

Sensationalist Scholarship: A Putative “New” History of Fairy Tales

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In early modern Europe, then, what was a mixed-media environment characterized by talking and manuscripts became even more mixed by the addition of mass print. Again, we need to stress that mass print did not replace talking or manuscripts. Major media generally accumulate; they do not supplant one another. We also should emphasize that mass print did not at any point or in any place become the predominant mode of communications. For several centuries after the introduction of mass print, literacy rates remained low. People who can't read—and that was the majority of the European population until the late nineteenth century—do not read manuscripts or printed texts. They talk. Orality, though not primary orality, survived well into the modern era even where print and literacy spread fastest and penetrated most deeply. And even among people who were literate, talking and manuscripts hardly disappeared once printing and printed matter became widely available. For many—and perhaps even most—purposes it remained easier to talk to someone than to write a note to them, and easier to write a note to them than to print one. (Poe 2011, 115)

For years now I have refrained from writing about Ruth Bottigheimer's speculative notions concerned with the so-called “new history” of the fairy tale because I believed a strong wind of sensible, well-grounded, judicious scholarship would blow them away. But I was wrong. I underestimated Bottigheimer's ambition. Somehow she has managed to make herself into a cause célèbre and to draw the attention of well-meaning scholars, who mistakenly think they might be able to have a dialogue with her. Yet it seems that she mainly wants to ride her own hobby horse with blinders and to astonish academia with her notions of what constitutes cultural evolution. Her “novel ideas” are part of the sensationalist vogues that haunt all cultures. Dressed in flashy colors, they can easily become attractive commodities. Sensationalism sells well, even sensationalist claims of publicity-seeking academics. Here a little history about Bottigheimer's “rise to fame” and details about her mission to define the fairy tale in absolute terms is necessary before I deal with her most recent book, *Fairy Tales: A New History*.

The Incident

On July 30, 2005, Bottigheimer, evidently anxious to publicize her theses in *Fairy Godfather: Straparola, Venice, and the Fairy Tale* (2002) and to cause a sensation, drew the ire of many of the folklorists attending the Fourteenth Congress of the International Society for Folk Narrative Theory in Tartu, Estonia, by delivering a paper, “Fairy Tale Origins, Fairy Tale Dissemination, and Folk Narrative Theory,” which dismissed the oral tradition as providing the source of literary fairy tales and

proclaimed Giovan Francesco Straparola as the original inventor of the fairy-tale genre. Until Bottigheimer had promoted Straparola to the position of “god” of fairy tales, very few scholars had paid much attention to Straparola, whose collection of stories, *Le piacevoli notti* (*The Pleasant Nights*, 1550-1553), published in two volumes, contain about fourteen eclectic fairy tales and fifty-nine stories with riddles.² A “bestseller” in its time, its allure can be attributed to several factors, which I have pointed out in *Fairy Tales and the Art of Subversion*: “His use of erotic and obscene riddles, his mastery of polite Italian used by narrators in the frame narrative, his introduction of plain earthly language into the stories, the critical view of the power struggles in Italian society and lack of moralistic preaching, his introduction of fourteen unusual fairy tales into the collection, and his interest in magic, unpredictable events, duplicity, and the supernatural. Similar to Boccaccio, Straparola exhibited an irreverence for authorities, and the frame narrative reveals a political tension and somewhat ironic if not pessimistic outlook on the possibilities of living a harmonious happy ever after life.”³

It must be said, however, that Straparola was not a great stylist; he plagiarized many Latin tales, translating them into the vernacular Italian, and imitated contemporary writers. The foremost Straparola scholar in Italy, Donato Pirovano, who edited the definitive contemporary edition of *Le piacevoli notti*, has written some very interesting remarks about Straparola’s patchwork linguistics. “In this general average tone, where there are no centrifugal impulses and extremes (it has already been pointed out how

Straparola tended to tone down the lexical expressionism of Morlini), the dialect expression and the Latin cast, together with the phonetic variants and frequent hyper-corrections, reveal the strong linguistic accomplishment of the author in the direction of the models of the novella tradition and are the tell-tale of a more general narrative project directed at bringing about a literary consecration of the fairy tale of the oral tradition.”⁴ Now, if an expert in Italian linguistics and Renaissance culture can indicate that Straparola was the mouthpiece of an Italian literary and oral tradition and wanted to consecrate the oral fairy tale, it is certainly questionable to crown Straparola as some sort of fairy godfather of a new genre. It might be best to dismiss Bottigheimer’s pretensions with a shrug of the shoulder and explore the remarkable oral/literary aspects of Straparola’s tales to understand how and why he replicated oral and literary tales in innovative ways.

Yet, instead of ignoring and/or critically reviewing Bottigheimer’s theses, Dan Ben Amos, one of the foremost and most reasonable folklorists in the world, decided to give her book, *Fairy Godfather*, a fair hearing and to organize a roundtable titled “The European Fairy Tale Tradition: Between Orality and Literacy” for the 2006 fall meeting of the American Folklore Society in Milwaukee, Wisconsin. Ben-Amos invited two highly qualified scholars, renowned medievalist Jan Ziolkowski and noted European anthropologist Francisco Vaz da Silva, to comment on Bottigheimer’s book, which Ben-Amos also criticized at the roundtable. Bottigheimer was allowed time to respond to their papers, but the session

was a fiasco because she refused to take their criticisms seriously and vaguely defended her ideas with unfounded rationalizations. All the papers of the AFS session were revised and expanded into articles published in the *Journal of American Folklore* in the summer of 2010.⁵ The major points of contention were Bottigheimer's claims that Straparola was the founder of the fairy-tale narrative, described as a "rise tale," which reflected the rise of the mercantile and bourgeois classes; that Straparola's tales set a model for other writers, especially the French; that it was through print literature that tales were disseminated and reached the peasantry, who had not been intelligent enough to create their own wonder tales; and that Straparola lived and worked in Venice and catered to a wide circle of artisans who were literate. Though nothing is known about Straparola, where he was born, where he lived, or what his profession was, Bottigheimer wrote an imaginary biography that was also questioned by the participants at the roundtable.

The Book that Set the Folklorists on Fire

As Ziolkowski, Vaz da Silva, and Ben-Amos thoroughly and politely demonstrate in their lengthy essays, Bottigheimer's *Fairy Godfather: Straparola, Venice, and the Fairy Tale*, is one of the most narrow positivist studies of folklore and fairy tales that has ever been produced. Ziolkowski begins his essay by stating, "the book will not become a landmark in folkloristics in general, and only time will tell if it has a lasting impact even within fairy-tale studies."⁶ Ziolkowski, who has published an exhaustive pioneer and comprehensive study, *Fairy Tales from*

Before Fairy Tales: The Medieval Latin Past of Wonderful Lies (2007), chastises Bottigheimer for ignoring numerous Latin texts that have their origins in an oral tradition and were fairy tales before tales were given labels. According to him, Bottigheimer has simply ignored striking evidence that the Greeks and Romans and other European, Asian, and African people were telling tales during the pre-Christian era and early antiquity that laid the foundation for a literary genre which gradually flowered in Paris, not in Italy, during the 1690s when the socio-cultural conditions were riper in Paris than in Italy for designating certain tale types as belonging to the genre of the fairy tale. The narrative sequence of Bottigheimer's "rise tales," which she attributes to Straparola, can easily be read differently and expanded to comprehend many other tale types and narrative patterns. But by limiting just fourteen of Straparola's tales to a tight girdle-like definition, what Ziolkowski calls a "perverse agenda,"⁷ she does Straparola an injustice because she ignores the wide range of different kinds of oral wonder tales that he drew upon to write his tales. Aside from his own significant work, Ziolkowski cites other studies, such as *Formes médiévales du conte merveilleux* (1989) edited by Jacques Berlioz, Claude Bremond, and Catherine Velay-Vallantin and *Märchen und die mittelalterliche Tradition* (1995) by Maren Clausen-Stolzenberg, which provide indisputable evidence that oral tales existed and at times informed numerous literary romances, *lais*, poems, and exempla. Yet, as Ziolkowski notes, "Tradition of the oral sort turns out to be a phenomenon Bottigheimer presents as being hopelessly elusive before the intro-

duction of phonographic recording in the 1870s. A slogan, probably around fifty years old and quaint in ways that would have disconcerted its original exponents, advocates that we ‘Question Authority,’ but Bottigheimer follows a simpler (and possibly simplistic) principle of ‘Question Orality.’ In her view, not only is it pointless to conjecture about oral traditional literature before unambiguous records of it survive, but in addition it is wrongheaded to suppose that oral tale-telling ever made a creative contribution to the fairy-tale tradition as she defines it in the subtitle of her book.”⁸ In general, Ziolkowski does not argue for privileging the oral over literature. Rather, he argues against positivist approaches such as that used by Bottigheimer, who relies on strict dichotomies, absolutes, and twisted speculative history. Moreover, he pleads the case for the discreet investigation of folklore and medieval texts: “We have an obligation to approach each and every story with an open eye to possible orality lurking behind literature as well as to possible literature behind orality. Old dichotomies have broken down over the past decades in the understanding of medieval literature: it has been recognized that Latin texts from the Middle Ages could have features indebted to orality, popular culture, and secular tastes, while the literary products of medieval vernaculars could be literate, learned, and Christian.”⁹

While Ziolkowski focuses on Bottigheimer’s rejection of oral wonder tales that stem from antiquity, the middle ages, and Eastern traditions, Francisco Vaz da Silva questions the accuracy and authenticity of Bottigheimer’s biographical depiction of Straparola and then shows

how she not only created a fictitious biography which depicts the unknown Italian author as a fairy-tale hero inventing fairy tales, but she also invented her own history of storytelling that excludes 95% of the European population from creating and disseminating tales in an oral tradition. It should be noted here that Pirovano has written: “The biography of Giovan Francesco Straparola still remains an unfathomable mystery. The almost absolute absence—at least in the present state of research—of documents that concern him is aggravated by the impossibility of extracting definite facts about his life from his works. There are only vague hints that give access to conjectural hypotheses in which various scholars of the past centuries have exerted themselves, certainly in a noble but fruitless way. Frequently they managed to reconstruct Straparola’s life, but these reconstructions were rarely persuasive if not groundless.”¹⁰

Vaz da Silva not only shows clearly that Bottigheimer’s biography of Straparola is groundless and misleading, he also points out the contradictions in her thesis wherein she claims that his tales appealed to an urban and artisan readership, but ultimately nourished Europe’s hungry folk imagination even though they were filled with reference to upper social classes in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. He then asks: “If there is a congruence between plot success and the preoccupations of the audience, then why would tales crafted for the specific situation of an urban Venetian readership become the characteristic lore of illiterate rustics across Europe and beyond? And why would tales offering imaginary escape from all-too-real pov-

erty register success among the upper classes? Clearly, the principle of reference to social reality, which Bottigheimer uses to explain why a rise plot should have been successful in sixteenth-century Venice, fails to explain the reception of urban rags-to-riches plots among illiterate rustics as well as among aristocrats. In other words, the principle that is used to account for the invention of the genre fails to account for its diffusion."¹¹ In addition to showing how contradictory many of Bottigheimer's assertions are, Vaz da Silva offers numerous examples of how folk and literary tales meshed. Moreover, he proves conclusively that the French writers of the 1690s were not primarily influenced by Straparola, as Bottigheimer claims, but that there were numerous French oral tales and literary romances that circulated and influenced writers such as d'Aulnoy, Lhéritier, and Perrault.

Vaz da Silva's critique of Bottigheimer's fabrications is further reinforced by Ben-Amos's essay in which he demonstrates that Straparola's plagiarizing and patchwork style followed the fashion of his age and also the tradition of oral storytelling: "In borrowing tales and passing them on to new audiences, Straparola acted as an oral storyteller in the garb of a writer. Using the relatively new media of print, he continued a behavior common and appropriate to oral culture. Within this new era, his work became a reservoir of tales culled from diverse sources, a reservoir that, as John Colin Dunlop long ago pointed out, was very popular in France. *Le piacevoli notti* thus became a source for literary fairy-tale writers who did not have direct access to oral tradition."¹²

More than the clear references to orality within Straparola's two-volume collection concern Ben-Amos. Like Ziolkowski, he provides strong evidence that there were numerous oral tales in ancient Egypt and Asia that became well known in Europe long before Straparola put pen to paper. Europeans, despite the rise of Christianity and witch hunts, continued to spread tales that involved pagan beliefs and rituals. As Ben-Amos remarks, "Tales about supernatural miracles, holy men, fairies, and animals that enriched mortals were told in legends and fairy tales both before and after the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, the time when Richard Whittington lived and then became the subject of a legend about a cat-less land, and both before and after the sixteenth century when Straparola incorporated into his anthology a version of 'Puss in Boots.'"¹³

One of Bottigheimer's major arguments throughout her essays and books is that absence of documentation of fairy tales (as she defines them) is clear evidence of absence of fairy tales in the lives of the peasantry until Straparola and others began writing and publishing their tales. However, as Ziolkowski, Vaz da Silva, and Ben-Amos reveal, there is more than sufficient documentation about storytelling and texts that indicates a long tradition of oral wonder tales that incorporated fairy-tale motifs, topoi, characters, and patterns. In pre-modern Europe before and after Christianity took hold, people both learned and non-literate believed strongly in witches, fairies, life after death, walking ghosts, vampires, devils, miraculous intervention, and so on. During the European witch hunts from approximately 1480-1700, that took

many different forms; the very testimonies of suspected witches, declared witches, witnesses, and prosecutors read like bizarre fairy-tales and certainly were part of the stuff that storytellers used to entertain or inform their audiences. The evening gatherings, in which all kinds of tales were told but never recorded, must have been filled with tales replete with fairies, witches, mermaids, dwarfs, ogres, dragons, devils, angels, saints, magical objects, potions, herbs, kings, queens, peasants, flying and talking horses, talking cats, dogs, and foxes, and so on. These tales were never recorded because the very few learned people who could write had no interest in collecting them and writing them down, and if they did, they stylized them for a different audience. Besides, these tales were told in dialect, and there were no orthographic standards that facilitated the recording of tales told by peasants, laborers, and artisans. Almost every person in pre-modern Europe breathed the stuff of wonder tales and other types of tales that contained a mixture of pagan beliefs and early Christian religious stories. In his thought-provoking book, *Strange Histories*, Darren Oldridge remarks; "In the period covered by this book—from the late Middle Ages to the beginnings of modern science at the end of the seventeenth century—the prevailing system of belief permitted many ideas that now seem unfamiliar or ridiculous. Can the dead walk? Most people in medieval Europe believed they could, and orthodox Christians assumed this would happen en masse at the time of the Last Judgment. Can witches fly? Even the most trenchant opponents of the persecution of witchcraft in sixteenth century-Europe believed this was possible. Just like us, the people who accepted

these things relied on a body of knowledge to help them evaluate the facts of the world, and just like us, they inherited this knowledge from the culture in which they were born."¹⁴

Belief in fairies, witches, devils, and ogres became dangerous in European societies that punished people for heretical expression and behavior, and the peasantry, always suspicious of their learned superiors, were not about to tell them tales that were part of their intimate culture. Certainly women were most reluctant to tell their tales to male interlocutors of the educated class. As Ben-Amos succinctly argues: "The slim documentary evidence of fairies in the belief systems of medieval European societies is not a testimony for their absence, and ignoring their documented presence creates a blind spot in the practice of literary empiricism. After all, ephemeral beliefs and communication occur regardless of their documentation. The meager references to fairies in contemporaneous writings are a function of the nature of medieval documents and of the attitude toward fairies rather than a testimony to their true prevalence in belief systems. With no church and no cult to support them, the fairies were relegated to the cultural periphery. Consequently, the evidence of their significance can be inferred most readily from the testimony about their vanishing: comments about their disappearance attest to their earlier presence. In the words of Chaucer's "Wife of Bath":

In the Old days of King Arthur, today
Still praised by Britons in a special
way,
This land was filled with fairies all
about.¹⁵

Yet belief in fairies has never vanished and fairy tales as part of oral and literary culture can be considered a minor subversive genre that infiltrates major dominant culture whenever it can. When J. M. Barrie had Peter Pan cry out to the largely adult audience of his 1904 play in London and ask them whether they all believed in fairies, the answer was a resounding YES! Whenever and wherever the play is produced in the twenty-first century, the answer remains the same.

Bottigheimer's Rebuttal

There is no need to summarize Bottigheimer's evasive reply to her critics published in *The Journal of American Folklore* because she has developed her "radical" ideas in *Fairy Tales: A New History*, to which I shall now turn. This book is slim in size and thought. Bottigheimer essentially rehashes her nomination of Straparola as the inventor of literary fairy tales and adds Giambattista Basile as co-inventor. She sets herself up as the main authority of defining fairy tales. She re-writes the history of the fairy tale by focusing on book commerce and contends that only the publication of books enables us to understand how writers created their fairy tales and how the tales were transmitted. She treats common people with great disdain and makes no effort to understand how language and communication have evolved and how tales were disseminated orally before printing machines were invented. She focuses only on the publication records of three countries, Italy, France, and Germany, and excludes the rest of the world from her analysis, as though only Europe gave birth to fairy tales. She concocts generic categories to stereotype the fairy

tale that do not enrich our understanding of why writers composed their fairy tales and how they created them. There is not a shred of sophisticated theoretical thinking in what she purports to be a "new" history of fairy tales.

In chapter one, "Why a New History of Fairy Tales?", Bottigheimer sets the tone of her book by declaring: "It has been said so often that the folk invented and disseminated fairy tales that this assumption has become an unquestioned proposition. It may therefore surprise readers that folk invention and transmission of fairy tales has no basis in verifiable fact. Literary analysis undermines it, literary history rejects it, social history repudiates it, and publishing history (whether of manuscripts or of books) contradicts it."¹⁶ Bottigheimer enjoys using declarations rather than thoughtful explanations to develop her theses and arguments and very rarely cites sources other than herself as an authority. For instance, she does not tell us who it is who has said so often that the folk invented and disseminated fairy tales. There are no references. Is she talking about oral folk tales or literary fairy tales? Who are the historians who have claimed that only the folk invented fairy tales? Where are her citations? She does not mention that in the last forty or fifty years, folklorists, literary critics, historians, and scholars of folklore and fairy tales from many different countries have been more interested in the intersections between the oral and literary traditions than in attempts to privilege one over the other. It is Bottigheimer who wants to establish a paper tiger, the dichotomy of oral and literary traditions and the privileging of oral tales. What does she mean by the abstract conglomerations of

literary analysis, literary history, social history, and publishing history that refute oral transmission of tales? Are these groups of people, institutions, or methods that she will use to prove that only she knows who the true inventors of the fairy tale are?

Indeed, this is what this chapter simplistically sets out to do. Bottigheimer begins with one of the most ignorant and false definitions of folk tales that I have ever read: "Folk tales differ from fairy tales in their structure, their cast of characters, their plot trajectories, and their age. Brief, and with linear plots, folk tales reflect the world and the belief systems of their audiences. . . . Folk tales are easy to follow and easy to remember, in part because they deal with familiar aspects of the human condition like the propensity to build castles in the air."¹⁷ In fact, folk tales, especially oral wonder tales, are much more diverse than Bottigheimer suggests. They have so many remarkable similarities with literary fairy tales and other genres such as myths, legends, anecdotes, etc. that it is very difficult to define a typical "authentic" fairy tale. Nevertheless, the omniscient Bottigheimer provides us with strict demarcations that, for once and for all, will enable us to know what a fairy tale really is. Actually, according to Bottigheimer, there are two types of fairy tales, both invented by Straparola: restoration fairy tales and rise fairy tales. "Restoration fairy tales are firmly based in the world of human beings,"¹⁸ Bottigheimer states, and I have no idea what she means. She outlines a plot in which a member of the nobility (king or queen) is banished or driven from his realm and regains it through enduring tests and trials. "Rise fairy tales

begin with a dirt poor girl or boy who suffers the effects of grinding poverty and whose story continues with tests, tasks, and trials until magic brings about a marriage to royalty and a happy accession to great wealth."¹⁹ These descriptive definitions are so vague, flat, and simplistic that they could fit thousands if not hundreds of thousands of narrative types and schemes. Moreover, Bottigheimer does not consider many other theories developed by Vladimir Propp, Claude Lévi-Strauss, Claude Brémont, Louis Marin, or Steven Swann Jones,²⁰ just to name a few, who have endeavored to explicate the patterns in folk and fairy tales in great detail. She does, however, discuss why tales about fairyland are different from fairy tales and declares that "the distinguishing characteristics of tales about fairyland—two parallel universes and sometimes unhappy endings—make their differences from fairy tales obvious. Despite these fundamental differences in location and outcome, tales about fairyland are often, and confusingly, lumped together with human-centered and real-world-based fairy tales."²¹ Yet, Bottigheimer does not attempt to understand the social history of fairies that can be traced to Greek and Roman antiquity and the worship of certain goddesses.²² Nor does she consider that fairies (and related creatures such as nixies, sirens, mermaids, and sylphs) were part of the real human word and belief systems of humans. What concerns her most is to establish her own categorical definition of two types of literary fairy tales and to demonstrate that the "unfettered country folk" could never have told tales that engendered what Straparola and Basile supposedly engendered—the genre of the fairy tale.

In her next chapter, "Two Accounts of the Grimms' Tales: The Folk as Creator, the Book as Source," she again rehashes what folklorists and literary critics have been discussing and have known for the past forty years. There's nothing new in this chapter except a vitriolic attack on the poor Brothers Grimm, or should I say, Wilhelm, for he was the brother most responsible for editing the Grimms' *Children's and Household Tales*, from 1819 onward. Bottigheimer makes a great deal out of the fact that many of the Grimms' informants were from the middle class or could read and that the Brothers somewhat idealized the German folk, a view that was carried on and maintained by German folklorists in the twentieth century and scholars from other countries. However, this does not discount the fact that most if not all of the Grimms' tales have oral sources and most can be traced to other countries and other collections of folklorists in other countries. Whether the Grimms' conception of the folk was right or wrong, they were responsible for the significant collecting of oral tales in Europe throughout the nineteenth century, and Bottigheimer does not give them credit for their endeavors to encourage learned people to pay more attention to non-literate people and their beliefs, rituals, and customs. Instead, she makes such demeaning remarks as: "The Grimms themselves were poor judges of the folk that they claimed to be the pure creators of and the uncontaminated disseminators of oral narrative. In the years of their collecting for the first volume of the First Edition, Wilhelm and Jacob must have been remarkably ignorant about Germany's folk. Despite the personal poverty of their adolescent years in Cassel, they had

passed their childhood among Hesse-Cassel's privileged and had spent their early manhood in libraries and archives, and, when ill health forced it, in spas. Unworldly, inexperienced, and like the tales they recorded, generally innocent of sexual knowledge, they were personally naive about the peasantry's earthly world. Thus it is not surprising that they projected the simplicity with which they were personally familiar onto the tales they were collecting, and beyond them, to the folk they believed in."²³

Bottigheimer assumes that she knows more about the German people than the Grimms did, and this puts her in the authoritative position to judge them and their relationship to the people. Perhaps she should read the letters that the Brothers exchanged between themselves and the recent biography by Stefan Martus to obtain a better understanding of the Grimms.²⁴ The Brothers were not the total bookworms and naive dreamers that she makes them out to be. They were not interested in mixing with and catering to the upper classes and always had contact with people both from the lower and upper classes. It is true that they were very diligent students, but they also were down-to-earth and knew that they had to work hard to support their family after their father's early death. Only one brother, Wilhelm, went to a health spa in Halle, not a luxurious spa attended by both Brothers as Bottigheimer suggests. Jacob travelled to Vienna and then to Paris and saw the ravages of war and its effect on the common people and wrote about them. The Brothers knew more about sex and bawdy jokes than Bottigheimer pretends, and the tales—among them many tales about soldiers—they collected do

in part reflect the “earthly world” about which Bottigheimer seems to know very little.

Throughout her book Bottigheimer works with assumptions, declarations, and questionable evidence as if only she knew the truth about history. She is, however, a most unreliable historian. In chapter three, “The Late Seventeenth- and Eighteenth-Century Layers,” she wants to prove that the talented French writers of the 1690s all knew Straparola’s and Basile’s works and could not have been influenced by a French oral tradition that, according to Bottigheimer, did not even exist. Yet, many of the women writers, d’Aulnoy, Lhéritier, De La Force, Murat, and even Charles Perrault, make reference to nannies and servants who told them tales. Some of the best scholars in France have documented the influence of French folklore and orality in the writing of the tales.²⁵ Often the women writers performed their tales orally in salons. With the exception of Murat, none of the writers ever mentioned Straparola in their letters or memoirs. As for Basile, none of the French writers could read Italian much less the Neapolitan dialect in which Basile wrote his tales. Yet, Bottigheimer once again declares: “I’ve examined Lhéritier’s and Perrault’s tales of the good and bad sisters and their respective magical rewards and curses. I’ve compared them with each other and with the two Basile tales that preceded them. And I’ve concluded that Perrault may well have had his niece’s tales as well as Basile’s two tales in front of him when he composed ‘The Fairies.’”²⁶

Once again Bottigheimer lets her imagination carry her away to invent scenes so that she can justify the magic powers of

the book. We have no knowledge whatsoever about Perrault’s practice of writing. We do not know whether he copied or worked with Basile’s and Lhéritier’s texts. It is most unlikely that he could decipher Basile’s unusual Neapolitan dialect and Baroque stories. It is more likely that Perrault may have known some oral tale related to the cycle of “the good and bad girls” that circulated not only in France but also in Germany, the Slavonic countries, and Italy. This is not to say that we must privilege the oral over print, but as various French scholars have endeavored to explain, we should be aware of oral influences in printed tales that can be traced linguistically, philologically, stylistically, and historically to all kinds of oral tales.

The oral components in Straparola’s and Basile’s tales are striking, but in chapter four, “The Two Inventors of Fairy Tale Tradition; Giambattista Basile (1634-1636) and Giovan Francesco Straparola (1551, 1553),” Bottigheimer uses her narrow definitions of the fairy tale as restoration and rise tale to eliminate any possibility that either Basile or Straparola might have based their tales on oral sources or tried to imitate oral performances that might have influenced their writing.²⁷ Once again, Bottigheimer makes all sorts of allusions to Straparola’s and Basile’s lives that make it seem as if their tales were formed either by their own imaginations or through reading books. It is important, however, to stress again that we know absolutely nothing about Straparola, and that he might not have even lived in Venice or addressed his tales to the urban artisans who supposedly devoured his books. We could even, like Bottigheimer, create a

Straparola who listened to tales by gifted Venetians and who might have known tales from *The Arabian Nights*, because of the trade with Turks, Arabs, and Persians in Venice. The truth is that we must rely on slight textual evidence in the case of Straparola and on historical records and texts in the case of Basile, two very different writers. Since I have already dealt with Straparola earlier in this essay, I will add here only that the author himself reveals his debt to the oral storytelling tradition in the book, frame narrative, and some of the tales. Straparola admits that the tales are not his; his narrative is based on a gathering of people from the upper classes who tell tales that they have heard before, a couple of them in dialect. All of them bear witness to an oral influence, including the telling of riddles. In the case of Basile, who chose to invent ten bizarre peasant women to tell the tales in his collection *The Tale of Tales* (*Lo Cunto de li cunti*), it is clear from the dialect, the hybrid plots, and his known performances at courts that he was thoroughly conversant with a lower-class tradition of storytelling. Naples, the south of Italy, and Sicily were treasure chests of oral storytelling, and Basile, who travelled throughout Italy and was not from the aristocracy, was clearly familiar with oral tales and literary works. His brilliance—the use of folk dialect to mock Baroque mannerist conventions—seems to have avoided Bottigheimer’s gaze.

In her final chapter, “A New History,” she begins with another one of her infamous declarations that are based on nothing but disdain for common people and oral traditions: “If we look forward from Straparola toward the fairy tale future, we see a publishing phenomenon with

printed texts carrying fairy tales from one place to another. The ubiquitous and mysterious folk and nursemaids remain, but as consumers of fairy tales rather than as producers.”²⁸ Given the fact that anywhere from 70% to 90% of the population in Europe was non-literate, that Latin dominated the books published in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, that books were often purchased by collectors, placed in libraries, and not read, that there are few records of people reading print fairy tales, that people from all classes read aloud in an oral tradition, that books were expensive, that most people spoke and communicated in some kind of dialect, we must ask what the common people were doing to amuse themselves in the medieval and Renaissance periods. We must ask why the learned people ignored the writing down of the tales of the common people. We know, however, that once learned people actually began to investigate in the nineteenth century what tales common people were telling, they found hundreds if not thousands that were not influenced by books; many were oral wonder tales. Bottigheimer forgets to add that books circulated mainly among the aristocracy and upper middle classes, and many of the French and German writers of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries wrote extraordinary literary fairy tales that show no connection to so-called restoration and rise tales. As to her derogatory remarks about common people, whom she turns into passive consumers unable to create their own wonder or magic tales, they are lamentable. Perhaps if she studied how peasants and laborers developed certain rituals, how tales and songs were performed in their homes and at work, how they con-

fessed their beliefs about elves, fairies, and witches in fabricated stories to their persecutors, how town criers might have circulated tales, and so on, she might have granted them some brains and creativity. Bottigheimer, however, goes even further than denying the majority of European people any power of original storytelling; she means to diminish the tales of all other peoples in the world with her “new” history when she writes: “In a large sense the international spread of fairy tales can be explained within a history of a predominantly Italian creation, French editing, and German re-editing that took place in a context of commercial mechanisms within book distribution networks.”²⁹ This statement—unless you subscribe to Bottigheimer’s prescriptive definition of a fairy tale—explains nothing and is an outright lie. Fairy tales, even the kind Bottigheimer celebrates, were told, copied, and disseminated by word of mouth and manuscript in many other parts of the world long before Straparola was born. Her “new” history of the fairy tale is nothing but an embarrassment to literary analysis, literary history, social history, and publishing history.

Ideological Simplifications and Implications

What is perhaps most disturbing about Bottigheimer’s *Fairy Tales: A New History* is her seemingly objective use of terms and methods to conceal a perverse ideological agenda. Perhaps she is unaware of her own ideological prejudices and the negative effects they might have for students and scholars of folklore and fairy tales, but they clearly color her views and reveal the defects and contradictions of her faux history.

In a superb talk, “Authorizing Fairy-Tale History? Disciplinary Debates and the Politics of Inequality,” held by Cristina Bacchilega at the recent 2010 meeting of the American Folklore Society, she comments: “When Bottigheimer writes, ‘Rise fairy tales are a product of that quintessential engine of modernity, the printing press,’ this seemingly matter-of-fact statement, which is more a declaration than a historical truth, participates in a larger and powerful discourse that has represented modernity as strictly literate as well as simply European, and has configured the difference between oral and print traditions into a strategy of control and domination. Why does this matter? Whether the fairy-tale genre is considered exclusively within European and literary history, or as a genre whose ties to expressive cultures and comparative literatures are inflected by global dynamics, has significant implications for ascribing a place for lay and subaltern knowledges in history.”³⁰

If Bottigheimer had been serious about writing a new, more balanced interdisciplinary history of the fairy tale, she might have begun with a discussion about the evolution of human communication throughout the world and how humans exchanged information and developed narratives based on daily experience, work, rituals, and beliefs. Though there is no exact date as to when human language and cognition developed, most historians agree that it was at least 100,000 to 200,000 years ago, long before alphabets, script, and printing presses. That is, all people on the earth lived and communicated by gestures and word of mouth thousands of years before such a thing as a fairy tale as we know it today came into

being. Yet, tales of various kinds were invented and cultivated, and as Michael Tomasello points out in *The Cultural Origins of Human Cognition*: “Natural languages also contain cognitive resources for construing whole events or situations in terms of one another, that is, for creating the various kinds of analogies and metaphors that are so important in adult cognition—such as seeing the atom as a solar system, love as a journey, or anger as heat. Also, children’s growing skills of linguistic communication enable them to participate in complex discourse interactions in which the explicitly symbolized perspectives of interactions clash and so must be negotiated and resolved. These kinds of interactions may lead children to begin to construct something like a theory of mind of their communicative partners, and, in some special cases of pedagogical discourse, to internalize adult instructions and so begin to self-regulate and to reflect on their own thinking—perhaps leading to some types of metacognition and representational redescription. The internalization of discourse interactions containing multiple, conflicting perspectives may even be identified with certain types of uniquely human, dialogical thinking processes.”³¹

The primary learning processes of language and cultural communication were and are based on imitation, instruction, and communication. What is important for the study of fairy tales and any other narrative form is a comprehension of its evolutionary tendencies. Tomasello writes: “Cumulative cultural evolution depends on imitative learning, and perhaps active instruction on the part of adults and cannot be brought about by means of ‘weaker’ forms of social learn-

ing such as local enhancement, emulation learning, ontogenetic ritualization, or any form of individual learning. The argument is that cumulative cultural evolution depends on two processes, innovation and imitation (possibly supplemented by instruction), that must take place in a dialectical process over time such that one step in the process enables the next.”³²

As metaphorical tales were told and circulated thousands of years before print, they served social functions, were retained through memory, and were passed on from generation to generation. When oral wonder tales originated, it is difficult to say, but there are traces, signs, patterns, and plots in early ancient manuscripts that reveal how all people came to know the world through metaphor, ritual, custom, and transformation. Tales were not named or categorized according to genre, but it is clear that most of the fairy-tale motifs, topoi, characters, plots, and conventions existed in oral traditions (and some continue to do so) long before learned people learned how to write and categorize narratives.

An interesting case in point is *The Thousand and One Nights* (*Alf Laila wa Laila*) which is purposely omitted from discussion in Bottigheimer’s essays and books. The tales in this collection were originally Persian and stemmed from oral storytelling traditions of the eighth and ninth centuries. As Paul McMichael Nurse points out in *Eastern Dreams: How the Arabian Nights Came to the World*, “Travel and trade mean exchanges not only of goods but also of ideas and information. Although their exact provenance is unknown, based on such internal evidence as cultural references and

terminology it is believed that many of the stories in the *Nights* originated with Indian, Arab, Persian, Greek, Roman and possibly Chinese travelers, merchants, and soldiers plying travel routes from the Balkans to the China Sea. Rest stops were spent around campfires or in the occasional caravanserai—walled hostels catering to travelers—dotting the roads. At these times, it was customary to swap stories to while away the restful hours before setting out again. The more popular tales were thus transferred from place to place while being continually modified according to regional customs and circumstances, much as a joke will assume local colour and familiar allusions for better comprehension."³³

The development of the *Nights* tales from the Oriental oral and literary traditions of the Middle Ages into a classical work for Western readers is a fascinating one. The tales in the collection can be traced to three ancient oral cultures — Indian, Persian, and Arab —and they probably circulated in the vernacular hundreds of years before they were written down some time between the ninth and fourteenth centuries. The apparent model for the literary versions of the tales was a Persian book entitled *Hezâr afsân* (A Thousand Stories), translated into Arabic in the ninth century as *Alf laylah wa-laylah* (A Thousand and One Nights), for it provided the framework story of a caliph who kills his wife because she betrays him. Then, for the next three years, he takes a new wife every day and slays her each night after taking her maidenhead to avenge himself on women. He is finally diverted from this cruel custom by a vizier's daughter, assisted by her slave-girl. During the next seven centuries,

various storytellers, scribes, and scholars began to record the tales from this collection and others and to shape them either independently or within the framework of the Sheherezade/Shahriyâr narrative frame. The tellers and authors of the tales were anonymous and their styles and language differed greatly; the only common distinguishing feature was the fact that they were written in a colloquial language called Middle Arabic that had its own peculiar grammar and syntax. By the fifteenth century, three distinct layers could be detected in the collection of those tales that formed the nucleus of what became known as *The Thousand and One Nights*: (1) Persian tales that had some Indian elements and had been adapted into Arabic by the tenth century; (2) tales recorded in Baghdad between the tenth and twelfth centuries; (3) stories written down in Egypt between the eleventh and fourteenth centuries.

Nurse emphasizes the important role played by the *rawi*, professional storytellers or reciting storytellers, in the dissemination of the tales that were addressed mainly to people of the lower classes, disdained by the educated classes. The *rawi* still exercise their profession in Morocco today. Nurse also notes that many of the tales come from written compilations and literary antecedents and were constantly being changed when told and written down. In the process they became truly international, and Nurse notes, "it is known that stories from the *Nights* were circulating in 'westernized' versions in Europe many centuries before their printed appearance, cropping up in oral form in Germany, France, Italy and Spain, although it is unclear whether manuscript versions of sundry *Nights*

tales were in circulation. All the same, it is likely some *Nights* stories were present in Europe from around the twelfth century, arriving through Arabized Sicily or Moorish Spain to be absorbed into the European folklore tradition."³⁴

Among the hundreds of tales that were recorded by scribes were stories that followed Bottigheimer's plots of rise and restoration tales such as "The Fisherman and the Genie," "The Tale of the Three Apples," "Aladdin and the Magic Lamp," and "The Ebony Horse." In addition, there were fairy tales of initiation and marriage rituals, tales with fairies, flying horses, and wizards, and tales dealing with incest, child abuse and abandonment, rape, slavery, exploitation, deceit, miraculous intervention, and so on. Were these tales told in Venice during Straparola's time? We don't know for certain, but we do know something that Bottigheimer never discusses: Venice was the most important trade center with the Byzantine Empire and the Muslim world, and it is quite possible that not only goods but tales were exchanged in this port city that was also known for the performing arts and the publishing of books. Though there was a higher rate of literacy in Venice than in most Italian cities, more than 70% of the people in the city could not read adequately, and even those who could read did not necessarily understand what they read. As Brian Richardson points out in *Printing, Writers and Readers in Renaissance Italy*, "What is striking from a modern point of view is that children could learn to read without necessarily understanding fully what they read: because of the force of tradition and the lack of prestige of the vernacular as a written language

among teachers, reading in one's native language did not play a part in the traditional curriculum."³⁵ Girls were rarely taught to read. Many people could only write their names and yet were considered literate.

In *Literacy in Early Modern Europe: Culture and Education 1500-1800*, R. A. Houston points out, "The imperfect nature of early modern sources generally makes it necessary to categorise people as literate or illiterate. However these are at best seen not as discrete categories, but as steps in a hierarchy of skills. At the same time, seeing and listening could bridge the gap between literate and illiterate. What is more, literacy can be used for different purposes: to serve some practical or functional end such as economic need among tradesmen, in which case reading and writing would be advantageous; or to fulfill a religious need, where reading alone is all that is commonly required."³⁶

Literacy was also used by the church and by governments constituted by the upper classes to subject the lower classes to authoritative regulations, social codes, laws, and manners. Very few books in the sixteenth century were secular and fiction. Even when they were read, they were frequently read aloud and in groups. For the most part and in most of Europe, orality of different kinds was the dominant mode of cultural communication in all social classes. Cultural conditions and languages were very diverse throughout Europe, and the stories and social practices of the lower classes were not considered worthy of attention. They were very rarely recorded just as Bottigheimer never bothers to explore oral mediation in all the classes and the possible connections between the classes in

regard to storytelling. If she had done this and had understood the complex nature of history, we might have a different picture of Straparola and Basile. We certainly would have a different view of the *Le piacevoli notti* and *Lo Cunto de li cunti* and the significant roles they played in mediating oral and literary stories that helped foster the genre of the literary fairy tale. As it stands, Bottigheimer's "new" history of the fairy tale can only be considered self-serving sensationalist "scholarship."

Notes

- 1 Marshall Poe. 2011. *A History of Communications: Media and Society from the Evolution of Speech to the Internet*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press: 115.
- 2 See Giovan Francesco Straparola. 2000. *Le piacevoli notti*. Edited by Donato Pirovano. Rome: Salerno: xlvii
- 3 Jack Zipes. 2006. *Fairy Tales and the Art of Subversion: The Classical Genre for Children and the Process of Civilization, 2nd ed.* New York: Routledge: 14.
- 4 Straparola, *Le piacevoli notti*: xlvii
- 5 See Jan Ziolkowski. 2010. Straparola and the Fairy Tale: Between Literary and Oral Traditions. *Journal of American Folklore* 123:377-397; Francisco Vaz da Silva. 2010. The Invention of Fairy Tales," *Journal of American Folklore* 123: 398-425; Dan Ben-Amos. 2010. Straparola: The Revolution That Was Not, *Journal of American Folklore* 123: 426-446; Ruth Bottigheimer. 2010. Fairy Godfather, Fairy-Tale History, and Fairy-Tale Scholarship: A Response to Dan Ben-Amos, Jan M. Ziolkowski, and Francisco Vaz da Silva. *Journal of American Folklore* 123.
- 6 Ziolkowski, 377.
- 7 Ziolkowski, 380.
- 8 Ziolkowski, 385.
- 9 Ziolkowski, 395.
- 10 Straparola, *Le piacevoli notti*, li.
- 11 Vaz da Silva, 404.
- 12 Ben-Amos, 430.
- 13 Ben-Amos, 434.
- 14 Darren Oldridge. 2005. *Strange Histories: The Trial of the Pig, the Walking Dead, and Other Matters of Fact from the Medieval and Renaissance Worlds*. London: Routledge, 4.
- 15 Ben-Amos, 435.
- 16 Ruth Bottigheimer 2009 *Fairy Tales: A New History*. Albany: State University of New York, 1.
- 17 Bottigheimer, 4.
- 18 Bottigheimer, 10.
- 19 Bottigheimer, 11-12.
- 20 See Vladimir Propp 1968. *Morphology of the Folktale*. Edited by Louis Wagner and Alan Dundes. 2nd rev. ed. Austin: University of Texas Press; Claude Lévi-Strauss. 1963. *Structural Anthropology* trans. Claire Jacobson and Brooke Grundfest Schoepf. New York: Doubleday; Claude Brémont. 1997. *L'Analyse structurale du récit*. Paris: Seuil; Louis Marin. 1989. *Food for Thought*. Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press; Steven Swann Jones, 1995. *The Fairy Tale: The Magic Mirror of Imagination*. New York: Twayne.
- 21 Bottigheimer, 16-17.
- 22 See Lauence Harf-Lancner. 1984. *Les Fées au Moyen Âge: Morgane et Mélusine. La naissance des fées*. Paris: Honoré Champion.
- 23 Bottigheimer, 45.
- 24 See Steffen Martus. 2009. *Die Brüder Grimm: Eine Biographie*. Berlin: Rowohlt.
- 25 See Robert, Raymonde Robert 2002. *Le conte de fées littéraire en France de la fin du XVII à la fin du XVIII siècle. Supplement bibliographique 19800-2000 établi par Nadine Jasmin avec la collaboration de Claire Debru*. Paris: Champion; Anne Defrance and Jean-François Perrin, eds. 2007. *Le conte en ses paroles. La figuration de l'oralité dans le conte merveilleux du Classicisme aux Lumières*. Paris: Éditions Desjonquères.
- 26 Bottigheimer, 73.

27 For two important essays concerned with the oral components of Italian fairy tales, see Cristina Lavinio, "La fiaba tra oralità e scrittura: aspetti linguistici and stilistici" and Giovanna Cerina, "La fiaba tra oralità e scrittura: aspetti semiotici," 1982, in *Oralità e Scrittura nel Sistema Letterario*, ed. Giovanna Cerina, Cristina Lavinio, and Luisa Mulas. Rome: Bulzoni: 91-114 and 115-132. See also Luciano Morbiato, ed. 2006. *La Fiaba e altri Frammenti di Narrazione popolare*. Florence: Olschki.

28 Bottigheimer, 103.

29 Bottigheimer, 107.

30 Cristina Bacchilega, "Authorizing Fairy-Tale History? Disciplinary Debates and the Politics of Inequality," manuscript of talk held on October 16, 2010 at the American Folklore Association Meeting in Nashville, Tennessee. Donald Haase, who responded to Bacchilega's paper, also made some very perceptive remarks about Bottigheimer's rhetoric of assertion at this session. See also Cristina Bacchilega's 2010 review of Ruth Bottigheimer's *Fairy Tales: a New History* in *Children's Literature Association Quarterly* 35: 468-71.

31 Michael Tomasello. 2008. *The Origins of Communication*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press: 9-10.

32 *Ibid.*, 39.

33 Paul McMichael Nurse. 2010. *Eastern Dreams: How the Arabian Nights Came to the World*. Toronto: Viking Canada: 23.

34 *Ibid.*, 46.

35 Brian Richardson. 1999. *Printing, Writers and Readers in Renaissance Italy*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press: 108.

36 R. A. Houston. 2002. *Literacy in Early Modern Europe: Culture and Education 1500-1800* London: Longman: 4.

Contesting the Spectacle: Global Lives as Counterpublic in the Context of Celebrity Activism¹

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The Global Lives Forum convened on February 27, 2010, to provide a space for critical discussion of the mission and products of the Global Lives Project. The Forum brought together the Project's staff of producers and filmmakers with scholars, students, and members of the public to engage in conversation about the potentials and limitations of the Project, what it had accomplished, and what work was left to be done.

Left implicit but yet perhaps the motivating force behind the entire day's discussions was the question of what makes the Global Lives Project worth doing. Why do we experience a need for something like the Global Lives Project; to what are we reacting? In the various panels and discussions, the participants at the Forum described dissatisfaction with the products of commercial media: radically simplified sound bites increasingly packaged and filtered by appealing personalities. What we know is what is spectacular and this seems insufficient for understanding the world and our places in it.

The current supremacy of the spectacle and its dangers is illustrated forcefully by the contemporary phenomenon of celebrity activism on behalf of Africa. The value of the Global Lives Project as a source of information about the world can

be appreciated if we consider the kinds of media background among which it exists and thus effectively defies.

Bono, Madonna, Angelina Jolie, George Clooney, Oprah Winfrey, and other megastars have chosen to lend some of their limelight to African disease, poverty, and conflict, which become their causes *célèbres*. Bono takes meetings with world leaders to discuss debt relief. Jolie promotes economist Jeffrey Sachs' Millennium Villages Project in Kenya. Winfrey had a school for girls built in Johannesburg. This explosion of interest in Africa among American celebrities is perhaps best confirmed in a 2006 article in the Style Section of the *New York Times* which remarked on Madonna's use of images of AIDS-stricken Malawian children as the backdrop during her concerts, and concluded: "That Madonna should suddenly be casting an ice-blue eye toward Africa should hardly be surprising. After all, she has always known how to spot a trend. And much as it may strain the limits of good taste to say it, Africa—rife with disease, famine, poverty, and civil war—is suddenly 'hot'" (Williams 2006).

A net result of this swell of this high-profile activism, however, is that celebrities have now become a predominant and ubiquitous source of information about Africa. In a 2007 report, media watchdog group Fairness and Accuracy in Reporting (FAIR) assessed the current state of Africa-related television network news coverage and concluded that African countries and issues are increasingly seen "through the prism of celebrity." A full quarter of Africa-related stories on the *NBC Nightly News* over 2005-2007 had a celebrity angle, most commonly focusing on Bono, with whom anchor

Brian Williams traveled to sub-Saharan Africa in the spring of 2006. Across the major networks, FAIR found that Africa-related stories were largely about either celebrity involvement at the G8 summit in Scotland, Bono's activism in general, the movie *Blood Diamond* (about Sierra Leone's civil war, starring Leonardo DiCaprio), Madonna's adoption of a Malawian boy, or George Clooney's activism in Darfur (Hollar 2007).

Celebrities exert immense influence in the public sphere. They attract attention not only from television news, but from every popular medium. The FAIR report captures how celebrities can and do define which issues are *the* issues when they talk about "Africa." They can and do set agenda that empower some actors and disempower others. They offer solutions and celebrate heroes. Because celebrities are regarded as trendsetters, they create, reinforce, and promulgate our popular "truth" about Africans: who they are, what their problems are, how those problems can be solved, and who can and should come to their aid.

Celebrities create this truth largely without the voices of actual Africans. For instance, many African activists complained that 2005's Live 8, the worldwide day of concerts to "raise awareness" in advance of the G8 summit, featured Africans in video montages about HIV/AIDS, but not as speakers or activists (Monbiot 2005). The 2007 "Africa Issue" of *Vanity Fair*, edited by Bono, featured only one African author (Beckerman 2007). *Marie Claire* magazine lionizes female celebrities who go to Africa and diarize about the resilient hope of desperate female victims of poverty, hunger, disease, sexual exploitation, and conflict (Stoeber

2006). In most instances of celebrity activism, Africans are present as subjects but absent as voices, and the "truth" or "common sense" about who they are and what they need goes untested by their own diverse experiences.

Yet while Africans are silent in celebrity activism, they are far from invisible. Celebrities make strategic use of intensely emotional images of suffering—children with distended bellies, skeletal AIDS patients, weary and overburdened women, and so forth. Many of these images feature the celebrity activists themselves, looking distraught. These images tend to recycle inaccurate and degrading stereotypes. "Africans," understood monolithically, are portrayed as passive and helpless, as perpetually beleaguered and in need, or as victims of misery largely of their own making. While the celebrity is recognizable, usually the Africans remain unidentified—as consumers of these images, we typically do not know their names, where they are from, or anything else about them. In this way, the images also act as a communicative medium that silences African voices. The celebrities—and the relatively affluent audiences for whom they proxy—are positioned in these images as the rescuers of the masses of anonymous Africans.

The marginalization of African voices in discourses about them seems intuitively rather unfair. Since celebrities, however, are ultimately so good at generating interest in and support for causes in Africa, we are compelled to ask *why* we should be so worried about such marginalization. Indeed, celebrities have a great capacity to effect the changes they seek: their wealth and public profile enable them to donate money and raise more;

they get the ear of politicians and policymakers; they inspire others to service. Celebrity visibility can be a huge asset to organizations and causes that might otherwise go unnoticed. Americans arguably “care” more about Africa now because celebrities have made it so glamorous (Alleyne 2005; Marshall 1997; Meyer and Gamson 1995; Street 2004; Traub 2008).

The reason to be critically thoughtful about celebrity activism is that it informs how various publics think about these issues, and hence how and to what extent they lean on their own governments and international organizations to intervene. Put simply, and in the words of the Global Lives Project, “what we see informs how we act.” A discourse that orients people towards charity for silent, passive victims does not lead to the informed or sustainable redress of some of the most difficult political and economic challenges. Celebrity activism might alert an otherwise apathetic public to the existence of suffering far away. But by portraying Africans as “unfortunate inferiors,” rather than as “outraged and insulted equals,” celebrities obscure (if not deny) the perspectives and the agency of actual Africans (Spelman 1997, 60). In the words of South African sociologist Zine Magubane (2007): “there is no room in this worldview for the possibility that Africans themselves might be the ones to create the political and economic conditions such that intense poverty might not be the *sine qua non* of African life” (391). The seemingly obvious solution to the marginalization of actual Africans in these discourses about them is to “get them in”—find a way to include African voices. Once there, those voices can contest stereotypes and reassert

political questions that get sidelined to charitable impulses. The difficulty with simple inclusion is that the current structures of our various, transnational public spheres, in which these problematic discourses circulate, are strongly biased against the meaningful participation of subordinated groups. The FAIR report highlights as much: the cameras follow the celebrities. Rather than focus on “getting them in” to a rather hegemonic set of discourses, then, it is perhaps more strategic to subvert these discourses, to widen the discursive space and amplify the counterdiscourses already forming in African and global counterpublics.

Counterpublics, as defined by critical theorist Nancy Fraser (1992, 2007), provide discursive arenas for the formulation of identity and discussion of common concerns. These forums include magazines and newspapers, films, popular music, avant-garde scholarly or artistic institutions, academic journals and, increasingly, online communities and their products. Participants, engaging as peers, articulate their desires, needs, and wants, outside of the supervision of the dominant groups in more mainstream public spheres. Through the processes of debate internal to them, counterpublics create counterdiscourses and counternarratives, which can then be used to lodge a collective, coherent, and sustained discursive attack on what is commonly asserted and understood as “true.” This structural change creates a space and a means for subordinated groups to exercise voice, to challenge assumptions, and to contest the *status quo*.

The Global Lives Project acts as a type of counterpublic insofar as it defies the logics of commercial media. It produces

films that stay close and true to the experiences of the subjects themselves, such that the materiality of their lives can be expressed faithfully, without regard for the right “angle” or emotionally compelling “hook.” The videos do not position an interlocutor between the subject and the viewer; no one is named the authoritative interpreter of the subject’s experience. There is no Bono or Jolie to describe how whole categories of people experience their circumstances. The videos are particular to an extreme: about specific individuals, over the course of one day of their lives. They thereby resist the tendency to generalize across complex diversity, while allowing the possibility that viewers might notice similarities to their own lives and forge meaningful connections.

In Fraser’s rendering, however, counterpublics are strategically oriented. They are political in their objectives, deliberate in their contestation. The Global Lives videos do not make claims or formulate concerns, needs, and wants in the way that Fraser imagines. But what *use* can then be made of them? Do they represent an arena in which the claims of celebrity activists, and other popular “experts”, can be meaningfully contested? If the videos are used as such, are they being co-opted in a way that transgresses the Global Lives Project’s purposeful neglect of narrative?

These questions came up multiple times over the course of the day’s presentations and discussions. Ultimately, they remain open ones. What makes Global Lives strategic and potentially emancipatory is that it offers a source of information about marginalized people that

is focused only on those voices and experiences. The construction and communication of knowledge about ourselves and others are always political acts; the videos provide the data with which viewers can assess just how general the “truths” they take for granted are. The Global Lives Forum provided an opportunity for those involved and interested in the Project to affirm a certain political commitment—not to paternalistically “shine a light” on the “darkest” corners of the globe, but rather to actively seek out and amplify the diverse voices that have been talking about their experiences all along but have been drowned out by much more powerful and spectacular public figures.

Notes

In these two event reviews, authors Rebecca Elliot and Stina Marie Hasse Jørgensen have adapted their presentations from a forum organized by Cultural Analysis and the Global Lives Project at the Doreen B. Townsend Center for the Humanities at UC Berkeley in February 2010. The forum, “Representing/ Experiencing Everyday Life in the Global Media: Commentary on the Global Lives Project”, asked a group of scholars and new media artists to reflect on the Global Lives Project itself (<http://globallives.org>), as well as on the value of new media for the understanding of everyday experience globally. The editors are grateful to Elliot and Hasse Jørgensen for their willingness to distill their longer works into our shorter review format. [Eds.]

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The Global Lives Project: Making New Media Matter in a Global World

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The Participatory Culture of Prosuming

Computing has infiltrated the everyday life of people all over the world. It is no longer merely a tool for communication and interaction, but also something-to-think-with, a medium that can give us new dimensions in the way we experience and engage with the world.

The digital media theorist D. Fox Harrell describes how digital media, or *phantasmal media*, affects our way of thinking and acting. He defines three different ways of computing: social, cultural, and critical computing. Harrell defines the aims of critical computing as to:

...challenge and provoke users' idealized cognitive models through enabling active participation imbued with culture and critical awareness. (Harrell 2009, 4)

Critical computing evokes in the user new ways of thinking and interacting with a globalized world. The Global Lives Project is a compelling example of this usage of computing technology. The GLP archive, which contains visual documentation of the lives of different people from around the world on a digital platform on the Internet, enables users to actively engage with global cultures.

Users can watch many different stories of everyday life, and can collect and upload their own documentation of the everyday life experiences of people in their locale¹. Thereby, GLP participants can add to the creation of a new online collective memory, made with other people through the digital interaction of sharing and distributing information. As a critical computing project, the Global Lives Project hopes to bring a critical awareness of how culture is categorized and transformed by engaging users in a collaborative new media project.

In the field of new media, the concept of participation is a notion of process-oriented production that is constantly changing, interacting, and mutating. Technology has enabled new ways of accessing, manipulating, and remixing already-accumulated media into new forms of expression. In general, new media allows a continuous stream of virtual collaboration; users can build on the works of others to share, edit, and/or sample as both a mode of production and a way of perceiving and engaging in the world. One could say that the process of editing has become a form of art, a mode of interaction, and a way of experiencing the world. In the book *Postproduction* the art critic Nicolas Bourriaud describes this new cultural form:

It is no longer a matter of elaborating a form on the basis of a raw material but working with objects that are already in circulation on the cultural market, which is to say, objects already informed by other objects. (Bourriaud 2002, 22)

By searching, selecting, and swapping from one video documentary to another,

as most of us do in digital archives, we can not only consume the GLP's stories of everyday life around the world, but we can also become remixers, making our own stories of life in a global world. By sampling or editing the Global Lives stories we can create new versions and new narratives from the existing stories. Thus, following Bourriaud, we might see the Global Lives Project as part of a culture of activity, enabling the reinterpretation of the digital archive through user-participation.

In this new form of culture, which one might call a culture of use or a culture of activity, the artwork functions as the temporary terminal of a network of interconnected elements, like a narrative that extends and reinterprets preceding narratives. (Bourriaud 2002, 19)

In this way, our process of selection, swapping, and viewing Global Lives stories, creates a way to build our own personal narratives by building upon the stories of others. These personal narratives are a new form of adaptations, showing our path or activity of selecting and watching these videos online. The recorded and expressed narratives can be seen as a kind of strategic consumption, a tactic to navigate the system. The philosopher Michel De Certeau explains this in the book, *The Practice of Everyday Life*:

A tactic insinuates itself into the other's place, fragmentarily, without taking it over in its entirety, without being able to keep it at a distance. (De Certeau 1984, 7)

This can also be thought of as a culture of *prosumerism*. Art scholar Lev Manovich created the term "prosumer" as a com-

ination of the words "producer" and "consumer". Thus, Manovich defines prosuming as a process in which the roles of producer and consumer merge. The Global Lives Project, I would argue, is a social platform that enables this culture of prosumerism. The retelling and reproduction of the narratives captured by the Global Lives Project is part of a new culture of participation enabled by the structure of the digital archive, which creates a place for interaction with the globalized world. As the mission statement of the Global Lives Project explains:

Our mission is to collaboratively build a video library of human life experience that reshapes how we as both producers and viewers conceive of cultures, nations and people outside of our own communities. (The Global Lives Project. 2010b)

The stated purpose of the Global Lives Project is to provide its users with new insights into the similarities and differences among diverse cultures and ways of living in the world; thus, the Global Lives project can be seen as giving everyday people a voice and a place to communicate, based on an ideal of participatory democracy. As the above statement shows, the aim of the Global Lives Project is to change the way people experience and think about the world. It trades on the fact that we are different enough that transcultural interactions are interesting, but similar enough that we can meet in a common interactive space. As the call for papers for the Global Lives Forum argues:

By freely distributing a stream of pixels from unexpected and *underexperienced*

human realities to screens around the planet, the hope of this global band of filmmakers is to rebuild a more holistic and humanist ethos for the upcoming generations of globally connected life. (The Global Lives Project, 2010a)

The Global Lives Project seeks to create room for free and open exchange of culture through dialogue and collaboration that can enable people to critically engage with the world.

The Culture of Technological Experience

One could argue that the Global Lives Project is not only a project that enables the prosuming culture of participation but also a technological experiment that investigates how we perceive and represent the world. The Global Lives Project addresses the tension between the way we *see* a person in another country and the *experience of being* a person in another country. Emerging technology offers us new modes of bodily perception, without any movement through physical space. In the Global Lives archive, we can not only see how people live their everyday lives, but we can toggle between these lives, moving from Kazakhstan to San Francisco in a split second.

New media technology, however, is something we experience *through*, so it is easy to forget that we are witnessing representations. We must pause to consider how these representations take place, because technology not only mediates the corporal world, it creates and changes our thinking. (Ihde 2003)

In *Technoscience and Postphenomenology*, Don Ihde describes how we are bodily engaged with technology. We embody

the technology used in our interactions with the world. Through this embodiment, technology gets under our skin. In other words, over time the *use* of technology can be transformed into a *being* of technology. Either one as a subject interactively engages with the world by the use of technology, i.e. by using glasses in order to interact with the surrounding environment, or one can engage with technology as a subject that perceives the world through *hermeneutical relations*. The hermeneutical relation is the way we interpret or read the world through technology and can best be compared to the relation between a *trompe l'oeil* painting and its viewer. First the *trompe l'oeil* technique deceives the eye of the viewer to believe that the painting is real, and then it reveals its identity as a painting to the viewer. This makes the viewer aware of the difference between the corporeal reality and the representation of the painting. The revelation of the deceptive quality of the painting – its *difference* – is done in order to make the viewer reflect on the painting as something in itself and not just mere representation. Further, it prompts us to reflect on the world in which the painting and the viewer are both present. In the case of the Global Lives Project, it is the computing technology that makes the transformation and creates the *difference*. Ihde explains the technological transformation:

Technologies transform our experience of the world and our perceptions and interpretations of our world, and we in turn become transformed in this process. Transformations are non-neutral. (Ihde 2009, 44)

The corporeal experience of culture is based on smell, taste, sound, sight, touch, and bodily perceptions. These sensations cannot be communicated entirely through technology. The bodily experience of culture is different from the experience of cultures mediated through technology.

That is the whole point. The space presented by the Global Lives Project is impossible to experience in the corporeal world alone. It is exactly because of the technological nature of the work that it enables us to perceive the impossible as possible: to create a participatory culture of prosuming. The space created in the new media work does not represent an actual physical space; rather, it refers to it in its presentation of itself. In other words, the experience of a new media work is brought about by the *difference* between the corporeal reality of the space and the technologically-developed *metamorphosis* of the space. The Global Lives Project could not exist without the technology. This is why the experience of the technology and the possibilities of selecting, sampling, and remixing personal narratives are an essential part of the project. One could say that it is a matter of enabling the technology to amplify the inaudible by exhibiting the technological attributes within the new media work.

Making New Media Matter in a Global World.

When critical computing projects use the new media technology as a medium that is something-to-think-with, it can open up questions that could not otherwise have been asked. The Global Lives Project opens our eyes to questions about what culture is and how it can inform hu-

man experience in a global world. This is partly due to the rise of the participatory culture of prosuming, whose prominent features are the development of technology as a mediator of experience and the recognition of the crucial *difference* between the corporeal world and the virtual world. However, all of these would not have made the Global Lives Project so successful without its ideal and realization of free culture. The project would simply not have existed without the motivation and belief in free sharing, collaboration, contribution, and communication. Yet, while the Global Lives can be said to realize this ideal of free culture, with their successful and constantly expanding digital archive of documentation on global lives, it is the technology of new media that makes the ideal of free culture possible to pursue. Because the technology enables us to do things that are impossible to do in the corporeal world, the digital archive of the Global Lives Project becomes both a tool for people to use and interact with, but also a way of being. There is a long way to go before the corporeal world can become as open and engaging as the GLP archive; however, the Global Lives Project is creating a digital path that shows us other possible worlds and cultures and enables us to use technology as something-to-think-with.

Notes

See more on how to participate on: www.globallives.org

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