unprintable Reactions to All the News that's Fit to Print: Topical Humor and the Media." *New Directions in Folklore* 5. <https://scholarworks.iu.edu/dspace/handle/2022/7198>.
- Graham-Smith, Greg. 2008. "Habeas Corpus: Bodies of Evidence and Performed Litigiousness—the Spectacle of Michael Jackson's Trial." *Communicato* 34(2): 278-89.
- Gray, Mary. 2009. *Out in the Country: Youth, Media, and Queer Visibility in Rural America*. New York: New York University Press.
- Grider, Sylvia. 2001. "Spontaneous Shrines: A Modern Response to Tragedy and Disaster." *New Directions in Folklore* 5. <https://scholarworks.iu.edu/dspace/handle/2022/7196>. Accessed 1 November 2010.
- Hafner, Kate. 1998. *Where Wizards Stay Up Late: The Origins of the Internet*. New York, NY: Simon & Schuster Publishing.
- Hatch, Mary Jo and Michael Owen Jones. 1997. "Photocopylore at Work: Aesthetics, Collective Creativity and the Social Construction of Organizations," *Studies in Cultures*,

Organizations, and Societies 3(2): 263-87.

- Healy, David. 1997. "Cyberspace and Place: The Internet As Middle Landscape on the Electronic Frontier." In *Internet Culture*, ed. David Porter, pp. 55-69. New York: Routledge.
- Hess, Aaron. 2007. "In Digital Remembrance: Vernacular Memory and the Rhetorical Construction of Web Memorials." *Media, Culture, & Society* 29 (5): 812-30.
- Hilmes, Michele, and Jason Loviglio, eds. 2001. *Radio Reader: Essays in the Cultural History of Radio*. London, U.K.: Routledge Press.
- Hine, Christine. 2000. *Virtual Ethnography*. Newbury Park, CA: Sage Publishing.
- Hoffman, W.J. 2007 [1888]. *Folk-Lore of the Pennsylvania Germans*. New York: Forgotten Books.
- Hou, Weimin, Manpreet Kaur, Anita Komlodi, Wayne G. Lutters, Lee Boot, Shelia R. Cotton, Claudia Morrell, A. Ant Ozok, Zeynep Tufekci. 2006. "Girls Don't Waste Time': Pre-Adolescent Attitudes toward ICT." *CHI 2006 Conference Proceedings*.
- Hounshell, David A. 1985. *From the American System to Mass Production, 1800–1932: The Development of Manufacturing Technology in the United States*. Baltimore, MD: The Johns Hopkins University Press.
- Howard, Robert Glenn. 2008a. "Electronic Hybridity: The Persistent Processes of the Vernacular Web." *Journal of American Folklore* 121:192-218.
- _____. 2008b. "The Vernacular Web of Participatory Media." *Critical Studies in Media Communication* 25: 490-512.
- _____. 2010. "Hybrid." In *Folklore: An Encyclopedia of Beliefs, Customs, Tales, Music, and Art*, eds. Charlie T. McCormick and Kim Kennedy White, forthcoming. Santa Barbara, CA: ABC-CLIO.
- _____. 2011. *Digital Jesus: The Making of a New Christian Fundamentalist Community on the Internet*. New York: New York University Press.
- Inglis, Fred. 2010. *A Short History of Celebrity*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
- Ivory, Karen. 2007. *Pennsylvania Disasters: True Stories of Tragedy and Survival*. Guilford, CT: Globe Pequot.
- Jenkins, Henry. 2006. *Fans, Bloggers, and Gamers: Exploring Participatory Culture*. New York University Press.
- _____. 2008. *Convergence Culture: Where Old and New Media Collide*. New York University Press.

- Jenkins, Henry, Ravi Purushotma, Margaret Weigel, Katie Clinton, and Alice J. Robison. 2009. *Confronting the Challenges of Participatory Culture: Media Education for the 21st Century*. Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press.
- Jennings, Karla. 1990. *The Devouring Fungus*. New York: W.W. Norton & Co.
- Jones, David R. 1985. "Secondary Disaster Victims: The Emotional Effects of Identifying Human Remains." *American Journal of Psychiatry* 142: 303-07.
- Jones, Kevin T., Kenneth S. Zagacki, Todd V. Lewis. 2007. "Communication, Liminality, and Hope: The September 11th Missing Person Posters." *Communication Studies* 58(1):105-21.
- Jones, Michael Owen. 1989. *Craftsmen of the Cumberlands: Tradition and Creativity*. Lexington: University Press of Kentucky.
- _____. 1995. "Why Make (Folk) Art?" *Western Folklore* 54(4):253-76.
- _____. 1997. "How Can We Apply Event Analysis to 'Material Behavior,' and Why Should We?" *Western Folklore* 56.3-4: 199-214.
- _____. 2000. "'Tradition' in Identity Discourses and an Individual's Symbolic Construction of Self." *Western Folklore* 59: 115-40.
- _____. 2001. "The Aesthetics of Everyday Life." In *Self-Taught: The Culture and Aesthetics of American Vernacular Art*, ed., Charles Russell, pp. 47-60. Jackson: University Press of Mississippi.
- Jorgensen-Earp, Cheryl R. and Lori A. Lanzilotti. 1998. "Public Memory and Private Grief: The Construction of Shrines at the Sites of Public Tragedy." *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 84(2): 150-70.
- Kapchan, Deborah A. 1993. "Hybridization and the Marketplace: Emerging Paradigms in Folkloristics." *Western Folklore* 52(2):303-26.
- Kapchan, Deborah A., and Pauline Turner Strong. 1999. "Theorizing the Hybrid." *Journal of American Folklore* 112(445): 239-53.
- Kassovic, Julius. 1981. "I'm OK—You're Nuked." Paper delivered at the American Studies Association Eighth Biennial Convention, Memphis, Tennessee, 1 Nov. 1981.
- Katz, James E., Ronald E. Rice, Sophia Acord, Kiku Dasgupta, David Kalpana. 2004. "Personal Mediated Communication and the Concept of Community in Theory and Practice," in P. Kalbfleisch, ed., *Communication and Community, Communication Yearbook* 28. Mahwah, NJ: Erlbaum: 315-71.
- Kearl, Michael C. 1989. *Endings: A Sociology of Death and Dying*. London, UK: Oxford University Press.

- Kennedy, Randall. 2003. *Nigger: The Strange Career of a Troublesome Word*. New York: Vintage Books.
- Kibby, Marjorie. 2005. "Email Forwardables: Folklore in the Age of the Internet." *New Media & Society* 7: 770-90.
- Kirchner, Audrey Burie and Margaret R. Tassia. 1996. *In Days Gone By: Folklore and Traditions of the Pennsylvania Dutch*. Santa Barbara, CA: Libraries Unlimited.
- Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, Barbara. 1995. "From the Paperwork Empire to the Paperless Office: Testing the Limits of the 'Science of Tradition.'" In *Folklore Interpreted: Essays in Honor of Alan Dundes*, eds. Regina Bendix and Rosemary Levy Zumwalt, pp. 69-92. New York: Garland.
- _____. 1996. "The Electronic Vernacular." In *Connected: Engagements with Media*, ed. George E. Marcus, 21-66. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- _____. 2003. "Kodak Moments, Flashbulb Memories: Reflections on 9/11." *TDR: The Drama Review* 47(1): 11-48.
- Kuklick, Bruce. 1972. "Myth and Symbol in American Studies." *American Quarterly* 24(4): 435-50.
- Laineste, Liisi. 2003. "Researching Humor on the Internet," *Folklore: Electronic Journal of Folklore* 25:93-97.
- Lamb, Chris. 1994. "The Popularity of O.J. Simpson Jokes: The More We Know, the More We Laugh." *Journal of Popular Culture* 28(1): 223-31.
- Langlois, Janet L. 2005. "'Celebrating Arabs': Tracing Legend and Rumor Labyrinths in Post-9/11 Detroit." *Journal of American Folklore* 118(468): 219-36.
- Lardinois, Frederic. 2010. "One Third of U.S. Internet Users Now Post Status Updates Once per Week," *Reading Write Web*. 19 Jan. 2010.
http://www.readwriteweb.com/archives/one_third_of_us_internet_users_now_posts_status_up.php. Accessed 19 Mar. 2010.
- Laske, Otto. 1990. "The Computer as the Artist's Alter Ego." *Leonardo* 23: 53-66.
- Leary, James P. 1977. "White Guys' Stories of the Night Street." *Journal of the Folklore Institute* 14(1/2): 59-71.
- Legman, Gershon. 1982 [1968]. *No Laughing Matter: An Analysis of Sexual Humor, Volume I and II*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.
- Leppzer, Robert. 1980. *Voices from Three Mile Island: The People Speak Out*. Berkeley, CA: Crossing Press.

- Levine, Lawrence W. 1988. *Highbrow/ Lowbrow: The Emergence of Cultural Hierarchy in America*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Lewis, Paul. 2006. *Cracking Up: American Humor in a Time of Conflict*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.
- Lifton, Robert Jay. 1968. *Death in Life: Survivors of Hiroshima*. New York: Random House.
- _____. 1969. *Boundaries: Psychological Man in Revolution*. New York: Simon and Schuster.
- _____. 1970. *History and Human Survival*. New York: Random House.
- _____. 1979. *The Broken Connection: On Death and the Continuity of Life*. New York: Simon and Schuster.
- _____. 1982. *Indefensible Weapons: The Political and Psychological Case Against Nuclearism*. New York: Basic Books, Inc.
- Limerick, Patricia Nelson. 1987. *The Legacy of Conquest: The Unbroken Past of the American West*. New York: W.W. Norton & Company.
- Linke, Uli, and Alan Dundes. 1988. "More Auschwitz Jokes." *Folklore* 99(1): 3-10.
- Long, Sarah Ann. 2005. "Digital Natives: If You Aren't One, Get to Know One." *New Library World* 106(1210/ 1211):187-89.
- Lovink, Geert. 2003. *Dark Fiber: Tracking Critical Internet Culture*. Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press.
- _____. 2007. *Zero Comments: Blogging and Critical Internet Culture*. New York: Routledge Press.
- Lowe, Donald M. 1983. *History of the Bourgeois Perception*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.
- Malmsheimer, Lonna M. 1986. "Three Mile Island: Fact, Frame, and Fiction." *American Quarterly* 38(1):35-52.
- Marshall, P. David. 2006. *The Celebrity Culture Reader*. New York: Routledge Press.
- Marx, Leo. 1964. *The Machine in the Garden: Technology and the Pastoral Ideal in America*. London, UK: Oxford University Press.
- McClure, Helen. 2000. "The Wild, Wild Web: The Mythic American West and the Electronic Frontier." *Western Historical Quarterly* 31: 457-76.
- McCracken, Grant. 1988. *Culture and Consumption: New Approaches to the Symbolic Character of Consumer Goods and Activities*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.

- _____. 1989. "Homeyness": A Cultural Account of One Constellation of Consumer Goods and Meanings." In *Interpretive Consumer Research*, ed. Elizabeth C. Hirschman. Provo, UT: Association for Consumer Research.
- McDonald, Paul. 2001. *The Star System: Hollywood's Production of Popular Identities*. London, UK: Wallflower Press.
- McLuhan, Marshall. 1994 [1964]. *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man*. Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press.
- McLuhan, Marshall and Quentin Fiore. 1989 [1967]. *The Medium is the Message*. New York, NY: Touchstone Publishing (Simon & Schuster).
- McNeill, Lynne S. 2009. "The End of the Internet: A Folk Response to the Provision of Infinite Choice." In *Folklore and the Internet: Vernacular Expression in a Digital World*, ed. Trevor J. Blank, pp. 80-97. Logan: Utah State University Press.
- Mechling, Jay. 2002. "Children and Colors: Folk and Popular Cultures in America's Futures." In *Folk Nation: Folklore in the Creation of American Tradition*, ed. Simon J. Bronner, pp. 263-83. Wilmington, DE: Scholarly Resources, Inc.
- _____. 2006. "Solo Folklore." *Western Folklore* 65: 435-54.
- Michael, Nancy. 1995. "Censure of a Photocopylore Display." *Journal of Folklore Research* 32(2): 137-54.
- Miller, Kiri. 2008. "Grove Street Grimm: Grand Theft Auto and Digital Folklore." *Journal of American Folklore* 121(481): 255-85.
- Milspaw, Yvonne J. 1981. "Folklore and the Nuclear Age: 'The Harrisburg Disaster' at Three Mile Island." *International Review of Folklore* 1: 57-65.
- _____. 2011. "TMI-2: Elements in the Discourse of Disaster." *Contemporary Legend*, forthcoming.
- Mitchell, Roger. 1979. "The Press, Rumor, and Legend Formation." *Midwestern Journal of Language and Lore* 5: 1-2. Special Issue.
- Montgomery, Kathryn A. 2009. *Generation Digital: Politics, Commerce, and Childhood in the Age of the Internet*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.
- Moore, Robert J., E. Cabell Hankinson Gathman, and Nicolas Ducheneau. 2009. "From 3D Space to Third Place: The Social Life of Small Virtual Spaces." *Human Organization* 68(2): 230-40.
- Morreall, John. 1983. *Taking Laughter Seriously*. Albany: State University of New York Press.
- Narváez, Peter, ed. 2003. *Of Corpse: Death and Humor in Folklore and Popular Culture*.

- Logan: Utah State University Press.
- Nash, Roderick Frazier. 2001 [1967]. *Wilderness and the American Mind*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 4th ed.
- National Enquirer, The*. 2009. "World Exclusive: Woman at Center of Tiger Woods Cheating Scandal Exposed." 28 November 2009.
<http://www.nationalenquirer.com/celebrity/67747>. Accessed 16 September 2010.
- Newell, William Wells. 1883. *Games and Songs of American Children*. New York: Harper and Brothers.
- Opie, Iona and Peter Opie. 2001 [1959]. *The Lore and Language of Schoolchildren*. New York: New York Review of Books.
- Oring, Elliott. 1976. "Three Functions of Folklore: Traditional Functionalism as Explanation in Folkloristics." *Journal of American Folklore* 89: 67-80.
- _____. 1983. "The People of the Joke: On the Conceptualization of a Jewish Humor." *Western Folklore* 42(4): 261-71.
- _____. 1984a. "Dyadic Traditions." *Journal of Folklore Research* 21(1): 19-28.
- _____. 1984b. "Jokes and Their Relation to Sigmund Freud." *Western Folklore* 43(1): 37-48.
- _____. 1987. "Jokes and the Discourse on Disaster." *Journal of American Folklore* 100(397): 276-86.
- _____. 1992. *Jokes and Their Relations*. Lexington: University Press of Kentucky.
- _____. 2003. *Engaging Humor*. Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press.
- Ornstein, Severo. 2002. *Computing in the Middle Ages: A View from the Trenches, 1955-1983*. Bloomington, IN: AuthorHouse Publishing.
- Osif, Bonnie A. 2004. *TMI 25 Years Later: The Three Mile Island Nuclear Power Plant Accident and Its Impact*. University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press.
- Palvrey, John and Urs Gasser. 2008. *Born Digital: Understanding the First Generation of Digital Natives*. New York: Basic Books.
- Pimple, Kenneth. 1996. "The Meme-ing of Folklore." *Journal of Folklore Research* 33(3): 236-40.
- Plato (G.M.A. Grube, trans., C.D.C. Reeve, ed.). *Republic*. [1992]. Indianapolis, IN: Hackett Publishing Company.
- Pope, Mark and Matt Englar-Carlson. 2001. "Fathers and Sons: The Relationship Between

- Violence and Masculinity.” *The Family Journal* 9(4):367-74.
- Prensky, Marc. 2001a. “Digital Natives, Digital Immigrants.” *On the Horizon* 9(5): 1-6.
- _____. 2001b. “Digital Natives, Digital Immigrants, Part II: Do They Really *Think* Differently?” *On the Horizon* 9(6): 1-6.
- _____. 2004. “The Emerging Online Life of the Digital Native: What They Do Differently Because of Technology, and How They Do It.” Unpublished.
- _____. 2006. *Don't Bother Me, Mom—I'm Learning!* St. Paul, MN: Paragon House Publishing.
- _____. 2007. *Digital Game-Based Learning*. St. Paul, MN: Paragon House Publishing.
- Preston, Michael J. 1974. “Xerox-lore.” *Keystone Folklore Quarterly* 19: 11-26.
- _____. 1994. “Traditional Humor from the Fax Machine: ‘All of a Kind’.” *Western Folklore* 53(2): 147-69.
- Provine, Robert R. 2000. *Laughter: A Scientific Investigation*. New York: Penguin Books.
- Putnam, Robert. 2000. *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community*. New York: Simon & Schuster.
- Rainie, Lee and Kristin Purcell. 2010. “The Economics of Online News,” *Pew Internet and American Life Initiative*. Washington, D.C.
<http://pewinternet.org/~media/Files/Reports/2010/The-economics-of-online-news.pdf>.
 Accessed 19 March 2010.
- Rawlinson, Linnie and Nick Hunt. 2009. “Jackson Dies, Almost Takes Internet with Him,” CNN.com. <http://www.cnn.com/2009/TECH/06/26/michael.jackson.internet/index.html> (June 26, 2009). Accessed October 31, 2009.
- Redfield, Robert. 1947. “The Folk Society.” *American Journal of Sociology* 52(4): 293-308.
- Reed, Lori. 2002. “Governing (through) the Internet: The Discourse on Pathological Computer Use as Mobilized Knowledge.” *European Journal of Cultural Studies* 5(2): 131-53.
- Rheingold, Howard. 2000. *The Virtual Community: Homesteading on the Electronic Frontier*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.
- _____. 2003. *Smart Mobs: The Next Social Generation*. New York: Basic Books.
- Richtel, Matt. 2010. “Growing Up Digital, Wired for Distraction.” *New York Times*, November 21, 2010 (Technology section).
http://www.nytimes.com/2010/11/21/technology/21brain.html?_r=2&pagewanted=1&nl=todaysheadlines&emc=a2. Accessed 21 November 2010.

- Riesman, David (with Nathan Glazer and Reuel Denney). 1961 [1950]. *The Lonely Crowd: A Study of the Changing American Character*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.
- Romanoff, Bronna D. and Marion Terenzio. 1998. "Rituals and the Grieving Process." *Death Studies* 22(8): 697-711.
- Ryan, Johnny. 2010. *A History of the Internet and the Digital Future*. London, U.K.: Reaktion Books.
- Samuelson, Sue. 1995. "A Review of the Distinctive Genres of Adolescent Folklore." *Children's Folklore Review* 17: 13-32.
- Santino, Jack. 1995. *All Around the Year: Holidays and Celebrations in American Life*. Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press.
- _____. 2005. *Spontaneous Shrines and Public Memorialization of Death*. New York: Palgrave MacMillan.
- Schickel, Richard. 1985. *Intimate Strangers: The Cult of Celebrity*. Chicago, IL: Ivan R. Dee, Publisher.
- Shatzer, Milton J., and Thomas R. Lindlof. 1998. "Media Ethnography in Virtual Space: Strategies, Limits, and Possibilities." *Journal of Broadcasting and Electronic Media* 42: 170-89.
- Simons, Elizabeth Radin. 1986. "The NASA Joke Cycle: The Astronauts and the Teachers." *Western Folklore* 45(4): 261-77.
- Singer, Eleanor and Phyllis M. Endreny. 1993. *Reporting on Risk: How the Mass Media Portray Accidents, Diseases, Disasters, and Other Hazards*. New York: Russell Sage Foundation.
- Smith, Moira. 1990. "Jokes and Practical Jokes." In *The Emergence of Folklore in Everyday Life*, ed. George H. Schoemaker, pp. 73-82. Bloomington, IN: Trickster Press.
- Smith, Roderick Nash. 2001 [1967]. *Wilderness and the American Mind*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 4th ed.
- Smyth, Willie. 1986. "Challenger Jokes and the Humor of Disaster." *Western Folklore* 45(4): 243-60.
- Sofka, Carla J. 2009. "News and Notes: Adventures of a Thanatologist: The Cultural Reincarnation of Michael Jackson." *Death Studies* 33(10): 958-60.
- Spigel, Lynn. 1991. "Communicating with the Dead: Elvis as Medium." *Camera Obscura* 23: 176-205.
- Stallabrass, Julian. 2003. *Internet Art: The Online Clash of Culture and Commerce*. Mustang,

- OK: Tate Publishing.
- Stoudt, John Baer. 2010 [1916]. *The Folklore of the Pennsylvania Germans*. Whitefish, MT: Kessinger Publishing Limited.
- Stross, Brian. 1999. "The Hybrid Metaphor: From Biology to Culture." *Journal of American Folklore* 112(445):254-67.
- Sunstein, Cass R. 2009. *Republic 2.0*. New Jersey: Princeton University Press.
- Susman, Warren. 1984. *Culture as History: The Transformation of American Society in the Twentieth Century*. New York: Pantheon Books.
- Tapscott, Dan. 1999. *Growing Up Digital: The Rise of the Net Generation*. Columbus, OH: McGraw-Hill Publishing.
- _____. 2008. *Grown Up Digital: How the Net Generation is Changing Your World*. Columbus, OH: McGraw-Hill Publishing.
- Tate, Cecil F. 1973. *The Search for a Method in American Studies*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- Thompson, Krissah. 2009. "Harvard Professor Arrested at Home." *Washington Post* (21 July 2009). <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2009/07/20/AR2009072001358.html>.
- Tithcott, Richard. 1997. *Of Men and Monsters: Jeffrey Dahmer and the Construction of the Serial Killer*. Madison: University of Wisconsin Press.
- Tomasula, Steve. 1998. "Bytes and Zeitgeist: Digitizing the Cultural Landscape." *Leonardo* 31(5): 337-44.
- Trachtenberg, Alan. 2007 [1982]. *The Incorporation of America: Culture and Society in the Gilded Age*. New York: Hill and Wang Publishers.
- Trifonoff, Karen M. 1999. "Quilting and Geography: Learning Activities for Elementary and Secondary Levels." *Journal of Geography* 98(5): 209-19.
- Tucker, Elizabeth. 2008. *Children's Folklore: A Handbook*. Westport, CT: Greenwood Press.
- Turkle, Sherri. 1995. *Life on the Screen: Identity in the Age of the Internet*. New York: Simon & Schuster.
- _____. 2005. *The Second Self: Computers and the Human Spirit*. Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press.
- Turner, Fred. 2008. *From Counterculture to Cyberculture: Stewart Brand, the Whole Earth Network, and the Rise of Digital Utopianism*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.

- Turner, Frederick Jackson. 1893. "The Significance of the Frontier in American History." *Proceedings of the State Historical Society of Wisconsin*.
<http://xroads.virginia.edu/~hyper/turner/chapter1.html>. Retrieved 5 October 2010.
- _____. 1961. *Frontier and Section: Selected Essays of Frederick Jackson Turner*. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall.
- Turner, Viktor. 1974. "Liminal to Liminoid in Play, Flow, and Ritual: An Essay in Comparative Symbolology." *Rice University Studies* 60(3): 53-92.
- Untiedt, Kenneth, ed. 2006. *Folklore: In All of Us, In All We Do*. Denton, TX: University of North Texas Press (Publications of the Texas Folklore Society).
- Upton, Dell and John Michael Vlach, eds. 1986. *Common Places: Readings in American Vernacular Architecture*. Athens: University of Georgia Press.
- Vickio, Craig J. 1999. "Together in Spirit: Keeping Our Relationships Alive When Loved Ones Die." *Death Studies* 23(2):161-75.
- Vygotsky, Lev. 1978. *Mind in Society*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Walker, Jesse. 2004. *Rebels on the Air: An Alternative History of Radio in America*. New York: New York University Press.
- Walker, J. Samuel. 2006. *Three Mile Island: A Nuclear Crisis in Historical Perspective*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Warnick, Barbara. 2007. *Rhetoric Online: Persuasion and Politics on the World Wide Web*. New York: Peter Lang Publishing.
- Wasik, Bill. 2009. *And Then There's This: How Stories Live and Die in Viral Culture*. New York: Viking Press.
- Weber, Sandra, and Shanly Dixon. 2007. *Growing Up Online: Young People and Digital Technologies*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Wehmeyer, Stephen C. and Kerry Noonan. 2009. "Re-envisioning the Visionary: Towards a Behavior Definition of Initiatory Art." *Western Folklore* 67(2/3):199-222.
- Weiss, Aaron. 2006. "The Last Word: The Ugly Web—Where Form Follows Way Behind Function." *netWorker* 10(2): 40-43.
- Wenger, Dennis E., James D. Dykes, Thomas D. Sebok, and Joan L. Neff. 1975. "It's a Matter of Myths: An Empirical Examination of Individual Insight into Disaster Response." *Mass Emergencies* 1: 33-46.
- Wenger, Dennis E., and Barbara Friedman. 1986. *Local and National Media Coverage of Disasters: A Content Analysis of the Print Media's Treatment of Disaster Myths*. Newark,

DE: Disaster Research Center, The University of Delaware.

- Westerman, William. 2009. "Epistemology, the Sociology of Knowledge, and the Wikipedia Userbox Controversy." In *Folklore and the Internet: Vernacular Expression in a Digital World*, ed. Trevor J. Blank, pp. 123-58. Logan: Utah State University Press.
- Whyte, Kenneth. 2009. *The Uncrowned King: The Sensationalist Rise of William Randolph Hearst*. Berkeley, CA: Counterpoint Press.
- Wolfenstein, Martha and Gilbert Kliman. 1965. *Children and the Death of a President*. Garden City, NJ: Doubleday Books.
- Wojcik, Daniel. 2009. "Outsider Art, Vernacular Traditions, Trauma, and Creativity." *Western Folklore* 67(2/3): 179-98.
- Wuthnow, Robert. 2010. *Be Very Afraid: The Cultural Response to Terror, Pandemics, Environmental Devastation, Nuclear Annihilation, and Other Threats*. London, UK: Oxford University Press.
- Yarbrough, Tyrone. 1998. "Consider the Source: Conspiracy Theories, Narratives, and Belief," *The Impromptu Journal (New Directions in Folklore)* 2. <https://scholarworks.iu.edu/dspace/handle/2022/3876>.
- Zukin, Sharon. 2005. *Point of Purchase: How Shopping Changed American Culture*. New York: Routledge Publishing.

NOTES

Introduction/ Chapter 1:

¹ A userbox is an information text-box created by the moderators on *Wikipedia*, which is an open-source, free-access, and participatory world encyclopedia of folk knowledge available online. See Westerman (2009) for background information on the use and importance of userboxes in the *Wikipedia* community, as well as examples of their use in practice.

² See also Bates (2009) for an in-depth look at the statistics and how the Internet was affected by Jackson's death, as well as a brief examination of the types of viral responses to the news by users in cyberspace. Of particular interest to folklorists is how the news of Jackson's death also influenced the creation of false rumors about other supposed celebrity deaths.

³ On the Internet, it is nearly impossible to make any social or contextual categorizations of the contexts behind some expressive behaviors with definitive accuracy (at least during the immediate moment of dissemination itself). This is both a difficulty and an asset for the collection of data online. A user's social context is not always clear in cyberspace on the surface, which can be problematic.

⁴ This is important to note because one of the major defense mechanisms in alleviating anxiety after a tragedy is denial (Wuthnow 2010, 10-12; see also Cohen 2001; Glassner 2000).

⁵ Baudrillard has often been criticized for his dense prose style and abstract presentation of his ideas. Therefore (in the interest of making my point clearer), I would like to invoke a reference from my own cultural inventory that I hope readers may also know: think of the film *The Matrix* (1999) and how an entire world of individuals go about their lives completely unaware of the apocalyptic “real world” that they will never know. Are their lives and experiences in “the matrix” *real* simply because their corporeal bodies exist elsewhere? See the works of philosopher René Descartes (2009; see also Almog 2005) for more on “dualism” and the “mind-body problem” from which Baudrillard derives his theoretical grounding.

⁶ See Hilmes and Loviglio (2001) for an interdisciplinary historical discussion regarding the cultural impact of American radio. For a discussion of radio broadcasting’s correlation to perceptions of national tradition, see Camporesi (2002).

⁷ My thanks to Simon Bronner for this information; he has been researching the use of computer technology among the Amish of central Pennsylvania since 2010.

⁸ The Pew Research Center’s Internet & American Life Project, April 29-May 30, 2010. <http://www.pewinternet.org/Trend-Data/Whos-Online.aspx>. Accessed 28 October 2010.

⁹ For an interesting collection and analysis of how American middle school boys and girls conceptualize and use technology in their daily lives, see Hou et. al (2006).

Chapter 2:

¹⁰ The adoption of interchangeable parts greatly influenced and hastened the later development of the automobile and American industrialization, which had their own repercussions on the development of American society. For example, following the widespread advancement and adoption of the automobile, the newly mobile society went off driving, which led to the creation of whole industries in tourism and hotel management, as well as the Eisenhower interstate system (see Belasco 1978).

¹¹ It should be noted, however, that the online venue’s privilege of anonymity is not without drawbacks. Some individuals also seek to “crash” a structured, communal online scene in order to rile up participants or to take advantage of the Internet venue’s anonymity. “Trolling,” as this behavior is called, is the deliberate act of contributing rhetorical content to a site that seeks to undermine its communal ideologies; more generally, trolling also acts in defiance of folk customs regarding communicative discourse on the Internet (such as when and where to use obscenities, for example). Individuals that partake in trolling gain pleasure from disrupting the expected discourse of a given Internet forum, and they thus have been dubbed by Internet users as “trolls” (a label which certainly encodes images of menacing creatures found in children’s folklore). When an Internet user acts a troll, they are not seeking the same kind of progressive connectivity as many of their peers are, but rather attempting to garner attention and rhetorically announce the superiority of their opinions to those whom they are disrupting. A common adage

invoked upon their appearance is “don’t feed the trolls,” meaning to ignore their presence. Regardless, what should be gleaned from these interactions (and their motivations) is how influential the digital format can be for fostering “real,” meaningful relationships with others, both jocular and serious.

¹² This may also partially explain why the digital format has been so fervently embraced as it has become available to most Americans.

¹³ Regular Internet usage instills a registry of aesthetic values upon users (which varies, depending on the kinds of interactions routinely sought out by an individual). Such values are constantly being subconsciously acquired, reinforced, and reshaped through repeated exposure to the dominant aesthetics of the Internet. To be sure, “how and why does folklore remain stable and change?” is/ has long been one of the three “questions that are central to folkloristics” (Georges and Jones 1995, 317). The presence of multiple variation deriving from dominant aesthetic motifs online helps to explain the broad similarities found between the sites of artists with no relation to one another beyond their shared craft. Certainly, there is no manual or official guide for artists to follow on how they should create their websites, and yet several artists’ websites seem to feature many of the same components: a folksy narrative back-story, an homage to heritage or family/regional tradition in some form (usually in prose), photo galleries of their work and/or family history, news clippings or press, basic information on their region or craft, and contact information for personal or purchasing inquiries. What else could possibly explain the widespread departure from colorfully patterned backgrounds; bold, fancy texts and images; frame-based websites; or idealizations of what constituted a “professional-looking” website of the Web 1.0? Clearly, aesthetic patterns emerged, were accepted as being desirable, and were then replicated through imitation until the archaic models faded away. These similar components may constitute forms of virtual folk architecture—a concept in and of itself that is attributable to hybridization. The Internet, as an expressive medium, serves as a disembodied, digital alter ego for many artists (see Laske 1990).

¹⁴ The function is clearly identifiable in the folk responses to catastrophic losses of human life throughout the mid- to late-twentieth century. For example, following the “Jonestown Massacre” on November 18, 1978, in which over 900 people were compelled to drink cyanide-laced punch as a part of a massive suicide ritual in Guyana, one popular joke surfaced was used to diffuse tension about the event: “Why don’t people tell jokes about Jonestown?” The answer: “Because the punch-line is too long” (Goodwin 2001; see also D. Jones 1985). The drink mix, *Kool-Aid*, was said to have been used, and consequently the brand has been jokingly referenced in folk culture as a euphemism for cultish behavior or blind devotion to an idea or organization by labeling the individual as “drinking the Kool-Aid.” This phrase is also occasionally self-appropriated by sports fans in order to rhetorically indicate loyalty to their favorite teams. As discussed earlier in the chapter, the incorporation of commercial products could be seen in the Challenger Disaster joke cycles, as well as several other tragic incidences covered in the media such as the public suicide of politician R. Budd Dwyer (Bronner 1988b; 2009). I briefly note the appearance of commercial items in humor that circulated during the Tiger Woods scandal in chapter 4 of this work. I draw attention to these incidences to showcase the structural traditions that link them as derivatives of the same lineage.

¹⁵ The *Holocaust* mini-series actually helped to popularize the term “Holocaust,” which to that point had not been widely used in American parlance. This fact conveys the growing influence of mass media on folk culture during this era.

¹⁶ For the uninitiated, a “Photoshopped image” refers to a picture that was manipulated in an effort to purposely create a new image out of the old. The term comes from the popular computer program, Adobe Photoshop, which many amateur (and professional) artists use in order to create a variety of artistic outputs. Throughout this study I most commonly refer to Photoshopped images when describing manipulated pictures where the imposed alterations are intentionally humorous and meant to convey a message (political, rhetorical, etc.) that can be decoded by a viewer and made meaningful based on shared cultural inventories and/ or worldviews.

Chapter 3:

¹⁷ The terms “Xeroxlore” and “photocopylore” mean the same thing. The terms “Xerox humor” or “photocopied humor” refer to the predominant motifs that typify photocopylore.

¹⁸ Folklore and folk culture can be found in the city, the office, and on the Internet just as authentically and meaningfully as in “unsophisticated” contexts. There are a handful of valuable folkloristic examples that support the claim that folklore exists in various circles of engagement (elite and non-elite, folk as well as mass, etc.). See Blank 2009b; Bronner 2009; Brunvand 1981, 2001; Dorson 1970; Dorst 1990; Dundes and Pagter 1975, 1987, 1991, 1996; Kirshenblatt-Gimblett 1995, 1996; Legman 1968; Untiedt 2006. Within contemporary folkloristics, the most influential work of these is likely Richard Dorson’s (1970) “Is There a Folk in the City?” which is an essay that is particularly relevant for underscoring my argumentation here. For additional historical contexts on the evolving debate, see Redfield (1947). For a more deliberate examination of the relationship between folk and mass culture, see Linda Dégh, *American Folklore and the Mass Media* (1994).

¹⁹ See Milspaw (1981; 2011) for additional context, collection, and analysis of Three Mile Island jokes.

²⁰ This is not to say that the jokes did not travel into national circles. In fact, there were jokes on Three Mile Island on the Johnny Carson show and in other regional circles when the crisis was at its peak. My point, however, is that *after* the accident left the headlines in national news circles, it reverted to being a strictly regional phenomenon.

²¹ For in-depth analysis and commentary on the Challenger Disaster, see Ellis (1991); Oring (1987); Simons (1986); and Smyth (1986).

Chapter 4:

²² The focus on getting the “last word” remains a part of Internet discourse today as well. See Weiss (2006).

²³ For the record, George Washington never chopped down a cherry tree. See Dorson (1976) for a lengthy study on fakelore.

²⁴ Consumerism and commodification are important pieces of the celebrity culture puzzle; however my specific research is more interested in the construction of imaginary relationships than the nuances of commodification and its implications. Consequently, I have chosen to refrain from distracting ruminations on consumer culture. That said, Zukin (2005) provides an accessible look into consumer culture; the context provided by Marshall (2006) is also helpful in cementing my argumentation here.

²⁵ Note the first-name basis or nicknames attributed to celebrities like “J-Lo,” “Jacko,” “Oprah,” “Fergie,” “A-Rod,” etc.

²⁶ This claim assumes that the reader is not a celebrity. If the reader is a celebrity, please piss off and stop ruining my analysis.

²⁷ This again points to my thesis that people utilize the Internet in order to symbolically connect with others in a meaningful, intimate way as they compensate for a lack of connectivity in their “real” lives.

²⁸ See chapter 6.

²⁹ While many fans would likely state that they are just supporting their team by wearing a jersey, diehard fans often appear to be subconsciously fantasizing about playing the sport themselves or even “taking over” for the athlete as if they were the same person. Grant McCracken (1988; 1989) productively writes about a process called “displaced meaning” wherein people attain cultural ideals through acts of consumption. For McCracken, it is not just an individual act of intimacy when a person wears a favorite player’s jersey—they are simultaneously communicating their identification with their values to others through rhetorical expression.

³⁰ I should clarify that the term “imaginary social world” was coined by anthropologist John Caughey in 1984. “Simulative social worlds,” by contrast, is a term that I have coined here to better articulate (and distinguish) the nature of online vernacular expression and the relationships that are derived from such interaction.

Chapter 5:

³¹ It should be noted that the first broadcast about Woods’ car accident appeared just over two hours after the actual event in question took place (at 2:25a.m., according to police records). By daybreak, the story had hit the Internet and was widely distributed across the globe. The information chain that was created in response to the incident continued to send its assembly line of facts through the vast network of mass media outlets at the disposal of citizen journalists, formal media members, and interested info-seekers throughout the height of the story’s lifespan.

³² Rachel Uchitel had previously been linked to a 2008 affair with television actor David Boreanaz during his wife’s pregnancy. Her second appearance as an alleged celebrity mistress also raised the stakes of the news reportage, and many bloggers quickly predicted that the salacious *National Enquirer* would be the recipient of a defamation lawsuit in short order if they did not produce “actual proof” of their allegations about Woods.

³³ That said, I should clarify that I am not passing judgment on Woods’ behaviors—regardless of my own personal dislike for his actions—but rather I am seeking to channel the overarching sentiments expressed by many people that I encountered in my ethnographic collections online and in person.

³⁴ For example, a rambling voicemail was leaked to the press in which Woods requested that a mistress delete his name and text messages from her phone because he suspected that his wife had caught wind of their affair. The audio evidence gave additional credence to the swirling accusations and provided concrete proof—straight from Tiger’s own mouth—that there was a darker side to his personality that many of his followers never knew existed.

³⁵ Another obvious (but important) difference is that O.J. Simpson was accused of gruesomely murdering his wife and her boyfriend, whereas Tiger Woods was accused of adultery. The seriousness of the respective allegations is important to consider: Simpson was acquitted of committing murder, but remained a social pariah who never resumed his work in sports broadcasting or acting after the trial (this may also be attributed to the fact that many people judged him to be guilty anyhow). Woods, on the other hand, was able to eventually return to golf after going on hiatus for a while. As of Fall 2010, his reintegration into the good graces of the public eye has been slow.

³⁶ To conceptualize the vast difference of sophistication between Web 1.0 and Web 2.0, I like to use the analogy of home music entertainment’s technological advancement. Vinyl LP record technology progressed into 8-track technology, which was then followed by cassette tapes, and eventually compact discs, laser discs, and later digital mp3s. Each iteration was more sophisticated and compact than its predecessor, while simultaneously managing to enable greater memory storage in a single device for prolonged, uninterrupted user enjoyment. Nevertheless, each of these devices served the same function: to play music. While an old record player provides the same great music as its successors, it is commercially undesirable because it is clunky and awkward, and the sound quality is usually inferior to the advanced formats. Similarly, Web 1.0 had the same function and a similar appearance to Web 2.0, but the latter is exponentially more intricate and accessible (yet affordable), and has attracted greater patronage that continues to develop and advance the global network it facilitates. For an applied, illustrative example of Web 1.0 vernacular expression and how it contrasts to Web 2.0 technology, see McNeill (2009).

³⁷ This assertion runs counter to the astute claims of Bill Ellis (2001) regarding the observance of a latency period following a media disaster. Ellis characterizes the latency period as a brief stretch of time (usually about two weeks) in which sobriety and decorum is consciously upheld in opposition to the allure of tasteless humor performance, particularly during the days following a serious event has taken place. However, as I discuss in this chapter’s section on Michael

Jackson's death humor, the socially sanctioned "appropriate time" for humor to surface in the wake of a tragedy is wholly contextual; more importantly the length varies based on the nature of the media disaster and the individual needs of the narrative purveyor. Increasingly, the latency period appears to be prematurely truncated due to the opportunities for anonymous expression in numerous online forums, which allows for risk-free vernacular expression without the constraints or expectations of defined social order. Furthermore, the observance of a latency period does not appear to be expectable in the case of celebrity scandal.

³⁸ It should be noted that part of the acceptability for the general, light Tiger Woods humor that surfaced the day after the crash was likely due to the fact that joke tellers and audiences were aware that Woods was in stable health and not critically injured as had been initially feared. Had Woods perished in the crash, it is likely that a period of shock and decorum would have instituted some adherence to a latency period (see note #7), but it is impossible to detect how the remainder of the saga would have unfolded in this particularly case.

³⁹ I make this claim for several reasons. First, I can observe from my own familiarity with using the Photoshop program that the mock Christmas card's manipulated alterations are unpolished and rather unsophisticated in terms of technical difficulty to edit and splice. Secondly, I have observed numerous artists that participate in friendly online virtual community Photoshopping competitions or message boards that have been established in order to challenge participants to compete and most convincingly/ deceptively blur the lines of visual reality and user-generated modifications with a single image. Among these die-hard Photoshop users, a consensus of dismissal and rejection has been apparent in their commentarial responses to the Tiger Woods Christmas card's popularity. In their eyes, the apparent level of difficulty for replicating such work is so miniscule that many of these participating artists write off the popular Photoshop has amateur rubbish that lacks the craftsmanship or necessary depth to be considered "art." Several artist bloggers that I observed characterized the popular Christmas card image as being so amateurish that "a 5 year old could make it," and grumbled that the picture was an embarrassing attempt at manipulating a clean image. I admit that I found it peculiar that the bloggers I observed appeared to be more annoyed by the underdeveloped artistic nuances instead of the image's encoded humorous message. Nevertheless, I am no elitist, but these informants most certainly are—between their headstrong disapproval of the Photoshop's novice aesthetic components and my own analysis of the image's complexity, I reckon that my assertion holds up.

⁴⁰ Note, also, that the Photoshopped image appears to take on the aesthetic "feel" and organization of the classic painting, "American Gothic." In raising this similarity, I admit that I may be guilty of reading deeper into the image than the original, anonymous creator may have intended.

⁴¹ Often referred in the folk lexicon as a "tramp stamp," a woman's lower back tattoo is frequently mocked as "trashy" body ornamentation. In this application, the joke also rhetorically refers to Tiger Woods' choice of sexual partner as being promiscuous or "easy."

⁴² For compelling evidence on the traditionality of this particular example, see Dundes and Pagter (1996, 332) for examples that show its derivations from the AIDS joke cycles of the 1980s and 1990s in photocopylore.

⁴³ Prior to the more generalized acceptance of incongruity theory in modern humor studies (post-Freud), Plato's "superiority theory" was one of the oldest and longstanding theories of laughter and humor. Plato posited that what makes a person laughable is self-ignorance and that the proper object of laughter is human evil and folly (V, 452). The laughable person, then, is "the one who thinks of himself as wealthier, better looking, more virtuous, or wiser than he really is" (Morreall 1983, 4). Plato's central thesis held that laughter had a malicious element associated with the derision of our inferiors. Humor could thusly be used to "put someone in their place" by establishing that their wit was not as superior to their peers' via public admonishment. Plato warned against the dangers of laughter as inciting reckless abandon and even went so far as to recommend that literature "be edited to delete mention of gods or heroes being overcome with laughter" as to not show weakness or folly (Provine 2000, 13).

⁴⁴ Another variation, playing on the news story and tradition of wordplay humor went: Q: What's the difference between Tiger Woods and Santa Claus? A: Santa stops at three ho's.

⁴⁵ Structuralists may note that this continuity potentially points to an organic tradition in narratives, suggesting a continuing transmission. The riddle-joke structure signals a short-lived joke "fad" related to the frame of a "sick" or "gross" joke. My thanks to Simon Bronner for pointing this out to me.

⁴⁶ Nevertheless, it is important to note that laughter is influenced by both social *and* biological factors (see Provine 2000).

⁴⁷ See Pope and Englar-Carlson (2001) for insights on the social perceptions that equate violent behaviors with masculinity. Also, for an excellent analytical overview of masculine traditions and their construction in folklore and society, see Bronner (2003).

Chapter 6:

⁴⁸ An earlier version of this chapter appeared as "Moonwalking in the Digital Graveyard: Diversions in Oral and Electronic Humor Regarding the Death of Michael Jackson" (see Blank 2009d).

⁴⁹ According to Keith F. Durkin, the postself is "the reputation and influence that an individual has after his or her death" (2003, 47) or continues to exist in the memories of the minds of the living. This often takes place in commercial or performative ways, such as with Elvis impersonators or commodified images of Che Guevara t-shirts. In the case of Michael Jackson, this took place in the form of humor sharing, the various public broadcasting of Jackson's funeral and homage videos to his music career, the reinvigoration of Michael Jackson memorabilia, or in the advertisement for the posthumous release of Michael Jackson's "This Is It" tour documentary. For additional research on the memorialization process and its social/psychological functions, see see Clark and Franzmann (2006); Dobler (2009); Field and

Filanosky (2010); Foot et al. (2005); Grider (2001); Hess (2007); Jorgensen-Earp and Lanzilotti (1998); Romanoff and Terenzio (1998); Santino (2005); and Vickio (1999).

⁵⁰ TMZ.com broke the news of Michael Jackson's death on June 25, 2009 at 5:20pm, P.S.T. and had already alerted readers of EMTs arriving at Jackson's residence before other news outlets had done so. The instantaneity of the Internet circumvented the hindrances that the physical publication of a "late edition" newspaper would have caused. This reality is a frequent causation for the Internet's ability to "scoop" print media.

⁵¹ The "super-celebrity" moniker that is assigned to Jackson in this chapter is my own doing; it should be noted that the term has not been used to describe celebrities of Jackson's stature in other cultural studies scholarship. I have introduced the term here in order to distinguish Jackson's legacy and persona from the ranks of other popular celebrities.

⁵² This is not *always* the case, of course... just usually. And for the record (lest I sound like a cranky jerk), I am not an ex-boy band reject hurling insults out of spite over lost glamour; I just happen to think that it is good fun to lampoon and mock the delirium of teeny bopper culture. As a consequence, I am fairly confident that fate will ensure that I have a daughter someday.

⁵³ The truth is that society is understandably unforgiving in cases of child molestation, especially given the prevalence of sexual assaults against minors (an unsettling one in seven children are victimized). Even in prisons, child molesters (often called "Chesters") are ostracized and are particularly vulnerable to being attacked.

⁵⁴ Numerous celebrity "death hoax" urban legends have circulated about the supposed demise of famous people: Paul McCartney of the Beatles was supposedly killed in a car accident (the folklore from which exacerbated a lengthy following in popular culture); actor Abe Vigoda was believed to be dead numerous times since the 1970s; child stars Fred and Ben Savage apparently met their demise in either a tragic accident or violent suicide (no one is really sure); "Mikey" from the *Life* cereal commercials was rumored to have consumed *Coca-Cola* after ingesting *Pop Rocks*, which resulted in his stomach exploding; comedian Sinbad was said to have died alone and broke; actor Jeff Goldblum was reported to have tragically died after falling off of a cliff in New Zealand; and Oprah Winfrey was said to have recently been found dead, face-down in her apartment. These hoaxes are meant to elicit emotion and displays of concern, which are then preyed upon by knowing hoax-mongers as signs of weakness or gullibility. However, beyond the "gotcha" impact of a celebrity death hoax, its function is actually quite similar to celebrity death humor—by trivializing death (especially by targeting the dichotomous usage of celebrities that are either very famous or were once famous, but currently resides in obscurity) the teller of the folklore creates an emotional wedge between reality and the seriousness of the content.

⁵⁵ By the end of August 2009, Michael Jackson's death was ruled a homicide, and an investigation of a potential accidental death due to prescription drug complications was pending. This essay does not wish to disregard this information, but it is important to note that this reality was unbeknownst to the public at the peak of the humor's dissemination in July 2009. As such, while factually relevant to understanding Jackson's death in totality, the cause of death is

immaterial to a proper discussion of the humor that Jackson's death influenced and how the Internet mediated this process.

⁵⁶ Considering the sexual and aggressive overtones found in the majority of popular humor, this was to be expected. See Baker and Bronner (2003).

⁵⁷ See Frank (2009) and Kibby (2005) for excellent discussions of how folklore is transmitted and shaped by emailed dissemination.

⁵⁸ See Mechling (2002) for a review of how popular culture influences and is influenced by folk culture. This is particularly relevant in considering the transition of humor from electronic to oral formats and the hegemonic processes at work that are in conflict with folk interests.

⁵⁹ Note that this joke was collected orally in August, after over a month and a half had passed since Jackson died. As this chapter argues, oral and electronic humor do not always adhere to the same latency period constraints and the fact that joke did not emerge in oral traditions until over a month had passed shows that time must pass for the same level of insensitivity found more immediately online can be carried out in the physical world. It is also important to note that this joke was recycled from Princess Diana joke cycles.

⁶⁰ Many of the examples are reminiscent of the folk riddles about the Challenger disaster (and other media disasters of the late 1980s and 1990s) that were recycled or modified before and after the event in oral traditions, as discussed in Chapters 3—Q: What was the last thing to go through Christa McAuliffe's mind (or in other cycles JFK Jr., Princess Diana, Budd Dwyer, etc.)? A: The cockpit; her teeth; her ass, etc. See Bronner (1988), Oring (1987), Simons (1986), and Smyth (1986) for further analysis of the folk riddle in these contexts and cycles.

⁶¹ As a note on my ethnographic experience, when I collected Michael Jackson jokes orally I also observed a wide variety of reactions that evolved as more time passed following his death. Some people were very upset that I was asking if they had heard any Michael Jackson jokes immediately after hearing that he died, commenting that it was "too soon," or that I was "an insensitive prick," as one person commented. During my ethnography on the streets of Bloomington, Indiana, another person actually took my phone and ran off with it, refusing to return it until I promised not to ask anyone else for jokes (granted, that took place at a bar in a college town on a weekend evening). The mood lightened considerably after several weeks had passed and I was able to collect numerous jokes; most of which overlapped with the humor that I had found online.

⁶² Robert Dobler (2009) fruitfully explores how teens respond to the death of loved ones by mourning online through social networking sites like MySpace. His examples provides additional context on the response to grief in the Digital Age.

⁶³ A direct link to the popular blog posting can be found at <http://www.yankeesdaily.com/?p=7573> (accessed August 31, 2009).

⁶⁴ Many of the specialized websites for Michael Jackson death humor "sold out," and are currently analogous to a cyber ghost-town. The material is static, irrelevant, or simply

nonexistent. In many cases, the old URLs are swamped with ads and viruses, making their former appearance and function a distant memory to visitors.

⁶⁵ “Flaming” is akin to verbal dueling in an online setting and is a form of trolling. The practice is found in public cyberspace forums such as message boards or a blog’s comments section.

⁶⁶ This terminology is indicative of a folk hierarchy that has permeated popular culture. An “A-List” celebrity is one that is featured in mainstream, popular, and desirable entertainment venues. “B-List” celebrities, by contrast, are often lampooned as has-beens or simply less talented or desirable entertainers.

⁶⁷ The connection between the death of Elvis Presley and Michael Jackson is an appropriate one. In an effort to memorialize, as well as fictionalize and reject the reality of Elvis’ untimely death in August 1977, many fans and performers subsequently became full-time “Elvis impersonators” (see Carroll 2005; Fraser and Brown 2002; Spigel 1991). This is not to say that Elvis impersonators did not exist before his death, as they most certainly did; the same can be said for Michael Jackson impersonators. My point is that their respective deaths *did* act as a performative catalyst by attracting a greater swell of performers into the effort of public memorialization. Just as Michael Jackson was lampooned in some venues whilst celebrated in others; Elvis’ death also garnered jokes about his weight, health, or drug abuse amid a lively public spectacle of grief. The collective cultural loss was dually noted on both sides of the response spectrum.

Conclusion/ Chapter 7:

⁶⁸ See Dégh and Vázsonyi (1975) and Dégh (1997) for the definitive explanations of multi-conduit theory and how folklore is disseminated through conduits that shape their content and forms. See also Bronner (2009) for examples of how folklore has been digitized with astute comparisons to corresponding examples of analog folklore.

⁶⁹ An important consideration that should not be lost here is that while such social exercises are at work, there is always the possibility of one’s mind being changed. People, social as they are, may revise their values or beliefs in order to conform to the majority, or because of meaningful experiences that alters their line of thinking, or due to the introduction of a logical counterpoint that causes them to reevaluate their position. What I am getting at here is that the contextual “social baggage” is not fixed and can change in response to new social pressures or stimuli. However, I would argue that such change would be indicative of an individual’s immense desire for connectivity (such as one that becomes alienated by their narrow inclusivity or a person that updates their behaviors or ideologies in order to match a lover) that outweighs their loyalty to their original positions.

⁷⁰ In this thesis, Turner argues that Americans’ perpetual advancement into the frontier exemplified the spirit of a unique people, noting “that coarseness and strength combined with acuteness and acquisitiveness; that practical inventive turn of mind, quick to find expedients; that

masterful grasp of material things... that restless, nervous energy; that dominant individualism” were distinguishable characteristics distinctive qualities of an exceptional nationalist cohort.

⁷¹ I am moved to again remind readers that what makes something “traditional” is not its origin or the passing of time, but rather continuities and consistencies that establish a meaningful pattern that is subsequently adopted and shared by a group of people (see Georges and Jones 1995).

⁷² Marshall McLuhan (1964) himself warned media consumers to be wary of the manipulative power that burgeoning mediums could exude, which (given his influence even to this day) may account for the skepticism regarding digital interaction.

VITA
Trevor J. Blank

EDUCATION

Ph.D. Pennsylvania State University, Harrisburg; *American Studies*, 2011

M.A. Indiana University, Bloomington; *Folklore*, 2007

B.A. University of Maryland, Baltimore County; *American Studies*, 2005

SELECT PUBLICATIONS

(ed.) *Folk Culture in the Digital Age: New Perspectives on Folklore and the Internet*. Logan: Utah State University Press, forthcoming.

“Cheeky Behavior: The Meaning and Function of ‘Fartlore’ in Childhood and Adolescence.” *Children’s Folklore Review*, Vol. 32 (2010): 61-85. **Winner of the 2010 William Wells Newell Prize in Children’s Folklore, American Folklore Society.**

“Moonwalking in the Digital Graveyard: Diversions in Oral and Electronic Humor Regarding the Death of Michael Jackson.” *Midwestern Folklore*, Vol. 35, no. 2 (2009): 71-90.

“Fieldwork, Memory, and the Impact of 9/11 on an Eastern Tennessee Klansman: A Folklorist’s Reflection.” *Voices: The Journal of New York Folklore*, Vol. 35, no. 3-4 (2009): 23-27.

(ed.) *Folklore and the Internet: Vernacular Expression in a Digital World*. Logan: Utah State University Press, 2009. Reprinted 2010. **Selected as a “Significant University Press Title for Undergraduates, 2009-2010” by Choice.**

“Contesting the Contested: Preservation Politics, Collective Memory, and the First Institution for the Criminally Insane in America.” *Material Culture: Journal of the Pioneer America Society*, Vol. 41, no.1 (2009): 39-60.

“The History of the Hoosier Folklore Society, 1937-2007.” *The Folklore Historian*, Vol. 25 (2008): 23-43. **Winner of the 2009 Richard Reuss Prize in History and Folklore, American Folklore Society.**

SERVICE

Editor, *New Directions in Folklore*, since 2010.

Member, Editorial Board, *New Directions in Folklore*, since 2009.