

Tradition in the
Twenty-First Century

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Locating the Role of the Past in the Present

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Robert Glenn Howard

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Vernacular Authority

Critically Engaging “Tradition”

Robert Glenn Howard

INTRODUCTION: VERNACULAR AUTHORITY IN EVERYDAY CONVERSATION

AT A WEDDING RECEPTION I ONCE ATTENDED, a banquet-style midday dinner of steaks, potatoes, and more traditional Filipino dishes gave way to wine, mahjong, and conversation. “Joan,” recounted stories of her childhood in the rural Philippines.¹ She described her “Auntie Loling” who had a “spirit friend.” Joan’s animated storytelling had commanded the attention of most of the players at the mahjong table when her daughter asked her: “How did [the spirit] exist? Did it used to be human before?” Joan responded to the whole group, booming in her typically authoritative tone:

They call it “*espiritista!*” In Filipino folklore there are good fairies and the bad fairies . . . The good spirit will befriend you, will give you a good harvest on your farm or will give wild pigs for dinner meat . . . [But] the bad spirit will possess you and later you go crazy. (Joan 1994a)

In her response, Joan referred to “folklore” as an authorizing force in her assertion that Filipino sorcery is real. Later she made it clear that this folklore was a source of power alternate to any offered by the dominant institution in her family’s public life at that time: the Catholic Church.

Joan recounted how her Auntie Loling worked with a spirit friend to help find a significant sum of money that had disappeared. Based on the

¹ The names of the respondents have been changed to protect their identities.

spirit's advice, Loling sent relatives to retrieve the cash. When the excited group returned to the house to report their success, Joan and her mother happened to be there, sharing a cup of coffee with the local priest who had unexpectedly dropped by for a visit. Joan smiled as she relished the memory of his disapproval: "My mom invited him [in] for coffee—so the priest was there. And the priest was just shaking his head. Because he said, ya know, 'that's the work of the spirits.'" (Joan 1994b)

As both a Filipino immigrant to the United States and a devout Catholic, Joan's recounted experiences become expressions of a specifically Filipino traditional authority that stands alongside but apart from the institutional authority of the Catholic Church. As such, Joan's everyday storytelling points to an important tension in the concept of tradition. On the one hand, *tradition* can refer to the empirical quality of an act as having been handed down, while on the other hand, it can refer to a noninstitutional or vernacular authorizing force perceived by those participating in an act.

The empirical sense of "tradition" comes into sharp focus when folklore studies are imagined in terms of a "science of tradition." Here, calling something traditional is the empirically verifiable claim that a specific component of expressive culture has continuities and consistencies through space and time (Georges and Jones 1995). Because *empiricism* is a term for the broad idea that scientific knowledge must be based on the replicability of evidentiary experiences through observation or under the controlled conditions of experiments, the published documentation of cognate forms of Filipino sorcery starting in the sixteenth century empirically verifies that Joan's beliefs are traditional (Cale 1973, 112; Fansler 1965, 214–17; Lieban 1967, 20–21; Pajo 1954, 110–14). In this sense, Joan's "folklore" has the quality of being handed down over several hundred years at least. On a strictly etic or analytic level, an external expert can document, classify, and verify that quality in her stories.

The sense of tradition as an authorizing force, however, is more sharply in focus when researchers approach folklore as performed expressive behavior or "discourse." Approached as discourse, the quality of being traditional is a perception among participants that their action is the result of social connections that have endured through space and across time. Focusing on Joan's deployment of the term *folklore*, we can see this second sense of tradition operating. For Joan, the use of the word *folklore* asserts that there are continuities and consistencies that she asks her audience to accept as evidence of the reality of Filipino spirits. In subsequent interviews, Joan

proudly recounted many tales of her youth in the rural Philippines featuring her powerful aunt using a male spirit to subvert husbands and thieves—as well as priests. Spending time with Joan and her family, I garnered a richer sense of the context for Joan’s storytelling when, on one occasion, I heard her husband refer to these narratives of magically empowered women as “crazy superstitions.”

In the case of Joan’s statement about “Filipino folklore,” these two aspects of tradition (the empirical and the authorizing) happen to coincide. However, this is not necessarily always the case. Take, for example, a very different kind of communication: the influential book by political activist and feminist theologian Starhawk (1979), *The Spiral Dance: A Rebirth of the Ancient Religion of the Great Goddess*, a work that has become foundational for many pagans. In the first chapter, Starhawk claims, “According to our legends, Witchcraft began more than 35 thousand years ago, when the temperature of Europe began to drop and the great sheets of ice crept slowly south in their last advance” (Starhawk 1979, 3). Here she authorizes her form of pagan belief by combining her description of the Old Religion with the assertion of a continuous practice of European witchcraft dating back to the last Ice Age. While some pagans accept this claim, historians have shown that there is no empirical basis for such a continuous tradition (Magliocco 2004, 46–47). The fact that these two aspects of tradition—its empirical verifiability and its vernacular authority—are not yoked together creates an important opportunity and places a significant responsibility on the shoulders of researchers.

While the discipline of folklore has long sought to accurately document traditional elements of culture, many folklorists have shied away from the critical assessment of folkloric expression. Meanwhile, the rise of critical studies has made social critique a dominant mode of expression in the humanities and interpretative social sciences. Stephen Olbrys Gencarella writes, “If folklore—its performance, exhibition, and analysis—faces a crisis today, it may lie not simply in questions of its academic survival but in its critical contribution to the politics of interpretation” (Gencarella 2009, 172). In chapter 2 of this volume, Gencarella aggressively imagines a “critical folklore studies” that goes beyond description to advocate for social justice: rejecting bigotry in traditions of all kinds even to the point of calling for folkloristic activism. In chapter 1, Elliott Oring also notes the tendency for folklorists to avoid the traditions that include bigotry. Oring, however, is interested in those problematic traditions for more scientific than critical

reasons. For Oring, leaving any evidence out of the science of tradition yields a biased data sample and a biased sample yields less generalizable discoveries. For Gencarella, on the other hand, folklore research may be of dubious value without what he terms an “ax to grind” in the service of a specific social cause.² Gencarella seems much less interested in the empirical assessment of tradition.

A discursive approach to communication events offers a middle way between these two perspectives because it values the social aspects of the performance separately from any empirical traditionality. This approach begins by acknowledging that the empirical and the authorizing aspects of any deployment of tradition are not necessarily related. From that acknowledgment, the researcher can approach any real-world discursive action recognizing that its empirical traditionality is often minor and sometimes irrelevant to its social value. From a discursive perspective, any individual’s deployment of her or his own construction of tradition seeks some outcome in the moment of the communication event.

Whether the handed-down nature of the tradition is empirically verifiable or not, the researcher can locate the empowering force of the discursive deployment of vernacular authority in the specific context of one or of a related series of communication events. Once that force is located and contextualized, the researcher may assess if the particular use of vernacular authority is problematic or if it suggests some positive outcome. This critical assessment is possible because the value of the traditional is not located outside of its discursive function. Instead, its value is located in its deployment as part of real human expressive behavior, and that value may or may not coincide with any empirical quality of being “traditional.”

Attempting to critically assess specific communication events—such as Joan’s use of the term *folklore* or Starhawk’s appeal to the Old Religion—the

2 Though Oring notes well-known studies of bigoted jokes—and there are feminist and other critiques of folktales to be sure—the ongoing ethnographic engagement with individuals who hold a problematic tradition is very difficult, at least because thickly descriptive interpretive ethnography requires ongoing and (at least somewhat) functional personal relationships between the researcher and her or his local consultants. As a result, these types of studies present unique difficulties. These difficulties are themselves under-discussed in ethnographic circles, and there are few examples to look to when engaging such a study. One example of a multi-decade engagement with just such a tradition can be found in my work on vernacular apocalyptic belief among fundamentalist Christians that appears in its fullest form in the book *Digital Jesus: The Making of a New Christian Fundamentalist Community on the Internet* (Howard 2011).

researcher is less engaged with the facts or aesthetics of the traditional expression as he or she is with the social impact that such expression might have. Considering the social impact, the folklorist is both the documenter of what is traditional and a commentator on the role the concept of tradition plays. Not merely calling out the bigoted nature of an anti-Semitic joke or the limited roles for young people offered by fairy tales, a discursive approach asks: “How is Joan empowered or disempowered when she appeals to folklore? Are contemporary believers empowered or disempowered by creatively imagining their new religious movement as ancient? What about Catholics who don’t believe in folklore or politically active feminists who reject the ancient authority of ‘Witches?’”

In the globally interconnected worlds of many individuals today, it is important that folklorists make critical moves to engage a politics of interpretation in ways that responsibly represent vernacular voices. Communication and travel technologies have increased many people’s ability to actively choose what and with whom they engage in their everyday discourse. This increased agency has increased the power of vernacular authority in comparison to its role during the late print and broadcast ages because today’s participatory media allow individuals to express themselves often right alongside powerful institutions. While scholars of media have long been adept at engaging the power adhering in mass media, they are in need of the folklorist’s perspective on the power of everyday expression as they attempt to engage participatory media (Howard 2012). One way to help bring that perspective to bear is for folklorists to approach everyday participatory discourse through the concept of vernacular authority.

Accordingly, in the next sections of this chapter, I consider *tradition* as a discursive formation. Then I define *vernacular authority* as a central way tradition functions discursively. Then I apply the concept of vernacular authority to two examples of everyday expression online, in which this authority is elevated above that of institutions. The concept allows me to critically assess the role that elevated authority plays in the ideologies these media users are constructing for themselves. My first example explores how vernacular authority empowers gay Catholic individuals to stand up to a hegemony that rejects their very identities. In the second example, I analyze how proponents of “natural family living” employ vernacular authority to dismiss potentially valuable sources of information about their health and their children’s health. In both cases, I treat the concept of vernacular authority as a specific kind of attempt to garner power through discourse

that emerges whenever there is a suggestion that noninstitutional processes have participated in the emergence of conditions that support current beliefs, values, or practices. In this sense, “institutions” are (in line with the Latin origins of the word) social formations that have been founded through a formal speech act, usually in the form of a written document. I argue that by critically assessing the role of vernacular authority in these kinds of communications, folklorists can bring our field’s values and tools to researchers grappling with the surge of everyday communication now possible in an age of network communication technologies.

Then, in the final paragraphs of this chapter, I reconsider Starhawk’s claim to a continuous tradition of European witchcraft. While it might be easy for a folklore researcher to simply debunk the claim, it would be equally easy to unreflexively praise the empowerment it seems to offer believers. A responsible analysis requires that the researcher seek to understand vernacular authority both on its own terms and in terms of the twenty-first-century globalized and transnational modernity we now all inhabit together. In the case of Starhawk, the critical researcher must seek to assess her claims in light of the creative power of metaphor that she values above the “stories” told by empirical research (Starhawk 1979, 192). A discursive approach to this traditional communication must assess Starhawk’s claim to authority by considering what impact such a claim has or might have on the wider social formations in which we all share a stake.

TRADITION

As Simon J. Bronner notes, “the philosophy of folklore study and its relation to public ideas of culture reside in the keyword of tradition” (Bronner 1998, 5). As other chapters in this volume have already shown, previous scholars considering the history and meanings of “tradition” have documented how the term came from the Latin *traditum* meaning “something handed over.” Less often noted, however, is that some of the earliest English usages of the word carry not the force of the everyday but the force of law. This is clear in its earliest definition as “an ordinance or institution orally delivered.”³ John Wycliffe’s 1388 translation of Paul’s Letter to the Colossians (Cooper 2002) contains one the earliest written examples of “tradition” in English. In Wycliffe’s translation, the line reads,

3 *Oxford English Dictionary*, 1989, 2nd. ed., s.v. “tradition.”

“See ye that no man deceive you by philosophy and vain fallacy, after the tradition of men, after the elements of the world, and not after Christ” (Colossians 2:8). Here, Wycliffe’s concern (via Paul) is specifically about the Colossian Christians giving authority to “an ordinance or institution orally delivered” (a “human tradition”) instead of the Holy Spirit made manifest during the individual experience of God’s Word read or heard in the vernacular language of the everyday believer.

As a forerunner of the Reformation’s rejection of papal authority, Wycliffe specifically argued for individual access to the Bible so everyday people could experience God’s words themselves instead of relying on “human tradition.” This definitive early use of the word in English associates it with the spiritually “deceitful fallacy” of institutional power and sets it in opposition to the vernacular alternate to the church made available when individuals could hear or read the Bible in their own (vernacular) language (see Howard 2011, 4–6). In this early form, “tradition” referred to the oral dispensation of *institutional* power.

The English word *institution* is derived from the Latin verb *institutio* meaning “to establish.” While some definitions of “institutions” have shifted to include things like “custom,” the defining characteristic of an institution is that it has been instituted or founded by some formal act that is typically linguistic, either oral or in writing. Institutions, often with complex apparatus such as that of the Catholic Church, function as powerful authorities. Wycliffe sought to break away from that authority in his argument against tradition. Wycliffe’s early association of the two suggests that (historically at least) institutional elements are more central to the idea of tradition than are the folkloric, the vernacular, or the everyday.

In chapter 8 of this volume, Simon J. Bronner articulates the more common, current understanding of tradition as a noninstitutional authority when he suggests that the “handiness” of tradition serves as a basic starting point from where individuals sort out the situations they confront in their daily lives. Individuals’ sense of “tradition” (their common knowledge handed on by their culture) gives them cultural maps showing where they are and helps guide them on how to proceed. In this sense, tradition is fundamentally “handy” because it is the first tool people reach for when confronted with the need to make a decision.

Extending this modern understanding of tradition a little, we can give Bronner’s formulation a slightly more critical inflection when we imagine “tradition” not as just “handy” but as a handy *authority* to which

individuals can appeal while adjudicating between the possibilities offered them by everyday living. When “handiness” functions as an authoritative “shorthand” that individuals deploy in their daily lives, it is functioning as a tool. Twentieth-century social critic Kenneth Burke famously termed such tool-like ideas “equipments for living” (Burke 1973, 304). Imagined as equipment, these ideas can be viewed in the terms made famous by sociologist Langdon Winner’s (1986, 19) insight that “artifacts have politics.” Just like material artifacts, the qualities of the idea-tool shape the products (material and otherwise) it creates.

Imagined as equipment that shapes social formations, the handiness of tradition is open to social criticism because more than just any one individual has a stake in the social aspects of their group. In a weakly critical form, the social critic could limit herself or himself to an empirical investigation of the facts behind the tradition: “How far back can it be traced in documents? Where has it migrated over time? Does it make claims that are supported by scientific investigations?” And so on. From this perspective, the value of the tradition is limited to its verifiable continuities and consistencies over space and time. In a stronger form, the social critic asks: “How well suited is this specific ‘tradition’ for use as basic equipment for living? Who does it empower? Who does it disempower?”

To make this move toward a stronger critical engagement with expressions of tradition, a rigorous accounting of vernacular authority shifts the analytical focus from the empirically verifiable background of the expression to the social impacts of its assertions. From this discursive perspective, vernacular authority emerges in a specific individual or series of related communication events where there is a suggestion (overt or implicit, consciously considered or not) that noninstitutional processes occurring over space and time have participated in the emergence of conditions that support the assertions, beliefs, or practices advocated by the communication.

In this sense, vernacular authority reimagines Bronner’s concept of “handiness” in a way that accounts for Dorothy Noyes’s important observation that the groups who foster any tradition can be (like tradition itself) conceived in two fundamentally different ways: as scientifically verifiable “empirical networks of interaction” or as “the community of the social imaginary,” like that made famous by Benedict Anderson (Noyes 2003, 11; see also Anderson 1991). A discursive approach leans more toward the critical than the empirical by focusing on the value of the “social imaginary” of a tradition and less on the “empirical networks” from where

it may or may not emanate. While this perspective assumes that vernacular discourse has power that the researcher can document, it does not assume that power is necessarily fair or just.

To critically engage vernacular discourse, the researcher seeks to make value judgments based on the social impact of claims authorized by a sense of tradition instead of empirical “discoveries” about its historical or current networks (Walzer 1987, 3). As philosopher Michael Walzer describes it, social criticism occurs when members of a specific social group speak “in public to other members who join in the speaking and whose speech constitutes a collective reflection upon the conditions of the collective life” (Walzer 1987, 35). While the discovery of existential facts may become important (even decisive) to this critical activity, it remains a means to the end of collective reflection on the social itself. A critical approach to “tradition” would specifically seek to understand claims to vernacular authority as assertions of power in specific contextualized communication events and then seek to evaluate those claims in terms of their impact on broader social formations. In the final move, the critic must communicate her or his judgments to the broader community involved in that social formation through teaching, exhibitions, video, writing, or other public discourse.

VERNACULAR AUTHORITY

The concept of vernacular authority is based on the idea that any claim to being supported by tradition asserts power because it seeks to garner trust from an audience by appealing to the aggregate volition of other individuals across space and through time. This sort of authority is similar to what Erika Brady has termed “relational authority,” Sabina Magliocco has explored as “participatory consciousness,” or what I have documented extensively among online fundamentalist Christians as “aggregate authority” (Brady 2001, 7; Magliocco 2012, 19; Howard 2011, 20–21). As imagined aggregate volition, this “lore” manifests as a perceived tradition. A trust in the aggregating of volition through informal social processes (the “handed-down” nature of a tradition) marks this particular authority as noninstitutional or vernacular.

As I have discussed in relation to Wycliffe’s translation of Paul, institutions also have handed-down or aggregated authority, and individuals can also attempt to garner trust based on their position in relation to an institution: a priest is sometimes trusted to make judgments about the state of an individual’s soul based on his authorization to act on behalf of the

institution of the Catholic Church; a journalist writing for *The New York Times* gains trust based on her or his presumed adherence to rules monitored by accomplished editors; or an academic researcher publishing in *Nature* earns trust for her or his publication based on the perception of the rigorous peer review associated with that publication.

Alternate to institutional authority, however, vernacular authority emerges when an individual makes appeals that rely on trust specifically because they are *not* institutional. Trust is justified by the assertion *because* the claim does not rely on any authority arising from formally instituted social formations like a church, a newspaper company, or an academic journal. As Oring has already noted in chapter 1, traditions can very well be institutional. The vernacular, however, is specifically set apart from the institutional.

Based in its classical definitions, “vernacular” can best be defined dialectically as that which is opposed to its alternate term “institutional” (Howard 2011, 7–10). An appeal to vernacular authority is an appeal to trust in what is handed down *outside* of any formally instituted social formation. Although it is possible for vernacular authority to be based on something other than the handed-down quality of tradition (in, for example, an individual’s personal revelation from God), folklorists tend to focus on instances where it appeals to a trust in some shared “common sense” or, to use the Classical Greek term for it, *doxa*: informally aggregated communal wisdom (Isocrates 2000, 291ff; Poulakos 2001). In terms of “equipment for living,” tradition’s role as common sense compels researchers to consider the “politics of interpretation” by reflecting on the trust we and others place in a tradition.

Today, critically assessing tradition is increasingly important because global communication technologies have changed the dynamics between institutional and vernacular authority. At the dawn of the age of print, the control of the capability to manufacture inexpensive books destabilized the manuscript-based authority of the priest class in Europe and, ultimately, contributed to the Protestant Reformation (Eisenstein, 1979; 336ff). However, the rise of both public and private institutions that could provide the means to physically distribute large numbers of books across vast geographic spaces created a publishing industry that produced texts not easily imagined as “artistic communications in small groups” (Ben-Amos 1971, 13). When broadcast media arose to displace publishing, there still seemed to be a bright and easily discerned distinction between a small group and the institutional mechanisms that made the movie *Star Wars* or the television show *MASH*.

However, Internet media (particularly “participatory media” like Facebook, Twitter, or any WordPress blog) blur the more physical distinctions between mass media and the small group that characterized earlier eras (Howard 2008b, 490–91). When *The New York Times* allows its readers to comment on their institutional articles in a text box just below the published piece, the vernacular and the institutional stand side by side in the same medium. Both are marked, but they are marked in distinction from each other: one as an institutional product and one as the vernacular commentary. Unlike a book or a television broadcast (that has not been placed online anyway), there is the opportunity for a small group to informally comment in a way that accesses the same audience as the institutional communication.

Mass media locates the decision making involved in the creation of global communication in the hands of institutionally empowered actors like writers, producers, and editors, whereas participatory media offers everyday individuals more choice both in the media they consume and in the globally accessible communication they enact. With more access to both institutional and vernacular expression, individuals can now choose to move beyond the communication delivered in print-, broadcast-, or cable-based media and consume homemade videos of freestyle biking teenagers, digitally modified photos that enact political commentary, or blogged texts describing the daily experiences of a stay-at-home mom.

The increased freedom of choice in what individuals can consume, combined with more opportunities to consume vernacular expression more quickly, increases vernacular authority because individuals can choose to consume ideas based on their already accepted values (or “traditions,” in Bronner’s sense of the term). When they do this, the continuities and consistencies that are the source of much vernacular authority are seemingly increased because the individuals are consuming media premised on their already-held values. When individuals frequent specific online locations that are linked by a shared value or interest, they enact what I have previously termed “vernacular webs” (Howard 2008a, 2008b). As a result, communicating in vernacular webs increases the perception of continuities and consistencies and thus increases vernacular authority.

As optimistic researchers like Harvard law professor Yochai Benkler (2008) and media theorist Henry Jenkins (2006) have demonstrated, creating these vernacular webs can be very empowering because individuals can seek out, compare, and assess large amounts of information before they

make decisions. Similarly, it can create new opportunities for transformation as individuals access and are influenced by ideas with which they might not have otherwise come into contact (Howard 1997). On the other hand, there are less optimistic researchers, such as the administrator of the White House Office of Information and Regulatory Affairs, Cass Sunstein, who has demonstrated how vernacular webs can be disempowering if individuals allow them to reify into communication enclaves that “filter” out ideas which might give them access to useful information or challenge them to think in new ways (Sunstein 2007, 138).

In the next section, I apply the concept of vernacular authority to two very different kinds of online discourse to explore both the optimistic and pessimistic possibilities of participatory media. First, I look at the authority created by self-identifying “gay Catholics.” Here we find a clear example of individuals being empowered by vernacular authority to contradict the Catholic Church’s institutional authority on who is a Catholic. In other cases, however, vernacular webs can disempower individuals if they choose to repeatedly seek out media that supports their already-held beliefs. To examine this sort of vernacular authority, I compare the case of gay Catholics online to some vernacular webs formed around the ideology of natural family living.

TWO VERNACULAR WEBS: GAY CATHOLICISM AND NATURAL FAMILY LIVING

Gay Catholicism

While vernacular webs have probably existed as long as communication, network media have extended the ability to communicate across space and through time. As a result, network media functions to magnify vernacular authority. In some cases, this is empowering. Among gay Catholics online, for example, there is a clear case of individuals being empowered. But in the case of some individuals heavily influenced by the ideology of natural family living, this authority can be so overwhelming that it functions to disempower the participants in the web. Exploring these two cases demonstrates how imagining vernacular authority as a discursive construction allows researchers to critically assess the social impact of individuals choosing to make claims from vernacular authority.

In order to document gay Catholic discourse online, I conducted a series of searches on common Internet search sites for the terms “gay” and

“Catholic.” Then I followed the links created by individuals whose pages appeared in the search returns in and across a variety of network media. Exploring this discourse, with the help of research assistants, we developed a catalog of topics that were most often discussed. We noted the exact terms used to reference the three most prevalent topics. Then we executed multi-termed keyword searches within six major participatory media. We archived the specific pages we found and organized them by both topic and medium.

The three most common topics we found suggest that this vernacular web centers its discourse on real-world activities that are central to the participants’ identities. Specifically, they included sharing stories and advice about finding a friendly parish and the challenges of interacting with local church officials; the temptation, pressure, and challenges of leaving an official Catholic parish for some sort of alternative religious community; and the need and challenge of taking communion even when it is explicitly forbidden for people who are regularly engaging in same-sex sexual activity.

Among hundreds of returns to searches of terms associated with these topics, I found “John’s” Myspace page. John has enjoyed a lifelong and intense relationship with the divine. This relationship was solidified when, at fourteen years old, he watched his mother die from a misdiagnosed stroke. During the quickening illness, he called out for God—and he had a revelation. As he describes it:

I had a sense that a voice had spoken to me inside my head, or as if a thought had been inserted in my consciousness. This was “Whatever happens, [John], I will always be with you” . . . I have never experienced anything positive like this ever again. Somehow, I don’t need to. The promise was so absolute and uncompromising that it has always been enough for me to fall back on in all my later troubles. (John 2010)

As a result of his intense faith, John eventually converted to Catholicism and worked as a lay minister but finally left the mainline church to follow what he terms a “radical orthodox traditionalism” (John 2010). John is not just a Catholic; he is a very conservative Catholic—at least in some ways.

John first accepted he was gay as an undergraduate studying theoretical physics at Cambridge University. Through a series of intense romantic engagements, he has lived with his current same-sex partner for over fifteen years. John’s Myspace page and other participatory media resulted from one of his early romantic engagements: his (eventually) successful attempts to convert a former love interest, “Paul,” to Catholicism. In a sad irony, once

Paul accepted John's Catholic faith, he rejected homosexuality and refused further contact.

During this dramatic period of John's life, he started posting web-based media about his struggles as a gay Catholic. Soon individuals sharing this identity found John's online expression, and he slowly developed an ongoing web of correspondence with other gay Catholics. John acts as a mentor in that community, often offering advice to others who share his identity.

In November 2009, John published a blog entry titled "How to have yourself unexcommunicated" [*sic*]. In the entry, John posted a letter he received from another gay Catholic that echoed an experience shared among many of John's readers. Seeking John's advice, the sender revealed that he had recently come out to his local priest; and in response, the priest forbade him from taking communion. After the text of the letter, John typed his response. The aggregate volition of individuals sharing the fundamental belief that they are, in fact, gay Catholics emerges both in the posted document and the responding comments beneath it.

The letter John posted described the interaction between the priest and the gay parishioner this way:

[My pastor's] gentle and compassionate nature led me to think he might at least respect my conscience in the matter. I was mistaken . . . He was very clear that if I could not obey the Church in this matter that I had to refrain from receiving the Sacraments . . . Not being able to receive the Eucharist is proving to be spiritually harmful. After much thought and prayer, I decided the best thing would be to leave. (John 2009)

The letter goes on to describe how the priest, after noticing the man missed church for a few weeks, called to enquire after him and insisted they have coffee together. Worried about the impending meeting, the man explained to John, "I don't know what to expect. I don't know if he will reconsider his position about denying me the Sacraments or challenge me with Scripture and Church teaching" (John 2009).

John's response offered a powerful and sustained twelve-point argument that culminated in the claim that the honesty inherent in coming out meant, "[The priest] should return the honour by respecting your conscience in this matter by not judging you and not refusing you sacramental absolution." In this response, John repeated a series of ideas common throughout this discourse. In particular, he made the argument that it would be hypocritical (and thus a sin) to profess that gay sexual activity is unethical if an individual

feels in her or his heart that God would not have created people with an innate tendency to sin. As it is often put, God would not create people who are innately “evil.” Both creating and recreating these common arguments, John’s claims simultaneously appeal to and enact the aggregated vernacular authority of gay Catholics, of which John is an important figure (John 2009).

In response to this post, John received public comments supporting and admiring the courage of his e-mailer. Acting together, these individuals generate a shared authority for the validity of their identity as well as the valuation of courage in the face of institutional rejection. In this discourse, one commenter wondered if individuals should really be so committed to being a member of a community that institutionally rejects their core identity. The commenter wrote, “why bother trying to get the Church to love Gays . . . when it’s not the Church’s love you are after; it’s God’s love” (John 2009).

John responded, “Obviously, [yours] is not a Catholic outlook on matters” (John 2009). Clearly, John feels his outlook *is* a Catholic one—a gay Catholic one. In light of John’s final assertion here, this example presents a particularly clear case of individuals using a vernacular authority that they dynamically enact in online discourse to counter a very powerful institutional authority.

The Catholic Church claims to be the final arbitrator of who is “Catholic.” In Catholic theology, an individual must be a “communicant” to be a practicing Catholic. To be a communicant, individuals must enact the ritual of Holy Communion at least once a year. The ritual can only be successfully administered to individuals who have attained a temporary state of grace by seeking forgiveness for their sinful acts from a priest authorized by the church or in an individual Rite of Penance and Reconciliation at the beginning of the liturgy. In 1986, however, the church specifically asserted that individuals who habitually choose to live gay lifestyles cannot be reconciled to the church (Vatican 1986). While the position of the church will continue to evolve over time, and the application of this idea by specific religious practitioners varies widely, the church is commonly held to assert the idea that while gay people are not “innately evil” (as John accused the priest of believing above), the choice to habitually engage in same-sex relations renders the individual leading a typical gay lifestyle unable to attain the spiritual state necessary to take yearly communion. This means that individuals living a LGBT lifestyle cannot be Catholic in the terms established by the church.

The online enclave formed by these individuals, however, generates an alternate authority for who is Catholic. As Leonard Norman Primiano notes, this sort of gay Catholic identity is a particularly clear case of vernacular religion (Primiano 1993, 1995, 2001, 2004). From a critical perspective on tradition, this individual deployment of vernacular authority seems to have the social impact of connecting individuals and empowering them to form an identity that has been denied by the hegemonic claims of one of the most powerful religious institutions in history.

While the case of vernacular Catholicism online demonstrates how vernacular authority can be empowering, the case of natural family living complicates any generalized critical assessment of vernacular authority. In the vernacular web surrounding discourse about natural family living, some individuals exhibit such an intense distrust for institutions that they discount the possible benefits offered by institutional medicine to their children and themselves (Kitta 2012). As Charles Briggs and Clara Mantini-Briggs have powerfully demonstrated in their research on cholera in the Delta Amacuro region, “[s]tories are just as real as germs,” and both can undermine our efforts to reduce human suffering (Briggs and Mantini-Briggs 2004, 7). While certainly a healthy distrust for institutions is warranted (Goldstein 2008), and many aspects of Internet communication can function therapeutically for the sick (Goldstein 2004), when vernacular authority is so magnified by the online proliferation of rumors that it limits individuals’ abilities to access health benefits, the social impact of that authority needs to be carefully considered. The next set of examples in this section engages in that consideration.

Natural Family Living

The ideology of natural family living was popularized by a periodical titled *Mothering Magazine*. Founded in 1976, the magazine focused on natural mothering processes. Associated with the feminist movements of that time, the magazine sought to provide women with an alternative to heavily medicalized practices by functioning as resource for information about birthing and childcare. Expanding its focus over time, the ideology has become associated with discourses such as that surrounding the home birth movement that advocates for nonclinical birthing environments; “attachment parenting,” which argues that mothers or other adults should be in constant physical contact with young children; and “unschooling,” which suggests that children learn best through everyday experiences and

that such experiences are hampered by the formal educational practices of schools. All these discourses share a reverence for what is perceived as “natural” and distaste for what is perceived as artificial human intervention into biology and psychology.

In the digital age, scientific research, popular books, and periodicals available on these topics can now be easily accessed through Internet searches for the key terms associated with them. Some of the most well-known sites include Nature Moms, Natural Family Online, and Earthy Family. However, the largest overall site is hosted by the online version of *Mothering Magazine*. Like most of these sites, Mothering offers professional journalism to its readership. The site is much larger than similar online magazines, however, because it hosts a massive public forum where individuals post and exchange their own ideas about natural family living. Formerly called “Mothering Dot Commune,” the forum changed its name in 2008 to “Mothering Dot Community” and is generally referred to as “MDC.”

On MDC, over 150,000 registered users post their beliefs and respond to each other’s posts. At the time of this research, these users had written over 5.4 million posts. Taken together, these posts create a huge enclave of communication premised on the idea of natural family living.

The forums are broken into nearly fifty subforums that focus their discussions on specific topics. These topics range from “Gentle Discipline” to “I’m Pregnant!” and from “Lactivism” to “The Case against Circumcision.” Each of these topics is discussed in terms of how human biology dictates particular practices. “Gentle Discipline” suggests that children can be led into good behavior by gently channeling their problematic impulses. “Lactivism” focuses on the idea that social norms push women away from their natural role as breast-feeders. Circumcision is strongly discouraged in this community because it is thought to inhibit natural immune response and sexual function and causes traumatic memories in adult males. Surrounding all of these topics, the forum can be seen to elevate vernacular authority over institutional authority by the repetition of specific claims among its everyday users. The forum powerfully pits the vernacular against the institutional by repeatedly expressing distrust at three levels: medical practitioners, the institutional structures that empower them, and (in its most extreme form) the belief in a wide-ranging conspiracy between media, government, and the medical industry.

Participating in the community since 2007, I have observed that one of the most commonly repeated challenges to institutional authority is in

the expression of distrust and hostility to actual medical practitioners on the ground. These kinds of statements can become more extreme when individuals swap stories about experiences they have had with doctors. In a discussion of what to do if a doctor recommends inducing labor during a difficult pregnancy, one user states, “Trust yourself and your body and your baby before you let them get their hands on you” (MegBoz 2009). While recounting how a doctor treated a yeast infection on a male infant’s penis by pulling back the foreskin and applying an antibiotic cream, a user wrote, “Why isn’t this sexual assault?” (PuppyFluffer 2007). During a discussion about a doctor’s recommendation to circumcise an infant who was having repeated infections, a user wrote, “Odds are high that if you do take him to a urologist they will recommend circ[umcision]. After all they make their big money from surgery” (MCatvrMom2A&X 2007).

The idea that individual doctors are corrupt is supported by the repeated expression of distrust for the institutional structures that empower those medical practitioners. This is common in discussions of the “birth industry,” circumcision, and elsewhere, but it is maybe most prevalent in the discussion of vaccines. One user exemplifies the attitude that vaccines are “unnatural” when she states, “I believe that all vaccines are 100% harmful and 100% ineffective and have always been a big scam. Vaccines are blood poisoning and are completely toxic garbage and do not belong in the human bloodstream” (MyLilPwny 2009).

The idea that vaccines are a “big scam” is a common one. In another post, a user links the medical field’s advocating of vaccines to a fundamental misunderstanding of human biology that pervades modern Western medicine: “Most people in the health field, even if they are more ‘natural[,]’ buy into Germ Theory” (MyLittleWonders 2006). By far, the most common explanation for doctors buying into “Germ Theory” is clearly expressed when one user writes: “IMO [in my opinion], it’s all about the pharm[aceutical] industry. Hmmm . . . how do we get people to buy stock in the company that produces Tamiflu(sp)? Scare people!” (NaomiLoreli 2006).

In the most extreme assertions I have found commonly repeated, the distrust of specific medical practitioners evolves from a disregard for the institutional structures that have generated their expertise to a belief in a broad conspiracy between medical practitioners, pharmaceutical companies, media institutions, and governments.

Exchanging conspiracy theories has been common in the forum since I have been observing it, and it can occur in discussions about almost any

topic. Discussing a particular episode of the television show *Law and Order*, a user describes how the show depicted a mother being convicted of murder after not vaccinating her child. Another user comments, “These kinds of plots are introduced by vaccine makers to Hollywood. Big pharma is very much in control of the film industry” (Gitti 2009b).

The media attention to the movement of an H1N1 flu pandemic from Asia to North America in fall 2009 became a major catalyst for these kinds of discussions. Generally a conspiracy is imagined between the government and the pharmaceutical industry, where companies that stand to make money from the purchase of vaccines by the government will pay kickbacks. A user wrote, “Because of the politics involved, it makes me even more sure that our kids shouldn’t be injected with any vaccine because it’s all just money, greed, politics, and disregard for human life” (AllyRae 2009). The specific allegation that the H1N1 virus was actually manufactured by drug companies and then released in Asia is often repeated. One user wrote, “Personally, not to look for the black helicopters or anything, but I think it [H1N1] is a man-made strain, tested overseas to see what would happen on a population too uneducated to realize what was going on” (Grahamsmom98 2005). These kinds of discussions often lead to worries that the government will force individuals to take the H1N1 vaccine. One user reported that her husband “learned today that the state of MA has legally deputized doctors and dentists in preparation for mass vaccinations . . . I sometimes sound like a conspiracy theory nut but my state is sure passing a lot of laws about it lately for some reason” (laohaie 2009).

Another user worried about the potential malevolent motives for the manufacture of swine flu and the forced vaccinations she expected to follow: “I do hope people wake up soon and see what is really happening” (Gitti 2009c). In another thread, someone suggested everybody put an anti-vaccination bumper sticker on her or his car. But another user warned against it: “I can’t express my fear of this enough. I already live in fear of the government as is . . . I just want to curl up and die so President Obama’s death squads don’t get to me first” (Minarai 2009).

At its most extreme, more traditional conspiracy claims crop up in support of the vaccine conspiracy theories. One user suggests that a book she read might be relevant. According to her, the book posits that vaccines are designed to use nanotechnology to, as she puts it, “inject people with a transmitter” (honeybuch2k8 2009). In another thread, a user takes it to the furthest extreme when she advocates for political suicide: “If an injection

means a rotten life or death afterward, why would you ever subject to it? *Even at gunpoint I will refuse.* Let them shoot me” (Gitti 2009a; italics in the original).

As an example of a critical approach to tradition, I have engaged these two cases by exploring how these individuals construct vernacular authority. In terms of the social impact of individuals choosing to make these claims, the case of gay Catholics shows how increased access to the expression of others who share a very specific identity seems to be improving the daily lives of these individuals by harnessing vernacular authority to the end of creating more inclusive ways of imagining what it means to be a Catholic. While this might be threatening to some non-gay Catholics, it seems to be playing a very positive role in the lives of these individuals. We should value this deployment of vernacular authority because it opens an avenue to act against the hegemonic assertions of an institution hostile to a significant number of individuals in our society.

Considering the social impacts of some of the natural family living discourse, on the other hand, presents a more difficult case. By seeking out the MDC Forum and locating like-minded others, some of these individuals may magnify their perception of continuities and consistencies in personal experience narratives and rumors. As Diane Goldstein notes, online vernacular communication about health issues has some clear dangers in its potential for the “perpetuation of health rumors, hoaxes, and disinformation” (Goldstein 2004, 39). Recently, folklore researcher Andrea Kitta (2012) has completed a full ethnographic study of the negative impacts associated with legend and rumor in relation to the perception of health risks. She concludes: “Vaccination will continue to be an issue in years to come. With new vaccines being developed, more celebrity involvement, and great access to the media and Internet, people will continue to question if vaccination is right for them” (Kitta 2012, 137). In some cases, that questioning can be so powerfully magnified by vernacular authority that these dangers swell beyond the specific cases of information-seeking users finding inaccurate information into a generalized authoritative force that may limit the ability of individuals to judge information they are receiving online.

The perception created by personal experience narratives and rumors repeatedly shared by like-minded forum users could then encourage them to choose to avoid medical treatment for their children or themselves. Here there is a potentially negative social impact of vernacular authority.

It is no doubt empowering for these individuals to be able to question a medical establishment they have had little chance to engage in previous generations. However, it is potentially disempowering if their aggregated expression overwhelms their desire to access care or their ability to judge the massive amount of medical research and opinions made available to them online. This disempowerment should be worrisome to us all because a rejection of preventative care for children unjustly and unnecessarily places those children at increased risks for health conditions that might lessen their participation in social activities as well as increase the costs of an already overtaxed health care system.

While these two cases present extremes of the possibility of vernacular authority, I will conclude in the next section by returning to the example of Starhawk's claim to a continuous European tradition of witches dating back to the Ice Age to suggest that most cases, like that of Starhawk, necessitate a far more nuanced consideration of the complex interpretative politics of vernacular authority—and such nuance must be the goal of any responsible critical engagement of human expressive discourse.

PURELY EMPIRICAL OPTIONS

At the beginning of this chapter, I asserted that considering how specific communication events discursively imagine “tradition” allows researchers to consider to what ends individuals are deploying their claims to vernacular authority. Because tradition in this sense is considered a handy tool (equipment for living), the careful observer can critically assess its social impacts. Expanding on Gencarella's suggestion that folklore studies should have an explicitly critical component, I have offered the concept of vernacular authority as one way to engage discursive deployments of tradition more critically by considering the politics of interpretation inherent in any appeal to the vernacular.

Even more than media, literary, or political criticism, the critically minded folklorist must remain extremely aware of her or his institutional power as a representative of an academic or professional institution because that power has its own social impacts. We can see this in chapter 4 of this volume, where Casey R. Schmitt uses his institutional voice to question the University of Illinois's Chief Illiniwek tradition as being “worth” the insult some feel it makes to their heritage. We can also see it in chapter 5 where Merrill Kaplan implores academics to consider the vast implications

of the fact that Internet traditions are largely curated by “the folk” instead of researchers.

Folklore studies have long valorized the everyday, and often they have sought to preserve what they imagine as fragile. While that outmoded perspective on folklore may underestimate the actual power of *das Volk*, it remains true that the institutional authority folklorists wield in terms of adjudicating what is “traditional” (or what has a “positive social impact”) may in some cases have significant repercussions for the actual traditions we document and analyze. One such case is in the “empirical” response to Starhawk’s 1979 pagan theological text, *The Spiral Dance*.

As I recounted at the outset, Starhawk made a claim to vernacular authority by imagining a continuous tradition of European witchcraft. She wrote, “According to our legends, Witchcraft began more than 35 thousand years ago” (Starhawk 1979, 3). An empirically minded thinker who is familiar with theories of human migration might immediately suspect that this is not true because it does not comport with previously accepted scientific knowledge. She or he might begin to formulate a plan to demonstrate how either the evidence offered by Starhawk is based in error or such overwhelming documentary evidence exists contrary to her claim that she should be disregarded. If the researcher imagines “tradition” as a simple issue of “empirical” truth in the form of scientific knowledge based on the replicability of evidentiary experiences, this would seem like a satisfactory kind of study to undertake. This purely empirical option seems reasonable and useful because it seeks to discover the facts of evidence and not enact any critical judgment about the folkloric expression.

Recognizing the institutional power of the researcher, however, brings to light how any attempt to opt out of a critical perspective necessarily fails. If a researcher publishes a study that documents the lack of empirical evidence for a continuous tradition of witchcraft in a rebuttal to Starhawk but does not engage the important appeal to vernacular authority she makes when she modifies her claim with “according to our legends,” then that researcher has failed to engage the pagan worldview Starhawk is articulating on its own terms. The researcher would be cherry-picking a particular detail (the empirical evidence of a continuous tradition) at the expense of grappling with the meaning of “our legends” for Starhawk and her followers. If a more bold researcher specifically understood that Starhawk is making a claim about the creative power of storytelling, but asserted that an empirically verified story is *more* true, then that researcher would be explicitly reducing

the value of this tradition to its supposedly neutral empirical existence across space and time. In either case, these purely empirical options are, intentionally or not, also blunt advocacy for an ideology that Starhawk specifically opposes because they elevate empirical knowledge over creative magic. And Starhawk expected this. In 1979 she wrote,

In the eighteenth century, came the age of disbelief. Memory of the true Craft had faded; the hideous stereotypes that remained seemed ludicrous, laughable, or tragic. Only in this century have Witches been able to “come out of the broom closet,” so to speak, and counter the imagery of evil with truth. The word “Witch” carries so many negative connotations that many people wonder why we use the word at all. Yet to reclaim the word “Witch” is to reclaim our right, as women, to be powerful; as men, to know the feminine within as divine. (Starhawk 1979, 7)

Well documented in Magliocco’s definitive study of contemporary paganism, *Witching Culture*, there actually was a systematic academic rejection of claims to a continuous European tradition of witchcraft (Magliocco 2004, 193). These researchers took an empirical option. However, as Magliocco notes, a central tenet of many pagan beliefs is a rejection of what Starhawk calls “the age of disbelief.” For many pagans today, opting only for empirically verifiable stories reduces the individual person’s ability to magically engage (to construct) their worlds in ways that are empowering.

Starhawk anticipated the empirical option by giving its perspective a place in her worldview: “without discarding science, we can recognize its limitations” (Starhawk 1979, 191). Distinct from empirical knowledge, “magical systems are highly elaborate metaphors, not truths.” It is precisely from their metaphoric nature that they gain power beyond that of the empirical: “The value of magical metaphors is that through them we identify ourselves and connect with larger forces; we partake of the elements, the cosmic processes, and the movement of the stars” (Starhawk 1979, 192).

At the level of interpretive politics, this magical perspective seems to be an empowering way that some people assert a vernacular authority. This may be appealing and powerful even if the tradition undergirding that authority rests on a “magical metaphor” of contemporary pagan “legends” instead of empirical scientific methods. As equipment for living a pagan life, these stories may be far more valuable than those of the academic historian. However, as Walzer (1987) suggests, a critical approach to vernacular authority cannot

simply address the empowerment of the individual deploying the authority. A truly responsible social criticism must be an ongoing “collective reflection” on “the collective life.” Just as the researcher cannot exclusively focus on the seemingly neutral argument that something is “empirically” traditional, she or he cannot simply advocate for the empowerment of one group without attempting to explore the nuanced ways that empowerment might interact with others.

The role of the social critic is fulfilled when she or he engages in this responsible exploration in public communication. This is more important today than ever before because all of us in this globally connected world create tools for living that shape not just our lives but also the social situations through we engage each other. This fact becomes particularly clear in the pagan example when we consider that some contemporary pagans are demanding the reburial of pre-Christian archaeological artifacts. Paul Davies, of the pagan group Council of British Druid Orders, told the British newspaper *The Guardian*, “We view them [pre-Christian human remains] as living people and therefore they have rights as people. Because the ancestors can’t give their consent in this way, the council [of British Druid Orders] speaks for the ancestors” (Randerson 2007). While it may be empowering for individuals to imagine that their religious group has the ability to speak for the dead, making such a bold claim about potentially valuable archaeological artifacts necessitates a critical engagement with the collective social impact this aggressive appeal to vernacular authority could have.

Interrogating such complexities is essential in an age of global communication because the current diversity of belief, practice, and authority will only continue to expand. While cultural studies scholars of media have long addressed institutional communication in critical terms, the criticism of vernacular expression requires a more nuanced approach because expert researchers are specifically empowered to place an institutional stamp of authority on “traditions.” In those moments, the cultural critic has a significant responsibility that requires we pay close attention to the politics even of the most empirical claims we make because those claims interact with and can alter the existing trust that empowers both traditions and institutions. Folklorists have long recognized this, and so today’s expansion of vernacular authority in the rapidly multiplying array of network communication technologies opens the door for critical folklore studies to assert the field’s long experience with research on everyday expression.

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