

Framing Violence and Play in American Culture

Simon J. Bronner*

Studies of violence, whether devoted to wars, riots, or ethnic strife, tend to focus on collective violence that is traditionalized — that is, part of the normative expectations for a culture as evident in its customs and lore. A barrier to explaining the process of traditionalization is the difficulty of objectifying violence for cultural study, especially when those objects are not aesthetically pleasing in academic efforts to elevate vernacular expressions to the level of high art. My concern here is on the practices of individuals acting together in the name of tradition to invoke symbols or actions of violence. Often these practices are “framed,” that is, distinguished by social agreement and a familiar situated context. Frequently the frames are perceived as playful: despite the stylized violence and aggressive speech in these frames, participants expect an air of jocularity. These frames are important culturally because they facilitate metacommunication, by which I mean transmission of expressive texts that refer to the act of transmitting or the use of the frame for violent discourse and action. The small frames of action, such as boys’ “horseplay” in a schoolyard or mock-fighting, raise questions about broader national patterns of violence that influence the social construction of the frame. The special case of the United States invites frame analysis because many of the country’s traditions revolve around a historical legacy of violence such as the “taming of the Wild West,” “outlaws and gangsters,” and rioting recognized by most Americans in their national heritage. This stands in contrast, for example, to the national self-consciousness of Japan as relatively non-violent. The question I centrally discuss here is how the framed cultural practices in the United States such as games, literature, films, and music affect changing nationally held ideas about collective violence.

My use of “frame” as a way to organize the vast issue of American violence’s cultural roots owes to ideas generated by the likes of Gregory Bateson, Ervin Goffman, Clifford Geertz, and Victor Turner in the mid-twentieth century to a central question produced by

*Distinguished University Professor, Pennsylvania State University Harrisburg

modernity: how does what we think and do in daily life relate to the special cultural scenes in which we intentionally or unwittingly participate? Conceived by Victorian anthropologists as bizarre, remnant, or escapist customs, manners, and rituals, folk practices studied by this group of social scientists were crucial to understanding the general culture because they encapsulated symbols that could not easily be communicated in everyday life. The post-Victorian symbolist ethnographers added a humanistic component to treat cultural scenes constituted by expressive practices (so named as to give them less judgment) as metaphors for the society in which people navigate and the inter-relations they negotiate. The scenes could be conceived as texts to be read with structure, symbol, and meaning. More than the others during this period, however, Bateson expanded the psychological notion of cognitive frames constructed by people in a scene to both explain and contain paradoxical communication. I can discuss later whether the others took a more behavioral or social-structural approach, whereas increasingly, Bateson's contribution to the way that people use cultural expressions to project anxieties about inconsistencies, vulnerabilities, and risks of the conduct of daily life is a foundation for many of the discussions of a basic communicative paradox in the so-called modern blurring of lines between violence and play.

To this foundation, I would add the sociological "practice theory" suggested by the likes of Pierre Bourdieu, Richard Bernstein, and Zygmunt Bauman — all working in the wake of social upheavals during the 1960s and 1970s. Practice theory related power struggles to the daily activities of ordinary people as well as to law-making bodies. Concerned as I am with expressive culture, it should not be surprising that I bring folkloristic theories by Roger Abrahams and Michael Owen Jones concerning the notions of vernacular poetics enacted not by an isolated folk, but by modern individuals, who invoke, create, and enact the idea of "tradition" to effect strategic outcomes. In keeping with the psychological concern for explaining motivations for the framing of these outcomes, I will add ideas of projection of anxieties and risks that could be considered Freudian, but which I connect to work to view culture situationally and cognitively in terms of symbol, function, and context as developed by Alan Dundes, Jay Mechling, and a host of others revising what came to be called ethnography and ethnology. The goals of analysis may be different from what they conceived because of the kind of material being discussed under the theme of violence, especially raising questions of the relationship of folk and popular culture, social reality and mass mediated or virtualized fantasy, and ultimately tradition and modernity in an individualizing society.

The theme of cultural violence involves multiple layers of questions because it is fraught with paradox, contradiction, and puzzlement. I identify these key lines of inquiry:

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1. If people do think in terms of frames, were boundaries clearer before now in what could be called post-modernity? Or is the impression that the present era has blurred these lines itself a product of post-modernity?
2. Following the historical argument, did literature, media, and language define violence previously as collective, adult and vertical violence?
3. If so, then why is there so much attention to “solo,” horizontal, and youth violence — signs of concern for the extremes of individualism?
4. And following the analytical use of culture as a text, what is the subtext of rhetoric in contemporary language and literature of the “extreme,” “terror,” “shock,” “random,” and “unexplained”?

In working toward answering these questions, I propose that confusion of categories results from disruption of segmentation of mental health and normality in society. A second hypothesis I will mention is that extremes of violence and play are related to contemporary crises, whether constructed or real, of sexuality, masculinity, and altered states of consciousness. And third, expressive culture has a key role in our analysis of anticipating, sensitizing, and promoting these blurred distinctions.

Influencing my concern for this theme over the last twenty years was my stay in Japan in 1996 and 1997. In June of 1997, a 15-year old boy was arrested for two homicides in Kobe that drew a tremendous amount of publicity. I doubt that such a tragedy would have received the fever pitch of media attention in the United States, but at the time, commentators issued proclamations that such horrific violence should not occur in Japan, a country that they described as traditionally harmonious and civil. Before the arrest, the attacker sent notes to the police daring them to catch him with the conspicuous reference to killing as a playful “game” (Chen 1997; Levinson 2001). Perturbed Japanese officials were convinced that this “frame” could not have emerged from Japanese society; they blamed Japanese youth culture’s fascination with American violent video games as the cause of this attitude. After the arrest, psychologists determined that the boy suffered from sexual sadism, a mental disorder where an individual gains sexual arousal and gratification from hurting others (Machizawa 2000). I recall reading the English daily, *Japan Times*, replete with editorials weeks after the incident asking “Whatever happened to the peaceful and harmonious Japan we knew?” Even if psychologists rationalized the shocking murders as neurologically derived, letters to the editor I saved claimed that the explanation lay in the deleterious effects of American popular culture.

The United States had its own time for self-reflection on the safety of its youth when two years after the Kobe murders, two heavily armed high school seniors at Columbine High School in Littleton, Colorado, killed 12 classmates and one teacher before killing

themselves. In the subsequent investigation of their journals and lives, literature, music, and media were implicated as responsible for their apparently unexplainable acts (Cullen 2009; Kass 2009). Socially, the boys were attracted to Goth culture with its neo-pagan undertones, video games such as *Doom* and *Wolfenstein 3D*, hyperviolent movies such as *Natural Born Killers*, and the heavy metal bands Rammstein and Marilyn Manson who spouted lyrics laced with references to death and mayhem. There was also speculation whether the dates they chose to create a “scene” was related to Hitler’s birthday or the anti-governmental Oklahoma City Bombing. Unfortunately, the incident was not isolated, as other school shootings followed. Although not the first school shooting, to “pull a Columbine” entered the American vernacular, used, for example, by Seung-Hui Cho in anticipating his rampage at Virginia Tech University in 2007 where he killed 32 people, the highest death toll of any school shooting to date (Grider 2007, 5). Littleton was also back in the news in 2010 when a 32-year old gunman attempted an attack at the Deer Creek Middle School, raising ghosts of the Columbine “massacre” (Meyer 2010). As with the other incidents, mental illness and social difficulties were suspected in the shooter and reporters commented on the difficulty in a public culture distinguishing between odd or aggressive behavior and neurological disorders. In the case of the Deer Creek shooting, the gunman’s father reported that his son suffered from schizophrenia, “heard voices and had bills he couldn’t pay” (Pankratz, Vaughan, and Bunch 2010).

Scholars as well as parents and school officials referred to an “epidemic” of violence from 1996 to 2010 perpetrated by a segment of society that was not supposed to be violent — children. Scholars tried to find patterns among the shooters — as youth who were bullied or alienated at school, disturbed by abusive or disrupted family situations, had mental health issues, played with guns and violent video games, and according to some analysts were often abusive themselves to animals. The discourse expanded from counselors to cultural scholars asked to analyze the role of culture in maintaining a civil society promised by modernity and progressivism. In 2002, for example, as someone who had researched American youth culture, trying to disrupt the stereotype of children as sheltered innocents in the book *American Children’s Folklore* (1988), I published an introduction to an entire volume devoted to the rising perception of teenagers as a social menace with the title “Folklore Responds to Columbine and Adolescence” (2002). I pointed out that statistics kept on juvenile crime showed a decline in assaults, drug use, and violence during the 1990s, and yet opinion polls revealed a perception that youth violence is spreading and juveniles are increasingly considered dangerous and feared. The discourse on violence in America could not escape the reference to Columbine. In light of reports of the 1990s that shooters were almost all boys, often trying to establish a “place for themselves” in what they perceived as a socially hostile environment, attention

was brought to struggles of maleness as well as adolescence. Boys, once thought more in control of their situation than girls, suddenly appeared at risk, and much of their plight seemed expressed or exacerbated by circulating folklore. Parenting styles, particularly liberal permissiveness, came into question as well as the alienating environment of suburbia that in a previous generation had been considered peaceful and nurturing with its green spaces and family environment. One way that the usual discourse of violence was troubled by this discourse was that worries about violence shifted from the effects of violent acts by urban, racialized, disadvantaged youth to what I called the “Jason” effect after the popular horror movie *Friday the 13th* (1980) in which the post-modern monster mingles in mainstream society as the apparently normal kid next door (Bracke 2005). Often in these movies, the dialogue suggests that the murderer is protected because disturbed individuals have been mainstreamed and their neighbors have not been informed of their condition. Despite decreases in violent crimes on the streets, movie violence was on the increase with plots often involving random aggressive acts or slashers with a hidden mental affliction. Indeed, I recall that one of the first questions I received from a Japanese student in my American culture class was whether I had a gun. Taken aback, I asked why he was asking. He explained that the American shows on Japanese television imply that everyone in America is armed.

One way to read the discourse following Columbine is confusion of the framing of childhood as a time of play, and in that notion, a concern for what this generation will grow into as adults. Whether cultural scholars were doing a better job of exposing youth culture as it really was enacted or that childhood innocence was gone, attitudes toward youth as an overly precocious social menace increasingly colored views of the state of American culture generally. These included the idea that youth was too independent and maturing too quickly, becoming too powerful socially and culturally, or no longer subject to parental control; youth had gone “wild” in conversation and folklore. Whether boys were becoming confused about their proper roles as a result of feminism or becoming hypermasculine because of increased patriarchy, the view was that boys’ activities increasingly were rough and often hypersexualized. Despite educational programs and legislation to curb gun use, gun play and mock violence were still in the news, particularly with “bored” or overly “competitive” suburban youth rather than the stereotype of guns with ghettoized racialized or marginalized gangs. Commentators noticed that the violence of football was more attractive to youth than the pastoral pastime of baseball. In reporting lore of legend quests, breath-control games, and supernatural play commentators saw a post-modern obsession with death by teens, even though folklorists pointed out that many of these activities were “traditional” before the contemporary moment (Ellis 2003: 220–35; Tucker 2008–2009).

LANGUAGE

Let me begin a brief survey of some expressive genres in which the paradoxes of violence at play come to the fore. Starting with language as a basis for the semantics of meaning, I collected, for example, slang word lists among pre-teens and summarized the most common themes in *American Children's Folklore* (1988:38-40). I noticed that children were hardly innocent in framing competition as fatal. They threatened to "clobber," "whack," "smear," "kill," "kick ass," "kick the shit out of," and "fuck up" the opposition. Individualism comes through in the phrase "sticking to your guns," meaning being intractable even against majority pressure. That is not to say that sticking out was always welcomed. Teens used folk speech of "weirdos," "freaks," "geeks," and "nerds," who were considered abnormal for their intellectualism and did not "fit in" with student "regulars." Elites by virtue of their upper-class status or narcissism were also suspect as "A-listers."

For both boys and girls, the expression of social dominance was in constructed binaries of masculine status. Toughness and individual bravery (hero complex) were seen as preferred and contrasted with puny, feminized, analyzed, intellectual individuals. Folklore provided a kind of legislation to maintain the system because of the praxis of daring and anti-authoritarian "line crossing." One framed activity worth mentioning is contests-in-insults, once thought to be restricted to African Americans (Bronner 1978). In popular television shows of the twenty-first century such as MTV's *Yo Mama!* the insults were ritualized by both blacks and whites. What remained consistent was the masculine participation in the playful abuse, leading to consideration of the function of the contests as male display by using verbal sexual bravado against someone else's mother as an attack allowed by the play frame on feminist or egalitarian principles. The youthful participants show that they separate from the mother as the feminine by claiming hyperphallic characteristics even as they invite defense of their mother as the center of society (see Abrahams 1962).

LITERATURE AND FILM

Violence is certainly evident in American literature, summarized by historian David Brion Davis in 1966 as "a peculiar fascination with homicidal violence," beginning with Charles Brockden Brown, America's first serious novelist, who presents in *Wieland* (1798) and *Ormond* (1799) a character who is driven by an irresistible impulse to kill, another who laughs ecstatically after murdering his wife and children, and a third who

attempts to rape a heroine alongside the corpse of his latest victim (Davis 1966: 29). As one follows James Fenimore Cooper through innumerable pursuits, escapes, and battles, one soon loses count of the bodies of Indians and renegades strewn behind. Even before they were writing “novels,” colonial Americans were devouring seventeenth and eighteenth-century “captivity narratives” of men and women held captive by Indians, followed by settlers exacting revenge. Primary examples are Mary Rowlandson’s *The Sovereignty and Goodness of God* (1682) and John Williams’s *The Captive Redeemed* (1704). In these early forms, the role of religion is questioned because God allows misfortune to befall the pious captive, but he or she is redeemed or tested and redefines “the hand of God” as issuing harsh justice to the wicked captors. From this literature, Richard Slotkin (1973) has hypothesized that American literature expressed an idea that violence was regenerative in advance of the frontier experience. Someone had to be eliminated, in other words, in order to regenerate a group self which was often fragmented or fraught with paradox. American Studies students are familiar with the work of Henry Nash Smith, who in *Virgin Land* (1950) considered “pulp fiction” in the form of dime novels often about frontier experience to be influential on the growing American mythology of the adventurous violent hero setting out on his own against authority. In a pattern that can be traced from Cooper’s Leatherstocking to Clint Eastwood’s Dirty Harry, the lone man taking matters into his hands, often with the aid of a gun, is a strong theme in American literature.

In contrast to depictions of Japan’s shame culture bringing the hero, or in Freudian terms, the superego, into line, American heroes are id-driven, motivated by personal convictions or anti-organizational sentiments. Previous to the extreme realism of modern films, journalistic writers such as Theodore Dreiser, Edgar Allan Poe, and Lafcadio Hearn captivated American readers with their exposes of murder as a function of the openness of American urban society. Arguably, this literary function of violence took a different turn with socially conscious novels about race and class differences maintained by hegemonic repression or stigmatization of marginalized groups as violent. Examples that come to mind are Richard Wright’s *Native Son* (1940), Harper Lee’s *To Kill a Mockingbird* (1960) and John Steinbeck’s *Grapes of Wrath* (1939; also significant is his *Of Mice and Men*, 1937) that can be compared to the ethical dilemma in the blockbuster movie *Avatar* (2009) of using violence to combat violence, or racism to defeat racism. We could look earlier at Mark Twain’s dystopia of *Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur’s Court* (1889) as a pivotal text that considers the fascination of Americans priding themselves on ingenuity in expanding the technology of war while underscoring the American devotion to progress.

I see another track of more recent vintage in novels that query readers to think about what is normal in a neurologically diverse world, especially since they feature

violence as a mark of insanity, only to implicate as violent those who define mental health. Such a trope is evident in Ken Kesey's *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* (1962) most notably, but consider it also in Chuck Palhniuk's *Fight Club* (1996), in which the reality the protagonist perceives is a figment of his imagination. And in film, Martin Scorsese's advancement of the gangster genre in *Goodfellas* (1990) and *Casino* (1995) beyond the *Godfather* trilogy (1972, directed by Francis Ford Coppola) is to question the mental stability of mobsters who are venerated as benevolent outlaws. David Brion Davis cautions that the frequency of fighting and killing in American literature and film is not necessarily proof of an unusually violent society, but he sagely points out that it reflects certain historical conditions, among which I would count the heritage that is positively portrayed of revolutionary and frontier experience. That image has become complicated of late in imaginative letters with concern for an egalitarian, diverse civil society, and I view the entrance of mental health as an especially compelling artistic theme of modern-day writers for dealing with the paradox of violence entrusted to resolve societal inequities.

GAMES AND SPORTS

One can see continuities of literary frames in American popular games and sports. Chasing games such as "Cowboys and Indians" or for those who think that the metaphors are dated, "Boys Chase the Girls," are among the first chasing games that children learn. I have commented that "Hide and Seek," which is found among many cultures has a peculiarly American cast because of its emphasis at a young age of defying parental authority. Unlike other cultures such as Japan, Great Britain, and Germany containing a high-power it, the It in America who is at "home" like a parent has little control over the children who have scattered from the "safe" spot of the base or home. Children hide by themselves while the it, who usually is stuck in that role, search for them. These traditional games contain linear narrative structures of something missing that the participants try to locate or retrieve stand in contrast to synchronous, or post-modern, structures of activities in which each person is both protagonist and antagonist. This is evident in "Cooties," "Assassin," and "Killer" in which each person essentially is "out for themselves" and "out to get others" because players can "tag" someone as well as be tagged, even outside their awareness. And the games are conducted in the flow of everyday life rather than separated in time and space as "Hide and Seek" is with its cues of "let's play" (in a particular spot and at a time of day) (Bronner 1995: 124-25).

The topic of games and sports, and whether what we witness are escapes or subversions of reality, or reinforcements of them, is admittedly complicated. I examined in the book *Killing Tradition* (2008), for example, the American fascination with hunting as a

metaphor for its heritage along with the ethic of animal rights that has gained currency. Thus portrayals of hunters and abuse to animals in media are consistently negative and yet, Americans in surveys generally support hunting as a fundamental American activity. One may also query the paradox of football's ascendancy as America's most popular, and arguably, iconic sport, even though it does not encourage democratic participation, is male dominated, and is roundly viewed as extremely combative in apparent defiance of prevalent progressive ethics of a modern civil society. This query spills over into cyberculture and Internet practices, that I have speculated constitutes a folk realm for anal, often violent play (Bronner 2009).

MUSIC AND SONG

The popular press often reports the explicit aggression of heavy metal and alternative bands as an influence on the blurring of lines between art and life, play and reality. An indication beyond what is listened to is the "cultural scene" that has emerged at concerts where there is an expectation of aggressive behavior often erupting into riots beyond the creation of dance "mosh pits" years ago. Yet before we indict their concerts and products too quickly, consider that a distinctive subgenre of American folk music has been the "murder ballad." European precedents in Scottish and Irish balladry certainly had their share of ballads in which tragedy is defined by a heroine dying for love or the awful consequences of sibling rivalry. Notable is "Lord Thomas and Fair Ellinor" where Thomas cuts his "bride's head right off her shoulders and dashed it against the wall." Many of the scenarios, however, are set among the aristocracy. The American corpus which continued to produce orally circulating narrative ballads into the twentieth century are more populist, although they often also concern love or family relations gone bad. Dastardly death is expressed in verse as warning and a vernacular statement that "it happens here too." A contemporary connection is in the children's rhyme about Lizzie Borden who murdered her parents in 1892 in Massachusetts.

Lizzie Borden took an axe
And gave her mother forty whacks;
When she saw what she had done
She gave her father forty-one.

Probably contributing to her notoriety in American folklore is the fact that she was acquitted; the verses play with the paradox that she clearly did it although she went unpunished. More than a catchy rhyme, I believe that Borden's persistence in children's

lore owes to this issue of the consequences of guilt and the suspicion that her parents somehow brought their grisly fate upon themselves, as implied in verses such as

You have borne up under all
With a mighty show of gall
But because your nerve is stout
Does not prove beyond a doubt
That you knocked the old folks out,
Lizzie Borden. (Burt 1958: 15)

The expectation that murder should be justified is a theme in American murder ballads, and the concern for more modern vernacular music is that it is treated as fun or male display, made famous, for example, in Johnny Cash's "Folsom Prison Blues" in which he kills a man in Reno "just to see him die." A persistent ballad that marks a transition is the ballad "Pearl Bryan" that also appears as a legend about the real-life death of nineteen-year-old Pearl Bryan of Greencastle, Indiana, in 1896 after a botched abortion. Although the facts of the case indicate that too many drugs were apparently administered to her, the ballad and legend owe their attention to her beheading — considered to go beyond the code of decency:

Next morning the people were excited
They looked around and said
Here lays a murdered woman,
But where, O where is her head? (Burt 1958: 32; see also Baker 1992)

Violence is an integral part of floating African-American blues lyrics that heavily influenced the rise of rock and roll. Scholars have noted that many puzzling lyrics displaying male bravado for repressed individuals function as escape or protest (Oliver 1990 [1960]: 265–89). One of the most played songs, for example, is "44 Blues" referring to a gun: "I walked all night with my .44 in my hand, I am going to shoot that woman over another man" (Oliver 1990 [1960]: 203). Of significance in the blues ballad is the rise of the black badman among outlaw songs such as Stackolee that proclaim "that bad man, that cruel Stack o Lee." Often viewed as a forerunner of the badass character in rap and hip hop, Stack o Lee defies the police and authority, but is admired for his bravado (Brown 2004; Roberts 1989: 201–220).

Other evidence of fantasizing about violence is in American children's parodies and adolescent recitations that comically exaggerate violence, such as "Mine eyes have seen

the glory of the burning of the school, We have killed all the teachers and broken every rule” (Bronner 1988: 97-99). Folk poetry can be found in fraternity and barroom recitations that playfully revel in degeneracy and phallocentrism, although their violent content is often considered not appropriate for “mixed company” :

The lights went out, and I ducked to the floor
As the stranger sprang in the dark.
His aim was true, and the sparks they flew
As his donnicker found its mark
With might and main, and a scream of pain
A man's voice filled the room.
With sighs and moans and farts and groans,
Three forms lay stacked in the gloom.
Then the lights went on, and the stranger rose
With a satisfied look on his pan,
For there on the floor with his ass all gore
Lay poor old corn-holed Dan! (“Dan McGrew,” also known as “The Face on the Barroom Floor”; see Baker and Bronner 2005: 324-25).

An important clue to the significance of these recitations is the reference in the text to fear of strangers in a mobile, dispersed society. They are not the “Other” defined ethnically, racially, or by class, but a generic stranger created by mobility. There is not just the expected mistrust but a notion that the stranger is also the self, thus creating a conflicted duality in which the attacker is also attacked.

CONCLUSION: THE CULTURAL PRACTICES, FRAMES, AND CONTEXTS OF VIOLENCE

Social critics often level the accusation against popular culture of promoting violence by desensitizing viewers to violence or trivializing the impact of portrayed violence. Heavy metal, rock, and hip hop, for example, have been singled out for violent lyrics that allegedly lead some listeners to replicate the described aggressive action in real life (Richardson and Scott 2002). This charge implies that the functioning of frames separating play from reality in face-to-face interaction such as the recitations and song parodies I mentioned have broken down in mass mediated culture. Sociologist Richard Felson's comment that “given the pervasiveness of media violence, it would be surprising if it had no effect on viewers” rings true, but the media bears stronger scrutiny at times of

crisis (1996: 123). Felson explains the phenomena by writing, “The reason that media effects are not consistently observed is probably because they are weak and affect only a small percentage of viewers,” but these weak effects may still have practical importance since, in a large population, they would produce some death and injuries, particularly by individuals who cannot discern the social construction of frames that distinguish between reality and fantasy (1996, 123). As I have shown, violence contextualized by the openness of society such as the United States has been a popular and marketable theme. The question remains, however, about the circumstances that implicate violence in imaginative expression to a higher degree, since we have seen the way historically, American culture is replete with violent images owing at least in part to its frontier heritage and open society.

Some potential answers are in cultural representations that open up fears about unchecked spread of modernity, raising anxieties about the public identity as well as personal security. Individualism, equality, and mobility — traits that go hand in hand with goals of democratic progressivism — are shown in imaginative expressions within folk and popular culture to produce socially estranged and status conscious individuals. Many social critics such as Richard Sennett (*The Fall of Public Man*, 1977), Robert Putnam (*Bowling Alone*, 2000), and Robert Bellah (*Habits of the Heart*, 1985) have lamented the decline of community and public culture. Along with this concern is the rise of a service and information economy which has produced what Alan Dundes (1978) has called the feeling of individuals being “a small cog in a massive uncaring wheel” (Dundes and Pagter 1992 [1978]: xxii). A comparative note that emerged from my time in Japan is the influence of what I called in *Following Tradition* (1998) a “festival culture” on Japanese sense of tradition in contrast to the United States. I found that in American culture the localism of collective, agreed-upon public rituals associated with Japanese festival is lacking.

I do not mean to reduce the decline of community all to festival. Complicating factors are the changing role of family (particularly in the spiritual context of Japan concerning filial piety), vocationalism, moral standards and authority, and the breakdown of institutions traditionally charged with promoting community such as schools, churches, and municipalities. As the charts drawn from attempts to quantify national traits such as masculinity and individualism show, the United States is indeed high in indicators of individualism and facing changes to its supposed masculine-feminine hierarchy stereotyped in the Marlboro Man or cowboy image (Japan which is often depicted as effeminate in American popular culture shows up in Hofstede’s cross-cultural survey as possessing the highest degree of masculinity among major “modern” powers) (Hofstede 2001: 279-350). As much as we want to locate trends to directly address, areas of

ambiguity exist, as Felson has noted, on the legitimacy of violence and the likelihood of punishment. Thus I see the conflicted discourse over whether we are witnesses to a decline or rise of nationalism, religion, and militarism as indications of these blurring divisions.

Expressive culture often is a “flashpoint” for debate because of the difficulty of resolving these social issues. Some examples that I can cite in the genres under discussion here are institutional bans of books and other cultural practices to show intervention in the prevention of violence. Many school districts have reacted to Mark Twain’s character of “Nigger Jim” in *Huckleberry Finn* by banning a book that had been considered a classic even though Twain scholars such as Shelly Fisher Fishkin have argued strenuously that Twain fought racism and was not an advocate of violence (Fishkin 1997). In the area of games and sports, schools have banned games they fear will be construed as promoting social dominance or violence such as “dodgeball” (Bazar 2006). That has not stopped the growth of “X-games” and “thrill rides,” as well as the runaway popularity of the *Dangerous Book for Boys* which offers excitement with the threat of injury and the framing of inequality as a way to compensate for the perceived deadening, feminizing effect of modern life (Iggulden 2007). In music and song, American politicians have assumed monitoring roles once reserved for parents by imposing rating systems according to violence as well as legislating “hate” in “hate speech.” I should hasten to add that I am not arguing against these programs, but viewing them as symptoms of a social malaise that has spread from the United States to other modern societies. In 2010, the Gallup organization reported that Americans’ assessment of U.S. morality was the worst since it began measuring it at the beginning of the century (Jones 2010). Asked to define the values in decline, Americans worried about disrespect for other people related to rising crime and violence.

Restating the propositions I suggested earlier, we can see uses of expressive culture to raise questions of violence as a failure of individual responsibility and morality in the psychology of Americans. For example for the first proposition on the disruption of lines that were thought to be clear on what is normal and what is not relates to doubts about the individualistic emphasis on relativism, egalitarianism, and modern self-indulgence in “outbreaks” of violence that defy its relegation to frames of play. The second proposition about the perception that if violence is part of our “tradition,” then it seems to have become more extreme in the contemporary moment, could relate to status anxiety created by the individualism and openness of society that once seemed so promising. Third, if expressive culture as I have pointed out has a key role in broaching the issues around specific enactments, its significance can be related to contestation of the public space, childhood, and visual culture no longer controlled by community, parents,

and institutions, respectively.

As I opened this essay with school shootings as emblematic of the problem of distinguishing between violence and play in American society today, I close with signs that it is not American culture to be blamed, but a dilemma of how to provide freedom and equality while insuring civility and responsibility, especially when the basis of what is normal seems increasingly ambiguous in the process.¹⁾ If anything, expressive culture takes on more significance as an instrument of persuasion, particularly as it has become more easily produced with new technology. The question is whether it can be suitably framed as expressive or transgressive.

Note

- 1) As this essay was going to press in January 2011, news broke of the shooting near Tuscon, Arizona, when 22-year-old Jared Lee Loughner opened fire on a crowd at a “Congress on Your Corner” public event by Representative Gabrielle Giffords. He shot nineteen people, including the Congresswoman, resulting in six deaths. The shooting drew worldwide coverage in the media and in the national press talk shows and editorials bemoaned the loss of a civil society represented by the violence. Much of the discourse was politicized with conservatives blaming liberals for fostering a moral decline in the country while the left chastised the right for blocking gun control legislation. In regard to the thesis I raised in this essay about the ambiguities of normality projected in public discourse and expressive culture in a post-modern dilemma of containing violence (with the implication of restricting mobility and freedom) while fostering a more open society, I can point out that the much of the commentary after the event focused on Loughner’s mental health status. He had friends and they testified that he was “interesting” or “eccentric” rather than insane and violent. Speculation on his adolescent interests in video games, drugs, and heavy metal music inevitably followed, although reporters frequently noted that these interests were not necessarily unusual. For instance, the *New York Times* reported “Several of Jared’s friends said he used marijuana, mushrooms and especially, the hallucinogenic herb called *Salvia divinorum* ...None of this necessarily distinguished him from his high school buddies. Several of them dabbled in drugs, played computer games like *World of Warcraft* and *Diablo* and went through Goth and alternative phases” (Barry 2011:16; see also Yardley, Luo, Dolnick 2011). Many commentators criticized the college he attended for not being more responsive to his alleged mental health problems, but officials pointed out that it could not force him into treatment particularly if he was not threatening. Again, the discourse was indicative of the uncertainty of boundaries between individual expression and a mental abnormality.

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