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Editor's Column

I am pleased to present to readers *Oral Tradition* Volume 34, comprising four essays that demonstrate, in the diversity of their topics and approaches, the broad reach of the study of orality and oral tradition. This volume brings together traditions from three continents—as well as, perhaps unexpectedly, the work of one of the twentieth century's most famous novelists. Dorian Jurić opens the volume with a critique of the ways in which the ballad “The Building of Skadar”—which Alan Dundes called “the most studied ballad in the history of folkloristics”—has served the political agendas of folklorists and other scholars. Edmund Asare examines the use of proverbs at an Akan royal court in eastern Ghana, demonstrating the remarkably multimodal character of a discourse that is conducted in speech, in the languages of drums and horns, and even in court iconography. Anthony K. Webster, following the trail of a Navajo chipmunk, reflects on the ethical burden of ethnopoetics in relation to John Watchman's narrative of “Coyote and Skunk.” Finally, Nicole G. Burgoyne explores the strategic use of forms of oral discourse by the narrator of Vladimir Nabokov's *Lolita*, and the ways in which those oral forms are ultimately undermined by the solipsistic pleasure the narrator takes in the act of writing.

These essays appear at the conclusion of a difficult year. Throughout this period of global crisis, scholars have been, for the most part, in the very fortunate position of being able to continue their scholarly work, even if many have had to contend with closed libraries, quarantine restrictions, and other challenges. New technologies—above all platforms for video conferencing—have made it possible for them to collaborate with colleagues, engage with students, and enjoy the support of friends and family even as they endure physical isolation. The mediated socialization that characterizes our current moment stands in contrast with the direct, embodied interactions normally presupposed by oral tradition. The essays presented here, and in previous volumes of *Oral Tradition*, thus stand as a reminder of what we miss for the time being, and what we can look forward to regaining. At the same time, the past months have highlighted the remarkable ability of mediated oralities to bridge vast distances and to bring together physically isolated individuals. This is a topic that I am certain will find a place in the pages of future issues of *Oral Tradition*. As always, I invite scholars to submit essays on any topic that opens a perspective on the world's traditional arts of the past or present, but I hope especially that some will take up the challenge of exploring new technologies of the spoken word, new paradigms for mediated performance, and new forms of dispersed community—in short, the ways in which the spoken word, disseminated in new forms, has made the present moment of shared isolation a little more bearable.

David F. Elmer
Editor, *Oral Tradition*

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Back in the Foundation: Chauvinistic Scholarship and the Building Sacrifice Story-Pattern¹

Dorian Jurić

On an 1820-21 trip into the fledgling Serbian Principality, Vuk Stefanović Karadžić (hereafter “Vuk”), the language reformer, orthographer, folklorist, and ideological father of the modern Serbian state,² collected the song “The Building of Skadar” (“Zidanje Skadra”) from the *guslar* (bard) Old Man (*Starac*) Raško³ at Prince Miloš Obrenović’s manor in Kragujevac.⁴ The song follows the three noble Mrnjavčević brothers (named Mrljavčević in the song)—the historical brothers Vukašin and Uglješa, and the likely invented Gojko (Koljević 1980:124, 138, 148)—as they erect the city of Skadar (Shkodër in present-day Albania). Whatever is built by day is toppled at night by female supernatural beings, *vile* (sing. *vila*).⁵ After three years of struggle, the *vile* reveal that the structure cannot stand until a brother and sister, Stoja and Stojan,⁶ are found and immured in the building’s foundation. When a search for these two proves

¹ This article is based on a paper delivered at the summer convention of the Association for Slavic, East European, and Eurasian Studies in Zagreb, Croatia, on June 15, 2019. Thanks are owed to John Colarusso, Naomi McPherson, Aida Vidan, Marina Jurić, my two anonymous reviewers, and the editors of *Oral Tradition* for their helpful suggestions and aid in bringing it to its present form. A portion of this research was supported by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada and McMaster University. Thanks are also owed to the Department of Ethnology at the Croatian Academy of Sciences and Arts for access to their archives.

² Vuk Stefanović Karadžić (1787-1864) was a peasant-born Serbian folklorist, linguist, and scholar who standardized the Serbian national language on a phonetic basis and produced an expansive collection of folklore material (songs, oral narratives, proverbs, etc.) that was ahead of its time for its scope and academic rigor. His work set the bar for how folklore research would be conducted in the Balkans for the next century (see Wilson 1970).

³ Raško was born in Kolašin, Montenegro (c. 1770). Like many Montenegrin Serbs in those tumultuous times, he joined one of the mass or personal exoduses out of Ottoman-controlled areas into the newly won, semi-autonomous Serb ethno-state. Raško arrived during the beginning of the 1804 Uprising against the Dahije (most certainly bringing “The Building of Skadar” with him) and settled in the village of Sabanta. For more on Raško see Karadžić 1833:xvii-xviii; Popović 1964:152; Nedić 1972:339 and 1990:114-22.

⁴ Latković has provided convincing evidence that Vuk collected material twice from Raško, first in 1816 and then again during a trip from August 1820 to April 1821 (Nedić 1990:115); most early scholars assumed that “The Building of Skadar” was collected on the second trip (Tomić 1908e:537). None of Raško’s songs were printed until 1823.

⁵ I use the native nominative plural *vile*. For a critical survey of the *vila*, see Jurić 2019.

⁶ Both proper names are derived from the verb *stojati* (“to stand, to be erect”), and so are fitting names for sacrifices to strengthen a structure. There are Aromanian variants of the song that have borrowed this element and use the names Constance and Constantine to the same effect (Stefanović 1937:273).

unsuccessful, a new sacrifice is demanded—whichever of the brothers' wives brings lunch to the masons the next day, she is to be immured in a tower wall. The brothers make a pact that they will not tell their wives about the sacrifice and that chance shall decide which one brings the lunch. The two eldest brothers, however, break their oath, and their wives feign head- and hand-aches the following day to avoid the task. It falls to the wife of the naïve youngest brother, who is not warned of the danger and innocently carries the lunch to her death. As she is being walled in by her brothers-in-law, her desperate protests give way to bitter acceptance, and she begs the master mason to leave a window for her breasts so that she can continue to feed her young child.⁷

Raško's song was first published in 1823 in the second volume of Vuk's *Serbian Folk Songs* collection (*Narodne srpske pjesme*; later editions bore the title *Srpske narodne pjesme*). The song caused an immediate stir in European scholarly circles after Vuk sent the first two volumes of his collection in March of 1824 to his personal acquaintance, the German philologist and folklorist Jacob Grimm; Grimm called it "one of the most outstanding songs of all peoples and all times" (Dundes 1989:156). At the prompting of Jernej Kopitar (Wilson 1970:112-13),⁸ Grimm had been using Vuk's song-books to learn the Serbian language, and he relished the opportunity to translate Raško's song into German to share with his peers (Grimm 1825; Dundes 1989:151). This led to Talvj's (1825:117-26) well-received translation the following year,⁹ as well as Goethe's famous revulsion at what he saw as the "superstitious and barbaric attitudes" depicted in the song (1825).

The song is a beautiful and tragic example of the local ballad form and displays the emotional weight that the finest traditional songs in the Bosnian-, Croatian-, Montenegrin-, and Serbian-speaking ("BCMS-speaking") regions can carry. However, the central motifs and story-pattern of the song (hereafter referred to as the "Building Sacrifice" story-pattern)¹⁰ are not particular to Serbian oral traditions. Rather, they are found throughout the Balkans in Albanian, Bosniak, Bulgarian, Croatian, Greek, Hungarian, Romanian, and Romani songs and oral narratives, as well as farther afield in Armenia, elsewhere in the Caucasus, and in India. As a migratory legend, the song's narrative is easily attached to well-known local structures in the social mapping of the groups among which it settles. The song is connected to a wide range of fortresses, cities, bridges, monasteries, mosques, and other structures, many of which predate the song's diffusion, in the areas where the story is sung or told. What unites all the versions is a

⁷ For an English-language translation see Holton and Mihailovich 1997:78-85.

⁸ Jernej Kopitar (1780-1844) was a Slovene philologist and linguist. He worked as the Imperial Censor for Slovene literature in Vienna and played an active role in the Pan-Slavic movement. Kopitar invented a literary-political regimen consisting of a vernacular grammar, orthography, dictionary, and Bible translation, along with the collection and publication of folk songs, tales, and proverbs, to be implemented in all Austro-Hungarian Slavic holdings. His aim with this program was to wrest from Moscow to Vienna the representative center of the Pan-Slavic movement. Vuk became his partner for the Serbian leg of this project. See Wilson 1970:3; Živković 2011:161-62; Kroepej 2013.

⁹ Terese Albertini Luise von Jakob Robinson (1797-1870), who wrote under the acronym Talvj, was a German-American author, linguist, and translator whose storied career included an early interest in the translation of Serbian folk songs. See Voigt 1913.

¹⁰ In Thompson's (1955-58) Motif-Index, these include motifs D2192 ("Work of day magically overthrown at night") and S261 ("Foundation sacrifice").

common plot centered on a group of masons or brothers building a structure that is destroyed by supernatural means, who then learn that a sacrifice of immurement is required to end the demolition.

In the century after the song was first published, the initial acclaim it garnered in European circles was bolstered by increasingly refined academic attention as variants and multiforms were collected,¹¹ published, and analyzed throughout the region. Alan Dundes called the song and its multiforms “the most studied ballad in the history of folkloristics” (1989:153) and provided an exhaustive list of publications to support his assertion (153-55). Though this research made great strides in tracing variant forms and comparing various texts, the vast majority of it was written using what are today outdated unilinear diffusionist methods; this set of approaches was part of a folklore analysis program drawn directly from literary history and ill-suited to the study of oral traditions (Bynum 1978:20; Lord 2000:101). Moreover, as with many shared oral traditions in the Balkans, from its very beginning this scholarship was marred by ethno-nationalist divisions, with each scholar’s *Stammbaum* model tracing the diffusion channels of the songs to an *Urform* conveniently located in the author’s own nation. Thus, Sako (1984:165) had the home of the song in Albania, Megas (1969-70:54 and 1976:179) and Solymossy (1923-24) put it in Greece, Vargyas (1967:223-31) in Hungary,¹² and Stefanović (1937:286) split it between his native Serbia and a Greek origin he felt was too convincing to refute.

Dundes (1989, 1995, and 1996) outlined the folly of such scholarship by stressing the importance of a broader range of international variants. In an effort to move past the nationalist tendencies of his predecessors, he further suggested a possible Indian source transferred to the Balkans via Romani groups (1995:42-43). Yet, in many ways, later international debates regarding these songs drew attention away from early polemics amongst BCMS-speaking scholars and from longstanding problems affecting the study of oral traditions and claims of ownership in that contentious region. These debates speak to larger issues regarding the problematic theoretical paradigms that are often used to analyze oral traditions and regarding how materials largely derived from a peasant class are appropriated by academics and others for political ends. In this article, I return to the history of the collection of songs exhibiting the Building Sacrifice story-pattern in BCMS-speaking regions / Yugoslavia / the Habsburg, Venetian, and Ottoman Empires to explore the ethno-national manipulations to which this song has fallen victim over the last 200 years. I highlight three critical problems in past folklore research that allowed folklorists, ethnologists, and others to draw these materials into such contentious misuse: (1) ignorance of the interplay between print literature and popular oral traditions; (2) intentional disregard of regional distribution patterns in favor of supporting a false, *ex post facto* ethnic lens of analysis; and (3) the replacement of a dynamic model of song transmission and adaptation with a simplistic academic myth of unilinear diffusion. These

¹¹ Zimmerman (1979b:373) cites the number of texts at over 200, Dundes (1995:40) suggests more than 700, and Vargyas (1967) presents 518 in his study.

¹² Dundes (1995:45) seems to have misunderstood Vargyas’s argument, claiming that Vargyas places the source of the song tradition in Bulgaria. In fact, Vargyas follows the same track as his peers, crowning the Hungarians as the first group to bring the tradition to Europe. He mentions Bulgaria as a possible source (Vargyas 1967:203, 211) but states that it was more likely the first beneficiary to borrow the song from Hungary (223-26).

problems are situated in a cultural-historical overview which aims to trace some of the underlying politics that informed these biased scholarly approaches. The problems are then explored, as they pertain to the Building Sacrifice story-pattern, through a modern critical lens, before a corrective is offered that allows for a clearer understanding of the true diffusion and history of this oral tradition in the region.

As an antidote to these problematic methods and theories, I use a system grounded in a diffusionary model that has been honed over time in the fields of folkloristics and comparative mythology, as well as my own reworking of a system based on analytical terminology employed by proponents of Milman Parry and Albert Lord's oral-formulaic system and on elements drawn from common folkloristics. Though diffusionary models were never Parry's or Lord's main concern when they began to explore the oral traditions of Yugoslavia (A. Parry 1971; Mitchell and Nagy 2000:ix-xii), the systematic approach they took to their research and the discoveries they made regarding the transmission of epic singing in BCMS-speaking regions has had lasting effects on the manner in which diffusion is understood in folkloristic theory. The model I employ here is further elucidated in my doctoral thesis (Jurić 2019:55-59), but a brief explanation of the terminology employed in this piece will help the reader navigate the following sections:

Story-pattern—a traditional cluster of generic motifs (Bynum 1978:79).

Formula—"a group of words which is regularly employed under the same metrical conditions to express a given essential idea" (M. Parry 1971:272).

Theme—"a subject unit, a group of ideas, regularly employed by a singer, not merely in any given poem, but in the poetry as a whole" (Lord 1938:410) and "a recurrent element of narration or description in traditional poetry. It is not restricted, as is the formula, by metrical considerations" (Lord 1951:73).

Multiform—an instance of variation among separate singings / recitations / tellings of various formulae, themes, and story-patterns that are of the same kind.

Variant—an instance of variation among formulae / themes / story-patterns / singings / recitations that are of a different kind.

Motif—a traditional unit of patterned behavior (by a character) in an oral tradition.

Episode—a smaller event / plot-point that is a constituent of a more elaborate motif, story-pattern, or theme.

For clarity's sake, in discussion I project this system of categorization onto previous scholarship that did not employ it.

The Andrić Polemic—Problem One: Ignorance of the Interplay between Print and Oral Culture

In 1908, Raško's "Building of Skadar" became the topic of a scholarly polemic between a number of Serbian and Croatian scholars. As the new editor of the publishing house Matica hrvatska's (hereafter MH) *Croatian Folk Songs* collection (*Hrvatske narodne pjesme*), Croatian historian Nikola Andrić was tasked with selecting songs from MH's archive for their upcoming

fifth volume.¹³ Among the 175 songs collected in southern Dalmatia by the lay collector Ante Franjin Alačević,¹⁴ Andrić found three undated songs that were near carbon-copies of three in Vuk's collection, including "The Building of Skadar."¹⁵ Convinced that Vuk had received or copied them from Alačević without crediting the collector, Andrić produced a short opinion piece on the matter, "Otkud Vuku 'Zidanje Skadra'?" ("Whence Vuk's 'Building of Skadar'?"), in MH's bi-weekly periodical, *Glas Matice hrvatske* (Andrić 1908a).¹⁶

Andrić derived his assertions entirely from a comparative textual analysis of Vuk's and Alačević's songs: Alačević's version had a number of characteristically Dalmatian dialect forms as well as a preponderance of words in the ikavian sub-dialect (characteristic of songs from many regions of Dalmatia). Andrić concluded that Vuk must have altered these to the ijekavian sub-dialect (the most common sub-dialect used in traditional singing, which is shared across the widest geographic range by singers of all ethnicities) in his published edition to better comport with his songs from Serbian sources (Andrić 1908a:98-99).¹⁷ Moreover, character names that were consistent in Vuk's song varied in spelling and pronunciation in Alačević's. Andrić took this as a sign that Vuk had standardized the unhewn singing of a rural bard in Alačević's original (98). Andrić could attest that the song tradition of "The Building of Skadar" was well known in Southern Dalmatia because of the fact that Alačević's collection had a second multiform of the song (Alačević 1888.68). Andrić also noted that Vuk himself had admitted that one of the other two songs in question, "The Death of the Mother of the Jugovićes" (SNP II.48), had come "from Croatia"; Andrić felt certain that this admission betrayed a broader malfeasance.

Without researching Vuk's publications adequately, Andrić incorrectly suggested that Vuk had provided no information regarding the sources of these songs and intimated that there might

¹³ Nikola Andrić (1867-1942) was a Croatian writer, editor, philologist, and translator. He acted as editor for volumes five through ten of *Matica hrvatska's* folk-songs collection (1909-42). On MH's collecting project see Velzek 1950; Primorac 2010:13-17; Jurić 2019:27-29.

¹⁴ Ante Franjin Alačević (1781-1856) was an early, lay collector of Croatian folk songs who gathered material in regions of southern Dalmatia throughout his life. His son and grandson continued this work and submitted the family's collections to *Matica hrvatska*. See Andrić 1908a; Bošković-Stulli 1978:314-17.

¹⁵ Vuk's songs and their corresponding versions in Alačević are: "The Building of Skadar" (SNP II.26)—"The Song of the Building of King Ukašin" (Alačević 1888.129); "The Death of the Mother of the Jugovićes" (SNP II.48)—"The Song of the Death of the Mother of the Jugovićes" (Alačević 1888.46); "God Leaves No Debt Unpaid" (SNP II.5)—"God Leaves No Debt Unpaid" (Alačević 1888.45). There are in fact seven such songs in the collection (Bošković-Stulli 1978:315). Song and tale numbers in this article are indicated by a period (in the form "date.#" or "volume.#") rather than with a colon, which indicates page numbers. Please see the "Abbreviations" section at the end of this article for a list of abbreviations used in song citations.

¹⁶ There was a similar row over ownership and claims of plagiarism in the 1860s, the so-called "Wild-Rose Trial" between Hungarian and Romanian scholars. See Leader 1967:1-2; Dundes 1995:41-42.

¹⁷ Andrić (1908a:98) incorrectly posited an absolute correlation between Croatian singers and the ikavian dialect in opposition to Serbian songs and the ijekavian. The responding scholars were quick to point out the error (Pasarić 1908a:490). In reality the three sub-dialects are found in various regions and do not map clearly onto specific ethnicities. As a general rule, the traditional register of the songs in all regions relies most heavily on ijekavian forms, with forms from other dialects (very generally ikavian for Croats and ekavian for Serbs) serving metrical demands (ikavian and ekavian forms are usually one syllable shorter than corresponding ijekavian forms). There are, however, a large number of exceptions, which manifest in unique regional rather than ethnic configurations.

have been political reasons for this. It was common knowledge that Vuk had received songs from contributors throughout the Slavic holdings of the Ottoman and Habsburg Empires, and Andrić felt that this was another example. To Andrić, the nature of the correspondence between the two documents and Alačević's long history of collecting songs in his region—Alačević may have started already at the end of the eighteenth century—stood as irrefutable proof that Vuk had received these songs from Alačević, or through an intermediary, but failed to cite the Croatian source. Though Andrić endeavored to dissemble any sense of outrage in his writing—concluding the article with discussion about how this revelation would not sully Vuk's legacy since academic practices at the time demanded no such transparency—other scholars were quick to assume malice in Andrić's critique of Vuk and were later vindicated.

The response to this scandalous article was swift, prompting a spat which stretched across 13 articles published between June and September of 1908. Early, tempered responses came from the Croatian literary critic and editor Josip Pasarić (1908a) and from Serbian literary historian Jovan Skerlić (1908). These comments were later joined by the more virulent critiques of Serbian historian Jovan Tomić.¹⁸ Tomić (1908a-e), for his part, stretched his leisurely prose and scathing castigation over a series of five short articles in which he both criticized Andrić's assertions and used the debate as an opportunity to conduct his own theoretical thought-project to explore how best one might determine a song's geographic origin. While Skerlić (1908:71) made passing remarks to this effect, it was only Tomić (1908a:224) in the earliest stages who recognized in Andrić's critique a politically charged chauvinism and not a simple scholarly error.

These scholars' responses addressed a number of inconsistencies in Andrić's depiction of Alačević's life (Andrić 1908a:98; Pasarić 1908a:488; Tomić 1908a:226-27) and debated how any solid culpability could be placed on Vuk when Alačević's songs lack dates and could just as easily have been copied from Vuk's collection (Skerlić 1908:69; Tomić 1908a:227). They reminded Andrić of other collections which contain multiforms of the songs in Vuk's, such as some older pieces in a collection of the Novi Sad scholar Tihomir Ostojić (Skerlić 1908:70), or in Matija Reljković's *Satir*, which shares a song with Vuk's collection (Pasarić 1908b:549).¹⁹ They also took a wider, folkloristic approach to the song by noting that its story-pattern is found throughout the Balkans (even Vuk had commented on other multiforms (2006:253 n. 19)). This, for Andrić's critics, undermined hurried conclusions that would relegate the song's origins to ikavian-speaking Dalmatia, particularly when its action takes place in Albania (Pasarić 1908a:489; Tomić 1908a:229). Tomić (1908b:304-05) further argued that the multiple versions

¹⁸ Jovan Tomić (1869-1932) was a historian and director of the National Library of Serbia. Jovan Skerlić (1877-1914) was a Serbian writer and critic, editor of the journal *Srpski književni glasnik* from 1904 until his death. Josip Pasarić (1860-1937) was a Croatian publicist, author, literary scholar, and mountaineer. See Džonić 1932; Milojković-Djurić 1988; Stojančević 1991; *Hrvatska Enciklopedija*, s.v. "Pasarić, Josip."

¹⁹ This is in reference to SNP II.100, which appeared in Matija Reljković's 1779 edition of *Satir iliti divji čovik* (*Satyr or the Wild Man*) (Reljković 1909:119). Andrić (1908d:148) later cast further aspersions on Vuk's scruples by suggesting that he had likely copied this song from Reljković and lied about the source. If any song in Vuk's collection should raise difficult questions of authorship and transmission, it would be this. Aside from some minor dialect variations, the songs are identical and show even tighter fixity than can be found in clear cases of derivation in Alačević's collection. Vuk was open about the similarity in a footnote, assuring readers that he had encountered the song often among peasant singers (Karadžić 2006:384 n. 76). Slovene scholar Matija Murko later agreed with Andrić, arguing that Vuk copied this song from Reljković and obfuscated its source (Murko 1925, 1951:12-13, and 1990:119), although it is possible that the song was memorized from the text by Vuk's source.

of the name “Mrnjavčević” in Alačević’s multiform were not proof of a vulgar original singer whose song had been polished by Vuk’s editing but, rather, proof that Alačević’s singer had obtained the song secondhand, far from its original source, and was unfamiliar with the personages of the song.

Most importantly, Pasarić and Tomić stood firmly in their support of Vuk’s transparency and the integrity of his collecting and editing practices (Pasarić 1908a:490; Tomić 1908a:223-25). They outlined Vuk’s numerous published comments regarding his devotion to properly capturing the language of his singers and his willingness to admit when he had betrayed that aim in his earliest publications (Pasarić 1908b:554-55; Tomić 1908e:539-42). Vuk had not encountered the ikavian sub-dialect before 1834 when he traveled through Dalmatia (Pasarić 1908b:548) and had no songs from Croatian singers or contributors in 1823, only from Serbian singers and regions (Tomić 1908d:469-70). Once Vuk had established Croatian connections and heard Croatian singers firsthand, he included songs in the ikavian sub-dialect (Pasarić 1908b:547-48) and named Croatian singers such as Gajo Balać (Tomić 1908d:472).

Both scholars also revealed Andrić’s elementary error and the simplest counterargument to his claims. While Vuk had indeed failed to print Old Raško’s name in 1823 when “The Building of Skadar” was first published, he had remedied that omission in his fourth volume in 1833, when he named both Raško and the singer Rovo (lit. “pock-marked,” a sobriquet) who provided Vuk with another of the contested songs, “God Leaves No Debt Unpaid” (Pasarić 1908a:488; Tomić 1908b:307-09).

In the face of these responses, and perhaps slightly ashamed at his simple error in missing Vuk’s song accreditation, Andrić countered vituperatively (to Skerlić and Pasarić in Andrić 1908b and to Pasarić and Tomić in Andrić 1908b and 1908c), revealing the chauvinism the others had inferred. As he attempted to fortify his position, he responded with a range of increasingly fanciful conspiracy theories about Vuk’s political agendas, thus pushing the polemic into an aggressive dialectic of personal attacks. He spurned claims of Yugoslav brotherhood by suggesting that Vuk set a precedent of habit for Serbian scholars to appropriate Croatian intangible culture, ever branding it with the Serbian name (Andrić 1908b:117-18). He also began to raise further allegations of a similar stripe: Vuk had borrowed heavily from eight Croatian dictionaries in constructing his own without crediting them (Andrić 1908b:117, countered as misrepresentation by Pasarić 1908b:545-47), Vuk did not respect the ikavian dialect (Andrić 1908b:119; response in Pasarić 1908b:547-48, Tomić 1908d:469-72), and more. Regarding the clearest flaw in his theory, Andrić doubled down on his beliefs, claiming that it was suspicious that Vuk had waited ten years to publish the names of the singers of these songs (1908b:118), later adding that both singers (Raško and Rovo) lacked surnames, full biographies, and character descriptions and suggesting that Vuk had invented both singers from whole cloth to obscure his theft (1908d:148).

When it became clear to Pasarić and Tomić that Andrić’s views did not rest solely in ignorance, they responded in kind. Tomić accused Andrić of denying science and willfully ignoring facts to “assert libel supported by imputation, falsification, and flights of fancy” (1908a:223-24 and 1908c-e). To Andrić’s assertions that Raško and Rovo did not exist, Tomić (1908e:537-38) cited a personal letter from Vuk to Prince Miloš Obrenović asking if more songs could be collected from the singers by a third party. Tomić also provided a probable source

for the third contentious song, “The Death of the Mother of the Jugovićes,” a bundle of manuscripts that Vuk mentioned having received from Archimandrite Lukijan Mušicki (Tomić 1908d:471).²⁰

Living close enough to Zagreb, Pasarić made a trip to the MH offices to peruse Alačević’s collection for himself. Though both songs were similar, they were not identical, and Pasarić presented a detailed comparison of their divergences, noting that both presented variations distinct to their respective regions (1908b:550-52). He concluded that both scholars had likely collected the same song independently from two separate singers in their respective regions (552). Though Andrić (1908b:119) had made great claims about the age of the paper and ink in the earlier section of Alačević’s collection, Pasarić contended that the section exhibited three different orthographies and a variety of different inks (1908b:555). He also found a number of notes and date markings surrounding the songs in question denoting 1842, 1847, and 1850, as well as a song about the historical figure Ban Josip Jelačić (Viceroy of Croatia from 1848 to 1859), hinting at a likely date of collection well after Vuk’s publication (1908b:556). All of these points Andrić summarily rejected on tenuous grounds (Andrić 1908c:135-36).

As this debate gained attention in learned circles, Dr. Miroslav Alačević, the grandson of Ante Alačević and the man who had submitted his grandfather’s collection to MH, decided he was bound to speak to the argument and wrote letters to both Andrić and Skerlić. These did little to settle matters. The younger Alačević admitted that he had met Vuk in Vienna but in 1859/1860, well after the latter’s volumes had been published. He had never shown Vuk his grandfather’s collection, nor had Vuk known of the man or his work (Pasarić 1908b:557; Tomić 1908e:544-45). These points were the final nail in Andrić’s coffin as far as Pasarić and Tomić were concerned, and yet Andrić found in the younger Alačević’s letter more “proof” to support his conspiracy theory. The older Alačević could not have taken the songs from Vuk’s collection because he never learned to read Cyrillic and had no books in his library written in the script (Andrić 1908c:135). One of the songs in question, “The Death of the Mother of the Jugovićes,” was not published by Vuk until 1845, whereas it appears in the earliest section of Alačević’s collection, in what Andrić titled “his oldest Venetian orthography.” Andrić suggested, without explanation, that the flow of literature at the time and lack of connection to Serbian publishing in Dalmatia would have meant that Vuk’s book could not have circulated in Dalmatia until around 1846/1847 (Andrić 1908d:148), at a time when Alačević was in the early stages of losing his vision (he went blind in 1851 (Andrić 1908c:136)) and old enough not to be keen on recording songs dictated from Vuk’s book (1908d:148). As Andrić grasped at increasingly obscure facts to support his theory (1908c:135), the debate faded to its conclusion. No resolution was accepted, only stubborn clinging to particular facts—Andrić certain that Vuk had taken his songs from Alačević and the others that Andrić was inventing fantasies to support a bias.

Returning to these shared multiforms, Andrić was right to suspect the close similarity between the two pieces as unnatural to the oral-traditional method of transmission (see Figure 1), especially given that seven songs are nearly identical across the two collections. The two

²⁰ Lukijan Mušicki (1777-1837) was a Serbian poet, writer, translator, and finally bishop of the Diocese of Upper Karlovci. One of the earliest Serbian writers to use the vernacular language, he was a friend to Vuk and supported his language reforms and song collections. Much of Vuk’s early song recording was conducted while he was staying at the Šišatovac Monastery in the hills of Fruška Gora at Mušicki’s request (see Wilson 1970:110-11).

versions of “The Building of Skadar” do not exhibit a multiformity that is natural to the diffusion of oral traditions in the region (see Bynum 1978:13-18; Lord 2000:30-138). Although examples are found of very tight textual stability across multiforms, these are often only in the shorter lyric songs and some ballads and are never represented to the degree found in these pieces (Coote 1992; Lord 1995:22; Jurić 2019:198-240). The facts that Andrić uncovered do curtail simple conclusions about how Alačević came to have these songs in his collection, and the case raises many questions. Those questions, however, could never support the type of wild assertions Andrić made regarding Vuk.

Vuk had been clear in 1833 about collecting from Raško, had published nine other songs from the singer that show marked stylistic and thematic similarities (Nedić 1990:117-22),²¹ and his letter to Miloš Obrenović cements the fact of Raško’s existence (Tomić 1908e:537-38). It is only a wild theory that would suggest that Vuk retroactively extended Raško’s name to his 1823 collection in an effort to hide the same type of Croatian source that he was elsewhere willing to admit. Skerlić’s suggestion that both might have copied the same popular song in its “perfect form” independently from two different singers (1908:70) reveals his misunderstanding of oral traditions from a literary bias and is untenable. Pasarić, too, suggested that the same song might have been collected independently by both collectors from two different singers in their respective regions, but this is equally unsound; Andrić was right to suggest that the textual stability between the two songs is close enough to raise concerns were it collected from two singers in the same region, let alone two separated by such immense distance (Andrić 1908c:134). Normal diffusion cannot account for two multiforms exhibiting this much similarity (Figure 1). This is further supported by the fact that the two collections include multiforms that exhibit an appropriate degree of variation indicative of diffusion (for instance Alačević 1888.165 and SNP II.38). Andrić simplified this case as a one-way example of plagiarism, *tertium non datur*; either Vuk copied from Alačević or vice versa. Under such stringent conditions, culpability could only fall to Alačević as the plagiarist. This is the conclusion that Maja Bošković-Stulli came to in her assessment (1978:315-17). Comparison of all of these songs reveals the majority have been copied and adapted to Alačević’s local dialect.

And yet a puzzle remains. Shifting Vuk’s songs to a local dialect is conceivable, but such a reading of the phenomenon still cannot account for the odd fact that Alačević randomized the naming of the Mrnjavčević brothers in his song into multiple forms. Was this an elaborate effort to obscure plagiarism? Was he rushed when he copied the pieces? Andrić and the junior Alačević provided notable evidence that Alačević was unaware of Vuk’s collection (1908c:135-36), but Andrić could not convincingly prove that Alačević had stopped collecting before Vuk’s books had reached his home city of Makarska (1908d:148). It is certainly possible that Alačević chose an odd approach to obscure his plagiarism, but one must wonder if the oversight that solves this

²¹ In total, Vuk published ten songs collected from Raško: “The Building of Skadar” (SNP II.26), “The Wedding of Prince Lazar” (SNP II.32), “Dušan’s Death” (SNP II.33), “Uroš and the Mrnjavčevićs” (SNP II.34), “The Building of Ravanica” (SNP II.35), “Battle at Deligrad” (SNP IV.31), “The Wedding of Grujica Novaković” (SNP III.6), “The Maiden Margarita and Voivode Rajko” (SNP III.10), “Czar Suleiman and Patriarch Savo” (SNP III.11), and “Four Uskoks” (SNP III.47). Vuk also noted collecting a multiform of the song “The Wedding of King Vukašin” from Raško, which he did not publish but which was relatively similar to the version he did (SNP II.25; Karadžić 1833:xviii-xix), as well as having collected portions of two other songs from him (Nedić 1990:115).

riddle might not plausibly lie with the lack of attention that early scholarship on oral traditions lent to the interplay between published collections and oral-traditional singers (Koljević 1980; Lord 2000:136-37; Mitchell and Nagy 2000:xiii-xiv). I believe there is another possibility, namely, that Alačević might have been unaware of Vuk's collection, but collected these songs from someone who knew it. "The Building of Skadar" and "The Death of the Mother of the Jugovićs" in Alačević's manuscript reveal a small number of stylistic shifts. The correlations are too close to reflect a traditional singer influenced by the song books (Finnegan 1976; Lord 2000:26-27, 136-37), but may have been recorded from an unskilled singer, working on belletristic rather than oral-traditional dictates, who learned Vuk's published songs verbatim. The songs might even have derived from someone actively obscuring the dialect markers to convince Alačević as collector that they were local songs. Whether it was Alačević or another who altered the songs to a local idiom, this collection could have easily occurred some time in the last half of the 1840s as Alačević's eyes began to fail him (which, despite Andrić's assertions, need not have occurred slowly), and when Vuk's collections would have been available in Dalmatia. Unfortunately, we will never know the manner in which Alačević came by Vuk's songs. What is certain is that Nikola Andrić's hurried conclusion about the resemblances was aimed, quite incorrectly, at labeling the Serbian Vuk as the obvious plagiarist and the Croatian Alačević as the hapless victim.

<p>Pisma Zidanja Kralja Ukašina Alačević 1888.129</p>	<p>Zidanje Skadra SNP II.26</p>
<p>Grad gradila tri brata rođena Do tri brata, tri Mirljavza Jednom ime Ukašina Kralju Drugo biše Uglješa Vojvoda Trići biše Mirljiviko Gojko Grad gradili Skadar na Boljani Grad gradili tri godine dana Tri godine sa trista majstora Ne mogoše temelj podignuti A kamo li sagrađiti grada Što majstora za dan sagrađili To sve vile za noć oboriše Kad nastala četvarta godinica Tada viče sa planine vila Ne muči se Ukašina kralju Ne muči se i ne arči blago Ne mo'š kralju temelj podignuti A kamo li sagrađiti grada Dok ne nađeš dva slična imena Dok ne nađeš Stoju i Stojana A oboje bratu i sestricu Da zazideš kuli u temelju Tako će se temelj ozdaržati I tako ćeš sagrađiti kulu Kad to začu Ukašine Kralju On dozivlje slugu Desimira Desimire moje čedo drago Do sad mi si bijo sluga virna A od sada moje čedo drago Fataj sinko konja najboljega I ponesi šest tovara blaga Idi sine, prigo bila svita Ter ti traži dva slična imena Traži sine Stoju i Stojana A oboje brata i sestricu A ti otmi ol za blago kupi Dovedi u Skadru na Bojanu Da zidamo kuli u temelje Ne bi l' nam se temelj odirzao I ne bi li sagrađili grada Kad to začu sluga Desimire On ufati konja u intove I ponese šest tovara blaga</p>	<p>Grad gradila tri brata rođena Do tri brata, tri Mrljavčevića Jedno bješe Vukašine Kralju Drugo bješe Uglješa vojvoda 5 Treće bješe Mrljavčević Gojko Grad gradili Skadar na Bojani Grad gradili tri godine dana Tri godine sa trista majstora Ne mogoše temelj podignuti 10 A kamo li sagrađiti grada Što majstori za dan ga sagrađe To sve vila za noć obaljuje Kad nastala godina četvrta Tada viče sa planine vila 15 Ne muči se Vukašine kralje Ne muči se i ne harči blaga Ne mo'š kralje temelj podignuti A kamo li sagrađiti grada Dok ne nađeš dva slična imena 20 Dok ne nađeš Stoju i Stojana A oboje bratu i sestricu Da zazideš kuli u temelja Tako će se temelj obdržati I tako ćeš sagrađiti grada 25 Kad to začu Vukašine kralje On doziva slugu Desimira Desimire moje čedo drago Do sad si mi bio vjerna sluga A od sade moje čedo drago 30 Vataj sine konje u intove I ponesi šest tovara blaga Idi sine, preko b'jela sv'jeta Te ti traži dva slična imena Traži sine Stoju i Stojana 35 A oboje brata i sestricu Ja li otmi ja l' za blago kupi Dovedi ih Skadru na Bojanu Da zidemo kuli u temelja Ne bi l' nam se temelj obdržao 40 I ne bi li sagrađili grada Kad to začu sluga Desimire On uvati konje u intove I ponese šest tovara blaga</p>

Legend

- Significant difference
- Difference of dialect
- Shifted word order
- Minor differences of pronunciation

Fig. 1. Comparative analysis of the first forty-three lines of Vuk's and Alačević's songs.

Chauvinism and Folklore—Problem 2: Privileging Ethnic Identity over Regional Distribution

The Andrić polemic is indicative of a larger undercurrent in folkloristics in the region leading up to and through political unification. Andrić's critique of Vuk was rife with flaws, suppositions, and overwrought conjectures, but the grievances which fueled his argument were common among Croatian scholars at the turn of the twentieth century. Such emotional responses color the scholarly discourse of the time and allow an empathic vantage onto the rationalities that undergird "figurings" of thoughts in such past events (Rebel 2010:19-20).

As both the Croatian and Serbian nation-states strove for independence from their respective imperial entities in the nineteenth century, their nationalist movements were built on ethnic claims to existence and territorial sovereignty legitimated to a large degree by the thought-worlds of peasant folklore. This material, usually taken as the nation's collective memory held in retainership by a social biomass, was imagined to draw traceable linkages between then present-day groups and ancient kingdoms and empires. However, as in many other regions of Europe, the peasant class that produced this lore did not carry clear and easy awareness of ethnic identity and often had to be taught to which ethnic group it belonged (Popović 1973:101; Kilibarda 1989:iii-ix; Dukić 2004:10; Fine 2006; Hajdarpasic 2015:104-09). As with other nationalist movements of the time, the work of creating that awareness fell to what Edin Hajdarpasic calls "patriot-scholars," those self-made ethnographic populists (2015:30), such as Vuk Karadžić in Serbia or Ljudevit Gaj in Croatia,²² who could marshal these materials in the service of the nation-state while facilitating their own advancement in social standing.

Although various traditional song styles are found throughout BCMS-speaking regions and attested as far back as the fifteenth century, the long, stichic, decasyllabic epic songs that have made the oral traditions of the region famous derive specifically from the range of the Dinaric Alps that span the border between present-day Croatia and Bosnia-Herzegovina and descend through Montenegro into northern Albania (Bynum 1979:1; Medenica 1985:37; Golemović 2008:13). These songs represent a blend of prehistoric Slavic traditions and myth as well as possible Balkan substratal influence that coalesced into a formalized, performative art amongst pastoralist peasant groups in mountainous regions (Bynum 1979:2). While the art is likely very ancient, by the time these songs began to be collected in great number, their signature form and superficial content layer bore the indelible mark of the drastic cultural shifts initiated by the incursion of the Ottoman Turks from the fourteenth to the seventeenth centuries. During these times of political upheaval, singers in these communities used the art form as a mode of conveyance for cultural knowledge, ethical mores, religious solidarity, and historical and contemporary reportage. Their songs focused on past medieval kingdoms, Christian heroes who fought against the Ottomans, Bosniak nobles at the height of Ottoman power, border-disputes and banditry, as well as the later Christian rebellions that aimed to push off the Ottoman yoke, all laid in palimpsest over ancient mythic material and the residual detritus of past manifestations.

Most importantly, these songs did not align with a single religious or ethnic

²² Ljudevit Gaj (1809-1872) was a Croatian linguist, politician, journalist, orthographer, writer, and leader of the pan-Slavist Illyrian movement in Croatia. Despalatović 1975 remains the most comprehensive biography of Gaj.

denomination, but were sung by people who would fall into all of the three major politico-religious ethnicities of the region today—Muslim Bosniak, Catholic Croat, and Orthodox Serb. The songs were all built upon a singular stylistic model, but were divided in content along the major axis that obtained among the peasant class in the region in imperial contexts—a bifurcated division elicited on religious lines between Christians and Muslims and not in terms of modern ethnic divisions (Murko 1951:370-71; Irvine and Gal 2000:65-66; Đukić 2004:10). Thus Muslim singers (Bosniaks and Albanians) most commonly sang songs that celebrated Muslim heroes and were prone to reach extended lengths, while Christian singers (Serbs, Croats, and Montenegrins) sang songs that tended to be shorter in length and most often celebrated Christian heroes.

One must be wary of depicting the early cultivation and spread of the art form as a utopian and idyllic phenomenon; there are accounts of fights breaking out between adherents of different creeds over epic songs and places and times when singing was forbidden for fear of exacerbating political tensions (Žanić 2007:54; cf. Murko 1951:245). For the most part, though, our earliest data suggest a very egalitarian atmosphere among epic singers of differing religious denominations. Slovene scholar Matija Murko related that singers of various faiths actively shared songs, that they often knew and performed songs in which heroes of their own religious persuasion were bested by those of the opposite when the audience required it, and that competition over these stories usually played out through the art and discursive interaction between audience and singer. If a Muslim singer in a coffeehouse sang a song in which a Muslim hero slew a number of Christian characters, an Orthodox or Catholic singer might be inclined to take the *gusle* next and have his characters take retribution. At worst, the situation might lead to moderate confrontations between artists, involving arguments, the breaking of *gusles*, or the greasing of their strings so that they could no longer be played (Murko 1951:42, 241, 334, 371-72, and 1990:122; Buturović 1972-73:78; Lord 2000:19; Žanić 2007:59-60).

Artistic differences dividing Catholic and Orthodox singers were negligible if not entirely absent. Serbian singers sang songs with Croatian heroes and vice versa, occasionally even shifting a character's ethnicity in those rare instances when they associated a character with an ethnonym (Murko 1951:370).²³ Even the overriding division between Muslim and Christian songs extends to only a few, largely superficial differences—average song lengths, unique characters (who often have counterparts across religious lines, as in the case of Marko Kraljević and Đerzelez Alija), and a few particular tropes (Muslim heroes often win two brides rather than one, etc.), themes, and formulae unique to each group. At a fundamental structural level, the formulaic composition that undergirds the art form of both Christian and Muslim songs is identical. It is only in the Romantic Nationalist period, under the auspices of “patriot-scholars,” that these natural divisions in the exclusively peasant art form began to be refashioned along exclusively ethnic lines, both by the singers themselves and by interested parties external to the art.

By the time Vuk had published “The Building of Skadar,” he had already shifted the

²³ It was common for Serbian singers to sing of Croatian heroes like Mijat Tomić, just as Croatian singers sing of Marko Kraljević. There are also unique examples that illustrate peasant singers' clear lack of ethnic association with particular heroes, such as songs where the Serbian Marko must learn the Serbian language to secret himself into an enemy city, or where he is noted for his wiles and intellect since he can speak or write in the Serbian language (see Vijolić 1887:168 for example).

focus of the publication plan that he and Jernej Kopitar had devised (Wilson 1970:108-12; Leerssen 2012:25; Kroje 2013). Facing constant backlash from his co-nationals in Austria and Serbia (Wilson 1970:105; Petrovich 1988:46; Živković 2011:161-62), Vuk quickly learned that legitimization of his language reform project would come exclusively from the circle of international scholars, particularly in Germany and Russia (Wilson 1970:4, 106, 131-49, 157, 177, 186; Zimmermann 1986:21-22; Hajdarpasic 2015:26),²⁴ whose approval and praise overshadowed any calumny brandished at the local level. Along with this revelation also came the high market price among Western European academics for the living oral epics that Vuk had earlier apologized for printing (Karadžić 1814:21-22). It was this patronage that helped spread Vuk's name in learned circles throughout Europe, and with it, the common titling of these songs with the Serbian ethnonym.

Moreover, until near the end of his life when Vuk began to more actively support the Yugoslav name and movement, his researches and collecting were built on a Herderian model of cultural groups.²⁵ Through his writings, Vuk attempted to house the vast majority of the region under the Serbian banner by classifying speakers of the Štokavian dialect of the BCMS languages (including present-day Serbia, Montenegro, Bosnia-Herzegovina, and much of Croatia) using the Serbian ethnonym (Karadžić 1849:23-24; Melichárek 2014; Hajdarpasic 2015:33). Though he was not the first to espouse it, his championing of a "Greater Serbian" idea would lay a strong groundwork for the newly formed nation-state and would inspire those such as Ilija Garašanin (1812-1874) who would carry the ideology through the nineteenth century (Hehn 1975; Pavlowitch 2002:44-46; Hajdarpasic 2015:95-117). This also meant that Vuk firmly believed that the songs he collected throughout parts of Croatia, Dalmatia, and Montenegro, as well as those that filtered in to him from collectors and singers in or from Bosnia-Herzegovina, were all Serbian songs, no matter the religious or ethnic affiliation of the singers.²⁶

Vuk's writings suggest that these views in their early stages were not antagonistic, but derived from a general ignorance of competing nationalist movements. Later contact with the Illyrianists in Croatia, however, saw him stand firm with what was likely a mix of allegiance to academic rigor regarding cultural theories of the time and some level of cultural chauvinism (Wilson 1970:91-94, 184; Popović 1973:95, 104-05). These views were admittedly practical as

²⁴ On Vuk's vernacular language reform, phonetic orthography, and the opposition he faced from an educated class of Serbs in the Austrian Empire, see Wilson 1970.

²⁵ That is, a model built on cleanly demarcated cultural groups with a natural claim to a habitable region and singularly united by language—one territory for one people with one language.

²⁶ Miodrag Popović relays a telling (although possibly apocryphal) account from Antun Mažuranić regarding one of the trips through Dalmatia he took in Vuk and Gaj's company. During a debate about the nature of the unity of their languages, Mažuranić claims that Vuk interrogated a local from the village of Orebić about which people he belonged to and what language he spoke. According to the account, the local "replied that he is 'a Dalmatian and he speaks "our language" [*naški*].' Later . . . he remembered finally and said that he speaks Slavic. Then Vuk hobbled over to him and asked him if he had heard of Serbian. The peasant said that he didn't know. Then Vuk said, 'do you understand how I'm speaking?' 'Yes, I understand.' 'There you go, that's Serbian. Do you understand now?' 'I understand.' 'Did you hear that, gentlemen?' Then Mažuranić said, 'my friend, have you ever heard about the Croatian language?' 'That's it! That's what I couldn't bring to mind right away. We are Croats and we speak Croatian'" (1973:101, translation mine). While Vuk's beliefs about the Serbian ethnonym were Mažuranić's main focus in relating this account, the peasant's relationship to ethnonyms is perhaps more poignant.

Vuk, like his Croatian counterpart Ljudevit Gaj with his Illyrian ethnonym, recognized the utilitarian service that a single ethnonym could provide in legitimizing a united Slavic polity independent of the two imperial powers ruling them. For Vuk, the Serbian name provided easy linkages from a not-so-ancient empire, through the songs and heroes of the peasant class, and into a modern political entity built on a warrior's ethic of revolt (Anzulovic 1999; Žanić 2007:125-26). It was these beliefs that inevitably caused the schism between Vuk and Gaj (Wilson 1970:299-304; Popović 1973; Despalatović 1975:133-34; Melichárek 2014), who embraced a joint project with Vuk, before realizing that Vuk's vision held no space for the Illyrian banner, nor for Gaj's orthography in the Latin script (Karadžić 1849; Popović 1973:104; Melichárek 2014:63-66).

While Gaj also used the oral epics and other song forms to support Croatian / Illyrian claims to national identity, he did so through publications in broadsides, newspapers, and other small, locally distributed media that were aimed at raising national awareness among the population in the Austro-Hungarian Empire.²⁷ Vuk and Kopitar incisively recognized rising international trends in folklore research and modeled a product that could do the double service of disseminating national awareness in local populations—albeit in a slightly slower, trickle-down model given the costs of the books and the time required to reformat for less costly forms of print media—while also appealing to a wider academic sphere. With Grimm's generous support through positive reviews and translations, Vuk's collection rapidly spread throughout Europe and with it the Serbian name. The stir caused by these works overwhelmed an earlier wave of publication that had carried a blended Illyrian / Croatian / Morlach name prompted by the publications of Alberto Fortis and Prosper Mérimée and in some ways even co-opted that movement with Vuk's inclusion of one song, the famous "Hasanaginica," in his collection (SNP III.80).²⁸

Strong linkages between the epic songs and the Serbian ethnonym were also found in the

²⁷ The Croatian political entity also did not map easily onto a Herderian national model, so that nationalism in Croatia more regularly relied on legal institutions, literature, and historical precedent rather than oral traditions to draw linkages to its medieval kingdom (Banac 1984:81; Despalatović 1975:4-5).

²⁸ Alberto Fortis's early publication of the "Hasanaginica" and of works from Andrija Kačić-Miošić's *Razgovor ugodni naroda slovinskoga* (*Pleasant Conversation of Slavic People*, 1756) in his *Viaggio in Dalmazia* (*Travels into Dalmatia*, 1774/1778; see Koljević 1980:4 n. 7; Wolff 2001; Leerssen 2012) exploded into *Sturm und Drang* pre-Romantic circles; his texts were translated, republished, and disseminated more broadly by Goethe and Herder (Herder 1778:130-38, 309-14; Dukić 2004:29-31). The popularity of those songs prompted Prosper Mérimée's *La Guzla* (*The Gusle*, 1827), a collection of anonymously-published poems purportedly taken down from an itinerant *guslar* but in fact, with the exception of a version of the "Hasanaginica," Mérimée's own inventions. It is to this earlier wave that Jovan Skerlić referred when he attempted to argue with Andrić that the Serbian name was well-known in Germany, but the Croatian / Illyrian name was known exclusively in France (Skerlić 1908:71; Andrić 1908b:117). These songs brought attention to the epic singing in traditional Croatian territories, but spread in association with a blending of ethnonyms and region-names (Morlach, Illyrian, Croatian, Dalmatian). Mérimée's book was also not a true academic work, but a belletristic farce of the author's own devising that was revealed soon after (Wilson 1970:202). The legacy of this early wave was soon overtaken by Vuk's highly academic work with the very clear and singular Serbian ethnonym.

stories themselves.²⁹ While the Christian epics contain foreign heroes such as the Hungarians János Hunyadi and János Székely, and some incontestably Croatian figures such as the *hajduk* Mijat Tomić, a large number of the most famous heroes in the songs sung by both Croats and Serbs are Serbian nobles and bandits—Starina Novak, Lazar Hrebeljanović, Miloš Obilić, Relja Krilatica, and the most popular hero of all the South Slavs, Marko Kraljević. There are also a number of historical figures immortalized in the songs, such as Vuk Mandušić and Stojan Janković, who belong to a relic ethnonym, the Morlachs,³⁰ and so are summarily claimed by both sides as members of their cultural retinue. Croat and Serb epic singers in a pre-World War One context would readily sing of all these figures with little worry of ethnic ascription, but in a postbellum, Yugoslav environment, the ethnicity of a song's hero became proof of ownership.³¹ All these facts lent an easier legitimacy to the cultural continua that oral traditions offered to Serbian nation-builders and provided foreign audiences with a simplified formula of acceptance when they were presented with a book titled “Serbian Folk Songs.”

By the time the Ottoman and Habsburg Empires collapsed after World War One and the first Yugoslavia was created, a dream of South Slavic union was implemented on top of two already established and firmly entrenched ethnonyms with the separate claims of both groups to national status, ethnic unity, and distinction supported by a shared peasant art form. These are the tensions that were felt in folklore circles at the turn of the century when a large number of Serbian and Croatian scholars were moving ever closer to an eventual shared Yugoslav entity and laying the academic and linguistic groundwork for that shift (Despalatović 1975:94; Petrovich 1988:54; Pavlowitch 2002:53-55; Barac 2006; Sotirović 2013:46).³² This contentious legacy informed an unease in political unity that prompted Nikola Andrić to lash out at Vuk Karadžić four decades after the latter's death. While most Serbian and Croatian scholars noted the shared cultural inheritance of the two groups and treated the traditions honestly, some Serbian scholars saw Croats as unrightfully asserting ownership over their ethnic traditions (Tomić 1908a:224), while a number of Croatian scholars felt that Serbs were excising their claim to a shared cultural heritage.

These tensions continued to surface in twentieth-century Croatian academic work. When editors for MH's folk song collections came upon the phrase “Slavic *vila*” (*vila slovinkinja*) in a

²⁹ Pre- and post-nineteenth-century uses of ethnonyms in the region are built on highly distinct conceptual models and so are often incommensurate (Banac 2002; Budak 2011). Ethnonyms occasionally arise in the songs but their uses are frequently arbitrary and contradictory. They are also generally based upon oral-traditional retention of historical models of legal / military association or noble lineage, likely opaque to most singers and reinterpreted by later, educated readers through a contemporary understanding of ethnicity.

³⁰ On the Morlach ethnonym, see Wilson 1970:192 n. 1; Wolff 2003.

³¹ This includes Skerlić's faulty critique in response to Andrić, when he asked how songs with Serbian characters could be said to be “heard only in purely Croatian territory” (Skerlić 1908:71). This same drive to correlate the ethnicity of the song's hero with that of the singer occurs with Albanian singers who most commonly sing about Bosniak and Serbian heroes and whose art has often been treated as exclusively derivative. On the dynamic roots of Albanian epic singing see Pipa 1984; Di Lellio 2009.

³² In their responses to Andrić, both Skerlić (1908:70) and Pasarić (1908a:490) felt obliged to make appeals to Yugoslav unity and the shared nature of the songs while simultaneously navigating well-understood arguments on ethnic lines. One reads in them the clear conflicts that were occurring both between interlocutors and within individuals as they navigated a shifting social identity in academic space.

song collected from the island of Hvar (Nališ 1885:46), they underlined the word “Slavic” in the manuscript and appended the suggestion that they alter the *vila*’s name to “Croatian *vila*” (*vila hrvatica*), “seeing as how Vuk would replace it with Serbian” (1885:79). When grievances regarding Serbian majority rule in the Kingdom of Yugoslavia became an excuse for state-sponsored genocide in Croatia’s Second World War fascist state, government-approved children’s school readers on Croatian folk songs included discussions about the role that Vuk had played in dispossessing the Croatian people of their intangible heritage (Grgec 1943:xv-xvi). Later, school curricula in Tito’s socialist Yugoslavia were thought by many to focus on Vuk’s collection to the detriment of others, while state-sponsored *gusle*-playing associations and festivals held to celebrate agrarian peasant culture in the republic were felt to stress Montenegrin playing styles and Serbian ownership of the art (Čolović 2002; Golemović 2012; Primorac and Čaleta 2012:160-61, 183).

In the decades leading up to the dissolution of socialist Yugoslavia in the 1990s, the state’s ethos of brotherhood and unity³³ began to falter and political tensions ran high. Once more, these issues of ownership resurfaced. In the political arena, Serbian and Croatian figureheads relied on material from the oral epics in their rhetoric, *guslars* came to prominence to sing about the tumultuous politics (Žanić 2007; Golemović 2012; Primorac and Čaleta 2012), and academics from all three ethnic groups returned to staking claim to the origins of the songs based on a selective use of historical facts. In this political climate, academic flag planting regularly sought to associate the songs with a single ethnonym (Zimmerman 1986:52-53; Koljević 1980:26, 31-33, 52, 300-02) or else to fight for smaller victories such as the ethnic source of the oldest extant or most celebrated songs (Balić 1970:306, 313; Pantić 1977; Šimunović 1984; Medenica 1987:10-19).³⁴ Some scholars chose a less scandalous way of undermining other groups’ claims to the songs by simply not mentioning them (Zimmerman 1986:1-106). Under these conditions, ethnic identity began to supersede discussion of the regional distribution of historical oral traditions, despite the fact that the former remained a poor criterion for assessing pre-World War One materials, and the latter a critical one.³⁵

These approaches had a direct bearing on the analysis of the Building Sacrifice story-pattern and the actions of the supernatural *vila* within the song. When political fighting over the oral traditions reached its zenith, sweeping claims were attempted by some scholars in an effort to place the songs in Vuk’s collection in a patently false, “literary-style” continuum, suggesting

³³ *Bratstvo i jedinstvo* (“brotherhood and unity”), the banner of ethnic coexistence Marshal Tito introduced in socialist Yugoslavia as a state motto to assuage interethnic tensions after the atrocities of the Second World War.

³⁴ See also the theoretical history of the Erlangen Manuscript provided in Medenica 1987. Here, Gesemann’s (Gezeman 1925) original theories are downplayed and competing theories of origin, such as Grgec’s (1944:175) or Prohaska’s (1928; cf. Buturović 1972-73:21-27), are excluded to present a single and unchallenged theoretical narrative that connects the document’s origins to Belgrade.

³⁵ Take, for instance, oral narratives about the fantastic land of “Golden Rasudenac,” which are often discussed in ethnic terms (Detelić 1998) despite having been collected from both Serbian (Čajkanović 1927:40) and Croatian (Mikuličić 1876:97-107, 137-43) storytellers in close geographic proximity in northwestern Croatia (Krstinja near Karlovac and Krasica on the Croatian Littoral) within some twenty years of each other (respectively collected shortly before 1886 and published in 1876; on these oral narratives see Jurić 2019:325-29). Examples such as this are myriad and stress the fact that songs and tales traveled in regional distributions with little consideration for ethnicity.

that all subsequently collected oral epics derived from his published work (Zimmerman 1979a:168). This perspective intentionally ignored the great time-depth and *longue durée* character of traditional storytelling and the methods by which oral traditions travel (both in oral and written form) among largely non-literate singers (Koljević 1980:91; Lord 2000:23, 79, 101). Aside from some very specific examples, there is no evidence to show that Vuk's singers were the originators of their respective songs; in fact, there is much evidence to the contrary.³⁶

Writing thirty years after the Andrić polemic, the Serbian scholar Svetislav Stefanović³⁷ conducted his analysis of the songs by intentionally ignoring fourteen published Croatian multiforms despite their being known to him through Jovan Tomić's writings. Stefanović further co-opted a Bosnian variant of the song with clear Bosniak influence, naming its four multiforms as Serbian (1937:288-90). These efforts had wide-reaching repercussions as foreign scholars dealing with this song tradition regularly mislabeled Bosniak and Croatian multiforms as Serbian based on his work (Leader 1967:27-33; Vargyas 1967:212). These increasingly chauvinistic analyses obscured clear scientific approaches to the song's history and diffusion by constantly muddying the waters of the analysis.

In truth, "The Building of Skadar" belongs to the most common of three variants of the Building Sacrifice story-pattern (more on the others below), what can be called the "lunch-carrier" variant. This variant is represented throughout the Balkans and has been collected from every ethnic group in the BCMS-speaking areas. Comparative analysis of all twenty multiforms of the lunch-carrier variant collected in the region until 1908, as well as four other examples that mirror its immurement theme, reveals eighteen critical episodes and traits in the immurement theme that are variously encountered across the multiforms and largely represented in the wider international tradition (Vargyas 1967:183, 202-06). Seven of these episodes are found in Raško's song, while eleven are not (Figure 2). This stands in opposition to Stefanović's analysis that allowed him to claim that all the possible "motifs" (a term he uses for elements on all structural levels) of the song are found in Raško's "perfect" version (1937:289, 304). Moreover, Alačević's multiform, which we know to be derivative, is the only one that begins to approximate the particular combination of episodes in Raško's multiform. All twenty-three other multiforms contain less than half of these episodes, arguing strongly against the position that they are, at least exclusively, derivative of Vuk's publication. Rather, these songs fit nicely into larger currents of the story-pattern's transmission in the wider Balkan region, and their unique aspects align consistently with clear regional distributions regardless of the ethnicities of the singers.

³⁶ Cf. Bynum (1978:20, 322). Vuk himself regularly cited other multiforms that he had personally heard (Karadžić 2006:98 n. 107, 311 n. 46, 356-57, 382 n. 74, among many), including publishing a multiform of one of the themes in "The Building of Skadar" that he had heard from other singers (253 n. 19; Zimmerman (1986:288) confuses this as a multiform that Raško sang). There are also older collections, such as the Erlangen Manuscript (Gezeman 1925) or Baltazar Bogišić's collection (Bogišić 1878), that are rife with variants and multiforms of Vuk's songs or their motifs and were collected a century before his work (compare Gezeman 1925:132 and Bogišić 1878:43 to SNP II.11 for instance); this also includes Reljković's earlier mentioned multiform of SNP II.100 published in 1779 (Reljković 1909:196-99). Some singers such as Filip Višnjić are clear exceptions in having actively invented many of their songs (Karadžić 1833:xii; Lord 2000:136).

³⁷ Svetislav Stefanović (1877-1944) was a medical doctor, poet, literary critic, and scholar, among other things. His legacy has been affected by his apologist views towards Hitler's fascist state (see Milosavljević 2010:77-81).

It is possible that a number of versions collected later in Slavonia derive from Raško's published songs, but if this is the case, they would represent natural currents built off the song re-entering popular practice from the published text in a traditional manner. However, the long history of the song collection in surrounding Hungary, Romania, and Bulgaria, the elements of those international multiforms present in the Slavonian songs, the divergence of a unique Slavonian variant (see below), and multiforms collected in Slavonia and Dalmatia as early as 1840-50 argue equally plausibly for a wide diffusion that predates all collected versions. Most of the scholars who have worked with the international data have concurred that the tradition's origins predate all collected versions by a number of centuries (Stefanović 1937:303; Vargyas 1967:230); it is equally likely that this holds for its diffusion, too (cf. Thompson's (1955-58) data on Motifs D2192 and S261).

Motif	Source	SNP II.26	Alačević 1888.129	Alačević 1888.68	Ilić 1876.275	Ivanišević 1885.106	Kamenar 1878.210	Burazović 1880.41	Gazdović 1883.31	Strohal 1883.18	Bogdešić 1884.26	Gabrić 1885.80	Lovretić 1885.19	Štuk 1886.13	Krauss 1887	Mostahinić 1892.10	Zovko 1893.195	Kušmiš and Kušmiš 1898.36	Hangl 1898.54 (HNP V.90)	Prčić n.d.12	Kachanovski 1882.120	Šestić 1889.193 (HNP V.92)	Kučera 1884.1	Kučera 1884.394	Lovretić 1885.32	Hangl 1898.50
Victim needs to tend to baby (and linens)		x	x		x				x	x	x			x		x			x	x			x		x	
Window for eyes		x	x	x	x	x		x	x	x	x					*		x	x	*		x	x	x	*	
Window for breasts		x	x															x			x					
Something dropped in foundation		*	*	x					x						x	x			*							
Victim's gradual realization of immurement		x	x						x											x	x					
Victim tries to purchase freedom		x	x																		x					
Reference to stone and wood		x	x							x																
Brothers-in-law remove lunch from atop the victim's head						x		x																		
Window the size of a mirror				x		x		x	x			x	x					x					x	x	x	
Window for hands							x													*						
River of milk flows from building				x	x		x	x		x	x						x	x								
Child drinks from river of milk				x	x		x			x	x							x								
Three rivers erupt from building			x														x	x								
Building destroyed by God/saints/heavens						x		x	x		x	x		x									x		x	
Victim avenges self by killing brothers-in-law									x	x																
Child cannot be consoled by father			x						x					x	x	x				x						
Victim chastises husband that his brothers told their wives; he did not									x					x												
Each brother guesses that his own wife is bringing lunch; husband is silent									x			x	x							x						
Shared episodes/traits with Raško's multiform		7	7	2	2	1	0	1	4	3	2	0	0	1	1	3	0	1	4	3	3	1	2	0	2	1

Legend

Episode Present

Remnants of Episode



Fig. 2. Variable episodes across multiforms of the lunch-carrier variant.

Variants, Histories, and Academic Myths—Problem 3: Inaccurate Distribution Models

Beyond the aforementioned, problematic scholarly habits, nearly every study conducted on this story-pattern from the 1890s to the 1980s has also based its analysis on an outdated, unilinear diffusion model grounded in an understanding of oral traditions as peasant literature. At times, the authors of these studies have seemed to make a concerted effort to ignore the artists who perpetuated the tradition as well as the decades of research we have—starting from the early works of Matija Murko, through Milman Parry and Albert Lord, and into the later proponents of their oral-formulaic school—that has focused on the means and manner by which these traditions were performed and promulgated. Here the singers are relegated to their romantic-era role as *vulgus in populo*, brainlessly repeating oral traditions over centuries, that allowed them to conveniently serve as the collective repository of a national spirit. Scholars working in this vein have often made bold errors regarding the logic that undergirds the diffusion of these songs and have consistently drawn these traditions back beyond extant records into imagined pasts and the realm of academic myths.³⁸ By producing theoretical models based on imagined *ur*-songs performed by a single, original fabulator and subsequently degraded in simple, unilinear transmission akin to a child's game of "telephone," these scholars could ground chauvinistic habit in convoluted leaps of logic, tracing all the songs back to their own home nation as spawning ground while silencing peasant artists in the process.

When Jovan Tomić was embroiled in his earliest critique of Nikola Andrić's bold claims against Vuk, he used the opportunity provided by his publications on the topic of the Building Sacrifice story-pattern to conduct his own theoretical experiment, investigating how best one might determine a song's geographic origin (Tomić 1908a-e). His final model settled on a rather simple, and often flawed, geographical triangulation based on a degradation-model of song transmission. For Tomić the key to finding the source of the song was to look at all recorded variants to find only the pure, un-degraded forms, that is, those that are most belletristically pleasing and rife with commonly shared motifs and names. The logic here is circular—those songs that contain the characters of King Vukašin and his brothers and locate the action at Skadar are the only contenders for belonging to the "true" tradition, and those self-same characteristics then become the coordinates for locating the song's true home (Tomić 1908a:229-30 and 1908b:304). Since Vuk's and Alačević's versions were the only two to contain all three characters (Vukašin, Uglješa, and Gojko Mrnjavčević) and the name of the city of Skadar, they were the only contenders for the source song. Since Skadar is in Northern Albania, the tradition of the Mrnjavčević brothers in oral lore is strongest in Upper Albania, Montenegro, and South-West Herzegovina (Tomić 1908b:307), and since the singer Raško was from Kolašin in Montenegro, Vuk's version is the logical original.

Beyond being self-fulfilling, this theory was based on a number of faulty suppositions.

³⁸ I use the term "academic myths" to describe a loose conglomerate of scholarly tendencies to step beyond contextual empirical data into "scientific" storytelling about oral traditions. These include tendencies to invent pasts, presents, or futures for those materials and their fabulators, as well as the use of "civilizing" models that have at times sought to divest oral traditions of their original contexts and potent systems of resonance in efforts to enclose them within ill-suited and foreign taxonomies. For a strong overview of this kind of myth-making in comparative mythology, folklore, and philological circles of the past, see Lincoln 1991 and 1999; Arvidsson 2006; Rebel 2010:131-80.

The Building Sacrifice story-pattern regularly attaches itself both to locally esteemed nobility and to important ruins and structures. There is nothing “original” to the tradition regarding the use of the Mrnjavčević brothers or the use of the old city at Shkodër as the structure being raised / razed. The Mrnjavčevićs’ names had a surprising reach in connection to the song, with Vukašin attested as far afield as western Bulgaria (Kachanovskii 1882.120) and Gojko’s name appearing in a song from Osova, Bosnia (Krauss 1887:19-20); the family might have represented a predominant noble connection in the region. This wide diffusion also made the Mrnjavčević names poor proof that southern Dalmatia could not be a natural home for the songs (Tomić 1908a:229 and 1908b; see Andrić’s accurate response in 1908d:146; cf. Bowra 1952:510; Stolz 1967). They are, however, no more an original feature of an imaginary *Urform* of the song than are the noble families of Atlagić, Filipović, Jakšić, Tatković, or Jugović connected (respectively) to multiforms and variants in Potočan (Šestić 1889.193 / HNP V.92), Dragovci (Bogdešić 1884.26) and Oriovac (Gabrić 1885.80), Mikanovci (Kučera 1884.394), Kućište (Štuk 1886.13), or Cavtat (Mostahinić 1892.10). Neither does the much wider and more common practice of using the masons themselves as the primary builders offer support for an *Urform* that must include the three noble brothers (Jukić 1850:100-02; Krauss 1887:19-20; Alačević 1888.86; cf. Vargyas 1967:195-96). In truth, Tomić made his most important contribution to the larger discussion of this story-pattern when he discovered records of an oral narrative version attested from fifteenth-century Albania (1908b:305-06; cf. Stefanović 1937:265-66). This fact provided an early hint at the story-pattern’s great time-depth in the area and stood as a challenge to those who would perform Taylor’s (1959) error of seeing Vuk’s song as the oldest form simply because it was the first collected.

As the focus of local and international scholarship began to untangle the Building Sacrifice’s wider tradition in the decades following Tomić’s articles, the material drawn from BCMS-speaking regions continued to be dogged by chauvinistic tendencies, but now Balkan-wide. After more than thirty years of scholarship in the region detailing the transmission patterns of epic singing, ballad scholar Lajos Vargyas³⁹ writing in 1967 could still ignore peasant artists and contrive empty theories to prove his native Hungary as the source of this oral tradition (1967:222). Exhaustively reviewing prior scholarship, Vargyas produced the most expansive analysis of most of the European versions of the Building Sacrifice story-pattern. Yet, despite the article’s breadth, its logic was regularly faulty, with everything ascribed to unilinear diffusion and decay (195). Vargyas’s *ur*-models were also all constructed from the dictates of the physical world, so that there may only be a logical number of masons (196) and duration of construction (198-99), bridges must be secondary structures because it makes no sense for a sacrificial woman to enter water to support a bridge (196-97), and singers may never add superfluous episodes (209). In setting conditions for candidacy to *ur*-status, Vargyas ensured that scholarly logic would ever dictate the rights of peasant singers to use their imaginations. Moreover, once he had systematized the tradition, it fell to his model to eliminate those competing theories that would undermine his assertions regarding unilinear transmission. This put him at odds with Svetislav Stefanović who, thirty years earlier, had quite correctly recognized a separate variant tradition of the songs in Bosnia.

³⁹ Lajos Vargyas (1914-2007) was a highly esteemed Hungarian ethnomusicologist and ballad scholar.

Stefanović, for his part, had approached these traditions from an equally troubling framework that traced derivation at will across all cultures, global regions, and times, and blurred distinctions between different structural levels of the songs, labeling any aspect he wished to discuss as a “motif.” Working from the same Frazerian, myth-ritual theoretical model as most other scholars,⁴⁰ Stefanović isolated a number of motifs for which he tried to support academic myths of ancient heritages—the building being razed derives from the Biblical story of Jericho’s walls crumbling (Stefanović 1937:259-61; see Josh 6:1-27), two children being immured has parallels in Africa (Stefanović 1937:258, 285)—while simultaneously and counterintuitively using those same traditions as proof of origin in local nations. Stefanović had, however, correctly identified a unique Bosnian variant involving children that are immured in a bridge and argued for two separate victim traditions—the “lunch carrier” originating in Greece and a homegrown Serbian tradition of two interred children (289-90)—that coalesced in Raško’s song. Unfortunately, this “Serbian” *Urform* was built on an erasure of the very clear Bosniak Muslim influence in the variant and its four extant multiforms. Stefanović’s conclusions also involved a strange disenfranchisement of Raško’s claim to his own song, with constant stress on Vuk Karadžić’s name and with Raško only appearing when the denouement of the argument required mention of his roots in Kolašin (292).

Stefanović’s erasure of the Bosniak character of these songs was then compounded by Vargyas’s need to reduce the diffusion pathways of the tradition to a single descent-line so that he might locate its source in his native Hungary via an academic myth of ancient song-swapping in the Caucasus (1967:223-26). Vargyas targeted the ancient origins reconstructed by Stefanović, and with them, by a kind of sleight-of-hand, cleared away the entire Bosnian variant as beholden to the tradition and therefore irrelevant (201, 206-10). The Bosnian variant is, in fact, a unique innovation on the common tradition. Vargyas was correct that there are enough aspects of the more common lunch-carrier tradition in this variant to link it to the wider story-pattern (208-10), though how much of the modeling of those aspects is convergence and how much divergence is a chicken / egg argument lost to the past and only to be conjectured about. It is undeniable, however, that the four Bosnian songs represent a unique manifestation. Their variant form belongs in large part to the local Muslim population, who were able to competently ground it in local legendry involving two historic sites—the bridges at Višegrad and at Mostar. The variant tradition represented by these four songs is not the only divergence in the region; there are, in fact, three clear variants of this song:

The first is a minor variant with few attestations (Figure 3), all collected in south-central Slavonia (Burazović 1880.73; Bogdešić 1884.135 / HNP V.29; Kušmiš and Kušmiš 1898.59) and taking the form of a much shorter lyric song. This variant details a character named Young Ivica / Jovica building a city that *vile* are destroying by night. He complains to his mother, who tells him to station fantastical guards about the city—falcons on the roads, wolves in the alleys, and guardsmen in blockhouses. A *vila* is caught by these sentries, at which point the songs resolve

⁴⁰ Dundes (1989:157-59 and 1995:40) has offered a competent deconstruction of this problem.

themselves in various ways—transitioning into swan-maiden motifs⁴¹ and other narrative patterns common to the tradition (see Jurić 2019:174-75).

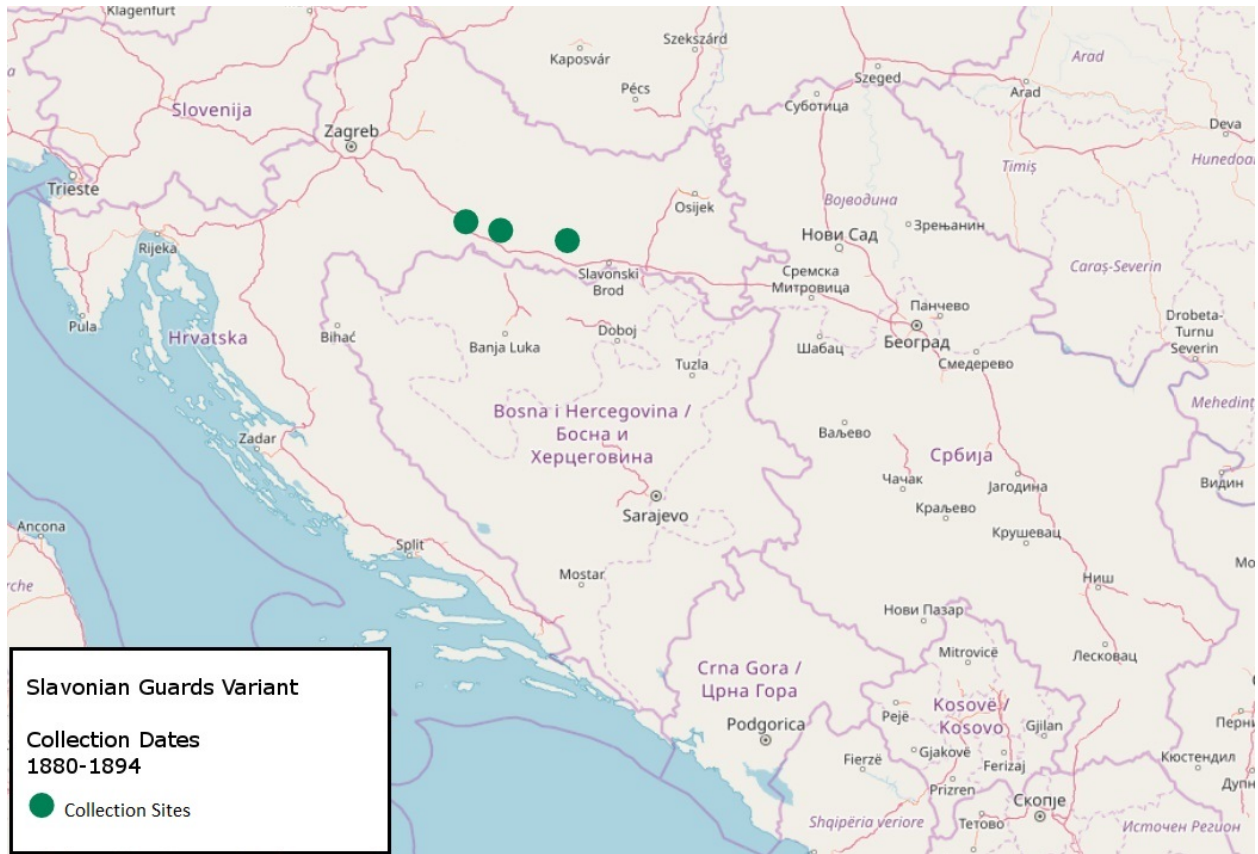


Fig. 3. Distribution of the Slavonian Guards variant.

The second variant is the Bosnian tradition (Figure 4), in which Pashas and/or masons are building a bridge and the *vile* razing it demand the other sacrifice—a brother and sister (Stojan and Stoja, also Ostoja or Stojka) to be immured in the bridge’s foundation. This variant tradition retains many aspects from the wider tradition, but has its own set of recurrent symbolism, often including a log-jam or tree trunk that must be cut with an axe, the fact that construction must wait until Đurđevdan (Saint George’s Day), and other details. The songs in this tradition mapped onto two specific structures—Mehmed Pasha Sokolović’s bridge on the Drina⁴² in Višegrad

⁴¹ In swan-maiden narratives, a man acquires a supernatural, ornithomorphic wife (a *vila* in the BCMS tradition) by stealing and hiding her wings and/or crown. After some years have passed and she has given birth to progeny, the bride regains her stolen items and flees back to her supernatural realm. See Jurić 2019:149-55.

⁴² This event is most commonly known through Ivo Andrić’s depiction in his opus *Na Drini ćuprija* (*Bridge on the Drina*), which mentions the song tradition (I. Andrić 1978:28, 49). Nikola Andrić’s suggestion that the Palunko multiform (Palunko 1886.80 / HNP I.36) concerns the Drin river in Albania and not the Drina in Višegrad (Andrić 1908d:146) is completely untenable.

(Hörmann 1888.3; Palunko 1886.80 / HNP I.36; Petranović 1870.52) and the Old Bridge in Mostar (Jukić 1850:100-02; for more detail on this variant see Jurić 2019:172-73).⁴³

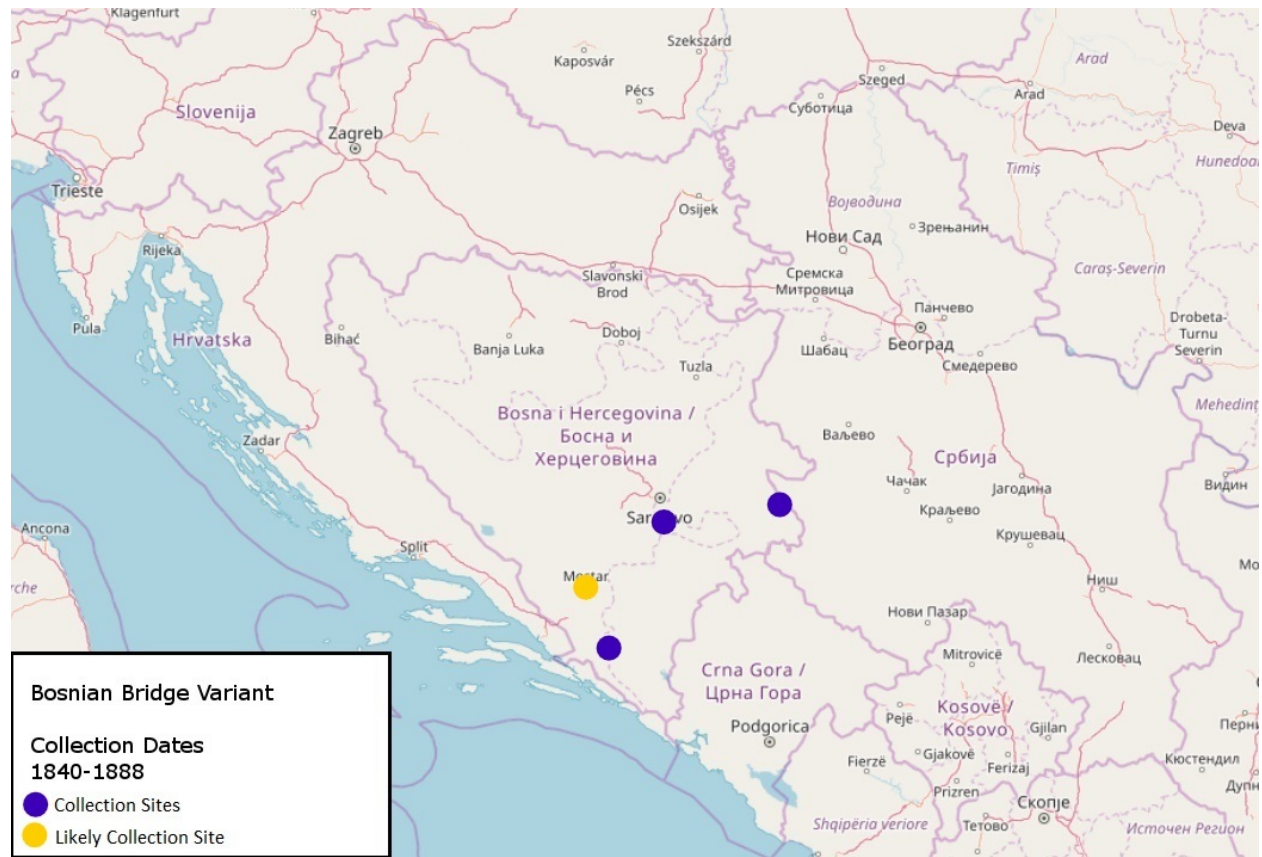


Fig. 4. Distribution of the Bosnian bridge-building variant.

Although the only two noted singers of this variant are not Muslims (Jela Bukvić Perinice in Popovo (Palunko 1886.80 / HNP I.36) and Ilija Divjanović at Jahorina (Petranović 1870.52)), Bosniak influence on the tradition is critical, if not central to its divergence. The Jukić multiform, collected by Marijan Šunjić (presumably in Mostar, though we have no data on the collection site), is the outlier in this regard for having no clear connection to Bosniak song culture beyond the characteristics it shares with the other multiforms. There is, however, no reason that we should not take Hörmann at his word that his songs were all collected from Bosniak sources. Hörmann's song, with its multiform in Palunko's collection, celebrates the Ottoman Turks'

⁴³ In 1891 Austrian Consul General Carl Peez noted that the Old Bridge was nearly destroyed by a log-jam in the 1870s but was saved when a youth of the city, one Anto Ančić, was bravely lowered into the waters on a hemp rope and cut the obstructions free with an axe (Peez 1891:17). This is the same event outlined in the Jukić song published in 1850 and reflected in many of the other multiforms across Bosnia. Peez was aware of the song (he published a few lines in his text (15-16)), but seems not to have questioned the veracity of the circumstances which caused a log-jam on an exceptionally tall bridge arch elevated 20 meters above water level and brought the song's events to life. I suspect that the Mostar tradition was also known in local legend and was fed to the foreign official as historical fact, although it could be that both song and vernacular history drew their inspiration from a historical event which was misdated when relayed to Peez.

bridge-building at Višegrad, focusing on Pasha Sokolović's trials. Both are also notable for including a secondary motif of a horse arrested in the river by a *vila* that is indicatively Bosnian and common to Bosniak song (Jurić 2019:122-24).

As for Ilija Divjanović's multiform (Petranović 1870.52), it is rooted in the bridge building at Višegrad, but disconnected from Pasha Sokolović and highly divergent from the other multiforms. This is the result, however, of intentional manipulation by the collector Bogoljub Petranović to produce a "Serbian" song to work in opposition to the Muslim versions. We know that Petranović was intentionally influencing the singer Divjanović to produce epic songs that he could use to support the Serbian state's political agitation in Bosnia (Kilibarda 1989:xii-xiii; Hajdarpasic 2015:102-05) and that the two worked together as a political song-farm, borrowing mythic material from Vuk's collection (Kilibarda 1989:xxii-xxiii) and regularly co-opting local Muslim material (xix-xx). These facts account for the extreme length of the multiform (642 lines compared to an average 103 in the others), the confused arrested horse motif (ll. 191-245, 611-31), the unnatural focus on *Serbian* builders, *Serbian* sacrifices, *Serbian* money in opposition to "dirty" Turkish funds, and the beneficent but traditionally artless bequeathal by *Serbian* King Milutin of his two children as a sacrifice (ll. 429-515). They also explain the appropriation of the log-jam from its poetic role in the other multiforms as the magic, bleeding testament to the construction's lasting nature, to simply another step in a series of politicized rituals to remove Turkish "taint" from a Serbian edifice (ll. 588-637), as well as the patently untraditional killing of the Pashas at the song's conclusion (ll. 551-63). It seems quite clear that Divjanović was well acquainted with a version of the Bosniak variant and remodeled it to serve Petranović's cultural-political agenda.⁴⁴

The final variant, that of the lunch-carrier, is the most common, the most widespread, and likely the oldest (Figure 5).⁴⁵ It is also the version with the most variation across multiforms (and in comparison to the wider tradition (Vargyas 1967:205-06)). While the songs generally follow the plot in Raško's version, of course lacking the search for the sibling sacrifice, they contain various unique episodes throughout (see Figure 2 above as well as Jurić 2019:173-75) and minor alterations, including the various false ailments the sisters-in-law use to avoid bringing the lunch, as well as the four multiforms that confound Dundes's assertion that this story-pattern requires a female victim (1995:47-48) by having a male character immured (Kučera 1884.394; Šestić 1889.193 / HNP V.92; Hangi 1898.29 / HNP V.91 and 1898.50; cf. Vargyas 1967:223). They also regularly resolve themselves in a number of unique ways: the husband of the immured wife cannot console his child and ends his own life (Mostahinić 1892.10), a river of milk erupts from the wall and the abandoned child drinks from it (Ilić 1878.275; Burazović 1880.41; Gazdović 1883.31; Bogdešić 1884.26; Gabrić 1885.80; Ivanišević 1885.106; Zovko 1893.195; Kušmiš and Kušmiš 1898.36), God or saints take pity on the child and release the mother with lightning bolts

⁴⁴ It is important to note that while Divjanović's song was intentionally re-crafted, its problem is most certainly not its comic elements as Stefanović suggested (1937:283). My research has produced abundant examples of humor, parody, and subversion of traditional expectations in the region's epic songs, which is not a sign of corruption, but the common play of innovative traditional singers (Jurić 2019:247-48, 362-68).

⁴⁵ Lacking from this discussion are a number of songs that might be thought of as "hapax legomena," songs for which we have no multiform data and which likely represent singer innovations. They are noted in Figure 6 and discussion of them can be found in Jurić 2019:173-75.

that destroy the structure (Burazović 1880.41; Gazdović 1883.31; Bogdešić 1884.26; Kučera 1884.1; Gabrić 1885.80; Ivanišević 1885.106; Lovretić 1885.32;⁴⁶ Štuk 1886.13), the mother avenges herself upon her brothers-in-law (Gazdović 1883.31; Strohal 1883.18), and so forth. The songs also reveal the various ways in which singers attempted to moralize the events of the song, such as a multiform from an unnamed singer in Banja Luka who inverted the straightforward tragedy in the motif by making the older brothers' revelations to their wives more tragic and relatable, while the youngest brother's reticence is ascribed to a cocksure hubris about his knowledge of his wife's schedule (Hangi 1898.54 / HNP V.90).

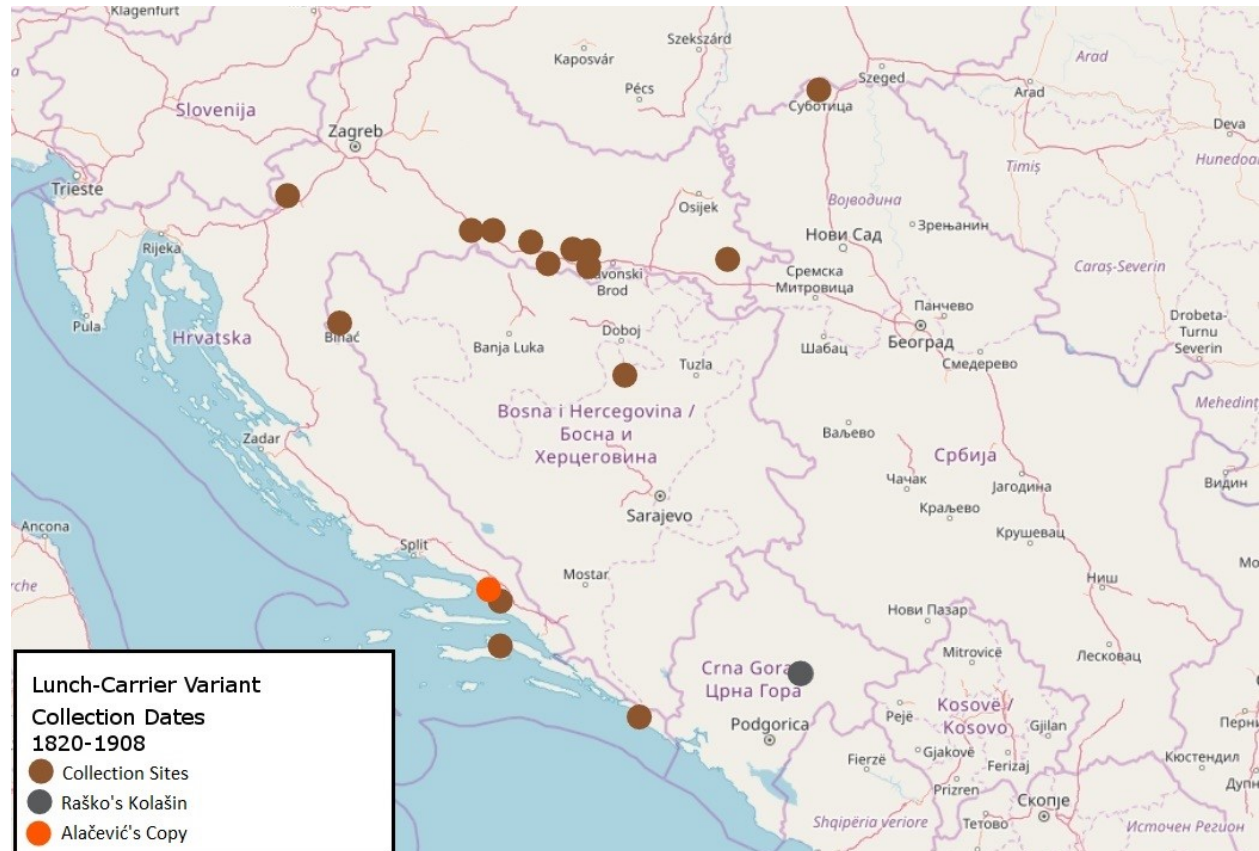


Fig. 5. Distribution of the lunch-carrier variant.

The lunch-carrier variant, however, never includes mention of the sibling sacrifice outside of Raško's multiform and Alačević's copy. Stefanović's suggestion that Raško's version is a blending of the lunch-carrier variant and the Bosnian variant is indeed correct. As Stefanović noted early on, Raško undoubtedly learned his song in Kolašin, which put him on the border between a well-established lunch-carrier tradition in Northern Albania (though likely already diffused throughout the entire Balkans) and a Bosnian bridge-building variant which had reached

⁴⁶ One of Lovretić's two multiforms (1885.32) has been copied directly from Kučera's collection (1884.1) along with a number of songs surrounding it in the manuscript. The history behind this might merit some investigation. For comparison with all of this song-swapping and plagiarism, one might wish to consult Ivanišević 1885.106 and Burazović 1880.41 to see what traditional multiformity looks like across two songs in close regional proximity. Cf. Lord 1991.

as far as Herzegovina (Palunko 1886.80 / HNP I.36) and could easily have been commonly encountered in northern Montenegro (Figure 6).⁴⁷ This song is not, however, an example of poetic perfection (Stefanović 1937:289, 304) that was stumbled upon by blundering serendipity, as Stefanović suggested (291), nor is it the product of the purely unique imagination of a belletristic artist, as Koljević would have it (1980:148), but, rather, the result of intentional crafting by a skilled *guslar* and oral-traditional artist, who lived in a border area where both traditions were known. In his multiform, Raško intentionally incorporated a false start from the first tradition, either to prolong the song or else to add suspense and intrigue to the telling (see Lord 2000:24).⁴⁸ It may also be that such a blended form was a common regional variant for the singers of Kolašin, though we have no data to support such an assertion.

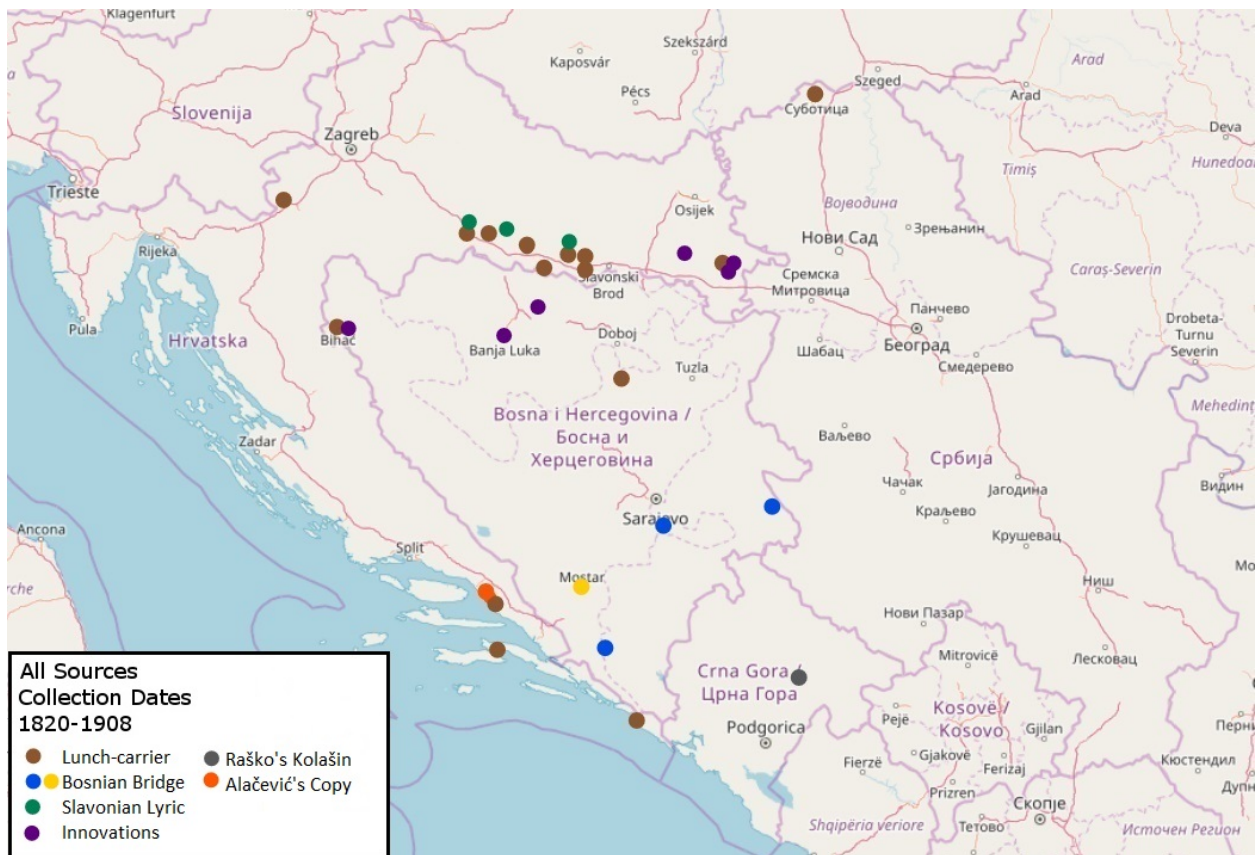


Fig. 6. Distribution of all variants and multiforms.

⁴⁷ Vuk considered Kolašin to lie within the boundaries of Old Herzegovina (1833:xiii) and classified Raško's singing as an example of Herzegovinian style (Kilibarda 1972:91). Kolašin was also the home of many Muslim singers (including the famous Ćor Huso (Pipa 1984:86; Lord 2000:19)) who might have performed the Bosnian variant of the song.

⁴⁸ One might conceivably argue for superfluous addition due to the singer's erring in the heat of performance (see for instance Lord 2000:114-15; Jurić 2019:181 n. 187, 168 n. 171), that is, for the possibility that Raško began singing the lunch-carrier variant, accidentally detoured into the search for siblings from the Bosnian variant, realized his mistake, and corrected it in performance by making the children undiscoverable. This type of error, though, is unlikely for such a skilled and senior *guslar*, and the text gives no indication of such, unless it was emended in Vuk's editing. See Jurić 2019:152-54 for examples of singers blending and combining separate traditions.

What is certain is that this story-pattern did not diffuse in a simple, linear pattern and that the movements it did make are obscured by a long enough history to make them largely opaque to academic inquiry. The scholars who have worked on the tradition have attributed its diffusion in the Balkans to dates between the twelfth and fourteenth centuries (Stefanović 1937:303; Vargyas 1967:233; cf. Dundes 1995:43-44). Long before these songs were collected in the nineteenth century, they had settled into distribution patterns that left certain variant forms bound to particular regions while also supporting a broader, and most certainly oldest, lunch-carrier variant throughout the region and beyond. How those traditions traveled, settled, divided, and converged, how often they doubled back upon themselves, where they died out or transferred across linguistic boundaries—such questions are not pointless to pursue, but in large part they can only be answered with conjecture. Their answers, however, are certainly not beholden to the kinds of simplistic unilinear patterns (for example, Greece → Serbia → Hungary → Bulgaria) proffered by most scholars and generally used to situate a privileged home nation at the point of origin (Leader 1967:32-33; Vargyas 1967:178).

Conclusion: Sacrificing “The Building of Skadar”

This song tradition has been plagued by poor folklore theory since its inception; while Alan Dundes has more generally addressed the jingoistic problems in the wider scholarship, the long history of problematic approaches to studying the distribution of this song in BCMS-speaking regions has fallen out of focus. It is important, however, to return to these issues. Nearly all of the subsequent research that addresses the distribution of this story-pattern is either deeply embroiled in faulty logic and chauvinistic manipulation, or simply carries the detritus left behind by others' poor scholarship. That scholarship has been marred by ignorance of the interplay between print literature and oral traditions, intentional ignoring of regional distribution patterns in favor of a less useful ethnic lens of analysis, and reliance on a simplistic academic myth of unilinear diffusion patterns in lieu of a dynamic model of song transmission and adaptation. All of these errors have, intentionally and unintentionally, distorted the facts of the oral tradition's diffusion in the service of useful nationalist narratives.

The history of folklore collection in the BCMS-speaking regions is intimately tied to post-imperial legacies and struggles for national independence under various banners. By returning to some of these politics and their connection to the region's folklore research, we can reveal the insecurities, worries, and biases that informed various approaches to the Building Sacrifice story-pattern. By bringing a modern analytical lens to the song, we can competently map the tradition and objectively reveal what can (and importantly, what cannot) be known about its diffusion and manifestation in the region. This not only provides a clearer image of what the actual tradition looked like at the time these materials were collected, but also allows us to give credit to the insights that scholars of the past working with the song actually contributed to its study. Like the lunch-carrying wife or the stably named brother and sister in the Building Sacrifice story-pattern, this oral tradition has been a consistent victim of sacrifice. By returning to these debates we can trim the fat of bad science and produce a clearer understanding of the

distribution and diffusion of these songs free of the chauvinistic manipulation of interested parties.

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Abbreviations

- HNP *Hrvatske narodne pjesme*. 10 vols. Zagreb: Matica hrvatska. HNP I = Broz and Bosanac 1896; HNP V = Andrić 1909.
- SNP *Srpske narodne pjesme*. 5 vols. Vienna: štamparija Jermenskoga manastira. SNP II = Karadžić 1845; SNP III = Karadžić 1846; SNP IV = Karadžić 1862.

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Unraveling the Knot: A Microethnography of the Use of Proverbs, Proverbial Language, and Surrogate Languages in an Akan Royal Court

Edmund Asare

Introduction

Proverbs are storehouses of traditional wisdom and are highly valued in Africa. Among the Akan of Ghana, proverbs are used in everyday conversations, storytelling, ancestral and royal praise singing, and conflict resolution, among other contexts. Proverbs may be expressed through drumming, horn-blowing, and dance gestures, and they may be illustrated on textiles, royal staffs, and swords. This article examines the use of proverbs, proverbial language, and surrogate languages in an Akan royal court.

Background Information about the Akan

The word “Akan” refers to an ethnic group and to the language spoken by some members of the group. The Akan occupy most of southern Ghana and represent about 47.5% of the total population of Ghana (Ghana Statistical Service 2012:5).

Akan subgroups in Ghana include the Agona, Akuapem, Akwamu, Akyem, Asante, Assin, Bron, Buem, Denkyira, Fante, Kwahu, Twifu, Wassa, and others. These subgroups speak mutually intelligible dialects and have some shared cultural practices (Yankah 2012:10). Some Akan people also live in Côte d’Ivoire, but they speak different languages. While each Akan royal palace may have unique customs, the verbal art forms and traditions described in this study are likely to be shared by many Akan communities. The literacy rate of Akans in their first language is 30%-60%, and 5%-10% in a second language (Eberhard, Simons, and Fenig 2019). The present study was conducted in an Akan community in Ghana.

Definitions and Conceptual Framework—The Proverb and Related Forms

Proverb scholars have yet to find a cross-culturally valid definition of the proverb. Norrick has argued that “we should not expect to discover a single characteristic *proverbiality* or a single inclusive definition of the proverb” (2014:7). He defines the proverb as “a traditional

figurative saying which can form a complete utterance on its own” (2014:8). The proverbial phrase differs from the proverb in that it is not syntactically complete and cannot stand on its own. Both proverbs and proverbial phrases are typically figurative and are pertinent to this study. Literal (that is, non-metaphorical) proverbs are known as maxims or aphorisms. Moreover, Yankah correctly notes that the proverb, in the African context, evokes a “broad spectrum of verbal and behavioral phenomena” (2012:196).

The goal of ethnography is to seek the insider’s perspective. So, this researcher elicited definitions of the proverb from two Akan elders, an *ɔkyeame* (“royal spokesperson”) and an *ɔdomankoma Kyerema* (“Divine Drummer”).¹ The *ɔkyeame* said: “A proverb is a veiled statement: an expression that can only be quickly understood by the wise.”² The *ɔdomankoma Kyerema* said: “Proverbs are expressions embedded in our traditions and customs by our forefathers; they want us to use proverbs and to interpret them.”³

I define proverbs as traditional, often figurative and coded, utterances that are expressed in the verbal and nonverbal performances of a community. Proverbs are frequently metaphorical, so this study will discuss some underlying metaphors as well.

The *Oxford English Dictionary* defines the word “proverbial” as “used or referred to in a proverb or idiom.” Therefore, the word denotes the proverb, the proverbial phrase, and the idiom. The word “proverbial” as used in this article refers to proverbs as well as to fragmentary, idiomatic, and metaphorical expressions, including ancient horn and talking drum texts. This study assumes broad definitions of the “proverb” and the word “proverbial.”

Proverbial discourse is defined as speech in which a string of proverbs (or proverbial phrases) is used by a speaker, or an interaction involving two or more speakers in which a proverb (or proverbial phrase) used by a speaker elicits proverbs (or proverbial phrases) from other speakers. Elicited responses may be figurative, metaphorical, hyperbolic, or allegorical. This definition rules out, as a proverbial discourse, for instance, a speech in which only a single proverb is used. This view is consonant with Yankah’s description of *kasabebu* (“proverbial speech”), which involves “a series of metaphorical utterances from which a well-bred Akan could draw a lesson” (2012:64).

Proverbs are sometimes embedded in stories. Finnegan (1967:46) notes that the Limba of Sierra Leone, for example, do not have separate words for proverbs and stories. So, they do not distinguish between the two.

Yankah (2012:62) provides a useful model for categorizing proverbs. He postulates two broad types of proverbs: the attributive and the non-attributive. The attributive type is shorter, crisp, and usually attributed to an authoritative source that might be either personal or impersonal. The non-attributive proverb is longer and takes the form of an animal tale, parable,

¹ The *ɔdomankoma Kyerema* is commonly referred to as the *ɔkyerema* (“the drummer”). The sites for this study were Akropong and Aburi Akuapem in the Eastern Region of Ghana. The *ɔkyeame*’s testimony was collected at Akropong on January 4, 2019, while the *ɔkyerema*’s testimony was collected at Aburi on January 10, 2019. The *ɔkyeame* is an elderly man in his seventies, and the *ɔkyerema* is in his sixties.

² *Ɛbe ye kasasie: asem a woka a, obi nte ase ntem gyese ɔye ɔbadwen ba.*

³ *Ɛbe ye mpanyinsem a, ewɔ yen amammre ne yen amanne mu a, yen nananom kantetefo hyehye too ho maa yen. Wose yenbube na yenkyere be ase.*

or story. Both types were encountered in this study, but most of the proverbs were attributive.

While proverbs occur naturally in discourse, they do not occur in every conversation. Nonetheless, there are contexts in which they are more likely to occur. According to an Akan saying, “It is the situation that calls for the proverb.”⁴ The Akan royal palace, where traditional elders meet regularly to steer the affairs of the state, was thought to be a place where proverbs were most likely to be used. The Akan royal palace is a storehouse of customs and traditions. Agyekum states that the palace “embodies the law, tradition, philosophy, religion, norms, and values of the Akan people” (2011:588). The royal court is a rich and inexhaustible source of traditional items of folklore.

Proverbs are part and parcel of the language of the king’s court. As an Akan elder put it: “If you are an elder speaking in the palace, your speech must contain proverbs so that people would know that you are an elder. It is the proverb that supports the argument. It is the proverb that gives weight to what is being said.”⁵ People of the court are expected to be well-versed in proverb lore and traditions. Furthermore, in some traditional societies, laws are codified in proverbs.

Interpretation of Proverbs and Limitations of the Study

We have noted that proverbs are veiled utterances; they are often dense, so it may take some effort to interpret them correctly. Cohen (1978:8) rightly observes that the speaker of a metaphor and the appreciator are involved in a transaction that draws them closer to each other and that the use of a metaphor by a speaker involves a “concealed invitation,” while the appreciator’s efforts to comprehend the metaphor are an acceptance of this invitation. This transaction, according to him, constitutes the acknowledgement of a community. Following Cohen, the transaction can be schematized as follows:⁶

Step 1—The speaker uses a metaphor, thereby extending a “concealed invitation” to the appreciator.

Step 2—The appreciator (hearer) recognizes that a metaphor has been used and makes an effort to comprehend it.

Step 3—“Intimacy” is achieved between the communicants.

Thus, a successful transaction is contingent on the appreciator’s realization that the expression is figurative and on the appreciator’s ability to decode the metaphor. Cohen’s three-step communication model is applicable to the proverb. For his use of the word “metaphor” one can substitute “proverb.” A discourse interaction involving proverbs can thus be likened to the tying and untying of a knot, in which a proverb speaker ties a knot that encapsulates a message, and

⁴ *Asem mmae a, abebu mma.*

⁵ *Se woye ɔpanyin na worekasa wɔ ahenfie a, ese se wokasa no abebu ba mu senea nnipa behu se woye ɔpanyin na worekasa. Wode be no horan asem no. Ebe no ma asem no mu yedru.*

⁶ Cohen (1978:8) notes that all three steps are involved in any communication but generally go unnoticed, because they are so routine; the metaphor, however, highlights them.

the interlocutor unties the knot in the light of contextual cues.⁷ In Akan society, the ability to use and to decode proverbs is highly valued. Interestingly, coding and decoding are implied in the emic definitions of the proverb stated above.

Even so, and especially in the context of the Akan royal palace, recognizing and understanding a proverb in speech or other interactions is not always easy. Proverbs are sometimes veiled and not always preceded by attributive formulae such as “Our elders said.” While the plain use of language may be understandable by all, the figurative use of language may be accessible to only a few who share common knowledge. A key principle applies: the greater the mutual knowledge of the speaker and the hearer of the proverb, the less explication is required. Sometimes the model described above does not play out smoothly because the hearer needs help in decoding the proverb. The hearer may then ask the proverb speaker (or a third party) to help untie the knot, so to speak. This model was repeatedly enacted during this study of Akan royal proverbs.

I relied on my interlocutors for the interpretations of the proverbial expressions and most importantly on their willingness to share information with an outsider. I also relied on my own cultural and linguistic fluency as a native speaker of Akan. Furthermore, given the role of shared knowledge in the coding and decoding process, what may be perceived as a proverb by members of a group may appear less so to others outside the group. These limitations notwithstanding, it is my hope that this study provides some insight into the use of proverbs in an Akan royal court.

Literature Review

African proverb scholarship has focused on many aspects of the proverb. These include the role of proverbs in the administration of justice (Messenger 1959), the iconographic representation of proverbs on linguist staffs (Ross 1982),⁸ proverbs as a politeness and mitigation strategy (Obeng 1996), and proverbs as devices of humor in African literary fiction (Mané 2015). Seitel’s (1972) study, which examines the use of proverbs among the Haya of Tanzania, is significant for its treatment of metaphors and the complexities of proverb use.

Studies on Akan drumming include Rattray 1923a and 1923b; Finnegan 2012; and Nketia 1954, 1963, and 1966. Nketia’s works focus on the role of the drummer, on Akan drumming, and on talking drum texts, respectively. Locke and Agbeli (1980) explore drum language and the Azogbo dance among Ewes in Ghana and Togo. Salifu (2008) focuses on the Dagbon royal court in Ghana. Salifu’s study has a few things in common with the present study, namely his focus on a royal court and on proverbs, praise singing, animals, and drumming. He notes for example that among the Dagomba, some praise epithets attributed to royalty are inspired by animals (Salifu 2008:11). Such studies could yield greater insights into how animals inspire and extend humans’ descriptive abilities in different cultural settings. These lists are by no means exhaustive.

⁷ The knot metaphor is applicable to the riddle, another enigmatic form that shares some common elements with the proverb.

⁸ The linguist is the spokesperson, envoy, and chief diplomat in the royal court.

On the subject of African horns, only a handful of studies were found. These include Sarpong 1990 and Kaminski 2012, both of which focus on the horns or trumpets of Ashanti kings. Hence, more scholarly attention needs to be paid to the intriguing subject of proverbs expressed through drums, horns, and the dance.

Research Purpose and Research Questions

Using ethnographic microanalysis, this study examines the use of proverbs, proverbial expressions, and surrogate languages in an Akan royal court. Ethnographic microanalysis has different names. It is often referred to in the literature as microethnography (Mehan 1998), ethnographic microanalysis (Erickson 1992), and constitutive ethnography (Mehan 1979). Ethnographic microanalysis or microethnography is an approach and perspective that employs “fine-grained sequential analysis (akin to that of conversation analysis . . .) to examine interaction as constitutive of particular settings and activities” (Mehus 2006:51). Microethnography and conversation analysis are both grounded in sequential analysis but an important difference between them is that microethnography focuses on “aspects of bodily communication, such as gaze, gesture, postural configurations, and interactions with artifacts and the built environment” (Mehus 2006:73-74). Ethnography is “the work of describing a culture” (Spradley 1979:3).

This study focuses on aspects of Akan culture such as announcing and discussing the death of kings, the surrogate languages of drums and horns, and proverbial depictions on royal spokespersons’ staffs. The study addresses the following questions:

1. What roles do the *ɔkyeame* and the *ɔkyerema* play in the royal court?
2. What is the role of proverbs and proverbial language in the royal court?
3. What is the role of surrogate languages (of drums and horns) in the royal court?
4. What is the role of proverbial language in the activities of the *asafo*?⁹

The study focuses on situations of proverb use and on the behaviors of the *ɔkyeame*, the *ɔkyerema*, and the *asafo*.

Methodology

The research project began in the summer of 2015. The initial field visit was at Akropong, Akuapem, in the Eastern Region of Ghana. It lasted eight weeks and yielded a

⁹ *Asafo* is a warrior association. It is made up of strong and healthy male adults living in the township. In the distant past, especially during the days of intertribal wars, they defended the city from enemies whenever it came under attack. Their activities include drumming, singing, and dancing. *Asafo* groups play active roles during festivals. They also organize themselves to do communal work such as clearing paths, putting out fires, building bridges, and other tasks. *Asafo* groups fall into two main categories: companies of the royal court and associations of the common people. See, for example, Nketia 1963 for a detailed discussion of *asafo* warrior associations.

substantial corpus of voice and video recordings. Subsequent field visits were made in 2016 and 2017, and each lasted about six weeks. The researcher also interviewed some interlocutors at Aburi. The last visit was in 2019 and lasted about two weeks. Throughout the process, there were multiple contacts with informants to cross-check data. The research was based on participant observation.

While the researcher is a native speaker of Akan (Twi), the language in which interactions took place, he did not have prior knowledge of the phenomena he sought to investigate. Yankah correctly points out that “Belonging to a culture does not necessarily make the researcher an insider to all constituents of the group he studies; within each culture, there is a wide array of close esoteric groups and in-groups to which all non-initiands are outsiders” (2012:6-7). Also, gaining access to groups and to information is not automatic and needs to be carefully negotiated.

The translation of proverbs from Twi into English posed some challenges. Dundes points out that “while it is a relatively simple task to translate African trickster tales into English, it was nearly impossible to do so for most African proverbs” (1973:246). There was difficulty in finding *le mot juste* in English for some archaic expressions used in the royal court. Translation was done as literally as possible. When possible, the proverb in the source language is presented with its English translation.

Research Participants

Eight interlocutors were interviewed as part of this study. They include two chiefs, four *akyeame* (royal spokespersons), and two *akyerema* (divine drummers).¹⁰ One person helped with negotiation of access but was not interviewed. Their ages ranged from thirty to seventy-eight years. The median age of interlocutors was fifty-six years. All the interlocutors were male. In Akan society, royal spokespersons and drummers are predominantly male. All had received basic formal education. Interviews were held in Twi. The interlocutors reported that they learned proverbs and traditions from their parents, grandparents, and chiefs (*nananom*).

Through chain referral, early informants introduced this researcher to others who also contributed to the study. As an elder figuratively put it: “The weaver bird and the sunbird can weave concurrently. Both are good nest builders, but each has its own style of weaving.”¹¹ The collaborators granted the researcher interviews, access to meetings, material artifacts, and ethnographic documents. They have been anonymized in accordance with the protocol governing this research. The researcher witnessed some events in which proverbs were used, recorded conversations in Twi, and translated them into English. Follow-up interviews were conducted with informants to clarify the use of proverbs. This enabled informants to confirm or to correct this researcher’s interpretations of the proverbs. It is also in line with Dundes’ (1966:507)

¹⁰ *Akyeame* and *akyerema* are the plural forms of *akyeeame* (“a royal spokesperson”) and *akyerema* (a divine drummer), respectively. Royal titles have been omitted to maintain anonymity. Care has been taken to ensure that any modifications to original texts do not lead to misrepresentation.

¹¹ *Akyem nwen no, na ahorobea nso nwen, ne nyinaa ye berebu, nanso nsonsonoe wo mu.*

recommendation to actively elicit the meaning of folklore items from the folk themselves and ask them to comment on their own lore.

The hypothetical situation method or *mise en situation*, to adopt a term used by Leguy (2001:71), consists in asking an informant to recall the use of specific proverbs and contexts in which those proverbs were used. If informants have no recollections, they are asked to provide contexts for the use of the proverbs.¹² This technique yielded much information about the proverbs. In some cases, it led to anecdotes. Most of the events recalled by the interlocutors were recent, having taken place between two weeks and five years prior to the interviews, except for one event that took place in 1979. Thus, data in this article are based on natural contexts, hypothetical situations, physical inspection of artifacts, and informant recollections of proverb use.

Proverbs in Contexts

Why do Akan people use proverbs? Seitel notes that a Haya may choose to use a proverb when it serves his interest to name a situation in a certain way, to persuade, to be ambiguous about a subject, to finish off a discussion, to display knowledge, or to entertain (Seitel 1972:244-45). Any of these reasons could motivate an Akan to use a proverb. As noted earlier, it is the situation that calls for the proverb. In the ensuing sections, I discuss some proverbial expressions and their related contexts.

In the early days of the fieldwork for this project, I was introduced to an elderly *ɔkyeame*, a highly skilled proverb speaker. When he learned about my interest in the proverbs and traditions of the royal court, he said: “If you want to hear *adomankomasem*, you beat the old lady’s grandchild.”¹³ I parsed the proverb hoping to use the literal meaning as a bridge to the figurative, but to no avail. When he perceived my trouble in understanding the proverb, he went on to say, “as you have come to hear *adomankomasem*, I assume you are ready to do what it takes to hear them.”

Adomankomasem is from the Twi word *ɔdomankoma* (“the Creator”). The word means “myths” or “great things.”¹⁴ The old lady symbolizes wisdom in Akan culture. The expression *kɔbisa aberewa tia* means to seek counsel from the old lady. The old lady knows the origins of things and of people. She is knowledgeable in proverb lore and traditions. If anyone beats her grandchild, she may react “angrily” by revealing the person’s secrets or origins. So, the proverb means one should not provoke a powerful person’s protégé.

In this context, however, it appeared the proverb was not being used in a conventional sense. I asked for the *ɔkyeame*’s help in understanding the puzzling proverb. He explained that beating the old lady’s grandchild meant taking an action that would cause the old lady (the

¹² This technique was used by Herskovits (1950:32) and Leguy (2001:71). Arewa and Dundes (1964:72-73) discuss the method.

¹³ *Se wo pe adomankomasem ate a, na woboro aberewa nana.*

¹⁴ Nketia notes that the *ɔdomankoma Kyerema* (“Creator’s drummer”) tells of the origin of things and says “great things,” *ɔka adomankomasem* (1954:38).

ɔkyeame) to respond favorably by providing the needed information. *Aberewa nana* (“the old lady’s grandchild”) also means a person trained by the old lady, who knows proverbs and traditions, so it was a veiled metaphor for the *ɔkyeame*, who represented both the old lady and the old lady’s grandchild.

The *ɔkyeame* had subjected the proverb to creative deformation: by the use of the phrase “beating the old lady’s grandchild,” something negative was being presented in a positive light and expected to yield a positive outcome. *Creative deformation* is the ingenious reinforcement, modification, or transformation of a proverb’s meaning by a speaker during performance (Yankah 2012:198). After the *ɔkyeame* had unraveled the proverb knot, I agreed to the terms of my apprenticeship. This was my first encounter with the proverb in the field.

The proverb’s ability to engender double meanings and ambiguity (as in the *aberewa* and *aberewa nana* metaphors) and its enigmatic nature are exemplified by the *adomankomasem* proverb. The figurative proverb, like the idiom, or its offspring the euphemism, is clearly more than the sum of its parts. This research was an exploration of *adomankomasem*. My interlocutor started teaching about the role of the *ɔkyeame* and the traditions of the royal palace.

A Sensitive Mission

Akan elders say, “It is the wise person that is sent on errands, and not the long-legged person.”¹⁵ The wise person may be relied upon to deliver messages intelligently. On the other hand, the long-legged messenger (a fast messenger who lacks intelligence) may arrive quickly at the destination but may not be able to accomplish the mission satisfactorily. This saying is applicable to the *ɔkyeame*, the king’s spokesperson and emissary. He is usually an eloquent orator and well versed in the traditions of his people. Yankah notes that he is appointed on the basis of “intelligence, knowledge of traditional lore and proverb eloquence” (2012:59). Yankah (1995) gives insight into the role of the *ɔkyeame* in Akan society.

According to an Akan proverb, “A royal is not a common fellow, so his name should not be associated with death.”¹⁶ In announcing the passing of a king or making any reference thereto, a speaker must be very tactful. He cannot simply say that “the king has died.” Doing so would be tantamount to violating cultural norms and committing a faux pas. If the offense is committed before a royal court, the punishment could be hefty. It is only through *kasakoa* (“idiomatic expressions”) and euphemisms that such a sensitive announcement can be made. The following account of a major event that had recently occurred contextualizes the wise emissary proverb cited above and highlights the rhetorical skills of the *ɔkyeame*.

A king had just passed away, and, in line with tradition, a royal delegation was sent to break the news to another king in his palace. Upon arrival, they were asked about their mission. Excerpts from the discourse are presented below.¹⁷

¹⁵ *Wɔsoma ɔbanyansafo, na wɔnsoma anammɔn tenten.*

¹⁶ *Odehye nye abofra na w’abo ne din abo owu din.*

¹⁷ This account was obtained from a member of the delegation. Identifying details have been removed.

Twi	Translation
<p>SPOKESPERSON: Nana ho mmfa no, ebere bi a, atwamu, enti yede no kɔɔ oduroyɛfo bi nkyɛn. Oduroyɛfo no asoma abeka akyerɛ abusuafo sɛ, yare no ani adan, enti ɔrentumi nnhwe Nana bio, enti yɛnkɔ hwehwe oduroyɛfo foforo mma no.</p>	<p>SPOKESPERSON: The king was not feeling well some time ago, so we took him to a healer. The healer has just sent us word that the sickness has taken a turn for the worse. So, he is no longer able to treat the king and has asked the family to come and take him somewhere else for treatment. [<i>Upon hearing this report, the king rose from his seat, went back and forth, came back to sit down, and asked through his okyeame:</i>]</p>
<p>KING: Asem a woreka yi, mente ase. Den asem na wope sɛ woka kyereme yi?</p>	<p>KING: What do you mean? What do you want to tell me? [<i>The spokesperson repeated the message but in a different form:</i>]</p>
<p>SPOKESPERSON: Nana atukwan akɔtwere odupɔn. Odupɔn atutu ama mmerɛnkenson asi ni ti ase.</p>	<p>SPOKESPERSON: Nana has traveled and leaned against the big tree, the big tree has fallen and the <i>mmerɛnkenson</i> (the central branch of a palm tree) has bowed its head. [<i>The king stood up again, went back and forth, came back to his seat, shook his head, and asked thoughtfully:</i>]</p>
<p>KING: Asem a woreka yi mente ase ara. Den asem na wope sɛ woka kyereme yi?</p>	<p>KING: I still do not understand your message. What do you want to tell me?</p>
<p>SPOKESPERSON: Nana, asaase mu apae. Odupɔn atutu ama mmerɛnkenson asi ne ti ase. Nana de n'akofena ato hɔ. Nana kɔ koraenkɔsan: kurow a wɔnkɔ nsanmma bio.</p>	<p>SPOKESPERSON: Nana, the earth has split, the big tree has fallen, and the innermost palm branch has bowed its head. The king has laid down his fighting sword. The king has traveled to the city to which no one goes and returns.</p>

Koraenkɔsan is an aggregated Twi word that means “the city to which no one goes and returns.” At that point, the host king understood the message. The mission had been accomplished.

This discourse shows that the announcement of a king’s death is not a simple matter. It is characterized by indirection, euphemisms, and by many twists and turns. Despite the host king’s requests for clarity, the spokesperson did not hurry through the announcement.

The *okyeame* spoke the language of elders. His language was euphemistic and metaphorical. There is some evidence in the literature to suggest that the use of euphemism is “an important stylistic feature in the speaking of proverbs” among the Aniocha of Nigeria (Monye 1996:71, with examples of euphemisms in Aniocha proverbs). Hence in the African

context, the two forms are not mutually exclusive. Skilled speakers are able to seamlessly combine verbal forms such as proverbs, anecdotes, and euphemisms, as seen in the next section on the royal funeral.

Furthermore, proverbs are closely related to idioms and may occasionally be considered as such. Norrick argues that “Proverbs, at least all figurative proverbs, are idioms in that they have SPIs [Standard Proverbial Interpretations] which are distinct from the literal readings which would be assigned to them on the basis of straightforward and compositional semantic principles” (1985:3). In the African context, proverbs often overlap with other kinds of verbal art. Hence the boundaries between the genres of folklore are flexible in Africa (Yankah 2012:196; Finnegan 2012:381). Future research could take a closer look at these intricate relationships.

Of significance is the progressive aspect of the report cited above. The message was that the king’s illness was getting worse, so the family should take him elsewhere for treatment. The king asks questions to disambiguate the utterance. In Akan culture, the announcement of the passing of a chief is not entrusted to just anyone but to a wise and highly skilled orator. Agyekum (2010:156) rightly points out that in Akan society, the death of a king is expressed in entirely different terms than that of an ordinary member of society. He analyzes a variety of euphemisms used among the Akan to refer to this unmentionable event.

Royal Funeral

Royal spokespersons usually serve as masters of ceremonies at royal funerals and other state gatherings, where their roles include making announcements, telling stories, speaking proverbs, telling genealogies, and entertaining audiences, as appropriate. According to an Ovambo saying, “A speech properly garnished with proverbs, parables, and wisdom is pleasant to hear” (Ojoade 1977:20). This belief is shared by the Akan.

Kings customarily travel with large entourages. According to an Akan proverb, “The bird owes its larger size to its feathers.”¹⁸ This means a king’s greatness is reflected in the number of his subjects. An *ɔkyeame* used this proverb to refer to a king and his large entourage who were arriving at the funeral of the late king. At the ceremony, the spokesperson of a visiting king’s delegation (Spokesperson A) requested permission for his retinue to leave and return the next day. The request and the responses it elicited were particularly figurative. Spokesperson B, an *ɔkyeame* acting as a master of ceremonies, rephrased and embellished the request with proverbs.¹⁹ Their speeches are presented below:

¹⁸ *Aboa no ntakra na ɛma no ye kɛse.*

¹⁹ The request made by Spokesperson A mentioned going to the “bottom of the big river” to find a cure but contained no attributive proverbs.

Spokesperson A (spokesperson for a visiting royal delegation)

Twi	Translation
Ɔse ɔrekɔ hwɛhwɛ aduro foforo aba na ɔde abeka Nana.	He says he is going to look for a new medicine to treat the king.
Ɔse senea ɔhu yare no fa no, eyɛ abese we, enti nea edi kan, ɔma mo nyinaa hyeden.	He says he sees the king's sickness as very serious, a situation that calls for the chewing of kola nuts, so he first of all wishes to console the entire state.
Ɔse mommprim mobo, na asem a abetɔ [ɔman yi] mu no, eyɛ awɛɛhosem.	He says, "do not lose heart." What has befallen the state is very sad indeed.
Ɔse, senea w'ahunu yare no ani afa no, na ɔno ara aba yare no anim na ayɛ den afa no, ɔbeserew mo nantew na wakɔ Firaw ase akɔ hwɛhwɛ aduro aba. (Enye saa na wokae?)	He says he has seen, the gravity of the illness, so he is asking permission to leave, and to go to the bottom of the Volta River to find a remedy. <i>[Turning to the king, the Spokesperson asked, "Was that not what you said?" The king responded with a nod and a smile.]</i>

Spokesperson B (master of ceremonies)²⁰

Twi	Translation
Ɔse sebe mpen aduasa, asu a onni patafo no na ɔtwa kwan mu.	The king says, thirty apologies, it is the river that has no pacifier that crosses the path.*
Nana yare a, sebe nne, adodow no yi, wode ama mmerewa tia se wɔmpɛ aduro pa bi mmesaw.	My apologies, regarding the illness that has today affected the king, old ladies have been asked to find a cure for it.
Ato abesewe, ato mfɔte, ato nkyereso.	We are at the point of chewing kola nuts, [†] we are at the point of termites, we are at a critical point.
Ɔse, sebe, ɔbarima a, onni akofo no, na ɔtwamu wɔ guam keke.	He says, my apologies, the man who has no fighters on his side easily passes through the crowd.
Enti Nana se, se eba saa mpo a, na eyɛ den se ara a, ɔbe wura Firaw ase, na nnuro pa biara a, ewɔ ho a, wotew, na wode besa saa ɔyare yi, wode besa.	So, the king says if the need arises, he will go to the bottom of the Volta River to find a remedy for this illness. [‡]
	<p>*Royal titles and other identifying information have been removed to protect anonymity.</p> <p>[†]Kola nut is used as a stimulant by mourners at funerals in Africa.</p> <p>[‡]The Volta River is the biggest river in Ghana.</p>

The references to the Volta River, a clear hyperbole, drew laughter and applause from some members of the audience. The speeches of Spokespersons A and B elicited the following response from Spokesperson C, acting on behalf of the bereaved family:

²⁰ The spokespersons (A, B, and C) spoke one after the other, and their remarks were spoken without interruption.

Spokesperson C (family spokesperson)

Twɪ	Translation
Saa asem yi too yen . . . yetoo nsa frɛ wɔn se wɔmmɛboa yen.	When this event occurred, we invited our brothers . . . to come and help us.
Na wɔn aba, na wɔn ahu nea ɛsɛ sɛ wode sa, nea ɛsɛ sɛ wɔyɛ na saa akwantu yi, ɔbɛ sɛsa n'adwene na w'aka akyerɛ yen se, "saa akwantu yi m'asan m'akyi."	They have come, and they now know what to do so that our king will change his mind and say to us, "I am no longer going on this journey."
Yɛwɔ awɛn mu, yɛrɛwɛn. Yɛnim sɛ yen nuanom . . .	We are keeping vigil. We are keeping vigil. We know that our brothers, from . . .
Sɛbe wɔn suman kwaa nɛ wɔn neema, yɛnim sɛ ɛbɛ du memeneda anadwofa de, na wɔn anya n'akade a ɛbema yen wura yi asɔrɛ na w'abɛ ka yen ho.	My apologies, thanks to their medicines, healing powers, and other things, from now until Sunday night, [our brothers] would have found a cure so that our leader would come and join us.
Enti sɛ wɔn aba, na wɔn ahu sɛ ɛmu ayɛ den, na wɔrɛkɔ wɔn akyi aba a, wosɛ nɛ kwan ara nɛn. Yɛwɔ atwɛn mu ara. Biribiara a wɔbɛyɛ, na yen wura yi abesɛsa n'adwene na w'abɛka yen ho bio no, yɛwɔ atwɛn mu ara.	So, if they have come, and have seen the gravity of the situation, and are going home, to come back later, tell them permission is granted. Anything that they will do to make our king change his mind and come to join us again, we are waiting.

The mode of the discourse was extraordinary. An *ɔkyeame* commenting on this discourse explained: "The royals were speaking in the proverbial mode."²¹ The above exemplifies what can be described as a proverbial discourse (*kasabebu*). It is characterized by euphemisms, indirection (*kasakoa*), proverbs, expressions of politeness, and hyperbolic forms. I argue that a proverbial discourse is a special mode of communication, a combination of verbal art forms that goes beyond the citing of single proverbs.

Spokesperson B rephrases and embellishes the request for permission to leave made by Spokesperson A. He cites two proverbs, both prefaced with the excusatory remark, *sɛbe* ("my apologies"). The first proverb, "it is the river that has no pacifiers that crosses the path," implies that everything will be done to turn the course of the river and prevent it from crossing the path. The river in this context is a proverbial symbol of a difficult problem. The statement is a *euphemistic proverb* in that it is intended to mitigate the impact of the sad reality on the audience. The proverb was effectively functioning here as a "mitigating and politeness strategy" (Obeng 1996).

²¹ *Ahenfo no rekasa wɔ abebu mu.*

Furthermore, Spokesperson B uses a string of metaphors to underscore the bitterness and pain caused by the event. He uses expressions such as *Ato abesewe, ato mfote, ato nkyereso* (“We are at the point of chewing kola nuts, we are at the point of termites, we are at a critical point”). His use of anaphora in the source language is remarkable.²²

Spokesperson B uses a second proverb that reinforces the first: “the man who has no fighters on his side easily passes through the crowd.”²³ This implies that the king has armies who will fight to save his life. Both proverbs are highly figurative, and their meanings can hardly be fully explicated.

Although the speech of Spokesperson C does not contain quotable proverbs, it can nonetheless be described as figurative, idiomatic, and euphemistic. The audience knows that Spokesperson C was not speaking plainly but figuratively. A request for permission to leave and find a cure for an illness was rephrased in proverbial terms by Spokesperson B. Spokesperson C expressed confidence that the delegation would find a cure for the illness. Of significance in the proverbial discourse are:

- 1) the use of indirection and euphemisms;
- 2) the use of hyperbole (for example, going to the bottom of the big river to find a cure);
- 3) the use of two attributive proverbs by Spokesperson A;
- 4) the present progressive aspect (which suggests an evolving situation);
- 5) the rhetorical posture of the interlocutors.

The speeches support the argument that the proverb (the proverbial mode) is “an unusual speech and behavior strategy” that has the propensity “to violate the norms of conventional speech and behavior” (Yankah 2012:8). In the next section, I discuss surrogate languages, another channel for the expression of proverbs in the royal court.

Surrogate Languages of Drums and Horns

While context is key to understanding proverbs in spoken discourses, it is insufficient for understanding the language of the drums and horns at the Akan royal court. What is required is an in-depth knowledge of the traditions and customs of the people. In-depth knowledge includes the ability to decode drummed messages. Sarpong describes horn language as “symbolic, idiomatic and proverbial.” He notes that “to understand the language of the horns, an individual must have knowledge of historical facts, animals, habitats, objects, colors, and word usages” (1990:7). This assertion is applicable to the talking drum as well.

A surrogate language is the reproduction of human speech through musical instruments such as drums, horns, and flutes. Drum and horn languages are esoteric and intriguing. They are highly coded and intended for those well-versed in oral traditions. Surrogate languages serve as

²² It was difficult to render the poetic effect of the original into English without stylistic losses.

²³ *Obarima a, onni akofo no, na otwamu wo guam keke.*

signals and as substitutes for spoken language (Nketia 1971:701). Hence, they constitute an alternative means of communication to insiders. Finnegan describes drum language among the Ashanti and the Yoruba as “very highly developed” and notes that expert drummers are usually attached to kings’ courts (2012:470). This study also examined the role of the *Ɔdomankoma Kyerema* and the languages of the drums and horns of the royal court.

According to an Akan saying, “Without the drummer, there is no king.”²⁴ Conversely, they say: “Without the king, there is no drummer.”²⁵ These sayings underscore the importance of the drummer in the Akan royal court. An *ɔkyerema* explained: “It is the drummer that strengthens the wings of the king.”²⁶ The king does not attend ceremonies without the drummer, and most ceremonies have no weight without him. The *ɔkyerema* played the following poetic piece on the *atumpɔn* talking drum to portray his role in the palace:

Ɔdomankoma bɔɔ ade.

Ɔbɔɔ ɔhene.

Ɔbɔɔ ɔkyerema.

Ɔbɔɔ kasa kronkron.

The Supreme Being created things.

He created the king.

He created the drummer.

He created sacred language.²⁷

The *ɔkyerema* decoded the message to this researcher. The ability to decode the messages of the divine drummer is, undoubtedly, a key differentiator in this communicative process.

In this section, I discuss what I will broadly term *kasa kronkron* (“sacred language” or “pure language”). *Kasa kronkron*, as explained by the *ɔkyerema*, refers to the traditional language spoken by the *Ɔdomankoma Kyerema* (“divine drummer”) through the drum (and by extension, the horn-blower through the royal horn) to the king. *Kasa kronkron* is often proverbial, solemn, and cryptic. I argue that *kasa kronkron* derives its proverbiality from its surrogate mode of expression, its idiomatic nature, and its ability to communicate with a few within a larger audience. It is a language heard by many but understood by a few.²⁸

²⁴ *Sɛ ɔkyerema nni hɔ a, ɔhene nni hɔ.*

²⁵ *Sɛ ɔhene nni hɔ a, ɔkyerema nni hɔ.*

²⁶ *Ɔkyerema na ɔma ɔhene ntaban mu yɛ duru.*

²⁷ Consult the eCompanion, sound file 1.

²⁸ *Kasa kronkron* cannot be understood by uninitiated persons.

Some Drums and Horns of the King's Court

Drums are important symbols of royalty, and there are many drums in the royal court. An informant explained that some drums are displayed only on special occasions such as during festivals. Only a few royal drums are mentioned here.

Three types of drums are played before the king comes to sit in state. These are the *nkrawiri*, the *petepire*,²⁹ and the *mpebi*.³⁰ They are short drums (*twenesin*) reserved for the exclusive use of the king. They are used mostly as signal drums to transmit short messages. The *nkrawiri*, the *petepire*, and the *mpebi* are less common than the *atumpan* talking drum. Although the *atumpan* is one of the most important state drums, it is owned by popular bands.³¹ Drums such as the *mpebi* and *aburukuwa* are special royal drums and may not be owned by private individuals. There is a special drummer for each drum in the palace.

At the king's court, the three drums serve as talking drums. The *nkrawiri* says: "Go ahead, say it and pay the penalty for it."³² Thus, people should be mindful of their utterances because they may be held accountable. The *petepire* says: "You will hear the judgment soon."³³ The *mpebi* says: "I practice no favoritism."³⁴ This means the king is fair to all. The *mpebi* is the symbol of the king's impartiality.

These maxims are spoken repetitively by the royal drums. Taylor (1962:95) points out that legal maxims are proverbs of a very special kind. In this Akan royal court, talking drums articulate proverbs relating to the administration of justice. They echo principles relating to (1) people's accountability for actions; (2) open hearings and timely rulings; (3) the impartiality of the king's court. Drum languages in Akan royal courts differ from palace to palace.

The *aburukuwa* is one of the king's most respected drums. It was described by an elder as "The king of all the drums."³⁵ The *aburukuwa* is an ancient and a special talking drum. It is a very small, high-pitched drum that imitates the sound of a bird. It is played with sticks and makes a scratching sound. At festivals, the drum is positioned close to the king. The *aburukuwa* was described as a "spirit-filled" drum. According to an informant, royals who know its sound can hear or even sense it whenever it is sounded. The informant explained that "it is a spiritual thing"³⁶ and declined to provide further details. Unlike the *nkrawire*, the *petepire*, and the *mpebi*,

²⁹ *Petepire*, carved from hard wood, means "the tough one." The metaphor refers to the toughness of the king.

³⁰ The name *mpebi*, meaning "I don't want any," originated from "the refusal of King Opoku Ware (1731-42) to take his share of the booty obtained from the Ashanti-Kete Krachi war" (Nketia 1963:28).

³¹ Nketia notes that popular bands were permitted to use "a few essential drums like *atumpan*, *apentemma*, *akukua*" (Nketia 1963:119).

³² *Kɔka ma yenkum wo.*

³³ *Wobe te mpren.*

³⁴ *Mempe bi n'gyaw bi.*

³⁵ *Twene no nyinaa tikora.*

³⁶ *Ɛye sunsum mu ade.*

which are played during regular palace meetings, the *aburukuwa* is heard only on special occasions, such as during festivals and in the event of the death of a chief.

According to an Akan proverb, “It is only the fitting animal’s skin that may be used for the drumhead.”³⁷ Drums are covered with animal skin, but not just any animal’s skin is fit for that purpose. An informant narrated that all the quadrupeds met one day to look for an animal whose skin was resilient and suitable for making a drumhead. Each animal cut a small piece of its skin for an experiment. After a few days of exposure to the sun, all but the antelope’s skin had shriveled. So, the animals concluded that the antelope’s skin was the most suitable for the drumhead. After donating more skin tissue, the antelope reportedly became so weak that she could not attend a gathering of the animals. Nonetheless, the drum was sent to the ceremony. The animals agreed that the antelope had done them a great honor and granted her an “excused absence.” Hence the Akan proverb, “If the antelope does not go to the gathering, its skin does.”³⁸ This proverb means that if, for instance, there is a funeral and a person is unable to attend the ceremony, it is fitting for that person to make a meaningful contribution to help organize the event.

In the past, elephant skin was used as the drum membrane.³⁹ An *ɔkyerema* explained that the skin of the antelope (*ɔdabɔ*) makes the best sound, but it usually lasts for less than a year if played vigorously. So, cow skin is used instead because it is tougher and can last longer.

At public ceremonies the king is welcomed by *fɔntɔmfɔm*,⁴⁰ also known as *ɔman fare bae* (“the drums that bring together the entire state”). The *atumpan* is the main talking drum in the set. The *atumpan* repeatedly says: “The noble one walks majestically.”⁴¹ A drummer said that he uses the *atumpan* to speak exclusively in proverbs to the king, but he can “say virtually anything” with the drum. Another drummer said that he cannot officially speak to the king except through *kasa kronkron*. He often uses the *atumpan* to make requests of the king; his “favorite” request is: “Chief, bring drinks.”⁴² The king obliges and sends money or drinks to them. Asked if the king understands all his messages, he responded in the affirmative and said, “If not, how can he know if he is being insulted?” The informant also uses the talking drum to invite members of the audience to the dancing ring by calling their names on the drum, and if they are unwilling or too tired to dance, they send money instead. He noted that when money is received, “the powers descend,” and he is energized to play more. The *fɔntɔmfɔm* is a favorite set of drums not just for chiefs, but for all who understand its coded language.

After the king has sat down, the *ɔkyerema* drums a proverb or two in his honor. The following is a typical example:

³⁷ *Aboa a ɔfata na wɔde no were yere twene.*

³⁸ *Se ɔtwe ankɔ gua a, ne homa kɔ.*

³⁹ The practice has ceased due to restrictions on the hunting of elephants.

⁴⁰ See pictures of the set of drums in the appendix.

⁴¹ *Obrempon nante brebre.*

⁴² *Ohene, fa nsa bra.* Consult the eCompanion, sound file 2.

Esono akura, sono akura, sono abotokura, sono akura pa, sono akura kronkron.

There are differences between the ordinary mouse, the striped mouse, and the sacred mouse.⁴³

The proverb means there are royals among royals and not all royals can ascend the throne. The king is referred to as *akura kronkron* (“a sacred mouse”). This saying affirms his legitimacy. *Ɔdehɛ kronkron* means “true royal.” The term *kronkron*, as noted above, is used to describe the sacredness of the talking drum language (*kasa kronkron*). Typical proverbs played on the *atumpan* by the drummers include for example: “It takes patience to build a nation.”⁴⁴ This maxim relates to governance.

The *ɔkyerɛma* controls many aspects of the ceremony by speaking to the initiated through the *atumpan* talking drum. Therefore, the *ɔkyerɛma* and the *ɔkyeame* are both royal spokespersons: one is an expert in the surrogate language of the drum, the other in the spoken word.

In the old days, royal horns and flutes were used to warn people of danger in times of war and other emergencies. So, people needed to understand the language of these instruments. According to an old Akan proverb, “The person who forgets his royal horn may get lost in the crowd.”⁴⁵ A variant of the proverb replaces the word *abentia* (“short horn”) with *atenteben* (“flute”). The *atenteben* is used to play funeral dirges for royals. The proverb means one should know one’s own customs and be able to interpret signals correctly. The saying underlies the importance of recognizing and responding to clarion calls.

The king’s horns are made of elephant tusks.⁴⁶ The elephant is the symbol of strength and majesty. For this reason, it is evoked in many Akan proverbs. At gatherings, the king’s horn sings his praises. It says:

Wopɛ ko, wopɛ ko dodo
Katakyie pɛ ko dodo
Mo po sasa sasa a,⁴⁷ mokoto barima
Mokoto barima!

You love fighting, you love fighting
The valorous one loves fighting
If you dare attack, you will meet a man; you will meet a man!

Barima (“man”) in the horn language recalls the attributes of masculinity in Akan society, not the least of which is bravery.

⁴³ Consult the eCompanion, sound file 3.

⁴⁴ *Yede brebre na ekyekye kurow*. Consult the eCompanion, sound file 4.

⁴⁵ *Se worefiri wo kurom abentia a, woyera wo bedwa ase*.

⁴⁶ In modern times, cow horns are sometimes used in place of elephant tusks.

⁴⁷ An archaic expression in Twi (meaning “to attack aggressively”).

On special occasions, the Adum people⁴⁸ play their own drum, which says *Hurow taban*, literally, “Jump wings.” The term refers to the eagle, a big bird that symbolizes strength. It flies higher than all the others, and if any bird misbehaves, it comes down quickly to exterminate the offender. The Adum people see themselves as the “eagles” in the state. The Adum people also have their own horn.⁴⁹ The horn says:

Esono ee soree,
Esono ee soree,
Asem yi, ɛɛ me yaa a, sɛ!

Elephant, arise!
Elephant, arise!
This issue has caused me so much pain.⁵⁰

While the Adum horn is speaking, the Banmu horn responds:

Asem yi, gyei yɛ pɛ ano.
We must find a solution to this issue.⁵¹

In traditional terms, the *banmuhene* (chief of the mausoleum) is considered the father of the *adumhene* (state executioner).⁵² Adum’s message is cryptic and proverbial. It does not refer to any grievance in particular. The horn language is invariable. Kaminski (2012:107) has suggested that one of the underlying reasons for surrogate languages is to conceal information from outsiders. This is also true of enigmatic royal proverbs. This communication shows the ambiguous and polysemantic nature of surrogate languages.

Twi is a tonal language. So, a single word could mean different things depending on the context and on how it is pronounced. *Osono* or *Esono* in Twi means “elephant.” In the horn language, *Osono* is a metaphor for the king (the strong leader). *Esono* may also mean “different.” Hence, *Esono wonko*, or *Osononko*, translates as “He who is different.”

An informant explained that *Esono wonko* refers to the king. “He who is different” implies there is no one like him. The *abentia* (“the short royal horn”) repetitively praises the

⁴⁸ Executioners and royal security officers.

⁴⁹ The horn is traditionally made from an elephant tusk. The Adum people belong to the royal palace.

⁵⁰ This is pronounced entirely by the horn and not expressed in words.

⁵¹ Adum is telling Banmu that someone may have aggrieved him. Banmu assures Adum that they must find a solution to his grievance. This is the language spoken by the two horns. The communication shows a close traditional relationship between a father and a son. The Adum people and the Banmu people are divisions of the royal palace. They are led by the *adumhene* (chief of Adum) and the *banmuhene* (chief of Banmu). This communication is between an Adum horn-blower and a Banmu horn-blower.

⁵² Traditionally, the *banmuhene* is senior in rank to the *adumhene*. The two are represented by their horn-blowers, who communicate with their horns.

king, “You are unique.”⁵³ He related that at the palace, whenever there is commotion, the *abentia* is heard calling the people to order. The horn says: “You are too noisy, the elephant is among you, the unique one is among you. Don’t you know that the king is among you?”⁵⁴ He noted that as soon as the *abentia* is heard, calm is restored. Royal horns are not used only to sing the praises of the king and to warn in times of emergency, but also to restore order in the palace and at gatherings.

I have provided some examples of the verbal messages expressed by royal drums and horns. These instruments give the aural impression of speech. As mentioned by the *ɔkyerema*, they can express virtually anything in the language, proverbial or non-proverbial. Tone is important in the encoding of the messages. From the foregoing, one can argue that there is a syntactic and semantic system that enables the drummer or horn-blower to match Akan speech sounds to the tones of the *atumpan* or *abentia*. This is what enables the drummer, for example, to mention the name of a member of the audience and the king to understand the messages of the drummer. For our purposes, however, a brief explication should suffice. The *ɔkyerema* played the following simple messages on the *atumpan*, which he decoded later:

Example 1: ɔhene, fa nsa bra!

Chief, bring drinks!

Example 2: Kete kiti, kete kiti krɛkrɛ (2x), meaning, ɔhene, ma wo homene so brɛ brɛ na bɛ saw.

Chief, get up gently and dance.

The message in Example 1 involves about five beats on the *atumpan*, with a pause after the name of the king. Example 2 is an *atran*, a musical piece that invites the king to dance. The notes are played in rapid succession. Example 2 includes both a “vocalization” of the drum beat by the *ɔkyerema* and the verbal basis of the drum language.

The *Asafo* and Other Groups

Asafo companies such as Apesemaka (a courageous group that is always eager to say something) and Asɔnkɔ (bearers of the state flag) use proverbial and metaphorical language in their drumming, horn-blowing, and singing. Only royal *asafo* companies are allowed to use horns. The activities of non-royal *asafo* companies involve only drumming and singing. In recent times, the activities of *asafo* groups have been restricted due to fears that they could lead to violence. Among the Adum people, the Apesemaka also had a play or a band (*agoro*) called *Apesemaka*.⁵⁵ The *Apesemaka* drums say:

⁵³ *Wo ye sononko.*

⁵⁴ *Mope dede, mope dede dodo, ɛsono te mo mu, osononko te mo mu, monnim se esono te mo mu.*

⁵⁵ An informant recalled that the last time they performed was at a royal funeral in the late 1970s.

Asafo Prampram, Asafo Prampram
 Anyako a frɛ Kotoko,
 Ankobea dade ɔkronpɔn.
 Ogya ɛhew kro.
 Yabɔ mpintin atra po, na baka ne hena?
 Y'amene sekan, na bɔha?

Asafo Prampram, Asafo Prampram,⁵⁶
 Porcupine, called upon in times of war.
 Ankobea⁵⁷ strong as iron.
 Fire that devours cities.
 We played the *mpintin* drums⁵⁸ and jumped over the sea. How can the lagoon stop us?
 We swallowed the dagger, why not the sheath?

The word *kotoko* (“porcupine”) indicates that the members of the company are fierce fighters and difficult to capture. The porcupine is symbolic of the Ashanti state. The figurative saying, “porcupine, called upon in times of war,” is an instantiation of animals in the drum language and songs of the people. The animal has many quills with which it defends itself. The metaphor recalls the Ashanti adage, “If you kill a thousand, a thousand more will come back.”⁵⁹ This means the warriors of Asafo Prampram are relentless in war. By stating, “We jumped over the sea. How can the lagoon stop us?,” the group is referring to its ability to surmount obstacles. The implication is that the sea is a bigger obstacle to cross than the lagoon. The figurative expression is reinforced by the next one, “We swallowed the dagger, why not the sheath?” This means that having swallowed the deadlier dagger, the group faces no danger from the sheath. Clearly, these are overstatements or hyperboles meant for firing up the rank and file.

The Asɔnkɔ drum says:

Ogya hyiren, hyiren, hwiren, hwiren (2x), Asɔnkɔfo mommra, mommra kiti kiti.	Fire, Fire, Fire People of Asɔnkɔ come. Come quickly in your numbers.
Twerebo pae, twerebo pae, Ebi rewu, ebi repira. . . . Esiw dɔm pintinn Edɔm piti piti, yensuro!	Flint and bullets explode, Some are dying, others are injured. . . . Unshakeable army of the hills! We fear not dense crowds!

⁵⁶ Name of the association.

⁵⁷ A military wing that takes care of the palace.

⁵⁸ *Mpintin* are hourglass drums used in royal processions. The drummers follow the king and repeatedly play the message “Nana duom ma yenko!” (“King, hurry and let’s go!”).

⁵⁹ *Wo kum apem a, apem beba.*

The Asonko people are known to be fierce fighters and are led by the *frankaahene* (“chief of the flag bearers”). They describe themselves as the “unshakeable army of the hills.” The Asonko people play two different drums in a call-and-response manner. One drum says: “Hatred is of old”;⁶⁰ the other responds: “We will shatter the crowd of enemies!”⁶¹

Their horn⁶² that they play in the background sounds the following warning:

Ogyata ba kyere ye kyere na oo.

It is a hard thing to capture the lion cub!

Otan firi tete.

Hatred is of old.

Bodom anyam pa.

We will shatter the crowd of enemies.⁶³

The group refers to the lion cub and not to the lion, because they believe that as children of the king (the lion), they cannot be easily captured. The metaphor stems from the animal kingdom, where it is believed that lion cubs enjoy great protection from their parents. It is also a proverb simile. Just as the lion protects its cubs, so does the king protect his “children.” The statement “It is a hard thing to capture the lion cub” implies that the Asonko people have the backing of the king and so are untouchable. The saying broadly means that certain persons may be untouchable because of their associations with powerful persons.

Other expressions used by the group include, for example, “fire that devours cities” and “flint and bullets that explode causing injuries and death.” Their language is rich in imagery, and animals feature prominently in it. Animals evoked include the elephant, the eagle, the porcupine, the lion, and the lion cub. *Asafo* companies are driven by bravery and a sense of pride in their accomplishments. As shown above, figurative language plays an important role in the activities of these groups.

Proverbs on Linguist Staffs

Akan linguist staffs or royal staffs (*akyeamepoma*) are another channel for the communication of proverbs. These staffs of office held by royal spokespersons fall into two main categories: proverbial and totemic. The imagery on proverbial staffs alludes to proverbs or wise

⁶⁰ *Otan firi tete.*

⁶¹ *Bodom anyam pa!*

⁶² The exact type of horn used by the group could not be ascertained.

⁶³ The last two statements imply that some foes are intractable, so the best way to deal with them is to fight and defeat them.

sayings, while totemic staffs may display an animal representing one of the Akan clans. This section focuses on the proverbial staffs.

Akans have mainly black and gold linguist staffs. *Asempa ye tia* (“The truth is brief”) is a black linguist staff. It has a simple design; however, it is considered the most powerful royal staff. The *Asempa ye tia* is used to perform customary rites. It is covered with the skin of the monitor lizard (*omanpam*). Figure 1 is a photograph of an *Asempa ye tia*. An informant explained that the main difference between the black and the gold staff is that the black staff has *sunsum* (“spirit”) in it, but the gold ones are ceremonial and have no spirit in them.

Figure 2 is a gold royal staff called *Obra tese nkosua* (“Life is like an egg”). The finial shows a hand holding an egg. The proverb means that life is precious. It also means that “power is fragile.”⁶⁴ When an egg is held too firmly it breaks, and when it is held too loosely it breaks. So, one should be careful with the use of power.

Figure 3 shows a staff called *Eti wɔ hɔ a, nankroma nsoa kyew* (“The leg does not carry the crown when there is the head to do so”). The finial shows a person with one leg raised and pointing to his head, meaning that only the head can wear the crown. The proverb means only the rightful heir can ascend the throne.

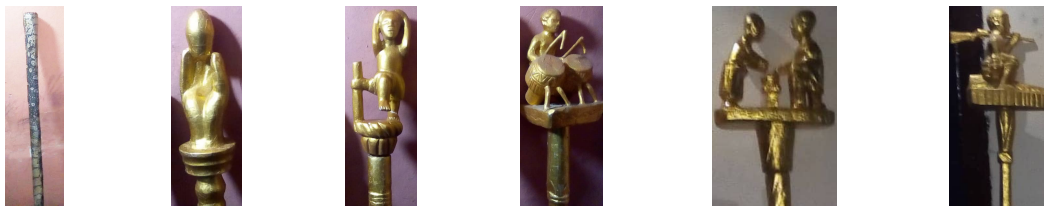


Fig. 1. *Asempa ye tia*; fig. 2. *Obra tese nkosua*; fig. 3. *Eti wɔ hɔ a, nankroma nsoa kyew*; fig. 4. *Odomankoma Kyerema a, ɔyan atumpan*; fig. 5. *Nea adea wɔ no na odi, na enye nea ɔkɔm de no*; fig. 6. *Ote atuo so* (photos by K. Addo).

Figure 4 is a staff that honors the *ɔkyerema*. It is called *Odomankoma Kyerema a, ɔyan atumpan* (“The Creator’s drummer playing the *atumpan*”). The drummer speaks *adomankomasem* through the *atumpan*. He is a master of ceremonies and is knowledgeable in the history and the traditions of the people. This staff is meaningful and honors the *ɔkyerema*’s role in the community.

The staff shown in Figure 5 represents the proverb, “It is the owner of the food that eats it and not the hungry person.”⁶⁵ The finial shows two people sitting, one of them with his hand in a bowl, while the other looks on. The proverb means that the owner has an exclusive right to what he owns. Figure 6 is a staff called *Ote atuo so* (“He who sits on guns”). The finial shows a man sitting with a gun on his shoulder. This means that the king wields power and presides over the army.

There were other royal staffs not pictured. One of the staffs is called *Sankofa wonkyi* (“It is not a taboo to go back and fetch what has been forgotten”). The finial shows a bird that has turned its head backwards to pick something. The symbol refers to the value of history in

⁶⁴ *Tumi tese nkosua*.

⁶⁵ *Nea adee wɔ no na odi, na enye nea ɔkɔm de no*.

navigating the future. Another staff represents the proverb, “A knot can only be untied by wise persons.”⁶⁶ A knot of wisdom is not easily unraveled unless one knows how to do so. The saying refers to a reef knot, a knot that holds firmly and is difficult to untie. Any attempt to untie it the wrong way complicates the situation by further tightening the knot. The proverb means only a wise person can solve a difficult problem.

The proverb, like the riddle, is a wisdom knot. An important difference between them is that while the riddle always elicits a direct response from its audience, the proverb does not necessarily do so. The addressee of the riddle is expected to guess the referent, but the referent of the proverb is usually known to both the speaker and the addressee. Both proverbs and riddles are enigmatic and may be difficult to interpret.

Humor is not left out of these depictions. One of the finials shows two people, one carrying a bowl of fufu⁶⁷ and the other a bowl of soup. This scene alludes to the proverb, “If you have taken the fufu, I have taken the soup.”⁶⁸ This means that a compromise is needed, because one cannot eat fufu without soup.

These examples show that for each “visual tableau” as represented by the finials on the staffs, there is a corresponding proverb. Therefore, the visual symbol carried by the *ɔkyeame* evokes a corresponding spoken proverb, and the meaning lies in the juxtaposition of the two. Hence, if the spoken proverb were not known throughout the community, the ability to decode the visual symbol would be limited. Therefore, in this context, visual signs and spoken signs have a unique connection.

Linguist staffs are selected to correspond with the message the king wants to convey. The following protocol is followed in the royal palace. There is an *akyeamehene* (“chief of spokespersons”), and he is assisted by an *ɔkyeame panyin* (“senior spokesperson”). The *akyeamehene* is a chief, so he does not carry a staff. It is the *ɔkyeame panyin* who carries the staff. When the king wants to deliver a message, he discusses the assignment with the *akyeamehene*, who selects the staff. The *akyeamehene* delegates authority to the *ɔkyeame panyin*, who may designate any of the royal spokespersons to deliver the message on behalf of the king. If the mission is a difficult one, both the *akyeamehene* and *ɔkyeame panyin*, as well as other chiefs, may accompany the delegation. The king always travels with the *Asempa ye tia*.

Conclusion

This study has described the use of proverbs, proverbial expressions, and surrogate languages in an Akan royal court. Proverbs are prevalent in the Akan royal court. They are expressed through multiple channels, including human speech, surrogate languages of drums and horns, and artifacts such as linguist staffs, among others. The study noted that the *ɔkyeame* is

⁶⁶ *Nyansapɔ wɔ san no abadwemma mu.*

⁶⁷ A meal prepared from pounded cassava, plantain, or yam and eaten with soup.

⁶⁸ *W’afa fufu a, m’afa nkwan.*

highly skilled in verbal discourse, while his counterpart, the *Ɔdomankoma Kyerema*, is highly skilled in the language of the talking drum.

The proverb's ability to engender double meanings and ambiguity highlights its enigmatic nature and susceptibility to creative deformation by skilled users. The stretches of discourse analyzed in the study showed the use of proverbs, indirection, idioms, hyperbole, and other verbal art forms. The proverbial mode of discourse, among the Akan, is a rich combination of narrative forms. It is also a rich combination of multiple "semiotic channels," where visual and musical sign systems make reference to spoken proverbs and socially distributed knowledge of proverbs. It is the socially distributed knowledge that enables the linkage of the three sign systems: verbal, musical, visual. The African proverb is an extremely complex phenomenon given these relationships.

Surrogate languages at the royal court are an effective, albeit esoteric, way of communicating among members of the community. The study finds that *kasa kronkron* (the sacred drum language addressed to the king) derives proverbiality from its mode of expression, its idiomatic nature, and its ability to communicate with a few within a large audience. The study also discussed proverbial depictions on spokespersons' staffs, animal metaphors, and the use of proverbial expressions in the court. All in all, proverbs are not simply devices that enable people to say more with less, but most importantly, they are highly instrumental in speaking to limited audiences and in preserving traditions.

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Appendix—*Fɔntɔmfɔm* Instruments

There are about eight instruments in the *fɔntɔmfɔm* orchestra. Figure 7 shows a pair of *atumpan* drums, male and female. The *atumpan* are the main talking drums in the set. The male drum has a lower pitch than the female. Figure 8 shows the *frɔm* (*bɔmmaa*) drums. They are the biggest drums in the collection and are male and female, with low and high pitches, respectively.

Figure 9 shows the *apaso*. Figure 10 shows a pair of male and female *mmeremma* drums. Figure 11 is the *dawuro* ("gong"), also called *Adawura Kofi*. The *frɔm* and *atumpan* are played with *akotokro* ("curved drumsticks"), while the *mmeremma* and *apaso* (the smaller drums) are played with *mmeremma maa* ("straight sticks"). Bare hands are never used to play any of the drums in the set.



Fig. 7. *Atumpan*; fig. 8. *Frɔm* (*Bɔmmaa*); fig. 9. *Apaso*; fig. 10. *Mmeremma*; fig. 11. *Dawuro* (photos by Edmund Asare).

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Learning to be Satisfied: Navajo Poetics, a Chattering Chipmunk, and Ethnopoetics¹

Anthony K. Webster

In memory of Barre Toelken

“This is so, isn’t it?” —F. R. Leavis (1972:62)

“Hane’ doo t’óó saad t’éí át’é jinóózjǫ’ át’ée da, t’áá bí be’iina’ haleeh.” —Rex Lee Jim (cited in Casaus 1996:10)
Rough translation: “Stories (poems) are not just words to be thought about, they are to become life.”

“[Poetry] avoids the last illusion of prose, which so gently sometimes and at others so passionately pretends that things are thus and thus. In poetry they are also thus and thus, but because the arrangement of the lines, the pattern within the whole, will have it so. . . . Exquisitely leaning toward an implied untruth, prose persuades us that we can trust our natures to know things as they are; ostentatiously faithful to its own nature, poetry assures us that we cannot—we know only as we can.” —Charles Williams (1933:9-10)

Prologue

I am sitting in my office at my home in rural southern Illinois. Outside I can hear the chattering of a chipmunk who lives near the steps that lead up to the front door of the house. The chipmunk spends much time on the landing of the stairs, oftentimes chattering away. Other times

¹ This essay could not have been written without the generosity of Blackhorse Mitchell. I thank him again. Our conversations about Coyote stories and the Navajo language have much influenced my thinking. Thanks as well to Rex Lee Jim and Laura Tohe who have taught me much about Navajo poetics. A conversation with Sherwin Bitsui brought many of the issues in this essay into focus for me. I thank him. Thanks to the other Navajos who have taken the time to talk with me about languages, poetry, and the moral imagination. Research on the Navajo Nation was done with a permit from the Navajo Historic Preservation Office. I thank them. An earlier version of this paper was presented at the University of Michigan Department of Anthropology Linguistic Lab (February, 2019); I thank all in attendance for a lively conversation. I thank especially Judy Irvine and Barb Meek for a number of insightful comments. Another version of this paper was presented at the Linguistic Anthropology Lab at the University of Texas at Austin (September, 2019), and I thank those in attendance as well for their comments. A slightly different version of this essay was presented at the University of Helsinki (September, 2019) as well. I thank Laura Siragusa for the invitation. I thank as well the audience members for a number of useful comments. I thank Aimee Hosemann for comments on earlier drafts of this essay. Finally, I thank the three reviewers for *Oral Tradition* for generous and kind comments.

silent. Whenever, though, I exit the house in the spring, summer, or fall, it bolts away and hides in the bushes near the window that looks out at our bird feeder and the front yard. This eventing is so common that it might easily become background, something that I am dimly aware of. It retains its salience, its compellingness, for at least two reasons. First, because I attend to the chipmunk by taking the occasional notes on its habits and my reactions to those habits (in the tradition of Aldo Leopold (1986)), then coupling this with quotes that I write in my leather-bound commonplace book (in the tradition of W. H. Auden (1970)). Secondly, because it contrasts so starkly with where I live in Austin, Texas. There I find no chipmunks. Their absence, especially for someone who grew up in the Midwest (Indiana), who grew up among the woods of the Midwest, seems always startling to me. The chipmunk at my home in southern Illinois is a reminder of their continuing presence in my life, a continuing reminder of something about myself as well. The chipmunk reminds me, to put it simply, of home, of my home in Indiana when I was young. Chipmunks, whatever else they may be, are reminders for me of home—both in Indiana and in Illinois now.

Introduction

Chipmunks are present on the Navajo Nation, in the American Southwest; they were certainly present—both physically and discursively—when I have been doing ethnographic and linguistic fieldwork there. Here is a passage on chipmunks by John Watchman in my commonplace book (I'll discuss the formatting below):

'Áadi 'inda hazéists'ósii,
 "Nishq'?"
 'Ákqó náádilgheed!
 T'áadaats'í 'aani.
 Daaztsá," ho'doon'iid, jini.
 'Áádóó 'ákqó náájilghod.
 Nt'ée', "t'áa'aanil ma'iyyéé daaztsá!á!"
 Yikáá' haasghodii' dahnahacha'.
 "ts'os, ts'os,
 ts'os, ts'os," nóo dahnahacha'.

Here is the translation of this passage that Blackhorse Mitchell and I did together several years ago now (Webster and Mitchell 2012:165-66):

And only then Chipmunk,
 "What about you?
 You also run over there!
 It may really be true.
 He is dead," It was said to him, they say.
 And then he also ran over there.

Then, “It is true that Ma’ii is indeed dead!”
 He got on top of his body and skipped around.
 “ts’os, ts’os,
 ts’os, ts’os,” he said as he skipped around.

The passage by Watchman is from a much longer narrative—often known in English as “Coyote and the Prairie Dogs” or “Coyote and Skunk”—that he and Edward Sapir recorded and translated together in the late 1920s (Sapir and Hoijer 1942; see also Dinwoodie 1999; Webster and Mitchell 2012). The major players in the narrative are Coyote, Skunk (sometimes Lady Skunk or Wildcat), and the Prairie Dogs. Chipmunk is not mentioned in most of the versions of this narrative that I have encountered (see for example the versions told by Yellowman, Curly Tó Aheedliinii, Laterro, The Late Little Smith’s Son, Timothy Benally Sr., and Rex Lee Jim).² Though, while many of the versions do not involve Chipmunk, it is the case that the place where Watchman told Sapir this narrative—Crystal, New Mexico (nestled as it is near the Chuska Mountains)—does have chipmunks. In my own visits there, I have seen chipmunks.

Among the most famous versions is the one told by Yellowman to Barre Toelken and then later analyzed by Toelken (1969) and then again by Toelken and Tacheeni Scott (1981). This incident is absent in that version. Indeed, Chipmunk is not explicitly named in the narrative. One goal of this paper is not to try and explain why Watchman included Chipmunk and Yellowman did not. For me, anyway, that seems beside the point. The point is rather: what is the moral work of this episode in the Watchman version? I do this as a way to honor the artistry of John Watchman. To honor as well the work of Barre Toelken.³

Recognizing the verbal artistry of individual narrators has certainly been a hallmark of the ethnopoeitic tradition—a tradition, of course, that Toelken was deeply involved with (see D. Hymes 1981 and 2003; Tedlock 1983; Toelken and Scott 1981). I make this point because narratives documented by prior generations of anthropological linguists are still presented as if they were the singular accomplishment of those anthropological linguists—the narrators have been erased. This is, perhaps, the most radical kind of “discursive discrimination” (Kroskrity 2015), where the human beings who told these narratives become, merely, the language. Notwithstanding D. Hymes’ (1987) insightful discussion of the artistry of John Rush Buffalo (see also D. Hymes 2003), a recent and valuable updating (Wier 2019) of Hoijer’s *Tonkawa Texts* (1972) praises Hoijer’s work while utterly erasing the contributions made by John Rush Buffalo. This, to borrow Bernard Perley’s (2012) term, is *zombie linguistics*—languages without speakers.

² See Parsons 1923; Hill and Hill 1945; Morgan et al. 1949; Haile 1984; Benally 1994; and Jim 2004 for the texts.

³ When I first began publishing articles on Navajo verbal art, Toelken was sometimes a reviewer of those pieces—he often let me know that he had reviewed the piece. His reviews were always generous—even if he didn’t agree with what I was saying—and always in the spirit of making my work better. This essay acknowledges that kindness. Toelken was, of course, not an anthropologist, but a folklorist. As a brief personal aside, I first became aware of Toelken when I took Sandy Ives’ Folklore class at the University of Maine in the early 1990s—the textbook we used was Toelken’s *The Dynamics of Folklore* (1979). My own interest in linguistic anthropology developed, in part, out of this early encounter with folklore and with Toelken’s work.

Toelken, to be sure, would have had none of this—for him these narratives were, most decidedly and ethically, the stories told by Yellowman.

Watchman told this narrative in a particular context—knew it was being artifactual—and as Nevins (2015) and Carr and Meek (2015) have suggested, that entails not just an awareness of the interactional moment (Webster 1999), but some vision of the future (see also Kroskrity 2009; Bruchac 2018). Watchman told this to Sapir, but he also told it to an imagined future audience (Webster 2017). We do well to remember that. We know as well that Watchman told this narrative in the summer, outside, that is, its traditional time in the winter. We do well to remember that too. We do well, that is, to remember that this was an interaction in a real time and space between human beings.⁴

Other Navajos have published versions of this story. In 1949, William Morgan included a Navajo and English bilingual version in a collection of Coyote Stories published by the Bureau of Indian Affairs. Timothy Benally Sr. (*To'dich'ini Binali Biye'*) published a version in Brian Swann's edited volume *Coming to Light* (1994:606-13). Rex Lee Jim (2004:320-23) published a version in a later volume also edited by Brian Swann (see also Webster 2004). In that piece, I should add, Jim reports on what Coyote tells him (2004:318):

“And Rex,” he chides. “Don’t forget about technology. The times are changing, and you must learn to embrace the changing. Change with the times. Change the way you tell my stories. Take the camcorder, the cameras, the tape recorders, and the digital cameras out of your closet and teach your nephews and nieces how to use them. Hey, they’re just collecting dust now,” he teases.

In what follows, I want to think about this passage by Watchman—think about it in relation to the larger narrative told by Watchman, think about it in relation to the other versions of this narrative told by others, think about it in terms of a particular Navajo-informed interpretative framework, and think about it in terms of ethnopoetics. Towards the end of this essay I’ll waver a bit, become less sure of things, and ultimately abandon the theme—this too will be a part of that particular Navajo-informed interpretative framework: Don’t say too much. And yet, as you’ll see, I’m going to take the long way around the barn to say this infinitely little. My excuse for taking this long way around the barn is that I hope it is aesthetically a relatively pleasing way—a shortcut, not in terms of saving time or distance, but in going that other way, of meandering. If there is a point to this meandering, it is to give substance to Geertz’s claim about poetry: “Like sailing, gardening, politics, and poetry, law and ethnography are crafts of place: they work by the light of local knowledge” (1983:167). One way, then, to get at that light of local knowledge about poetry is through *ethnopoetics*. While ethnopoetics has often been conceived as the study of the poetries or literature of a people, here, I’d like to refigure ethnopoetics as the understanding of poetic practices (literature more broadly) through ethnography, the *ethno-* of ethnopoetics reminding us, as Barbra Meek (2019) has noted, of the ethnography needed for

⁴ Watchman was not, of course, unique in this regard concerning the Navajo Field School run by Sapir in 1929. Dinwoodie makes this point as well about another consultant, Bernie Bitsili: “In any case, evidence from Sapir’s *Navaho Texts* shows that informants did not always restrict their activities to ‘informing.’ Bitsili took the interview as an opportunity to attempt much more: to attempt to reframe his culture in a new world-order” (1999:188). Watchman, too, was attempting to say something about that “new world-order.”

understanding the poetic practices of any constellation of people. I would certainly place Toelken's work in this tradition. In what follows, I hope to make clear the value of such an approach. I hope to suggest, as well, that such a refiguring of ethnopoetics makes clear the kinds of ethical issues to which anthropologists should be attentive.

John Watchman's Chattering Chipmunk

A number of years ago, Dell Hymes (1981, 1998, and 2003) suggested that Native American narratives that were dictated to a previous generation of linguists and anthropologists are better represented as a series of lines than as block prose. Other work in ethnopoetics added nuance and subtlety to Hymes' original formulation, often highlighting the difference between the kinds of narratives analyzed by Hymes (recorded by hand by earlier researchers) and those recorded by contemporary audio-recording technology, and also seeking a rapprochement between the two perspectives (Tedlock 1983; McLendon 1982; Bright 1979; V. Hymes 1987; V. Hymes and Suppah 1992; Kinkade 1987; Kimball 1993a; Kroskrity 1985; Wiget 1987; Woodbury 1985 and 1987). Adding to this was, as well, attention to both the meanings of such verbal art and the evaluative and aesthetic criteria by which such forms of verbal art were understood (Bahr 1986; Bahr, Paul, and Joseph 1997; Kroskrity 1985 and 2012; Kimball 1993a and 2010; Palmer 2003; Molina and Evers 1998; Epps, Webster, and Woodbury 2017). Questions as well of translation—not just of lexical items, but of poetic devices that might reveal subtle shifts in rhetorical force, in the kinds of expectations that listeners might have had towards such shifts—have been an important concern in ethnopoetic research (D. Hymes 1981; Tedlock 1983; Berman 1992; Kimball 1993b; Woodbury 1998; Bunte 2002; Kroskrity 2010; Mitchell and Webster 2011). The divining of lines is only one component of ethnopoetics. Ethnography is a crucial component as well.

Toelken and Scott (1981) applied an ethnopoetic perspective to Navajo narratives—and in particular, a version of “Coyote and Skunk” as told by Yellowman. Among the many important points raised by Toelken and Scott (1981) is the value of collaboration in the translation process—Toelken's revised translation with the help of Scott is a much better translation, more attentive to the subtleties in the Navajo version. My own translation work has benefited immensely from the guidance of Blackhorse Mitchell. Mitchell and I worked together to produce the full translation of Watchman's narrative, which we published together (Webster and Mitchell 2012). Elsewhere, Mitchell and I have worked together to translate the poetry of Rex Lee Jim (see Mitchell and Webster 2011).

In the full published version (Webster and Mitchell 2012), I have followed D. Hymes' lead and segmented this narrative into lines, verses, stanzas, and scenes. In doing this, I hope to have highlighted something of Watchman's underlying poetic structuring. Ethnopoetics attempts to reveal something of individual voice and style. I hope as well to have said something about the subtlety of meaning that ethnopoetic analysis might discern. In what follows, I want to explain briefly the ethnopoetic principles that informed that presentation and then say something about the plot and highlight certain key moments in the narrative before turning again to the passage quoted at the beginning of this essay.

In that published version, lines have been segmented based on the use of the quotative *jini* (“they say”), parallelism (thus if two utterances are identical, I take that as an indication that each is a line), the use of initial particles (*nit’ée’* (“then”), *’áádóó* (“and then”), *’áadi* (“and”), and others), as well as form and content alignment. Larger narrative units are principally determined by form and content alignment. Scenes were indicated by Roman numerals (there are four scenes). Stanzas are indicated by a space between lines. Verses are indicated by indentation. In addition to the full publication in Webster and Mitchell 2012, the interested reader is encouraged to see also Sapir and Hoijer 1942:20-25.

There is a great deal of repetition and parallelism in the narrative. Such parallelism seems to create meaningful pairs of action and response. The providential world of the opening scene is one example (see below).⁵ Here is an example of the use of parallelism by Watchman that ties in to the scene concerning Chipmunk:

’Ákqó jílwod.

 Nit’ée’, “t’áá’aanííla!” jinio njílwod.

’Áádóó Gahtso dahnáázhdilghod Ma’yęę bich’i’.

 Nit’ée’, “t’áá’aanííla!” jinio nnáájilghod.

’Áádóó Tązhii ’ákqó náájilghod.

 Nit’ée’, “t’áá’aanííla!” nóo nnáánálwod.

He went there.

 Then, “It is indeed true!” he said as he came running back.

And then Jack Rabbit also started running towards that Coyote.

 Then, “It is indeed true!” he said as he also came running back.

And then Turkey also ran there.

 Then, “It is indeed true!” he said as he also came running back.

Watchman uses the initial particle *’áádóó* (“and then”) to introduce both Jack Rabbit (*Gahtso*) and Turkey (*Tązhii*) and alternates that use with *nit’ée’* (“then”) when they return having been convinced (as indicated by the emphatic enclitic *-lá*) that Coyote is dead. Watchman also uses the semeliterative prefix *náá-* (“again, also,” a prefix that indicates repetition) with *-wod*, *-ghod* (“to run”) for both Jack Rabbit and Turkey, but not with *-wod* (“to run”) for Deer.

Watchman uses a number of Navajo ethnopoetic devices in this narrative (poetic devices particular to the Navajo language). For example, Watchman opens the narrative with the formulaic opening, *’alk’idqá’ Ma’ii jooldlosh, jini* (“long ago Coyote was trotting along, they say”). This formulaic opening clearly indicates that what is to follow is one of Coyote’s numerous adventures. *’Alk’idqá’* (“long ago”) suggests that the world Coyote inhabits will be

⁵ By “providential world,” I mean that a narrator creates a world that sustains or provides for the needs of a character. Here Coyote desires water and water is provided for him. Such providential worlds can be found in other Native American narrative traditions as well (see D. Hymes 2003:203-27).

slightly different from the current world.⁶ The word is, as one Navajo told me, a “necessary” part of the story. It also places this narrative squarely within the voice of tradition. Navajos sometimes call this genre of narratives *Mq’ii jooldloshí hane’* (“stories of the trotting Coyote”). This opening connects with the genre name. Watchman also closes the narrative with the formulaic closing *t’áá’ákódí* (“that’s all”). In such ways, Watchman places his narrative within the received expectations of Navajo narrative genres.

So much for the basics of poetic structuring. The essential details of the plot are as follows: Coyote and Skunk come up with a plan to deceive the other animals (sometimes just Prairie Dogs, sometimes all the animals that *-dlosh* (“trot”)). The plan revolves around Coyote pretending to be dead. Once the other animals are convinced of the truthfulness of Coyote’s death, Skunk, whose name in Navajo is *gólízhii* or “the one who urinates,” urinates in the eyes of the other animals, and Coyote jumps up and clubs all (or almost all) the animals to death. After they have done this, Coyote convinces Skunk to participate in a race. The winner gets the dead animals and the loser gets nothing. Skunk, knowing he is slower than Coyote, hides and lets Coyote run past him. Afterwards, Skunk eats all the dead animals that have been roasting in a pit. Coyote returns and pleads with Skunk for food and Skunk gives Coyote scraps (bones).

Most of the versions of “Coyote and Skunk” begin with Coyote alone. This opening scene represents a “lyrical” moment (D. Hymes 1998:ix) or a “providential world” (D. Hymes 2003:226). Such lyrical moments are common in other Native American traditions. Here the lyrical moment concerns a world of wish fulfillment. All seems right with the world. Coyote wishes aloud for a gentle rain and a gentle rain begins to fall. Watchman develops this scene with tight parallelism (or repetition with variation) and pairing.

“My toes, I wish that water would come bubbling between!”

Just so, between his toes, it came bubbling up, they say.

“My belly, I wish water would come to that level!”

Just so, it reached the level of his belly.

“My back, I wish I could trot along with it at that level!” he said, they say.

Just so, his back, it reached that level, they say.

“My ears, I wish only that they stuck out!” he said, they say.

Just so, his ears, only they stuck out, they say.

Each line begins here with Coyote mentioning a body part and then his desire. The Navajo version presents the parallelism even better. The parallel lines are chant-like (Navajo chants exhibit such parallel structures and the upward direction of such parallelism; see Reichard 1944; McAllester 1980; Field and Blackhorse 2002).

“Shikégizhdéé’ tó hada’nlxoshle’!”

T’áá’áko bik’egizhdéé’, hada’nlxosh, jiní.

“Shibid bíghahgo tó neel’áqle’!”

⁶ I have heard older Navajos use this form—especially elongating the final long vowel even more—as a way to introduce stories about their youth—suggesting, in a humorous way, that they are so old that their youth occurred during such mythic times.

T'áá'áko bibid tó bineel'á, silíí'.
 "Shiigháán t'éidasitáago yishdloshle'!" ní, jini.
 T'áá'áko bíghaáán t'éidasitá, jini.
 "Shijaa' t'éeyá háát'i'le'!" ní, jini.
 T'áá'áko bijaa' t'éeyá háát'i', jini.

Not only is there the repetition of the initial possessed body part (in Navajo body parts need a possessive pronoun, here *shi-* ("my") in the first line and then *bi-* ("their, his, her") in the parallel line), but each pair is resolved through the use of *t'áá'áko*, which I translate as "just so." There is more. Watchman also ends each of Coyote's "wishes" with the optative enclitic *-le'* ("wish"; enclitics are semi-bound morphemes that occur in word-final position; optative means that the enclitic indicates a wish). Verb forms are repeated in each parallel line (the sound-iconic *hada'nlxoshle'* ("bubbling up, between") in the first line, for example, is repeated in the second line, but without the optative enclitic *-le'*). This is a form of grammatical parallelism, and it lends an internal coherence to this section as well. Finally, Watchman ends five of the lines with the quotative *jini* ("they say"). This device is used at the end or near the end of thirty-eight lines (there are eighty-eight total lines). It is one of the primary poetic structuring devices in this narrative. It occurs nineteen times in the first twenty-four lines, and then occurs only nineteen more times in the next sixty-four lines. Its use at the beginning of a narrative indicates that the narrative is outside the personal firsthand knowledge of the narrator and places the narrative in the voice of tradition (this is what others have said).

Jini, I should add, is one of the features that Toelken missed in his 1969 translation of Yellowman's narrative (Toelken and Scott 1981:92). Indeed, Toelken had taken Sapir and Hoijer—and by extension Watchman—to task for the "apologetic device" used in their text collection (Toelken and Scott 1981:112). It should be obvious, as it became obvious to Toelken, that *jini* is not superfluous to these narratives, but essential. It is, in that respect, a quintessential example of what Sherzer called the "poeticization of grammar" (1998:18). Here, to add to that, I quote Navajo poet Laura Tohe (2005:11):

Jini, they say. We accept *jini* as part of our stories on simple faith. It's not important who said it, but that it was said. The stories become part of our collective memory. Our stories begin and end with *jini*. At Ya'dziilzihii is the place named after the contest where young men shot flocks of arrows toward the clouds to see who could shoot farthest, *jini*. At Séi Delehí, lover's trysts took place on the wide sandy bed near the tamarisks. *Jini*.

The use of *jini* in contemporary Navajo poetry can be found in poets as diverse as Luci

Tapahonso, Rex Lee Jim, and Esther Belin (Webster 2009:34).⁷ It continues to be a salient aspect of Navajo verbal artistic tradition.

With Coyote's arrival at the Prairie Dog Town, the lyrical moment ends. Coyote now deceives in order to get what he wants (namely, food). Watchman spends very little time on the actual mechanics behind the deception that Coyote and Skunk engage in, rather he moves to the "running and returning" motif. Here the various animals each run to see if Coyote is in fact dead, and seeing him "dead" they return exclaiming *t'áá'aanílá!* ("it is indeed true!"). This is repeated verbatim five times (twice by Deer). To make sure that the listeners understand the veracity of this statement, Watchman adds *-lá* ("indeed"). Chipmunk is the last such animal to go. He (possibly she) has been goaded to go by Skunk—Coyote's partner in the deception (though the two, as I noted earlier, will have a falling out over the eating of the corpses of the Prairie Dogs). Mitchell translated the pronoun referring to Chipmunk as "he," but that's not in the Navajo form (Navajo does not code for gender in its pronominals)—as a translation, then, it says too much, it's exuberant (on the exuberance of translations see Becker 1995). It's also the case that in Navajo English, of which Mitchell is an accomplished speaker, "he" and "she" do not code for gender and can be used interchangeably. Here is the relevant excerpt again; this time I have added emphasis on an important recurrent sonic form:

'Áadi 'inda hazéists'ósii,
 "Nishq'?"
 'Ákqó náádílgheed!
 T'áadaats'í 'aani.
 Daaztsá," ho'doon'iid, jini.
 'Áádóó 'ákqó náájílghod.
 Nt'ée', "t'áá'aaníl ma'iiyęę daaztsálá!"
 Yikáá' haasghodii' dahnahacha'.
 "ts'os, ts'os,
 ts'os, ts'os," nóo dahnahacha'.

The sonic forms that resonate here are *hazéists'ósii* ("chipmunk, little chatterbox") and the ideophone *ts'os*, which simulates a chattering sound. Note that the *-ts'ósii* here is most likely the form for "slender, little" and not the ideophone *ts'os* (likely related to the ideophone *ts'qqs* (compare with Webster 2006 and 2018)); but—and I think this a key to Watchman's craft here—it is potentially heard in *hazéists'ósii*. This is a kind of *sound texture*—two forms interanimate each other, suggesting possibilities (what Jakobson (1960) would call intensification of form).

⁷ Let me say something about the example from Rex Lee Jim that circles nicely back to a point made by Toelken and Scott. Here is the use of *jini* in a poem by Jim: *Áko ląq háádóó ma'ii haaldloozh jini* (1998:69). Here's how Jim translates it in that volume: "Ahuh, where did coyote start trotting, they say, my grandfather?" (1998:69). Here's how I translated it: "And so, surely, from where does coyote start trotting, it is said" (Webster 2004:73). And here is how Jim translates it in a more recent collection: "Aq', so where did coyote start trotting from, they say?" (2019:11). Here Jim uses the very affirmation form that Toelken and Scott (1981:84) discuss as an example of the ironic sound texture evoked by Yellowman in his telling of a Coyote story (I discuss this example shortly). No doubt here a coincidence, but a delightful coincidence nonetheless, which also reminds us of the salience of the affirmation form.

Such sound textures work by way of phonological iconicity—where the sounds of and in words are felt to resemble each other (see Webster 2018; Samuels 2001). Navajos that I know call this practice *saad aheelt'éeego diits'a'* (“words that resemble each other by way of sound”; see Webster 2018). This kind of sound texture, then, is not unique to Watchman, but his placing it in this story does seem to be unique when compared to the other versions of this narrative. One of Toelken and Scott’s (1981:84) key insights is Yellowman’s use of *qq* at key moments in his narrative to create an ironic tension—in everyday discourse *qq* is used to assent, but here the device is used to call into question the truth of what is being described in the narrative—one hears an affirmation when one should know better (compare this use of sonic texture with that described by Mitchell and Webster 2011).

Navajos that I know, that I have worked with, do like to contemplate the relations between words by way of sound—drawing connections between such sonic forms (much of Jim’s poetry is predicated on this (Webster 2018)). Punning, then, is an aspect of a broader Navajo acoustemology (Webster 2018; see also Feld 2015). It is not mere happenstance, for example, that *leetso* (“yellow dirt, uranium”) sounds like—can pun with—*Yé'íitsoh* (“monster(s),” of the kind killed by Monster Slayer—though it is important to recall that not all monsters were slain); there’s a deeply moral overtone here (see Yazzie-Lewis and Zion 2006). Part of this has to do with a Navajo language ideology that the Navajo language was “put down” by the Holy People for Navajos to use (see Peterson and Webster 2013:99)—and being so placed, it is important to attend to connections based on sounds; language, that is, *saad*, as Jim told me in October of 2000, being “sound that communicates.”⁸ Here is a poem by Jim that plays with the ideophone *ts'qqs* (1995:37):

na'asts'qqsí
ts'qqs, ts'qqs
yiits'a'go
íits'qóqz

And while there are a number of ways to translate this poem, since much of it is ambiguous, here is one translation (see Webster 2018 for other translations):⁹

mouse
suck, suck
sounding
kiss

Jim’s poem calls attention to the way that the ideophone *ts'qqs* is also a verb stem and can be found in the nominalized term for mouse—morphologically analyzable as “the one that goes

⁸ I hasten to add that this practice of punning is not restricted to Navajo internal puns—rather, interlingual puns are also quite common and can do similar moral work (see Webster 2009, 2010, and 2018).

⁹ For example, *na'astsqqsí* can be heard as *náá'ásts'qqs* (“to perform a sucking ceremony again”; see Webster 2018:32).

about sucking”—and the verb for “kissing” or “sucking.” Now *ts’òqs* simulates something like the sound of kissing or sucking—perhaps of a mouse, or a baby, or a ritual specialist, or lovers. Mice, as Jim long ago explained to me, can be omens of death, of evil—this point particularly salient given the deadly Hantavirus outbreaks on the Navajo Nation. The book *saad* was published two years after the 1993 outbreak—the poem, partly, comes out of that moment (Webster 2006). All of this, of course, can be convoked by the interplay of sounds in the poem. It can be many poems simultaneously.

The interplay of sounds in Watchman’s version looks somewhat different than the example described by Toelken and Scott. It looks, instead, more like the example from Jim’s poem. Paul Zolbrod discusses something of the place of *hazéists’ósii* in Navajo mythic narratives and provides some suggestive commentary by Pearl Sunrise and Wesley Thomas. Sunrise translated *hazéists’ósii* as “little chatterbox” (contrasting with *hazéétsoh* (“big chatterbox, squirrel”)) and called attention to the “chattering sound” that it makes. She also noted that *hazéists’ósii* chatter when they feel safe. Their sound can communicate something—a sense of safety (Zolbrod 2004:687; see also Webster 2018). Zolbrod also provides the following discussion (2004:686-87):

According to Navajo anthropologist Wesley Thomas . . . the root for both words is *-zei-* which designates sound, preceded by the prefix *ha*, which designates movement. It is traditional, he added in a conversation during the spring of 2000, that squirrels are perceived as messengers, either by the sounds they make or the way they shake their tails.

Both squirrels and chipmunks, for those that might listen, are messengers by way of sound. Note that the irony in the passage by Watchman is that *hazéists’ósii*—by producing a sound found in its name—is sending a message that it is safe while it dances on Coyote who is only feigning to be dead. *Hazéists’ósii* is not safe. In conversations with Mitchell, while we were translating this passage, he found this scene rather compelling. So too did other Navajos I discussed it with. Some of that, I think, has to do with the ways that the sounds resonate across this passage (see also Toelken and Scott 1981). But only some of it—because I think there is something else at play as well.

Now, as I suggested earlier, this passage does not occur in the other versions of this narrative that I am familiar with. It does, however, resonate quite clearly with a passage found elsewhere in Navajo narrative tradition—that is to say, Watchman’s use is an intertextual reference. The link is to mythic narratives that depict *Naayee neizghani* (Monster Slayer) killing *Déélghééd* (Burrowing Monster, also known as Horned Monster; see Reichard 1950; Matthews 1994; Zolbrod 1984). Here’s how Gladys Reichard describes it (1950:419):

It was customary for him [Chipmunk] to crawl out to the very end of Burrowing Monster’s horn and, when Monster Slayer had supposedly killed him, Chipmunk ran out to be sure he was dead, and reported by his usual sound, *ts’óós ts’óós ts’óós ts’óós*. As a reward he was allowed to streak his face and stripe his body with Burrowing Monster’s blood.

This scene is also included in Matthews’ *Navaho Legends* and in Paul Zolbrod’s *Diné bahane*.

Matthews calls the animal a “ground squirrel” and gives the form as *Hazaí* (1994:118)—the Franciscan Fathers complicate the matter by giving the form for “chipmunk” as *hazaí* (Franciscan Fathers 1910:141) in one place and as *hazéists’ósii* (1910:178) in another and translating *hazéists’ósii* as “ground squirrel” as well (1910:141); Zolbrod (1984:229) calls the animal “squirrel” (see also Zolbrod 2004) and provides the Navajo form *Hazéétsoh*—which is conventionally translated into English as “squirrel.”

Such questions of translation, especially of non-present animals, can be tricky. Here is an example from the work of Elsie Clews Parsons concerning “turtle” and “horned toad.” Parsons (1923) provides a narrative involving Coyote swallowing Turtle. Sapir and Hoijer (1942:474) even point out in the notes to the Watchman version that Parsons’ narrator (Laterro) uses Turtle instead of Horned Toad. We are fortunate that Parsons included a rendering of the Navajo form. Parsons gives this form as *nashonditiji* (1923:368). This is not the form for “turtle” that I am familiar with; that form is *tsisteel*. In fact, the form that Parsons gives is most likely *na’ashó’ii dich’izii* (“rough lizard”), or, as it is normally glossed, “horned toad.” Thus, this narrative has the same two main characters, Horned Toad and Coyote. There is no difference, then, between the main characters in the Watchman version and the Laterro version. One can imagine how this miscommunication could have occurred. Parsons’ translator Lewis might have glossed the form as, perhaps, a “hard” or “rough” “reptile” or “lizard,” and that certainly could have been understood by Parsons as “turtle” (see Webster 2008:462).

Ground squirrels and chipmunks do look similar, and both can have streaks on their faces.¹⁰ My goal here is not to resolve the question of whether or not it was a ground squirrel, a chipmunk, or a squirrel that climbed out onto Burrowing Monster’s horn and made its customary sound to indicate safety—it seems entirely likely that it depended on a narrator’s views on the matter. Some question of translation practices is probably involved as well. Some sense, as well, of the pleasure some Navajos take in synonymy and polysemy, of diversity of form (Peterson and Webster 2013). The crucial point is to note the resonance between this scene and the scene described by Watchman. The fundamental contrast here is that in one case Chipmunk, as Zolbrod writes, “signals to *Naayee neizghani* that *Deelgeed* is dead, and the world is now safe from a fearful predator” (2004:687), and in the other case Chipmunk is wrong—Coyote is not dead, Chipmunk’s signaling of safety is misguided, and Chipmunk and the other animals pay for that mistake with their lives. Appearances can be deceiving. Many Navajo listeners would have recognized the intertextual reference and the irony here. The world is not safe and the old assurances have failed. It is this contrast, coupled with the end of a providential world, that seems most suggestive, suggestive of the possible moral work of this narrative. Perhaps this was commentary to Sapir, perhaps to that imagined future audience.

Let me, as a way of concluding this section, circle back to the work of Toelken. Toelken and Scott (1981) highlight some of the moral overtones of the version of this narrative told by Yellowman: a critique of greed, of wanting more than is needed—of a lack of moral control on the part of Coyote. They discuss as well the moral work of laughter in response to these stories—that laughter indicates a recognition of the breaking of moral precepts. In a later piece, Toelken

¹⁰ Here it might be useful to note that “chipmunk” is, according to Silver and Miller, a borrowing into English of the Ojibwa word *atchitamo*, which they gloss as “squirrel” (1997:257).

(1987) would highlight the multiple—fourfold—interpretative framework that Coyote stories are a part of—from entertainment to the articulation of a moral order to ritual to witchcraft. Specifically, Toelken writes (1987:391),

The story which I translated in the Yellowman articles, where Coyote wishes for rain so that he can use the flood to kill and eat prairie dogs, appears by brief allusion in the Rainmaking segments of several rituals. The power of the allusion is enhanced by the prairie dog imagery, for prairie dogs are thought to embody the same forces underground as those which are represented above ground. Prairie dogs are said to “cry for rain.”

And still finally, at a later date, Toelken has this to say about Coyote tales more broadly and, again, about this particular story (1996:14):

One of the reasons the stories are so eloquent, it seems to me now, is that—far from needing analysis and explication—they are in and of themselves dramatic analyses and enactments of the weaknesses and arrogances that cause trouble for all humans. Yellowman knew I was using these stories to better understand Navajo worldview, but was he employing the stories for a broader purpose in telling them to me? Is there a reason why his most often-told story, at least in my presence, is that one about Coyote making rain in order to drown the prairie dogs that are insulting him?

Anthropology on an Intimate Scale

As a way of moving towards a conclusion, after having not offered much in the way of a definitive interpretation of either the narrative told by Watchman or the single scene I’ve been discussing, I’d like to draw some more obvious connections between Toelken’s work and what I have been saying—all of which leads me as well to saying something more about a particular Navajo interpretative framework and about the place of ethnopoetics in a concern with human affairs.

In some sense, I have deformed Watchman’s verbal artistry—I have focused on a brief section of a much larger narrative. In another sense, I hope to have honored Watchman’s artistry as well by highlighting his brief intertextual allusion to another narrative. Here let me quote Alton Becker on the value of such an approach (1995:393-94):

Of all the different mistakes a philologist must make in attuning to a new lingual world, the most difficult to overcome are mistakes of prior text. Prior text (or lingual memory) builds over a lifetime, giving resonance to things people say or hear. The hardest thing for an outsider to know is what is new and what is common—when people are speaking the past, when they are speaking the present.

The allusion, its quickness (Calvino 1988; Webster 2006), works because it taps into those prior texts—giving, that is, a particular resonance here, but giving it without saying too much. While

in some cases, explicit describing of what is really happening is the preferred option in narratives, more often than not, the preference I have encountered—in Navajo narratives and poetry (both forms of *hane'* (“story, narrative”))—is the more elusive route, the less explicit route, so that the person can “come to it” themselves. Such coming to it oneself makes the moral message more relevant, more compelling, because you have made that connection. So too that way of doing things—of elusiveness, of non-bossiness—is also a moral way of speaking. As an example of such a view, here’s a quote by Jim about his poetry (2001):

One of the good thing about poetry is that you can disguise it in many ways . . . and sometimes that approach is sorta sneaky but it’s a preferred approach in many ways and it’s a much more forceful approach in many ways because the person end up talking about it and discovering for him or herself rather than say it directly, I mean I could say it to you so I really just give it to you straight, and you could say, “Well, you’re not supposed to say that, and well it won’t be the last and too bad.” Whereas the other way it begins as way of self-exploration, and that process again the reader begin to say, “Hey wait a minute,” and becomes more convincing . . . more meaningful, because of the experience that that person, the reader goes through, the hearer, the listener.

As I have discussed at length elsewhere, many of Jim’s poems are predicated on punning, and Navajos I have discussed this with have found the puns to be particularly strong ways of expressing moral ideas (see Webster 2018). Puns are, for many Navajos, invitations to imaginative acts—they do not force a singular interpretation, they are multiple things simultaneously, not to be resolved, but to be contemplated—and thereby to be lived (to recall Jim’s point from the epigraph to this essay). Toelken, as well, makes this point about simultaneity concerning Coyote stories and the ways they prompt contemplation (1996:9):

Lévi-Strauss notwithstanding, this is not a simple binary system in which something is either A or not-A; this is a complex analog system in which most things are A and not-A at one and the same time.

Here we do well to recall what a Navajo consultant told W. W. Hill about the work of Coyote stories (Hill and Hill 1945:317):

The old men used to tell these stories when we were young so that we would think. They told us these stories to make us think, just as Rabbit figured how to get rid of his enemy, Coyote.

As Mitchell told me one evening as we were working on the translation of one of Watchman’s Coyote stories, “these stories are true, people are still like that.” One Navajo friend told me that the best Coyote stories, the strongest Coyote stories, the ones that really made you think, were not the full tales told on winter nights, but the quick allusion to a Coyote story in conversation—when the story had a particular relevance for the moment, had a particular moral relevance for the moment. The task then was for the listener to figure that out on their own. Toelken too takes up the allusions to Coyote stories—he focuses on their use in ceremony (1996:8-9):

Either in these conversational breaks or in the myth recitations themselves, participants will hear and make allusions to Coyote's various and well-known adventures.

My friend's comment, I should add, resonates quite directly with a point Ronald Scollon made for Athabaskan narratives (2009:261):

Within the Athabaskan storytelling tradition one doesn't waste words or insult one's listener by telling somebody something he or she already knows. A truly knowledgeable person really only requires an allusion to the story.

One is, as well, reminded of Basso's discussion of Western Apache aesthetics (1996:85):¹¹

An effective narrator, people from Cibecue report, never speaks too much; an effective narrator takes steps to "open up thinking," thereby encouraging his or her listeners to "travel in their minds."

And a bit later on (Basso 1996:103):

Over the period of years, I have become convinced that one of the distinctive characteristics of Western Apache discourse is a predilection for performing a maximum of socially relevant actions with a minimum of linguistic means. Accordingly, I have been drawn to investigate instances of talk . . . in which a few spoken words are made to accomplish large amounts of communicative work. For it is on just such occasions, I believe, that elements of Apache culture and society fuse most completely with elements of grammar and the situated aims of individuals, such that very short utterances, like polished crystals refracting light, can be seen to contain them all. On these occasions, the Western Apache language is exploited to something near its full expressive potential.

After having spent nearly 20 years thinking, writing, and talking with Navajos about Navajo verbal art, I would suggest that much the same could be said for the poetry of Rex Lee Jim (1995)—especially those poems he considers to be "masterpieces"—because they were messages from *níłch'i 'áłts'íísí* ("Little Wind") and not his own creation (Webster 2018 and 2019); such poems are quotations of Little Wind. So too, I think, for the quickness displayed by Watchman in his use of the scene concerning Chipmunk. They are such poetic crystallizations, or at least momentarily so.

Toelken's work, to borrow a distinction from D. Hymes (1996:60), was—or became more over time—mediative, less extractive in its emphasis (see also Kroskrity 2015; Davis 2017; Bruchac 2018)—not placing narrative traditions in some homogenizing perspective, collecting for the sake of collecting, extracting ethnographic tidbits, or reducing narratives to mere literalism. Not making them, that is, tell our story. We need to steer away from a Frederick

¹¹ Navajo and Western Apache, like the languages to which Scollon refers, are Athabaskan languages, and the people share—to varying degrees—certain aesthetic sensibilities (see Peterson and Webster 2013; see also Rushforth and Chisholm 1991).

Clegg-like vision of anthropology. Here is the ongoing relevance of an ethnopoetic approach. A theory of storywork (McCarty et al. 2018), for example, entails a commitment to understanding locally relevant interpretative frameworks—to some sense of the diversity of narrative traditions, of the diversity of the ways of making sense of narrative traditions (see Sherzer 1987 and 1998; Epps, Webster, and Woodbury 2017). Ethnopoetics should engage in a principled dialogue with local theories of meaning and moral responsibility, local interpretative frameworks. This is a view of ethnopoetics that recognizes narrators as coeval, fully intersubjective in the doing of things with words, in telling stories to fellow human beings—not as some abstracted “Navajo myth,” but as something far more important, the attempt at creating a shared sense of the world (Fabian 1983; see also Palmer 2003; Dobrin 2012; Moore 2015). Or as Blackhorse Mitchell told me, in talking about his own poetry, the attempt at reminding people that he is a human being.

When ethnopoetics, as it has done at times, reduces narratives to merely the discerning of lines, when it forgets the human beings, the verbal artists, involved in the fashioning of narratives, forgets the very languages being spoken, forgets the situatedness of such intersubjective moments, then it too reproduces the denial of coevalness—becomes, that is, extractive in its emphasis.¹² In the mediative approach, the approach exemplified, for example, in Lise Dobrin’s (2012) ethnopoetic work—which shows how ethnopoetics can call attention to that

¹² Among the more egregious examples of an extractive model concerning Indigenous narrative traditions is work that hews closely to “literary Darwinism” and “evolutionary psychology.” Gottschall (2008) and Stewart-Williams (2018) are recent examples of this extractive orientation. Their work, as well, is not based on an implicit denial of coevalness, but rather is explicitly predicated on a denial of coevalness—it values narrative traditions only in relation to the distance such traditions (and narrators) can be removed from our time and our place, removed from any sense of contemporaneity. Extraction and the denial of coevalness seem intertwined in their approaches. To get some sense of this extractive approach, Gottschall (2008) engages in a kind of mass inspection, looking for keywords concerning beauty and romantic love in English language translations of putative “oral traditions” (scant attention is given to questions of translation). There is no acknowledgment of the humanity of the narrators, no attempt to place them within a particular sociohistorical, interactional, or personal context—they simply become the voice of a culture (contrast this approach with Haviland and Hart 1998). The narratives are chosen because, among other reasons, “most of the 90 collections in our sample date to within a few decades of the year 1900, before many of the represented cultures were saturated by Western influence and—more specifically—by images of attractiveness conveyed by Western mass media” (Gottschall 2008:134). In the chapter on “romantic love,” Gottschall (2008:168-169) credulously cites W. Ramsay Smith on his methods of documenting and editing Australian Aboriginal verbal art. Gottschall ignores that Smith plagiarized roughly 90% of his book from the work of Australian Aboriginal author and inventor David Unaipon (Unaipon 2001). Unaipon is denied coevalness by Gottschall. He is erased. Steve Stewart-Williams, in his *The Ape that Understood the Universe*, describes the research of Gottschall and his co-author Marcus Nordlund as follows (2018:144):

Jonathan Gottschall and Marcus Nordlund analyzed thousands of traditional folk stories from cultures around the world, again looking for telltale signs of romantic love. They restricted their survey to stories that predated contact with the West—stories, in other words, that couldn’t have been “tainted” by Western individualism or Shakespearean sonnets.

David Unaipon, who had a variety of literary influences—John Bunyan’s *Pilgrim’s Progress*, Christian sermons, European fairytales, and so on (Muecke and Shoemaker 2001:xi)—is, again, completely erased as a coeval human being, someone who existed in the same time, who was a contemporary in all that implies, with W. Ramsay Smith. Margaret Bruchac (2018:18), in her compelling *Savage Kin: Indigenous Informants and American Anthropologists*, which investigates the lives of the Indigenous peoples who interacted with anthropologists—even as some anthropologists erased their co-presence—makes a particularly salient point, which should echo with the fetishizing of 1900 as some magical Rubicon of “contact”: “Here, it is important to note that, by 1900, few Indigenous communities in North America were as socially isolated or ‘primitive’ as collectors might imagine” (or, I would add, as some evolutionary psychologists and literary Darwinists would still like to imagine (see also the earlier work of Radin 1966:126 and Wolf 1982 on this point)).

coeval moment between narrator and audience (in this case Dobrin)—we see the ultimate value in an ethnopoetic approach, in attending to the how and what people may be trying to say through the stories they tell, to paraphrase D. Hymes (1996), as voices worth listening to on their own terms—not as abstractions, but as interactions (see also the chapters in Kroskrity and Webster 2015). This is ethnopoetics, this is anthropology on an intimate scale.¹³

It is this mediative perspective that influenced Toelken's eventual returning of the Yellowman tapes to the family so that they could be destroyed. Part of this had to do with the concern of some Navajos with having “the voice of a dead man” on tape (Toelken 1998:383). There was also a concern with playing the tapes with Coyote stories at the wrong time of the year (in the summer, for example; Toelken 1998:383). And then there was the view that Toelken's own questions about Coyote stories had suggested an interest on his part in witchcraft, and were implicated in the illnesses of the family of Yellowman (Toelken 1998). Ultimately, it was Yellowman's sister who requested the tapes be returned so that they could be destroyed. Toelken's article on returning the Yellowman tapes came out while I was preparing to do fieldwork and, as such, it became something I was concerned about in my own fieldwork. It prompted conversations with Navajos about my own recordings.

In my experience interviewing Navajos, most have not been concerned with being recorded (either in Navajo or English or some combination of the two)—indeed some have wanted me to record them, to make a record of important things. Some Navajos did not want me to record them (for a variety of reasons). One Navajo did let me record them, but they also wanted me to destroy the recording after they died. They also told me though, after I asked, that it was appropriate to keep the transcripts after they died. When I asked a Navajo friend about this, he told me that the person was probably concerned with the sound of their voice—the danger was with the hearing of the sound of the voice; the transcript didn't have the same issue. My friend didn't seem particularly keen to go into details and so we moved on to other more enjoyable topics. Perhaps there is a change afoot concerning the way language is understood—a change, perhaps, in language ideology, so that the recording of voices is seen as less dangerous. But then this might be a change in a semiotic ideology—older Navajos that I know sometimes lament that their parents and grandparents were reluctant to have pictures of themselves taken, that they would have liked to see such photos of family members (see also Faris 1996; Peterson 2013; Denetdale 2007). Perhaps, echoing Jim, such things are changing with the times. Perhaps there have always been multiple competing language and semiotic ideologies at play among Navajos (Peterson and Webster 2013; Field 2009). In any case, what I learned from such conversations was not to presume that I knew what Navajos were going to tell me. What I learned was to listen (Webster 2015; compare with Basso 1996; Cruikshank 1997; Meek 2007; Nevins 2004).

I am reminded, finally, of Auden's “The Joker in the Pack” (1989), an insightful reading of Shakespeare's *Othello* that turns, at the end, to a contemplation of Iago's relation to a particularly pernicious vision of science—a vision that asks not whether or not we should do something, but rather, merely and more dangerously, can we do something. Auden raises the

¹³ This is merely to restate Fabian's (1983) point about the intersubjective foundation of ethnographic fieldwork, and to echo as well Paul Friedrich's point that “ethnopoetics tends to relativize knowledge, to recognize its subtlety”—“more hesitantly and generously” (2006:228).

possibility of reframing our understanding of knowledge in the following manner (1989:271-72):

To apply a categorical imperative to knowledge, so that, instead of asking, “What can I know?” we ask, “What, at this moment, am I meant to know?”—to entertain the possibility that the only knowledge which can be true for us is the knowledge we can live up to—that seems to all of us crazy and almost immoral.

Seeing this question as immoral or craziness is, in fact, entangled in a particular set of assumptions about the nature of science, of knowledge, of the responsibilities towards the acquisition of knowledge (see Debenport 2015; Isaac 2007). For Navajos that I have talked with about such things, this is precisely the moral way to approach knowledge—to ask, that is, “What, at this moment, am I meant to know?” To do otherwise, as Toelken (1987 and 1996) has discussed, is to indicate an impatience with the proper ways of coming to know things. To do otherwise suggests, then, a lack of moral responsibility.

Learning to be Satisfied

What I’ve been getting at here, and what Toelken got at in his own way, is a view of the work of anthropologists as attending to the limits of our knowledge, the limits of what we should and should not say, what we should and should not know. A view that we have ethical, that is to say moral, obligations to respect such limits—to not be too bossy in our interpretative practices, to respect the imaginative capacity of others, to know when to stop (see Webster 2019).

We go a long way as anthropologists, as fellow human beings, by not trying to impose an overarching order on Navajo frameworks of meaning and moral responsibility—by trying, that is, *not* to solve Navajo philosophy (see Aberle 1961; Farella 1993; Faris 1990; see also Denetdale 2007; Lee 2014).¹⁴ This was a realization that Reichard (1945) made concerning Navajo recognition and respect for diversity (linguistic and otherwise), her mammoth *Navaho Religion* (1950) being more encyclopedia than grand overarching theory of something called “Navajo Religion.” One of the critiques that I have heard from Navajos of the work of Matthews (1995), Zolbrod (1984), and Witherspoon (1977) is that they posit an overarching unity where there is, in fact, diversity—diversity informed by contexts (see also Faris 1990 and 1994). There is simply no such thing, nor can there be, as “the Navajo Nightway” or “the Navajo origin narrative”—there are only, as Navajos have told me, particular instantiations in particular contexts (see

¹⁴ I borrow the phrase “frameworks of meaning and moral responsibility” from Rushforth and Chisholm (1991:4).

Wasson and Toelken 1998 on this point as well).¹⁵ This was, I should add, Farella's (1993) implicit critique of his earlier book *The Main Stalk* (1984).¹⁶

We do not, that is to say, translate cultures any more than we translate languages. What we do, hesitatingly and generously, if ever so incompletely, is to translate particular instantiations of cultures, of languages, of people—and those particularities allow us to say something not so particular. That is, they allow us to say something human, or, I would venture, something humane. Which is another way of saying something that Rex Lee Jim told me in October of 2000, standing outside in the cool evening, at the overlook at Tsegi at Canyon de Chelly National Monument on the Navajo Nation (I've presented the transcript based on pause structuring to highlight something of the cadence; see also Webster 2018):

The more and more genuinely Navajo I become
 People like my work more
 Even though they're not Navajos
 And I've come to the realization
 That in doing that
 I become more and more human

The question that lingers is not what makes us human, but rather, and more urgently, how do we become more human.

It is my view—informed by Toelken and Navajos that I have worked with over the years—that the task of the anthropologist, the task of ethnopoetics, is not to explain Navajo verbal art, to pin it down, but rather—as I have tried to do here and elsewhere—to place it within a particular Navajo interpretative framework, to respect that framework of meaning and moral responsibility as well; to not, that is, say too much (Webster 2018 and 2019). Here I cannot help but recall the caution found in N. Scott Momaday's *House Made of Dawn* about Saint John's inability to not say too much (1968:97):¹⁷

It was that, I think, that old Saint John had in mind when he said, "In the beginning was the Word. . . ." But he went on. He went on to lay a scheme about the Word. He could find no satisfaction in the simple fact that the Word *was*; he had to account for it, not in terms of that sudden and profound insight, which must have devastated him at once, but in terms of the moment afterward, which was irrelevant and remote; not in terms of his imagination, but only in terms of his prejudice.

¹⁵ Zolbrod (1984:19) is certainly aware of this limitation as well.

¹⁶ As an interesting aside, I have often heard anthropologists recommend Farella's *The Main Stalk* to those interested in Navajo philosophy; I have not heard them recommend Farella's later *The Wind in the Jar*, which calls into question the very foundation of his earlier book. *The Main Stalk* fits a particular anthropological expectation, less so *The Wind in the Jar*.

¹⁷ Momaday's novel makes use of Navajo verbal art. The title is an intertextual reference to Navajo verbal artistic traditions and to the translation work of Washington Matthews (1994:269-75).

We must be careful with our prejudices. Careful, that is, in learning to be satisfied. That's a lesson, I think, Watchman might well have understood.

Epilogue

Returning now to my commonplace book, let me give the last word, not to Watchman or Toelken—though I should—but rather to Italo Calvino and his concern with the fundamental quality of *quickness* in literature—of which, I think, Watchman has taught us something (1988:54):

A writer's work has to take account of many rhythms: Vulcan's and Mercury's, a message of urgency obtained by dint of patient and meticulous adjustments and an intuition so instantaneous that, when formulated, it acquires the finality of something that could never have been otherwise. But it is also the rhythm of time that passes with no other aim than to let feelings and thoughts settle down, mature, and shed all impatience or ephemeral contingency.

We know only as we can.

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Orality and Social Memory in Vladimir Nabokov's *Lolita*

Nicole G. Burgoyne

As any reader of *Lolita* knows, Vladimir Nabokov's novel is characterized by the strong, central voice of its narrator, Humbert Humbert, opening as it does with one of the most famous apostrophes in literary history. Humbert lures readers in, seducing them with his confiding tone and the ornate register of his language—he himself refers somewhat self-mockingly to his “fancy prose style.”¹ But the language of the novel does not so much capture Humbert's writing style as his *speaking* style, suffused as it is with markers of oral performance. More important, however, is the fact that this oral performance undergoes a surprising transformation, from what initially seems like a courtroom defense to what reveals itself, in the novel's final pages, as literary memoir. In this essay, I argue that Humbert's turn to memoir represents, within the novel, the character's attempt to more effectively control the narrative and thus his own legacy, by way of suppressing the dialogism inherent to oral performance. Ultimately, however, this attempt is shown to fail, as Nabokov intentionally weakens the persuasiveness of Humbert's narrative, restoring a sense of morality to a novel often thought to delight in its own immorality.

Critical readership of Nabokov's novel has not failed to notice the self-consciously arch literary style of Humbert's narration. Much of the scholarly apparatus provided by Alfred Appel Jr. in *The Annotated Lolita* was devoted to explicating the many allusions made by the novel's narrator, and to providing a guide through the thicket of Humbert's rich vocabulary.² In Appel's words, “Many kinds of allusions are identified: literary, historical, mythological, Biblical, anatomical, zoological, botanical, and geographical. . . . Puns, coinages, and comic etymologies, as well as foreign, archaic, rare, or unusual words are defined” (1991:xi-xiii). Indeed, Appel himself played an important role in shifting critical attention away from more traditional literary-critical concerns such as the reliability of the narrator and the ambiguous moral standing of the text to questions of language and intertextuality. Since then, of course, scholarship on *Lolita* has bloomed to encompass a panoply of critical approaches.³

¹ “You can always count on a murderer for a fancy prose style” (Nabokov 1991:9). This self-deprecating statement is debatable (one need only think of Steinbeck or Faulkner's murderers) and yet it suggests a gentleman misunderstood by his inferiors (“fancy”). This impression is corroborated shortly thereafter by the survey of “historical” examples of aristocratic approval of pedophilia (19).

² As Appel notes in his preface, *The Annotated Lolita* was “the first annotated edition of a modern novel published during its author's lifetime” (1991:xi).

³ I refer here to Roper 2015 and to Bertram and Leving 2013. For a comprehensive collection of scholarly takes see the rather recent Pifer 2003 and Kuzmanovitch and Diment 2008.

Yet of these various themes, one whose depths have not yet been exhaustively plumbed is that of orality. As Monica Manolescu has importantly noted in her contribution to a recent edited volume, “it is time to reassess the role played by orality in Vladimir Nabokov’s *Lolita* and more largely in Nabokov’s work, a topic that has been obscured by the predominant view of Nabokov as a ‘writerly’ writer of infinite premeditation” (2017:85).⁴ Though *Lolita* and other novels by Nabokov have been subjected to analysis by folklorists, relatively little has been written about the oral qualities of Nabokov’s work in general and even less about *Lolita* specifically.⁵

Nomi Tamir-Ghez tallies the instances of apostrophe to an imagined audience in the text, ultimately claiming that they are examples of ineffectual rhetoric, which only highlight the true redemption of the character when the conceit is abandoned at the end of the novel (2003:18):

Throughout the novel, while Humbert does his best to justify himself, the reader is made aware of his rhetoric, and this awareness counteracts any feelings of empathy that might have developed. Only at the end, when he leaves behind all pretense of self-justification and turns instead to self-castigation, does Humbert win over the reader and close the distance between them. While all the efforts of the narrator to win over the reader fail, the author finally wins us over, using as his strongest weapon the protagonist’s own realization of his guilt.

The question of whether Humbert Humbert’s confession is persuasive is of course an intensely subjective one, but there are reasons to resist the notion that either Nabokov or Humbert win the reader over in any straightforward sense. My reading of *Lolita*, which draws on theoretical work by Benjamin and Halbwachs, instead suggests that the ending represents the culmination of the narrator’s efforts to exploit literary forms drawn from oral performance for their rhetorical and persuasive potential. I argue that the failures and fissures in the narrative, such as Humbert’s self-professed mawkishness, and half-glimpsed breaks in the chronology of the story, are presented by the author in an effort to encourage the reader’s critical stance toward Humbert’s manipulation of the narrative and as an invitation to question his reliability while moving beyond subjective reading of the text.

To begin, this premise is supported by Nabokov’s own texts on literature and *Lolita* in

⁴ I am grateful to the author for sharing her work with me before its publication.

⁵ Cf. Haber 1977; Ciancio 1977; Jones 1980; Wepler 2011.

particular.⁶ In his “On a Book Entitled *Lolita*,” which he insisted be published with the novel, Nabokov implicitly condemns emotional identification with a novel’s hero or heroine, insisting on an “art for art’s sake” perspective. He writes (Nabokov 1991:314-15):

There are gentle souls who would pronounce *Lolita* meaningless because it does not teach them anything. I am neither a reader nor a writer of didactic fiction and, despite John Ray’s assertion, *Lolita* has no moral in tow. For me a work of fiction exists only insofar as it affords me what I shall bluntly call aesthetic bliss.

My argument that Nabokov knowingly weakens the persuasive quality of his protagonist’s narrative thus recuperates a modicum of morality for what is otherwise a book that insists on the merits of a predator’s prose. But the reader’s judgment of the narrator, I argue, does not hinge on the reader’s ability or inability to identify with him but, rather, on whether the reader does or does not deem the narrator to be persuasive. I will demonstrate below that the text repeatedly emphasizes the social context of an individual defending himself before an audience, and thus occasioning such a judgment on the narrator’s credibility. It is in this sense that morality is at issue in and central to the text.

In the essay mentioned above, “‘I Speak Like a Child’: Orality in Nabokov,” Manolescu productively dwells on Nabokov’s personal statements and life as a teacher. She draws on his stated inability to deliver impromptu oral remarks, as well as on examples from throughout his critical and fictional oeuvre to develop a sense of the author, writing (Manolescu 2017:86-87):

There are moments in Nabokov’s texts when oral narratives remain irreducible to writing, either resisting transcription or possessing an aura of authority and authenticity that is lost or suppressed in writing. . . . [S]poken discourse definitely appears as a medium distinct from writing, albeit in close interaction with it, and its ephemerality leads to moments when artistic mastery is relinquished or simply made irrelevant.

The above overview of her argument explains Manolescu’s sustained analysis of Humbert

⁶ To emphasize the timeless nature of great literature and its inability to serve as historical witness, Nabokov wrote: “The truth is that great novels are great fairy tales—and the novels in this series are supreme fairy tales” (1980:2). Later in the same essay, Nabokov postulates (5-6):

There are three points of view from which a writer can be considered: he may be considered as a storyteller, as a teacher, and as an enchanter. A major writer combines these three—storyteller, teacher, enchanter—but it is the enchanter in him that predominates and makes him a major writer. To the storyteller we turn for entertainment, for mental excitement of the simplest kind, for emotional participation, for the pleasure of travelling in some remote region in space or time. A slightly different though not necessarily higher mind looks for the teacher in the writer. Propagandist, moralist, prophet—this is the rising sequence. We may go to the teacher not only for moral education but also for direct knowledge, for simple facts. Alas I have known people whose purpose in reading the French or Russian novelists was to learn something about life in gay Paree or in sad Russia. Finally, and above all, a great writer is always a great enchanter, and it is here that we come to the really exciting part when we try to grasp the individual magic of his genius and to study the style, the imagery, the pattern of his novels or poems.

By these criteria, Humbert Humbert would receive high marks as a storyteller and perhaps enchanter, but Nabokov allows ample ground for criticism of his attempt to serve as moralist.

Humbert's voice and sensitivity to the vocal, as well as her attention to the general lack of direct quotation of Lolita herself. Manolescu finds that the title character's climactic account of her escape from Humbert Humbert offers one brief interlude of "narrative agency. . . . Her discourse is the expression of freedom and vocal maturity (hence her 'new voice'), although it is submitted to Humbert's typical narrative mediation" (2017:92). Despite her emphasis on the novel's orality in terms of dialogue, however, Manolescu does not remark on what in Genette's terms we could call the novel's "narrative instance," namely the conceit that the novel's text consists of notes Humbert is preparing for a courtroom speech in his own defense, an apologia. As we will see, the text is rife with direct addresses to an imagined audience, both in the sense of an imagined courtroom audience as well as that of a general reading public, largely one-directional addresses that dampen the supposedly dialogic nature of the novel.

The first lines of Humbert Humbert's narration insist on the evocation of an oral situation by focusing on the physical movement of the tongue in speaking the title character's name: "Lolita, light of my life, fire of my loins. My sin, my soul. Lo-lee-ta: the tip of the tongue taking a trip of three steps down the palate to tap, at three, on the teeth. Lo. Lee. Ta" (Nabokov 1991:9). Just as the oral poet apostrophized his muse for inspiration, Humbert Humbert, tasting the name on his lips and feeling how it is spoken, begins to address an audience that would have been sitting before him.⁷ What we are reading, as Humbert will tell us on the penultimate page, were meant to be notes for what is effectively an oral performance of the tale. The narrator explains (308),

When I started, fifty-six days ago, to write *Lolita*, first in the psychopathic ward for observation, and then in this well-heated, albeit tombal, seclusion, I thought I would use these notes in toto at my trial, to save not my head, of course, but my soul. In mid-composition, however, I realized that I could not parade living Lolita. I still may use parts of this memoir in hermetic sessions, but publication is to be deferred.

Let us imagine for a moment the situation in which Humbert would have delivered his address orally. Captured for the murder of his nemesis double Clare Quilty, Humbert could be facing the death penalty. His motivation is to tell the jury his side of the story, to explain a crime, "the cause and purpose [of which] would have remained a complete mystery" were it not for the pages we are reading (4). This narrative was to be, in John Miles Foley's words, a "voiced text" (2002:43),⁸ and it would have been placed against the hard evidence available to police, and testimony from other witnesses, perhaps—and most importantly—including Lolita herself.

⁷ One might compare *Lolita*'s opening lines to those of Homer's *Iliad* or *Odyssey* in terms of apostrophic invocations: "Rage—Goddess, sing the rage of Peleus' son Achilles. . . . Begin, Muse, when the two first broke and clashed" and "Sing to me of the man, Muse, the man of twists and turns," as Robert Fagles (1990:77 and 1996:77) renders the first lines of each respectively in his translations.

⁸ Foley writes, "What separates this kind of verbal art from contemporary written poetry enshrined in literary reviews, chapbooks, and anthologies is precisely its intended medium of publication, the means by which it reaches an audience. Voiced Texts aim solely at oral performance and are by definition incomplete without that performance. Compare this trajectory with the more usual and familiar kind of written poetry, which aims primarily at transmission through print to an audience of silent, individual readers" (2002:43).

But, according to the (fictional) foreword by a certain “John Ray Jr.,” this was not to be, for Humbert “died in legal captivity, of coronary thrombosis, on November 16, 1952, a few days before his trial was scheduled to start,” and “Mrs. ‘Richard F. Schiller’ [Lolita] died in childbed, giving birth to a stillborn girl, on Christmas Day 1952, in Gray Star, a settlement in the remotest Northwest” (Nabokov 1991:4).⁹

In many ways, these deaths perfectly suit Humbert’s desires. The above quote shows that, at some point, a literary text became the vehicle preferable to oral testimony, and the necessity of such a performance was annulled by the narrator’s death. As Humbert had intended, neither he nor Lolita are alive at the time of publication, and because “Lolita” is not capable of presenting the truth, Humbert’s final words ring eerily true: “one wanted to have H. H. exist at least a couple of months longer, so as to have him make you live in the minds of later generations. . . . And this is the only immortality you and I may share, my Lolita” (309). The possessive of this last word is apt. Lolita is the narrator’s pet name for his beloved, an imposed redefinition of her character that centers on one man’s perception. This brings to light an essential trap of this narrated testimony—that despite an appeal to a factual basis, the reader is here limited to a homodiegetic character’s perspective, a character with plenty of reason to deceive.

The narrative instance of the novel reinforces Humbert’s domination over the narrative by not only exploiting the first-person limited perspective, but also the third-person limited perspective, and even at times shades of an omniscient perspective. As an example of a subtle suggestion of distance between the narrator and a human persona, Humbert Humbert uses a pseudonym, with which he refers to himself in a sly third person with occasional epithets. For example, he claims “Humbert Humbert is also infinitely moved by the little one’s slangy speech, by her harsh high voice” (43). Humbert’s epithets for himself such as “Humbert the Hound” or “Humbert the Terrible” make light of his abhorrent behavior with a self-mocking tone that invites exculpation.¹⁰ The narrator, though meant to seem objective and yet sympathetic, persistently reinforces his own monopolizing perspective.¹¹

Humbert Humbert’s direct apostrophes to his jury all take place in the first half of the book, with the first occurring on the first page of the text: “Ladies and Gentlemen of the jury, exhibit number one is what the seraphs, the misinformed, simple, noble-winged seraphs, envied. Look at this tangle of thorns.” He then introduces an autobiographical sketch of his childhood, of which more below. The “ladies and gentlemen of the jury” will be addressed twice more in those exact words (87, 103), and at other times emphasis is added, for example in the exclamation

⁹ That Lolita’s daughter is stillborn seems meaningful given that that Humbert Humbert at one point fantasizes about molesting Lolita’s daughter and even granddaughter (Nabokov 1991:174).

¹⁰ Humbert Humbert uses the following epithets: “Humbert the Bel” (Nabokov 1991:41), “Humbert the Hoarse” (48), “Humbert the Wounded Spider” (54), “Humbert the Humble” (55), “Humbert the Hummer” (57), “Humbert the Hound” (60), “Humbert the Cubus” (71), “Humbert the popular butcher” (108), “widower Humbert” (111), “friend Humbert” (148), “Humbert the Terrible” (275), and in a case of split personality: “In fact—said high-and-dry Humbert to floundering Humbert . . .” (229). These self-deprecating turns of phrase are distinctly more flattering than his references to Charlotte as “fat Haze” (43), “the old girl” (45), or “busybody Haze” (61), though she is often “the Haze woman” or simply “Haze.”

¹¹ Despite our dependence on Humbert Humbert, when we reread the novel, it is possible to fill in some gaps in the narrative. For example, certain moments such as Lolita’s happiness (Nabokov 1991:202), inexplicable to Humbert Humbert at the time, can with hindsight be traced to a secret encounter with Quilty, Lolita’s future lover.

“Jurors!” (123). Assuming a situation of verbal address, Humbert names his audience in the attempt to maintain their attention and to develop a relationship with a group of people whose task is to judge him.

At times Humbert feels the need to directly address the ladies of the jury, for example, “Gentlewomen of the jury! Bear with me!” (123). When it comes to describing the first copulation between Humbert and Lolita they are “frigid gentlewomen of the jury,” but they then become “sensitive gentlewomen of the jury” just a few pages later (132, 135).¹² When addressing the male members of the jury regarding the ultimate failure of his relations with Lolita, however, Humbert appears to expect sympathy for his lust and fear: “I should have known . . . that nothing but pain and horror would result from the expected rapture. Oh, winged gentlemen of the jury” (125).¹³ Humbert Humbert makes assumptions of each gender’s potential reaction to his narrative and attempts to address them—and appeal to their sympathy—accordingly.

The apostrophes cited above are the first step towards highlighting the oral quality of *Lolita*, and yet there are just as many apostrophes to *readers* throughout the text. The author of the fictional foreword, John Ray Jr., has already foreshadowed the shift from oral testimony to literary memoir described above by referring to the manuscript he has edited and providing his own view on the inherent tension of the work as somewhere between a novel and a diary (3-5). Early in the novel, in the context of an excerpt from his “diary” in which he describes knowing that he could kiss Lolita with impunity, Humbert interrupts himself to say that he “cannot tell the learned reader (whose eyebrows, I suspect, have by now traveled all the way to the back of his bald head), I cannot tell him how the knowledge came to me” (48).¹⁴ It becomes clear, then, that the oral and literary qualities of his narration are by no means mutually exclusive. In other words, there is no definitive threshold beyond which an oral testimony becomes a literary one. Rather, elements of both are intertwined throughout, despite Humbert’s claim that he began with the intention of crafting a verbal performance and decided at the end of his endeavors that a literary document would be more appropriate (308-09).

Humbert Humbert’s imaginary testimony begins with two “exhibits,” playing on the idea of showing his audience physical evidence, as though he were serving as his own lawyer. The first exhibit comprises reminiscences of his childhood, which are meant to be accompanied with photographs.¹⁵ “I am going to pass around in a minute some lovely, glossy-blue picture-postcards,” we read, yet no such photographs are included in the text (9). As Humbert further

¹² Cf. Herbold 2008 and Wakamiya 2008.

¹³ Tamir-Ghez (2003:30-32) suggests that “winged gentleman” is a backhanded compliment, as the intended allusion to Poe’s “Annabel Lee” speaks of jealous seraphs, and thus the apostrophes to the jury are perceptibly more negative than those to the reader discussed below. It seems to me that Humbert Humbert associates his “learned reader” with the therapists he has duped in the past, and that they are not a privileged audience. Rather, I will suggest below that Humbert Humbert tires of addressing an audience at all and falls into hermeneutic sentimentality.

¹⁴ Cf. the “blonde-bearded scholar” (Nabokov 1991:59, 135, 228).

¹⁵ Humbert Humbert’s summary of his early life centers on the love affair he identifies as a precursor to his relationship with Lolita, setting up a textbook example of the Freudian psychosis of melancholia. It seems that John Ray Jr. of the foreword has fallen for it, though Nabokov directly contradicts this interpretation in his appended essay.

explains, his father owned a hotel on the Riviera, therefore postcards are likely readily available. Yet this detail informs us that personal pictures will not be presented, only a commercial product far less likely to provide irrefutable evidence of Humbert's claims about himself. This is but a shadow of the problematic nature of his second exhibit, a diary recording his brief residence with Charlotte and Dolores Haze in Ramsdale. The diary deserves attention for the interesting interstitial point it represents between oral and literary dimensions of the text.

The diary to which Humbert appeals seems to be authentic documentary evidence, but we learn it is produced from memory, thus negating the purpose of a written text as an external support. Describing this "exhibit two," Humbert says (40):

I speak of this neat product of the Blank Blank Co., Blankton Mass., as if it were really before me. Actually, it was destroyed five years ago and what we examine now (by courtesy of a photographic memory) is but its brief materialization, a puny unfledged phoenix.

This reference to the diary is an appeal to the facts, to the pretense of an indisputable record of the events. Yet a diary is in obvious respects a questionable piece of evidence. One might use a diary to establish thoughts on a specific period of one's life, to introduce a sort of testimony from that time, which would be unaffected by later thoughts and motivations. In this case, however, such a use is negated by the fact that Humbert is relying on his *memory* of the diary, only proving, as we shall discuss in reference to the theories of Maurice Halbwachs below, that memory is a reconstruction of the past based on the present point of view.

Also, Humbert's inclusion of "Blank Blank Co., Blankton Mass." is peculiar, to say the least. If he had forgotten the actual name, it would have been easy to omit it. Most likely this turn of phrase is meant to suggest the actual names were unimportant. However, this omission draws more attention to the fact that Humbert controls our access to information and is already imposing his idea of what we need to know onto his reconstruction of the document in question. This impression is heightened when Humbert continues (40),

I remember the thing so exactly because I wrote it really twice. First I jotted down each entry with pencil (with many erasures and corrections) on the leaves of what is commercially known as a "typewriter tablet"; then, I copied it out with obvious abbreviations in my smallest, most satanic, hand in the little black book just mentioned.

This is odd behavior for a diary; indeed, it sounds more like the preparations of a manuscript of a novel for publication, as Humbert hoped to convince his wife Charlotte when she discovered the diary (96). All in all, the reader has learned that the supposedly credible written record of the diary has been subjected to a great deal of editorial discretion in the vein of written revision. Despite his overtures to oral narrative, Humbert has also exploited the potential for revision offered by written texts.

The carefully emplotted exhibits one and two are followed by romantic tropes (sketched with similar meticulousness) that are comparable to folklore motifs, meant to make the narrator's kidnapping and abuse of a child fit within accepted social norms. As Walter Ong has described,

the recurrence of motifs in oral tradition is “conservative or traditionalist” in the sense that it serves to introduce new material in a standardized format (1982:41-42):

Narrative originality lodges not in making up new stories but in managing a particular interaction with this audience at this time—at every telling the story has to be introduced uniquely into a unique situation, for in oral cultures an audience must be brought to respond, often vigorously. . . . In oral tradition, there will be as many minor variants of a myth as there are repetitions of it

Humbert’s apologia employs the well-known motifs and plot structure of a fairy-tale-like love story to lull the audience into a sense of familiarity with and, eventually, understanding for his crimes. For example, his journey through the American “wilderness” (Nabokov 1991:149, 152, 158, 281) might be compared to the taxonomized folklore motifs of the refuge for lovers for Humbert Humbert (R312.1) and captivity for our princess Lolita (R10.1). Lolita, in turn, escapes from her undesired lover (T320ff.), though only after a quest for her (H1385.5) does Humbert find his lost love (T96) and vanquish his villainous double.¹⁶ Humbert thus makes use of his audience’s assumed familiarity with a body of stories, punctuating his story with recognizable tropes.

Though folklore motifs might seem like the basic ingredients of most romantic fiction, Humbert Humbert’s testimony also reflects the even more complicated and canonical structural analysis of folklore such as Propp’s (1968) schemata of the thirty-one functions of folktales. In Propp’s terms, the broad strokes of Humbert’s story break down to *abstention* and *interdiction* (regarding his predilection for nymphets), *reconnaissance* of the Haze family situation, *delivery* of Lolita into Humbert’s grasp, *villainy* by Quilty and Lolita (when she leaves him), the *lack* of Lolita and *struggle* to find her and the mysterious double who stole her, *victory* in locating Quilty once Lolita identifies him, and *punishment* of the villainous Quilty with death, although Humbert foresees his own punishment in the near future.

Comparing *Lolita* to these structural studies of folklore shows us that the story exploits familiar motifs and plots in order to satisfy the audience’s expectations of narrative structure. This should be understood in the broader moral context of a rapist and murderer attempting to justify his actions in and through the satisfaction of his peers’ normative expectations. Humbert’s prose is more than lulling, though—it is entrancing. As I shall argue below, this quality stems from his use of the first-person “experiencing narrative,” with which the story is told in the most persuasive way possible.

Oral Styles of Literature

Humbert Humbert exploits a literary style called the experiencing narrative. In his essay “The Storyteller: Observations on the Works of Nikolai Leskov,” Walter Benjamin (1978:83-109) suggests that an experiencing narrative contains a special quality of orality, which

¹⁶ Motifs cited according to their classification in Thompson 1932-36. The double is perhaps more dominant in nineteenth-century Kunstmärchen such as E. T. A. Hoffmann’s *The Devil’s Elixirs* (1963 [1815]), Hugo von Hofmannsthal’s “A Tale of the Cavalry” (2008 [1898]), and Dostoevsky’s *The Double* (2004 [1846]).

makes it superior for the art of storytelling. Benjamin laments the declining ability to tell a story well, which he defines as the ability to share experience (84-85). As Benjamin writes, "The storyteller takes what he tells from experience—his own or that reported by others. And he in turn makes it the experience of those who are listening to his tale" (87). Benjamin sees this assimilation of experience as gaining wisdom. To conclude, then, a skilled storyteller imparts wisdom to his audience by offering his experience as something that can be applied to their own lives. In this way, advice may be proffered while avoiding an overtly pedagogical tone.

For Benjamin, orality is key in the storytelling process: "Among the writers who have set down the tales, the great ones are those whose written versions differ least from the speech of the many nameless storytellers" (84). Maintaining a style of colloquial speech preserves the natural conventions of storytelling, for example, by keeping "a story free from explanation as one reproduces it" (89). This style of storytelling is used not only to provide fiction with a realistic quality, but also in non-fictional experiencing narratives such as Olaudah Equiano's autobiography (1999 [1789]), which relates the narrator's experiences in a straightforward manner, in the hope that the audience will draw wisdom regarding the evils of slavery from the experiences related. The persuasive quality of the experiencing narrative can speak to broader social issues. This is an important tool in turning an account of a single remarkable life into wisdom useful for others and perhaps society as a whole.

The latter part of the title Humbert suggested for his text, "Lolita, or the Confessions of a White Widowed Male" (Nabokov 1991:3), might well trade on such pedagogical narratives, given its allusion to "Confessions of an English Opium-Eater" (De Quincy 2003 [1821]) and more generally the confessional genre from St. Augustine to Rousseau and beyond. Humbert engages in the kind of oratorical style Benjamin described by largely refraining from foreshadowing the plot. Instead, he forces the reader to experience the plot unfolding just as he did when he was living through the events recounted. By leaving out overt additions to the narrative, for example, an aside early in the novel about how he always knew Lolita would abandon him, Humbert preserves a sense of the integrity of the story's unfolding, and also leaves the story's surprises intact for the reader, thus heightening the entrancing quality of storytelling, as Benjamin suggested.

With regard to the assimilation of experiences from another person, the discourses of cultural and collective memories come into focus when an individual or group of individuals insists on a particular interpretive frame for understanding said experiences. This assimilation of views is exactly Humbert Humbert's motivation; he wants the audience to be persuaded by his perspective on the events he narrates, though without overtly demanding it. More precisely, while the audience comes to learn the events of his story, Humbert also wants them to absorb and accept his rationale, namely his supposed desire and love for Lolita. Humbert attempts this precarious balance of fact and opinion by employing both a first-person monologue that details his raptures and also, as discussed above, references to himself in the third person.

As seen in Benjamin's analysis of Leskov's "The Wandering Pilgrim," narratives of one's life story are ideal for storytelling. Yet despite Humbert's specific invocation of oration, addressing this imagined audience, several other aspects Benjamin identifies in ideal narratives and oral tradition in general do not apply. First, foreword aside, the reader is confronted with a text and not an oration, not even a narrated conversation as in "The Wandering Pilgrim" or the

dialogic format of Faulkner's *Absalom! Absalom!* Second, Humbert's discourse contains far too many flourishes to be considered colloquial speech. Third, he identifies himself as "the writer" as early as the second page. He even emphasizes the textual nature of his memories when he says, "I leaf again and again through these miserable memories . . ." (Nabokov 1991:13). The implication is that he reads and rereads what he has written down of his memories, a task indicative of literary solitude, which does not suggest the social dynamic inherent in performance or speech.

Lolita is mostly narrated from the first-person perspective, and I have demonstrated that the text shows several qualities of oral performance such as apostrophe. That said, Humbert Humbert at one point exploits the most persuasive artistic device distinctive of literary works, namely omniscient narration, by giving his own perspective a glimmer of omniscience. Whereas, for most of the novel, Humbert describes his memories in the vein of the experiencing narrative, the omniscient perspective arises briefly before Humbert's statement identifying the text as memoir at the end of the novel, when he ends his story in a contrived manner, passing his own definitive judgment. After finally halting his flight from the police in his car, having murdered Quilty, Humbert is waiting for the police to catch up with him. In his own words: "And while I was waiting for them to run up to me on the high slope, I evoked a last mirage of wonder and hopelessness." What follows is a reminiscence of an event that took place shortly after *Lolita* ran away. Feeling sick, Humbert pulled off a mountain road that overlooks a valley (307-08):

As I approached the friendly abyss, I grew aware of a melodious unity of sounds rising like vapor from a small mining town that lay at my feet, in a fold of the valley. . . . And soon I realized that all these sounds were of one nature, that no other sounds but these came from the streets of the transparent town, with the women at home and the men away. Reader! What I heard was the melody of children at play, nothing but that, and so limpid was the air that within this vapor of blended voices, majestic and minute, remote and magically near, frank and divinely enigmatic—one could hear now and then, as if released, an almost articulate spurt of vivid laughter, or the crack of the bat, or the clatter of a toy wagon, but it was all too far for the eye to distinguish any movement in the lightly etched streets. I stood listening to that musical vibration from my lofty slope, to those flashes of separate cries with a kind of demur murmur for background, and then I knew the hopelessly poignant thing was not *Lolita's* absence from my side, but the absence of her voice from that concord.

This scene is a departure from the purely experiencing narrative in two ways: firstly, Humbert consciously evokes this scene out of the chronological order he usually attempts to maintain, choosing this scene as a fitting end to both the "Murder of Quilty" section and the story as a whole. Secondly, the scene is one of looking down on the world, a God's-eye view in which he can know where men and women are and what children are doing without actually seeing them, and understanding his and *Lolita's* place in the whole scheme of things. This strongly suggests the perspective of an omniscient narrator who delivers the story fully analyzed and understood. Humbert switches to this omniscient literary mode because it offers a tone of greater authority, delivering an interpretation of the events he has narrated.

Humbert Humbert's inner monologue is meant to exculpate his actions by authentically

conveying his emotional state, his love for Lolita, and his enormous sense of loss when she leaves him. And yet, at times this very authenticity is subtly undermined by references to the editing process of this literary text. The quotation above is the most obvious example of Humbert's authorial discretion, his choice of what to narrate and subtle suggestions of the correct way to interpret these events. However, there are other places where the careful construction of Humbert's storytelling is laid bare to the reader. This is true of the carefully packaged story of Humbert's childhood, but the best example is the short twenty-sixth chapter, in which Humbert describes the pain he relives as he writes everything out (109):

The daily ache in the opaque air of this tombal jail is disturbing, but I must persevere. Have written more than a hundred pages and not got anywhere yet. My calendar is getting confused. That must have been around August 15, 1947. Don't think I can go on. Heart, head—everything. Lolita, Lolita, Lolita, Lolita, Lolita, Lolita, Lolita, Lolita, Lolita, Lolita. Repeat till page is full, printer.

Humbert is attempting to give the audience the impression of witnessing his unadulterated thought processes, yet he himself does not commit the emotional act of filling an entire page with the name of his beloved. Rather, he only wants the *effect* to be achieved by the printer in the interest of impressing his audience. The monologue format of the novel mimics the experiencing narrative lauded by Benjamin, yet Humbert's writing must be examined as a wholly fabricated narrative created for the purpose of persuasion. After all, Humbert's motivation is not to share experience of the kind imagined by Benjamin, namely that of the seasoned traveler or wise peasant. Indeed, Humbert's motivation cannot be considered the desire to impart wisdom at all. Rather, his motivation is to defend himself before an interlocutor, be it an actual jury or the court of public opinion represented by the reading public. This morally inflected social dynamic is one that Benjamin described as crumbling alongside the very practice of storytelling. Indeed, judgment is a key concept for Nabokov's text, drawing out the ineluctably social element of performance, all the while suppressing any actual exchange or dialogue in favor of a unidirectional testimony on Humbert's part.

The Social Quality of Humbert Humbert's Memories

As he looks back, remembering the events of his life, Humbert Humbert is driven by the goal of explaining, giving a rationale for, his relationship with Lolita. His selective narration is thus an ideal example of Maurice Halbwachs' notion of memory as a reconstruction of the past designed to align with a current perspective, a feature of his larger argument that memory is a social faculty. Halbwachs claims that (1992:38):

it is in society that people normally acquire their memories. It is also in society that they recall, reorganize and localize their memories. . . . [W]e appeal to our memory only in order to answer questions which others have asked, or that we suppose they could have asked.

Halbwachs offers the psychoanalytic process as an institutionalized example of his notion of

memory as an essentially external process, couched in society rather than in the individual. And indeed, beyond psychoanalysis, it is customary for individuals to interrogate each other in order to establish past events. This practice is aimed at establishing a collective experience, and is thus a social activity.

Even if one does not accept Halbwachs' claim that memory is *only* engaged in order to answer the questions of others, the idea that an individual remembers a story in response to an interrogator is particularly compelling in the case of Humbert's narration. Humbert maintains a defensive stance throughout the text with the premise of addressing an audience. After briefly waxing poetic regarding his passion for Lolita, he even explicitly anticipates questions from the audience, his jury. "Did she have a precursor? She did, indeed she did. . . . Oh when? About as many years before Lolita was born as my age was that summer. You can always count on a murderer for a fancy prose style" (Nabokov 1991:9). Humbert's imagined dialogue not only exhibits an example of the staged interrogation of memory, which Halbwachs describes as remembering what we believe others will ask, but also points to a tension between Humbert and the audience he is addressing. Humbert shows himself to be in the process of adapting to the will of the jury, accepting an imagined duty to justify his actions. Despite the show of bowing to public inquest, however, he is surreptitiously attempting to persuade the jury to absorb his point of view on the events in question.

The tension between what Humbert Humbert believes his audience would like to hear and what he himself wishes to speak about is especially tangible in the first half of the novel, when he speaks directly to his audience of jurors or readers. Early in the text, as we have seen, he makes a show of reining in his florid description of well-known stories of nymphets and the world-famous authors who loved them. "But let us be prim and civilized. Humbert Humbert tried hard to be good. Really and truly, he did" (19). Here, Humbert falls into an ironic third-person perspective, assessing himself in the same register as he used to illuminate the long tradition of pedophilia he sees himself as propagating. The excuse of educating his audience, which Humbert uses to indulge in the pleasure of reeling off this history, falls away entirely when he comes to the personal experiences that still haunt him. Midway through the novel, after extensively recalling a shopping trip to buy presents for Lolita, he settles in for another sleepless night and considers using on himself one of the sleeping pills reserved for incapacitating Lolita (109):

There were forty of them all told—forty nights with a frail sleeper at my throbbing side; could I rob myself of one such night in order to sleep? Certainly not: much too precious was each tiny plum, each microscopic planetarium with its live stardust. Oh, let me be mawkish for the nonce! I am so tired of being cynical.

Despite the image of Humbert's predatory thoughts at the side of a child, Humbert seems to suspect that his audience will rebel at his indulgence in a bombastic description of the sleeping pills. His admission to mawkishness applies just as well to the long description of the shopping trip he had recently undertaken, which few people besides someone who shares his own prurient interests could be expected to find compelling. As he describes, "I had great fun with all kinds of shorts and briefs—phantom Lolitas dancing, falling, daisy-ing all over the counter" (108). As we can see, he is tiring of explaining himself to his audience, of keeping up the lighthearted distance

of sarcastic self-mockery of the first few pages; now, he is more interested in losing himself in sentimentality. Such indulgence only increases as the novel progresses, its heightening indicative of a decided decrease in the narrator's consideration for the presumed intended audience.

In fact, Halbwachs links an increasing immersion in memories to a separation from the rest of society. In his conclusion to the theory that memory is couched in the fabric of society, Halbwachs states (1992:169):

If recollections were preserved in individual form within memory, and if the individual could remember things only by forgetting human society and by proceeding all by himself—without the burden of all the ideas that he has acquired from others—to recapture stages of his past, he would have the illusion of reliving it.

In the solitary confines of his prison, both physical and mental (Nabokov 1991:31-32, 109, 308), Humbert Humbert becomes increasingly lost in his memories, increasingly choosing to relive them rather than explaining or justifying them to his audience. The premise of an oration in a social context falls away at times, as he gives in to a rapturous state of re-experiencing. This turning away from the explanatory mode and the increasingly self-indulgent attitude of the narrator makes the surprise ending of *Lolita*, the transformation of a testimony into a literary memoir, not quite so surprising. To repeat an earlier quotation, Humbert claims, "In mid-composition, however, I realized that I could not parade living Lolita. I still may use parts of this memoir in hermetic sessions, but publication is to be deferred" (308). Though I have discussed above the persuasive techniques of the text's direct addresses to its audience, the planned "hermetic sessions" mentioned here reflect the increasingly masturbatory mode of writing visible in the novel. More broadly speaking, whereas all of the text's oral qualities emphasize the narrator's initial role in a dialogue with a jury of his peers, the literary techniques of persuasion are initially aimed at his reading audience in perpetuity but develop into an asocial memoir. The narrator's increasing distance from his audience precludes any redemption, because Humbert casts off the pretense of justifying himself to others and himself.

Conclusion

Throughout the majority of Nabokov's novel *Lolita*, which comprises a fictional introductory note and the manuscript written by Humbert Humbert, an expectation of judgment persists, given that its primary motivation is to present a story of malfeasance to a jury in a courtroom or the jury of the reading public. As Humbert writes on his penultimate page (Nabokov 1991:308):

For reasons that may appear more obvious than they really are, I am opposed to capital punishment; this attitude will be, I trust, shared by the sentencing judge. Had I come before myself, I would have given Humbert at least thirty-five years for rape and dismissed the rest of the charges.

In other words, the narrator believes he should be punished for his treatment of Lolita, but not for murdering Quilty. It is worth noting the obvious disparity between Humbert's punishment of Quilty's behavior towards Lolita with death and his insistence that he himself should not be killed. Even this statement subtly insists on the relative innocence of his actions compared to those of Quilty, based on Humbert's larger narrative of his deep feelings for Lolita. Humbert's withdrawal from society into the pleasures of writing and re-writing his memoir at the conclusion of the text further undermines the suggestion that thirty-five years of confinement would be a suitable punishment.

The initial narrative instance of an oral testimony in a courtroom defines Nabokov's text *Lolita* as a dialogue to establish moral rectitude. As I have detailed, this premise is utilized to employ techniques of persuasion related to oral tradition, such as apostrophe and familiar folklore motifs. At the same time, the production of this written text impedes and suppresses the essentially dialogic format of oral tradition. The narrator's hermeneutic enjoyment in the act of creating a literary text renders his confinement a kind of protection and solace. There seems little justice in Humbert Humbert's end; his story remains uncontested by his victim or even the state's prosecutor. But perhaps that is the moral to the story after all, to the extent that the narratorial authority is increasingly shown to be bankrupt and transparently self-serving.

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