



ESSAY

Mothman, The Silver Bridge Collapse, and the Folklorization and Commemoration of Actual Events

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HIGHLIGHTS

The social (con)fusion and commodification of two dramatic historical events might have helped to build and sustain the famed 'Mothman' legend.

ABSTRACT

By examining the songs, media, and material culture associated with the legendary monster Mothman, this paper shows how folklore can become commodified and what issues may arise as a result. By using Paredes' theory of "folklorization" and McDowell's concept of "commemoration," legend scholars can track historical developments across space and time to understand the metamorphoses a legend undergoes and why. Ultimately, this paper uses the term "narrative hijacking" to describe the process in which a historical event such as the Silver Bridge collapse of 1967 is overshadowed by its association with a legend, which in this case, is the story of the Mothman.

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INTRODUCTION

The legendary monster "Mothman" has cemented its status in popular lore thanks to the success of John Keel's 1975 book *The Mothman Prophecies* and the 2002 movie of the same name. Despite its popularity, this creature spawned a significant rift among the people who were affected by the real-life events behind the monster. Tragically, on December 15, 1967, 46 people died as the bridge that connected Point Pleasant, West Virginia, and Gallipolis, Ohio, collapsed. Point Pleasant had been the epicenter

of Mothman sightings, and the monster became indelibly linked to the bridge disaster. This paper examines the commemoration and folklorization of this event, investigating how it has become associated with a large bird-like creature that came to be known as Mothman.

An examination of the narratives and material culture surrounding Mothman and the Silver Bridge collapse, including songs, literature, and film, shows an intriguing interplay between the outsider and insider perspectives regarding the events and raises important questions regarding the commodification of legends. In this paper,



I will show some of the complications that arise as actual events become folklorized, and how the narratives surrounding historical events can be hijacked by people with a significant economic incentive. Ultimately, my argument is that the ways in which the events surrounding the Silver Bridge collapse have been commemorated and folklorized have resulted in what I term a “narrative hijacking” in that the popularity of Mothman has overshadowed the actual events of the bridge collapse.

To put my article in context, I will provide background information about Mothman and the Silver Bridge collapse. A literature review of folklorization and commemoration will also be provided, which will contain a review of the literature that has been published about Mothman. To build on my argument, I will provide evidence from two songs: Ray Anderson’s “The Silver Bridge Disaster” and Fish Fisher’s “The Mothman Song,” to show the significant difference between how people dealt with the events. A discussion of the book and the movie *The Mothman Prophecies* (2002) will be included. Finally, I will show how the popularity of the movie led to further commemoration and folklorization.

Literature Review

Latin-American folklorists used folklorization to describe the way an event became folklorized by way of artistic production and other displays of culture. This concept was popularized in the realm of American folkloristics by Americo Paredes, particularly in his work about Jose Mosqueda. Drawing upon the work of Paredes, John H. McDowell developed the theoretical framework of “commemoration.” This concept focuses on the specific function that the forms of folklore exhibit. Each of these theories is applied to historical events. In the case of the Silver Bridge collapse and Mothman, the disaster is an actual event that transpired. The aftermath of the history, and the folklorization and commemoration efforts enacted, are particularly telling, and the frameworks provided by Paredes and McDowell lend a helpful hand for analysis.

Paredes’ article “Jose Mosqueda and the Folklorization of Actual Events” established the structure upon which this essay is built. In his work, Paredes discusses the folklorization process linked to Jose Mosqueda. Mosqueda was arrested, indicted, and later died in jail due to his involvement with a train robbery that occurred near the border of Texas and Mexico in 1891. By tracing the development of corridos, or ballads, that recounted the event, Paredes shows how the narrative surrounding the story shifted. The original corridos of Jose Mosqueda were more of an accurate depiction of what actually happened while also reflecting how people along the border

felt. However, as time went on, the narrative changed. People’s roles were altered, and Mosqueda transformed from a simple robber to reflect the heroes of border ballads, and the song itself morphed from an outlaw ballad to a border-conflict ballad (Paredes, 1971, pp. 10-14). Similarly, songs arose about Mothman and the Silver Bridge. In this case, however, the center of attention is not on a single song that changes over time, but rather it is on the shift in focus from the bridge to the creature.

In his article “Chante Luna and the Commemoration of Actual Events,” John H. McDowell intentionally draws on the theory of folklorization. He says that he takes his “inspiration from Paredes in this paper, as indeed I have done through my entire academic career” (McDowell, 2005, p. 40). McDowell is clear that he is not merely applying Paredes’ theory to another ballad, and he creates the concept of “commemoration” to analyze the events surrounding Chante Luna. What sets commemoration apart from folklorization is that it serves a particular function, which is that a historical event is commemorated to push a narrative.

Chante Luna is an outlaw who is captured due to help by two of his associates and is transported towards Chilpancingo. At a barrier, Chante is told he will be delivered to federal agents. He kills one of his partners and then dies in a gunfight with the federales (McDowell 2005, p. 53-54). This story seems straightforward enough, but the corridos it appears in show marked differences. In the corrido form, it is “clear that this good man was framed by the government, accused of a murder that he did not commit” (McDowell, 2005, p. 53). Individuals that would be sympathetic to his cause composed corridos that reflected an ethos of anti-government corruption. As such, it makes sense that Luna is depicted as “a bold man of action” (McDowell, 2005, p. 54). On the contrary, a newspaper article from the time tells a very different story, painting a portrait of Chante as a criminal and murderer while suppressing the names of the individuals involved and therefore erasing their memory. The newspaper, as opposed to the corrido, comes from a place of sympathy for the federales rather than the people. McDowell makes the point that “every teller has a stake in the tale, and this stake influences their take on the story” (McDowell 2005, p. 61). Like the situations surrounding Mosqueda and Luna, the stake of the individuals in the events of the bridge and Mothman influence their presentation of the events.

Like McDowell, I do not merely wish to recapitulate the theories of those who have come before me. Instead, I apply their theories simultaneously. The events which transpired in Point Pleasant in the late 1960s are uniquely multifaceted in that there is a historical event, the bridge

collapse, but on top of that, there is a legendary creature imbued with supernatural abilities which have become the focal point of the events. This stands in stark contrast to the stories of Mosqueda and Luna. Furthermore, while their focus was on corridos and newspaper articles, I use songs, books, movies, and material forms to show how the events have resulted in an ongoing rift between the parties involved.

Mothman Background

Over a thirteen-month span between November 1966 and December 1967, the town of Point Pleasant, West Virginia, was inundated with mysterious sightings of what has now become known as Mothman. The phenomena got its start on November 15, 1966, when Mr. and Mrs. Scarberry and Mr. and Mrs. Mallette saw a creature that they could not explain as they were driving near a remote and abandoned munitions storage site near Point Pleasant known as the TNT area. They described seeing a being that “was shaped like a man, but bigger... Maybe six and a half or seven feet tall. And it had big wings folded against its back” (Keel, 1975, p. 77). They added that “it was those eyes that got us... It had two big eyes like automobile reflectors” that were “hypnotic” (Keel, 1975, p. 77).

The next day, a press conference was called, and the witnesses were interviewed by local reporters. An investigator named Mary Hyre sent the story to the AP wire, and “the bird was the chief topic at supper tables throughout the Ohio valley” (Keel, 1975, p. 78). From the onset, the creature was called a bird, not Mothman, but later that day, a copy editor coined the term “Mothman,” playing off the popularity of Batman. This narrative of hijacking and sensationalism has carried on into today as the monster’s popularity has become the focal point for commodification rather than the bridge disaster.

Shortly after the Scarberry’s and Mallette’s encounter, Point Pleasant was flooded with sightings. Two volunteer firemen had a sighting of a giant bird by the TNT area. They said that “It was definitely a bird... But it was huge. We’d never seen anything like it” (Keel, 1975, p. 82). Once again, the creature was described explicitly as a bird, but the media narrative at this point had attached the enigmatic moniker “Mothman”, and that was where the focus lay. Keel notes that “Television crews and newsmen from other states hovered around the old generator plant, hoping to glimpse the monster” (Keel, 1975, p. 86). The familiar pattern of paranormal, voyeuristic tourism that is prevalent in Point Pleasant today is here in its nascent stages.

A journalist and ufologist named John Keel traveled to Point Pleasant, originally to research UFOs, but

his presence changed the Mothman legend forever. Keel was a Fortean: a school of thought named after Charles Fort. Forteanism focuses on paranormal and unexplained phenomena and is an “examination of the way in which anomalous events emerge into public awareness and are subsequently framed through, at times antithetical frameworks” (Dixon, 2007, p. 191). In many ways, it is an interrogation of consensus reality. He had come to Point Pleasant to inquire about UFO sightings, and then the bird sightings started. It was a perfect storm. Keel jumped on the situation, and ran with the Mothman story, his Fortean lens obfuscating his view of the events. Eight years later, he published *The Mothman Prophecies*, which made the story of Mothman even more popular while diminishing the lives lost in the Silver Bridge disaster.

People were frantic, searching for an answer. An Ohio professor posited that the creature was a rare sandhill crane (Keel, 1975, 88). No one had an explanation, but those who saw it “agreed on the basic points. It was gray, apparently featherless, as large – or larger – than a big man, had a wingspread of about ten feet, and did not flap its wings in flight. Its face was a puzzle. No one could describe it. The two red eyes dominated it” (Keel, 1975, p. 88).

Keel says that over the years between 1966 and 1967, over a hundred adults saw the creature (Keel, 1975, p. 88). Then the unthinkable happened. On December 15, 1967, the Silver Bridge connecting Point Pleasant and Gallipolis, Ohio, collapsed. Red lights on both sides of the bridge led to a build-up of cars that the structure could not withstand. Eye-bar 13 broke, and the disaster ensued. Cars fell into the Ohio River below, and 46 people died. It is, to date, the deadliest bridge collapse in United States history. The lore surrounding Mothman is that it is an omen of death and that its presence predicted the disaster. The sightings stopped after the collapse, but the fact remains that real people died and that something was being seen. Thirteen months after the sightings began, they stopped after eye-bar thirteen snapped and led to a disaster that changed Point Pleasant forever.

Mothman Songs

There have been several songs made about the Silver Bridge collapse and Mothman. For the purpose of this paper, I will be covering two different songs: Ray Anderson’s “The Silver Bridge Disaster” and Fish Fisher’s “The Mothman Song.” Each of these songs deals with the occurrences in Point Pleasant in a harshly different manner. Anderson focuses solely on the bridge disaster, while Fisher focuses on the legends surrounding Mothman. Interestingly, Fisher’s performance, which I have used

as my example, is done at the annual Mothman festival, taking place in Point Pleasant. The festival was set up by a local following the movie's release and is used as a means to capitalize on its popularity. This gathering has drawn much ire from many other locals but still remains a complicated issue as it greatly benefits the town's economy. Thus the musical forms that have been folklorized and commemorated have contributed to the rift and are also used for markedly different purposes.

Following the work of Paredes and McDowell, I also am using song in my study. However, they both used ballads or songs which have a narrative structure. I, on the other hand, am using songs that don't tell a story but rather contain a historical overview of the situation. Furthermore, the ballads of Jose Mosqueda and Chante Luna were shown to have changed over time, while the songs of Anderson and Fisher have remained the same. Instead of comparing how the narrative components of a song change over time, I am comparing two different songs to show how those songs exemplify the different ways people have dealt with historical events.

Ray Anderson's "The Silver Bridge Disaster," released shortly after the collapse in December 1967, captures the sentiment of the time, which was of how sad it was that the disaster happened. The verses show that the song was used as a way to mourn and deal with the tragedy that had happened. For the sake of brevity, the whole song won't be included, but rather important verses will be quoted.

The lyrics constantly stress that actual people lost their lives: "There were husbands and wives, little children that lost their lives." Part of the divide that has occurred between the people who focus on Mothman and the people who focus on the Silver Bridge is that the former's commodification of the legend trivializes the real people who died. This song shows that the focus immediately after the bridge collapse was on the disaster and not the monster.

The song also functions as a coping mechanism to come to terms with the tragedy. These lines show as much: "Oh my friends, do you know that we're a traveling, day by day as we journey along, and someday we must cross this chilly river 'cross the bridge into our eternal home. Let's prepare now to meet all our loved ones." The phrases "we must" and "our loved ones" are bonding terms that place stress on the community and a shared sense of loss. Anderson then moves on to say that one day we will cross the river (death) and be united with our loved ones. The Christian ethos of West Virginia is invoked, and the people are reminded that despite the terrible loss, they will be able to see their loved ones in the afterlife.

Fish Fisher's performance at the 2015 Mothman Fes-

tival in Point Pleasant stands in stark contrast. By this time, nearly 50 years after the disaster, the perspective has changed. No longer is the focal point the real people that had died, but rather the mystery surrounding the legend of Mothman. Following the popularity of the movie's success, vendors and artists have a financial incentive to capitalize on the commercial value. Again, whole lyrics will not be provided, and important quotes will be referenced.

The popular lore of Mothman has become the focal point. References such as Mothman being "Chief Cornstalk's ghost or an alien," the "buzz on the television," and that he "sends premonitions" are straight out of Keel's book. The only mention that the disaster is also tied to Mothman's role and the question of whether the creature was a harbinger of death or an agent of protection. Here we see how the influence of both the book and the movie has resulted in a performance situated within a specific context. The festival was created as a result of the opportunity to commodify the legend following the movie, and the song focuses on deep lore from the book, which is altogether absent from Ray Anderson's song, which of course, predates them both. Thus there is a temporal shift in perspective dictated by a purpose: from the disaster to the monster, from coping mechanism to financial gain.

John Keel and *The Mothman Prophecies* (1975)

In 1975, John Keel published his book *The Mothman Prophecies*, which detailed the events that plagued Point Pleasant during the late 1960s. The book contains everything from UFO sightings, musings on ultraterrestrials, speculations of Mothman's link to Tibetan "tulpas," and, of course, Mothman itself, as well as the Silver Bridge collapse. Eventually becoming a *New York Times* bestseller, this work led to the 2002 movie by the same name. Without this book, it is entirely plausible that the Silver Bridge disaster would not have nearly the historical recognition that it holds today, and Mothman's place in monster lore would be immensely less significant. Although these are both factors that have led to an economic resurgence in the town, the book has contributed to the rift which now exists surrounding the situation. It has created what I term a "narrative hijacking" in that it has made the story about Mothman rather than the disaster, and it was a forerunner of tension that exists within the emic and etic perspectives.

My concept of narrative hijacking is similar to Jeannie Banks Thomas' "invasive narrative," though it differs in significant ways. Thomas says that "an invasive narrative is not a story that locals live *by*; rather, it is a story that locals live *with*, whether they like it or not" (Thomas, 2015,

p. 51). The original context of Thomas' invasive narratives is Salem and its association with witch trials. The difference between the invasive narrative and a narrative hijacking is that in the case of Salem, the story of the witch trials is at the center of the narrative, whereas in the case of Mothman, the Silver Bridge Collapse is, as I argue, the real point of concern, and that the legendary monster has usurped the historical event as being the point of focus.

Keel's book has played a major role in the popularity of Mothman and the narrative surrounding Point Pleasant attached to it. I would argue that his personal stake in the legend and the way that he understood what was happening was shaped by his Fortean worldview and deep interest in the paranormal. As such, it is not surprising that Keel came away from the situation with his bias confirmed: that there is a Fortean creature in Point Pleasant, that the UFO sightings, the Men-in-Black, the telepathic messages, and even the bridge disaster itself are all intertwined. Dixon says, "the figure of the Mothman, then, becomes the fulcrum around which the character of Truth, along with the associated constructs of reality, cause-effect, explanation, coherence, and identity are thrown into doubt" (Dixon, 2007, p. 191).

Clearly, as we have seen through Ray Anderson's song, the bridge disaster was on the minds of people after the event had happened, but that song was made just months after the fact. Keel's book was published eight years later and has become a staple of both Fortean and monster literature. In many respects, this book hijacked the narrative from being about the disaster and the tangibility of the lives that were lost and the families that were ruined and made it about the monster.

Keel had become convinced that Point Pleasant was what Dixon terms an "extra-geography," a space "whereby the rigid spatial categorizations of cartographers and planners provoke, and are on occasion overturned by, flights of imaginations and fancy" (Dixon, 2007, p. 189). This occult journalist went into the situation looking for Forteanism, and, in a biased way, it is exactly what he found. Keel affirms this as much: "I realized the folly of trying to measure the circle from some distant point, so I picked a microcosm on the edge of the circle – a place where many manifestations were occurring simultaneously, and I hit the jackpot immediately" (Keel, 1975, pp. 12-13). In other words, To Keel Mothman and the Silver Bridge were absolutely connected, and so he conflated the two. For others, however, that was certainly not the case.

So it was Keel's lens, his preconceptions, and personal biases which led him to see the story of Mothman and the Silver Bridge as one and the same. Perhaps it is the power of the title of both the book and the movie that

led to the narrative hijacking, the shift in perception from the Silver Bridge to Mothman. If the title was "The Silver Bridge Prophecies" or even the more alliterative "Point Pleasant Prophecies," the rift would be diminished.

A further rift that Keel's work contributes to exists between emic and etic communities and their relation to the events. Emic and etic are terms used by folklorists to distinguish between insider and outsider perspectives; emic corresponds to the insider, and etic corresponds to the outsider (Dundes, 1962, p. 101). This distinction existed in the 1960s during Keel's time and continues to manifest itself as the commodification of the legend, which the Hollywood movie contributed to, has exerted its power and influence over the small town of Point Pleasant.

One way that this emic and etic conflict plays out in Keel's book is through the portrayal of the so-called "Men-in-Black." These familiar figures, which are cemented in extraterrestrial lore thanks to the movies starring Will Smith and Tommy Lee Jones, appeared in Keel's work. In fact, Keel is credited with coining the term. Interestingly, these characters were erased from the film, just like other real-life characters that appear in the book.

Keel depicts these men and women as being distinctly "other." He focuses on their Oriental features and their foreignness and thus concludes that they must be alien. He says that:

"What troubled me most was the fact that these mystery men and women often matched the descriptions given to me by contactees who claimed to have seen a UFO land and had glimpsed or conversed with their pilots; pilots with either pointed features or Oriental countenances, dusky skin (not Negroid) and unusually long fingers," (Keel, 1975, p. 34).

Keel was quick to confirm his theories in even the presence of people who did not look like him, and Dixon points out that between 1960 and 1970, West Virginia experienced a great increase in immigrants from the Philippines, Japan, and China (Dixon, 2007, p. 201) so it is reasonable to conclude that these weren't extraterrestrial visitors but rather people from this demographic.

Keel himself occupies somewhat of a liminal space as far as emic and etic perspectives are concerned. He was not from Point Pleasant, but he became closely ingrained with the community, particularly with figures such as Mary Hyre, a local reporter, and Woody Derenberger, a local who had a UFO sighting and informed Keel that he had been getting telepathic messages from a man named Indrid Cold whom Keel understood to be intertwined with Mothman.

The emic and etic rift continues to play itself out today and is complicated by the fact that there is consternation within the emic community. Hollywood, the ultimate etic, continued the narrative hijacking that Keel started with the movie, which has been met with cynicism by the locals. Koven notes that movies with folkloric features can reflect contemporary belief traditions (Koven, 2008, p. 3). The fact that the movie featured the monster and not the disaster reflects the shift in focus. Some locals chose to capitalize on this popularity by way of creating festivals, statues, tours, and museums. So the rift that Keel's xenophobia started was exacerbated by Hollywood and caused tension within the "insider" perspective.

Keel's Role, Ostension, and Mothman Anomalies

While Keel played a crucial role in the popularization of the Mothman legend, I would argue that there have been three major phases in the story's development. First is the initial phase, which involved the first reports of Mothman sightings. This occurred during the beginning of the 13 months of sightings starting in 1966 and ending in 1967. During this phase, newspapers ran stories about the monster, Keel was on the ground conducting fieldwork, and Point Pleasant became a hub for ostensive actions. The second phase can be called the "Keel phase," during which Keel wrote articles about Mothman, culminating in the 1975 publication of *The Mothman Prophecies*. The third and final phase began in 2002 with the release of *The Mothman Prophecies* movie. This period is marked by a renewed interest in Mothman and new tourist attractions being put into place in Point Pleasant.

David Clarke's article "The Mothman of West Virginia: A Case Study in Legendary Storytelling" provides a good summary of the development of each of these phases. On November 17, 1966, reporter Mary Hyre, whom Keel was in continuous contact with, reported in the Athens, Ohio messenger that four people in Point Pleasant had been chased by a "man-like thing" with wings and red eyes, flying at 100 miles an hour (Clarke, 2022, p. 267). These four were the Scarberrys and the Malettes, who reported their experience to Deputy Millard Halstead. This story was distributed in a publication for troops called *Pacific Stars and Stripes* and was met with further newspaper stories until the title "Moth Man" was applied to the monster, which stuck (Clarke, 2022, p. 267).

While this essay suggests that the presence of the Mothman narrative today has spawned antagonism in Point Pleasant, in part due to the commercialization of both a monster and a disaster, the development of a legend's popularity is more complex than the simple formula

of story + tourism = money. The story of Mothman was extremely popular during this initial phase, largely without Keel's guiding influence, as there were eight years between the bridge collapse and the publication of his book. As Clarke notes, in the months after the original stories were reported, the TNT area of Point Pleasant became a hub for legend trips (Clarke, 2022, p. 267). Folklorists use the term "legend trip" to describe a journey to a location associated with a legend. A legend trip is a form of ostension, a term used by Linda Dégh and Andrew Vászonyi to describe the acting out of a legend (Dégh & Vaszonyi, 1983). During this period, hundreds of sightings were reported in Point Pleasant, many of which were collected by Keel. So people were seeing *something*, and these sightings invited both locals and outsiders to participate in the legend by performing ostensive acts.

Keel joined in the legend, tripping himself, as he visited the TNT area in search of Mothman. During his first trip, the journalist Mary Hyre and a woman named Connie Carpenter were among those accompanying him. Connie previously had an encounter with Mothman and told Keel that the being she saw had a wing span of ten feet and glowing red eyes with a "hypnotic effect" (Keel, 1975, p. 30). Subsequently, Connie was stricken with klieg conjunctivitis, a condition of the eyes marked by redness and swelling. During their visit to the TNT area, Connie said she saw Mothman's eyes. Keel reentered the site, and while he was alone, Mary Hyre saw a "tall figure running," and a woman named Mabel McDaniel heard a metallic, hollow noise, which Keel denied making (Keel, 1975, pp. 98-99). Mary Mallette's ear began to bleed, and a local policeman, Deputy Sullivan, said that he had seen something. These anomalous encounters, coupled with physical effects, provided in a memorate form by Keel, indicate that *something* was happening in Point Pleasant. With the sheer volume of sightings reported, it is no wonder that the legend and allure of Mothman spread so rapidly.

Another Point Pleasant area resident who was at the core of both Mothman legend trips and anomalies was a man named Woodrow "Woody" Derenberger. On November 2, 1966, Woody was driving home when a chimney-shaped vehicle sped by him and stopped in the middle of the road. A man stepped out of the UFO, which was hovering in midair. The being introduced himself telepathically as Mr. Cold. Woody was instructed by Mr. Cold to report his experience to the authorities, which he did, and the story was recounted in the local press, radio, and television. After his encounter, Woody's farm became a destination for legend trippers, who hoped to glimpse the craft for themselves (Keel, 1975, pp. 67-69). While discussion of Mothman is typically focused on the bird-like creature, Keel's narrative and the legends abounding in

Point Pleasant during the late 1960s include anomalies such as UFOs, telepathy, and precognition.

Woody Derenberger was not the only person in the Point Pleasant area to see a UFO. In fact, Keel's text is full of UFO sightings. He details how a woman named Mrs. Kelly witnessed a metal disk above her children's playground, which featured a humanoid being standing outside of it in midair. Mary Hyre witnessed a UFO herself, and so did customers, including a police officer, of Tiny's, a restaurant outside Point Pleasant (Keel, 1975, pp. 55-56). Keel came to call the 13 months between 1966 and 1967 the "Year of the Garuda," named for a divine bird from Hinduism. He notes how folklore of flying beasts is present in most cultures throughout the world (Keel, 1975, p. 41). It is not strange, then, that stories of winged creatures appeared in West Virginia. While people were sighting something, whether that be sandhill cranes, military experiments, or Mothman itself, the acts of ostension by locals and outsiders alike show a communal desire to interact with age-old legends of supernatural flying beings.

There were more anomalies that added to the allure of the Mothman story. Keel details how he began to receive messages from what he refers to as "the entities" about disasters such as plane crashes that turned out to be true (Keel, 1975, p. 241). This included a warning of an impending disaster in Point Pleasant, which is often interpreted as the Silver Bridge collapse. Mary Hyre told Keel that she had a precognitive dream about people drowning in a river and Christmas packages floating on the water (Keel, 1975, p. 274). This is eerily similar to the historical events of the bridge collapse. Keel also says that acquaintances of his began to receive phone calls from him that he never made and suggests that somebody, or something, was imitating his voice to make these calls. While I would argue that the third phase of the Mothman legend, beginning with the movie in 2002, was affected the most by capitalistic drives, interest during the first phase, much of which is detailed in Keel's book, was driven by ostensive action related to Mothman itself, rather than to the legend of Mothman, as was the case in the third phase.

In 2002, *The Mothman Prophecies* (2002), starring Richard Gere, was released, starting what I consider the third phase of the Mothman story. Naturally, this movie sparked a renewed interest in the monster, and with that, more ostensive acts mainly focused on local tourism. Some Point Pleasant locals, such as Jeff Wamsley, saw an opportunity to capitalize on this popularity. Wamsley says:

"Since the movie came out, it's just been wow! I

knew it would. I was selling Mothman stuff before the movie came out. I was working on my first book (about the Mothman), and somebody called me and said, "Hey, you know, they're doing a movie with Richard Gere in it!" and I knew right then that the floodgates (would open) and it would just be like BOOM!" (Kruse 2015, p 323).

Since then, Wamsley has created a Mothman Museum, a Mothman Bus Tour, and a Mothman festival.

There is a duality at play when it comes to the use of Mothman to boost tourism. On the one hand, Kruse notes how "small towns in Appalachia and other regions have a vested interest in attracting tourists" (Kruse, 2015, p. 313). Point Pleasant is a unique case study in this regard, as the bridge disaster left it literally disconnected from a good deal of its economic origins, as those who would have come to the town from across the Ohio River were no longer able to. Furthermore, researchers have noted how small towns such as Point Pleasant are vulnerable due to larger market forces causing trends such as population decline and, thus a weakened economy (Wirtz, 2011, p. 13). However, the resurgence of Point Pleasant as a place because of the commercial success of the movie has left it in a position to capitalize on tourism in a way that many small towns aren't. Still, it is Mothman, and not the Silver Bridge, that draws outsiders in, and some residents just "roll their eyes when it comes to the Mothman" (Kruse, 2015, p. 323).

Denny Bellamy, the Executive Director of the Mason County Convention and Visitors Bureau, works with the Mothman bus tour in an attempt to "weave the history sites together to form a heritage tourism landscape that intersects with Mothman lore" (Kruse, 2015, p. 320). He notes that people on tour inevitably link Mothman to the Silver Bridge, which he states explicitly the "locals don't like at all" (Kruse, 2015, p. 321). This point is key to stress, as it affirms indeed that there is antagonism within the community. The popularity that Mothman imposed on Point Pleasant led to this rift. Still, small towns like this would be remiss if they were to pass on such a lucrative opportunity. Charles Humphries, the Executive Director of the Mason County Development Authority, says of the decisions made to boost tourism by way of Mothman that he "had people wanting to run me off! Some of them tried! I still have people that hate the Mothman here in town. But I saw it as an opportunity to get our name on the map" (Kruse, 2015, p. 326).

The ways in which the actual events have been folklorized and commemorated in Point Pleasant stretch beyond the tours and museums. Both the Silver Bridge collapse and Mothman have been commemorated by ma-

terial forms that stand in marked contrast to one another. A plaque commemorating the Silver Bridge collapse sits down by the riverside. It is very plain and acts as a means to remember those who lost their lives. In contrast, a huge metallic Mothman sculpture was commissioned by the Point Pleasant Main Street Organization and sat in a prominent position in town. Herein lies the difference between the way that these two aspects of the same event have been dealt with in a different way: the plaque is meant to remember, the statue is meant to draw people in and further folklorizes the actual events, and is a continuation of the narrative hijacking.

Researchers have noted that there is a trend of “people traveling to destinations to recapture the distinctive sense of place portrayed on screen” (Alderman et al., 2012, p. 213). The tourism that has been driven towards Point Pleasant is largely due to this trend. However, the movie was not shot in Point Pleasant, so travelers who desire to interact with the legend in this regard are getting more of a simulation rather than an authentic experience. Furthermore, the tourism boost of Point Pleasant has allowed people to engage in legend-tripping and ostensive practice in new ways in regard to Mothman.

Implications and Applications

By applying Americo Paredes’ theory of “folklorization” and John H. McDowell’s theory of “commemoration,” legend scholars are able to trace the diachronic development of contemporary monsters. The case of Mothman shows how the interplay between emic and etic perspectives of legends spawn significant social problems, particularly when commercial interests are at stake and when people’s lives are significantly altered due to events tied to the legend. This research helps to show the complexities at work as folklore becomes commodified and how local communities become disenfranchised in the process.

Conclusion

The renewed interest in the actual events tied to the 1967 Silver Bridge collapse has led to unique and complicated antagonism between the insider and outsider perspectives, resulting in inter-group strife. John Keel’s book largely shifted the focus from the tangibility of the tragedy towards the mystery of the legend. The release of the 2002 movie opened up an opportunity for Point Pleasant to capitalize economically, and in many ways, it allowed the locals to reclaim their power. Still, this move was met with resistance and cynicism while the deaths caused by the Silver Bridge collapse live on in the collective memory of the town.

This work should cause an expansion of how the theories of folklorization and commemoration can be applied to actual events. Folklorization and commemoration spread to the material realm and even into popular culture. Despite the fact that there is strife and disagreement in Point Pleasant over how this situation was handled, this is an example of how an actual event can be turned into folklore, as would be the case in Keel’s book, transmitted into popular culture in a movie, and then reclaimed back into folk culture through material means such as festivals, art, and music.

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