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*Once upon a Virus: AIDS Legends and Vernacular Risk
Perception (review)*

Gary Alan Fine

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ervelt (along with the current popularity of Hawai'i narratives packaged as "spooky tales" and "ghost stories") have worked a chilling effect on indigenous Hawaiian perspectives by their ubiquitousness in the marketplace and in folklore scholarship alike. In the context of the contemporary movement for sovereignty and self-determination among Native Hawaiians, this volume contributes importantly to the wider project of recovering and revaluing indigenous agency and epistemology, and it provides Hawai'i students with the tools to recognize and honor their knowledge about where they live.

Once upon a Virus: AIDS Legends and Vernacular Risk Perception. By Diane E. Goldstein. (Logan: Utah State University Press, 2004. Pp. xvi + 210, 1 figure, appendix, references cited, index.)

GARY ALAN FINE
Northwestern University

For the study of contemporary legend to assume its rightful place at the forefront of folkloristic endeavors, scholars must venture beyond the examination of particular and idiosyncratic case studies to focus on the content and context of legend complexes. The public power of this genre is most evident through the interconnection of legends that are motivated by and that address issues of public concern. Like wolves, legends often run in packs.

Over the past quarter century, AIDS has been our diabolical companion, alternatively evil and impish. One of the great virtues of Diane Goldstein's *Once Upon a Virus* is to remind us that legends mutate as rapidly as the contagions that they track. Over twenty-five years, HIV/AIDS has impacted so many corners of our society and has sparked so many narratives that the legends about this disease can be used to provide a means for understanding the ways in which this threat is interpreted. Whether speculating on the cryptic origins of this ailment, the motivations of disease vectors (as "AIDS Harrys" are technically termed), or the threats from kisses on Caribbean beaches, AIDS is

rarely far from our minds and tongues. Whether it be fast-food employees who masturbate in the mayonnaise, women who initiate men into the world of AIDS, miscreants who slip infected needles into telephone coin return slots, or government scientists whipping up batches of the virus in their secret laboratories, AIDS stories monitor our fears. Taken together, they demonstrate the revealing fact that where public anxiety exists, folklore is to be found. Tradition is the canary in our mental mines.

Diane Goldstein is our guide as we canvass these legends, and a knowledgeable guide she is. Admittedly she is not the theorist of contemporary legend for which we might yearn. The book lacks an overarching explanation—no structural, feminist, or psychoanalytic perspectives here. Meanings are found in plain sight. Neither is Goldstein a deep ethnographer. With the exception of some research in Conception Bay North in Newfoundland (near Goldstein's home base of St. John's), this data is largely catch as catch can, admittedly a long tradition in legend research. The analysis is less definitive than probative. Yet despite these caveats, Goldstein has a comprehensive awareness of AIDS lore, and most of the major narratives of the disease are well covered. At the end, one realizes just how legends can provide an alternative, if spotty, folk history of a disease and its metaphors.

Still, an analysis that chooses to be deep rather than broad will find tasks left undone. Given that much of Goldstein's data is from the relatively small population in Newfoundland, one might have asked for a greater analysis of the oikotypes of AIDS legends. As Linda Dégh and Clifford Geertz have each argued in their own ways, narratives are locally constituted. While legends shout to populations, they also whisper to small groups. Just as Newfoundland has been used for genetic studies, "the rock" could provide a genetics of narrative. Within small populations, one can observe narrative distortions through networks, and recognizing Dégh's contributions, one can examine how certain specially constituted networks (e.g., families, interests, occupations) select particular texts to narrate and to alter.

On a more global level, AIDS narratives con-

nect to the actions of states and other institutions. Folklore needs to be examined as a part of the political economy of nations and of the world system. One feature that led to the creation of particular themes of AIDS legends is how governments—and we think here of the Reagan administration, although no doubt Canadian readers have their own examples—constructed the crisis of AIDS, and responded or did not respond. And not just governments, but drug companies, major employers, hospitals, schools, religions, activist groups, and social service agencies each had a part to play. As these powerful social actors set the terms of the pandemic, images flowered and were transformed in the public imagination. Without such a political analysis, a stance largely abjured in Goldstein's book, the way that legends fit into institutional life—what has been called the third force of folklore—cannot be appreciated.

None of these limitations should obscure precisely what *Once Upon a Virus* has provided. We now can understand how an array of legends tracks the creation and transformation of a major human challenge. Goldstein reminds us, properly, that how we see danger is intimately linked to vernacular perceptions of risk, perceptions that are embedded in tradition. As Susan Sontag emphasized, AIDS is a metaphor for our age, but folk narratives are metaphors for the ages.

Witching Culture: Folklore and Neo-Paganism in America. By Sabina Magliocco. (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2004. Pp. 268, notes, bibliography, index, acknowledgments.)

Gary Alan Fine
Northwestern University

For both believers and skeptics, religion is the most folkloric of institutions. If one is not part of a tradition with some measure of longevity, how can one justify embracing a belief for all eternity? Scholars of religion have long limned the folkloric ingredients of religious belief, whether it be Alan Dundes's explication of the career of the Christ or Bert Wilson's accounts

of the construction of Mormon teachings. To be sure, uncovering traditional motifs in narratives of faith does not address their validity; gods can surely wield lore and custom to persuade their rough parishioners.

In *Witching Culture* Sabina Magliocco uses her considerable acumen to analyze how Neo-Pagans use folklore in the construction of beliefs and rituals. Yet despite considerable borrowings of traditional themes, this is not your father's Paganism. With the possible exception of Unitarians, no community of belief is likely more politically progressive and postmodern than Neo-Pagans. This is a true-blue creed, as azure as the Mormons are scarlet.

Magliocco is an effective and affectionate guide in mapping the development of Neo-Paganism in America and the multiple—and occasionally conflicting—strains from which it draws. The author shows that, although the roots of Neo-Paganism can be found throughout the twentieth century, the movement had its beginnings as a movement of practice in the 1970s, when it emerged to “reflect and refract the cultural politics characteristic of the American experience” (p. 3). Like all religious movements, Neo-Paganism is cultural politics congealed in faith. It is a coalition of what outsiders might describe as tree huggers. The evident divisions within the movement emphasize that no Mother Church exists, but we find an array of denominations, sects, and cults, each searching under rocks and over clouds for an authenticity of the wild. And as Rodney Stark persuasively argued of early Christianity (and which was equally true of much of the American religious revival of the eighteenth and nineteenth century, excluding the Latter-day Saints), Neo-Paganism—and particularly Wicca—is essentially a feminist movement, a haven from the gendered threats of male hegemony (*The Rise of Christianity*, Princeton University Press, 1996).

Witching Culture presents a richly textured ethnography, as fine a participant-observation account of an American scene as folklore has been gifted with since Leslie Prosterman's *Ordinary Life, Festival Days* (Smithsonian Institution Press, 1994). For my taste, however, Magliocco does not stand sufficiently back from the movement to gain the analytic purchase