

# COMMUNITY BELONGING IN LOCAL CHARACTER ANECDOTES

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Local character narratives offer a fruitful corpus for exploring the relation between community belonging, identity and narrator stance. After summarizing North American scholarship on the local character genre, I explore the ways two narrators establish their storytelling rights to a rural Maine narrative tradition. Adopting an interactionist orientation toward discourse, I map the ways that the narrators position themselves with respect to each other and to their internalized other, the local character. I demonstrate that community belonging, and the storytelling rights that such belonging confers, is a discursive accomplishment that transcends stable class and geographic positions. The character story offers narrators a way to simultaneously identify with the most marginal, most emblematic members of their community while at the same time distinguishing themselves as normative citizens. Recognizing identities as plural, multi-voiced and sometimes conflicting, I challenge folklorists to explore how differently situated narrators can participate in a tradition that is attached to a particular place. I suggest we replace the notion of positionality – an enumeration of fixed identity features – with that of positioning – a discursive and social accomplishment – in our discussions of storytelling rights.

Keywords: local character anecdote, storytelling rights, positioning, identity, Maine

In comparison to the personal narrative, the local character anecdote remains an understudied genre in the United States. This is partly due to its association with the small, highly integrated village community, which is a social entity that is less and less relevant to the fabric of contemporary life. Yet as my students in Columbus, Ohio have discovered, stories about idiosyncratic teachers, oddball roommates, and other characters abound on contemporary college campuses, indicating that the form continues to do important social work. Perhaps the lack of attention to these stories relates instead to the fact that the stories themselves challenge the ways we think about storytelling rights (Shuman 2005). These are stories told about other, usually marginal people, from the perspective

of the ordinary citizen; as such, they risk maligning their protagonists or creating humor at another's expense. Moreover, in racially diverse contexts, the local character story, like the modern joke form, can transform into a patronizing or even hostile objectification.<sup>1</sup>

Notwithstanding these dangers, local character anecdotes provide an opportunity to examine the interactive dimension of narrative, not only with respect to the ways that narrators position themselves toward their audiences, but also the stances they take toward the characters they animate through narration. The stories direct us to questions of mimesis and representation, particularly as they relate to the fuzzy nature of class and regional identity in the contemporary world. In this way, they challenge the notion of fixed identity positions, offering instead the idea of changeable selves defined by and within social interaction. Anna De Fina (2015) distinguishes between two general approaches to the relationship between identity and narrative: the autobiographical and the interactionist. In the first, the researcher assists the narrator in producing a coherent self, irrespective of their social context. This approach presumes a core identity that, if not entirely fixed, achieves a kind of stability across the lifespan.<sup>2</sup> In the second, the research focuses on the strategies narrators, co-narrators and audiences deploy to “achieve, contest, or reaffirm specific identities” (De Fina 2015: 352). De Fina continues, “Identity is literally in the doing, rather than the thinking, and it is in the doing that it is amenable to observation for discourse analysis” (ibid.: 352–53). In this orientation identities reveal themselves to be plural, often multi-voiced, and even potentially contradictory. Moreover, in contradistinction to contemporary ideas of positionality, where individuals declare their various identity categories (white cisgender female) as limitations on their ability to know or understand another, the interactionist approach recognizes that people mutually constitute one another, both in social interaction and in their narratives of social life.

As Deborah Schiffrin (1996) has noted, sociological studies persist in positing class as a constant rather than an independent variable when examining oral discourse. She argues instead that in a U.S. context class is a flexible, relational category, established through discourse and dependent upon to whom and about whom one is speaking (Schiffrin 1996: 199). As people move both up and down the socio-economic ladder and in and out of regions, their sense of their place in the world necessarily shifts. Yet many continue to imagine the “folk” as the salt of the earth, unaffected by mobility or outside influences. Folklorists participate in these fictions when we privilege the expressive culture of densely networked groups, where class, ethnicity, family, and geographic identities are stacked

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<sup>1</sup> For instance, when I searched the keyword, “local character”, in the Indiana University archive of student folklore papers several years ago, I unearthed a series of jokes told in the 1960s by white Indiana farmers in which the butt of the joke was a Black man who was subjected to violence as a consequence of his purported slow-wittedness. A white colleague, who grew up in Montgomery, Alabama, recognized a body of white-authored stories featuring Black community members from her childhood. She noted that even when authors told such stories affectionately, they were demeaning to their Black subjects. Other racialized marginals include Jews, gypsies, and ethnic minorities, such as French-descended people in New England.

<sup>2</sup> Bamberg (1997) has identified this as the third act of positioning in any narrative telling, the way in which a narrator positions themselves to themselves, answering the question, Who am I?

and convergent rather than variable and contingent (Noyes 2014, 2016; see also Gupta and Ferguson 1997).

Particularly in societies where geographic and social mobility are the rule rather than the exception, we must attend to how people establish their belonging to a place and its narrative traditions. A great deal has been written about how outsider collectors have distorted folk narratives, overlaying their own class perspectives on the material.<sup>3</sup> Certain locales, such as Maine, have also suffered from outsider descriptions that romanticize or flatten the harsh realities of everyday life (Lewis 1993). Without contesting the very real concerns of who gets to speak for/about whom, I recognize various possibilities for storytelling rights that are negotiated through the discursive exchange.

In this essay I examine two narrators' identity work as they relate local character stories from their youths growing up in the small town of Brooks, Maine in the early 20th century. One narrator lived his entire life on a road that bears his family name, whereas the other left as a young adult but maintained contact with her hometown over her lifetime. How do these narrators position themselves with respect to their internal "other"? How do the subtle distinctions of class and region work themselves out in encounters with the "characters" who fuel the town's narrative tradition? After summarizing existing North American scholarship on the local character anecdote, I introduce my narrators and explore their relationship to each other and to the tradition they narrate.<sup>4</sup> I then share a selection of their stories in order to illustrate the dance of identification and difference that narrators perform when they fashion stories of community belonging.

## THE LOCAL CHARACTER ANECDOTE DESCRIBED

Local character anecdotes have for the most part been described as tales of the witty or outrageous antics of in-group deviants. In her survey of residents of a small Nova Scotia town Diane Tye found no fixed form. Residents shared everything from the barely elaborated reference, to fragmentary, pieced together collaborations of many speakers, to "fully developed [anecdotes], well structured, and artfully performed by a single narrator" (Tye 1989: 197). Full of exaggeration, these stories often focus on the extraordinary and constitute a significant part of the community's oral repertoire, being known and shared by everyone.<sup>5</sup> Following Robinson (1981), Tye observes that evaluation is more often implied than overtly stated in local character stories. Following Stahl (1975), she observes

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<sup>3</sup> See, for example Lindahl's (2001) assessment of Richard Chase or the voluminous literature on the Grimms' editorial practices.

<sup>4</sup> Because I conducted my research in a North American context, I am restricting my review to the North American scholarship. This should not be taken as a statement that the local character anecdote is a peculiarly North American genre.

<sup>5</sup> Tye notes that men are more likely to dominate in public arenas, whereas women shared the tales in semi-public settings. Though individuals reported the local character narratives being shared less frequently

the action moves by a surreal logic from the normal to the abnormal. Tye concludes that the stories function to account for individual eccentricities, and in a sense protect the nonconformist from disparagement. Amanda Dargan (1984) makes a similar claim. Within her own family, character stories and characterizations of family members worked to excuse individual shortcomings as family inheritance and to embrace flawed individuals whose behavior makes them vulnerable to social censure.

Adopting the perspective of the character/narrators, Ray Cashman (2008: 94–107) argues such stories constitute a shared community resource that allows people to cement affective bonds. Focusing on performances at *ceilis* (Irish storytelling sessions) in a rural village on the Northern Irish border, Cashman attends particularly to the sociality of elderly bachelors. Though he notes the care with which people during a *ceili* test the waters to determine how much criticism, fun at another's expense or teasing will be tolerated, the performance ultimately consists of people telling stories about others who are much like themselves in order to strengthen the egalitarian ethos of the group and to push against more divisive supra-local sectarian identities (Cashman 2012). In her Nova Scotia research, Tye found that being a character is “an expressive role, and one generally adopted on some level of consciousness by stigmatized individuals” (1989: 182). Yet individual acceptance of the character role may vary. In exploring the oral repertoire of a single “character” from the Irish countryside, Cashman (2017) discovers that this man deeply resents the less-than-flattering portrait his neighbors have constructed of him.

Pat Mullen (1978) identifies an inherently ambivalent attitude toward local characters in his examination of a cycle of anecdotes about the Taylor brothers, two filthy bachelors who live on the literal edge of their beach community in Texas. Pointing out that small communities both tolerate and keep their distance from in-group deviants, Mullen notes that the brothers are simultaneously renegades and extreme exemplars of their community. Not only do community members tell tales about the brothers' antics, many of the stories they narrate involve using the characters to shock or dupe community outsiders. Mullen concludes, “The anecdotes about real deviants become the property of the entire group, and as such they can function more effectively than traditional tales as symbolic expressions of that particular community's values and norms” (ibid.: 129). Indeed, in his exploration of three 19th century folk outlaws from backwoods Maine, Edward Ives (1993) raises the possibility of a character also assuming hero status by virtue of his opposition to the outside authority of the state.

Tye, Cashman and Mullen underscore community ownership of these stories. For Cashman, the characters and narrators tend to overlap, whereas for Tye and Mullen, narrators and characters constitute distinct groups. Richard Bauman (1986) takes a somewhat different focus in his examination of the repertoire of Texas rancher, Caswell Rogers, highlighting individual artistry rather than the community ownership of tales. Rogers' stories

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within the family, in that setting children, who deferred to their elders in other settings, might be the carriers of new details or new stories regarding known characters.

typically conclude with an instance of quoted speech, when either the deviant or their victim provides a comic verbal corrective to harsh moral judgments. Like the narrators in Tye's, Mullen's and Cashman's studies, Rogers shared his tales in small group social settings or on visits with nonlocal relatives. In all these studies the local character anecdotes cement local identities; however, because folklorists typically privilege rooted narrators and because these narrators are not that different from the people they caricature, the problem of how the stories negotiate the narrator's storytelling rights doesn't arise. To conclude, North American folklorists highlight the positive value of these stories, asserting that they incorporate the outcast into the shared traditions of communal life. Although the humor in these stories may disparage their target, these scholars place it more often within the realm of the warm, inclusive humor that Bakhtin (1984) identifies with the premodern or anti-modern carnivalesque.

## NARRATOR RELATIONS

The two narrators I examine were both residents of the small farming community of Brooks, Maine in Waldo County. Beatrice Hanson was born in 1908 to what we might call a poor but secure family who lived within the village proper. Leland Kenny was her age-mate. He grew up in an area called the Flat, a few miles from the village. The two were lifelong friends who shared a set of grandchildren – Bea's younger daughter married Leland's son.<sup>6</sup> However, Bea left Brooks at 19, worked her way through a Master's degree in English, taught high school during the war, and eventually settled with her second husband Frank in northern New Jersey where they both taught college. Leland stayed put. He lived all his life on Kenny Road, outside Brooks. He got into the insurance business and did well for himself, eventually owning his own business. By the time the two childhood friends were retired, they shared roughly the same economic position, though Bea had accrued considerably more educational capital.

For Leland, telling stories of the characters from his youth involves both distinguishing himself and his family as normative citizens and acknowledging a set of shared life experiences with those living on the social margin. For Bea, telling these stories involves a dance of identification and difference across class and gender. Moreover, as someone who left, Bea, the narrator, exists at the margins rather than the center of village life, and she orients herself not to the community she narrates but outward toward a new audience consisting primarily of family, incorporating us into an attenuated identification with her regional heritage.

In the mid-1980s, I collected a series of local character stories from Bea. Bea, however, did not consider herself to be the authentic voice of the folk. After narrating a hilarious

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<sup>6</sup> Bea's older daughter was my mother, but because the sisters were not close, the families rarely visited, and I never met Leland.

cycle of stories involving an unlikely love triangle, she remarked, “And every time I went home, I would ask about it; what’s been happening with Bertha, and Gilbert, and Lester? Because it was a run-on affair, and it was very amusing to the town.”<sup>7</sup> Although Bea did not explicitly say that Leland was her absent narrator, sometime later, Bea recommended him to me as a *real* Mainer. Frank and Bea were in regular contact with Leland, and on one visit, they left him three cassette tapes and asked him to record his memories of Brooks’ characters for me. Leland had already done something similar for his eldest grandson Craig, and despite not knowing me, he agreed.

In October 1987, Leland sent a cassette to Bea. As the intermediary between us, Bea listened to Leland’s stories before she passed them along. She wrote a response to Leland, sending me a copy of her letter to him along with his cassette and letter. In her letter to me, she makes the following comment, “The tape Leland sent was very interesting for me, since I knew almost all the people he talks about. How interesting it will be for you – or what you can use from it, I can’t tell.”<sup>8</sup> Indeed, the tape reveals that Bea had set Leland a difficult rhetorical task. Not knowing me or understanding my purpose, with no physical audience for his stories and limited practice with his tape-recording equipment, Leland struggled to establish an appropriate frame before launching into a series of reminiscences that are peppered with doubts about whether he has hit upon whatever I am after. Nevertheless, his stories, told in fits and starts, are quite moving. They provide an interesting and complicated picture of early twentieth century Maine. Throughout his reminiscences, Leland emphasizes the poverty of his childhood:

And to tell you the truth we was so damned poor when I was young that I never had a nickel in my life. When I would get up to ten, eleven years old and we would go to the village, we had to walk two, three miles. My grandfather used to go out every Saturday night to the movies, and my mother would hardly ever let us go, because she didn’t have the 15 cents to – for the admission. That’s the truth. And your grandmother can verify this, all of it, I’m sure. We was very, very poor, and we wasn’t the only ones. It seems to me that as I get older and think back about these things, the people that had a secure job, like a storekeeper, was the only ones that had any money, and could go upriver hunting, when there wasn’t any deer around anyway at that time.<sup>9</sup>

Leland paints a picture of general economic and environmental scarcity, calling on Bea to confirm his memory. In contrast to his parents’ poverty, however, his grandfather, a driver for New England Telephone and Telegraph Company, was living comfortably. To ease her own household burden, Leland’s mother would send him to live with his grandparents in Bath, Maine, during the summers. There Leland earned money by running errands for people, money that he deposited religiously in the bank. One of his saddest memories is the day his mother broke the news that the bank had failed and his carefully saved ten dollars was gone.

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<sup>7</sup> Tape-recorded interview of Beatrice Hanson (December 28, 1986). By Katherine Borland.

<sup>8</sup> Letter, Beatrice Hanson to Katherine Borland (January 15, 1988).

<sup>9</sup> Tape Recording, Leland Kenny (December 1987).

Whereas Leland draws a distinction between folks living in the Flat, a rural area, and those living in the village of Brooks, he also indicates one's financial circumstances rested on having steady employment rather than being tied to generational wealth or poverty. In our storytelling sessions the previous year, Bea had characterized everyone in Brooks, including herself, as poor, except for a tiny professional class. She was therefore surprised to learn that from Leland's perspective, his childhood was much more deprived than hers. She writes:

I had no idea at all that your childhood was so poor in respect to money. This surprised me. I always knew, when I was growing up that there was no extra money around; that we had to be very careful. But as you said on the tape, father had a regular R.F.D. route which brought in a steady income, small though it was. And for a time, he lumbered and did a lot of building.<sup>10</sup>

Here, Bea acknowledges a certain blindness with regard to Brooks' subtle class gradations.

Yet, in his subsequent letter to me, Leland places Bea squarely within his community circle:

I have known your Gramma ever since we were pups and Frank for so long. They are wonderful people and Mary and I have a catnip fit if we do not hear from them at least once a month or so. Your Grandmother can write the best letters and talks the same that I do and that is down to earth I can tell you. I have been very nice in this letter Gram would be surprised I am sure because we talk to each other in letters and person to person in the country style.<sup>11</sup>

Even a cursory stylistic review of the two letters suggests that Leland's claim that he shares a speech community with Bea ignores important differences, but the epistolary exchange reveals the important ways that insidership and outsidership are managed rather than fixed categories. Leland asserts a childhood class distinction between himself and Bea, of which Bea has been unaware, and yet, when addressing me, he authenticates her insider status as someone who speaks like him, even though I hear and read differences in their expressive styles. I will return to this question of shared speech community after an examination of the two friends' anecdotes.

## BROOKS CHARACTER STORIES

Leland has many fond memories of his neighbors in the Flat, several of whom are "characters" in the village pantheon. As is common in the North American tradition, these are mostly men and boys who are filthy, lazy, ugly, or prone to outrageous behavior of one sort or another. Yet, defining the characters solely in terms of traits misses the central aspect of

<sup>10</sup> Letter, Beatrice Hanson to Leland Kenny (January 15, 1988).

<sup>11</sup> Letter, Leland Kenny to Katherine Borland (March 2, 1988).

the humorous character anecdote: from the perspective of the narrator, these community members operate outside the ordinary rules of propriety. As we shall see, anyone can become a character in someone else's narrative, if they exhibit a shameless disregard for convention. Living in the Flat, Leland as a boy is proximate to the characters in his stories. Typically, he names their idiosyncrasies in passing without embellishment, as he focuses on their positive attributes – generosity, helpfulness, a fondness for pansies. Leland's story of John Bull appears to follow this format, but then it takes a surprising turn:

We had a character that lived over on the Johnny Bull Road. In fact, his name was John Knowlton, but everybody called him John Bull. And so, the road was named for him, John Bull Road. Really, he was a great uncle to me, but he was uglier than hell. Oh, Jesus Christ!

I know one time when I was going to school, because I used to go down – when I got old enough, I'd go down on the river and set traps for muskrat, and mink, or anything like that, you know. Muskrat, I'd skin 'em out, and I'd get, oh a dollar – seventy-five cents or a dollar for them, and oh boy, that was a lot of money. Well, I saved all that and bought my clothes to go to school the next year.

Hang on, I'm gonna check this, just a minute Kathy, see if it's coming through. (Tape recorder clicks off and on). Coming through fine Kathy, coming through fine.

Now to finish up about Johnny Bull. I went down one morning. I probably was maybe twelve years old, eleven or twelve, somewhere in that area. And the brook was lined with holes at that time. With muskrat. They'd dig holes in the side of the bank for their homes, and then they'd come out and slide down into the river.

But my trap was gone, one of them, that morning. And I pulled and pulled and pulled and finally out come a great big mink! Well, I damn near fainted away. A mink was worth six or seven dollars! At that time. But I grabbed that thing and (chuckles, low voice), well I killed it. I had to do that. And I run like a son-of-a-gun up to the house and showed my mother.

I said, "Look at that! Look at that! Got a beauty!"

And she said, "Well what are you gonna do? You gonna skin him out?"

And I said, "No I don't dare to. I can skin muskrat, but I don't dare to spoil this one."

"Well," she said, "Why don't you take it over to Uncle John? He'll do it for you, I'm sure."

So, I went over. I hated to, because he was kind of an ugly, gruff, old bastard. And – your grandmother will tell you. She knows. And, uh. But I went over.

And I said, "Johnny, I've caught me a mink. Would you skin it for me? I don't dare to. I'm afraid I'll spoil it."

He said, (in a low, gruff voice) "Yeh. I caught one just like it the other day. Probably is a brother to it." Said, "Yeh, I'll fix it up."

Well, he did! He skinned it out and stretched it for me, put it on a board just so it would retain its form when you sell it, but he told somebody, one time, and it come back to me: He said, (gruff voice) "Damn if he'd set any traps, and he couldn't skin his own fur!" (Leland cackles). Well though, that's the way it was. To each his own. He had his mannerisms. I have mine. You have yours. So.<sup>12</sup>

<sup>12</sup> Tape recording Leland Kenny (December 1987).



In the space of a few minutes, Leland paints a compelling picture of life in the country outside Brooks Village, where men and boys trapped river animals to sell. As in his letter, cited earlier, he elicits confirmation from Bea (my grandmother) for his sketch of John Bull as the kind of man children feared. And yet, Bull does the favor Leland asks, contradicting Leland's expectation that he will be unpleasant. The humorous twist arrives only at the end when Leland reveals that his (self-perceived) bravery in asking for help from an older, more experienced trapper, ultimately subjected him to Bull's ridicule. Thus, Leland confirms that Bull is the gruff, old bastard he claimed he was.

Yet Leland, the narrator performs additional emotional work by revealing that Bull has effectively made a character of Leland, the novice trapper, exposing and condemning his shameful (according to Bull) inability to skin a mink to another unnamed person. As an older narrator recalling this story from his youth, Leland experiences no retrospective embarrassment for his lack of skill. In fact, speaking as his youthful self, he repeats his fear of spoiling the mink twice, first to his mother and then to John Bull. Leland's coda epitomizes the narrative stance that a teller of local character anecdotes deploys: he avoids censuring Bull. The coda simultaneously collapses the distinction between ordinary and marginal citizens upon which the genre is based – we all have mannerisms – while at the same time demonstrating Leland's normative stance by contrasting his own live-and-let-live attitude with John Bull's harsh judgment of Leland's younger self.

Leland's story about a classmate, Ozbourne Lamphier, recognizes yet another level of poverty in the Flat, and here, his repertoire of character stories overlaps with Bea's. Both Bea and Leland describe Ozbourne as a friendly, good-hearted person. He was on the stocky side, he played the violin for dances. As an adult, he had a booming voice. Here is Leland's recollection:

We always called him Ozzie. And he was something else, I'm telling you. And my mother and I at that time moved down to the end of the Flat, and it was about, just about half a mile from where he lived with his aunt. He had a hard life. There's no question about it. He was kicked around and abused about all his life and starved to death and everything else, but he's always said, when he got old, older and grew up, he said that my mother fed him more meals than he ever got anywhere else in the world, and I guess that's true, 'cause he was there morning, noon and night!

Then Ma'd drive him home. (laughs)

But sometimes he'd stay so late, she'd get kind of tired of it. So one night my father, who's not that type to do it, but he went up what they call the old Ale Rose barn which is between my house and his house, and he put a sheet over his head, and it was getting dark, and Ozzie come up through there, he was trotting right along, and he was kind of superstitious, he always was too, and my father jumped out at him and made an awful noise and stuff, and he said – Ozzie took off – went into the air about ten feet – took right off and down through the field and way out around, and he finally got home.

And he never stayed after dark after that.<sup>13</sup>

<sup>13</sup> Tape recording, Leland Kenny (December 1987).

Although the story is about a local character, Leland labels Ozzie “something else” without elaborating on his foibles. Instead, he explains that Ozzie has reasons for being socially out of step. He did not have a good homelife, and no one except Leland’s mother seemed to be looking out for him. This statement provides the hook for the story’s humorous turn, as Leland reveals that Ozzie was a guest who routinely overstayed his welcome.

Curiously, in this story Leland’s father performs the outrageous act that typifies a character. But Leland, the narrator, is careful to mention that his father was not normally a practical joker. We therefore surmise that he was driven to it by Ozzie’s maddening presence. In other words, Ozzie, even as the victim of a practical joke, is understood to be the shameless one. Leland’s father’s cartoon-like description of the home-bound Ozzie, trotting along and then shooting ten feet in the air when he’s frightened encapsulates his character status. Thus, Leland’s stories reveal two attitudes toward characters: in the John Bull story, anyone can be a character by being exposed as having violated propriety; in the Ozzie story, certain individuals occupy the character role by virtue of their fixed marginal position. Nevertheless, Leland provides an ambivalent portrait of Ozzie. He is a boy who is a nuisance, foolish enough to mistake a man in a sheet for a ghost, but he deserves our sympathy for his hard life.

Bea’s first story about Ozzie takes place when they are both young adults. Bea had moved back to Brooks temporarily to live with her brother while she waited for her divorce from her first husband to be finalized. She had no job, so she spent a good deal of her day chopping wood to feed the furnace. When she attempted to hire Ozzie for this chore, so that she could play the piano, Ozzie the music lover prevailed over Ozzie the wage earner. Every time she sat to play, he’d put his axe down to listen. Bea, the narrator, remarks, “Goodbye wood!” She prefaces her next anecdote with the claim that Ozzie’s antics are typical of Maine humor:

And this is Osbourne’s idea, or Maine, typical of Maine sense of humor. He had been working with a crew on the road over in the woods somewhere all day and they were all going home in a truck. And they stopped at the store in the village, some of the men, to get some things to take home, perhaps Osborne as well, I don’t know. But among the things that he got because it must – probably was his – was a bottle of ketchup. So, on the way home he said to one of the fellows, “Look. Get out that bottle of ketchup and pour it all over me. Pour it all over my head. Have it dripping down. And when we get down to the shack,” he said, “you boy’s lug me in and lay me down on the floor and say, ‘There. There he is,’ and she’ll think I’m dead.” I-you know. Which they all did. Poor Emerald [Osbourne’s wife]. It almost scared her to death. Here’s this man all blood. “What hap – my lord!” What had happened! “Oh, I don’t know, I don’t know if I tell you.” Well, of course, ultimately, she found out that it was ketchup. Boy did she give it to Osborne! She chased him with a stick of wood! (laughter) They had quite a fight before they got that straightened out.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> Tape recorded interview of Beatrice Hanson (December 28, 1986). By Katherine Borland.

Here we see Ozzie performing the outrageous act, but the humor in Bea's story arises from Ozzie's wife, Emerald's attempts to punish him for his transgression in a kind of "Punch and Judy" scene. As was true of Leland, Bea ventriloquizes her characters when narrating these anecdotes. Although she defers to Leland as the more authentic narrator, like him she animates her versions of the stories through the liberal use of dialog and voice modulation, adopting the speech styles of those who remained in Brooks.

Moreover, Bea demonstrates a gendered allegiance to Emerald (poor woman), who is the target of the practical joke, even as she demonstrates Emerald to also behave like a character in her subsequent attack on her husband. In her New Jersey living room, Bea addresses herself to a group who are distant from the time-space of her stories. For this reason, she can reframe the story she heard about Ozzie's ketchup episode as typical, not only of Brooks but of the Maine of her youth. As is true of other documented local character traditions, when the Brooks narrators position themselves as superior to their characters, they remain nonjudgmental, laughing at their foibles rather than admonishing them. Even as someone who left the community, Bea continues to identify with the characters who were, after all, her schoolmates when she was young.

One final narrative example involves an encounter between Bea and Ozzie that happened when Bea, who was by then living elsewhere, returned by train to Brooks for a visit. She hadn't seen Ozzie in about eight years and much had happened in the interim, but as she was settling herself on the spur line, she heard a commotion in the next car and quickly realized it was Osbourne:

Well he came right in and sat right down and had a long conversation which e m b a r -  
rassed me no end. But (spoken wryly) – the whole car wouldn't have missed a word.  
(Booming voice) "HOW ARE YA?"  
"LET'S SEE! YOU WAS DIVORCED WEREN'T YA?"  
(low) "Yes Osborne. I had a divorce."  
"YEH, I THOUGHT SO. HE DRANK AWFUL, DIDN'T HE?"  
(low) "Yes, he drank—"  
"YES HE WAS A REAL DRUNKARD THE WAY I UNDERSTOOD IT. HE WAS A REAL  
DRUNKARD!"  
(low) "Well he did drink a lot."  
"YEH THAT'S RIGHT. HE DRANK AWFUL. THAT'S WHAT I UNDERSTOOD. DAMN  
NEAR KILLED HIMSELF ONCE, DIDN'T HE?"  
(low) "Well, yes, he had a bad accident."  
"YEH I KNOW. I HEARD ALL ABOUT IT. HE DAMN NEAR KILLED HIMSELF."  
"WHERE ARE THE CHILDREN? YOU HAD CHILDREN."  
(low) I said, "Yes, I have two little girls."  
"OH TWO LITTLE GIRLS. OH YEH, YEH. NOW HOW OLD WOULD THEY BE NOW?"  
And we go on. And he just ope—telling everything that he knows about my whole life!  
You know, and the people in the car wouldn't have missed a word for anything, you know.  
And every once in a while – Emerald did not come in to our car – he'd holler out through  
(coughs), say: "YOU ALL RIGHT OUT THERE EMERALD? YOU GOT THE TICKETS!"<sup>15</sup>

<sup>15</sup> Tape recorded interview of Beatrice Hanson (December 28, 1986). By Katherine Borland.

In this anecdote we can see Bea animating both her own voice and that of her temporary tormenter, Ozzie, and the humor derives from the different ways that the two characters represent the events of Bea's private life. Clearly, Ozzie is channeling local gossip, and he is simultaneously broadcasting it to a new audience in the train car. Bea, the narrator, positions herself as the victim – she is embarrassed by the encounter. Yet she knows that Ozzie, as one of the characters from her village, does not intend to shame her. Instead, he operates outside the bounds of village propriety. Her embarrassment comes from those other anonymous passengers, who are leaning in to catch the details. That Emerald remains in the other car, despite her husband's repeated calls, offers an understated expression of gender solidarity across their lines of difference. In the narrative Bea secures her reputation as a normative citizen by her embarrassment, but Ozzie continues to pull her back into the substrate of village storytelling by insisting that she remains one of them.

As Mullen observed in his collection of Texas character stories, marginal community members provide the normative community with its distinctive folk/local/regional identity. As someone distanced in time and space from the place she conjures, Bea, the narrator, includes the village, the attentive audience on the train, as another character in this and in many of her stories. In this way, she creates an additional frame for her audience: we see the village watching the characters interact as a unified representation of what is typical about Maine. By introducing this frame, Bea pokes fun at Brooks' normative citizenry, aligning herself and her audience with the outsiders the villagers judge. Moreover, as in Leland's story of John Bull, Bea exhibits no retrospective embarrassment at the circumstances that caused her to become the subject of village gossip. Yet, because she addresses an audience of outsiders, in the talk that surrounds the narrative she offers additional context. This oral literary criticism explicitly positions us, Bea's listeners, to be empathetic towards characters like Ozzie. Recognizing a basic unfairness in the division between those who were temporarily poor and those who remained on the margins of society, she says:

And yet [Ozzie] was as good-hearted, actually, you know, as he could be. A good-hearted fellow. And, um, he's dead now. Those people so often had a talent of some kind or other, but they never had a chance (pause) at all. They were born poor. They didn't know how to get ahead (pause) really. They might have wanted to, but they had no idea how to go about it, to get ahead, that education might help them, you see, they couldn't – didn't go to school any longer than they had to and then it was – if they quit school nobody cared, you know.

Outside the storytelling frame, Bea offers an undertheorized explanation of the marginal character's failure to thrive. Indeed, both she and Leland remark on the less humorous side of life on the margins as they recall other Brooks characters: people whose houses fall down around them, who live in squalor out in the country, until one day, they freeze to death or burn their house down around them. People who are convicted unjustly of crimes they didn't commit, or who spend their lives moving in and out of jail for petty offences. These observations reconstruct the subtle class differences that underly the distinction between normative and marginal community members, distinctions that their character stories seemingly collapse.

## CONCLUSION: CONSIDERING NARRATIVE STANCE

Telling local characters stories, as I have demonstrated here, is a means of identifying with figures who themselves embody a contradiction: the character, as Mullen (1978) has pointed out, is both the most marginal and the most emblematic member of the small community. In the Brooks, Maine examples, my narrators animate their stories by dramatizing dialog, speaking as the characters they encounter in the story world they create. Thus, the anecdotes function to replay in words small scenes of community life, constituting a form of restored behavior (Schechner 1985). Unlike the character studies I summarized at the outset, however, these stories are told retrospectively about a lifeworld the narrators recognize has changed. Leland and Bea look back on their community from the perspective of people whose lives have turned out well. They speak to one of the next generation, a product of their own generation's economic and educational progress. Just as the characters in their stories entangle them in the local lifeworld, when Leland and Bea perform these stories, they reach for me, gently pulling me into an identification with them and their regional ethos by means of their narrative skill. Humor, especially self-referential humor, plays an important role in strengthening social bonds across difference.

When in her letter she wonders about the usefulness of Leland's stories to me, however, Bea recognizes my position as an imperfect audience, a community outsider who shares neither their speech community nor their memories of life in a small farming town. Indeed, the usefulness of Leland's and Bea's stories for those who approach Brooks as outsider researchers rests in the ways the narrators demonstrate a local identity based on their mastery of the character genre, one that allows them to perform a dance of identification and differentiation with the characters they animate. This flexible, shifting, positioning stands in contrast to notions of positionality that enumerate biological and sociological categories – declaring oneself a straight, white, cis-gender woman or man, for example – that are understood to fix or limit one's possibilities for knowing and being known by another. Although positionality offers an important corrective to the universal claims of earlier researchers to speak authoritatively for and about cultural others, it ignores the ways that belonging, and the storytelling rights that belonging confers, are interactional accomplishments that depend as much on who we are understood to be by our interlocutors as on who we claim we are.

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## PRIPADNOST ZAJEDNICI U ANEGDOTAMA O LIKOVIMA IZ LOKALNOG ŽIVOTA

Narativi o likovima iz lokalnog života bogat su izvor u istraživanjima odnosa između pripadnosti zajednici, identiteta i stava kazivača. U ovom radu, nakon navođenja pregleda literature o žanru anegdota o likovima iz lokalnog života, bavim se time kako dva kazivača uspostavljaju svoje pravo na pripovijedanje priča koje pripadaju narativnoj tradiciji ruralnog područja američke savezne države Maine. U radu se na temelju interakcionističke perspektive prikazuje kako se kazivači pozicioniraju u odnosu jedan na drugog, kao i kako se pozicioniraju u odnosu na lik iz lokalnog života kao svoje internalizirano drugo. U radu se pokazuje da su pripadnost zajednici te prava pripovijedanja koja proizlaze iz njega diskursno sredstvo koje nadilazi stabilne klasne i geografske odrednice. Priča o liku iz lokalnog života pripovjedačima omogućuje da se istodobno identificiraju s najmarginalnijim i najosebujnijim pripadnicima svoje zajednice, ujedno ističući da su oni sami uzorni građani. Prihvatimo li da su identiteti višestruki, višeglasni, a ponekad i u sukobu, izazov koji se postavlja pred folkloriste jest istražiti kako je različito pozicioniranje pripovjedača vezano uz njihovo sudjelovanje u tradiciji koja je povezana s određenim mjestom. U radu predlažem da u našim raspravama o pravu na pripovijedanje pojam položaja pripovjedača – u smislu nabiranja stalnih značajki pripovjedačeva identiteta – zamijenimo pojmom pozicioniranja koje proizlazi iz diskursnih i društvenih faktora.

Ključne riječi: anegdota o likovima iz lokalnog života, pravo na pripovijedanje, pozicioniranje, identitet, Maine