THE PRACTICE OF FOLKLORE

Essays toward a Theory of Tradition

Simon J. Bronner

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RETHINKING THE BOOGIEMAN

A Praxeological Inquiry into the Origin, Form, and Cognition of a Troubling Folk Character

Orange County, California, district attorney Tony Rackauckas was intent on keeping Lawrence Brown in prison and invoked folklore to make his point. Brown had served almost half of his forty-nine-year sentence for kidnapping and molesting two girls, ages seven and eight, in separate incidents in 1983. Unsuccessful in preventing the release, Rackauckas issued this warning to county residents: "A dangerous, violent sex offender will be a free man to walk the streets of Orange County and prey upon our children. [He is] Lawrence Brown—*the boogie man of every child and parents' worst nightmare*" (Duke 2010; emphasis added). A few years later, the Bucks County, Pennsylvania, district attorney called fifty-eight-year-old William Charles Thomas "a real life boogeyman" after charging him with the sexual assault of six children (Tavss 2017). Physically, neither man looked the part of a monster. They were not disfigured or hulking, and both were reported as appearing "normal" to workmates and neighbors. Although the press frequently pinned the "real-life boogieman" label on sex offenders in the early twenty-first century, precedents could be found in the past century and in far-flung locales. It had been sensationally applied, for example, by reporters in the early twentieth century to child murderer Albert Fish in Brooklyn, New York, and across the ocean, to convicted child rapist Ted Paisnel, also known as the "Beast of Jersey," residing in the Channel Islands located off the French coast of Normandy (Osborne 2017; Webster 2018).

Prosecuting attorneys emphasized "real-life" as an adjective to shake the assumption that the boogieman is a flight of fancy. The officials assumed that their audience associated the boogieman with a hair-raising story from childhood that they learned with maturity was nothing but fantasy. Law enforcement wanted to put the public on alert that there was indeed truth to the folklore that people have known for generations. The folkloric figure was frightening to be sure, and judging from Rackauckus's statement, arising from the anxieties, if not imagination, of parents as well as children. More specifically, the connection to nightmare and horror locates the figure in the scary evening darkness when

children are asleep. One might metaphorically call the boogieman a monster for heinous deeds, but the physical characteristics of the figure are unclear, except for being a non-parental adult male, usually older and oversized. The officials are unequivocal on one point: the boogieman is especially reprehensible for sexually molesting defenseless, innocent children.

The spate of reports of "real-life boogiemen" raises questions about the basis of belief in the frightening figure. Is the connection of sexual molestation to boogiemen a shift in meaning for the belief or had it been there all along but somehow repressed or unnoticed? Does the notice in the press contribute to, or mirror, the spread of the boogieman trope? Given that much of folklore broaches topics that are difficult to face, is the folklore necessary in the modern age, if there is indeed more openly expressed concern for sexual attacks on children? Or, put another way, is there a difference in the intended symbolism and purpose of the parents in narrating the belief to produce a certain action and the way it was interpreted, and subsequently retransmitted, by children? According to folkloristic scholarship on the belief, typically taken from the view of adults, the creation of a boogieman is a ploy by parents to control their children rather than a warning device of external dangers (Green, A. E. 1980; Widdowson 1977). But one might ask, what does it mean in practice? That is, what happens when the mother or father paradoxically scares the child he or she is trying to protect, or is the tradition-bearer more likely to be one or the other? Is the effect measurable or observable? And what does the child do, if anything, with this experience, or folkloric frame, in later life? In fact, if it is a potentially traumatizing story that in later life people realize, perhaps resentfully, was a ruse, why do children upon becoming parents perpetuate it upon their own children?

These questions are significant, I contend, because exposure to the boogieman figure as a belief, and visualization or narration of the actions that this frightening figure takes, often constitute the first and most formative experiences children have with a form of punitive folklore that reaches to multiple expressive genres. They boil down, in my estimation, to the sources, and consequences, of a purposeful folkloric process, and complex, that begins in early childhood. I call it a fundamental "complex" that precedes related widely reported concepts of cooties, for example, as ritual dirt extending to games, crafts ("cootie catcher"), sayings, and beliefs (Bronner 2011a, 214–16; Samuelson 1980). The boogieman is therefore a basic idea, or proxy, for fear introduced to children even more than an objectifiable icon—a dark, largely indeterminate male figure who preys upon children—and becomes central to adult social, as well as political, discourse across genres. Recognized as part of folklore, it is probably the most commonly known frightening figure who has entered into popular story, song, and film for adults (Pettigrove 2015, 20–23; Shimabukuro 2014). The boogieman likely has not been rendered materially as much because

its features are typically undefined. These depictions in folk and popular culture suggest either that the boogieman is hard to get out of one's mind or it serves other functions through the life course. And, in considering those functions, I examine the effects that practices related to the complex have on later development that might relate to social factors such as gender (question of the molester's manliness and the victim's vulnerability as a female characteristic), race (perception of blackness as a scary feature), ethnicity (tie to comparable traditions that immigrants bring to the United States), religion (relation of a punitive preternatural force to practice), and class (notion of the molester as part of the underclass and the victim as underprivileged and therefore less protected). I also ask if the popular understanding of the complex has been influenced by the perception of childhood innocence resulting in the avoidance of sexual themes and dark psychological motives. Relevant, too, from a reflexive standpoint is whether folklorists' previous interpretations of the boogieman were affected by the same repression of sex in the texts and contexts they study.

The character of the boogieman lies outside of the fiction of benign fairies and colorful creatures to which children might be introduced through media. Yet it is not exactly factual either. While the boogieman is realistically narrated, it usually is not described as a specific person or thing. The boogieman is often beastly without being depicted as an animal. It is grown, rather than impish, and usually surreal, without being supernatural. It roams a shadowy realm that folklorists might call legendary or liminal, and is often introduced ambiguously compared to other more clearly visualized monsters in children's fantasy worlds. The background for transmission of the boogieman is often bedtime, a difficult transition time for both parents (or their proxies, often institutional, such as camps) and children. It is challenging for children because of the separation from parents and from activity, the latter a sign of vitality. For parents, worries arise of monitoring children because they are often out of sight in their beds away from their caregivers, and at the same time, images of stillness in sleep raise anxieties about death. I refer to consideration of these factors in framing, and symbolizing, the folklore of the boogieman for child and parent in a praxeological study, in the sense of focusing on the comparison of the intentions and effects of social actions influenced by their cultural as well as physical environment, and the psychological sources for repeating, or enacting, these actions. My focus in this essay is on the boogieman complex in the United States, although I include comparative material to similarly perceived figures in other countries (see Pettigrove 2015, 14–19). Here I am tracing references in time to the name "boogie" or "bogey," the most prevalent label for the frightening figure used in early childhood.

A common perception, or ethical concern, is that parents dupe children with the boogieman story. Underlying this worry is that children's earliest exposure to belief embedded in narrative is with frightening figures. It presupposes

that children's understanding of tradition is gained from parents rather than from peers. Challenging this view is psychologist Brian Sutton-Smith, who in the two books that defined his major contributions to folklore studies, *The Folkgames of Children* (1974) and *The Folkstories of Children* (1981), argued persuasively that children have their own expressive agency, and in keeping with Jean Piaget's developmental concept of evolutionary adaptation, suggested that children develop through play a distinctive age-centered culture of their own. In *Folkstories of Children*, Sutton-Smith countered the common adult perception that children do not develop narrative skills incorporating traditional structures until their preadolescent years by pointing out narrative themes generated by children as early as eighteen months old: "being lost, being stolen, being bitten, dying, being stepped on, being angry, calling the police, running [a]way, or falling down" (Sutton-Smith 1997, 160–61). The connection among them, Sutton-Smith observed, was that they represented children's responses to their basic unmet sociopsychological needs. One major need that spurs narrative is sleep, which children resist, developing a fear that they will not wake up (theme of "dying" and metaphorically "falling down" and "being lost") or be vulnerable to abduction (theme of "being stolen" and metaphorically "calling the police," "being bitten," and "being stepped on"). From his corpus gathered in a single year and place of 500 stories from fifty young children, he theorized that the distinguishing feature of the material was its *phantasmagorical* quality, that is, its theatrical framing of frightening images in a dream or sleep-like setting associated with the dark. This finding, however, raised perplexing questions that he, and other children's folklore scholars, had difficulty answering. Although emphasizing the generative process of expression by children for their own adaptive purposes, often arising out of two-year-olds' "conversations with themselves" as rehearsals for approaching listeners, Sutton-Smith acknowledged the influence of storytelling by parents, television, and books. Yet he did not follow up this line of inquiry about the parent-child interchange of traditional practices, or move significantly from stories and games to the "imaginative realm" of belief.

I will argue that the boogieman figure, co-constructed by parents and children, has persisted, even grown in popularity, because it is an adaptive device, typically phantasmagorical, that responds to fears and anxieties about sexual molestation and then uses that response rhetorically later in the context of an individualizing society in which building trust with strangers is a problem. I do not claim that fear of molestation is the motivation lying behind every situation, but to overlook it is to miss a major reason for, and significance of, the rise of the boogieman complex, and more broadly to uses of belief and fantasy. Although the use of the boogieman as a folk threat is often abandoned after early childhood, it continues to have a role in later narrative expression and cognitive development, particularly, I find, in psychosexual stories of adolescence, and as the examples at the outset of this essay indicate, to public officials tasked with ethical as well as criminal enforcement of a growing populace.