

Digital Horror Folklore and the Maintenance of the Gendered Status Quo

by

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Certificate of Approval

This is to certify that the accompanying thesis by Maggie Elizabeth Weeks has been accepted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for graduation with Honors in Anthropology.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

Folklore is an art form that spans across many cultures and is a universal tradition. Many associate folklore with older generations, used to warn younger generations about what not to do. Some associate folklore with European peasantry,¹ seeing it as a resistant and community building outlet. In recent years, however, the definition of folklore has broadened. It now includes things like urban legends, riddles, and e-folklore (email chains and jokes), which have gone viral in recent years. While folklore as a concept can be beneficial for the maintenance of culture and traditions, it can also present us with certain pitfalls, which highlight the not so beneficial aspects of culture. In this thesis, I will be exploring two folkloric horror stories that that circulated online via Reddit and a Creepypasta fandom site. In analyzing these folktales, I will discuss the gendered status quo and how it is created and reinforced by ideas within the digital stories. By analyzing *digitized horror folklore*, I hope to contribute to the existing anthropological literature that centers on folklore and gender.

My overarching question asks: How does digitized folkloric horror contribute to the gendered status quo, and additionally, what is revealed by analyzing digital horror folklore? Other questions relevant to this thesis are: How is folklore constituted, and what types of folktales are there? How is horror constituted? How do concepts of “abject” females, monstrosity, and liminality in digital horror folktales reinforce the gendered status quo?

¹ Dundes, “Who are the Folk?” 2

In the following chapter, I will discuss how folklore has been perceived by different thinkers in folkloric studies. I will analyze the types of folktales as categorized by Stith Thompson and Annti Aarne, two folkloric thinkers. I will then discuss what attributes make up the horror genre, and how it operates. Chapter 3 discusses gender representations in folklore. I will invoke Julia Kristeva, Victor Turner, and other thinkers, focusing mainly on the idea of female monstrosity and abjection in folklore, and how that does or does not translate to the digital sphere. In Chapter 4, I will discuss important findings from analyzing digital folklore, including belief and authenticity, authorship, the “folk,” and sites of resistance. In Chapter 5, I will analyze and explore the two digital folktales, titled, “Something’s Really Weird About my Sexy New Neighbor” and “The Woman in the Snow.” I will discuss how these stories as digital horror folktales work to maintain the gendered status quo and show how they reflect the findings mentioned in Chapter 4.

To do this, I have gathered theories and ideas from folkloric theorists and anthropologists. I gained an understanding for folkloric theory and was able to map the theories onto my own work. I then browsed Reddit and other online forums specifically for horror stories that centered female characters and came across the two folktales. I read and analyzed these stories and their comments in depth and applied traditional folkloric theory to the stories. By doing so, I hope to contribute to the existing literature surrounding folklore, horror, and digital media.

Chapter 2: The Theoretical Background of Folklore and the Horror Genre

Within this chapter I will be discussing the theoretical background of both the study of folklore and the study of the horror genre. I will be discussing how folklore and horror are defined, categories of folktales, and the structure of a horror tale. I will also prompt thought about the digital sphere and think about how folklore might change through digital spaces.

2.1 What is Folklore?

Across cultures, folklore is traditionally thought of as stories passed down orally from generation to generation. Folklore is more complex than just a transgenerational story, however. Folklore is an ever-evolving area of study which is contested and defined differently by a variety of anthropologists and folklorists. William Bascom, quoted in Maria Leach's "Definitions of Folklore," defines folklore as "...myths, legends, folktales, proverbs, riddles, verse, and a variety of other forms of artistic expression whose medium is the spoken word."² Bascom also claims that folklore serves four functions: 1) an escape from reality, 2) a validation/justification of culture, 3) a function of pedagogy, and 4) a function of maintaining conformity.³ Aurelio Espinosa claims that "folklore, or popular knowledge, is the accumulated store of what mankind has experienced, learned, and practiced across the ages as popular and traditional knowledge, as distinguished from so-called scientific knowledge."⁴ Alan Dundes, one of folklore's most famous academics describes folklore as a "mirror of culture."⁵ More pointedly anthropologic, he says

² Leach, "Definitions of Folklore," 256

³ Bascom, "Four Functions of Folklore," 333-349

⁴ Leach, 257

⁵ Dundes, "Folklore as a Mirror of Culture."

folklore is an “autobiographical ethnography” – “a people’s own description of themselves.”⁶ This method of autobiographical ethnography allows members of a society to fictionalize what is true about themselves. In that way, folklore both reinforces social structures, and informs readers why these social structures should be dismantled. Dundes quotes: “Folklore reflects (and thereby reinforces) the value configurations of the folk...”⁷ One of folklore’s functions thus attempts to teach about what is *wrong* in society, while also simultaneously reinforcing what should be changed.

Elliot Oring theorizes folklore similarly to Dundes – he posits that folklore serves as a way for a community to understand and *see* what their society is about through fictionalized accounts of events and things. Oring writes, “Folk narratives are reflections of the societies and individuals which create and transmit them; consequently, they reflect a wide range of human ideas and emotions.”⁸ In this way, folkloric narratives both *create* and are *created by* emotions and human ideas. Oring goes on to write, “A folk narrative reflects both the individual and the community...His narrations depend upon a measure of community acceptance.”⁹ The level of community acceptance surrounding a particular folktale engages human emotions and ideas, and vice versa.

It is clear, then, why the study of folklore is salient to anthropologists – folk tales reflect social anxieties, social rules, and social norms. In this way, the “mirror” of folklore allows members of a community to look at themselves and be looked at.

⁶ Ibid, 55

⁷ Ibid, 59

⁸ Oring, “Folk Narratives,” 133

⁹ Ibid, 123

2.2 Thinkers in Folklore Studies

Many of the theorists and thinkers regarding folklore are structuralist thinkers, and thus it is important to discuss structuralism. However, it will become clear that structuralist thinking is a framework with many pitfalls and does not apply itself well to folklore in the digital sphere.

Structuralism is defined by Alan Barnard as, "...those theoretical perspectives which give primacy to pattern over substance."¹⁰ In terms of folklore then, one could say a structuralist view of "Little Red Riding Hood" contains Little Red Riding Hood as a young girl, and the wolf as a "predator." The stuff of the story only makes sense in relation to the patterns and binaries noticed within the tale. Claude Lévi-Strauss, the father of structuralism, writes about the meaning of myths. In his writing, he poses the question that if all myths are without logic or continuity¹¹, "how are we going to explain that throughout the world myths do resemble one another so much?"¹² Lévi-Strauss's major claim is that all folktales share similarities, cross culturally. Even further, these similarities are innate to folktales and mythology – as Dundes says, "Most practitioners of structural analysis assume that they are discovering, not inventing, the patterns they discuss."¹³ Dundes, in the same article, quotes Lévi-Strauss: "This code...has neither been invented nor brought in from without. It is inherent in mythology itself, where we simply discover its presence."¹⁴ This does make sense; myths reflect social anxieties, and we are all humans, therefore we all share the same social anxieties.

¹⁰ Barnard, *History and Theory of Anthropology*, 120

¹¹ Lévi-Strauss, "The Structural Study of Myth," 429

¹² *Ibid*, 429

¹³ Dundes, "Structuralism and Folklore," 128

¹⁴ *Ibid*, 128

Vladimir Propp, another important folklorist, also has structuralist implications in his writing. For example, he breaks down the players in folklore into only two categories: “Folklore also presupposes two agents, but different agents, namely, the performer and the listener, opposing each other directly, or rather without a mediating link.”¹⁵ This binarism doesn’t account for those who listen to folklore, as well as create folklore, or people who create the folklore *as* they are listening or reading. Propp also distinguishes between folklore and literature, writing that performances of folktales can be minutely changed in the act of the performance, while literature stays stable.¹⁶ On a broader scale, Propp claims that the genre of folklore consists of categories. Perhaps in a slightly anti-structuralist viewpoint, Propp suggests that each culture has a different way of classifying folktales. Nonetheless, it is the principle of classification that remains universal.¹⁷

Even more nuanced in structuralist thinking than Propp and Strauss is Stith Thompson and Antti Aarne, folklorists whose books are essential to this thesis. Aarne combined all known types of folktales in a book aptly titled, “The Types of the Folktale: A Classification and Bibliography.” Aarne, writing the first publication in 1910, classified all folktales by major types, along with subtypes. For example, he has broken up the book by: Animal tales, Ordinary Folktales, Jokes and Anecdotes, Formula tales, and Unclassified tales.¹⁸ Within each of these major types are subtypes. For example, under Animal tales, Aarne distinguished between “wild animals and domestic animals” and “birds.”¹⁹ Under each category within the index, Aarne has classified tales in a way

¹⁵ Propp, *Theory and History of Folklore*, 8

¹⁶ *Ibid*, 8

¹⁷ *Ibid*, 41

¹⁸ Aarne, *The Types of the Folktale*, 19-20

¹⁹ *Ibid*, 19

akin to the Dewey decimal system – each tale is accompanied with a few numbers and a letter, and then titled. Under the titles of many of the tales he has categorized the Motifs by letter and number as well (“Motif H607.1”).²⁰ The purpose of categorizing tales in this way was so that one could find the “code”, for example 924A, and then could see authors, motifs, and other cultures that have similar stories.

Stith Thompson expanded upon Aarne’s index in 1960, adding many more tales, but seemingly maintaining the original categories. Thompson also put together a six-volume index of folkloric themes titled the “Motif-Index of Folk-Literature.” According to Thompson, the term folktale is often equated with “household tale” or “fairytale.”²¹ However, he goes on to say that folklore is much broader than each of those two terms, and instead is used as an umbrella term “to include all forms of prose narrative, written or oral, which have come to be handed down through the years.”²² In his compendium, Thompson has distinctly categorized folktales based on their content and format. Thompson asserts that there are four major types of folktales – the Märchen, the novella, the hero tale, and the Sage.²³ The Märchen, a German term, “is a tale of some length involving a succession of motifs or episodes.”²⁴ Märchens typically employ a fictionalized world as the setting, and its characters and plots are considered “marvelous.”²⁵ Novellas are like Märchens in the way they are formatted and structured, but they differ in that they take place in a realistic locality and time. Where the Märchen is structured completely around falsities, the Novella’s events are at least semi-believable

²⁰ Ibid, 323

²¹ Thompson, *The Folktale*, 4

²² Ibid, 4

²³ Ibid

²⁴ Ibid, 8

²⁵ Ibid

to the reader. Thompson's third folk type is the Hero tale. The hero tale consists of just what it sounds and is equivalent to comic books about superheroes. The final major folk type is the "Sage" in German, or, in English, "local tradition, local legend, migratory legend, and tradition Populaire."²⁶ Thompson implies in his categorization of different types that there is no overlap between folktales. That is, a Novella cannot be a Märchen if the events are somewhat plausible, and the Sage cannot be a hero tale if no "hero" is present.

Thompson, Aarne, Propp and Lévi-Strauss all think structurally in their theories and ideas. I will argue that as folklore culture, along with digital culture, has progressed and evolved over time, there are manifold categories that are less distinct and can overlap, and thus structuralist thinking cannot encompass the whole field of folklore.

2.3 What Makes Something Horror?

A form of media (a film, novel, etc.) is generally considered to be a part of the horror genre if it has the "capacity to provoke a certain affective response."²⁷ An affective response eked out by something horrific might be fear or disgust. Bruce Kawin defines horror just so, as a "compound of terror and revulsion."²⁸ On the surface, horror seems easily distinct from other genres of media, yet there is a complexity underscoring the way that horror fashions itself as horror. For example, Noel Carroll notes the use of monsters in horror stories. He writes that the existence of monsters in a story does not merely make it a horror story, as light-hearted fairy tales and other forms of folklore include monsters in the plot. What *does* differentiate a monster in a fairytale from a

²⁶ Ibid

²⁷ Carroll, "The Nature of Horror," 52

²⁸ Kawin, "Horror," 3

monster in horror fiction, though, is the “attitude of characters in the story to the monsters they chance upon.”²⁹ Carroll writes: “In works of horror, the humans regard the monsters that they encounter as abnormal, as disturbances of the natural order. In fairy tales, on the other hand, monsters are part of the everyday furniture of the universe.”³⁰ This is particularly intriguing, in that something is not relegated to the genre of horror unless there is an element of abjectivity, or “otherness.”

2.4 Horror Format and Structure

While there are subtypes of horror – science fiction horror, erotic horror, gothic horror – the overall structure of a horror story is relatively the same. One of the most significant aspects of a horror story is its temporality. The affective response required of a viewer or reader to categorize horror as horror relies on the story’s linearity. If you were to skip ahead to the end of a story, the suspense and build-up of the story would no longer affect you the same way as if you were to read the story in its entirety.³¹ Susan Stewart asserts that “to read or hear the ending of the tale first would be to cancel out the experience of it.”³² Thus, a significant characteristic of the horror story is its experiential and linear temporality.

Further, the horror story’s structure and format rely on its believable relationality to the reader or viewer. Where, for Thompson, the Märchen is all fiction, and the Novella is semi-real, successful horror depends on at least some element of reality. Stewart says, “In the true story the audience stands in the place of the narrator; there is a tacit

²⁹ Carrol, 52

³⁰ Ibid

³¹ Stewart, “The Epistemology of the Horror Story,” 33

³² Ibid, 34

assumption that audience and narrator can ‘stand in each other’s shoes.’”³³ In order for horror to be successful, the reader or viewer must insert themselves in the place of the narrator or character, and similarly, the reader or viewer must believe that the narrator could also imagine being the reader. In thinking about structuralist folkloric thinkers, this idea of reader/author relationality might oppose Propp’s way of thinking about the folkloric performer and the folkloric listener as completely distinct.³⁴

Similarly, Stewart asserts that horror stories take place in a sort of liminal space between not only real and false, but other binaries, such as “between the animal and the human or the human and the machine.”³⁵ Stewart invokes Turner’s conceptualizations of liminality and writes, “Just as Victor Turner, in his study of Ndembu initiation rights, concluded that the monstrosity of liminal sacra is meant not so much to frighten initiates as to teach them the proper shape of things, so the 19th century notion of the sublime encompassed a fictional terror that results in transcendence and knowing.”³⁶ According to Stewart then, horror is a tool in which readers can go “beyond” and transcend distinct boundaries. In other words, horror cannot be diluted into this or that – the concept itself is multifaceted.

2.5 Superimposing Traditional Folklore Studies onto the Digital Sphere

Many of the anthropologists and folklorists studying within the academic circles of folklore and the horror genre that were mentioned have not taken the digital sphere into account. Thompson was writing in the 60’s, before things like Facebook and Instagram were conceived. Dundes was also a scholar during the 60’s, and Bascom was

³³ Ibid, 35

³⁴ Refer to footnote 15

³⁵ Stewart, 41

³⁶ Ibid

studying folklore and anthropology in the 40's. Susan Stewart's article "The Epistemology of the Horror Story" might be a prime example of pre-digital folkloric horror analysis, as it accounts for the temporality of the horror story as evidenced by letters at the beginning of a novel or tale. She writes: "Here the technique of the letter is even more effective than it is in horror movies...On this page the shadow is our own; we have taken the victims place."³⁷ While Stewart references movies, this logic doesn't account for what is shown on the computer screen, through certain Internet platforms. How does the digital sphere change or affect folkloric horror? Further, how does the use of digital spaces in creating folkloric horror reinforce the gendered status quo? In later chapters, I will argue that folklore circulated in the digital sphere is much more complex and harder to categorize than folklore that is written or told orally. Specifically, I will argue that horror folklore circulated on digital platforms like Reddit or Creepypasta, where interaction with the story and the author is easy and commonplace and influences the gendered status quo.

³⁷ Ibid, 39

Chapter 3: Gender in Folklore

Female characters in literature are often categorized differently than male characters. The same goes for folkloric horror, and I will argue that folkloric horror as a genre furthers the gap between male and female characters. Throughout this chapter I will explore essentialist gender representations (i.e., male versus female) in folklore, and investigate the role of abjection, liminality, and monstrosity. Further, I will prompt thought about how digital spaces complicate these representations.

3.1 Stereotypic Male and Female Representations in Folklore

Male characters in folklore are typically represented as strong, brave, and fearless heroes that *always* “get the girl.” Male characters are dominant in their relation to women and other creatures, and they usually end up violently slaying anything that gets in their way. In Antti Aarne’s, “The Types of the Folktales,” just looking at the table of contents is both shocking and unsurprising. Under the category titled, “Ordinary Folktales,” Aarne has written: “Supernatural or Enchanted Husband (Wife) or other relative.”³⁸ This is a clear example of the “male benchmark” – the fact that the male gender is pervasively used as the default. He has also categorized his “Jokes and Anecdotes” section between men’s and women’s stories. The first subtype under the male category, unsurprisingly, is referred to as “The Clever Man.” There is no “The Clever Woman” category. This reveals to readers that male characters of folklore are usually associated with positive attributions, thus allowing people in the “real world” to reinforce those perceptions.

Many of the stories in Aarne’s category of “Supernatural or Enchanted Husband (Wife) or Other Relatives” feature the titular women as “monstrous” or object in some

³⁸ Aarne, *The Types of the Folktales*, 19

way. For example, one of the stories is titled, “The Snake-Wife.” The tale is summarized by Aarne as: “A king sees, falls in love with, and marries a lovely girl who is actually a snake-woman.”³⁹ There is also a tale titled, “The Youth Wed to a She-Devil.” This tale portrays the woman in question as a “succubus.” Furthermore, under his category Jokes and Anecdotes, he has written “Stories about a Woman (Girl).” Just some of these examples are: “The Tenant Promises his Daughter to his Master,” “The Inked Girl,” and “The Weeping Bitch.”⁴⁰ Anyone flipping through this folktale index can clearly see that, in contrast to the “Clever Man” category, the women in these tales and anecdotes are posited as the butt of jokes, easy to criticize, and more importantly, completely cast aside or “abject.” Julia Kristeva defines “abject” as “the jettisoned object, [which] is radically excluded and drags me towards the place where meaning collapses.”⁴¹ Women’s exclusion thus collapses meaning, or makes no meaning. According to Kristeva, women are monstrous and “abject” for several reasons. One is their connection to “filth” – in other words, the fact that women get periods can taint other aspects of life. Kristeva writes: “Menstrual blood, on the contrary, stands for the danger issuing from within the identity (social or sexual); it threatens the relationships between the sexes within a social aggregate, and, through internalization, the identity of each sex in the face of sexual difference.”⁴² As natural as menstruation is, it is just as unnatural, abject, and “other” because it is defined against default maleness. Thus, women in folklore and in real life can be represented as *objects* of desire and disgust.

³⁹ Aarne, 138

⁴⁰ Ibid 423-430

⁴¹ Kristeva, *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*, 2

⁴² Ibid, 71

3.2 Boundaries and Monstrosity

Recall that Susan Stewart wrote about horror as a place for liminality because horror transcends boundaries. This may be true for those who are not considered “abject.” For example, a male character in a horror folkloric tale might easily be able to transcend rigid boundaries and definitively become the hero or the savior and stay within the sphere of what is “normal.” But a female character, like in the stories I will analyze later, may not be able to transcend any boundary, and instead is stuck in between and within certain categories and binaries. In this way, female characters exist in a constant state of liminality, never able to reach one side or the other. Victor Turner writes about people enmeshed in a liminal space: “Those undergoing it – call them ‘liminaries’ – are betwixt-and-between established states of politico-jural structure. They evade ordinary cognitive classification, too, for they are neither this-nor-that, here-nor-there, one-thing-not-the-other.”⁴³ Ultimately for Turner, those entering a liminal space will come out on the other side to be categorized, once the ritual is complete. For the female characters in the digital stories, however, it is more complicated.

A way to conceptualize this idea of liminality is to look at the concept of monstrosity. Jeffrey Jerome Cohen presents readers with seven different theses regarding monstrosity. Thesis Four states that “The Monster Dwells at the Gates of Difference.”⁴⁴ Cohen writes that the “monster” consists of what is considered as the “outside” and the “beyond” – “of all those loci that are rhetorically placed as distant and distinct but originate Within.”⁴⁵ Cohen asserts that the concept of a monstrous creature challenges the

⁴³ Turner, “Variations on a Theme of Liminality,” 37

⁴⁴ Cohen, “Monster Culture (Seven Theses),” 7

⁴⁵ Ibid

status quo in which boundaries are not to be crossed. For example, Cohen writes, “The woman who oversteps the boundaries of her gender role risks becoming a Scylla, Weird Sister, Lilith, Bertha Mason, or Gorgon.”⁴⁶ If she transcends the boundaries strictly laid out for her, she automatically becomes “other.” Female characters in folkloric stories are stuck in a liminal space, careful not to transcend boundaries so as not to be considered other. However, when a female character does become monstrous, she exits that liminal space.

Zimmerman, author of “Women and Other Monsters,” reinforces this idea that the monstrous is what defines boundaries:

“For women, the boundaries of acceptability are strict, and they are many. We must be seductive but pure, quiet but not aloof, fragile but industrious, and always, always small. We must not be too successful, too ambitious, too independent, too self-centered – and when we can’t manage all the contradictory restrictions, we are turned into grotesques. Women have been monsters, and monsters have been women, in centuries’ worth of stories, because stories are a way to encode these expectations and pass them on.”⁴⁷

Because of folklore’s traditional aspects, paired with the tendency to portray women as abject, folkloric horror is a genre that perpetuates gendered hierarchies. Through analyzing digital horror folkloric tales, I will argue that through horror folklore, women are relegated to a perpetual liminality, unable to become one or the other - a good or a bad woman, a desirable or an undesirable woman, unless they become monstrous, in which case they are neither and automatically considered “other.” This contrasts with male characters, who easily fit into a “good or bad,” “desirable or undesirable” binary. Women may be able to toe the line between each – a woman might be sexy and beautiful

⁴⁶ Ibid, 9

⁴⁷ Zimmerman, *Women and Other Monsters: Building a New Mythology*, 8

but also grotesque in some way – but they are never able to assert themselves as both or neither. That is, until they become monstrous.

3.3 Representations of Women in the Digital Sphere

If this is how women are represented in written folktales, how do digital folktales complicate these representations? Just as folklore acts as a “mirror of culture,” so too does digital media. The representation on the Internet and social media of women as simultaneously wanted and unwanted gives young people a perception of their “place” in the world. When I think of women portrayed in digital media, I think of a video that went viral a few years back of a model having a photoshoot, and then being shown the Photoshop process. The model, through digitization, is made from an objectively attractive woman, sans makeup, to a Barbie-doll look alike – much thinner than the actual model, with “better” eyebrows, lips, and nose. The Photoshopped picture acted as a “mirror of culture” for many young women and girls. What happens, though, when it is not a visual representation of women, but a folkloric representation of women? How does the use of folklore strengthen the gender binary and power structures? In the next chapter, I will discuss other findings that strengthen the claim that digital folkloric horror tales reinforces the gendered status quo. Following an argument by Kay Stone regarding whether inherent sexism in fairytales exist,⁴⁸ I will argue that digital horror folktales that present women as “monstrous” others are at least as dangerous as written, traditional folktales, and *do* have inherent sexism built into their format, structure, and purpose.

⁴⁸ Stone, “The Misuses of Enchantment.”

Chapter 4: What is Revealed by Analyzing Digital Folktales?

Representations of gender are obvious when analyzing traditional folktales. In specifically analyzing digital folktales, however, many other concepts come to the surface. Some of these concepts include belief, authorship, the “folk” and more. This chapter explores the underlying analyses that come when looking at digital folktales.

4.1 Belief, Authenticity, and “Realness”

Belief, by many structuralist folklorists, is considered a core and foundational aspect to folktales. Benjamin Gatling quotes Linda Dègh in his article on the anthropology of belief, writing that “belief is the ‘core of the legend.’”⁴⁹ Legends and folklore would not be as perennial if they didn’t evoke some sort of belief in people. The belief in these stories is precisely what allows them to transcend time and circulate years after their creation. Yet, as Gatling suggests, it is not so much belief in the sense that people know these stories to be true. Rather, it is belief in the sense that these stories have the *potential* and the *capability* to be true. This is where Gatling attempts to discern between belief and believability:

“Thus, legends are merely stories told as possibly true, that is, as believable. What separates legends from other narrative genres is the degree to which tellers and hearers entertain the possibility that the events described via story might have actually happened, or, to frame it differently, the likelihood of their veracity.”⁵⁰

Folklore and legends are not so much “belief stories” in that they are distinctly factual, but that the listeners and readers have the ability, capacity, and desire to conceptualize of them as such.

⁴⁹ Gatling, “There Isn’t Belief, Just Believing,” 310

⁵⁰ Ibid, 312

To establish a tangible example for the concept and power of belief, we can look to the Internet legend, Slenderman. Slenderman has become a ubiquitous and commonly known “entity” across not only digital platforms, but also within person-to-person conversations and contexts. Andrew Peck writes about the “digital legend cycle” in which he investigates the multimodal performances of the Slenderman tale. The tale of Slenderman consists of an unnaturally tall creature with no facial features, donning a suit. This creature is seen in the background of fictionalized pictures, and allegedly kidnaps people. Peck argues that the tale of Slenderman is a marriage between traditional oral folktale methods and digital circulation and collaboration. Within this argument he pinpoints that performances of folktales are objectively affected by and through digital media, and he does so with four sub-arguments: 1) digital folktales occur *asynchronously*, 2) digital folktales combine both mimetic and personalized aspects to a particular tale, 3) digital folktales are circulated via different modes of media, and 4) digital folktales foster “group expectations” to create a group identity.⁵¹ Both the Reddit and the CreepyPasta tale fit with these four sub-arguments, making it clear that they are digital folktales. But what is most important in Peck’s argument to this thesis is what Peck calls “hybridity.” He writes that the origin of the Slenderman tale was created from an “existing matrix of belief that included mass media representations of paranormal creatures, the user’s personal experiences and fears, and the influence of previous posts to the discussion thread.”⁵²

Following Peck’s third point that “digital folktales are circulated via different modes of media,” one could argue that it is thanks to the Internet that folktales spread so

⁵¹ Peck, “Tall, Dark, and Loathsome,” 334

⁵² Ibid, 339

authentically and rapidly. Trevor Blank, in the Introduction to “Folklore and the Internet” describes the Internet as helpful in the circulation of folklore: “The Internet does not diminish the potency of folklore, instead, it acts a folkloric conduit”⁵³ - the use of the digital platform strengthens the “potency” of the story. Thus, the stories’ authenticity is a technique better conjured through digital spaces. The communication between the author and Internet users through comments, likes, etc., promotes this aura of authenticity, in that users are believing the story is true and applying what they know via the story to their *own* reality. Digital spaces thus make for more believable tales.

4.2 Genre and Intertextuality

Dovetailing with peck’s notion of “hybridity,” Bauman and Briggs have written about going beyond the classifications of genre, and instead pose the concept of genre intertextuality. Bauman and Briggs present an example of genre intertextuality through the *coloquio*.⁵⁴ The *coloquio* is essentially a tall tale which, as Bauman and Briggs describe it, shifts from having elements of truth to having elements of skepticism: “As evident in the *coloquio* example, one of the most common strategies is to use formal features in creating generic intertextuality, while disjunctions in semantic content, participant structures, metapragmatic frames, and the like are used in challenging generic precedents;...”⁵⁵ In the case of both “Something’s Really Weird about My Sexy New Neighbor” and “The Woman in the Snow” we will see elements of genre “formalism” and genre “nuance.” The tales follow what Propp would likely categorize as folkloric morphology – the tales have an initial situation, an interdiction which is then violated, the

⁵³ Blank, “Introduction,” 7

⁵⁴ Bauman and Briggs, “Genre, Intertextuality, and Social Power,” 156

⁵⁵ Ibid, 156

villain's reconnaissance, etc.⁵⁶ However, Propp's morphology is not exactly followed to a tee by these tales, and thus there are nuances behind each folkloric "stage." For example, with digital tales, people can anticipate and wait for the next part of the story, and likely would get a digital notification when it became available. Bauman and Briggs might describe this nuance as a difference in participant structures, which indexes an attempt to challenge genre formalism. In this way, genre intertextuality provides an alternative way of thinking about the categorization of folklore. Genre intertextuality is more evidence that digital spaces that circulate folklore cannot be adequately studied through structuralist thinking.

There is a collaborative element to these tales as well. The digital sphere makes it easy to engage in this collective collaboration, again, due to the ways that information is easily disseminated.⁵⁷ For example, Shira Chess also writes about the Slenderman mythos, terming it an example of "open-sourced fiction:"⁵⁸

"Like open-source software, the open-sourcing of storytelling thrives on reuse, modification, sharing of source code, an openness (and transparency) of infrastructure, and the negotiation and collaboration of many individuals."⁵⁹

Slenderman was open sourced through a variety of means and media methods. People began writing their own Slenderman tales, creating artwork, making short films, and more. It became so widely known that it spanned different genres and media modes.

While the author might be the primary creator of such a tale, the author will inevitably absorb the takeaways that the users and readers are experiencing. This

⁵⁶ Propp, "Morphology of the Folktale."

⁵⁷ Blank, "Introduction to Folklore."

⁵⁸ Chess, *Folklore, Horror Stories, and the Slenderman*, 75

⁵⁹ Chess, 74

absorption of feedback may not be intentional by the author, but because information is much more quickly spread via the Internet, they will collaborate with commenters and users in some capacity. Furthermore, the amount of upvotes and/or downvotes indexes to the author the reception of the story, which also creates an element of collaboration – if the author were writing to no one, there would be no response. These collaborative aspects emphasize the efficiency and collaborative aspect of digital spaces.

With digital folktales come a sense of collective identity, indexed by the comments and the online communities themselves. In the case of Slenderman, the collective identity coalesced through the multimodal circulation of the story as well as the believability of the story. Ultimately, this sense of collective identity reached its apex with the murder of a girl by two teenage girls who heavily believed in Slenderman.

Online, it is easy to create this sense of collective identity - commenters upvote others' comments, and reply to them, either agreeing with their statement or disagreeing. Here, we can invoke Bloomaert's concept of "conviviality", where likes and comments produce a *mode of social action*.⁶⁰ Referring to "liking" and "commenting," Bloomaert writes: "What happens here is 'communion' in the sense of Malinowski: identity statements expressing, pragmatically and metapragmatically, membership of some group."⁶¹ For those engaging with the Slenderman tale, liking, commenting, and sharing creates both a collective identity and "communion." Internet users thus become members of a group that is bonded through the tale of Slenderman.

⁶⁰ Bloomaert, "Conviviality and Collectives on Social Media," 2

⁶¹ Ibid, 6

4.3 The “Folk”

In digital spaces, who is considered the “folk” in folklore is very important. For anthropologists and folklorists, it is significant to determine who the folk are, because according to Marcel Rioux, “It is all too evident that he who would study the total culture of a society must take into account all the fact and all the groups and sub-groups which make up the society under study.”⁶² When folklore studies began to crop up, the “folk” was “inevitably defied as a *dependent* rather than an *independent* entity. In other words, *folk* was defined in contrast with or in opposition to some other population group.”⁶³ The category of the folk became equated to the European peasant⁶⁴ and thus was completely distinct from noble and elite groups. But who is the “folk” in digital spaces? Does the category of the folk expand? Does the category of the folk disappear? According to Trevor Blank: “Folk groups are readily identifiable on the Internet, as evidenced by chat forums, blogs, online political activity, fan web pages, and a plethora of other interrelated concepts.”⁶⁵ In the case of the Reddit and Creepypasta tales, the “folk” are both the users and commenters interacting with the stories, and the authors. Alan Dundes writes: “The term ‘folk’ can refer to *any group of people whatsoever* who share at least one common factor.”⁶⁶ He goes on to write that “with this modern conception of folk, we see that we can no longer think of the folk in monolithic terms as a relatively homogenous group of peasants living in a symbiotic relationship with an urban center. Folk is not a dependent variable but an independent variable.”⁶⁷ In this way, we can see that the “folk” on the

⁶² Rioux, “Folk and Folklore,” 193

⁶³ Dundes, “Who are the Folk?” 2

⁶⁴ Ibid

⁶⁵ Blank, “Introduction: Toward a Conceptual Framework for the Study of Folklore and the Internet,” 8

⁶⁶ Dundes, 6

⁶⁷ Dundes, 8

internet is a much wider group of people and encompasses nearly everyone. This is significant to the argument of the gendered status quo because it emphasizes the wide amount of people reached through the circulation of folklore in the digital sphere.

4.4 Authorship

Authorship is another salient aspect of digital folklore. In *Digital Authorship*, R. Lyle Skains claims that authorship has shifted and manifested differently through the digital sphere: “The twenty-first century, however, has ushered in a new era of authorship...I have termed this breed of author the *demotic author*: one who is ‘of the people,’ participating in a community of writers and readers...”⁶⁸ This new era of authorship, evoking the demotic author, can be best represented through digital tales. The authors are “of the people” in that they are interacting with and responding asynchronously to other users about the story. Skains presents readers with a tangible example of this demotic author through the concept of fanfiction, which is slightly tangential to Reddit and Creepypasta tales. Skains writes: “...writing fanfic creates deeply attentive and invested readers who not only identify with the texts they read, they take ownership of them.”⁶⁹

This multi-proprietorship emphasizes the conviviality Bloomaert discusses, in that multiple authors can convene over what is written, co-written, and edited. In this way, folklore is a fantastic avenue for gathering multiple groups of people into believing and practicing ideas. What this means for the gendered status quo, then, is that under the rules of conviviality, female subordination can be easily agreed upon and perpetuated.

⁶⁸ Skains, “The Rise of the Demotic Author,” 2

⁶⁹ Skains, “The Rising Underclass of the Fanfic Author: Introduction,” 62

Each of these findings has a common theme: the efficient reach and spread to people through digital spaces. What does this mean for folklore and the gendered status quo? In what follows, I will analyze two tales and discuss how they reinforce the gendered status quo through the employment of the findings mentioned in this chapter.

Chapter 5: Folkloric Horror and Female Characters: Two Digital Stories

With the creation of the Internet came a variety of platforms for communication and connection, and Reddit and Creepypasta are just some of those platforms. Their purpose is to foster online connections and share creations (drawings, stories, jokes). Specifically, regarding this thesis, I will be analyzing two folkloric horror tales on the Reddit and Creepypasta platforms that center simultaneously monstrous and sexually tempting female characters. In combining traditional folklore theory with the use of technology and the Internet, I argue that digital folkloric horror clearly maintains a gendered status quo. In other words, I argue that folklore circulated through the digital sphere allows readers and Internet users to conceptualize the story in such a way that perpetuates gender stereotypes.

Clicking on the “[NoSleep](#)” page on Reddit, one is brought to a page with black and blue accenting, and a cover image titled: “NoSleep.” The title is written in a shaky font with a black background and stars – somewhat evoking the “Twilight Zone” logo. While there seems to be some homage to the “Twilight Zone,” the “NoSleep” logo includes the little Reddit robot, indexing that this space is specifically Reddit owned. This page is described as “a place for redditors to share their scary personal experiences.”⁷⁰



⁷⁰ “NoSleep,” Reddit, <https://www.reddit.com/r/nosleep/>

Scrolling through the page, one is met with bold headed titles – many of them vague and inconspicuous. One is titled: “the weeping woman”⁷¹ and another is titled “The Elevator.”⁷² The purpose of this Reddit page is not only to spook those surfing the internet, but to share, collaborate, and engage with people’s creative content. It is a way for “users” hiding behind a cartoon avatar to share their hobby of writing horror stories.

5.1 First Analysis

“Something’s Really Weird About My Sexy New Neighbor” is an example of that creative content so widely shared via “NoSleep.” This tale was posted as a six-part series, with its first post created in November 2016. The story is about a simultaneously sexually tempting and monstrous woman with an evil motive. It’s written in first person and exudes a casualness – it’s written like a diary entry. The story has garnered 8,271 “upvotes” – a digital affirmation akin to Facebook’s “like.” The story centers around a teenage boy named JB – short for Jean Baptiste. His brother Sam and his father are relocated to Tulsa, Oklahoma due to his father’s new job. When they move into the new house, the two boys immediately notice the titular “sexy” neighbor – she is middle aged and described as pretty in a “Barbie-doll kinda way.”⁷³ They initially take note of the woman’s breasts and other body parts, and frequently watch her together through their window. As the days go on, the boys realize that the woman is not just “sexy,” but creepy – they witness her digging in her backyard very late at night and staring at them

⁷¹ Ibid

⁷² Ibid

⁷³ “Something’s Really Weird About My Sexy New Neighbor,” Reddit, https://www.reddit.com/r/nosleep/comments/68jsyc/somethings_really_weird_about_mySexy_new_neighbor/

expressionlessly through her own window. Although the boys are genuinely creeped out by the neighbor, they never dismiss their intense fascination with her figure.

Additionally, within this modern folktale is a “meta-folktale”: the father in the story tells the boys a warning story of a boy named Red Finney who went missing when he was a young boy. The odd thing is, the father describes, the woman across the street that the boys are so infatuated with was the same woman that lived on the father’s street years ago. He tells them to stay away from her and says: “That female is evil.” The boys soon find out that the woman is, by their perceptions, “evil,” as she uses her sexual temptation to lure in men and boys. At one point in the story, the boys have a strange encounter with the neighbor, where she tells them that she is under an old man’s spell, and the man is using her as a sort of bait for kidnapping and murdering people. At one point, the boys have an interaction with the neighbor – she tells them that all those weird things the boys have seen her doing is not actually her, it’s the man whose spell she is under. She says, “That wasn’t me...That was him. He just looks like me sometimes.”⁷⁴ She tells the boys the story about how she was “taken” by this old man named Pross, and JB and his brother offer her some sanctuary in their house. Later that night, as the woman is crawling into JB’s bed, his mother comes up to say goodnight:

“So Mom sees the girl in my bed, she puts her hands on her chest and says, ‘Jean-Baptiste, who is this man?’”⁷⁵

JB is shocked because as his mother sees the figure in the bed as an old man, he sees the figure of the beautiful, sexy woman, smiling an evil smirk. Eventually, the father goes missing, and the story is over somewhat anti-climactically, but nonetheless ends with a

⁷⁴ “Something’s Really Weird About My Sexy New Neighbor,” Part 4

⁷⁵ Ibid

“lesson.” JB, the main character, says, “But if any of you see her – you’ll know if you do, believe me – **don’t let dem tiddies**⁷⁶ **fool you.**”⁷⁷

First, we must explore whether this story is categorically folkloric. There is wide ambivalence regarding what constitutes the genre of folklore. Vladimir Propp has influenced other folklorists in both agreeing and debating with the claim that that all folklore follows a uniform structure.⁷⁸ Propp’s studies primarily considers fairytales, which have a very distinct structure, and can almost be plotted with a template. Thomas Seobok tends to agree with this morphological stability, but argues that content varies with each story, creating an individual “texture.”⁷⁹ He explains that “texture” means, “...each text is marked by a unique set of features which impart it to a certain particularity and concreteness or – to borrow a label from literary criticism – texture.”⁸⁰ In agreement with Seobok, I argue that this tale *is* folkloric, as its form is relatively similar to other folkloric tales. Yet, this story has a particularly specific “texture” in its content and delivery. The story is written like an intimate diary entry designed to share with only your closest friends. The diary-like format of the story pulls the reader in with a sort of intriguing “lean in and whisper” technique. This type of communication, the abundant typing errors, and the diary like indexing of days – “Sunday, Monday” – is meant to create a sort of aura of authenticity, which is the folktales’ marked “texture.”

Furthermore, in terms of traditional folklore theory, we can recall William Bascom’s four functions of folklore. “Something’s Really Weird About My Sexy New

⁷⁶ This is how the word is spelled in the story.

⁷⁷ “Something’s Really Weird About My Sexy New Neighbor,” Reddit, https://www.reddit.com/r/nosleep/comments/68jsyc/somethings_really_weird_about_mySexyNewNeighbor/ Part 6

⁷⁸ Bauman and Briggs, “Genre, Intertextuality, and Social Power,” 136

⁷⁹ Ibid, 137

⁸⁰ Ibid, 136

Neighbor” fits into each function. Recall that his four functions were: 1) an escape from reality, 2) a validation/justification of culture, 3) a function of pedagogy, and 4) a function of maintaining conformity. As a story that centers the female, it validates gender perceptions and maintains a level of conformity in that women are only reduced to their “sexiness” – this is a common perception in the real world, and the tale is working to make readers think it is true of all women. The tale also serves as a function of pedagogy, as it teaches readers a lesson, albeit a negative one. The story fulfills each function that Bascom proposes and creates and maintains its own literary “texture.” According to these criteria, “Something’s Really Weird About My Sexy New Neighbor” would be within the digital folkloric canon.

But is it a horror story? At face value, it contains all the classic horror elements – it is disturbing, suspenseful, tinged with both reality and a distinct unreality. Anyone who has read Stephen King will notice that the story is somewhat intended to echo a King-like quality – the story involves young boys who move into a new neighborhood and soon discover not everything is as it seems. The affective response conjured by the horror is evident in the boys’ reactions throughout the story. Throughout the story there is plenty of language indicating that JB and Sam are afraid of their neighbor: “I don’t want to look. It’s just too freaky.”⁸¹ These affective responses are not only evident via the characters in the story, but also via the Reddit users, materialized by the number of “upvotes.” In this way, the story certainly falls under the horror category.

⁸¹ “Something’s Really Weird About My Sexy New Neighbor,” Reddit, https://www.reddit.com/r/nosleep/comments/68jsyc/somethings_really_weird_about_mySexyNewNeighbor

The representation of the “abject” female is particularly clear in this story. Frequently throughout the story, the neighbor’s body parts are referred to in an objectifying and disturbing manner. She’s described as “stacked”, with “big ol’ melons” and a “pumpkin ass.”⁸² Moreover, she’s referred to as “evil” and inherently dangerous and further and isn’t even given a name in the story. She is simply referred to as “the sexy new neighbor.” This is what makes her the epitome of the abject female – she is first anonymized, not given a name, and only referred to by her redemptive “sexiness.” Then she is vilified through words like “evil” and “dangerous.” Her ontology as a woman is conflated with her actions of luring men in to kill them – what she *is* is what she *does*. When she is seen as “sexy,” she is within a liminal space – she has not crossed a boundary because she remains within a typical perception of women. However, recall the quote by Jeffrey Jerome Cohen, where he claims that once a woman oversteps boundaries laid out for her, she becomes monstrous.⁸³ When she turns “evil” she is no longer within a liminal space – she is now definitively the monstrous “other.”

In “Something’s Really Weird About My Sexy New Neighbor” we see that there are clear elements of reality – JB and his brother move into a real house in a real place, they both go to school, and they are realistically curious boys. While there are elements of reality in this folktale, we can conclude that what makes this digital folktale worth analyzing is not its element(s) of reality in the story but the fact that readers are *sucked* into the reality so much so that they begin applying the content of the story to their *own* reality. The comments demonstrate that the Reddit users are thrust into the sort of imagined world that the author has created and are empathizing with the affective

⁸² Ibid

⁸³ Refer to footnote 46

responses the boys in the story are feeling. There is extreme anticipation for the next part of the story to be posted: “If there isn’t a part-2, you’ll be wearing your balls for earrings,” “Great storytelling!” “It’s a creepy start! Keep it up.”⁸⁴ The author of the story even posits himself as JB and pretends that the events are happening in real time – and many of the Reddit users believe this. The author writes in response to someone’s anticipation for part two: “Lol I’ll update if something happens. Kinda hope it doesn’t, honestly.”⁸⁵ One comment says, “Dude if I were you I would just move to a new neighborhood. Don’t mess around with this shit.”⁸⁶ Another comment says: “Can you take a picture of her house,”⁸⁷ giving a truly tangible example of how real people think this story is.

Interestingly, in this specific tale, the affective response typically evoked by horror is also evoked by the neighbor’s abject femaleness. The characters are both frightened and excited by the neighbor and it seems that they cannot decide which feeling is more prevalent – excitement or fear. At one point in the story the boys are staring at their neighbor through the window, observing her strange and scary behaviors, when JB tells Sam the woman is half-naked: “He jumps up and starts looking with me right away. Man! And here he was supposed to be all scared, but I say the word ‘naked’ and he’s up like grandpa at the bingo hall.”⁸⁸

Reddit users seem to express a similar affective response themselves, both in terms of horror and the intrigue of the abject female. In terms of the abject femaleness of

⁸⁴ Comments under “Something’s Really Weird About My Sexy New Neighbor,” Reddit, https://www.reddit.com/r/nosleep/comments/68jsyc/somethings_really_weird_about_mySexy_new_neighbor/

⁸⁵ Ibid

⁸⁶ Ibid

⁸⁷ Ibid

⁸⁸ Comments, <https://www.reddit.com/comments/695bbf>

the story, many comments are clearly objectifying and misogynistic: “Modern day succubus,” “I’d still smash,”⁸⁹ etc. Here, with the horror and the intrigue by the abject female, the folktale is fulfilling Bascom’s second function of folklore: the validation/justification of culture. The affective response(s) expressed by the readers/Reddit users create and affirm both the imagined space where the story is posited, as well as a space of reality, where their perceptions of abject and evil femaleness from the story are superimposed onto women in the real world. In this way, our current perceptions of gender relations are thus validated and “justified” by the language of objectification and the use of the female as a conduit for evil within the story.

5.2 Second Analysis

The title of the second story I will be analyzing is: “The Woman in the Snow.” Underneath the title is a NSFW warning: “This page contains content that is NSFW (not safe for work) and may not be suitable for all audiences.”⁹⁰ Above the title in a small heading reads: “in: Monsters, Nature, Places, and 2 more.”⁹¹ When you click on the “2 more” link, a drop-down box appears with the words “NSFW” and “Dismemberment.” These are the key words associated with the story, indexing what the story is about.

“The Woman in the Snow” begins with the speaker describing a fictional forest in Norway, called Isengleskogen. The speaker writes:

“Isengleskogen is a forest in northern Norway. I recently moved to Lakselev for work. Even though it was January, I figured that since I was out in the wilderness, that I might as well go out into the woods to explore a bit. There wasn’t a whole lot to do in town. Besides, I’d heard the trails in Ingelskogen were pretty nice.

⁸⁹ Comments, https://www.reddit.com/r/nosleep/comments/68jsyc/somethings_really_weird_about_mySexy_new_neighbor/

⁹⁰ “The Woman in the Snow,” https://creepypasta.fandom.com/wiki/The_Woman_in_the_Snow

⁹¹ Ibid

There were only a few blocks between my house and the edge of the woods, anyway.”⁹²

The main character is set to take a hike in the forest, and not too long into their walk, they realize they are not alone. The character sees that there is a naked woman alone in the distance. The character calls out to her but receives no response. Immediately after noticing the woman, the character is put under a sort of trance: “I could barely see her moving between the trees, drifting almost casually through the snow. Something struck me about her appearance, though. I had to get closer to her to know if I was right or not.”⁹³ The character then calls out to the woman and, again, gets no response. While it is unclear if the main character is male or female, they are clearly entranced by the woman’s appearance. The character says, “Without going into any lurid details, I’ll just say her body and what little of her face I managed to see was damn-near perfect.”⁹⁴ Again, the character is distracted from his or her main goal to help the woman, by the beautiful body and face of the woman. Eventually, the character continues to follow the woman and soon he notices she is levitating, and not actually leaving any footprints. In blindly following the woman, the character becomes lost. The reality of the situation then becomes a little clearer to the character, in that they begin to be worried by and scared of the woman. Finally, the character notices the woman is not *really* human:

“I looked up from my struggle to notice her now standing very close to me, nearly arm’s length away. That’s when I lost it. I began to will myself away from her. I took off running, not caring what direction I was headed anymore. As long as I could get away from that monster, that thing. She wasn’t human, or if she was, she wasn’t a normal human.”⁹⁵

⁹² Ibid

⁹³ Ibid

⁹⁴ Ibid

⁹⁵ Ibid

Eventually, as the character continues to run, they stumble upon the woman-creature devouring a middle-aged man:

“When I looked down, I saw her. I now saw the full scope of the bone pile. It was huge. It looked almost like one of those mass graves that genocides and massacres have been known to produce. There were some animal bones too; deer, birds, dogs, but it seemed like it was mostly people. As I looked closely, I saw tooth marks on the bones. As I looked up, I saw exactly what she was doing, the exact source of that noise. It was a man. It looked to be a middle aged man, or at least what was left of him. His body was missing from around his stomach down. She was holding his torso up, devouring him...Where it had once wore its disguise as a normal woman, attempting to maintain a sort of dignity or beauty, its façade had mostly been abandoned. Its mouth opened too wide, probably due to what seemed to be her cheeks missing, and hungrily tore off chunks of flesh, ravenously, animalistically.”⁹⁶

The story ends with the character cautioning readers from going to the Ingleskogen forest, especially alone.

One can easily see the similar themes across the two digital tales. There is a woman, considered doubly “other”, a main character or characters who seem to identify with the male gender, and an element of horror.

As with “Something’s Really Weird about My Sexy New Neighbor,” we should explore whether “The Woman in the Snow” is categorically folkloric. As I’ve shown in the previous analysis, the first tale was folkloric, due to its format and its individualistic “texture.” The story’s individual texture consisted of the diary entry format, and the fact that the writer interacted with the readers. “The Woman in the Snow,” while written more like a traditional tale or novel with a first-person point of view, still contains its own individual texture. Its texture consists of the way in which the story is laid out, and

⁹⁶ Ibid

additionally, how the narrator communicates with his audience(s). For example, the texture of the story is tangible in that the climax of the story is not until the very end, and furthermore, the antagonist character (in this case, the woman-creature) seems to act as a magnet for the main character, drawing the character in. More specifically, though, the story's texture includes the way in which it stands aside from other folktales. There is a slight sense of humor and a lot of implied sexual tension, as well as the way in which the story concludes – with a warning directed at the reader. Invoking Seobok, then, the story's individualistic texture helps to define the tale as folklore.

The story also follows Bascom's four functions of folklore, most clearly following the third function: "a function of pedagogy." The cautionary warning at the end of the tale serves as both a pedagogic and cautionary tool – readers are warned about the dangers of venturing into Ingleskogen alone. Even further, readers are warned against helping stranded, naked women, implying to readers that they if they tap into being a savior, they may be eaten. Bascom's other functions of folklore are perhaps implicit but nonetheless salient in determining whether the tale is folkloric. First, it is a tale that allows readers to escape from *their own* reality. I hesitate to say that it is an escape from reality in general, because there are realistic elements to the tale, and the moral warning at the end could be applied to real life events. Instead, the story allows readers to escape their own reality and enter the reality of Ingleskogen. Just as with "Something's Really Weird About My Sexy New Neighbor" there is the potential for readers to apply the reality of the story to their own life – in that sense it would be reasonable to believe that male readers apply the way the "creature" is othered in the story to women in real life. In that same vein, the tale acts as a justification/validation of culture. As I will discuss

further in the following chapter, not only does it validate rules and norms about venturing out into a new place alone, but it validates and justifies cultural norms and perceptions about women. The fourth function - maintaining conformity – is similar to the second function in its justification of misogynistic culture. The story clearly shows that 1) you should not go out into the woods alone, and 2) women are dangerous. Thus, “The Woman in the Snow” definitively follows Bascom’s functions of folklore.

Looking at the comments following the tale, many users appreciated and enjoyed the story. Comments like, “This really took me into the story. 9.5/10,” “10/10 very well written,” and “This story gave me the creeps. Very well written from start to end and more realistic than anything else I’ve read today. 9/10. Only losing points for being slightly boring near the beginning”⁹⁷ show the enjoyment readers had by reading the story. Users are commenting on not only the story itself, but the *way* it was written, and the way in which it sucked readers in. Other users seem to be taking the story much more seriously. One comment says, “I would love to know more about the entity in this one. Definitely sounds like some sort of folklore being, but it doesn’t sound like a Huldra⁹⁸...”⁹⁹ Another comment writes, “I remember first reading this story and being amazed, and it’s still as amazing in its like 5th read by me. Having been into Norway before and hiking, and also have lived in the terrible Northern Sweden area for a few months before, I have to say, this hits pretty close to home.”¹⁰⁰ Here, these comments are revealing the way that these users are situating themselves in relation to the story. The first comment shows that the user is serious about the entity within the story and feels the

⁹⁷ Comments on “The Woman in the Snow”

⁹⁸ A Huldra is a Norwegian folktale creature, usually a woman, who seduces her victims.

⁹⁹ Comments, “The Woman in the Snow.”

¹⁰⁰ Ibid

need to categorize it. The other user feels a locational connection to the story. Analyzing these comments can help us understand users' own analyses of and attachments to the story.

5.3 Combining Chapter 4 Findings with Analysis

In summary, and to recall Chapters 3 and 4, “Something’s Really Weird About My Sexy New Neighbor” and “The Woman in the Snow” are both tales that are created through a sort of hybrid mosaic of social norms, beliefs, and ideas. For example, the content within “Something’s Really Weird About My Sexy New Neighbor” shows the author or authors’ beliefs of, at least, how women are perceived by others. By portraying the sexy neighbor as the quintessential “hot” woman across the street, the authors are laying out a very common trope and fantasy. In “The Woman in the Snow” there are traditional folktale elements concerning the rescue of an endangered woman – the main character goes out of their way to “save” the woman, until they find out she is not really a woman. In this way, the foundation of each tale is made up of a sort of mosaic of social norms and beliefs.

Furthermore, as mentioned in chapter four, each story has their own individual “texture” creating a sort of authenticity in which the potentiality for belief can take place. Recall the comments mentioned in chapter four: “Dude if I were you I would just move to a new neighborhood. Don’t mess around with this shit,” and “Can you take a picture of her house.”¹⁰¹ These comments are tangible examples of the believability of the story, and this believability was promoted through the way in which the story was written. For

¹⁰¹ Comments, https://www.reddit.com/r/nosleep/comments/68jsyc/somethings_really_weird_about_mySexyNewNeighbor/

example, “Something’s Really Weird About My Sexy New Neighbor” has its own authentic texture in the way it is written like a diary entry. Additionally, the creator of the story authentically interacts with the users and readers, writing things like, “Lol, I’ll update if something happens. Kinda hope it doesn’t, honestly.”¹⁰² Here, the author is expressing authenticity in two ways – 1) the author is presenting readers with the notion that the events in the story are happening in real time, and 2) the author is expressing an authentic reaction to the events that are “occurring.” Readers and users can then take the author’s authentic writing and beliefs at face value, allowing them to further believe the events themselves.

Even further, readers go in to reading these tales with a preconceived notion that the events are real, because the NoSleep “about page” says, “NoSleep is a place for redditors to share their scary personal experiences.”¹⁰³ The NoSleep page is specifically dedicated, then, for users to *recount* what has happened to them, or at least, to write stories in a way that seem authentic. One could argue that because these stories *all* have the potentiality to be true, it might even constitute the entire NoSleep subreddit as a folktale.

Further, the authenticity of the stories is multilayered - there is a more of an impetus to believe the stories are true because there is a blatant statement that these stories are personal experiences, *and* the author is writing it in such a way that bolsters authenticity. However, taking the authenticity of the story and applying the fictional events and mythos to the real world is where the concept of authenticity becomes slippery. This gets at the “folkloresque,” a word termed by Michael Dylan Foster, “to

¹⁰² Ibid

¹⁰³ NoSleep About Community, <https://www.reddit.com/r/nosleep/>

produce potent rhetorical devices that can in turn be enlisted by others to serve various discursive ends.”¹⁰⁴ Jeffrey Tolbert writes about the murder of a twelve-year-old girl by two other teens, which was spurred by the Slenderman Mythos. As mentioned before, these stories are not so much propelled by proper belief, but by the possibility or potentiality for belief: “...by forging connections to real-world belief traditions and thereby attributing the *possibility of belief* to Slenderman narratives, the folkloresque adds another dimension of ‘realness’ to the fictional Slender Man mythos.”¹⁰⁵ In the Reddit and Creepypasta tales, their “folkloresque” nature furthers their believability and authenticity, and in extreme cases, can be applied to the real world. In other words, if the stories were written in a way that didn’t mimic a folktale, there would be a distinct lack of “realness,” foreclosing readers’ capability to believe the stories as true. Regarding gender, then, the authenticity of these horror folktales firmly maintains the status quo, as the capability of these stories to be believed propels application in the real world.

It is equally important to analyze these stories considering publics and counterpublics. A public is twofold, as defined by Michael Warner. Warner writes that publics act as a “social totality”¹⁰⁶ in that large, dominant groups of people are categorized holistically by what they believe and preach socially. Publics also act as a “concrete audience.”¹⁰⁷ As publics are dominant and totalizing, counterpublics are peripheral and marginal, only encompassing a small portion of citizens. Publics and counterpublics only exist relative to each other – one cannot exist on its own without the inverse. In terms of these digital folktales, it is appropriate to situate those who identify with the male gender as the

¹⁰⁴ Tolbert, “Dark and Wicked Things,” 92

¹⁰⁵ Ibid, 93

¹⁰⁶ Warner, “Publics and Counterpublics,” 49

¹⁰⁷ Ibid, 50

public, and thus those who identify with the female gender, as the counterpublic. This schism is not only represented via real users' and commenters' reactions to the story – it is also replicated *within* the story. In other words, the male public that absorbs and ingests these folktales are the dominant group. They are the dominant public because in both the story and in the real world, they are portrayed and represented as main characters which are in complete opposition to the “evil” female creature. Thus, female characters within the story, and female readers, are relegated to being a counterpublic.

Additionally, these digital tales reveal the concept of authorship, specifically in terms of whether Internet users are taking ownership of these stories. Recall the multi-proprietorship that becomes clearer in the digital sphere - when you search the title of the Reddit story, many other sources come up. For example, besides Reddit, other sources include www.stitcher.com, www.steemit.com, www.anchor.fm.com. The fact that several other sites have circulated the story that originated on Reddit, suggests that readers are taking, perhaps indirectly, ownership of the story and placing the story in other locations. In this way, digital folkloric tales lend themselves to a sort of collaborative authorship, where more than the author can have property of a story. Bloomaert's idea of conviviality is particularly important here, as Internet users are marking themselves as members of a group (in this case, a group interested in digital horror folklore) by rebranding the story on different websites. Further, the multi-proprietorship could also be argued as being an unintentional and indirect way for people to foster digital connections.

5.4 Recalling Monstrosity and Boundaries

As I've mentioned in previous chapters, male characters in folklore are typically seen as brave, courageous, but simultaneously victimized by female characters. While it

is unclear whether the main character in “The Woman in the Snow” is male or female, the female creature “preys” on men, so let’s assume the main character is a male. In “Something’s Really Weird About My Sexy New Neighbor,” the female character is majorly sexualized by the two boys in the story. They use provocative phrases to describe her body - “the big tiddie girl,” “pumpkin ass,” and more - and frequently make mention of how they’d like to have sexual relations with her. When the boys find out she is indeed evil, there is a shift in attraction, but not by much. Here is where female characters become complex in their ontology - she is both desired and wanted through her sexuality as a female, but undesired and unwanted through her evilness as a female. She becomes a sort of enigma, insofar as the boys can’t decide if they want her, or if they want to stay away from her. We see this in “The Woman in the Snow” as well. The main character is taken aback by her beauty initially, feeling distracted by her “damn-near perfect” naked body and face. She is seductive, in the way that she is considered “perfect,” but suddenly she becomes disgusting, inhuman, and monstrous, as her body starts to change. The main character considers her monstrous *before* they see her devouring a human body – they characterize her as monstrous and ugly once they see her body transforming from the illusory, perfect body. “The Woman in the Snow” is thus considered doubly abject – she is at one moment, female, which according to Kristeva and other theorists is abject, and at the next moment, is abnormal and unwanted, furthering her abjection. The “creature’s” abjection is solidified throughout the wording and phrasing within the text, along with the cautionary warning at the end, signaling to readers that this creature is not something to seek out.

5.5 Pursuing Change through Digital Communities

The digital spaces in which folklore circulates creates a great space for opportunity (sharing content, communication, and connection). Samuel L. Wilson and Leighton C. Peterson discuss “The Anthropology of Online Communities” and write: “Specific case studies such as Kuwaiti women’s uses of the Internet for political action, American teenage dating practices in chat rooms, and a study of the norms and practices of community maintenance in an online lesbian café illustrate how offline social roles and existing cultural ideologies are played out, and sometimes exaggerated, in online communication.”¹⁰⁸ These examples show how digital platforms can strengthen communities. While digital spaces can strengthen communities, they can also concretize and perpetuate damaging status quos, privileging some and disadvantaging others. However, the strength of digital communities remains strong and can be used to counter those damaging status quos.

As an example, there are interesting digital communities of women among Reddit that write about the damage done to society by male literary writers. The subreddit “r/menwritingwomen” specifically focuses on the trope of men who write about women, and interestingly, a number of this subreddit’s posts analyze NoSleep content. One post is titled, “Reading the top stories on r/nosleep was a mistake.”¹⁰⁹ Underneath the title is a screen capture of a story written on NoSleep.

¹⁰⁸ Wilson and Peterson, “The Anthropology of Online Communities,” 456

¹⁰⁹ “R/menwritingwomen,” Reddit,

https://www.reddit.com/r/menwritingwomen/comments/lmzvzc/reading_the_top_stories_on_rnosleep_was_a_mistake/

In my defense though, *she* was absolutely gorgeous. Brown eyes that twinkled mischievously; plump, kissable red lips that parted to reveal white teeth like perfect little sugar cubes and thick dark hair that gently tickled her shoulder blades. Her dresses clung to her like they couldn't get enough of her body. And I understood why. She had just the right amount of curves in just the right places. I wanted to sink my teeth into them. Just... scrumptious.

Figure 1.1

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The comments under this post are interesting and seem to indirectly scold the author of this text. When searching through this subreddit and typing “Nosleep” into the search bar, other examples of misogynistic writing appear. For example, one post is titled, “Delightful piece of writing in r/nosleep today.”¹¹¹

The text that is shown reads:

I couldn't help let my eyes wander across every expose inch of skin, heart fluttering as my leering gaze met her clothing and I wondered what she looked like underneath. She was lean but athletic, clearly strong without being stocky. Perfect, really. Just perfect.

I forced my head away for the nineteenth time, then tried to start a conversation again for the thirteen time, growing more self-conscious with each failure.

But what was I supposed to talk about? *She's young enough to be your granddaughter* flashed through my mind. It seems the most intrusive thoughts worm their way into our minds so much easier when we try to fight back against them.

Figure 1.2

¹¹⁰ Figure 1.1: Screen capture of story excerpt

¹¹¹

https://www.reddit.com/r/menwritingwomen/comments/o19681/delightful_piece_of_writing_in_rnosleep_today/

I squeezed the napkin hidden on my lap while gazing at my barely touched chicken cordon bleu. The problem, I decided, was inertia. Once I'd gotten over my own conversational inhibitions, we would speak freely. That's what people do. They talk all the time about nothing, and the most inconsequential nonsense has a way of consuming the greatest amount of air. All I had to do was open my mouth and form words. Any words.

Figure 1.2 continued

Here, we can see some clearly objectifying language throughout. The comments in reaction to the writing signal a sense of distaste: “At least he basically opened with ‘leering gaze’ so you know right out of the gate that not being a creep is in the cards,” and “Yet another reason to back up the claim that men staring means they are thinking about what I look like naked.”¹¹² Another user writes, “Thank fuck she’s lean-athletic and not stocky-athletic. Heaven forbid a strong woman dare to appear strong and threaten his fragile masculinity.”¹¹³

These comments are examples of resistance in which women can push back on what has been written about the community (of women), in a way that empowers that community. These comments allow women to place the power and agency back onto them, rather than onto the male writer(s). While this subreddit doesn’t specifically focus on folklore as a primary genre, the use of NoSleep content as a site of analysis is significant. The use of NoSleep reveals that digital folkloric horror is a genre that is recognized by women as perpetuating gender hierarchies and stereotypes. In this way,

¹¹² Ibid

¹¹³ Ibid

this subreddit becomes a site of resistance and a place for female identifying people to challenge what has been written in folkloric horror.

Chapter 6: Conclusion

Throughout this thesis, I have discussed the theoretical background of folklore and the horror genre and mapped how certain thinkers theorize folklore and horror. By mapping these theories, I have also prompted thought about how folklore fits within the digital sphere. I discussed representations of gender in folkloric tales by highlighting the transcendence of boundaries and the concept of monstrosity, and how these aspects, when married with folklore, perpetuate the gendered status quo. Further, I explored broad findings in analyzing digital horror folklore. Digitized horror folk tales breed an emphasized level of belief and authenticity, which pushes readers to believe the perceptions in the story to be true, and thus to replicate those perceptions in the real world. Digitized horror folklore also creates collaborative communities, which are glued together by common ideas and perceptions of women. This collaboration is seen through Internet comments where users are agreeing with others by commenting or upvoting, and through collaborative authorship where users are open-sourcing content.

Folklore can reveal our most ingrained norms and notions. Folklore within the horror genre, circulated throughout the digital sphere makes this exceptionally clear. I have discussed that digitized folkloric horror that centers a female character inarguably objectifies the female community and thus perpetuates the gendered status quo. In this way, digitized horror folklore can be seen as having an extreme effect on perceptions of gender. And while digital spaces seem to reinforce this status quo through horror folklore, there seems to be a silver lining. Subreddits like *r/menwritingwomen* foster digital communities in ways that directly resist content like *NoSleep's* - they provide subordinated groups with the opportunity to reclaim their identity.

The two folkloric horror stories analyzed in this thesis are perfect examples of how creative media can reflect the ways in which we perceive one another. I found myself to be both shocked at the objectifying language about the women in the stories, yet at the same time, not shocked at all, because as a woman, I've heard this all before. Looking at the comments under the stories was a stark reminder of how pervasive the negative perceptions of the "Other" are, and it made me even more invested in this research. In writing this thesis, I wanted to challenge the common idea that folklore is a harmless form of media, with no real-world implications. Instead of viewing folklore as one sided in its fun and triviality, I hope this research has shown that folklore can be simultaneously damaging *and* beneficial. All this is to say, digital folklore is a particularly useful tool in revealing social and cultural perceptions of individuals and groups, as well as revealing how to counter those perceptions.

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