

IDENTITY AUTHORITY,  
ARTISTIC AUTHORITY,  
MARKETS AND MEANING:  
CONTEMPORARY ENGLISH-LANGUAGE  
STORYTELLERS EXAMINED

WENDY WELCH









Identity Authority,  
Artistic Authority,  
Markets and Meaning:  
Contemporary English-Language  
Storytellers Examined

By

Wendy Welch

A thesis submitted to the School of Graduate Studies in partial fulfilment of the  
requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

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## ABSTRACT

This dissertation's central theme is who professional storytellers are and what they do. It investigates the occupation of professional storytelling in the United Kingdom, Canada and the United States. A partially autoethnographic study borrowing from concepts of life-writing, it examines the professional storytelling organizations of these nations, as well as the identity, individual and communal ownership ethics, and marketing practices of professional storytellers. It discusses how these factors affect the storytelling profession and the behavior of its practitioners. The background of professional storytelling stemming from oral tradition, literary and library work, theatre, spirituality and other sources is examined here.

Key concepts in this examination are identity authority and artistic authority, and how storytellers, folklorists, and listeners perceive the differences between the two. Identity authority reflects on the background and heritage of the storyteller, while artistic authority stems from their talent and ability to tell a story in a way that engages an audience. Storytellers see their identities as creative artists, activists, dispensers of wisdom, and as cultural representatives or presenters.

Authenticity is examined as a critical point. Authenticity, I argue, has multiple meanings within folklore studies. It can also be too context-specific to interpret widely. As discussed in the thesis, marketing concepts also problematize claims of authenticity.

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## ABBREVIATIONS

e-int.: interview via e-mail

int.: interview

ISC: International Storytelling Center

NAPPS: National Association for the Preservation and Perpetuation of Storytelling

NSN: National Storytelling Network

SC/CC: Storytellers of Canada/Conteurs du Canada

SFI: Storytelling Foundation International

SfS: Society for Storytelling in England and Wales

Sp: Storytell Post

SSC: Scottish Storytelling Centre

SSF: Scottish Storytelling Forum

tel. int.: interview via telephone

\* denotes word is in glossary in Appendix A

## CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

*“Everyone knows what stories are—fortunately; for it is excessively difficult to say just what they are.” – Thomas Leitch, What Stories Are (1)*

The goal of this dissertation is to investigate the occupation of professional storytelling in the United Kingdom, Canada and the United States. A storyteller myself, I have built a partially autoethnographic study examining the professional storytelling organizations of these nations, as well as the identity, individual and communal ownership ethics, and marketing practices of professional storytellers overall. This dissertation discusses how these topics affect the storytelling profession and the behavior of its practitioner, taking as its central theme who professional storytellers are and what they do.

This chapter defines professional storytelling, explains the methodology used for this research, and surveys extant literature on professional storytelling. Folklorists are familiar with storytellers generally. “Everyone” is a storyteller in the folklorist’s eye. Professional storytellers are a more marked category, however, and require explanation. The difference between the unmarked category “storyteller” and the marked category “professional storyteller” is problematized by distinct uses among the occupational groups of folklorists and storytellers. As American folklorist Robert McCarl, Jr. pointed out, “The same expression told to an outsider (or to another audience not indigenous to the work setting) requires greater elaboration and explanation that extends the account and radically alters its form and refocuses its function” (1978: 156). This is true of

folklorists and storytellers. “Professional storytelling” will be defined throughout this document as storytellers themselves would use it, but for comparative purposes, folkloristic use of the term must be discussed. To that end, definitions of “story,” “storytelling” and “storytelling event” will also be necessary, and follow the definition of professional storyteller.

In addition, Appendix A provides a glossary of storytelling terms as storytellers define them, primarily taken from the professional storytelling lexicon, with additional explanations of unexamined words storytellers used in this dissertation. Terms that appear in the glossary are marked on first use with\*. Readers already familiar with these terms from a folkloristic standpoint may find it helpful to have them defined from a storytelling point of view.

### **1.1 Definitions**

“Professional storyteller”\* in folklore studies usually means someone recognized as a high quality storyteller\* in his or her community. British-born folklorist Gerald Thomas, in his work with French Newfoundlander and storyteller Émile Benoit, postulated, “One might define the two traditions [of public and private storytelling] in terms of a parallelism between, on the one hand, the ‘professionals,’ and on the other, the ‘amateurs,’ without any question of remuneration, of course. . .” (135). Thomas discussed Benoit’s performances at the *veillée*, an adult gathering around a storyteller in a village setting, as professional storytelling. *Veillées* could be private, with just the family present and a parent taking on the storyteller role for the household children, or they could be

public parties including a meal, card games, and a more formal presentation by a storyteller recognized for the quality of his narrative ability (41-45). Thomas examined a private gathering at which Benoit, desired as a narrator, is the professional storyteller.

Professional storytellers in folklore studies are those who show a qualitative difference from amateur storytellers. As American folksong scholar Neil Rosenberg commented about the amateur-professional/private-public dichotomy he found in his Canadian fieldwork on country music, “‘amateur’ has taken on certain *connotations*”<sup>1</sup> and implies a value judgment (1986: 154). Thomas also mentioned that the term “professional” does not imply payment, answering a question that might arise in the reader’s mind. “Professional” in popular use does imply payment, as American folklorist Roger Abrahams commented: “Anyone, of course, may be a *real pro* at what they do, simply by being so good one gets paid for it” (1978: 180).

This two-pronged definition of “professional” as connoting a skill level and/or payment is found in the Oxford Dictionary:

(adj) 1 of or belonging to a profession or its members. 2 having or showing the skill of a professional. 3 doing a certain kind of work to make a living. (noun) 1 a person working or performing for payment. 2 someone highly skilled. (637)

“Professional” connotes receiving payment and operating at a skill level at least higher than someone walking in off the street. Storytellers adhere to these two principles in the way they use the term professional storyteller. In a 1996 article in Storytelling

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<sup>1</sup> In this and all subsequent quotations, words appearing in bold, italic, or parentheses are original to the author of the quote. Any addition or alteration by me is noted in square brackets [ ].



World, a national trade publication for professional tellers, American storyteller Milbre Burch referred to both payment and quality:

A professional storyteller is potentially a many-splendored thing: solo artist, storytelling community activist, and small business owner. . . .

Let's not kid ourselves; even established performers long for the stability of a day job. If we can spend some time developing as storytelling practitioners, without the pressure of paying our landlords with the proceeds, we'll have more grace, more fun, and less burnout. (17)

So, what is the job of the artist? It is both practicing our art and articulating its worth. (19)

Storytelling that displays an acceptable standard of quality appears to mean that the audience\* likes it, the teller is proud of it, and that it follows certain ethical standards (Klein 5-23; Sobol 1999: 210-212).

It is possible that payment for storytellers may come in a form other than money. There are storytellers who tell\* within specific cultures for recognition (and perhaps the services to them that this recognition brings), as Hungarian folklorist Linda Dégh suggested in her 1960s investigation of Hungarian storytellers, Folktales and Society:

When the storyteller has found his own public, his reputation grows with his activities. His techniques become more refined and his ambition increases. Folklorists at one time would point out that there is no aspiration to recognition of authorship in folklore creation, that the folktale narrator did not aspire to a recognition of his knowledge and would disappear, nameless, and modest, behind his work. This opinion has changed since the attention of folklore has been drawn to the personality of the storyteller, and it has been shown to be an erroneous assumption on the part of collectors who fell prey to an optical illusion. In oral tradition,

in traditional folk culture, there is none of the professionalism among creative individuals that exists in highly civilized areas. But each good storyteller or folk artist seeks special recognition of his talents, and the public readily complies. (170)

A case may be made for public recognition as payment among storytellers, according to Dégh. However, most people who see telling stories as their profession want to be reimbursed financially for their time and effort. This is perhaps the greatest distinction between the use of “professional storyteller” by folklorists and storytellers: folklorists focus more on the quality end, tending to dismiss the remuneration angle; storytellers focus on payment (through funding or exposure to future opportunities for funding) while keeping the need for a skill level at the fore.

Professional storytelling alters the context of a storytelling event, as Irish folklorist and storyteller Clodagh Brennan Harvey found in late 1980s Ireland. Observing storytellers asked to tell their traditional tales\* to folklorists, she began to

question the accuracy of the long-standing notion that the storytellers and the stories were “dying out,” for it appeared that it was not uncommon for these and other storytellers to tell their tales specifically and solely to folklore collectors and other professionals interested in traditional storytelling. This development suggested that the emphasis has been on the wrong corpse, so to speak, for it was not the storytellers and their tales that were dying out, but rather the traditional contexts and audiences for such storytelling. (3)

Like Harvey’s discovery that storytelling was taking place outside the “traditional” settings of casual home gatherings folklorists had looked for, professional telling can occur in various venues\*. Professional storytelling often takes place in formal,

very Public venues. Throughout this dissertation, “Public” with a capital P will refer to a formal arrangement for a performance in schools, festivals, libraries, churches, community centers, theatres, arts centers and other venues, rather than the public spaces of kitchens and porches described by Dégh and Thomas. These Public contexts are delineated by a verbal agreement or written contract\* between the teller and the hiring agent\* for that venue. The audience has gathered or been gathered for the purpose of hearing the story\*; telling does not rise spontaneously, or from an informal expectation; it has been prearranged.

A few cautions may have arisen in the minds of readers. Professional storytellers do engage in private and public (with a small p) storytelling events in non-formal, spontaneous ways, such as sitting around the kitchen table, or passing the time during tasks or relaxation periods. However, they are not telling stories “professionally” in these situations unless there has been a prearranged formal agreement of storytelling, almost always with a financial exchange resulting from it.

“Professional” and “traditional” as used in this thesis should not be read as mutually exclusive. Professional tellers may also be tradition bearers recognized in folklore studies. Scottish Traveller Duncan Williamson, who was interviewed for this dissertation, is generally regarded as a traditional storyteller, as exemplified by publications from American folklorist and storyteller Donald Braid (“The Traveller and the Hare” and Scottish Traveller Tales) and my own publication on Williamson in Storytelling Magazine. Yet Williamson makes the greatest part of his living as a storyteller; thus he is a professional and also a traditional storyteller. Folklorists have

investigated numerous people who are simultaneously professional and traditional storytellers. Scottish teller Sheila Stewart, examined by Scottish folklorist and storyteller Sheila Douglas in King O the Black Art and other folk tales; Canadian teller Stewart Cameron, analyzed by Kay Stone (Canadian storyteller and folklorist) in Jack in Two Worlds; and Cajun teller Barry Jean Ancelet (who is also a folklorist) depicted by filmmaker Pat Mire and cultural anthropologist Maida Owens (both Americans) in Swapping Stories, are traditional tellers who also perform for pay. I am using “traditional teller” here in the same way as Thomas described Benoit, a teller steeped in a particular community and having recognized status as an enchanting narrator.

If a professional storyteller is someone who tells stories for payment, the definition of “storyteller” is simpler. A storyteller without “professional” in front is the narrator of a story, no matter how or why he is telling it. Of course, professional tellers sometimes leave off “professional” as understood, saying, for example, “She’s a great storyteller” when they mean to praise a colleague.

A story is a cohesive collection of words with a beginning, middle and end forming a plot. It is information on “*what happens, to whom, and why*” (Chambers 340). This information is coded in a “certain structure, and this structure has a certain minimal and maximal complexity. The degree of complexity and the nature of such minimal and maximal structures will be the same in all cultures” (Rayfield 1085). The story’s information is structured so that “everyone—young or old—of whatever circumstances, of whatever talents and abilities (or lack of them), of whatever social or economic class can make use of it” (Chambers 340).



Storytelling, then, is the act of narrating certain structured pieces of information in a format acceptable and accessible to listeners. These formats include *Märchen*, personal experience narratives, legends, monologues, and other genres of narrative art identified in folklore studies. Story narration uses performance techniques, including a balance of description and dialogue, repetition, dramatic variation of the voice, gestures, and formulaic patterns of speech. Storytelling may serve informative purposes, such as facilitating communication within or between groups or communicating cultural information, and storytelling may serve entertainment goals, including a work diversion, displays of creativity, or showcasing one's narrative prowess (Wells and Hall iii).

Further, storytelling is an artistic combining of truth and beauty in ways that make the formatted information enticing for people to hear. From a lifelong study of Arab-language folktales, Egyptian-born folklorist Hasan El-Shamy concluded in 2004, "As an aspect of folkloric behavior, a true folktale, told orally from memory, is one of the most delicately balanced manifestations of human life" (ix). In his 1960s study of Irish storytelling, American folklorist Henry Glassie said, "When the people of Ballymenone tell stories, they say what they know to discover what they think" (34). Of rural storytelling in Denmark of the 1800s, Danish folklorist Bengt Holbek wrote in 1989, ". . . the 'marvelous' elements [in fairy tales] may be read as expressions of emotional impressions associated with experiences in their own lives" (43). And from his work with African-American urban communities in the 1960s, Abrahams surmised, "One can tell a great deal about the values of a group from its stories because they reveal what actions are approved and what are not" (1963: 61). Storytellers in black urban environments

reveal their artistry through “effective word use in storytelling” (61). Word art imparting information artistically, incorporating a sense of wonder—this is storytelling.

Storytelling is composed of several elements. First and foremost, storytelling requires a narrative and a narrator, as discussed at the International Society for Folk-Narrative Research in 1986:

The principal character at the Edinburgh congress [of the International Society for Folk-Narrative Research] was the narrator, the storyteller, the tradition bearer, who was examined from many different viewpoints.

(Lehtipuro13)

Storytelling also implies an element of performance and the situational context of that performance, including a defined group of listeners. English storytelling researcher John Purkis pointed out these elements: “The darkened room, the presence of others, the incantory pulse of the voice—all this liberates deeper levels of audience participation and comprehension . . .” (17).

### **1.1.1 Professional Storytelling Events**

Storytelling takes place at “storytelling events,” said American folklorist Robert Georges in 1969. Georges theorized that storytelling events must take into account not just the teller and the tale, but the context—the venue, current events in that community or the wider world, and the social history of the text and teller—of the performance (Georges 315). This is echoed by American folklorist Deborah Kapchan: “Performances are aesthetic practices . . . whose repetitions situate actors in time and space, structuring individual and group identities” (479).

Storytelling often takes place in regularly-scheduled events set up especially for professional tellers, with storytelling as the prime activity. These may include guilds\*, festivals, storytelling clubs\*, concerts\* and olios\*. Storytelling may also occur as part of a larger activity, usually in situations like folk festivals or celebrations that incorporate several art forms in simultaneous separate performances. Storytelling events for professional storytellers tend to fall into seasonal patterns, although these will vary by country and with the teller's success rate as an artist people want to hear. Generally, summer is festival season in North America and the United Kingdom; schools begin in Autumn, and Halloween brings a high demand for storytellers. Guilds and clubs often hold special concerts in late October. November sparks multicultural work in Britain; tellers are needed during Eid (the Muslim holiday at the end of Ramadan's fasting season, when Muslims visit each other's houses and give children gifts), Hanukkah, *Neuros* (the Kurdish New Year) and other times of specific celebrations. December tends to be internationally dominated by holiday events. Winter is a dead time for many tellers (except February in America for Black History month) and Spring sees a return to the museum, church, civic and school programs. National holidays are also busy times for tellers: American Independence Day, St. David's Day in Wales, Scotland's St. Andrews Night.

Any teller living where one ethnicity dominates is likely to follow that schedule, regardless of membership in that ethnicity. For instance, when I lived in a small strongly Baptist town in the American South, Christmas and alternative Halloween parties at churches were the bread-and-butter work, although I am not Baptist; living in an area that

was twenty percent Muslim, I found the Islamic calendar ruling school and community work, but I am not Muslim. Christian friends in predominantly Jewish or Muslim areas of London follow those festival calendars. In Ireland and North Ireland, Catholic events dictate much of the seasonal schedule. In part this is because the religious holiday calendar controls school times, and many storytellers make the majority of their living from schools. An individual teller's schedule will also follow her own ethnic calendar for special events.

Individuals are often members of storytelling organizations\* that support their profession at national and local levels. The United States has two interrelated national organizations: The National Storytelling Network (NSN) and the International Storytelling Center (ISC). NSN organizes the US National Storytelling Conference in July and Tellabration, a night of storytelling by and for adults in November. The International Storytelling Center oversees the National Storytelling Festival in the first weekend of October. It will not have escaped notice that a national organization has the word "international" in its title. ISC executive director Jimmy Neil Smith said that he felt the NSN and ISC model had played a major role in the international revival of storytelling, paving the way for other countries to develop their own organizations and storytelling traditions for future generations (conversation at US National Storytelling Festival 4 Oct. 2002). The director of the US National Storytelling Network estimated in excess of six thousand full-time, day-job and casual tellers working in the United States.

The Society for Storytelling in England and Wales holds its Annual Gathering Meeting each April. In February, the Society encourages a week of storytelling events

known as National Storytelling Week. Performers are not booked via the Society for Storytelling, although its secretary Tina Bilbe keeps an informal notebook of brochures from fully paid member tellers, which she uses when schools or libraries call looking for a storyteller. Bilbe thought the number of actual working tellers in England and Wales was probably double that of the number who chose to advertise in the Society for Storytelling Directory of Storytellers (int. 11 June 1998). This directory contained upwards of three hundred entries in 2001.

The Scottish Storytelling Center arranges celebrations adhering to the ancient Celtic and Christian calendars, including the festival of St. Bride in February and the celebration of Beltane in April. The Edinburgh Arts Festival in August exerts a strong influence on storytelling events during that month. The Scottish Storytelling Festival is held at the end of October annually, kicked off by “Tell a Story Day” when people are encouraged to tell stories to one another in informal venues across the country. In Scotland, the Storytelling Centre invites tellers to join its bi-annual “Storytellers in Scotland” Directory by recommendation only. It advertised forty-eight tellers in 1998, seventy-four in 2000 and just over one hundred in 2003.

In Canada, the national organization is the Storytellers of Canada/Conteurs du Canada. Many guilds and regional organizations, such as the Ottawa Storytellers or the Vancouver Storytelling Society, hold monthly meetings in their regions. Toronto has the weekly storytelling club 1001 Nights, and the Toronto Storytelling Festival in February. The Storytellers of Canada/Conteurs du Canada have begun holding their annual conference in mid-June. November brings the Vancouver Storytelling Festival. Only 144

storytellers had ads in the Canadian 2004 on-line directory, although estimates place professional tellers at more than two thousand (Coulter int. 12 July 1999).

### **1.1.2 Professional Storytelling Genres**

Although the glossary in Appendix A gives working definitions of storytellers' terms for the types of stories they tell, it may be useful for readers to have a general overview of how storytellers see genres within their profession. Here are a few categories of tale types, as storytellers define them, appearing in this dissertation:

**Living history story, character portrayal:** A storyteller dresses and acts as an historical character, telling the story in first person. These portrayals may be fictional or legendary (for example, Mother Goose or Jack's mother) rather than historic (such as Queen Eleanor of Aquitaine or Sojourner Truth); in the former case the story is usually called a character portrayal; in the latter, it will be referred to as a living history story. Living history and character portrayals are considered a specialized activity within storytelling.

**Personal story, personal tale:** These terms are used interchangeably to describe a story told about something or someone of importance to the teller. These differ slightly from the folkloristic term "personal experience narrative" because, while the story may be told in the first person, the teller may speak of his own experiences or those of another person. Storytellers often use "personal stories" or "personal tales" in contrast to "folktales" or "traditional story." Personal stories differ from history stories in that the teller is not costumed. Also, personal stories are more likely to take place in the present day or within a few generations of family history. Personal stories in storytelling situations can have elements of legends or folktale motifs blended in.

**Sacred story:** Storytellers tend to refer to creation stories as sacred. There is a growing awareness, as will be shown in this dissertation, that some stories which appear to have no sacred elements to a Western eye may actually be sacred within another culture. Folklorists might be more likely to use the word “myth” where storytellers would refer to a sacred story.

**Traditional story/tale:** To a professional storyteller, any story that is not copyrighted, and whose author is unknown or has been deceased for some time, is a traditional story. Most folktales will not have recognized authors, although Hans Christian Andersen is a notable exception. Tellers may refer to sacred stories as myths, or describe themselves as telling tale tales, legends, or folktales from any given culture, but all these stories will come under the umbrella “traditional.”

## 1.2 Six Delineations of Professional Storyteller

Within the storytelling occupation, storytellers who receive payments for telling stories can be organized into six interconnected delineations, based on the geographic markets in which they are working and the means by which they support themselves. I am using “market” in the same way as Rosenberg: a “combination of people, money, and time” in the sense of people wanting to hear a teller, fees they are willing to pay, and duration of the tours\* and performances the storyteller gives (1986: 158).

- **International storytellers** have multiple bookings\* in two or more countries. For purposes of this dissertation, tellers whose homes geographically border two countries and who work across that border are not counted as international.

- **National tellers** are defined here as their counterparts above, except that they have not worked outside their home country multiple times. They will work across a large geographic area of their nation and generally enjoy a strong reputation with repeated bookings in their resident country.
- **Regional storytellers** tell in their area, but do not perform outside their surrounding counties, shires, states or provinces multiple times.

Rosenberg made geographic distinctions similar to mine in discussing country musicians, dividing them into local, regional, national and international markets, showing that each had “special characteristics” (1986: 158). A local market offered limited exposure to mass media; a person working in the local market tended to have a day-job and not tour much. At the regional level, the performer was likely to have commercial recordings for sale and greater access to mass media. In national and international markets, commercial recordings had widespread distribution and access to mass media was assured (158-159).

Storytellers working today at the national and international level are more likely to have books than recordings for sale through major distributors, but the parallels are obvious. While major recording labels are not necessarily interested in storytelling to the same degree as song, publishers tend to take national and international storytellers seriously.

Yet storytellers who work regionally may in fact be spending the greatest part of their working life telling stories, unlike Rosenberg’s country musicians. Storytellers have



found niche markets that support them in a variety of ways. Thus international, national and regional tellers are spread across the categories below:

- A **day-job storyteller** uses storytelling in her workday. Teachers and librarians comprise the largest group of such tellers; they spend part of their time actively telling stories to classes, groups and other intentional audiences.
- An **outside-the-day-job storyteller** has a full- or part-time job that does not use storytelling in it, but he<sup>2</sup> spends weekends and “off” days telling stories for pay as a secondary income. Because “outside-the-day-job” is an unwieldy term, this dissertation uses the terms “part-time” or “casual” storytellers. While it is technically possible for a casual teller to work nationally or internationally, none quoted in this dissertation does, nor am I aware of any international teller who has a day-job that does not incorporate storytelling. Casual tellers cited in this dissertation are working regionally, and are introduced by their “other” job, as in “aerospace engineer and storyteller Miriam Nadel.”
- A **full-time storyteller** derives all her income from storytelling. This storytelling is likely by contract rather than through one employer. Such storytelling may include performances, occasional classes (in contrast to being, for instance, a full-time professor), consultation on and/or organizing storytelling events, writing about the praxis of storytelling, publishing folktale/story collections, or any other aspect of professional telling.

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<sup>2</sup> When not referring to a specific person, male and female pronouns will be used interchangeably throughout this dissertation.

To see how these categories interact, consider examples drawn from people interviewed in this document. American Dan Keding works in America, Canada, Britain and Ireland. All Keding's personal income is from stories, including being artistic consultant to a folk festival hiring storytellers. Keding is an international storyteller. Margaret Read MacDonald is a library supervisor in Washington State; MacDonald travels to Thailand, geographically distant parts of Canada, and Europe to tell stories, but she has a "day job." MacDonald is an international and day-job storyteller.

The author of this dissertation is a national and day-job storyteller. Although I have told in numerous countries (America, Canada, Germany, Romania, the United Kingdom, Ireland), this rarely included being invited outside a country during the time I lived in it. Work in America while living in the United Kingdom came as the result of setting up tours, rather than being invited. Being invited is a criterion used here for distinguishing between international, national, and regional tellers. Any person with initiative will be able to organize a storytelling tour in another country. Also, if a person is willing to forego payment, it is easy to vacation in another country and tell stories as a volunteer in many venues. A retired American couple in Ireland at the Seacat Storytelling Festival spoke of many other festivals they had attended by volunteering to tell for free. Retirees give the festival international guests they may not have been able to afford otherwise. This arrangement also offers the storytellers international exposure they may not have received by waiting for an invitation. Some storytelling entrepreneurs have organized tours for regional storytellers to visit foreign countries and tell in folk clubs while there. My husband and I hosted American tour groups of visiting storytellers in

Fife, Scotland in the late 1990s. While these are good activities for developing and established storytellers, they are not considered in the distinctions between international, national and regional storytellers.

Reginald Rockwell is an example of a casual teller. He is a retired newspaper editor and regional storyteller, working primarily in his home state of Virginia, as well as Tennessee and North Carolina. He relies financially on a pension and investments, and storytelling is his sole line of work. Regional tellers differ from most national and international tellers in that they almost always have a supplemental income, which may be day-job related, or from an independent source not relying on hours worked: retirement pensions, book royalties,<sup>3</sup> disability checks, or another earner covering his/her living expenses. Regional storytellers are often retired.

Day-job tellers can be regional, national or international tellers. MacDonald, an international day-job teller, was mentioned above. New Englander Carol Birch, a public librarian, works nationally at festivals from St. Louis to Los Angeles. Tennessean Pam Johnson, an elementary school teacher, is also a regional teller, spending weekends telling at church suppers and her summers at library reading programs in nearby towns. Day-job tellers tend to be happy to hire themselves out for storytelling unconnected to their daily work; these telling events could be next door or across the ocean. Of the storytellers interviewed, only one day-job teller did not wish to take on performances outside her classroom. For purposes of this dissertation, unless a day-job teller is specifically mentioned as working nationally or internationally, the reader can assume he

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<sup>3</sup> Some national and international tellers receive book royalties or other payments, but this is not their primary income.

is working within his region. Day-job tellers are identified here by their job title, as in “librarian and storyteller Lois Sprengnether.” In the United States, day-job tellers are perceived as the largest category of professional storytellers (conversation with Karen Deitz, National Storytelling Network Executive Director, 1 Apr. 2005).

### **1.3 Methodology**

This dissertation is autoethnographic, informed by occupational studies. Autoethnography has emerged primarily since the late 1970s out of anthropological studies, but also from the fields of literature, culture studies and sociology. The phrase “has a double sense—referring either to the ethnography of one’s own group or to autobiographical writing that has ethnographic interest” (Reed-Danahay 2).

Writing in 1987, British anthropologist Marilyn Strathern defined autoethnography as “anthropology carried out in the social context which produced it” (17). It is similar to oral history, case study, life history, and ethnography (Denzin 27). My autoethnographic work moves between an autobiography of my life as a storyteller and folklorist, and ethnography done by an “insider” within the occupational community of professional storytellers.

Yet the way in which I have written this dissertation could better be called life-writing, for it takes into account an ever-present discourse between a writer (myself) and the reader (you). While academic papers have traditionally been written in a vacuum, as it were, with no address made directly to the reader and no mention made of the presence of the writer, life writing offers a more inclusive atmosphere. Some storytellers interviewed

here spoke of preferring storytelling to theatre because storytelling lacked the “fourth wall,” the invisible shield that keeps actors from directly addressing the audience. In life writing, this wall is also down. Canadian Humanities Professor Marlene Kadar identifies three types of life writing: autobiographical, which Kadar finds limiting because of its linear nature and the suppression of anything irregular or not considered objective truth; autobiographical but including other sources such as letters, journal entries, etc. to fill out aspects of the story and put the writer in context of her time and place in history and society; and autobiographical “written by an author who . . . does not pretend to be absent from the [black, brown, or white] text himself/herself” (10). The latter form “does not necessarily judge the text according to how ‘realistic’ the autobiographical truth may be . . .” (11). “Life writing as a critical practice, then, encourages (a) the reader to develop and foster his/her own self-consciousness in order to (b) humanize and make less abstract (which is not to say less mysterious) the self-in-writing” (12). While one typically thinks of letters and autobiographies as life writing, this dissertation is also a form of life writing, for it addresses the reader, has a rather present writer, and problematizes the notion of what academic writing must look like to be successfully considered “academic.”

Informing this autoethnographic and life-writing approach will be concepts from occupational studies. “The complex of techniques, customs, and modes of expressive behavior which characterize a particular work group comprises its *occupational folklife*” (McCarl 1978: 145). McCarl defined a working group as any group that is bounded, in part, by the oral transmission of knowledge about how work should be done, passed from

the experienced worker to the apprentice (1985: 8). McCarl also found that occupational groups displayed a belief in their own uniqueness, an identity separate from mainstream culture (1985: 15). These are characteristics shared by professional storytellers. McCarl postulated that occupational folklore consisted of technique, gesture, narrative and custom. Technique is what a person needs to know to do his work; gesture and narrative communicate information on how to do the job; custom is the practice, honed over time, of how the job is done. American folklorists also explore how information passes between master and novice through oral and non-verbal communication (McCarl 1978, 1985; Abrahams 1978; Michael Bell 1983; Robert Byington 1978). Occupational studies may encompass investigating the individual as a performer of his work. Bell depicted occupational work as performance in The World from Brown's Lounge. American folklorist Michael Owen Jones described chair-maker Chester Cornett as a performer of his work in Craftsman of the Cumberlands. Byington found the work setting, or context, critical to and inseparable from occupational folklife itself in his contribution to the "Working Americans" issue of Western Folklore, "Strategies for Collecting Occupational Folklife in Contemporary Urban/Industrial Contexts" (Byington 1978: 185). Likewise McCarl described firefighters' relaxation and debriefing rooms, the scenes of fires, and the firehouse itself, as well as behavioral differences in these spaces (1985: 57, 61). In other words, who was doing the work, as well as where, how and why they did it was as important as what work was being done.

## **1.4 Fieldwork**

Fieldwork for this thesis took three primary forms: the formal interview, participation in an Internet community, and participant observation of multiple storytelling events as a featured teller, local teller\* or audience member. Recordings of storytelling performances, follow-up e-mails, and scribbled notes on sticky pads and the backs of programs have fleshed out this research. The primary research technique was the formal interview. Informants are listed in Appendix B, along with some supplementary information about our interaction.

### **1.4.1 Fieldwork: The Formal Interview**

As a former journalist, I had developed interview techniques before beginning folklore studies. My interviews tend to be loosely constructed around a central theme, allowing the speaker to discuss what she sees as important without much guidance. Each interview began with asking for the informant's name and association with storytelling. Following in no particular order were questions about the history of her storytelling career, thoughts on story ownership\*, sense of herself as a storyteller in terms of identity (for example, traditional, Native American, original story writer, etc.) and ideas on storytelling generally and her experiences specifically. The final question was usually whether she had anything else she would like to discuss. I did not use specific statements, but asked the questions in the context of each distinct interview. Formal interviews took place in several settings (the most common being a restaurant or the teller's home) over three specific research trips.

### ***Research Trip I***

A grant from the Newfoundland-Poole Society allowed two research trips in late 1997 and early 1998. Traveling from Newfoundland to Toronto, thence to Michigan, Ohio, Kentucky and Tennessee for interviews, recordings were done with a standard cassette tape recorder with a built-in microphone. These interviews are split fairly evenly between people I knew and strangers. As Bruce Jackson described in Fieldwork, “Contacts are sometimes necessary to get the work started” (44). Jackson also pointed out that having a respected contact to make the introduction was important. “If you use the wrong person you can wind up further back than if you’d started cold and on your own” (44). Respected friends in the profession often suggested other interviewees.

### ***Research Trip II***

Travel in early 1998 included Newfoundland, Nova Scotia, Maine, New York, Virginia and Illinois, using the same cassette recorder but also toying with a new mini-disk recorder. This research included making “cold calls” to tellers with longevity in the profession. These cold calls were not entirely the same as Jackson’s “cold canvassing.” In cold canvassing, the researcher is “strolling up to strangers and asking them questions” (45). Jackson mentioned the work of Richard Dorson, who sometimes looked for informants by starting conversations in bars with strangers (Dorson 1967: 19-47) (Jackson 45). Already knowing which storytellers I wanted to speak to usually meant the starting point of a cold call was a literal telephone call, saying something like, “I saw you perform at such-and-such festival, and was struck by your comments about tradition in storytelling. Could we meet for a discussion?”



### ***Research Trip III***

Moving to Scotland soon after Research Trip II allowed another research trip through England and Wales over June-July 1998, using a mini-disk recorder. This trip encompassed a week in London, a few days in Cornwall, two days in western Wales, a day in Cumbria and a day in Yorkshire. Contacts with tellers here were greatly aided by the fact that I had spent the previous summer in the United Kingdom, performing and getting to know tellers.

### ***After Trip III***

As an American storyteller living in Scotland and organizing storytelling events, international tellers were often house guests and thus became informants. These interviews were conducted in the same way as on research trips.

### ***Interview Logistics***

Storytellers interviewed were given the option of using their own name or a pseudonym; none chose the latter. If tellers displayed nervousness about being recorded when discussing certain topics, the recorder went off and anonymity was offered for that portion of the interview, or to return to the topic after the rest of the interview had been conducted and the recorder removed. Comments made at these junctures are attributed to “name withheld” and are not dated. Storytell posts from those wishing to remain anonymous are dated.

#### **1.4.2 Fieldwork: Participating on Storytell**

From 1998 through 2003 I was an active participant on Storytell, an international English-language listserver for those interested in storytelling. This listserver is hosted by

the academic body, the Texas Women's Institute.<sup>4</sup> Storytell had in summer 2004 slightly fewer than four hundred American members, with some fifty-five British and about forty-five Canadian participants. A few tellers from the Republic of Ireland and Australia outnumbered the single-person representation of, among others, the Philippines, Singapore, China, India, Peru, Germany, France, the Netherlands, Sweden, Norway, Northern Ireland and the Vatican. About half of the list's participants could be described as "lurkers," registered with the Texas Women's Institute's net provider as members, but rarely posting. Storytell has had two addresses during my participation:

<[storytell@lists.twu.edu](mailto:storytell@lists.twu.edu)> (its current address) and <[storytell@venus.twu.edu](mailto:storytell@venus.twu.edu)>.

As part of my research and also daily life as a storyteller, Storytell was monitored daily, and notes made when people were discussing issues paralleling my investigations. Such research involved posting questions and inviting comment. Storytell members tended to be not just accepting, but enthusiastic about research conducted on-line. When posting questions soliciting thoughts, a reminder went into the last paragraph: "And please remember, anything you say in response is likely to be written into my dissertation, so if you don't want to be quoted, either email me off-list or say so in your post! Thanks again."

If an unsolicited posting on the list was of interest, I tried to contact the writer. Those who did not respond or could not be found are quoted as "name withheld." Contributors who responded chose their own identification, by their name or via a descriptor such as "Asian storyteller in Canada," or "name withheld."

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<sup>4</sup> The URL for the organization's Storytell archives is <[www2.twu.edu/archives/storytell.html](http://www2.twu.edu/archives/storytell.html)>.

### **1.4.3 Fieldwork: at Storytelling Events**

In some cases conversations that gave interesting insights took place immediately before or after storytelling concerts or festivals; informants may also have made remarks during their performances that are incorporated into this research. Such comments are distinguished by the place and date they were made. Most were never recorded but rather documented in journalist's shorthand on yellow stickies, programs, festival schedules and odd bits of paper.

Electronic recording devices tend not to be welcomed at storytelling events, so use of such equipment is often interpreted as recording stories so one can learn them for oneself. At the US National Storytelling Festival, recording is banned on festival grounds, except for journalists. Attending the US Festival several times as a journalist, I never wanted to carry a tape recorder, given my blurry identity of journalist/storyteller/ethnographer. I rarely carried recording devices into storytelling performances in any country. In cases where specific interviews were held during a festival or other storytelling event, the equipment remained in my luggage until evening, when tellers gathered to relax and have informal story swaps\* in the hotel or dorm. If remarks used in this dissertation were made privately or casually, I sought permission, while Public performance remarks were considered usable.

### **1.4.4 Handling of Informants' Texts and Quotations**

Quotes from informants are notated by references such as (Sp 29 Oct. 2005); (int. 29 Oct. 2005) or (e-int. 29 Oct. 2005). The above parenthetical references are, respectively, a Storytell post, a personal interview, and an e-mail interview, but the 29

Oct. date is only an example. There are also a few instances of remarks made at public events or in private conversation. Public event comments are distinguished between those made to me and those made as part of a performance or other public address. Private conversations may omit specific dates and locations, unless relevant.

A potentially confusing circumstance is that tellers who were interviewed face-to-face may also be members of Storytell or have answered follow-up interview questions by e-mail. Specific information on dates and locations of interviews, Storytell posts, e-mails, and casual remarks are found in the bibliography.

Throughout this document, when an autobiographical story conveys information, I treated myself as an informant and wrote in italics, resisting the temptation to edit this text more than once for clarity.

Where e-mails contained typographical errors or obvious word omissions, or where it was evident that a spell checker substituted one word for another (for instance, a reference to Nashville, Television) these were corrected without noting the correction.

Where informants and other contributors used what are considered by some readers to be vulgar words (such as “shit”), these are written verbatim. Where the use of religious names connotes the possibility of profanity or sacrilege, internal vowels have been replaced with hyphens, e.g. “G-d” or “All-h” in order to avoid infringing on my own or others' religious beliefs while offering accurate quotes.

#### **1.4.5 Autobiographical Information**

As an active professional storyteller, accessing events and tellers was easy. My interest in storytelling began in 1985, my senior year at a Michigan high school, when a

guest storyteller visited our Microbiology class as a Christmas gift from the teacher. I was smitten. Completing a journalism degree at university, storytelling activity was piecemeal until 1991, when I settled into work as a reporter for a small-town paper about thirty miles from Jonesborough, the town in Tennessee known as the birthplace of modern American storytelling. One day, rather out of nowhere, the thought struck that perhaps the town's library would let me tell stories for children. The librarians were receptive and we put together a Wednesday morning preschool story time. About six months later, the library abruptly hired me to do weekly storytelling programs in elementary schools. This whetted my appetite. I left the newspaper to pursue a Master's degree in Storytelling at East Tennessee State University and became graduate assistant for the program. After graduation I worked full-time as a professional storyteller across the Eastern United States until beginning doctoral studies in 1997. Moving to Scotland in 1998, I founded a non-profit organization using storytelling for practical applications such as literacy and health awareness. Returning to America in 2004, I directed the Florida Folk Festival and worked with regional folklife events as staff folklorist for a state park.

In 1997 I founded the American Folklore Society's Storytelling Section. Between 1996 and 2004 I attended more than thirty festivals dedicated to or including storytelling, and organized three. In the United Kingdom I attended: Seacat Storytelling Festival (1996) and the Ulster-American Storytelling Festival (1996) in Northern Ireland and the Sperrin Mountain Storytelling Festival (2002) in Ireland; Festival at the Edge (1996) and World Book Day (2003 and 2004) in England; in Scotland the Scottish International

Storytelling Festival (1998-2002), Edinburgh Festival (1999 and 2002), the Edinburgh Fringe Festival (2000), the Scottish Children's Festival (2000), the Perth Storytelling Festival (2002 and 2003), Aberdeen Storytelling Festival (2000-2005), the Wigtown Book Festival (1999), Glasgow Storytelling Festival (1999 and 2001), the Edinburgh Book Festival (2000-2004) and others. At all of these festivals I was both a researcher and a featured teller\* except Festival at the Edge, where I performed as a volunteer, and the 1999 Edinburgh Festival, at which I was an observer.

In America I attended the Corn Island Storytelling Festival (1993 and 1997), several National Storytelling Festivals (intermittently from 1985-2005), the Tennessee Storytelling Festival (1995), the GreeneSpring Ghost Fling (1992-1994), the Big Apple Storytelling Festival (1995), the Smithsonian Folklife Festival (1999), the Virginia Highlands Storytelling Festival (1998-2000), the Fall Homecoming Festival (2002, 2003), and the Appalachian Storytelling Festival (1992-1994). I was a guest teller\* at Corn Island, GreeneSpring, Big Apple, Virginia Highlands, Fall Homecoming, and the Appalachian and Tennessee Festivals. I was a workshop leader at one of the National Storytelling Festivals.

Between 1998 and 2005 I took four workshops (all at the 2004 American National Storytelling Conference in Bellingham, Washington), taught several more (in Canada, America, the United Kingdom, Ireland, Germany and Romania) and interviewed more than sixty tellers. I participated in storytelling clubs in America, Canada, Ireland and the United Kingdom, including the Yarnspinners Clubs in Cork, Belfast and Dublin; storytelling clubs in Fife, Perth, Edinburgh, Glasgow, Aberdeen, and the Borders in

Scotland; Hebdon Bridge Storytelling Club, London Yarnspinners Hammersmith, and London Yarnspinners held at the Irish Centre in England; and in Canada, the 1001 Nights in Toronto, a library storytelling tour in Gander, another on the Avalon Peninsula, and a storytelling salon\* in Newfoundland.

I administrated seven storytelling clubs for children and adults in Scotland and organized storytelling events on various levels, including two festivals (in Fife and Perth) and serving on the committee for the Scottish International Storytelling Festival in 2002. I attended several conferences, among them the US National Storytelling Conferences in 1997 and 2004; the University College of Cape Breton Symposium on storytelling from 1997-1999; Florida Story Camp (2005); two Scottish Storytelling Development Days (2001 and 2002); and two of the Annual Gathering Meetings of the Society for Storytelling in England and Wales (1999 and 2000). I was also a storytelling coordinator with the Blackburn with Darwen Borough Council's Library System (2003); was resident storyteller for the same borough's pilot storytelling scheme in 2003; was the delegate to the Scottish Parliament's Traditional Arts Working Meeting (2003); and was on the Traditional Arts Advisory Board to the Scottish Parliament (2002-2003).

In early 1999 I was invited to be listed in the Scottish Storytelling Center's directory\* of tellers. In summer 1999 I was asked to be a member of the Scottish Storytelling Forum, the board overseeing the Scottish Storytelling Center's activities. This offered access to the mechanics of storytelling administration and informal conversations based on shared observations. In 2003 I went to Lancashire, England to take up a storytelling residency\* that began as a three-month project and turned into an

eighteen-month job. In 2004 I moved to Florida to become Folklife Programs Director for the Stephen Foster State Folk Culture Center. This is a partial listing of the contexts in which I conducted fieldwork with professional and other storytellers.

Blurred roles result when a fieldworker participates in the event she is researching. Accordingly, when I participated in an event in addition to being a researcher, my position is footnoted. Likewise, I also note any general involvement or specific position with organizations discussed.

### **1.5 Investigation of the Literature on Professional Storytelling**

The questions asked during fieldwork were somewhat informed by the small amount of scholarly literature available on professional storytelling. Overall, storytelling scholarship has taken a straight yet seldom-traveled path, starting with texts, moving into classifications, beginning to become interested in repertoire analysis, then narrators and their individual creativity, before moving again toward community uses of storytelling and their meaning, purpose and influence in our daily lives.

Folklore scholarship regarding professional storytelling developed from research based primarily on traditional tellers or on the texts themselves. In the 1800s, the antiquarian collectors and gentleman hobbyists of Europe and America pursued texts largely divorced from their context of community and narrator (Georges 327-328). In 1888, with the founding of the American Folklore Society, a literary influence controlled the early output of its scholarly publication, the Journal of American Folklore (Zumwalt xi). Many hobbyist folklorists were collecting folktales, and this collecting increased in



specialization, accreditation, and standardization of expectations and publications as time passed. Folktale scholarship was particularly prominent in Scandinavia and Germany. The anthropological and literacy influences, as well as the Old and New Worlds, could be said to converge in the life work of Stith Thompson (Zumwalt 59) who inherited the scholarship of the late Antti Aarne and completed The Types of the Folktale in 1928 (Zumwalt 58). In 1926, Russian folklorist Mark Azadovskii published A Siberian Tale Teller, studying the influence of individual storytellers' personalities on how they put together their narratives. "In contrast to Western European research it is particularly characteristic of the Russian school of folklorists that they are interested in and pay attention to the personality of the singer or the narrator" (Azadovskii 1). He was concerned that "The study of the style of every narrator is made only in conjunction with the changes which are made by him in the traditional subject matter" (11). In other words, folklorists were not interested in how a change appeared (usually through the influence of the narrator's personality and surrounding community events) or why it had appeared (in order to reflect the contextual situation of the telling and the personality of the teller) but with what had actually changed. Azadovskii shifted from text to teller, studying tradition as interacting with creativity to reflect a community and an individual.

Even this brief glimpse of narrators brought by the Germanic and Eastern folklorists seemed to fade away again. Vladimir Propp's 1928 publication Morphology of the Folktale, all structure and no context, was translated into English in 1950. Meanwhile, Thompson produced the 1935 Motif-Index of Folk Literature. It should be pointed out that these structural works have contributed considerably to the overall study

of folktales, if not of narrators. Thompson was “unblushing” that he was a classifier rather than a collector, and saw his life’s work as assisting collectors by designing a workable system for archiving folk tales that others collected (Zumwalt 59-60). From the 1930s into the 1960s Western folklorists published more on folktales than on storytelling, concerned with collection and classification rather than the narrator and situational context.

This concentration began to change in 1960, as Albert Lord’s The Singer of Tales examined the repertoire and performance skills of an individual storyteller. Lord produced a hybrid study of storytelling and folktales, looking at changes appearing in the texts over time, and how these reflected the teller’s individual circumstances and performance abilities. In 1962, German folklorist Max Lüthi began to point out how stories represented their surrounding communities; he called fairy tales “a universe in miniature” (25). Although subject to the personalities and whims of their narrators, fairy tales hold their form well through centuries:

“The fairy tale has no landlord” is a common expression in Greece. Each storyteller can tell it in his own way, so long as he faithfully retains the basic structure, and, thus, the essential details with their deeper meaning not easily comprehended by reason. (Lüthi 63)

In 1969, Robert Georges published his article “Toward an Understanding of Storytelling Events” and Linda Dégh’s Folktales and Society appeared, a further breakthrough including narrators, context and social meaning of storytelling events themselves in examinations of storytelling. Context, meaning both consideration of the narrator and of the time and place in which storytelling occurred, became a fundamental part of

storytelling studies; scholarly investigations of folktales began moving toward reflexive examination of how and in what situations collections were gathered. In 1971, American folklorist Dan Ben-Amos refined folklore's definition into the study of "artistic communication in small groups" (13) and folklore studies expanded from scrutiny of the object to include investigations of the object's maker (for example, Jones studying Chester Cornett in 1975) and the contextual performance of that making (Ben-Amos 1971, 1993).

The shift from product to maker is reflected in the 1980s and 1990s by Glassie in Ireland with Passing the Time in Ballymenone (1982), Thomas in Newfoundland with The Two Traditions (1993) and Lindahl, Owens and Harvison in Louisiana with Swapping Stories (1997). With the exception of Glassie, these examinations of traditional storytelling included storytellers who told professionally, in the sense that they had a recognized skill level and received payment. However, the investigators did not deal with the professional status of their informants. The folklorists writing these works looked at whole communities, then focused on individuals within them. Rosenberg's comment about folksong scholarship is apt: "Generally it is only in retrospect that folksong scholars have come to realize that some of their informants were professionals" (1986: 150).

The storyteller himself became increasingly recognized as a critical part of understanding how storytelling events functioned. American folklorist Richard Bauman published Story, Performance, and Event in 1986, bringing the creativity and performance skills of storyteller Ed Bell to the fore of the study. Bauman pointed out that

Bell exhibited specific narrative abilities to hold his audience when he was telling to members of his community, and additional skills when he was outside that context (103).

By 1986, important things were happening to storytelling itself: it was in full swing as a rejuvenated art form in England and the United States, and gaining popularity in Canada, Scotland and Ireland. Yet storytelling scholarship, whether based on collecting folktales, repertoire analyses, contextual event investigations, or performance studies, examined traditional storytelling and storytellers, even as some of those traditional tellers “went pro.” Again, the academic ignoring of these developments parallels what happened in folksong revival scholarship. In his essay “The Folksong Revival,” American folklorist Bruce Jackson observed, “Although university students and some faculty members were central to the revival, the revival had little direct impact on university teaching or research in the 1950s and 1960s” (74). This could be because “Like many revivals, it appealed primarily to individuals who celebrated traditions not their own” with audiences made up predominantly of urban whites (73).

The storytelling movement was similar to Jackson’s description. In most cases, either urban white audiences listened to professional storytellers who told to people unassociated with their tradition, or the professional storytellers had no association with the storytelling traditions they offered audiences. Lindahl’s discussion of storyteller Frank Proffitt, Jr. in Jack in Two Worlds, the first scholarly book to approach the storytelling revival, is one example of a folkloristic treatment of a traditional storyteller who worked as a professional teller before urban, white audiences removed from Proffitt’s community. Lindahl pointed out that Proffitt “knew that he would have to make

some stylistic changes in his father's tradition if he was to be a successful stage performer of folktales" (30). Proffitt adopted the voice and stylistic techniques of his renowned storytelling uncle, the late Ray Hicks, which Lindahl called "flamboyant" (30).

There are very few examinations of storytellers who were investigated because they were professionals, or situations examined because they encompassed professional storytelling events. Of the studies that do inspect professional telling, the subject of the research tends to be a member of a distinctive family or community with a history of traditional storytelling, and their professional status bypassed. As examples, storytellers and Travellers Duncan Williamson and the Stewarts of Blair were the subject of studies by Braid and Douglas. Additionally, Ray Hicks is profiled in Jack in Two Worlds and is the subject of a dissertation by American folklorist Cheryl Oxford.<sup>5</sup>

In the 1990s, a body of literature produced by folklorists who were also storytellers began emerging. England's Simon Heywood, a folklorist and storyteller, produced the 1998 monograph The New Storytelling, a history of professional storytelling's development in England and Wales. Clodagh Brennan Harvey, an Irish folklorist now part of the American storytelling scene, published her dissertation Contemporary Irish Traditional Narrative: The English Language Tradition in 1992. Kay Stone, a retired folklorist and teller in Canada, and Joseph Sobol, an American folklorist, storyteller and musician, published Burning Brightly: New Light from Old Tales and The Storyteller's Journey, respectively. Stone studied Canadian and American storytellers in the late 1980s; Sobol investigated American storytellers in the 1990s.

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<sup>5</sup> "They Call Him Lucky Jack: 3 Performance-Centered Case Studies of Storytelling in Watauga County, N.C." Northwestern 1988. Oxford's dissertation also studied Stanley Hicks and Marshall Ward.

There are also three compilation works edited respectively by William McCarthy (an American folklorist), Margaret Read MacDonald and Lebanese-born Afra Kavanagh (a Canadian lecturer in education and a storyteller). McCarthy's Jack in Two Worlds deals primarily with the United States, but includes one Canadian teller. MacDonald's Traditional Storytelling Today investigates storytelling in several countries, including the United Kingdom and North America. Kavanagh's Women in Storytelling is from the annual storytelling symposium she organizes in Canada. American storyteller and therapist Susan Gordon's essay "The Powers of the Handless Maiden" in the compilation volume Feminist Messages (edited by American folklorist and storyteller Joan Radner) rounds out the major treatments in folklore studies. Two storytellers have also edited a scholarly investigation of their own community or profession. Librarian and storyteller Carol Birch and educator and storyteller Melissa Heckler, both Americans, published Who Says? Essays on Pivotal Issues in Contemporary Storytelling.

Of the essays in the "North American," "Theory" and "European" sub-sections of MacDonald's Traditional Storytelling Today, most do not discuss professional storytellers. Twenty deal with folktale types and genres, eight with traditional narrators, six with storytelling prior to 1960 and two with male/female repertoire differentiation in traditional communities. The four remaining essays by Martha Bean (a linguistics professor in California), Sobol, French oral literature scholar Veronika Görög-Karady, and me encompass professional storytelling in different ways.

Bean and I each examined instances of professional tellers using stories in the context of their daily work. In "Cross Culture, Cross Class, Crossed Wires: An Analysis

of an Emic Storytelling Event,” I described a housing project in which a community of functionally illiterate parents used storytelling, first to send messages about safety to their children, then to “tell off” a visiting group of volunteers engaged in stereotyping (579). Bean's article entitled “The Role of Traditional Stories in Language Teaching and Learning” discussed telling stories in classroom settings.

Görög-Karady examined French professional storytellers in the late 1990s, finding that they tended to avoid associations with the past or with “Frenchness” and to favor practical applications of storytelling in everyday society (228). Kavanagh's Women in Storytelling also focused on modern functional uses of storytelling. The collection was compiled from proceedings of the University College of Cape Breton's Fourth Annual Storytelling Symposium, investigating either the ways in which women involve stories in their work as educators, or feminist readings of female characters in traditional fairytales. Only two essays dealt directly with professional storytelling. My introductory essay, “Perceptions of Inequality: Women in the Art and Business of Storytelling,” dissected the image of the crone in artistic renderings of traditional storytelling sessions and suggested that North American storytellers tend to denigrate the storytelling contributions of professions such as librarian or teacher. In “The Princess in Transition: A Changing Metaphor,” American international storyteller Diane Wolkstein recorded how and why she reframed a traditional fairytale to encompass her image of what “princess” really meant in the twenty-first century

Writing in a similarly feminist context, storyteller and therapist Susan Gordon contributed to Feminist Messages. Her essay, like Wolkstein's, was a self-analysis of the

psychological impact of a Grimms' tale as a healing story regarding her relationship with her parents. "This story became a prism through which I began to look. . . . 'The Handless Maiden' as I tell it is a story of human development" (267).

An examination of how folklorists who are storytellers approached their subject matter reveals that we used methodologies already established within folkloristics. I use occupation. Stone and Sobol built studies through awareness of intentional communities created by and for storytellers. Stone introduced the concept of storytellers creating intentional communities:

Folklorists explore individuals and their expressive forms within their communities, not just as isolated artists, and that is what I am attempting here. This community might be a town or village, a family or a group, or a consciously formed gathering of people who come together to hear and tell stories. Here my focus is on these consciously formed groups, often but not always in an urban environment. (1998: xiii)

Likewise, Sobol depicted American storytellers as an intentional community in The Storyteller's Journey:

I will concentrate on the experiences of those for whom the festival represented not just an optional leisure activity but a public enactment of a ritual obligation to themselves and to a consciously conceived community. The depth and stability of these obligations and this community are certainly open to question. (125)

Heywood's examination of professional storytellers proceeds from repertoire analysis. He found professional storytellers in England and Wales were similar to those Stone, Sobol and Görög-Karady considered in that they were removed from a past-



focused association, distanced from a traditional sense of community and involved in the deliberate use of material from outside their realm of life experiences:

Crucially, most storytellers of the movement in England and Wales draw their repertoire from outside family or other traditions or origins. They involve themselves in a storytelling in which they have not grown up. Rather, they look further afield, or back in time: towards a culture which is assumed to have once existed, but which lies outside the personal experience of (most) participants. (Heywood 16)

McCarthy and those contributing to his book were examining traditional tellers who told Jack tales professionally. Stone researched primarily Canadian storytellers who had fairy tales from the Brothers Grimm in their repertoires. An important difference between McCarthy's and Stone's repertoire-based research is that she gave less attention to the way in which her storytellers acquired their stories. The tellers were not necessarily from a community that had passed these stories between themselves orally; they may easily have gleaned them from books. Sobol, for his part, examined professional storytellers because they were professional storytellers, looking at their ethical and developmental concerns under the umbrella of an intentionally developed (consciously conceived) community. Perhaps the study of professional storytelling is currently moving into folklore studies primarily through frameworks such as community studies, repertoire studies, or studying individual, traditional storytellers who happen to be professional storytellers. Such studies tend to approach storytelling from the point of view of a folklorist or other social researcher, although the folklorist may also be a storyteller (for example, Sobol, Stone, Heywood, Kavanagh).

Analyses of professional storytelling by folklorists and ethnographers who are professional tellers bear findings similar to research by folklorists and ethnographers who are not professional tellers. Their starting points are alike: studying community, examining repertoire, investigating how traditional stories change. In the small body of literature in which folklorists who are not storytellers have analyzed storytelling professionals, they echo Heywood and Stone's findings: many professional storytellers draw their repertoire from outside their own geographic or cultural communities.

American folklorist Barre Toelken felt that taking stories, particularly Native American folktales, "out of their cultural contexts, even when 'recontexted' by the teller's commentary" (1996: 53) was not always respectful or wise. He contributed an essay entitled "The Icebergs of Folktale: Misconception, Misuse, Abuse" to the 1996 compilation Who Says? Essays on Pivotal Issues in Contemporary Storytelling. Toelken suggested that folklorists' and storytellers' handling of traditional tales would both be suspect from a traditional Native American storyteller's point of view.

One does find a dichotomy of thought between storytellers and folklorists regarding professional storytelling. Professional storytellers who are not ethnographers largely discussed meaning and purpose: stories were used for education, as a healing agent, as a means of interesting children and adults in other cultures, or to increase literacy. These writers were rarely interested in the story as an ethnographic depiction. Folklorists who are not storytellers appear to be particularly concerned that storytellers may be destroying the story as an ethnographic descriptor of the culture from which it

comes (Lindahl 1994: 4; McCarthy 167; Toelken 1996: 53). This dichotomy of thought is a recurring theme throughout this dissertation.

## **1.6 Description of Chapters**

As preparation for examining this dichotomy and other points, here are brief overviews of each chapter. Chapter Two investigates why a study of storytelling is reasonable for a folklorist to undertake, and how it might offer benefits to Folklore as a discipline. The chapter explains using lived experience as autoethnography and discusses helpful and problematic terminology used by folklorists and storytellers. Also introduced are the key concepts of identity authority and artistic authority.

Chapter Three introduces the national storytelling organizations in the United Kingdom and North America. It examines how storytellers see these organizations interacting with the professional storytelling scene. The chapter concludes with an analysis of similarities and differences in the organizations' development and growth.

Chapter Four examines Public identity within professional storytelling, categorizing ways in which storytellers define themselves and their art. Such definitions include as business operators, creative artists, activists, keepers and dispensers of wisdom, and representers\* or presenters\* of cultures.

Chapter Five investigates how the storyteller chooses and readies the tale for telling. The effects of gender on repertoire and story crafting are included in this discussion. The chapter ends with a brief look at how and why storytellers may alter stories.

Chapter Six circles the vexed question of who has the right to tell which stories based on issues of individual and cultural ownership. Both terms are given working definitions. Individual ownership, or the right of a storyteller to be known as the originator of a story, focuses primarily on the problems of copyright and perceived mutual expectations of best praxis within storytelling as a profession. Within consideration of cultural ownership, or the perception that a particular story belongs to a specific group, is included an examination of the right to tell a story through participant understanding. Stories considered sacred are discussed as a complex issue.

Chapter Seven concludes the thesis by reiterating the findings of the previous chapters and returning to the central goal: presenting an occupational, autoethnographic study of professional storytellers. It also ties together several thoughts from the preceding chapters to discuss why tellers may choose to tell stories from outside their own experiences

## CHAPTER TWO: CONFESSIONS OF A STORYTELLING FOLKLORIST

*Q: What did the autoethnographer say to his informant?*

*A: But enough about you, let's talk about me. – folklore joke*

Particular challenges and opportunities await a storytelling folklorist who researches the first half of that job title as an occupation—not least the need to prove that professional storytelling is appropriate for a folklorist to study. An examination of the thoughts and vocabulary of storytellers and folklorists is evident in these challenges. “Tradition” and “authenticity” were the most problematic words, the first because it has many definitions, the second because it has such a limited and limiting one. Both words may be used differently by storytellers and folklorists. Following discussion of these terms is a brief examination of the word “revival” and a short analysis of relevant folksong scholarship. There follows a depiction of storytellers as an international occupational group.

### 2.1 Professional Storytellers as Folklore

Toelken discussed the “stunning eclecticism” of folklorists: “One’s final impression is that the best we can say of folklore is that it encompasses all those areas which folklorists have chosen to be interested in” (1969: 91). This definition provides ethnographers with a great deal of space in which to maneuver, but some restrictions still

apply. Whether professional storytellers are reasonable subjects of scrutiny for a folklorist, and whether such storytellers constitute a folk group, are pivotal questions.

Folklore has been defined as “artistic communication in small groups” (Ben-Amos 1971:13). American folklorist Dorothy Noyes, paraphrasing American anthropologist Richard Handler explained, “We prove the reality of a group by demonstrating that it has a culture, unified within and discernable without (Handler 1988)” (449). Noyes pointed out that these groups need not be, even cannot be expected to appear as, homogenous (454). She theorized that “group” has replaced “folk” as the term used for the object of study because “The classist, racist, and antimodern connotations of *folk* were all problematic in an American context; moreover, the word was tied to an old paradigm that understood the people as bearers, not makers, of tradition” (452).

Folklore studies may have shifted the terminology from “folk” to “group,” but doing so has not fully altered the politics underlying the theory. Folklorists and storytellers Joseph Sobol in America and Kay Stone in Canada made cases for storytellers being distinct from the mainstream society around them, because they were a “consciously conceived community” (Sobol 1999: 125) and an “intentional community” (Stone 1998: 33). Stone described the Canadian scene as several small groups rather than one large group. “There are now hundreds of groups in cities and towns in the United States and Canada that consider themselves to be communities, in contrast to the professional associations of other performance arts” (40). “[B]oth countries share in a general belief that an overall storytelling community does indeed exist that goes beyond

national boundaries, and . . . covers the whole of modern organized telling” (Stone 42). As Noyes notes, “I should like first to stress that a felt reality is quite real enough” (466). The felt reality among storytellers is that there is a group to which they belong. In that sense at the very least, professional storytellers may be said to constitute a folk group.

Another facet exists for deciding whether storytellers who tell professionally are reasonable subjects of folkloristic scrutiny. Folklore has moved from “artistic communication in small groups” (Ben-Amos 1971: 13) to what American folklorists Charles Briggs and Amy Shuman in 1993 called “using artistic communication in everyday life” (112). Glassie narrowed this somewhat in 1995. He suggested it was not everyday life, but non-coerced everyday life, in situations where groups used artistic communication to maintain their cohesiveness, which is the folklorist’s domain:

There are certainly groups that are not traditional—people gathered into units by police sweeps, or statistical convenience or sheer chance—but the group called “small” is only as large as it can be while it continues to be constituted by the artistic communications of its shifting membership.

The “small group” is like the “traditional society,” a human aggregate assembled by customary conduct. . . .

Accepting artistic communication in small groups as their definition, folklorists are not directed to the study of all life. They come to focus on its moments of authenticity, when individual commitment brings social association. Their realm of the inauthentic, then, would contain non-artistic actions, the coerced or the perfunctory, and social orders so scaled that cohesion is trivial or merely legal. (1995: 401)

To be inauthentic by Glassie's standard, the occupational group of professional storytellers would need to contain non-artistic communication, be coerced or perfunctory,

or be incohesive as a social order. Whatever else may be said about professional storytellers, they are communicating artistically, practicing a widely-recognized art form. Also, in all my years of professional storytelling I have never met anyone who was coerced to enter this low-paying and highly unstable profession.

To meet Glassie's other criterion for a folk group, storytellers should be a socially cohesive group that can define itself by joint participation in a traditional (a problematic word) activity. Sobol skirted the question of tradition:

“The storytelling community” is a common usage, one that has great invocatory significance to those who consider themselves a part of it. But the nature of this particular community is problematic even to storytellers, let alone to those schooled in traditional folkloric categories. Since contemporary storytellers are usually seen as adapting folkloric sources to styles and contexts that are clearly “nontraditional,” the actual traditional dynamics within the community have often been obscured. (1999: xii)

Something that is obscured still exists. Storytellers themselves, whether “traditional” or not, are engaging in an activity with a long history in traditional studies. To that end, they are a socially cohesive group participating jointly in a traditional activity.

## **2.2 Participant Observation and the Dichotomy of Storyteller vs. Folklorist**

If storytellers are a reasonable study for a folklorist to undertake, how did being a storytelling folklorist affect the study? A parallel exists with Italian folklorist Alessandro Portelli, who had difficulties examining a group and situation of which he was a part: the



Italian student movement of 1968. He discussed these in The World Observed: Reflections on the Fieldwork Process:

Hence, the problem for coeval fieldworkers. A movement was being created under our own eyes, and we had the machinery to record it (the 1960s were also the age of the relatively inexpensive portable tape recorder) but we didn't know *what* to record. Like Bob Dylan's Mr. Jones, we knew that "something is happening here" but we didn't know what it was. (46-47)

Since becoming a professional teller in 1991, many things have changed in the profession. Imagine trying to analyze a painting as the painter was working on it, and how inaccurate that depiction would be once the finished piece was on display. Like Portelli, I found that separating immediate and remembered experiences into accurate patterns was at times almost counterproductive, because each piece of information is connected to something else that occurred later, and modifies how that information is perceived (47). Dissecting the offerings of open and honest informants into separate containers, no matter how broad the labels, was frustrating, because both my informant and I had "been there, seen that" as part of a whole movement, an entirety that existed with hindsight but not at the time we struggled to describe.

Portelli conducted no formal interviews, but walked around with his tape recorder on, much like a candid camera (48). Access, in short, was easy; he could get up close and personal because his informants were his friends. The problem was gaining distance. Because Portelli was of the age and nationality to have been involved in the student movement, and because he knew so many people from this era, he was unable to "play dumb" and ask questions informants believed he knew the answer to:

It may make sense for me to ask a Kentucky coal miner, “What happened in Evarts on May 5, 1931?” or a Terni steelworker, “Who won the local elections in 1920?” (a battle between miners and gun thugs; the Socialist party): the narrators can assume that I don’t know the answers, because I am a foreigner, or so much younger. But when a movement activist says, “My initiation was Paolo Rossi” (a student killed by the Fascists at the University of Rome in 1966), it makes absolutely no sense for me to ask “who was Paolo Rossi?” The inevitable reply would be, “Who are you trying to kid? You were there, or you should have been.” (52)

When tellers mentioned “Blood on the Porch” it was no good for me to say, “What was that?” Every American professional storyteller has felt the impact of that now infamous moment when, according to some, the golden age of American storytelling died and the competitive age began. As it happens, I was physically present when “Blood on the Porch,” described in Chapter Three, took place, but that is beside the point.

Storytellers in the role of interviewee assumed—correctly—that they shared with the storyteller in the role of interviewer a certain amount of baseline information about the storytelling world. Therefore asking them to examine a common and casually used term was useless.

Questions storytellers did not see as pertaining directly to storytelling also required finesse. In The World Observed, Toelken described his frustrated attempts to learn the Navaho language. Because he kept asking about nouns, the native speakers assumed he was not serious about learning this verb-oriented language (2). Displaying a similar misunderstanding of motives mixed with cultural expectations, tellers sometimes interpreted lightly requests for information not directly related to storytelling as they

perceived it, dismissing the queries as uninteresting, or wondering aloud if my study would really be about storytelling, since it involved so many questions about “tradition” or “authenticity.”

Sometimes the very act of approaching a subject could be considered rude. Professional tellers tend to exercise great tact when approaching peers on certain topics. They express themselves cautiously regarding, for example, the politics of individual tellers interacting with storytelling organizations. England and Wales have a relatively small professional storytelling community of less than five hundred people. It puzzled, even alarmed, some informants to be questioned about the Society for Storytelling's relationship to themselves as individual tellers, or whether London storytellers wielded more clout than their rural brothers and sisters—particularly if the informant knew I was the Scottish liaison<sup>6</sup> to the Society for Storytelling in England/Wales. Certain things were (or should be, the implied silent message seemed to say) sacrosanct; to look behind them was intrusive, interpreted as one storyteller prying into the affairs of another. A disinterested folklorist asking discerning questions might have been able to delve deeper into some issues.

Yet participating so deeply in the community brought a good sense of what enquiries would fully explore the storytelling occupation. The ability to interact as one of the gang grounded meaningful conversations in a storytelling perspective using a common lexicon. Informants could tell from a brief conversation that their inquisitor “spoke the language,” as it were. This brought swift credibility with most of the

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<sup>6</sup> This is a non-voting board position, welcoming new members and ensuring they connect with the Society's opportunities in their region.

storytellers interviewed, at least until I began tossing about “folklore words” like “tradition” and “authenticity.”

Speaking the language of storytellers while studying the theory of folklorists brought the realization that storytellers and folklorists sometimes use the same terminology to express different concepts, hence the need for Appendix A in this document. In 1966 (and again in her reprinted essay thirty years later) American folksong scholar Ellen Steckert observed, “We are in a humpty-dumpty age of ambivalent and misapplied words and although it is not our province to dictate usage, at the very least we can clarify what is happening” (104).

Applying folkloristic thought to a storytelling situation, the researcher bifurcates between two quite different ways of thinking. In fact, sometimes the literature by folklorists on professional storytelling was rather painful to read. Dégh, describing day-job storyteller Ágoston Fábián, noted that “her storytelling skill earned her the job which she still holds. She works as a nanny in one of Kakasd's preschool centers and entertains the children with tales before and after their lunchtime nap and while they eat their snacks” (305). Dégh said of Fábián's delivery that it seemed “artificial and conceited” compared to the unassuming spontaneity of past village storytellers. She noted that most of her repertoire came from a book of folktales from the region. Fábián avoided anything that seems unclean or improper, such as “girls who fart or say ‘shit’” (305). Dégh then described Fábián's numerous honors and awards from the regional and national arts organizations of Hungary, and said Fábián was “an invaluable subject of folkloristic

scrutiny as a folklore informant and a professional teller of tales” (306). Lindahl, in his introduction to Jack in Two Worlds, said:

It [the English-*Märchen* tradition] has too long been trivialized, even dismissed, by people having little regard for its internal rules, or it has been warped into a dramatic form by storytelling circuit performers wishing to realize their own distorted notions of its scale and grandeur. Yet these little traditions live, sometimes even thrive, as they await the fair treatment of folklorists. (1994: xxi)

Other folklorists seemed more ambivalent. William McCarthy, a folklorist who does not tell stories professionally, edited Jack in Two Worlds. The essays studied eight storytellers who told Jack tales, often in settings that were removed from the story’s community of origin (x). Several of the scholars contributing essays were professional tellers. They examined storytellers who were both traditional (in that they told stories from their own communities) and professional (they told them for pay, in settings outside their community). In his own discussion of storyteller Leonard Roberts, McCarthy presented a man born into the community that his tale reflects, and who collected the story from his aunt, but who told the story outside his community context to a group of teachers in a folklore class (169). McCarthy found Roberts a complex person to analyze as a traditional teller, although he does not sound so unhappy with Roberts as Dégh was with Fábián:

As teller of the tale, Roberts presents us with several paradoxes. First, Roberts is not only from one of the most remote regions of the United States, namely the mountain fastness of eastern Kentucky. He even had the good sense to be born in a log cabin at the head of a holler. Nevertheless, second, he did not grow up with this tale despite the fact that

his mother had heard it, for she did not tell it to him. Moreover, his aunt's version is not the only source of his version, nor does he make any pretense that it is. Clearly, he has read many versions of AT 313C, including the American text of Richard Chase, the Irish Texts of Jeremiah Curtin, and the German texts of the Grimms. This is not a version uninfluenced by print. Third, Roberts was an educated person who read, taught, and enjoyed literature. Ultimately he obtained a Ph.D. in English from the University of Kentucky. Fourth, both Roberts's version that I collected and Aunt Columbia's that he collected were obtained by folklorists eliciting them. . . . Finally, the text we have printed comes from a narrator whose local reputation was as a folktale narrator but whose professional reputation was as a folktale specialist. Roberts was a folklorist as well as a folk performer. (170)

McCarthy seems to be considering carefully the "paradoxes" in classifying Roberts as a traditional and professional performer. Roberts is also an amateur folklorist performing in contexts that are not of his community. Folklorist Carol Silverman, a New Yorker who performs Bulgarian and Yugoslavian songs and dances, suggested in her essay "The Folklorist as Performer" that discomfort with folklorists-cum-performers was a defense mechanism displayed by those concerned about being in a marginalized discipline:

Folklore programs are even more pronounced in their neglect and sometimes disdain for the "doing of" performance. In Bulgaria, most professional folklorists are suspicious of researchers who perform. In the United States, folklorists have sometimes had to conceal their performing activities or risk academic credibility. This attitude is quite ironic, considering that the opposite is stereotypically expected by lay people: the folklorist is supposed to show up with a guitar and entertain! So while the

public says entertain, the academy says don't. Some folklorists have, unfortunately, had to choose, but others have managed to combine roles.

What is the origin of academia's ambivalent attitude of respecting performance when done by "the folk" but not when done by a folklorist? My feeling is that it is tied to the emergence of the discipline as "scientific," and the perceived need to establish "objective distance" in the cultural "laboratory." A "performing scientist" just doesn't fit the image. In more recent years, of course, the whole question of objectivity has been reexamined and the reflexive interactive nature of all fieldwork, whether performance-oriented or not, has been explored. Folklorists who perform are often in a unique position to investigate the issue of reflexivity, beginning with their own experiences. (Silverman 34-35)

Silverman's experience was echoed by Canadian Sheldon Posen, who stopped performing as a folksinger for a time after he entered a Master's program in Folklore. As Posen described it, "To paraphrase journalist Calvin Trillin, I had 'authenticized myself out of the folksong business'" (134). Silverman pointed out that folklorists miss a large degree of reflexive opportunity when they dismiss internal voices. Her suggestion that folklore is a discipline on the defensive finds support in writing folklorists do about themselves. Ben-Amos refers to folklorists as having "an enormous academic inferiority complex" (1973: 117). He used folklore students' reading widely across disciplines as an example; it is good to encourage "liberal scholarly tendencies" and interdisciplinary thought in folklore students, but the students of anthropology, cultural geography, and literary criticism are not reading folklorists (117). Ben-Amos blames this on folklore being a blend of original technique with theories borrowed from other disciplines (115). However, folklorists Amy Shuman and Charles Briggs state that folklore journals claim

readers and authors from the very disciplines Ben-Amos named (Shuman and Briggs 110).

American folklorist Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett suggests that difficulties with public vs. academic work as folklorists exist because folklore is a “young academic discipline on the defensive” (1988: 140). Shuman and Briggs postulate a reason for the confusion and concern of folklorists about the place of their discipline in the Academy. Since the challenge of American folklorist Américo Paredes in 1972 to “place questions of the politics of culture at the heart of the discipline of folklore” (Shuman and Briggs 115), the discipline has been moving toward a shift in position, resulting in discomfort and a sense of displacement. Folklore’s history of voicing the Other—speaking on behalf of marginalized groups in the name of advocacy, representation, observation and analysis—is no longer protected by academic research, as the privilege of the scholar:

The right to place scholarly concepts, theories, and methodologies in a privileged position, one in which their interpretive powers are seemingly not constrained contextually by their positional provenience in particular nations, classes, genders, ideologies, and races, has been withdrawn.

(Shuman and Briggs 115)

Instead, “we can begin to see that championing the folk is built into the discipline, and it may not even be possible to avoid advocacy” (Shuman and Briggs 130).

Perhaps, when folklorists perceive themselves as fighting for credibility in academic life, it is only to be expected that pursuits seen as “quasi-academic” would be seen as demeaning the discipline. Public folklore has certainly suffered from this “mistaken dichotomy” (Kirshenblatt-Gimblett 1988: 140). At the 2004 International



Society for Contemporary Legend Research meeting in Aberystwyth, Wales, a senior colleague referred to me without malice as a “quasi-academic” because I was a “popularizer” of folklore, by which he meant telling folktales. He felt this would be an unchallenged statement, was startled when asked to support it, and retracted the statement. Folklorists may wish to be seen as participating in a “real” (authentic?) science, with no hint of that which might demean it, such as investigations with practical implications (Kirshenblatt-Gimblett 1988: 140) or studying entertaining uses of folktales. Yet to gather a body of knowledge about the occupational group of professional storytellers, all participants must be willing to listen to one another. The conversation should not be over before it has begun.

Continuing on that theme, two conceptually difficult words will reappear in this dissertation: “tradition” and “authenticity.” These two terms became increasingly meaningless during interviews with informants and observed/participated in storytelling events, in some measure because they are used differently in the folklore and storytelling occupational lexicons.

Tradition surfaced repeatedly in discussions with storytellers; authenticity echoed again and again from the folklorist side of my brain. Other ethnographers had confronted these words’ ability to shut down an investigation if left unexamined. McCarthy explicitly bypassed “tradition” and “authenticity” because “many issues had to be passed over or touched on only lightly” in order to get to the meat of his research. These included “the definition of tradition in the first place; the question of genre and ‘authenticity’; the influence of collectors—and festivals—on tale-telling; and so on and

on” (x). Sobol hinted at similar difficulties (1999: xii). These two problematic terms require investigation, starting with tradition.

### **2.2.1 Tradition Explored in Folklore Literature**

When an ethnographer struggles to capture and assimilate the term “tradition” into her research, she is in good company. Folklorists such as Glassie, Ben-Amos, and American Simon Bronner, to name but a few, have wrestled with the term for decades. “Accept, to begin with, that tradition is the creation of the future out of the past” (Glassie 1995: 395). Thus performers find themselves “positioned at a complex nexus of responsibility. . . . [P]erformers must, at once, keep faith with the past, with their deceased teachers, and with the present, the mumbling members of the audience who seek engagement . . .” (1995: 402). Tradition, then, is constantly modernizing, accepting into itself the innovations of individuals who show continuity with the past. Glassie was concerned with the position of history as axis or action (1995: 409) within the creative act. Bronner started farther back with his enquiry. He questioned how scholarship could use the term “tradition” given its values-laden popular uses. As a folklore term “tradition” must contend with that fact that

An emotional or even spiritual connotation to tradition exists that may belie objective chronologies or social inventories. To claim tradition, after all, is to bring into play the force, and guilt, of countless generations of ancestors, and perhaps the gaze of present-day neighbors. . . . That is not to say that attempts to clinically objectify tradition do not exist, particularly in folkloristics which above all other disciplines has claimed it for its sense of being. . . . Feelings about authority, about the virtue of the

past, and about the state of the present, shape the positive and negative value given tradition. (Bronner 145)

Tradition thus becomes “a balancing concept in America, often applied to a constructed social other, and more recently applied to a personal self in search of identity and community” (Bronner 162). Ben-Amos suggested that tradition was both “a motive for and a subject of research” (1984: 98) and that tradition was “a term to think with, not about” (97). He identified seven strands: lore, or accidental survivals of past knowledge (104); canon, the collective cultural expressions of a society (107); process, the movement of folklore primarily through time (117); mass, the actual material of folklore (118); culture, an anthropological term that arguably refers to the way a people group operates (120); langue, an “abstract system of rules that generates the performance and speaking of folklore” (121); and performance, or expressive behavior in action (123-124). Ben-Amos found these words used synonymously with “tradition” in folklore literature.

Each of the above theorists postulated some thought on tradition echoed by professional storytellers. For example, Glassie wrote:

In different situations, tradition can be identified with the products, whether causal or canonical, of historical action, or as the historical axis within creative acts, or as the style of historical construction peculiar to a culture. (1995: 409)

Relating Glassie’s description to the storytelling occupation, one could have a straightforward telling of a fairy tale (products of historical action). One could also have a reworking of the ballad Tam Lin, based on the original (historical axis) but taking into account changed attitudes toward women, abortion, and definitions of rape, the storyteller's twenty-first century mind forming a vocabulary for the tale that no bard

could have conceived in the seventeenth (creative acts). And a storyteller could create a story combining forms of oral formulaic repetition found in Arabic and Gaelic storytelling, including in the tale all those glorious runs\*, lays\* and formalized phrases replete with white palfreys and swords that glisten in the sun (cultural, historic constructions).

All of these are real examples, visible in professional storytelling. Regional American teller Lynn Rubright (a retired university educator) said of telling classic fairy tales, "I prefer not to 'fracture' fairy tales to make them more palatable to contemporary values" (Stone 1993: 252). Numerous storytellers, including American national teller Janice Del Negro, Scottish international teller Ewan McVicar, and myself have tackled Tam Lin, trying to, in the words of McVicar, "drag this beautiful poem into the twenty-first century so women feel ownership instead of confusion" (conversation). English international storyteller Helen East has combined two traditional forms to create an original piece. East's amusing story, "The Man Who Had No Luck"<sup>7</sup> has her storytelling partner drumming a back beat as she repeats, "He walked and he walked, for a thousand days and a thousand and one nights" to break the story into distinguishable portions of the man's journey. This expression is repeated at least six times in the story. East combines the historic form of a folktale with the historic form of story runs and lays although the two forms are not from the same origins. East's version is drawn from a book of Irish tales, the formulaic language from her Indian childhood. When I saw East perform the

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<sup>7</sup> A man sets out to ask God why he has no luck, encountering on the way a lion, a tree, and a woman, none of whom are thriving. The man is ultimately eaten by the lion when, after God tells him he is not short of luck but fails to notice opportunity when it appears, he ignores the facts that the beautiful woman is lonely, the tree has a treasure chest blocking its roots, and the lion is hungry.

tale at Festival at the Edge (England) in 1996, she was effectively “plunder[ing] the past” to create something new (Glassie 1995: 405).

The storytellers mentioned above see tradition as keeping faith with the past, even when using it to create new types of expressive verbal art. They rely on the past to create credibility for their chosen forms of communication, in the way Bronner discussed.

Storytellers may also associate tradition with some of the strands Ben-Amos identified.

Ben-Amos suggested that tradition was “the abstract system of knowledge that generates the actual performances” (1984: 121). In other words, it is the collective resources of expressive behaviors available to a person by virtue of his everyday life: his religious, ethnic, cultural and occupational groups, his non-coerced activities, etc. Storytellers draw on all aspects of their lived experience to make stories work, including the unexamined rules that have governed their lives. Fábíán would not say “shit” in front of children as a professional storyteller. The rawness of the story as it would have been told in its natural context, amongst adults, was altered by Fábíán’s internal rules: do not use foul language in front of children. Fábíán negotiated a set of conflicting abstract rules for her behavior. The stories as she knew them were raw; the children as she knew them were innocent. Her culture taught her hard stories; her culture taught her to protect children. When the two conflicting culturally-learned abstract rules of behavior collided, Fábíán made her decision.

Lest readers think this is reading too much into Fábíán, consider an example. Many of the “artistic techniques” a storyteller employs could be described as simple cultural rules writ large. In my telling of “The Hungry Pumpkin,” the pumpkin repeatedly

says, “Meat, meat; I want meat to eat.” After saying this twice alone, I want the listening children to chant along. The way to do this is to say “and the pumpkin said,” take a deep, obvious breath, raise one’s hands in the air and while exhaling lower the hands and begin to chant. The listeners, from ages three through adults, will chime in. No one overtly taught me to do that. I know that the way to conduct someone is to lift one’s hands—an association with high art culture—that the way to make words authoritative is to slow down and speak in a deeper, masculine voice—an association with gendered culture—and that leaning towards people brings them into more intimate, compliant contact—an association with Western civilization’s rules of interaction. No one taught me to perform those “techniques.” They are ways of life, *langue*, “the abstract system of knowledge that generates the actual performances” (Ben-Amos 1984:121). Ben-Amos did not necessarily mean “performance” in a Public sense; still, my expressive communication in Public relied on unexamined assumptions of shared cultural knowledge, upheld by listeners knowing instinctively what was wanted, and doing it.

### **2.2.2 Authenticity as a Problematic Term**

“Authenticity” has been heavily and increasingly debated in Folkloristics. Swiss-born folklorist Regina Bendix postulated, in her study of American and German folklore scholarship, that the term has lost the clearer meaning it had in the early days of the discipline:

Folklorists . . . for a long time located authenticity within the autonomy of entire social groups, or the “folk.” Lack of identifiable authorship, multiple existence over time and space, variation of the items, and the social and economic circumstances of the “bearers of tradition” served as

ways of testing folklore's authenticity. Once individual performers or makers of artefacts entered the discussion, the criterion of anonymity or nameless tradition began to unravel, and the problem of authenticity could have rendered itself obsolete. However, the vocabulary of authenticity that permeated disciplinary discourse escaped the paradigmatic changes. Original, genuine, natural, naive, noble and innocent, lovely, sensuous stilling—the string of adjectives could be continued. Folklorists since the eighteenth century have used them to circumscribe the longed-for quality that they saw encapsulated at first in folklore texts and later in folklore performance. (16)

If authenticity is associated with something original, genuine, and innocent, Bendix opined, the term becomes problematic. However, American folklorist Gregory Hansen felt that authenticity, for all its debatable meaning, was still a necessary term. Hansen argued not that authenticity and tradition are terms folklorists should not use, but that they should not believe in them too strongly:

In problematizing the idea of “authenticity,” deconstructionists are calling into question folklorists’ use of the term “tradition,” and ultimately making a bid by playing their hand in the definition game. While their queries are productive and useful for examining how people express themselves in the present, rather than how many folklorists may wish to believe that people learn and perform their folk expressions, accepting a fully blown deconstructed perspective of folklore carries with it some potentially negative consequences. (67)

Hansen cited consequences: every expression of culture could be labelled folklore; the conceptual distinction between commercial and folk music would be lost. He warned:

Accept the deconstructed view of folklore, and the idea that revivalist folk musicians and traditional folk musicians learned their arts within

qualitatively different contexts also evaporates. . . . Advocating for a deconstructed “folklore” has the clear potential to bolster the argument that the subject matter of folklore is less important than the folkloristic interpretation of the cultural expression. (68)

In other words, authenticity is a term folklorists require in order to distinguish what they study from the rest of life.

Perhaps for this reasons, authenticity has been a stumbling block for investigators scrutinizing storytelling. It is all too easy to identify within professional storytelling echoes of German folklorist Hermann Bausinger’s “folklorism,” or American folklorist Richard Dorson’s “fakelore,” or a commercialization of “authentic” tradition. Of folklorism, Bausinger wrote:

The concept of folklorism was introduced to folkloristic discussion primarily by Hans Moser. Never strictly defined, the concept indicates not so much clearly circumscribed attributes as a certain process: the process of a folk culture experienced at second hand. The concept addresses the widespread fact that folklore—in the widest sense, not limited to oral tradition—appears in contexts to which it originally did not belong. (126-127)

Dorson described fakelore as a “contrived, romantic picture of folklore” (1959:

4). In both cases, there is a sense that the “authentic” thing has been overtaken by either romanticism or people who just do not know any better. Using “fakelore” or “folklorism” to describe professional storytelling, however, requires a more careful scholarly examination than has been provided to date. McCarthy, Stone and Sobol were pioneers in examining storytelling as a professional phenomenon, and they carefully stayed within existing folkloristic parameters of studying repertoire and/or intentional communities.



Their work has resulted in emergent concepts to be dissected, probed and appreciated. Yet the perceptions of professional tellers, their thoughts regarding “authenticity,” their motivations, purposes and planning, have not been researched. In fact, the very use of authenticity in folklore studies is problematic, for the term can have multiple meanings. Seven pieces of authenticity emerge from a review of the literature dealing with this concept in folklore, anthropology, literary criticism, and philosophy. The choice of the term “pieces” is semantically symbolic. When Ben-Amos put together his seminal “Seven Strands of Tradition,” he presumably had in mind that a strand is, in and of itself, a separate thing, but when wrapped around each other, those individual strands become one integral entity, a rope that holds together and from which one can hang other concepts. “Seven Pieces of Authenticity” reflects that: 1) pieces may or may not form a cohesive whole, depending on whether one has all of them when one starts putting the puzzle together; 2) pieces may or may not relate to one another, depending on their position within the puzzle; and 3) pieces, when put together, may form small pictures within a larger one. Here, then, are seven possible pieces of authenticity:

#### ***2.2.2.1 Authenticity as the Opposite of “Fake”***

American folklorist Richard Dorson’s term for inauthenticity was “fakelore”:

America, the land of plenty, must indubitably own plenty of folklore. Now, in the era of their world eminence, Americans should proudly unfurl their folk heritage. Hence the popularity of largely manufactured “folk heroes” like Paul Bunyan, exuding 100 percent Americanism, of “folk singers” titillating urban audiences in Town Hall and the Broadway cabaret; of mammoth treasuries cramming together anecdotal slabs of local color, jocularity, sentiment, and nostalgia in the name of folklore; of

guided folk dance and folk art revivals; of what in short one critic has called the “cult of the folksy.” . . .

For this contrived, romantic picture of folklore I coined, in 1950, the term “fakelore.” Fakelore falsifies the raw data of folklore by invention, selection, fabrication, and similar refining processes, but for capitalistic gain rather than for totalitarian conquest. The end result is a conception of the folk as quaint, eccentric, whimsical, droll, primeval. (1959: 3-4)

Dorson had little patience with popularizers, whether they worked for artistic excellence or for lucrative reward. “Beware, too, of the defensive argument now used by ‘folklore’ writers to justify their tampering with sources: ‘We have the same right as the original storytellers to tell a folktale in our own way’” (4). Dorson, in short, saw using traditional materials outside one’s own culture as tampering, creating inauthenticities for a mass market rather than carrying the stories forward into new times and places.

One of the primary definitions Bendix found was authenticity as antithetical to “inauthentic,” or fake:

Once we have overcome the dichotomy within our disciplinary thinking, “authenticity versus inauthenticity” can become an object of study itself. We can study the negotiation of authenticity once we have ceased to be a negotiating party, or once we admit to our participation in the negotiating process. This stance allows us to examine the meanings and the history of “authenticity” from a distance both within and beyond disciplinary discourse. (23)

American folklorist Lee Haring writes: “The questions, ‘What is authentic folklore?’ and ‘How can I distinguish it from the inauthentic, the commercialized, or the fabricated?’ grow out of dichotomies like *fictional* vs. *factual* writing . . .” (1995:187).

Authenticity as oppositional to fake is one of the most common uses of the word, both in folkloristics and in everyday usage. Richard Handler and Eric Gable suggested that the association with fakeness so prevalent in definitions of authenticity may stem from societal anxiety:

An enduring image of modernist anxiety is that the world we inhabit is no longer authentic—that it has become fake, plastic, a kitschy imitation. Anxiety, so the common wisdom has it, goes hand in hand with desire. We may have lost authenticity, but we want to find it again, and will pay what it costs (within reason) to get it. This image of “authenticity lost” has also been at the center of much “countermmodern” cultural critique, and it has given anthropology a kind of romantic aura—a longing for a lost authenticity. Thus it often seems that the scholarly study of late modern or postmodern culture is a study of a reverse alchemy. What was once golden is now plastic. (1996: 568)

American ethnographer Edward Bruner also associates “authentic” with “true or “genuine,” noting that museum personnel at historic recreation sites use “authentic” in two ways: to indicate that what they are creating resembles the time period they wish to represent; and to declare that what they create “is a complete and immaculate simulation, one that is historically accurate . . .” (399). In these uses, authenticity is also synonymous with “credible and convincing,” “achiev[ing] mimetic credibility” (399). The first meaning is “based on verisimilitude” and the second, lesser-used meaning is “based on genuineness” (399). And American folksong scholar Steve Winick had perhaps the most sweeping association of authenticity with fakeness. Paraphrasing Canadian folksong scholar Sheldon Posen, Winick wrote, “Nothing, in other words, is ‘inauthentic’ except perhaps the most flagrant dishonesty” (Winick 286, based on Posen 1993:135).

Still, if it is a prevalent idea, it also contains some subtle distinctions. German-born art psychologist Rudolf Arnheim found that art often held “two authenticities,” contradicting one another. Photographs (and other works of art) “are authentic to the extent that they do justice to the facts of reality, and they are authentic in quite another sense by expressing the qualities of human experience by any means suitable to that purpose” (537). In other words, art can reflect life in an artistic way (what Bruner might have called “genuineness”) or art may give accurate information about life—a strictly factual approach. The distinction between artistic and factual renderings of reality could be said to divide between “true” and “truth.” The confusion that can result from not distinguishing which is the case is evident in an amusing anecdote from American Matt Herman, an English instructor at Stone Child College in Montana. Reading the blurb on the cover of N. Scott Momaday’s novel House Made of Dawn, which described the book as “almost unbearably authentic,” one of his students responded, “Well, I don’t know so much about what unbearably authentic means, but I do know that it says ‘fiction’ right up here in the left-hand corner” (125). This student equated “authenticity” with “true.” The blurb meant “authentic” in terms of truth, that is, an accurate depiction of Native life experience.

#### ***2.2.2.2 Authenticity as Representation of the Human Experience***

The above story, while funny, also touches on what German art and psychology theorist Rudolf Arnheim noted: the contradictory nature of authentic art as being emotionally honest and an accurate depiction of the spirit of a thing. Finding that authenticity involved a depiction of life as people (specifically, the artist) experienced it,

he termed such depictions “representational.” Arnheim theorizes that representation involved not just factual accuracy, as mentioned above, but artistic organization in order to create a realistic yet recognizable portrayal of the human experience:

To the extent that the arts were representational, they aspired to a faithful rendering of the facts of reality; but in order to make their images comprehensible to the human mind they had to select and shape and organize the material taken from reality—they had to find and impose form. By doing so, they had to partially reshape the facts of nature perceived by the eyes. . . . [T]he fancies and liberties of the human imagination are anything but authentic when taken as documents of physical reality. (573)

Arnheim could have been speaking of the British ballad scholar A.L. Lloyd when he wrote those words. American folklorist Steve Winick investigated Lloyd’s use of his own aesthetic and experience to bring “emotional authenticity” to the text of the ballad Reynardine. He found that “. . . Lloyd believed that authorial mediation was necessary to preserve the essence of the ballad. In this sense, his authorial interventions served, in his own mind, to create an emotionally authentic text” (301). Lloyd “locates the song’s authenticity in its aesthetic and emotional content” (302). In assessing why Lloyd found emotional authenticity so important, Winick writes

Leslie Shepard beautifully summed up Lloyd’s personality as ‘a romantic at odds with a scholar’ (Shepard<sup>8</sup>] 1986, 132), and it is precisely in their respective conceptions of authenticity that these two facets of Lloyd’s personality were at variance. (296)

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<sup>8</sup> In the article, Shepard’s name is misspelled in this citation. It has been corrected here.

By finding emotional authenticity a paramount concern, Lloyd left a legacy that might otherwise not exist:

Furthermore, Lloyd's search for internal authenticity had secondary effects. Not only was the emotional power of the song he created appealing, the specific trait of ambiguity, which Lloyd emphasised, has enabled "Reynardine" to fit the repertoires and ideologies of many singers and listeners. People are able to interpret the song in their own way, which is crucial to their appreciation of it. (Winick 303)

Lloyd's emotional honesty compelled him to work artistically on the ballad, and thus make it approachable for those whose life experiences followed Lloyd's interpretation.

American art historian Henry Sayre found a similar approach in the writer Spalding Gray's life work. Sayre stipulated that "the final authenticity of Spalding Gray" is that he told fictionalized stories to tell his true-life story. This is authenticity as emotionally-perceived human experience, rather than a factual portrayal of events (269).

American Ray Allen is Associate Professor of Music at Brooklyn College. He explored whether the composer George Gershwin could authentically depict the emotional authenticity of the Black experience when he wrote Porgy and Bess: "By equating authenticity with racial inheritance and portraying their characters as exotic others, they kept black culture at a safe distance from their white audiences" (253-254). Yet American and English professor Rosemary Hathaway pointed out in a Journal of American Folklore article that Zora Neale Hurston took almost a "catch on if you can" approach, specifically to make the vicarious experience of another culture that much more powerful:

If Hurston had wielded her anthropological authority more overtly, such an accusation [of indulging in racial stereotypes] would perhaps be substantiated. But her deliberate refusal to play the role of ethnographic interpreter in chapter 6 allows her to present her folkloric materials not as “exotic” eccentricity, but as part of the day-to-day functioning of this community—so routine as to not require explanation by the authoritative, omniscient narrative voice. (Hathaway 177)

Hurston’s books are read and re-read by successive American generations of all ethnicities. Gershwin wrote a musical that keeps people going back to see it, right up to the present day. The authenticity of their work cannot be debated strictly along cultural representation lines, or as context-specific. They have transcended contexts and time with authenticity as emotional honesty, authenticity as convincing art—what is called in this dissertation artistic authority. Thus art that is emotionally honest, or sincere, is authentic in this piece of the puzzle.

American literary critic Lionel Trilling’s analysis of the title terms in his work Sincerity and Authenticity suggested that sincerity was an emergent concept of the modern world, which was eventually replaced by authenticity (31). American anthropologist Richard Handler cited Trilling when he built his own case for authenticity as, among other things, “a cultural construct closely tied to Western notions of the individual” (2). Individualism, Handler argued, “allows people to locate ultimate reality within themselves” (3). In other words, emotional honesty, or sincerity, is individualistic, yet seeks to touch a responsive place in a wide human audience, as Gershwin and Hurston did. Authentic can, in this sense, be associated with excellent art, art with which people identify, art that offers glimpses into human experience that spark recognition

from its audience. This is an emerging concept in anthropology that may have a great deal to offer future discussions of authenticity.

### ***2.2.2.3 Authenticity as Stemming from a Source***

If authenticity is connected with genuineness, that sense of being genuine may stem from association with a particular and culturally-specific source. Handler's analysis and placement of the individual within the construct of authenticity includes the idea that to be authentic is to be connected to origins:

In the ideology of possessive individualism, the existence of a national collectivity depends upon the possession of an authentic culture; as people told me in Quebec, where I learned about nationalist ideology, "we are a nation because we have a culture" (Handler 1985b). And an authentic culture is one original to its possessors. . . . (4)

It is also a popular idea that authentic items are attached to a source. In examining this word, I began to look for places where "authentic" was used. Some of my favorites included: on an advertisement selling pizza at a Florida music festival (the owner said he put the word on the banner because the recipe he used was Italian); in the flyleaf of a 1928 cowboy novel, where the author was called "authentic" because he had worked as a cowhand in Wyoming; at a museum committee meeting in Virginia, by a person trying to decide if an American lecturer were "authentic enough" to be asked to give a lecture on Ireland. Each of these instances were unexamined moments in people's lives that passed unselfconsciously, and each presupposed that authenticity was connected to the individual's connection to a source of ethnographic knowledge. The pizza was authentic because the recipe was from the country viewed as the originator of pizza.



In folklore studies, source material passed down over time is a possible indication of authenticity. Canadian historian Ian McKay said:

That which is unchanging, the true, solid, and possibly even providential core of a culture and society, resides within the Folk. . . . Identifying the true with the constant meant that discussion of the Folk and their lore stressed, with an uncanny consistency, such essentialist questions as those of *origin* and *authenticity* (authenticity being construed in the most rigid possible way: a version of a song was “authentic” only if it consistently reproduced the characteristics of the piece in its ‘original’ form.) (14)

American philosopher Charles Taylor associated authenticity with a moral sense of right and wrong, and as in touch with a source (26), possibly God, possibly family or community. German theorist and social critic Walter Benjamin suggested that “the presence of the original is the prerequisite to the concept of authenticity” (220). Glassie in Pattern in the Material Folk Culture of the Eastern United States (1968) and Jones in Craftsman of the Cumberlands (1989) felt that the methodology of making was critical to defining folk culture (that is, authenticity). What was associated with a community way of learning, even when innovated upon by an individual, was rooted in folk culture (see, for example, Glassie 1968: 4). As American ethnographer Steven Snow said, “Authenticity is located not in the artifacts per se or in the models on which they are based, but in the *methods* by which they were made—in the way of doing, which is a way of knowing, in a performance” (xv).

For Bendix, authenticity in the sense of a pure connection with a rural source is a concept from the European Romantic period:

The call for “authenticity” implied a critical stance against urban manners, artifice in language, behaviour, and art, and against aristocratic excesses; . . . Such nostalgic visions were clearly fuelled by explorers’ reports of encounters with “exotic” and “savage” peoples whose existence an enlightened age sought to link to itself. Following the logic of their own philosophy, Rousseau, Herder, and their contemporaries assigned such purity and authenticity to the rural and pastoral way of life in their own countries. (16)

Bendix felt that as folklore vied for respect in Academe, the need to prove that folklore studies were a scientific method of inquiry equal to other academic pursuits formulated the idea of authenticity, and the place of folklorists as authorities on the subject. Folklorists did not create the concept of authenticity, were reacting to or acting upon the Romantic Era idea of the term (16).

#### ***2.2.2.4 Authenticity as an Etic Concern***

Bendix and Hansen both touched on the idea that authenticity could be considered a construct of particular importance to folklorists and anthropologists, but not necessarily to other disciplines or general consumers of popular or folk culture. Hansen suggested that, “‘authentic tradition’ reflects more the exercise of scholarly authority than the recognition of things as they are within quotidian social orders” (67). Like “tradition,” “authenticity” sets apart a distinct group that operates in a certain way. Who sets the boundaries of the group so defined and where those boundaries are set may be decided by the people themselves in what they choose to display. American folklorist Susan Auerbach described several such negotiations between ethnic groups and festival organizers in Los Angeles in her article “The Brokering of Ethnic Folklore: Issues of

Selection and Presentation at a Multicultural Festival.” The decisions were not made solely by the ethnographers directing the festival because it was important for the groups to display themselves as they saw themselves both within the context of their communities and of being in America (*passim*). The artists were partners in deciding what was authentic and appropriate to present.

In his article “Is it Authentic, Is it Real, Does it Matter? The Lesson from Professional Wrestling and Buildings.” Canadian Folklorist Gerald Pocius suggests the fake and the real exist simultaneously, and people finally pay little attention to whether they are witnessing something that is genuine or spurious. The two exist simultaneously, and often judgements about a cultural expression come from how well the two blend together. (344) Pocius finds it is only social scientists who have an interest in genuine versus fake, and that this is because “There are inherent differences in how we formulate our questions when we investigate what we consider fake versus what we consider authentic” (Pocius 345).

Bendix examined two hundred years of American and Germanic folklore scholarship to conclude that “[A]cknowledging the constructed and deceptive nature of authenticity leads to cultural scholarship committed to life on a planet characterized by inescapable transculturation” (228). After American folklore studies shifted definitions in the 1970s and 1980s to embrace “artistic communication in small groups” (Ben-Amos 1971:13), reflexivity emerged and began to call into question the politics of the discipline within academic and cultural environments. The resulting shuffle of paradigms and

motivations problematized authenticity as an unexamined term within folkloristics.

Bendix welcomes a deconstruction of authenticity:

[T]he canons of the cultural disciplines, such as literary and language studies, music, art history, and ethnology, thus originated with a strong commitment to understand, restore and maintain the genuine.

During the past few decades, however, these same fields have increasingly realized the problems inherent in their ideals. (4)

A desire to maintain the genuine on the part of academics does not necessarily echo the perceptions of those within the cultural group producing the performance or artefact academics seek to analyze, as Auerbach expressed. Bendix questions why academics and popular culture alike are so taken with the concept of authenticity:

Rather than giving in to the temptation of constructing new, elusive authenticities, cultural scholarship aware of the deceptive nature of authenticity concepts may turn its attention toward learning to tell the story of why humans search for authenticity and why this search is fraught with such agony. (227-228)

Bendix has suggested that authenticity is a relatively modern construct, produced by universities and those who study cultures. Taylor found rather an older idea: “The ethic of authenticity is something relatively new and peculiar to modern culture. . . . It is a child of the Romantic period, which was critical of disengaged rationality and of an atomism that didn’t recognize the ties of community” (Taylor 25). Haring, without suggesting a sense of time, has similar thoughts:

Movement of cultural products from one setting to another, or from one audience to another, has become such a commonplace in our time that the notions of setting and audience lose their stability. Even less stable is the

notion of authenticity, which motivates much of the interest in folklore.”  
(1995: 187)

Yet, for all that authenticity may be ignored as a concept of academic authority or importance generally, Gable and Handler find that it remains remarkably intact as a concept in popular use:

[W]hen the public are both openly sceptical about the capacity of the powers that be . . . to make definitive judgments about authenticity and also openly sceptical about authenticity itself as a foundational value . . . the vernacular concept of authenticity changes very little [and] shows a remarkable resilience, in a sense, because it is under threat. (1996: 569)

Although people may dismiss the authority of folklorists or museum curators to define authenticity, those people still retain a definition of authenticity in their own minds as something that should be considered distinct from “everything else.”

Those in authority as ethnographers would not necessarily be qualified to determine what is authentic without assistance from those who live in the communities and practice their arts. According to McKay:

This perception of Folk culture as a sort of delicate Elizabethan filigree, so fragile that it needed to be vacuum-sealed and guarded in a dark cabinet, left Creighton and other folklore experts in an odd position. Although middle-class and urban in their own backgrounds, and often lacking extensive knowledge of the communities they visited, they nonetheless functioned as arbitrators of authenticity, and wielded more authority on such matters than the working-class people who sang the songs and espoused the folk beliefs. (107)

Folklorists may wish to arbitrate what is authentic and what is not for their own purposes, as Hansen discussed, but they may not be accepted as the final authority by the folk

themselves, or by the paying public viewing folk arts. This leads to a quagmire that this dissertation circles: would the public recognize authenticity and can they be trusted to uphold, honor and pay for the privilege of seeing it, or does the public want easily recognizable common-denominator art. This is a philosophical question surfacing repeatedly in this study, and it pertains to the next piece of authenticity.

#### ***2.2.2.5 Authenticity as Context-Specific***

So much of authenticity rests within a negotiation between practitioner and observer, as McKay pointed out, that authenticity can be very context-specific. A performance that is inauthentic in one location (say, for example, a gentile telling *Midrash* narratives in a *yeshiva*) may be authentic in another (perhaps the same gentile telling those stories at a conference on world religions). Posen, writing in Transforming Tradition, states that authenticity is renegotiated with each context where rules are laid out for behavior and performance:

“[A]uthenticity” is relative, and the singing of a Newfoundlander in his kitchen to his neighbors, with all the norms, rules, and values operating in that situation, is relatively the same as the performer on a coffeehouse or festival stage to his audience, with all the norms, rules, and values operating in *that* situation. In other words, each takes place within a valid context which has to be taken on its own terms. . . . Each context gives its own meaning to the behavior occurring within it, even if the behaviors are “the same.” (135-136)

In some instances, context may help to set up a narrator as an expert simply because the listeners are unfamiliar with the culture, and will assume the storyteller is an expert. Such assumptions resemble the “touristic reading” Hathaway defined as

the fallacious practice whereby a reader assumes, when presented with a text where the writer and the group represented in the text are ethnically different from herself, that the text is necessarily an accurate, authentic, and authorized representation of that “Other” cultural group. . . . [Tourist reading can have] positive and tangible benefits: an awakened interest in cultures other than the reader’s own may lead individuals to think more critically about these other cultures, about their own culture contexts(s), and about the ways they react to and interact with different cultural contexts. (169)

If the reader, unguided, is left to decide for himself whether the writer is a cultural expert, the reader may not be “qualified” to make such a judgment, and may assign an expertise that does not exist. Such touristic reading depends on authenticity is a rejected concept of academic authority, one which people prefer to assign for themselves rather than accept as someone else’s judgment. As Hathaway defines it, touristic reading also answers the question of whether audiences can be left to judge authenticity for themselves with a firm “no.” The artistry of the presenter may outweigh whether that presenter has any connection to a legitimate source, unless one considers careful research leading to expertise as a legitimate connection.

#### ***2.2.2.6 Authenticity as Representation (with a Goal of Exact Duplication)***

Careful research is critical when the artist’s goal is exact duplication. Accurate representation with the unattainable goal of exact duplication may be the ultimate goal of authenticity in some uses. Discussing how museum curators and ethnographers working with historical properties think of authenticity, Gable and Handler referred to “the dream of authenticity as perfect copy” (1996: 576).

Others took a more general view of what “representation” might mean. Allen tackled whether Gershwin, who “took an authenticating journey to Folly Island” (250), could realistically hope to portray black experiences as part of the American experience. Here he examines a critic who said Gershwin could not:

But Hall Johnson’s challenge to Gershwin’s claim of folk authenticity brought into question the validity of such a black-white collaboration in the name of national art. Rather than seeing his people’s traditions as the distilled essence of a national ethos, Johnson argued that black folk tradition sprang from the soul of black folks and thus could be interpreted and fully appreciated only by African Americans who had “sowed the seed” and who knew “the secret at the root” (1936: 28). Johnson’s call for a cultural base for authentic folk expression posed serious problems for white composers. . . . (255-256)

From the stance that representation does not mean *artistic interpretation* of life experience, but an *exact copy* of that experience, it becomes problematic for those outside that realm of experience—for example, white men writing about black people—to retain any sense of authenticity. They have no authority to depict something they cannot lay claim to by virtue of inheritance, for studying the experience will not be enough to accurately represent it.

#### **2.2.2.7 Authenticity as Authority**

Allen’s quotation puts Johnson, as a person of African heritage, in the position of being qualified to adjudicate whether Gershwin, as a person of European heritage, could legitimately discuss producing an authentic folk opera based on Black experiences. It also suggests that Gershwin could neither adjudicate nor, in fact, produce, such a piece of art.



There is, this statement implies, a power to authenticity, and therefore a desire for it amongst the general public. An authority exists in being an identified member of an ethnicity, an authority that transcends scholarly or artistic research. Authority is intrinsically bound up with authenticity.

In her article “We are Bound to Tradition yet Part of that Tradition is Change: The Development of the Jewish Prayerbook,” American folklorist Ilana Harlow tackles the idea of authenticity as intertwined with authority. Arguing that the realm of the inauthentic included only the coerced, Harlow said:

Conceptions of authenticity of tradition are affected by notions of authority. People value traditions that are validated by an authority whom they accept. Some scholars (Hobsbawm and Ranger 1983, and Handler and Linnekin 1984, for example) challenge the authority of some traditions, contending that they were invented and calculatingly introduced into communities by powerful, manipulative, outside forces for political purposes. But authority should not be portrayed solely as an evil, dominant force which imposes itself upon unwilling subjects. People often seek out authority. . . .

People also reject recognized authority when its edicts do not correspond, at any level, with their own sense of what is good or proper. . .

An authority is an authority by virtue of the fact that people choose to follow it. Ideas and customs formulated by individual members of a group become traditional because at some level they are appealing to the group.  
(35-36)

#### ***2.2.2.8 Identity Authority and Artistic Authority as Indicators of Authenticity***

Two terms are useful here in discussing the aforementioned pieces of authenticity: artistic authority and identity authority. Returning to the world of professional

storytelling, I will define these terms, then draw examples and pose theoretical arguments within the confines of this community. In simple terms, artistic authority is the ability to present a story in a way that is compelling and enticing to listen to. It could also be called “talent,” or “artistic ability.” Artistic authority means the person is a good storyteller, one to whom people choose to listen.

“Identity authority” means that the storyteller appears to be from the culture about which he tells. He has the outward appearance and the inner confidence to present himself as a member of this cultural group—be that an ethnicity, occupation, leisure activity, or any other delineation of culture. A teller with identity authority can correctly use gestures, historic references, or abstract values, in the same way that she can say her own name: for instance, that a high compliment for an Irish farmer is to say his potatoes are like flour (Weir’s Sperrin Mountain Storytelling Festival performance); or that an Eritrean man showing subservience crosses his arms and looks directly at the speaker (myself, learned by experience telling stories with young men from Eritrea); or that stroke victims have swimming therapy twice a week under England’s National Health Service (Thomas int. 10 July 1997). A person who is not from a particular culture may study that culture enough to absorb the information needed to have identity authority. However, if that teller looks different than the other members of that cultural group, identity authority will be limited, for it is largely bestowed by listeners. If one has identity authority one sounds to the audience as though one belongs. Appearances, of course, may state otherwise. And the truth may be otherwise: keeping in mind Hathaway’s touristic reading concept, audiences may not always recognize whether a

teller legitimately knows what he or she is talking about. Confidence and artistry can cover a multitude of ethnographic errors. Of course, most storytellers would not put themselves in a position of telling a story not from their own background to a group of people who would know that background better than them. American storyteller and minister Linda Bandelier lives in Scotland. For the first few years she lived there, all she told were cowboy stories based in her native Montana, even though she knew many Scottish stories. (She was married at that time to a highly-regarded Scottish storyteller.) As she put it, “That’s all I was allowed to tell” (conversation). “Allowed” refers to Bandelier’s own wish for regard as a good storyteller; she knew that if she told a Scottish story and messed up any details, her audience would know better than she.

Doc McConnell described the intertwining of artistic talent and identity eloquently in his suggestion as to why some tellers might not be happy to have others exploring their community's stories:

We do have some storytellers who by their very nature can more help an audience to imagine a character by their speech, body language [waves hand] etc. They tell the story better because it’s become about them, but someone else tries to tell it without that and so it doesn’t work so well.

And I’ll tell you, another prime example is Frank Proffitt Jr., and Ray Hicks, that family, and some others telling Appalachian stories—you take someone who just comes into the area, and turns out to be a super storyteller—it’s kinda like some musicians resent people from New Jersey or somewhere, who play our bluegrass music better than we do. (int. 16 July 1999)

McConnell, himself an Appalachian, felt that the ability to tell a Jack tale or Appalachian story well had less to do with the teller's upbringing than his talent and skill

level. A storyteller without the identity authority of being Appalachian could nevertheless have the artistic authority to tell the story in a compelling way because, as McConnell said, the story had “become about them” (16 July 1999). They would also have sense enough to either research the details, or omit many of them. It is important to note that McConnell is not stipulating that the teller learned enough about Appalachian culture to present it well; rather, he is saying that the teller bypassed cultural detailing by using his artistic authority. Mary Medlicott, an international teller living in London, felt that the talent to present a story in a way that made people want to listen was more important than identity authority. Medlicott refused to allow her Welsh background to become part of her identity as a storyteller, yet recognized identity as a powerful tool for storytellers. She suggested that identity and artistry intertwine when creating the goal of every storyteller, telling a story worth hearing:

I kind of unstereotyped myself years ago, but then if I’m telling Welsh stories I do sound very Welsh, but I didn’t want to be seen as that, because I wanted to be seen as a storyteller of the world. In Brixton [the part of London where Medlicott lives] within fifteen blocks, ninety-six different languages have been recorded. People from all over the world come here and tell me their stories, and I want to tell them. It’s a good process of discovering what works, and not disregarding the power of the ethnic. (int. 10 June 1998)

Her casual use of the phrase “the power of the ethnic” displayed a great awareness of how identity affects professional storytellers. Medlicott implied two things: that a background in the culture that produced a story can invest the storyteller with a commanding authority when telling it; and that the artistic ability of a storyteller who is

not from the same culture as the story may let the story portray that tale in a compelling, enticing way that will make people want to listen to it. “I have to say, I think that [artistic ability] is stronger; imagination and talent can landscape a story [of which the storyteller has no direct knowledge]” (10 June 1998). What Medlicott referred to as “the power of the ethnic” is expanded here to encompass additional ideas of culture besides ethnicity, and call “identity authority.” Artistic and identity authority surfaced repeatedly in discussions, fieldwork and literature regarding authenticity.

#### ***2.2.2.9 Audiences and/or Hiring Agents as Authenticators***

The idea that artistry may trump identity is one of significant debate in folklore circles. The question is not so much can artistry make an audience believe they are hearing the “real thing” as what harm will be done if that happens. Harlow’s research among urban Jews in New York presents an interesting facet of this debate. She has suggested that a group can recognize for itself that which appeals and does not appeal to it in defining itself. Authority, in her example, is held within and bestowed by the group itself regarding information about itself.

This self-definition, however, is not quite the same thing as an audience listening to a story from a place about which they know little or nothing, and adjudicating whether the teller is authentic. In museum settings, the diverse audiences which view historical artefacts and heritage properties might not have such discernment. Gable and Handler postulate that heritage museums are “arbiters of a marketable authenticity” (1996: 568). Association with authentic items gives other items authenticity, said Canadian anthropologist Wayne Fife: “Semantic slippage is a process by which an original artifact

or sign justifies the authenticity of a ‘similar’ reproduction” (63). “Proximity, both physical and verbal (or literal and metaphorical), seems to be one of the keys to creating the illusions of authenticity” (78). The Williamsburg Colonial heritage site decided not to sell replicas of anything that was not displayed at Williamsburg for this very reason (Gable and Handler 1997: 35).

Whether the general public gathered as an audience or as consumers of cultural tourism can recognize that which should be valuable to it, is a concept debated in the literature. The Los Angeles Festival of the Arts is one example. Its director, Peter Sellars, decided that his presentation of “folk artists” would not be interpreted, and that even setting these artists in the marked category of “folk” was inappropriate:

One of the aims of the Festival was to remove forever the concept of ethnomusicology and ethnic studies, which at its core is offensive, and to move to another level where we didn’t have to have special parentheses around things. These were not “primitive” artists or “folk” artists. These were *artists*. (Sellars 1991: 13)

Examining this festival, American folklorist Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett suggested that this attempt to do away with categories may have reinforced them, or at least the idea of an authentic connection to the past: “This plain style of presentation—the very absence of the theatricality we associate with folkloric troupes—is an ‘ethnographic’ way of marketing the authenticity of what appears on the stage” (1995: 232). The festival included five hundred artists from “21 Pacific Rim countries and various parts of the United States, and 900 of them based in Southern California . . .” (224). They included “the Woomera Mornington Island Culture Team (aborigines from Queensland,

Australia), performers from the Polynesian islands of Wallis and Fatuna, and Japanese American *taiko* drummers” (225). These artists were not translated for the audience, resulting in a “mismatch of performance and audience” (Kirshenblatt-Gimblett 243). This mismatch was what the organizers wanted. “The organizers of the Los Angeles Festival ‘quoted’ from Japanese or Hawaiian culture, but in theory, if not in practice, withheld ‘translation’ for the many Los Angeles audiences who were not speakers of those ‘languages’” (243). The festival took this approach because

Ethnographic expertise was just not up to the task, for all it could do, from the Festival organizers’ perspective, was to come between audience and performer with “information” that, even at best, offered little chance of conveying all that audiences back home could be expected to know. . . . A few factoids delivered by experts cannot close the gap. Nor should “information” create the illusion of instant communication. If, as Sellars suggested, “People in those societies don’t sit around explaining everything” . . . then his audiences should simply deal with the performances themselves—who is to say that everyone back home understands what these performances are doing? Or that everyone can or should have access to everything? There is in these remarks a convergence between practical limitations on what audiences can be expected to know or learn and avant-garde principles of reception that, at least theoretically, required no preparation or expert foreknowledge and may even benefit from their absence. (243-244)

Kirshenblatt-Gimblett suggests that the organizers refused to apply expert knowledge to assisting an audience toward a “correct” understanding of what they viewed. In the realm of museums rather than festivals, Gable and Handler said, “They [those in power] need the authority of authenticity to legitimate their power” (1996: 568).

In this Los Angeles festival example, the ethnographers gave up that power, not so much surrendering it to the audience as abolishing altogether the need for ethnographic contextualization as a precursor to enjoyment or even enlightenment.

#### ***2.2.2.10 The Pluto Parable as a Discussion of Storytellers' Thoughts on Authenticity***

Let me turn now from folklorists to professional storytellers, and examine how they view the concept of authenticity. The ideas of coming from a source and of representing the human experience are intrinsically bound up with one another and the concept of authenticity as storytellers may apply the term. A storyteller is working in a market setting, and thus wants to please a hiring agent (and by proxy, the audience). Therefore what pieces of authenticity he values most will be the pieces the hiring agent values. It may seem that an assumption has been made here, but most hiring agents do tend to value one or more pieces of authenticity. This statement is upheld by research conducted on Storytell.

Knowing that issues of authenticity in the minds of tellers often have to do with cultural representation, it seemed wise to avoid using any specific ethnicity or situation in asking for input on so public a form. Accordingly the question designed to investigate this concept set the inquiry in a whimsical realm of fantasy:

Suppose a teller from planet Pluto moves to Earth. She's the only Plutonian for 200 miles in her area. On Earth, she is hired a lot, because Plutonian stories are really a hot topic. There's been a lot of interest in Pluto recently.

So this teller from Pluto is plying her trade (let's call her Amy), clicking



along nicely. Then one day Amy finds that she is double-billed with another teller, also telling Pluto stories. But this teller is from Earth. And the Earth teller, frankly, is brilliant. She gets the cultural details wrong--she has no idea, for instance, that Plutonian mountains don't have trees on them--but she is magic to listen to. Her stories make the listeners, even Amy, laugh and cry. She's lovely.

She's also respectful. She tells the audience before she starts that, although she is Earthen, she loves and respects Plutonian culture, and she never tells Plutonian sacred stories--although Amy heard her tell half of one, with a different beginning. Amy herself will admit that she's not as good a teller as the Earth lady.

What do you think? Do the people hiring tellers have any responsibilities in this situation? Does what they are hiring the teller for make a difference in which teller they should hire? Should cultural authenticity be rated higher by someone hiring storytellers than artistic brilliance? Vice versa? Finally, what, if anything, should Amy do? Offer the other teller cultural detailing? Tell the other teller off? Exchange email addresses?

Yes, it's a silly little parallel universe, but just indulge me for a minute and tell me what you think. . . please?

Thankee kindly, Wendy "analyzing is fun" Welch (Sp 17 Apr 2005)

Responses from tellers included a strong link between connection with a source and representation of human experience, but added authenticity as unnecessary and authenticity as context-specific. In some instances tellers seemed put authenticity in opposition to artistry: a teller could be authentic, or she could be artistically brilliant. Sometimes she could be both, but if she could only be one, context dictated which was the more important. Three tellers pointed out that authenticity was a relative term, not only in context, but simply in trying to specifically define it. These tellers felt that trying

to decide who was “authentic” might be a waste of time and a diversion from assessing the actual quality of the storytelling. Storyteller and educator Mary Black said:

- \* It might be possible the Earth teller might love "THE 'Plutonian culture'" she has grown to know regardless of what it actually might be.
- \* The Plutonian teller might only be telling stories based on a certain region of Pluto (with her own bias). And perhaps the Earth teller has, without knowing it struck a certain historic chord (or truth) that the Plutonian teller rejects or is unaware of. - Mary (Sp 18 Apr 2005)

Regional storyteller and former librarian Marilyn Kinsella agreed:

After Ms Pluto leaves planet Earth, she may want to tell fellow Plutonians about the wonderful stories she heard whilst on her tour of the universe. Is it okay for her to do that considering that she really never had a chance to experience first hand every nook and valley of the fair green planet? Can she relate the stories of Jesus, Buddha, or Sky God without having studied the religions? Marilyn [Kinsella] (Sp 17 Apr 2005)

Kinsella suggested divergent views might come from the religious beliefs of Plutonians. Regional storyteller Maggie MacRaven suggested that divergent views might be more related to history. Yet both tellers believed such diversity would be a part of discussing the right of any teller to be considered culturally qualified to tell stories from Pluto:

[T]hose from Pluto may have very diverse and sundry “truths” and ideas about Plutonian Culture---for instance, there could be an ancient and ongoing war between North and South Pluto (or East and West). . .

Perhaps, Pluto was invaded and colonized--the inhabitants would probably have quite a different view of life on Pluto--pre-and post-colonization--dependent upon whether they were the oppressed or the oppressor. . . . I wonder if there is one “true” story on any planet, country,

state, city, street. Lots of stuff to think about.

Maggie MacRaven (who never believed the wolf ate Red Riding Hood's grandmother--though many did and the wolf has been vilified all because of that fictional tale. We never heard the wolf's version). (Sp 17 Apr 2005)

One concern arose from reading the tellers' posts. They were considering the emergent and many-voiced nature of folklore to be a hindrance to what could be considered authentic. Folklorists deal differently with this issue. Toelken's twin laws of dynamism and conservatism have already been discussed. Storytellers in all the countries examined here tended to display a conservative nature regarding their understanding of folktales. They see the stories as changing because they change them to make good art, but perhaps do not see them as changing because the communities which created them have changed.

Still, the tellers cited suggest that authenticity as they see it may be an elusive, even unreal, quality not attainable in most circumstances. Other tellers suggested that authenticity might be very important to define in certain contexts, and that those contexts were largely determined by the hiring agent. Storyteller and educator/librarian Faye Hansen suggested that trying to delineate between "cultural authenticity" and artistry has its own pitfalls:

You're in the unique position of a festival producer and in some respects I think that puts you in a different position than that of being another teller, regardless of where you hail from. The heart of the matter is how the teller is billed. If you have billed the teller as telling authentic stories from a particular cultural tradition, then the cultural authenticity is important. (Recall the challenges of dealing with culturally

authentic tellers that Lee and Joy (and we who managed stages) faced at Corn Island.) If cultural authenticity is the goal then you must be willing to sacrifice some of the polish of a seasoned platform teller -- understanding that platform telling is alien to most cultural traditions. And you must cultivate a higher degree of tolerance among audience members who may be more accustomed to platform tellers performing and not patient with foreign dialect and /or non-western story structures (Stephen Humbi from Papua New Guinea and Johnny Brotherton from Fiji come to mind). On the other hand, if accessible entertainment and audience building is the goal, you will focus less on exact cultural authenticity and aim more for cultural appreciation and celebration, as in the example of your Earthling teller. As a producer, one seeks to produce a successful and satisfying overall event.

Now as a teller, if I were scheduled to perform with someone from a particular cultural tradition, I would probably not choose to tell stories from that tradition, no matter how much I loved them or how well I told them. Seems like bad form. My two cents. Faye [Hansen] (Sp 17 Apr 2005)

Hansen points out that not every “authentic” cultural representative is enticing enough to be enjoyed in festival settings, and may suffer a concomitant lack of listener appreciation. Other responses to my Earth/Pluto question displayed recognition of several contexts in which being from the same culture as the story one told was a desirable trait—and considered as reflecting authenticity. A neophyte storyteller and college instructor from North Carolina felt that context dictated how much identity authority should be considered as more important than artistic authority:

If I were the Earthen teller in that situation (and I probably would be—I’m very interested in Asian cultures, and a lot of the stories that I’ve learned

come from East Asia) then I would be both tremendously embarrassed at getting things wrong, and glad to be corrected. Privately. After I'd had time to get over my embarrassment. Exchanging e-mail addresses might be the best thing.

Then, if Amy can correct the other teller's cultural details, the other teller will be able to tell stories that make people laugh and cry, AND get the cultural details right. And that (it seems to me) would be ideal.

However, if someone is doing stories for Plutonian Heritage Month, or the like, then I think it behooves one to double-check the credentials of someone who's telling stories. If they're not Plutonian, do they speak Plutonian, or have they visited Pluto, or have they engaged in long, deep study of Pluto?

My last thought is that, although cultural authenticity is important, there are different kinds of cultural authenticity. I'll get annoyed at people who get the little details wrong, but it's nothing more than an annoyance until the basic messages of the story, and the impression that comes across of Plutonians as a people, get distorted. I've seen that happen, but I don't think the presence or absence of trees on mountaintops is going to do that.

(Name withheld Sp 17 Apr 2005)

This question suggests that "accuracy" is less attention to specific detail than adherence to the overall accurate presentation of the culture a story introduces, but does not indicate who makes the assessment of overall accuracy: the teller, the listeners, the hiring agent, and/or members of that cultural group. Mary Grace Ketner, a museum administrator and storyteller in Texas, suggested that mistakes in cultural detailing would come from tellers on both sides, particularly if the visiting teller were working in a foreign language:

When two cultures are trying to communicate, they need an interpreter who has some grasp of both cultures. In this case, for example, it could be

a Plutonian who knows his own culture a lot and the culture of the audience a little, or it could be the Earthling, who knows the culture of the audience a lot and the culture of the story a little. Mistakes in communication will happen either way, but the mistakes will be different. If, for example, the Plutonian uses the word “hill” instead of “mountain,” not understanding the vague difference, the audience may still get the wrong picture.

Best, as you have said, is for them to follow-up by getting together so that each of them takes a step forward in their skills in some way, but the attempt at communication, even with errors, is a giant step. It is just as important to be knowledgeable about WHOM you are talking TO as it is to have a clear understanding re: WHAT you are talking ABOUT.

Whoever the storyteller is, s/he must meet the audience halfway.

If the Earthling audience cannot understand the Plutonian storyteller, has more progress been made than if the Earthling storyteller commits an innocent error, such as not knowing there are no trees on Plutonian hills? Either way, it is the beginning of understanding, and a starting point to further understanding (if your heart is pure, as we say!) (Sp 20 Apr 2005)

Ketner points out a context-specific authenticity based on an awareness of one's listeners. A regional storyteller from Missouri, with an educational and theatrical background, reiterated that context would dictate the need for identity authority over artistic authority:

I think cultural authenticity is very important, however I think non-Plutonians who happen to be brilliant tellers should be able to tell Plutonian tales if they want to take the time to learn them correctly. So, Amy should talk to the brilliant teller and offer an exchange--she will provide cultural information in return for some help with her own telling

skills. That way, TWO good tellers of Plutonian tales will develop, and a good friendship may be forged. Maybe the brilliant teller can go to Pluto to learn first hand about the planet and culture there.

If the people hiring the tellers are looking for authenticity in Plutonian tales, they should definitely go for the Plutonian first, or at least get her advice in hiring other tellers. Judith Wynhausen (Sp 19 Apr 2005)

The idea that context dictated what type of authenticity would be most beneficial was echoed by Ghislane Walker, a university lecturer and storyteller in southern England:

Depends so much on what the event organisers are trying to achieve. Even if this were targeted mainly at other storytellers - are they coming to see some sparkling performances or are they looking for authentic material? Do you have any way of finding out? If it's quite a general audience is there any problem showcasing two performers who use similar material in different ways? Provoking a discussion can be the most powerful outcome. . . . Playing safe and trying to keep everyone happy just leads to bland, unstimulating fare - I doubt if either the Earthlings or the Plutonians would enjoy that. Best wishes (Sp 19 Apr 2005)

Walker observed that artistic brilliance has a particular kind of appeal, but must be weighed against the purpose of the event. English publisher and storyteller Tim Sheppard also thought context determined what type of authenticity would be required, but he felt it was up to those hiring the tellers to set the stage, literally and figuratively:

For a paying audience looking for entertainment, artistic brilliance is definitely important. For an academic conference authenticity might instead be prime. But an open-hearted authentic performance without pretensions or ambitions beyond its limited level can also be very satisfying. So I would say it's all about audience expectations, and that depends substantially on the promoter/marketing/programme description

etc. which should focus on the strengths of each performer and not make false claims. (Sp 17 Apr 2005)

Context may dictate whether a storyteller is regarded as having recognizable identity authority. Identity authority is important to storytellers; many recognize the inherent politics and issues of appropriation when they tell stories from outside their own cultural experiences. Storyteller and librarian Lois Sprengnether<sup>9</sup> stated that if a cultural representative of Islamic storytelling were available to tell stories at her Michigan library, she would hire him (Sp 20 Sept. 1999). Failing a representative's availability, she would hire any artistically competent storyteller or tell the Islamic stories herself. Sprengnether would take any presentation of a culture rather than ignore the opportunity to present that culture to the children in her library storytelling program. This emphasis on cultural exposure with or without actual cultural representatives was echoed by another Midwestern librarian and storyteller:

My angle is that we need to share stories of other cultures so that we and our audience may learn about that culture. . . . I do feel that a storyteller should research the sources, and find out as much as possible about the culture and background for the particular story, and be respectful, of course. Pat Rainey (Sp 19 Apr 2005)

To a storyteller, the wisdom that resonates when a listener heard the story could be "authentic" if it speaks to her life situation—what Arnheim called "the qualities of human experience" (537). In this sense authenticity is a portrayal of the human experience, focusing on representation rather than fact. Meaning cannot be assigned only

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<sup>9</sup> Sprengnether works near Dearborn, Michigan. The area has a large Arabic-, Kurdish- and Farsi- speaking population, encompassing several nationalities. Dearborn is also replete with transplanted second- and third-generation Appalachian families.



by cultural context, such as what the tale meant in its originating society. Meaning must come from the situational context as well. Cultural and situational context were used decades ago by ethnographer Bronislaw Malinowski (1947 [1923], 1965 [1935]). Meaning depends on situation (including the individual personality of the hearer) plus cultural interpretation. As Ben-Amos interpreted these concepts, cultural context was “the broadest contextual circle which embraces all other possible contexts” (216). The narrowest interpretation, situational context, required that the speaker’s gender, age and ranking be taken into account (218).

But perhaps this model is missing the possibility of a situation outside the realm of cultural context as folklore study has traditionally defined it. It could be possible to make a case that, say, a story in which Coyote is punished for stealing is true for the life circumstances of the teller, not because she is Native, but because she deals with theft on a daily basis. Cultural context, as defined by Malinowski and presented by Ben-Amos, encompasses any discernable grouping as a culture. Sprengnether works daily with children from deprived backgrounds, and sees them steal and get caught and bear the consequences of their theft; she is therefore living in a thieving culture. In that sense she could be considered qualified to assign that meaning to a story about Coyote in the performance context of her library, although it is doubtful she would succeed in the same negotiation at a powwow.

Perhaps Sprengnether is doing what American folklorist Ben Botkin suggested, that is, having faith in her profession that it relates to life (1952: 182). Botkin, as American historian Jerrold Hirsch pointed out, “was one of the first American folklorists

who did not view the modern world as a threat to the existence of folklore” (3). Botkin felt that folklore should be used to better people’s lives, for “celebrating American diversity *and* attacking social injustices that violated democratic principles [were] interrelated tasks” (28). Indeed, Botkin believed the folksong revival could and should be a “‘cultural force’ as well as a ‘cultural expression’ (1963:84)” (Hirsch 29). As Hirsch points out, Botkin’s appeal to see folklore not as threatened by amalgamation between groups, but as a way of exploring that process and the process of urbanization, was dismissed by other folklorists of his day (the 1950s and 1960s). In effect, they “[attacked] Botkin’s alleged sins without trying to understand his aims . . .” (30). Botkin might have seen in the storytelling revival and in the activities of storytellers today an interesting aspect of American history working itself out, rather than Dorson’s “fakelore” or what Toelken terms “misuse.” In his essay “The Icebergs of Folktale: Misconception, Misuse, Abuse,” Toelken listed ways in which tellers might “abuse” any traditional Native American story:

- The story is presented as a children’s story, with the implication that it represents children’s (or child-like) logic. This approach makes coyote stories into quaint animal tales; Coyote is a rascal who needs a good spanking. Such a presentation can trivialize a complex and evocative story because cultural context, which provides the matrix for moral response, is missing.
- The story is like a crystal pendant: in a hushed voice, the narrator reverently “shares” the secret wisdom of the ages. Coyote becomes a spiritual guru. In the background: the tinkling of glass chimes and the sipping of herbal tea.

- The story is a universal archetypal experience for all humanity (overlooking distinctive and significant differences in cultural worldview, gender, religious belief, humor and entertainment!). (1996: 53)

Certainly Toelken denigrates the use of Native stories to explain a universal archetype that stealing is bad. but he is trying to preserve the belief system attached to Coyote tales within the context of Navaho culture. Sprengnether is trying to restrain a child from doing something potentially harmful. Botkin would have studied the ways in which Indian stories were used to teach American values. As outsiders, neither Botkin nor Sprengnether must “deal with feelings of having tampered with a tradition that has been handed down to them” (Hirsch 5). Hirsch says that “Botkin thought about how parts of a tradition associated with what he saw as an oppressive social order could still be of value in the more egalitarian world he [Botkin] wanted to create” (5). In other words, folklore need not be tied to where and when it was created, but can serve useful purposes in the processes of transition, changing cultural values, and studying how people interact. This is a somewhat broader suggestion than that made by American ethnographer Stanley Fish and Canadian Sheldon Posen. Individually, they postulated that interpretations of a story, a text, can only be correct in certain situations, or contexts. No universally acceptable interpretation exists (Fish 3; Posen 135). As Jeff Titon cautions, misreadings of Fish’s hypothesis could give the impression that

he has let loose an anarchy of interpretation, a world in which any interpretation of a given text carries as much weight as any other. . . . Fish’s point is that “right” interpretations of texts are right only within

particular contexts; there is no universal or foundational or eternally correct interpretation of a text. (Titon 433)

Returning to the supposition that a librarian wants to use a Native American folktale to warn children against stealing, the authority figure of the librarian entertaining children in a culture that includes efficient theft as one of its positive values is authentic in the sense of depicting human experience. But in a sense of authentic as connected to the source, only the context with the Native American teller is authentic. Which situation is authentic in terms of being genuine as opposed to fake is a question that divides semantically. Sprengnether's desire to hold a child back from theft using a Native American trickster character and the sound of her own voice is certainly genuine and trustworthy on moral grounds. Posen's "norms, rules and values" may play a role here. The rules governing "authentic" library storytelling programs and "authentic" telling of Coyote stories within Native American culture are likely to be different. And aside from that, Sprengnether's use of the story is context-specific, but it is not what a folklorist bent on protecting Native American tales from cultural exploitation might see as authentic. Perhaps "a world in which any interpretation of a given text carries as much weight as any other" could give way to a world in which meaningful interpretation carries the weight it deserves (Titon 433). Perhaps Sprengnether's use of the story echoes Botkin's life work: "By claiming a place for industrial, black, ethnic, and urban lore in a pluralistic national tradition, he hoped to change social realities (cf. 1946:12-14; 1947: 78-81)" (Hirsch 28).

### **2.3 “Revival” as a Problematic Term of Uncertain Meaning and Usefulness**

“Revival” is a word that the discipline of folklore has often associated with professional storytelling. Rosenberg wrote in his seminal article, “Revivals,” that revival is often used “to describe practitioners of folk music, storytellers, and craftspersons” (1997: 723). However, the term is problematic, for even among the chroniclers of storytelling history in the United States, Canada, England/Wales and Scotland, voices differ on whether what happened was indeed a revival. What follows begins with a brief overview from storytelling histories in each country showing how revival has been accepted, rejected or sidestepped as a description, then moves to a discussion of revival in folklore studies.

Sobol called the 1990s American storytelling scene “a mixture of revivalistic, vitalistic, and nativistic elements” (1999: 7). In 1943, American anthropologist Ralph Linton described “nativistic movements” in his article of the same name as “any conscious, organized attempt on the part of a society’s members to revive or perpetuate selected aspects of its culture” (230). Nativistic movements focus on particular elements of culture, not any one culture as a whole (230). In a nativistic movement, revival and perpetuation are the likely stated purposes, but only “certain current or remembered elements of culture are selected for emphasis and given symbolic value” (Linton 231). Sobol asserted that the American storytelling movement could be seen primarily as a revival: “[The storytelling revival] is part of a longstanding pattern of folklore-based cultural revivals, and it is based firmly on its predecessors” (1999: 5). He saw the storytelling revival as partly a product of 1960s social upheaval.

Stone and Heywood each sidestepped whether organized storytelling represented a revival. Stone referred to the “so-called storytelling revival” (1998:xiv) and pointed out that “Many people assume that the revival of storytelling as a profession began in the 1970s, but in fact its origins are found in the development of training programs for teachers and librarians at the very beginning of the twentieth century” (1998: xiv). Heywood suggested that storytelling could be seen either as “the resuscitation of an ancient and defunct art-form” or as building a new art form with “elements of truth in both views” (7). He likens storytelling today to “. . . Frankenstein’s monster: its individual constituent parts are hand-me-downs from previous entities; but the manner of their combination is new, and the result has an identity all its own” (7). Glassie’s reference to revival people “plunder[ing] the past to confect new things” comes to mind (1995: 405).

The most enigmatic discussion of whether professional storytelling is a revival activity comes from Donald Smith, Director of the Scottish Storytelling Centre:

Storytelling in its own right was not prominent in the folk revival of the seventies in comparison with song and instrumental music. It was not until the work of the Traveller storytellers began to be published that they were invited to schools and other venues to share their traditions. In the late eighties, the Netherbow Arts Centre in Edinburgh began to feature traditional storytelling and a Scottish Storytelling Festival was founded. Oral storytelling began to move beyond the previous limits of the Folk Revival and to engage with a wider community of contemporary audiences. (167)

Smith distances Scottish storytelling from the folk revival yet suggests that storytelling was a part of it, since the commodification of Traveller stories as published works (it is unclear whether these works were by Travellers or by academic interpreters of Traveller culture) sparked interest in storytelling. Smith's findings echo Bausinger's comments about "offer[ing] the first reliable access to regions which were formerly known through prejudices and erroneous opinions" (39). The Travellers were showcased in a positive way by their participation in Scottish storytelling, as keepers of Scotland's oral history. Rosenberg said the term revival was used "to describe situations in which individuals or groups perform texts, enact customs, or create objects that are based on traditions from outside their own personal historical and/or cultural experience" (1997: 724). In that sense calling the Scottish storytelling scene a revival could be problematic.

From the folklore literature point of view, American folklorist Bruce Jackson said a revival created its own cultural experience, as people saw and heard "folk music performed in a real context, a real community: that of the folk revival." Even though the folk revival community was transitory, it was "as real and as legitimate as any other [community] based on shared interest and knowledge" (1993: 81). Steckert avoided using the term revival to discuss folksingers, instead referring to an "urban folksong movement" (93). She believed that a generation of "urban utilizers" had developed a particular blending of styles to create a new one. "The sound of the new aesthetic is one which developed from a merger of vocal and instrumental folk, classical, jazz and pop styles" (99).

As Rosenberg pointed out, “revival” connotes a value judgment in folklore literature. “Although sometimes it is a straightforward descriptive term for certain kinds of social movement, it frequently implies a judgment about authenticity” (1997: 723). As early as 1943, Linton discussed the pejorative side of revivalism, saying they arose in situations where one culture felt frustrated and inferior to another (233) or were initiated by “particular individuals or groups who stand to gain by them. . . .” (234). Linton’s emphasis on frustrated nation-states included, with his concept of “groups who stand to gain” (234), the beginnings of what would become a market-driven perspective on revivals (for example, Rosenberg 1986; Bausinger 1961). Bausinger couched the concept of “folklorism” or *folklorismus* in economic terms:

Folklorism is the means used to protect the allegedly essential folk culture from actual development, and it is done with the help of all of the technology of the culture industry. Folklorism makes it possible to pretend that the issue is the *Kyffhäuser* [legends], while the real movement of culture is carried by the principle of the *Kaufhäuser* [department stores], i.e., consumerism. Folklorism seems to preserve culture in a realm of the original and authentic; it denies the connection between culture and industry, which in reality has given folklorism its weight. (160)

Writing about storytellers as revivalists, folklorists do not so much discuss the addition of economics as a loss of aesthetics. For example, “Jack tales transported to a modern urban setting by revivalist professional tellers frequently lose much of the richness of their southern mountain savor” (Stotter and McCarthy 167). Folklorists may see revivals as causing objects of folklore to lose aesthetic value through the handling of inside knowledge by outsiders. Feintuch’s comment that folklorists should assist “[r]ather



than castigate revivalists as if they had somehow corrupted what does not belong to them, as some folklorists have tended to do" (1993:192) shows another folklorist recognizing implicit judgment in the term "revival."

In addition to value judgment, the term "revival" carries a timing difficulty. Social historian Eric Hobsbawm, from Britain, postulated that at least two types of "invented tradition" exist. The first is a reliance on the past figuratively but without real substance, more as an authenticating device than a reality (Hobsbawm 2). The second type of invented tradition he suggested was a sudden surge of interest in something that establishes itself quickly (3). This spurt of interest in some activity, like storytelling, may or may not have any historical base. Something that springs up quite recently and establishes itself with great rapidity we might call a fad or a revival; it seems to come from nowhere. An interesting dilemma presents itself in discerning between an invented tradition and a revival of interest in some activity. How can one decide whether there is a historical precedent that has been changed so significantly as to be difficult to recognize? In an article discussing the development of the Jewish Prayerbook, American folklorist Ilana Harlow noted the time-bound nature of such distinctions:

It is not just actual time-depth but also perceived time-depth that lends authenticity to tradition. It is not uncommon for a practice that is only one generation old to be viewed as authentic tradition and for the revival of an ancient tradition to be viewed as inauthentic. When an innovation in tradition is transmitted in the same mode as other traditional items, the second generation grows up with the notion of it as "authentic"; as part of "the way we have always done things." And it is possible for a revived ancient tradition, not recognized as such by the masses, to be perceived of

as radical innovation. It seems that many people have an emotional attachment to, and investment in, an item of tradition as it was when they first encountered it. (37)

One generation's invented tradition, or revival, can become the heart of the next generation's deeply held belief. The fact that a tradition is invented does not mean it is not valued in folklore. Coerced or not, longevity can create tradition as lore, the collectively held wisdom of a group. At some perhaps indefinable point, what constitutes an invented, revived or "real" tradition becomes more a math problem than an arbiter of what can be studied in folklore. The expression of artistic communication is in the activity itself, regardless of who began the activity, when, for what reason.

Storytellers are not participating in an art form that started recently, but in one that has been changing contexts, as Harvey pointed out (3), since people drew on cave walls. Storytellers add colored lights, theatrical props, dramatic training, literacy, and other skills and strategies to an art form that did not necessarily always encompass these—although few among us have the authority to state whether cavemen storytellers used sticks and stones to get a laugh from listeners. Telling stories is one of the oldest pastimes in the world. It is not plausible in building a constructive investigation of storytelling today to say that a person who tells professionally, incorporating available technology, is inventing a tradition.

There are, then, two concerns about using "revival" to describe storytelling activity in this document. One is that the definition currently held in folklore is problematic, and open for review. If revival means the handling of cultural materials by people outside that culture, then which cultures own what stories will become paramount.

Cultural contexts and artistic expression in small groups would be subservient to the concept of original ownership. If revival means what Jackson and Steckert postulated, a thing that carries itself forward through new artistic styles built from traditional forms, revivals fit the concept of artistic communication in small groups—never mind that the groups are intentional, consciously formed, and urban. If social history weighs into the folklore picture, it can derail the central concern of why people are displaying expressive behavior in their communities when research focuses on determining a cut-off date acceptable to designate “ancient” from “modern.” Folklore seems divided within itself on how the term “folklore” should be applied. For their part, storytellers do not really care if they are revivalists, traditionalists, or nativists; they care that they be perceived as good at telling stories.

The second concern is that this dissertation argues that storytellers do not see themselves as taking stories from outside their cultures so much as see the enjoyment of stories as built on mutual understanding. Mutual understanding is achieved through being in touch with the story’s emotional core, the theme as it speaks to human experience. Storytellers do not see such understanding as coming only through lived experience based on ethnicity or other marked categories. For example, a woman who lives in a place where young people are prone to stealing may tell a story about thieving that comes from Native American, Middle Eastern, French-Canadian, or any other ethnic community. She may see herself, in that instance, as telling a story in which she culturally participates because she identifies with the concept of the harm theft does. Storytellers see themselves as using stories in practical, in-the-moment ways. That concepts expressed in the stories

may mean different things in various cultures does not necessarily influence how storytellers tell their tales. An interesting future study would be to examine whether people with similar life circumstances, for example, those caught up in cultures of theft in Baghdad, Texas, and Toronto, might be perceived as a cultural group. Such a study would problematize the word “culture” and require extensive investigation. An investigation of this magnitude is too peripheral to this examination of storytelling to warrant full development. I wish only to ask the reader to understand that “revival” is not a discussion-building word in the context of studying professional storytellers. Echoing Rosenberg’s assessment, it is a “pejorative or judgmental term for folklorists, referring to the contextually inauthentic or spurious . . .” (1997: 724).

## **2.4 Folksong Scholarship as Parallel yet Problematic**

In the early days of my dissertation research, advice suggested examining the literature on the folksong revival, and on folksong scholarship generally. Folksong and narrative studies show similarities, but folksong scholarship cannot be applied whole cloth to storytelling. Aesthetically and artistically, folksingers and storytellers display different techniques. Also, folksong has roots in primarily rural community entertainment, while storytelling adds urban influences to these roots, including the professional influences of library science and education. A similarity between folksong and folk narrative scholarship is that folklorists appear to have largely ignored each movement at its inception.

Aesthetically, folksingers display techniques of performance far different from storytellers. Oscar Brand was one of several folksingers whose words were recorded in “The Folksong Revival: A Symposium,” during the winter meeting of the New York Folklore Society in 1963. Brand said he was a singer who tried to “sing a song as well as [I] can, as pleasantly as possible, and to bring to the audience exactly what it was that made me love the song in the first place, even if it means changing to a new version sometimes” (98). Singing uses a tune, a carefully applied rhythm and meter, into which words must fit. As folksong scholar Alan Lomax put it at the same symposium, “Folksingers do improvise. But they improvise out of a stock of their culture. Every folksinger has a tradition of lines, tunes, melodic devices, ways of varying things, ways of indicating chords, ways of handling rhythm” (104).

Storytellers pride themselves on the ability to respond to the performance situation *in situ*, what Bauman calls “the management of information” (39) in adapting to various situations. Storytellers need to display a flexible vocabulary, and not only have the freedom to move responsively in directions hinted at by the shadows that cross listeners’ faces, but the responsibility to do so. American storyteller and puppeteer Bob Shimer, who has been a full-time entertainer for more than a decade, found that storytelling required a greater flexibility yet offered more freedom than other art forms:

Having been a Storyteller first has colored my way of approaching the other things I do. Puppets and Ventriloquism came after I had been a professional Storyteller for some years. I had started to use puppets but the Vent[riloquism] came when I was an Entertainer on the “Love Boat” (ship not TV show). I met a Vent there and he got me interested. Most Vents

memorize scripts to use like actors only they play both parts. Storytelling doesn't rely on memorizing stories rather telling them. The stories become organic, changing in ways as the teller gets feedback from the audience. I do vent the same way. I have the framework in mind and the conversation develops around that.

Later I also added Magic to the act but still work with a framework and let the routine develop. I find this the best way for me to work. If something happens, like a Storyteller, I can easily adapt. The art of Storytelling is unique and allows the entertainer to think on their feet better than other forms. (Sp 8 Oct. 2005)

As a storyteller, I have changed words mid-sentence based on a look, a gesture, from a listener. An example:

*I see her in the second row, on the right. She was smiling. But the woman flinches when I say, "The leopard sniffed the baby" and a sadness crosses her face. As the storyteller, I know the leopard is really the baby's mother, shape-shifted, and won't harm the baby. But the woman in the audience doesn't, and for some reason, she is being harmed by the depth of emotion this story is bringing to her. So the sentence that was to end there extends itself, without even conscious thought on my part. I hear my voice continue. "The leopard sniffed the baby, and licked her, gently, caressing her cheek with its warm tongue." A story that was moving quickly, playing on the nerves of the audience, comes to a screeching halt for an unexpected tender moment. The woman smiles; it is still a sad smile, but she has stopped fidgeting with the hem of her dress and squirming in the metal folding chair. I have no idea what her story is.*

In this storytelling situation, I was managing the flow of information much as Bauman described (38-39), doling out facts as I thought they fit. This woman's mind jumped away from the story to something triggered by her life experience; she needed to be reassured

and brought back via careful management of the story's information. Though it is possible to manipulate mood with the voice in a song, it takes special skill to alter the rhythm mid-stream. Changing the rhythm, pace, and impact of a story takes less effort. While a singer has the established melody and set words, the storyteller has a wide-open choice of vocabulary, as opposed to memorized ballad lines.<sup>10</sup> Singers and storytellers share the freedom to engage openly with the listeners, but singing brings a more formalized differentiation between listener and performer. Two people in a room, one of them talking, may simply be a conversation in the eyes of the general public. Two people in a room, one of them singing, has connotations of performance, no matter how casual.

In terms of how the two art forms have been examined by folklorists, there are also differences. Storytelling has roots not only in rural community entertainment, as does folksong, but also in the history of library science and education. Storytellers may be people who use stories as part of their daily work in education, therapy, or other communicative job venues. Folksingers have tended to find less scope for “day-job” inclusion of their skills. Any study of professional storytelling today must include the professions that gave it background. Stone pointed out four main streams of influence on professional storytelling today: theatrical, library, educational and spiritual (Burning Brightly Chapter Two). These are problematic to place in parallel to folksong backgrounds. The 1960s folksong revival sprang, as Steckert outlined it, from a political situation that had ripened since the 1930s, fed by a mostly rural stream of traditional singers. The revival created “imitators” of these singers—people who had “taken time to

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<sup>10</sup> Some storytellers do memorize their stories, but this is not a majority approach. None of the storytellers interviewed for this dissertation memorized their tales.

learn the skills of those whom they have admired" (97); "utilizers," or performers who adapted traditional styles to urban performance contexts (98); and those who created a "new aesthetic" by breaking out of distinct genres influenced by tradition and creating original art using the sound of urban folksong (99). Storytelling is perceived by Stone, Heywood, Sobol and D. Smith as developing from traditional storytellers, literature, high art, and established professions drawn from various urban influences. Folksong is perceived by a preponderance of the writers in Rosenberg's Transforming Tradition as coming from a single root: traditional music. Whether they created parallel developments may be debated, but the folksong and storytelling movements started from different roots.

Also, folksong scholarship usually points out a rural/urban divide. Steckert lets this distinction go unexamined throughout her discussion of the new aesthetic and the utilizers of tradition in folksong. She found that traditional singers learned their material—both the texts and their texture, or performing style—"from oral tradition as they grew up" (96). From this wellspring grew the imitations and new sounds of urban folk music. Storytelling does not have so clear a divide. As will be discussed in Chapter Three, in Europe storytelling developed largely through urban centers: London's Lambeth borough, Edinburgh, Toronto and Vancouver. Only in the United States did the scene take the majority of its flavor from a small-town rural aesthetic flowing out of Jonesborough, the hamlet that ultimately became storytelling's American capital.

Time also plays an important role in the differences between folksong and storytelling examinations in scholarly literature: the folksong revival's greatest moments of growth are far enough behind us to be examined by scholars. Storytelling is newer in



its development, and therefore less open to the interpretation of hindsight. Scholars still have much to explore in the professional storytelling world.

For all these reasons, folksong scholarship's aesthetic and historical considerations will not be used as a primary source of data in this dissertation. What may be of use are theoretical considerations on the nature of folksong as a traditional art in popular presentations, and folkloristic reaction to the same, along the lines of Rosenberg's Transforming Tradition. Also, the folksong and storytelling movements share a sense of being overlooked by folklorists as perhaps outside the realm of "authentic" studies of folklore in context. As Jackson wrote in "The Folksong Revival":

There has been a great deal of journalistic writing about the folksong revival, but very little scholarly attention has been paid to it thus far. It did not fit the academic models of folkloric behavior fashionable in the 1950s, 1960s and 1970s. Perhaps the revival was too closely linked to popular movements, perhaps it was too close to contemporary political and social events for the taste of American folklorists. One can read every issue of the *Journal of American Folklore* published between 1963 and 1983 and get no idea from them that the United States had for ten years in that period been engaged in a massive land and air war in Asia, so it is hardly surprising that what seemed a transient and popular phenomenon escaped scholarly notice.

Professor Alan Dundes has suggested that the folksong revival, since it consisted of performers and audience members who had little in common with one another outside the festival, wasn't a matter of folklore concern so much as it was an example of *folklorismus*. (1993: 80)

Like Sobol, Stone and Heywood, Jackson hinted at the idea of intentional communities, but suggested that the political nature of folksong and the era in which it was popular

prevented “established” scholars from rocking that particular boat. Perhaps “escaped scholarly notice” is more a stylistic device than a specific description of the fact that many scholars from the folksong revival era did not wish to study the phenomenon.

## **2.5 Autoethnographic Approaches to Research: Emotions and Lived**

### **Experience**

Autoethnography has begun to offer a place for the engagement of feelings, of instincts, in folkloristics. Australian Education professor Bronwyn Davies, writing an autoethnographic analysis of women’s subjectivity, stated:

Poststructuralist discourse offers a critique of the celebration of masculinity and its equation with rationality and confirms for women their sense of self as embodied [in] their emotions, desires, feelings as a legitimate part of reason. (59)

Nor is emotion an entirely feminist approach. Studies such as English professor Sw. Anand Prahlad’s “Getting Happy: An Ethnographic Memoir,” published in the 2005 Journal of American Folklore, have challenged what Prahlad referred to as “the schizophrenia so common among first-generation and minority academicians” (21). Prahlad finds a disconnect between his whole being, including his “inner, spiritual voice” and the “imperatives handed down by societal institutions” of Western learning. To have such commentary, along with an autobiographical essay that is a “merger between folkloristics and creative writing” (21) published in a premier journal of folklore shows

that this disconnect has been recognized to some extent in the discipline. Along the same lines, Theatre Ph.D. student Kate Berneking Kogut's recent playful essay "Framed: A Personal Narrative/Ethnographic Performance/ One-Woman Show" discussed the concept of play and relaxation by using a theatrical monologue format and a cheerful, enthusiastic style interspersed with clever stage direction and symbolism rather than academic references (90-104). The cheerfulness, sense of fun and enjoyment evident in play were narrated not only through Kogut's words, but by her use of a playful form to tell her story.

This embracing of autoethnography and unconventional formats for academic writing discloses a growing interdisciplinary recognition in ethnographic sciences that "emotional processes are crucial components of social experience" (Ellis and Flaherty 2). Social research is also opening up to the interpretation of knowledge gained through daily living as a source of data. In their seminal collection of essays, Investigating Subjectivity: Research on Lived Experience, Florida-based sociologists Carolyn Ellis and Michael Flaherty state their intention of returning to social research as intrinsically tied to understanding human subjectivity (1). Ellis and Flaherty find that "the study of emotional lived experience is treated as outside the sociological domain because emotions cannot be studied scientifically" and that "Researchers who write about their own emotions risk being seen by colleagues as emotional exhibitionists . . . [and most colleagues] have been males from upper-middle-class, Anglo-American, professional backgrounds. . . ." (3-4).

Of course, the inclusion of lived experience demands rigorous systematic observation. Researchers should remember what American folklorist Michael Jackson saw as “the ways in which our knowledge is grounded in our practical, personal, and participatory experience in the field as much as in our detached observations” (3). Autoethnographic study gives the researcher voice, authority, and a framework for developing information based on lived experience.

Anthropologist Pnina Motzafi-Haller is an excellent example of emotional involvement steeped in life experience as part of academic discernment. Writing an autoethnographic piece on her experiences growing up Mizrahim in Ashkenazi-centered Israel, Motzafi-Haller described how, as a young student, she saw her direct emotional involvement as preventing her from academically studying the split between these two streams of Jewish culture (203). She felt that academic tools would help remove the intensity in her voice as she discussed this dichotomy, replacing passion with logical reasoning. Accordingly she pursued graduate work in Africa with the idea that, when she had acquired the correct academic tools and enough time had passed, she would return to her focal point of study and be prepared to contribute logically, with emotional separation, to scholarship on Mizrahim culture. Africa was as far removed from her own ethnic identity struggle as she thought she could go, yet there she found the same frustration with academic voicing as she had in efforts to write about her culture. She made friends; she saw inequalities; she wanted to make the world a better place by writing about her experiences, pointing out what she had found of how people related to one another based on skin color and how that affected lives. Back at her Harvard office:

I had a hard time making the transition away from the “field” and into academic authorship. It was not merely the wrenching experience of rendering the real, complex reality I came to know and grasp so well in bloodless academic abstractions. . . . I forced myself to write about land tenure and changing definitions of rights to land in a language and style that was meaningless, that violated my own feeling of what I had learned in those hard fifteen months “in the field.” I had very little satisfaction with the academic exercise I produced. . . . I felt that there were enough works like it about this or that African tribe or group and that my proper “addition to the literature” was a violation of the very reason that brought me into anthropology in the first place. . . . I felt a terrible guilt for deserting them there, back in Botswana. (207-208)

Motzafi-Haller found that her attempt to reach toward dispassionate thought led her instead to discover that her passionate voice was valid, and “right” in both the academic and the moral sense:

How do I understand my complex experience in Africa within this larger project of constructing my professional and personal “life story”? . . .

Even if I naively believed, before leaving Israel for graduate studies in the US, that “Africa” would be the absolute “other” for me, the professional “safe heavens” [*sic*] where my emotional involvement would not “stand in the way” of my analytical understanding, I was very conscious, from the outset, of the larger purpose of what I believed was this necessary “detour.” The professional skills and recognition I planned to acquire in the relative emotional calm of “doing” an African ethnography were to empower me to return to those “burning questions.” Looking at that “African experience” today, it is clear that it was not only the necessary “phase” towards the “great return” to dealing with those burning questions of identity; it was a very powerful experience that

enabled me to rethink, from new and critical angles, the very basis of such identity. (208-209)

Motzafi-Haller was caught in a situation based on ethnicity that had the potential to harm people. Storytelling, at least in Western professional contexts, is not often quite so survival-based. Still, the frustration she experienced is one I have shared since beginning my doctoral work: I meant to make the world a better place by researching how stories affected people, discerning how best to tell them, to whom, and when. Instead I filled it with debates over words, and what they meant to which parties. Still, contributing to an ongoing discussion between folklorists and storytellers has the potential to, among other things, lessen the dichotomy of applied folklore versus academic folklore, and the feeling of us-versus-them sometimes observable between folklorists and storytellers.

## **2.6 Storytelling as an International Occupational Group**

This investigation limits itself to four nations, each with English as its first language. There has been no previous comparative study of international storytelling published, although Stone's work included both American and Canadian storytellers and pointed out differences between them.<sup>11</sup>

The storytelling occupation that spans the globe cannot be said to function as a cohesive whole. Chapter One offered geographic and economic differences in classifying professional storytellers. Across borders and within countries, people have diverse ways

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<sup>11</sup> Although she examined both American and Canadian storytellers, Stone was looking at repertoire, community participation regionally, and history, rather than an overt comparing of how occupational storytellers work in their respective countries. Her study has given me many insights into both sides of the border.

of approaching storytelling. Also, storytelling groups have tended to reach out to one another less than individual storytellers have, and the resulting knowledge of storytelling praxis and administration between countries is therefore somewhat hodge-podge. As an anecdotal example, in 1999 a national American storyteller in New England posted to Storytell that there were no storytelling organizations he knew of that served as quality control, vetting storytellers before allowing them to join. I posted the names of two: the Jonesborough Storytelling Guild in Tennessee, requiring four performances from potential members in front of existing members, and the Scottish Storytelling Centre, which invites tellers on the basis of recommendations by two board members.<sup>12</sup> (Sps exchanged in July 1999) The storyteller responded that he had never heard of the Scottish Storytelling Centre, but would like to know more about them. Likewise, the secretary of the Society for Storytelling in England and Wales, Tina Bilbe, was unaware of the Storytellers of Canada/Conteurs du Canada in 2003 (conversation).

As examples of individual tellers making connections between countries, American storytellers David Holt and Dan Keding each travel between Britain and the United States. Keding often recommends storytellers to the Shropshire, England storytelling community, particularly to the hiring agents for that area's annual Festival at the Edge (FATE). Holt, by contrast, is working in Asia, across Europe (including the United Kingdom) and in Africa. Holt's interaction with international organizers of storytelling events tends to be scattered and more fleeting, while Keding's is concentrated for the most part in the network of storytellers who attend and perform at FATE. Keding

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<sup>12</sup> The board is called the Scottish Storytelling Forum.

has a personal relationship with the Shropshire storytelling community, while Holt has professional contracts with many international hiring agents. This is not to say that Holt is not friendly with those hiring agents, or that Keding's relationship with the FATE community is not professional. It is to point out the difference in how the knowledge of international telling that these tellers hold will affect the tellers with whom they come in contact.

A dialogue between individual tellers will certainly have a positive effect on the storytelling communities of those involved. Interviews with storytellers from the Illinois community (of which Keding is a senior member) revealed that they display a deeper understanding of international storytelling issues, such as differences in perceptions of tradition and story ownership issues, than other communities where I conducted interviews. For instance, Illinois native and national teller Janice Del Negro responded to a question about how changing a folktale affected the storytelling tradition with "Whose tradition?" That was an unusual repost. Other tellers tended not to display any reflexivity toward their use of "tradition."

As the Illinois storytelling community benefits, so does Shropshire's. They have performance opportunities in, and an understanding of, the United States not so readily available to other regions of England. The late Richard Walker, Amy Douglas, and Taffy Thomas are three tellers from this region of England who have performed at the Illinois Storytelling Festival. Also, the Shropshire pub swaps and festival tend to display a larger number of stories recognizable as American versions of folktales and legends than other regions of England. Over tea at his home, Walker once described to me a lad of about



fourteen who stood up at The Three Feathers (a pub) and told “The Wide Mouth Frog,” a story Keding made famous, in a Midwestern American accent. I saw similar American/British mixes in performances at Festival at the Edge, the Lake District Storytelling Festival<sup>13</sup> run by Thomas, and in storytelling clubs in London and Yorkshire.<sup>14</sup>

By contrast, Holt may recommend other storytellers to replace him at annual events that seek rotation in their performers, but he is not actively building community between, for instance, Amsterdam and his home city of Asheville, N.C. Holt tends to be involved in large projects such as art center performances rather than community festivals. The knowledge he gains may be shared with individual tellers, who may disseminate that to their own communities. Again, it depends on the relationships of individual tellers between themselves.

Along the same lines, American international storyteller Laura Simms regularly visits Romania and conducts storytelling workshops and events there. Knowledge of Romany storytelling praxis, as well as Eastern European ethnography, returns with her. This wisdom may be dispensed to a large group from the festival stage, when as part of her storytelling performance she contextualizes a “typical” storytelling event in Romania. It may also come out in smaller discussions on Storytell, or even direct conversations with individuals interested in international work. All three of these have been observable from Simms via the US National Storytelling Festival, her postings to Storytell, and my own requests for advice.

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<sup>13</sup> I attended as a member of the audience.

<sup>14</sup> I attended as the featured teller once and numerous times as an audience member.

Individual contact with international storytelling communities does provide benefits to the involved regions, which was the premise behind the Artist's Exchange Programme between Scotland and North America.<sup>15</sup> But these benefits will be non-standard among communities. The pockets of wisdom rest with the tellers involved and depend for their dispensation on the personality of those tellers, and their access to a larger professional storytelling group. What is described here is, in short, non-coerced, non-governmental interaction between people who share a common profession, even internationally. Interaction builds cohesion in an uneven spread.

Because Canada and the United States share a border, interaction between these countries has been more common than between either of them and the United Kingdom. Some Canadian tellers (international teller Dan Yashinsky and national teller Gail Fricker, to name two in Toronto) also work quite regularly in the United Kingdom and bring the benefit of their experiences back to home communities. Such benefits are random and individualistic. Between Canada and the United States there may be some differences of opinion as to storytelling best practice (Stone 1998: 40) but the easy crossover of borders makes it simple for tellers to interact. I am one of numerous American tellers who have visited the Storytellers School of Toronto and been featured at 1001 Nights (the Friday night story swap in Toronto); several tellers from British

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<sup>15</sup> On alternate years, storytellers from Scotland and North America visited the other country. In 1999, Sheila Stewart and I toured America for six weeks, performing an "Old World/New World" selection of stories and ballads at colleges and festivals. In 2000, New England teller Tom McCabe worked with Storytelling Unplugged at various venues across Scotland and was the featured teller for the Guid Crack Club, run by the Scottish Storytelling Centre in Edinburgh. I was at that time Storytelling Unplugged's director. In 2001, world events moved the focus of this exchange to Europe, and Storytelling Unplugged (the umbrella under which the Artist's Exchange programme was developed) took five young storytellers to Germany. The board for the Artist's Exchange consisted of Bob Blair (Glasgow), Margaret Bennett (Edinburgh) and me. The organization later worked in Romania.

Columbia were at the US National Storytelling Conference held in Bellingham, Washington in 2004. Many American storytellers perform at the Yukon Storytelling Festival in Whitehorse, according to one of its former administrators, Canadian organic farmer and teller Tonya Coulter (int. 12 July 1999).

The professional storytelling community encompasses all those who perform for pay, regardless of their country. However, the practice of storytelling can differ between nations, and even regions. Thus, when it comes to storytelling in various countries, the occupational groups tend to be understandably more cohesive within nations than across international borders, at least in terms of how folklorists would define them. And it stands to reason that regions subdivide within these national occupational groups.

## **2.7 Conclusions**

This chapter laid out research difficulties and examined the use of certain problematic words and terms. The terms “tradition” and “authenticity” are particularly problematic in these early phases of studying professional storytelling. Authenticity may be defined in at least seven ways in folklore studies. Storytellers tend to see authenticity as heavily dependant on context. Tellers could almost be said in some instances to believe that authenticity is an acquirable skill rather than a state of being. Where folklorists might see authenticity as a quality that either is or is not present, storytellers see authenticity as something tied to the hiring agent: if the hiring agent requires authenticity, there are differing strategies for proving that one could be considered authentic.

The defensive baggage folklore as a discipline carries challenges perceptions of performing folklorists as somehow not quite academics, and affects how folklorists see performers generally. And while there may be some useful areas of overlap, scholarship suggests that the folksong revival developed from tradition as its primary root.

Storytelling developed from not only tradition, but also literature, education and other influences more urban than those in folksong. This problematizes the application of folksong revival studies to storytelling, all the more so because revival itself can be a pejorative term in folklore studies.

# **CHAPTER THREE:**

## **HISTORY AND DEVELOPMENT OF**

### **PROFESSIONAL STORYTELLING IN THE UNITED**

### **STATES, CANADA AND THE UNITED KINGDOM**

*Once upon a time . . . – typical Western European opening of a Märchen*

This chapter explores the national storytelling organizations in the United States, Canada, England/Wales, and Scotland. It considers how these organizations began, how they affected the development of storytelling as a profession, and what challenges they faced or created in modern storytelling.

The first sections give an overview of the national organizations, placing them in the timeline of developing storytelling interest in that country, discussing important people or events, and outlining “growing pains” or schisms that required negotiation. An analysis of the similarities and differences of the organizations and their influence within each country follows these profiling sections. There are many storytelling guilds and organizations in the nations examined within this dissertation. This research focuses on the major national organizations because these national organizations are open to all storytellers in that particular nation. Although there may be a vetting system based on storytelling ability for membership, the national organizations do not represent a special interest or geographic region. The League for the Advancement of New England

Storytelling may have serious political clout in the profession, but people in California are not represented in its membership. By contrast, the US National Storytelling Network offers membership to any storyteller who can afford the entry fee.

Also, these national organizations are the major bodies responsible for setting the tone and pace of the professional storytelling communities in their countries. The national bodies record and shape history. Each offers some venue, be it a festival, conference, or annual gathering, at which like-minded professionals can meet; each is a force for advocacy regarding storytelling in its country. Regional groups may have a felt importance to an individual storyteller, but her overall career is being influenced by the policies set within the national organizations. Thus this study is restricted to national organizations.

Whether national organizations developed from an interest in professional storytelling or created storytelling interest is a chicken-and-egg question. It is important to remember that this dissertation deals with the storytelling profession's expansion in its most recent permutations, not the full history of storytelling as a profession. For storytellers in the United States and Canada professional storytelling had a resurgence in interest with the first US National Storytelling Festival in 1973 and the subsequent formation of the National Association for the Preservation and Perpetuation of Storytelling (NAPPS) (Stone 1998: 25-26; Sobol 1999: 3). Canada's national organization formed in the early 1990s (Stone 1998: 54). In England and Wales the current status of professional telling can be linked to the 1960s growth of library and governmental

schemes (Heywood 22). Scottish maturation appeared primarily in the late 1980s and early 1990s (Smith 167).

### **3.1 History and Development of the (former) National Association for the Preservation and Perpetuation of Storytelling**

The US national storytelling organizations based in Jonesborough began their lives as a single entity for the purpose of running a festival. Within ten years they had developed into the major direction-setting body for the American storytelling marketplace.

Discussing the US organizations is complicated by the fact that they have had so many names and permutations. In their own words:

Storytelling, the language art that pre-dates written history, is now served by two organizations, both headquartered in Jonesborough, Tennessee where the American storytelling revival was jump-started by the first National Storytelling Festival in 1973. The success of that first festival led to the founding of the National Association for the Preservation and Perpetuation of Storytelling (NAPPS), which as a result of explosive growth in the '80's, changed its name to The National Storytelling Association (NSA).

In 1998, NSA, in an effort to better serve the needs of the diverse storytelling community, divided into two separate organizations, National Storytelling Network (NSN) and International Storytelling Center (ISC).<sup>[16]</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> These became the final names of the two new organizations. The website seems to skip their other names for purposes of clarity. This website also refers to one of the organizations by a previous name, presumably by accident. Footnote by W.W. not in original.

Both organizations are dedicated to advancing the art of storytelling - as a performing art, teaching aid, and cultural transformation process, but, the National Storytelling Network and Storytelling Foundation International *[sic]* have taken different approaches to accomplishing that mission. Both SFI *[sic]* and NSN jointly own and are funded by revenue from the annual National Storytelling Festival. As a membership organization, NSN receives additional funding support from dues, National Storytelling Conference revenue, sponsorships and gifts. ISC has no members, and receives its funding by providing educational and training services, as well as receiving grants and donations. <[www.storynet.org/NSN](http://www.storynet.org/NSN) 2004>

For purposes of clarity, events after 1998 will reference “International Storytelling Center (ISC)” or “National Storytelling Network (NSN)” even though they may have been known as the National Storytelling Association, the National Storytelling Members’ Association, and/or the Storytelling Foundation International in the time period discussed. Prior to 1998, NAPPS will be the term used for the American organization. Many interviewees in this dissertation used NAPPS as a name after 1998. Footnotes are added where confusion might arise over the storytelling community’s popular use of “NAPPS.”

The National Association for the Preservation and Perpetuation of Storytelling was conceived in 1973. Jimmy Neil Smith was a high-school teacher in Jonesborough, Tennessee, a small town experiencing the challenges of many southern communities. The newly built Interstates 81 and 181, connecting the larger cities that surrounded this small town, bypassed Jonesborough, leaving it to suffer a slow economic death. Smith was active in the local Chamber of Commerce. The story of how Smith hit upon storytelling as an agent in his efforts has become the stuff of legend in the professional telling



community. International storyteller Heather Forest said Smith and a few friends were returning from a conference in another state. As they neared home, Smith began outlining an idea for a festival that would attract tourists to Jonesborough. Smith's friends were not enthusiastic (int. 17 Dec. 1998). Folk music had been done. What else was there? And at some point “the word storytelling was said, and the rest, you know, is history”

(McConnell int. 16 July 1999). This story is chronicled in Joseph Sobol's history of the American storytelling revival as “The Station Wagon Creation Story” (1999: 72-77).

National storyteller Doc McConnell, who lived near Jonesborough in the 1970s and watched the idea unfold into reality, quipped, “He [Smith] was driving along in a little blue car, but if you listen to the people now who say they were there [when he got the idea for the storytelling festival], it would have had to be a bus” (int. 16 July 1999).

### **3.1.1 The Festival and its Influence on Creating a Storytelling Market and a Sense of Occupational Community; or, Growing Pains**

The first US National Storytelling Festival was held in October 1973 and attracted sixty audience members. It featured Appalachian story collector Richard Chase, some local schoolteachers and a librarian, and Jerry Clower, a television personality who had been doing comedy on national radio. The event was nearly named the Bugaboo Springs Storytelling Festival after a creek that runs through Jonesborough—a piece of occupational folklore with which storytellers continue to delight themselves (US National Storytelling Festival brochure 2002). Thus the US National Storytelling Festival chugged forward, picking up steam and participants for the first ten years, with storyteller Laura Simms coming on board as artistic director in the mid-1970s.

The festival grew from a charming but somewhat obscure regional event into a drawing point for people who were already practicing storytellers but had not considered it as a viable and sustainable profession. Forest, who first appeared at the festival in 1980, said, “Until I heard about Jonesborough, I didn’t know what to call myself” (int. 17 Dec. 1998). As a performance artist living in New York City, Forest sang folksongs and danced between waitressing and other hand-to-mouth jobs that kept funds coming in. Following an incident in which she sang a fable from Aesop to a coffee house crowd that was not altogether receptive, someone told her that what she did was like what happened “in Jonesborough.” She had never heard of professional storytelling or Jonesborough, but:

I packed up my little car and headed south.

[Wendy:] Did you know anyone down there?

[Heather:] No, I didn’t know any other tellers then. I called myself a storyteller to the chagrin of those around me; they said this was a corny name. But I didn’t know of anything else, so I kept on my own track, making story pieces set to music. . . . Anyway, I packed myself up and went down there and there were maybe eight hundred people there at the time. I looked around and felt for the first time as though I had found a family, that I wasn’t such an oddity. I didn’t fit with the folk entertainers, I wasn’t a visual artist . . . but here I found myself among kindred spirits. Not that the style of storytelling was like mine; I had nothing in form in common with what I saw there, but everything I saw inspired me. I guess everyone seemed in common with me, we all knew all our stories by heart and had a real desire to communicate with the audience. It wasn’t like actors I’d seen.

I went back home, so delighted to have found what felt like a group of people doing similar things. I remember writing a letter to the National Association thanking them for existing, and sent a little tape with stories I did, with the consequence that I got invited to be in the next festival in 1980. So that's how I came to meet other storytellers, and actually started lifelong friendships. And you know earlier how you were talking about communities. I think yes, there is definitely an intentional community from that festival. When I got there, there were people like me. And they had a name: professional tellers. I felt I had come home. (int. 17 Dec. 1998)

Forest's narrative is typical of the tellers who discovered the US National Storytelling Festival in the early days. McConnell also found a homecoming. He was invited to tell his Appalachian stories at the 1973 festival:

Only when we had the first festival in Jonesborough—I came to that festival and decided this is what I've been doing all along, and decided then, I started remembering tales and stories from my family to tell in a formal presentation of storytelling. My brother Steamer started doing [the] same thing. (int. 16 July 1999)

The festival became a catalyst for performers like McConnell and Forest, who began to find a sense of occupational community as they regrouped each year in Jonesborough to meet fellow tellers and perform for growing audiences. The National Storytelling Festival reached two thousand participants at its tenth anniversary in 1982. That anniversary “marked the end of ‘the bush-beating era’ —when revival activists like the Folktellers had to hunt up and down for colleagues to fill the festival bill—and the beginning of an era of stampede” (Sobol 1999: 191). This flagship production attracted both casual listeners and aspiring tellers whose goals included one day appearing on the

National Storytelling Festival stage. The occupational community expanded and the politics of professional storytelling developed rapidly:

*“We are all storytellers”*—this was a key article of the revival catechism. “Everyone is welcome, everyone has a story worth telling, worth hearing.” It’s a powerful universalist message that infused the infant storytelling communities with the rosy glow of sanctuary. But it began to be discovered in the eighties that while everyone was called, not everyone was chosen. Blocs began to form, based on geography, ethnicity or status, to articulate, challenge, or protect the emerging lines of structure and authority within the national movement. An irresistible tide developed that would transform the spontaneous *communitas* of a revitalization movement, and the ideological *communitas* of revival discourse, into the rationalized organizational structure that Victor Turner called “normative *communitas*.” (Sobol 1999: 191)

NAPPS had “created a monster”—that is, developed a demand that overwhelmed available supply. There were some fifteen slots for featured tellers at the US National Festival, with vastly more tellers than that seeking to be featured. At the 1985 National Storytelling Conference, held in July at Washington College, Jonesborough, what was meant to be an informal evening of story swapping became one of professional storytelling’s great meta-stories: “Blood on the Porch.”<sup>17</sup> That conference marked a perceptual change within storytelling in the United States. Tellers now speak of this time as the marker between the age of friendly telling and the emergence of the art form as

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<sup>17</sup> When I asked Storytell members if they knew the origins of this moniker some had first encountered it in Joseph Sobol’s storytelling history, while others believed it was a song written by Ed Stivender. One person thought someone anonymous had said it, and it stuck and was picked up by others. The nickname has become an item of occupational folklore.

serious business. Sobol described the build-up to this defining moment in the profession's perception of its own history:

The transition between the “bush-beating era” and the stampede that followed was disorientingly swift. . . . In 1985, it went over the competitive edge, with traumatic results. Cathryn Wellner, then a member of the NAPPS board of directors from Seattle, reflected . . . “[P]eople kind of figured at the time that the only path to stardom was through NAPPS. Now there are so many more things happening around the country that people are more sophisticated about it.” (1999: 195)

As an 18-year-old new graduate of high school that July, with the ambition to be a professional storyteller, I attended the 1985 National Storytelling Conference in Jonesborough with great expectations. My timing was, in retrospect, pretty bad:

*To be honest, I was so young and so naïve, and here were all these nice adults. I had no idea what was going on, but I knew something was. Nobody was listening to anyone else, and on Friday night, the first night of the swapping porch, everybody had been listening. It had been magic. But on Saturday night, people were just waiting to tell. I left. There were a bunch of tellers in a little room off someplace inside the college, and Dan Keding, one of the other tellers, a really nice guy, found me wandering around and said, "C'mon, I'll show you where the real telling is happening." Looking back—I didn't understand this at the time, but now I get it—they were thinking they were going to audition.*

With hindsight it is apparent that several of the people who wanted to tell on the porch had assumed that the US National Storytelling Festival's selection board was listening, and that being seen by them would earn the teller a slot at this “Carnegie Hall” of storytelling. From my adolescent viewpoing, something ugly was happening, but what was unclear. People were not listening to each other that night though they had been the

night before. This ugliness had not been factored into my “great decision” to become a professional storyteller and bring joy and peace to the world.

Other tellers were not so naive. People's behavior, as they scrambled for an opportunity to tell, became a bit hysterical and ill-tempered. Canadian Cathryn Wellner (a regional teller as well as former NAPPS board member) described the night in The Storyteller's Journey:

One person got up. And instead of telling *a* story, which is *the* rule, and everybody knows it—it doesn't have to be restated—we thought—this person got up and told *three* stories. Not short stories. And people are generally polite. So nobody really could believe that this was really happening. And when the second story ended and this person went on to do *another* story, the tension began to build until it became almost explosive. And by the time that person sat down, feeling, I'm sure, as if they'd done a good job, because everybody was listening—what was really happening was, there was this *burn* going on. A smolder around the group. And the next person to get up, kind of *rushed* up, because, my gosh, the time was getting late, and if I don't tell my story now I'll never get another chance like this—and so, the listening stopped. Because there were so many people who wanted to get up and tell a story, and such an awareness in the group that this was happening, that there really wasn't anybody listening to anybody. But there was this tension about *having* to get up and tell a story. The body language was wonderful—people began to physically move forward. (Sobol 1999: 196)

International storyteller Dan Keding, who was also there, said:

I looked over, and there was a friend of mine, [X], and he was down like this [gets down in football linebacker position] ready to run onto stage the second the woman that was there stopped. And once that teller paused, and

I saw [X] tense, and I thought, “Shit, he's gonna rush her! He's gonna make a fool of himself!” She was just pausing for breath. But nobody was listening. It was sad. It was really sad because some people thought they were going to make it, and the people who had already made it [told at the National Storytelling Festival] thought they had to defend themselves from these invading hordes. (int. 21 Dec. 1998)

Wellner continued:

And it got ugly. There wasn't any violence, but it was probably as close as you're going to get. Because there were some people who were clawing, literally, for space. It was, “My audition, dammit, if I don't get this audition I'm never going to make it!” (Sobol 1999: 196)

The perception that there was something important at stake for the participants, that a possible market value for such a thing as a professional storyteller existed at all, is a byproduct from the success of the US National Storytelling Festival. It was the only vehicle at that time through which celebrity as a professional teller could reasonably be expected. Following “Blood on the Porch,” that perception changed:

By 1985 or 1986, it was dawning on the storytelling world that the “blessed community” (activist John Lewis’s phrase referring to the civil rights movement before the alliance of blacks and liberal whites collapsed) of early movement days was transforming itself into a professional community, with competitive pressures and corresponding ecological limits. (Sobol 1999: 192)

### **3.1.2 The Rise of American Storytelling**

American storytelling began to outstrip the national storytelling organization in development as the 1990s began. The rise in competitive pressures included increasing economic stakes and possibilities for achieving recognition as a storyteller. The National

Association for the Perpetuation and Preservation of Storytelling began its own publishing firm, producing Homespun, a tenth-anniversary anthology of stories from its festival tellers in 1982, but it was other publishing firms that carried the bulk of the popular storytelling books forward. Folklorist, librarian and international storyteller Margaret Read MacDonald published The Storyteller's Start-Up Book with August House in 1986, opening the market for “how-to” storytelling guides. Between 1986 and 1996, books on storytelling multiplied at a considerable rate. Most of these were produced by August House, the first publishing firm dedicated to storytelling materials, with a minority coming from Shoe String Press and Yellow Moon Press. Libraries Unlimited and other publishers producing educational materials found their “how-to” books on storytelling outselling other publications ( National Storytelling Festival resource tent manager conversation 5 Oct. 2002).

Guilds, workshops and festivals blossomed across North America. Some guilds organized events designed to offer instruction in the art of storytelling, or put together telling opportunities for their members. Doc McConnell recalled tellers as desperate for how-to information. “Those years [1985 to about 1995] were people just crying for workshops, you know: ‘How do we do this? We want to do this!’ ‘Course now they all know, or think they know” (int. 16 July 1999). Professional storytellers—particularly those with a good reputation because they had been hired by the US National Storytelling Festival—were invited as workshop leaders to teach neophyte tellers the tricks of the new trade.



Festivals proliferated across the country. By 1989, there were more than five hundred festivals within an eight-hour drive of Jonesborough, either dedicated to or including storytelling (S. Jackson, Archives of Appalachia presentation 1994). But the festival circuit could not support the rising numbers of new and inexperienced tellers; it was treated as a place for more established professionals. While people who had been featured tellers at Jonesborough flew frantically about trying to keep up with demand, the newbies languished with nowhere to go, no place to tell. (McConnell int. 16 July 1999). Dan Keding is now a familiar face and a respected voice in the occupational community of both Britain and America. When I met him in 1985, he was a struggling up-and-comer in the business, a schoolteacher who had quit his job to pursue storytelling and folk singing as a career. He recalled those early days:

In Britain, you had these folk clubs, these pubs, these places where people could cut their teeth. Low-risk try-out-your-material places. But in the U.S. it was festivals and schools, man, just festivals and schools. And it was hard to break in. (int. 21 Dec. 1998)

Contributing further to this professional constipation, throughout the 1990s the US National Storytelling Festival was cautious about how many new tellers it would allow on stage. The majority of featured tellers were veterans of previous Jonesborough festivals.<sup>18</sup> If it had been hard before, as Keding postulated, to “break in” to the perceived upper echelons of the American storytelling scene, it was about to get harder.

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<sup>18</sup>Based on festival brochures from 1990-2002. The US National Storytelling Festival is referred to interchangeably by storytellers as “the National Storytelling Festival,” “Jonesboro (or Jonesborough),” “The Jonesboro(ugh) Festival,” “NAPPS” and “The NAPPS Festival.”

The National Storytelling Festival continued to be a shining goal for aspiring tellers, but it also became a platform where hiring agents and other storytellers could view who was doing what kind of work. The US festival was sought after by tellers and scrutinized by hiring agents alike largely because there was a lack of venues between this pinnacle of success and the beginning storyteller in her home, church or classroom. Prior to 1998, the national storytelling organization did not have a membership branch devoted to developing venues for storytellers, so storytellers as a grassroots force solved their own problem. National storyteller Elizabeth Ellis, a veteran of numerous storytelling performances at the National Storytelling Festival before and after 1998, described storytellers as “matchmakers,” turning the general public on to storytelling. The many applications of storytelling now recognized as normal practice were largely found by storytellers themselves, Ellis felt:

I think that's something that's under-acknowledged about storytelling, about storytellers. We made our own venues. We created the paths. . . . We found places that wanted to hear stories. If you use economic language, we created the demand. No, that's not right. There was always a demand in the human heart to hear stories, to tell stories. We matched people up to the demand. We were the matchmakers. (int. 4 Oct. 1994)

Of the sixty-plus tellers I interviewed, forty-two were running one or more storytelling venues.

Schools, libraries, museums, churches and guilds would become the available places for new tellers to cut their teeth, as the glut of professionals turned their creative energies to organizing venues in which they could perform. Storytellers were actively creating opportunities for themselves and each other outside the national organization and

its venues. Day-job and American national storyteller Lucinda Flodin, now based in Chicago, was a midwife and storyteller from Tennessee in the 1990s. She built a regional organization holding an annual festival in a bookstore in Nashville. Pam Johnson, an elementary school teacher turned temporary librarian, began a preschool children's storytelling program at the library in Gray, Tennessee. In 1993 I started a ghost storytelling festival in the town graveyard of Greeneville, Tennessee, hiring five tellers annually. American storytellers created their own opportunities and shared them with colleagues.

It became evident that more and more people were either becoming storytellers or interested in having storytellers involved in their institutions. The National Association for the Preservation and Perpetuation of Storytelling, having moved from a basement operation running a festival to an advocacy organization promoting storytelling across America, had for some time recognized within itself a somewhat schizophrenic imbalance, said National Storytelling Network board member Loren Niemi. A national storyteller, Niemi felt that as a membership organization the National Storytelling Network had a responsibility to the dues-paying participants, storytellers who could be national tellers geared toward a festival market, or day-job and weekend tellers (conversation 4 Oct. 2002).<sup>19</sup> Other elements of the organization saw their role as advocacy and creating opportunities. Thus the American national storytelling organization split:

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<sup>19</sup> Niemi and I talked at the "aftermath" party for the 2002 US National Storytelling Festival. I was staying with friends in Jonesborough and had covered the festival for a Scottish Arts magazine, The Living Tradition. My research on the American storytelling scene was known through friends and colleagues; Niemi introduced himself and offered to speak with me if it were of assistance.

Both organizations [the National Storytelling Network and the International Storytelling Center] are dedicated to advancing the art of storytelling - as a performing art, teaching aid, and cultural transformation process, but, the National Storytelling Network and Storytelling Foundation International<sup>20</sup> [*sic*] have taken different approaches to accomplishing that mission. . . .

NSN is a member driven organization. . . . NSN sponsors the National Storytelling Conference in cooperation with local or regional members at a different location each year. [NSN is] aimed at enhancing the connection of the national organization to guilds and storytelling groups in their respective regions.

ISC on the other hand, is focused on the advocacy of storytelling as an art form that brings positive change in all areas of human endeavor. ISC [runs] the National Storytelling Center, a multi-million-dollar complex in Jonesborough. . . . <[www.storytellingfoundation.net](http://www.storytellingfoundation.net), 2003><sup>21</sup>

This split could be seen as a delayed realization that not every American teller was or wanted to be a teller of national proportions. Keding and I agreed that this was likely (personal conversation 5 Oct. 2002). Day-job tellers, casual tellers, and regional tellers were also dues-paying members of an organization born to oversee a festival that since the 1980s had been “the biggest game in town” (Keding conversation). Perhaps the delineation can best be summed up in a pithy quote from Niemi at the post-festival house party. As a few of us sat on the back porch discussing the National Storytelling Network, he commented: “There was a divorce. SFI [which became the International Storytelling

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<sup>20</sup> As mentioned earlier, Storytelling Foundation International was the early name for the International Storytelling Center. The website appears to have left the previous name by mistake.

<sup>21</sup> This website has since been updated and the 2005 website for the National Storytelling Network is quoted at the beginning of this chapter.

Center] got the house, and we [the National Storytelling Network] got the kids”  
(conversation 5 Oct. 2002).

### **3.2 The Society for Storytelling in England and Wales**

As with the American organizations, analyzing the Society for Storytelling in England and Wales begins with naming difficulties. Wales is represented in the organization’s name, but perhaps the bulk of Welsh storytelling is not. In Wales, just under thirty storytellers registered with the Society for Storytelling as of 2003, none Welsh-born. (In 1992 the Society for Storytelling’s directory had just five tellers in Wales, again none born there or speaking Welsh.) Catherine Aran, a storyteller working in the Welsh language, e-mailed that as of 2005 there were four other Welsh-speaking storytellers in her country, and of these only Scottish-born Michael Harvey was registered with the Society for Storytelling:

Unless there is someone else who I have not heard about as yet, I believe there are only the five. Out of these five there are only two of us who are Welsh born and bred. This is Mair Tomos Ifans who does a little storytelling now and then when asked, and myself. Guto Dafis I believe was born in India, but I have no idea whether or not his parents are Welsh speaking or that Welsh was a language he was brought up with or one he has learnt. I heard that Eysyllt Harker was brought up in Liverpool among the Liverpool/Welsh community but I can't confirm this, but I know that Michael Harvey who is extremely active in the storytelling world is originally from Scotland and has learnt the language (one cannot tell if he is native or not from his accent, he has learnt that well!!!).

Eysyllt, Michael and Guto all live in South Wales in the Cardiff and Swansea areas. Mair lives in mid-Wales, and I am in the North.

The number of storytellers in Wales has been increasing rapidly recently so it has been very difficult to put a real number on this - but they are all either Anglo/Welsh (Welsh born/English speaking) or have moved into the country mainly (not all) from England. (e-int. 23 Oct. 2005)

A year before Aran's e-mail, Siwan Rosser, a Welsh language professor at Cardiff University, said storytelling in the Welsh language was thriving in Wales. Rosser drew a sharp distinction between professional and traditional storytellers: traditional tellers in Wales told Welsh folktales and legends in the Welsh language. Rosser felt that if my search criteria were English language storytellers making a living by telling stories in Wales, I would find none of them were native to that country. Her prediction was accurate.

Rosser also suggested that Welsh language storytellers were primarily interested in reclaiming Welsh language and heritage. She felt that stories from the Mabinogian played a large part in this, but the act of storytelling in and of itself did not (28 May 2004). In a follow-up e-mail, Rosser postulated that activities at the creative writing centre Ty Newydd in Llanystumdwy were the closest Welsh storytellers came to professional storytelling in terms of seeking to make a living from their work (6 Sept. 2004).

Contacting the Ty Newydd center elicited the following e-mail from its coordinator, Sian Northey:

Ty Newydd, the National Writers' Centre for Wales does hold storytelling courses, but so far, although we hold writing courses in Welsh we have not held a Welsh medium storytelling course. At least not in the 3 yrs. I have been working here. (5 July 2005)

Heywood, chronicling the Society for Storytelling's history, mentioned a lack of Welsh participation in the organization. What is not there cannot be studied. As this dissertation is restricted to English language telling, storytelling in Wales as its own phenomenon is not thoroughly investigated here.

### **3.2.1 The Beginnings of the Storytelling Movement in England and Wales**

The Society for Storytelling developed very differently from the American organization. In America, the creation of a festival sparked storytelling interest and necessitated the development of an organization. In England and Wales, storytelling interest and revitalization predated the development of a national body by some twenty years. Unlike the American organization, the Society for Storytelling does not have a clear starting date:

An original aim of this present study was to identify the date of the beginning of the storytelling movement. No such date exists. . . . A useful starting point for the story of this emergence, however, is the middle-class *milieu* of European and North American education around the turn of the [Twentieth] century. At this time, following the lead of the writers and scholars noted above, teachers and educators gave great prominence to myth and fairy tale, both as spoken art and as literature, and storytelling was an established part of teacher training. (Heywood 17)

Heywood considered the 1966 Borough of Lambeth in London as the start of organized storytelling in Britain, when storytellers from libraries and from performance backgrounds were sent into public parks armed with sound systems to tell stories for children. After 1972 these park-based sessions moved into specific housing estates, targeted because of poor literacy rates and economic deprivation. At the same time, the

first full-time appointment of a local authority storyteller was made when the Inner London Education Authority hired the former English teacher Roberto Lagnado to visit schools. In 1981, one of the Lambeth Borough scheme participants, international teller Helen East, helped to form “Common Lore,” a theatre group based on multiculturalism and the oral tradition (int. 12 June 1988).

Multiculturalism was a strong theme in the 1980s English and Welsh storytelling scene while developing adult venues and adult audiences was another. The College of Storytellers opened in 1980 in Hampstead. Heywood wrote:

Its aim was, explicitly, “to revive the ancient art of storytelling” (Parkinson 1996). It thus set a further precedent, not simply for what later became known as the storytelling club or session, but for an openly revivalistic approach to storytelling. . . .(24)

More geared toward adult telling was the West London Storytelling Unit led by national storyteller Ben Haggarty, who left this in 1985 to establish the Crick Crack Club, arguably England and Wales's most influential monthly storytelling gathering (Heywood 25). It was Haggarty who would begin the debate that resulted in the formation of the Society for Storytelling in England and Wales. He called for a credentialization process for storytellers.

### **3.2.2 Credentials and the Society for Storytelling**

Offering credentials through a central organization is a topic of much debate among storytellers and shows an unresolved tension in the profession. On the one hand, storytellers like to espouse the inclusive view that “everyone is a storyteller.” Yet storytellers bemoan the fact that anyone can put out their shingle to declare themselves a



professional practitioner of the art. As a friend of mine says, “One bad storyteller can ruin your career”—by which she means a hiring agent experiencing a bad storyteller may be more likely to go with a different art form next time. An April 2006 discussion on the international listserver Storytell was receiving attention from British, American and Canadian tellers alike, debating the usefulness versus the limitations of credentials for storytellers. This debate has raged since the early days of storytelling. What follows is an examination of its British facet.

Professional storytelling in England and Wales enjoyed an extraordinary period of growth in the early 1990s. England and Wales had perhaps only a dozen professional storytellers in 1981 (East int. 12 June 1998). By 1990, the National Folktale Centre Directory compiled by Helen East and day-job teller Linda Cotterill listed one hundred storytellers. One year later, the number had almost doubled to 191 single tellers, eight tandem teams and eight companies (National Folktale Centre Directory 1991). The leap in storytellers corresponded with rising audience numbers, fueled additionally by a 1992 television series called By Word of Mouth, produced by Medlicott. This series led to a veritable explosion of weekly and monthly adult storytelling sessions, modeled after the Irish Yarnspinnners clubs established by international teller Liz Weir in Belfast, Cork and Dublin. These were small, community-oriented groups with attendance ranging from five to forty (Weir, conversation at Sperrin Mountains Storytelling Festival 2004).<sup>22</sup> As these groups proliferated, questions began to arise: What was the purpose of these community groups? What function did they serve within storytelling in Britain?

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<sup>22</sup> I was a featured storyteller at this festival. Liz Weir discussed Yarnspinnners and Irish storytelling generally over post-performance drinks.

The newer organizations springing up in the 1990s tended to have a less focused approach than their 1980 and 1970 counterparts:

Previously, lacking precedents or the support of an established scene, organisations . . . had tended to start with quite specific viewpoints and objectives, such as to revive adult storytelling. . . . In the 1990s, then, older groups therefore tended to retain some sense that, even within a diverse spread of activities, there was one specific kind of storytelling which, more than others, was their special concern. By contrast, starting with a clean slate, but at the same time with the precedent of ten years' diverse development by other organisations, [newer groups] aimed from the first to spread [their nets] as widely as possible over the range of available options. (Heywood 40)

Copying existing musical performance folk clubs that had gradually come to accept storytelling, tellers created folk clubs dedicated to narrative art. British tellers began to create places in which to perform and thus to develop interested listeners to perform for (Keding int. 21 Dec. 1998). Add in the fact that, from about 1984, storytelling was receiving an increasing share of grant money from the English Arts Council's literature department (Heywood 44), and one can almost write the script for the gathering storm. The new storytelling folk clubs formed organizations such as "London Yarnspinners" or "West Hampton Storytellers," operating on minimalist budgets and involving a mix of unpaid and paid tellers. This mixing of amateur and professional eroded what had up to this time been a rather clear distinction between the two. Heywood described the ensuing ill will:

Controversy broke out. The immediate issue was standards in professional storytelling, but there was a range of underlying anxieties about the new

eclecticism, not least its commercial and financial implications, as well as a more fundamental debate about the whole nature of tradition and the storytelling enterprise. . . . (45)

The matter came to a head through the voice of the aforementioned Haggarty. Haggarty was and is a mover and shaker in British professional storytelling. He directed Britain's first storytelling festival in 1985 and was a founding member of "The Company of Storytellers," now regarded as one of England's best touring storytelling companies by national teller Pat Ryan and regional teller Tina Bilbe (both of London) among others. Haggarty also founded the influential Crick-Crack Club, which became known for teaching storytelling development to new tellers. By 1992, Haggarty had eleven years of storytelling pioneering under his belt, including performances across Europe and consultative work with Globe Theatre in London and other notable institutions.

It was in 1992 that Haggarty wrote an unsolicited article for the British storytelling magazine Facts and Fiction, an independent publication run by the late Richard Walker (an international English storyteller). In his article "The Standards for Storytelling" Haggarty called for a professional standard of storytelling through assessment before an individual could lay claim to the title. This issue was alternately debated and ignored throughout the remainder of the 1990s and was partly responsible for the development of the Society for Storytelling. Medlicott suggested that it was a way of "forestalling" the debate on credentials (int. 10 June). The Society formed in 1993 as a national organization of voting members with an elected, voluntary board. The Society for Storytelling was intended to be

a facilitator and a platform for dialogue, sponsoring conferences and publications, promoting debate and discussion within the movement, and acting as an advocate and facilitator of storytelling outside it, in the arts and education, to business, and generally. (Heywood 48)

The Society saw, and continues to see, itself as primarily an information-dispensing service. On their website they explain:

**We aim...**

- to provide information on oral storytelling, stories, storytellers and storytelling events, such as storytelling festivals.
- to be a network for everyone interested in the exchange of knowledge regarding the art of oral storytelling. We encourage networking between members, especially those with specialist interests such as education, therapy, faiths and libraries, and publish fact sheets in some of these areas. Our annual membership list is published (to members only) in County order to facilitate local networking.
- to increase public awareness of the art, practice and value of oral storytelling and the narrative traditions of the peoples and cultures of the world.
- to promote the exploration and sharing of oral storytelling and stories, whether locally, regionally or internationally, formally or informally
- to advise on the nature and scope of oral storytelling.
- to develop contacts and liaise with organisations and individuals whose aims are complementary to ours, both nationally and internationally.

<[www.sfs.org.uk](http://www.sfs.org.uk), 2005>

With the formation of the Society for Storytelling, some concepts that had “floated about in the ether” were put on the back burner in English storytelling (Bilbe personal conversation). But in 1997, Haggarty brought a proposal to the Society for

Storytelling: a board of experienced storytellers should be set up as an agency providing credentials, determining who could be called “storyteller,” and who could not, in England and Wales. The credibility of the profession was at stake and required upholding. One of the attendees at the Annual Gathering Meeting, a membership and board meeting combined, was Pat Ryan, an American living permanently in London. Ryan had been active in London storytelling for “about six years” at that point. He described the Annual Gathering Meeting when Haggarty’s vetting scheme was officially put forward as “electric with tension.” Haggarty said he wanted to guarantee a quality of telling that “protected the professional use of the title ‘storyteller.’” (Ryan int. 10 June 1998). With supporters and detractors at the meeting, Haggarty proposed that the Society for Storytelling require tellers to prove a minimum competency, either by coursework or performative ability before a jury of peers. After Haggarty outlined his proposal

Mary Medlicott [a founding Society board member] stood up. You know what presence she has. And she said something like, ‘We have listened carefully to all Ben has to say.’ . . . And then she basically asked everyone to set it aside, table it rather than vote. (Ryan int. 10 June 1998)

Medlicott is an influential storyteller in the British scene, an international performer and author of numerous story collections with a commanding presence. In an interview she recalled the moment of setting aside the proposal as “necessary.” She hoped that the Society for Storytelling would now be “focused on getting on with the work. There was more in that proposal of detriment than of benefit to the storytelling community” (10 June 1998).

Nevertheless, the issue of “credentials” for professional storytellers in England and Wales continues to bubble below the surface, occasionally breaking through in opinion pieces from storytelling trade publications such as the late Walker’s Facts and Fiction, or the Society for Storytelling magazine Storylines. As the Society’s secretary Tina Bilbe<sup>23</sup> stated, “We have our skeletons rattling away in the cupboard. But we intend to get on with things” (int. 11 June 1998). Thus the Society for Storytelling rejected becoming an agency bestowing credentials.

### **3.3 The Storytellers of Canada/Conteurs du Canada**

The Storytellers of Canada/Conteurs du Canada (SC/CC) is a national organization in a dual language society. They describe themselves and their purpose as an inclusive organization dedicated to the promotion and preservation of storytelling:

#### **Who We Are**

We are a national organisation of storytellers. All friends of storytelling - tellers and listeners - are welcome.

We encourage the participation of all peoples: storytelling is a common root of all cultures.

We continue to develop storytelling as a distinct, recognised art form. We facilitate communication among storytellers and about storytelling.

#### **What We Do**

Storytellers of Canada (SC/CC) produces, publishes and updates the SC/CC Storytellers On-Line Directory.

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<sup>23</sup> Tina Bilbe is a day job teller at the Reading library, and performs outside her job about once a month in other libraries and schools.

We hold an Annual Conference, hosted in a different region every year, to do the business of SC/CC, share stories, culture and hospitality, and share and respond to storytelling issues.

Throughout the year, we preserve and promote storytelling, provide a forum for discussion and advocate with cultural agencies: SC/CC was instrumental in adding storytelling to Canada Council Literary grants and storytellers to the Canadian Childrens Book Centre annual book tour.

In 2001, SC/CC initiated the first Storyteller-in-Residence mentoring program in Canada. The mentorship project, based in Winnipeg and funded by the Canada Council for the Arts, has pioneered a mentoring model, which can be used in other centres across Canada. Resource guide available on request for future SC/CC sponsored mentorships. <[www.ss-cc.com](http://www.ss-cc.com) 2004>

### **3.3.1 What Created the Storytellers of Canada/Conteurs du Canada**

The American organization developed from a festival, the English/Welsh from a controversy. The Canadian organization grew from a wish to apply for grants. Planning for a Canadian national storytelling organization began in earnest in 1992, after years of discussion among Canadian tellers that such a body would be useful to obtain funding and influence opportunities for storytellers in federally-funded arts. Toronto children's author and regional teller Celia Lottridge said:

We had been talking for some time . . . at festivals, in our guild meetings, on e-mail, and we'd been saying for some time that we needed a national organization. Then the Canada Council, you know, the federal government, they were offering a kind of a storytelling grant, and that created a catalyst for storytellers, a sense of purpose, to make a lobby group for storytelling. We needed a national organization to get us

together. So in '92 our first meeting was in Montreal. Now we meet around the country each year. Rosalyn Cohen, she got that first meeting together, she's a Montreal Anglophone. Our hope was that we'd have members from coast to coast. And we've had the conference every year since, and made gradual progress. Now we have a newsletter. That was a big step up for communication.

[Wendy:] So Rosalyn was the one who got it going?

[Celia:] No, well, she was certainly one of the ones who did a lot of it, but she was really the Montreal meeting, getting that together. Jan Andrews, a lot of people, were involved with getting the group going. We wanted, I mean, we wanted an organization that wasn't just for Toronto, for Canadian storytellers. In Toronto, training opportunities and defining storytelling are all the big debates. We wanted to move away from that.

(int. 10 July 2004)

Although the organization was developed by Anglophone Canadians, they quickly became aware that part of Canada's heritage had been "left out," and changed the name to Storytellers of Canada/Conteurs du Canada. The organization now tries to keep at least one Francophone on the executive board (Lottridge int. 10 July 2004). Of 144 tellers listed in the on-line directory as of December 2004, fourteen were from Quebec, eight being Francophones <<http://www.sc-cc.com/english/directory.htm>>.

Of the national organizations examined here, Storytellers of Canada/Conteurs du Canada was the last to be formed. Like the Society for Storytelling, it was organized after many groups had already developed by region or special interest within the nation. Although this dissertation will not focus on regional organizations, it may give the reader perspective to know that the Storytellers of Canada/Conteurs du Canada formed years after most of the regional associations in the country. The Vancouver Storytelling Circle



began in 1986, developing into the Vancouver Society of Storytelling in 1991. The Storytellers' Guild of Montreal formed in 1990; the Yukon International Storytelling Festival began in 1988, sparking a regional storytelling organization to support it in 1989. Toronto's storytelling scene has been organized since the late 1970s, encompassing the Storytellers School of Toronto, the 1001 Nights storytelling club and, later, the Toronto Storytelling Festival.

Perhaps one reason for this late blooming is the Canadian storytelling community's commitment to decentralized formation. In 1998, Stone observed:

In Canada the situation is further complicated by the recent establishment of an informal network, Storytellers of Canada, that has met for the past three years in different cities. The commitment to decentralization has been very strong, as well as the wish to avoid formal dues. As of this writing, S.O.C. is an informal communication network linking groups and individual tellers across the country. How long it can exist in this loose form is a question that can only be asked and not answered at this point.

(54)

Note that by 2004 Lottridge described the SC/CC as an established organization, while in 1998 Stone gave it informal status. A wish to avoid centralization, coupled with such a vast and relatively under-populated country, may have led to strong regional foci rather than a national one. Lottridge supported this theory:

It takes five hours just to fly between B.C. and Toronto. If you hold a festival, and you invite non-regional tellers, you need a whopping travel budget. Your money just gets eaten up by the travel. . . . We are more regionally focused. We have to be. Vancouver is a long way from Toronto.

(int. 10 July 2004)

The United States shares Canada's size problems, although it is much more densely populated, and there are certainly many regional storytelling organizations in America. However, these organizations began after the formation of a festival and a national organization. In Canada, the regional organizations almost always preceded the national ones, usually by several years.

Storytellers of Canada/Conteurs du Canada had no wish to develop quickly, said Gail deVos, a national storyteller from Alberta. A storytelling course instructor for educators at the University of Alberta and author of numerous books on storytelling, particularly on working with teenagers, DeVos is in charge of membership records and services for Storytellers of Canada/Conteurs du Canada. She described the mutual wish for “organic” growth in Canada’s organization:

I got involved at a secondary meeting that coincided with the 1993 National Storytelling Conference held in Seattle. Because it was so close to our border, there were numerous Canadians at the conference and we spoke to the need for a Canadian organization in much the same way that NAPPS (as it was then) was available for American storytellers. We also agreed to the decision made at the first SCCC conference held in Montreal that we would move slowly, shaping the organization organically rather than imposing a shape on it. And basically that is what we have been doing ever since. Moving slowly and steadily, holding one conference a year in various locations across this country. (e-int. 26 June 2004)

### **3.3.2 How Storytellers of Canada/Conteurs du Canada Benefits Canadian Tellers**

Moving slowly and steadily has not held the Storytellers of Canada/Conteurs du Canada back from making an impact on Canadian storytelling. The organization oversees

the highly successful StorySave project, which records elders from the First Nations communities and Anglophones and Francophones from Canada's historical professions such as farming and fishing <[www.sc-cc.com](http://www.sc-cc.com)>. Moreover

I am not sure if it really does anything for storytellers on the ground since many of them do not seem to involve themselves with the organization (or even know about it for that matter) but it has made inroads for acknowledging storytelling as an art form with government agencies and others who were not really sure where storytelling fit. Since SCCC, storytelling and storytellers are recognized by major funding agencies and storytellers now tour along with children's authors and illustrators as part of a week long celebration of Canadian children's books hosted by the Canadian Children's Book Centre. SCCC is the one who vets the applications for the tellers for this organization -- but they were also responsible for lobbying for the inclusion of the tellers in the first place.

As a storytelling instructor at the university level, the national organization gives the art a sort of legitimacy for those who have not yet embraced that mode of thought. If it is not just a local thing -- perhaps it can be taken seriously!!!! (e-int. De Vos 26 June 2004).

Lottridge agreed that the Storytellers of Canada/Conteurs du Canada provided support and access. "For me, I've learned about other storytellers, sites, opportunities . . ." (int. 10 July 2004).

Storytellers of Canada/Conteurs du Canada does offer professional advice for storytellers. The organization suggests both professional behavior and business etiquette on its website:

#### **SC/CC Guidelines for Professional Storytellers**

These guidelines are for all storytellers. They lay the foundation for all

storytellers in their pursuit of excellence in the art of storytelling.

What is a Professional Storyteller?

- A professional storyteller has the ability to deliver a varied program of told stories which reflect an understanding and respect for the lineage of the stories.
- A professional storyteller has the ability to present a résumé that demonstrates public performance experience and ongoing professional development.
- A professional storyteller maintains active participation in a storytelling association and storytelling community.

What are Professional Fees for storytellers?

- A minimum of \$125 for a performance up to one hour should be the basis upon which a professional storyteller negotiates his/her fee.
- For workshops, a minimum of \$250 per hour is recommended.
- If the teller wishes to work for a fee lower than this due to personal or community considerations, he/she has an obligation to inform the presenter that the above is the recognized fee for the service <www.sc-cc.com 2004>.

Canadian tellers do not yet consider these policy and praxis suggestions binding, either voluntarily or as something firmer. Given its wish to be reflective of rather than to shape Canadian telling, the organization may not move into too much advice-giving. Merle Harris, a regional teller from Alberta, said she thought of the organization more as an opportunity to network than a source of advice:

I think the opportunity to get together annually, the SC/CC provide that. And a chance to meet up with people. The newsletter, we just started that, is important. Keeping up with what other people are doing, really. It provides that.

[Wendy:] Do they set policy for Canadian storytellers, advice and all that?

[Merle:] Well, yes, sort of. We're still pretty new. I think that role will grow in the coming years. (int. 10 July 2004)

De Vos seemed to sum up plans for the Storytellers of Canada/Conteurs du Canada in her comment, “. . . SC/CC hasn't had a large presence yet -- but I do believe it is coming” (e-int. 26 June 2004).

### **3.4 The Scottish Storytelling Centre and the Scottish Storytelling Forum**

There are several arms to Scotland's main organization, the Scottish Storytelling Centre (SSC). “The Scottish Storytelling Centre” refers both to an organization and a physical space, the latter within the Netherbow Arts Centre on Edinburgh's High Street, in the historic John Knox house. Its 72-seat theatre hosts storytelling concerts throughout the year. The Scottish Storytelling Centre is governed by the Scottish Storytelling Forum, a group of some fifteen (in 2003) people who are board members. The Scottish Storytelling Centre also has three full-time staff, in addition to contracted special project employees. The SSC staff oversees the Scottish International Storytelling Festival.

#### **3.4.1 History and Development of the Scottish Storytelling Centre**

The SSC developed from a festival. The Scottish International Storytelling Festival started in 1989 and the Scottish Storytelling Forum (SSF) emerged as a loosely organized governing body for the festival in 1992. Because Scotland is a small country with only an estimated six million people, the definition of the Scottish Storytelling Forum's duties was not pronounced. At that time the Forum was a quasi-social group of people who told stories professionally and as a hobby. Storytellers working regularly in

Edinburgh were invited to join the Forum. As interest in storytelling expanded beyond putting on the festival to other venues and aspects of storytelling, the Scottish Storytelling Centre was established in 1997 and the Scottish Storytelling Forum mutated into the SSC board.

The question arises whether the SSC created the interest in storytelling, or capitalized on existing interest. According to Donald Smith, founding director of the Scottish Storytelling Centre, it was the latter. Scotland had already experienced a resurgence of interest in folksong and in Traveller culture. These led to an expansion of interest in storytelling, as Smith explained in Storytelling Scotland: A Nation in Narrative:

With the birth of the Scottish Storytelling Festival in 1989, audiences began to experience a range of oral narrative, including traditional storytellers from different parts of Scotland, storytellers from other cultures and some storytellers who developed their material from contemporary experience . . . . Out of this new energy in 1990, came the Guid Crack Club, a monthly storytelling gathering open to all-comers, and in 1992, a Scottish Storytelling Forum, embracing established storytellers, enthusiasts and learners, teachers, librarians, ministers, social workers and countryside rangers. The 'rediscovered' live art of storytelling was taken into schools, libraries, care centres, forests, camp sites, museums and arts centres. Funding bodies began to take notice and more people began to think of themselves as storytellers. In 1997, the George Mackay Brown Scottish Storytelling Centre was set up by the Storytelling Forum at The Netherbow to resource and develop this expanding network. (167-168)

While storytelling expanded to new venues, those credited with starting the revival were not members of the Scottish Storytelling Forum, nor involved with where and how

storytelling spread. Linda Williamson, former wife of Duncan Williamson, was a board member, but her husband and other Travellers were not. The Scottish Storytelling Forum's members are part of the vetting process for listing storytellers in its directory. Two Forum members must see a performance (each) of the prospective candidate before the candidate can be admitted to the Directory. By 2003 the Centre listed 104 tellers as approved and available for hire in its directory. About nine of these were Travellers.

### **3.4.2 The Scottish Storytelling Centre's Influence on Storytelling in Definition and Practice**

The "Storytellers in Scotland" Directory 2000 also gave a definition of storytelling. The Scottish Storytelling Centre asks and answers the question "What is storytelling?" at the beginning of its national register of professional tellers:

#### **WHAT IS STORYTELLING?**

Stories are woven into the fabric of everyday life in anecdote, news and gossip. They are part of the way in which we understand our environment and experience, and come to terms with them. So what makes storytelling different?

The emphasis in traditional storytelling is as much on the telling as the story. This kind of storytelling is not based on memorisation of a written text: it is an improvised art form in which certain patterns and structures (i.e. sequence of events, key phrases, images, dramatic shifts of mood and emotion) form the memory deposit, but overlaid on them is the character, mood and style of the storyteller and his or her audience. In this way stories are passed on through generations and recreated by the teller at each narration.

As for these stories, many are traditional folktales, because they represent in a very rich form the oral process of shaping and telling. They

are the product of a community experience as well as the art of individual storytellers. But historical stories, legends and contemporary stories can equally be the subject of the storyteller's art if they have been shaped for oral telling and if they embody some sort of community or collective experience.

The art of storytelling does not date, irrespective of the age of its materials. The kind of expressive skills, and the exercise of the verbal and visual imaginations, are as essential a part of our humanity now as when our remote ancestors first evolved narrative art. (3)

The Scottish Storytelling Centre's definition of storytelling is important for Scottish storytellers because the Centre exerts a strong influence on hiring tellers in Scotland. The SSC books the Scottish International Storytelling Festival, publishes the national storytelling directory, and decides through a vetting process who may be listed in it. This listing has ramifications for the "Writers in Scotland" scheme run by the Scottish Arts Council. The scheme allows schools to book storytellers at half their fee; the other half is paid by the Arts Council. All storytellers in the Directory are automatically included in the roster of approved artists for this scheme. "Writers in Scotland" is one example of the ways in which Scottish storytelling work is dependent on the Scottish Storytelling Centre. Another is the Storymakers Report.

The Children's Storytelling Coordinator position in the Scottish Storytelling Centre was created at the close of a 2001 project called "Storymakers." Two tellers, both education specialists working in Edinburgh, were appointed by Smith to document ways in which storytellers were using stories to work with children across Scotland. Thirty-four storytellers were interviewed about projects they had created independently, but the



published report removed their names from their projects, making it appear that everything described had been established by the Centre (Storymakers Report). One international teller called several of the interviewed tellers to solicit their opinions.<sup>24</sup> Finding dissatisfaction from other tellers about the situation, he wrote a complaint letter to Donald Smith. In response Smith wrote that “all work done by storytellers registered with the SSC reflects on the SSC.” The teller who complained said, “It wasn’t clear whether this meant ‘what you do belongs to us’ or what” (telephone conversation 27 Apr. 2002). What did become clear was that a poor relationship with the Scottish Storytelling Center might adversely affect a storyteller’s work in Scotland, so the teller in question dropped the inquiry. The SSC later offered to put together an appendix of storytellers and their projects to be attached to the report, which was being sold for £5 (about \$8 Canadian). The appendix had not been compiled as of March 2006.

### **3.5 Analyzing and Comparing the Histories of the National Organizations**

At first glance there are obvious similarities between the American and Scottish organizations even though they developed some twenty years apart. Strong parallels between the organizations in Canada and England/Wales are also easy to discern, along with some differences.

#### **3.5.1 Similarities Are Likely Not Intentional**

However, it is important that limitations on this analysis of similarities be recognized. The Scottish and US organizations are alike, but Scotland’s national

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<sup>24</sup> I was one of the tellers interviewed and one of those called by the teller who wrote the complaint letter.

organization (the later of the two to develop) did not model itself on America's. In an interview about his organization's history, Smith made clear that Scotland developed along its own path:

The Society for Storytelling was not really a role model. No, we did no serious investigation of how storytelling in England or Wales was taking place. After all, can you really work with an organization that covers primarily only England, but calls itself the UK national organization for storytelling? (int. 6 April 1999)

Smith was concerned that people not think Scotland had been following England's development. Given the geographic proximity and the cultural history between the two countries, his concern is unsurprising. Smith did not overtly address US storytelling during the interview, but he repeatedly dismissed the idea that Scotland had taken thoughts on storytelling administration or praxis from other examples. During my tenure on the Scottish Storytelling Forum's board, American storytelling was never mentioned as a role model. Indeed, in some cases the Scottish Storytelling Forum and Centre were careful to distance themselves from American involvement. For instance, the US National Storytelling Network runs "Tellabration," one night each year in November when people around the world set up venues for telling stories, primarily to adults. In the early 2000s, the Forum began "National Tell-A-Story Day," similar in theme to Tellabration but held in October. When I mentioned Tellabration to Smith just prior to a board meeting, he said he had not heard of it before, but saw no reason to participate in an existing event rather than to create one for Scotland (personal conversation). Thus it is important to understand that, although the developments may be parallel, it is not because

Scotland intended any deliberate imitation of American storytelling. It is also interesting that Scotland is the only organization examined here using a vetting process for the giving out of credentials. As mentioned earlier, credentials from a central organization is a debate that never really ends in the storytelling profession—except, perhaps, in Scotland, where the subject did not arise in interviews.

Likewise, the storytelling organizations in England/Wales and Canada differ from the US and Scottish models in several ways while sharing attributes between themselves. Yet there is no evidence to support that the Canadian organization modeled itself on England and Wales, and no storyteller consulted thought this was likely. The response of Canadian Merle Harris, educator and storyteller, was typical: “England? We don’t have ties with England. Well, historically, but not in storytelling” (int. 10 July 2004)

### **3.5.2 Identifiable Similarities and Differences**

The most evident similarities and differences between the organizations examined here are:

- All four organizations and the constituencies they serve draw on oral tradition as a foundation of professional storytelling. With the exception of Scotland, they draw on additional influences, but differences emerge as to which are considered the greater influences.
- The United States and Scotland have designated buildings that house physical offices and display centers. These locations display a strong geographic influence. Neither the Canadian nor the English/Welsh national organization has offices outside individual homes.

- The organizations appear to differ significantly in their desire for and use of national control. While all the organizations charge a listing fee for entry in their registry, only Scotland requires a vetting process as well. Canada seems disinterested in a centralized presence, while in America the storytelling organizations have reacted to organic growth in somewhat ambiguous ways. In England, the opportunity to exert central control was turned down. The American and Scottish organizations developed a festival first, an organization second, and now hire storytellers for specific work contexts that they control. Neither the Canadian nor the English/Welsh organization runs a festival nor hires storytellers; these organizations developed after several regional and special interest groups were in place and the storytelling movement had been thriving for some years.

An analysis of how these characteristics impact upon their national storytelling communities follows.

### ***3.5.2.1 Oral and Literary Traditions as Foundational Influences on Professional Storytelling***

All four organizations recognized oral tradition as a foundation for professional storytelling. Only Scotland recognized it as the sole foundation; other countries included literature, theatre, religious and other influences in their backgrounds. Examined here are the intertwining of oral tradition and literacy—primarily through librarians—in each country. Much of this examination chases a chicken-and-egg question of vexing

proportions, for this section deals with the how the professional storytelling community sees itself and with what the organizations profess as their foundational influences.

Both Smiths—Donald in Scotland and Jimmy Neil in America—tied themselves to the identifiable oral traditions of distinct people groups in their areas, the American Smith to Appalachians, the Scottish Smith to Travellers. Jimmy Neil Smith used existing local talent to promote storytelling where he could find it when he began his Jonesborough festival (personal conversation, National Storytelling Festival 4 Oct. 2004). Although there had been a revival of interest in storytelling previously in America and other countries, that movement had died down with the advent of television (Kane 1990: 66). According to McConnell, J.N. Smith had to “practically start from scratch, a few teachers and librarians” to find tellers for his festival. And the style of telling in the US National Storytelling Festival’s early years was region-specific, McConnell and Smith agreed. “Honey, it was all Appalachia” (McConnell int. 16 July 1999).

The Scottish International Storytelling Festival evolved from positive responses to Traveller storytellers featured at the Netherbow Arts Centre’s theatre, in the first Scottish International Storytelling Festival. Traveller tellers Duncan Williamson and Willie McPhee worked alongside professional tellers David Campbell and McVicar, now both recognized as international storytellers. The strong oral traditions of Appalachia and the Scottish Travellers were foundational in developing professional storytelling in America and Scotland, respectively. Let me now examine the literary traditions that also influenced storytelling development.

### ***3.5.2.2 Library Influences in Canada***

The Storytellers of Canada/Conteurs du Canada and the Society for Storytelling both celebrate a strong library influence. Heywood cited Toronto as the main development point from which library storytelling spread in Canada. In the 1950s, the Boys' and Girls' House (the children's public library) offered storytelling events for children and training to staff (21). Stone also found that Toronto librarians influenced Canadian storytelling in a positive way. When storytelling began to take off in Toronto in the 1970s, it was pioneering work, flying blind. Up to that point storytelling as a pastime did not always enjoy a good reputation with the general public, being considered a library activity for children:

Even at the peak of school and library activities [in the 1950s], the public at large did not give storytelling the same respect it had in traditional communities; it was not regarded as significant artistic expression for adults, nor was it part of the broader culture. Despite this, librarians and teachers who continued to tell stories regularly and enthusiastically were able to develop into skilled and artistic narrators who could bring the printed word into full and vibrant life. Such tellers kept storytelling alive and very dynamic for more than a century, and provided the firm base on which organized storytelling continues to grow and blossom. (Stone 1998: 18)

But as storytelling increased in adult popularity, librarians and teachers became the founders of the first storytelling guilds in Canada and instructors in courses offered to would-be professional storytellers. “Such guilds set a pattern that still influences

organized storytelling today . . .” (Stone 1998: 35). Librarians are also the largest occupational group represented at Canadian storytelling festivals:

In terms of numerical strength, library-educational storytelling is still often the most strongly represented category at festivals, since storytellers with this training already had a wealth of experience before storytelling events became popular in the 1980s. (Stone 1998: 29)

Although the public may not have been noticing or respecting these committed individuals prior to their appearances on festival stages, the professional storytelling community in Canada shows no ambivalence as to their importance. Kathleen Bailey is a former librarian in Toronto who trained under Canadian library storyteller Alice Kane. Bailey cited two librarians of significant influence: Kane, and Lillian Smith.

Ontario-born Smith’s influence extended beyond Canada, for she worked with Anne Carroll Moore, head of the New York Public Library’s children’s department, and an influential woman in American storytelling. Smith went to New York in 1911 and stayed one year before returning to Canada to organize Toronto Library’s children’s department. Ten years later, in 1922, the library opened the Boys and Girls House, a separate building specifically designed to serve children. As one innovation, she designated a room on the top floor of the house as “a professional study room. Here, in spare time, the staff could read the *Heimskringla*, *The High History of the Holy Grail*, various versions of Ulysses’ wanderings, or the heroic stories of Roland and Charlemagne” (6). Such influences worked their way into Smith’s storytelling plans, Bailey recalled:

Lillian Smith totally influenced the Boys and Girls House. She told stories in sequence, and she got other librarians to do that. So each would learn a piece, and one week you would get a piece of some knight saga in the Beaches Branch, and next Saturday another teller would tell the next part somewhere else. They were hero stories, cycles of hero stories. That was in the 1930s and 1940s. We don't do that today, you know. (telephone interview 9 Nov. 2006)

Bailey came to storytelling too late to learn under Smith, but Kane, who was a prodigy of Smith, trained Bailey.

Alice was amazing, simply amazing. She always told you, hold the story out like a gift, and that's what she did. When she told a story, she just disappeared. You know? . . . I was lucky to take two courses from her. That was in about 1980. I commuted on a bus overnight to do that, so I could fit it in with my job. She was teaching for the Storytellers School of Toronto.

Alice's influence was tremendous in terms of both library telling and others in the city telling stories. There was a smorgasbord of people then, doctors, from all over, someone from Sweden I remember. She helped lots of storytellers launch. And you know the Toronto School imported people from outside Canada. They always wanted different flavors and types of storytelling. (tel. int. 9 Nov. 2006)

Kane owed her own storytelling career to Smith's influence. A shy girl with a stammer (63) she had no desire to be a storyteller. But

In Lillian Smith's Boys and Girls Division of the Toronto Public Library, storytelling was an integral part of the work. It was not an atmosphere in which stars were born or prima donnas encouraged, but every children's librarian from the august senior staff to the newest member was expected to be able to tell stories completely and acceptably without excuses and, above all, without gimmicks. (63)



Kane overcame her initial shyness to become what Bailey described as “one of the most influential teachers of storytelling” at the Storytellers School of Toronto (tel. int. 9 Nov. 2006). This came about in part because Kane took a position in Parkdale, a branch library of Toronto, in the 1960s. Parkdale became a “success story” told again and again in libraries—where, Canadian storyteller Rita Cox is quick to point out, storytelling had never gone away as an enthralling pastime.

Cox, a Trinidad-born, American-educated librarian, relieved Kane as the Parkdale children’s librarian in 1972, and called her “a great influence in my life” (tel. int. 21 Nov. 2006). Coming from Trinidad, Cox was the product of an active oral tradition and already an accomplished storyteller. She trained in librarianship at Colombia, in the same system that educated Anne Carol Moore. She found her heritage and her education useful in Parkdale, a community she described as “very mixed ethnically and also socio-economically, with many needs for literacy, for cross-cultural communication, for social action.” It was the success of Parkdale and similar projects that led to the formation of a storytelling school.

Toronto Public Library had a strong public storytelling tradition, and gathered crowds still when no one else was telling stories. Story hours lasted a long time, everyone was coming. . . And Dan Yashinsky, you know, he was a young man then [in the 1970s] and he was something of a groupie, and he hung around the librarians and the branches, and he was the one who got the Storytellers School of Toronto going, with so many of us [Toronto librarians] on board. I was in that from the beginning. My hat is off to Dan, because he united us, he brought us together, from so many

different backgrounds, and it was the librarians who trained people in how to tell stories. . . .

Alice Kane was fantastic [teaching at the Toronto School]. She could stand absolutely still as a block and take you into magic world. The theatrical storytellers, many of these actors and people who are turning to storytelling now, they are unlearning the gestures and the exaggerated ways of speaking they learned in theatre. . . .

Asked whether librarians received their due place in the storytelling scene of Toronto specifically and Canada generally, she was enthusiastic in her affirmative response:

Women were at root of it, because libraries in Canada carried on storytelling as an essential part of their job description. Toronto Public Library was known for tellers for many generations, long before the revival. Toronto Public Library never lost it. I've trained storytellers in the libraries for years, and now each year at the Toronto Festival we have a session called Off the Shelf which is all librarians. I think people recognize this [the contribution that librarians made] and even look to the libraries for support. Storytelling is sexy now. . . . Everywhere there is a festival now. We still benefit from that groundwork today.

It was not only in Toronto that library women made up the driving force of professional storytelling for day-job tellers and those pursuing full-time telling careers. A former coordinator of the Yukon Storytelling Festival in Whitehorse also cited women with library backgrounds as the people behind that storytelling scene. Former or current

librarians hold most of the offices and positions associated with the Storytellers of Canada/Conteurs du Canada and its publication Appleseed Quarterly.<sup>25</sup>

Mumbi Jonson, a lecturer and regional storyteller from Toronto, thought one explanation for this unapologetic embracing of women and literary influences could be the association of storytelling with writing groups in Toronto. Some writers in this group, including the aforementioned Cox, came from a library background. The Storytellers School of Toronto has long been appreciative of, even in some ways derived from, writing organizations. Jonson added:

I think women in Canadian storytelling have felt comfortable because they have been so welcomed and supported in the writers' associations. We never had to move in; we were always there. That's affected the library situation, because there's a strong overlap. (int. 12 May 1998)

### ***3.5.2.3 Library Influences in England and Wales***

Like Canada, England and Wales have been significantly impacted by female librarians. Those with profound influence include Marie Shedlock, Eileen Colwell, Trinidadian Grace Hallworth and Canadian Alice Kane. Shedlock was author of The Art of the Storyteller. French-born but English-educated, she entered the world of storytelling around 1904, as a schoolteacher. Traveling across Britain as a voice advocating the use of storytelling in classrooms and libraries, her influence spread to America in 1906. Eileen Colwell trained as a librarian in her native Yorkshire and moved to London in 1926 to take up a challenging position as a pioneer in children's librarianship. Soon her inner-

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<sup>25</sup> This Canadian journal of storytelling was, until the late 1990s, published by the Toronto School of Storytelling. It is now published jointly by the Toronto School of Storytellers and Storytellers of Canada/Conteurs du Canada.

library was a model for others to follow. Colwell put together several storytelling clubs and told stories in so many sessions that, at the time of her death in 2002, she had worked with “up to 40,000 children. Her anthologies, including Princess Splendour and other Stories (1969) and The Magic Umbrella and other Stories for Telling (1977), reflect this work” (Obituary, The Guardian, 25 Sept. 2002). Colwell also wrote the Storyteller’s Handbook, a 1980s classic that updated British storytelling praxis from Shedlock’s earlier The Art of the Storyteller. Grace Hallworth, author and storyteller from the Caribbean tradition, moved to England from Trinidad in 1956 to work in Hertfordshire’s children’s library (Heywood 20). She became a professional storyteller in 1981 and wrote story collections. Alice Kane was a Toronto children’s librarian in the post-World War II era. She co-founded the Storytellers School of Toronto in 1979, and is the author of Songs and Sayings of an Ulster Childhood, edited by Edith Fowke. Shedlock, Kane and Colwell dedicated their lives to the principle that storytelling should be a part of British children’s library services (Sawyer 18) from the 1900s through the 1950s. Then television appeared, with a crippling effect on library story times. Participation plummeted (Kane 1990: 66). But the Lambeth scheme was hovering into view on the horizon.

Medlicott, asked about librarian influence in her country, identified two library schemes as important in influencing the British scene overall: the Lambeth Borough housing scheme’s outreaches in London; and the success of the Belfast library storytelling sessions run by international storyteller Liz Weir during “The Troubles” (Medlicott int. 10 June 1998).

As early as 1966 in the economically challenged Borough of Lambeth in London, teams of storytellers armed with portable amplification told in parks. Paralleling the Canadian scheme in Parkdale, the purpose was to promote local library services to children from the Lambeth Borough and thereby strengthen community spirit. This scheme hired Helen East as one of its first non-librarian storytellers (Heywood 23). The other tellers were librarians and English teachers (East int. 12 June 1998). One of these was Frances Craig, who retired in 2003 as head of Children's Services for Dunfermline Library in Scotland. Craig started working with Lambeth's storytelling scheme in 1968, and spent the next seven years in the borough. She remembered the scheme's dynamic creator with great fondness as an unsung heroine, and pointed out that American library storytelling had a strong impact on Britain (Craig was given a draft of this dissertation's section on librarians.):

[Janet Hill] was an extremely dynamic person. To my mind only Eileen Colwell did more to establish storytelling as a legitimate role for a librarian. . . . Only weeks before I started in Lambeth [as a library assistant] Janet had returned from a year's exchange in the USA. It was during this year that she caught the spark which fired her enthusiasm. She had observed and indeed been involved in storytelling projects while in the States and was determined to set up something similar in Lambeth.

I shall never forget encountering her in the entrance hall of the Central Library one morning. I, a relative rookie, was going in as she was coming out. She stopped me and announced that she was setting up a team of storytellers. There was to be a planning meeting. "You will make sure that you are free to come along," and off she went, leaving

me stunned and thinking - she didn't even ask me if I was interested or indeed whether I knew anything about storytelling!

Needless to say the team was set up. It consisted of Janet, her assistant - a very charismatic Indian librarian who was a brilliant storyteller and those staff who were responsible for running Children's Libraries (none of us trained!)

Janet drew up an ambitious itinerary taking in local parks, play schemes, the dismally shabby courtyards at the foot of the high-rise council flats and a children's home and we were dispatched in pairs to practice our art! It was truly a character forming experience. Helen [East] did not exaggerate.

The first venture was so successful that in subsequent years Janet decided to expand the scheme by recruiting additional storytellers from the local community. So we found ourselves working alongside a fascinating mix of people - a number of teachers . . . [but] there were also students, an Australian minister, aspiring actors, etc. etc.

The fact that this project ever got off the ground was entirely due to the determination of one woman - Janet Hill. Her inspiration was that experience she had in the States. Apart from Eileen Colwell's very well respected pioneering work in the '50s and '60s there was no similar tradition in England at that time (letter 6 June 2004)

As Craig pointed out, one should not ignore the part that American librarians played in getting the Lambeth scheme going. It would be impossible to deny the positive influence of libraries and librarians overall, asserted Helen East. As a participant in the Lambeth scheme, East felt she had learned to tell a story under any circumstances, including standing in a crowd with no microphone, with people doing "all sorts of things you don't even want to know about all around me." For her, there was no possibility of

denying this background, or of wishing to: “The libraries gave us the opportunities. We are, I think, all of us grateful” (int. 12 June 1998).

Craig's comment on the number of non-librarians joining the scheme's second year shows how strongly its influence was felt, and not just inside libraries. If the Lambeth scheme did not spread within libraries, it certainly made itself felt on the burgeoning folk scene. Medlicott, now regarded as a founding mother of the British storytelling scene, was one of those who answered a newspaper ad for people to tell stories in strange settings and thus became in 1980 a storyteller with the Lambeth scheme. At that time, Medlicott said she “was a budding journalist with a vague interest in folky things” (int. 10 June 1998).

While North Ireland is not part of the Society for Storytelling in England and Wales, Medlicott also identified it as one of the great influences on professional storytelling in England and Wales. There, a library storytelling scheme was run by Liz Weir, a former librarian who now works internationally as a professional storyteller. Weir describes here her work as Director of Children's Services in the 1970s:

I used to run a scheme in Belfast where we sent storytellers—mostly story readers, I have to say, but some came over from America and Canada and they were approaching it differently [telling without the book]—to places throughout the city, because Belfast was so troubled then that we put on lots of activities for children. Keep them off the streets, keep their minds off things. So I had eight storytellers, doing up to sixty sessions a week.  
(int. 4 Aug. 1997)

This was during the infamous “Belfast Troubles” and the legend of this scheme runs deep as a positive influence on a divided city. Her former telling partner, international

storyteller Billy Teare said, “I think Liz Weir has done more to change the situation in Ireland than any woman—any man or woman—living. Never mind politicians. She brought people together when they were blowing each other apart” (Mainstage speech at Seacat Storytelling Festival 3 Aug. 1997).<sup>26</sup>

Weir did not remember particular names of American or Canadian storytellers involved in the scheme, but she did recall them as having a style of storytelling different from that of Irish librarians: without the book, more lively and somewhat polished (int. 4 Aug. 1997).

#### *3.5.2.4 Library Influences in the United States*

Here is a conundrum, for the US storytelling scene does not necessarily indicate a great respect for American librarian storytellers, while British tellers cite them as crucially influential. Librarians are very much in evidence in the American storytelling occupation, both historically and in the present. A significant number of those who have told at the US National Storytelling Festival since its inception have been librarians, including Elizabeth Ellis, Gayle Ross, Diane Wolkstein and Beth Horner, all librarians who eventually quit their day jobs to pursue storytelling full-time. Carol Birch and Barbara McBride Smith are national storytellers who continue to be librarians. Janice Del Negro is a national teller who was a librarian and is now editor of the *Bulletin of the Center for Children’s Books* at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign. Board member Margaret Read MacDonald is the head of Children’s Services for Seattle Public Library.

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<sup>26</sup> Liz Weir was honored during this festival as one of the peacemakers of Ireland by a surprise delegation from the audience, headed by Teare and Irish singer/songwriter Colum Sands.



Asked on Storytell what influence tellers felt librarians had had on the profession, the librarian participants (mostly Americans) were swift to respond that it was not only those who performed at Jonesborough who should be honored as pioneers, but also the named and unnamed librarians who nursed the flickering flame of oral narrative prior to 1973. Susanna Holstein, a community librarian, storyteller and past president of the West Virginia Storytelling Guild, spoke for many when she said that “libraries kept storytelling alive during a time when storytelling was dying out in communities and homes, replaced by radio, TV, and movies” (e-int. 15 Aug. 1999).

Yet for all their visibility in the profession today and in the past, librarians appear to occupy a somewhat ambivalent position in American storytelling. Regional storyteller and former librarian Suzie Schaeffer commented:

Having come to storytelling as a librarian and being a teller who works with children more than adults, and very young children most of the time, there are times when I feel as if what I'm doing isn't considered 'real' storytelling by some (much? Most?) of the current storytelling world. Yet without those librarian tellers and other tellers to children, there wouldn't have been enough left of telling to have a renaissance when it came. (Sp 15 Aug. 1999)

Literature on professional storytelling supports Schaeffer's feelings of denigration. As one example, national storyteller Milbre Burch wrote:

The word *storytelling* has a bad rap in America, except when invoked with poetic license to describe the craft of a filmmaker or novelist. Otherwise, it seems to call to mind the image of a musty librarian reading from a book to a group of two-year-olds (18).

Tellers in America point out unwillingness for professionals to align themselves with stereotypes of libraries as musty, disenfranchised places. Regional teller Faye Hansen (in Arkansas) said when festival organizers discover she is a former librarian, they tend not to place a high value on her. “‘Oh, another one,’ you can hear them thinking” (Sp 21 Aug. 1999). This revealing comment suggests that perhaps professional tellers in the United States do not so much wish to disassociate with librarians in their past as with librarians in their future. Storytelling has evolved from children's entertainment to high art, even to tours organized by the Kennedy Center (Ross int. 5 Aug. 1997) and a storyteller at the 1996 inauguration of Bill Clinton.<sup>27</sup> The art has become marketable, but to draw too much attention to the librarians might call some of this market authenticity into question. By market authenticity, I mean the development of storytelling into something more than a tradition, namely a viable and sustainable profession. It might be safe to say that while storytelling has worked hard on its sexy, enticing image, librarians suffer from an unsexy stereotype. Therefore, the syllogism postulates, storytelling associated with librarians may not be sexy or enticing. Perhaps “ignoring librarians” is, as David Holt suggested, an unintentional byproduct of the US festival, with its performances before largely adult crowds. The rallying cry has become, “It isn't just for kids anymore.” (int. 9 July 2002).

But storytellers continue to work within and without libraries. Perhaps fewer librarians will achieve international recognition in the future, or break out of regional festival telling into the national scene, but then, librarians have day jobs in which they

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<sup>27</sup> Diane Ferlatte told the story “How the People Pushed the Sky Up.”

can tell, and it would be absurd to suggest that every storytelling librarian in America wants to become an international teller. Librarians are valued in educational contexts. Hansen found that although festival organizers did not seem to have much use for her, a school librarian background was a bonus in working with children:

I figure I get booked into schools because that is my background—I speak the language and my programs are directly pertinent to the needs of the educators that sponsor me. With pressure on test scores, etc. this is more frequently true for school market bookings—could be that women are more easily booked into schools than men because more often school environments are where they came to storytelling—many female tellers are former librarians. (Sp 21 Aug. 1999)

Storytellers can be quite vocal about librarians' contributions. Barbara McBride-Smith (a school librarian and national teller), introduced a colleague at a Sunday afternoon session of the 2003 US National Storytelling Festival as representing “the holy trinity of storytelling. She's a storyteller. She's an author. And she's a librarian.” With opinion on librarians running the gamut from Schaeffer's feelings of disenfranchisement to McBride-Smith's proud declaration of affinity, the American storytelling industry's attitude toward librarians continues its ambivalence. The profession is too varied in the make-up of people within it, and America too large a country, to achieve a consensus. Nor does it need one; librarians will continue to tell stories, and storytellers will continue to be librarians.

#### ***3.5.2.5 Library Influences in Scotland***

If other countries have a positive image about librarians, Scottish storytellers appear to have no image at all. Writing the introduction to the Scottish Storytelling

Centre's "Storytellers in Scotland" Directory 2000, Donald Smith answered his own question "Who Are the Storytellers?"

Some of the people listed have been shaped by a particular tradition of stories and storytelling; others have been influenced by a variety of traditions. Most storytellers in Scotland, however, acknowledge a debt to Gaelic storytelling, storytelling in Scots, or to the traditions of the Scottish travellers [*sic*], or all three. (3)

This depiction seems to leave out the occupational streams of storytelling development.

The directory that opens with this essay has two librarians listed, both of whom sit on the Scottish Storytelling Forum. Neither identified themselves as librarians in their advertisement. There is currently one book on the history of Scottish professional storytelling, Storytelling Scotland. Written by Smith himself, it understandably takes the view that organized storytelling there began with those who ultimately formed the Scottish Storytelling Centre. Smith sees storytelling in Scotland as based solely in tradition and he is not the only one to do so. Association with an ancient past is rampant in the Scottish storytelling scene. In her introduction to The King o' the Black Art and Other Folk Tales, a collection of Traveller tales from the Stewarts of Blairgowrie, compiler and storyteller Sheila Douglas wrote, "Before introducing my storytellers and their stories, I would like to make clear that what we have here is a native Scots story tradition and storytellers who are native Scots people, descended from craftsmen in metal from a bygone age" (1). American folklorist Barbara McDermitt lived in Edinburgh and worked as a casual storyteller for many years. Her article "Storytelling Traditions in Scotland" does mention a modern approach to storytelling in Scotland. However, she

qualified this approach by pointing out that the newer tradition is nevertheless still an oral one. There is nothing literary, nothing of the library, to Scottish storytelling's history. In fact, the job of the Scottish Storytelling Forum includes educating educators in storytelling:

[The Scottish Storytelling Forum] is responsible for the annual Scottish International Storytelling Festival; the development and encouragement of storytelling groups throughout the country; the training of storytellers especially to work in schools, libraries, community centers, etc.; and the development of the Scottish Storytelling Centre at the Netherbow [Theatre in Edinburgh]. . . . The thrust of the forum and the Storytelling Centre is to encourage traditional storytellers to tell their stories to wider audiences of all ages, and to reawaken an interest in others to help revive the art in a full, meaningful way that does honor to past historical roots and acknowledges present developments in Scotland's ever-changing human and political landscape. In short, the forum and its outreach programs are rekindling a genuine revival in the art of storytelling.

Scottish storytelling tradition today, with its roots firmly set in the past, has three major strands. There is the Highland and Hebridean Gaelic tradition, the Scots tradition in the Lowlands and up as far north as Shetland, and, coming into its own with new appreciation, the ever-evolving urban tradition. (290-291)

McDermitt left little room for considering occupational and literary streams of storytelling such as librarianship or teaching. Librarian and national storyteller Bea Ferguson, one of the two librarians listed in the Scottish directory, echoed that librarians were not significant to Scottish storytelling's history, but thought that they would play a part in its future:

I don't think that I could name any one librarian who historically helped with the storytelling tradition. There has always been a culture of 'storytimes', but always for children and predominantly read from picture books. That is still very much the case.

There is very little support for work with children from management in Scottish libraries and so storytelling/reading was never really encouraged and goes on almost despite management, who see adults as the priority. That said, it has gone on by dedicated children's librarians, but I know of very few who would tell stories orally.

There is now a growing number of people who are encouraging storytelling in libraries in conjunction with the SSC, but I think the revival came first and not the other way round. (e-int. 28 Sept. 2004)

### ***3.5.2.6 Comparison and Contrast of How Storytelling Historians List***

#### ***Influences on Professional Storytelling in the Examined Nations***

The literary influence is not the only storytelling historians have noted, or that storytellers themselves cite. Professional storytellers often come to the art form from a previous profession, as indicated by the fact that none of my informants gave storytelling as their first career. In an informal survey of Storytell members, I found that the primary background occupation of storytellers was education. Of about 130 people who responded to my query as to what their regular workday job was, or what their previous job had been before they entered storytelling. The occupation groups cited were, in descending order:

#### **Education**

teachers; school counselors; school librarians/media services; students; health counselor/school nurses; folklorists academic, applied; family life educator/counselor; university/college professors

Arts/Humanities

regional/city librarians; pastors; museum staff/heritage industry managers;  
orchestral violinist, sculptor, actors, puppeteers, dancers

Publishing/Book Trade

journalists; copy writer; cartoonist; publishers, desktop publishers/design  
consultants; bookstore clerks; editors—books, newsletter, technical  
writing, editorial assistant; authors—fiction, expository, feature article,  
children's; bookbinder, proofreader

Mental/Physical Health Services

manager, rape crisis center; pharmacist; therapists, psychologist, children's  
counselors; aerobics instructor; health promotion specialist/health  
counselors, social worker

Business/Industry

bankers, accountants, fund-raiser; lawyers; retail business owners,  
business administration instructor, computer technologies consultant

Sciences

computer scientist/tech supports, aerospace engineer, veterinarian, nuclear  
reactor supervisor. (Sp 21 Aug. 2000)

In this survey, I grouped the headings by the largest number of responses, but did not distinguish how many of each specific job there were. I wrote each new job title as it came in via e-mail. I also did not distinguish among the respondents' countries, intending only to capture the range of occupational backgrounds evident in contributions to Storytell.

The major influences on professional storytelling in the countries examined here are many. In Canada, Stone observed theatrical storytelling, therapeutic and spiritual storytelling, the oral tradition, and library/teacher storytelling as streams that influenced the development of Canadian professional storytelling. In England and Wales, Heywood

listed seven influences: literature; folklore, mythology, and early anthropology scholarship; psychoanalysis and general therapy; the 1960s counter-cultures and interest in spirituality; professional and amateur theatre; working-class traditions of informal (called “pub” or “kitchen table,” depending on the gendered arena) storytelling; and revivals of folk music and other traditional arts (7-8). Heywood and Stone compliment one another’s categories. Her oral tradition is encompassed by his folklore et al, working class telling, and folk revivals. Both mentioned spirituality and theatre as well (Stone 1998: 15-31; Heywood 7-8).

Scotland’s central organization acknowledges only one influence: the oral tradition, broken into three main bodies of the Highland (Gaelic), Lowland (Scots) and Traveller traditions (“Storytellers in Scotland Directory” 2000: 3). The primary difference between American storytelling influences and those in Canada and Britain seems to be that America has less interaction with an industrialized working class tradition of storytelling. Aside from this, the lists drawn up by Stone, Heywood, and Smith (albeit his has one item) are echoed in US tellers and their history.

### ***3.5.2.7 Designated Centers and Resulting Geographic Influences***

The preceding section was an imbrication of professional development and historical analysis with viewpoints from the national organizations’ participants and their literature. The following will address how having a designated office has affected the organizations themselves. America and Scotland have central offices for their storytelling organizations. The Society for Storytelling does not have an official office, only Tina Bilbe's home near London, where the archives are kept and she makes phone calls from



her own telephone line. Board meetings are usually held in people's homes. Storytellers of Canada/Conteurs du Canada does not have an office. Board members work from their homes (ranging from Newfoundland to British Columbia) and keep in touch by e-mail and, to a lesser extent, telephone (De Vos, personal conversation 10 July 2004). The impact of a central geographic location for a national storytelling organization on storytelling praxis merits consideration.

First, a brief description of the two offices in question is in order. The American storytelling offices have always been located in Jonesborough, where Jimmy Neil Smith was a teacher. The offices began in Smith's basement, progressed to a warehouse on the edge of town, then moved into more elegant historic buildings on Jonesborough's picturesque Main Street. The International Storytelling Centre built its new offices from a reconstructed historic hotel in Jonesborough, after sharing office space with the National Storytelling Network from 1998 to about 2002. The Network continues to inhabit the old office space, also on Main Street in Jonesborough. The new interpretation center has a theatre, resident storytellers in performance, breakaway rooms for workshops, a bookshop and storytelling store, and a room with wall plaques and picture displays showing how Jonesborough developed as the capital of American storytelling.

The Scottish storytelling offices have since their creation been located in the Netherbow Arts Centre. The Scottish Storytelling Centre is currently renovating the Netherbow Arts Centre, expanding and improving the building to be a new interpretation centre for Scottish storytelling (estimated completion 2006). The centre will have a

theatre, a hallway gallery displaying pictures of Traveller, Gaelic, and current professional storytellers, a storytelling store, and classroom space for workshops.

For Scotland and the United States, a result of having offices seems to be the evident influence of the towns/regions in which those premises are located. Jonesborough is a small, historic Southern town whereas Edinburgh is a large, historic British city. Each has made its presence felt in storytelling praxis and administration.

### ***3.5.2.8 Storytelling Influences from the US National Office***

Appalachian storytelling in the 1970s and 1980s dominated the popular view of American storytelling (McConnell int. 16 July 1999; Simms int. 6 Oct. 2002). The late Ray Hicks, of the famous Appalachian ballad and storytelling Proffitt family, was the only storyteller to perform at every American National Storytelling Festival from his first invitation until his death in 2003. Hicks was an Appalachian storyteller out of North Carolina. McConnell, who also tells Appalachian tall tales and was raised in East Tennessee, performs in a straw hat and often holds a corncob pipe while onstage. McConnell found that one of the side effects of being regarded as a “master storyteller” was “imitation rather than imagination.” In other words, people taking his workshops did not look at the substance of how he put stories together as an artist, but at his Appalachian style: his clothing, the way he sounded, and what stories he told. Jack Tales told by people in blue jean overalls, wearing straw hats and carrying corncob pipes became the norm. “Well, that was all you heard for awhile there. . . . People think the clothes are part of it because, you know, here we are in Tennessee” (int. 16 July 1999). McConnell's clothing style has continued to be imitated by new tellers since the 1980s.

Ruth Stotter and William McCarthy echoed this proliferation of Jack Tales, citing that half of the tellers who had told at the National Storytelling Festival by 1988 had Jack Tales in their repertoire (154-155).

In the mid-1990s I was involved with the National Youth Storytelling Olympics started by Flora Joy, then head of the East Tennessee State University Storytelling Program. During my 2½ years as her graduate assistant, Joy set up a storytelling competition for young tellers. Children ages eight through fifteen came to tell stories as part of a national competition. In 1993, when I was a judge for this competition, six of eleven candidates wore straw hats and/or blue jean overalls. One young gentleman had a piece of hayseed stuck in his mouth as a prop. American storytelling has developed in part out of the popular stereotype of what Appalachia looked like and how Appalachian tellers told stories. When Al Gore, then vice president of the United States, opened the US National Storytelling Festival in 1997, he reminisced about taking his own children to it some fifteen years earlier, and stated how pleased he had been to see it celebrate Tennessee's strong storytelling tradition. It took almost twenty years for the US National Festival to overcome the need to be a showcase for the Appalachian storytelling tradition. (Sobol 1999: 197-199). As the former Artistic Director for the US National Storytelling Festival, international storyteller and New York resident Laura Simms brought in storytellers from around the world between 1983 and 1985. The response of the storytelling listeners was not positive, and the festival swung back to a more conservative approach in 1986, hiring only one new teller (Sobol 200). Until the 1990s, Simms felt

that Appalachia functioned almost as a “safety net” for how to define and sell storytelling (int. 6 Oct. 2002).

### ***3.5.2.9 Storytelling Influences from the Scottish National Office***

Donald Smith tied his creation of the Scottish Storytelling Centre to the concept of traditional communities: Traveller culture and Gaelic (Highlands) and Scots (Lowlands) traditions of tale-telling (168). As McVicar pointed out, Smith also tied it to the fact that he had a building in which to showcase them:

To me the crucial element was that Donald [Smith] had a physical performance location at his command (also true for Jimmy Neil Smith?). I suspect that no Netherbow might have meant no storytelling revival. It's the combination of Donald and the Netherbow that made it happen more than any other energy/ resource source. And Donald is a self-starter, not concerned to research what happens elsewhere, more interested in applying his own general values/ approach / experience / expertise to a new situation.

One of the most interesting aspects for me of the development of the Centre has been that little reference seems to have been made to what has happened organisationally elsewhere in storytelling. The first festival drew on models of folk festivals and arts festivals in Scotland. A good parallel development is that of the puppet festivals [which were well-known] years before I'd heard of anything happening re: storytelling festivals. Another possible influence of course could have been the storytelling competitions at folk festivals. (e-int. 28 June 2005)

The Scottish Storytelling Centre also appears to be trading on its location, but in a different way. It would be safe to suggest that Edinburgh is to Scotland what London is to England, what Los Angeles and New York City are to the United States: a nerve center; a

testing ground for the new graduates racing to the top of their professions; chock full of theatres and trendy shops; rife with the importance of its position within its nation. The Scottish Arts Council, the newly built Dancebase (Scotland's multi-million pound facility for teaching dance) and the Scottish Writers' Association share the city center with the Scottish Storytelling Centre, not forgetting that construction on Scotland's new parliament building started in the same area in 2000. Edinburgh is important to the success or failure of any large arts movement in Scotland.

The Storytelling Centre is Edinburgh-centric. Thirty of the ninety-five storytellers registered in its on-line "Storytellers in Scotland" Directory as of 2005 were from Edinburgh. In 2003, twelve of eighteen Scottish Storytelling Forum members were Edinburgh residents. All four of the Forum executive members were metropolitan Edinburgh residents. Two storytellers hired to coordinate a national Gaelic storytelling project and the children's storytelling project spun from Storymakers, were Edinburgh residents, although not natives.

Such geographic claustrophobia is perhaps only natural in a small country, and it could also be considered natural in a newer organization. Sobol pointed out that in its earlier years the National Storytelling Festival featured primarily tellers from "within about a hundred-mile radius" fleshed out with a few tellers from regions farther afield; the National Association for the Preservation and Perpetuation of Storytelling also had a regional board, made up of people from the southeastern United States. "It was not until the late eighties, under considerable pressure from other regional groups, that the board and the festival achieved full national representation" (1999: 159). It took about fifteen

years for the US National organization to establish geographic representation on its board. The Scottish Storytelling Forum is just approaching that benchmark, so it would be premature to suggest that it will not also achieve national representation. The American organization also tried to combat its Jonesborough-centered history by instituting National Storytelling Network State Liaison officers. The National Storytelling Network has a person in each of the fifty states who serves as a voice between that state and the Network (Karen Dietz, National Storytelling Network Executive Director, Florida Story Camp 2005.) To date, the Scottish Storytelling Forum has not attempted corrective mechanisms, and given the attitude of the Edinburgh arts community to the rest of the country, it may not do so. A Scottish Arts Council officer once remarked to me that storytelling had “enough trouble being taken seriously” without considering moving its offices out of Edinburgh, or recruiting “in the North” (Nod Knowles personal conversation). Again, the size of Scotland must be taken into account; it is more necessary for a large country to reach out to its far-flung members than for a small country, in which members can reach Edinburgh within a day’s drive.

#### ***3.5.2.10 Centralized/Decentralized Control***

Whether a national storytelling organization exerts centralized control or not is very much a subjective inference on the part of a researcher. Some facts are obvious, but the interpretation of them will vary among storytellers and those who research storytellers. Here, then, are the facts, and an analysis of them.

The US and Scottish storytelling organizations have a few major differences in how they take on members. The first is that the Scottish Storytelling Centre invites tellers

to join on the basis of recommendation by members of the Scottish Storytelling Forum.<sup>28</sup> As of 2004, once a teller joined, he paid a £10 annual fee. For anyone not registered as a teller but wishing to join the Centre, the fee was also £10 annually. The National Storytelling Network required an annual fee of US\$50 for adults; membership includes being listed as a teller in their directory. English/Welsh annual membership and listing was also by fee (£25) as was Canada's (\$50); only Scotland vets its storytellers. The fact that listings can be denied indicates a different approach in Scotland to that of the other organizations investigated here; the Scottish Storytelling Centre exerts more centralized control over its tellers.

Unlike the Scottish Storytelling Center and the International Storytelling Center, neither the Society for Storytelling nor the Storytellers of Canada/Conteurs du Canada run a festival. The US National Storytelling Festival's tellers are chosen by staff at the International Storytelling Center. The International Storytelling Center hires storytellers to do residency work in its interpretation center. The Scottish International Storytelling Festival hires storytellers annually to present workshops, work in schools, and feature in concerts at the Netherbow. These tellers are picked by the Netherbow Artistic Director Donald Smith and the Scottish Storytelling Centre's Coordinator, Joanna Bremner. The Scottish Storytelling Festival lasts two weeks, while the US festival is three days. During the Scottish Festival, I have been involved in school performances, workshops, and concerts that kept me busy for the entire run of the festival. In addition, the Scottish Storytelling Centre schedules year-round workshops, special storytelling events, and

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<sup>28</sup> The board members must hear the prospective teller at separate performances, that is, one board member at one performance, another at a second.

coordinates events for third parties. The English/Welsh storytelling organization does not hire storytellers at all. Bilbe does recommend storytellers to people on the basis of geography and the telling context described to her, but does not contact storytellers on behalf of third party employers. The Society for Storytelling does ask individuals to give workshops at its Annual Gathering Meeting, but the workshop leaders are not paid. Selection is done through review of applications by the committee putting together that year's conference; the conference moves between regions. Likewise the Canadian storytelling organization does not hire storytellers, but runs a conference. The National Storytelling Network functions in many ways like the SfS and SC/CC, offering networking opportunities and holding an annual conference.

The US and Canadian national storytelling conferences move around their respective nations. The Scottish Storytelling Centre alternates annually between Perthshire (centrally located in terms of geography) and Edinburgh.

Also, no one name is attached to Canada in the way that American and Scottish tellers mention their respective Smiths. Likewise, Bilbe, Medlicott, and other pioneers of the Society for Storytelling do not refer to one person as having created the group. Also, neither Heywood in his research on English and Welsh storytelling, nor Bilbe in her role as Society secretary, could put a functional birth date to the Society for Storytelling. Neither could Stone nor any of the Canadian tellers interviewed for this dissertation define their beginning moment. The Society for Storytelling and the Storytellers of Canada/Conteurs du Canada were created out of a felt need in an existing storytelling community; regional organizations in England/Wales and Canada predate the national



ones. In America, only one pertinent organization predated the establishment of the National Association for the Preservation and Perpetuation of Storytelling. The National Story League was formed in 1903 by Richard Wyche, an educator who wanted to see the educational influences of storytelling on children expanded (Pellowski 213-214). The National Story League was still in existence in the 1970s, and still functions today, but not with as much influence as the ISC and NSN. No Scottish regional or special interest storytelling group predated the formation of the Scottish Storytelling Forum (McVicar int. 29 June 2005). As discussed earlier, there were influential groups such as Common Lore run by Helen East, the College of Storytellers in Hampstead, and the Crick Crack Club, established by Ben Haggarty; all these developments and the subsequent proliferation of small clubs and organizations came between 1980 and the early 1990s, predating the Society for Storytelling. Bilbe thought this situation reflected well on the society, for it meant time had been taken to consider carefully the purposes of the organization:

The Society for Storytelling is not just for tellers, but for storytelling – these things were carefully thought when it was set up. We didn't want it to be an association and so forth. We wanted it to be much more a welcoming place where anybody with any interest in telling could come and get information. . . . No, it was never seen as a place to book storytellers; it is a place for tellers and enthusiasts to get information. (int. 11 June 1998)

The organization developed out of a need to provide information on storytelling and to create an opportunity for tellers to gather annually and discuss their art form.

As one of its members stated earlier, the Storytellers of Canada/Conteurs du Canada may wield less political clout in storytelling than some of Canada's regional organizations. Two regional groups are arguably exerting more influence than any others. The Storytelling School of Toronto, founded in 1979, and the Vancouver Society of Storytelling, begun in 1991, have each put in bids to produce the Canadian Storytelling Directory. A Canadian teller commented that storytellers and storytelling groups from Toronto refused to be listed in the Canadian Storytelling Directory when it was produced by the Vancouver organization (Name withheld). Further, Stone mentioned that "not all Canadian groups responded to the Vancouver questionnaire" (1998: 54). In the other countries examined, one organization tends to have emerged as the clear front-runner and controller of how storytelling is developing, or at least of how history will speak of storytelling developing.

Stone (who is resident in Winnipeg and active in the Toronto storytelling scene) wrote of the Vancouver group:

The Vancouver Storytelling Circle and the Vancouver Society of Storytelling function together to sponsor regular events and a major national festival, as well as having published three editions of the *Canadian Storytelling Directory* since 1991. They also offer *The Storytelling Circle Newsletter* which covers local events and tellers. The Vancouver community has a vibrant social and artistic history and active relations with other B.C. scenes, groups and communities. It is a much younger organization than the Storytellers School of Toronto, and has a quite different artistic, social and geographic history within the storytelling communities and the community-at-large. As a fast growing association it is assuming a role as a second national community. (45)

Stone cited the Toronto-based storytelling organization as being to Canada what Jonesborough is to the American storytelling scene, although of the two models, she found Toronto to be more based in organic growth (1998: 26):

Toronto was closer to the grassroots model; the group developed first, drawing on a local base of experienced tellers and an established tradition in the library-educational model. The founding members first organized a weekly Friday night event that emphasized storytelling shared within the community. The festival came only after the several founding members decided to create a formal organization, The Storytellers School of Toronto. True to its name, the school began offering regular classes in storytelling, with community outreach rather than performance training or promotion as the main goal. (1998: 40)

Lottridge felt there were distinct differences between the approaches that Vancouver and Toronto displayed:

Yes, I think they had different characteristics, Toronto and Vancouver. Toronto was very philosophical in its approach, you know, the Storytelling **School** of Toronto. They wanted to be the springboard of storytelling, not just a group of tellers, but teaching courses, all that. The impulse at the beginning was that we needed to include the community, get more people aware of storytelling, to try to act as a group that supported storytellers, not just put together a festival right off. (int. 10 July 2004)

Educator and storyteller Melanie Ray, of Vancouver, described her region's organization as having a different ethos from Toronto's:

It's newer [than Toronto], really focused on getting people out there to tell. Toronto, well, I don't know them personally, but it's more training-based, more teaching people ways of doing it. In Vancouver I think we just go out and do it, not sloppy, but we're [pause]

[Wendy:] Dynamic?

[Melanie:] Yeah! Dynamic. (int. 7 July 2004)

Alberta storyteller Gail De Vos couched her response in terms of the national organization and its interaction with both groups:

I am not sure that there is much interaction with the Vancouver group -- many of the Toronto group are part of the SCCC movement and so there is some cross over and intersection. For example the two organizations are now co-producing the "Appleseed Journal" which was the Toronto School's baby. (e-int. 26 June 2004)

Stone also cited not necessarily a history, but perhaps a predilection, for regions to be noted as having their distinct identities, even down to the story variants they tell:

Yet a successful intentional community can (and perhaps must) develop a viable regional personality and also a recognizable tale treasury after a few years of existence. Some stories are associated with the group as a whole, others come to be identified with individual members. For example, members of Stone Soup Stories of Winnipeg [a storytelling guild] occasionally related their local variant of "Stone Soup," a folktale that functioned as part of the founding legend of the group. (1998: 34)

And while Winnipeg's small group is less well-known than Toronto's large one, each sees itself as playing a particular role. The Toronto group's website lists their mission as

to inspire, encourage, and support storytelling for listeners, tellers, and those who have not yet heard. Since 1979 we have been providing courses and workshops, holding gatherings, festivals, and events to celebrate and present the art of storytelling; supporting the creative work of storytellers; and producing publications about storytelling and storytellers.

<[www.storynet.org](http://www.storynet.org)>

The Storytellers School of Toronto runs courses, promotes storytelling and storytellers in educational work, and produces the Toronto Festival of Storytelling. The Vancouver Society of Storytelling (formed in 1991) grew from a group of tellers who had been meeting since 1986 as the Vancouver Storytelling Circle. The society organizes a festival each November. The group aims are to “develop and encourage this ancient art form in our daily lives, and to increase the public's appreciation of storytelling and oral traditions” <[www.storynet.org](http://www.storynet.org)>. The Vancouver Society of Storytelling encourages Vancouver area storytellers to

perform in schools, homes, hospitals, in concert, at festivals, as part of therapeutic and educational work, and more. They study oral traditions, recording and reading tales of peoples the world over, encouraging connections throughout our multicultural city. They write both fiction and nonfiction.

The Vancouver Society of Storytelling is committed to the development and encouragement of storytelling as an art form and to increase the public's appreciation of storytelling and oral traditions. There is a strong commitment to multiculturalism and service to the storytelling community.

Both storytellers and listeners work together to further the objectives of the VSOS which are:

- To encourage and foster the development of storytelling as an art form.
- To increase public appreciation of the art of storytelling and oral traditions.
- To explore similarities among individuals, communities and cultures.

<[www.vancouverstorytelling.org](http://www.vancouverstorytelling.org)>

The difference in approach that some storytellers thought was exhibited between the Vancouver and Toronto organizations may stem in part from Canada's library storytelling influence. Stone and Heywood both mentioned the pivotal role played by Toronto Children's Library Services in the development of Canadian storytellers' skills overall. It would be only natural for tellers from Toronto to feel a resultant sense of pride and for training to be a major part of their perceived contribution to Canadian storytelling when they created their own organization.

### **3.6 Conclusions**

American folklorist and former record producer Kenneth Goldstein discussed the imbricating of folk music and commercial expectations in "A Future Folklorist in the Record Business." He showed that the unsurprising main concern of the business was to sell records (107). Therefore, "To be able to put out the records of 'traditional singers' and of more or less 'authentic music,' I knew it was necessary also to put out commercial records" (107). Commercial singers such as Oscar Brand received more attention from the industry than did Jeanie Robertson.

In the same way, storytelling organizations have to pay attention to what "sells," particularly if the organization is financing buildings or offices. These organizations must find ways of producing events that meet the expectations of audiences, or promoting tellers who will draw in paying listeners and sponsors. Tellers are likely to endorse such organizations because the organizations in turn endorse the teller and engage him in storytelling activities. Yet one must remember as discussed in

Section 3.2.2, that the Society for Storytelling in England and Wales came into being largely to fight credentialization. The members did not want to have a storyteller or storytellers set up as a board of examiners, saying one person could claim the title of storyteller but another could not.

The need to display individual creativity and identity—explored in some depth throughout the following chapters—is something that professional storytellers in all countries discuss. One might expect to observe that American and Scottish storytellers, whose organizations have central offices financing large building projects, would have a more standardized style of storytelling amongst themselves, but there is no evidence to support this assumption.

The place of librarians in the countries examined here varies widely, and its significance as an element of storytelling's history depends not only on which country one is examining, but on the background of the storyteller to whom one speaks. There is nothing surprising about this, but it does make the impact of librarians difficult to accurately determine on a factual basis. The place of Native American, Traveller and other traditions has a secure place of honor in the histories of professional storytelling development, which could be considered a double-edged sword. Future chapters will explore how this honoring has made stories from such cultures “popular” for including in one's repertoire, even if one has no connection to that culture. Traveller tales are still immensely popular in Scotland, with many tellers eager to align themselves with that tradition in some way. Scottish interest in Traveller tales is, Donald Smith's Storytelling

Scotland: A Nation in Narrative pointed out, a direct result of the Scottish storytelling organization's influence.



## **CHAPTER FOUR:**

### **THE IDENTITY OF A STORYTELLER**

*“The folktale, like every other product of art, has as its basis a definite artistic purpose.”*  
 – Mark Azadovskii, *A Siberian Tale Teller* (12)

Chapter Three examined how the national storytelling organizations gave recognition and opportunity, as well as responsibility and collective identity, to storytellers. This chapter probes the question of individual identity amongst practicing storytellers. It examines how storytellers see themselves as individuals and within an occupational group, delineating five broad categories of how storytellers approach professional identity. Of particular interest is the use of artistic authority and identity authority by storytellers. By intertwining these authorities they establish themselves as competent and compelling narrators.

#### **4.1 Storytellers Negotiate a Public Identity**

Storytellers associate themselves with particular ways of being known, by ethnicity, by religion, by the way they dress or the types of morals found in the stories they choose to tell. They choose a “personal affiliation with certain symbols,” as anthropologist Edward Spicer described it:

The essential feature of any identity system is an individual's belief in his personal affiliation with certain symbols, or, more accurately with what certain symbols stand for. There are collective identity systems as well as

individual ones; . . . A relationship between human individuals and selected cultural elements—the symbols—is the essential feature of a collective identity system; individuals believe in and feel the importance of what the symbols stand for. The display and manipulation of the symbols calls forth sentiments and stimulates the affirmation of beliefs on the part of the individuals who participate in the collective identity system. (795-796)

Of course, this “affiliation with certain symbols” must then be negotiated with others. If those observing the storyteller believe that her affiliation with, for instance, Jewish religious symbolism, is not real/genuine/true/authentic, she may profess herself Jewish until the last listener has abandoned her, to no avail. Storytellers, like all of humanity, engage in what American psychologist and social theorist George Mead defined as the self emerging through social interaction with others:

If the given human individual is to develop a self in the fullest sense, it is not sufficient for him merely to take the attitudes of other human individuals toward himself and toward one another within the human social process, and to bring that social process as a whole into his individual experience merely in these terms: he must also, in the same way that he takes the attitudes of other individuals toward himself and toward one another, take their attitudes toward the various phases or aspects of the common social activity or set of social undertakings in which, as members of an organized society or social group, they are all engaged; and he must then, by generalizing these individual attitudes of that organized society or social group itself, as a whole, act toward different social projects which at any given time it is carrying out, or toward the various larger phases of the general social process which constitutes its life and of which these projects are specific manifestations. (154-155)

Or, in simpler terms, a storyteller negotiates professionally between his self-expectations and those of the listeners, and between being a storyteller with responsibilities toward the group of professional storytellers, and being an individual who is telling a story. He makes this negotiation each time he steps forward in a storytelling event. Canadian-born sociologist Erving Goffman echoed Mead:

The expressiveness of the individual (and therefore his capacity to give impressions) appears to involve two radically different kinds of sign activity: the expression that he *gives*, and the expression that he *gives off*.

(2)

To paraphrase Goffman, it is possible that there may be mismatched signals between how a teller sees himself (according to Spicer, the attitudes he internalizes) and how others see him (the attitudes others read into his actions or appearance). Add to this that in Women's Ways of Knowing the four authors (psychologists and ethnographers) discussed “subjective and constructed knowledge,” in which a person considers and accepts or rejects what others tell her about herself (134). Thus the storyteller must present an identity (Goffman’s “information he gives”) yet must also accept feedback on both that intended identity and the unwitting information leakage Goffman describes as “giving off,” and which the four authors of Women’s Ways of Knowing address. Then the teller must present a counter-identity. In putting together these two ideas, one can reach the following conclusion: we project a way of thinking about ourselves through our actions and discourse, while those with whom we interact create an identity for us in accordance with their perceptions of our actions and the information that we “leak” through our demeanor. In public life, one negotiates a projected identity between the self-

identity—what one believes about oneself—and the identity assigned by others—what others say about or exhibit as behavior toward that individual. The result of this negotiation is presented identity, the imbrication of how a person sees himself with how he perceives that others see him.

Storytellers, because their livelihood depends on Public performance, must carefully negotiate how they present self-identity. As Goffman put it, “When an individual plays a part he implicitly requests his observers to take seriously the impression that is fostered before them. They are asked to believe that the character they see actually possesses the attributes he appears to possess . . .” (17). The identity that storytellers take on when they “play the part” of being a storyteller becomes their Public professional identity. This does not imply that storytellers must have significantly different Public identities based on taking on a character; indeed a majority of storytellers interviewed here and observed over time make little distinction between their “performance persona” and their everyday persona. The suggestion here is that storytellers depend in part on the audience identifying them as being entitled to tell the story they choose to relate. To that end, storytellers will employ a variety of techniques depending on the context in which they are telling. If they are telling a story from their own background to a group of people who share that background, the techniques employed will differ from a teller presenting a story not from his background to a group of people also not from that background. Most tellers have better sense than to tell a story not from their background to a group of people who share the background of the story.

That would be suicidal in terms of upholding or gaining a good reputation, as the inability to handle the cultural detailing would be obvious to the listeners.

Which techniques are employed could be called in Goffman's words the information the teller gives—the actual text of the story—and the information he gives off—word choice and use of cultural references, for examples. Such a negotiation for the “right” to tell a story need not be held only in an ethnic context, although that has occupied pride of place in storytelling studies. Let me begin instead with a physical example before moving into ethnicity.

As a relatively small, slightly rotund female with a high-pitched, soft voice, people sometimes assign me personality traits such as “quiet” or “sweet” or “mousey” on first meeting (conversations with Weir, Holt, Keding, Wilson and Heubner). Not seeing myself this way yet aware that others might judge this book by its cover, I regularly tell stories involving a strong woman who redefines her role in society. As a storyteller I must start negotiating my identity with the audience inside the confines of their expectations in order to expand those confines to a less restrictive space. In essence, using stories of women lulls the listeners into identifying with me by telling a “woman's story,” often one with themes of love at its core. The love turns sour; the sourness turns to murder; murder turns to revenge by females who have been compliant, soft and blonde. The murdered women who avenge themselves are depicted as petite, with soft voices and blue eyes. Thus I am challenging the perceptions of small, mousey women by standing, a small, mousey woman, before the listeners narrating a story about a small, mousey woman who fought back.

This renegotiated identity is a pact made with the listeners. I will conform to your expectations of me—to a point. You will allow me to circumvent or challenge your expectations—to a point. This is my Public identity, the redefined parameters between what they expect, who I think I am, and how far we can negotiate together. In examining zydeco music in Creole communities, American folklorist John Minton referred to this negotiation of self to expand performance options as “an interpersonal dynamic within an extrapersonal channel” (3). Storytellers are not the only people who make this type of negotiation, but they are overtly aware of the need for this Public identity as part of their occupation, and display self-reflexive awareness as to their means of negotiating it. They negotiate this identity through several layers (what Spicer might have called association with symbols) including occupational background (Faye Hansen believes her teaching history gives her credibility for school bookings), religion (English national teller Shonaleigh markets herself as a Jewish teller of Jewish tales) and ethnicity.

Ethnicity is a primary means of identifying oneself and a vital point of negotiation for Public identity with an audience. “Ethnicity” is used here in all cases where descriptors such as white, African American, Appalachian, English, Irish, Traveller, black, Caribbean Canadian, or other geographic or racial distinctions might be applied. In this sense the use of ethnicity is the same as sociologist Viranjini Munasinghe in her study of Trinidad, her birth country. Munasinghe “opted to subsume what in many if not most contexts are articulated at the local level as ‘race relations’ under the theoretical rubric of ethnicity” (8). Munasinghe created a theoretical framework for ethnicity as “both internally generated (that is, subjective) and externally imposed mechanisms of

boundary maintenance within polities labeled nation-states” (10). Citing Richard Handler, Munasinghe then built an understanding that ethnicity is used differently in academic and lay environments; in academic settings it becomes a tool of identification, while in a lay environment it is more a marker of something different from the norm (11). Thus ethnicity will be used to characterize both racial and geographic distinctions in this dissertation, and applied equally to all distinct groups.

Consider Sheila Kay Adams as an example of someone using her ethnicity to create a Public identity. Adams is a national storyteller from Mars Hill, North Carolina. She comes from a family of ballad singers and storytellers raised on the oral tradition in the mountains. Adams remembers her grandmother’s house before electricity. She believes that her family background assists her in procuring work. Adams describes a dichotomy of thought regarding “mountain people” that puts her in an odd position when negotiating her Public identity:

Well, right now it’s kinda cool to be Appalachian, to have some family connection or claim some sort of kinship. I mean, after a performance [outside Appalachia] people come up to me and say “my family came here back in the early 1800s, and we left western North Carolina ten years ago,” et cetera. So it’s pretty cool, all of a sudden we have this recognition of how great our way of life is, but then that also means mountain people are put in a strange position because folks do have to struggle with stereotypes. I’ll ask people [at my performances] what comes to mind when you start talking about Appalachia, and they come out with all the clichés —men laying around on the porch, there’s always some reference to women, barefoot and pregnant, and they put it in nice words, but they

talk about ignorance, backhills schools and “book larnin’”. But at same time everybody plays up that connection. (int. 15 July 1997)

Adams finds her ethnic heritage a strange position to be in, both desirable yet rife with stereotypes. American international storyteller Dan Keding wishes he could take a specific ethnic identity. He feels “cheated” out of exploring the English side of his family heritage within his profession. It is not a negotiation of Public identity he thinks he could successfully make:

I’m from Chicago; I look and sound like Chicago. But my dad’s side of the family were some sort of estate workers down by Cornwall. I have no idea what that means, and to try and acquire that now, even use it as a storyteller, well, do I sound like I’m from England? Would you pay to hear me tell English fairy tales with an accent like this? (int. 21 Dec. 1998)

If Keding is concerned with privately exploring his ethnicity and perhaps claiming an English heritage as part of his Public identity, London-based international storyteller Mary Medlicott would offer a cautionary tale. Medlicott refused to market herself as a Welsh teller when she left her native Wales:

I am Welsh. People heard it in my voice, and they assumed it would be my niche. I had to be careful to avoid that stereotype. I refuse to be marketed as a Welsh teller. Coming from Wales, you get marketed as Welsh. What is interesting to me is, when I started storytelling, when I really got into it, the last thing I wanted to be seen as was a Welsh teller, and that is quite likely why I don’t sound Welsh now. . . .

However, since time’s gone on, I have discovered more and more pleasure in telling Welsh stories, in planning programs at schools, etc. “Travels with my Aunt” was a loose format for a lot of stories from Pembrokeshire, where I came from. I love doing that. In that and in other



ways too, just more and more I enjoy going back to the Welsh stories. So in some ways I'm willing when I want to do that, willing, but also there are a lot of opportunities to do things in Celtic context, so if I'm working with Irish or Scottish people, working with Welsh roots, Welshness, yes but I never allow it to disallow me telling an African story, or any other story. If I'm telling a Welsh story, I might well bring my Welsh up, as it helps sometimes to give people a kind of context. (int. 10 June 1998)

It is interesting that as Medlicott enters her third decade as a professional storyteller she has become more comfortable with her Welsh background as part of her Public identity. It is also interesting that, as a London-based storyteller, she trained her voice not to "give off" (Goffman 2) information about her background. She can use a Welsh accent when she consciously wants to, but she objected to tellers imitating this accent when telling stories from Wales. "Try to sound as though you're Welsh when you're not, and you sound as though you're engaging in stereotypes" (int. 10 June 1998)

Newfoundland storyteller Anita Best agreed. Working in the Atlantic Provinces as a singer and storyteller, she felt that people stereotyped Newfoundland constantly, but that she too could stereotype Newfoundland if she wanted to by putting on a thick accent and repeating stock phrases. She thought it did not matter where you were from; "it's how you play to the house about where you're from" that matters (conversation). Additional cases could be made using occupational backgrounds with storytellers such as Hansen, who used her library background to advantage to enter schools but hid her library experience from festival directors when possible. Storytellers negotiate their Public identity with careful consideration and acute awareness. It is part of the job.

## 4.2 The Identity of Storyteller

In addition to the Public identity they project as individuals, storytellers as part of an occupational group will draw some sense of identity from the job itself. It is natural that people have “feelings of pride and accomplishment” (McCarl 1985: 133) in their work roles and that they have personal ideas about what those roles are. Interviews, observations, conversations, and my own work as a storyteller have identified at least five ways in which storytellers view their work identities. Not every storyteller will believe that all of these characteristics are part of what a storyteller is and does; this is a combined list of what storytellers in the countries examined here refer to when they talk about themselves and their work. In the United States, Canada, England/Wales and Scotland, storytellers express the following aspects of their identities:

- Storytellers are self-employed business operators.
- Storytellers are creative artists.
- Storytellers are activists.
- Storytellers are keepers and dispensers of wisdom.
- Storytellers are cultural representatives or presenters.

Storytellers as cultural representatives or presenters brings up questions of authority to speak as a storyteller, which are examined as “identity authority” and “artistic authority.” Where the ways of identifying storytellers listed overlap with studies conducted in folklore, some information grounding the point within folkloristics will be included in each section.

#### 4.2.1 Storytellers Operate Businesses

To a professional teller, storytelling is among other things a job, and storytellers are not naïve about the need for business acumen. Writing in the trade journal Storytelling World, American national storyteller Milbre Burch was succinct about the need for good business practice:

We can be artists without having a career in the arts, and we can have a career in the arts without being artists. But if we are making a career of our art, we'd better attend to our business. Selling our services and our resources has all kinds of implications. . . . As a performer once said:

"There's a reason they call it show business and not show art." (18)

English casual storyteller Barbara Neville is a cultural liaison university staff member working with international students at London University's School of Tropical Medicine. Her awareness of the business angles made her chary of becoming a full-time teller:

I didn't want to be a fulltime storyteller, because I didn't want to be self-employed. Mainly it was the fact of having a mortgage, and three cats to support, and an extravagant lifestyle at times. . . .

But really, I think the main thing was, it wasn't just so much how to find enough work, but I find that storytelling takes a great deal of energy, it uses you, uses you up, differently from other jobs. So I enjoy doing it part of the time, but I think it would be very draining if I did it all the time. Certainly it would be working with children as well, all those days in schools. It sounds grand, but then they haul you into a completely unlikely space, they throw successive ages of children at you and you have to cope. No, I must admit, I never wanted to be a fulltime storyteller. (int. 12 June 1998)

Neville knew herself well enough to know she did not want to exchange her university position in a prestigious London medical school for a life of financial uncertainty. International storytellers Taffy Thomas in England and Heather Forest in America finished their educations knowing they wanted to be entertainers. Thomas runs the company Dancetales with his wife Chrissy, while Forest oversees Story Arts, a nonprofit corporation. Keding and Corkery left careers in education to own storytelling businesses. Holt and his wife Ginny Calloway set up High Windy Audio to accommodate his recordings of Appalachian music. All are working nationally or internationally. Storytellers who use telling as part of their day jobs tend not to run separate businesses, but they do keep records of their payments and work schedule for storytelling work outside their day jobs (Flodin int. 19 Dec. 1998).

Some storytellers even run businesses to help themselves and other storytellers find work. English teller and entrepreneur Graham Langley arranges an annual Storytellers' Hiring Fair in Birmingham. Tellers pay a fee to tell a ten-minute story. The listeners, who pay a fee to attend, are folk club and festival organizers, and others with an interest in hiring storytellers, all invited by Langley (Sp 12 Feb 2005).

From January to May of 2005, I monitored four threads<sup>29</sup> on Storytell related to business practices in storytelling: "Pricing Question for Fellow Pros" (26 Jan.; 7 responses); "Storytelling Careers and Career Paths" (27 Jan.; 5 responses); "The Business Questions everyone asks" (15 Mar.; at least 9 responses<sup>30</sup>); "Copyright and claiming story as own" (20 Apr.; 24 responses). Questions ranged from asking about fees, to how

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<sup>29</sup> Threads are posts on the same theme, usually having the same title in the "subject" line of the e-mail.

<sup>30</sup> My computer experienced technical difficulties that prevented an accurate count.

to start a storytelling career, to appropriate use of contracts between teller and hirer, to how to ensure a story was “safe” to tell for pay (that is, not copyrighted). There were also four postings of career opportunities, usually jobs or conferences. Storytellers can see themselves as business operators.

#### **4.2.2 Storytellers Make Art**

Storytellers are artists: creative, energetic and imbued with intent to push storytelling into many areas of inventive expression. Regional storyteller Rocky Rockwell, from Virginia and in his seventies, is a fierce advocate of storytelling as high art:

The more storytelling resembles theatre, the better it will be. It needs to escape its previous confines and reach ‘Joe Sixpack.’ You can’t do it through folklore, you can’t do it through education, you won’t get it with a library or just memorizing Peter Rabbit or something out of a storybook; that’s not storytelling, that’s a recitation. Storytelling itself is a bad word among theatre artists.

There needs to be a concerted effort to bring in different areas. I’d love to see the establishment of a storytelling circuit much like the old vaudeville circuit. (int. 17 July 1999)

Rockwell advocated storytellers being creative not only in crafting the content of their stories, but in finding places to tell. He believed that storytellers should “push the envelope” and get storytelling into theatrical and other artistic settings.

Health worker and storyteller Allison Cox was more concerned with creativity in crafting the words of the stories. Cox, from Washington State, has been telling stories for several years, and recently co-edited two books of applied storytelling that have been

well-received in the United States, Canada and Britain. Cox expresses her love of making language work for her as art:

We all have felt the rush of looking at the world from upside down as a child. Milton Erickson cited this universal act as a common thread of a shared altered experience. Most storytellers use this language of gesture, facial expressions, shifting tones, pauses, naturally, because Storytellers imbibe these real human qualities in their characters.

The language patterns that we use are important as well. A traditional storytelling technique is also a hypnotic induction, for example, “my brother once told me of a man, whose sister sailed across the shining seas, beyond the three dog mountain, and to the edge of the Black Forest to hear this story from the old monk who still lives there to this day.” My conscious mind is still stuck out there in the three dog mountains, but my unconscious-the best adventurer in the land of story-is already pouring tea for the hermit and begging a story. When we listen to stories, we often leave the critical mind behind to travel to a land where anything can happen and we hope it will. (Sp 15 Oct. 2000)

Like Cox, the late national teller Richard Walker thought bringing the art form to life by careful use of words and gesture was crucial. Walker, from England, began his storytelling career in theatre at age 21. “I felt I had an art thingy in me, but I was a shyish guy, so I got into amateur theatre.” This led to street theatre with Chris Bolton’s Merlin Theatre, then Prism, in the early 1970s. Walker set up Cat Whiskers Folk Theatre and began doing mummers plays shortly after. Cat Whiskers toured several folk clubs before Walker became discontented. Although it was possible to make rich language flow in theatre, the “fourth wall” kept the speaker from addressing the audience. “I was starting to feel need of something more intimate, something of my own to offer” (int. 10 July

1997). He moved into children's entertainment and storytelling developed naturally as part of his "bag of tricks." Soon he was doing a radio program of storytelling for the Shropshire area and organizing a local storytelling troupe. In the 1980s storytelling was recognized enough that folk clubs began accepting adult storytellers:

And so I became a professional storyteller, and I'm very pleased to be one. It goes back to what you asked me earlier, about being a tradition bearer. Take a story I tell, Eldrid, that goes back to the eleventh century. The story is still brilliant, and it's been developed over nine hundred years. It's gone through voice after voice after voice, and now it's in me as well. These are the ones that work. (int. 10 July 1997)

Walker and Cox found pleasure in the creative crafting of stories through word and gesture. Also, like Rockwell, Walker felt satisfaction in creating new venues for storytelling.

Children's Book Review editor and national American teller Janice Del Negro, in her forties and pursuing her doctorate in Library Science in Illinois, saw the storytelling art as pertaining to the crafting of stories, not venues. Del Negro expressed disappointment at a lack of artistry of storytelling:

I hate sloppy storytelling. It makes me nuts. When you get up there and open your mouth, you bloody well better know what's gonna come out of it. Craft your story, get it right, then let it flow.

Then there's the story of the person who hawked his tapes right at end of a really tender story. Talk about blowing a moment. The audience was right there, with him, and he just brushes off everything they're feeling. We're supposed to be professional grown-up artists, but sometimes. . . (int. 20 Dec. 1998)

Keding also mentioned storytellers who told tales that “weren’t quite ready. You know, you’ve seen them. They just needed to work on it for another week, but they get overeager and trot it out and it just isn’t ready yet” (int. 21 Dec. 1998).

Such artistry need not become too precious. Aerospace engineer and storyteller Miriam Nadel, in her forties, lives in New England. Nadel enjoys the creative process. “I take a lot of liberties with my stories, using a lot of modern (anachronistic) details. Among other things, I claim to channel the Wise Men of Chelm” (Sp 21 Sept. 1999). Nadel finds that making people laugh is an art form, and her enjoyment in crafting stories is evident (e-int. 11 Nov. 2002). International Irish storyteller Billy Teare, from Belfast and in his fifties, has been performing full-time for more than fifteen years. Like Nadel, he takes a light-hearted approach to storytelling, uses juggling, memory acts, and other comical turns from the vaudeville stage to flesh out his storytelling. He believes that storytelling needs entertainers, people interested in the artistry, to function:

See, first there were the bards and the druids with their oral tradition, shamans, witch doctors, Celtic peoples, bards, when there were no longer druids, still there were bards, entertainers to the royal court and so on, and bards were like the priestly class. Gleemen, they were more sort of, no, you couldn’t say they were descended from the priestly class, more that they were just entertainers of the sort that went into homes, told stories, bits of nonsense, tumbling and so on, what I regard myself as. (int. 3 Aug. 1997)

Teare thought that crafting stories carefully and thoroughly was important, but “Remember, this is so the audience has fun” (int. 3 Aug. 1997).



### 4.2.3 Storytellers are Activists

The artistry of storytellers probably serves one or more agendas. It could be argued that storytellers generally expect to find themselves part of a large and loosely cohesive group of people who are sharing the identity “peacemonger.” A peacemonger is a slightly playful term for someone with the goal of making the world a better place. Storytelling in this vein can include: environmental tales (Emmert int. 29 Dec. 1998); stories used in mental health counseling or therapy (Cox Sp 15 Oct. 2000); and tales to help those in temporary situations of grief or despair, such as refugees (my own work in England) or people suffering bereavement (Holt int. 9 July 2002). Several tellers were involved in collecting and telling personal experience narratives and folktales following 9/11 in the United States (Cox; Simms; Sprengnether; Sps “Re: Changing the World” and “Re: Our Work Must Go On,” 12 –23 Sept. 2001). International storyteller Laura Simms, who lives in New York, went to the makeshift reopened schools and told folktales with messages of peace, calm, and coping with fear. She also asked students to tell her their personal stories if they wanted to. On the American west coast Cox gave seminars for school teachers on how to use folktales to discuss children’s fears. Sprengnether, working in Michigan near many people of Arabic and Kurdish origins, began looking for folktales from these regions to present to her audience of Anglo, Polish and Appalachian children, in order to challenge violence toward Muslims in the wake of 9/11.

Storytelling is often associated in the minds of its practitioners with “worthy” causes such as post-9/11 telling, and with artistic frames of mind that involve what one teller described as “a 1960s outlook on life” (Otto Sp 18 Feb. 1999). By “1960s outlook”

Otto appeared to mean an approach that promotes peace, open discussion, and general goodwill. That the bulk of practicing storytellers in North America are of an age to be cultural products of the 1960s may have something to do with Otto's observations (conversation with National Storytelling Network Director 5 Oct. 2002). Work in this vein, according to one international teller in Northern Ireland, "will, ultimately, change the world" (Weir int. 4 Aug. 1997).

It is interesting that, based on observations via Storytell and discussions with informants for this research, there is a widespread agreement with "peacemonger" as an identity amongst storytellers, even internationally. It is certainly held by a significant majority of individual storytellers with regards to both themselves and the profession as a whole. The International Storytelling Center in the United States has on its website a subsection devoted to storytellers who promote peace, encompassing forty-three tellers in twenty-one states, two in the United Kingdom (Weir in Northern Ireland, and myself in England, where I lived until late 2004) and six in Canada (including Lottridge and Wellner, quoted in this dissertation). The website reads:

#### **Storytellers and Story Educators for Peace**

This is a partial listing by country and state of storytellers who identify themselves as focusing all or part of their repertoire on peace-building and conflict transformation. The list is constantly growing; please consult it often. <[www.storytellingcenter.net](http://www.storytellingcenter.net) 2005>

Promoting peace and conflict resolution can be seen as an important part of storytellers' views of themselves as individuals and as participants in a profession associated with the wisdom of past ages and cultures. Still, sharing peacemongering as a

goal does not mean that storytellers think alike about how peace should be promoted. In wishing to preach harmony and good relations between different groups, storytellers take differing political stances. Keding sees himself as a Democrat (int. 21 Dec. 1998).

Rockwell sees himself as a Republican (conversation). It is not an unreasonable assumption that, within the storytelling community, people will have differing opinions as to which political orientation will bring about peace. Educator and storyteller Kim King asked just such a question on Storytell:

Hey guys, I had an interesting question via the HealingStory Listserv this morning. Has anybody out there designed a set of stories to reflect a social/political point of view? I know that some have, but don't have any particulars at my fingertips, as I read but don't save Storytell posts.

So whichever side of the political fence you sit on, how about it? What was your program? What point of view was it designed to support? How did it go over with your audiences? (Sp 13 Mar. 2005)

The only response to this post came from a storyteller who discussed the stories he was working on, but not how they reflected his political views. He was also working on a general program, not a performance involving politics *per se*. To be classified as activists does not require a storyteller to take a particular line regarding politics.

However, if storytellers do want to put forward a particular stance, it behooves them to do so subtly. As Weir said, audiences "do not like being used. . . . You shouldn't take advantage of an audience like that. Storytelling is not therapy (int. 4 Aug. 1997). Forest agreed that audiences know when they are being used, and react accordingly (int. 17 Dec. 1998). A librarian and teller in the American Southwest recalled a time when she felt she had crossed the line between telling and preaching. She told "La Llorona," the

Spanish tale of a woman who kills her own children, immediately following the celebrated US court case in which a mother was found to have drowned her two sons. This teller reoriented the story to encompass what she considered to be “healing thoughts” but found that the audience appeared not to recognize the comparison. She was disappointed, but decided it was an instance of audience expectation regarding a well-known folktale; they could not see the folktale as a metaphor because it was familiar to them as a story. She also felt that she might have been a bit early in her timing of the tale, and was ultimately “relieved” that the audience did not get the comparison (Name withheld Sp 18 May 2000).

#### **4.2.4 Storytellers are Conduits for Wisdom**

Fourteen international, national, regional, day-job and weekend storytellers interviewed from the United Kingdom and North America felt that they were involved in dispensing wisdom. It might be worth mentioning that all these tellers were over the age of forty-five when interviewed. This section includes discussions from a few tellers who represent the two primary areas of wisdom storytellers mentioned during interviews: ancient wisdom and the wisdom of personal experience. As a starting point, a brief background about how wisdom is seen within folkloristics is advantageous.

Ethnographers have found appeals to ancient status as an authenticating force in diverse situations. “[It is] the authority of the past, commemorated in ritual and tradition, which gives ongoing legitimacy to the present and future” (Workman 29). Folklore scholar Hermann Bausinger noted in Folk Culture in a World of Technology that the introduction of the 1908 edition of the famous German folksong collection

*Zupfgeigenhansl* contained a truism: “What has survived the test of time simply must be good” (67). Bausinger also commented that folk festivals often present a situation where

“tradition” is specifically invoked, although interest is not focused so much on what is handed down directly from one’s forebears as on aspects of the ancient that are endangered by recent developments and are valued precisely because of that fact. (69)

Folklore studies show that people think present utterances are made authoritative when associated with the past. Bronner pointed out that many popular use definitions of tradition in popular use include an aspect of “handing down” something that carries wisdom. “Tradition” in part becomes synonymous with guidance from the past (144).

Storytellers find tradition associated with a handing down of past wisdom as well. In this sense, any storyteller may see herself as involved with dispensing wisdom if she links her art form with an ancient past. Associating stories with antiquity, wisdom becomes an automatic byproduct. Treetop Wilson and Carole Ann Heubner, both late regional storytellers in Tennessee, felt they were very much linked with a diachronic tradition drawing on the past for its appeal and authority. “This is an ancient artform; storytelling is as old as the hills, older! It’s very traditional. We participate in that, and it’s a real privilege to be part of such an ancient process” (int. 16 July 1999). Wilson and Heubner worked with the Tales and Tours program in Jonesborough. They told folktales from European folklore, vaudeville pieces, and legends from the Jonesborough area. “Storytelling is a calling as much as an art form, really. . . . You’re part of the life cycle of these stories” (int. 16 July 1999). Wilson and Heubner see themselves as associated with ancientness, with a sense of participation in a process made venerable by age. The

fact that some of their material is recent does not, for them, negate that the process by which they impart stories is the “ancient, oral tradition” (16 July 1999). To this couple, it is the process of performing stories that is ancient, not the tales themselves.

Keding associates the past more with the stories than the process of telling. He enjoys telling stories linked with ancientness:

I like the old stories. I like to tell them, I like to hear them. . . . Yes, I think of myself as a traditional performer—not perhaps in the sense that you would use “traditional” as a folklorist, but I’m passing on the wisdom. That’s what storytelling offers the world. (int. 21 Dec. 1998)

Keding differs from Wilson and Heubner in that he sees the tales themselves, rather than the act of telling them, as the mainstay of association with the ancient. Keding also found wisdom in personal stories, but cautioned that the trick lay in knowing when your experience had something to say to other people, and “when to keep your mouth shut about last Christmas with your grandmother” (conversation). Storytellers can see themselves as repositories and dispensers of ancient wisdom, or of recent wisdom. People use stories, both their textual content and the act of creating them as a formed narrative, to sort out their personal experiences and make them comprehensible, an idea echoed by Bauman (1986: 5) and Sobol (1999: 33).

A personal experience narrative may become, in the mind of the teller, a description of the human journey. British international teller Taffy Thomas offers the wisdom of personal experience. When Thomas suffered a stroke in the middle of a street performance, the former fire-eater and trapeze artist found himself paralyzed and fighting

for his dignity. He tells the story of his journey from street circuses through hospital life to storytelling in an autobiographical show, “Take These Chains from my Heart” (int. 10 July 1997). Thomas received an MBE Award in 2002 for telling stories as an inspiration to those facing similar adversity.<sup>31</sup> This is one example of sharing personal, modern-day experience for the enlightenment of others.

Yet personal experiences of storytellers are not only shaped into narratives, but also influence which traditional stories a storyteller chooses to tell. Canadian anthropologist Caroline Brettell, investigating her mother’s career as a journalist, examined the “blurring of genres and the blending of voices in biography and autobiography” (S46) and identified a way of conducting research that resonates with this investigation of storytellers and how they see wisdom: “life-course analysis” (S45). First created by Glen Elder, a sociologist, in 1974, then honed by historian Tamara Hareven, the concept of life-course as Brettell applies it suggests that turning points of importance to individuals will be marked both by the individual’s behavior and by responses from his family or group. Life-course analysis can be applied to storytellers who attempt to make sense of the turning points in their lives by including them in a blurring of folktale and autobiography, or telling them as personal stories. Sheila Darr, an educator in a Texas university, felt that folktales offered her a very personal kind of wisdom, making sense of the life experiences that motivated her to become a storyteller, narrating primarily European and Native American traditional stories: “I came to storytelling in part because of several dramatic events in my life that felt like they needed to be told ‘someday’” (e-

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<sup>31</sup> Member of the British Empire, an award given annually by the Queen to individuals who have performed distinguished service.

int. 11 Nov. 2002). Darr tells folktales whose themes she considers cross-cultural, and of interest to women. Storytelling offers her a voice to express concepts that reflect her views on how women should treat others and be treated themselves; she finds great wisdom in ancient folktales, although she often alters the tales to reflect her life experiences. For instance, in a given folktale she may change the gender of a magic helper—someone rendering assistance to the beleaguered hero/heroine—based on who helped her in “real life.” Folktales help Darr shape what she wishes to say about life without using her own family story to express it. Darr uses folktales to share wisdom, masking her voice of experience through the story (e-int. 11 Nov. 2002).

Keding is not concerned about hiding his personal voice, so he uses both folktales and personal experience narratives to impart wisdom. A large man of imposing stature, Keding’s Croatian grandmother told him stories throughout his childhood highlighting the difference between physical strength and strength of character. He credits her with keeping him from becoming a bully. As an adult, he began putting together stories that fit the same theme, based on neighborhood characters and lived experience. Two personal stories I have heard Keding tell come to mind. One is of a childhood friend, an elderly Holocaust victim who taught Keding kindness in the face of oppression. Keding also tells the story of a learning-challenged boy from his strict Catholic grade school, and how the boy’s natural innocence taught the students to respect him and make a place for him in their class. It is this type of wisdom, espousing among other themes kindness and peace between men, which he feels is important to perpetuate in his tellings of folktales and personal experience narratives (int. 21 Dec. 1998). Unlike Darr, Keding is not trying to



unknot an internal string. Rather, he is trying to pass on what he feels he has been “blessed with,” a heritage of understanding about values that will benefit society. He tells stories that value what he values, that reflect his worldview. This is slightly different from Darr's concern with redeeming past difficulties, creating a voice for the position and plight of women with a background of family difficulties in today's society. Keding is interested in perpetuating ancient values that reflect his own; Darr, perhaps, is looking for wisdom to sort out her history and claim for her own. Despite these differing motivations, both feel that, as storytellers, they are dispensers of wisdom.

One person's wisdom can be another's folly, as Toelken described in his essay “The ‘Pretty Languages’ of Yellowman.” He noted his failure to understand that a story was not an etiological tale, even though told in response to a young boy asking about snow's origins (1981: 72). “In short, by seeing the story in terms of any categories I had been taught to recognize, I had missed the point; and so had our young visitor [the boy], a fact which Little Wagon [the storyteller] at once attributed to the deadly influences of white schooling” (1981: 73). Toelken suggests that Navaho stories studied anthropologically have suffered from distortion because of

the well-known tendency of our culture to see things chiefly in terms of its own existing categories, and thus to classify data in its own terms. This leaning may have as much to do with normal thought processes as it does with cultural myopia, and we may never be able to cure it; but we should be aware of its effects on what we suppose to be our objectivity. (1981: 74)

Toelken urges us to recognize how our worldview imposes its myopia on what we believe a story is saying. For example, whose wisdom is being espoused when, say, an

Episcopalian librarian from Detroit tells an Islamic folktale from Iran? Working in a Muslim area of England as part of a scheme created by the English Arts Council in 2003, my job was to develop local storytellers in a predominantly Pakistani and Indian community. Anjum Anwar, Education Liaison officer for the Lancashire Council of Mosques in Blackburn, England, was a partner in this storytelling project. Anwar uses storytelling to teach Islamic values to Muslim children in schools. She thought storytellers telling stories from Islamic traditions were likely to get some important things wrong:

But I have also met storytellers, from many lands, who were not like you [Wendy] who thought the way they saw the world was the only way to see it. They didn't even know they had choices on how to see it; they just thought it was as it was, and they saw it as it was.

And you and I both know that a Muslim boy is going to see the world quite differently to an English girl. So when we're talking about peace, yes, there is a world cry for peace, but whose peace? Is it peace when some people are just told to be quiet? That becomes an important question, doesn't it? [laughs] And we're just talking about storytelling! (Lancashire Council of Mosques and Blackburn with Darwen Council Storytelling Project training day, 13 March 2003).

Yet Anwar found the awakening interest in Islam heartening, which complicated her position:

I mean, the fact that they want to tell these stories is good, eh? Just that the interest is there. So no, I'm not saying other storytellers shouldn't tell stories from Islam.

[Wendy]: [laughs] Okay, Anjum, what are you saying?

[Anjum]: [laughs] That's a good question. I'm saying, I'm saying just be careful. Do your homework. Or don't say it's an Islamic story. (13 March 2003)

In the immediate aftermath of 9/11, several tellers on Storytell discussed why they thought it was important to begin telling Islamic stories. This is a typical posting:

We all have different ideas we bring to the profession. But by and large, I think storytellers are a positive force for good in the world, at a time when we need it more than ever. We need to get out there and promote an understanding that challenges fear of the unknown, before it's too late. (Sp 14 Sept. 2001).

The call to challenge fear that stems from not knowing about other cultures echoed Anwar's agenda. Anwar was “pleased” that non-Muslims were interested in the culture, yet deeply aware that there are elements of Islamic story telling – let alone the difference between Indian/Pakistani Muslim culture as expressed in Britain and Arabic Muslim culture as it guides Islamic practice worldwide—that North American and United Kingdom storytellers would not only not understand, but might not be able to see.

Anwar and the Storytell poster quoted are classic examples of people with differing worldviews trying to achieve the same outcome—which, given the depth of their differences, might not look the same when each feels he or she has achieved it. American anthropologist Edward Hall found “that people brought up in different cultures live in different perceptual worlds. . .” (70). Anwar and the above teller both use words such as “peace” yet for each of them it means something different.

When a teller with no background in Muslim culture finds an Islamic story, he is likely to find elements of the tale bizarre. According to Toelken, anything that stands out from the ordinary would be glossed over:

A person sees things in terms of a structured cultural vocabulary provided for him by his society (earliest, of course, his family); phenomena which do not match his linguistic programming are likely not to be perceived at all, or may strike him as “illogical” or “abnormal” (1975: 265)

Bausinger concurred. “The characteristic of familiar contact further explains why the often far-reaching and comprehensive experiences of individuals can only be inadequately received and digested by others” (38-39). Hence, elements of a story not understood would be turned into something “playfully unreal, charmingly strange, or supernatural” (39).

Toelken notes that, when people with conflicting worldviews meet, a person unprepared to face the fact that he has a worldview will not appreciate the worldview of others:

When [a person unaware of his own worldview] moves among other cultures, he expects at most to add its language and some of its customs to his own vocabulary; when others move into his culture, however, he expects them to *convert* to his worldview and essentially to give up their own. (269)

Add to this that “What is naturally known or constitutes proof in one culture may not be understood or considered relevant in another culture” (Struthers 125) and one can see that worldview becomes more problematic the less it is acknowledged as a factor. In effect, one cannot see what one does not know that one cannot see. A teller will have difficulty

assimilating into his telling meanings he does not know are there for someone from within a given culture. The full force of history behind a story about Arabic culture may become “playfully unreal, charmingly strange” (Bausinger 39) or something a bit more ethnocentric. Whether this revamping of cultural detail into charming oddness is valid depends on the storyteller’s aim and his negotiation with his listeners. If he is purporting to accurately portray a culture, it is not valid. However, if he states that he tells the story as it speaks to him, based on his own worldview, then perhaps he has become engaged in what Ben-Amos called “post-modernistic folklore” (“Foreword” Bausinger ix) and what Bausinger called “folklorism” or *folklorismus* (xi). He is using a tradition to which he has no attachment to take part in a traditional activity in which he is fluent—storytelling.

It is fascinating and disorienting to realize that, although each believes their use of storytelling to be beneficial to their listeners, Anwar and the post-9/11 Storytell teller approach the telling of Islamic stories with disparate ideas about what the intellectual landscape of an Islamic story would look like. Intellectual landscape refers to the point the story might be trying to make, or the assumptions that could or could not be read into the tale. Islamic audiences listening to Anwar and western audiences listening to the post-9/11 teller are hearing two different stories. The 9/11 teller may be deluded in believing he is promoting Islamic understanding, but he is, as Anwar pointed out, reminding people that a separate culture exists. That, in and of itself, is not a bad thing in her mind.

#### ***4.2.4.1 Wisdom and Personality***

One must also consider that each storyteller has a personality of his own, and these personalities will affect how they present their culture:

*I worked with asylum seekers, the term in Britain for people seeking to stay in the country as political or economic refugees, during the "Second Gulf War." We met monthly at the town library and shared a meal. (I had a grant.) After eating, we told stories. Each month had a theme: "strangeness," "fear and security," "the things I want to tell people about Britain." The purpose of the project was to give a voice to a voiceless group of people within British society. Most attendees were from African or Middle Eastern Muslim countries. Once we were sitting in the after-dinner circle. Mohiba Moribbyahar and Naziq Mustafawe were sitting near each other. Moribbyahar came from Bosnia with her two children during the Civil War; she lost her brother in the fighting and was separated from her husband in the ensuing confusion. Mustafawe left Iraq with her husband and three children, all under the age of ten, in 2002, after her husband was released from prison. Moribbyahar is a devout Muslim; Mustafawe is not so forthcoming with her views. I don't remember how it came up, but suddenly Moribbyahar said the pictures of a mass grave found outside Baghdad were "the work of the Jews." They had been planted the pictures on American and British television to incite hatred against Saddam Hussein as a defender of Islam. The room went very quiet. Mustafawe's daughter Marden had been translating for her mother, as she usually did. But Marden stopped translating early in Moribbyahar's speech; I didn't notice this at the time, but the health care worker pointed it out later. Marden came to me afterward, visibly upset. Mustafawe's father had gone missing before the family left Iraq. His body was pulled from the mass grave about four days before the meeting at the library. Marden had decided not to translate the discussion for her mother, and was enraged at Moribbyahar. A lot of Muslims from Iraq saw Muslims in England, Pakistan, Bosnia and Africa as "clueless" about Hussein's rule and not listening to those who experienced it.*

It was a strange thing to have happen in a storytelling circle intended to promote peace and goodwill; I was horrified to have unwittingly forced a young girl into making such an adult choice. And the incident brought up a wide range of questions regarding the wisdom that can be carried by a single human voice.

German-born and American-educated Edward Sapir, a linguist and anthropologist, said “Our natural interest in human behavior seems always to vacillate between what is imputed to the culture of the group as a whole and what is imputed to the psychic organization of the individual himself” (194). Thus a person does not speak for a culture, only for herself within it. Bauman divided the definition of personal experience narrative into “a particular class of reported events” and “a particular point of view” (33). One must take into account cultural and situational contexts and never forget to consider the personality of the storyteller. Dégh said her work in Hungarian communities “encouraged me to view the personality of storytellers as most crucial, well above the other two indispensable factors: tradition and audience” (290). Sapir stipulated that it is “necessary to discover the contrast, real or fictitious, between . . . a segment of behavior seen as cultural pattern and a segment of behavior interpreted as having a person-defining value” (196). Azadovskii mentioned that “the same *Märchen* can take on a different tone and a different coloration with various narrators” (8). Taking personality, situational context and cultural context into consideration, the storyteller becomes a single voice within a complex, densely populated situation.

What is the value of a single human voice when it purports to speak wisdom? Tellers may incorporate their own life experiences into folktales, bringing contemporary

order and analysis to the human journey as they see it. Whether the wisdom that experience taught the teller will mean much to others is a separate question.

Moribbyahar's life experience had taught her to hate Jewish people and to revere Islam to the point of violence. The proof is evident that this is not a message valued by all Muslims. A personal experience narrative is shaped by the worldview and cultural expectations of its narrator and intended audience. Such a narrative has the value of one human voicing her lived experience to back it. It is a different wisdom than association with the past. "The central problem of tradition is explaining the ways that people rely on one another, with reference to precedent, for their wisdom, their expression, their identity" (Bronner 144).

When storytellers intermingle their experiences with folktales the result is wisdom from the past co-mingled with experience of today. Backing the telling of a folktale with the message of his life—"be nice to those weaker than you"—Keding is not telling a personal experience narrative, but a story about (for example) three questing boys, a princess and a magic frog helper. The voice of his experience speaks from the mask of the story, and it is impossible to say what authority is added to his voice when it is wrapped around with the ancient wisdom espoused in the story. Whether Moribbyahar's deliberate personal perspective or Keding's artistic masking of his experience will be granted more respectful listening is left to their listeners. My personal reaction is to say, "Yes, but Dan was doing something worthwhile and Mohiba was expressing prejudice." This line of reasoning strengthens the example. A bitter pill goes down more easily when sugar-coated. Had Moribbyahar couched her racial feelings inside a folktale, the group



might have been less apprehensive. If Keding straightforwardly lectured children on the finer points of not being bullies, they probably would not listen as attentively as they do to his stories. Storytellers, then, ultimately offer wisdom that carries less weight than the authority of antiquity but more than a single voice.

The final decision on wisdom will rest with the audience. Why does it seem that Keding's point was "better than" Moribbyahar's? Western values have instilled this perspective, so Western ears hear Keding and Moribbyahar in a particular evaluative way, embracing one but rejecting the other. It is the listeners who decide whether wisdom is truly wisdom and a story is worth hearing—and they can exhibit a personal or collective rejection of offered wisdom.

#### ***4.2.4.2 Wisdom and Age***

Listeners need not divine wisdom solely along lines of ethnicity. Age, along with many other factors too numerous to name here, can be significant. Sobol discussed his research as being with the Vietnam generation. He believed that this group formed and embraced storytelling in its current American permutations (1999: 32). In thirty years of storytelling, an entire generation of currently practicing storytellers (myself included) was born during or after the Vietnam War, into what might be called the era of cynicism, sometimes referred to as "Generation X." Perhaps the quintessential Generation X question is "What does your experience have to do with me?" American, Canadian and British storytelling literature focuses on storytellers whose formative years were in the 1960s. The generations of tellers who have come into the occupation since then are undervoiced in the literature, and therefore the question of lived experience cannot be

explored as separate from the shared experiences of those who remember the 1960s. The assumption that a younger generation will listen to an older one is no longer a truism in Western culture. As American anthropologist Margaret Mead pointed out in 1970, in an age of advancing technology, prefigurative patterns of wisdom transmission—the younger generation teaching the older—is more likely. Likewise when the experience of the younger generation is radically different from that of their elders, cofigurative transmission, peers learning from each other, is the more common pattern (3). Applying Caroline Brettell's life-course analysis (S46), what is a turning point to one person may be something of no consequence to another. Thus when Sobol says that "The storyteller is the mediating image of restored wholeness . . . clarifying the social matrix for at least the duration of the performance event" (1999: 29) clarification may be a problematic term. Wisdom may be what the storyteller perceives herself as giving, but receiving depends on whether the listener has ears to hear.

#### **4.2.5 Storytellers Represent or Present Cultures**

Storytellers, as has been evident from the preceding discussion of wisdom, showcase their culture to people outside that cultural group, or the storyteller may be showcasing a culture outside his own to others also outside that cultural group. The experience of this neophyte teller as an educator on the west coast of America suggests two categories of cultural storyteller:

Last summer, I heard for the first time that some Native American tellers did not want others telling the tales of their people. Exactly one month later, I was invited to tell stories at a large Powwow. I

explained my dilemma to the organizer, a Native American, but she told me it was a bunch of nonsense. Still feeling uncomfortable, I scheduled some other gig for the day of the Powwow, so I had an excuse to turn down her offer. I consulted with a Native American friend of mine who told me that if my heart is pure and I don't pretend to represent someone else's culture that her elders and teachers believe

very strongly that it would be okay to tell their stories. (Sp 21 Mar 2005)

This teller mentions representing someone else's culture as purporting to be from that culture. "Representing" and "presenting" are useful terms for drawing a distinction between telling stories from within ("representing") and without ("presenting") one's cultural experiences. They are defined in the glossary in Appendix A.

Tellers display an awareness of the issues inherent in representing a culture.

English storyteller Amy Douglas works primarily with English audiences. "Telling stories about your culture, and telling stories within your culture, those are two different things" (int. 9 June 1998). Douglas prefers telling stories within her culture, even if those stories are from sources outside her cultural experience. As an Anglo woman, she felt she could comfortably relate an Asian Indian story in England, because English audiences would share her basic understanding of Asian Indian culture. She would not be comfortable telling the same story in America. As Douglas put it, "There's a basis of common language, a basis of understanding, you don't have to explain so much about the laws, the humor in your own group" (int. 9 June 1998).

Sheila Stewart, storyteller and one of the Scottish Stewarts of Blairgowrie, is a cultural representative. She is teaching Traveller culture to Travellers and to those with an academic interest in Traveller culture. She has no personal doubt of her position as a

cultural representative. “I am the last in my line of tradition bearers. It is my responsibility to share what I know with others, to give them the old stories and songs, the Traveller way of life” (int. 7 April 1999). Stewart is a representative of her own culture. She has the authority of a life lived in that culture behind her.

By contrast, Sprengnether has been telling stories for more than a decade. She believes that presenting stories from other cultures is part of her mission:

Personally as a librarian in a culturally mixed community that is still taking baby steps to develop local tellers, I find a real need for stories to be told that expose listeners to the wealth of cultural viewpoints in the world. Waiting for a storyteller of each background literally can prove deadly as various incidents of racial or ethnic violence throughout our metro area repeatedly show. More and more I realize my own mission is presenting in an enjoyable manner the wealth of all cultures as a means of understanding. (Sp 20 Sept. 1999)

Sprengnether sees folktales as presenting mutual cultural understanding, not specific points of value such as “be kind to those weaker than you” (Keding) or “be tough and survive” (Darr). She would hire community storytellers representing the Arabic, Kurdish, Spanish, Appalachian, Jewish and other groups of people that make up her region's diverse and non-interacting population if her budget and their proximity allowed. If she is without access to such tellers because of money or geography, she will happily tell Arabic, Kurdish, Spanish, Appalachian, and/or Jewish stories herself (Sp 20 Sept. 1999).

### **4.3 Identity Authority and Artistic Authority as Elements of Storytelling**

#### **Identity**

In representing or presenting cultures and dispensing wisdom, storytellers repeatedly deal with issues of identity authority and artistic authority (terms defined on page 79 of this document). International storyteller Heather Forest felt that artistic and identity authority intertwined in telling about what one knew while taking into account the full context of where one was presenting it. To have an identity replete with storytelling heritage yet be unable to tell a story in a way that compelled the audience to listen was to have identity authority without artistic authority, and would preclude the teller from being considered a “good” storyteller. Forest had little patience with the concept of ethnic identity as an aspect of professional storytelling. In a follow-up e-mail, she said it was talent, not race, which got a storyteller booked into festivals (20 Jan.1999).

National teller Kate Corkery is aware of the interplay between talent and ethnicity. An Irishwoman living in London for the past twenty years, Corkery believes her storytelling educates young people about Ireland. “I tell stories of my people, my history from Ireland, here in London.” Corkery also discussed the need to tell the story in a way that reached the listeners in each specific storytelling event. Children who had never sheared sheep would need a bit of background for her word pictures to be accurate in their heads. To her, identity authority was hers by dint of being Irish and telling Irish stories. Displaying artistic authority meant being aware of her audience’s needs and catering to them:

So as long as the story's told in a way that's real, you can go away and think of the meanings, the deeper issues, later on. I think that's what matters. What matters is it's a live medium, on the day at the time.

Whoever is there, wherever you are. And that's what's hard, and that's the lovely freedom storytelling gives you that other arts don't. If you get too over reverent, it takes away the meatiness, then there's not that much left.

(9 June 1998)

By "a way that's real," Corkery meant "not too flowery, using language that works for the people in front of you."

A similar thought is found Newfoundland folklorist Philip Hiscock's reference to Polly Stewart, stating that a teller of legends must take into account how the audience expects the narrative to be told—how, in essence, they are willing to hear it:

Or, as Polly Stewart pointed out, the best-told legend, by local standards, is one whose style most approximates conversational speech, and which seems least story-like (Stewart 1988). In other words, the legend normally responds well to contextual changes, and that response is most clearly seen in its text which varies easily and appropriately.

(Hiscock 50)

The legend adapts to the context around it, the content changing to match the needs of the storytelling event. Bauman calls this "the management of information" (39). Corkery calls it "a way that's real." A talented teller understands the performance context in which she is working. Context can subdivide into two concepts, as expounded on by Bronislaw Malinowski: the context of culture (1965: 18) and "the context of situation" (1947: 306). Ben-Amos also referenced these (1993: 209). Both concepts are important in performance contexts. Cultural context refers to mutually expected codes of conduct,

what Ben-Amos—drawing on de Saussure—called *langue* (1984: 121). “Accordingly, any aesthetic expression is rooted in and explained by its context of culture, which in turns it reflects” (Ben-Amos 1993: 216). Situational context includes the venue, biographical details of the speaker (age, gender, etc.) and the physical and historical time of the performance (218). Contexts are not intended to carry value judgment in folkloristics as “no one situational context is privileged over any other” (219); therefore a “performance” context is no less or more than any other context in which a storyteller finds herself. But contexts are intrinsically related to meanings of formulaic utterances, including narratives, which means that the storyteller is aware that she and her listeners are in an unwritten agreement as to her purpose in speaking to them. Or, as Hymes said more formally:

The use of a linguistic form identifies a range of meanings. A context can support a range of meanings. When a form is used in a context, it eliminates the meanings possible to that context other than those that form can signal; the context eliminates from consideration the meanings possible to the form other than those that the context can support. The effective meaning depends on the interaction of the two. (19)

Context in storytelling situations, then, implies the use of a form of linguistic meaning rooted in some aspect of culture, being spoken in a physical situation. To put it as children might express the relationship, the lady is there to tell stories. She is engaging with the listeners through a particular, formal activity. As such, she had better know what the children expect when they hear the word “storyteller,” and either behave accordingly, or negotiate a new mutually agreed understanding.

Corkery, telling stories as an Irishwoman in London, was aware not only of her spatial, situational, contractual context (was she in a school; was she required to tell stories to a specific theme; was the room too hot; were the children excited because it was close to a holiday, a Friday afternoon, etc.) but of her cultural context as well: did the children have any familiarity with Ireland; was there anything in the room that can be used to assist visually with what she is describing; did the children understand her accent; what did her London life experience give her that she could use to “translate” Ireland to them? Keeping contexts in mind, Corkery knows that the right amount of detail can hold inform her listeners, but too much will annoy them, while too little make the story bland and dull.

What Corkery describes is similar to the storytelling techniques outlined by American folklorist Lee Haring. Discussing storytelling sessions when a storyteller faced listeners outside her cultural context, Haring said storytellers use the “conventional rhetorical devices” of reduction, allusion and augmentation (2003: 22-23). Reduction involves removing sections or condensing actions that might not be understandable, while augmentation is a more thorough explanation of those actions; this explanation would not be necessary within the teller’s own cultural context. Allusion is actually a coded message to others who would be within the cultural context. As Haring observed, the storyteller uses allusion to “define the knowers against the ignorant by alluding to what only the in-group know” (2003: 23).

Haring dealt only with storytellers working from their own cultural background. Telling a story for which one lacks the cultural background puts the teller in a



handicapped position, and introduces two additional techniques: research, and resetting. If she does not understand the cultural details, she must remove them or gloss over them (reduction), learn to understand them, or replace them with details she does understand (for example, resetting the story's central theme in another culture).

#### 4.3.1 Artistic and Identity Authority in Various Performance Contexts

Suppose a teller who has little cultural knowledge of the story he is performing tells it to an audience who also has little cultural knowledge. "Michael's story," shows how artistic authority can be threatened by ignoring cultural detailing:

*"Michael" is a Scottish teller who is a friend of mine. When I was coordinating a Valentine's Day storytelling event at a local restaurant, Michael had asked me to hire him because he had a love story he was working on, a Japanese ghost story. Knowing Michael to be an entertaining and compelling storyteller, I was happy to do so.*

*His story was impressive. A woman commits suicide after weaving a kimono of her own hair for her husband, who needs it to impress a rich man but then goes off with a new wife. Full of rich language and sensual—nay, erotic—commentary, the listeners at the restaurant hardly breathed as they listened to Michael. I loved the story. He was telling it with an artistry I hadn't before associated with his cheerful, irreverent use of language. This was an "adult" story in many senses, and we usually worked with children.*

*But as Michael described a traveling caravan, camels appeared in it. The husband in the story, having been seduced by a rich woman traveling with the entourage, went into his house and picked up three clay pots. He put his heels against the side of the house and said "I divorce you, I divorce you, I divorce you," dropping a clay pot each time. While the image of shattering was artistic, my brain stopped interjected the commentary "Hunh?" The insertion*

*of these cultural details seemed odd. While no authority on Japanese culture, I had read Shogun. Wasn't divorce in feudal Japan appealed for only to the area's lord?*

*I suspended disbelief and listened to the rest of the story. The man, broken by his encounters with rich life in the city, returned home to his first wife and was forgiven by an act of love-making. It was the day after their sexual encounter that he realized she had been a ghost. The man died of heartbreak. At the end of the telling, Michael received the highest compliment an artist can have from listeners: a hush before the beginning of the applause.*

*When Michael and I sat with a drink after the evening had finished, he asked, "Do you know if there were camels in Japan back then?" He said he'd "stuck them in" because he thought of camels when he thought of caravans. "And that 'I divorce you' thing, that's Arab culture, isn't it?" Michael said he needed to "fix" that part of the story. Artistically, he felt the broken pots worked, but culturally he knew they were not accurate. (Valentine's Day 2000, Fife, Scotland)*

Artistic excellence can be marred by cultural inaccuracy. Michael's elegant story was marred by introduction of inaccurate detailing that stood out from his masterful handling of the rest of the material. The inaccuracy made me question other cultural details such as the description of an altar behind the house and the way the house was lit at night. Whether this was true for other listeners was beyond my ability to ascertain; as the person who had hired Michael and who was hosting the night, it would have been bad form to make such enquiries. Judging by the hush and applause at the end, it seems the listeners enjoyed and admired his word choices and artistic techniques, and either did not perceive, or along with me were content to overlook, his cultural error. Artistic and identity authority are tied together. A talented storyteller might not have every cultural

detail perfect. Had Michael told the same story to a group of Japanese scholars, or of Japanese tourists, things would have been different—and Michael, being intelligent, would not have done that. Had Michael fumbled with the artistry of telling the story, things also might have been different.

Looking at authority from the identity side, a teller may be firmly grounded in an ethnicity but not feel comfortable moving between cultural performance contexts. Jock Duncan is a bothy ballad singer and regional storyteller, one of the last farm hands who used horses to work the land. Duncan, in his late seventies, speaks Scots with a strong Doric accent; Doric is Aberdeenshire Scots. Duncan was born and bred in the area, and sees his role as continuing to interest young people in the Scottish storytelling traditions (including narrative ballads). He has become a source for a new generation of storytellers and singers. His comments are translated from Scots to English:

It was all right to sing Scots songs and speak in Scots in the schools then [when he was a school child] but the ballads are all disappearing now. I think that's a large part of what's done it; the youngsters can't speak in Scots, so they can't read them or understand them when they hear them. The next generation . . . they're helping to bring them back by getting out there and singing them, making sure people hear them. That's bringing them back. (int. 11 July 1998)

Duncan is unabashedly delighted with the fact that he is now considered an important source for singers on the folk scene. He speaks of a responsibility to present the Scots language to a new generation, and appreciates the efforts of young people to learn from him. “They do come up, and they work hard. I give them a song or a story, and they take

it away and practice. Sometimes they come back and do it for me. That's a thrill, I can tell you" (11 July 1998). Duncan is teaching Scots culture to Scots. He is a representer of his cultural group to his cultural group. He wants to represent, as accurately as a single voice of experience can, Old Scotland to New Scotland.

Yet Duncan is concerned about his artistic abilities. He decided not to register with the Scottish Storytelling Centre because "they are really good storytellers down there" (conversation 14 Mar. 2005) and he worried that his storytelling skills would not be artistically strong enough to merit entry into the organization. Personally, I believe he would have been welcomed as a cultural expert. But Duncan, seeing himself as a storyteller in the Scots tradition, was not as concerned with artistry as with accuracy in presenting his cultural identity. This is not to denigrate Duncan's renderings of Scottish folktales and ballads; my husband and I have whiled away many a happy hour with cups of tea in his living room as he sang or told us stories in a style so engaging we would forget where we were. Yet Duncan saw his identity as a rural Highlands Scot representing the rural Highlands stories primarily to rural Highlands people. He felt his authority as a teller lay in this pairing, not in the larger venue of artistic authority to audiences whose cultural and situational context might have been outside his current expectations.

American folklorist Richard Bauman investigated something similar with Ed Bell, a storyteller who told tall tales as part of his work running a fish camp in Texas. Bell became so sought after as a performer that, unlike Duncan, he made the contextual leap and began telling at festivals, schools, and universities. There he found audience

members with little understanding of what his tall tales described: hunting, fishing, and farming. “From his reading of his new audiences, Bell believes that they need to have more explained to them in order to make the tales accessible . . .” (102). Bell began incorporating more details—what Haring called augmentation (20003: 23)—such as explaining tackle that would be used for redfish, and repetition, which “ties the narration together in webs of cohesion that help an audience unfamiliar with traditional storytelling to hold together a story in their minds . . .” (Bauman 102). Bell, being an artistically excellent storyteller, knew when his listeners could keep up with him and when they could not. He was unafraid to switch contexts because he had confidence in his identity and his artistry.<sup>32</sup>

Storytellers both present and represent ethnic heritages, and to do so well, they must exhibit artistic and identity authority in some interrelated quantity. They must also carefully watch the contexts of their performances. For a teller from outside Islamic culture to tell an Islamic story to a group of Muslim children could border on madness. Yet it could also be welcomed, depending on a few factors: are the children steeped in their Muslim heritage or separated from it; is the teller a new scholar of Islam seeking to “test drive” his stories in front of cultural experts. If not, probably the teller making a grave error in judgment by trying to do something for which he is unequipped. Each storytelling event is unique, and the dynamics of whether the teller will be perceived as having identity authority change with each storytelling situation.

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<sup>32</sup> When my husband and I visited Jock and Frances Duncan socially in March 2005, I repeated my nearly annual offer to write a letter on his behalf to the Scottish Storytelling Centre. I believed that the Centre would take Jock on the basis of his traditional reputation, without further vetting. Jock thanked me, but stated that Frances was now too ill for him to travel much.

Among storytellers, identity authority often comes from identification with a particular source for one's repertoire, such as international tellers Gayle Ross with Native American tales and Liz Weir with Irish stories. People whose repertoires come from one (usually ethnic) source are considered "authentic" because what they do is based on the ancientness of a particular heritage. In a non-ethnicity example, authenticity could stem from having been involved in an experience. National teller Elizabeth Ellis telling stories of her work as a nurse in Vietnam is a case in point. However, as a relatively new storyteller, college loan officer Faye Chance was offered the opportunity through an arts grant to research first-hand narratives from veterans in East Tennessee, Virginia and North Carolina. Chance had never been a nurse, nor visited Vietnam. She moulded the information she collected into a story about nurses in Vietnam, which she told onstage. Afterward, she said:

All these veterans were coming up to me and said, 'Thank you. You saved my life.' They were veterans, and they thought I was too. I hadn't said this was research material. I felt awful. I was crying, literally crying, with the shame of it. It was awful.

So the next time I did it they announced before I started that this was actually an interpretation of other people's, blah blah. That seemed weird too. It interfered somehow. I don't know why. So the third night we added a little bit to the program [the printed handout audience members got]. We put in that the material Faye Chance was doing was gathered from the experiences of many women who had served in Vietnam, but that I myself had not served there. (int. 9 July 1997)

Chance's feelings of shame were compounded by the reactions of other tellers from the area, who suggested she was trying to pass herself off as part of a culture that was not hers to claim. "I wasn't [trying to make people think I had been a nurse in Vietnam] and I didn't want anyone thinking that. But, well, anyway" (9 July 1997). Artistic authority and her careful attention to details in researching and crafting her story gave her the appearance of identity authority that Ellis had from actual experience. In both cases, listeners, including listeners who had been in the Vietnam War, were convinced they were hearing "authentic" experiences from Vietnam. Faye had connections with a source and had done careful research. Whether connection to a source through careful research brings authenticity is, as Chapter Two discussed, problematic in folklore studies. It was very problematic in real life for Chance, who felt shame on two levels: she disliked the fact that she had, by being convincing in her telling, made Vietnam veterans believe she had been a nurse; and she disliked the fact that those who knew her assumed this had been her aim. Chance wanted to be a "good" storyteller. She saw her work as artistically rendering the data in a compelling, evocative story. She accomplished that, and was "the victim of my own success. They believed me" (9 July 1997). Chance, unprepared to negotiate the question of her background, failed to uphold her identity authority—which was arguably created by the fact that her artistic authority was so competent. She tried two negotiations, both unsuccessful to her mind. (9 July 1997).

In what has become a cautionary tale from occupational storytelling in the late 1990s, Keding embodied the bemusement of many professional tellers when he described the antics of a regional Illinois storyteller who decided to present himself as a Native

American teller (int. 21 Dec. 1998). The teller appeared very white, having pale eyes and light skin. He promoted himself as the official holder of stories to a Native American group because he had been apprenticed for three years to a tribal elder. This teller's lexicon of terms and ways of self-advertising, along with his inability to answer certain questions about "his" culture, gave rise to suspicions. His claim to be the keeper of stories for this ethnic group clashed with his demeanor and appearance, along the order of Goffman's "gives" versus "gives off" information (2). After storytellers in Illinois began making inquiries,<sup>33</sup> it came to light that the teller had not studied with a tribal elder, but only been given permission from "an elder" to learn stories from the Native American tradition. The elder turned out to be a Canadian of British descent who claimed to be the reincarnation of a First Nations leader in contact with spirits of dead tribe members—"a New Age Indian reincarnation," as one teller termed this identity (21 Dec. 1998).

American national storyteller Jackie Torrence once met the elder in question as he attempted to take food from her plate at a formal dinner (after the fashion of a shaman fed by others from their cooking pots).<sup>34</sup> Her response has become legend within the storytelling community: "You are a white man. Stop acting like this and go get a job" (Torrence Institute in Jonesborough, Tennessee 7 July 1994).<sup>35</sup>

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<sup>33</sup> A group of Illinois storytellers, some of whom had told with the teller at Corn Island Storytelling Festival, began checking the facts they received in answer to several questions. I met the teller at Corn Island and was one of those who asked him questions, but was not involved in the subsequent fact-checking.

<sup>34</sup> Jackie Torrence, now deceased, was one of America's most recognizable storytellers. She appeared on the David Letterman show and many PBS storytelling specials; she is profiled in *I Dream a World*, a collection of biographies about African American women who improved the world. If health had permitted, she would have been an international storyteller, but she suffered from severe diabetes.

<sup>35</sup> Jackie Torrence led a four-day workshop on storytelling at East Tennessee State University; I was the graduate assistant for this institute, as the workshops were called.



This teller's failed bid to overcome melanin evidence that he was white stemmed largely from his inability to correctly give information within his stories regarding his chosen identity. Had the teller exhibited any identity authority with his choice of words or body language, or had the teller been artistically authoritative, the question of his authenticity might not have arisen. There are limits to what a storyteller of mediocre artistic authority can lead an audience to believe, stated international teller Heather Forest:

I think you have to give the audience credit. For example: what if I said, "Here's a Scottish story I've just written, it's really good, I think you'll like it; it's called Macbeth." And then I told it with my own words. You don't have to credit Shakespeare. Everybody knows it's his. Wouldn't that show disrespect for your listeners, that you didn't think your audience was too bright? (17 Dec. 1998)

Forest felt that artistic authority came from just such a negotiation, telling what one knew while taking into account the full context of where one was presenting it. Forest had little patience with the concept of ethnic identity as a desirable or undesirable aspect of identity in professional storytelling. In a follow-up e-mail, she said it was talent, not race, which got a storyteller booked into festivals (20 Jan. 1999).

#### **4.4 Conclusions**

This chapter examined how storytellers see themselves as individuals and as members of an occupational group. Professional identity can be divided into five broad categories: storyteller; business person; artist; peacemonger; and dispenser of wisdom.

As peacemongers and dispensers of wisdom, problems arise with regard to the ability to present or represent other cultures. Depending on their worldview, some tellers may misrepresent cultures while believing they are portraying them accurately. Others may misrepresent cultures without intent to accurately portray them. Others may, by virtue of study or long-term association, accurately represent the culture while not being a visible member of it—that is, they may have the wrong facial characteristics or skin color, yet accurately portray the culture.

There is often an uneasy balance of accuracy versus artistry displayed when storytellers venture outside their own cultures to find stories. Those with artistic authority may be able to overcome a lack of identity authority, depending among other things on performance context, while those with identity authority are sometimes concerned about lacking artistic authority.

## CHAPTER FIVE:

### FINDING AND CRAFTING STORIES

*“ . . . [W]e are no doubt dealing with highly gifted people with rich phantasies and strong memories, with artistic types who are the equals of the outstanding creative writers in the world of literature.” – Walter Berendsohn Grundformen volkstümlicher Erzähler-kunst in den Kinder- und Hausmärchen der Brüder Grimm: ein stilkritischer Versuch (129)*

When choosing which tales to include in their performance repertoire, professional storytellers are making a personal judgment, shaped by the image they hold of themselves and by the contexts in which they anticipate performing. Stories will become part of a teller's performance material based on the artistic authority and identity authority a teller feels she has, and on the teller's judgment of whether the story will appeal to any anticipated listeners. The teller's gender will affect how that choice is made. This chapter examines how storytellers choose and craft the stories they decide to tell.

Based on interviews and on informal questioning of other tellers at events, professional storytellers seem to have between thirty and seventy stories in their memories, recoverable on a moment's notice. This was true of casual as well as international tellers; the least number of stories one casual teller knew was ten, while others cited “thirty plus.” Only four tellers (three international, one national) cited more than seventy. Ewan McVicar, from Edinburgh, carries in his wallet a list of about eighty

tales he can recount. Kira van Deusen, a national teller from Vancouver, claimed about the same number (conversation). Heather Forest, from New York, laid claim to more than one hundred and fifty tales in “total recall mode” (int. 17 Dec. 1998). Dan Keding, from Illinois, stated that he had more than three hundred stories in his head that could be “dusted and pressed into service with about ten minutes to spare” (int. 21 Dec. 1998). It is valuable to consider how and why these stories were chosen by their tellers, and, once chosen, what the teller did to and with them.

### **5.1 How a Teller Finds a Story**

The ways in which storytellers find tales divide into three large categories: from oral sources, from print sources, and from their own internal resources. Oral sources can include other tellers, family members, and personal experiences told by close sources. Some storytellers visit colorful local characters in communities to hear personal stories or folktales. Print sources are books, magazines, the Internet, or other tangible written copies. Internal resources include one’s imagination and personal experiences.

Informants’ initial oral sources were usually performances from other tellers. An initial source refers to the first place that a storyteller finds a story he likes; a follow-up source is one the teller seeks out or happens upon to back up his research of the story as he first encountered it. Of those interviewed here, only Holt, Keding, Poland and Rockwell (all Americans, two international, one day job and one regional teller) were gathering stories outside their circle of family and friends. Tour guide and storyteller Madeline Grantham in England and national teller Sheila Kay Adams in America had

taken notes or made electronic recordings of family conversations at social gatherings. English tellers Helen East (international) and Amy Douglas (national) visited Scottish international teller and Traveller Duncan Williamson to learn his family's stock of traditional stories (Douglas int. 9 June 1998). My last visit with Williamson in 2004 coincided with a visit from Douglas and East. Douglas found that most of the stories she told came from other tellers. "I find it difficult to tell stories from books. You have to have the background, and you can't get it from the page" (9 June 1998). As she became more familiar with motifs of traditional tales in general, Douglas gleaned material from books and intertwining it with themes she learned from Williamson and others. "Now it's maybe fifty-fifty that I tell from books and from other people's [repertoires]" (9 June 1998).

Print sources, then, are used as both initial and follow-up sources. A teller might today find a story she likes on the Internet and begin using it without looking for other text versions or knowing anyone telling that tale. Texts may also be used to "flesh out" stories the teller is struck by after hearing them in a performance or fieldwork setting, as Douglas does with stories from other tellers.

Tonya Coulter, a regional storyteller and organic farmer in Toronto, is another example of someone combining print and oral sources. After graduating high school, Coulter worked with the Whitehorse Storytelling Festival in the Yukon, where she heard stories from First Nation tellers. She liked the tales, and when she moved to Toronto to attend university she found they were not well-known. However, she felt it was "not

appropriate” for her to tell them. “I’m a Canadian of Ukrainian descent” (int. 12 July 1999). So Coulter finds alternate versions of the Native tales from other print sources.

Likewise, internal resources such as imagination and experience can mix with print or oral sources. American national teller Beth Horner took the story of a living skeleton eating oatmeal mixed with blood to protect its powers, combined it with a personal experience narrative of overcoming fear as a child, and created an original piece about a woman searching a castle for treasure (National Storytelling Festival 1995).

## **5.2 Why a Teller Chooses a Story, or a Story Chooses a Teller**

Tellers tend to choose stories that are compelling to them for some reason. An autoethnographic example will open this discussion.

In 1984, at age seventeen, I first heard Child Ballad Ten, “Twa Sisters”<sup>36</sup> in 1984, and began telling it nine years later after looking up print versions of the ballad. Why did a story heard once on the radio, sitting in a car waiting for my mother to get off work, stay with me for nine years? I have tried to re-enter that moment and analyze its impact, as a template for investigating why tellers choose a particular tale. My strongest memory is that the story was beautiful, sung by one woman, joined by a high harmony during the refrain “Lay Your Hand to the Bonny Broom.”<sup>37</sup> The minor melody was compelling. The second reason for liking the story was that it felt old. To my teenage self the song spoke

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<sup>36</sup> The ballad is known by many names. As a folktale it comes under the motif of The Singing Bone (AT 780).

<sup>37</sup> If research since then has proven correct, this was not the actual refrain. Pentangle recorded a version of the ballad with the refrain “Lay the bent to the bonny broom.” (“Cruel Sister,” Pentangle, Transatlantic Records, London, 1970) I do not know who I was listening to on the radio. I have seen no version of the song with “Lay your hand to the bonny broom” as the refrain.

of ancient things from faraway places. This was compelling, creating a desire to connect with that long line of ancient history. Next, the language was evocative. I heard the lines “In terror sits the black-haired bride,” and “They made a harp from her breast bone” once, yet could repeat them twenty years later (accurately, it turns out). And last, the story was about unfairness. The older sister is courted by a man who knew that he loved the younger; the older sister murders the younger sister, not the man; the older sister is held responsible for the crime. The man is never held accountable for his trifling with the affections of the older sister. The unfairness of this tale rests on a modern interpretation. Of course having a husband was more essential to a woman’s wellbeing in the ballad’s time period than in mine, and there were issues of whether the older sister had to be married before the younger according to inheritance rights. But first hearing the ballad at seventeen, knowing nothing of medieval days or folklore studies, my emotions were captured by this callous and callow youth who caused great damage by knowingly courting a woman he did not love. Thus I felt connected to the story’s theme, as I perceived it, rather than its cultural context, yet also reacting to its context in recognizing it as a piece of ancient art, however modified.

In this example one finds a few key elements of how a story appeals to a teller. These include: emotionally identifying with the theme of the tale—Stone calls this concept “the center of the story as the tellers see it” (1998: 195); an appreciation of the story’s power, artistry, aesthetical appeal, based in my case on the age and wording, perhaps on other criteria for other tellers; and a practical consideration of the story’s usefulness in anticipated performance situations. Of course these three are interactive; the

dividing line between emotionally identifying with a story and finding it aesthetically compelling is a psychological point that shifts with each teller. Outside my experience with “Twa Sisters” is a fourth consideration, somewhat less intermingled than the first three: a storyteller may inherit or be bequeathed the story by another teller, or by his cultural community.

### **5.2.1 Participant Understanding with the Emotional Core of the Tale**

To a storyteller, emotional resonance can be prized above cultural meaning. American storyteller and educator Melissa Heckler, in her 1996 essay “Two Traditions,” explored the oral and literary streams of modern storytelling (not the dual traditions of public and private performance Thomas described in his 1983 work The Two Traditions). Heckler referred to storytellers as “bridges” (29). Dégh used the word “conduit” to describe Ágoston Fábíán “bringing her ethnic culture into the mainstream of national culture” (306). The storyteller has experienced the story in one way, and brings her experience to the story's telling. Heckler found that at least one folklorist did not see it in quite the same way:

[A]n outraged folklorist criticized an article of my storytelling experiences with the Ju/'hoansi by writing, “She's taken a point from the story and applied it to herself!” Exactly. I had. The job of the storyteller is fundamentally different from the job of the folklorist, scholar, or researcher who may try to keep a clinical or academic detachment from her or his work. It is precisely the storyteller's work to explore a story and make a personal relationship with it. This isn't entirely an intellectual quest, but also a quest for an emotionally meaningful relationship with a story so we can tell it with conviction. A folktale, of any culture, in some



essential way, must happen to us as much as any personal story we tell.

(29)

Heckler's approach to storytelling calls for an emotional interaction with a personal story\*. She is untroubled by the fact that the narrator and the story are from divergent cultures. Likewise my reaction to "Twa Sisters," and indeed to most of the stories in my repertoire for many years, is emotionally tied to the tale's theme as I perceived it. This divergence troubles some folklorists. Lindahl, in his introduction to Swapping Stories, suggested that cultural context, along with the community and community teller, are the essential elements of the storytelling process:

[Professional storytellers] are usually less interested in the local dynamics of folk traditions than in acquiring material for performance. At such large gatherings as the National Storytelling Festival in Jonesboro, Tennessee, a Florida librarian may reshape a Scottish ballad he has learned from a book into a prose tale and attempt to entertain an audience of hundreds of strangers from around the world. Such performers seldom attempt to duplicate the style of the borrowed tales - or to share with the audience much knowledge of the original tale-tellers and their communities.

Although often artful and entertaining, such performances rest on the premise that the tale itself is more important than the folk artist who told it, more important than the artists' folk community. (5)

Lindahl is not sympathetic to Heckler's assertion that storytellers look for a way to resonate the story with their intended hearers, regardless of cultural context. Clearly, some storytellers and folklorists may have divergent ideas about what characterizes or motivates a professional storyteller. Heckler described the storyteller as expecting to bridge a gap to achieve a new mutual understanding, and the folklorist as missing this

point. Lindahl describes a storyteller as missing the point of what a story is and does in its own folk community, and as undervaluing the native teller. Perhaps the point here is that there are two different points, and that storytellers display awareness of these. An example may help to illustrate:

Kate Corkery often tells a story about a family in Ireland whose luck had gone sour. The basic plot of the story is as follows:

- A man's wife dies after eliciting three promises from him: he will marry a woman she has picked out for him, he will not go see the village shenachie for any reason, and he will look out for the interests of their son amidst any additional children he and his new wife may have.
- The man has a family with his new wife, and eventually becomes hard up for cash. He must sell his cow, but the cow takes ill. The man goes to the shenachie (a village wise man), who tells him to exchange the cow's death for a member of his family, whom he must choose (unbeknownst to them) at the evening meal. That person will sneeze three times; the man must not say "God Bless You."
- The man chooses his son from his first marriage. On his second sneeze, the boy's stepmother (unaware of what is happening) blesses him and asks if he feels well.
- The shade of the dead wife appears, and blesses the stepmother for the care she has shown another woman's child. The cow dies. The economic fate of the family and emotional future of the man are left untold.

Corkery, who was brought up in Ireland, said when introducing this tale at the Scottish International Storytelling Festival that she liked the story because it illustrated

the collision of the old and new religions in Ireland (Closing night performance at Netherbow Theatre, Edinburgh, 4 Nov. 2000). For her, the story was an integral part of her community in the way Lindahl advocated. I heard the story from Corkery in 1999, during the Seacat Storytelling Festival at which we were both featured guests. To an American woman working with British children from challenging backgrounds, the story was about blended families and a stepmother's kindness when even the biological father had neglected and abandoned his child. Yet Corkery contextualized the story within Ireland's religious history. Each of us ascribed a meaning to the tale that was embedded in her culture, Corkery's via ethnicity, mine via class. Neither Corkery nor I believed that Corkery's meaning was the correct (true, authentic, real) one. When I was a guest of her London Yarnspinners group in February 2004, we discussed our different perceptions. She could see mine in the story and I could appreciate hers. However, appreciation did not equal understanding, as I knew so little about religions in ancient Ireland. Corkery, as I recall, laughed. "Well, what does it matter, when we both have a good story to tell? We each tell the story as it told itself to us."

Being professional storytellers, we each tell the tale as we expect it to reach our listeners. There seems to be no significant difference in our versions. Artistically, her ending is stronger than mine. She has the husband look up and see his dead wife standing outside. Then Corkery says, "I don't know what happened after that." This tension dissolving into humor is a particular strength of Corkery's. Out of respect for her artistry my ending is different (and, incidentally, weaker). Corkery also spends more time

describing the schenachie and his home. We see no other differences, yet we each see the story's emotional core differently.

A storyteller may feel that he comprehends a story because he has experienced the same emotions and/or situations as the characters within that tale. Although not involved with the cultural details of the story, this level of understanding offers insight leading to an ability to depict the tale in a way that is compelling to listen to. Librarian and storyteller Batsy Bybell of Idaho found that emphasizing the teller's responsibility to the story's emotional core means artistically gifted individuals could render compelling stories that they could not claim through cultural identity:

This discussion reminds me a little of the prevailing attitude back in the sixties when some of us were in the trenches of the civil rights and women's equality skirmishes. At that time it was widely and stubbornly held that whites could not write about African Americans and men could not write about women. In the meetings and rallies and classes I attended this was absolute gospel, and, in fact, any art about women produced by men, or about African Americans produced by whites was considered fraudulent, self-serving and probably immoral! There were some, like Hemingway, who were considered toast for Hades. I remember the first time I read closely H's "Cat in the Rain" and "Hills Like White Elephants" I was absolutely stunned at his perceptivity about women's relationships with obtuse, uncommunicative and self-centered men—which is, let's face it folks, the main issue women often have with their men. At that moment I began to question the prevailing dogma. And many feminists and African Americans have softened in the intervening years. Of course, there are many men who cannot write, talk, paint, whatever, about women with sensitivity, and probably most cannot do it with the

understanding women desire. The same goes for whites dealing with black issues, although some, like Nadine Gordimer, have done it to considerable satisfaction. Nonetheless those who can produce sensitive, perceptive and honest art about women or blacks have added greatly to the understanding of their issues. (Sp 18 Apr. 2001)

What Bybell describes here is artistic authority, the ability to tell a story so compellingly that the audience either forgets the teller is not a member of the cultural group about which he speaks, or does not care because they are entranced by the story. Heather Forest is an example of a storyteller who had an emotional response to a tale and turned it into a display of artistic authority:

But stories are not just representatives of their cultures. They're about the things that happen to people. For instance [brings out her book Wisdom Tales], in this I tell the Korean version of the story you mentioned [The Lion's Whisker<sup>38</sup>] with the tiger, because that version is about a husband, that's the one that touched me. In Wonder Tales [her previous book] those are very concerned about reflecting culture, so I made sure I used correct historic content. With Wisdom Tales it's more about plot. So I was more interested in the emotional aspects.

And this story is very much out of personal experience [reads from opening of her version]. "After many years in battle, a fierce warrior returned home so somber that it seemed to his wife as if his spirit had been killed in battle and that only his flesh and bones walked through the door. Although she welcomed him with great embraces and tears of joy, he did

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<sup>38</sup> A stepmother seeking to befriend her new son seeks assistance from a wise man, who offers to make her a potion requiring a lion's whisker. She spends weeks getting the whisker, moving closer to a wild lion day by day until he becomes accustomed to her. When she returns with the whisker, the wise man tells her to do with the child as she did with the lion, move slowly closer until he is no longer threatened. Forest's version involved a husband and wife rather than a stepmother and child, and a tiger rather than a lion.

not respond to her touch. His icy eyes did not meet her gaze. He seated himself at the table and stared out the window.”

I’ve had experience with a person you love drawing away from you. This is my experience with someone pulling away from you—I know what this woman felt. When I tell the story, I feel so—there’s some universal elements, you know. It’s easy to describe the hows. My goal is to show this story, even though it might be from the rain forest, it includes us. It’s not a story about what they eat; it’s a story about the emotions. (int. 17 Dec. 1998)

Forest found herself identifying with the story, engaged in participant understanding with what she saw as the emotional core. Her artistic abilities helped her describe how she, as a person, had felt when her loved one pulled away from her, and apply that knowledge to a Korean folktale, even though she knows “nothing” about Korea and has never visited that country. As English sculptor and teller Alan Davies described it, achieving artistic authority is done through the emotions:

I find this hard to explain clearly, but once I’ve got the bones of the story, a lot of the work is done with what I can best describe as ‘emotional pictures’ (not very clear, but I can’t think of another way of putting it—sorry). This may not make any sense to some of you—I guess I have a very close link between emotional/visual constructs, or something. Anyway, what I’m doing here is very much a two way process—exploring the emotions in the story, and my own reactions to those emotions, establishing an internal dialogue with the story, if you like. I find that this is where I find the truth in my telling, and where a lot of the richness and texture accumulates; the emotional pictures seem to automatically pull in the external, contextual stuff that is needed to make the whole thing work properly. (e-int. 13 Dec. 1999)

When participant understanding is applied to folktales, the usual assumption is that the “participation” will be with emotions and reactions, rather than with the situation described in the plot. In other words, a storyteller will understand what it feels like to be powerless, as opposed to being deprived of a magic feather. For this reason, stories that compel tellers may seem unusual choices to those not privy to a teller’s personal life. Choosing a story may thus almost be described as the story choosing the teller. The late Richard Walker, an international teller from Shropshire, England, suggested that stories choose tellers as much as tellers choose stories:

Actually, I think stories choose you. Elsewise, how could you remember them. Stories stretch back, some of them eight hundred years, and when I tell them to school kids, they’ve got them, the story goes on. It’s all part of the passing of tradition. (int. 10 July 1997)

Neil Early, a pastor and storyteller from Louisiana, used slightly different wording to express the same concept:

We celebrate the people, histories, customs and traditions of the stories we tell. I know we have helped a good many people gain appreciation for others they would never have considered through our story sharing. No matter what, we will have to tell the stories that call to us to tell them. (Sp 23 Sept. 1999)

A regional storyteller who recently left her library position to pursue full-time storytelling posted on Storytell:

In my experience, which is not as extensive as many of you, the story lets me know whether I should tell it or not. I can’t get inside a story that is out of my understanding. If the essence of the story is important to me, I will recreate it in my own setting, with my own belief system.

I love the story, “The Fly” from Jane Yolen's “Folktales from Around the World.” When I tried to tell it, however, I couldn't bring it to any tellable form. Finally, I changed the setting and characters from Asia to the East Tennessee Mountains. Then it worked perfectly. (Name withheld Sp 22 Sept. 1999)

American Midwest educator and storyteller Lorna Czarnota said, “I let the stories tell me what to do. In that, I find my work to be sacred work” (Sp 24 Sept. 1999).

The story choosing the teller is a concept with natural credence among storytellers, even among artists generally: a painter may refer to a subject or image that haunts his mind's eye, while a musician may hear a tune repeatedly in her head. Tellers find that the tale offers them an immediate moment of emotional resonance. Participant understanding is a powerful enablement for storytellers to allow themselves access into other people's lives, experiences, cultures and perceptions. Tellers who make no claim of identification with a story through ethnicity or participation in the story's described events may find that they “understand” what the story is about in terms of its emotional resonance, what it says to them, and how the tale “chose them” to tell it. These understandings will vary, depending on the teller's worldview, personality, cultural background, and other factors, but informants in the United Kingdom, Canada and the United States referred to stories choosing them. It seems to be a concept with common credence.

### **5.2.2 Finding the Story Aesthetically Compelling**

Participant understanding is not the only reason that tellers choose a story. Storytellers sometimes identify specific elements of the tale as compelling, or they



identify the entire tale as they heard /read it as being artistically enticing. In this artistic enticement, there may be an element of personal identification, but the teller is not making this the primary thrust or reason behind working with the story. Carol McGirr of Toronto (and a former student of Alice Kane) found an attractive beauty in the imagery of a Russian folktale learned from a book of fairy tales. McGirr was “attracted to the story by the wondrous golden bowl that filled with moving images . . .” (Stone 1998:181). She enjoyed the story’s beauty in the print version she read; she found the imagery compelling. “She also considered it a profound story, one that offered a positive metaphor for human endurance under impossible conditions” (181). McGirr was taken with the power of the story’s theme, not as it resonated with her personally, but as an artistic way of expressing the human condition, that is, a metaphor.

Another regional Toronto storyteller, Marvyne Jenoff, felt a kind of negative affinity for the stepmother in “Snow White,” and retold the story by making this character, usually seen as malevolent, into a helper for the daughter. Jenoff’s attraction to the stepmother was somewhat personal, an emotional anti-affinity, but it was also based on artistic considerations. Jenoff wanted to transform the story, to take on the artistic challenge of rebalancing the good-evil dichotomy of the tale. “[I]f the mother’s character was positive then the threatening forces had to be found elsewhere” (Stone 1998:188). The male characters of the dwarves and the father took on this role. “However, these antagonists were more misguided than evil or destructive. Instead, a vague evil was embodied by the anonymous, impersonal steel city and its inhuman technology . . .” (189). Jenoff concentrated on character rather than action. Her artistic alterations came

from identifying with the story's population; it is impossible to divide artistic and personal considerations in this creative moment. "Her personal identification with the characters, not just her literary skills, gave this text its vibrancy" (189). Jenoff rose to an artistic challenge, wishing to alter a story that compelled yet simultaneously repelled her because of its portrayal of a mother figure.

Both Jenoff and McGirr displayed an attraction to the story based on aesthetic elements, not the tale's emotional resonance or plot. Indeed, Jenoff needed to revamp the plot and recast a character to find satisfaction with the tale.

### **5.2.3 Practical Considerations for Choosing a Story**

Along with the mysteries of personal and artistic attraction, storytellers often cite a practical consideration of the story's anticipated usefulness as a reason for learning it. Stone said of McGirr, "When I asked why she had chosen to tell that particular story, she responded that she wanted to tell a relatively brief narrative and one that she knew she could control the length of time it needed for a full telling" (1998: 181). The situational context for which she needed a story influenced her decision to use the Russian folktale.

Although entranced by Child Ballad Ten on first hearing, I began learning to tell it nine years later because an upcoming gig at a ghost storytelling festival and a performance for a women's group each seemed an appropriate place to tell this story. Later, while running seven after-school and weekend story clubs for children from 2000-2002, my searches for good stories were far less artistic than utilitarian. Needing at least three new stories every week brought about a search-and-seize approach to books of folktales from many lands.

Another example of this practical approach is American health worker and storyteller Allison Cox. She looks for stories that help her express themes involving health and wellbeing, and needs new stories on a regular basis. Cox also seeks ways in which she can exercise her creativity to make stories express this theme through judicious word choice and careful crafting.

McGirr was looking at story length; I needed a ghost story to fit audience expectations; Cox sought stories that would help her express particular concepts of mental or physical wellbeing. None of us chose stories unless they were also compelling for some other reason, but we had our eyes on the practical considerations of where and when we could tell the tales.

Of course there are also stories that tellers may avoid overall. Fairy tales are not the first choice of many tellers, being difficult to render and sometimes so well known in the Disney versions that the ability to alter them (or restore them to an older form) without being seen as “wrong” by the listener is a difficult negotiation. German folklorist Max Lüthi refers to “the fairy tale’s great need for precision” (57) in the form’s concentration on timing, stylistic elements, and plot building. Asking on Storytell about tellers who used fairy tales brought only six responses from tellers who said they included them. Of these, five used them regularly and one was using Hans Christian Andersen stories for a special occasion at her school. One of the five who responded was Mary Clark, a storyteller and administrative assistant with the University of Michigan’s School of Public Health. Clark had experienced children “correcting” her fairy tales. “I tell fairy tales. I’ve been corrected by children [when telling a fairy tale]. Always an

opportunity for them to hear another version and/or sometimes to help out with the story.” (Sp 29 Oct. 2005)

Likewise storytellers will leave out of their repertoire tales they cannot comprehend. A Canadian colleague said she avoids African stories “because I never get the point” (conversation). No teller wants to tackle a story she cannot grasp. And tellers may avoid a story they very much want to tell because the story is too difficult for audiences to comprehend in spoken form, but loses what the storyteller loves about it if it is simplified. Cox loved a literary tale written about a greenwoman (that is, an herbalist and healer) in the seventeenth century. The greenwoman has a client threatens to cry “witch” if she cannot become pregnant after taking an herbal concoction. Fearing the client’s husband impotent, the greenwoman sends her own lover to cut wood for the client, knowing what is likely to happen. Cox found that repeated attempts to make the story into a tellable piece fell flat. It came out as simply a sexual story, when Cox felt its power lay elsewhere. The story was complex and required the media of the written page to fully comprehend. Cox is still trying to tell it but doubts her success at this point (conversation).

#### **5.2.4 Inheriting a Stock of Stories or Being Bequeathed a Story**

There are also tellers who have less personal choice of what stories they tell. Such a teller may be the story keeper for his village in a formalized, traditional process, hearing stories from elders in his culture and retell them. He may also use his own imagination to create stories that ethnographically reflect his tradition; use personal experience narratives or add his own imaginative touches to traditional stories; or use print sources to

look for stories from only that background. He may combine any or all of these in his repertoire, but he will do so within the confines of representing a particular culture because he is the story keeper for that culture. A story keeper is a formal position usually found within an aboriginal structure. It is a rare occurrence in professional storytelling for a story keeper to perform in Public.

Storytellers may also confine themselves largely or entirely to a single cultural source by choice.<sup>39</sup> The majority of such cases interviewed here were Appalachian storytellers (nine), with one teller each from the African American, Native American teller, Irish, Traveller and Jewish cultures.

Scottish international teller Sheila Stewart's repertoire is drawn from her family background. Stewart has many folk songs from her mother, Belle, and stories from her father, Alec. "I work entirely from the oral tradition. Here [tapping her forehead]. This is my book; this is my tablet for writing. It's all up here, and in here [puts hand on heart]" (int. 19 April 1999). Stewart felt her own creativity did not intermingle with the stories she told. "I tell them the way they were told to me. Oh, I use my own words, sure, but I don't change them" (19 April 1999).

English national teller Shonaleigh sees herself as representing the Jewish tradition in a modern age. She retells the ancient Midrash stories, creates her own material from amalgams of personal experience and folktales, and improvises on traditional Jewish tales using her imagination:

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<sup>39</sup> I also interviewed at least two who had rejected being identified as tellers using a single cultural group for their primary material: Medlicott and Flodin, both of whom came from easily identifiable cultural groups.

My mother and grandmother told stories. The Yiddish tradition, Talmudic tradition, Midrash. You've been around that all your life. Jewish communities are a real ethnic mix, the next door neighbors are Turkish, so we visited back and forth a lot. That type of thing is always happening all 'round.

I can remember tons and tons and tons of stories. And I'd found that people really wanted to hear Jewish stories. They have a wonderful quality and great humor. Jewish humor is a great selling point. (int. 9 June 1998)

Shonaleigh alters many Jewish stories to allow her own sense of humor to "rework the energy of them." She wants them to be relevant to today's society:

Many times the original version of a tale, I've altered because it's too preachy, it's tedious, boring to listen to. So I tell that story, but I've taken all the facts and the heart of the events and tell the same story with the same events but just in my own way. It's still recognizable as that story but now it's got just a slight moral slant, it's no longer incredibly heavy. (9 June 1998)

International storyteller Gayle Ross is Cherokee. Ross learned her stories from a mix of print and oral sources (5 Aug. 1997). She read versions of Cherokee tales from such collectors as Mooney, and "fixed" things had been inaccurately represented, or that had changed within the culture and need to be portrayed differently. She also learned stories from other Native American traditions, including Hopi, Lakota, and Navaho, from private and public storytellers. Thus Ross chose stories primarily from within specific cultural parameters. She uses her identity to determine her repertoire:

I take my stories from a lifetime of understanding what it means to be Native American. If people want to invest to that same level, okay. But if not, not okay.

[Wendy:] Where do your stories come from? I mean, from books, from people.

[Gayle:] Some from other Native people. A lot of them can't get out now, but they want the stories told. I visit them, and they tell me, and then I tell those tales out there. Some from books, but mostly from childhood, from talking to other Native Americans, from my family. My family – G-d we had a lot of stories. (5 Aug. 1997)

As Ross identifies herself as a storyteller through her Native background, she is limited in story choice. However, Ross and other international storytellers working with one primary culture may find other stories creeping into the mix. Tellers working in venues with international participation are in a unique situation. They may encounter tellers from other traditions who share stories with them in festival settings. I have heard Ross tell at least one story in this way; she was a guest in my Scottish storytelling clubs in 2002, and told a British folktale she learned from Weir.

In the same vein, when Stewart and I did an American storytelling tour together for six weeks in September and October of 1999, she often told how the skunk got its stripe. There are no skunks in Scotland. Stewart learned the story as a young woman from a Native American teller featured at the same English festival as herself. When telling the story, Stewart would contextualize it by explaining how she acquired the story, and that she told it because it was a gift from the other storyteller. In this way Stewart contextualized the story both ethnically—she was telling a Native American tale because she had been given it by a Native American—and occupationally—she was telling this story because another professional teller had given it to her.

Because tellers representing a particular ethnicity are often working in festival settings and other large venues, they hear many stories from other cultures. Like Stewart,

Duncan Williamson is an internationally recognized storyteller from the Scottish Traveller tradition. Williamson is best known for his vast repertoire of Traveller tales, recorded by Linda Williamson for her doctorate in folklore. More than three hundred traditional tales are on deposit with the School of Scottish Studies in Edinburgh, comprising Williamson's repertoire as recorded by Linda Williamson in the 1980s. Through being invited to festivals around the globe, he has picked up songs and stories from every conceivable part of the world where English language storytelling occurs. He learned Australian Eric Bogle's song "The Band Played Waltzing Matilda" from New Zealand artist Gordon Hall and Jewish history tales from a 1992 trip to Israel (int. 13 Nov. 2000). Williamson runs these stories through his own cultural filter; "I bring them home, here" (13 Nov. 2000). He readily offers tales learned from tellers at festivals across the world with comments like, "Listen to this, Wendy! I got this from Gordon while we were in New Zealand together!" (Williamson 13 Nov. 2000). He introduces the stories in public performance by naming the teller who told the story to him, and what festival or other venue he was working in when he received the story. Williamson's repertoire, then, has been supplemented by material gathered from other tellers. However, he does not believe this makes him a multicultural storyteller. "All my stories are traditional, told as traditional, the old way" (int. 2 Sept. 2000). By this, Williamson means the Scottish Traveller tradition. Changes will no doubt have been made to these internationally-acquired stories, offered from a Jewish teller to a Scots hearer.

When staying at my Scottish home on a visit to meet with Williamson, David Holt said, "Well, what difference does it make if he learned them from somebody outside



the Traveller camp? He still tells them in the way he would tell those stories. Isn't there such a thing as a traditional style, maybe? Is that what he's got?" (int. 9 July 2002). In other words, a story transmitted via Duncan Williamson is a traditional story because it has come from a traditional source—the person, not the place.

The difference between how Williamson and Stewart acquired and contextualized their tales is noteworthy. Stewart told one story that was “given” to her by another storyteller. Williamson picked up stories from hearing them told by other tellers. Whether by gift or by simple absorption over the course of a weekend festival or other interaction, tellers working internationally may acquire stories from other tellers working at the same events. They may incorporate these into the body of stories they tell, not by resetting the story in their own culture, but by explaining the context of how they acquired the story.

International tellers, and other tellers of great reputation in the occupation, will also give stories to newer tellers. Traditional storytellers who do not work as professional tellers may also “bequeath” stories to tellers who are professionals. In these situations, the teller who has received the story will usually mention this connection when introducing the story.

When a teller narrates a tale that another teller has given him, the status of the bestowing teller may be evoked in the learner's retelling. Roger Ellingwood, a music teacher and neophyte casual storyteller from the American Midwest, introduces one of his tales as “this story I got from Jackie” (Sp 12 Oct. 2000); international English teller Taffy Thomas is “very proud” of a story given to him by Scottish Traveller Betsy White (int. 10 July 1997).

In gifting situations, whether the story is moving between countries, from a newer teller to a more established one, or from an established teller to a neophyte, the new teller is not choosing the story. Another storyteller is choosing that teller to tell that tale. In the case of a teller representing a specific culture selecting stories on the basis of that culture, slightly more choice is involved. Issues of identifying with the story's emotional core, finding elements aesthetically compelling, and practicality may also come into play, but only within the parameters of a particular culture.

Storytellers, then, choose stories on the basis of emotional resonance, aesthetic attraction, and practical considerations. Additionally, they may have stories chosen for them by their community or by another storyteller; they may also set cultural parameters around the stories they choose to tell, representing only their Public cultural identity. Once the teller has the tale, how she puts together the story for telling is a process that merits consideration.

### **5.3 How a Storyteller Crafts the Story**

There are multiple ways of approaching the crafting of a story into a tellable tale. Some tellers creatively invent stories from beginning to end. These are often story writers, people who have published stories or have ambitions to publish them. A common method of crafting stories is to pull apart and reconstruct folktales, bringing in motifs from other stories and/or adding one's own personal experiences. Also, tellers may tell stories in ways that range from exact replication (memorization) through duplication to

innovation to originality, such as going to a print version of that tale and building their story from that base.

Holt builds stories from fieldwork fleshed out with researching print versions of tales. He sometimes combines two personal experience narratives to make one story. Holt said of his material:

It's like traditional base, my own innovation. I learned that from musicians like Doc Watson and others; if you do it the way you learned it, it's just repeating, and it may not be accessible to an audience. But if you put your own feelings, your own thoughts, you own spin into it, you have something wonderful. (int. 17 July 2000)

Regional teller Gwenda Ledbetter combines her personal creativity with stories heard from others, folklore in her area's newspaper, and folktales:

When I find a story [I want to tell or rewrite as a creative piece] what do I do? Well, for instance, the *Charlotte Observer* asked for a ghost story from this particular place. I did schoolwork in Yancey County, and one boy had told me what happened there. . . . So I wrote it off his account and [newspaper clippings from the time].

I knew the place, had walked around in it, could see it happening, because it came from, out of, the oral tradition. I just trust it; it's been passed on; it has the shimmer of having been passed through many mouths. I do get a whole lot of 'em, ghost stories from students, other stories from other tellers. The Sir Gawain story I tell, I heard it from other professional storytellers. I'm very ear conscious, also much into reading, having started that way, telling stories from literature.

[Wendy:] Were you sticking close to the story as you read it?

[Gwenda:] Was I sticking close to the text? Yes. But then you enjoy having the creativity to put in things in oral tradition stories—you don't

know yourself where it comes from, it can be spontaneous, it can happen in front of an audience as you tell the story, whereas at other times it has to seem spontaneous, and that's harder. (int. 15 July 1999)

Ledbetter said she actually preferred not to think too much about the creative process of her story crafting. She thought of her artistic ability as “a magic well. You can get the magic out of it when you need it, as long as you don't look inside to see what's making it” (15 July 1999).

Like Ledbetter's, Doc McConnell's repertoire is drawn from multiple sources crafted into a single tale. But McConnell has no qualms about examining his own creative influences. He took creative writing in college and enjoys mixing his academic training with his family background:

[A]s I grew older I got interested in entertainment, in country music, folk, gospel. Later on I began to do a bit of radio, so as I was onstage with the audience, the opportunity would present itself to tell an anecdote, or a joke, so I was doing that, but still along lines of what I would call the entertainment business rather than an art form or classified as storytelling.

And of course I had taken college courses in writing, so that paved the way for using some of my family material. . . . I tell stories I heard from the old men, stories I heard in my family. (int. 16 July 1999)

McConnell uses his creativity to flesh out his stories, creating pieces of local lore and family lore intertwined. When he needs to complete a partially remembered story he turns to his creative side:

My brother Steamer features in a lot of my stories. Often times I'll've heard stories around home, or remembered stories, but they are so fragmented, so short on details. And you get stories told where a listener not being as familiar with the subject matter of the story as the teller

would be has demanded that the teller fill in details. But I have been cautioned by that ardent critic, my wife to leave out some of my details.

(16 July 1999)

National teller and editor Janice Del Negro has two approaches to a story she finds:

To take a folktale, the Three Golden Oranges, which I like a lot, I basically tell that as Three Golden Oranges, not as another story created from that motif. . . . I tell that the way I heard it but not some version or variation made up around that motif. It is that story.

But “Martha”—E 323 Dead Mother’s Benevolent Return, are you impressed? That story built around that motif is structured as a story I made up built around the idea of a mother coming back, of a mother showing her love, and of the relationship between Martha and her husband. It says a lot about their relationship because she can hear the baby crying and he can’t. That was a real breakthrough story for me in some ways because it showed me what I wanted to do. What I found myself being madly in love with was the motif of the story that existed cross-culturally. I liked the idea, and I built my story. (int. 20 Dec. 1998)

Creating stories from folktales is a common method of crafting stories, and was the predominant method among the people I interviewed. Tellers assimilate stories from multiple sources, sometimes breaking motifs and elements apart to recombine them as new tales.

Stories can also be based on personal experiences, on imagination, on a combination of these and a folktale, or on personal experience and imagination without a folktale. International English teller Taffy Thomas said, “I try to draw on both things, the personal and the traditional. My stroke show is a combination of traditional folktales and

my own experiences” (int. 10 July 1997). Incorporating folktales into a larger narrative, Thomas could be considered as creating an original text, crafted using personal experience. He has used traditional sources that say what he wishes to say, coupled with his own voice of experience. A blending of multiple influences to fall somewhere between replication and creativity is common among storytellers. Del Negro blended motifs from a Spanish folktale with the plot of an Appalachian Jack story; American educator and storyteller Melissa Heckler blended folktale with personal experience (29). The majority of tellers in the category of “creating new from old” seemed to employ this method because, as Medlicott said, “Put simply, it helps you build a better story” (int. 10 June 1998).

When stories told by tellers do not use folktales at all, they will be either completely from the imagination, or based on personal experience. Personal experience stories are self-explanatory. Tellers who have the ability to create compelling stories from their own imaginations are likely to be writing them down and creating books. Carmen Deedy and Jay O’Callahan, both American international storytellers, are two examples of those who create original stories. Deedy has published several of her original pieces as children’s picture books. The overlap between storytelling and creative writing is evident here. At this point storytelling diverges from association with any historical precedents. It is the far end of a continuum, one that removes the teller from participating in an oral tradition, and moves her into the realm of creative writing. Informants tended not to discuss this area so much as focus on using their creativity to enliven and retell existing stories.

#### 5.4 Gender Issues in Choosing and Crafting Stories

When a storyteller chooses a story to tell, gender affects both the decision to tell that story and how the storyteller crafts the tale. Marvyne Jenoff, who was discussed earlier, is one example of a teller who revamped stories to change the behavior of female tellers. Kate Corkery often changed the details of stories, although she said it was “more editing than embellishing.” She said it would be common to do some minor bowdlerizing and to make “politically correct swaps. I adapt stories to have women doing the more important things. I’ll often change male characters to female ones” (int. 9 June 1998). American Midwest educator and teller Priscilla Howe rewrote “Beauty and the Beast,” changing the ingénue to a beast at the end because she felt the story sent an incorrect message to young girls about their expectations in marriage (e-int. 9 July 2000). Del Negro and Flodin tell feminist versions of the child who travels to the North Wind and receives magical gifts; Anna is the Scandinavian hero Del Negro picked up on, while Flodin changed the Appalachian Jack to Jackie (Del Negro int. 20 Dec. 1998; Flodin int. 19 Dec. 1998).

In her essay in Women’s Folklore, Women’s Culture entitled “The Misuses of Enchantment: Controversies on the Significance of Fairy Tales,”<sup>40</sup> ethnographer Kay Stone wrote one succinct sentence in conclusion to her discussion of a young girl coming to terms with “Cinderella”—“She revises for herself a story she dislikes but cannot abandon” (1985: 144). This sentence encapsulates a way in which some female

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<sup>40</sup> This title is a parody of an influential book called The Uses of Enchantment by child psychologist Bruno Bettelheim. Bettelheim argued that fairy tales were a necessary part of child development but needed to be used by adults who had a full understanding of their power on the minds of children.

storytellers cope with their wish to tell folktales yet remain true to any images they may have of women that are contrary to those they see as portrayed in the story.

But not all female storytellers feel it incumbent to present overtly feminist stories, or to revamp existing stories to meet expectations of how women should be portrayed in modern society. Folklorist Linda Pershing, writing about the annual Pinkster festival in Tarrytown, New York, discussed gendered storytelling in African-American contexts. The Pinkster festival is an inversion: originally Dutch colonists in the 1700s gave their slaves a few days off while they celebrated Pentecost and Spring's arrival. Over time the festival has come to be an expression of cultural pride and racial identity (57). At Pinkster, storytelling has always been a part of the celebration, and women storytellers have featured prominently. The storytellers used techniques associated with African *griot* telling: call and response, eliciting audience participation, and telling many tales featuring animals. But while Dylan Pritchett (the only male teller) included stories featuring courage, integrity, and pride in one's culture, only the women storytellers included tales with themes of families and family dynamics. Moreover, Pritchett used Biblical stories to create African-American parodies, with conventional roles inverted or the endings altered. ShaRon Mason and J. Gilliam Brown (the women tellers) told "trickster tales that instruct the listener about ways to better understand social relations. Sometimes these stories offer gender-specific messages" (58). Racial interaction informs much of their storytelling (for example, Brown often chooses stories in which a small, defenceless animal overpowers a larger one). Pershing noted:



. . . African American women strategically use their influence to shape the event so that it focuses on racial issues. I have never heard them use the term “feminism” in discussing the festival, nor do the storytellers tell many tales that deal overtly with the status of women. Instead, while situating themselves in positions of authority at the event, Mason and Brown tell stories that address bigotry and oppression in general. (59)

The festival offers a lesson to feminists, particularly white feminists, who insist that for all women, gender must be the primary mode of analysis in interpreting cultural expression. At the Tarrytown festival, women assume authoritative voices through their creation of public performances that comment on social justice. (61)

Pershing picks up on an important point. Women in positions of artistic or academic power may be burdened with the need to express solidarity to feminist ideals, even if those ideals are not theirs, or if they do not serve the artistic needs of the story. They may also find that feminist perspectives force them to present an essential, monovoiced way of looking at women. In Undisciplined Women, folklorists Diane Tye and Pauline Greenhill discussed the need for women to be seen as suitably diverse within folklore studies. They pointed out that Canadian society offers a great variety of conceptions of women, regionally, ethnically and diachronically:

But we should not expect a unified vision of women’s folklore in Canada to emerge. . . . [T]he idea of one women’s folklore shared by all members of the sex—heterosexual or lesbian, in the north or south of Canada, labouring in or outside the home, working, bourgeois, or élite class—is problematic. (269)

Tye and Greenhill suggested that a monovoiced rendering of feminist or female scholarship would be counterproductive, contributing to the status quo rather than

offering resistance or challenge. Storytellers appear to think in a similar way, espousing the need to explore feminist themes as individual women, rather than part of a group that should uphold or espouse a particular point of view. There are as many ways of looking at women in stories as there are storytellers telling the tale, and there are as many ways of hearing about women in stories as there are people hearing the tale.

However, in folklore studies, Kay Stone, Susan Gordon and Joan Radner are among the few who have written about professional storytellers from a feminist perspective. Most examinations of feminist or female storytelling are within the private sphere to which the understanding of women's storytelling has been largely relegated. For this reason, much of the scholarship fails to apply to the context of women who earn their living from telling stories. For example, American folklorist Margaret Yocum described women in her family telling stories in the "private sphere" of the kitchen and other feminine spaces (45-53). While this delineation is useful to study of traditional storytelling among families, the private/public sphere in professional storytelling is subservient to the Public sphere.

New England therapist and storyteller Susan Gordon suggests that women find ways of presenting positive meanings from tales others might consider negative toward feminist values. Gordon's handling of "The Handless Maiden" was based on interpreting the story's text in a way that Gordon felt reflected feminine strengths. Gordon did not want to significantly change the text of the tale as she had read it. Rather than change the actions of the story to have the maiden make different choices, Gordon found ways of interpreting the maiden's choices as good ones for her listeners:

[T]he Grimms' tale reinforces and validates the limitations placed on women by leaving the Maiden passive, pious, and dependent on her husband at the end of the tale. My telling of the Maiden reads through the coded text of the tale and makes explicit the clear and active choices the Maiden and later the King make. It recovers this tale as a healing story. (267)

Gordon wanted to stay close to the original plot and interpret it in a way that allowed her, as the narrator, to reveal strength in the maiden. Gordon made only one significant change; rather than have the hands restored by a divine act, she grafted a Russian motif onto this German folktale. The maiden's hands grew back when she plunged them into water to save her son from drowning. Gordon's approach to the story could be called "reframing." Adhering to the original actions of the tale and to the basic plot as she finds it, the storyteller finds ways of interpreting these actions to her audience as positive. Reframing differs significantly from another strategy, namely, "reworking" the tale. Jenoff, discussed earlier, reworked "Snow White," changing character actions, times and locations, situational and cultural contexts to reflect her worldview and feminist perspectives. Both reworking and reframing are techniques used by female storytellers wishing to explore and present feminist folktales as they define feminist.

National American teller Diane Wolkstein of New York reworks stories as well, but within a particular cultural confine. Being Jewish, Wolkstein finds herself most drawn to the stories that reflect "my own traditions: stories of women, Jewish stories" (int. 13 May 1998). Her association of gender with participation in a tradition is reflected in her retelling of a Grimms' fairy tale about Princess Rayna. The princess is a decision-making character who acts on her own initiative. When the prince must climb a glass

mountain to rescue her, the princess takes off her shoes and walks down to meet him (int. 13 May 1998).

Still, even if a storyteller has decided to give a story a particular slant, spin, reworking or reframing, the final decision on what the story means is not left to her. A story is interpreted not only by the storyteller who crafts it, but also by all the listeners to that telling. Stone, listening to a Canadian storyteller describe a heroine, thought the girl seemed very placid. The Canadian teller, a “single, independent, assertive woman,” responded with surprise when interviewed about having such a weak heroine. “Actually I see her [the story heroine] as being very much her own person” (1998:181-182). While storytellers alter tales to reflect more positive images of women or various races, others feel this is an artificial attempt to keep up with the prevailing winds of public opinion, not the real currents of a society. As regional teller Elinor Benjamin of Newfoundland commented, there is a reason why Cinderella in her Western European form continues to be told. Benjamin felt that changing the story to a more feminist perspective was “preaching a sermon” (personal conversation).

When tellers transform stories in which heroines act passively by reframing the text, as described here, listeners may or may not make the same connections as the tellers, as Stone discovered. Another example is the story of “What Women Want Most,” also known as “Sir Gawain” or “Dame Ragnell.” The plot is well-known in English-language storytelling. An Arthurian knight must prove that he knows what women want most, and learns the answer from an old crone: what women want most is their own sovereignty, the right to choose for themselves what is best for themselves. This story was very popular in

the 1990s storytelling circuit, both in Britain and North America. Between 1996 and 1999, in Scotland, England, America and Canada, I heard literary versions, a rap, a ballad, an Appalachian spoof, and other variants of this tale. Two tellers in my circle of acquaintances told this story. One was a preacher from East Tennessee (“Charles”) the other a professional teller from New York (“Monika”). Charles, his wife and I were sitting in a Dairy Queen in 1997, and he described narrating this story at a social club for rural women. He included the story because he thought it had particular appeal to women; it was the only “woman story” he knew. At the end of the evening, the woman who had organized it expressed dismay that Charles had seen fit to tell a political story. Clueless, he asked her what she meant, and she asked him why he had chosen to tell an abortion story. It took Charles some time to discern that she had read into the “right to choose” line of the story, the political statement attached to pro-abortion activism. Charles wished to learn more “women’s stories” (that is, stories he thought would appeal to women) after finding that this one did not work well in certain situations.

Monika told “Dame Ragnell” at a workshop in East Tennessee, not too long after the Dairy Queen discussion. Monika is a professional storyteller of international standing, highly respected. Out of curiosity, I asked her if anyone had ever thought her version of Dame Ragnell was about abortion. She looked at me rather like a deer in headlights and said that was not what she thought it was about. Had I thought it was? I explained about Charles and she said, “Hmm. Interesting.” It was most interesting that, although she was working not fifteen miles from where Charles had told his version, Monika had no similar reaction from her East Tennessee audience. One reason might be her

“sophisticated” status. She was an internationally recognizable storyteller, from New York, in an Appalachian environment. But the people attending that workshop were sophisticated people, educators, industrialists, upstanding citizens in their community. This reason smacks of stereotyping Appalachians. Another possibility was that Charles was a preacher and thus would be expected to take a particular stance on abortion; this seems plausible, although the women to whom Charles was speaking were not members of any particular congregation, but a social club. Also, Charles was telling to a room of only women, while Monika had a mixed audience. And, of course, Charles was male and Monika female. As folklorist Gary Alan Fine noted, “The differences in cultural usability is one feature of interaction that separates men and women. . . . There are ‘male’ stories and ‘female’ stories” (234). By “cultural usability” Fine meant that the story “must be seen as ‘usable’ in group interaction” (234). It must fit the cultural mores of that group; it must conform to expectations of shared values. Perhaps in the case of Charles, the story was unusable as a women’s story, while for Monika, it was evident she was not trying to use it as a women’s story. Gender affected the message each sent in telling the same story, as well as the response to it. Which factors were more influential than others is less significant than that gender influenced the message.

#### **5.4.1 How Gender is Portrayed in Personal Stories**

The effect of gender on personal experience narratives can be quite pronounced. At the East Tennessee State University (ETSU) Storytelling Library I examined one hundred and forty-six personal experience narratives, as recorded by professional tellers on CD or cassette for retail. The tapes were predominantly made by white American

tellers. Such a small and ethnocentric sample means that conclusions drawn here could be considered only as an opening into future work regarding gender differentiation in repertoire choice. Until that time, this abbreviated study may spark interest.

Overall, personal experience narratives shaped into performance pieces by professional storytellers tended to follow a pattern with gender issues: stories told by men about women tend to honor the women, while those told by women about men tend to be more humorous or describe a man's come-uppance. Stories told by men about men, or by women about women, do not display a consistent pattern.

Twenty-five of these stories were told by men about themselves, and nineteen were told by women about themselves. Men were more likely to be the object of the story told than women, and more likely to be the teller of a personal story than a female teller. Men told eighty-two of the tales examined, while women tellers presented sixty-four. The most obvious conclusion to draw is that men are more often the subject of personal stories than women. Leaving aside the non-gender-specific categories of neighbors, children and pets, men were the definable subject of the story fifty-seven times in this sample, while women were the story's subject in forty-seven stories.

After the number-crunching micro-study above, I listened to the stories. A pattern emerged fairly rapidly. Two examples drawn from this survey are the audiotapes First Kiss by entrepreneur and regional storyteller John McLaughlin of Florida and South Side Stories by international storyteller and Illinois native Dan Keding. Each man tells a personal experience story involving women. McLaughlin gives a half-hour narrative of how his cousin, who died of cancer, was his closest childhood friend. Keding relates his

memories of a neighbor so quiet that no one heard her until the day she shouted at a policeman who came to arrest her son. Each woman is presented in a sympathetic “woman-who-made-me-a-better-man” way. Of the thirty-one stories in this sample where women tellers told about men, none involved the theme of a man who made the woman into a better person. In some stories, such as the tale of a difficult father-daughter relationship told from the child's point of view, the male character came across as completely unsympathetic (“My Father and the Cap O’ Rushes” Greene 1980). There were no tales in this sample in which the woman was presented as unsympathetic. Women, based on this small sample, are evidently not telling many stories that venerate men—in fact, sometimes the opposite—but men are telling tales that honor women, placing them on a pedestal. Men are not telling personal tales that denigrate women. No stories in this sample told of abusive female caregivers as counterfoil to Greene’s portrait of her father. There were four other stories involving unsympathetic portrayals of men (two fathers, one stepfather, one male relative, one neighbor, this last told by a man).

Men do not appear to be telling tales involving women who spurned them, or even women who were spurned by them. The spurned lover story is a type of personal tale found, in this mini-study, only among female storytellers.<sup>41</sup> Some ex-lover tales involved spirited narrations of the women's innovative attempts to reclaim the relationship. One woman arranged herself naked on her ex-husband’s bed, to be greeted by his return home with another woman (National Storytelling Institute July 1994). International storyteller Laura Simms (of New York) told a self-effacing tale involving an

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<sup>41</sup> There were also no stories of same-sex relationships in this sample. Whether this is indicative of overall trends is uncertain.



undignified and illegal entry into a bachelor pad, where she spent the night in a laundry bag in his closet (US National Storytelling Festival performance 1991). Yet when men narrated old love affairs, they skipped the part about the women almost entirely, choosing instead to talk about what they did to keep themselves busy, or how they found new love.

In an effort to gain some insight from other tellers and receive feedback on such a small sampling, I posted this research on Storytell, sparking an interesting debate on repertoire selection based on gender. Members of Storytell were shown the data outlined here about male and female narrators and asked to comment on why it seemed that only women were telling tales of the “he-done-me-wrong” type. Appalachian Stephen Hollern, a professional fundraiser and regional storyteller, sent this response to Storytell:

Wendy, I would love to tell stories about the women in my life. . . .

However when it comes to disastrous lover stories, I just don't want to sleep on the couch. My wife might not appreciate them. I have this sign I bought her, “When mamma ain't happy, AIN'T NOBODY HAPPY.”

I have had some crazy women in my life at times, mother, sister-in-law, my Grandma who believed President Reagan himself was going to take her monthly pension away. But discretion is the better part of being a husband. And besides, when a woman beats on a man in storytelling, we are just big lugs who can take it.

I have a story about a man named Jimmer Gray, lived in Kentucky in the early 1900s. He called his wife “doughbeater,” or “the old doughbeater,” TRUE STORY. I mentioned that as I was telling and this country boy just about got whupped by some very angry ladies afterward. It is a great story, but hard to tell when I can't quote Jimmer Gray saying, “Doughbeater, go git my shotgun.” He really did call her that. No one in my family knows her real name. When he was feeling nice he just called her “old woman.”

Anyway, I suspect we may be afraid of suffering the wrath of the women in our audience. (15 Jan. 2000)

Six respondents to Hollern, all female, disagreed. New England college lecturer and teller Catherine Conant's response represents the gist of these:

I offer the following observation:

The way I read Wendy's request for stories, it was more a challenge to provide or share stories that offer the wisdom, pain and joy of loving and/or losing the love of someone special. I can't imagine too many people being so innocent as to think we are only allowed one relationship in life, that being with our current spouse. Frankly I think I'm hearing a faint echo of some 'Well, I'd tell the truth, but the old battle-ax would clean my clock'. (Heavens! Is that a rolling pin I see behind her back?)

The image of a furious woman, angry because her faults/ shortcomings or previous rivals have been revealed could almost be called a stereotype. The freight the story carries might be what evokes a bad reaction. Is the story's core to ridicule or humiliate? If there are thoughtful stories, constructed with some kind of insight, humor or balance, then that's what we need to hear. I for one believe there are loving, funny and marvelous stories about the person you almost married but didn't, the breakup that in hindsight was a blessing or the person you loved who didn't love you back.

Be it male or female, nobody likes to be thought of as a vaudeville character. (Sp 16 Jan. 2000)

Hollern did not respond to all posts, but he did to Conant:

Hmmm. Something to think about, but I daresay if I ask my guy friends, they too would hesitate before they would talk freely about the bittersweet memories of an old love. I did exactly that once in a relationship. I told of

the one woman who I never really dated, who I grew up with. Who I knew like the back of my hand. . . .

She once said as we drove through the country with friends, “you know, I think Steve is someone I could live with and be happy for the rest of my life.” OK, so I was young and stupid. I didn’t get the hint. I can look back over 23 years and still see the sun in her hair, blowing in the hot Kentucky summer. . . .

Now, I have told that to my best friend—he has a similar experience he shared with me. BUT, that’s the kind of thing best told in sweat lodges or around a campfire with hunting buddies. Because we do tend to put our mammas and women we care about on a pedestal. . . .

And when I tell a story, even when ornery, I tell it with love for the people I choose to remember. Jimmer Gray's wife, who he called “doughbeater,” was loved by him. They were real people and she cared for him till the day he died and he still called her “old woman” as he told her he was gonna miss her.

Thanks, Catherine for making me cogitate (putting my soapbox back under my desk). I am done now. (18 Jan. 2000).

Hollern then sent the following e-mail to me:

Wendy,

I hope you read the thoughts I sent to Catherine. It made me think and realize men do tell stories about women. Very personal deeply felt stories. Stories of conquest, of angry breakups, of the best sex ever (pardon me, but it is true). We do tell of the lost loves and how glad we are that we didn't marry the crazy one. We relive the fights with spouses and the goofy things our mamma did.

BUT, we only tell these things to each other. It is a guy thing I guess, but as I thought about it, I realized that I did tell a lot to guys, but seldom to women. And not to just guys, but to those few who enter our inner

circle. Men are so competitive, we don't let our guard down often to others and then to those we can trust with our deepest stories. And the story I shared with Catherine is my favorite to share with a pal. (18 Jan. 2000)

Hollern has identified at least two reasons why men are selective in their repertoire choice regarding women. One is the letting down of a guard, of looking vulnerable or perhaps foolish in relating personal details. The other is an observation that it is “not safe” for men to denigrate women in any way. Hollern also suggested that women may denigrate men with impunity, and the microstudy of 128 stories upholds that thought. This is not to advocate that Hollern and Conant exemplify all the thoughts on male and female storytelling extant in the profession. Indeed, it would be impossible to draw conclusions from this anecdote. But I would submit that Hollern’s and Conant’s discussion typifies the ways in which men and women approach issues of gender, and that is its usefulness.

Canadian university lecturer and storyteller Mumbi Jonson heard me give a report on this research as part of a paper on the veneration of women by male storytellers at a University College of Cape Breton symposium in 1998 on women in storytelling. She thought that the veneration of women was similar to their denigration. Jonson commented, “That isn’t what we want either! We want to be humans, ourselves, and get the credit for what we do. That’s all” (12 May 1998). When discussing the topic with her, she suggested that male and female roles in storytelling were still emerging in the art form, and I tend to agree with her. Still, based on the small sample examined here of predominantly American commercial storytelling tapes, and on the Storytell exchange

repeated, men and women do appear to have divergent approaches to the opposite gender in their personal tales. Further than that cannot be analyzed on such lean evidence.

#### 5.4.2 Censorship in Gendered Repertoires

Women do appear to have reasons to be cautious when presenting strong characters. Keding described an informal poll he conducted with “twenty storytellers in the Illinois area.” He phoned ten male and ten female tellers to ask if they had ever experienced censorship in a school setting. One man had; all ten women had. Keding asked the tellers what had been involved. The responses ranged from being asked “not to tell a certain story again” to work being cancelled:

One of [the female storytellers], she brings out all her make-up and she dresses up as Baba Yaga while showing the kids how she does it. Her background's in theatre. Then when she's all dressed up as this witch, the kids have seen her change into it, she tells them a Baba Yaga story. And she got cancelled by a school because she was showing a witch.

Okay, so what, you might think, but Jim May<sup>42</sup> had been in that same school last semester. And so had I. And he told a story with a witch in it. No problem. I told “The Three Golden Hairs.” You know the one—where the young girl says to the wizard—the wizard says to her, “Don't you know what a powerful wizard I am?” and she says, “Now you know how powerful a witch I am.” No problem. But this woman does the same strong woman character, she gets canned. (int. 21 Dec. 1998)

Keding's survey did not extend to the gender of the school principals who were involved in the censorship. He cited other examples in which women telling about

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<sup>42</sup> Jim May is an Illinois national teller who runs the Illinois Storytelling Festival. He is the author of numerous storytelling recordings, including the ALA Notable *A Bell for Shorty* (August House Recording, 1994).

witches or other strong female characters received negative commentary. One teller had written an original story in the style of a fairy tale, chronicling the adventures of a girl who must kill a skeleton in order to retrieve her own life. The story is meant to be an allegory of domestic abuse. She was requested not to tell the story again after presenting it in a high school:

But I told “Stan” in that same district, and Jim had done “A Bell for Shorty.”<sup>43</sup> It was about her being a girl, a woman, not about the story. Some people just can’t stand to see a woman talking about strong women. (Keding int. 21 Dec. 1998)

Asked whether he thought this censorship was conscious on the part of the principals involved (that is to say, were the heads of the schools openly censoring the concept of strong women, or had it been couched as some other concern) Keding felt the censorship might have been a case of simply not liking something for one reason but telling oneself it was for another (telephone conversation).

Yet if women have a disadvantage in presenting strong female characters, they may be advantageously poised to deal with other subjects. Holt recounted an episode in his early career of narrating an elephant’s being hung by a circus owner as a crowd draw after the elephant had killed a man. He told the story in an area near where the incident had happened, thinking this connection of locality would please his audience. When he finished telling the story:

They looked at me with murder in their eyes. That was when I learned, you can’t hurt or kill an animal onstage. You can’t hurt or even think

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<sup>43</sup> Both of these stories deal with death. “Shorty” is about loss of a family member and subsequent effects on the living. “Stan” is about the death of a Holocaust victim and includes a mild portrayal of torture.

about killing a child onstage. No incest ballads, no stories of little abused kids making it to the orphanage. Nothing like that. The audience will never forgive you. . . .

It is a kind of a sacred trust. And if you disappoint or betray your audience, they will get angry with you. There are things that are supposed to happen, and things that are not supposed to happen, and if you decide to be a hotshot and talk about the things that aren't supposed to happen, they will remember you. Not kindly.

[Wendy:] You know, I think that's because you're a man. I tell a story called "Seal Beach" where a little girl gets changed into a seal and her neck gets broken. And the first time I told it, I thought I might get into trouble, because I remembered hearing about your experiences in Erwin, but do you know, they loved it. And I think one of the reasons I got away with it is because I could be a mom. I'm little, and female, and I have a soft voice, and they think, "This girl couldn't do anything bad." They let me tell it sympathetically, as though I were warning them, not gloating about what happened.

The thing I find I can't tell are stories where men get bashed, or where people think men are getting bashed. I told "The Flower of Northumberland" as a prose story, changing the Scotsman to a Welshman, and at the end of the story, I had a line where the stepmom said to the girl, "You will find as you get older that there are women who are fair, and men who are not and someday you'll learn to be the one and play the other." And the guy that was hosting my storytelling night got really snarky in his response and his next introduction, saying we'd have to have a guy tell a strong man story. It was just the way the ballad was; I wasn't trying to give anybody a hard time. Now, if a guy had said that, would he have reacted the same way? Maybe women get to talk about horrors onstage, but not about strength.

[David:] I don't know about the malebashing, but I think you're right about the animals and children. I think women could get away with that because they would be seen as sympathising, or something like that. Yeah, I can think of some examples of that. (int. 17 July 2000)

A storyteller may perceive gender as affecting what he or she can reasonably choose as a suitable story, based on the teller's own self-image as well as anticipation of listener demographics. Storytellers may be compelled to reinterpret a traditional tale with gender concerns in mind. International Scottish teller David Campbell tells a version of the Silkie Wife in which the seal-woman lives willingly on land with her fisherman husband. After the birth of their first child, she offers her silkie skin to him, telling him to hide it from her. "For I am not certain my heart would make the right choice in the heat of the moment," she tells her husband (Storytelling performance at Edinburgh Guid Crack Club 12 Dec. 1999). On my storytelling audiotape Women: Strong and Foolish, Weak and Wise, I describe an abused wife who returns from the dead to kill her murdering husband. Neither the female revenant seeking revenge nor the willing silkie wife is a folkloric figure; both are alterations of traditional characters (the seal-woman and the vengeful revenant), their actions reversed from the familiar pattern. The silkie deliberately aids in her captivity, when in folktale versions she is desperate to find the skin her husband has taken from her. The female revenant takes on the usually masculine revenge role. Based on folktales, but altered to reflect the world as we see it, Campbell and I have changed stock characters from well-known folktales. Our changes could be described as association with tradition without actually encompassing it, a revivalist approach according to Glassie, when performers "plunder the past to confect new things"



(1995: 405). Within the profession of storytelling, this type of playing with familiar patterns to forge modernist tales could be seen as the way that stories should move forward. Stories, as reflections of past insights into a society, continue to update, absorbing contemporary concepts in their movement through time. American educator and teller Kimberly King took this view. “If stories are reflections of society, and they got written down at some point [so that they are available for telling], but society moves on, well, don’t the stories have to move if they’re going to reflect what we’re thinking about?” (Sp 21 Sept. 1999) Del Negro believed it was time that “stories reflect both sides of the coin. It’s about time we started our own tradition, hmm?” (e-int. 21 Jan. 2000)

## **5.5 Conclusions**

This chapter examined how storytellers find or construct stories. They choose stories for a variety of reasons – power, artistry, aesthetic appeal and usefulness in a particular telling context. In constructing a story to tell, many storytellers will break folktales down and reassemble them, sometimes peeling away to the basic plot before building with different characters and settings. Others mix folktale motifs with original ideas of their own, while a few write completely original material. Incorporating personal experiences, changing gender roles, and other creative editing of source material is prevalent.

When storytellers say a story chose them, they are expressing in a poetic way that it has a particular emotional resonance for them. Both men and women mold their repertoires in ways that reflect modern approaches to gender. Men may tend to be

cautious of the “unrequited love” saga and would do well to be careful when relating stories of violence toward women, children or animals. Women telling “love gone wrong” stories or tales involving violence toward women, children and animals may find the audience more accepting. Yet women narrating tales of powerful women are more likely to experience censorship than men telling the same stories, or stories of powerful men.

## CHAPTER SIX: INDIVIDUAL AND CULTURAL OWNERSHIP

*“The right of an author to own a story and control its use is as essential to storytelling in everyday life as it is to writers who copyright manuscripts prepared for publication.*

*However . . . storytelling rights are usually tacitly understood and require subtle negotiations and constant reassessments of entitlement.” –Amy Shuman, Storytelling Rights (1).*

*“Possession is nine-tenths of the law.” – French Proverb*

The previous chapters dealt with making a story one’s own through careful crafting and displays of artistic and identity authority. In the storytelling profession, “ownership” is a synonym for the right to tell a story. American folklorist Amy Shuman uses the term “entitlement” to discuss this concept of storytelling rights (1986: 1). Ownership divides into two large categories: individual and cultural. This chapter offers an overview on the concepts of individual and cultural ownership in folklore studies and examines them in storytelling. Personal experience and sacred stories are discussed as special considerations within, respectively, individual and cultural ownership. Among other issues examined are the rationales that storytellers use to claim rights to a story, and the ways in which storytellers view making changes to stories based on ownership considerations. Storytellers tend to change stories by altering cultural detailing to assist themselves or the audience in understanding (as previously discussed) or by putting a

distinctive stamp of personal creativity into the tale. The changes made often reflect the teller's worldview.

## **6.1 Ownership in Folklore Studies**

Individual ownership refers to a story that is identified as being a particular teller's property. Another term for individual ownership could be "intellectual property." UNESCO adopted a "Recommendation on the Safeguarding of Traditional Culture and Folklore" at its 1989 Paris General Conference. Section F, "Protection of Folklore," stated that, "whether it be individual or collective it [folklore] deserves to be protected in a manner inspired by the protection provided for intellectual productions" (11). The idea that an individual may "own" a text is not new to folklore studies. Scottish historian David Thomson recorded the story of a nineteenth-century tailor told in Ballinskelligs Bay, Ireland. The tailor, as part of his trade, collected stories. "If he wasn't able for stories . . . people those times would hardly think him fit to remain in the house making clothes" (48). An undisputed master storyteller in an area where the tailor was working would not relate a brilliant folktale, lasting over an hour, in the presence of the tailor, because the elderly teller was "jealous of it" (49). Irish folklorist Seamus O Duilearga also discussed a storyteller being jealous of his tale in the company of a rival (163-4). Travel writer Lawrence Millman, who has an American Literature Ph.D, described a scene he witnessed in an Irish pub: the purchasing of a long story over several evenings by giving the teller pints of beer (123). The purchase was partially wording, partially plot; the buyer did not want the exact words, but the overall plot of the long tale.

Yet, as the UNESCO recommendation quoted earlier stated, cultures, rather than individuals, may also be considered the owners of a story. Numerous folklore books have been published along these lines, including Swapping Stories: Folktales of Louisiana, and Singing Story, Healing Drum, an examination of shamans and storytellers in Siberia. In Swapping Stories, Lindahl stated that the narratives selected represent cultural as well as individual styles (9). European tales tend to be “extremely long and complicated” (9) while stories from the southern states “evoke small-town America” (10). Lindahl called the stories in Swapping Stories ethnographically meaningful because they “leaped social barriers” (11) but did not become a cultural amalgamation:

Each of the tale-tellers here represents the cultural style of at least one Louisiana community. Cultural style is conditioned by the shared values and experiences of each of the myriad groups that retell . . . tales. . . . [E]ach culture will appropriate the tale for its own uses and reshape it continually to correspond with its own constantly changing world view. (9)

Yet the teller Lindahl discusses are from the communities that spawned the styles in the story; they are not appropriating the tales from outside, rather they change outside stories to fit into their community’s cultural style. Toelken found that people telling stories from outside their own cultural experience tended to “meddle” with the stories. Such storytellers considered “positive meddling” an “enlightened” thing to do, but it is “meddling nonetheless” and participates “in the manipulation of its [the story’s] *meaning*” (1996: 51). Toelken was concerned because

such manipulation can lead easily to downright expropriation of cultural materials and abuse of their meanings, and this is especially evident in the way Native American stories materials have been reused in the United States by both storytellers and academics.

A number of professional storytellers, because they cannot fairly represent other cultures' meanings or contexts in a strange environment, have ceased performing Native American stories; there are others who have never started doing it. . . . Academics, because they fancy they *do* appreciate context and meaning, seem to have no hesitation to tell, retell, summarize, or assign American Indian stories to their audiences without any regard to tribal practice or belief. . . . Strangely enough, while professional storytellers have generally been willing to understand the dilemma more fully, academics have resisted the subject because of its apparently romantic and non-objective implications. (51-52)

American English professor Jacqueline McGrath touched on the same idea in her examination of Sherman Alexie. A Coeur D'Alene American Indian and author of numerous books, Alexie believes "only Native Americans can write characters who are Indian, and he is known for vilifying white authors for attempting to do so, particularly Barbara Kingsolver" (McGrath 95). McGrath's discomfort with Alexie's position is not parallel to Toelken's, but it approaches the same problem—academic involvement with cultures outside their own life experience. Her comments show how self-aware academics have become of their post-modern disputed authority to investigate others:

I find myself torn between agreeing with his criticism of writers such as Kingsolver or Tony Hillerman, who capitalize on the popularity of the Native American novel genre and perpetuate romantic stereotypes in their characterizations of Indian people, and my own rejection of the

impossibility of non-Natives studying, reading, and writing about Native American people and culture in ways that are not colonizing and destructive. (95)

Folklorists conducting research with people in particular cultures have shown an increasing awareness of the need for “respect,” not just for the worldviews of other people, but the fact that those worldviews may be authoritative in that culture. The works of Julie Cruikshank, Sheila Te Hennepe, Susan Ritchie, Amy Shuman and Charles Briggs, among others, have offered an alternative to asking questions from a position of authority as folklorists and anthropologists. Te Hennepe asks, “How do the questions [ethnographers ask] change as we create First Nations control of First Nations education?” (180). Cultural Survival Quarterly devoted its January 2001 issue to intellectual property and local empowerment, as opposed to investigation from outside researchers. Folklorists are realizing that recognition of cultural integrity, ownership issues, and the ability of “marginalized” groups to educate and speak for themselves have not always been respected in folklore studies (Ritchie 366-367). With this brief background in individual ownership from a folkloristic point of view, I turn now to the same concept within professional storytelling.

## **6.2 Individual Ownership Defined in Professional Storytelling**

Individual ownership in professional storytelling is not a well defined term. By calling a story a particular person’s property, one could mean the exact words of that teller, or the plot line, or a particular theatrical arrangement of the story. For instance,

national teller David Novak, who lives in North Carolina, entered storytelling with a theatrical background. He tells “Little Red Riding Hood” moving a red bandana around his head to portray Little Red, the Wolf, Grandma and the Woodcutter. During the story’s action climax, he chases himself around a chair, becoming a different character each time he reaches the front of his audience. This version is considered Novak’s property because of the unique theatrical moves he created. The words are not necessarily his, but the actions are. Anyone attempting the same story would be instantly recognized as telling “David Novak’s story.” By the same token, Heather Forest tells Aesop fables as rhyming poems with songs punctuating the action. The fables are not hers but the rhyming couplets and songs are. It is somewhat simpler to identify rhymes and song lyrics as the particular property of an individual mind than an entire prose telling of a folktale. No matter how carefully worded, an entire text will not usually be known as a particular teller’s. However, when phrases are seen by other performers to be well chosen and to display crafting and consideration, they may be considered a storyteller’s property. I did not use Kate Corkery’s ending to a story for fear of impinging on her right to be known as the person who created such a lovely phrase. Thus what part of a folktale-based story is the teller’s property will change in the mind of each teller.

The previous examples are from tellers using folktales, which are public domain. A story believed to be owned by a particular teller could be also an original story (fiction), a personal experience narrative from his own life, or a personal experience narrative told him by another person. The lines delineating these types of stories can be blurry. “The Quiltmakers” was recreated from a memory of an Eastern European folktale



rewritten by an unremembered author for an American children's magazine. "The Quiltmakers" as I tell it could be called an original tale, a folktale retold, a literary story, a personal experience narrative masked inside a folktale, or a conglomeration of some or all of these. One must also take into account that the author whose version I read may have seriously reworked the folktale.

Usually, "what type of story is that" is a folklore question, not a storytelling one. Storytellers tend to be more concerned with the story's power to move an audience than with its genre name or Aarne-Thompson number. Tellers tend to use loose, internal terms such as "traditional story" or "personal tale" to describe their narratives. English librarian and teller Tina Bilbe, secretary for the Society for Storytelling, was succinct: "I listen for a good story, one that grabs me, one that I know I can grab an audience with. That's all" (int. 11 June 1998).

Individual ownership, then, is really assigned to that which is unique to a teller, marked by his or her creativity. If a well-known storyteller is telling a story that is new to the scene, he or she may become known as the first source for the story. In the late 1990s, I was working on learning AT 480 "The Kind and Unkind Girl." The story appeared in an anthology at a friend's house under the title "The Twelve Months." The twelve months appear within one hour, in winter, to a girl with a wicked stepmother. The girl is expected to bring strawberries home to her stepsister and does so, but the stepsister, trying a similar experiment, dies in the woods along with the stepmother.

Just as I was beginning to creatively play with the story in preparation for telling it, Dan Keding gave me a copy of his latest storytelling tape, Strawberries in Winter. The

title story was another version of “The Twelve Months.” At that point I abandoned the story because the assumption among my peers would likely have been that I got it from Keding’s tape. Interestingly enough, Lucinda Flodin said the same thing. She and her husband made a new tape including that story when they were featured in the US National Storytelling Festival in the early 2000s. Flodin had not known it was the title story on one of Keding’s recordings, yet people assumed she and her husband had the story from Keding (int. 19 Dec 1998) because his tape—which Flodin had no knowledge of—came out before their performance. When I mentioned these two incidents to Keding while visiting him in 2002, he laughed. He said he had no interest in being known as the “owner,” or even “originator” of the tale (that is, the first person to tell it professionally in a major venue that would encourage other tellers to put the story in their own repertoires).

These examples show how individual ownership can be a nebulous concept in professional storytelling. One “owns” a story or a portion thereof by virtue artistic uniqueness. One could also become the “originator” or “source” of a story by being the first person perceived to tell it. A person assumed to “own” (or have originated) a story may not be interested in “owning” it. And each of these variables is subject to change in every juxtaposition of teller and tale.

### **6.2.1 Personal Stories as Individually Owned Stories**

Individual ownership becomes somewhat clearer when the story told is a personal story, or a personal story once removed—that is, a story based on the experiences of others told in the first person by a teller who did not experience it. Personal stories may be original pieces created from life experiences of the teller or someone in the teller’s

acquaintance. A story crafted in the first person about an historic figure is not called a personal story in professional storytelling's lexicon; such a story is generally referred to as a living history\* story or a character portrayal\*. A personal story could be an artistic imbrication of historic events, family events and personal observations. Appalachian national teller Elizabeth Ellis, now living in Texas, tells a one-hour story of her experiences as a nurse in Vietnam; the story involves personal experience narrative, political commentary, reminiscences of historic figures, and oblique references to folktale characters. Storytellers would call her work a personal tale.

In folklore studies, Shuman, writing on oral and written storytelling by urban teen-agers, found a "precarious relationship . . . between the participants in an event and the reporters who claim the right to talk about what happened" (1986:1). "Another person's story is experienced as an event and can be reported" (14). Shuman found that when adolescents retell each other's stories "they assign authorship to another narrator" (1986: 14). American folklorist Susan Kalčik investigated women's storytelling in the non-professional public storytelling event of a woman's support group, what was at that time (1975) called a "rap group." Kalčik found that women tended to condense stories commonly remembered among the group's members into "kernels" or "kernel stories" (7). Shuman describes a similar phenomenon of using truncated personal experience narratives (1986:14). Kalčik's article's title, "... like Ann's gynecologist or the time I was almost raped," offers an example; everyone in the group knew what happened with Ann's gynecologist, so the term became shorthand for the story (7). In this sense, the group communally understands the story because they identify with it and relate it to their

own lives. However, to say the group owns it would be playing with the meaning of words. The group communally recognizes that one named person in their number told the gynecologist story; they identify with the story to the point that they can shorten its retelling to a mere kernel of the original. In this sense, they have “participant understanding” with the emotional core of the narrative. Professional storytellers often consider this impetus to tell a story.

But the women in the group do not—at least Kalčík does not address them doing so—retell the story as their own. The story is of *Ann*’s gynecologist. This is a significant difference between the type of storytelling event Kalčík and many folklorists investigate, in public settings, and the competitive market of professional storytelling in Public sessions. If Ann tells the story of her gynecologist to a professional storyteller friend, that teller may ask Ann for permission to retell it Publicly, with potential changes to make the story more performable. These changes might include removing or altering names, relocating the story in another time or place, and omitting or clarifying details for contexts that might include people who have less experience with gynecologists. The friend may ask to tell it in first person, as if it had happened to her, or want to tell it as if it had happened to Ann; she may seek Ann’s advice, or consider how she is going to tell it an artistic decision that Ann should not be involved in. It depends on her relationship to Ann, her expected venue for the story, and her personal ethics.

In a support group, no one is going to seek to retell Ann’s story except briefly, as a kernel, and that will largely be for purposes of mutual support. As Kalčík wrote:

The story may not be developed beyond this kernel if the audience already knows the story and an allusion to it is considered sufficient or if the kernel is offered by way of a supportive comment, indicating that the narrator has had a similar experience to one being presented by someone who has the floor. (7)

This is not to say that the teller who asks Ann for the right to tell this personal narrative will not use it in a way supportive of the story's theme, purpose, and use in the group where the teller first learned it. The need to be declared the owner of stories in public versus Public telling situations may differ. Group members may spread Ann's gynecologist's story in other private or public settings. Unlike Shuman, Kalčík's article was not focused on a theme that encompassed that potentiality.

In the professional storyteller's perspective on ownership, one widely accepted taboo appears: telling someone else's personal story as one's own is bad behavior, unless permission has been given by the person to whom the story "really happened." Ellis, who describes herself as "large from birth," tells a personal experience narrative about her grandfather giving her a tiger lily, to prove that his fair-skinned and freckled granddaughters were equally beautiful. She refers to it as "the most ripped-off story ever" (conversation, National Storytelling Festival 2002). As a neophyte storyteller in my early twenties, I told this story once as if I were the one receiving the tiger lily. Afterward the guilt and the fact that the story did not work well with my transplanted knowledge stopped me from ever doing it again. Of twenty-five tellers interviewed for an article in Storytelling World entitled "Some Pressing Issues for Storytellers: Ethics, Apprenticeship, Etiquette, Courtesy, and Copyright," five had experienced another teller

co-opting his personal narrative (Klein 11-13). No storytellers interviewed for this study thought this practice acceptable. Forest spoke firmly:

Why would anyone want to tell a story from [someone else's] life? There are people who say adamantly it's a folk process; if you tell a personal story, you're putting something out into the stream of oral tradition. But really, ownership becomes an issue of economics, in practical terms. . . . I like what Elizabeth Ellis says: "You want to tell a story about my mother? MY mother?! Haven't you got a mother? Then go develop a story about your own mama! How could I possibly let you tell one about mine?" (int. 17 Dec. 1998)

Klein echoed Forest's adamancy:

Personal stories, which are also original stories, fall into a special category. There is nothing in a storyteller's job description that permits us to help ourselves to the content of other people's lives whether the originators are making their living at telling about it themselves or not. . .

Patricia McKissack warns, "Storytellers cannot just take someone else's family story, overlay their own family names, and call it their own. That's stealing not only a person's story, it's stealing another person's life and that's *unconscionable*." (11-12)

Canadian regional teller Pearl-Ann Gooding agreed, adding that it is permissible to tell someone else's personal story only with their consent:

Personal stories - often humorous family tales, tales of the holocaust, war stories, etc. These have an unwritten personal copyright to them. Before telling a tale such as this, I would receive verbal or written consent before performing. Referring to a story is different than an actual telling. (e-int. 25 Sept. 2005)

The personal experiences of another are respected. When they are not, the storytelling scene can be very self-policing. Keding's depiction of how his personal experience narrative about his dying grandmother was stolen by another teller became legend at a 1999 storytelling congress debate on ethics. Keding later posted this "letter to the storytelling community" on Storytell:

As many of you know there is a story that has circulated around the storytelling community for a rather long time about an event that happened to me. I was asked to perform at a school soon after the death of a beloved teacher and one of the new faculty members that knew my work asked me to tell the story of the death of my Grandmother, a very personal and deeply intimate story. I did and was confronted by some of the junior high students afterwards proclaiming that it was not my story, that the storyteller that it had happened to had been there a year or so before and that I was a liar. I was shocked and stunned. Not so much that someone had told it but that they had led these kids on to make them believe it was their family story. I convinced the kids of the truth and they were now equally upset with the other teller. (15 June 2000)

Although the professional storytelling community is not united in its expected standards of behavior, the majority opinion seems to be that only the individuals involved in the story (be that through actual participation in events described, or by family history, or by being told the story by someone who requests it be retold) have the unfettered liberty to tell that tale. Others may present material on behalf of the story's protagonist, if they can successfully negotiate a way of doing this (as Faye Chance tried to do). But to represent oneself as the person involved in another's personal tale is considered artistically difficult and, without that person's permission, morally reprehensible.

### 6.3 Cultural Ownership Defined

Cultural Ownership refers to the perceived prerogative of an individual to tell a story by virtue of being a member of the culture—the distinctive group—that produced it. The entitlement to tell a story via cultural ownership stems from, among other possible factors, participating in the tale’s ethnicity, religion, description of life experience, and/or occupational depiction. Cultural ownership is problematic in many senses. How one decides who is a member of a cultural group is a negotiation made at each storytelling event between a teller and her hearers. The likelihood that such a question will even form in the minds of listeners depends on whether the teller makes a bid for identity authority within a culture (that is, makes a bid for cultural ownership).

David Holt, recognized internationally as an expert on Appalachian culture, grew up in an unmusical, non-storytelling family. Whether he is an Appalachian tale teller is not something Holt thinks much about. “If somebody asks me, I say I’m from Texas. People don’t usually ask when I’m onstage, but I don’t mind one way or the other” (int. 15 July 1999). Holt found people not inclined to question whether he reflected the same community as his tales. By contrast, the story of the apprentice to the Elder Who Was Not was a failed bid for identity authority; the teller was denied his desire to be known as part of a particular culture because his appearance, actions and storytelling skill could not support his claim.

A professional storyteller is most likely to care about identity when the hiring agent cares. Sometimes hiring agents are looking for an “authentic” representation of a particular culture. In these instances, it may be important to the hiring agency that stories



reflect a particular theme, such as seafaring life, or folktales from Vietnam. In these instances, negotiations can be quite context-specific. If Gentiles tell Holocaust stories, perhaps it is not equally acceptable to do so at a conference on world religions and a *yeshiva*. Listeners may not accept tales of trickster Coyote offered by a teller with an Irish brogue, no matter what the performance context. A hiring agent may or may not consider a Caucasian woman telling Thai, Laotian and Cambodian folktales acceptable for an exhibit intended to educate children about the American war in Vietnam. And most vexed of all, when the claim on a story is cultural by virtue of ethnicity, “authenticity” is defined in the mind of the hiring agent. Observations at festivals and other events led to a few classifications of ways in which people have claimed authenticity satisfactorily for the hiring agent: bloodline, upbringing and research. Folklorist Vaughn Ward identified her own traditions using a nearly identical list in a panel discussion entitled “Who Inherits the Tradition?” Ward stated that she belonged to three traditions: the New Mexico ranch culture into which she was born, the Adirondack woods culture that she researched as an ethnographer, and the “birth tradition, my Southern, Scotch-Irish, Choctaw-Cherokee, East Texas Methodist family, which informs everything I do” (41). Ward felt comfortable claiming a tradition she acquired through research, a tradition she inherited by bloodline, and a tradition she knew by being brought up in it.

Holt did not feel he could claim a tradition inherited through research, although he mixed cynicism with humor on this point. “[T]hat’s changing now that I’m past fifty. If you’re still telling stories at sixty, you are a tradition bearer. It doesn’t matter how you learned to do it, or how often they told you you weren’t one before. The day you turn

sixty, you become one” (int. 15 July 1999). Holt came to North Carolina as a college graduate, eager to learn claw hammer banjo from the mountain communities. He soon began a college program in old-time mountain music, and over the years won numerous awards, including two Grammys (plus a spoken word Grammy in an unrelated field). Holt tours with traditional singer Doc Watson and has appeared on Grand Ol’ Opry and Hee Haw, and in the film O Brother, Where Art Thou? He has traveled worldwide, including Africa, Europe and South America, as a storyteller. Whether he is representing or presenting Appalachian culture is a question Holt dismisses. “Does it matter, as long as I tell the stories well? I mean, if I bore them, they’re not gonna care if I was born there or not” (int. 17 July 2000). What place does folklore studies or occupational storytelling hold for those like Holt, who made space in their lives to research how to do something they loved, not because it was their cultural inheritance, but because they felt a passionate desire to be able to do it?

It is a trickier thing to negotiate ethnic boundaries than occupational ones. American folklorist Susan Auerbach discussed the difficulty of deciding “who represented what” in the Cityroots Festival, celebrating new immigrant traditions in Los Angeles (224). While the folklorist planners struggled with whether or not to admit youth group revivalist performers, the chosen artists displayed sensitivity to how they were presented. A Vietnamese group of monochord players gave a performance of “The Godfather” theme that “brought down the house” (234). Vietnamese in Latino Los Angeles, they made a cultural statement: we are Americans. As Auerbach observed, “One should not underestimate the need of ethnic traditional artists to show their awareness and

mastery of mainstream American styles” (235). Folklorist and New Yorker Carol Silverman spent two years with a Romany family; as they took her into their family’s affairs and their cultural way of life, she noted (like Auerbach) that “Members of ethnic groups develop values and strategies for ensuring that the identities ‘American’ and ‘ethnic’ complement each other” (120).

Yet Silverman experienced a personal identity dichotomy: “As an outsider who learned how to cross the outsider/insider boundary to act as a Gypsy, I was, in many ways, treated as one. Note, however, that I was never labeled a Gypsy; one must be born into that status” (110). Silverman might be said to be a Gypsy in everything but name. Some storytellers, like Keding, find themselves in the opposite situation, having a cultural background in their bloodline, but no upbringing—in other words, a Gypsy (for example) in name only. English by bloodline, American Croatian by upbringing, Keding has a frustrated desire to tell English stories. Someone poetic might say Keding chased the blood in his own veins, his interest in English folktales stemming from his absent English father. It can be difficult for tellers to represent themselves successfully as members of a group with which they have not interacted since infancy, using only bloodline as justification.

Holt, a Texan by upbringing, does not have even a bloodline to tie him to Appalachia. He was not exploring a family heritage; he was chasing a sound he loved (mountain music) and found storytelling as a part of this love. It is difficult to say what authority will be given people from one culture who study another, particularly if the study is practical rather than academic. Holt seems to have achieved the right to be a

cultural representative of North Carolina's mountain people, both to an audience and to hiring agents. People who grow up in regions noted for an art form (for example, storytelling in Appalachia, or zydeco music in Louisiana) can be referred to as "steeped in tradition." This is an evocative image; in the same way that a cup of tea takes on stronger flavor by longer exposure between hot water and leaves, so performers gather strength and flavor from longer exposure to those who do as they wish to do. Holt, who moved to North Carolina almost forty years ago, begs the question of how long it takes to steep a cultural representative to full strength. There can be no definitive answer; artistic authority allows some to pick up ideas and idioms quickly and use them in an easy manner, while others struggle with the same aspects. Appearances are also a large factor, as is accent. A white-skinned person claiming to be African-Canadian is going to experience incredulity from her audience; the Irish-brogue teller of Native American tales has a hard row to hoe.

Still, even if such skill cannot overcome appearance, within the storytelling community artistic authority appears more prized than identity authority, and individual ownership rather than cultural ownership is apt to occupy pride of place (Klein; Sobol 1999: 208). In her article on ethics, Klein addressed fifteen out of twenty pages to the idea of individual ownership, and only two to the concept of cultural ownership. Sobol thought the question of whether it was acceptable to tell stories from outside one's culture emerged in 1988, when the annual National Storytelling Congress in the United States tackled diversity amongst tellers. African American, Jewish, Hispanic and Native American tellers expressed disappointment with those outside these ethnically defined

groups appropriating folktales from them. “[R]evival storytellers had ventured into the oral traditions of the world, taking freely from whatever versions caught their fancies” (Sobol 1999: 211). This conference sparked a debate that has raged with fluctuating intensity ever since. Some might say it was overdue. US National Storytelling festival former artistic director Laura Simms invited a Native American traditional teller to the festival in 1977; following what Simms considered an issue of cultural ownership violation, he refused to return:

Ron Evans, a Chippewa-Cree Talking Stick Holder, was a storyteller for some years. He was traditionally trained and came to [the] NAPPS [Storytelling Festival] in 1977 for the first time. He had been telling stories his whole life. He made a tremendous impact on the storytelling world giving most people their first real taste of traditional native tales. He was spell binding and totally brilliant, hardly moved and had the tents brought to silence. He stopped telling stories because people did not respect his requests not to tell certain stories. (Sp 19 May 2000)

Prescribing ethnic ownership to folktales in professional storytelling is problematic, as tellers express varied opinions. Regional teller Albert Fowler, a retired minister in Victoria, British Columbia, has told as an avocation for about fifteen years:

I am always amazed at the way some, mainly 1st nation, folk lay cultural hold to ownership of the stories they tell. After hearing many “authentic” tales from one first nation teller, a 1st nations friend of mine suggested that it would be as hard to find an authentic tale from that first nation as it is to find a pure member of that nation. Everyone wants to be Haida these days but so many were lost by intermarriage, raids and sickness that he didn't know anyone who was more than say 1/4 pure blood. (e-int. 25 Sept. 2005)

Likewise folklorists have evaluated the problematic nature of assuming a “pure” strain of ownership regarding any cultural material. Discussing the interaction of cultures when refugees move into a *Heimat* (homeland) space, Bausinger said, “Many of the objects and traditions the refugees brought with them could be integrated smoothly into the supply of beautiful and pleasant things available to everyone, things that were advertised and increasingly consumed” (122). Soon “something that at first is part of the regional character and at times is all but elevated to a regional symbol . . . enters the channel of general cultural adjustment . . .” (123). Thus, “It can be demonstrated that even the seemingly unique, no matter how specific in detail and outward appearance, has become interchangeable in its essential substance” (124). Bausinger carefully differentiated between “naïve perseverance,” such as the insistence of displaced people on wearing traditional costume in new contexts, and the assimilation of styles and fashions based on those costumes in the newer context (126). Assimilation and integration make ownership all but impossible to ascertain.

Going one step further, folklorist and educator Donald Haase pointed out that prescribing ethnic ownership to fairy tales is uncomfortably similar to the abuses heaped on folklore studies by National Socialism in 1930s Germany (66). Suggesting that fairy tales developed out of a folk culture “untouched by its social or historical context” (68-69) was incorrect, but “If fairy tales are not the universal possession of an all-encompassing, undifferentiated humanity, and if they are not the sole property of any single national group, then to whom do fairy tales belong?” (70). Substitution of “folktales” for “fairy tales” creates the question that plagues storytellers. Haase ultimately

argued for an individual ownership of fairy tales; each teller would take ownership of a story by analyzing its message and retelling it in a way that reflects that teller's own intent, rather than genuflecting intellectually to the story's ancient roots—particularly when those roots point to a nationalistic past or an unviable view of European values as world values (72). He cited ironic interpretations from popular culture, including Sinead O'Connor singing “Someday My Prince Will Come” and Shelley Duvall's Fairie Tale Theatre as exposing, belying, challenging and altering for positive reasons (Toelken's “positive meddling” [1996: 51]) the premises underlying fairy tales from the Brothers Grimm and Perrault (Haase 72). Compilation volumes by authors such as Jane Yolen and Angela Carter have rendered fairy tales from Oriental and Arabic cultures in English translations alongside their European cousins. Storytellers do not appear to engage substantially with the idea of fairy tales as cultural expressions of ethnicity. Tellers overall do appear to differ from Haase's assertion that fairy tales cannot have universal emotional appeal (69-70). Again, their assumption of emotional appeal on a broad level could stem from not accepting the limits of one's worldview (as Toelken described, even not realizing that one has a particular worldview) and thus believing that one's values are world values.

#### **6.4 Respect**

In storytelling the key word one hears surrounding telling a story outside the teller's culture is not “don't” but “respect.” The word is omnipresent, and has come to be regarded as something akin to permission for professional storytellers to engage in a

variety of performance activities. Michigan librarian and storyteller Lois Sprengnether expressed her opinion on Storytell that respect was an important element of telling stories outside one's culture: "IMHO [in my humble opinion] it is fine to tell stories of a culture not your own as long as it is done with respect" (Sp 20 Sept. 1999). Forest agreed:

I try to respect the culture from which [a story] comes, try and learn as much about its - what we were just talking about, really. Context. I try to give as much of an accurate depiction of its locality as possible. I don't take an Appalachian story and turn it into a cowboy tale. (int. 17 Dec. 1998)

"Respect" remains the bedrock of justification for tellers who present rather than represent cultural narratives. What, then, does the term "respect" mean to professional tellers? When one begins to analyze its uses, "respect" has no universal meaning in the storytelling profession, but has at least four ways of being used. Respect could mean not telling the story, researching it to ensure accuracy, passing it on (by telling it), and telling it with participant understanding.

Respect can signify leaving stories from other cultures alone in the way Simms discussed above. Regional teller Rocky Rockwell assigned respect one interpretation and was succinct in his position:

For those who tell stories not of their own culture, and in the dialect of other cultures, I offer the following quote from Roy Blount, Jr.:

"Nobody ought to wear a Greek fisherman's cap who doesn't meet two qualifications:

1. He is Greek.
2. He is a fisherman." (Sp 30 Apr. 1999)



Flodin also felt that respect sometimes required leaving a story alone:

I get really mad at people who assume they can just go plundering in, take all the Native American stories or the Appalachian tales, the Jack tales and the Mountain tales, and just do what they want with them. Hackle board—that's not something somebody from Chicago knows about unless they have an ancestor in Appalachia. They don't know what to do with Jack jumping up and down on the hackle board, and it messes up the story.

There are a lot of stories out there; it is such a [quotation gesture with hands] "white power trip" to think, "We took their land, now we can take their stories." Hands off. (int. 19 Dec. 1998)

Flodin and Rockwell appear to hold the minority point of view in research done for this study. Several tellers seemed to indicate that respect included or was defined by making the story's cultural features as accurate as possible. Sheila Darr suggested that because Appalachian stories were so popular, many people attempted to tell them without discerning the nuances of vocabulary. Thus they misused words such as "cove," "canyon" and "holler" interchangeably, alienating every true Appalachian in the audience (Sp 21 Sept. 1999). Greg Liefel, a medical supplies sales representative and storyteller in the American Midwest, responded to Darr's post on Storytell regarding accuracy as showing respect:

To respect the culture, even if one is poking fun at things, the research and authenticity must come as close as possible. However, as a teller and lover of storytelling, I'd like nothing more than to have someone come up to me after a show and say, perhaps, "this word should be said this way; or, this phrase means something else and you want to use this phrase" rather than think I was being disrespectful. . . . But I can't agree to exclusivity of stories based on culture alone. (We might never hear the great stories if we

stuck to this.) What I can agree to is deep respect for culture and a fervent attempt to understand the cultural aspects around a story before and when sharing it. (Sp 22 Sept. 1999)

A Native American casual teller in Oklahoma picked up on Darr's suggestion that people take advantage of the popularity of certain culture groups without showing enough "respect" to understand what lies behind the things they describe. She called this

co-opting culture. What I generally see is people who pick up the trappings: the sweet grass, the stories, maybe even the songs, the richness of Native cultures, without delving into the reasons for the need of stories, songs, ceremonies, prayers said in a certain way. Indian people are on the bottom of almost every US socio-economic scale there is. Health conditions on most reservations are like they were forty years ago for the rest of this nation. Indians have been taken from their accustomed lands and transported to places where few could exist, let alone flourish. When the men couldn't hunt and fish as they were used to, the women had to rely on the food given them by the government. They made fry bread. Without getting out a lecture here, Native people have lost so much, gone through so much, that the ceremonies and stories are a medicine to use to balance the pain and losses, not just of the past, but now. Many people want the glamour of the rituals without knowing why they are so necessary; they want the surface of "Indianness" but not the reality.

So I guess some Indian folks feel that too many people only take the good from their cultures, not wanting to look at nor understand the harshness that the stories and all the rest try to balance.

Beyond those feelings, I believe any person can examine another culture with respect and openness, can tell the stories, sing the songs. But you call regalia a costume and every skin in the place will know you are calling a holler a canyon. (Name withheld Sp 22 Sept. 1999)

This storyteller echoes Bausinger's definition of folklorism, and also ideas encompassed in British<sup>44</sup> social historian Eric Hobsbawm's "invented tradition."

Hobsbawm implied that invented traditions seek credibility via association with the past, taking on the form but not the substance. Invented tradition

is taken to mean a set of practices, normally governed by overtly or tacitly accepted rules and of a ritual or symbolic nature, which seek to inculcate certain values and norms of behavior by repetition, which automatically implies continuity with the past. In fact, where possible, they normally attempt to establish continuity with a suitable historic past. (Hobsbawm 1)

Rather than couching this concern in terms of "inventing tradition," storytellers such as the woman above may see it more as usurping or "co-opting" a culture.

Sprengnether put few parameters on her use of the word "respect." She felt that passing the stories on was the most important element of showing respect. In essence, respect meant making sure the stories stayed active. Sprengnether detailed her attempts to show respect for the tales she chose to tell:

I woke up this morning with a phrase from the efforts to save endangered animals: Extinction Is Forever. This is precisely why attempts to restrict telling to specific members of any group concern me.

When I wanted to focus on Native American tales one summer, while still observing the traditions (and explaining them to my listeners), I checked every book I could find that might discuss it, but was without success. Checking around I was told if any one person might know the entire U.S. seasonal traditions, it was Barre Toelken, who had been president of the American Folklore Society and was an adopted Hopi (if I

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<sup>44</sup> Hobsbawm exemplifies the difficulties of assigning cultural ownership within his own person. Born in Egypt to an English father and Austrian mother, he was educated in Germany before moving to London.

recall correctly). He graciously answered my emailed query and said it was impossible to say. It not only varied so widely by traditions, but the traditions are being relaxed as more and more younger tellers give less weight to the old traditions. . . . [N]ot every part of the country is blessed with so many native tellers interested in maintaining their cultural integrity to the point of limiting their stories to native tellers alone.

Again and again we have examples of elders intentionally passing stories on to non-natives rather than letting the stories die out. The instances I am aware of seem to be more likely to come from the northern sections of our country. I say whatever it takes to keep the stories alive (remember *Extinction Is Forever*). Published stories, while they may contain errors, are available to share after you respectfully try to understand and share it with others who might need its message. (Sp 20 Sept. 1999)

The definition of respect for most tellers appears to be close to Sprengnether's openness.

"Respect" in her use swings away from focusing on accuracy of detail, or laying hold of a story's holistic meaning within its culture, to acknowledging the story's cultural past while giving a careful rendering of its emotional core. The reasons why the culture tells or values the story, likewise the aspects of the culture it highlights or affirms, do not appear of primary concern to a majority of tellers. National storyteller Mary Hamilton, from Kentucky's capital city of Frankfurt, thought that finding only people from the story's culture qualified to portray it, or to assign it the meaning its hearers should take from it, bordered on asinine. Hamilton asserted that "meaning" in stories should be left to the listener:

There are events that happened in my family for which my sister and I were both present; yet the events have a different meaning and result in a different story when the event is told about. Why would meaning be any

more fixed in a folktale handed down? Why should/would we assume that any two people who tell the same story (even if word for word and taught to both within a culture with a strong, formal oral tradition) would view the story as significant for exactly the same reasons, always perceive its “meaning” in exactly the same way? It doesn’t happen in families; is there something vastly different about cultures that would guarantee that two people from the same culture would understand the same tale from their culture in exactly the same way? I don’t believe they would, so who exactly determines what the “meaning” of any given story is? (Sp 17 Apr. 2001)

American folklorist Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett echoed Hamilton’s assertions on meaning, asking, “What are the preconditions for creating interest in what audiences do not understand?” She answered this question by analyzing the non-interpretive approach of the Los Angeles Festival of the Arts in 1990, which left meaning to the observers (1995: 224). “[W]ho is to say that everyone back home understands what these performers are doing? Or that everyone can or should have access to everything?” (244).

A storytelling enthusiast from India agreed:

Learning comes at many levels, and I’m quite happy to enjoy them all, in turns. In this context, I speak from the point of view of an audience. I first read Harper Lee’s “To Kill a Mockingbird” at a precocious eight. Not understanding “rape” troubled me a bit, but didn’t keep me from enjoying the narrative about race relations and about growing up. I read the book again at nineteen, and it had a different meaning. I am now a father, and I have no doubt that my third reading (which will happen when my son decides it is time!) will be different. If I had been forbidden to read this book till I had amassed all the life experiences needed for a full understanding, I would still be deprived of the immense pleasure of the

story. Moreover, I would have missed out on the chance to let the book influence my thinking.

Should you deprive the audience of a story, unless you know for certain that someone else has a more “culturally informed” version? Of course, as a professional teller (which, again, I ain’t) it is up to you to assess what constitutes their money’s worth — the story, or the added cultural subtext.

(Sp 19 Apr. 2001)

Medlicott and Forest, among other international storytellers, echoed this call to tell the stories “with respect” and let meaning rest with the audience. Professional tellers may not so much wish to present or even understand the intricacies of the tale within its culture as to tell the tale in a way that allows it to resonate with their own life experiences and/or those of the listeners they intend to tell it to. This, too, is identified as respect for the story.

Tellers are aware of the potential hazards involved when they respectfully present rather than represent cultures, as Nebraskan educator and storyteller Dayle Ann, who specializes in Native American tales, described:

Some of what is going on with this issue is the way Native American stories have been “adapted” to fit non-Indian ideas of what a story should be, or preconceptions about what Native Americans are like, or what our world views should be. This is not appropriate, it is not honoring the people the stories came from, and it is a distortion of the intent of the stories. So, while I don't always agree with the position that non-Indians should never tell traditional stories, I readily understand it.

[Another teller] wrote that you hoped “the day comes when such teaching tales will be available without attempted restrictions on the ethnicity of the teller if the teller is respectful to the story's intent and

presents them knowledgeably.” I guess the question is, how does that happen? How does a teller learn what the intent is and acquire the cultural context that intent grows out of? And from what source does a non-native teller learn the stories? . . . I don’t think there will ever be a way for non-Indian people to know whether they understand the original intent or the cultural context of a traditional tale. (I’m not even sure I do.) I don’t think this necessarily means they can’t tell those stories. But perhaps the best way to present them might be in terms of what the tale holds for the teller, along with an explanation of the derivation of the story. And by paying attention to, and respecting, the underlying concerns of the people who object to the use of these stories by non-Indians. (Sp 22 Sept. 1999)

As is evident from these quotes, many tellers are unprepared to deny access to any story on the basis of a mismatch between the teller and the story’s cultural context, so long as the teller uses respect to tell the tale. They are more concerned with “what the tale holds for the teller,” as Dayle Ann described it, which I termed the “emotional core” and Stone called “the center of the story as the tellers see it” (1998: 195). “Respect” may not be associated with accuracy based on cultural understanding so much as with the emotional resonance of a story to its potential teller, as a Canadian librarian living in the Philippines observed:

Many storytellers emphasize the need to understand a culture if you want to tell its stories. When I hear or tell Bible stories, I don’t think “Oh, this is a neat story. I’d like to tell it.” Rather, I understand the context of the story, the whole cycle of stories. The context consists of what came before, what comes after the story, and other stories that present a different view of the same situation as well as all the sermons and discussions that refer to the stories. And actually, when you read the Bible, some of the

stories are just bare bones. They may seem disjointed and may not make a whole lot of sense without the context.

I'm never going to understand Native American or Hmong stories in the same way that I understand Bible stories, but I can treat them with the same respect. If I wait until I feel that I fully understand a Native American story, I will probably never tell it. I grow in understanding by hearing, telling, and reading more and more Native American stories, by learning more about the various tribal cultures, by talking with members of different tribes. But I will never understand a Native American story in the same way a Navajo, a Pima, or an Omaha Sioux would. On the other hand, each of them would hear something different in that story, just as a Baptist, Catholic, or Jew would hear something different in the story of Moses and the Burning Bush.

I agree that we need to tell stories from other cultures, that everyone needs to hear stories from other cultures. I don't think that any story can be locked up and only accessed by members of that particular culture. Stories escape from one culture and travel around the world, changing as they do so. In trying to make sense out of a story, each teller tells it a little differently from the previous teller. Each listener hears something different. (Sp 12 Dec. 2000)

This teller's use of "respect" is enigmatic. She states that she understands the context of Bible stories, but not of Hmong or other folktales, yet she wants to tell Hmong stories "with the same respect" as she feels for Biblical ones. This Canadian librarian in the Philippines is likely to tell a tale because its emotional core resonates with her, speaks to some aspect of her life, and makes her feel that she can "respect" the story because of this connection. She will not necessarily have identity authority, but will have some sense of connection to the story in her own mind.



The teller is associating with Hmong culture because she lives amongst Hmong people, but other stories may attract people because they are perceived as being from interesting or popular cultures, such as Native American, or more recently, Arabic. Tellers may be booked by hiring agents in preference to tellers whose identity authority outweighs their artistic authority, depending on the goals of the event. Thus telling a Native American story as an Anglo teller with artistic authority could diminish the opportunities for tellers from within that heritage to present their own stories in the same venue.

However, it is unlikely. First, the hiring agent or agents set the definition for what authentic will be in the context of the anticipated performance. Hiring agents are well aware of the quagmire that opens when, for instance, a non-native teller is hired to tell native stories. A hiring agent does not wish trouble upon herself. Depending on the context of her intended performance, if she can find an artistically qualified Native American storyteller within her geographic and pricing limits, she will most likely hire him as her first choice.

Yet suppose a white teller, such as the person discussed earlier, successfully manages to hide the fact that he is not native from the hiring agent. The teller is now in a position of having to present stories not from his own experience to an audience. If the audience is children, he may “pass” for a time. But eventually any teller in this position is going to hit up against just what happened to that teller: a factual error, a cultural slip, or simply seeming “wrong” will result in lost credibility. As Forest commented, it is unwise to assume one’s audience is not bright enough to see deception and agendas.

#### 6.4.1 Folklore Studies on Giving Voice to Marginalized Groups

There is a body of literature in folklore studies suggesting that people telling folktales from outside their own culture group are depriving tellers from that group of the opportunity to benefit financially from their own culture. A material culture example may help to set the scene.

In 1976, Anglo and Hispanic jewelry makers set up booths near Native American designers outside the Santa Fe Museum of Fine Arts in New Mexico. The Anglo and Hispanic artisans were removed from museum property; Indian crafters were not, resulting in a lawsuit against the museum for “unlawfully discriminating against [non-Natives] on the basis of race, ancestry, or color” (45). The court ruled that the exclusion was cultural, not racial discrimination. Experts examining the Anglo and Native artists’ necklaces could find no differences, but Albuquerque trader Robert Zachary stated, “There is more than silver, labor and turquoise, more than adornment . . . [there is] the story of a fragile, primitive culture, tenuously coexisting within our technological society” (Evans-Pritchard 48). The Anglo necklaces, identical in metals, designs, and quality standards to Native work, posed a direct threat to the Indian economy. As Tony Tortelita, a Native artisan said, “Listen! You took that culture away from me, see? That's my culture what you're selling, see? Supposed to be. That's my living, not yours” (48).

Increasingly, and particularly in Canada, researchers are attempting to work alongside Native artisans to help them present their own work. Wesleyan University professor Wendy Wickwire published two books of Okanagan stories by Harry Robinson, working carefully with him to create phrasing and correctly transcribe the stories. Profits

from the books went to Robinson and others in the Okanagan tribe. Wickwire was well aware of her position as an authority figure from outside the culture. By “authority figure” I mean what Canadian sociologist Sherene Razack considered innate underlying power structures between white and non-white people (*passim*). Part of the negotiation Wickwire made to keep Robinson in the seat of power regarding how his stories were presented was resisting a “typical” “scientific tendency” (23) to edit Robinson’s stories from a western point of view, imposing a sense of linear chronology on them:

The purist might edit some or all of these “modern contaminants” out of Harry’s story, believing these to be tarnished post-contact influences on an otherwise traditional body of knowledge. This is typical of the scientific tendency to crystallize living, evolving oral culture—to transform myth into static artifact, an “urtext” which contains the purest essence of what, to the Western mind, a native American culture *is* (was). To do so is to miss the point entirely. In an oral tradition such as Harry’s, where nothing is fundamentally new, and where creation is not some moment in the past, but remains present as the wellspring of every act and every experience in the world, the body of what is known is an integral part of creation. Influences on that body of knowledge work forward and backward in time (23).

Wickwire is one of a growing body of researchers seeking to define their research within the parameters of their informants’ worldviews, to honor the ways in which informants see themselves and their stories, rather than superimpose their ideas about the group on top of the research they conduct. Ethnographer Roxanne Struthers is another example, although unlike Wickwire she is a member of the group she studies. Working toward a Master’s degree in Community Health, Struthers examined the health-related

practices and beliefs in the Ojibwa tribe of which she is a member. Struthers found that being a member of both the academic community and the Ojibwa community meant she could reflexively discern how each organized their discourse. She began to question the requirements of a linear academic approach that could not encompass aspects of the non-linear culture she was investigating (125). Quoting written sources from non-natives as authorities on an oral culture seemed strange to her (126). When she saw the dichotomy between linear academic thought and the Ojibwa “harmonious, circular” way of life, she could call the internal split she experienced worldview and defend her place in academic study as an insider (125). Recognizing that her work gave voice to those underrepresented in mainstream discourse, Struthers could produce positive, balanced ethnography in contrast to what she perceived as research focusing only on problems conducted by those unfamiliar with Ojibwa values and ways of life (127).

Razack discussed power relations between privileged and underprivileged people and groups in Looking White People in the Eye (1999). The title itself is a clever commentary on her main premise: that white people and white-dominated institutions of power may not always acknowledge their dominant position in relation to subdominant groups, even as they work toward advocacy for those groups. “Unlikely to acknowledge their oppressive practices, dominant groups merely deny that such practices exist” (24). Struthers, Briggs, Bauman found the academic world of folklore defensive of its perceived role in giving voices to marginalized communities, not fully coming to terms with the consequences of imposing an academic voice upon them in pursuit of this goal. Even as they claim to argue for destruction of privilege for dominant groups, scholars

may advocate doctrines of personal freedom, individuality and essentialism to resist accepting that some groups are dominated. “I am suspicious of those who warn of the dangers of identity politics, race essentialism, or ethnic particularism without paying attention to the specific relations of domination and subordination in any one context . . .” ( Razack 169). The assumption of marginalization itself is an idea Shuman and Briggs state must be laid aside, for it further marginalizes the group to which it applies, and could prevent their participation in dialogue about themselves:

[T]he relativistic strategy of casting the folklore of oppressed groups as . . . “marginalized voices” in a global panoply conceals the politics it decries—the containment of difference in naturalized categories that are constructed by representatives of dominant sectors (including folklorists). (122)

Raznic, in a chapter entitled, “From Pity to Rescue: The Ableist Gaze and the Politics of Rescue,” asks, “What would a politics of accountability look like? Clearly it begins with anti-essentialism and [is] guided by a search for the ways in which we are complicitous in the subordination of others” (159). Since domination systems such as patriarchy, capitalism and white supremacy “interlock and sustain one another” (159) most people are at some point simultaneously dominant to some groups yet subordinate to others. Therefore appropriate strategies to address giving marginalized voices a hearing must take into account how we as scholars have participated in marginalizing those voices. Although similar in theory to Briggs and Bauman’s position, Raznic calls for different action, believing that some groups are currently unable to assert themselves without assistance. For example, Raznic examined women with disabilities as a

subdominant group—and mercilessly dissected what she called “my own complicity with respect to [marginalizing through pity] women with disabilities” (131). Without academics calling attention to the marginalization of others, such marginalization will continue, Razack states; yet, by calling attention to marginalization, academics may participate in such marginalization, argue Briggs and Shuman.

#### **6.4.2 Storytellers and Issues of Power and Portrayal**

It is possible to draw parallels between folkloristic argument and the ways in which storytellers use the word respect. Leaving a story alone because one is outside its culture corresponds to Shuman and Briggs’ call for allowing people to voice themselves. It also, as Flodin pointed out earlier, shows the awareness of power relations between white and non-white people that Razack calls for, and attempts to redress the past by refusing to be part of the problem—that is, participating in a racist system.

Researching a story to render it accurately as cultural representation compares to the necklaces in the Portal Case, and Wickwire’s presentations of Robinson’s stories. The Portal Case proved a bit unnerving to some informants. When storytellers talk of “respect” for another culture, “accurate representation” can be highly prized (Arbing Sp 8 Aug. 2001; Darr Sp 21 Sept. 1999; Sprengnether Sp 20 Sept. 1999). As the Portal Case points out, a better duplicate makes it more likely that the original may not be purchased—a point that storytellers, as business owners and competitors in a marketplace, were swift to grasp. However, this is a complex situation. A teller in a day job would be the most likely to incorporate tales from aboriginal people in her program

because it is part of her job to teach children about the world around them, or ignite children with a passion for reading. A day job teller receives a salary for her work. Not many have budgets that allow them to hire storytellers in. Of those who have budgets, not many can afford to hire the best-known storytellers from Native traditions, given travel and other expenses. And if she can find a Native person who knows stories but is not a professional storyteller close enough to her area, there is a chance that the teller may not be comfortable with the white-dominated venue she is offering. I once asked a friend from the south of Fife to come to a school in the northern half of the shire to tell stories. She was not a trained storyteller, but she was a gifted one, and a proponent of introducing Islam as a peaceful religion. However, she refused. "I wouldn't feel safe up there" (conversation). Until that moment, I had no understanding that my town of residence was perceived as racist to the point of fear by Muslim people.

A typical dilemma for a storytelling librarian in America might be: she has \$50 left in her budget to be used at her discretion. She wants a Cherokee storyteller, but knows \$50 is not enough to entice any Cherokee teller she has seen at the US National Storytelling Festival. Her area is not populated with people from any native group. The librarian uses the \$50 to buy a book of Cherokee stories and three picture books of a Cherokee folktale. She learns a story from the book and tells it to children, with the new purchases propped up at the rear of her telling area. After she has told the story, there is a rush from children wanting to check out the books.

It is possible to claim that the library, by refusing to give enough money to attract an authentic, artistically accessible Cherokee teller, is participating in a racist system.

Razack's position that racism is inherent in institutions, even if the institution is aware of this problem and seeks to change it, would support the idea. Perhaps the librarian is also guilty of unconscious racism, for given the other demands of her job, she is unlikely to have exhausted many avenues in seeking a Native teller. Not seeing one readily accessible, she has taken the easy route. Perhaps she has not been cautious about purchasing books by Native authors. Perhaps the authors usurped the tales from another tradition.

If it is possible to make the reader momentarily stand in the shoes of the librarian and look out from her eyes, the scene is different. This librarian sees a group of white Appalachian children whose knowledge of people "not like us" is limited to those with black skin. She knows that the children like to hear her tell stories. She knows that she cannot understand most Native stories. She finds one that seems accessible, at least understandable to her, and reworks it to fit the children's vocabulary and developmental levels. She uses the Internet and a few phone calls to get tips on certain harder-to-understand points, such as why things in the story come in fours instead of threes. Then she tells the story, shows off her new books, and watches in satisfaction as white children reach for books that teach them about another culture. She feels a glow of pride that she can be a part of their learning process. She also knows her circulation statistics, which are tied to her budget, are rising.

It is not only day job tellers who will tell Native stories, but they are the majority. A white storyteller at a major festival telling a Native story has more responsibility than a teacher or librarian using stories as part of her daily work, and in today's more judicious



climate, few white tellers at the national level (of the United States and Canada) will tell Native stories. In the United Kingdom, Native American/First Nation stories appear far less frequently. Festival telling in any nation is judged by higher standards and spreads to wider audiences. Those audiences will adjudicate the teller's authenticity when he calls regalia a costume. Also, sooner or later the misguided teller with his cultural details wrong will meet someone only too happy to straighten him out. The library teller is far less likely to peddle her story outside the library, for by virtue of her work, she knows there are things she does not know and she would be embarrassed to display her ignorance to a wider audience. In her estimation, giving the children a first look at a culture, no matter how flawed, is more important than refusing to explore the culture with them because she has no money and cannot be authentic. This second show of respect—telling the story with careful consideration of details and accuracy—is prevalent in day job storytelling.

The previous example also has elements of telling the tale in order to help it “survive.” Wickwire cites a similar reason for publishing Robinson's stories despite her misgivings that to do so will place them in a static version within linear time:

Ironically, to crystallize Harry's stories, either on tape or in book form, also fixes these living stories in time. They will now no longer evolve as they have for hundreds of generations. Indeed, this book might be criticized for Homerizing Harry, though in a relatively unfiltered way. But short of retelling them in the native tongue by a taught, live Okanagan storyteller, what alternative do we have today? (23)

The question Wickwire asks haunts posts by Sprengnether and others telling Native stories. The choices are to tell the story in a flawed way, or to leave the story out

of the repertoire children under her care will grow up knowing. There is a qualitative difference between Sprengnether and Wickwire, for the latter is realistically publishing stories never heard before. Sprengnether is translating the stories for a young audience, and probably learned her version from a book. She is not saving the story from extinction, only bringing it to the awareness of children who might otherwise overlook such books as having nothing to do with them. Wickwire is working with something more fragile and primal.

A bizarre situation must be mentioned before leaving respect as preserving a story. There are storytellers who boast that tellers (not usually themselves) have told stories from a heritage not their own, to children of that heritage. This is a surreal claim, and I have only two examples of it, one of a regional teller in the American Southwest asked to tell at Native after-school programs, and one from an American teller who brought a Japanese teller to the States to work in an area with many first-generation Japanese-American children. In the American Southwest it is unlikely that there is a dearth of Native tellers. The non-native teller asked to come into the program will have taken a fee that could have gone to a Native teller, and will likely have erred in some ways regarding the story's cultural details. A perusal of the teller in question's website confirmed that this person may be claiming identity authority that he could not back up before a larger, more judgmental audience.

The teller who worked with a Japanese teller is not in the same situation, for she brought a cultural expert to the place rather than purporting to be the expert. Both she and

the Japanese teller told stories, but hers were not presented as authentic. She also was not taking a fee from the Japanese teller.

The last aspect of respect tellers mentioned was participating in the emotional core of the tale and being true to its message as the teller understood it. This use of respect ignores entirely the power relations Razack brings to our attention. Emotional core participation is also the most likely place to see radical changes introduced to the story, changes that will alter important ethnographic details. In some cases, as Forest, Medlicott and Emmert mentioned, tellers will pick up the plot of the story from a culture they know they cannot understand and place it in an entirely new setting. In Scotland, I told a story in which the skunk from the American version became a badger. Scotland has no skunks, and it was not necessary that the animal be a skunk in order to get the point (as I saw it) across. Recasting characters, even entire settings, occurs regularly at this end of the “respect” continuum.

And for that reason, this aspect of respect is the least economically threatening to aboriginal storytellers. By the time a teller who understands only the emotional core of the story gets through altering what she does not understand and inserting her personal stamp of creativity on the story, it will no longer look, sound like, or be a recognizable Native story. It will be something of a hybrid between a traditional plot and a piece of creative writing. Whether audiences will consider such a story notable depends in large measure on the teller’s artistic authority, and how cleverly she has recast the story to reflect her own identity authority.

Of the four aspects of “respect” examined here, it is probably the second that is most economically threatening to Native tellers. Careful research providing an exact duplication can be very satisfying—and inexpensive. Schools and libraries seeking storytellers whose fees they can afford will likely be delighted to find one who does British Isles, First Nations and Japanese folktales.

It is interesting that both sides of the “tell/don’t tell” debate on cultural ownership use respect as one of their arguments, defining the word differently. “Respect,” in storytelling, is similar to “tradition” in folklore studies. To paraphrase Ben-Amos, it is a word to think with rather than about.

#### **6.4.3 Code of Ethics**

The problem with “respect” being a word to think with rather than think about is its prominence in the only written code of ethics storytellers tend to reference. Six members of a storytelling guild in California compiled a code of ethics, based on a previous document created by folklorist and regional storyteller Lee-Ellen Marvin and international storyteller Doug Lipman, both from New England. When the storytelling community appeared to reject the Lipman-Marvin code as “too restrictive” (Sobol e-int. 31 Jan. 2006) the California group put together the following for The Storyteller’s Guide:

- Stories are to share and tell. While we encourage the art of sharing stories, we want to encourage respect in our community. You deserve respect. Respect others.
- A storyteller’s personal, family, and original stories are her/his copyrighted property. It is unethical and illegal to tell another

person's original, personal, and/or family stories without the permission of the author/storyteller.

- Folklore and folktales are owned by the public, but a specific version told by an individual teller or found in a collection is the author's or teller's copyrighted property. If you like a folktale a storyteller has told, ask that teller for a reference or where it can be found. Research the story by finding other versions and then tell it your way.
- Published literary tales and poetry are copyrighted material. They may be told at informal story swaps, but when you tell another's story in a paid professional setting you need to research copyright law. (If you record an original story you need to get permission and pay the author.)
- When telling anywhere, it is common courtesy to credit the source of your story.
- Pass stories, share stories, and encourage respect within the storytelling community. (97)

Two prominent members of the American storytelling community, Lee-Ellen Marvin and Joseph Sobol, referenced the guide above when consulted about a code of ethics, and both discounted the Lipman-Marvin document. In view of the research described earlier on what respect means in the storytelling community, the guide is a fine opening sally on

a difficult issue, yet lacks two important elements: a definition of respect; and a section dealing with cultural ownership.

#### **6.4.4 Sacred Stories**

As with personal stories in individual ownership issues, there is an area within cultural ownership unchallenged by tellers who present other cultures. It is generally regarded as unacceptable to tell sacred stories from a culture not one's own. As Sprengnether said succinctly, "Sacred stories often deal with creation times and should be treated with extra caution and research" (Sp 20 Sept. 1999). English publisher and storyteller Tim Sheppard agreed:

There is another first rule of storytelling: the rule of having real respect for the story. Many cultures consider some, or even all, of their stories, to be sacred in some way. This is often unknown or unacknowledged by people without any understanding of the traditions. . . .

If anyone started telling the stories of Jesus, having turned him into a girl with a squint and a penchant for revenge, there would probably be lots of people objecting. But even so, such 'artistic' messing with the sacred, by those with no apparent appreciation of sacredness, does go on. I'm not the only one to note that, funnily enough, nobody yet seems to be doing such creative things with Islamic scripture—after all, that would be bad taste, wouldn't it?

I'm aware that there is a difference between scripture and folktales, yet as I mentioned this difference isn't black and white. It is better described as a continuum, where many traditional and apparently mundane stories have an element of the sacred invested in them, to a varying degree. This element is often concealed in symbolism, clothed with an accessible form, yet based soundly on wisdom of a very specific teaching.

Therefore, even apparently minor details, though seeming perhaps extraneous or arbitrary today, could be essential. Removing such details might well seem a way of making a story 'better', yet might remove a key principle that the deeper principles in the story were hanging on. Such an assumption is one important reason why scripture is slavishly copied and great pains are taken to preserve its integrity. I'm not suggesting that folktales of a popular kind (rather than the exacting wonder tales) have, or should have, such a status. Yet in principle it is easy enough for a teller to come across a story and knock it into a 'better' shape, but then in later years come to realize that the story was better as it was. The teller needed to be improved by the story, rather than the story be improved by the teller. By leaping into improvements, a teller is more often influenced by personal preference rather than deep understanding. Living with the story, contemplating it, and most importantly listening to it with some humility, can reveal that the source of discomfort is not a bad story, but some part of the personality that is in conflict and not yet able to accept a home truth. (Sp 12 Dec. 2000)

Sheppard touches on key points: identifying with the emotional core of the story does not mean the teller understands its full cultural context; and tellers may not discern a sacred story within a culture if it does not resemble sacred stories from their own. Sacred stories, when recognized as such, are usually left alone by storytellers in the United States, Canada and the United Kingdom alike. International storyteller and Native American Dovie Thomason believed the problem was that many non-natives do not see how, for example, Lakota and Sioux people could consider "simple folktales" about animals to be sacred (National Storytelling Conference keynote speech, 7 July 1999). Once a story's cultural place is recognized as rooted in hallowed ground, most

storytellers will leave it alone, according to the majority of Storytell participants and informants in this research.

## **6.5 Individual and Cultural Ownership Issues Explored**

Of course there are differences in attitudes toward individual and cultural ownership among tellers in the United States and United Kingdom, and Canada. Native American and Traveller stories are treated in similar ways in, respectively, the United States and the United Kingdom. Canada appears to handle culturally-specific stories differently, but shares American and British approaches to individual ownership.

Margaret Sheehan is a teacher in Illinois who uses storytelling in her classroom. Sheehan also works regionally as a storyteller and is an active participant on Storytell. Having been a day-job and casual teller since the late 1980s, Sheehan was “fed up” with issues of individual ownership in the storytelling profession:

Teller A does a brilliant folktale. Teller B hears it and asks permission to tell. Teller A says it is a folktale, so just don't copy outright and Teller B can tell it. Teller B tells it, and Teller C hears it. Teller C starts telling it. Someone says, “Isn't that Teller A's story?” and Teller C says it is from Teller B, who says he had permission from A. How long will this type of behavior go on among professionals? (Sp 18 Jan. 2000)

Sheehan was suggesting that it would be better for people to worry less about where the story came from in terms of individual ownership and more about what the story taught. She felt that this problem continually reared its head in the profession, and thus the stories were being subsumed by the debate surrounding them. The enjoyment of



the story and its message are lost in the tracking process, and the tracking process itself implies a hierarchy of telling. Established professional storytellers are more likely to be identified as an oral source of folktales for newer storytellers than the other way around. Anyone who hears another, probably regional, teller presenting any story in a national or international performer's repertoire could accuse the regional teller of having taken it from the national one, no matter what the circumstances of actual acquisition. Because the national or international teller has greater exposure to listeners, it will be more likely that people hear a tale from a national or international teller for the first time, and think of it as that teller's story. Thus, context of hearing affects who may be seen as the owner. An executive board member of the Storytellers of Canada/Conteurs du Canada, and of The Alberta League Encouraging Storytelling, retired educator Pearl-Ann Gooding echoed this idea. She suggested that it was wrong to tell stories from other cultures without permission from elders in those communities, and wrong to tell personal experience stories of others unless permission had been given, but these rules were negated if the performance context were "small" enough:

All of these considerations are for performing pieces publicly, receiving pay, or recording. If you intend to tell the story for a small informal group such as your family or an informal gathering of just stories not open to the public or with no pay, then acknowledging your source (always) should be sufficient. (e-int. 25 Sept. 2005)

Elinor Benjamin, a regional teller in Newfoundland, agreed with the idea that context dictated etiquette with regard to citing past sources, or previous owners, of stories:

Sometimes I do tell versions of stories I have heard from other people, and then I do mention them by name unless it is with very small children and

not a major public venue. Then I say “I got this story from a friend” or something like that. (e-int. 25 Sept. 2005)

This issue of performance context offers a dilemma to regional tellers. Storytellers who are beginning to make their names known through exposure on a national stage may find it easy to take material from lesser known tellers with relative impunity. Lyn Ford, who had not yet been featured at the US National Storytelling Festival in 2002, willingly taught a story to a teller later featured at the 2002 festival. She said this teller usually credited her as the source when telling the tale, but did not when he told it at the US National Storytelling Festival:

He came up to me later, privately, and said he hoped I didn't mind him telling that story; I had never minded before. And I told him, “I am not a national teller yet, but I will be someday. And when it's my turn on stage, I will take care of that.” (int. 7 Oct. 2002)

I asked why Ford thought the teller's behavior had changed, as he normally credited her quite willingly. “The stakes were higher. He wanted, I guess he wanted, why don't you ask him—he wanted to be seen as the person who created the story. It's such a big deal [the US National Festival]” (7 Oct. 2002). The teller apparently did not want anyone to know he had help finding or crafting the story he told, particularly as the story was well-received (Ford 7 Oct. 2002).

Keding described one of the greatest difficulties with the US National Storytelling Festival as its status as “**the** marketplace” (int. 21 Dec. 1998). Forest described it as “the Carnegie Hall of storytelling” (int. 17 Dec, 1998). A Storytell member who was a casual storyteller echoed this comment:

Adult storytelling in the US seems highly dependent on the once a year weekend festival format—I think it must move beyond that. One hopeful sign is it seems to be appearing in more and more college courses—but we need to develop more total programs and programs with enough breadth that the graduates don't come out like cookie cutter replicas of the one person department.

This college track needs to be paralleled by noteworthy training centers and strong guilds and other centers—Storytelling should maintain its open-system characteristics or expand them while we strengthen the identity (Name withheld Sp 8 Sept. 2002).

The dependency this teller cites on the US National Storytelling Festival is not echoed across the United States. Holt said:

I think maybe the storytelling profession is maturing somewhat. I really don't think that Jonesborough is it anymore, not the be all and end all of storytelling. There are lots of midrange tellers out there now, who are really pretty good. That wasn't the case ten years ago. And most of these guys are never going to get near Jonesborough, because they only hire five new people every year. But they are still great tellers, and their reputations are going to bring them work. Your average midrange teller these days is really pretty darn good (int. 9 July 2002).

In 2003, Ford was invited to be an Exchange Place teller at the US National Storytelling Festival; this is a short guest spot for “rising-talent” performers. Ford was enthusiastically received at this telling. When asked if being an Exchange Place teller made any difference to feelings about the other storyteller who had not credited her, she felt that because this teller had preceded her at the US National Storytelling Festival he would continue to be known as the first person to tell “her” story to the American storytelling audience. The teller who recounts a story at a prestigious and large festival,

such as the US National Storytelling Festival or the Toronto or Vancouver Storytelling Festivals, may be perceived to be the “owner” of the tale within professional storytelling. This may or may not be the reality, but such perceptions can be powerful in the storytelling community. Thus some people may neglect to tell the whole truth about where their stories come from.

Newer tellers have been known to attend festivals with notebooks to write down the basic outlines of stories told by the featured tellers. Keding estimated the percentage of listeners at the US National Storytelling Festival seeking new stories was higher than 25 percent (int. 21 Dec. 1998). International storyteller Gayle Ross, regularly featured at this festival since the 1980s, gave the same figure (int. 5 Aug. 1997). Yet it is not just the US National Storytelling Festival, Ross asserted; she was confident that any given audience will contain a percentage of new storytellers looking for performance material. Of Cherokee heritage, Ross is comfortable representing her culture to audiences from different cultural contexts, but hesitates to tell Native American folktales when

I spot a teller sitting on the front row with a notebook open on his lap. And I've seen that, people with their notebooks open, scribbling away while you're up there pouring it out. . . . People stealing stories like that are more interested in getting material to perform than in understanding what the story's about, what formed it. (int. 5 Aug. 1997)

The sight of such notebooks, or at least the assumption that they are there, can affect the way in which a teller will offer the story. As Keding described it, one's conscience says to do the best material one has, but “you know if you do someone is going to ask to tell it, or just tell it without asking” (int. 21 Dec. 1998). Thus a strange,

internal negotiation takes place. Tellers from a specific culture (as Ross is) might be comfortable including ethnographic material specific to the story's cultural background with an audience outside that culture if the audience were merely enjoying the story at a casual entertainment level. But two things could happen: tellers could get the rough gist of the story without any understanding of its culture, and perpetuate the story in a way offensive to that culture; or tellers could get the rough gist of the story with or without understanding of the culture, and perpetuate the story in an artistic way that entices other people to hire them.

Some informants side-stepped questions when asked about ownership issues.<sup>45</sup>

National teller Janice Del Negro said:

Look, there are a lot of good things happening in storytelling, and a lot of bad. If we spend all our time focusing on who gets to do what, when do the stories get told? I'd rather focus my time and attention on the creative angles, working with the stories I love. Nobody can actually tell anybody they have or haven't got the right to do anything, unless they go to court. And that's not gonna happen. The stakes in storytelling are too small. (int. 20 Dec. 1998)

Forest was concerned that she not be thought close-fisted with her material:

I've had this issue come up once. A storyteller wanted to tell a story I was telling, and he came up to me and said, "I really like your words for this. Can I use them?" And I let him tell this story in my own words. Once we were featured at the same festival, and I came rushing in at the last minute, running up behind the stage as that teller was coming off, thinking of the

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<sup>45</sup> I generally asked about this issue after finding out where the storyteller got his material. If it was primarily from other tellers, I would ask about his perception of ownership between the teller he got it from and himself. I also asked if the interviewee gave permission for others to tell his stories.

story I was going to tell and leaning toward that one, and then he said “Oh by the way, I told your story.” So I had to think fast and do something else. But that wasn’t a problem, because I had something else to do. (int. 17 Dec. 1998)

The elements of ownership discussed here appear in all the countries examined. One further element of cultural ownership appears specifically in Canada. Unlike the United States and Britain, where the dominant theory seems to be either telling with “respect” or being a member of the community oneself, the prevailing take on cultural ownership in Canada seems to be that those stories must be “released” by an elder of that community—something that in itself can prove problematic to define. Fowler approached the question of ownership through ethnic identity, saying he felt disadvantaged:

When one noted Haida teller tells stories to her own parents, they ask where the story came from then say: “Oh, I never knew that. Is that where we get that idea from?” Is the teller saving the culture from forgetful extinction or is the teller more simply expanding on some basic cultural thought?

As for me, I have a real problem. I am Canadian. My father's ancestors arrived in Ontario around 1800. My mother's ancestors have been traced back to New Holland, now New York. Whose stories do I tell? (e-int. 25 Sept. 2005)

Fowler appeared to be in the minority among Canadian tellers; three others upheld the idea that a Native Elder would be the correct person to ask for permission to tell a Native story. Gooding felt that cultural ownership of stories pre-empted its access by storytellers outside that cultural group. Again, Gooding, like Fowler, based culture on ethnicity. She

asserted that cultural ownership could only be delegated to an individual teller by a community elder:

Cultural stories - first nations, Ukrainian, etc - oral stories belong to the culture and unless you have been given permission by a person in authority to tell an oral cultural story that is not of your culture, you are walking on thin ice. Can you be sued for such a thing? Most likely not, no. But it is stealing and stripping of one's identity just none the less. Hard feelings and cruel words can pass along with a distrust of sharing more oral stories. Who has authority to give? An Elder of the First Nations band that your tale has come from, contacting the nearest cultural centre of that ethnic background, asking the person or group you heard it from how you would get permission to tell it. (e-int. 25 Sept. 2005)

Benjamin, a former librarian who became a full-time storyteller about five years ago, seemed to uphold the idea as well, albeit in an unexamined way. Stories that had been published, she felt were there for the telling. This somewhat problematic statement was not examined further. Benjamin found that a connection with the teller she thought of as owning the story was important, and built a credible claim for her right to tell that tale:

I tell several Laura Simms stories, after having gotten permission for one, and gone to her residency, which makes a connection. I have been using some Micmac stories that I got from the collections of Silas Rand of Nova Scotia, but he is my 2nd cousin, 4 times removed, so I feel that connects me sufficiently, right? Lately I've become intrigued by the Native North American stories of the 4 and 5 worlds. I'm not quite sure how to get around that one, but if it has been published with the permission of the community involved, I kind of feel that "ownership" of the story is being shared, if due respect is paid. I have not made any recordings, but

wouldn't dream of recording anyone's specific version of a story without getting permission. On my website where I list some of the stories I tell, I try to give credit where possible and provide links if a version of the story is available on the internet. (e-int. 25 Sept. 2005)

Kira Van Deusen is a Canadian author who collects and translates folktales. She found an additional dimension to "ownership": because the stories she works with are largely inaccessible to English-speaking tellers, she is seen as the story's owner in the Canadian scene. Van Deusen saw the community elder as the source of authority to transfer ownership for cultural stories, and touches on the concept of identity authority and artistic authority in discussing a friend telling Hans Christian Andersen stories:

About ownership of stories, I thought immediately of a conversation I was in just the other day. A friend is planning a Hans Christian Andersen event and was thinking of a particular teller. Then she said, "but she only tells such and such a tale, and now [X] is telling that one and telling it better." So it would seem that to her the story can get temporarily "owned" by the person who is doing it regularly and doing it better? Or just that she would invite the better teller.

I'm thinking about how ownership on most of the levels you are talking about seems to be in the eye of the beholder. Most people refer to the Siberian stories I tell as "Kira's stories." Sometimes it's embarrassing since it seems they think I have written them. A few have asked permission to tell some of them. They are in my books which brings up copyright rather than tellerright.<sup>[46]</sup> It also brings up translation as one of the ways we might claim a story, i.e. nobody would have access to that Siberian material if I hadn't translated it so that's part of why they think of it as mine, even though it's folktales.

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<sup>46</sup> This is van Deusen's descriptive term for what might be considered oral copyright. I did not hear it used by other tellers during my research.



I always wish I could get people to acknowledge not only my book but also the original teller and culture but I'm sure they don't always do it. And I'm sure some tell in a way I would think of as appropriate while others seem to miss the point. How can you hope to control what people do after you've put it out in a book or even by telling to a big audience? . .

In a different vein, I spent some time in Nunavut last year and learned a long Inuit story which I'm just now working up to tell. Now, if anyone asked about that one I would say no, just because the Inuit tellers granted permission to me to tell it, not necessarily to re-grant permission to others. So interested tellers would need to look up other versions. I think you've covered something like that. (e-int. 25 Sept. 2005)

## 6.6 Altering Stories

Tellers may gloss over or alter cultural detailing in stories if they either do not feel comfortable with the details themselves, or are telling stories to an audience that may not comprehend those details. Tellers with and without identity authority may make similar alterations for different reasons, one because of his lack of understanding, the other because of his listeners' lack. A third reason is to make an individualistic stamp, to let his story stand out through a display of artistic authority. Recognition of individual ownership was established earlier as coming from some distinctive creativity in the story—particular phrasing, rhyming, theatrical techniques, gestures, etc. And the fourth is that a teller may see a way to “improve” the story, in her opinion. Tellers may not even be aware which choice they are making; Benjamin's approach to altering a story could encompass one or more of the above:

Since I tend to work mostly with traditional material that is in the public domain, and don't make very many modifications, except for editing language that doesn't work for me, it's not a huge issue for me. (e-int. 25 Sept. 2005)

Benjamin does not explain why the language does not work; she changes it. Other tellers are more self-analyzing. Tellers may see changes within the story as improving the tale by imparting more current wisdom, as in Canadian teller Marvyne Jenoff's reworking of the mother figure in Snow White. There are also tellers such as Susan Gordon, who prefer to leave the tale as much as possible in its traditional (in the sense of older) version. Rather than create a scene from her imagination, Gordon searched print variants of "The Handless Maiden" to find a motif in which the queen's actions resulted in the regrowth of her human hands.

Thus storytellers may alter tales to establish themselves as creative individuals with artistic authority, to increase identity authority, or to revamp a message to fit their worldview. In folklore studies, discussions of alteration often stem from the story traveling between communities, and details changing in order to accommodate new landscapes or audiences (for example Bauman's discussion of Ed Bell, or Haring's "reduction," "allusion" and "augmentation" as storytelling devices, discussed in Chapter Four). Dundes pointed out the interconnectedness of "form and variation" in all forms of folklore. "To the professional folklorist, *the* song, *the* tale type, is an abstraction or ideal form which is manifested many, many times (i.e., multiple existence) in concrete versions" (169). Some folklorists are more conservative than others in registering concern regarding alterations. Haring studied the performance contexts that might lead to

altering a story and pointed out that changing a story implies altering a time-honored belief or tradition:

Because such tales had their genesis in an oral tradition, we are tempted to imagine their original tellers as simple folk endowed with infallible wisdom and, in some cases, divine inspiration. As a consequence of that belief, tampering with the classical texts of Perrault or the Brothers Grimm is considered by some to be tantamount to sacrilege, similar to revising text of the Holy Scriptures. (64)

Sheppard suggested that tellers should examine how much “rejigging” they needed to feel comfortable. A massive transformation of a story from outside one’s culture might imply that the story is not accessible to that teller:

I believe that stories have a life of their own and most stories have such universal qualities that we are all incorporating them into our selves and our cultures each time we tell them anyway. But [if our alteration] results in our listeners being cheated out of learning about a culture, cheated out of having to think about a new idea, cheated out of hearing a new voice just because we’re too lazy or ignorant or insensitive to explore the background of the story, I would have to object. (Sp 23 Sept. 1999)

Texan educator Sheila Darr also saw several complexities in why storytellers might need to change a story, asking more questions than she answered:

Even telling the story in a language other than that in which it originated causes some of its original “spirit” to be lost. Do we really think that by restoring the Temple at Luxor (or wherever) we are saving some part of the ancient Egyptian culture, or are we really preserving an artifact that points to the culture and whispers to us of mysteries that we can only guess at within the limitations of our culture’s paradigms (which in fact limit our personal paradigms unless we not only consciously work at

breaking free of them but also have the capacity for profound empathy that allows us to step outside of our points-of-view to a radical extent). . . . I would never suggest that we should bulldoze the Temple at Luxor because it cannot mean to us what it meant to those who built it.

Our paradigms expand as we incorporate the values and imagery and symbolism from native traditions that are somewhat new to us (not radically new, because incorporating those involves a radical paradigm shift - again, a possible experience but not a common one) and resonate with the values, imagery, and symbols we are already familiar with. We transform the stories and ourselves/our culture by telling them. (After all, the Temple at Luxor has a meaning for us that it did not, could not have for those who built it. And part of its meaning for us lies in our very efforts to try to understand, as best we can, what it meant to them.) (Sp 21 Sept. 1999)

Simms had similar thoughts, but felt that ultimately each situation must be taken in a case-by-case consideration, given the dynamic nature of storytelling and story events:

I had the good fortune of receiving permission to tell a Zulu story many years ago. Having told it, I had to learn a lot about it. I put my heart into the telling and adorned it from within outwards with voices, gestures, language, intention that was all very personal. To my great surprise someone rather well known began telling it without knowing the cultural background. Changed the words, left out a difficult part that was the most important part of the story and used my gestures and voices etc. I felt so pained by the whole episode. On the other hand, others have retold it with the greatest care and made it their own and gave credit for having been inspired by my telling. That felt okay. It is, for us storytellers, in the end, almost a situation by situation dilemma that does take dialogue and reflection. I love that about it, actually. It is more real than making a

rigid law and then trying to squeeze everything to fit that. Dialogue between us and respect is essential.

There are Native American storytellers who have loved my retellings. Others who think it is not correct at this moment in history. Others who are angered by my telling any of those stories. (Sp 19 May 2000)

Sheppard, Darr and Simms point out that changes may be both unintentional and unavoidable, if the teller is unfamiliar with the cultural background of the story.

Medlicott felt it was the inherent privilege of any storyteller to rearrange a story's cultural details; indeed, it might show more respect for a story if a teller unfamiliar with a cultural landscape picked up the tale's whole plot and set it down inside another, more understandable location (int. 10 June 1998). Fowler agreed:

Sometimes I hear an old tale, perhaps told in different cultures or parts of the country, a tale such as Jack O'Lantern or of a young man's encounter with a boot seller who turns out to be the devil and who has exchanged a pair of boots possibly for his soul. I know that this story has been told in Scandinavia and in Cape Breton. Again, I take that story and turn it into a local tale that happened when I was young, right here on Vancouver Island. (e-int. Sept. 25 2005)

Donnamarie Emmert, a storyteller who teaches college as an adjunct in Virginia, felt home was best when choosing a story setting. Emmert gleans folktales from around the world through books and other tellers, then recasts them into Appalachian settings:

I've been focusing for the past two years on Appalachian stories, because that's where I'm from, and frankly it sells.

[Wendy:] So you take stories from other places and change them?

[Donnamarie:] Everything changes with me; I find myself changing—taking perfectly good stories from other cultures and making them

Southern. There's one—somebody's done it for me—a story based on a traditional British ballad. Barry Moser, an illustrator, has taken it and turned it into an Appalachian story.

[Jack Beck, Wendy's husband:] In the original story, the woman turns into a swan and her lover shoots her.

[Donnamarie:] Yeah, in this one she becomes a whitetail deer and he shoots her. It's pretty easy to do, actually [making changes]. There's not too much—you can't take a story out of, from the plains of Africa and change it, well in a way you could, but that loses too much in the translation—but it's not hard. You take a basic story and change it; it's just not that hard. And then it's—I always found out later, it's always already something here, a bunch of them. There's always a version out there someplace.

[Wendy:] Why do you reset them in Appalachia when the version you read isn't from there?

[Donnamarie:] Frankly, it's easier for me because it's what I am. I know where all the stuff is. It's easier for me to do; it's my voice, and it is easier for me to find my voice in a story if I make it Southern. . . . I wouldn't take Sir Gawain and the Loathly Lady and sling 'em up in a haystack someplace and make them speak Kentucky Southern. Audiences wouldn't accept that, even if the story would. (int. 29 Dec. 1998)

Emmert's and Medlicott's resetting of stories is a practical alteration, made for purposes of cultural clarity; tellers may also make changes because they wish to be distinctive.

Tellers can claim individual ownership of a story—or have it assigned by the professional storytelling community—only if the tale contains some unique element that they contributed. Ledbetter remembered an incident during storyteller Richard Chase's involvement with the North Carolina storytelling scene that exemplified this concept.

Chase did fieldwork among Appalachian people and published their stories in Grandfather Tales and Jack Tales:

Then, of course, the interesting thing is, what about creativity? He [Chase] was close to our gathering [of North Carolina storytellers, who met to tell stories on a monthly basis] as a folklorist, but when people started performing his stories, if he felt they were too close to his words, he got very angry. Doc McConnell was telling one time when he walked in, and he [Chase] just pitched into him [McConnell], [waving fists] he'd stolen his story and that, and of course in the beginning of his book it says to take these stories and tell them. That was a really chafing thing, not just this incident, but overall in the scene at that time [the late 1970s]. (int. 15 July 1999)

If a teller repeats a story from another teller almost verbatim, or even just in the style of the originating teller, he may find himself the object of anger and of criticism. But a teller may hear a story from another teller and craft it into something new, with additions, subtleties, imbrications of formulaic language or motifs from other tales, and so on. If a teller is not too close to the original words, and has made a new creation definably his own work from the story, the story will be judged a success or failure as a stand-alone piece of art. In other words, it will not be Sheehan's "Did teller A make a good job of teller B's story?" The question will become, "Did teller A tell a good story?" Storytellers value individual displays of creativity. Many storytellers spoke of putting themselves into the story (for example, Chance 9 July 1997; Emmert 29 Dec. 1998; Flodin 19 Dec. 1998). The negotiation between new, exciting and/or different and traditional is played out again and again in the ongoing interaction of storytellers and audiences. Toelken called this spectrum of dynamism to conservatism the "Twin Laws"

of folklore: “Balancing the dynamism of change in performance is the essentially conservative force of tradition itself” (1996: 39). Tellers must find the balance between placing enough of themselves into the tale to make it distinctive, yet allow the story to remain accessible to an audience. A teller recognizably copying another teller's story is considered bad behavior and bad art. But the method of acquisition is not the reason for condemning the teller; censure comes when a teller does no further work, taking the polished piece from the mouth of another.

National storyteller Connie Regan-Blake is a founding member and past chair of the former US National Storytelling Association. She stated that it was critical to the sustainability of the storytelling profession for tellers to display not only artistry in innovating stories, but also dedication to creating new stories for telling. If everyone told the same tales, there would eventually be no dedicated group of listeners:

[Story creation] includes not only autobiographical tales, but breathing life into traditional tales and bringing them to light. We must build out from that foundation of doing our own work. If all of us are telling the same tales the same way, it will all cave in one day. (Klein 14)

Regan-Blake's comment is not necessarily accepted widely in the storytelling profession.

Chance observed:

In this atmosphere of “this is my story, you can’t tell it” and “you’re the wrong race to tell this story” I find that the people most willing to share stories, and the happiest to let you tell the stories they tell you, are the old timers, the traditional tellers. They’re so free with the material; it’s their heritage, and they want to share it with people like me and have people like me pass it on. We won’t do it the same way, but we’ll both do it. (int. 9 July 1997)



Regan-Blake is a former librarian who since the 1970s has been working full-time with storytelling, and who thus has more vested interests in the competitive economics of who is telling stories, while Chance is a casual storyteller. Yet Chance's observation about the current era of storytelling may not have taken into account that there is nothing new under the sun regarding economic competition in storytelling, as Thomson's depiction of the 1800s tailor showed at the beginning of this chapter. Or, as Keding put it, "The golden days of storytelling, weren't" (conversation).

Yet if the audiences at festivals have tended to be classed as conservative in their expectations of tradition by most storytellers and events organizers, there are some exceptions. Rockwell was adamant that the future of storytelling lay in a more theatrical direction, breaking away from the traditional style of storytelling, as well as from the traditional repertoire:

Folklore and twice told tales are okay for many venues, but they don't make the cut for a theater audience which has expectations that differ from those of the traditional storytelling audience. The latter is patient and forgiving. The theater audience isn't, and until it becomes accustomed to the many variations of Story, it expects instant gratification—which is to say material that evokes smiles and laughter. This, quite simply, is what causes those unfamiliar with Story to return for the next show.

Developing new stories is the most creative part of Story, and indeed it's the most challenging. But, it's necessary if The Performing Art of Story is ever to reach the mainstream of American entertainment. Also, there's no better right brain stimulant in an increasingly left brain world of technocrats, than assembling an original story. Also, there's no better way to avoid copyright infringement. (Sp 10 Aug. 2001)

Sheppard had a different view, more in line with Toelken's chastisement of people involved in "positive meddling" (1996: 51):

Leaving stories 'better' than one found them would naturally be about improving timing, intonation, expression, phrases etc. and not the plot. To a person who has been brought up hearing the stories respectfully retold, breaking with that respect by hacking the plots about, or creating hybrid versions at personal whim, would be such anathema that they probably wouldn't consider that a storyteller might be capable of it—yet we live in a post-modern age where such 'uniqueness' is valued and expected of 'creative artists,' and where all tradition is fair game for plunder. Well, almost all. (int. 6 June 1998)

David Holt found his personal satisfaction somewhere in the middle, mingling tradition and innovation:

I learned a long time ago that you take a traditional melody and put your own thoughts, feelings, emotions, and spin to it. That's what makes something wonderful. Repetition is just that; creating something new is fine, but it's not traditional. But to take something old, add yourself to it, and pass it on, that's tradition. (int. 9 July 2002)

Tellers who find their own voice succeed, international British teller Helen East agreed.

Like Holt, she felt that tellers should innovate on traditional material:

There is a great deal of competition in London. People who find their own way, negotiate their own passage, are those who know the traditional stories and tell them with respect for that culture, but in their own voice. I know you know that I don't mean physical voice. I mean the voice of yourself, your past experience, your thoughts on things, how the story feels to you. That's what makes a good storytelling session into a brilliant

storytelling session: the storyteller must put herself into it. (int. 12 June 1998)

Why do tellers wish to make a story distinctive or easier for an audience to understand? In the simplest terms, they wish to because they are in competition for paying work and for recognition as excellent tellers. Understanding of the tale from the audience will contribute to enjoyment, thence to praise afforded the teller, and the hiring agent will take note—and, presumably, hire that teller again.

## **6.7 Competition and Marketing**

Storytellers compete for recognition as good artists, bookings and payment. These are aligned dominoes, for a good reputation leads to work that brings payment. For some tellers, as Doty noted, artistry is a greater motivation than financial gain. For those who make their living as tellers, it is show business, not “show art” (Burch 18). Not all tellers can reasonably expect to make a living wage.

Internationally, individual storytellers cited fees ranging from nothing to \$5,000 US per day. In the United States, fees vary widely. From Moscow, Idaho librarian and storyteller Batsy Bybell observed:

Around here, I can ask \$100/hour, get it once in a while, but it’s much more likely that I’ll receive anywhere from \$25 to \$50 for a half-hour shot. . . . Telling is not my primary means of support, and making money at it isn’t all that important for me now (Sp18 Apr. 2001).

In Appalachia, area arts councils recommend \$200 per day (Flodin int. 19 Dec. 1998). In California, the arts council recommendation is \$350 per day (Sp 20 Dec. 1998). Fees go higher in Washington State:

My regular fees are \$200 per hour, \$350 a half day and \$500 a day. This includes ferry fees (and long waits in line) and gas around the Puget Sound. If it's longer than that - then we add for time and mileage. (e-int. 15 Oct. 2000)

An Arkansas regional storyteller quoted \$400 for a school day, but often worked for less (Hansen Sp 21 Aug. 1999). Tellers in Nevada had a similar price (Kanegis Sp 15 Apr. 2001). In addition, many tellers will offer their services free in the early stages of their careers in order to gain expertise or break into areas not previously explored. The highest (unconfirmed) fee of \$5,000 per day belongs to Jay O'Callahan, a New England teller who writes all his own material (Forest int. 17 Dec. 1998).

In the United Kingdom, tellers in Scotland, rural England and Wales earn a suggested £200 per day with fees at about £350 per day in London for tellers of good reputation (East int. 12 June 1998). Such fees are fairly standard across the country.

Canadian tellers average about CAN\$350 per day in urban areas (Cox e-int. 15 Oct. 2000). Fees at the Whitehorse Storytelling Festival in the Yukon were \$1,000 for a weekend, including about four hours of required performance time for tellers who had an established reputation, and \$100-\$150 for "spots" on regional stages—perhaps two hours over the weekend (Coulter int. 12 July 1999). An established Toronto teller charged \$500 for a day of school work, \$250 for a single workshop.

Annually, fees in all countries range from minuscule to a living wage. Mary Hamilton, a national teller in Kentucky, reported an income below \$35,000 US while Heather Forest, an international teller based in New York estimated her annual income above \$72,000. In Canada, a Toronto international storyteller reported income above

CAN\$62,000, while a Yukon regional teller claimed \$18,000. In the United Kingdom, my annual storytelling income for 1999 was £15,000. A regional storytelling friend in England reported income of £12,000. Another teller who used storytelling in her day job counted only her casual storytelling at my behest, and came up with £3,500 annually. These annual figures are gross income, unadjusted for costs incurred while working.

These, then, are the fees for which storytellers compete—if it is payment that motivates the competition. Whether the competition is economic or artistic, tellers are aware that competition is a necessary part of the profession. Social worker and American storyteller Bob Kanegis discussed competition and market share as a part of the “story ownership” debate:

Before I wade into this, I think acknowledging the big elephant in the room that no one politely mentions is in order. People who in one way or another are trying to make money from storytelling, performance telling in particular, are competing with each other. It’s not a pretty word, but let’s admit it. We’re competing for attention, recognition, gigs, money and more. Not only that, when we’re successful in inspiring people with the power of story and storytelling, we’re helping to create new tellers and more competition. How many tellers were there 20-30-50 years ago trying to make a living at it compared to now. . . .

I fear for the commodification of stories. The whole range of opinions and stances have been expressed here; there are those that have no qualms whatsoever about putting out a story, in person, in writing, or on tape and having anyone at any time in any circumstance use that story in anything from an outright imitation to an adaptation. Others guard their creations more or less carefully. I don’t think one or another stance is correct. As

we can see from the discussions here there is no shortage of intelligent argument at any end of the spectrum. (Sp 15 Apr. 2001)

Hamilton's response to Kanegis suggested an alternate reading of the situation. She thought storytellers made too much of competition. Hamilton interpreted the upsurge of interest in storytelling Kanegis described as a positive, healthy development that could in fact build more storytelling opportunities for storytellers overall:

There may indeed be an elephant in the room but I don't think the elephant is named "Competition." I think its name is "Fear." I think it may be competition's relative or maybe even competition's parent!

To my reasoning, competition is fear-based. It involves looking over one's shoulder to see what others are doing, it involves assessing the value of one's work based on comparisons instead of on some inner core or inner compass, a belief that if I didn't get the job/grant/whatever and you did that means you won and I lost (you've been elevated while I've been diminished) and competition involves a belief that whatever is of value in storytelling is scarce — the supply is limited so for me to have some it has to come from someone else. . . .

I do not believe that the creation of more and more storytellers creates more and more competition for the existing storytellers. I think the creation of more storytellers simply creates more storytelling. I think storytelling is so powerful that the more people have of it; the more they want it.

That, in theory, should create more work for the increasing numbers of people earning a living through storytelling. (Sp 17 Apr. 2001)

Whether the elephant is called competition or fear, storytellers acknowledge its presence, and leverage themselves and their work into positions that will showcase their particular talents and style. For most tellers interviewed here, whether they saw more

storytellers as beneficial or potentially detrimental to themselves, competition meant being distinctive, although many were reluctant to distinguish whether their motivation was economic or artistic.

The distinctiveness tellers sought could come primarily through identity rather than artistic authority, as Arkansas educator and teller Faye Hansen lamented:

There is this PC [politically correct] perception that having a balanced program means having one of each race and an equal number of each gender. Consequently if you are young or old, male, Jewish, black, Hispanic, oriental, etc. regardless of gender, you have a better chance of being hired by festivals. . . .

I find this trend a challenge as it limits my opportunities as a white woman teller, even though we make up the demographic majority. There is greater pressure on us to find additional things to do such as sing, dance, etc. to give us a niche. In addition it dismisses the cultural value of our heritage—it being no less wrong to group all European-Americans together than all Africans (My background happens to be predominantly Swedish and Polish—both areas with rich storytelling traditions). (Sp 21 Aug. 1999)

Many tellers are aware that identity authority, particularly if associated with some traditional status, is a marketable commodity. I am using “traditional status” in the same way that Ben-Amos described “canon” and “culture.” The Southern Arts Federation hired national teller and musician Sheila Kay Adams in 1998 as the key artist in an American Heritage tour. Adams, who holds a Master’s degree in Education, felt that it was “cool to be Appalachian” on this tour (int. 15 July 1997). Emmert focuses on Appalachian storytelling because it is her self-identity and goes over well with hiring agents,

particularly in San Francisco, which she regularly visits on vacation from her day job. “I don’t know if it’s the stereotype or what, but if somebody hears I’m Southern, it’s like WHOOHOO! They’re right there. They ask, ‘What kind of stories do you tell’ and you can almost see ‘Hee Haw’ flash up in their eyes sometimes” (int. 29 Dec. 1998). People can associate Appalachian stories and their tellers with stereotypes perpetuated by a television show that portrayed hillbillies as stupid, barefoot, chewing grass blades, excellent musicians and dentally challenged.

Both Adams and Emmert know that being associated with a culture considered rich in storytelling increases the interest of hiring agents. Ross, asked if she thought the same about Native American tales and tellers, gave a qualified answer:

There is this problem that Native stories are seen to be hot on the market right now. And that means anybody and everybody just dashes out and gets a book. They read Mooney’s Cherokee Tales and think they’re experts. That’s a problem. But other than that, no, I don’t think the commodity angle comes into it. (int. 5 Aug. 1997)

More tellers think the commodity angle enters the equation (for example, Adams 15 July 1997; Chance 9 July 1997; Emmert 29 Dec. 1998) than do not (Ross 5 Aug. 1997).

Tellers sell themselves and their stories as commodities in the marketplace for stories; they find specialties. American folksong scholar Neil Rosenberg described specialization as “an identifiable ‘sound’ and a distinctive instrumental style or technique which functions as a personal repertoire” (1986:157-8). Storytellers are very similar; they show a distinct style located within a larger cultural style, as Lindahl described in Swapping Stories (9). This style becomes a part of their marketed material. “Marketing” is that



which storytellers do in order to obtain work. This is not a term one hears often when doing fieldwork amongst storytellers, for it rings with a strangely inappropriate sound in a profession that likes to think it connotes ancient wisdom and the handing down of home truths. In fact, when informants were asked about how they marketed themselves, the majority explained not how they did it, but how much they hated it. Rosenberg does not mention finding an aversion to self-marketing among professional singers. He found only that they changed their repertoire and style to fit larger markets as their careers advanced (1986: 160). The negotiation to retain traditional status while becoming a popular performer, Rosenberg suggests, did not noticeably alter the ways in which the folk music functioned within a community; one could “view country music as an example of a process which occurs when the music of a group . . . achieves access to commercial media” (1986: 152). In short, “the music continues to function as folk music” (152) although such access opened a feedback channel where stylistic influences flowed down the hierarchy from the national to the regional scene—and market (160).

Rosenberg believes that singers “draw upon their ‘background’ for unique elements which they can ‘sell’” (1986: 161). Keding took this concept one step further, stating that storytellers sell themselves as well:

You are selling yourself. You’re an actual commodity standing up there in front of an audience. I can always get worried. Here comes a younger, cuter, stronger, better looking storyteller than me. She will be more impressive on stage because of the way she looks. I better lose some weight. I better trim my beard. I better grow my beard longer. All that crap. (int. 21 Dec. 1998)

McConnell felt that marketing oneself was not the real issue in storytelling. The important factor was whether the person was a good teller, not a good marketer:

The problem we've got is, since the discovery of how much fun this profession is, why we've got an awful lot of late bloomers. I think people sometimes think you're just up there talking; they don't think of it as an art form, and they jump on the bandwagon. It makes things tricky for the rest of us. One bad storyteller can ruin your wages. (int. 16 July 1999)

Holt was aware of how powerful a concept tradition could be in relation to marketing:

Since I did the CDs with Doc (Watson) again I seem to be this traditional figure. There doesn't seem to be any real substance to who gets to be a tradition bearer and who doesn't. It's an odd distinction. I just don't worry about it, and I get on with what I'm doing. (int. 9 July 2002)

Tellers who feel they have a marketable identity try not to step too far away from the expectations of the person who hired them. British international teller and Traveller Sheila Stewart recalled:

I remember a time when we were at a festival, my sister and I, and there was this jazz band, and they said, 'Come on and sing with us.' And we were just having fun, after the concert you know, and we were singing away, and suddenly there was Ewan MacColl, mad as anything, telling us to get down and stop it. The Stewarts of Blair do not sing anything but folksongs, he said, or you'll hurt your status as traditional singers. And I always remembered that. (int. 19 Apr. 1999)

Stewart felt that she was being told by the person who had hired her and brought her to the event, "You have to be what they expect; you'll damage your reputation and people will stop thinking of you as a traditional singer if they see you doing that." She heeded that message. "Wendy, I don't even sing along with the radio now" (19 Apr. 1999).

McConnell found that his identity (Appalachian) made him an object of imitation:

The early tellers we were inviting to the National Festival, a demand was being placed on us to do workshops. People came to Jonesborough so hungry for how-tos about telling stories, how to present, collect, tell, preserve, find ‘em. All these were subjects for little storytelling workshops so as a result of that we, my brother Steamer and I and other tellers as well, were beginning to formalize a storytelling structure, making it more structured. There began to be a “this is how you do it” feel that, like it or not, we were a part of creating. (int. 16 July 1999)

An unintentional effect of this formalizing process was that tellers across the country began wearing denim bib overalls and straw hats (McConnell's usual storytelling garb):

There they were, speaking with New York accents, trying to stretch those Brooklyn sounds out into drawls. It was funny, and sorta sad, and sorta unavoidable. We didn’t mean to teach ‘em that. They just started dressing like us, or like they thought we would be dressing, being from Appalachia. But the good ones grow out of it. (int. 16 July 1999)

Rosenberg points out that “The movement of performers through various market levels and status stages may involve the use of folk traditions in various ways” (1986: 161). As their imitation of his clothing styles suggests, McConnell was in storytelling’s early days a standard by which tradition (and thus, marketability) could be measured in the minds of neophyte storytellers. “If Doc is traditional, then being like him will make me traditional” may be a naïve thought, but it is not an illogical correlation for a person to make at the beginning of her career. It is certainly—no pun intended—a telling one, revealing much of the mindset concerning identity authority as a marketable commodity

in professional storytelling's neophyte years. Simms touched on this when discussing a storyteller she booked at the US National Storytelling Festival:

Joe Heaney: I brought him to the NAPPS festival [the US National Storytelling Festival] in the early 1980s. He was a traditional teller who regaled people at night in the Eagle Tavern in Manhattan with his old stories and tales about Ireland. He was great. The real thing. He was an elevator man during the day in a building in Brooklyn. He could barely believe his eyes when he came to Tennessee that so many people wanted to hear stories and he got paid for it! (Sp 19 May 2000).

The dichotomy on which Simms remarks, between being the traditional real thing (tellers such as Heaney who have identity authority and who may or may not have artistic authority) and the professional real thing (tellers such as herself who have artistic authority and who may or may not have identity authority) is omnipresent in the storytelling world. Some openly acknowledge this tension in the marketplace (Burch 17-21; Emmert 29 Dec. 1998; Holt 17 July 2000; Kanegis Sp 15 Apr. 2001). Others indicate that they are aware of the issues involved without feeling that the two must be mutually exclusive (Forest 17 Dec. 1998; Keding 21 Dec. 1998; McConnell 16 July 1999; Ross 5 Aug. 1997; Simms 6 Oct. 2002).

With the exception of Rockwell, most tellers seem to feel that, in a profession whose participants see themselves as harbingers of ancient wisdom and peacemongers, an overt concern with money can be perceived as a bad thing. In a profession dedicated to artistic excellence, perhaps money is perceived as an inconsequential factor. In a profession whose participants see themselves as small business operators, a concern with money is to be expected. Some tellers are more comfortable than others with this

juxtaposition of economics, artistry and a sense of participating in something ancient.

Rockwell felt that storytelling as a whole and storytellers individually have no reason to be ashamed at requiring promotion and development. He drew a parallel with the professional folk music scene:

As folk music grew from the grassroots, it also died in the grassroots to leave a number of guitar pickers unemployed. Bluegrass music grew from the grassroots, and it surely would have died there except for one thing—professional promotion that brought it such nationally recognized venues as Nashville, Tennessee and Branson, Missouri. (Sp10 Aug. 2001)

The US National Storytelling Network, Rockwell concluded, should be doing the same for storytelling, with its allegorical head held high (Sp 10 Aug. 2001).

But Rockwell appears to be in the minority in being comfortable juxtaposing economics with storytelling services. A teller from New England who runs a storytelling business resolved the conflict in a more subtle way. “The business staff sells our mission. We never sell our services. Our services are gifts. As are the stories that I tell” (Name withheld Sp 11 Aug 2001). Forest had a similar approach: “I tell people the money I charge is for getting up, getting my hair combed and my clothes presentable, getting in my car and driving to their school to arrive on time. The stories are free” (int. 17 Dec. 1998).

What seems to emerge is that most storytellers find identity authority, particularly in terms of association with tradition, an aid to marketing rather than a hindrance. Yet they do not like to acknowledge as much, or even discuss being engaged in money matters at all, let alone self-marketing (ints with Forest 17 Dec. 1998; Holt 9 July 2002;

Keding 21 Dec. 1998; McConnell 16 July 1999). Regional US teller Thomas Doty, who markets himself as “Doty and Coyote” and tells Native American tales, did find money a pollutant to his art, and to identifying himself with Native American tradition in that he tells from the Native American canon of folktales. To him, “big bucks” described attitude, not income:

When I mentioned “big bucks” I wasn't referring so much to income or lack of it, but rather to an attitude I have noticed in a handful of storytellers as regards their intentions as “artists.” This exists in all art genres, not just storytelling. To me, going after “big bucks” in the arts is synonymous to launching a career in theatre simply for the satisfaction of being thrust into the spotlight and swept away into the ego-orgasmic heights of glitzy show business. Mistaking this for the “success” of an art form is a big mistake. . . .

I have met storytellers who spend every minute of every day marketing and promoting their work, frantically fueled by a picture of themselves looking great in that spotlight. For many of these storytellers, it's been a few years or more since they added a new story to their repertoire, or read a book, or visited the places or the people the stories come from, or creatively stretched the limits of their art.

I have met storytellers who spend a great deal of time scheming how they can use their creations over and over to make more and more money rather than contemplating new creations, or considering the places where sharing their stories might do the most good. Their business plans rarely include where they would like to be “artistically” in the future. I have met storytellers who turn down gigs because sponsors lack funds, even when a sponsor asks for all the right reasons, or even needs the stories. These storytellers serve their pocketbooks before they serve the stories.

I have met a few of these “big bucks” tellers and I am not impressed.

Like Coyote in the old time myths, they represent a great example of how not to act, and for me, they do little to perpetuate storytelling and pay little respect to the sacred traditions of our art.

As far as money, each storyteller charges what is needed to survive. This works. And there are a few extremely dedicated, gifted and generous storytellers who make a great deal of money. This works, too. We all have the reality of paying our bills, supporting our loved ones and our lifestyles. We also have the responsibility to make the stories available to those who want or need them — with all the wisdom and truth and healing they offer — and often those who need them the most are unable to pay. When we make money our first consideration, we no longer serve the stories, and we are no longer artists. When we serve the stories first, often even the most hardened reality of bill paying falls into place. When it doesn't, we find the means to deal with financial realities without sacrificing the integrity of our art. (Sp 17 Apr. 2001)

The simultaneous need to market, and an aversion to being perceived as doing so, is a problem tellers must overcome, said Burch in an article on professional standards:

America's simultaneous worship of and loathing of money—similar to its preoccupation with and horror of sex—makes for some pretty strong double messages about both. We need to take a deep breath and examine our unspoken attitudes about financial success . . . . Our unconscious attitude about money almost certainly steers our business practices. . . .

We can be artists without having a career in the arts, and we can have a career in the arts without being artists. But if we are making a career of our art, we'd better attend to our business. Selling our services and our resources has all kinds of implications. (18)

Burch finds support from American ethnographers Richard Handler and Eric Gable.

Writing on Colonial Williamsburg, they comment, "First, Americans often judge what

they conceive as purely cultural activities—art for art’s sake, for example— . . . to be impractical and wasteful, or, at best, a luxury that can be sacrificed in hard times” (30). Also, “business can be seen to compromise, corrupt, or pollute “higher” activities that should not have to be justified in economic terms” (30). The folklorists and storytellers are in agreement on this point.

## **6.8 Conclusions**

This chapter examined the ownership of stories, both individual and cultural. It commenced with an exploration of the historic attitude in folkloristics to the topic, particularly regarding intellectual property, cultural ownership and the worldviews of other people. It looked at the marketing, competition and economics of professional storytelling.

Individual ownership is difficult to define, covering as it does different notions such as exact words, the plot line, or theatrical presentation. Cultural ownership is easy to define theoretically yet difficult to determine in specific situations. When storytellers choose stories for telling they are likely to choose folktales rather than literary works, in order to avoid ownership difficulties. They are also likely to avoid other teller’s personal stories. Sacred stories tend to be considered inappropriate to tell by storytellers from outside that story’s culture.

Cultural ownership raises issues surrounding presenting or representing a culture and difficulties of crossing ethnic or occupational boundaries. Another problematic term examined in this chapter was “respect.” This much-used word can be interpreted in a



number of ways, ranging from leave the story alone, to research, to sharing an emotional resonance with the story, to ensuring the survival of a story by telling it.

Canadians showed a slight difference in their approach to cultural ownership from those of tellers in the United Kingdom and the United States. First Nations stories in Canada were generally perceived to need a “release” from a tribal elder before a teller would consider them, although this was not considered true by all Canadian tellers. In America and Britain, cultural ownership could be circumvented through respect.

There is a tension between altering stories and retaining the traditional form. While storytellers often alter folktales to make them identifiable with modern times, their own life experience, or some other criteria, audiences want to hear them in a way that sounds “traditional,” meaning as close to what they have come to expect as possible. Identity authority, particularly when associated with tradition, is beginning to emerge as a “brand” issue, with tellers becoming aware of the marketing advantage to be gained from differentiating themselves clearly. Tellers also know that artistic excellence can distinguish them from the crowd. Most storytellers displayed acute awareness of the hiring agent as the person they needed to please.

Tellers often speak of having “respect” for other cultures yet tend not to see how telling the stories from other cultures might rob accepted tradition bearers of work and income in a marketplace where tradition can be a commodity subject to the laws of supply and demand. Storytellers sometimes display a deep-seated difficulty with the notion of marketing themselves and even talking about the business aspects of their

profession. This suggests that storytellers feel uneasy about marketing a profession they promote as peacemongering and promoting social activism.

## CHAPTER SEVEN:

### REFLECTIONS AND CONCLUSIONS

*“Where the story-teller is loyal, eternally and unswervingly loyal to the story, there, in the end, silence will speak. Where the story has been betrayed, silence is but emptiness. But we, the faithful, when we have spoken our last word, will hear the voice of silence. Whether a small snotty lass understands it or not.” – Grandmother, in Isak Dinesen’s “Blank Page,” Last Tales*

This examination of professional storytelling has involved an autoethnographic investigation of the occupation of professional storytelling in the United Kingdom, Canada and the United States. The professional storytelling organizations of these nations were examined, as well as the identity, individual and communal ownership ethics, and marketing practices of professional storytellers overall. How these topics affect the storytelling profession and the behavior of its practitioners was a part of the investigation. The central theme of this dissertation has been who professional storytellers are and what they do.

Professional storytellers are a marked category distinguishable in identity and praxis from the unmarked category “storyteller.” The most significant differences are the expectation of payment among professionals, and that professional tellers’ performances will be Public storytelling events, some organized by or through various storytelling organizations. Professional tellers can also be divided into further delineations, from

international to regional, and from full-time, deriving all of their living from storytelling, to casual, earning only a small portion thereof.

As a full-time national storyteller, I have been able to investigate autoethnographically such diverse events as festivals, concerts, workshops, conferences, guild meetings, salons, and daily performances of many tellers, myself included. This fieldwork took place in several countries, across eight years, and included participation on Storytell, the Internet listserver of those interested in storytelling.

The extant literature on professional storytelling showed that the profession has a largely uncharted history in the United States, Canada and the United Kingdom. Folklore scholarship regarding professional storytelling developed from research based primarily on traditional tellers or on the texts themselves. There were therefore several research paths that could have been chosen, but this study moved along the one that compared the development of the national organizations. In future years scholars will no doubt want to compare working practices of storytellers between English-speaking countries, and develop investigations of worldwide professional storytelling activities. This boat sailed closer to shore, examining the organizations in comparison between countries, then dropping international comparisons when examining working practices. This method enabled covering the material in terms of marketing, identity and artistry, and authenticity.

Overall, storytelling scholarship started with texts, moved into classifications, began to become interested in narrators and their individual creativity, and then moved again toward community uses of storytelling and their meaning, purpose, and influence

on our daily lives. When professional storytelling entered the scholarship in the 1990s, the storytelling revival had been ongoing in the United States, England/Wales and Canada, with beginnings in Scotland. This was parallel to folksong revival scholarship in that “the revival had little direct impact on university teaching or research in the 1950s and 1960s” (Jackson 1993: 74). Jack in Two Worlds (1994) was the first published folklore collection of essays to approach the storytelling revival. There have been very few examinations of storytellers who were investigated on the basis that they were professionals, or specific examination of professional storytelling events. Of the studies that inspected professional telling, the subject of the research tends to be a member of a distinctive family or community with a history of traditional storytelling, while their professional status is bypassed. But in the 1990s a body of literature by folklorists who were also storytellers began emerging. The explorations from folklorists and ethnographers who were professional storytellers had similar findings to research by folklorists and ethnographers who were not professional tellers.

Again, while different scholars organize their research differently, some might wish for more comparisons between folksong and folktale scholarship on revivalism, repertoire, and even on how folklorists reacted to each. Revivalism is certainly a topic of interest to folklorists, and this investigation may aid future scholars. The fact of whether there was a storytelling revival, and why, is less important to this study than what professional storytelling is and what professional storytellers do. More than thirty years have passed since the awakening of interest in storytelling now found in England and the United States, so what may have been a revival might now be a veritable industry.

## 7.1 Areas for Future Study

Looking at the national storytelling organizations in the United Kingdom and North America enables research into how credentialization and centralized/decentralized control have played out in various countries. Analyzing the similarities and differences in the organizations' development and growth, one finds that Scotland and America have taken similar approaches. Scotland is likely to become more centralized in the future, as its new storytelling center reaches completion, and its offices oversee increasing portions of Scotland's storytelling scene. In contrast, England/Wales and Canada are similar, the Society for Storytelling predating Canadian development as a grassroots, decentralized organization.

Future investigators of professional storytelling might wish to branch into apprenticeships, degree programs, and other training opportunities bestowing some form of certification. Discussion here was limited to the national organizations for several reasons, not the least of which was the scope of the subject. An entire dissertation could be written on the credentialization issue in the United States alone. In April 2006, threads of discussion on Storytell were pursuing that very line of thought. There is consistent tension between "everyone is a storyteller" and the recurring theme that storytellers should have some form of ethical and skill standards before claiming the title. A second reason for not pursuing the credentials issue significantly is that the debate appears to be neither gathering steam nor dissipating. If mutual respect is fostered by healthy debate, then the people on both sides of this discussion will be around for a good long time.

Future research would be interesting in this area, but is beyond the scope of this examination.

Overall, storytellers in all the countries investigated tend to see themselves as engaged in an activity intended to bring about peace, dialogue between cultures, and wisdom. This is an important part of many storytellers' identities. Another aspect of identity is artistic authority and identity authority, roughly correlating to artistic ability and one's personal background in terms of ethnicity, class, upbringing, etc. A person with both identity authority and artistic authority is likely to be highly sought after as a storyteller, unless the identity does not "fit" the hiring context for some reason. Artistic authority is considered somewhat more desirable than identity authority by most tellers represented here; some tellers with identity authority have eschewed being recognized for that identity, fearing too limited a repertoire would develop, in turn limiting telling opportunities.

It is conceivable that some of what is examined under artistic authority and identity authority might be seen as more passive than one would expect from a folklorist. Sometimes, folklore must protect that which it studies, and people who "barge in" to other cultures and snatch stories without responsibility can be seen in a negative light by some folklorists. A dispassionate examination of how artistic authority in essence exonerates people in professional storytelling from audience censure might be considered counterproductive, but this study goes further than that. This research shows that artistic authority in part includes knowing when one does not know enough to tell a story, and when one needs to employ shortening or lengthening techniques designed to either cue an

audience in or remove things about which the teller knows little. If the concept of artistic authority and its resultant inhibiting factor on telling stories from cultures not one's own has caused folklorists or storytellers to think further about their attitudes and approaches to issues of story ownership, this would be of benefit to both groups. Likewise, if the concept of culture expands to encompass people who share an understanding of the story's emotional core, that too would offer new ways to conceptualize who has the cultural rights to tell which stories.

The artistry involved in crafting a story includes how and why a story is chosen, and the personal choices a teller makes to prepare the story for telling. If the teller has artistic authority but lacks identity authority, as in the case of "Michael" cited earlier or the hypothetical Plutonian teller discussed in Chapter Two, artistic authority can be threatened by lacking identity authority. Gender should be included in identity authority, as it affects how tellers choose their repertoire and craft stories. Gender is one reason why storytellers may alter stories. Tellers also alter stories so they do not "steal" stories verbatim from other tellers.

Story crafting was barely mentioned in this study. People pursuing performance studies might someday cross paths with folklore studies in this area, following in the footsteps of Rosenberg, Fish, Titon and Stone to examine the artistry behind the art, and the heritage behind the artist. There is much to discover here.

Who has the right to tell which stories remains a vexed question, based on issues of individual and cultural ownership. Individual ownership focuses primarily on the problems of copyright and perceived mutual expectations of best praxis within



storytelling as a profession. Cultural ownership involves the right to tell a story through participant understanding. Stories considered sacred are generally accepted as culturally inappropriate for “outsiders” to tell, but cultural ownership generally remains a nebulous concept in storytelling. The issues behind ownership, both individual and cultural, are intertwined with the storytelling marketplace, involving how storytellers market themselves and which cultures are considered “popular” with hiring agents.

This is largely a storyteller’s concern with her own occupation, and may break new ground among folklorists, perhaps challenging some of the ways in which we have examined markets and money when intertwined with folk arts. Rosenberg was a pioneer in this area, and much of the scholarship on the folk music revival is recognizing the strange dichotomy that storytellers have also come to see: that “selling” tradition makes for strange bedfellows in tourism and talent, heritage and performance, business acumen and a love of one’s ethnicity, native soil, religion, background—whatever it is that brings that storyteller self-identity. Cultural tourism and the use of folktales have miles to go before the scholarship sleeps. There are acres of unexplored grasslands, with perhaps some exciting and even dangerous concepts hiding in the tall rushes.

There is an interesting area of storytelling concern given only a cursory glance here: storytellers are keen to discuss why personal stories have become such a part of so many repertoires. Tellers have many theories on this, including the perhaps oversimplified idea that telling personal tales limits the opportunities for duplication from other tellers. Experiences of storytellers fail to support this belief.

Authenticity is in large measure a storytelling concern involving the marketplace, and in which contexts what tellers can expect to be hired. But this is also a concept important to folklorists, for different reasons. Folklorists have long been arbiters of what is and is not “authentic” in certain settings. In storytelling situations, sometimes hiring agents play the same role. Perhaps because it is in many ways seen as a marketing issue, storytellers see authenticity as context-specific. But storytellers also see authenticity as intrinsically tied to representing the human experience, and their concept of participant understanding as giving them the right to tell a story intertwines with a piece of authenticity. If they are representing the human journey accurately, whether they are representing or presenting a culture is likely to be of less importance to them.

The rules governing meaning and message are context-specific in most performed acts. As other social science fields embrace people speaking for themselves, and lived experience as aspects of life to be studied in their disciplines, Folklore is moving toward a similar understanding. Folkloristics in the future is likely to take a wider sounding of what “authenticity” does and does not mean in terms of how and why people and artifacts are studied.

## **7.2 Comments on a Central Theme**

Professional storytelling was my chosen dissertational topic because, as a professional teller, I had access to a lot of storytellers who would be happy to talk about their work. Since these were people I would normally be hanging out with anyway, getting on with life while conducting dissertational research seemed to be a good

strategy. This research began with a desire to document and to better understand the international professional storyteller community. To a large extent, the questions that came to the fore in the process of fieldwork and its analysis were not those postulated at the outset, but rather more powerful. The most significant finding is not all that surprising: Storytellers are well aware of the pitfalls in using material from cultures not their own, but this does not stop them. Many believe that their goal—be it imparting wisdom, a creative expression of the human experience, or being an activist and peacemaker—is more important than cultural detailing. Directly related to such a concept is that “authenticity” may have a more encompassing definition in praxis than folkloristics has previously examined.

While conducting this research and creating this written dissertation, I heard criticism of storytellers from folklorists who felt tellers usurped cultures not their own. Canadian scholars in particular wanted to know how it could be defensible for a teller who was not connected with First Nation stories to tell them. Although unwilling to defend a storyteller regarding such action, I do hope to have described clearly the thought processes by which storytellers make the decision to take stories from Native sources—both people and books. Let the following discussion of non-natives telling Native stories stand as an example of this phenomenon in other cultural groups as well.

Storytellers stories they have heard or read in many ways: in their own words; by picking up the plot and setting it down inside another location; verbatim as they memorized it from another teller or book; by taking a piece of one story and a piece of

another and welding them together; there are as many ways to confect a story as there are storytellers. When a teller does this, critics say, she could cause harm.

First, she might be depriving a Native person of payment. If a non-native teller tells a Native story, she is doing something that another person might be better equipped to do. If she got paid for it, she has taken paying work from that Native teller. Or so the argument goes. There are several reasons why this cannot be true in most cases. If the teller is an international or a national teller, recognized and lauded on festival stages, she will have been hired on the basis of her reputation for putting stories across to people. She will have achieved this reputation by choosing material she is unable to handle well. It would be sheer lunacy for a teller with a brilliant reputation to risk it by taking a story whose details she does not understand and crafting it into a performance piece. A gifted teller might manage to remove enough of the story's cultural details to make her seem competent with what remained, but the story at that point would be a pale shadow of itself. A good teller knows this fact. Tellers do not want to tell stories they cannot grasp—especially in front of paying audiences who must watch them struggle with the detailing.

Suppose the non-native teller in this case has carefully researched the Native story, done his homework as it were. He knows how to handle the cultural details and understands hidden nuances and meanings in the tale, indiscernible to those not so familiar with Native culture. This position is one folklorists sometimes occupy. Toelken is but one example. Yet Toelken felt it was wrong for folklorists to assume this type of

relationship to other cultures' stories. Shuman and Briggs, speaking of no particular culture, felt it was inappropriate for folklorists to presume to speak for others.

Next is the issue of cultural presentation versus representation. Storytellers want to make the world simultaneously bigger and smaller, bigger in the sense that they introduce ethnic groups that people do not see in their daily life, and smaller by making those ethnic groups less strange and exotic through a story. Storytellers and folklorists approach stories differently; hence storytellers rush in where folklorists fear to tread. Folklorists mostly prefer to see stories undistorted, as reflective of the cultures that birthed them, as honest reproductions of a time, a way of life, or a mindset. Storytellers, to use a simile, enjoy tossing stories like pizza dough, distorting, stretching, pulling out pieces, trying new shapes, punching holes. They are unafraid to experiment with what folklorists might recognize as significant cultural artifacts. But good storytellers do not purport to be representing a culture when they experiment in such ways. Perhaps I can best explore this thought in a metaphorical story from my childhood:<sup>47</sup>

*At a county fair, a man impressed the audience by mimicking the sounds of animals. When he did a pig squealing, the crowd clapped in delight. But a farmer challenged the mimic, saying he didn't sound anything like a pig. The mimic invited the farmer to do a better pig squeal, and the farmer agreed to take up the challenge the next day. He arrived the following day wearing a large overcoat. The audience heard the mimic, then the farmer. The crowd voted that the mimic sounded more like a real pig, whereupon the farmer opened his jacket to show a small pig; he had pinched the pig's ear to make it squeal. The farmer berated the people for preferring a substitute to the real thing.*

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<sup>47</sup> I read this story in a Cricket magazine as a child of perhaps ten, and it stuck with me.

As a child reading that story, I sided with the audience; if they knew they were fake pig squeals, why was the farmer angry? The audience preferred him to a real pig; they did not think he was a real pig. In other words, they did not care that he had no claim to authenticity on the basis of a connection to a source, as opposition to fakeness, or as exact duplication. They just liked the noise he was making. And even now, the rather cynical thought of my childhood echoes across years of life experience, interviews and research. I remember very clearly thinking to myself, *Yes, but next year they probably invited the mimic back and they didn't invite the man with the pig; so there.*

As stated on pages 325-326, the majority of Native stories told by non-natives are found in day job work such as schools and libraries. Sprengnether, along with others quoted, felt it was more important for children to hear stories from many cultures told than it was to ensure such stories were told by people from those cultures. Sprengnether is not purporting to be Native American; she is telling children her understanding of a Native American story. By doing so she could give false cultural information unknowingly. She also could have kept an aboriginal person in the area from earning a fee, assuming there was money in the library budget to hire a teller. She has participated in what Razack would call a racist system by refusing to acknowledge that her library may not be a place that a Native teller would comfortably visit.

And by telling a non-native story she has informed children there are more ethnicities to explore than those they see about them. She has increased interest in literacy generally and in Native culture specifically. She has upped her library's circulation statistics. And she has purchased a book on Native culture to circulate.

Whether these pros and cons balance into a good trade-off is a value judgment best left to the mind of each reader. I neither condone nor condemn the decisions of tellers in this area, but merely describe them.

### **7.3 The Conclusion**

Folklorists are primarily concerned with authenticity as they define it. Storytellers are largely concerned with artistry. Thus storytellers see folklorists as fuddy-duddies, while folklorists see storytellers as feckless. The world needs both. I do not necessarily agree with Charles Briggs and Amy Shuman when they say folklorists should no longer seek to protect and advocate; some culture groups may very well need to be protected from well-meaning storytellers and other cultural tourists, who will not treat them with dignity (115). Bendix says that once authenticity moved from expressive culture displays to scholarly documentation of the same, it became much harder to prove something was an authentic expression rather than an artistic one perpetuated by clubs and social groups (97). In blunt (and somewhat hyperbolic) terms, storytellers question why such definition is necessary; folklorists question how anyone cannot see that such definition is necessary.

Returning to the pizza metaphor, without the folklorists to reprimand storytellers at appropriate times, there might be nothing left to point to and say, "This is pizza as the Italians used to make it." But without the storytellers to mix and match elements of stories from various cultures, pizzas might be as dull as pepperoni and cheese, with nary another flavor involved. Who first thought of putting pineapple and ham on pizza: a folklorist or a storyteller?

The world needs art and the world needs archetypes. Let the storytellers play, let the folklorists preserve, and let those who “own” the stories try to assert their claims. It seems to have worked fairly well so far, as the world has not yet run out of stories, or people to tell them, or most important, people who want to hear them.



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## APPENDIX A: GLOSSARY

These are definitions as storytellers tend to use them. In some cases they differ from folkloristic use of the word or term.

- **Audience, listeners:** a group of people brought together intentionally to listen to the storyteller, or a group of people gathered casually by exposure to the storyteller. An example of the first would be school children taken to the gymnasium by their classroom teacher. An example of the second is people who wander up and sit down at a stage after hearing the storyteller invite them to come and listen by telling a joke, singing a song, or otherwise self-advertising in an attempt to entice listeners to his performance. Audiences may be voluntary or involuntary (for example, people at a festival or school assembly).
- **Booking, gig, session:** an arrangement between a hiring agent and a storyteller to do a specific storytelling event. These terms are most often used to describe telling stories in straight performance; more specific storytelling events such as workshops or training sessions tend to be referred to by their more marked categories. (By “marked” I mean that the teller will be somewhat explicit in describing what she is going to do. A storyteller could say she “has a gig” at the local elementary school. But if she is giving “a teacher inservice,” she may say she is doing “a training session.”) “Performance” and “evening concert” also tend to be marked categories, distinguished from the more common daytime

performances at schools and civic centers. If a storyteller is giving an evening concert for adults, he is likely to say he has “a concert.”

- **Ceilidh:** a house party in Scotland and Ireland in which people take turns singing, playing instruments, telling stories, and sometimes dancing. This is somewhat similar to a salon in the United States or Canada, except it mixes music and dance with storytelling. People in the United States and Canada sometimes refer to ceilidhs, but it is generally considered an Irish affectation. I attended a house party in Ohio that one teller insisted on referring to as a ceilidh, and other tellers, after she had used it several times, began correcting her, saying it was a “story swap.” Referring to a ceilidh in the United Kingdom as a “story swap” or “salon” would also be unusual.
- **Concert:** an evening storytelling event, usually for adults. Concerts may take place at festivals or storytelling clubs, or be special arrangements at arts centers or other venues. Concerts tend to be done by one person or act, although it is possible for a storytelling “olio” to be described as a concert.
- **Contract:** a written agreement between a teller and a hiring agent stipulating the responsibilities of each.
- **Directory:** a listing of storytellers, their contact details, and their specialties. Directories are usually published by storytelling organizations. Tellers often pay a fee to be listed in them, or listing may be a benefit of organizational membership.
- **Featured storyteller:** very similar to guest storyteller, perhaps slightly more prestigious. “Featured teller” means someone hired to tell stories at an event. In

the occupational lexicon, “featured” tends to describe tellers hired at festivals and concerts. To be the only “featured” storyteller at an event is equivalent to being the “headliner” in musical terms.

- **Festival:** a special event, usually lasting more than one day, offering entertainment. Storytelling festivals predominantly feature storytellers, but tellers can often be part of a musical or community festival, particularly in the children’s area. In the United States and Canada, festivals tend to be held over a weekend in a single place, fairly often outdoors or in a contained area such as a county fairground or civic building. The scheduled events tend to run throughout the day, often having special highlights in the evening. In Great Britain, festivals are often held with an event per day over a period of two or more weeks, spread across a city. They are almost always indoors. At a British festival, one might find storytellers making school visits during the day, holding a workshop at a museum in the evening, or having a concert themed on a museum exhibit. The next night might feature a story swap in a local pub. There are rarely stages built for the purpose of that event in a British festival. At an American festival, one is likely to see tents in a field, or the use of picnic shelters in a park, with simultaneous running of stages.
- **Guest storyteller:** very similar to featured storyteller, perhaps slightly less prestigious. The person asked in a formal arrangement to tell at any storytelling event. A guest storyteller may be paid or unpaid, but they have been asked to attend the event for the purpose of telling stories.

- **Guild:** a group of storytellers in geographic proximity who form an organization. A storytelling guild is a circle of people interested in or practicing storytelling; the guild may be performance-oriented or merely meet in a private home, with its members telling to one another. A storytelling guild does not indicate some authenticating body, as in the craft guilds of Europe. Rather the term connotes like-minded individuals gathering to hear and tell stories, and/or to organize area storytelling events. Guilds tend to be important for beginning storytellers, as they offer a place in which to practice stories.
- **Hiring agent:** a person wishing to book a storyteller for a particular storytelling event. There seems to be no specific term used for this person in professional storytelling, so I have called them “hiring agents” for purposes of clarity. “Agent” should not imply a “Hollywood” connotation of a person who books talent on behalf of a third party. People hiring storytellers tend to be directly linked to the venue in question. Hiring agent is also not necessarily how a teller might describe a person calling to request a storyteller. “Booker,” “the person from \_\_\_\_\_ (insert name of large venue),” or a reference to the person’s specific title “arts officer,” “principal of the school,” etc. also seem to be common references.
- **Lay:** a piece of repeated text within a story at strategic points. For example, each time a man moves on from an encounter, the teller could say, “He walked and he walked, for a thousand days and a thousand and one nights.”
- **Living history story, character portrayal:** when a storyteller dresses as and acts as an historical character, telling the story in first person. The character can be

from any time or age. Sometimes the characters are fictional or legendary rather than historic, in which case the performance could be called a character portrayal. Tellers dressed as Mother Goose or as Jack's mother are examples of this. Living history and character portrayals are a somewhat less common form of storytelling, considered a specialization.

- **Local teller, supporting teller:** a teller in a subordinate position to a featured or guest teller, usually from the area in which the event is being held. Local tellers hired or asked to tell for free in support of a nationally recognized teller at a festival may be referred to as supporting tellers by the hiring agency, but are unlikely to be called so in publicity materials. Tellers rarely refer to themselves as “supporting tellers.” Tellers and publicity materials are more likely to use the term “local tellers.”
- **Olio:** a storytelling event featuring several storytellers for equal lengths of time. Usually between 60 and 120 minutes, olios usually give each teller between ten and twenty minutes. Sometimes referred to as a storytelling sampler, these are often held as part of a festival, but an olio may also be an evening concert. Although the format is used in each of the countries examined here, “olio” appears to be an American term, and probably derived its storytelling use from its popular meanings of a mixed casserole or a hodgepodge.
- **Ownership:** the right to be known as the “owner” of a particular performed story; ownership can be cultural (as in Native American tellers may “own” Coyote folktales) or specific to a performer (as in David Novak is known as the “owner”

of his version of AT 333, Little Red Riding Hood, using a red bandana to create the four characters). Ownership is not always asserted by a storyteller who was the “first” (or perceived to be the first) to introduce a story to professional storytelling, usually by telling it at a large festival or recording it; ownership is not always clearly discernable amongst storytellers or even a desirable concept to have clearly defined. To “own” a story as an individual, one must have something distinctive, specific, unique, and original to that teller. To “own” a story within a culture is far more nebulous. When a culture “owns” a particular story, the general perception is that an “elder” (someone old and/or in authority within that culture) should give permission for you to tell it; sometimes tellers simply ask someone who has a bloodline to that culture for permission, whether the person has status within the culture or not). Ownership is a poorly defined concept within professional storytelling.

- **Personal story, personal tale:** a story told about something or someone of importance to the teller. This differs from the folkloristic term “personal experience narrative” in that, while it may be told in the first person, a teller may tell his own experiences or those of another person. Parents with children who tell stories often give them family stories to tell. Family stories are narratives of events considered important within one’s family, such as “the day Dad fell in the pond” or “How Great-grandfather came to America.” Sometimes tellers may ask friends or family members for permission to tell “their” story in the first person. Storytellers often use “personal stories” or “personal tales” in contrast to



“folktales” or “traditional story.” Personal stories differ from living history stories in that the teller is not costumed. Also, personal stories are more likely to take place in the present day or within a few generations of family history. Personal stories in storytelling situations can have elements of legends or folktale motifs blended into the tale; they can be completely true or be a latticework of reality on which a tale is built.

- **Presentation/representation:** the way in which a storyteller interacts with the ethnographic information within a story. Cultural representatives intentionally wish to showcase aspects of a culture accurately to their listeners; cultural presenters wish only to tell a story from that culture, presenting it to listeners without identifying themselves as part of the story’s ethnic background, and may be more concerned with the story’s emotional core than its cultural detailing. Cultural representatives are concerned with what Welsh-born, London-based storyteller Mary Medlicott called “the power of the ethnic.” They present the story as a piece of ethnographic information, entertaining, yet informative about the culture from which it comes. Cultural presenters are not necessarily concerned with complete accuracy of detail.
- **Professional storyteller:** a person who is paid to tell a story; synonymous with occupational storytelling
- **Professional storytelling:** the act of telling a story for payment; synonymous with occupational storyteller
- **Representation/presentation:** see “presentation/representation”

- **Resident storyteller:** a teller invited to work professionally with a group (often a school or other residential or day facility) over a period of time
- **Storytelling residency:** the situation of a teller working with a group over time. Residencies can last between three days and a year and are usually contractual.
- **Respect:** a word invoked by storytellers who present cultures. “Respect,” in storytelling, is similar to “tradition” in folklore studies in that it is a word to think with, rather than about. It has at least four applied uses in professional storytelling: leaving a story alone because one is outside its cultural context; researching a story in order to accurately depict its cultural context; participating in the perceived meaning of the tale to the teller and being true to its message as he understood it; and telling the tale in order to keep it circulating, letting the meaning rest with the hearers. Both sides of the debate on telling stories outside one’s culture use the term “respect” to uphold their opinion.
- **Run:** a repeated cycle. For example, a man makes three journeys within his larger journey; each journey is a run.
- **Salon:** an event organized by an individual rather than a group, hosted in that person’s home, in which a group of people are invited to tell stories to each other informally.
- **Story, tale:** interchangeable words for the narrated piece a person wishes to tell
- **Story swap:** an informal exchange of stories between professional storytellers in an organized setting. These can be held during festivals for audience members to

tell their own tales, or can be after-hours entertainment open only to the storytellers from that festival. Both are referred to as story swaps.

- **Storyteller:** a person who tells a story. Unlike the marked category, “professional storyteller,” a storyteller does not necessarily receive payment, or have a certain skill level. Any person who narrates a story is a storyteller, although not necessarily a “professional storyteller.”
- **Storytelling clubs:** a performance-specific gathering of storytellers. Clubs may be run by guilds, individuals, or formal/informal groupings of storytellers. Usually held in the evening, clubs normally have a storytelling guest, the person who will do the bulk of the storytelling. Clubs often offer “open mic” spots for other storytellers to tell one story. In the United Kingdom, clubs tend to be more common than guilds; in North America, the reverse is true. Pubs and village halls are the most common settings for UK clubs. Clubs in North America could be held in private homes, civic centers, churches, or any other building available for public rental or available through private connections.
- **Storytelling conferences:** gatherings of storytellers to discuss practice, administration, and performance techniques, usually including workshops and performances, almost always hosted by a storytelling organization
- **Storytelling industry:** any and all activities associated with storytelling where an exchange of money is involved. This includes publications, teaching, telling, consulting and lecturing. It also includes building office spaces for national organizations, employing staff, and generating publicity.

- **Storytelling organization:** a formally constituted or incorporated, or informally-gathered, body of people who work administratively with storytelling. This could be a guild (operating on a low-key basis at a local level) or a national institution such as the Scottish Storytelling Centre. A storytelling organization is distinct from a storytelling business. A storytelling business is an individual or group of tellers who book venues for him/themselves; its primary goal is finding work for its teller or tellers. A storytelling organization has administration and the running of storytelling events as part of its goal (e.g., a guild) and probably hires or invites other tellers to participate. A storytelling organization is open to all new members who would like to participate and meet the organization's criteria.
- **Tell/telling:** to narrate a story/the act of narrating a story. Examples include, "I'm going to tell you about Jack," or "Time to tell! Who's first? We're telling Jack stories tonight."
- **Told:** to have been a storyteller at an event or venue. "Tom told at the Village Hall last March." "Have you told at Jonesborough yet?"
- **Tour:** the arrangement of a series of storytelling events for a particular teller. This could include, among other things, giving concerts, workshops and school tellings at festivals, community centers and other venues.
- **Traditional story/tale:** any folktale. Storytellers tend not to distinguish carefully between types of folk narratives, e.g. legends, myths, fairy tales. They may use these terms, but to a professional storyteller, any story that is not copyrighted, and whose author is unknown or has been deceased for some time, is a "folktale."

Most folktales will not have recognized authors, although Hans Christian Andersen is a notable exception.

- **Venue:** a venue is any physical place where a storytelling event occurs. This term is used in a large and small sense; e.g., a school may be a venue, but the back porch of the school may also be called a venue. The school is the general setting, the back porch the specific place in which the telling is located. The difference between the larger and smaller uses of the term will be context-specific. A teller inside a school asking, “Where is the venue?” means “Where do you want me to locate myself?” A teller fielding a phone call from a person wishing to hire them (hiring agent) may ask “What is the venue?” meaning, “Are you a school, civic group, etc.?” In some uses “venue” almost becomes synonymous with “event.” E.g., “The venue is a fun fair at a school.”









