Document generated on 10/02/2022 2:12 p.m.

Ethnologies

ethnologies

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Case Closed?

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Volume 41, Number 1, 2019

URI: https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1069848ar
DOI: https://doi.org/10.7202/1069848ar

See table of contents

Publisher(s)

Association Canadienne d'Ethnologie et de Folklore

ISSN

1481-5974 (print)
1708-0401 (digital)

Explore this journal

Cite this article

Ellis, B. (2019). Death by Folklore: Case Closed? *Ethnologies*, *41*(1), 99–120. https://doi.org/10.7202/1069848ar

Article abstract

My original essay "Death by Folklore" was written soon after the 1982 murders of teenagers Annette Cooper and Todd Schultz in an area of Southeastern Ohio plagued by rumors of Satanic cults. I argued that the killings and the local reaction to them could be understood as acts of ostension, possibly criminal acts or, more likely, acts of interpreting ambiguous events in terms of familiar legends about Satanism. Since then, the original defendant has been exonerated, and a convict has confessed to being the actual murderer, which he says was the result of an unmeditated impulse with no folklore relevance. So, was my article irrelevant to the crime? The essay surveys new information uncovered through investigative journalism and criminal justice research, and concludes that ostension, in its current sense, remains the best theoretical tool for understanding the murders' cultural significance.

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Death by Folklore
Case Closed?

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Introduction

In October 1982, as the cultural phenomenon later called the "Satanic Panic" emerged in small-town America, police found the dismembered bodies of two youngsters, Annette Cooper and Todd Schultz, near Logan, Ohio. Many assumed that the crime was committed by a devil worshipping cult that local legendry held was active in the area. The situation changed, however, when police arrested the stepfather of the girl, Dale Johnston, proposing that he was engaged in an incestuous affair with Cooper and had murdered her and her boyfriend to keep his deviant sexual life from being exposed. In January 1984, Johnston was tried at a Logan courthouse before a three-judge panel, it being felt that no unbiased jury could be empanelled in the rumor-filled area. Johnston was found guilty and sentenced to death row, a decision that generated a noisy celebration in and around Logan. Johnston's lawyers, citing multiple flaws in the prosecution's case, initiated an appeal.

This is how the matter stood when I researched the case for a presentation given in October 1984, shortly before Halloween at the American Folklore Society's annual meeting. The public reaction to the murder and to Johnston's prosecution, I argued, had to be understood in terms of contemporary legendry, more specifically the phenomenon of legend *ostension*. In their recent publication, "Does the Word 'Dog' Bite?" Linda Dégh and Andrew Vázsonyi (1995 [1983]), had recently borrowed this concept from semiotics. Adopting this term, I surveyed the ways in which the underlying legend-trip complex could have influenced the way that the murder was constructed by police, the larger public and, possibly, by the murderer (Ellis 2001 [1989]). For in spite of Johnston's conviction,

the matter was far from being settled before the public. Indeed, a local cult "expert" had come forward with a detailed alternative explanation of the forensic evidence, interpreting marks on the couple's corpses as signs that the two had been human sacrifices at a devil worship ceremony (Ellis 2001: 227).

No compelling evidence was ever found for underground Satanic cults in small-town America, although the claim was widespread regionally and repeatedly aired on national media during the 1980s and early 90s. Yet the concept of ostension provided a number of productive ways to understand how rumors about cults helped fuel regional controversies like the Cooper/Schultz murder case. In a legendlike way, multiple explanations circulated simultaneously in a way that resisted closure: some felt Johnston was guilty as charged, while others believed that local police had rushed to trial to shield the real perpetrators. My 1984 presentation, its 1989 publication in *Western Folklore* and its later revision as a chapter in my 2001 book *Aliens, Ghosts, and Cults* all acknowledged that the case was far from closed. Indeed, Johnston was released on appeal and never again brought to trial.

And so the matter rested, until 2008, when Chester McKnight, a convict serving a long-term sentence for a series of rapes and molestations, volunteered that he had committed the crime. He had met the two at a party held at a house on the edge of town, he explained, where they had come to purchase drugs; then the three went to a cornfield to get high. When he made a pass for Annette, her boyfriend intervened, and in a mindless drug-fueled rage, he murdered the two. Later, with an accomplice, he returned to dismember and dispose of the bodies. In a brief trial, McKnight plead guilty to the Cooper/Schultz murders, with the accomplice pleading no contest to a lesser charge.[1]

So . . . case now closed?

I think not, and this essay will briefly survey the information that has come forward in the last decade in the light of the theoretical concepts that I proposed when the issue was new. In so doing, I will take advantage of two alternative academic constructions of the matter. One comes from

1. Osinski (2012) is the most central and organized source on this turn of events, summarizing official and media reports and expanding on them with interviews with McKnight, with the investigators to whom the convict confessed contacted, and with his alleged accomplice. Other accounts of his confession include Oliphint (2017) and Possley (2016). The cable TV series *The Perfect Suspect* handled the case in "The Killer in the Corn," episode 5 of season 1, premiered Jan. 25, 2018 on the *Investigation Discovery* network.

journalist Bill Osinski (2012), who saw the matter as a social panic in which Dale Johnston became a scapegoat to quiet regional fears. The other comes from the criminal justice analysis by sociologist William S. Lofquist (2001), who found the trial flawed because of nationally pervasive institutional flaws in the prosecution of capital crimes. I'll also consider newly proposed redefinitions of the scope of "ostension," developed by folklorists observing the rapid growth of digital communication. No, I do not intend to expose the "real" killer in a folkloristic Miss Marple way, but instead expand our knowledge of the case as a legendary one, developing, mutating, and generating variants as it remains vital in tradition.

True Crime as Folk expression

Some forms of criminal acts have been studied as performances of folk culture for some time. Police in Europe and America have long noted that many burglars left a pile of excrement on the floor before departing, which Albert B. Friedman (1968) interpreted as a folk custom. More seriously, violent acts in which mobs ritually carry out extralegal executions (often of ethnic outsiders) have long been seen as a form of traditional folk culture (Baker 1988, Dundes 1991, Bennett 2005: 247). Baker in particular pointed out the way in which traditional legends selectively preserved details about how lynchings were expected to be carried out, thus sowing seeds of future violent acts. A similar point was made in my discussion of small-town panics provoked by rumors about Satanic cults in and near Hazleton, Pennsylvania, which often led to acts of vigilante violence (Ellis 2001 [1990]: 199). Indeed, a subsequent rumor-panic about illegal immigrants in the same area of Pennsylvania led to mob action resulting in the murder of a Latino immigrant. As in the case of most lynchings, the perpetrators were not held legally responsible for the deaths (Fine and Ellis 2010: 103-105).

In their landmark essay introducing the concept of ostension, Linda Dégh and Andrew Vázsonyi (1995 [1983]) explicitly grounded the term in murderous actions. The essay begins with a discussion of rumors that anonymous sadists routinely placed poison or sharp objects in the treats that they gave out to children on Halloween. While authenticated instances of such actions are quite rare, the authors felt that reported instances were common enough to suggest that the rumor had begun to create a reality of its own. They proposed:

> Frivolous as it may sound, as a consequence of the mere repetition of such criminal acts (as well as of pertinent rumors, reports, warnings, and public

> discussions), murderous assaults against children on All-Hallows Eve seem to have become almost customary, pardonable, justifiable, and, so to say, fashionable to some people. These people, possibly suffering from some sort of mental disorder, might never have committed murderous assaults or other deviations despite their inclinations, without the exposure to recurrent actual or imaginary precedents, without actual or imaginary models. (245)

Such actions, they suggested, were grounded in the folk belief that evil was especially potent at this time of year, and so one must be prepared "to kill (as it is customary) with poison and pins, the lurking enemy, both the earthly and the supernatural" (247). Such executions in most cases take place through harmless rituals, enacted through oral and mass-media performances of legendry, particularly those concerning creatures like vampires that embody social evil. But ostensive action—literal acts of murder—could theoretically provide another means of performing legends, especially for "mad killers" (247).

Dégh and Vázsonyi's article sparked intense discussion among folklorists. Dégh's student Sylvia Grider (1984, 1985) was quick to apply the concept of ostension to the case of Ronald Clark O'Bryan, accused of murdering his own son Timothy in 1974 by putting cyanide in the child's trick-or-treat candy. O'Bryan was convicted and executed for the crime, but investigation suggested that he was no "mad killer" but a clumsy opportunist who had taken out a large insurance policy on his son's life and purchased the poison used in the killing. He hoped to use the common legend of Halloween candy tampering to misdirect police attention from his own suspicious actions (e.g., attempting to collect on the insurance policy within days of the child's death). In fact, actual cases of anonymous Halloween sadists have proved impossible to document, as Joel Best and Gerald T. Horiuchi (1985) and I (Ellis 1994) subsequently found.

Ostension and the Cooper/Schultz murders

I too considered the Halloween significance of the murder of Annette Cooper and Todd Schultz. Their dismembered corpses were discovered on October 14, 1982, near their home town of Logan, Ohio, at the same time as local communities were making preparations for Halloween celebrations. Authorities were already jittery, for the Chicago Tylenol capsule tampering murders had occurred only two weeks prior and had been followed by a rash of copycat crimes. Thus the candy tampering rumor was circulating more intensely than usual. In addition, as my study (2001 [1989]) showed,

claims of cult-related cattle mutilations had been common in the area since the 1960s, and rumors of strange occult ceremonies were rife enough to generate an active legend-tripping tradition in the nearby Hocking Hills. There covens of devil worshippers were said to hold strange rituals in a small rural cemetery, allegedly a burial ground for witches located in the exact center of a natural pentagram formed by the peaks of five surrounding hills. It was a popular site for boyfriends to take their dates, and legend held that if they did witness a satanic ceremony, the cult would kill them.

So it was not surprising that many locals immediately assumed that the murder had been committed by devil worshippers. Such speculation continued until September 1983, when Annette Cooper's stepfather, Dale Johnston, was charged with the crime and convicted in short order. The weakness of the prosecution's case produced speculation that the police were shielding an underground cult that involved influential members of the community. Such a scenario was already a common motif in cult rumors, which often blamed the lack of hard evidence on sabotage by law enforcement investigators who feared reprisals from Satanists holding high offices. One such claim had been promoted in the 1970s, after an inmate at the federal penitentiary at Leavenworth, Kansas told FBI investigators that cattle mutilations were being coordinated by a secretive group of wealthy Satanists. This allegation proved credible enough that federal investigators carried out a clandestine investigation into the persons named by the convict, as well as into the affairs of prominent occultists such as Isaac Bonewitz and Anton LeVey (Ellis 2000: 254-263).

And *The Columbus Dispatch* published a lengthy account of a local "expert" on cult activity who claimed that the "consummate skill" with which the couple's bodies were dismembered indicated that they had been the focus of a human sacrifice committed by occultists (Ellis 2001: 227). Such a theory was promoted by a 1986 independent television documentary, *Reasonable Doubt*, originally an undergraduate project at Ohio State's Department of Photography and Cinematography (Canaan 1989). This won a local award for investigative journalism and later sold to the public on videotape. So, in spite of Johnston's conviction, the cult theory remained a robust alternative to the "official" solution of the case.

At the time my essay was originally presented, Johnston's appeal was still pending, so I used the Dégh/Vázsonyi paradigm to suggest a number of likely ways in which the Cooper/Schultz murders could be read as an expression of this subculture's folk legendry.

1. *Literal fact:* They were ritually sacrificed by members of a satanic cult, in accordance with that subculture's folk religious traditions.

2. *Ostension:* They were killed in a way that deliberately imitated the content of legends about Satanism. The agents might have been cult members, or perhaps persons trying to act like cult members. In either case, the legend acted as the precedent and model for the crime.

3. *Pseudo-ostension:* They were murdered for other reasons, but the killers manufactured details to suggest performance of a legend, perhaps (as in the O'Hare murder) to try to distract police.

4. *Quasi-ostension:* The murder had nothing to do with Satanism, but police and/or the media used the legend after the fact to misinterpret the case.

Given the information available at the time, in 1984 I tended to favor options 3 and 4 as the best likely explanations, but I cautioned the audience that the first two possibilities could not be ruled out.[2] When Dale Johnston's appeal proved successful, and he was freed, I found #4 increasingly likely. But even the final revised version (2001) of my essay cautioned readers that the case had never been solved, and so all of these legendary possibilities remained in play. And when Johnston's lawyers sued the State of Ohio to gain a declaration of innocence, the motion was denied: the board ruled that while prosecutors had not proved his guilt beyond a reasonable doubt, Johnston likewise had not demonstrated his innocence "by a preponderance of evidence" (Possley 2016). The truth was still out there.

New Research: Criminal Justice and Investigative Journalism

The prosecution of Dale Johnston became widely cited as an example of prosecutorial misconduct, and an essay by sociologist William S. Lofquist (2001) identified a number of factors that resulted, from a criminal justice point of view, in a "wrongful conviction." The author readily agreed that one such factor was the single-minded involvement of the police's lead investigator, whom he described as "an overzealous, highly moralistic, somewhat unstable figure" with little actual experience in investigating any form of violent crime (190). But Lofquist's most unsettling insight about the Johnston case is that it illustrates a way of investigating murder

2. At the time I noticed that the audience gave this paper a very chilly reception. Noticing my colleague Sylvia Grider in the crowd, I asked her afterwards if the paper needed more work. "Oh, no, it was great!" she replied. "You just scared the stuffings out of us."

cases that professionals accept as customary. The Logan police's targeting of Dale Johnston was, he argues, "the product of the normal, day-to-day, routine operation of decision makers" in which investigators generate "normal crime" narrative frames and apply them to evidence. These "normal crime" scenarios emerge in a collective process among the law enforcement subculture through of reflection on many individual cases, both personal and second- or third-hand. Such reflection, generates a model of criminal behavior that is accepted by them as normative. In many cases, the "normal crime" models reflect shrewd understanding of the *modus operandi* or "M.O." of many actual criminals, much as scientists normally work along paths of uncontroversial paradigms of "normal science."

However, the collective process by which "normal crime" scenarios are generated and maintained is not scientific by nature. The speed with which "Satanic cult" and "Satanic ritual abuse" claims entered police subcultures as "normal crime" paradigms and spread internationally makes it clear that this process can be, at times, an institutionalized form of contemporary legendry. And so these preexisting narrative frames are imposed onto individual scenarios like the physical evidence in the Cooper/Schultz case even when the facts do not fit them especially well. Johnston was convicted mainly because he was the only viable suspect around whom prosecutors were able to construct "a highly credible narrative account." This form of storytelling is familiar in the legal world that "inevitably relies on popular images, assumptions, and inferences" (183).

Witnesses often are coached on how to present their experiences, and lawyers on both sides are fond of organizing their witnesses' contribution into a persuasive narrative. Testimony that accused Johnston of molesting his stepdaughter cast him as an intrinsically immoral individual. Such a person, police considered, would be capable of moving from incest to violence and then to murder. No other suspect fit the expectations of a "normal crime," and so Johnston was speedily convicted. While not denying that Johnston's conviction was flawed, Lofquist concluded that prosecutors acted in a manner that most law enforcement experts would consider prudent, making use of methods considered legally reliable at the time. Some of these have since been ruled out of court, including the coaching of one witness through repeated hypnotism to produce an alleged eyewitness account of Johnston's angry confrontation of one of the victims on the day of the murder (the defendant subsequently documented an alibi that proved that this confrontation was a fiction). Nevertheless, at the time of the trial, Lofquist notes, police were engaging in a practice

that was considered legal and beneficial to their case, much as the judges presiding over the Salem Witch Trials considered spectral evidence to be valid evidence against patently guilty defendants.

Bill Osinski, deeply troubled by what he experienced when he covered the trial for the *Akron Beacon Journal*, was less objective, seeing the incident as a miserable failure of "every level of the justice system" in which "small-town folks cheer[ed] as an innocent man was sent off to be executed" (2012: ix). His highly involved "true crime" approach had led to a series of investigative articles in 1985, attacking the credibility of the Logan police investigation and calling for a fresh approach (Lofquist 2001: 186). When Johnston was released and police declined to reopen the case, Osinski moved on to other work in another state. Still, the lack of closure in this case haunted him. "Many times during those years, I fell asleep at night wondering if I'd ever find out who had killed those two kids," he comments in the book's introduction, adding "I hold to the Christian belief that all is revealed when we pass from this life to the next" (2012: viii-ix).

So when a convicted child molester, Chester McKnight, came forward in 2006 to confess to the Cooper/Schultz murders, Osinski experienced this as an answer to his prayers. The convict "saw the light," the journalist says, accepting the impression of investigators that the confession he offered was based on "an internal struggle to tell the truth" (122-124). When a woman who had lived in Logan at the time of the murder affirmed that McKnight had been at a drug party at the same time as the couple, Osinski says, "The dam of lies, gossip, and forensic fairy tales that had held together for a quarter of a century started to crack, and the truth was finally flowing." The convict was charged with the murders in September 2008; in December, he entered a guilty plea and received a twenty-year sentence, which was added to the time he was already serving for molestation and rape.

Osinski now believed that he could narrate "the real story" and bring the tragic story to a close. In short, the couple visited the house of a notorious drug dealer, bought marijuana, and then retired to a secluded spot with McKnight, who'd just happened to be there, also buying drugs. There the drifter, high on cocaine and LSD, suggested that they engage in three-way sex, and when the couple declined, he attempted to rape Annette Cooper. When her boyfriend tried to protect her, he pulled out a pistol and shot the youngster dead; then he killed the girl to eliminate her as a witness. "Really, it was on a whim," he explained to Osinski (2012: 152). So, according to "the real story," none of the area's legends about Satanism were relevant, nor were the police's "normal crime" assumptions.

The murder had no broader significance: it just happened in the blur of a random scuffle in the middle of a drug high.

The more serious offense, in the journalist's mind, was that committed by the residents of Logan, who pressed the local police to apprehend a suspect, any suspect, and provide closure to the panic the murders had caused. He comments:

> [People in small towns] cling to the notion that they are somehow removed and safe from the sorts of crimes they want to believe happen only in the big cities. They cling to the notion that they are somehow better in a moral sense than the people trapped in the urban jungles. They want desperately to be reassured that someone who could commit such terrible crimes could not be one of them, could not be their neighbor. To preserve those illusions, the people of Logan were more than willing to send an innocent man to his execution. (2012: 168-169)

There is some support for this view. Jeffrey S. Victor (1993) found that rumors of Satanic cults tended to circulate most actively in communities that had experienced rapid economic declines, particularly in "rust belt" communities where blue-collar industries such as manufacturing and mining had moved out (47-48). His conclusions also are strikingly similar to the conclusion I wrote for my original essay, where I suggest that the "Satanic cult" motif symbolically communicates this message:

> "Satan made them do it – them – not us God-fearing, Bible-reading, family-rearing members of the community." Neighborhoods like Logan, seeking release from the anxiety of having undetected Satanists in their midst, might have demanded another human sacrifice, in this case Dale Johnston. Certainly the celebration that erupted after his conviction dramatizes the sacrificial nature of his sentence (Ellis 2001: 232).

So: case closed? Quasi-ostension was the culprit, i.e., retrospective overinterpretation of a random, motiveless crime in terms of community fears expressed in traditional narrative plots. These circulated among the police as "normal crime" scenarios and among the general public as Satanic cult legends. Organizational misconduct by investigators joined hands with popular desire for a cathartic verdict. The two dynamics produced a "groupthink" situation in which important evidence was disregarded and irrelevant details given false constructions in the name of providing closure. With Johnston now exonerated and the real perpetrator's confession on the record, we can all sleep easily at night.

Or can we?

The "Truth": Fact or Folklore?

One of the intriguing aspects of Lofquist's and Osinski's publications is the widened perspective they provide into the oral culture that grew up around the case. In an interesting comment, Lofquist notes that some of the sources he interviewed "were quite forthcoming in their discussions," though they asked that their identities be kept confidential. This, the author comments, is not unusual, since at the time, the case was still legally unresolved, and the shadow cast on the competence of the Logan legal system made most participants reluctant to speak, even off the record (2001: 179). Osinski, writing after the McKnight confession and conviction, had more freedom to relate this private gossip, providing interview sources in chapter endnotes. This confirms that Logan County was a whispering gallery of conspiracy theories, some relating to Satanism and occultism, others obliquely accusing prominent figures in the town of involvement in criminal racketeering. A "cult researcher from the Hocking Hills area," Osinski reports, had visited the scene of the murders and found clear signs of Satanic cult activity, including "occult symbols hanging from a tree." Informants from Logan had assured the investigator that the area was a well-known "hot spot" for cult rituals (Osinski 2012: 160). One particularly insistent rumor held that the lead investigator in the prosecution was himself a Satanist, and that he had framed Dale Johnston to protect his fellow cult members. Lofquist relates (affirming that he had heard the story from two independent sources) that this officer had previously served as chief of police, but was abruptly demoted "because of his involvement with occult religious practices" (2001: 188).

Osinski gives more details, confirming that during his term as chief of police, the investigator had previously investigated reports of animal mutilations, identifying them as "the work of a cult" with a certainty that associates found suspicious (2012: 51).[3] He was indeed demoted in 1980, two years before the Cooper/Schultz murders, and no reason for this action was recorded in his personnel file. Contacting Dale Griffis,[4] a retired law enforcement agent who had gained considerable notoriety as an expert on

3. Animal and cattle mutilations had provoked controversy in rural America in the 1970s, and "cult rituals" were a common explanation for them. See Ellis 2000: 240 ff. for an overview.

4. Osinski names this person as "Dale Griffiths," but from the information given about his background he is easy to identify as Griffis, one of the most prominent of the "cult cops" of the era and a key participant in the notorious "Toledo Dig" held at the site of a popular legend-tripping destination near Toledo in 1985. See Ellis 1996 (1991): 178 ff.

underground Satanic cults, the journalist learned more details about the affair. In 1980, Griffis recalled, he was summoned by Logan officials soon after this agent had been demoted. Taken to the demoted officer's desk, emptied and left ready for his successor, he found in one drawer "a small cloth figure with pins stuck in it." Griffis identified it as "a voodoo doll," and police officers told him that they "suspected Thompson had left it as a spooky sort of desk-warming gift for his successor." They also explained that the ex-chief of police had been reported around town "wearing Rambo-style camouflage gear, with his face covered in black greasepaint. The ensemble was set off eerily by a necklace of chicken feathers." Griffis affirmed that such a necklace was customary among some of the cults he had investigated[5] and concluded that the officer involved had "more than a passing interest in the occult."

Sarah Johnston, wife of the defendant, added that after the conviction, she had been contacted by a number of people sympathetic to her situation and critical of the police. One such identified himself as a member of the neo-pagan new religion Wicca, a "white witch." He claimed that his group of "white witches" had determined that there was "something evil" in Logan, "a Satanic-style cult that included leading businessmen and members of the justice system in Logan" (2012: 97). Others said that the conspiracy involved a ring of illegal drug traffickers, a theme closely aligned with the cult legends. This ring involved "the upper echelons of Logan society" or "some important people in town" (2012: 96). A complicated story told by an employee at a local flower shop held that once a month a rush of calls would come in requesting the same floral arrangement, each one bearing a packet marked "fertilizer." The worker suspected that these packets actually contained drugs and the customers were part of the inner circle dedicated to Johnston's conviction (2011: 96-97).[6]

5. The doll stuck with pins is a familiar tradition in popular culture with origins in Anglo-American malefic folk magic, though it is often associated in the popular mind with Caribbean and African-American superstition (See Armitage 2015). A quick review of attested traditions in folklore and new religions showed no support for Griffis's claim that applying black facial makeup and wearing a chicken-feather necklace was an occult practice. If the rumor is based on some truth, it is possible that the officer was seen dressed in some kind of politically incorrect blackface costume preparing to appear in a privately attended minstrel show.
6. It is normal for bouquets to come with a packet of "Plant Food," which consists mostly of powdered sugar but does superficially look like heroin or cocaine. Sarah Johnston was briefly committed to a mental institution after admitting to a mental counselor that she had considered tracking where these meetings were held to detonate a bomb and kill the conspirators (Osinski 2012: 97).

The drug-trafficking motif, analysts of the Satanism scare phenomenon found, often merges with the cult scenario. Jeff Victor quotes one "cult awareness" speaker who claimed that adult Satanists would often provide a party house where adolescents would be lured to gather, try out recreational drugs, and engage in sex. As time goes on, the cult's "recruits," under the influence of drugs, would be encouraged to engage in more perverse sex acts and commit criminal acts, often the sorts of animal mutilations documented by the Logan Police. Finally, dominated more and more by drugs and by the Satanists' occult beliefs, they would participate in an act of human sacrifice (1993: 136). McKnight's confession, featuring a party house and a group of naïve adolescents, seems parallel to such "cult awareness" narratives; in any case, as Lofquist notes, police had become obsessed with trying to uncover evidence of a criminal ring practicing "rampant drug use, child sexual abuse, and child pornography" (2001: 190), all motifs linked with Satanic cults during the 1980s scare.

Proto-Ostension: McKnight's Confession

In addition, when considering the varieties of ostension involved, one option often ignored is what Dégh and Vázsonyi termed *proto-ostension*. To make a story more credible, that is, tellers sometimes claim that the experience happened to themselves. That is, "a more distant story" is transformed "into an apparently verifiable first-person account" (1995: 253). In legal situations, lawbreakers, especially those already serving in prison, can gain social power by appropriating the details of a story they have heard and claiming it as something they actually witnessed. Osinski expresses confidence that McKnight's confession was "the true story," but the details of how this confession was communicated to the police contain troublesome details. Having "seen the light," the journalist honestly reports, he first contacted a sheriff in Athens County and offered to confess to an unsolved murder there. Indeed, there was a cold case there, and McKnight's account seemed to fit its M.O. But the county's prosecuting attorney did some homework before proceeding and found that the convict could not have committed this crime, for he was in jail at the time.

McKnight then offered to confess to the Cooper/Schultz killings. Osinski candidly records some of his pragmatic reasons for doing so: as a registered sex offender, he had been told that he would no longer be welcome in the trailer park where he had been living. For this reason, the reporter says, he "started working toward ensuring that the state of Ohio would shelter him for the rest of his days." In cooperating with

investigators, one officer remembered, his only concern was that he would be able to continue to serve out his sentence in the prison where he was currently housed (Osinski 2012: 122-124). Law enforcement officials were cautious, realizing the possibility that McKnight could well be fabricating a confession. The case had been well covered at the time, and the convict had ample access to details of the case in popular culture and in other convicts' gossip. And, as Lofquist points out, inmates often have ample reason to provide false testimony. During one of Johnston's appeals in the 1980s, in fact, prosecutors introduced testimony from a cellmate who claimed that the defendant had privately confessed to the crime. Relying on such testimony, with its obvious self-serving rationale, is, Lofquist says, "one of the most glaring faults in capital prosecutions," but he concedes that the practice is routine in law enforcement, providing a "confession" when the circumstantial evidence against a defendant is otherwise weak (2001: 186, 191). Such testimony often goes through several stages of rehearsal before being used in court, giving inmates an opportunity to clean up ineffective or inconsistent parts of their story.

Indeed, as Osinski records, McKnight initially narrated a "snitch" version that claimed that Dale Johnston had hired him to carry out the murders and offered him $5000 in exchange. But this provoked a skeptical response from the first groups of investigators, and he quickly dropped this detail and started afresh with "an air of genuineness" (2012: 124).[7] To a folklorist's eye, his "real story" appears to be built out of widespread "reefer madness" stories about adolescents who experiment with marijuana and quickly come to bad ends, often violent ones. In any case, Todd Schultz's brother, while relieved that the case had finally been closed, was vocally skeptical about the story McKnight had told. The idea that the victim had gone to the party house to purchase drugs was "a complete falsehood," adding, "I never knew him to smoke pot... He didn't even drink beer. He didn't like the taste of it, so I didn't see that as accurate. He was a pretty square kid when it came to that stuff. He wasn't looking for drugs" (Gregory

7. The prosecution of McKnight's alleged accomplice, a local drug-dealer, also raises troubling questions. This defendant, a lifelong alcoholic in poor health, apparently confessed but gave several conflicting accounts of his role in the crime, then withdrew it all and pled "not guilty." The Logan prosecuting attorney conceded to Osinski that, given McKnight's "easily attacked credibility" and the lack of hard evidence to put the second man on the scene of the crime, it would have been difficult to win a conviction. So authorities offered the accused accomplice immediate release and medical attention if he would plead "no contest" to a lesser charge. The suspect agreed, was released, and at once recanted all of his testimony supporting McKnight's account (2012: 131-32).

2012). Given the ubiquity of horror stories about cult involvement and drug experimentation, as well as the lasting public attention to the cold case, McKnight's story of the couple's fatal drug purchase could well be an act of proto-ostension: a plausible story that fits a "normal crime" scenario, which made many things easier for the police and bought the convict benefits and higher status in the prison's subculture.[8]

Reverse Ostension: "Normal, Day-to-day, Routine"

So: case *not* closed for this folklorist. For legendry consists of verbal texts plus the actions legends motivate. The genre comprises "what has 'really' happened" AND "what a person or persons can *make* happen," as I argued in my original article (Ellis 2001: 235). It is therefore encouraging to see the concept of ostension both used and thoughtfully expanded by folklorists confronting the implications of a more recent violent incident, in which two young girls from Waukesha allegedly stabbed a classmate as part of a "sacrifice to Slender Man." This mysterious supernatural figure, the focus of a growing body of lore shared and discussed online by denizens of the World Wide Web, is explicitly a fictional creation. But, as a number of folklorists (Blank and McNeil, eds. 2018) have observed, it is clearly founded on existing folk narrative complexes about boogie-persons who stalk and victimize people, especially children. The immediate official response to the Waukesha incident warned parents that "The internet can ... be full of dark and wicked things. It is also providing an opportunity for potential child predators to reach children like never before" (qtd. in Tolbert 2018b: 95). True, the increased reach of digital communication has produced newer ways in which legend influences life and vice versa, for better and for worse.

It remains unclear whether the Slender Man narrative complex provided a precedent and model for the two perpetrators' violence (*ostension*) or whether this was an excuse made up later to evade the real reasons they attacked her (*pseudo-ostension*). Yet researchers like Michael Kinsella have shown that the Internet has quickly become a locus for activities that mimic the older face-to-face models. More, the way in which websites become "places" that one can imaginatively "explore" has created opportunities for participants to engage in a virtual form

8. Inmates convicted of molestation have especially low status inside prisons and thus are often targeted for violence by fellow convicts. See Trumbo 2018. So McKnight's new status as a convicted murderer may well have protected him from such casual assaults.

of legend-tripping, web-surfing from site to site, collecting information relevant to an imaginative quest. This activity, even though it takes place through the medium of a digital search, nevertheless qualifies as a form of ostension, Kinsella argues. Individuals, often as part of a team of collective adventurers, "concurrently discover and create, or perhaps more correctly, *perform into being* [Kinsella's emphasis] liminal realms bordering between fantasy and reality" (2011: 145). In addition, once participants relate what they have found or experienced to a larger audience, it follows that their actions become part of the virtual legend-trip. In short, through ostensive performance, "experience is instantly and irrevocably part of the tradition that instigated it" (2011: 145).

Jeffrey A. Tolbert has suggested an expanded understanding of ostension to come to terms with the distinctive way in which the Slender Man complex operates among the online groups that have formed around this story. For his part, Kinsella is immediately concerned with digital experience, that hybrid form that both is and is not real, where the adventurer spends real time at a computer terminal but does not "really" perform actions with real-world implications. And yet, Tolbert counters, the social interaction that occurs is real, though it occurs in widely separated places among people who may not know or meet each other in the usual face-to-face society. He suggests that Slender Man was the result of yet another form of ostension, for which he proposes the term *reverse ostension*. Rather than an existing story affecting real-world behavior, that is, this process involves "weaving together diverse strands of 'experience' (...) into a more or less coherent body of narratives" (2018a: 27). That is to say, the realities of many otherwise separated individuals are combined, through collective imaginative actions, into a single narrative complex. A two-sided process, it simultaneously encourages participants to propose new narratives describing encounters with Slender Man and at the same time allows them to see these unique stories in terms of one ring of tradition that binds them all.[9]

One could expand more daringly on Tolbert's proposal, seeing it not as a new social dynamic created by the Internet, but as yet another illustration of how groups generate normative scenarios out of individual experiences, and then use these scenarios as a model for real-life actions. The "normal

9. This concept is similar to that I proposed at work among the emergent community of "alien abductees," whose paranormal experiences were quite diverse but who generated, through communal discussion, a more or less coherent abduction scenario. This model implicitly helped newcomers to the group tailor their memories to an existing set of traditions of belief (Ellis 2001 142 ff.)

crime" paradigms that Lofquist describes, after all, emerge from a collective process of traditionalizing the solutions of many true crime cases, official and unofficial, and generating from them a normative model of criminal behavior. Just as the Creepypasta community generates a social map out of shared virtual experiences, thus inspiring new experiences, the "normal crime" process reduces the full spectrum of potential perpetrators into a limited number of "usual suspects," thus expediting the process of closing cases by arresting and convicting plausible culprits.

One may respond that the police are educated professionals, while Creepypasta enthusiasts are credulous play-actors. One type of storytelling, we concede, is carried out in full seriousness by criminal justice professionals, reflecting on "true crime," while the other is a pleasurable pastime that Internet users consciously define as fictional in nature. Yet both processes result in "maps for action, often violent actions." The Slender Man mythos can inspire criminal acts; while prosecution teams stalking alleged criminals can use "normal" paradigms to carry out wrongful convictions. If ostension is a valid way to understand human behavior, I counter, then the education, professional status, and social position of the persons who engage in it are immaterial. They are, as Lofquist and I argue in different ways, means of making a kind of sense out of day-to-day reality, and they both can lead to serious, perhaps deadly consequences. Legendry in both cases achieves social impact through ostension, that is, the use of a useable past to perceive and shape the emerging present through real-life action,

And fantasy has an uncanny capacity to cross over into reality. Timothy Evans, in his contribution to the *Slenderman* collection, points to an unsettling quote from horror writer H. P. Lovecraft:

> My own rule is that no weird story can truly produce terror unless it is devised with all the care and verisimilitude of an actual hoax [Lovecraft's emphasis]. The author must . . . build up a stark, simple account, full of homely corroborative details, just as if he were trying to "put across" a deception in real life – a deception clever enough to make adults believe it. My own attitude in writing is always that of a hoax weaver . . . and simply devise a lie as carefully as a crooked witness prepares a line of testimony with cross-examining lawyers in mind (1930, qtd. by Evans 2018:131).

Evans builds on Lovecraft's narrative methodology, arguing that the author's practice was essentially legendary in nature, intending "to go beyond the mere temporary suspension of disbelief into the realm of legends, wherein belief and disbelief are in an ongoing dialogue," leading

ultimately to a "participatory" culture in which the audience not only responds emotionally to the core story but actively builds on it, feeding in still more corroborative details and, in extreme cases, altering perception of consensus reality in the direction of the legend.

Lovecraft himself proved an effective "hoax weaver" in the creation of an existentially evil book titled *The Necronomicon*. He mentioned this vile work, which drove any would-be reader insane, in thirteen of his published stories, and his inner circle of friends who also wrote for *Weird Tales*, a magazine featuring horror fiction, also cheerfully referenced the non-existent book. As Joseph P. Laycock (2019) documents, Lovecraft repeatedly admitted in letters to fans and in public statements that the wicked volume was a fantasy of his, commenting "I don't want to confuse any sincere folklore student by pulling a misleading hoax" (qtd. in Laycock 2019: 188). Yet by the 1930s, a spoofing "history" of *The Necronomicon* was being circulated as fact by an Alabama fan. When the author's works experienced a revival in the 1970s, a number of publishers produced volumes that claimed to be reprints of the cursed book. These publications, even when produced in a tongue-in-cheek vein for Lovecraft fans (one is entirely in an invented, untranslatable language) were soon taken up by law enforcement experts as evidence for the dangers of Satanic cults. John Todd, an early outspoken cult "expert" claimed that the book was an extremely dangerous volume encouraging readers to engage in "Baal worship." At least two teens who committed real-life murders in the 1990s, later confessed that their violent acts were caused by reading *The Necronomicon* along with other Satanic books.

Laycock concludes that all the parties in the *Necronomicon* mythos, the fiction writers as well as the emerging subculture of Satanic cult experts in the criminal justice system, were engaging in "serious play," leading to "construction of an alternative reality." Such play was more than fantasy or hoaxing, for it involved serious social consequences. A clever fantasy became a tangible book, which became a plausible motive in confessions by the perpetrators of real murders, thus generating a "normal crime narrative" circulated by law enforcement personnel specializing in alleged cult activity. That development, Laycock warns, "set the stage for the persecution of innocent people" (2019: 196).

Nor is this process a new one. In 1903, a Russian anti-Semitic newspaper published *The Protocols of the Learned Elders of Zion*, a document claiming that a secret society of wealthy Jews was seeking world domination with the help of Satanic powers. The work was soon proved to be a hoax; yet

Sergey Nilus, a Russian mystic who promoted its publication, responded:

> Let us admit that the Protocols are spurious. But can't God use them to unmask the iniquity that is being prepared. Didn't Baalam's ass prophesy? Can't God, for the sake of our faith, change dog bones into miracle-working relics? So he can put the announcement of truth into a lying mouth. (qtd. in Cohn 1996: 102)

In short, the knowledge that a given narrative frame was originally proposed as a fiction or hoax is ultimately not very important if the scenario proves plausible and compelling as a way to view or experience real life. It follows that a lively legend complex will achieve its primary social impact through ostension, that is, its use in perceiving and shaping the emerging present. Such narratives, through serial recomposition and communal discussion, become traditions with the power to create the future out of the past, as Henry Glassie put it (2003:176).

Conclusions

The actual truth of the matter now is beyond recovery, for most of the central figures are either in poor health or deceased. When the Logan Police reopened the case in the light of McKnight's confession, the lead investigator found that the files and evidence retained from Johnston's trial had been stored in disarray in a building with a leaky roof. To his dismay, he found some crucial files damaged and the bulk of the paperwork so disordered that it could not be sorted out. Some crucial evidence simply had disappeared. There simply was no way to test any of the proposed accounts, including McKnight's confession, to prove his version of the murder beyond any reasonable doubt.

And so my legendlike range of options remains open. The couple could have been enticed by devil worshippers, given drugs, and then murdered as a human sacrifice to Satan. Or killed by prominent citizens of Logan to protect their underground crime ring of drug and pornography trafficking. Or lured into the hands of a drug-crazed killer by that seemingly harmless bag of "killer weed." Or Dale Johnston might have killed the two to cover up his incestuous activity and escaped thanks to clever lawyers and a bumbling prosecution team. Or he might have been framed by the lead investigator to cover up his hidden involvement in occultism or his cult associates' guilt. Or the police, motivated by intense public pressure, might have railroaded him as a scapegoat for the threat of criminal conspiracies that many believed were destroying their small town family values. Chester

McKnight might have committed the murder, his shifting stories simply the result of his understandable reluctance to confront the memories of his violent act, blurred by drug use and passing time. Or he might have cobbled together his story as a means of gaining social power and privileges in the institution that he admits had become his permanent home.

So: case *not* closed for this folklorist. The closer one looks, the more one feels that Dégh and Vázsonyi were quite right: "fact can become narrative and narrative can become fact" (1995: 261). We should continue to grapple with a growing realization that ostension is not limited to occasional deviant acts like the Waukesha Slender Man "sacrifice." Rather, ostension, like the use of "normal crime" narrative frames by police, is simply part of our normal, day-to-day, routine way of life.

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