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“IT’S A HOAX!”

A PRACTICAL GUIDE FOR UNDERSTANDING AND SURVIVING WEIRD INTERNET
PHENOMENA

by

Camille S. Price

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree

of

MASTER OF ARTS

in

Folklore and American Studies

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ABSTRACT

“It’s a hoax!”

A Practical Guide for Understanding and Surviving Weird Internet Phenomena

by

Camille S. Price, Master of Arts

Utah State University, 2020

Major Professor: Dr. Lynne S. McNeill
Department: English

This project dives into some of the darkest of online spaces, as I seek to uncover the legends, narratives, and beliefs that encourage and popularize culture surrounding self-harm. Building on the extensive research that has been conducted on folk antagonists born on the internet such as the Slenderman, I will discuss another character named Momo who, according to legend, lead their primarily young followers through a series of self-inflicted, harmful acts, each increasing in severity, with the final act ultimately being the taking of one’s life. Research will examine social media threads, YouTube videos, film/television, and fan fiction to unpack the "who, what, how" of the culture's primary participants, and what non-participants stand to gain from understanding its implications.

PUBLIC ABSTRACT

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Lastly, I could not have made it through this journey without my late dog, Johnny, and all of the many nights he slept next to me while I typed. I love and miss you, my little boy.

Camille S. Price

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In midsummer 2018, Momo—an infamous internet character—began permeating dark corners of the internet. Associated with a frightening image of a sculpture created by Japanese artist Keisuke Aiso of the special effects company *Link Factory*, Momo appeared as a female bust with long, black hair, bulging eyes and a sinister smile, perched atop two chicken-like legs. A photo of the sculpture was later taken by a different person and then posted to the reddit thread /r/creepy by Redditor AlmightySosa00, where it would eventually be swept up by other online users, thus paving the way for a weird internet phenomenon¹ to be born: The Momo Challenge (Know Your Meme 2020).

Momo’s unsettling depiction sparked an interest—particularly among young people, presumably Gen Z-ers, or Zoomers² as they are known colloquially—to try and contact her through WhatsApp, a popular messaging system.



Figure 1: “The Momo bust.” (Momo memes 2018)

According to the legend, once a person was able to successfully make contact with Momo, she then proceeded to send the caller disturbing images and messages. As

¹ Any strange online behaviors that cause alarm and/or don’t seem to make sense at first.

² Generation Z is the demographic cohort born after the year 1997 (Dimock 2019). The term often is shortened to “Gen Z,” or more colloquially as “zoomers” (a term based on a portmanteau of “baby boomers” and “Generation Z”) (Pseudo Fiction 2018).

communication persisted, the interaction reportedly escalated to the point of Momo demanding the caller to inflict self-harm or commit violent acts, with the ultimate act being the taking of one's life. This perceived interaction with Momo among young inquisitors became known as "The Momo Challenge," and according to the *Buenos Aires Times* was associated with the suicide of a 12-year-old girl, who took her own life in July 2018 supposedly in connection to this challenge (Mustafa 2018).

Chatter of the Momo Challenge resurged in early 2019 after internet trolls, online users who intentionally provoke and upset others online for their own amusement (Vicente 2020), began manipulating content featuring Momo appearances in YouTube videos of the popular children's entertainment show *Peppa Pig*, as well as in videos featuring scenes from the online game *Fortnite*, and other learning videos geared towards young audiences³. YouTube channel MrEuropeanTv⁴ posted a clip of one of these appearances occurring during a children's learning show. In the clip, a scene is shown depicting a young girl learning about kitchens and cooking, when the show is immediately interrupted by a black and white screen with Momo at the center of the frame (2019). Momo then proceeds to say the following to viewers:

Hey, it's Momo again. That was a neat trick, huh kids? Did you do everything Momo said to do last time? Well, I need another favor, but don't worry it's real easy, kids. Go find the sharpest toy you can find. Your dad may have one in the garage or just check mom's kitchen drawers. When you've found some nice, sharp toys, push the sharp end down really hard on your wrists from here [a pair of plastic gloves enters the frame from the bottom of the screen, razor blades are shown at the base of the hand slowly moving down the arms] to here. If it hurts, don't stop. You have to be brave for Momo. If you do it right, there should be lots of red stuff coming out. Remember that this is the easy and fun way. If you don't

³ It should be noted that YouTube videos of Momo appeared ostensibly in children's programs after the legend itself started to circulate.

⁴ MrEuropeanTv is a YouTube channel that typically features videos about music, news, cars, and travel. As of May 2020, the channel has over 12,000 subscribers.

do it, Momo will come get you while you sleep.

As the animated graphic of Momo's face is speaking into the camera, images of tools and other sharp kitchen objects appear on the screen. Two hands slide into view from the bottom of the screen and a demonstration of how to slit one's wrists is then shown to the show's viewers. The frame of Momo speaking into the camera then cuts out and the regular programming featuring the young child playing with a toy kitchen set picks up exactly where it left off.

After claims of Momo appearing in these online videos of children's shows and games surged, concerned educators and school administrators began alerting parents either through written letters or posts to their respective social media pages warning them of the dangers associated with this internet sensation (Dickson 2019). For example, Haslington Primary School, located in Haslington England, posted the following to its Facebook page on February 26, 2019:

We have become increasingly aware of highly inappropriate videos circulating online and are being viewed by children across the school. These video clips are appearing on many social media sites and YouTube (including Kids YouTube). One of the videos starts innocently, like the start of a Peppa Pig episode for example, but quickly turn into an altered version with violence and offensive language.

Another video clip is going by the name of 'MoMo' which shows a warped white mask which is promoting children to do dangerous tasks without telling their parents. Examples we have noticed in school include asking the children to turn the gas on or to find and take tablets.

As you can imagine, this is highly distressing for the children to view. We encourage you to be vigilant when your child is using any device or watching any clips. We would also encourage all parents/carers to remind the children of our school online rules:

KS1: If it upsets you, switch off the screen and tell an adult.

KS2: Save it, block it, report it.

If you have any concerns or questions, please speak to your child's class teacher.

These and other examples of weird internet phenomena highlighted in this article show that cultural oddities like the Momo Challenge have been shaped as a result of the internet's accessibility to wide audiences and content creators. No matter the role that we play in these phenomena—either as active participants or observers—at times, these phenomena seem to permeate society with frightening and/or confusing conversations at a rapid pace, which can be an intimidating experience. The goal of this article is to provide a basic, easy-to-use survival guide that can aid in understanding weird internet phenomena when they arise, so that ultimately these situations can become more survivable and the aftermath of which more manageable.

The Digital Folklore Project

I was first drawn to the study of weird internet phenomena as a researcher with the Digital Folklore Project (DFP), a virtual research center hosted by Utah State University's Department of English, Folklore Program, and Fife Folklore Archives in the Merrill-Cazier Library (DFP 2014)⁵. In early 2018, just a few months before Momo made her sweeping debut on the internet, the DFP started noticing internet content about Tide Pods that would later become tied for first place in that year's #digitaltrendoftheyear, a hashtag used to crowd-source digital folkloric trends from online users all around the

⁵ The following is a full description of Digital Folklore Project per USU's Department of English website: "The DFP tracks digital folklore trends (such as urban legends, Internet memes, hashtags, vines, and other trending items) on an annual basis. The DFP is dedicated to the documentation and study of this influential and growing cultural form. It creates digital depositories of this online lore and makes its annual findings publicly available regarding the most significant types of digital folklore for the calendar year" (2020).

world based on what they see in the various online spaces that they occupy. The content of the Tide Pod Challenge consisted of satirical memes showing how Tide Pods were a delicious addition to any regular food item. Content then shifted from satirical memes to youth, presumably zoomers, acting out this meme via YouTube footage showing them literally biting into Tide Pods. It was at this juncture that the Tide Pod Challenge was born, and the responses from outside observers, while varied in nature, were collectively both concerned and critical.

Many of the same players involved with the Tide Pod Challenge began interacting with the Momo Challenge in distinctly similar ways. For example, in both challenges zoomers were either genuinely curious seekers of the intrigue behind each internet phenomenon or were vocal criticizers of their peers who were. Both challenges also prompted responses of genuine concern and/or criticism from members of older generations. All of these responses to the Tide Pod Challenge and Momo Challenge spread through a variety of mediums including digital memes, news articles, popular culture, material culture, and more. Institutions became involved as well, namely social media sites such as YouTube, Facebook, Twitter, and in the case of Momo, Whatsapp was a central key player. (Sleight-Price, Ahlstone, and Jones 2018)

Whether or not an extraordinary number of young people were biting into Tide Pods or interacting with a malicious internet character, each example did illustrate the expression of real, lived experiences worthy of attention for the cultural narratives they highlighted regarding the concerns and challenges facing various generations, as well conflict that arose as a result of misunderstandings between members of older and younger generations. As a folklorist and researcher, it is my aim to investigate the ways

in which society at-large interprets and responds to these online trends—or weird internet phenomena—that are perceived as dangerous, and to provide tools for navigating those challenges productively as they emerge.

Defining Folklore

In order to understand how certain behaviors, emerge online, it is important to discuss a few key terms, first. There are many definitions of folklore that exist in a number of texts, but quite simply, folklore is informal culture that emerges at a level that is both grassroots and crowd sourced. As Lynne McNeill explains in her introductory folkloristics text, folklore can be broken down into four major areas: stuff we do (behavioral), stuff we believe (spiritual/conceptual), stuff we make (physical), and stuff we say (verbal) (2013:37-64). For example, folklore can include anything from rituals surrounding a specific holiday or time of year such as decorating a Christmas tree, community-based values or convictions that influence the preservation of activities such as farmers' markets or annual festivals, family recipes that made for special occasions such as special birthday cakes or secret pie recipes, particular crafts passed down by someone else like beadwork or jewelry-making, and narratives that we share with one another such as jokes and proverbs or words of wisdom.

Another term closely related to folklore is performance, and as theater scholar and playwright Richard Schechner articulated “Everything in human behavior indicates that we perform our existence, especially our social existence” (1982:14). Deborah A. Kapchan adds that “...there is an agentive quality to performance, a force, a playing out of identities and histories” (2003:121). It is also important to note that folklore does not

imply falsehood, nor does it relate specifically to cultural artifacts and behaviors that existed exclusively in the past. While folklore can certainly include both of those elements, many folklorists, including myself, study expressive culture that exists all around us right here, right now. These folkloric categories of behavior, belief, material culture, and narrative as articulated by McNeill (2013) often overlap with one another, and they provide a general overview of all that folklore encompasses: in short, folklore is in everything about our daily lives and within the communities of which we are a part. It is helpful to have a basic understanding of these terms in order to use the survival guide offered later in this article, as the “weird internet phenomena” that emerges around us is the stuff of folklore⁶.

Understanding Legends

One subgenre of folk narrative is legends, and these stories are often at the center of weird internet phenomena, as will be discussed later. Legends are a genre of folk narrative that is situated somewhere in between the “stuff we believe” and the “stuff we say” categories: they are the stories we tell and believe to be true, that are popularly regarded as historical (this could be mean within the recent or distant past, though an historical element is not always present in a legend) though they are usually unable to be authenticated. Legends are identifiable by a set of key characteristics. For example, they are visible, temporal/spacial, and “truthy”; In other words, the evidence supporting the legend can be debated. Renowned legend scholar Linda Dégh explains that “... [legends touch] upon the most sensitive areas of our existence, and its manifest forms cannot be

⁶ This means that you too can wear a “folklorist badge” by the end of this article!

isolated as simple and coherent stories. Rather, legends appear as products of conflicting opinions, expressed in conversation.” (Dégh 2001:2). Legends function as a way of negotiating the fears and anxieties of a community, provide answers to irrational events, and reinforce societal roles and stereotypes (Dégh 1971; Dégh and Vázsonyi 1983; Ellis 1989; McNeill and Tucker 2018; Peck 2015).

Additional features to look for in identifying a legend include its visibility, contemporary relevance, and debatability. One legend local to Logan, Utah, is that of the cemetery’s Weeping Woman. Locals will explain that the Weeping Woman statue—a prominently visible statue situated at the center of the cemetery—will produce tears on nights of full moons or Halloween or Friday the 13th, with added bonus points if a full moon coincides with any of those particular holidays. Other examples of legends that are visible to onlookers might also include old buildings considered to be “haunted,” and of course one of this paper’s primary case studies, Momo, with her startling image and widely known internet presence⁷. Additional features notable within a legend are its temporal and spatial aspects; in other words, how a particular haunting story or weird internet phenomenon is situated within the recent past or plausible present. And finally, legends are often told as being literally true while there always remains an interrogation of truth associated with them; if questions can be asked and evidence debated, chances are that what you are dealing with is a legend. For example, take this interview transcript regarding the Momo Challenge between *This Morning* hosts Holly Willoughby and Phillip Schoefield and guest Nicola Hartevelde, a parent who had one of her children

⁷ Additional examples dealing with specific “challenge-related” behaviors also include hanging and fainting games (Tucker 2014), the milk chug challenge (Jones 2018), and the babysitter murder legend.

commit suicide in 2017. Harteveld explains that she has other young children who were supposedly targeted by the Momo Challenge. At the beginning of the interview, they discuss the details surrounding the Momo Challenge and what it entails, why it became prevalent to the Harteveld family, and measures taken to address the matter at home. The group is also joined by psychologist Dr. Anna Colton (2019) and the interview begins with the group explaining the nature of the Momo Challenge (noted above). Ms. Harteveld explains that her children play a lot of Fortnite and she implies that Momo had appeared while they were playing the game. Ms. Willoughby asks for more information and the following conversation ensues:

HW: ...something like Momo, [is] spread by fear, and if I went home and said to Harry tonight, there is this thing called Momo dah, dah, dah. Is he going to go to school tomorrow and go, "Have you heard about Momo?" And am I perpetuating something I don't know?

AC: ...it's difficult to say. It's personal. I would probably say, "Look, there's a bit of chat about a scary image. If you see it, just don't engage in it. Shut it down."

HW: Is that not going to make him Google it? What would you do?

NH: That was my fear that if I didn't say anything about it and then they go into school and their friends have all seen it, and then they are curious and they do start Googling it then. So at least if you ingrain that in them, "This is what it is and it's dangerous, don't click on it." Or like I told my youngest that it was a virus and to stay away from it.

Phillip Schoefield (PS): I don't know that between the four of us, here, if anyone watching, that we've actually managed to explain or even understand. And that's the trouble with people of our age is understand[ing] what it is precisely. It's been described as a hoax. Some police forces have said that it's a phishing exercise. It's that sort of thing. Yeah, it's a scary face, but there's loads of them on the internet. What makes it dangerous? How does it link with suicide? What are we actually physically seeing that is causing this?

NH: I think it's the fact that whoever is behind it, whether or not it is a hoax, but there could be sort of people that are taking it on as being Momo, so to speak. And then our messaging, whether it be anonymously, a friend or somebody, asking them to do these things such as leaving the gas on in your kitchen or

harming yourselves.

HW: Or harming others.

NH: Or harming others. Exactly. So, it's a case of even if it is a hoax, all this hysteria and hype about it, is it perpetuate then for copycats to come and kind of take it on?

Throughout this conversation, it is clear that the nature of the Momo Challenge—who is behind it, what it entails, when it became a problem, where it is occupying space, why it matters, and how it is being used to influence audiences—is being debated among all conversants. The lack of objective verifiability of details surrounding the Momo Challenge is what helps us identify this phenomenon as being rooted in a legend.

Legends and the re-telling of those legends serve many purposes. They provide a rational answer to irrational events, reinforce gender stereotypes, and social roles. They also allow us to negotiate our fears and anxieties. In the case of Momo, people expressed concerns over internet security, safety controls in online platforms accessible to young people, how children interacted with Momo either as victims, seekers, or jokesters, and adults' insecurities about responding to the phenomenon in order to best protect younger populations. Similar fears related to internet safety have been expressed within digital folklore for many years; in fact, one may recall the Goodtimes virus of the 1990s, one of the first legends to emerge within the digital era. The Goodtimes virus warnings were transmitted to internet users via chain emails, and they cautioned its readers to avoid interacting with any email—either opening or deleting said emails—containing the phrase “Goodtimes or else their computers would be infected with a dangerous virus. The musician Laika details the hysteria surrounding that legend⁸ in a satirical song called

⁸ Upon sharing this song with a friend and mentor of mine, Dr. Lynne McNeill, she mentioned

“Badtimes” (2000):

“If you receive an e-mail with a subject of "Badtimes", delete it immediately without reading it. This is the most dangerous e-mail virus yet.

“It will re-write your hard drive. Not only that, but it will scramble any disks that are even close to your computer. It will recalibrate your refrigerator's coolness setting so all your ice cream melts. It will demagnetize the strips on all your credit cards, screw up the tracking on your VCR and use subspace field harmonics to render any CDs you try to play unreadable. It will give your ex-boy/girlfriend your new phone number. It will mix antifreeze into your fish tank. It will drink all your beer and leave its socks out on the coffee table when there's company coming over. It will put a dead kitten in the back pocket of your good suit and hide your car keys when you are late for work

“Badtimes will make you fall in love with a penguin. It will give you nightmares about circus midgets. It will pour sugar in your gas tank and shave off both your eyebrows while dating your current boy/girlfriend behind your back and billing the dinner and hotel room to your Visa card. It will seduce your grandmother. It does not matter if she is dead, such is the power of Badtimes, it reaches out beyond the grave to sully those things we hold most dear

“It moves your car randomly around parking lots so you can't find it. It will kick your dog. It will leave libidinous messages on your boss's voice mail in your voice. It is insidious and subtle. It is dangerous and terrifying to behold. It is also a rather interesting shade of mauve

“Badtimes will give you Dutch Elm disease. It will leave the toilet seat up. It will make a batch of methamphetamine in your bathtub and then leave bacon cooking on the stove while it goes out to chase high school kids with your new snowblower. These are just a few of the signs. Be very, very careful.”

Each of these legend examples—the Momo Challenge, the Tide Pod Challenge, and the Goodtimes virus of the 1990s—revealed personal safety concerns that seemed insurmountable in terms of one’s own ability to combat them⁹. The primary claims made

having received an email in the late 1990s with nearly the exact same verbiage used in the lyrics of Laika’s song.

⁹ In recent news during the COVID-19 global pandemic, several legends emerged particularly with regard to potential remedies. The sitting president, Donald Trump, suggested that the public inject Lysol into their bodies to kill any viruses or bacteria currently lingering in their systems (Trump 2020). Reckitt Benckiser, parent company of the maker of Lysol and Dettol, immediately responded to this by issuing the following statement: “As a global leader in health and hygiene products, we must be clear that

in each of these cases—i.e., ‘there’s a creepy internet creature used to prey upon children,’ ‘kids are eating poison because they think it’s cool,’ ‘this is a computer virus that will destroy your entire life,’ respectively—were not necessarily the real harms; rather, it was the warnings themselves that spread like viruses because those were the dialogues that people and institutions were engaging in and investigating with each other. Furthermore, confronting these legends felt especially daunting because they all occurred on a platform available to an incalculably large audience: the internet. I am suggesting that these factors therefore necessitate a basic survival guide for learning how to identify the real harms that become prevalent in weird internet phenomena, and for subsequently navigating those issues confidently and productively, both now and in the future. However, in order to fully utilize a survival guide rooted in digital expressive culture, an understanding of a few other key folkloric terms—along with a few cross examples—is necessary.

Additional Key Terms

1. Memetics.

Memetics is the study of “memes,” a term that was first coined by biologist Richard Dawkins in 1976 in his book *The Selfish Gene*. In Chapter 11, “Memes: The new replicators,” he defines memes as “units of cultural transmission, or a unit of imitation.”

He continues to explain that “just as genes propagate themselves in the gene pool by

under no circumstance should our disinfectant products be administered into the human body (through injection, ingestion or any other route)” (Freking 2020). This comment catapulted the Tide Pod Challenge back into nationwide conversation in both on- and offline spaces, thus highlighting some familiar patterns present in all of the legends mentioned throughout this paper.

leaping from body to body...so memes propagate themselves in the meme pool by leaping from brain to brain (206).” Examples of this may include certain phrases, songs or tunes, and beliefs. In the digital age, Limor Shifman builds upon this definition by explaining internet memes, as follows:

(a) A group of digital content units sharing common characteristics of content, form, and/or stance. For instance--photos featuring funny cats with captions share a topic (cats), form (photo + caption), and stance (humor). (b) These units are created with awareness of each other--the person posting the “cat with caption” image builds on the previous cats in the series. (c) These units are circulated, imitated, and/or transformed via the Internet by many users. Internet memes are multi-participant creative expressions through which cultural and political identities are communicated and negotiated (177).

Some characteristics to look for in a meme include replicability, wide-spread, simple, interactive, whimsical, and repetitive.

Folkloric example:

Several memes came out of the Momo Challenge that meet these criteria. For example, in one meme a digital artist took the movie poster from the film “Mamma Mia” and photoshopped the Momo face onto each of the characters, thereby creating a new film called “Momo Mia: The Movie.” This example includes both folklore and a pop culture¹⁰ reference, was created in response to other similar memes being produced and perpetuated by other online users, and quite honestly, is funny. So, there we have it: a meme!

¹⁰ Pop culture differs from folklore in that it originates from a single, influential source, as opposed to collective grassroots sources.



Figure 2: “Momo Mia” The Movie

2. Ostension and Legend-Tripping.

Ostension indicates real-life happenings that parallel the events told in pre-existing and well-established legends and lore. The most direct form of ostension involved committing an actual crime mentioned in a well-known urban legend, such as microwaving someone's pet animal or placing poison in a child's Halloween candy. While such events are rare, folklorists must recognize, as Linda Dégh once famously articulated, "that fact can become narrative and narrative can become fact" (date unknown).

Dégh and Andrew Vázsonyi, another famous legend scholar, first applied the term “ostension” to folkloristics in their 1983 essay published in the *Journal of Folklore Research*, wherein they cite Ludwig Wittgenstein and Bertrand Russell¹¹, language experts in semiotics, who explain ostension as “a type of communication where the reality itself, the thing, the situation or event itself functions in the role of message (6).” They elaborate on this term by explaining that “ostensive action ... is the showing of an action by showing the action itself or by another action (8).” A later interpretation was made in 2015 by legend scholar Andrew Peck, who defined ostension as an aggregated

¹¹ An additional source to consult regarding the work of Ludwig Wittgenstein and Bertrand Russell may include *Philosophy of Language and Linguistics: The Legacy of Frege, Russell, and Wittgenstein*, for which a complete citation has been included in the Works Cited section of this article.

practice as opposed to a singular action to illustrate the volume and variance of interactions people have with a legend. Peck writes, “‘Action’ suggests an individual expression of volition, ephemeral and shared on a personal scale; ‘practice’ refers to the collection of many actions and acknowledges the connectivity, aggregated volition, and self-awareness enabled by the affordances of networked communication (15).”

Anytime there is mention of ostension, there needs to be a brief discussion about legend-tripping. Legend-tripping essentially entails any action taken with the intent to recreate a legend experience for oneself, thereby seeking to take some ownership of the narrative. Legend “questing” is another cross term that is often used when discussing legend seekers within the context of ostension (Lindahl 2005:165; Tucker 2007: 182-210; Bronner 2012: 319-323; Gabbert 2015:146-169). The difference between the two is that “trip” references an entire journey, whereas “quest” primarily regards the objective of that trip (McNeill and Tucker 2018:8). Bill Ellis adds to our understanding of legend tripping by further explaining that “the trip, not the legend, is the thing” (Ellis 2001, 190). In other words, while a legend may be what inspires a specific trip or quest by a seeker, the journey’s objective is what matters most; legend trips and quests stand all on their own, distinct from the legend narrative itself.

Folkloric example:

A good way to think about legend-tripping is to reflect on personal experiences, such as visiting a specific site which is alleged to have been the scene of some tragic, horrific, and possibly supernatural event or haunting. Exploring these types of areas based on the stories surrounding the sites is called legend-tripping! Another example

mentioned earlier was that of the Weeping Woman statue of the Logan, Utah Cemetery. As the legend goes, if a group of people visit the gravesite on a night when there is a full moon, or it is Halloween or Friday the 13th, and stand in a circle, rotating counterclockwise 13 times while chanting “weep woman, weep,” then the statue will eventually start to cry. Below are images showing legend-trippers testing the legend’s theories by performing the ritual as previously described:



Figure 3: Group of legend-trippers chant around the weeping woman statue, Feb. 2019.

Figure 4: Legend-tripper touches the eyes of the statue to see if there are tears present, Feb. 2019.

(photographs by Camille Sleight)

3. Identity Play.

In their book *The Ambivalent Internet: Mischief, Oddity, and Antagonism Online*, Whitney Phillips and Ryan Milner borrow from sociologist Erving Goffman’s (1958) description of identity performance by explaining that it is “...the process...of implicitly asserting who a person is or wants to be seen as being.” Phillips and Milner further

explain that “identity play is tied to as much ‘performing a role’ as ‘messaging around’ or ‘making fun of.’” In their chapter of the same title, they argue that Identity Play can help and harm equally (58).

Folkloric example:

In their article, “Forbidden Foodways: Tide Pods, Ostensive Practice, and Intergenerational Conflict,” Camille Sleight-Price, Daisy Ahlstone, and Michelle Jones explain that many of the Tide Pod Challenge’s younger participants dissented against the negative labeling that occurred towards their generation throughout the course of that particular internet phenomenon. Dissenting participants, in particular, sought to distinguish themselves specifically as *non*-participants of the challenge, in that they did not literally attempt to eat a Tide Pod like some of their peers. In one example, the authors, Sleight-Price, Ahlstone, and Jones cite a YouTube video entitled “KID DOES THE TIDE POD CHALLENGE!!!”. In the video, a boy appearing to be around the age of 10, stares directly into the camera lens and states, “Hey, everybody! ...So... I’ve heard this, um, thing on the Internet, the Tide Pod Challenge. Uh, yeah, so I’m gonna do the Tide Pod Challenge. Don’t worry, I’ve talked to my parents and they’re okay with it...” (ThunderChezz 2018)¹². The boy holds his hands up to the camera to reveal that he is holding a detergent pod. He then opens his mouth and proceeds to count down (“3-2-1!”) while moving the pod closer to his mouth as if to eat it. At the last moment he tosses the detergent pod off to the side and speaks sternly into the camera, “Of course I’m not

¹² Unfortunately, this video is no longer available on YouTube due to new content guidelines.

gonna do it! How stupid can I be to do this stupid challenge?! Like, those people that are out there doing that challenge, they've got to be complete idiots!" (2018:10).

We can see in this example that the boy, whose generation was particularly gaslighted¹³ throughout the course of the Tide Pod Challenge, is asserting his position as a wiser member of his generation through play intended to help self-identify himself as a "wiser zoomer" among a community which he shares with other zoomers who did 'stupidly' bite into Tide Pods when the challenge was popular. He does this by pretending to bite into a Tide Pod himself, but then it becomes clear that his intent is to make fun of the challenge and berate fellow young people for performing in a way deemed foolish. The creation of this video not only serves to call upon fellow young people to cease behaviors as dangerous as eating poison, but also as a public relations announcement to people from across all generations that not all young people deserve to be gaslighted for behaviors they publicly do not approve of.

A Practical Guide for Understanding and Surviving Weird Internet Phenomena

Noted legend scholar Jeannie Thomas is often heard imploring her folklore students to "notice and wonder" about the world around them. I have found this advice particularly useful when navigating aspects of expressive culture that I either find interesting and/or particularly difficult to make sense of. Her admonition is the launching point for this survival guide. I will offer some key steps in thinking like a folklorist so that readers can feel more confident in their understanding and survival of weird internet

¹³Gaslighting aims to control another person or cover up abusive behaviors through shame responses. Gaslighting often involves manipulation meant to make a victim feel crazy (BTR 2020)

phenomena. The steps we'll be exploring together throughout this survival guide include the following: 1) Noticing and wondering; 2) Looking for patterns; 3) Identifying key players; 4) Considering the narrative behind the narrative; 5) Pausing and breathing; 6) Observing to understand, not to judge; 7) Collecting evidence and analyzing the big picture; and; 8) Coming up with a game plan.

1. *Notice the phenomenon and wonder about it.*

The first step in surviving any weird internet phenomenon is acknowledging that it exists. Before reacting to the situation, allow for adequate time to briefly reflect on what is happening. Folklorists would consider the following questions when writing down field notes¹⁴ for a particular form of folklore they were noticing and wondering about: When and where did you first notice it? Why did you start paying attention? What were your initial thoughts when you first started observing the phenomena/phenomenon? What do you wonder about it now? As these questions are considered, it helps to write down one's answers; in other words, create a set of field notes! It acts as a way to ground oneself in the situation so that all steps to surviving weird internet phenomena are followed, rather than jumping to a conclusion that may or may not be on target with what is actually taking place. Remember, the last step is to act responsibly amid whatever chaos—large or small—is being caused as a result of the weird internet phenomenon that is being observed.

¹⁴ Field notes are intended to be read by the researcher as evidence to produce meaning and an understanding of the culture, social situation, or phenomenon being studied (Schwandt 2015).

2. *Look for patterns.*

One way of looking for patterns is by paying attention to both the conversations taking place and the manner in which they are occurring. Oftentimes something catches our attention because we have seen or experienced similar versions of it elsewhere. In looking for patterns, some questions to consider asking and jotting down in field notes may include: What about this situation seems familiar? Why does it feel familiar? Last time I observed these familiarities, how was it influencing me based on the role I was playing at the time? What is different about this situation? What is different about me within this context as opposed to last time? Establishing patterns is critical for finding footing when there is a weird internet phenomenon, especially if you feel it is directly affecting you or someone you care about, and there are feelings of angst and/or chaos as a result. We will build upon these concepts more when we reach step #7: collecting and analyzing evidence. For now, though, it is important to focus solely on observations of the situation at-hand.

3. *Identify all of the conversants involved in the phenomena/phenomenon.*

Not only is it important to pay attention to what conversations are taking place, but also to recognize how that information is being exchanged. For example, was news of the phenomena/phenomenon shared through a friend or family member? Email? Social media? The news? The local police department? A letter from a school administration? These questions matter because the role that each conversant play informs the *intent* behind the phenomena/phenomenon, and until we understand the intent of those involved can we thoughtfully consider the narrative behind the narrative as we will discuss in the

next step. Intent reveals bias, and bias¹⁵ informs intent. Understanding how bias may be influencing not only the message being communicated, but also the manner in which it is being interpreted is an essential precursor to navigating through the next steps of this survival guide. Communication scholar, Cris Critcher suggests that anytime there is a mass panic occurring--or a weird internet phenomenon as this paper articulates--the key players involved oftentimes fall somewhere into the following categories: 1) mass media; 2) moral entrepreneurs; 3) the control culture; and 4) the public (2008: 1129-1131). In noticing and wondering about the weird internet phenomenon occurring and continuing to keep track of those thoughts by way of field notes, the participants of a particular phenomenon can then be identified either using these categories articulated by Critcher, or perhaps Critcher's model could be used to identify new categories if needed.

4. *Consider the narrative behind the narrative.*

One way to understand what is meant by finding the “narrative behind the narrative,” which essentially means to “find out what’s really going on,” would be to first look inwardly at the ways in which one personally expresses themselves. One could consider reflecting upon the following: Have you ever written a poem, doodled in a notebook, or cooked a special meal to show someone you care about them? What about planting certain flowers because they remind you of someone or singing songs associated with specific memories? All of these behaviors—and of course, the list is endless here—communicate something that runs deeper than what is simply visible at the surface. It is

¹⁵ Bias: “a particular tendency, trend, inclination, feeling, or opinion, especially one that is preconceived or unreasoned” (dictionary.com, accessed 4 April 2020).

important to consider these seemingly small, individualistic behaviors, because anytime we are assessing the nature of an internet phenomenon, we are looking at the collective behaviors of several individual people. Folklorists are constantly searching for exactly those types of hidden communications and what they represent not only for the individual creating them, but also for the communities of which that individual is a part.

In thinking about this idea of narratives behind narratives, some helpful questions to guide one's thought processes could include: What activities or behaviors of mine do I turn to when expressing a reality that might not be readily visible to others? What would I like people to understand more about me when they observe those behaviors in me? How can reflecting on these personal experiences help me seek to understand others when they are expressing something that is not immediately understood to me at the surface level? What might those performances teach me about what is really happening with what that person is experiencing? These questions will be helpful in digging a little deeper when wondering about a weird internet phenomenon: in other words, looking for the "narrative behind the narrative."

5. *Pause and breathe. It's not time to react yet.*

After having identified the weird internet phenomena or phenomenon, noting patterns that the phenomena/phenomenon share(s) with other similar situations, reflecting on the narratives behind those narratives, and identifying all of the key players, let all of the information marinate before deciding whether or not to react. Get grounded by taking deep yogic breaths: breathe in (1-2-3-4) and breathe out (1-2-3-4-5-6). Repeat as many times as necessary. We are oftentimes inherently reactive to weird internet phenomena,

which is why they spread so easily (Critchler 2008). However, paranoia and gut reactions have no place in the following survival guide steps, which are designed to help all of us make sense of odd situations through an objective lens.

6. *Observe to understand, not to judge.*

Entering conversations with preconceived judgements can often hinder one's ability to absorb information objectively, which as stated in the previous step, is the main goal of this survival guide. The same rings true when noticing and wondering about weird internet phenomena. Thomas says it best: "If something strikes you as strange or weird, recognize that you are judging and try to unpack that response" (2018:38).

Communication scholar Dr. Marshall B. Rosenberg adds to this by noting that one form of alienating communication is "the use of moralistic judgements that imply wrongness or badness on the part of those who don't act in harmony with our values" (2003:24). A strategy for avoiding this, he explains, is to observe without evaluating; otherwise, combining the two--observation and evaluation (which admittedly tends to be human nature) --communicates criticism. He offers seven rules of thumb for using evaluative as opposed to judgmental language, which essentially boils down to the following: 1) be mindful of verb choice; 2) do not confuse prediction with certainty; 3) be specific when describing both the situation and those involved; and 4) avoid using denotative adjectives (2003:25-35). In reviewing one's observations, or field notes as this article suggests as one way of documenting those thoughts, one may pay attention to the places where they have been making straight observations as opposed to evaluations. It can, at times, feel easier to jump right into making evaluations about something, especially when we do not

understand it (i.e., behaviors we deem to be “weird” as the title of this article suggests). However, at this step in the survival guide, we still are not quite ready to start drawing conclusions (we’re almost there, though, so stay tuned!).

7. Collect the evidence and analyze the big picture.

Analyze the situation using evidence. When collecting evidence, it is important to find a variety of sources as opposed to just one type, always remembering to keep track of sources using field notes. For example, when an internet phenomenon pops up on a popular news site, be sure to find a corresponding article from a different network to compare what information is being reported or *not* being reported (this helps for seeing past biases, as discussed in step # 4). A person may ask themselves if the source is relevant to what is being investigated. How does that source align with the purpose of this research? Is the source itself reliable (and why or why not)? Determining the answers to these questions is essential for productive analysis because if the sources are not reliable--either because the author’s credentials do not match the expertise they are claiming to have, or they are making certain judgement calls based on information that has been taken out of its original context--a person will not have an accurate view of the big picture to begin with and therefore the final analysis will be incomplete.

Once a person has gotten a grasp on what their information sources are saying about the situation (and remember, news sources can have a range, as pointed out in step #4), it is important to contextualize all of it within other similar happenings either in the recent or distant past. Revisit any notes that may have been written down when looking for patterns in step #2. Try and sort them into the “Whos, Whats, Whens, Wheres, And

Whys” of the internet phenomena/phenomenon being studied. Continue contemplating the following: How did the events play out in other similar circumstances? What did experts say at the time, and which experts should I consult now? How can noticing details about a past phenomenon help clarify that which I am wondering about with a current one? What data is available that speaks to the phenomenon at-hand? What methods were used by the researchers who collected that data? If no data and/or specific methodology is available, what inferences could be made about the nature of that phenomenon?

Responses should only be planned after proper time has been given to consider all of the moving parts and people who are at play throughout the course of the weird internet phenomena/phenomenon. Once all of the facts have marinated and settled in, then a person can start to move towards analyzing the big picture—or making specific evaluations as discussed in step # 6—and determining a response that Thomas states is “...self-aware, well-informed, well-reasoned, questioned, and open to revision” (2018:39).

8. *Come up with a game plan.*

Before coming up with a game plan it is to determine how the phenomenon personally affects oneself and the people around them. For example: Are you or is someone you know directly contributing to the phenomenon and its spread? Or are the phenomenon’s related behaviors indirectly influencing responses within a community of which you are a part? Understanding how the phenomenon affects oneself will be helpful for two reasons: 1) It will reveal the importance of the information that has been gathered up to this point and therefore necessitate a response, and 2) it will help to identify the

audience for *whom* the game plan is being developed. Is the audience yourself? A family member? Fellow community members? What values does the audience hold? One way to think about this is to come up with a list of identities that they carry (Meeks & Austin 2002:28-30). For example, how old are they? What is their profession? How would they describe their gender if they identify with one? What are their religious and/or spiritual traditions if they have any? What familial roles do they play? In what ways are they potentially advantaged or disadvantaged economically? How does their geographic location factor into their lives?

Secondly, think about *what* message should be conveyed to this audience.

Knowing what message to send will be based on understanding the audience's values and needs as they pertain to the given situation. Another way to think of this is to pretend what it would be like trying to sell toilet paper to someone. What approaches would be used if one were selling toilet paper to their mother-in-law versus a classroom full of preschoolers? How can contemplating the various aspects of the identities of each audience inform how well the information presented to either of them will be received?

And finally, consider *how* to communicate this message to the intended audience.

It is important to think about what the most accessible option will be based on who will be interested in the information being presented, and again, thinking about their different values will be crucial at this point, too. How will different social media platforms affect communication? Is the audience accessing these platforms? If not, what alternatives will they respond to best? *When* will the audience be available to receive information? In addition to thinking about the best way of reaching the audience, it is also important to be thinking about timing.

Survival Guide Application

With this survival guide in mind, let us return to the Momo Challenge and try and make sense of what was going on throughout this particular weird internet phenomenon. In a letter that was shared with me in February 2019 by an anonymous informant within my own community, the director of Little Wonders Daycare in Logan, Utah, had sent out the following letter to parents:

Dear Parents,

It has come to my attention that in the Elementary and Kindergarten classrooms there has been a lot of talk about “Momo”. When I researched this it is a game that has challenges attached to it that are inappropriate and very concerning to us at Little Wonders. We are taking measures to prevent this from becoming a bigger issue, thus talking to the children today and explaining that this will no longer be a topic of conversation at Little Wonders [sic]

If you have any questions or concerns on how to help us with this matter, please feel free to talk to the administration.

Sincerely,

Sandy Dellow
Director

Before this letter was sent to me in early 2019, I had noticed quite a bit of new buzz (because to recap: the Momo Challenge had already been a topic of internet conversation the summer prior) about the Momo Challenge through my social media channels. As a researcher with the Digital Folklore Project, I had heard about the Momo Challenge the prior summer, but I wondered why it was becoming such a hot topic of conversation among my parenting friends. I decided to start paying attention to the Momo Challenge again because I was interested in understanding how young people were engaging with this internet phenomenon, which I found to be both fascinating and

honestly, a little weird. I kept track of articles and social media posts speaking to the challenge, making notes along the way of what I was observing (step 1).

As I was taking notes, I started noticing a lot of patterns existing between the Momo Challenge and the Tide Pod Challenge, which was another internet phenomenon that I had previously researched and that had started permeating the internet at around the same time. In the case of both Momo and Tide Pods, there were a lot of similarities in the conversations taking place: they were both focused on youth (particularly zoomers), memes were a common method of communication, and in particular negative memes were created to illustrate intergenerational conflict between younger and older generations. There were also material artistic responses through digital art,¹⁶Etsy products, and businesses creating merchandise to pay homage to the phenomena. Further, the news picked up both of these phenomena and published several warnings to adults of the dangers of the activities involved in each respective “challenge” (step 2).

I was curious as to what was really going on in terms of kids’ interactions with the Momo Challenge; in other words, I wanted to understand what narratives existed behind those which were being reported upon by the news and being discussed by some of my friends on social media (step 3). Were kids actually interested in Momo at all, or was it all hype on the part of adults? If kids were actively engaging with this weird internet phenomenon, in what ways were they participating? How did kids’ interactions differ from adults’ perceptions of those interactions? These were some of the questions I wanted to try and answer so that I could unearth what was really going on with the Momo

¹⁶ www.etsy.com is a website for independent makers to sell their products in personalized online stores.

Challenge.

As I was taking notes about patterns, I was seeing throughout the Momo Challenge (step 2) and looking for deeper-seeded narratives behind those that were circulating online and in my own community, it was time for me to articulate who some of the key players were in terms of this internet phenomenon spreading its influence (step 4). In returning to the groups Critcher noted in his 2008 article on moral panic and which are noted in the above survival guide, I was able to identify several key players. First, there were media networks with various political and social leanings covering this story. I wanted as much information as possible on this topic, so I made sure to collect from a range of information sources (which is also important when following step 7). Second, I noted several moral entrepreneurs—individuals and groups that campaign against immoral and/or threatening behaviors (Critcher 2008:1130)—getting involved with the Momo Challenge as well. For example, as I was scrolling through the social media site Reddit, I came across a group called r/GamerGhazi. One thread¹⁷ stood out to me in particular: “Like Eating Tide Pods and snorting condoms, the Momo challenge is a viral hoax. Spreading the story distracts from the internet’s real harm” (lizlynngarcia, 2019). I was intrigued by this because the subject line addressed two weird internet phenomena I had either previously researched (The Tide Pod Challenge) or was currently researching (The Momo Challenge), and this came in handy to me in going through step 2 (looking for patterns) as well as step 7, which I will cover in just a bit. This Reddit group, which was one group out of many that I found, acted in a moral entrepreneurial role in how its

¹⁷ Reddit threads function as a group chat for all members of a particular Reddit community, in this case, r/GamerGhazi.

members advocated for people outside of the group that were interacting with the Momo Challenge (either seriously or satirically) to stop doing so. In particular, they felt that by giving the legend of the Momo Challenge (i.e., there is a creepy thing on the internet stalking kids) so much “airtime” as it were, that the real harms to which adults needed to be alerted were going unaddressed. Some of the real harms, they argued, included cluelessness in journalism (r/GamerGhazi, user post deleted, 2019), diversions that allowed for undesirable candidates getting elected to office (Kapparoath, 2019), and social media sites being used for exploitative purposes such as suicidal ideation (brita_water_filter, 2019), to name only a few.

In continuing to identify key players in the Momo Challenge based on the groups Critcher (2008) identified, the control culture in this instance included law enforcement and school administrations. As seen in the examples from both Haslington Primary School (Haslington, UK) and Little Wonders Daycare (Logan, UT, USA), as educators and school administrations became aware of the Momo Challenge, with law enforcement being one such source of that information (Lewis 2019), they began distributing emails and letters warning parents of the challenge’s “inappropriate and very concerning” (Dellow 2019) activities. Lastly, all of the culmination of all conversants in these instances can be considered the public opinion of which Critcher (2008) makes note. I personally consider myself to be a part of this last group because of my interest as a researcher in understanding the phenomenon. Furthermore, not only do I wish to understand the narratives behind the narratives of the Momo Challenge, but that desire is backed by the intent to talk about the Momo Challenge with my peers, social media followers, and readers. In recognizing this intent, however, it is important that before

sharing posts on social media or writing papers on the Momo Challenge that I take the time to pause and breathe (step 5) and collect the necessary information that I need in order to talk about the phenomena truthfully with my audiences so as to avoid inadvertently spreading misinformation.

Admittedly, it was challenging at first not to immediately make evaluations of the Momo Challenge. I tend to err on the side of skepticism, and as I noticed several individuals in my life reacting to the phenomenon in ways that I thought were “overdramatic,” I had to recognize my own judgmental observations in order to separate my feelings from making simple observations of the behaviors taking place (step 6). In fact, the title of this paper even invokes a sort of judgement in that I call the Momo Challenge, as well as the other challenges mentioned, to be “*weird* internet phenomena”! It can be difficult to label something for exactly what it is without automatically relegating that “something” to a category that helps us make sense of what it is that we are noticing and wondering about. However, this separation of observation and evaluation when navigating the *process* of understanding is essential for creating an objective and thorough perspective on a matter. When we approach issues, we do not understand objectively we avoid unproductive dialogues and actions, and ultimately, we get to the bottom of things more quickly, more efficiently, and with far fewer casualties along the way. In short, we are better able to survive the situations that seem completely and totally *weird* to us.

As talk of Momo continued to circulate through social media and more schools began issuing warnings through letters and emails, I determined that in order to better understand how kids were really grappling with this particular internet phenomenon—

and therefore have a better idea of the big picture in terms of the Momo Challenge (step 7)—I needed to cross-reference all of what I was hearing in the news by going right to the source and talking to a young person myself. A colleague of mine had mentioned to me one day in class that her 12-year-old daughter had been talking non-stop with her friends about Momo, and so I asked if she and her daughter would be willing to share with me their thoughts on the matter. In our visit, my informant “O” explained the following to me:

I know there was this Momo Challenge where you text her and she texts you things to do. ... People were really scared of her and everything. And then I wasn't really a part of it. I was more just watching YouTube videos on it. And then I figured out that she was just this art piece and I was like, "Huh, interesting." **I had one friend and she was really into it. She's like, "Do you want to talk to Momo?" And I was like, "Mm-mm (negative) I'm not into that."** And then she was like, "Well, it's fine." I'm like, "No."... The Momo Challenge is where Momo tells you to do these things. It's kind of like the Whale Challenge¹⁸ or whatever. ...I wasn't really into Momo. It didn't seem like the thing that scared me or made me awake at night, just imagining, "what is it? Wow." I knew what she was. **There wasn't anything scary about it after I knew that she was an art piece. ... We watched a lot of YouTube videos on it and they're like, "Oh my god, I want to try this." And I was like... I don't know** (personal interview, 2020, emphases added).

In her book on seeking the supernatural through legend-tripping, Jeannie Thomas points out that “...we don’t just run from scary things, we run to them as well” (2015:4). I learned that in O’s particular friends’ circle the reactions to Momo were mixed. While some of the (presumably young) people to which my informant was referring in our interview were interested in “contacting the Momo,” others were not. Once O learned that Momo was a sculpture and not actually a creepy supernatural being lurking around

¹⁸ Another example of a dangerous and conceivably lethal game that took place through the internet was the Blue Whale Suicide Challenge. This challenge was studied extensively by folklorists Elizabeth Tucker (2018), Benjamin Radford (2018), and Alexandra Arkhipova, Anna Kirzyuk, Daria Radchenko, and Josef Zislin (2018).

on the internet, she expressed disinterest in Momo because the “scare factor” just was not there.

As I thought about these mixed reactions as related to me by O, I once again thought back to similar patterns that I noticed while studying the Tide Pod Challenge, which, as previously discussed, involved many of the same key players. During the height of the Tide Pod Challenge, the news had catapulted the phenomenon into mainstream conversation in such a way that made it seem as if nearly every zoomer was eating Tide Pods (Zwirz 2018; Bever 2018; Gartenberg 2018). However, the reality of that situation was that there were only 130 cases of Tide Pod ingestion reported, which when speaking of an entire generation of people, was statistically insignificant (NPR 2018). In the case of that phenomenon, it seemed to me to be an unfair assessment on the part of the media and members of older generations gaslighting and belittling the entire zoomer generation over the actions of just a few (Caulderwood 2018; Rodgers 2018; Wright 2018). Noticing these details about the Tide Pod Challenge helped clarify for me some of the things I was wondering about with the Momo Challenge (step 7). First, while some zoomers were expressing interest in interacting with Momo either literally (as a supernatural internet creature) or metaphorically (representative of a particular narrative: satirical, serious, or otherwise) many zoomers were not interested in Momo at all, or simply recognized from the beginning that Momo was just a hoax. What I noticed from both phenomena was a disconnect between how members of older generations perceived the actions of zoomers, versus what types of behaviors zoomers were actually involved in. While there were still valid concerns that existed in both phenomena, the ones that got addressed seemed less significant than what could have potentially had greater impact to

the audiences involved with each case.

Conclusion

After noticing and wondering about the Momo Challenge and Tide Pod Challenge, identifying patterns between the two phenomena, considering the narratives behind the narratives, identifying key players in each case, pausing, observing to understand, collecting evidence, and analyzing the big picture, it was finally time for me to come up with a game plan (step 8)! As someone who spends a lot of time studying legends and internet culture, it was important to me that my game plan be to come up with a guide that could be applied within multiple contexts. Why? Well, because “weird stuff” surfaces online every day and these phenomena will keep showing up for as long as the internet exists, and for as long as people continue to interact with each other through it as a primary channel of communication. Online spaces are places where global communities gather to create new meaning through the metaphors found within legends and storytelling, all of which are able to transcend the barriers of space and time because of the accessibility afforded by the internet. *And this is a good thing.* Even when social behaviors surface online that we do not understand right away, there is something to be learned about the way the world works and the people that make it work through the human narratives that breathe life into these types of weird internet phenomena. Folklorists offer countless, valuable tools for tracing the cultural meanings found within each of those metaphors, which the majority of us play some part in helping to create anytime we interact with them ourselves either directly as a participant or indirectly as a

curious bystander. This survival guide is meant to help all of us—regardless of the roles we play—take responsibility in those narratives that we help shape, and to do so in a way that fosters understanding rather than chaos.

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