

Bloody Mary in the Mirror: A Comparative Examination of a Living Tradition

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Abstract

This thesis is a cultural analysis of Bloody Mary, which exists simultaneously as legend, ostension, folk drama, maturation ritual, a demonstration of social hierarchy within a folk group, and various types of play. I investigate Bloody Mary through the lens of each of these genres, exploring retrospective narratives from adults and teenagers, in addition to narratives collected from contemporary school children. Included in these groups are women who attended Catholic school in the 1980s and consider themselves “cultural Catholics,” adults who grew up in St. John’s, Newfoundland during the 1980s but did not attend Catholic school, high school students from a small community just outside of St. John’s, and contemporary school-aged children.

Building upon the research of Langlois, Dundes, Tucker, Ellis, Armitage and with consideration given to Sutton-Smith’s rhetorics of play, the present investigation analyzes the function of Bloody Mary to each group of informants, extracting elements of similarities and variants that could be conceptualized through a table of structural elements in order to show mutations over time, geography and cultural groupings (such as religion and age). This comparative, cross-cultural examination of contemporary usages and functions of Bloody Mary frames it as living, dynamic folklore and an important aspect of children’s folklore/childlore.

Chapter 1

Bloody Mary is an adolescent ritual activity that has been commonly reported for nearly half a century from most parts of North America. This thesis is documentation, exploration and cultural analysis of that children's activity, along with its various uses and generic forms, as it has been known in and around St. John's, Newfoundland, Canada, over the past twenty-five years. While Bloody Mary has long been considered merely a game played by young girls, in this thesis, I consider Bloody Mary as something that exists simultaneously as legend, ostension, folk drama, maturation ritual, a demonstration of social hierarchy within a folk group, as well as various types of play.

In this thesis, I explore the various generic forms of Bloody Mary, as written about by other scholars since the late 1970s. I then consider Bloody Mary as it pertains to my informants. As such, I examine the functions of Bloody Mary over time (beginning with the early 1980s through to current school children), geography, and cultural sub-culture (Catholic children compared to non-Catholic children). In exploring the Catholic sub-culture, I encountered an aspect of Bloody Mary that was exclusive to this group, and will thus examine the concept of a "Catholic ecotype" as applied to Bloody Mary. I also discuss the changes in transmission of Bloody Mary and the dynamic nature of Bloody Mary as it relates to children's folklore.

Throughout this thesis, I reference four main groups of informants using a system of acronyms and within these groups, the informants are referred to using their

first name (in most cases) and the first initial of their surname. In cases where I use only initials, it is at the request of the informant. I will briefly outline the referencing system here, with more detailed explanations given later in this chapter. The first group of informants will be referred to as “Former Catholic School Attendees” (FCSA), and consists mainly of my peers, those who attended St. Pius X School at the same time I did (in the 1980s). There are several other women in this group who did not attend the same school but attended other Catholic schools in the St. John’s area in the same period, and these are noted as slight variations. Another group of informants are high school students from Crescent Collegiate School in Whitbourne/Dildo, NL, where I worked briefly as a substitute teacher in 2009. This group of informants are referred to as “Whitbourne/Dildo” (WD). The next group of informants are contemporary school children, who were attending elementary school when I interviewed them. They were in a variety of grades and attended several different schools, and will be referred to as “Contemporary Elementary Students” (CES). The final group of informants were not chosen as informants intentionally, but rather serendipitously, and are referred to as “Folklore Interviews” (FI) throughout this thesis. They were often friends, or even friends-of-friends who, through casual conversation, took an interest in my topic and volunteered to be part of my research.

Methodology

Much of my early research for this thesis began as a term paper (as described below), and as I spoke with the students who became the second group of informants

(WD students), the idea of a cross-generational comparison began to emerge. I was fortunate that my profession as a classroom teacher afforded me the opportunities to speak with children of various ages about their Bloody Mary experiences. After doing fieldwork with my peers and high school students, I found that I encountered other informants almost “accidentally” through conversations at parties or in other social settings, such as school staff rooms. When I returned to teaching in a lower grade level classroom at Bishop Feild Elementary, the Bloody Mary activity once again came up among my students without me seeking it out. And so, as I began to analyze the narratives and experiences of these four groups of informants (FCSA, WD, FI and CES), many similarities emerged, for example, in the invocation of Bloody Mary and the prescribed setting used by most informants, yet the differences in usage, or functionality lead me to consider the multi-generic nature of Bloody Mary. I then sought out previous scholarship on the topic, or on closely related topics and considered where my own fieldwork fit with the work of other folklorists.

How I Came Into This Topic

I stumbled upon the topic when researching a term paper for a graduate course, Language and Play (FL6250), in 2009. I had chosen to write my paper on slumber party games played by my group of friends when they were pre-adolescents and teenagers. I began to ask my friends – consisting of women born in the mid-to-late 1970s – about their recollections of games and activities that were commonly played at sleepovers and slumber parties of our youth. Their recollections included games

such as “Truth or Dare,” sometimes referred to as “Truth, Dare, Double Dare, Promise to Repeat.” This activity involves the several choices given in the name of the game. Each participant is asked which they would prefer: to answer a question truthfully (which was usually quite personal and involved something that the participant may have been keeping a secret); to take on a dare, which in those days (before the technology of caller ID) often meant a prank phone call; to take on a double dare, which was a far more extreme dare, that may have involved leaving the house and running to ring a neighbour’s doorbell late at night, or sneaking into the room of a sibling of whoever was hosting the sleepover and stealing their underwear. The “promise to repeat” aspect was usually frowned upon and considered “wussy” because no personal risk was involved. If someone chose “promise to repeat,” the ringleader of the group would usually give them something embarrassing to repeat, such as declaring their love for someone extremely undesirable in their class. (Susan L-FCSA/12)

An activity recollected by informants was using the Ouija Board, which, in her article “Spooky Activities and Group Loyalty” Shaari Freed explains as follows:

When participating in a Ouija board session, players sit around a game board (either homemade or store bought) which has the letters of the alphabet as well as the words “yes,” “no,” and “good-bye” written on it. The players each place one finger on an upside down glass, or some other marker, which the spirit will use to indicate the desired letter. The players usually say a short invocation inviting spirits to join them. They then proceed to ask various questions of the spirit (e.g., “Who will I marry?” “Which boy likes me?”). (Freed 1994: 33-39)

Similar to this context, Jeanne Myrick examined Ouija Board usage in Newfoundland and noted the social setting under which her informants used the Ouija Board, which was always “among friends” (Myrick 1999: 162).

My friends also recalled playing “Light as a Feather, Stiff as a Board.” In her 2008 article “Levitation Revisited,” Elizabeth Tucker deals with this activity at length, determining that it is primarily a preadolescent activity dating back as far as three centuries. She writes,

One intriguing but understudied form of children’s folklore is levitation, a ritual in which several pre-adolescents or adolescents lift a friend with only a few fingers of each hand. Sometimes the individual who gets lifted lies on the floor; other times he or she stands or sits in a chair. Records and studies since the seventeenth century have identified this process as a “spell,” an “inchantment,” a “curiosity,” a “game,” a “trick,” a “procedure,” or an “activity.” (2008: 47)

Tucker notes her own use of Mary Douglas’s definition of ritual as symbolic action,

The presence of certain symbolic elements [in levitation], over a wide span of time and space, creates a sense of ritualistic potency. As in many rituals, the order of events must be faithfully maintained, the tone must be solemn, and the outcome is expected to be something almost miraculous; so the word “game” does not quite do justice to the nature of what is happening. (Tucker 2008: 47, Douglas 1973:126)

In adapting Tucker’s usage of Douglas’ definition, and applying it to my own work on Bloody Mary, I came to realize that the term “game” was not wholly accurate. In considering this problematic word “game,” it is important to note that

Bloody Mary is not merely any competitive game of childhood, such as baseball or hopscotch. Although I will use the term “game” to refer to Bloody Mary, and as such, the verb “play” is employed to accompany the term “game,” Bloody Mary serves many functions to its participants. These functions vary, often based on the age of participants, and how and when they partook in Bloody Mary. As I will discuss in Chapter Four, belief is an integral aspect of “playing” Bloody Mary, and the children involved often believe that Bloody Mary would appear to them, which makes the “game” quite serious for some of them.

Tucker’s earlier article on levitation (1984) discusses the varying “chants, stories and processions” (127) that she encountered through her research and interviews with pre-adolescent girls. There are parallels between these narratives and those I encountered in my Bloody Mary research, and much of Tucker’s analysis of the story-telling that accompanies the levitation activity is congruent with my idea of Bloody Mary being considered a form of ostension or even legend tripping.

Although the Bloody Mary activity of my childhood did not use much in the way of narrative leading up to actually engaging in the activity, almost all of my other informants (“other” being non-Catholic school attendees), told me about the conversations that led up to their participation in Bloody Mary, whether it was a story about the origin of Bloody Mary, who she had been while still alive, or a story about what had happened to someone they knew who had summoned Bloody Mary.

In continuing my research on slumber party games, several other friends talked about using Tarot cards or even a pack of common playing cards to tell one’s

“fortune.” The informants involved referred to “fortune telling” but, in actuality, the cards were specifically and exclusively used to divine who the participant’s next boyfriend was going to be (Susan L-FCSA/2009), which at that age (twelve to fourteen) was one of the most important things on one’s mind.

Eventually, among the various slumber party activities we discussed, one of my informants mentioned playing Bloody Mary. This struck a chord with me for several reasons. The first reason is that Bloody Mary was an utterly terrifying part of my childhood – for years, I scuttled past mirrors in darkened rooms, for fear of “accidentally” even thinking about Bloody Mary if I glanced at my reflection. However, it was the second aspect of hearing this particular informant recollect playing Bloody Mary that led me to further consider the topic. This particular informant described the “end result” of the game – that is, who or what would supposedly appear in the mirror. Her deviation from my own experience was so surprising to me that I decided to explore the topic further. Casual questioning of other friends and acquaintances in St. John’s on the same topic indicated that there were not only far more variations than I had originally anticipated, but also that one particular group of people, Catholic school attendees in the 1980s – my own peer group – seemed to have a particular ecotype that no other individuals had. With this realization in hand, I began to dig deeper.

Explanation of Informant Grouping

This thesis looks at several different groups of informants, and so my research and analysis generally consider, and refer to, groups of informants. There are individuals quoted throughout, but they are almost always identified as being part of a group of informants. These groups are divided by religion, gender, geography and generation.

My first group of informants was my friend group, women who had attended Catholic schools in St. John's, Newfoundland, in the 1980s. St. John's is a medium-sized city, with a population of 150,000 – 200,000, depending on where one draws the line between city and suburb. According to Statistics Canada (statcan.gc.ca), the population of the municipal area in 2011 was 196,200. St. John's is a port city, having developed as a result of the commerce built around St. John's harbour, including fishing and shipping. The residents of the city are primarily of English, Irish and Scottish descent. As a result of this ancestry, English Protestantism, Irish Catholicism and Scottish Presbyterianism are prevalent as the “mainstream,” commonly held, belief systems. There is a long-held understanding of a cultural rivalry of sorts between the Catholics and the Protestants, and one of the most obvious by-products of this religious segregation was, for many years, a denominational school system. Beginning in the nineteenth century, and up until 1998, schools in St. John's were governed by two different school boards, the Roman Catholic School Board and the Avalon Consolidated School Board. Which school one attended depended on both address and religious beliefs or, at least,

those of your family.

It may be important here to explain that while attending Catholic school in St. John's did not guarantee a development of the Catholic faith, it was at the very least, a cultural determination for many aspects of one's young life. Even now, as an agnostic adult, I frequently happen upon colloquial expressions and “superstitious” practices that I had not previously identified as being “Catholic.” While “superstitions” and “superstitious” are not generally used by folklorists, in this thesis these words may appear within quotation marks, as they are used by informants. As such, I have applied a working concept of “cultural Catholicism” (the folk beliefs involving expressions, exclamations, swear-words and customary actions that have developed out of Catholic doctrine, but are no longer or not necessarily a part of “official” belief systems – further discussed in Chapter Four) as it pertains to many of my informants and has helped to formulate my idea of a Catholic ecotype as applied to Bloody Mary.

My first exploration approached Bloody Mary as a children's activity, or game. For some of my informants, it was firmly associated with slumber parties, Ouija boards and Truth or Dare. However, these categorizations bring about questions that lead to other determinations in the folkloric spectrum. The specifics of where it is played, how it is played, who plays it and the variations in script and action open up many possibilities to consider. In my experience, it was a form of play-acting by young girls. My friends and I would summon some sort of “mirror witch” (Tucker 2007: 95), while pretending not to be scared in front of each other. We considered it a game, but from a folklorist’s perspective, it is also a form of folk drama. There is a

prescribed setting and in some cases an accompanying narrative, which can lead to categorizing it as a form of belief narrative. The anticipated spectral vision in the mirror is thought by some to be malevolent and capable of harming those involved physically, so Bloody Mary can certainly be considered a form of supernatural folklore. However, localization of the origins of Bloody Mary and an accompanying narrative of the belief amongst some of my informants puts Bloody Mary in the realm of legend and ostension. I have also considered Bloody Mary from the perspective of a maturation ritual, and in this thesis, draw on the work of Alan Dundes and his psychoanalytical approach to folklore to further develop this idea. An additional thought, something I must consider from my current perspective as a classroom teacher, is Bloody Mary as a form of bullying which, for some girls, is something of a coming-of-age event. As well, I consider Bloody Mary in a contemporary context – not only through fieldwork conducted with contemporary school children and their knowledge and participation in Bloody Mary, but also considering the transmission, usage and adaptation of Bloody Mary through the use of the Internet and other forms of media. As there are now many other forms of popular media available to children (compared to the limited availability of my own youth, which would have meant mainly books, movies and television), consideration will be given to other forms of media that would act as forms of transmission, such as YouTube, e-mail chain letters and websites.

The current version of Bloody Mary has been heavily influenced by popular culture. I explore how this affected several elements of the Bloody Mary activity – the

visual (what was seen in the mirror or expected to be seen), the contextual (what was said and how it varied among informants), and the possible sources for similarities (popular movies, for example).

In doing fieldwork for my paper on girl's slumber party games, I developed my interest in Bloody Mary, based in part on my own childhood experiences and the fear of looking at a mirror in the dark, which has never quite left me. My original fieldwork was limited to my peer group and, as I interviewed friends and colleagues about an aspect of their childhood that most had not thought about in over twenty years, I discovered something that I had never considered before: as children in Catholic school, we anticipated seeing the Virgin Mary in the mirror, and that was not the commonly reported form in the previously published scholarly literature on Bloody Mary. When I asked other non-Catholic friends about their experiences with Bloody Mary, there was quite a variation in the anticipated result of the ritual, but not a single one of them mentioned expecting to see the Virgin Mary in the mirror. When pressed to recall details of this aspect of their elementary school years and tell me whom they expected to see in the mirror, Catholic school attendees responded that the Virgin Mary (Jesus' mother) was the anticipated figure in the mirror. The varying responses from non-Catholic respondents will be considered from several different perspectives. Firstly, it was among this group of informants that I found the most narratives explaining who Bloody Mary was, or why she was in the mirror. These narratives are examined and considered from several different folkloristic lenses, including legend-tripping and ostension, as discussed by Linda

Dégh (2003) and Bill Ellis (1982/83). Secondly, it was among these non-Catholic informants of varying ages and several generations that I found the most variation in ritual and the anticipated vision in the mirror. Despite this variation, one commonality that is worth further consideration is the recurring idea of a violent or malevolent female figure. As summoning Bloody Mary frequently was (and still is, as discussed throughout this thesis) undertaken in the elementary school bathroom, a setting in which most authority figures are female, I will also explore gender in the context of play.

My first group of informants is composed entirely of women, as my original focus was on girls' slumber party games. However, as my interest in this topic deepened, I decided to branch out further, and conduct some interviews with current school-aged children. Among this group, there are both boys and girls, as I have found that Bloody Mary is – in 2014 – no longer restricted to female audiences or participation. This group of informants will be referred to throughout the paper using their initials, the acronym for Contemporary Elementary Students (CES) and the year in which the interview was conducted (for example, HC-CES/11).

When interviewing children, there are several ideas that must be considered. First of all, the collector is viewed as something of an outsider – an adult in a child's world. This has worked both for me and against me in conducting interviews with children. In some cases, the children I interviewed were the children of friends and colleagues. In these cases, I was able to approach the interviews in a less formal setting. In each case, I encouraged the parents to leave the room, and in a slightly

conspiratorial tone, pointed out that the child should call me by my first name, not “Ms. Winter,” as some of their parents might have suggested. I also found that offering “Gummy Worms” (a popular candy amongst children of that age group), finding common interests in books and other aspects of popular children's culture also made for common ground, and allowed me to be “let in” to their world a little bit more than they may let their parents. I often started off the interviews sharing some of my own Bloody Mary stories and admitting to having a lingering fear of the dark. In these particular interviews, I felt as though I had been fairly successful in breaking down the barrier between adult and child. Sylvia Ann Grider has written about the collecting children's folklore, and makes some essential observations that I considered when embarking upon this project.

A certain self-recognition is inherent in the study of childlore.... However, because we as adults are so close to the material which we once shared, we tend to gloss over much of it because we regard it as obvious.

(1980:161)

Being “close to the material” was sometimes a challenge when collecting from children for this thesis. All adults were children themselves, but it is important not to consider ourselves “experts” when it comes to aspects of childhood that we are approaching as collectors and folklorists. For me, maintaining neutrality during interviews was sometimes difficult, especially since Bloody Mary was quite relevant to my own childhood experiences. When discussing it with children, I did not want to colour their narratives in any way, or use suggestive or leading language or questions.

Gary Alan Fine has noted that children are their own distinct folk group (Fine

1980:172) with their own stages of cognitive, physiological and social development. With this in mind, I interviewed children ranging in ages from six to sixteen, using different techniques and with varying objectives.

During the spring semester of 2009, while completing my graduate course work, I was doing a brief replacement for a teacher at a school in Whitbourne/Dildo, a community just about an hour's drive outside of St. John's. There, I spent three weeks as the French teacher at Crescent Collegiate High School and one day, while chatting with a group of students while waiting for the rest of the class to filter into the room, the students asked about my master's program and I told them about the paper I was currently working on. I had not realized at this point that Bloody Mary was still practiced by contemporary children and engaged the students in a conversation about Bloody Mary. This particular group of fifteen-and sixteen-year-olds were eager to help, sharing their stories and experiences with me. While I took as many notes as I could during our conversations, I did have the responsibility of being primarily their French teacher, so eventually had to turn the conversation to French verbs. However, I asked them to write down anything they wanted to share with me for my paper and took away several handwritten accounts of their experiences of Bloody Mary.

These narratives and the accompanying notes and conversations that I use in this thesis will be referred to as Whitbourne/Dildo 2009, using the initials of the informant beforehand to distinguish the source (for example, NH-WD/09). This group consisted of high school students, and also showed the most variation in their

narratives and personal experiences. These students live in a relatively small community and have gone to school together their entire lives, yet had the most variation in narratives about Bloody Mary. When asked about their experiences with Bloody Mary, most of the responses I was given were accompanied by local lore and legend. Their localization of Bloody Mary was, to me, another indication that Bloody Mary could be further explored in other genres, not “just” as a children's game.

Another point of interest among these informants was that all of the girls who responded to my questions claimed to have participated in Bloody Mary at a much later age than my original group (my peers) of Former Catholic School attendees. My personal experience with Bloody Mary was at quite a young age, lasting until about Grade Five (age ten), whereas the group of Crescent Collegiate students “played” Bloody Mary in school when they were in middle school, Grades Five, Six and Seven. These girls admitted to using Bloody Mary as a scare tactic on younger girls if they were unfortunate enough to be in the girls’ washroom at the same time. The girls stated that they were engaging in this particular activity (scaring younger girls) because the same scare tactic had been used on them by the older girls when they were in lower grades. Scaring younger pupils with tales of haunted bathrooms and local witches seems to be a part of the school culture in this group. I also saw the same use of Bloody Mary amongst my youngest informants, who are currently of elementary school age. Bloody Mary has come up in chain emails (further discussed in Chapter Three) with the slightly older children in the upper-elementary grades, and also as a method of scaring younger children when they go into the school bathrooms

(particularly at Bishop Feild Elementary School in St. John's). This use of Bloody Mary as a rank-pulling, sort of "coming of age" ritual lends itself to consideration in genres such as maturation rituals, and perhaps even an in-school legend trip.

My Own Experiences With Bloody Mary

As mentioned earlier, when Bloody Mary came up in interviews for the term paper from which this thesis developed, it was an activity that I was familiar with, having taken part in it myself in the bathroom of my elementary school, St. Pius X Elementary, in St. John's, Newfoundland in the 1980s. Bloody Mary was prevalent amongst my friends throughout elementary school, mainly in the primary years (Grades One through Three). My first introduction to Bloody Mary was during after-school Brownies, a group I was involved with from 1983 until 1987, when I was age six through to eleven. The Brownies are a part of the Girl Guide movement, intended to introduce younger girls to the Girl Guide principles through weekly sessions and occasional sleepover camps. In Brownies, girls are divided into smaller groups called Sixes, and these Sixes are named after British fairies, such as Pixies, Imps, Kelpies and Sprites. Within these groups, an older Brownie (someone in Grade Three or Four) is designated as the Sixer, and is considered the leader. I was a Sprite, and my Sixer, Erin, was in Grade Four, which meant that for me, she was very old, and very wise. So, when she told a select few of the younger Sprites about Bloody Mary, I believed every word she said. When our Brownie leader (referred to as "Brown Owl" but in daily life, my Kindergarten teacher, Mrs. Williams) was otherwise occupied

testing for one of the many Brownie badges, or teaching an important skill (such as how to use a pay phone) we quietly slipped into the Ladies' Room of the Parish Hall where our meetings were held. There, on the sink, as Erin had promised, were several drops of red. The red drops were quite obviously blood (in reality, it was nail polish), and we assumed it to be Bloody Mary's blood.

Fascinated, we listened as Erin explained to us how to summon Bloody Mary. We had to close the door (something which we were not permitted to do), turn off the lights (another Brownie rule about to be broken), look in the mirror and say "Bloody Mary" three times. At this point, Bloody Mary would appear to us. The blood we saw on the sink was from a previous visit by Bloody Mary, wherein she was, according to Erin, crying tears of blood. This made sense to our young, Catholic minds, as we had frequently seen Mary, the mother of Jesus, depicted in Catholic iconography, crying over the death of her son. And why wouldn't she cry tears of blood? Jesus' death was certainly fraught with blood and violence. Even at the tender age of six, we were all too familiar with these ideas, as we were exposed to them every day of our lives. They were on the walls of our classrooms, at the many crucifixes that were posted above every door in our school, when we went to Mass during the week to celebrate the feasts of various saints and stared at the Stations of the Cross around the perimeter of the church, and on the weekends when we went to Mass with our families and were herded into small, unheated rooms at the back of the church to listen to liturgy stories written to help children understand the word of God. During these Children's Liturgy groups, I recall completing many colouring sheets,

particularly around Easter time, of Jesus nailed to the cross, while Mary, his mother, knelt at his feet, crying. And so, when several of Mary's tears of blood fell onto the sink, they would remain there forever (according to Erin). Of course, we had to try it. And so, three little girls, two six-year-olds and a nine-year-old, closed the bathroom door, turned off the lights, and said "Bloody Mary" ... twice. Before we reached the third and final "Bloody Mary," we were interrupted by Brown Owl, and sent back to our corner of the Parish Hall.

As it happens, the Bloody Mary ritual that Erin taught us that afternoon is quite similar to the official Girl Guides ritual performed by Brown Owl, in which the youngest Brownies (who are called "Tweenies" until this ceremony takes place, part way through the first semester in Brownies) are officially inducted into the Brownie group and sorted into their proper Sixes. Each Tweenie had to stand next to Brown Owl in front of a fake toadstool and a round mirror laid on the ground that was supposed to represent a pond, and allow herself to be turned around three times as Brown Owl says "Twist me and turn me and show me an elf, I looked in the mirror and there saw..." at which point the Tweenie must say "MYSELF!" Seeing oneself in the mirror on the ground was an important element of the ritual, as the ceremony was introduced with a story about a girl finding a fairy while walking in the woods and making promises to the fairy to be helpful to others and always do her best. Clearly this intention and the sacred nature of this ceremony were forgotten when we were introduced to something as dark and devious as Bloody Mary. The allure of "antithetical" and "supernatural" as proposed by Mechling and Ellis, respectively,

will be further discussed.

Bloody Mary continued to be a popular pastime at St. Pius X Elementary School among my peer group. As the chosen ones who had been inducted into the secret knowledge of Bloody Mary by an older girl, my fellow Sprite, Sarah, and I felt it was our duty to share what we had learned the day before. And so, after explaining to some of the other girls in our class what was involved, we trekked to the closest bathroom at recess time and began the ritual once again. Although this bathroom did not have perpetual drops of blood staining the sink, there were two mirrors, no windows, and a light switch, and this was good enough for us. As I recall, there was quite a crowd of Grade One girls gathered in front of the mirror, just about to utter our third “Bloody Mary” when the bathroom door flew open and in came a girl from another class, who promptly ran out the door to tell on us.

The secret was now out, and trips to the bathroom became closely monitored by teachers. As no teacher would allow more than one girl to leave and go to the bathroom at the same time, you either got lucky and met friends from other classes at the same time, or you attempted Bloody Mary on your own. The latter was not for the faint of heart, and to this day, I do not know if anyone who claimed to have gone through with it actually did. I do recall the story of Tiffany, who supposedly was in the bathroom when several other girls made it to the third “Bloody Mary” and was so terrified that she wet her pants. As Tiffany was not in my own class, this story was never entirely confirmed but it became a part of the Bloody Mary legends that began to circulate amongst my friends.

I do not recall ever trying to summon Bloody Mary at home on my own at any point, or hearing if anyone one else did. Part of the fascination with Bloody Mary certainly came with the group dynamic or pack mentality that drives many childhood games. I certainly was far too scared to try calling Bloody Mary on my own. In fact, I was so scared, that I remember asking a babysitter to cover my mirror one night when I woke up crying. I remember very specifically that she covered it with my blue raglan and I also remember trying to come up with a reason for having the mirror covered, should my parents come home and ask for an explanation. For some reason, I felt that it was okay to tell my babysitter (who was also my cousin), but that I should keep it from my parents. Looking back on this, I speculate that I was afraid of getting in trouble with my mother for trying to summon Mary (the Virgin Mary). My mother was attempting to instill some Catholic virtues into her children, and I had a feeling that playing around with this sort of thing was some form of sin. Bloody Mary is, for children, what Jay Mechling labels “antithetical play” (1986: 97) – play that children strive to keep a secret from adults as it explicitly goes against what they have been told to do.

I have encountered a wide variety of reactions when asked about my thesis topic, and occasionally come across one that is noteworthy in relation to certain aspects of my topic. Recently, I was engaged in a conversation that was highly relevant to the above discussion about how I was introduced to Bloody Mary myself. One of my co-workers, Wendy, who is several years older than I am, but grew up in the same neighborhood (she did not, however, go to Catholic school), asked about my

thesis, and when I told her what I was working on, she said that she had not played Bloody Mary herself, but knew of it from her own children (who are currently in Grades One, Three and Five) mentioning it. I told her that I had learned it at an early age, and named Erin B, my Brownie Sixer as the one who had told me about Bloody Mary, and my coworker said “Well that makes sense – they’re a very Catholic family!” (Wendy K-FI/13)

Wendy’s comments are worth examining on several levels. First of all, even though she is only five years older than I am, she has no recollection of even hearing about Bloody Mary during her school years. She then asked two more of our coworkers, both of whom had attended school with her and thus were the same age, born 1972-73, if they had heard of Bloody Mary and both responded that they had not, until they came to work at our school, Bishop Feild Elementary. I have found that other St. John’s women over the age of forty, even if they had attended Catholic school several years before I did, did not know about Bloody Mary. Christine H, born in 1972 stated that

I’m surprised that I had never heard of it until you asked me about it! Especially since I went to Holy Heart [a local high school] when it was still an all-girls school. You’d think that with all the ghost stories we used to tell about that place, like the stories about “Sister Beads,”¹ that I’d have heard something about it! And since you mentioned it to me that first time, both of my kids have come home from school talking about it!” (Christine H/FI-2013)

¹ The legend of “Sister Beads,” a ghostly nun who walks the halls of the school, came up with two other informants as well who had also attended Holy Heart of Mary High School in St. John’s. One was a contemporary of Christine H (born in 1972), the other was one of my peers (born in 1977).

In addition to Christine H, several other women I spoke with, also born between 1971 and 1973, had heard about it from their school-aged children but otherwise knew nothing about it from their own childhoods. The oldest St. John's – indeed Newfoundland – person I have spoken to who recalls Bloody Mary as part of their own school culture was born in 1974, meaning that they attended elementary school in the early 1980s. I realize that the one year between those who knew and those who do not seems to be quite a slim margin but in all of the conversations I have had, both formal (interviews) and informal, since I have been working on this topic, I have found this discrepancy in age and participation in Bloody Mary seems to be consistent. This suggests it was popularized in St. John's around 1980.

Chapter Two – Literature Review

Bloody Mary has been written about by a variety of folklorists, who have considered its many facets, forms and functions. Considering the scholarly work on Bloody Mary from a chronological point of view, I will start with what seems to be the first essay published on the topic. Janet Langlois' article " 'Mary Whales, I Believe in You': Myth and Ritual Subdued" was first published in *Indiana Folklore*, in 1978, and then again in the 1980 anthology *Indiana Folklore: A Reader* (edited by Linda Dégh).

To illustrate her thoughts on the interrelation between myth and ritual, Langlois uses a narrative relayed to her in 1972 by a twelve-year-old student, Gia, a student at an experimental Catholic school for black children in Indianapolis. Langlois' transcription of her conversation with Gia is basically a retelling of the well-known contemporary legend, "The Vanishing Hitchhiker," localized by Gia to have taken place in Indianapolis, and then followed by the description of Gia and her school friends summoning the dead girl from the story, using a mirror in a darkened bathroom and calling her name ten or a hundred times, while chanting "Mary Whales, I believe in you."

Langlois interviewed a number of children at the school. It turned out that the "legend/game" (as Langlois refers to it in her article) was well-known to many of the students there. Of the eighty students interviewed, twenty were familiar with the activity and had participated in it, and of those, ten were still actively engaged in the activity. This indicates that approximately one quarter of the students who spoke with

Langlois had engaged in the Bloody Mary activity at some point and were willing to talk to an adult about it. Although not an extremely high number, Langlois considered it relevant enough to include it in her findings. It is worth considering the idea that, due to the subversive nature of Bloody Mary, not all the students who had knowledge of, or participated in Bloody Mary would admit it to an adult.

Langlois analyzed different aspects of her information to consider elements in the legend/game. She considered the “primacy” of myth and ritual: which came first amongst participants? In some cases, students knew of the legend but had not participated in the game. In other cases, the legend was something of a precursor to the game; that is, the story was told to explain the game – who they were going to summon in the mirror and what happened to her. This group also knew what the anticipated result of the summoning would be: Mary Whales will scratch your face and draw blood. There were, in Langlois’ collected texts other, more violent variations in the end result. She notes some particularly extreme variations, such as a text in the archives at Indiana University, collected in 1968, in Salem, Wisconsin, that came from several boys who did not know who Mary Worth was (note variation in name), just that she “comes leaping out of the mirror screaming and leashing out with her long, sharp fingernails and scratching the chanter’s face to shreds” (Langlois, 1968). Other variations noted by Langlois include variation in the name (many of which came from her original informant, Gia), including Mary Whales, Mary Lou, Mary Johnson, Mary Weathersby, Mary Worthington and Mary Worth. (200)

The origin of any of the names is not clear, nor is the origin of the accompanying narratives. Langlois lists variations in the legend relating to the game and in her research found that Mary Worth, for girls in Southern Wisconsin, was a woman who was marred in an accident and, when summoned in the mirror, would try to disfigure the person who summoned her. This particular variant, that of a wronged or disfigured girl or woman who then attempts to force other girls to meet her fate should they summon her in the mirror, is also noted by Jan Harold Brunvand in his brief treatment of Bloody Mary in his 2001 *Encyclopedia of Urban Legends*. He writes

The legend component of the ritual is sketchy, consisting usually of vague stories about some kind of tragedy suffered by the real Mary that disfigured her and made her determined to harm other young girls. (205)

In other variants discussed by Langlois, the subject of the summoning was a witch, sometimes one from the 17th Century Salem witch trials. Other variations said that she was of African descent, somehow connected with a cult, and in still other cases, a woman murdered by a jealous lover.

Langlois' article is the only research, other than my own, I have come across that deals with Bloody Mary (and its variants) as played in a Catholic Elementary school. Her findings were not the same as mine – she did not encounter informants who made any specific connection to the Virgin Mary, as I did – however, her article and her examination of ritual and myth were relevant to my thesis as I explored the complex generic forms of Bloody Mary.

Alan Dundes' 1998 article, "Bloody Mary in the Mirror: A Ritual Reflection of Pre-Pubescent Anxiety" is an example of a psychoanalytical approach to folklore. Bloody Mary, at first glance, seems ripe with symbolism and could be viewed as a representation of a societal milestone – the onset of a girl's first menses. Dundes takes on a game/ritual generally played by girls and uses it to illustrate a larger point: that there is a "persistent lack of analysis or interpretation" in folklore. He states that many academic folklorists "do little more than report folkloristic texts totally devoid of the slightest hint of thoughtful commentary" (76). As such, he puts forth his own interpretation of Bloody Mary as menstruation text and informal maturation ritual. Dundes uses Bloody Mary, which he calls a "traditional ritual found in American folklore" (76) – noting that it has also been reported in Newfoundland (found in texts in the MUN Folklore Archive) – to show what he clearly considers to be a proper analysis. At the time of his writing, there was apparently little analysis done on the topic of Bloody Mary, and Dundes felt this essay would "make perfectly clear what the ritual is all about" (76).

Starting with Herbert and Mary Knapp's general discussion on "Scaries" in their anthology of children's folklore *One Potato, Two Potato* (1976), Dundes begins to examine the primary elements of the Bloody Mary ritual (pointing out the variations in naming the person in the mirror, including Mary Worth, Bloody Mary, Mary Jane). He determines that the barest elements commonly found in collected narrative of the ritual include a child, usually a girl, who enters a darkened bathroom

and repeatedly calls the name (or some derivative of) “Mary,” anticipating that a malevolent creature will appear in the mirror.

Dundes discusses Simon Bronner’s treatment (1988) of “Mary Worth” rituals, which are described by Bronner as “a girls’ tradition common in elementary school” (1988:168) with séance-like atmosphere. Included in Bronner’s collected texts is a particular narrative from a male informant in Pennsylvania in 1984, which caught Dundes’ attention. This narrative describes the method of summoning Bloody Mary as follows:

To call her ghost, girls go in the bathroom and prick their fingers with a pin to draw a drop of blood. Then they press the two droplets of blood together and say “We believe in Bloody Mary” ten times with their eyes shut. (77)

What appealed to Dundes about this particular text was the presence of blood. The girls in this particular school had incorporated their own blood, in the form of a pinprick to the finger, reminiscent of another childhood ritual (making your closest friend your “blood brother” or using blood to swear an oath about keeping a secret).² Dundes felt that this was a key element in his analysis. Finding little else useful in Bronner’s essay, he moves on to Janet Langlois’ essay.

In his brief discussion of Langlois’ “Myth and Ritual Subdued,” Dundes summarizes Langlois’ primary concern of determining wherein lies the relationship between myth and ritual. He claims that while Langlois may have “failed in her

² Urban Dictionary.com defines Blood Brothers: “When two people cut their thumb and press the open cuts together forming a blood pact. Considered by some to be like becoming family.”

primary goal of trying to resolve or at least illuminate the myth/ritual controversy, she did make a valuable observation about the ritual. It has to do with the importance of the mirror.” Langlois observes that the mirror “literally reflects the identification of the participants with the revenant”(1978:11) and while Dundes notes that she is correct in this observation, he feels that “it does not really explain the underlying meaning of the ritual” (79).

Touching briefly on Jan Brunvand’s three-page discussion of Bloody Mary in his *Encyclopedia of Urban Legends* (1986), Dundes summarizes the work of the previously mentioned folklorists by stating that “It is clear that Bronner, Langlois and Brunvand certainly know about the ‘Bloody Mary’ ritual, but it is equally obvious that its basic underlying significance, if any, seems to have eluded them” (79). That being said, just what does Dundes himself think about the deeper meaning behind the Bloody Mary ritual?

The first question Dundes poses is “What exactly does the reflection of Bloody Mary mean?” and then “And why does the ritual almost invariably take place in a bathroom?” (79) These questions, along with his earlier points made about Bronner’s observation of one of his informants using a pricked finger to draw blood as part of the ritual in calling Bloody Mary, lead to Dundes’ analysis on Bloody Mary, in which he uses ten texts taken from seventy-five reports collected by his undergraduate students at the University of California, Berkeley. Of this sample, five narratives mention flushing the toilet as part of the Bloody Mary ritual.

From the mention of the toilet in half of the texts, Dundes has made the leap that the ritual of summoning Bloody Mary is related to the approaching menses of prepubescent girls. In considering the rituals associated with menstruation in other cultures, Dundes notes that American culture does not have a formal ritual, and surmises that Bloody Mary may serve as an informal ritual of sorts. He states that “The Bloody Mary ritual in that context would appear to be an anticipatory ritual, essentially warning girls of what to expect upon entering puberty” (85).

Elizabeth Tucker’s *Journal of American Folklore* article (2005) looks at Bloody Mary narratives collected from college students (“college” in this article is interchangeable with the Canadian term “university”), in contrast to the more commonly studied preadolescent narrative. Tucker notes that in her earlier work, as a graduate student studying under Linda Dégh, she examined the storytelling of pre-adolescent girls, and that Bloody Mary, or Mary Wolf (a variation noted by Tucker in her 1977 dissertation), fit neatly into the lives and culture of many pre-adolescent girls. However, in this more recent work, Tucker uses the narratives she collects regarding summoning of “mirror witches” amongst college students to apply a combination of Jungian analysis and social context, gender and folk tradition, with both a psychological and social orientation.

Over a period of four years, Tucker collected forty-two relevant narratives from students in a residence hall at Binghamton University, NY. The residence, Sullivan Hall, was said by students to be haunted, and an apparent “no drugs, no alcohol” policy may have led students to become more intrigued by supernatural

activities, such as ghost “hunting” and mirror summoning. Supernatural exploration is a likely destination for curious minds gathered together in an unfamiliar setting (such as at girls’ slumber parties, sleep-away camps and college students living away from home at the first time). The exploration of supernatural activities may have a slightly illicit feel – the thrill of “antithetical play” (Mechling 1986: 97) – but no Sullivan Hall rules were being broken and thus it seems to be the perfect extracurricular activity for the non-rebel college student who is looking for a mild thrill, or even as a vehicle for developing new relationships through shared experiences. As seen later in this chapter, Shaari Freed discusses these shared experiences and their effect on relationships and this approach is very much in line with my own regarding early adolescent girls’ use of Bloody Mary.

Tucker also uses Carl G. Jung’s ideas of archetypes and archetypal images to illustrate how storytelling (and an activity like Bloody Mary) works so well in a college residence hall. She states that

When freshmen arrive at their new home away from home, they enter a domain where a communication pattern for storytelling already exists. This pattern is invisible (not readily apparent) and inherited (passed along by older students). Stories that spring from this underlying patterns rise to the surface with subtle variations. (118)

By considering Tucker’s adaptation of Jung’s theory and applying it to any particular legend, the population or folk group that tells it and passes it on, and the location to which it relates, there is a door opened on yet another possible usage of the legend. It would seem that the archetypal theory, as applied to the study of legend

leads to more of a primal usage; in some legend-sharing situations, we use our previously gained knowledge and unconsciously-absorbed experiences to become a part of greater consciousness. Being part of a social group is a strong motivator for most people, and can influence the way people act and think, consciously or subconsciously. This idea should also be considered when examining ostension. By taking an already-known narrative and following through with an action, or re-enactment of it, the participants are becoming part of a “greater consciousness,” which means joining the ranks of those who have gone before them and participated in the same action, and then adding their own narrative of their own experience.

Tucker delves deeper into the Jungian notions of the animus (the male element in every female’s psyche) and the anima (the female aspect of the male psyche) and considers the psychoanalytical notions of who appears in the mirror, to whom, and what it could represent. This particular exploration is not necessarily relevant to my own work on Bloody Mary, but I feel it is more in line with my own experiences than the psychoanalytical work regarding the same subject as considered by Dundes (previously discussed in this chapter). Tucker’s use of the Jungian archetypes as an analytical tool provides some insight into the function of supernatural play and, for me, is highly applicable to my own research.

One of Tucker’s narratives involves a male ghost appearing in the mirror to a female student named Jessica when she was meditating in front of the mirror in her room at Sullivan Hall. She then sought help or assurance from a male resident Jason, who concurred that he felt a “presence” in the room. Tucker goes on to discuss

aspects of both Jessica and Jason’s backgrounds and personal interests – both of which either explain or enhance the validity of belief for both students. Jessica saw the apparition when she was meditating – an activity that generally appeals to people who are open-minded to the idea of other levels of consciousness and some level of spirituality. One can conclude that someone with this belief system and worldview is more likely to believe that they have had a supernatural encounter than someone with a more black and white worldview. Jessica is also described in the article as “psychic” and already having an interest in the supernatural prior to this particular situation. Jason was sought out by Jessica and consulted on the whole incident because he was “versed in shamanism” (189) and had apparently felt a presence in the residence as well. We are told that both Jessica and Jason already have “conscious experience” with supernatural occurrences, making them ideal candidates to become involved and caught up with the supernatural stories that seem to be a part of Sullivan Hall on this particular university campus.

Such activities have become known to folklorists as “legend trips” and on the same vein of exploration, we find the term “ostension.” Wynne L. Summers’ article “Bloody Mary: When Ostension Becomes a Deadly and Destructive Teen Ritual” (2000) examines ostension, a common teenage activity with sometimes dire consequences. However, the “Bloody Mary” that is referred to in the title of the article is a reference to an elderly woman who lived in the Nebraska countryside, just outside the author’s town of Lincoln, in the middle part of the twentieth century. This woman was the victim of teenage vandalism and escalating violence, brought on by

exaggerated stories and often fabricated tales that were passed around amongst the local teen population. Summers' offers historic biographical information on the woman who became known as Bloody Mary, as the result of an incident wherein she defended herself and her property from teenage vandals and was shot. The woman, whose real name was Mary Partington, continued to live on her family's property into the 1960s, when she was quite elderly, but eventually the ongoing violence and destruction, that came from local teenagers daring each other to approach her house, often taking a souvenir, or leaving behind a broken window, or destroyed mailbox, forced her to leave the house she had lived in her entire life, and move to a nursing home. Summers goes on to write that the destruction to the property continued after her departure. In 1977, a group of teenagers set the house on fire, which led to its collapse.

The article, though not related directly to the Bloody Mary of my own research, is indeed relevant, for several reasons. The first is that it discusses the darker, more extreme side of the generic forms of Bloody Mary in the Mirror, ostension and legend tripping. Both Linda Dégh (2003) and Bill Ellis (1982/83) have written extensively on the two, which though not interchangeable, share underlying sociologic effect. Legend tripping is the most similar to Summers' personal narrative experience, and some of the narratives I collected in Whitbourne/Dildo from the students at Crescent Collegiate. Several of the students in that group of informants wrote about who they understood Bloody Mary to be; for

example, in one case she was the ghost of a long-dead, local woman who was ostracized within the community for being a supposed witch.

My interest in Bloody Mary originally developed out of my own personal experience and involvement, and I can say, in my own experience, that it was primarily a girls' activity. Nonetheless, among my younger informants, I noticed that it was becoming more widespread and less gender-specific. As well, on YouTube, many of the videos I watched featured boys, as well as girls, participating in the activity. However, most folklore scholarship – primarily in the field of children's folklore and games – indicates that historically, Bloody Mary is categorized as a girls' game.

Shaari Freed and Elizabeth Tucker have both explored pre-adolescent activities, Freed in her article “Spooky Activities and Group Loyalty” (1994) and Tucker in several articles, including two on levitation, one in 1984 and then revisiting the topic again in 2008. In their articles, both scholars have indicated that such activities tend to draw female participants. This will be discussed further in Chapter Three.

While conducting a “play audit” (an assessment of how children use the play space available to them) at a school in the north of England in the early 1990s, Marc Armitage, folklorist and play consultant, was told by a child that the corridor in which the bathrooms (or simply “toilets” as they are referred to in this article) were located was haunted. He writes that he noted what the child had said but dismissed it, until a short time later he was doing an audit at another school, and the same thing was said

by another child – that the toilets were haunted.

Armitage set out to explore the topic mainly due to the high frequency in which he came across stories of “toilet ghosts” amongst school children. He states that in

...around 65 per cent of the schools in the study group the story was well known amongst the child population, even if some children said they did not take part in the rituals associated with the story. Despite some variations in detail, most of the story was consistent. In a further four per cent of schools there were stories that fitted the structure of the toilet ghost story (at least in part) but no single named character was recorded. Very few adults within the schools knew of the existence of a toilet ghost character at their school and, of those who did, few gave any real significance to it. The type and general location of the school does not seem to be a factor, as the stories were collected in new and old schools, in both urban and rural areas, schools in predominately wealthy areas and those more disadvantaged, in schools provided by the state and by the church, in big schools and small. (2006: 1)

Throughout the article, Armitage notes and discusses the similarities in the toilet ghost stories he encountered at various schools, as well as giving a brief overview of other versions of the stories and their occurrences in other countries. He notes, that amongst the schools he used as a sample for his research, that the structure and detail of the toilet ghost stories were fairly consistent. He statistically breaks down the “named character element” to show that the most commonly used name he came across was “The White Woman” – which was apparently used by 75% of respondents. Other names used were “The Grey Lady” and “The Green Lady,” which

Armitage said he came across at two schools per, but notes that “The White Lady” was also used at those schools as the name of the toilet ghost. The White Lady is a common character or motif in ghostlore in general, Armitage notes, common in the ghost stories of the British Isles, and similar to some versions of the North American “Vanishing Hitchhiker” motif.

Other variations Armitage came across in his survey included Candy Man, Chucky and Charles – all male, all coming from popular culture (in this case, movies), but “not generally referred to by children with any seriousness” (2). This stood out to me as an important point in the article, which Armitage further considers later in the article. The level of seriousness in children’s play, particularly in supernatural play, can be directly linked to the level of belief, which is an integral part of supernatural play, to be discussed in the next chapter.

In his brief survey of the toilet ghost stories found in other countries, Armitage writes that “she” is well-known in the United States, Canada, Sweden, Holland, France, Australia, Japan and Thailand. He points out that the term “she” has been chosen deliberately because “amongst all recorded versions of the story so far, the central character has been female” (3). In his overview of these variations, he includes some examples of toilet ghosts in the other countries, such as “Hanako San” in Japan, which means “The Little Flower Girl” and notes that she is generally thought to appear wearing a white dress (in keeping with the Woman in White motif) or sometimes a red dress (which could symbolically link her to Bloody Mary).

Although there are similarities in names of these toilet ghost, Armitage notes that the different legends in the various countries have different structures, and so from a folkloric perspective, likely have different roots. The structure for the British school toilet ghost narratives were apparently all quite similar amongst his sample and, much like in my own findings, not just limited to institutions, but also reported in “home bath-rooms at sleep-over parties” (4).

Citing the mirror as a common element in these narratives, Armitage considers the use of mirrors in stories, folktales and as a ritualistic prop (7). However, unlike my own research, the mirror is not present in each narrative collected by Armitage. In some cases, the ghost does not appear in the mirror at all, but is expected to materialize (or according to some of his informants, already has) after completing a certain ritual. Much as in my own research, the rituals vary, both in script and action. In some cases, there is water running, a toilet flushing or knocking a specific pattern on a certain door (4). In other cases, the variation in “script” (what one was supposed to say to summon the ghost) was related to the story or legend of who the ghost was and how she came to be haunting that space. Some of the examples presented by Armitage here were surprisingly similar to my own findings, particularly those of the high school students from Crescent Collegiate in Whitbourne/Dildo. Some examples of these from Armitage are:

“White Lady, White Lady, we’ve killed your white baby” (audit March 1996a).

“White Lady, White Lady, we killed your black baby” (audit July 1997a).

“White Lady, White Lady, what have you done with your white baby?” (audit July 1998a). (5)

Armitage references Janet Langlois’ findings (1978), considering the similarities to Bloody Mary narratives, and the La Llorona legend of the woman who drowned her own children and then herself, and her distraught ghost seeks out others to drown near the body of water where the drownings took place. A similar story was told to me by a student in Whitbourne/Dildo, but it was localized to have taken place in that community (see Chapter Three, below). The article goes on to examine other possible origins of the White Lady myth (as collected from children at the various schools) and again, there were notable similarities to some of my collected narratives. Armitage points to a specific story about a baby that accidentally drowned in a lake that was once located on the land that the school now stands. According to the school children, this is the reason that the White Lady haunts their bathroom. However, Armitage researched the matter further and discovered that the story has no historical truth (6). I encountered several similar stories in my own research (about the origins of the version of Bloody Mary found in various school bathrooms), particularly at Bishop Feild School, and these stories, predictably, turned out to have no historical merit (see Chapter Six).

After presenting an overview of his findings at various schools in England, Armitage delves into the psychology behind the “toilet ghosts.” He asks about what purpose such stories have in the world of childhood. I was struck by his conclusions as I found them to be very much in line with my some of my own. He writes:

Children, and adults for that matter, certainly enjoy the thrill of fear (witness the popularity of scary theme park rides and horror films) and revel in the delight of passing on fear, either by the telling of spooky stories or jumping out from behind the door and shouting “Boo!” But the creation of liminal space in this context suggests something much more significant than simple enjoyment. In the context of the toilet ghost stories it has been generally concluded that the prime purpose of play such as this is in children developing a mechanism for dealing with fear. (2006:9)

The article goes on to consider the common fears of children and their understanding of what is real and what is imaginary. Armitage states that what has been written on these ideas generally concludes that “These stories serve as a mechanism that allows children to tackle and conquer fear by personifying a real or perceived but undefined external anxiety” (10). However, he also notes that there is not always a purpose or a reason for everything children do, and that “children do sometimes play purely for the sake of it and use play as an enjoyable way of passing time” (10).

All of the previously written literature that I considered in writing this thesis has illuminated different aspects of Bloody Mary and served to illustrate the multi-faceted, multi-generic nature of what I once would have considered “just” a children’s game. In the past, scholars have identified Bloody Mary as a legend, a school children’s game, a maturation ritual, and a form of supernatural play. As this thesis

shows, Bloody Mary is all of those and more. It is a highly dynamic tradition, spanning several generations and is found among different folk groups that vary in age, geography and religion, serving different functions and with slight variations.

Chapter Three – Complex Generic Forms

Bloody Mary exists simultaneously in many complex generic forms. It is, by some accounts, a game or pastime, generally played by preadolescent girls at slumber parties and is likened to other séance-style games such as “Light as a Feather” or using the Ouija board (which are also multi-generic ostentitious events). When played in the schools, as it was exclusively amongst my first group of informants, Bloody Mary can be viewed as a legend trip. Based on research done amongst high school students in the community of Whitbourne/Dildo, Newfoundland, Bloody Mary is a woman in several local legends. Bloody Mary also has many of the essential aspects of folk drama and, while not necessarily categorized as such by the participants, is certainly worth considering. There is also a supernatural element to Bloody Mary, and several of my informants admitted to an interest in the supernatural and occult at the time in their lives at which they were participating in Bloody Mary. Currently, amongst contemporary school children, Bloody Mary is still played, but we are seeing the effect of technology on the transmission of the narratives that accompany the game or ritual. Recently, my attention was brought to a chain e-mail that has apparently been circulating the inboxes of pre-teens for the past five years or so. Schools have started to develop policies about e-mails like this one. They are considered (at least in the school where one of my informants teaches) a form of “cyber-bullying.” It made its way to a younger boy, who became distraught, and his mother called the school and a school meeting was called to determine how to handle

the situation (further discussed below).

Prior to undertaking the research for the term paper from which this thesis developed, I had considered Bloody Mary a game. In my experiences, it was always prefaced with the verb “play,” as in “Do you want to play Bloody Mary?” or it was something that we “did,” as in “She was doing Bloody Mary yesterday in the bathroom and a teacher caught her!” By calling it a game, something about the supernatural aspect is in some way diminished. However, Bill Ellis has pointed out,

We should not be quick to dismiss such rituals’ significance simply because many teens assert that they are “only games.” Games, as folklorists have noted, are transcriptions of serious, real-life concerns, and their play-like elements often allow these concerns to be expressed more directly than they would be in passing conversation. This is particularly the case in considering young women’s ritualistic games. (2004:143)

Children’s games often have underlying significance to them. Up until the middle of the twentieth century, no one had really taken much a scholarly interest in what children do when they play. However, in recent years, beginning with the Opies in the mid-1950s, folklorists began to explore the different forms of play, and the purposes they serve. Children are viewed as either something in need of protection, both from the physical world and from various aspects of culture. Often times children are shielded from things that adults fear might harm them in some way. That is why we “childproof” everything from medicine to computer search engines. With modern technology in the age of DVRs (an application of digital television that allows people to “record” any shows they would like to watch and save them for later

playback), parental control can even dictate what children are able to watch on television, even when there are no adults present. Children are told how to act and react to situations, what specific words are acceptable and which are not. They are told what is inappropriate, and are given boundaries, both physical (for example, not to go to past a certain streetlight, or the end of a cul-de-sac) and social (such as being told not to ask questions about certain things in public). These lines of acceptable behavior certainly exist for a variety of reasons: safety, social acceptance, and social responsibility among them. As children get older and reach their teenage years, there is a generally accepted and expected amount of rebellion. As long as it stays within a safe and “normal” range, no serious action is taken against them, though teenagers are frequently grounded or have various privileges taken away. However, adults in our society do not have to live within the same confines as children. As adults, we are the rule-makers. Our elected governments act as the “parents” in our society; they decide on the rules and regulations that we, as responsible members of society must follow, as well as the fines, and consequences that we must face should we break these rules, inadvertently or not. Given all of the restrictions that are put on children, it is no wonder that they are often drawn towards what Mechling (drawing on Sutton-Smith) refers to as “antithetical play” (1986: 97).

In order to understand why children engage in antithetical play, it is helpful to reconsider our notions of the innocence of children. Children are living, thinking entities who take in and process the world around them, as best they can, given their prior cultural knowledge and cognitive capacity. They know, after a certain age, what

is right and wrong, as well as what is expected of them and, like teenagers, they have within them, a certain amount of rebellion against all of that. People have a tendency to question authority, even on a very small scale. If one were to place the needs of children on Maslow's hierarchical pyramid (a five-stage theory proposed by American psychologist Abraham Maslow in 1943 to explain what motivates human beings towards personal growth and development), after the physiological needs (food, shelter) have been met, the next level of needs are safety and security, and then self-actualization. Brian Sutton-Smith has proposed that many of these sociological needs are met by children through play (1997). Where else would children act out against the constraints placed upon them by well-meaning adults but within the world they create for themselves?

In the introduction to *The Ambiguity of Play*, Brian Sutton-Smith writes that in the study of children's folklore, we, as folklorists, must consider the various rhetorics of play. Among those he suggests for consideration is the rhetoric of "play as power, contest, conflict, war, competition, hierarchy, hidden transcripts and so forth" (1997:7). In conducting interviews with both children and adults who recalled Bloody Mary as part of their childhoods, I detected a common thread in the attitude towards their recollections of "playing" Bloody Mary – that it was perceived as being a little bit naughty, and certainly something to be kept hidden from the prying eyes of parents and teachers, anyone that might somehow hinder, or interrupt the experience. "Children are aware of how adults will react, and therefore, keep (these materials) generally among themselves" (Sullivan 1995: 158). Elizabeth Tucker has suggested

that, when collecting legends and narratives from children, the context in which they are interviewed can have an affect on how open they are with the collector. She points out that in a one-on-one setting with an adult, a child may be generous with details, but reluctant to broach certain “taboo subjects” (1995:193). The usage of the word “taboo” is what caught my eye here in reference to Bloody Mary and my own collecting of stories and recollections of Bloody Mary experiences. In particular, when interviewing children of friends and colleagues, I quickly learned (or at least attempted!) to break down the barriers between adult and child, by ensuring that the child called me by my first name (no matter how their parent introduced me), and then by sharing some of my own anecdotes, or anxieties that would be more relatable to a child (my fear of the dark and obsession with Harry Potter books, for example). As a result, in most cases, I felt this allowed my younger informants to share their stories in a more candid fashion. As Tucker points out, “...their stories flow better with minimal adult interference” (1995:192). And while sitting down with an adult to have a conversation recorded likely constitutes “interference,” generally, by presenting the situation as a slightly subversive one, by sending parents to another room, sharing a bag of gummy worms and talking about Bloody Mary, I found that my younger informants opened up to me and we had authentic conversation about their Bloody Mary experiences.

Giving consideration to Sutton-Smith’s theories on why children play the way they do, I found that the rhetoric of power (further discussed below) through play can be applied in some of my collected narratives of the Bloody Mary experience. The

girls from Crescent Collegiate (Whitbourne/ Dildo) told me that they first learned about Bloody Mary from hearing the older girls on the school bus talk about it. For instance, one explained:

When I was in elementary school, I found out about Bloody Mary when I was about six or seven years old. The older girls used to talk about it on the bus and stuff so me and a couple of friends would try it. We would go in the bathroom and say “Bloody Mary” or “Bloody Mary I killed your baby” five times with our eyes closed and the lights off. By the time we were done we would be too scared to look in the mirror, we always ran away. But a friend of mine said she seen something and she cried. I think until this day she won’t go into a dark bathroom. Also we used to lock the younger girls in the bathroom when I was in Grade Six, so eleven years old, and do the same and scare them. (S.J-WD/09)

S.J’s account sounds like what teachers and administrators would consider bullying in today’s school environment. When I asked S.J why they used Bloody Mary to scare the younger girls, she shrugged and said “I don’t know. It was something that was done to us, so when we were the oldest, we did it too, y’know. It was just something that you did.” (S.J-WD/09)

By adopting Bloody Mary as a scare tactic against the younger girls, S.J and her friends were continuing something that they themselves viewed to be a tradition. They wanted to establish themselves as the oldest and therefore the most powerful in their school setting. By “playing” Bloody Mary and frightening younger children, they were asserting their power. Another informant, Andrea H, told me that she learned about Bloody Mary from a girl in her grade who was considered a “mean girl.” She said that that particular girl was the “head girl or the alpha girl” in her

group of friends, and she felt that participation in Bloody Mary was somehow required of her. (Andrea H-F.I/10)

Kerrie C told me that she remembers not wanting to “do” Bloody Mary in the darkened bathroom of her basement, but since all the other girls at her house were participating, she felt pressured to do it as well. This sense of peer pressure is also, to some extent, a power-play among groups of children. Those doing the pressuring are viewed as the most dominant within the group and those being pressured, the weakest.

As previously mentioned, Shaari Freed and Elizabeth Tucker have both explored pre-adolescent activities, Freed in her article “Spooky Activities and Group Loyalty” (1994) and Tucker in several articles, including two on levitation (1984; 2008). In their articles, both have indicated the preponderance of girls (rather than boys) in the activity. Freed explores the idea that pre-adolescent girls’ engagement in what she deems “supernatural” activities serves to strengthen the bond that is part of a developmental stage. She cites Selman et al. (1977) in which the writers propose a five-stage developmental awareness in children and adolescents. Freed summarizes these stages and points out that between the ages of seven and fourteen, an important element in the development of friendships is “intimate-mutual sharing” (36). Freed shares her own experiences regarding “spooky activities” (her term), such as using the Ouija board and playing “Light as a Feather” and regarding the bond that developed in her “friend group.” She writes:

I remain convinced that a certain component of that connection is directly

attributable to our supernatural adventures. I believe that because we participated in activities that felt mysterious, forbidden, foreboding, and (best of all) unique to us, our loyalty to the group increased. I postulate that the state of arousal and fear worked as a form of initiation and served as a kind of glue to enhance group cohesiveness. (31)

My interest in Bloody Mary originally developed out of my own personal experience and involvement, and I can say, from my own perspective, that it was primarily a girl's activity. However, Bloody Mary is becoming more widespread and less gender-specific. On YouTube, many of the videos I watched featured boys as well as girls participating in the activity, and my own fieldwork with younger informants in 2012 and 2013 indicates an opening up of boys' interest. As noted already, most folklore scholarship – primarily in the field of children's folklore and games – indicates that historically, Bloody Mary is categorized as a “girl's game.”

The majority of my informants were women and girls, simply because they were the ones who had experiences with Bloody Mary. Men that I asked responded by saying things like “Bloody Mary was something I remember the girls doing in the bathroom at school” or recalled their sisters and their friends playing it in their basement. Bill Ellis' statement about young women's interest in exploring the supernatural is certainly worth consideration. In his book *Lucifer Ascending* (2004), Ellis states that

Adult witchcraft often incorporated serious elements of protest against male domination in the religious and social world. Women who adopted the witch's role could gain and wield considerably more power than they could by

conforming to “good” images of femininity. We can expect similar elements of protest against conventional female role models in these forms of play, and perhaps in a more visible form. (2004:144)

While this may have been true several centuries ago, and perhaps even into the twentieth century, in today’s Western society one would assume that women are as socially “powerful” as their male counterparts. Why then do such magical traditions prevail amongst young women and girls? Is Bloody Mary, as considered through the experiences of my informants, a gender-based activity? Based on my early fieldwork, it would seem so. My more recent fieldwork, which expanded to include current school-aged children, tells a different story. The current generation of school children that I spoke with (from my own Grade Six classes from the 2010/2011, 2011/2012 school years, Cowan Heights Elementary students from Grades Five and Six, and Bishop Feild Students from Grades One, Two and Five) show a more wide-spread audience for Bloody Mary participation. It would seem gender may no longer be an issue. At Bishop Feild Elementary school, Bloody Mary is not only played by boys as well as girls, but apparently Bloody Mary has a brother, named “Bloody Paul,” who appears in the boy’s bathroom. Eli B, a Grade Six student who has attended Bishop Feild since Kindergarten, told me that

Bloody Paul is Bloody Mary’s brother. Someone said he got hit in the head with a shovel, which is how he died and now he haunts the boys’ bathroom by the gym. I know some kids who have seen him down there. Sometimes he flicks the lights and stuff. (Eli B-CES/13)

Eli was the first boy to talk to me about Bloody Paul, but as I further discuss in

Chapter Six, Bloody Paul is starting to establish a place in the extended folklore of Bloody Mary at Bishop Feild School. For some of my informants, Bloody Mary was strictly a school-based activity, however, many of them (all female) recalled doing it at sleepover parties. At these same sleepover parties, or at least at the same point in their lives, they also participated in other games, such as “Light as a Feather, Stiff as a Board”, séances and using the Ouija Board. A few informants talked about using a deck of playing cards to determine who “their next boyfriend” was going to be (Susan L-FCSA/09). As my original research is based on girl’s slumber party games I could not say whether or not boys engage in these types of activities. However, there is certainly far more documentation and archival material about girls being involved with divination and supernatural play. For instance, both Ellis (2002) and Tucker (1984, 2008) discuss girls’ divination activities in the United States. Creighton (1968) has collected examples for girls in the Maritimes of Canada (184-191).

In my conversations about the Ouija board, I found three informants who said that the board they used was passed down to them by their own mother, or the mother of the friend that introduced it to their peer group. My own Ouija board had been my mother’s. I found it at age twelve in my grandmother’s attic (a fact which added to the authenticity of it), and while my mother told me several stories that seemed to validate whether or not “it worked” when I asked, she did not try to discourage me from using it. My grandmother, who was a devout Catholic, told me to “be careful” when I took an interest in it, but did not say much beyond that. However, there are many people who truly believe that the Ouija board is not a game, but a gateway to

the spiritual realm, to be heeded or left alone entirely. In discussing Ouija board usage with informants, I found that the same “rules” that had been passed on to me by a friend’s older sister were fairly common ones: always be respectful of the spirits you summoned, request a “good” spirit (it was important to find out right away what you were dealing with, usually by asking, and if the planchette (the heart-shaped piece that you put your fingers on that was “guided” by the spirits) started to go in circles, you were likely dealing with something evil and should say “good bye” right away, at which point the planchette would be drawn down to the “good bye” on the bottom of the board). Another integral rule was to never, never use it by yourself, lest you become possessed. One informant put it best when she said “It’s funny that we always thought as long as we followed the rules we’d be safe, even though apparently [this was said in a facetious tone], you could get possessed pretty easily.” (Erin D-F.I/09)

In my interview with Krista N, she said that while she used Ouija boards and séances as an adolescent, she would never do it now. When I asked her why, thinking it was because as an adult, she had outgrown it, she replied that she thought it was “wrong” to go “tinkering with things you didn’t know enough about.” Interestingly, Krista N told me that she no longer identified with Catholicism, but had incorporated handfasting³ into her wedding ceremony. While she does not believe in organized

³ Handfasting refers to the Pagan wedding rite of joining two people in a blessed union. “Traditionally, the handfasting gesture made a figure-eight with the hands, right to right and left to left...symbolizing that all parts of [the couple] were joined.” (Kaldera and Schwartzstein 2004:7-8)

religion, she feel has affiliation with more pagan traditions. (Krista N-FCSA/10)

KN: I used to be really into all that kind of thing when I was young...maybe early teenage years, I guess.

LW: What kind of thing? What kind of involvement did you have with it? I mean, in what context? Hanging out with your friends and playing Ouija board?

KN: Totally! Friends coming over after school or going to my friend Monique's house...we'd go to our bedrooms and play Ouija board. If our parents weren't home, we'd even light candles, burn incense, that kind of thing.

LW: And you believed it?

KN: Absolutely! In the same way we believed in Bloody Mary when we were in elementary school. It was terrifying of course, but that was part of it. I guess it was so scary because we were convinced it was true.

LW: Did you ever feel guilty about it? That it was a "bad" enough thing for you to hide from your parents?

KN: Yes! Of course! That was the Catholic way, wasn't it? And there was always the concern of evil spirits and all that...I'm not sure we totally believed it, but we were still young enough that Catholicism had a hold on us.

LW: And now? Do you still hold that belief system?

KN: No, I don't really have that...Catholic-ness anymore...but I think I have more respect for...spirituality. I wouldn't play with an Ouija board anymore. I feel like it's asking for trouble of some kind. Y'know, Pandora's box and all that kind of thing. (Krista N-FCSA/10)

Ellis discusses the use of divination activities among young women in both the British Isles and North America, beginning with an excerpt taken from writings by a British cleric named Rev. Alexander Roberts who claimed, in 1616, that women were

more susceptible to occult activities. Among the reasons Roberts gives for this are that girls "...are by nature credulous, wanting experience and therefore more easily deceived [than boys]" and that girls are "more impressionable and thus more easily influenced by the devil" (quoted in Ellis 2004:144). Despite Roberts' notions being rooted in seventeenth century sensibilities, as a teacher who has worked with pre-adolescent children, I can say in my experience, that girls are generally easily influenced by their peers, and there is quite often a power struggle to be the "queen bee" of the social group. This ongoing development of social hierarchy among girls may in part be a driving force behind the attraction to the supernatural and "deviant supernatural play" (Ellis 2004:163).

As previously noted, most of my informants are women, and I did find that the previous generation of Bloody Mary participants was almost exclusively women. In my early fieldwork, asking men about Bloody Mary usually garnered a response similar to Brad P's:

BP: Bloody Mary? Oh yeah, I remember girls going into the bathroom and coming out crying and all that. The boys never got into it though. I don't really know what it's all about. (Brad P-FI/11).

However, as mentioned previously, I came across a number of boys among the next generation of Bloody Mary participants (current school-aged children) and I will further discuss these findings in Chapter Six.

Freed's hypothesis on the connection that she developed as a preadolescent engaging in supernatural play with her girlfriends works well with many of my

informants, particularly those who participated in Bloody Mary at a slightly later age than those in my original group of informants (Former Catholic School Attendees). Several of them commented that while they were frightened of “doing” Bloody Mary, they felt pressured by their peer group, or did not want to be left out. In the case of Kate D, Melanie B and Kerrie C, all three women made comments (below) relating to the interests of their group of friends of that particular time in their lives.

Interestingly, each of them maintains connections to at least some of the girls from those groups. Melanie B was quite expressive about her memories from that particular time in her life (which she cited as between the ages of twelve and fourteen) and how intrigued they were by supernatural play, incorporating it into much of their “play” time.

Kerrie C talked about feeling that she had to participate in Bloody Mary even though she did not want to. As with Andrea H, Kerrie C recalls doing Bloody Mary one at a time in a basement bathroom while the other girls waited outside. In Kerrie’s case, they were entering into adolescence.

Andrea H said that there was a “mean girl” in her social group at school and that it was the mean girl who insisted that everyone play Bloody Mary. Andrea notes that you were supposed to go in the bathroom alone to prove you believed in Bloody Mary. She states that she always closed her eyes while doing it because she was afraid of seeing her. She also said that she was really afraid of the dark at the time, so it was even more terrifying for her. She felt she had to do it at sleepovers, particularly at one friend’s house, in the basement where they were all having a slumber party.

These experiences took place when she was in Grades Four and Five, between ages ten and eleven.

There is a fine line between “shared experiences” that serve to strengthen a social bond among friends, or help create a bond, such as the “ostensive play” Elizabeth Tucker discussed based on narratives collected from students in the Sullivan Hall and what has become popularly (and sometimes inaccurately) called “bullying” or hierarchical play. In comparing the experiences of Andrea H and Kerrie C with the experiences of Melanie B and Kate D (below), I cannot help but wonder if the attitude of the informant towards that particular recollection is what defines it as “ostensive play” (Tucker) or a shared “spooky experience” (Freed), or conversely, a sense of being bullied (as with Andrea H and Kerrie C) or in the case of the Whitbourne/Dildo girls, a representation of social hierarchy.

Both Melanie B and Kate D indicated that the shared experience of supernatural play was an important part of their adolescent experience. During their interview, they discussed some of their shared experiences, ending the conversation by noting that all the participants from those activities at that point in their lives are still friends.

KD: Remember when Maggie went to New Orleans and came back with all that shit? The voodoo candle and stuff?

MB: Yeah! And then we went to the graveyard over by school and lit candles and scared ourselves to death.

LW: When did you go there? After school?

KD: No, it was on the weekend. We were having a sleepover at my house and snuck out I guess...to the graveyard.

LW: In your pajamas? In costumes?

MB: Oh we were dressed in more or less costumes, but not really...just whatever we could find around Kate's house that looked...um...witchy.
[laughter]

KD: Mom's scarves and flowy skirts and stuff.

MB: God, Kate, that was a long, long time ago! It's kind of embarrassing to think about it now.

KD: Also funny that we are all still friends, the group from that time. Except Erica. She moved away in high school and we kind of lost touch. Happens.

(KD-FI/11, MB-FI/11)

While Kate and Melanie talked about the more positive aspects of being involved with a group of girls engaging in supernatural play other informants, such as Kerrie C and Andrea H talked about how they felt forced into participating in such activities. Andrea referred to a "mean girl" in her peer group. When I asked for further details, Andrea told me that

She was just like, oh you know, the "alpha" girl in our group. Kind of like that Mean Girls movie where there is always a leader who sort of controls the other girls and no one really wants to go against what she says. It's hard, when you're that age because girls can be so mean to each other and no one wants to be on the outside of that. You just don't have a strong sense of self and being "kicked out" of the girl group would be quite devastating. (Andrea H-FI/11).

In Andrea's case, and also in the case of the Crescent Collegiate students, playing Bloody Mary was not necessarily an experience that fostered closer relationships (which is how Kate D and Melanie B view their own "occult activities") but was instead a way for dominant girls to assert their authority over the passive girls in the group (in Andrea and Kerrie's case) or for the older girls to remind the younger girls

in lower grades of the social hierarchy or “pecking order” of the school. In these circumstances, Bloody Mary becomes a form of bullying.

The day after I wrote the above paragraph, in June 2013, I ran into the parent of a student of mine. She asked about my thesis topic and as I explained it to her, her eyes widened and she said “We used to play that when I was little back in Ontario!” Before I could say another word, she launched into her experiences and said “And you know, looking back now, I really feel as though I was bullied into playing Bloody Mary...because I was terrified! And the tough girls that were at the sleepovers always made everyone play it and you just didn’t want to say no!” We chatted a bit further about it, and her stories were very much aligned with the other women who felt that had been pressured into playing Bloody Mary. The woman from Ontario, Jennifer, is within the same age range as well (aged 36 in 2013). She notes that “It wasn’t called bullying back then, of course, we didn’t have that same language for it, but that is certainly what it was!” (Jennifer F-FI/13)

By exploring the label “bullying” and applying it to Bloody Mary, we see it as a further example of the many forms of subversive folklore, as defined by Sutton-Smith in the glossary of *Children’s Folklore: A Sourcebook*

Subversive folklore: multifaceted expressions of a group that undermine the authority of the dominant culture; also, any folklore involving victimization of others in the same group – such as children by more powerful children– which in effect also subverts adult authority because it involves taboo behavior. (1995: 314)

Today's school children are well-versed in the language and situations that we refer to as "bullying." Some people, including teachers I have known, may even say that the terminology is not only overused, but in many cases, misused. While contemporary children are still playing Bloody Mary, none of the students I spoke with felt they are being "bullied" into playing Bloody Mary. It is important to note that there is a difference in "bullying" and the concept of a shared experience among a peer group, no matter how frightening or subversive that experience may be. However, Bloody Mary has turned up in a different format and has been labeled (officially, by school administration) as bullying. A colleague of mine who taught at Holy Cross Elementary in St. John's, brought a memo to my attention that was being circulated at a staff meeting (2012). An email was being sent around to children within the school in "chain email" form – a text copied and pasted into a new email and sent on to a massive list of contacts. I have copied the email she forwarded to me (the same one that has been circulating among students and was intercepted by a parent) and pasted it below (including spelling and grammar errors, as well as the square brackets stating "surname removed").

Death By Bloody Mary THIS EMAIL HAS BEEN CURSED ONCE
OPENED YOU MUST SEND IT. You are now cursed. You must send this on
or you will be killed. Tonight at 12:00am, by Bloody Mary. This is no joke. So
don't think you can quickly get out of it and delete it now because Bloody
Mary will come to you if you do not send this on. She will slit your throat and
your wrists and pull your eyeballs out with a fork. And then hang your dead
corpse in your bedroom cupboard or put you under your bed. What's your
parents going to do when they find you dead? Won't be funny then, will it?

Don't think this is a fake and it's all put on to scare you because your wrong, so very wrong. Want to hear of some of the sad, sad people who lost their lives or have been seriously hurt by this email? CASE ONE - Annalise [Surname Removed]: She got this email. Rubbish she thought. She deleted it. And now, Annalise dead. CASE TWO - Louise [Surname Removed]: She sent this to only 4 people and when she woke up in the morning her wrists had deep lacerations on each. Luckily there was no pain felt, though she is scarred for life. CASE THREE - Thomas [Surname Removed]: He sent this to 5 people. Big mistake. The night Thomas was lying in his bed watching T.V. The clock shows '12:01am'. The T.V mysteriously flickered off and Thomas's bedroom lamp flashed on and off several times. It went pitch black, Thomas looked to the left of him and there she was, Bloody Mary standing in white rags. Blood everywhere with a knife in her hand then disappeared. The biggest fright of Thomas's life. Warning... NEVER look in a mirror and repeat -'Bloody Mary. Bloody Mary.' Bloody Mary... I KILLED YOUR SON' Is it the end for you tonight! YOU ARE NOW CURSED We strongly advise you to send this email on. It is seriously NO JOKE. We don't want to see another life wasted. ITS YOUR CHOICE... WANNA DIE TONIGHT? If you send this email to... NO PEOPLE - You're going to die. 1-5 PEOPLE - You're going to either get hurt or get the biggest fright of your life. 5-15 PEOPLE - You will bring your family bad luck and someone close to you will die. 15 -25 OR MORE PEOPLE - You are safe from Bloody Mary ** DO NOT FORWARD COPY AND PASTE. RENAME THE SUBJECT

A nearly-identical text is included in Gail De Vos' recent book *What Happens Next? Contemporary Urban Legends and Popular Culture*, demonstrating the power of the Internet and the wide-spread transmission of such texts. Evidently, at Holy Cross Elementary in St. John's, the recipients of the e-mail were quite frightened, and

ultimately, a concerned parent brought it to the attention of the school administration. There was, however, little that could be done about it. Many children have their own e-mail account and, if something is sent to them by someone they know, it will arrive in their inbox, despite any filters or protective measures put on a computer network by the school board, or at home by parents. When I brought this up in my own class of Grade Six students, many of them told me that they too had received the same e-mail at some point throughout the year. I asked if they had sent it on, and every one of them said that they had.

The chain letter has been around far longer than e-mail. This fact is simply stated because the Internet is a relatively new phenomenon. But the “chain e-mail” – and not the hand-written chain-letter – is a part of the culture of the current generation of school-aged children. The mode of transmission has changed but the idea remains the same. I recall coming into school several times throughout my elementary school life and finding a hand-written chain letter on my desk, requesting that I copy it out a specified number of times and give it to others, or else I would have bad luck. I remember taking it so seriously that I enlisted my mother to help with the copying, as that many copies were just more than my ten-year-old hands could handle (for more information on the shape, distribution and history of chain letters, see Daniel van Arsdale's large on-line archive of them [van Arsdale, 2013]). While the threatening e-mail may be considered a form of bullying in the modern school system, the chain letters were once considered a game or a form of play. They were not welcome, but were a part of childhood life, and everyone dutifully continued the chain, without

question. However, in this contemporary version of the chain letter, there is an underlying threat, and while copying and pasting the text into a new e-mail is far simpler than copying a letter out by hand, the tone of the email is far less playful than the chain letters of my childhood and somewhat more menacing.

Another aspect of the chain e-mail that is worth noting is the verification, the proof, of the repercussions of not following through with the instructions. By mentioning names of victims who did not complete the chain as required, children who read the e-mail are led to believe that these events actually happened. In my experience as a teacher, children are far more likely to believe something that they have read, rather than something that they have been told by another child on the playground. As a teacher, I have repeatedly told my students not to believe something just because they have read it on the Internet but, for contemporary children, the Internet is the source of all information, and they tend to put a lot of faith in it. Although this belief in superstitions and curses put into effect by the Internet is not exclusive to children. How many adults forward emails sent to them by friends that promise good fortune from the Dalai Lama or money from Bill Gates? (See <http://www.snopes.com/inboxer/nothing/microsoft.asp>) Such emails often have “proof” of validity included in the tag lines – a brief, seemingly personal anecdote from one of the recipients – not unlike the “true” stories of Bloody Mary’s victims who did not forward the email to fifteen of their friends. These emails tend to be cyclical, meaning that they turn up over and over again in slightly altered versions. Using Google Groups as a search engine, the first of the Bloody Mary emails can be

traced back on the Internet as far as 2006. The text was practically identical in each of the emails, with one exception of a text that had some profanity inserted into the original text. While the origins of the original email are unknown, judging from the grammar mistakes, language used and intended audience, younger readers (who, in my experience have been the recipients of this email) tend to assume that the original author was a younger person, which for them, adds to the authenticity.

The content of the Bloody Mary emails is passed off as a first-person account of the events of the narrative (a memorate). The names and dates seem to make the story more believable. By following the instructions, which means cutting, pasting and sending the email on to their friends, the participants will be repeating exactly the same letter they were sent. This means that the original author is being farther and farther removed. It is no longer a “friend of a friend” that knew the people who had such unfortunate experiences with Bloody Mary, but instead, an unidentifiable stranger. Is this, then, still a “legend” in Bascom’s terminology? Bascom wrote that “Legends are prose narratives which, like myths, are regarded as true by the narrator” (1965: 4). The validity that comes with knowing someone connected to the email is gone – yet children are not quick to think that through. Unlike many contemporary legends, where there is localization added into the telling to authenticate the narrative, this email seems to have remained fairly intact, perhaps simply because the text is copied and pasted each time in contrast to being spread orally. Or perhaps it is because the senders are too scared of the suggested consequences, lest they succumb to the same fate as the purported victims of Bloody Mary.

Could sending the chain email be considered a form of ostension? The narrative requires a form of action, and included in this narrative are the consequences for several people that did not follow the action as required. Bloody Mary in its original form can certainly be considered a form of “ostensive play” (Tucker 2007:188). Put most simply, it begins with a story, often told to a younger girl by an older girl. Most people I interviewed recalled being told the method of summoning Bloody Mary in the Mirror by older girls on the school bus, on the school playground, at Brownies or at a slumber party. In some cases it was intended as a dare – for example, as shared by Kerrie C, one child told her friends about it at a sleepover party and then every girl there was expected to do it. Kerrie explained that there was a specific bathroom in her basement that became the most popular place amongst her friends for doing Bloody Mary because “it was dark, you had to go down the hall past the laundry room, [and] it wasn’t used much by my family” (Kerrie C-FI/11). After participating in Bloody Mary, participants generally shared their story with others, even if nothing happened (which was apparently often the case). Many of my informants admitted to running from the bathroom before saying the final “Bloody Mary” – or in the case of an informant from Dildo:

A friend of mine told me that a girl she knows said “Bloody Mary” into the mirror in a dark bathroom and she appeared over her head holding an axe. When she turned on the light, Bloody Mary disappeared. (B.W-WD/09)

It is worth noting that in this narrative (and in many “legend style” narratives) the person who had the supernatural experience is not the one telling the story. It is a friend, friend of a friend, or someone someone knows. The distance between the teller

and the participant in the actual event grows more distant with each telling – a fabulate, in terms of older narrative definition (see von Sydow, 1977) – yet the tellers still hold the story to be true. The stories of children who know someone who knows someone who actually saw Bloody Mary, or in some cases, was harmed by Bloody Mary, are in part, what drives other children to attempt the Bloody Mary ritual themselves. In this sense, Bloody Mary can be considered a “legend trip.” By definition, a legend trip involves the telling of a story along with visiting a specific place, often times an abandoned house or graveyard, where events, such as a grisly murder or a ghost sighting had occurred (Dégh 2001: 253). Generally undertaken by teenagers, usually the original story will be told about the site, and then other stories involving other people that made the “pilgrimage” to the site at night and what may have happened to them. Participants will visit the site themselves and their story then becomes a part of the narratives told by other. Stories about Bloody Mary experiences that were shared by my informants, or posted on Internet forums, have a similar tone. While Bloody Mary is not specific to one town or affiliated with a house or school – indeed, she seems to be found all over North America and, according to Marc Armitage, even further afield – there is a common location for her sightings; in a mirror, and most often, but not exclusively, in a bathroom. Legend tripping is when action is taken to reenact a narrative. And while the group of Catholic school informants did not have an overt narrative relating to Bloody Mary, many of the other informants did. However, in Wynne L. Summers’ article, legend tripping does not just express a belief about something, it actually tests the credibility

of a belief (2000). Even the Catholic school participants, with their lack of narrative, but common belief system, and shared expectation of the mirror apparition, can fit nicely into this idea. As Elizabeth Bird writes

I view the legend trip as play, involving not only story-telling, but also doing particular things. The emotional power of the experience derives from a combination of setting, narratives, and actions, all of which are interdependent. (1994: 192)

Bloody Mary can also be considered a ritual or a form of ritualistic play. While Dundes gave some consideration to the ritual from a psychoanalytical point of view, I feel that it is also important to examine the cultural implications of the ritual, or the notion of “playing” at summoning ghosts, in the mirror and otherwise. Many of my informants brought up using the Ouija board and playing “Light as a Feather, Stiff as a Board” at the same point in their lives when they were participating in Bloody Mary. Elizabeth Tucker has referred to these activities as “ostensive play” (2007:192), while Ellis calls these activities “deviant supernatural play” (2004:163) or “ritualistic games” (2004:144) and claims that these activities have historically held an attraction for groups of young women.

Tucker adapts Mary Douglas’s definition of ritual as symbolic action:

The presence of certain symbolic elements [in levitation], over a wide span of time and space, creates a sense of ritualistic potency. As in many rituals, the order of events must be faithfully maintained, the tone must be solemn, and the outcome is expected to be something almost miraculous; so the word “game” does not quite do justice to the nature of what is happening. (1984: 126)

Tucker continues by discussing the varying “chants, stories and processions” (127) that she encountered through her research and interviews with pre-adolescent girls. There are parallels between these narratives and those I encountered in my own Bloody Mary research. According to Tucker, as part of the levitation ritual, there was often a story told by the participants about how the person who was about to be levitated had “died.” Although the (soon-to-be-levitated) participant was very much alive, the other participants consider the person who is to be levitated “dead” and they raise them up from the dead, often while chanting a prescribed script, such as “Light as a feather, stiff as a board”(127). Much of Tucker’s analysis of the story-telling that accompanies the levitation activity is comparable to the idea of Bloody Mary as a form of ostension or legend-tripping. Although the Bloody Mary of my childhood did not use much in the way of narrative leading up to actually engaging in the activity, almost all of my informants who were non-Catholic school attendees told me about the conversations that led up to their participation in Bloody Mary. The three most prevalent narratives were: a story about the origin of Bloody Mary (as was the case with the students of Crescent Collegiate in Whitbourne/Dildo); an explanation of who she had been while still alive (which was a commonality among current school children; the narrative claiming that she had been a student either at their school, or had lived – or died – on the site that their school is now on), or a story about what had happened to someone they knew who had summoned Bloody Mary. In telling the story of what happened to someone else while they were playing Bloody Mary, the

activity is then a form of legend tripping, or a form of ostensive action, as explained by Brunvand in his *Encyclopedia of Urban Legends*

The concept of ostension applied to the study of urban legends recognizes that sometimes people actually enact the content of legends instead of merely narrating them as stories. As Dégh and Vázsonyi phrase it, this form of legend transmission involves “presentation as contrasted to representation (showing the reality itself instead of using any kind of signification).” (2002:303)

Children talk among themselves about the stories they have heard about others and what transpired when they participated in Bloody Mary. They then go to the bathroom in the school that the events supposedly took place in, and perform Bloody Mary themselves, sometimes to an audience (perhaps an incredulous peer who did not believe their story as it was being told) or sometimes alone, and then afterwards telling the tale of what happened. Their narrative then becomes part of the collective narrative, and the activity and story are perpetuated within the school culture. This was the case in my own experiences (the story of the unfortunate Tiffany, as told in the first chapter of this thesis), as well as the narratives shared with me by informants.

Tucker’s conclusion to her essay applies something of a psychoanalytical notion to the ritualized aspects of levitation that is applicable to some (but not all) of my Bloody Mary findings/research.

By manipulating symbolic images and cooperating in a peer-group ritual, they undergo an experience that is frightening or supernaturally inexplicable but still satisfying at the same time. They have chosen to pursue this experience, and by doing so they have established limits – at least, within a ritually

controlled situation – upon worrisome developmental horrors that they all share. (Tucker 1984:133)

Tucker and Freed have both written on what I find to be one of the most fascinating functions of Bloody Mary – a maturation ritual which in effect is dressed as a game. This particular function is applicable to a number of my informants, particularly Kerrie C, Melanie B and Kate D, who were participating in Bloody Mary as early adolescents, aged twelve through fourteen. Tucker's explanation of why levitation should not be merely labeled as a game but instead as a ritual, is applicable to Bloody Mary. While I am fairly certain that girls are not engaging in supernatural play such as levitation and Bloody Mary because they feel it is important to their psychic and social development, as an adult who has already been through adolescence and as a folklorist considering Bloody Mary in all of its facets, I feel confident in saying that it certainly fits into Tucker's analysis (above).

Similarly, Dundes (1998) determines that Bloody Mary is a maturation ritual of sorts, and it is important to note that my findings are not in full agreement with his. Dundes wrote that the connections and relationships among maturation, impending puberty and Bloody Mary were the presence of blood and the use of the bathroom as a setting for Bloody Mary. He emphasized the symbolic link between Bloody Mary and menstruation. I did not find this link – symbolic or otherwise – in my own research. Instead, my informants' comments suggest that the maturation ritual relates to the function of supernatural play, or the dalliance into the supernatural experience as part of the social development of the adolescent.

Out of all my informants, I found Kerrie C's comments about her adolescent belief system, how her peer-group's activities affected those beliefs, and how she views that time in her life to be the most relevant when considering the function of Bloody Mary as a maturation or coming-of-age ritual.

KC: I remember being scared of playing Bloody Mary...of the bathroom in my basement where we'd go to do it.

LW: Why did you play it then, if you were so scared?

KC: I'm not sure, now. It was just something that I felt like I had to do.

Everyone else...in our group...was doing it, and I was just expected to do it.

LW: And did you all do it together then?

KC: No. You'd go in on your own. The rest would wait outside the bathroom.

LW: And what did you expect would happen?

KC: I'm not sure now...I guess that she would appear in the mirror?

LW: Who? What did you think she would look like?

KC: Oh, I really don't know anymore [laughs]. I guess she was somewhat scary...maybe with a hood on? Very pale, almost glowing, and blood dripping down her face.

LW: And you really believed in it?

KC: I think so. Sort of. It was at the time when we all believed – as a group, sort of – in fairies and angels and all that shit [laughs]. Remember? When angels and all that shit was everywhere? Books about your guardian angels and wind chimes and all that junk... New-Agey stuff, I guess.

LW: And do you still believe in that sort of thing?

KC: Oh god no! No, not at all.

(Kerrie C-FI/11)

Kerrie C, now in her mid-30s, went to a Catholic school in Mount Pearl (just outside of St. John's) in the 1980s, but was not one of my original informants (which was composed of my own peer group – Former Catholic School Attendees of the 1980s – who lived in St. John's). She does not recall playing Bloody Mary in elementary school, as my earliest group of informants did. Instead, it was part of her early adolescent years, through junior high school. She laughed throughout the interview, feeling quite embarrassed about her thirteen-year-old self. However, I found several relevant ideas in this portion of her interview, particularly in the language used to describe the events. Kerrie claims that she did not really want to participate in Bloody Mary, but clearly felt the peer pressure that often accompanies adolescent activities of the (even mildly) subversive nature. She talked about a group belief system: “We all believed – as a group, sort of...” and how now, as an independently-thinking adult, she no longer holds these beliefs.

As noted earlier, the visits to a specific location and the shared stories among the participants make Bloody Mary a teenage legend trip, as discussed by both Dégh and Ellis. Shaari Freed's thoughts on adolescent “spooky activities” (as cited earlier) and how they serve to solidify relationships during the formative adolescent years are applicable to Kerrie C's experiences and recollections as well.

Many of the informants I interviewed outside of the Former Catholic School Attendees (FCSA), talked about Bloody Mary as a game they played (or in the case of the children in my class, still play) at sleepover parties. Along with Bloody Mary, informants consistently reported engaging in other activities that could be considered

“occult related” such as “Light as Feather, Stiff as a Board,” séances, card reading and the use of Ouija boards. Ellis categorizes these activities as “Occult Play” (2003:12) and considers them with the dumb supper (marriage divination), palmistry, the sieve-and-key ritual and other divination “games.” In analyzing this type of “play” Ellis offers up a variety of possibilities. He considers that collected narratives regarding these events could be considered traceable to actual events. He points out that there certainly was – and still is – a “living tradition” amongst adolescent girls. However, Ellis concluded that “When American folklorists began collecting adolescents’ supernatural belief legends intensively, they found that the nominal beliefs underlying such stories more often than not had to be taken ironically” (2003:148).

Another genre that should be considered when analyzing Bloody Mary’s possible generic forms is folk drama. Folk drama, by definition, should take into account an analysis of performance situations, practices and texts. Much of the folklore scholarship on folk drama has focused on the traditional script, and the historical and geographic roots of the script. Steve Tillis, in the introduction to his book *Rethinking Folk Drama*, discusses folk drama with an emphasis

...on performance, unfixed by authority that is based in living tradition and so exhibits variation in repetition as it engenders and/or enhances a sense of communal identity among those who participate in it. (199: xiv)

This perspective effectively summarizes much of what I have come to recognize about the participation and transmission of Bloody Mary. It is indeed a

“living tradition” – that is, something that continues to be passed on, but changes slightly, with variations between generations. There is no correct or incorrect way to do Bloody Mary and, among my informants, there was plenty of variation in the script and the ritual. Nonetheless, every narrative that I collected was within a range of similarities. Interestingly, what originally piqued my interest on girls’ slumber party games, was a book called *The Daring Book for Girls*. I flipped through it in a book store and the page that caught my eye was a brief explanation of who Bloody Mary might have been historically (Mary Tudor was offered as the most likely explanation in the book but never mentioned by any of my informants) and then gave instructions on how to summon Bloody Mary. Although I was familiar with Bloody Mary, based on my own experiences in a Catholic school in the 1980s, this was the first time I had ever come across Bloody Mary in a text intended for children. While it triggered a resurgence in the popularity of the activity amongst my students when I put the book on my classroom shelf, all of my informants claimed to have been told about the activity by other girls, often older girls, but never by adults. For children, because the activity is passed on by their peers (more or less), it exists within the realm of antithetical action or play, which scholars of children’s folklore agree, such as Sutton-Smith and Mechling, have shown to hold particular interest for children.

Tillis also gives due consideration to the drama in folk drama, considering the actual performance, meaning the speech, movement and space in which it takes place. He suggests that in folk drama, there is “a frame of make-believe action shared by the performers and audience” (1999: xiv). The notion of entering into a “frame of make-

believe” is an integral aspect of any dramatic event or presentation. To effectively deliver (in the case of the “performer” – the individual or individuals calling Bloody Mary) or to be a part of (in the case of the “audience” – often times, the other children in the bathroom, or those waiting outside to hear if Bloody Mary appeared to the summoner) the performance, there is a metaphorical stage being set. One must enter into it with a willing sense of belief, and a knowledge that this activity is something beyond everyday life. While Tillis uses these ideas to explain how he will approach some far-reaching, internationally collected forms of folk drama (from the Persian devotional drama called “Ta’ziyah” to the English Mummers’ plays) in my own research, I feel that Bloody Mary, a seemingly ever-present childhood activity that is being “performed” in school washrooms and at girl’s slumber parties, is equally worthy of consideration as a form of folk drama. The participants of Bloody Mary – or any form of “occult play” – know that they are stepping out of the mundane and into something more magical or mysterious. Even when speaking with adults about their Bloody Mary experiences from childhood, there is always a slight change of tone in the conversation when recalling the specific event. Young children bring a certain intensity to any “make-believe” form of play and I feel as though Bloody Mary, for preadolescents, falls into that same category. The tone of voice changes, there is a certain reverence adapted and it is clear to participants that they are moving from the ordinary into the extraordinary.

As previously mentioned, for me, and the group of Former Catholic School Attendees, Bloody Mary was a game we played at school, during class time, when we

made arrangements to meet in the bathroom, or after school at Brownie meetings in the Parish Hall that attached our church and school. The subversive nature of the Bloody Mary activity is typical of a children's game, and is in fact a studied and noted aspect of children's folklore. As noted by Bernard Mergen

The lure of forbidden play is a strong element in children's lore. Does it help the adult come to terms with his own world? How many battles in life are won on the playing fields of childhood? (1995: 249)

As mentioned already, folklorists who study children's folklore have noted that many children's games and rhymes have an antithetical quality. Bloody Mary, for this group of informants, fits into the category of a game and as such, it is fairly gender specific and usually undertaken by girls. As discussed in Chapter Two, in his psychoanalytical analysis of Bloody Mary, Alan Dundes has suggested that this activity could be interpreted as a ritualistic game relating to menstruation and the onset of puberty. He points out that

It should be abundantly clear that this girls' ritual has something to do with the onset of the first menses. The dramatic change from girlhood to womanhood is signaled physiologically by this catamenial condition. (1998: 84)

Dundes is concerned with the lack of textual and contextual analysis that folklorists give to their collected research. With Bloody Mary in particular, he feels as though it has been treated only as ritual, or only as legend, without credence being given to interpretation. In addition to his interpretation of the relationship between Bloody Mary and menstruation, he also delves into the name that, despite many

variations, such as the addition of a surname Whales, Worth, the name “Mary” is always present in this activity. Dundes mentions the connection between Catholicism and the Virgin Mary, but takes it even further by suggesting that virginity is a concern amongst pre-pubescent girls as they come to understand the connection between sex and pregnancy. Dundes also notes that the name “Mary,” in some dialects, sounds the same as the verb “marry,” which, according to Dundes, is an “expectation” that is “part of the culturally defined transition from girlhood to womanhood” (85).

While I can see how the Bloody Mary activity could be interpreted as Dundes has in his essay, Dundes’ particular concern here is not with Bloody Mary itself, but instead, with the lack of textual interpretation done by contemporary folklorists. By considering this thesis a cultural analysis, I do not analyze each and every nuance of the collected anecdotes, but instead interpret them based on the contemporary culture at the time in which the Bloody Mary activity was undertaken and examine these interpretations in terms of generic perspective. That being said, as both the performer of Bloody Mary at age six and the adult collector and analyzer of Bloody Mary reports, I do not agree with Dundes’ analysis. Dundes’ claims that he realizes that “...many conservative literal-minded folklorists as well as informants familiar with Bloody Mary may not agree...This is because the majority of folklorists are unable or unwilling to recognize the unconscious content of folklore fantasy” (89). While in some cases, such as the interpretation and analysis of traditional folktales, I see the value in Jungian and Freudian interpretation and approach, for my purposes, I think that Bloody Mary should be examined with the cultural context in mind – who did it,

when, why and to what purpose. Bearing that in mind, I shall continue the discussion by considering the high school students of Whitbourne/Dildo.

My next group of informants, the high school students from Crescent Collegiate in Whitbourne/Dildo, had plenty to contribute on Bloody Mary, and certainly from a different perspective than my original group. These students attended elementary school after the Catholic school system had been dissolved in the late 1990s and, as a substitute teacher in their school, my asking students about their personal belief system would likely have been frowned upon by the school board. The Eastern School District (under whose jurisdiction Crescent Collegiate falls) claims to be a non-denominational school system. This would indicate that any and all belief systems are accepted. That is not entirely the case. For example, while teaching at St. Matthew's Elementary in St. John's (which was once part of the Catholic school board, and has retained its name from that time) I had a parent launch a complaint against me because I had explained in class what a Ouija board was. This parent felt that "...it was offensive to Christians" and that I had no right to push my beliefs "...upon children who come from Christian families." This complaint made its way into my permanent file at the school board. Given the cultural circumstances under which I teach, I have always tried to tread lightly when discussing belief systems other than the traditional Judeo-Christian one.

At Crescent Collegiate, the students in the Grade Ten and Eleven French classes I was teaching were all familiar with Bloody Mary, although it was only the

girls that would admit to having participated in it. These girls said that they “did” Bloody Mary when they were in Grade Six and Seven (which was older than my original group of Catholic School Attendees who engaged in it while in the lower grades) with a number of variations in the ritual. The method for calling Bloody Mary varied, from having to say her name five times, ten times, thirteen times or even a hundred times. The setting was always the same: a darkened room with a mirror (although not specifically a bathroom, as was the case with the first group of informants). However, the Whitbourne/Dildo students often mentioned the use of additional props, such as a flashlight or a candle. They also recalled incorporating other actions into the ritual, such as flushing a toilet, flicking the lights on and off, and having to turn around three times. Most intriguing to me was the student who said that in summoning Bloody Mary, one had to say “Mary Whales,⁴ I killed your baby!” At this point, in a successful summoning, Bloody Mary would apparently attempt to slice you with a knife, or in one account, an axe. When I expressed an interest in this particular version, the students explained to me that some people thought that Bloody Mary was the ghost of a woman named Mary Whales, who had lived in their community over a hundred years ago and was known to be a witch. They said she was burnt at the stake, in some accounts with her baby in her arms, and in other accounts, she was pregnant at the time. That is the reason one is supposed to say “I killed your baby” because apparently, it enrages her and she will come after whoever has summoned her in the mirror.

⁴ This is the only example of “Mary Whales” that I encountered in my own fieldwork.

This story seemed to ignite a bit of a discussion, as there were other students who claimed that Bloody Mary was the ghost of a local woman who was killed in a train accident on the way into St. John's on her wedding day. Another student claimed that Bloody Mary was the ghost of a girl whose own father had murdered her and that she was buried on the land that Crescent Collegiate was built on. There was also mention of a "Woman in White" who haunts a local river where she supposedly drowned. The students of Crescent Collegiate all had explanatory narratives for their version of who Bloody Mary was, although I had never asked for any, merely if they knew of Bloody Mary and whether any of them had ever partaken in the activity.

For this group, Bloody Mary was not an activity done in isolation, but instead an event from the past that was explained by a legend, in fact, several legends. As discussed by Bird (1994)

It is well-documented that local legends tend to develop around particular types of places – bridges, cemeteries, unusual graves, deserted houses and so on. As Mullen (1972) points out, "legends thrive on ambiguity..."(1994:103).

As well, they had localized the legends so that Bloody Mary was a part of local lore. Their experiences with Bloody Mary in no way indicated any Catholic ecotype, but instead brought to light an entirely different aspect that I had not previously considered. This group seemed most interested in explaining to me who Bloody Mary was, and why she would come after you if summoned her in a mirror. There seemed to be almost an equal weight on the importance of the narrative and the experience. Janet Langlois made this connection between ritual and legend in her

1978 article. Langlois considered Jan Brunvand's musings that, "It seems reasonable to think that the tale-game relationship – psychological and structural – might easily result in as many articles and theories as the myth-ritual relationship has" (1978:197).

Langlois's work at Holy Angels, an experimental Catholic school in Indianapolis, resulted in a similar conclusion to that of my study at Crescent Collegiate in Whitbourne/Dildo, NL, thirty-five years after Langlois' study and many kilometers away. I found that, while there were many students (all female) in the classes I spoke with who were familiar with the Bloody Mary activity and recalled participating in it in elementary school, there were more students interested in the idea of who Bloody Mary was and the legends that they told me as local legends. For those students, the legend telling and the game were not necessarily intertwined. Many of the students who told me the legends claimed never to have participated in the actual calling of Bloody Mary. Others had participated at a younger age and then revisited the idea recently after hearing the stories from older friends. One girl told me that a friend of hers had called out "Bloody Mary I killed your baby!" into a darkened room with a mirror and was slashed at with a knife by the figure in the mirror. (N.H-WD/09)

Some of the explanatory legends that I was told were familiar motifs from a folklorist's perspective. The Woman in White (a common motif in contemporary folklore) as a motif came up several times in legends passed on to me by this group of students. Parallels⁵ can be found in both Thompson (1955) and Baughman (1966),

⁵ Thank you to Martin Lovelace for motif-index suggestions.

including: E422.4.4 (a). Female revenant in white clothing; E425.1.4. Revenant as woman carrying baby; G303.6.1.4. Devil appears when woman looks at herself in mirror after sunset; and G303.6.1.2. Devil comes when called upon.

Interestingly, the students did not talk among themselves prior to responding to my question – it was not, at that point, a class discussion. They were given time to write down their legends and pass them in voluntarily. Thus, the legends are different, yet familiar, and based in a local setting. After I had read what I had collected from the students, they were interested in hearing them read back to the class. So, I read several of them out loud to the class and many of them, contributors or not, nodded in agreement or added in some comments about the location of the story as it has been written, suggesting a different landmark or location close by. This demonstrated that these legends were not new to this group, and that they had been discussed and shared many times.

One student in particular told me that his older cousin had passed them on to him and he thought it was someone related to a friend of the cousin's – the classic “friend of a friend” pedigree of a story. The idea of identifying the person in the story is part of the discussion of the features of a memorate or fabulate in a personal belief narrative. This was not at all part of the experience of my first group of informants, who simply “did” Bloody Mary in darkened bathrooms. For the Whitbourne/Dildo students, the actual experience of Bloody Mary was a thing of the past. It was something that older girls used to scare younger girls in something of a hazing ritual (according to the girls I spoke with in Grades Ten and Eleven) or even a rite of

passage. However, at the time of my research, the students were beyond the age of playing games like that and far more interested in frightening local lore and the origins of Bloody Mary. This, apparently, was a fresh activity, trying to outdo each other with such legend telling. For this age group, the story-telling in and of itself had become the primary experience. Participating in the Bloody Mary activity was no longer of interest to them.

The following narratives came to me in written form, as I had asked for students to write down anything they were interested in sharing with me on the topic. I ended up with three pages of short paragraphs, with the authors identified only by initials. The lore behind their version of Bloody Mary was easily identifiable as several well-known contemporary folklore motifs. Most notably, The Woman in White – the wandering ghost of a woman who has either been “done wrong” by the townsfolk, and killed violently, for being a witch, for killing her children, husband, etc., or in another version, a woman who was accidentally killed on her wedding day, and now haunts that location (haunted bridge, river bank, train platform). Students here told me several versions, citing local landmarks, including the site on which the school is built, saying that Bloody Mary was a former student that had been killed by her classmates, and buried in a trunk under the school. Coincidentally (or not) that particular story is the same as the 2005 Bloody Mary “slasher” film, *Urban Legends: Bloody Mary*.

My cousin told me that there was a witch who lived in Dildo a hundred years ago. Her name was Mary. She got caught by the townsfolk and they dragged

her down by the water and burnt her tied to a steak [sic]. She was pregnant at the time, so now when you call to her in the mirror, you have to say “Bloody Mary, I killed your baby” five times and she’ll appear in the mirror holding a knife dripping in blood. (C.F-WD/09)

There’s a story about a ghost that walks down by a river here because she was killed there. She drowned her own children or something. And then she drowned herself. Someone said she is the ghost in the mirror that is Bloody Mary. (D.H-WD/09)

Bloody Mary wears a white dress and is holding her bloody head in her hands. It was cut off because she was on her way in to St. John’s for her own wedding, on the train. She leaned out the window to wave good bye to her family and her head got cut off by a pole or something. When you look at her in the mirror, she tries to cut your head off with an axe. (E.S-WD/09)

There was a girl from New Harbour (I think) who was killed by her own father and buried underneath where this school is now. I think maybe there was a school being built then but not this school...And that’s why you play Bloody Mary in the bathroom here because she haunts it. (anonymous-WD/09)

Local legend is that the big bridge on the main highway of Clarke’s Beach is haunted by a young lady wrapped in a white towel with long curly black hair. It is said that she was swimming there on a date with her true love and she drowned. Apparently if you go up there in the evening just before dark she will approach you and drown any trespassers of her death area. (N.H-WD/09)

There are similarities in the motifs of legends told to me and those collected and researched by Langlois, who states that “analysis of the sparse reports of these Marys suggests ‘missing links’ in the circular movement from legend to game.” (200)

Langlois turned up narratives about Mary Worth as a witch who was burned at the stake in the Salem witch trials. One of the narratives (C.F-WD/09) I collected in Whitbourne/Dildo identifies Bloody Mary as a local woman who was supposedly burned at the stake, suspected of being a witch. However, in the book *Making Witches: Newfoundland Traditions of Spells and Counterspells* (2008), in response to a story about a fisherman cutting a known witch's arm because he blamed her for a slump in that season's catch, Barbara Rieti writes:

I do not mean to discount the possibility of vigilante witch-bashing, which has been documented in England into the 1800s. But in Newfoundland, it can't have happened often, if it happened at all.... For one thing, if a person believed in a witch's powers that strongly, he or she would probably have been too afraid to try. (2008: 42)

In taking Rieti's extensive research into account, it seems that this particular story of the "local" witch being burned at the stake is likely the result of some form of media influence on this group of teenagers. Despite the fact that several of the high school students concurred with the original informant, I could turn up no other known story of witch burning in Dildo, or anywhere else in Newfoundland.

Langlois also makes reference to the Weeping Woman, which is often associated with the Chicano legend "La Llorona," about a woman who, in some accounts, drowns her children before drowning herself and is often seen in a white dress, walking by the river. There was one such legend shared with me by a student, that of Bloody Mary as a woman in a white dress who can be seen both in the mirror and by the river in which she drowned, crying and walking along the river bank.

Why are these motifs turning up in such different places and different times, localized by the tellers? The idea that the ghost summoned in the mirror in the Bloody Mary game of my childhood is in fact malevolent and intent on harming whomever called her was not at all familiar to me. Nonetheless, based on the era of Langlois' research (the 1970s), it is not a new idea. How did these stories reach the students in a fairly rural community in Newfoundland, to be told over and over again, as truth, by contemporary teenagers? The best answer for that question seems to be mass media and technology, through the use of the internet and movies. The question to be considered here perhaps is what purpose does Bloody Mary (The game? The legend?) serve in this context? Langlois states that "Whatever the relation of legend to myth and of game-playing to ritual, I find that the analogy of legend to game as myth to ritual generated exciting possibilities for understanding a not-so-simple game once played by not-so-simple children" (1978: 203). Engaging in Bloody Mary and the telling of these legends touches on a culturally universal sentiment: fear. For children and teens, there exists a certain thrill in dabbling in something that they may know little about while living in a relatively safe environment, as all of my informants do (and did as well in childhood, in the case of the retrospective group).

Elizabeth Tucker offers insight into why young people are drawn to the sites of supposed-hauntings.

Among these reasons are desires to understand death, probe the horror of domestic violence, and express the uneasy relationship between humans and technology. There is also a strong emotional component: an attempt to feel both thrilled and afraid under relatively safe circumstances. (2006)

A chance encounter while writing this chapter led me to a conversation on the street outside my house as a group of young women walked by. I knew one of them, the younger sister of a friend, and she introduced me to her friends who were visiting from different parts of Canada. My friend's sister asked about my thesis, and as we chatted, one of her friends from Ontario piped up and said "Bloody Mary! I was sooo scared of Bloody Mary when I was a kid!" We proceeded to talk about it, with me frantically scribbling notes on the back of an envelope. As I asked her about variations in the actual ritual, and the background of her involvement with Bloody Mary, she made a comment that has become particularly relevant in my consideration of why children partake in Bloody Mary.

SG: No one ever reached the third "Bloody Mary" because we'd run out screaming. We were just too scared.

LW: Why did you do it then?

SG: Why did we do it? We were just at the age, I guess, when you loved to be scared. We also really liked to watch scary movies too, even though I remember not being allowed to, really. I remember watching "Candy Man" in someone's basement but we had to keep it a secret from the parents.

LW: Why did you keep that under wraps? Did you keep Bloody Mary a secret too?

S.G: I guess we kept it a secret because...because maybe we thought they'd laugh at us for doing it...for believing in it. Or maybe we knew that our parents wouldn't like the idea that we were scaring ourselves so much. (SG-F.I/12)

In every interview I conducted, the informants discussed a certain amount of secrecy that accompanied their experience with Bloody Mary. In most cases, they called to Bloody Mary in a bathroom, as it allowed for complete darkness, one of the necessary elements in the game. School bathrooms were the most common place to perform the Bloody Mary invocation. In these cases, the children involved were careful to keep from being discovered by teachers. One informant, Sarah C, recalls taking turns being placed as sentry to make sure that teachers or even other students (those likely to tattle) did not walk in and catch them. Any sort of play that involved secrecy as an essential element is an integral part of what Mechling calls an “antithetical device” (1986:102) and Sutton-Smith considers “subversive folklore” (1995: 307).

SG’s comments were quite similar to those made by my own students in Grade Six. They were the third group of informants to be considered in this section: the Contemporary Elementary School children. This group of informants range in age from six years old to twelve years old and attend several different schools in different parts of St. John’s. This age group turned out to be quite active in the Bloody Mary activity. Some of these children, for example Riley F, had explanatory narratives that went along with the Bloody Mary game and others did not. Riley told me that

Bloody Mary was a girl named Mary who was a student at our school (Cowan Heights Elementary). She went there a long time ago. Someone killed her...at school, I think? Or behind the school...something like that. And she

used to have a trophy or something with her name on it in the trophy case, but it got stolen, I think? Anyway, now, she haunts the school and you can make her appear in the girls' bathroom mirror when you turn off the lights and say "Bloody Mary" either three times, or maybe ten...I'm not sure. (Riley F-CES/10)

My own Grade Six class in 2011 was especially interested in the origins of Bloody Mary, frequently asking me who she was, when they became aware of my thesis topic. One student in particular would often ask me if she was "real." When I asked her to clarify what she meant, Hannah would reply "Is she real? Is she really a ghost who can get me? I'm afraid of Bloody Mary!" This same student admitted to engaging in the Bloody Mary activity regularly with her classmates at sleepover parties, so I asked her why, if she was so concerned with being harmed by Bloody Mary, did she participate in it? She responded that "Everyone at the sleepover was doing it and running out of the bathroom screaming, so I did too." When pressed further about why they did it, several of my students responded by telling me that they loved being scared.

For this particular group of eleven and twelve year-olds, their interest in all things supernatural continued to escalate throughout the school year. The books that were requested by students for our classroom library were increasingly mature and generally consisted of stories involving girls with supernatural powers who could speak with ghosts, girls who were in love with vampires, teenagers who fought demons and post-apocalyptic stories of zombies and children left in a world with no parents, and monsters at every turn. As the classroom teacher, I feel a responsibility

for all literature that I put on my shelves so, as my students requested these books, I would buy them and read them myself before making them available to the students. In many cases, while there was nothing inappropriate about the content, in terms of sexuality or language, I found the stories to be gory, violent and in the case of the zombie books, nightmare-inducing. However, as a teacher I know that if students are interested in the subject matter, they will be more inclined to read, and cultivating a love of reading is one of the foundations of my personal teaching philosophy, so I did put the books on the shelves throughout the year. When one student asked if a particular book was good, I told him that it had given me nightmares. He responded “Wicked!” and signed it out.

To me, these are all indicators of aspects of their culture. This age group of children is very into scaring themselves and the thrill of fear. One of my students (Hannah C, age 11) who has both a fear of and fascination with, Bloody Mary, told me that she and a classmate (Kelsey C, age 11) had had a sleepover the previous weekend and had “called” both Bloody Mary and “Ann Marie Shirran.”⁶ They squealed in unison over the memory of how terrified they were. I asked them to elaborate on “calling” Ann Marie Shirran. Kelsey asked if I remembered that her body had been found by some people camping somewhere “a couple of hours away from here.” Kelsey then informed me that Shirran had lived on her street and that her house was “all creepy and no one lives there now.” At this point, Hannah chimed in

⁶ Shirran was a local woman who went missing in 2010. Her remains were found in Cappahayden, 100 kilometers outside of St. John’s, in September 2010. She had been murdered. See the National Post news story at <<http://tinyurl.com/death-of-AMS>>

to say that it was “haunted and so scary.” I asked them how they contacted her and they explained that they called her up in the mirror “just like Bloody Mary.”

This variation or even “spin-off” of Bloody Mary (calling a mirror ghost through a ritualistic process) was something I came across in a few other cases during my fieldwork, though none quite so fresh and localized by a recent death, in contrast to a legend that has been passed down. An Australian friend told me that while she had never heard of Bloody Mary, she recalls trying to summon the Candy Man⁷ in the mirror through a similar ritual, and recalls running out of the bathroom shrieking in terror, much like many of the Bloody Mary participants.

Bill Ellis theorizes that teenagers engage in these mirror rituals, as they find them to be “both thrilling and deviant” (2004:171). This statement is accurate in many aspects of the latest craze to sweep my sixth grade classroom. From Bloody Mary to horror movies to passing on chain e-mails with terrifying consequences, there is, to the adolescent child, nothing quite like being scared, within a controlled environment.

Bloody Mary can and should be considered from a wide range of folkloristic lenses. It exists simultaneously as a game, pastime, legend, folk drama, form of ostension, maturation ritual, rite of passage and an emergent form of bullying, or peer control. In the next chapter, I explore the functions of Bloody Mary as it pertains to my groups of informants, using Sutton-Smith’s Rhetorics of Play as a starting-off point.

⁷ For Candy Man, see Koven, 2007: 137.

Chapter Four

Rhetorics of Play in Bloody Mary

As discussed briefly in the last chapter, my informants in Whitbourne/Dildo, attending Crescent Collegiate, admittedly used Bloody Mary to scare younger students in their school. The reason they gave for doing this was merely that it had been done to them previously. They admitted to waiting in the bathroom for younger students to appear, and then turning off the lights and calling Bloody Mary. The girls I spoke with said when this had taken place, they were in Grade Seven or Eight, which are the eldest years in a particular wing of the school (the part considered the Elementary/Middle school). For the consideration of social dynamics, because they were in the oldest Elementary grade, they were already the top of the social hierarchy. Why then terrify younger girls in such a way? The girls I spoke with said simply that it had been done to them when they were the younger students and so they did it to the younger girls once they became the oldest. They were unabashed in telling me this – it was just the way it went in their school culture. They were merely reenacting a tradition that had been passed on to them.

According to the Sutton Smith model, this form of play can be categorized as “play as power” – in this case, the older girls are asserting their power over the younger girls within their school, which is its own mini-society or folk group. Dundes has famously defined a folk group as “Any group of people whatsoever who share at least one common factor. It does not matter what the linking factor is – it could be a common occupation, language, or religion – but what is important is that a

group...have some traditions that it calls its own” (1965: 2). In that regard, each of my groups of informants can be viewed as a folk group, and will be considered as such when I analyze the functions of Bloody Mary as applied to each group.

Below is an explanation of what Sutton-Smith refers to as “Rhetorics of Play” and the application of these ideas to Bloody Mary. This set of theories really ignited my thinking about how to approach Bloody Mary, and opened up the scope in which I was able to explore it and see the value and functions a simple “game” can have in the world of children’s folklore.

I will begin with examining the rhetoric of “Play as Progress” (Sutton-Smith, 1997: 9). The idea of “play as progress” explores the notion that children and animals develop socially, cognitively, and morally through play. Thus, play is about development, not merely fun. Bloody Mary serves as a tool for social development for children such as Ariel, Chester and Tiegan (discussed in Chapter Six). In my experience as a primary-level teacher, I have observed children as they learn to interact and play with their peers. As adults, we sometimes forget that peer-interaction, sharing and collaboration are learned through experience. By finding common ground – in this case, an interest in Bloody Mary – children come together to create a narrative that they build on, using their experiences. These particular experiences were developed at a highly imaginative level (meaning they were “creatively enhanced” from a regular experience, such as a trip to the washroom during class time), yet a number of children latched on to the idea as a group, and

built on their various interpretations of Bloody Mary, based on (limited) prior experience (what one child had heard from an older sibling).

Another way Bloody Mary can be considered a form of the “Play as Progress” rhetoric is that for some of these children, it may be their first foray into a method of intentionally frightening themselves. Younger children (in my experience as a teacher) shy away from things that frighten them. I have had children tell me that certain movies that were created with children as their intended audience, such as *Monsters Inc.* (2001) or *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory* (1971 and 2005) were “too scary” for them to watch. By re-interpreting aspects of the Bloody Mary narrative and experience, thereby “claiming” it as their own, seven and eight year-olds are able to explore ideas that would previously have been too frightening.

Next, I will consider the rhetoric of “Play as Fate.” This idea applies mainly to games of chance and luck, but worth considering in relation to Bloody Mary, for as Sutton Smith describes it “...the belief that human lives and play are controlled by destiny, by the gods...but very little by ourselves, except perhaps through the skilled use of magic or astrology. This rhetoric enjoys only an underground advocacy in the modern world” (1997: 10). For some “players” of Bloody Mary, there is indeed an element of luck or destiny involved, particularly for those who accompany the activity with a gory legend of sorts that says Bloody Mary might enact violence upon whomever summoned her, to avenge her own death, or in the case of some stories, the death of her child. Therefore, if the story is even partially believed by the participant, by calling to Bloody Mary in front of a mirror in a darkened room, the child is rolling

the proverbial dice, and taking a chance or risk. For participants, there is always a risk involved, even in the case of the FCSEA, who did not have a frightening narrative to consider, but knew there existed a chance of getting caught by a teacher, Brownie leader or another child who enjoyed tattling.

As previously mentioned, the rhetoric of “Play as Power” is highly applicable to Bloody Mary. This includes various forms of play that serve to solidify a hero or leader of a group. Sutton Smith calls this rhetoric “as ancient as warfare and patriarchy” (1997: 10). Though usually applied to sports, this particular rhetoric is relevant to Bloody Mary, particularly in the case of the girls from Crescent Collegiate, Whitbourne/Dildo, who admittedly used Bloody Mary to scare younger girls in their school community, a tactic that was used on them when they were younger and “powerless” (in terms of social status within the closed community of a school). They used Bloody Mary to solidify their collective social status. As the oldest girls in an elementary school (where Grade Six was the highest grade), they were asserting their power over younger students. However, in the context of the contemporary school system, it may be said that what these girls were doing was a form of bullying (See Chapter Three).

The rhetoric of “Play as Identity,” (1997: 125) as defined by Sutton Smith, generally applies to celebrations and festivals within a community, and is an activity that affirms or advances the participant’s power and identity within the group or community. To apply this rhetoric to Bloody Mary, I have considered it from definitions developed by both Linda Dégh (definition of a “legend trip” – see Chapter

Two) and using Elizabeth Tucker's definition of a ritual (as developed by Douglas).

Tucker states that

The presence of certain symbolic elements, over a wide span of time and space, creates a sense of ritualistic potency. As in many rituals, the order of events must be faithfully maintained, the tone must be solemn, and the outcome is expected to be something almost miraculous. (1973: 126)

By participating in the ritual of Bloody Mary, when the undertaking of such has come from the telling of a story, leading then to the action of calling up Bloody Mary in the mirror, the participant is affirming their place within a group. Bloody Mary is used to confirm an aspect of identity within a community of people, generally young girls. This was the case among most of my informants, but particularly valid among the group who engaged in Bloody Mary in their early adolescence outside of the school setting. Kerrie C, Andrea H and Jennifer F, all discussed the pressure they felt to participate in an activity that frightened them. When asked why they would participate, the response was always the same. They felt they "had to" (to maintain some social-status within their peer group). They were at an age when peer pressure was rampant and fitting in with your friends felt like one of the most important things in life.

Sutton Smith considers the rhetoric of "Play as the Imaginary" to be one of the three "modern set of rhetorics" (accompanied by the rhetorics of Progress and Self) (1997: 50). Play that can be categorized here are activities that emphasize the use of imagination, creativity and innovation. When children create situations that are

elevated beyond the mundane, everyday existence, they are engaging in some form of fantasy play that requires creative imagining. Bloody Mary, for some, fulfills aspects of the need to create imaginary situations. For many children who participate in Bloody Mary, although they claim that they know it won't "work," they will still engage in the activity, faithfully following the steps, just to see what may happen.

Sutton-Smith writes that

Children's play fantasies are not meant only to replicate the world...they are meant to fabricate another world that lives alongside the first one and carries on its own kind of life, a life often much more emotionally vivid than mundane reality. (1997: 158)

Bloody Mary, and the belief – even if only the slightest level of belief – that someone might appear in the mirror if summoned, serves as an important element of children's imaginary play. It goes beyond the imaginary games of very young children (playing "house" or "school") and moves play into the realm of something more in their control, with a possible outcome. Perhaps for children, there is something about the formulaic or ritualistic nature of Bloody Mary that is appealing. If they follow the methods passed on to them by other children, they might be lucky enough to achieve the desired results.

In exploring Bloody Mary, consideration must be given to the idea of belief and how it affects or influences the recollections of my informants. My research has shown that while there were certainly many variations in the age and context in which Bloody Mary was experienced by informants, that there seems to be a commonality

that should be discussed; the level of belief that the informants had at the time in their lives they engaged in the Bloody Mary activity.

Belief and Cultural Catholicism

An examination of belief and the belief systems of my informants is an essential part of this cultural analysis. In Chapter One, I divided my informants into generation-based groups (Catholic School Attendees of the 1980s, High School Students – Whitbourne/Dildo 2009, Current Elementary School Children, and then additional informants – labeled as Folklore Interviews). At first glance, one might be tempted to think that these groups are culturally homogeneous due to their geographic and ethnic backgrounds, but if one moves away from this assumption and scrutinizes these groups, the generational differences account for a much wider cultural divide than is first evident.

The most prominent cultural divide, in my opinion, is the difference in a generation who went to school in the same city, under two different school boards – a Catholic school board and a non-denominational school board. My informants from this generation (that is, my peers – women born in the late 1970s to the early 1980s) have a cultural awareness of something that once had a strong influence on many aspects of culture – religion. However, in my experience with contemporary youth who are being educated in a school system that is not divided based on religious belief, I have noticed a much more secular culture. While I do not think this affects the quality of the education system, as a folklorist studying the effects of a Catholic

belief system on a children's activity, the lack of obvious religious divide has eliminated the Catholic "tint" that my own generation applied to Bloody Mary.

As it has been noted, one of the primary difficulties with studying children's culture from a retrospective viewpoint, is that for an adult revisiting a part of the childhood (as my informants did when I interviewed them about their Bloody Mary experience) there is a tendency to present an analytical view of the situation, which prevents the recollection from being entirely unbiased. As adults, we realize that we had been engaging in activities that we now view quite differently. With this in mind, I cautiously undertake the analysis of narratives of events that occurred more than twenty years ago, in the case of my peers.

When asked whom they expected to see in the mirror, almost all respondents from the first group – the former Catholic school attendees – had the same answer: The Virgin Mary. Susan L recalls

We'd go into the bathroom at Pius, the one next to the main lobby, and when we'd say we were going to "do" Bloody Mary, I immediately pictured the very same Mary in the mirror as the painting of the Virgin Mary that was above the archway in the main entrance of the Pius...which was also pretty much next to that bathroom. (Susan L-FCSA/10)

Another informant, Michelle R, recalled that

When I was really young and someone even mentioned the name "Mary," that is immediately where my mind went. I didn't know any other Marys at that point, only the Virgin Mary, and I went to Mary Queen of Peace School, so statues and paintings of Mary were everywhere. When I first heard of Bloody Mary, I think the girl who told me may have even said it was going to be Holy

Mary in the mirror. That is why I was so afraid, I think. I knew she was good and holy and I didn't want to be doing something bad, like calling her to come in the mirror in the bathroom. I think I somehow thought she was an angel maybe, and that if we called her, she would take us to heaven...right then and there. (Michelle R-FCSA/14)

Although Michelle is the only one who recalls specifically being told what they would see in the mirror (in contrast to all other informants from varying groups), they all state that they intrinsically knew that they would see the Virgin Mary. The Blessed Virgin holds an important place in Catholic Doctrine, and not only as the mother of Jesus. Many of the folk beliefs that branch off from formal Catholic doctrine involve Mary (Swackhammer, 1980). Within traditional Catholic belief, Mary is a prominent figure. My own school, St. Pius X Elementary, used to hold a special mass and ceremony in May to honor Mary. We called May "Mary's Month" and wore homemade medallions, made from store-bought, oval-shaped religious medals of Mary sewn on to a piece of light blue ribbon. We had to wear them every day, attached to the left side of our uniform, pinned above our heart. Many classrooms also had miniature altars set up in them, with a small statue of Mary on it and a small basin of Holy Water. Children were encouraged to pray to Mary during May and I recall classroom visits from the parish priest who told us that "...because Mary was a mother herself, she was especially good at hearing the prayers of children." Several of my other informants from this group attended other Catholic schools, such as Mary Queen of Peace and Mercy Convent, and these schools were even more "Mary-driven." One informant who attended Mercy Convent recalls the

statue of Mary that was located at the front of the school as something that they were taught to revere.

The nuns used to tell us that “Mary was watching over us” and that we should say our prayers to her. I always felt as though the statue was alive somehow, that the statue was the one watching us, which was terrifying, now that I think about it. But I think that we all felt that was the case, more or less, so I guess at the time, it seemed normal...which is pretty fucked up. (Natalie L-FCSA/09)

She claimed that when they “did” Bloody Mary in the school bathroom, she expected to see the face of the statue of Mary, because to the young girls at Mercy Convent, that Mary was “Mary” – the statue and the Mother of God were one in the same. She states

I think that somehow we connected the statue with the whole thing...because I remember being afraid to even look at the statue when I passed by it, just in case it was crying tears of blood. (Natalie L-FCSA/09)

Former students from St. Pius X, Mercy Convent, Mary Queen of Peace, St. Joseph’s, Holy Family and St. Patrick’s school all had a similar recollection of the legend of Bloody Mary. As Kimberly W recalls

I remember girls coming flying out of the bathroom, screaming that they had seen Bloody Mary. When I was really young, maybe Grade One or Two, I remember asking another girl outside the bathroom what they were talking about, and she told me that if you turned off the lights, looked into the mirror and said “Bloody Mary” three times, then Mary would appear in the mirror, crying tears of blood. I also remember that after that, I was afraid to go into that particular bathroom, so would make the trip to the bathroom on another

floor, which for some reason, wasn't as scary. I asked her who "Mary" was, and she said (as though it was incredibly obvious) "Why, the Virgin Mary, of course...y'know, Jesus' mother." (Kimberly W-FCSA/09)

Kimberly W attended Mary Queen of Peace School and recalls the emphasis that was put on the school's namesake in school ceremonies and special occasion masses. Like most Catholic schools in St. John's, Mary Queen of Peace had a church located just a few meters from the school, and the entire student body would attend masses on the feast days of saints and to celebrate other notable events in the Catholic calendar, such as the beginning of Lent, Ash Wednesday, the start of Advent, and various other Catholic feast days that occurred throughout the school year. Kimberly said that May was always an important month at that school, and that because of the school's name, they felt a special claim or connection to Mary. She recalled that they were often reminded that their uniforms were blue "like Mary's robes." Like the students at my own St. Pius X Elementary they wore special Mary medals throughout the month of May. Given the nature of the Catholic education and the ever-present iconography and reverence of the Virgin Mary in schools of this era, it is no wonder that this entire group of informants identify so strongly with the Virgin Mary in their Bloody Mary experience. Amongst these informants, there is no additional narrative or legend that accompanies the experiences recounted to me during these interviews. None of the Former Catholic School Attendees recalled any story behind the Bloody Mary experience, other than whispers of girls who "actually saw" Bloody Mary. The lack of narrative could be attributed to the shared assumption of who the anticipated

figure in the mirror would be. As Catholic school students, we all knew plenty about the Virgin Mary. Perhaps no narrative or explanation was needed to complete the “game” for us. Our belief in Mary was not being tested by summoning an apparition in the mirror; it was merely deepened. While all of my informants from this group would admit to be frightened by “doing” Bloody Mary, none of us felt we were truly in danger, or that Mary was in any way malevolent or threatening towards us. I may have been afraid in the same way I was scared of forgetting to say our prayers at night or of the supposed presence of God in the church when the red light was lit up next to the tabernacle that held the blessed host wafers on the altar of the church. It was an almost reverential fear.

Interestingly, most of the women I spoke with about Bloody Mary added a disclaimer of belief at one point or another during the interviews. They would add in statements like “I didn’t really think anything would happen, but...” (Sarah C-FCSA/09) or “I think it must have been a pack mentality type of situation...” (Kimberly W-FCSA/11). These are hallmarks of a childhood retrospective interview, with the adult looking back on their childish behavior and trying, as an adult, to explain or make excuses for activities that, in that moment twenty years ago, seemed very real and valid. The validity and importance of these activities – at the time in which they were undertaken – is evident when consideration is given to comments such as those made by Kerrie C about how she was afraid to go into her basement where the bathroom she had “done” Bloody Mary was located. I shared my own story about covering the mirror in my bedroom with my raglan because I was afraid

that I would “accidentally” look in the mirror in the dark and see Bloody Mary and apparently, I was not alone – others claimed to have had the same fear, and covered their own mirrors as well.

A Catholic upbringing in St. John’s brings with it many unspoken, and perhaps even unacknowledged, cultural implications. In fact, a phrase that was brought up in conversations while conducting this field work was “Cultural Catholicism” – the idea that while you may not still identify as a practicing Catholic, or even if you reject Catholic doctrine, there are still some deeply ingrained remnants of belief that never quite leave you. In some cases, these are habitual remnants, such as blessing one’s self when a funeral procession passes by, or using religious ejaculations such as “Jesus, Mary and Joseph” instead of the more common contemporary “swear” words. But this observation of vernacular religious beliefs is not a new one. Marion Bowman’s 1985 thesis is a study of religious folklore among what she calls “lay Catholics” in and around St. John’s. She has also given much consideration to the “Bible of the Folk” in Newfoundland and, in using Don Yoder’s definition, states

The richness of Newfoundland's cultural tradition in areas such as narrative, music, song and dance is well attested. It is no less rich in the comparatively neglected field of folk religion, which can best be defined as 'the totality of all those views and practices of religion that exist among the people apart from and alongside the strictly theological and liturgical forms of the official religion.' (Bowman 1993: 87 quoting Yoder 1974:14)

In 2011, I put out a quick informal survey in the form of a Facebook question asking if anyone (on my “friend” list) had any habitual, Catholic-influenced language.

I turned up quite a number of enthusiastic responses – twenty people had something to say – within an hour. These ranged from the expected “Blessed Jesus!” to the more elaborate “Gentle Jesus in the Garden” and “Sweet Mother of God, Bless us and save us!” This swift response can be taken as an indication of how people will still feel the ripples of a belief system that was enforced upon children at an early age. Not a single one of the people that responded to my informal survey still attend church on a regular basis (although more than half claimed “weddings and funerals only”) or identify with practicing any form of religion. However, all of them claimed to use such “Catholic exclamations” in their daily life. In her 1989 article, “The Cross in the Window: An Examination of a ‘Miracle’ in Folk Catholicism,” which describes the seemingly miraculous and mysterious appearance of a cross within a windowpane in a rural Newfoundland Catholic household, Keli Jo Healey notes (with regard to her informants)

They pepper their speech with many religious phrases, though this is probably more the result of social influence than the direct teaching of the church...Such phrases constitute a standard part of speech for some people and indicate – although the user may not ever realize it – the folk interpretation of God’s presence and power. (1989: 72-3)

While these speech patterns and expressions are taken lightly amongst this particular generation (my peers, now in their early to late thirties) and given no particular credence as being blasphemous, a generation ago, according to my mother, a practicing Catholic would have counted these transgressions and taken them to confession. A short interview with my mother indicated that there were certain things

one was expected to confess. One could not get away with saying they had not done anything wrong that week. My mother recalled

I had the same sins every time. I had a list that I'd go through. You know, like lying...I'd say I lied a few times, maybe five times about this or that. And then there was disobedience. I'd always say I disobeyed my parents maybe three times and of course, I fought with my brothers a few times. I said the same sins every week. (EW-FI/11)

Upon hearing your confession, the priest acting as confessor would likely assign you a series of specific prayers to atone for your sins. I asked my mother if taking the Lord's name in vain was cause for concern and she replied

Oh, of course! I never swore myself until I was about twenty-five, and by then, I didn't go to confession anymore, so that was never on my list. Although, that was one of the Ten Commandments, so it may have been a bit more serious. Mine were always just venial sins, the minor ones. The Lord's name in vain may have been considered a mortal sin, right up there with murder and adultery. (EW-FI/11)

This conversation is a good indication of variations in the Catholic beliefs and practices, and the differences in the common attitudes towards them that exist between the generation that would have been in school in the 1960s and the generation of my fieldwork (those who attended Catholic school in the 1980s). Nonetheless, many of my informants, as previously stated, still hold on to elements of their Catholic school days, even if they claim not to be practicing Catholics anymore.

Another aspect of Cultural Catholicism is the folk belief adaptations that many of my informants and peers admit to using, such as praying to St. Anthony for missing things (“Pray for St. Anthony to come around; Something that’s lost shall be found” KF-FI/11), or hanging rosary beads on a clothesline the week leading up to a wedding so that the sun will shine on the wedding day (JO-FI/11). I was also offered information about several folk beliefs that I had never heard before, such as using a wedding ring to bless and thus remove a wart, toothache, or pink eye. For me, these types of what might be called “fringe” beliefs (“fringe” in the sense that they have little to do with Catholic doctrine, yet seem to be part of the everyday language of people raised as Catholics, even if they claim, as many do, not to practice Catholicism any longer) may explain why the first group of informants (Former Catholic School Attendees) did not have an explanatory narrative that was passed on with the instructions to the Bloody Mary ritual. They were, as a group, consistent in both the anticipated visual in the mirror, the ritual itself (calling Bloody Mary three times) and the lack of narrative leading into the ritual. Bloody Mary, for former Catholic school attendees, was an extension of their Catholic belief system. It was not influenced by external means, such as media, but instead, was passed on within a generally closed community (within a school) that maintained a congruent belief system. While none of my informants felt that engaging in Bloody Mary was sacrilegious or specifically a form of rebellion (which is how Krista N claims she feels about it now, as an adult – see Chapter Three) they all were adamant about the importance of keeping the activity from adults, particularly teachers, as it was an activity frequently undertaken

in the girl's washroom during class time.

While the Former Catholic School Attendees were the only group with whom I discussed religious belief (because of the link I had uncovered between religion and a particular version of Bloody Mary), my other groups of informants often mentioned belief as part of their experience. With regards to belief, Patrick Mullen states that

Belief exists at every level and in every context of society – official and unofficial, institutional and noninstitutional, enfranchised and disenfranchised, the center and the margins, and small and large groups. (2000:139).

Andrea H mentioned, as almost an afterthought, when I asked her about the Bloody Mary script and setting, that in addition to the (usual) darkened bathroom with a mirror and saying “Bloody Mary” a certain amount of times, “You had to believe it was going to happen.” (Andrea H-FI/11). Other informants, such as Kerrie C, Melanie B and Kate D spoke about what they believed in during that particular point in their lives (when they were participating in Bloody Mary activities). Kerrie C (2011) noted that she “believed in angels and all that shit” and Melanie B talked about her interest in voodoo, séances and spells, which started after one of their close friends went on a trip to New Orleans.

We were at that age, I guess, when you don't believe in the Tooth Fairy, Easter Bunny or Santa Claus anymore, so I guess, maybe, we were looking for something else to believe in. (Melanie B-FI/11)

Melanie B also discussed the other activities she engaged in with her friends at this time, including using a Ouija board, playing “Light as a Feather” at slumber

parties and even conducting a séance in a graveyard using “voodoo” candles that one of her friends had brought back from a trip to New Orleans. She felt that perhaps she and her group of friends, at age twelve and thirteen, were trying to hold on to some kind of belief in things that are fantastical or on some level, magical, and thus became interested in “occult play” (Ellis’s phrase, 2004:143) – séances, haunted graveyards and trying to summon spirits.

The Contemporary Elementary Students, particularly the Grade Two students at Bishop Feild Elementary, were very much in the midst of their Bloody Mary experiences during the time at which I wrote my thesis. One has only to read the transcription of my group interview (see Chapter Six) to get a sense of the role Bloody Mary was playing in their current school culture. One of my younger informants, Tiegán (age eight), told me that she knew that Bloody Mary was “only a Halloween folktale.” Tiegán’s comment (further discussed in Chapter Six) indicated to me that she had brought Bloody Mary up to an adult, likely a parent, and had been told that it was “only a Halloween folktale” to dismiss her fear. I should point out that I had this conversation with Tiegán in the early spring – nowhere near Halloween. For Tiegán, at age seven or eight, Bloody Mary was a valid concern because she believed so firmly that it was real. She spoke to me about her knowledge and experiences with Bloody Mary at length (full transcription in Chapter Six).

The level of belief among this age group was extremely strong. At this age, children are willing to put their faith in almost anything that is of interest to them. They have not yet developed the skepticism so commonly found in adolescents and

adults, therefore, the actual Bloody Mary ritual was not the most important thing for them. Many of them had not even participated in the activity, but instead discussed Bloody Mary at length and considered ways in which Bloody Mary could be incorporated into their various types of play. They seemed quite certain that Bloody Mary really did exist, and that she could somehow find her way into their lives – and not simply through a mirror in the girls’ washroom.

Although the belief systems of the FCSA and the CES groups are quite different, one based on Catholic doctrine, both formal and informal, the other entirely secular, developed from oral tradition handed down from older children, it is important to note that belief is an integral part of the Bloody Mary tradition.

Chapter Five

Informants and the Function of Bloody Mary Among the Different Groups

The following section includes the Table of Structural Elements, along with some explanation, analysis and interpretation of its contents. Prior to introducing the Table of Structural Elements, I have summarized my main groups of informants and briefly discussed the function of Bloody Mary as the activity pertained to each group.

The first group, Former Catholic School Attendees, consists of approximately a dozen women now in their early to late thirties who attended Catholic school in St. John's, NL, in the 1980s. For this group, myself included, participating in Bloody Mary was a mildly subversive form of play (Sutton-Smith's term). The informants in this group participated in Bloody Mary at a younger age than any of my other informants from other (non-Catholic) groups. While their participation in Bloody Mary may not have served the same function it did for the other groups of informants, who participated because they felt the pressure from their adolescent peers or to demonstrate their hierarchical status within the school, or even as a dalliance into supernatural play, there was a certain thrill in participating, and knowing that we had been told about it by "older" girls. While the younger girls were not trying to "fit in" with the older girls, being made something of a "pet" by older girls and included in their games and activities was some sort of honor, which gave "status" in a peer group of children in a lower grade. Perhaps participating in Bloody Mary (or at the very least, being included in the group enough to be told about Bloody Mary) served as an

initiation of sorts for the youngest girls at Catholic schools. Particularly in the case of the Brownie pack, as previously discussed. Sarah C recalls how she felt when an older Brownie in Grade Four invited her (a younger Brownie in Grade One) to follow her to the bathroom and call Bloody Mary.

I remember Erin B whispering about Bloody Mary when we were sitting in our groups – remember the fairy groups? Imps and Pixies and all that. So it already had that sort of magical sense to it for me...being in Brownies. And then Erin was talking about Bloody Mary and told me to ask to go to the bathroom after her, and meet her there. And I did, and she was there with another girl – another Grade Four – and they turned off the lights, and started to say in spooky, quiet voices “Bloody Mary, Bloody Mary...” And then we got scared and ran out. But I think I was more excited that the “big girls” had asked me to play...and I didn’t want to seem like a baby in front of them, even though I know I must’ve been terrified.” (Sarah C-FCSA/09)

This was the only group of informants for whom The Virgin Mary was associated with Bloody Mary, that is, not with any other previously existing cultural figure (not affiliated with anything else in particular). These homogeneous recollections of this group could be attributed to several factors. First of all, this group was participating in Bloody Mary in the 1980s, when no one had the Internet, which meant there was no easy access to information about Bloody Mary. We could not “Google it” as so many children do today. We were not receiving emails about Bloody Mary, and what happened to other children who summoned her. We could not watch videos made by other people participating in Bloody Mary, and therefore, we did not even know that other children played Bloody Mary. As it was a secret,

somewhat deviant activity, we did not consult parents about who she was or to answer any questions we might have had. Therefore, whatever was said by the other children within our limited community (of Catholic children), was taken as truth, and our version of Bloody Mary remained “pure” – with few outside influences, and changes that happened to this activity were simultaneous and organic amongst the players. If a particular experience of a girl in another class was particularly shocking – such as Tiffany P wetting her pants out of fear while playing Bloody Mary – then that became embedded within the lore, and served to further illustrate how terrifying – and real – Bloody Mary was. Tiffany’s story was then told as part of the Bloody Mary lore that was passed around among this particular group of school children.

The religious aspect of the activity, that is, the Virgin Mary appearing to us in the mirror, was a simple manifestation of our surroundings. As previously discussed, we were inundated with Catholic iconography and imagery so the image we anticipated seeing was one we were all quite familiar with – the Virgin Mary. In many of the portraits and artwork representing the Virgin Mary, she is shown looking benevolent with her infant son Jesus in her arms, or else she is shown as a grieving mother, crying for her son as he is nailed to the cross, or even holding his body in her arms. Perhaps this is why this group of informants were the only ones for whom a benevolent Bloody Mary was anticipated in the mirror. However, her benevolence made the experience no less terrifying.

Among this group of informants, no one seemed to recall any particular narrative about who Bloody Mary was – which, to me, strengthens my postulation

about the Virgin Mary being the only option for us at the time (there was no narrative to explain who she was because we already knew she was Jesus' mother). There were only two narratives that I recall ever being told about previous participants. The first narrative was the previously-mentioned one about Tiffany, who peed in her pants out of fear during the summoning of Bloody Mary. As she was not in my class, she was not a close friend, which is likely how the story became somewhat embedded in the legend of Bloody Mary participation. None of my friends wanted to actually ask her about it personally, so we had to go on the word of other girls who supposedly witnessed it. The other accompanying narrative was the one told to me by Erin B (who you may recall from an earlier chapter as my inductor to Bloody Mary) intended as the proof of Bloody Mary's existence. There were several drops of nail polish on the sink in the Pius X Parish Hall bathroom where I did Bloody Mary for the first time. Erin told us that it was blood, dripped there from the mirror when some other girls called Bloody Mary, and that no amount of scrubbing could erase it.

There was no particular bathroom that was considered haunted (as there were with other schools in my interviews with contemporary school children), but one bathroom was preferable over the others for Bloody Mary activity, perhaps because of its location. It was in the corridor that was slightly removed from regular classrooms, just off the main foyer of the front entrance of the school. In retrospect, this may have been the most popular bathroom for Bloody Mary because there was less chance of getting caught by teachers.

The next group, the Dildo/ Whitbourne Group (students of Crescent Collegiate), a dozen of whom provided me with written material, was the first to make me aware of older children engaging in Bloody Mary, as the teenage girls in the classes I taught told me they had “done” Bloody Mary in Grades Six, Seven and Eight. Up until I spoke to these informants, I was not aware that Bloody Mary was considered something of a pre-adolescent activity, along the lines of Ouija boards and levitation activities. Not only did they perform it in the school bathroom to scare themselves and each other, but they also “used” Bloody Mary to scare younger girls who came into the bathroom. In this sense, Bloody Mary was both some sort of “coming of age” ritual (it was explained to me that the older girls that had come before them had done the same thing, and so they felt it was their duty and their right to continue on with that “tradition” and do the same to the younger girls coming up in the grades below them), and a form of what is now considered “bullying.” However, the uses and application of the term “bullying” in the schools deserves its own treatment, as many other childhood “traditions” such as practical jokes and chain letters, are becoming cited as “bullying” and it is worth giving some consideration to this new label and how it affects the evolution and adaptation of children’s culture. Several of my other informants (from the “Folklore Interviews” group) discussed how they felt pressured into participating in Bloody Mary when they were young adolescents (as discussed in Chapter Three). This group had a variety of narratives explaining the origins of Bloody Mary, although I had not asked for any explanation.

To these informants, sharing the origin narratives seemed more important than sharing their recollections of how they “played” Bloody Mary.

The third group is comprised of approximately fifteen “random” interviews with people who took an interest in my research because they had Bloody Mary experiences (or in a few cases, had absolutely none, which is why I included their comments in parts of the thesis, to show the extremely narrow margin of participants’ experiences).

No one in this group anticipated seeing the Virgin Mary. Some expectations were influenced by popular culture (Kate D and Melanie B expecting to see the wicked queen from Disney’s Snow White, and the face of Skeletor from the 1980s He-Man cartoons, respectively), others fueled solely by imagination of the participants.

The informants in this group were very “peer driven” in the way they participated in Bloody Mary. Many of them recall Bloody Mary as part of their early adolescent lives, some in the school bathroom, but more often at sleepover parties, alongside games and activities such as “Light as Feather, Stiff as a Board,” Ouija boards and séances.

Most widely quoted from this group are Kate D, Melanie B, Kerrie C, Andrea H and Jennifer F. These women are mostly “once removed” from me – friends of friends who expressed an interest in my work during casual conversation in social settings. Jennifer F is the parent of a child I taught and our conversation about Bloody Mary was brief, but directly relating to what I had been writing about the day

before we spoke (June 2013). I was revisiting the idea of Bloody Mary as a form of bullying (Chapter Three), when I had a chance encounter with Jennifer, who – completely unprompted by me – noted that as an adolescent, she felt forced into playing Bloody Mary, which she compared to bullying.

For this group of informants, Bloody Mary was a form of “supernatural play” (Ellis), a form of group solidification and bonding (Freed, Tucker) and an exploration of power and authority in the form of play (Sutton-Smith).

The final group, Contemporary Elementary Students, consisted of mainly “casual interviews” with approximately twenty students, conducted while I was teaching, or often times, while doing lunch supervision. As such, I did not go through the formal process of applying to the school board to conduct research within the school. By “casual interviews,” I mean that I did not record them – in most cases they were spontaneous conversations – but simply chatted with the students and made notes, sometimes during, sometimes from memory immediately afterwards. These informants will thus be given pseudonyms for the sake of privacy. Amongst this group are students from Grades Six and Seven from Cowan Heights Elementary, Grade Six at St. Matthew’s Elementary, Grades One, Two and Five at Bishop Feild Elementary. Also included in this group are some formal, recorded interviews. These are with two sisters (Kyra and Riley, ages ten and twelve at the time of interview), Eli B, in Grade Five at Bishop Feild (ten years old), and a very brief recording (under a minute) with one of my own Grade One students (Ariel – age six) as well as a somewhat murky recording (done while I was on recess supervision duty with various

children chiming in with their thoughts and opinions), after the mother of both Ariel and Chester, (in Grade One and Two) had given me the go-ahead to record both of her children. These two children and their beliefs about Bloody Mary are discussed in Chapter Six. For the Contemporary Elementary Students, Bloody Mary has the most variation in function. Children participate in Bloody Mary in the “traditional” sense, as well as using the mere name “Bloody Mary” as an element in other activities (see Ariel’s development of Bloody Mary in Chapter Six).

With this in mind, I have laid out the structural table of elements as a tool to concisely present the variations of my findings among my informants. The columns are organized as follows:

Who: In some cases, the “who” is more general – group based – in cases with wide-sweeping similarities in texts. This is the case with Catholic School Attendees (FCSA) and Crescent Collegiate High school students from the Whitbourne/Dildo area (WD). Also included in this column are names and pseudonyms of other informants, both from the main groups of informants, as well as individuals.

Where: The “where” column consists of both geographical places – St. John’s, Whitbourne/Dildo, Kilbride and Mount Pearl – where my informants experienced or participated in Bloody Mary. The only exception in this column is Bishop Feild School, which is in St. John’s, but all informants listed as affiliated with this locale are still Bishop Feild students, a relevant fact that will be discussed more thoroughly in Chapter Six.

When: The years listed in the “when” column are the years in which the informants engaged in Bloody Mary. In some cases the dates are vague (particularly among the FCSSA group, as they recalled playing Bloody Mary over a period of several years during their primary school years during the mid-1980s). In some cases, the years are approximate, as is the case of the Crescent Collegiate students. When I asked them when they played Bloody Mary, they did not seem quite certain, but several of them seemed to think it was when they were in Grade Six, which I calculated to be the year listed in the table.

Script: The use of the term “script” is one I played with before settling upon it for use in this table. I also considered the term “invocation.” To invoke means to vocalize, and a script indicates a predetermined invocation. Folk Drama is certainly one of the main facets under which Bloody Mary falls, and the use of the term “script” further solidifies this idea. There are prescribed texts and actions that accompany the Bloody Mary experience, and these vary among my informants.

Non-Verbal Ritual: This section is used for any additional details that informants made about their participation in the Bloody Mary game. There were some variations here, but no stand-alone examples that were not replicated elsewhere in the table (meaning that at least one other informant had discussed that same variant).

Anticipated Result: This section summarizes the variations of the expected result – what or whom the participants expect to see in the mirror, what they expect might happen to them.

Localized?: This section, with a question mark, asks whether or not the variations result from the localization of the informants' belief. By this, I mean is the belief or tradition exclusive to that group of informants, and shared among them.

Table of Structural Elements

Who	Where	When	Script	Non-Verbal ritual	Anticipated result	Localized?
Catholic School attendees	St. John's, NL	mid-1980s	Bloody Mary three times	Lights out, looking in the mirror	Virgin Mary appears crying tears of blood	Yes, to religion
Crescent Collegiate High school students	Whitbourne/Dildo, NL	2004/5	Bloody Mary, I killed your baby	Lights out, eyes closed	A woman in white will swing an axe or knife at you and try to kill you	Yes
Crescent Collegiate High school students	Whitbourne/Dildo, NL	2004/5	Bloody Mary five times, ten times, thirteen times, one hundred times	Lights out, looking in the mirror	A woman appears in the mirror holding her own bloody severed head	Yes
Andrea H	St. John's, NL	1989/90	Bloody Mary three times	You had to believe you were going to see something	Some sort of shadow	No
Kerrie C	Mt. Pearl, NL	1992/93	Bloody Mary three times	Lights out, looking in a mirror	Virgin Mary	Yes, to religion
Kate D	St. John's, NL	1995/96	Both three times and also thirteen times	Turn around three times before looking in the mirror	The wicked Queen from Snow White	No
Melanie B	St. John's, NL	1995/96	Bloody Mary three times	Turn around 3 times before looking in the mirror	Skeletor from He-Man	No
Riley F Kyra F	St. John's, NL	2010	Call Bloody Mary 3 times	Lights out, Looking in mirror, water running	The ghost of a girl who had gone to their school would appear	Yes
Kelsey C Hannah C	Kilbride, NL	2010/11	Call Ann Marie Shirran three times	Lights out, looking in mirror	That the ghost of the murdered woman would appear in the mirror	Yes
Eli B	Bishop Feild School, St. John's, NL	2012/13	Say Bloody Paul three times in a darkened bathroom	Lights out, looking in mirror	That Bloody Paul will appear holding a shovel	Yes
Nicky T, age 11	St. John's, NL	2010/11	Say Bloody Mary three times in a darkened bathroom	Lights out, looking in a mirror, at midnight	The character from the movie "The Grudge" would come out of the mirror and kill you	No
Chester B, age 7	Bishop Feild School, St. John's, NL	2012/13	Say Bloody Mary three times in a darkened bathroom	Lights out, turn around three times	The ghost of Bloody Mary, who lost her eyes playing darts, would appear in the mirror	Yes
Ariel B, Age 6	Bishop Feild School, St. John's, NL	2012/13	I don't believe in Bloody Mary	Run away from her out on the playground	Bloody Mary wants to cross over into your world and make you her slave	Yes

The first group of informants, Former Catholic School Attendees, had very little variation in any structural element. This group was fairly homogeneous, with the same ritual, script and anticipated result – that the Virgin Mary, a benevolent figure, would appear in the mirror crying tears of blood. This was the only group that did not have recollections of narratives explaining the origins of Bloody Mary.

The second group of informants, the high school students of Crescent Collegiate, were mostly interested in sharing origin narratives. They had quite a wide range of variations of origin, and many of their narratives (see Chapter Three) drew on commonly found contemporary legend motifs (such as the Woman in White, or any variation on a woman who met with a violent end and now haunts a specific locale to exact her revenge). There were quite a lot of small variations in script, for example, the number of times one said “Bloody Mary,” and there was some debate about this among the students while we discussed it.

The informants who are part of the group of Contemporary Elementary Students had the most variation in all elements of Bloody Mary. This is no surprise, as the group is comprised of children from several different elementary schools throughout the St. John’s area. These children are not tied together by religion, and although St. John’s is a relatively small city, I would venture to say that these children are not connected by geography. The children in the different schools tended to have different elements in their Bloody Mary experiences. Most indicated that Bloody Mary was exclusive to their school (usually because she was a former

student that haunted the bathroom) and all were genuinely surprised to learn that was not the case.

One commonality that only became clear to me after I constructed the table was that in most cases, under the heading “Localized?” the answer is “yes.” This indicates that the transmission of Bloody Mary was mainly oral, meaning that it was passed on the way children’s folklore traditionally has been – by word of mouth, in the classroom, or the schoolyard. This oral transmission accounts for the localized variations within each group: the Virgin Mary among Catholics; shared local legends among the students from the small town, where there is only one school; Bloody Mary becoming the ghost of a local woman who was murdered; and finally, the mutation of Bloody Mary to Bloody Paul, and then Bloody Mary who could cross over into our world to make you “her slave.” (Ariel B-CES/12/13)

In the cases where the responses were not “localized,” the anticipated result was influenced by popular culture and media. In these cases, the informants mentioned a vague shadow, the witch from Snow White, Skeletor from “HeMan” (a popular 1980s children’s cartoon) and a character from the horror movie *The Grudge*. Additionally, all of the ritual elements – the script, the setting of the darkened bathroom – contained the most well-known elements of the Bloody Mary activity.

Chapter Six

Contemporary Elementary Students and Bloody Mary

Scholars such as Gary Alan Fine, Sylvia Grider and Jay Mechling have examined the notion that children are their own distinct folk group. Fine has noted that the rapid maturation rate of children, in three main areas (cognitive, social and physiological), may be what sets them apart from all other adult folk groups.

1980:172) The very nature of the movement through stages is what makes the folklore of childhood so dynamic. Their customs, games and beliefs can literally change overnight sometimes. I have witnessed these rapid changes firsthand as an elementary school teacher, working every day with the ages noted by Sylvia Ann Grider as the most influential on childlore:

The folklore that they share is most active during the elementary school years, roughly ages six through twelve...the traditions of childhood generally stop after the child enters intermediate school, which coincides with puberty and adolescence. (1980:161)

Mechling suggests that we should continue to consider children's folklore beyond early adolescence, stating that "Children's lore ends whenever the individual leaves school and enters full time the world of work, that eight-hour-a-day setting which spawns a folk culture of its own." (1986: 94)

With these ideas in mind, my interviews of contemporary school-aged children are with children between the ages of five and sixteen. When and how they

engaged in Bloody Mary vary greatly, with no particular pattern emerging that is in any way comparable to my early informants' usage of Bloody Mary. The functions of Bloody Mary among contemporary school-aged children has far more variation than it does among my early informants (my peers and friend group), and the ages at which they participate in the Bloody Mary activity also shows more variation. By conducting interviews with such a broad range of informants, spanning several generations, I was able to deepen my understanding of the interplay of collective tradition and individual creation and evolution.

Fine's proposal of "Newell's Paradox" – two seemingly contradictory factors working simultaneously for the preservation and advancement of children's folklore, is highly applicable to Bloody Mary, and may perhaps be at the core of what drew me to it as a folklorist. In his 1883 book, *Games and Songs of American Children*, William Wells Newell noted the inventiveness and conservatism of children's folklore and games. Inventiveness is the dynamic nature of folklore, involving creating and altering traditions as required by circumstance (such as a parody of a popular song, rewritten to reflect a situation in popular culture), whereas conservatism preserves what already exists, ideally in the purest, least tampered-with form possible. While these notions can certainly be applied to most aspects of folklore, I have found them to be especially applicable to children's folklore. To paraphrase Fred Rogers, the host of the long-running children's television show, Mr.

Roger's Neighbourhood, "Play is the work of childhood."⁸ Children are redefining and adapting their culture all day, everyday. The lore, customs and oral traditions of childhood are constantly in effect at any given moment in a child's life. For example, as I have seen in schools I have taught in, as children walk from place to place, they often use skipping patterns, pretend they are airplanes, birds or superheroes, or recite little rhymes in low voices about the repercussions of stepping on a crack ("Step on a crack/Break your mother's back"). They are constantly engaging (or being engaged) in creative and thought-provoking activities, either formally in the classroom, or informally by their caregivers, parents, or each other. Children even "play" when performing the most basic functions, such as eating ("Here comes the train/plane/car...into the tunnel/hangar/garage!"), whereas adults have to use much of their waking time to perform mundane tasks (working, remembering to pay bills, taking the garbage out, driving a car from place to place to do errands), children's imaginations are more free to develop and roam, and thus their culture expands and changes at a rapid rate.

How then can these two factors of conservatism and inventiveness exist side by side? I have seen the interplay between these two notions in the world of children and their games, customs, beliefs and songs. As a school-teacher, I regularly use music in the classroom, teaching my students songs in both French and English for various occasions. Every time I hear children sing parodies of well-known songs,

⁸ While I have attributed this quote to Mr. Rogers, a quick internet search attributed it to several other people, such as Maria Montessori and Jean Piaget.

such as “Rudolph the Red-Nosed Reindeer,” I want to scramble for a pen and a recorder. The song is as popular amongst children as it was when I was a child (almost always the first choice when singing Christmas songs in a room full of children), but the additional parts that are inserted throughout the song have changed from generation to generation. When I was a child, the games that “all of the other reindeers” would not let Rudolph play included baseball and hockey. Today’s children say “Monopoly.” Also, we used to say that they “used to laugh and call him names...like stupid” and today’s children seem to no longer interject that particular term, having been told that is not acceptable – adults tell them not to use the word “stupid” to describe people or situations. My Grade One students will come to me and tattle if one of their classmates use the word “stupid” to describe anything at all, even something as seemingly inconsequential as their lunch box or choice of socks. So, when singing “Rudolph,” instead of saying “stupid,” they sometimes say “like Pinocchio” or “like lantern” – meaning that his nose is like a lantern. This particular name was shared with me by my friend’s seven year-old son, and his mother needed further explanation. To an adult, there seemed to be nothing wrong with “lantern” but to a child’s ear, it is as offensive as “stupid,” just more socially acceptable. In keeping with the children’s tradition of subversive or antithetical play, it is worth noting that one of my informants (I.A.P, age 7) said “...but when no grown-ups are listening, we say stupid, even though we’re not supposed to.” Finally, at the end, when we used to say Rudolph “would go down in history (like Columbus!)” today’s children say “like Elvis” (even though some of them do not know who Elvis is).

What one can take from all of this, is that notions of simultaneous conservatism and innovation are very much in effect here. Children still sing the song (as often as possible each Christmas) but have adapted and changed it, making it their own for a new generation.

In my research on Bloody Mary, who is not as well known to most children as Rudolph the Red-Nosed Reindeer, I have found an interplay between tradition and creativity also applies. There are of course, generational adaptations and changes – most notably, those relating to transmission, due to the availability of mass-media in such forms as the Internet and movies – but I have even noticed changes and adaptations to the functions and “ways of playing” Bloody Mary, when there are just a few grades separating the “players.”

I was fortunate enough to have several opportunities to witness these adaptations throughout the school year of 2012-13 where I currently teach, at Bishop Feild Elementary. One of my Grade One students, Ariel B (age six) came in from playing outside during the lunch hour and was quite agitated and upset. She was scribbling on a piece of paper and whispering excitedly to one of her tablemates during “Cloud Time” (quiet time after lunch, when the lights are off, lamps are lit, and soft music is playing. The children can rest, draw or look at books, but are not supposed to talk with their friends). I asked Ariel what was going on that she needed to be chatting with her friend, and she said it was very important, because if she did not tell everyone what was going on, that Bloody Mary was going to get them all. Had they been talking about any other “scary” aspect of childhood, I would have

immediately told her that whatever they were conjuring up in their imaginations did not really exist and they had nothing to worry about, but the folklorist in me was not going to let such an opportunity get away. So instead I proceeded to question Ariel in a casual, conversational way, furtively taking notes the whole time.⁹ I asked Ariel who she thought Bloody Mary was and she told me that she was “a ghost...She is really bad and scary and she lives in the mirrors but she is trying to escape and if you look at her in the mirror, she will try to make you her slave!” Ariel told me that she had learned about Bloody Mary from her older brother, Chester, who is in Grade Two. She then said that Chester had told her you had to write things down so she wouldn’t “get you and make you her slave,” and that is what she was frantically scribbling when I asked her what was going on. I looked at the pages that she had written on, and they were just scribbles, punctuated with Ariel and her brother’s names. It is important to remember that Ariel, in the early days of Grade One, was pretty much “pre-literate” or “an emerging reader/writer.” The only words that she could spell easily were her own name and her brother’s. I asked what the words meant, and she said it was “A spell...that you could write down and it would keep her away, from taking you over, to be her slave in this world until she gets out of the mirror!” Apparently (according to Ariel, as there were no actual words), on the paper was written “I don’t believe in Bloody Mary” over and over again.

⁹ I discussed the situation with Ariel’s mother (who is currently a university student herself) at the end of the day and explained my interest in Bloody Mary, at which point her mother told me to “feel free” to write about Ariel in my thesis and that I was welcome to talk to her about it anytime.

I asked Ariel about Bloody Mary again a few months later, during the second term of Grade One. By this time, three months into the school year, I thought some of the Bishop Feild lore about Bloody Mary in the mirror of the downstairs girls' bathroom may have infiltrated the Grade One collective consciousness, but instead, Ariel told me that she did not really remember much about Bloody Mary from earlier in the year and actually seemed sort of embarrassed. I was surprised, to say the least, especially since Bloody Mary is quite firmly ensconced in the subculture of the Bishop Feild students. I know this to be true as I have spoken to former students about it (who are now in Grades Eight and Nine) and have interviewed current students in the upper elementary levels, both formally (with parental permission) and informally (while on lunch supervision duty).

However, in the case of Ariel, after I thought about her lack of interest in Bloody Mary, I came to this conclusion. Early in the school year, the Grade Ones in my room did not know each other, as they had been two separate groups for their Kindergarten year. As a result of this, the social groups had not yet formed, and Ariel, who is quite bright, an independent thinker and is somewhat sophisticated for her age, did not easily join in with the other children. I suspect that it was easier for her to join in with her brother and his older friends in Grade Two, some of whom she would have played with over the summer. As the year progressed, Ariel settled into Grade One social groups, and Bloody Mary was not something she cared to revisit in the context of the other kids, her new friends, who were more interested in playing

with their stuffed animals at that particular juncture. For Ariel, Bloody Mary allowed her entrance to the world of Grade Twos, when her own social role had not yet been established amongst her peers in Grade One. Similar to many of my other informants who claimed they had just played along with Bloody Mary to ensure social acceptance in their peer group, Ariel invested her beliefs fully into her brother's activity, but when it did not become part of the Grade One world, she let it slip away in favor of activities that her own classmates were engaging in.

My second "interview" (using the term loosely as it lasted for under a minute) in December, four months after the first time I asked Ariel about Bloody Mary, was quite brief.

LW: Ariel's going to tell me what she knows about Bloody Mary

Ariel: I don't know about her.

LW: What about all that stuff you were telling me back a few months ago about your brother and what he knew about Bloody Mary?

Ariel: I don't know why my brother says Bloody Mary is real!

LW: What does he say?

Ariel: [sighs a frustrated sigh and rolls her eyes at me] It's Sophie (a child in Ariel's brother's Grade Two class)... He's going to Sophie...she's the first one, the first one to think it, but I haven't talked to her...

LW: Well, what does your brother say Sophie said?

Ariel: [more frustrated sighing] I don't know...I forget.

LW: What? Remember one day you were running around on the playground and...

At this point, Ariel was staring at me incredulously with her lips pursed together, so I told her not to worry about it, and let the topic drop.

Another noteworthy discovery relating to Ariel's interpretation of Bloody Mary came when I was waiting for two of my other students to be picked up at the end of the school day. These two boys, Isaac and Noah, are good friends and were playing in the classroom after all the other children had left. As I know both children's parents quite well socially (prior to becoming their child's teacher), I knew that they were fine with me questioning their kids about Bloody Mary. So I asked if either of them had heard of Bloody Mary, and they both replied that they only knew of it through Ariel talking about it early in the year. Then I asked them if they had ever heard of Bloody Paul (another adaptation that had recently come to my attention, through an interview with a Grade Five student, Eli – see below). To this Isaac replied, "Oh! Is that just a boy version of Bloody Mary?" After I confirmed this, they pretty much tuned me out and went back to their own interactions, which I scribbled down rapidly.

Noah: Imagine if there was a baby too, and then it would be like "Bloody Baby!"

Isaac [laughing delightedly]: Yeah, and Bloody Dog!

Noah: How about Bloody Cat?

Isaac: How about Bloody Horse?

Noah: Bloody Hamster?

Isaac: Bloody Guinea Pig?

[uproarious laughter from both]

Noah: Bloody Fish! And it would come up out of the water and BITE YOU!

Isaac: Bloody Eel! No! Bloody Sea Monster! And it would have legs and chase you even when you WEREN'T in the water!

[more delighted laughter]

Isaac: How about Giant Bloody...ummm...Nothing?

Noah: Isaac! Isaac! It would be like this...how about Giant Bloody FREAK!?!

(This was followed by wild laughter)

In this brief exchange, Isaac and Noah demonstrated Newell's Paradox beautifully. They latched on to an idea I had presented them with – Bloody Mary, which as a game or ritual, has a certain structure or pattern of rules – and completely ignored what could be viewed as the traditional format. In fact, they did not even inquire into what it was, and why I was asking them about it, but merely took the title and turned it into a completely different game to suit their own play. Isaac and Noah are “new” friends, this being their first year in the same class, and are developing their own in-jokes and language, as friends do. They were far more excited by the verbal play that the very words “Bloody Mary” presented to them, than they were interested in “playing” Bloody Mary in the traditional sense. The word “play” in and of itself here is also a form of antithetical play, as described Mechling (1986: 97). For these boys, anything labeled as “gross” is exciting and a bit taboo, and the idea of bloody babies, dogs and guinea pigs was enough to capture their imaginations, as well as their sense of humor. As stated by Herbert and Mary Knapp, “While children

are remarkably conservative in preserving their traditions for generations, they are also very flexible in adapting their lore to present concerns” (1976:14).

As explained by Gary Alan Fine and Brian Sutton-Smith, children have different social needs at different points in their development, and so their types of play evolve and adapt based on these needs. In considering the theory of Newell’s Paradox, as explained by Fine and also the various rhetorics of play, as developed by Sutton-Smith, I have been able to examine Bloody Mary with new eyes.

A few months later, the lunch supervision schedule and the weather coincided, and I found myself supervising the Grade Two classes (both of the students mentioned by Ariel were in Grade Two) during indoor playtime. This gave me the opportunity to speak with Chester and Sophie, along with a few of their other classmates who noticed me with an iPad in my hands and wanted to be a part of the discussion. I was trying to speak directly with Chester but when I asked about Bloody Mary, the conversation drew many participants, who had some very original thoughts to share. (I have numbered the lines for ease of reference in my discussion below.)

1. LW: I’m looking for Chester. I’d like to ask him about Bloody Mary.
2. Tiegan: Bloody Mary isn’t real.
3. LW: What do you mean?
4. Tiegan: She’s just a Halloween folktale, did you know that?
5. LW: I didn’t know that.

6. Tiegan: Well, I just hear it a lot over Halloween and now I've got my creeps over.
7. LW: Anyone else hear it at times other than Halloween?
8. [Several other students came over yelling] "Me! I did!"
9. Stella: She is trying to protect the girls' bathroom!
10. Tiegan: I actually saw blood!
11. Stella: Me too! I did!
12. LW: Where?
13. Tiegan and Stella: In the garbage!
14. Tiegan: And when we went into my dreamworld, in my mind, there was this huge tornado of blood! We can get into each other's dreamworld!
15. Stella: No! We couldn't because of the tornado and the line that separates them!
16. Tiegan: And then we saw Bloody Mary!
17. LW: Where did you see her?
18. Tiegan: She was making the tornado and she grabbed Stella back!
19. LW: In your dream? Or in real life?
20. Tiegan: Real life! In my dreamworld, at night, it becomes real...in my house. We can slip into each other's dreamworld.
21. Colin: Can I tell you something Madame Winter? I always thought Bloody Mary was the queen of blood.

22. [Confirmation from several other children] “Yeah, she is.”
23. LW: What does that mean?
24. Colin: I don’t know really, I’m just guessing.
25. LW: Chester, tell me what you know about Bloody Mary.
26. Chester: Well....I don’t know if this is true...but, I think how Bloody Mary was made is she was just throwing darts with her friends and she hit a high shot and it went around the mirror and came back into her forehead.
27. LW: And when did this happen? Ten years ago? A hundred years ago?
28. Chester: Maybe a thousand.
29. LW: Where did this happen?
30. Tiegan: Probably at her friend’s house. Darts...back in the olden days...I know it from the stories I was listening to at Halloween....She was going over to her friend’s house and they were playing darts and darts back then were just drawings on the wall and you had to throw knives into the wall.
31. LW: Knives! They were throwing knives and that’s what happened?
32. Chester: Yup.
33. LW: So is Bloody Mary in the mirror herself?
34. Chester: Yeah, she lives in it.
35. LW: Which mirror?

36. Colin: Every single mirror! I've done it before! In the middle of the night, I went into my bathroom and I closed all the lights and I said "Bloody Mary, Bloody Mary..."
37. Chester: Did you forget to turn on the tap?
38. Colin: No. I said "Bloody Mary" and I saw her in the mirror.
39. LW: So, what did she look like?
40. Colin: A red dress, red eyes and black hair.
41. LW: And was she bleeding?
42. Colin: No, but it looked like her dress was made out of blood.
43. LW: Anyone else try it?
44. Stella: I tried it in the middle of the day and it didn't work.
45. Chester: It has to be in the middle of the night.
46. LW: Anyone ever do it in the bathrooms?
47. Tiegan: No. Kids are afraid to do it at school because you could die without your parents knowing.
48. LW: I think your parents would know.... But I heard that Bloody Mary lived in the girls' bathroom here at school?
49. Stella: I think there is another ghost in the bathroom...and she's Bloody Mary's friend.
50. LW: Sophie! What do you know? Ariel told me that you know about it.

51. Sophie: I know that everybody keeps saying “I saw bloody footprints in the bathroom! I saw bloody this in the bathroom, I see this in the bathroom, I see this in the bathroom, I saw a dead body in the bathroom, I saw lalala in the bathroom, I saw lalala in the bathroom...” [laughter]
52. LW: Does anyone want to add anything?
53. Tiegan: Well.....Bloody Mary killed many, many people. And one of them was her own daughter...and now SHE is Bloody Mary...the Second.
54. LW: And where would one find Bloody Mary the Second?
55. Tiegan: Down in the girls’ bathroom at Bishop Feild.

(May 2013)

This group interview with Grade Twos presented quite a number of worthwhile ideas that are quite important to my observations regarding the dynamic nature of Bloody Mary in the contemporary context. Tiegan, in particular, was quite vocal in her participation and extremely interested in sharing her knowledge. While I have never been Tiegan’s teacher, I spoke with her teacher and learned that she is an extremely astute little girl with an active imagination and great artistic ability. These traits may have contributed to her colourful and detailed answers and comments. Early in the interview, Tiegan says that Bloody Mary is “just a Halloween folktale, did you know that?” (line 4). This particular usage of the term “folktale” jumped out at me, as it is a scholarly term (to a folklorist) being used by an eight-year-old. Tiegan has taken a scholarly term and made it her own, in as much as an eight-year

old child can incorporate such a term into their vocabulary. Tiegan may have been told that something frightening was “just a Halloween folktale” to diminish it in her imagination, and make it less frightening. By calling something “just a folktale,” I suspect that she was implying that a folktale is a mere incorrect belief. However, throughout the conversation I had with the Grade Twos, Tiegan was the most involved, and only one of her comments (line 31 – when she attempts to add credibility to her knowledge on the Bloody Mary origins) was related to her original statement, which led me to feel that she had been told Bloody Mary was “just a Halloween folktale” but for her, it seemed to hold more relevance.

The Grade Two group had taken the Bloody Mary origin story (the narratives that are often told to explain the spectral vision that appears in the mirror, usually in the legend-style, as was the case with the Whitbourne/Dildo group of informants) and created something that I had never encountered before, in my own research or in the previously published material on Bloody Mary. Bloody Mary, Queen of Blood (line 21), who can get into your dreamworld (line 14) and became Bloody Mary because she was injured during a dart game...a thousand years ago. This is a wonderful example of John McDowell’s discussion of the transmission of children’s folklore, drawing on C.W. Von Sydow’s ideas of mutation through transmission. Von Sydow stated that “An original motif may be superseded by a new mutation, but a new mutation may also yield to the older form....If a motif is particularly popular, this very fact may induce various narrators to mutate it in different ways”(as quoted

in McDowell, 1995: 234). From this, McDowell proposes a model of transmission of folklore among children. He writes

When adult folklore or popular culture is assimilated into the realm of children's folklore, changes take place that are most revealing of childish attitudes and concerns. These extraneous materials undergo a sea change, to eventually display the contours of perception and conception characteristic of the child's mind. (53)

While Bloody Mary – in all its facets – is not really “adult folklore,” the Grade Two students at Bishop Feild have certainly applied childish characteristics to the story of origin. In the case of Tiegan and her “dreamworld” (line 14), as well as with Ariel and her concerns about Bloody Mary crossing over into this world and “making you her slave,” Bloody Mary has been transformed into something entirely new. Bloody Mary has been cast in the role of a childhood “boogeyman” of sorts. No longer an entity or ghost that can be summoned in the mirror as part of a game or a dare, for some of these children, Bloody Mary now exists as a nocturnal threat. As well, her origin – death by dart – seems to be more or less agreed upon by this group of classmates. I can only speculate that one or more of these children must have a dartboard in their home (fairly common in Newfoundland), and the parental warning of the dangers of reckless dart playing must have held enough weight to become a current fear and has manifested itself in the “new” Bloody Mary legend.

I suspect that, similarly to my interview with Eli in Grade Five (below), much of the information being shared with me may have been made up fairly recently. In this sense, the information garnered from the Grade Twos and Eli is not particularly

relevant to my analysis of variations or to use as an example to further illustrate the multi-faceted aspects of Bloody Mary, however, it does beautifully illustrate the dynamic nature of the living tradition. As John McDowell writes

But the robust world of children's folklore forces the folklorist to confront the creative potential of every folkloric transaction, the capacity for new forms and items to emerge from traditional competencies. These creative factors are regenerative rather than degenerative, facilitating the continuous emergence of folkloric materials freshly coined in response to the experiences and needs of their hosts. (61)

I stumbled across the opportunity to interview Eli B, age ten, when I heard him joke with one of his friends about Bloody Mary. One day while I was holding the playground door open as the students at Bishop Feild made their way outside to play at lunchtime, the last few Grade Five boys meandered out the door, and I noted that they were as "Slow as cold molasses going uphill." In his defense, one of the boys told me he had been in the washroom, to which his friend (Eli) retorted "You were in there for ten minutes! What were you doing? Playing Bloody Mary?" I immediately jumped from teacher-mode to folklorist-mode and said "Bloody Mary? What do you guys know about Bloody Mary?" Perhaps recognizing a way to escape from potentially getting in trouble for loitering in the building unsupervised when they were supposed to be outside, the two boys were quick to share some information. During this brief conversation, it came to light that (at least, according to these Grade Five boys at Bishop Feild) Bloody Mary has a brother, named Bloody Paul, who apparently resides in the mirror in the boys' washroom. Eli B, one of the

two boys who told me about Bloody Paul (whose existence was corroborated by his classmates during a lunchroom supervision I did a week later) was thrilled when his mother and teacher consented for him to come do an interview with me one day while my own students were in music class.

1. LW: So Eli, tell me why you asked Josh if he was playing Bloody Mary that day last week?
2. Eli: Well...he was taking a long time, he's just really slow all the time getting ready, so it was funny to think he was playing, y'know, Bloody Mary.
3. LW: Why was that funny?
4. Eli: Well, y'know, because it's not real and also because it's something the girls do. I mean, not much anymore but they used to all the time. The girls in my class, I mean. But I think other girls too, because my brother Seamus told me about it a long time ago, and he learned it from girls too.
5. LW: So, the boys don't do it?
6. Eli: (laughs) They totally do. I've done it, so has Josh and lots of the other guys. But they say she lives in the Girls' Washroom here at school and so maybe that's why it doesn't work if you do it in another washroom, like at home or something.
7. LW: Why do you think she is in that washroom?
8. Eli: Well...I guess 'cause she died here or something? I know she was supposedly a student or something, like this girl a long time ago, and

she drowned? Through the ice, I think? A long time ago, like more than a hundred years. In the eighteen hundreds I think.

9. LW: I see. And Bloody Paul?
10. Eli: Oh yeah! He was her brother and he was a student here and he died too. Someone hit him in the head with a shovel and that's why he's bleeding all over and stuff.
11. LW: And how do you get Bloody Paul to come out? In the mirror too?
12. Eli: Yeah, same as Bloody Mary, but he'll try to kill you with his shovel if you look behind you when you call him.
13. LW: And where did you learn about Bloody Paul?
14. Eli: From my brother. From Seamus.
15. LW: Do you think Seamus would like to sit and have a chat with me and tell me what he knows about all this stuff?
16. Eli: Probably not. He probably doesn't remember. And he's pretty busy...with basketball and his girlfriend and stuff.

My conversation with Eli was rich on several levels. First of all, he was the first child I had ever spoken to about Bloody Paul, who it would seem, is the boy's variation on Bloody Mary. I have never encountered a gendered variation of the mirror-ghost (other than the Candy Man, popularized by the movie of the same title) in any of the previously written articles, nor otherwise in my own fieldwork. Eli says (line 8) that Bloody Mary was a Bishop Feild student who drowned. This historical explanation is similar to the "disproved" stories in Marc Armitage's article on toilet ghosts (2011:6). As Bishop Feild school only started admitting female students in

1972, the first year it became an elementary school, I know that a female student did not die there in the 1800s, as suggested by Eli. However, several years ago, while writing a play based on the history of Bishop Feild School with a Grade Six class, I read in a photocopy of a newspaper kept in the school archives from the mid 1930s, that two young boys who were students at Bishop Feild, drowned by going through the ice on a nearby pond. This knowledge may be the root of that particular story, as many of the current students come from Quidi Vidi, which is a fishing village not far from the school, situated between a lake (Quidi Vidi Lake) and a small cove (Cuckold's Cove), either of which could have been the site of the demise of those two children so long ago, that have been incorporated into the legends of the neighborhood.

Also interesting in that interview is Eli's comment about his brother (line 16). He claims that Seamus probably wouldn't remember anything about Bloody Mary. This caught my attention because when I spoke with Eli's mother to ask if I could interview him, she told me how terrified Seamus had been over Bloody Mary "for years." I would think that if something had that much of a psychological impact on a child, then they would likely remember it several years later (Seamus is in Grade Eleven at this point). But Eli has raised the point that as a teenager, Seamus has moved beyond his interests in childhood games and beliefs generated in his elementary school days, for more socially acceptable, age-appropriate interests, such as basketball and girls.

Eli was also the first student to bring up Bloody Paul. As this particular story was quite localized (exclusively to Bishop Feild), I decided to start asking around to see if I could garner any more information. I spoke with a former Bishop Feild student, Nicolas M, and asked him about Bloody Paul. He replied “Yeah, I heard of him, but someone made that up.” Nicholas is now in Grade Eight, having left Bishop Feild two years ago. He would have been in the school as a younger student when Eli’s brother Seamus was attending Bishop Feild, so it is likely that the story of Bloody Paul was emerging at that time. Nicolas’ comment gave me pause. He was dismissing Bloody Paul as something that had been “made up” and therefore not really worth considering. Of course someone had made Bloody Paul up, just as someone had made Bloody Mary up, along with most aspects of children’s legends, games and folk belief. Which raises the question – where does tradition end and creation begin? Bloody Paul is the most extreme mutation of Bloody Mary that I encountered throughout my entire study, and caused me to think of Von Sydow’s “mutation” (as referenced by McDowell).

An original motif may be superseded by a new mutation, but a new mutation may also yield to the older form, being unable to assert itself at its expense. If a motif is particularly popular, this very fact may induce various narrators to mutate it in a different way. (1995: 51)

These types of changes, mutations and dubious origin narratives serve as proof of the dynamic nature of Bloody Mary, demonstrating its vitality as a living tradition.

Chapter Seven

Conclusions

For this thesis, I originally planned to interview only my peer group, comprised of women in their thirties, but soon found such variation in their recollections that I separated them into two categories: those who had attended Catholic school in the 1980s and those who had attended non-denominational schools. I then found that pretty much all of the former Catholic school attendees (FCSA) had the same notion of who Bloody Mary was (or what the anticipated “result” of the activity would be – that is, who they would see in the mirror) – the Virgin Mary. And so emerged the notion of a “Catholic ecotype.”

As mentioned in Chapter One, as I continued my term paper research, I was also returning to work as a teacher in the public school system. While acting as a replacement teacher at Crescent Collegiate School in Whitbourne/Dildo (an hour’s drive outside of St. John’s) for someone out on a three-week medical leave, I had the opportunity to speak with contemporary high school students and ask them what they knew about Bloody Mary. As seen in Chapter Three, their responses were mainly legend-style origin narratives. Some of their responses linked Bloody Mary to other popular legend-motifs, such as the Woman in White, the Weeping Woman or La Llorona. With these new narratives, I began to examine Bloody Mary from a legend perspective, which led me to also consider legend tripping and ostension, as written about by Bill Ellis and Linda Dégh. While considering these works, I also examined previous scholarship by Alan Dundes, Janet Langlois, Elizabeth Tucker, Brian

Sutton-Smith and Marc Armitage. Some of these works pertained directly to Bloody Mary, while others brought up comparable notions that helped to further develop my exploration of the multi-generic aspects of Bloody Mary. As such, I considered Bloody Mary as a game, which included ideas from Brian Sutton-Smith's "Rhetorics of Play," such as Bloody Mary as a tool to gain hierarchical position within a social group (which is now considered "bullying"), and Bloody Mary as "deviant supernatural play." Moving beyond the field-work conducted with my peer group (FCSA), field-work conducted with the students of Crescent Collegiate school in Whitbourne/Dildo (WD), the occasional bits and pieces of interviews that came up in social settings (Folklore Interviews – FI) and the analysis of scholarship about Bloody Mary and how it pertains to my own work, I found my most recent – almost accidental – field work, conducted during the 2012 – 2013 school year at Bishop Feild Elementary school, to be the most valuable when applied to my previous findings.

In each group of informants, I found variations based on several factors. What I originally considered to be a natural progression of transmission based on developing technologies – meaning that what was once oral tradition among children had become something more widespread, through movies, television and the internet – turned out to be variations based on cultural groupings. In short, the high school students (Whitbourne/Dildo group), as well as the Cowan Heights and St. Matthew's students, all seemed to take their Bloody Mary narratives from media ideas, whereas

the Bishop Feild students seemed to “inherit” their Bloody Mary narratives and traditions from older students and siblings.

In my job as a classroom teacher, I found opportunities to discuss Bloody Mary with contemporary elementary students. I learned that the tradition of Bloody Mary, which was part of my own childhood in the 1980s, is still very much a part of the elementary school world. In 2013, Bloody Mary belief was still present in the three different schools of the children I interviewed. At St. Matthew’s Elementary and Cowan Heights Elementary in Cowan Heights (the West End of St. John’s), and at Bishop Feild Elementary in downtown St. John’s, students remain convinced that Bloody Mary still haunts the school bathrooms. Bloody Mary undergoes a constant revitalization in the dynamic world of elementary school sub-culture, but, as with many aspects of children’s folklore, there are some constants embedded within the tradition that remain intact.

At Bishop Feild Elementary, in particular, I was introduced to some variations of Bloody Mary that I had never come across in any of my previous fieldwork or in any of the published scholarship. This is where Ariel, a Grade One student, told me that Bloody Mary was trying to make people (children) “her slave” and would come into our world through the mirror to do so. Ariel was convinced (for a short period of time) that the only way to prevent that from happening was to write a repetitive “spell” over and over, stating your disbelief in Bloody Mary (as discussed in Chapter Six). Ariel’s narrative led me to her older brother, Chester, in Grade Two, from whom she had learned about Bloody Mary. The “passing on” of Bloody Mary

narratives and rituals from older to younger children is, in some regards, an important part of the Bloody Mary transmission, which I originally surmised may be fading out to make way for more modern transmission, such as movies and the Internet with all its easily accessible sharing sites, such as Facebook and YouTube. However, at Bishop Feild, I was happy to see the tradition still intact, and in several cases, the stories were passed down by older siblings who had attended Bishop Feild and had since moved on to junior high or high school.

As mentioned in Chapter Six, Eli B told me that his brother (now in high school) had shared the Bloody Mary story with him (see transcript, pages 146-147), and Eli went on to tell me about another bathroom ghost at Bishop Feild Elementary – the ghost of Bloody Paul, who was supposedly Bloody Mary’s brother. Bloody Mary acquiring a sibling is something I had never come across in any form (through my own field work or through researching previously published scholarship), and I feel confident in saying that it is a recent addition to Bloody Mary lore, which at this point, is localized at Bishop Feild. While I could not find the person who is responsible for creating Bloody Paul, I would venture to date this narrative as having been developed in the last five years. Eli said that his brother, now aged sixteen, had told him about Bloody Paul. As previously discussed, when I spoke with a former Bishop Feild student, Nicolas M, and asked him about Bloody Paul, he was familiar with the story, and felt that it had been created during his time at Bishop Feild. This was a rare instance in which I encountered the morphing and evolution of a piece of

children's folklore and was able to trace its inception to one particular class of (now graduated) students.

Several other time-frames for certain versions of Bloody Mary also became evident as I wrote this thesis. The rise of popularity in the Bloody Mary activity itself in and around St. John's seems to have started in the early 1980s, more specifically 1983. As mentioned in Chapter One, I was introduced to Bloody Mary the year I was in Grade One (1983) by an older girl who would have been in Grade Four at that time, meaning she was born in 1974. Women I asked about Bloody Mary that were born between the years 1974 onwards knew what I was referring to, and most had participated in Bloody Mary at some point in their childhoods. However, women born before 1974 (in the St. John's area) did not know what I was talking about, unless they had children who were currently interested in Bloody Mary.

The most mutated versions of Bloody Mary came from the Grade Two class at Bishop Feild. What originally came to my attention through my own Grade One student, Ariel (that Bloody Mary wanted to make everyone her slave in this world so she could escape the mirror), turns out to have trickled down to her from her older brother Chester, who was in Grade Two. When I had the opportunity to speak with the Grade Two class, I encountered versions of Bloody Mary that were so far removed from the original narrative – yet did not seem to have any particular popular culture transmission – I could only assume that they came directly from the imaginations of this particular group of students. At this point (a year after the field

work) I could not say for certain if any of their Bloody Mary narratives have superseded the bathroom mirror version (the “original”), but I do intend to follow up with the Grade Twos (now in Grade Three) and see if they still hold the same beliefs (as described in Chapter Six) or if they have passed on their knowledge to other children in lower grades.

As this thesis progressed, and I moved from my original intent of a retrospective exploration based on the narratives of adults, to fieldwork involving contemporary school children, I gained some insight into the ever-evolving belief systems of children. Childhood is a fickle time – what is integral one day becomes forgotten the next, as children move on to the latest game, toy or activity. While adults can tell you about their experiences of childhood, as they have already passed from childhood, the point at which they gave up playing certain games or abandoned certain beliefs (such as the belief that they can indeed summon Bloody Mary in the bathroom mirror) is not usually clearly defined. Therefore, while a retrospective approach has its merits, there is always something that gets lost, or slightly distorted by time and memory. Children, however, are in the midst of creating, playing, experiencing and evolving. The malleable nature of their belief-system is responsible for the revitalization of traditional games, and the localization and claiming of contemporary legends.

Working as an elementary school teacher while writing my thesis has given me the unique opportunity of interacting with children while they were discovering aspects of supernatural play, such as experimenting with Ouija boards, and of course,

Bloody Mary. Several of my most important discoveries/conversations/insights came from accidental interactions with the students of Bishop Feild. Having Ariel B tell me that she was afraid Bloody Mary was “going to get her,” (Chapter Six) for example, led me to question her about what she knew about Bloody Mary, and I then went to the source of her knowledge, an older sibling in the grade above. While speaking with Ariel’s brother Chester, I was bombarded with new information about Bloody Mary by his classmates in Grade Two, who were quite eager to share with me. The Grade Two interviews were textually rich, and also brought to light some new insights on both the oral tradition of Bloody Mary and how it is passed around among children, as well as demonstrating that the gender-specificity that was prevalent in my older (adult and high school aged) informants no longer exists.

Childhood beliefs, as noted above, are often discarded as swiftly as they were developed, and as Ariel demonstrated in my second interview with her, later in the same school semester, what was once terrifying can quickly become a distant memory. Or, in Ariel’s case, brushed aside and dismissed as something she could not remember.

Bloody Mary continues to be a living tradition in children’s culture. While the Bloody Mary of 2014 has taken on some contemporary variations – particularly at Bishop Feild Elementary – the Bloody Mary tradition seems to have become firmly rooted in children’s folklore. It is as relevant to St. John’s school children as counting-out rhymes, variations of tag and the telling of ghost stories. As I have demonstrated throughout this thesis, Bloody Mary in all its functions and facets, has

remained a prominent aspect of antithetical play since it first made its way into elementary school bathrooms thirty years ago. Children still share it with other children, changing certain aspects and adapting for their own locale, but what is at the fundamental core of Bloody Mary, the supernatural play and its subversive nature, continues to appeal to children.

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