

MERRY KRAMPUS: ALTERNATIVE HOLIDAY PRAXIS IN THE
CONTEMPORARY UNITED STATES

by

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THESIS ABSTRACT

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Since the early twenty-first century, individuals in the US have discovered the enduring winter tradition from Alpen Austria known as *Krampusnacht*. These events center around the figure of the Krampus, a beast-like, punishing “devil” that accompanies St. Nicholas on December 5, the eve of his feast day. By 2010, groups of people in US cities were staging their own Krampusnacht processions in downtown areas, referencing the European enactments while simultaneously innovating their embodiments to meaningfully interact with the Christmas season in the United States. Participation in these events increases annually and the Krampus figure’s presence online and in popular media is on the rise. This thesis explores how Krampus-associated traditional material is being practiced, altered, and transmitted across various fields of public culture in the US as a response to the perceived over-commodification of winter festival opportunity.

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

This thesis represents the culmination of a lifelong interest in the symbols and traditional materials associated with seasonal holiday expressions in the United States (US). As a young child growing up in a depressed, post-steel town in Pennsylvania's Allegheny Mountains in the 1980s, I vividly recall how the holidays seemed to hold an inexplicable transformative and energizing power over a community that defined itself by its hardships. Johnstown, Pennsylvania was a major hub of steel production in the period directly following World War II and the local plant, Bethlehem Steel, employed a large portion of the population. By the early 1980s the plant was closed, leaving many households in Johnstown without income, including mine. Although I barely remember it, my father was forced to knock on neighbors' doors offering to shovel snow or provide a hand at other odd jobs to try to make ends meet. I do recall a general sense of tension and worry permeating adult interactions within my family and anywhere in the community where people stopped to talk. Except during the holidays. The people of Johnstown had a way of *showing up* for just about any date on the US festival calendar. Neighborhoods would explode with decoration for Valentine's Day, St. Patrick's Day, Easter, Fourth of July, Halloween, and especially Christmas. Classrooms, grocery stores, banks, and churches dripped with rarified symbolic material and became changed places. To my young mind, already overloaded with fairytales, folklore, and fantasy media, these holiday transformations were impossible and numinous; nothing short of magic.

The world-changing power represented by the holidays of my youth transcended the visual, material products of tradition. Adults around me seemed lighter, friendlier, and less concerned about the social and economic trials the future might hold. Reflecting on this, it was my first exposure to the numinous time-out-of-time that holiday traditional observances represent, a concept that the topic of this thesis often relies on. Every Christmas was the *same* Christmas. Year after year, the same festive materials were unpacked and staged to create a singular, continuous temporal space removed from the march of progress (or lack of it). My grandmother on my father's side (widowed by lung disease connected to my grandfather's life in the mills) did not have much money but every Christmas she built a sprawling, winter village under her tree. There were miniature shops, a post office, a town center, a mirror-pond complete with tiny ice-skaters, and of course a church, all set up in tiers on a rolling bolt of white felt under a sky of pine needles. Some of these tiny, glowing buildings were handed-down to her, some were collected second hand, and some were gifts from Christmases past. I acknowledge that I may be leaning a bit heavily on the fencepost of nostalgia here, but perhaps that further emphasizes the point. The traditional holiday practices that surrounded me in my youth seemed to be about building new and better worlds. These festival worlds were, for me, a place of escape and maybe they were for the adults as well. As an adult, I recognize that activating the charged spaces and times represented by the holidays is always a response to the places and histories in which the practicing agents contemporaneously inhabit.

In retrospect, analyzing my own history of holiday praxis (an important term here, which will be further engaged with below) also reveals some basic but often overlooked

features of tradition that factor heavily into the framework for the study to follow. It is important to recognize that tradition in general, and holiday traditions specifically, rely on variation for their continued enactment. Often interactions with mass culture drive those variations, particularly in the late twentieth and twenty-first centuries when the idea of an unmediated life, untouched by commercial and consumer culture, is a ghost of the past. In my family's traditions, the store-bought product was often placed right beside familial objects of folklife on the holiday table. My Nan's Christmas sandtarts, cookies made from a closely guarded family recipe, sat on a plate next to a Hickory Farms box of summer sausages and specialty processed cheeses every Christmas eve. My mother's most beloved winter holiday decoration is a three-foot-tall, plastic Frosty the Snowman from the 1950s illuminated by a lightbulb inside and passed down to her from her grandmother. Every Christmas, when Frosty comes out, she tells the family about how much it meant to her when she would see it on her grandmother's front porch for the first time each season. Popular culture items are used in vernacular or folkloric ways to help traditions endure, and to mark the seasonal year.¹ For instance, I remember waiting for days with anticipation for any number of holiday television specials, media products that I consumed over and over again and embraced as tradition.

When my family left Johnstown for Locust Grove, Virginia in 1987 our holiday traditions began the adaptation processes essential to the kinds of variation mentioned above. Removed from the large network of extended family members, our traditions shifted to fit the needs of just the four of us: my father, my mother, my older brother, and

¹ Jack Santino, *New Old-Fashioned Ways: Holidays and Popular Culture*, (Knoxville: University of Tennessee UP, 1996).

myself. As my brother and I got older, Christmas Eve became the main site of all our traditional practices. Instead of a large Christmas dinner, we would have a spread of appetizers and snacks, including Nan's recipe for "Finger Chicken." As a family, we would watch *It's a Wonderful Life*, play a board game, and open gifts at midnight. By the time I was in my teens, our traditions would change again to include group activities alternately planned by each family member. These traditional practices, altered to fit the four of us, focused on celebrating a closeness that the move away from larger social networks required. Now that my brother has two sons, our traditions have shifted yet again. Most importantly perhaps, is the return of the gift exchange to Christmas morning to facilitate Santa Claus's overnight delivery. Still, Nan's sandtarts (Mom makes them now) and the box of Hickory Farms are laid out on the coffee table on Christmas Eve.

In order to provide additional personal context for this thesis, it is important to address my relationship with holiday traditional praxis as an adult. Since leaving home for college in the late 1990s, I've lived in Vermont, Georgia, New York City, and the Pacific Northwest. Distance makes spending Christmas with my parents, brother, and nephews a relatively rare event. When I moved to Manhattan, I ended up in retail as a bookseller at the legendary Strand Book Store. Years later, I would hold the same position at Portland's famous Powell's Books. Working in the service industry, especially retail, in the United States results in complicated recontextualizations of the holiday calendar. First, interactions with any festival season's symbolic material come on early and fast, and last a while. Second, the US economy's reliance on holiday sales numbers – particularly Christmas – means that one's workload is at its peak when the prevailing cultural messages (at least implicitly) tell you to take a break, celebrate, and be

jolly. My coworkers and I were lucky to have Christmas Day off. Both companies I worked for during my tenure in retail froze personal days from early December to mid-January and time off was only granted if an employee won a seasonal “lottery.” Not only is there no real holiday for retail workers, but even taking a day off could result in disciplinary action. Lastly, and perhaps most important in leading me to this thesis project, is the way that US retail environments during the Christmas season expose those in service positions to the collective pressure, stress, and anxiety felt by many during this time of year. It is not uncommon to be berated by frenzied shoppers, or otherwise witness customer meltdowns. My personal experiences with holiday retail quickly resulted in yet another variation in my traditional practices. While living in New York, my partner and I began the tradition of celebrating major holidays with only one another. This is a personal example of how variable tradition is always a response to evolving cultural utilities. Because of the minimal time off and social overexposure of retail jobs at Christmas, we brought the season’s traditional material into our own, quiet space. Still, Nan’s sandtarts (made by Mom and sent by post) and the Hickory Farms sausages and cheeses are laid out on the coffee table on Christmas Eve.

Sometime around 2012, I discovered the Krampus. I cannot point to one specific source that revealed this alternative winter holiday figure. I had been aware of St. Nicholas’ day since I was a child. My mother, a Catholic school teacher, celebrated the day with my brother and I when we were very young. Our stockings would come out on the night of December 5, and the next day we would wake up to find them filled with a small gift and some candy. These treats were ostensibly from the saint, but the monstrous Krampus was certainly never present or even mentioned. Too bad, I probably

would have loved him. As for the Krampus, I can only say with certainty that I had been exposed to the figure by 2012 because I drew it on a birthday card I made that year for my partner, whose birthday happens to be December 5. If I were pressed, I would guess that I came across Monte Beauchamp's book of Victorian era Austrian postcards that feature the Krampus, or Brom's novel *Krampus: The Yule Lord*, while fulfilling my duties at the Strand.² These images of the Krampus appealed to me as a fan of fantasy art and genre fiction. I was unaware of the larger traditional enactments and cultural origins of the figure, and certainly had no idea that by that time Krampus processional events were occurring in cities in the United States.

Over the next few years, I included the Krampus in my holiday tradition in small ways and only in its US "Christmas Devil" iteration. I bought a Krampus ornament for our Christmas tree and finally read the Brom novel. I was thrilled to see the creature featured on television shows like NBC's *Grimm* and Fox's *American Dad*.³ In preparation for applying for graduate programs I took German classes where the instructor showed a YouTube video of an urban Krampusläufe in Graz, Austria. I was awed by the costumes, pyrotechnics, and general atmosphere of chaos. This began my exposure to how the Krampus fit into traditional practice in its larger context and took me to other digital spaces where images of the Austrian events were available. I would eventually find out by word-of-mouth that people in Portland were participating in an annual processional event. Investigating the Portland Krampus Lauf online led me on a

² Monte Beauchamp, *Krampus: The Devil of Christmas*, (San Francisco: Last Gasp, 2010).; Brom, *Krampus: The Yule Lord*, (New York: Harper Voyager, 2012).

³ *Grimm*, 308, "Twelve Days of Krampus," directed by Tawnia McKiernan, aired December 13, 2013, on NBC.; *American Dad*, 908, "Minstrel Krampus," directed by Josue Cervantes, aired December 15, 2013, on FOX.

path that revealed similar events springing up all over the United States, and my research interest in emergent US Krampus events began. The topic initially seemed rather amorphous and obscure and a series of questions presented themselves. To answer them I had to disambiguate how the figure of the Krampus was represented and being used in the US in contrast to the cultural context of the Krampus in its original, traditional, festival material.

Krampusnacht is a winter festival event originating in the Alpen regions of Austria, southern Germany, and parts of Italy.⁴ Taking place on the eve of St. Nicholas' feast day, the seasonal celebration is a folk Catholic tradition featuring procession and public embodiment of the Krampus – an animalistic, demonic figure – through costuming and masking. This regional tradition is considered by many to be rooted in pre-Christian practices and references to its enactment can be found in documents dating as far back as the thirteenth century.⁵ In the early 2000s, images of the Krampus figure and contemporaneous documentation of the Alpen processions appeared on English language websites, drawing the interest of small groups in the United States. As of 2019, a cursory online search returns over forty local expressions inspired by *Krampusnacht* traditions in cities throughout the US. In fact, googling Krampus along with the name of any mid-to-large urban center is likely to hit on at least one event. The Krampus figure is also increasingly represented in mass culture treatments associated with the US winter holiday

⁴ Al Ridenour, *The Krampus and the Old, Dark Christmas: Roots and Rebirth of the Folkloric Devil*. (Port Townsend: Feral Books, 2016).

⁵ David Natko, "Ritual Rebellion and Social Inversion in Alpine Austria: Rethinking the 'Perchtenlauf' in its Relationship to the Carnavalesque." (master's thesis, Arizona State University, 2014).

landscape, appearing in films, television specials, comic books, and as manufactured material products oriented toward Christmas traditional praxis.

This thesis is driven by lines of inquiry primarily concerned with why the Krampus and its traditional material appears as it does (and when it does) in the US and the roles that cultural utility and meaning-making might play. I investigate in what ways the emergence of Krampus-themed celebrations and the proliferation of the figure in the US holiday landscape signify a shift in vernacular attitudes toward dominant culture constructions of ritual and festival opportunities in the United States. By considering the intentional activity of members of multilocal US Krampus (sub)cultures, alongside popular culture textual representations of the figure, this thesis will seek to reveal the significance of how the tradition and its symbols are being structured to communicate certain ideologies. Ultimately, I hope to answer the question of how the Krampus and its ritual material might provide ludic outlets for cultural opposition, social complaint, and recuperative traditional praxis in the heavily commodified (and mediated) sphere of holiday activity in late-capitalist society.

In order to contend with these inquiries, I have constructed a theoretical framework utilizing bodies of scholarship that address traditional activity, holidays, festival, ritual, and carnival, as units of cultural praxis. The primary concept that will scaffold this work is largely informed by folklorist Simon J. Bronner's practice oriented approach to the analysis of tradition.⁶ As suggested above, the term *praxis* is central to identifying how US Krampus event participants and enthusiasts are framing variable traditional activity to structure new holiday enactments as alternative seasonal

⁶ Simon J. Bronner, "Practice Theory in Folklore and Folklife Studies." *Folklore* 123, no. 1 (2012).

observances. In *Explaining Traditions*, Bronner defines praxis as: "...symbolic modes of activity in the conduct of life..."⁷ *Symbolic* is the keyword in Bronner's conception of praxis as it pertains to traditional enactments. If traditional practices focus on the repeatability and alterability of socially constructed activities, then praxis refers to the metaphorical power actors generate inside and around traditional action regardless of practical outcomes. Praxis, in this sense, obliterates the binary between thought and action and links activity to cognition in ways that performance theorists often ignore.

This thesis employs a practice theory approach to folklore to investigate how Krampus event participants and enthusiasts in the United States are repositioning traditional activity to construct and communicate new sets of cultural concerns. To frame this movement toward a practice orientation, it is important to acknowledge the ubiquity of performance theory in American folkloristics and to address the benefits and limitations inherent to considerations of expressive material as performance.

As Barre Toelken writes in *The Dynamics of Folklore*, performance theory, "...seizes on *performance* as the primary grouping of phenomenon to be studied. Here the individual performer or creator of traditional artifacts is viewed as operating in and *for* an audience made up of the group of people whose tastes and responses condition – and occasion – the performance."⁸ Another way to describe the performance oriented view of folkloric materials relies on the idea of "folklore as event."⁹ This conception is useful in that it activates the expressive material with attention toward situational and

⁷ Simon J. Bronner, *Explaining Tradition* (Lexington: University of Kentucky UP, 2011), 11.

⁸ Barre Toelken, *The Dynamics of Folklore*, (Logan: Utah State UP, 1996), 5.

⁹ Robert A. Georges and Michael Owen Jones, *Folkloristics: An Introduction*, (Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1995), 288-299.

interactional contexts and interrupts the strictly textual readings of earlier folkloristic endeavors. The limitations presented by performance theory, however, might be best exemplified by Richard Bauman's assertions that performance (as a unit of inquiry) refers to specially framed events characterized by intentionally rarified modes of communication.¹⁰ Bronner clarifies how this primary tenet of performance theory is applied in folklore studies: "...folklore is identified as aesthetically marked events (rather than textual items) situated in an observable, specific frame or stage conducive to artistic communication (usually small groups and settings set apart from everyday life)..."¹¹ Certainly, the performance framework applies to the on-the-ground Krampus events that occur in cities across the United States and chapter three of this work engages with performance analysis to a degree. That said, this thesis situates performance as unit of practice in order to go beyond the borders implied by considerations of *stage*, *setting*, and *audience*. If the performance lens focuses on event and action, the practice lens provides an analytical depth-of-field that reveals constructed views of collective, traditional activity.

In "Practice Theory in Folklore and Folklife Studies," Bronner sets out to explore the two important theoretical keywords that emerged as particular approaches to folkloristics and ethnology around the 1960s.¹² For American folklorists, performance theory developed as a lens for analyzing expressive communication beyond strictly textual consideration. Meanwhile, ethnologists and folklorists in Europe were employing

¹⁰ Richard Bauman, "Performance," in *Folklore, Cultural Performance, and Popular entertainments*, ed. Richard Bauman, (New York: Oxford UP, 1992), 41-49.

¹¹ Simon J. Bronner, "Practice Theory in Folklore and Folklife Studies." *Folklore* 123, no. 1 (2012): 30.

¹² *Ibid*, 23-47.

practice theory to address "...cognitive and cultural rationales underlying repeated, variable behavior and framed activities."¹³ Bronner tracks the development of both perspectives from early academic adoption to their contemporary iterations, goals, and uses, presenting practice theory as a more comprehensive analytic mode for the study of folklore today.

Bronner acknowledges that neither US performance leanings nor European practice thinking should be cast as monolithic. In any individual piece of research, theories and methodologies from either perspective are differently arranged and employed. That said, the theories can be generalized in their subjective and objective approaches in important ways. Performance studies focuses on emergence, casting specialized *event* space as the primary field of inquiry and the bodily performer and audience as the primary units of analysis. Bronner offers a critique of this approach, suggesting that these micro-considerations focused solely on *situated events* and *enactments* halt the designation of expressive material at *verbal art* and "...[imply] that every event is unique and operates under its own unrepeatable conditions."¹⁴ How does this effect the discipline's approach to tradition, variation, and grounded everyday activity? What room does it leave for historical and sociocultural inquiry? For Bronner, advocating for practice theory orientations in American folklore studies addresses those questions (among others) by expanding opportunities for etic analysis without sacrificing important notions like reflexivity and activity-over-text approaches.

¹³ Ibid, 23.

¹⁴ Ibid, 29.

Bronner also underscores the efficacy of practice thinking for framing investigations of folklore and folklife. Expanding on interventions in practice theory by Pierre Bourdieu and Anthony Giddens in the later twentieth century, and following contemporary scholar Theodore Schatzki, Bronner links practice to folklore by providing a comprehensive definition of the practice lens: “Practice theory is about the theory of repetitive, variable action, and the kind of practice in need of evaluation to explain traditionalized, embodied behavior...”¹⁵ Here the connections between practice and folkloristics begin to take shape. Notably, this condensed explanation of a practice theorist’s concerns not only overlaps with many of the myriad attempts at defining folklore within the discipline, but it also leaves considerable space for expanding the analysis of individual performance into the broader realm of collective meaning making and social construction processes essential to the concept of tradition as praxis. As Bronner proposes:

The folkloristic contribution to, or precedent of, practice theory... is to view tradition as a kind of shapeable, contestable norm, within which social agency can be enacted... If orientation toward performance is open to criticism for stopping assessment of verbal art at the expression of behavior, organization of study around practice invites a depth of psychology of cognitive sources and motivations for a broader range of repeatable actions and processes we recognize as traditions.¹⁶

The primary intervention that Bronner’s practice-oriented approach provides for this thesis involves an opportunity to engage in a degree of etic analysis that is often absent from the scant scholarly treatments of tradition and holiday observances. As Bronner puts it, “Tradition is enacted for good reason, often outside the awareness of

¹⁵ Ibid, 31.

¹⁶ Ibid, 40

participants in cultural activities, as strategies of maintaining social identities and connections, communicating symbols and values to themselves and others, projecting and attempting to resolve their identities and conflicts.”¹⁷ In his 2016 article, “Toward a Definition of Folklore in Practice,” Bronner foregrounds group meaning making – as well as the role of the individual – in embodying tradition while providing the important reminder that folk activity is repeatable *and* variable, simultaneously.¹⁸ Leaning into the practice orientation as a central tenet of my framework allows me to transition from event-specific social interaction as a primary analytical unit to the praxic activity that US Krampus participants engage in. This way of thinking provides the opportunity to investigate how expressive enactments (both ephemeral and material) constitute and are constituted by organizations of culture in senses both emergent and over time. Framing tradition as praxis will reveal what the emerging transformation of this traditional material in the US today may express for Krampus culture participants.

Folklorist and festival scholar Jack Santino’s discussions of US holiday celebrations similarly contribute to the overall perspective that this investigation of American Krampus activities assumes. Like Bronner’s culturally constructive view of the processes of tradition, Santino recognizes that holiday-related activities and symbols are inherently variable in response to ever-shifting concerns of cultural utility. In *All Around the Year*, Santino explains how holiday observances continue to act as revealing units of cognitive activity:

...although we have a tendency to view these customs as quaint, people celebrate these holidays very vigorously today, in that sense, they are very

¹⁷ Bronner, *Explaining Tradition*, 10.

¹⁸ Simon J. Bronner, “Toward a Definition of Folklore in Practice.” In *Cultural Analysis* 15, no. 1 (2016): 6-27.

much a part of contemporary life. To investigate holidays fully and correctly... we need to think of them as dynamic processes of human behavior and look at the ways people create them by regularly recreating traditional symbols and actions... Holidays permeate our culture... If they did not continue to be meaningful, holidays would die.¹⁹

In his 1996 book, *New Old-Fashioned Ways: Holidays and Popular Culture*, Santino investigates how holiday traditions in the US inform – and are informed by – mass culture products.²⁰ Acknowledging these relationships goes a long way in framing Krampus activity in the United States as a new tradition emerging in a time and place of heavy mass mediation. He uses examples of contemporary narrative media as an entryway into these processes. The examples he provides, though dated, show how popular media leverages holidays thematically and calendrically. Subsequently, those uses reflect on popular conceptions of holiday motifs and affect how people interpret their traditions and customs. Santino identifies a unique cultural perspective on holidays in the United States, noting that our celebrations are heavily commodified because we ourselves, and our culture, are heavily commodified. As he explains, “We cannot live in a money-based, profit-driven society and expect our major ritual occasions not to reflect that society.”²¹ This is not necessarily a tragedy or perversion of festival tradition, but an obvious transition given the heavily mediated culture in which people in the United States operate. This perspective provides a good starting point from which to examine how the recent emergence of Krampus related celebrations throughout the US may signify an oppositional response to commodified holiday material. It will also be useful in parsing how the introduction of the Krampus figure into the mass culture holiday

¹⁹ Jack Santino, *All Around the Year*, (Chicago: University of Illinois, 1994), xvi-xvii.

²⁰ Santino, *New Old-Fashioned Ways*.

²¹ *Ibid*, 4-5

milieu – via television, film, and other media – interacts with those ideas and influences transmission and practice in the US.

Santino’s concept of the *ritualesque/carnivalesque* spectrum also informs this work. His article “The Carnivalesque and the Ritualesque” provides an important framework for exploring the various levels of opposition that Krampus themed subgroups may, or may not, communicate through their new traditional practices.²² He introduces the term *ritualesque* to describe the oppositional aspects of expressive culture, arguing that the transformative intention particular to certain public events positions them on a spectrum from the *ritualesque* to the *carnivalesque* in relation to the emphasis placed on either social change or ludic festivity. In his introduction to *Public Performances: Studies in the Carnivalesque and Ritualesque*, Santino acknowledges the ambiguity inherent in many classifications of ritual and festival:

Often the terms are used interchangeably. In part this is due to the porous, shifting nature of the events themselves, heavily dependent on context and intended purpose ... By approaching performance events as *carnivalesque* and *ritualesque*, we are able to understand the multiple modes of communication; the simultaneity of joy and anger, of politics and fun; and how “fun” in some contexts equals protest.²³

In much scholarship, festival is sometimes considered in relation to ritual and sometimes presented as something wholly separate. The key to distinguishing ritual from festival has historically been cast as being specific to the former’s transformative processes: ritual is the stuff of cultural necessity and meaningful change in contrast to the ludic and expressive “safety valve” of festival enactment. Santino’s intervention turns these

²² Jack Santino, “The Carnivalesque and the Ritualesque.” *Journal of American Folklore* 124, no. 491 (2011): 61-73.

²³ *Ibid*, 3.

definitions in upon themselves, making space for ludic communications of opposition in overt and covert ways. Contemporarily, these phenomena are dynamic and public events often unfold on a spectrum that acts as a bridge between world-changing ritual intension and the Bakhtinian carnival license. Applying Edith and Victor Turner's theories of ritual structure, and the concept of liminoid activity to these on-the-ground performances will further address how concerns of ritual opportunity in the United States affect the ways such events may be positioned on Santino's ritualesque/carnivalesque spectrum.²⁴ These concepts provide an analytical space for determining to what degree Krampus culture participants cast their activities as strictly ludic or overtly in line with oppositional ideologies, and allow for an etic consideration of what US Krampus event praxis tacitly expresses.

While Santino's and Bronner's scholarship on the important cultural processes that traditional enactments and holiday activities represent provide the overarching framework for the discussion of US Krampus culture to follow, this thesis will engage with theories that address subculture theory, online vernacular networks, incorporation/excorporation dynamics, and the relationship of folklore to mass culture. This work presents a great deal of original research that attempts to situate Krampus-related praxis in the United States throughout a range of cultural spaces. I hesitate to acknowledge these as separate fields because the practice theory approach assumes a single field of culture in which vernacular, mass, and official interests overlap. That said,

²⁴ Edith and Victor Turner, "Religious Celebrations." In *Celebration: Studies in Festivity and Ritual*, ed. Victor Turner, (Washington, DC: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1984), 201-206; Victor Turner, "Liminal and Liminoid in Play, Flow, and Ritual: An Essay in Comparative Symbology." *Rice Institute Pamphlet - Rice University Studies* 60, no. 3 (1974): 53 – 92.

the nature of the Krampus's emergence in the United States finds participant activity differently expressed across different sites of communication. Given the transformation of this tradition over space and time, oscillations of diachronic and synchronic consideration proves necessary. The following chapters are structured to represent these complexities.

Chapter two presents the European origins and variants that US Krampus culture participants identify as the sources of their seasonal embodiments of the figure and foreshadows how constructions of traditionality play into these activities. References to the various processional, mid-winter beast masquerades of Europe proved ubiquitous in my fieldwork with US Krampus event participants, signaling the need for an entire chapter addressing not only the variants, but the cultural history of the Krampus itself. With few scholarly sources to draw from, writer and Los Angeles Krampus event organizer Al Ridenour's 2016 book, *Krampus and the Old, Dark Christmas: Roots and Rebirth of the Folkloric Devil*, was invaluable for initiating further research into the topic.²⁵ Charles Fréger's photo essay, *Wilder Mann: The Image of the Savage*, a book referenced by many participants in this research, also acted as an early signpost for further discovery. The chapter includes reviews of scholarly literature that positions a selection of these European, masked processions as contemporary, socially important enactments for the endogenous communities that annually enact them. The purpose of chapter two is to provide some context for the repeated but altered treatments of Krampus events and traditional material that later chapters reveal.

²⁵ Ridenour, *The Krampus*.

In chapter three, various Krampus-themed events in US cities are situated and explored. The Turners' model of ritual structure is applied to the Portland, Oregon procession (Krampus Lauf PDX) to identify to what degree these kinds of events in the United States reflect definitions of *separation*, *liminality*, and *reincorporation*. The ways ritual processes such as *communitas* and *ludic recombination* might be employed by participants in these events is also considered.²⁶ Grounding this exploration are interviews with the Krampus Lauf PDX organizer, Facebook event page interactions, and my own experiences leading up to and during the 2018 procession. These investigations into ritual opportunity and liminal/liminoid expression set the stage for further analysis regarding the carnivalesque elements of US Krampus events and the possibility of performed oppositional strategies that align with Santino's idea of the ritualesque. Here, more complex processes of US Krampus observances are revealed through the cultural associations expressed by other event organizers and participants. A praxis of performance emerges, allowing for an easy transition to how US Krampus culture is beginning to be structured by participants on a larger scale.

The fourth chapter of this work establishes how Krampus-related praxis in the US works to develop shared cultural constructions for participants despite the widespread nature of discrete, localized events. I rely on Simon Bronner's and Zygmunt Bauman's concept of culture-creation as a structuring enterprise to address three keywords that commonly arise when group participants discuss their associations with Krampus activities.²⁷ The coding of recorded interviews and other fieldwork materials reveal that

²⁶ Edith and Victor Turner, "Religious Celebrations".

²⁷ Bronner, *Explaining Tradition*; Zygmunt Bauman, *Culture as Praxis*, (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul), 1973.

metaphorical constructions of traditionality, creativity, and alternativity are consistently referenced suggesting the creation of a shared ethos and implicitly countercultural message specific to American Krampus culture. The second part of chapter four employs Paul Hodkinson's "indicators of subculture" to determine to what degree these cultural structures result in the formation of a subculture and how this designation might influence continued acts of structuration.²⁸ Appropriately, Dick Hebdige's commentary on the lifespan of subcultural expression in the face of dominant culture mediation and incorporation raises questions about what massified representations of the Krampus might mean for the nascent culture emerging around the figure in the United States.²⁹

Finally, in chapter five, the US Krampus culture's complex relationship with mediated spaces is explored. Methodologies leveraging the internet as archive and active participation in social media groups reveal how online Krampus related activities both boost the construction of shared, subcultural ideologies and contribute to the semiotic flattening of the figure and its associated traditional material. Bronner's positioning of participatory digital activity as processes occurring in the "folk network" provides a field of analysis for examples of early Krampus event organizational efforts on Facebook, giving way to what Lynne S. McNeill refers to as the multilocality of identity that digital culture initiates.³⁰ Robert Glen Howard's notion of network hybridity further complicates these processes and acknowledges that institutional interests access and

²⁸ Paul Hodkinson, "Four Indicators of (Sub)Cultural Substance" in *Goth: Identity, Style and Subculture*, (New York: Berg, 2002), 29-33.

²⁹ Dick Hebdige, "Subculture," in *Popular Culture: A Reader*, ed. Raiford Guins and Omayara Zaragoza Cruz, (London: Sage Publications, 2015), 355-371.

³⁰ Bronner, *Explaining Traditions*; Lynne S. McNeill, "Real Virtuality: Enhancing Locality by Enacting Small World Theory." In *Folk Culture in the Digital Age* ed. Trevor J. Blank, (Logan: Utah State University Press, 2012) 85-97.

activate the vernacular digital toward its own ends.³¹ As internet memes and references to massified images of an Americanized Krampus proliferate online, nuanced structures are concentrated into a shorthand of opposition: the Anti-Santa. Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett's concept of ethnographic fragmentation shows that processes such as these have pre-digital antecedents specific to mass mediated transmission.³² Analyzing more recent, US Krampus-related pop culture products through the lens of Jeffery A. Tolbert and Michael Dylan Foster's *folkloresque* – mass media's perception and presentation of folk material – alongside Jack Santino's observations of the inseparability of holiday praxis and mass culture in the United States suggest new forms of tradition bearing in a heavily mediated society.³³ Following US Krampus traditional praxis across these various sites of culture ultimately unveils a cyclical process of practice, consumption, production, and meaning-making that speaks to the probable longevity of the Krampus as a new winter holiday figure in the United States.

³¹ Robert Glenn Howard, "Introduction: Why Digital Network Hybridity Is the New Normal (Hey! Check This Stuff Out)," *Journal of American Folklore* 128, no. 509 (2015): 247-259.

³² Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, *Destination Culture: Tourism, Museums, and Heritage*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998).

³³ Michael Dylan Foster, "The Challenge of the Folkloresque." In *The Folkloresque: Reframing Folklore in a Popular Culture World*, ed. Michael Dylan Foster and Jeffrey A. Tolbert, (Logan: Utah State University Press, 2016), 3-33.; Santino, *New Old-Fashioned Ways*.

CHAPTER II

TRACKING THE KRAMPUS: HISTORY AND PRACTICE

The emergent US Krampus culture transforming Christmas perfectly illustrates Bronner's practice oriented definition of folklore as "traditional knowledge put into, and drawing from, practice."³⁴ In this age of the hyper-mediated condition it seems appropriate that the loop of praxis represented here occurs through overt processes of ritual and semiotic bricolage. Understanding how contemporary enactment and consumption of the Krampus could represent post-modern, late-capitalist ludic recombination cast as an intertext of (re)appropriated traditional material requires some historical contextualization with the zoomorphic beasts, winter spirits, and saints' companions of the European festival year's darker stretch.

Krampusnacht (Krampus Night) and similar European processional, festival events are based on vernacular religious forms and foreground regional enactments of folk belief, custom, and material lore. If, as Alan Dundes asserts, "[variation] is the very hallmark of folklore," European festival embodiments of midwinter beasts arguably represent a kind of folkloric exemplar.³⁵ Similar processional celebrations focused on therianthropic masquerade can be found in Sardinia in the form of the shaggy, black masked *Mamuthones*; in Bulgaria as the *Kukeri*; and as the lumbering tree-like *Sauvages* of Switzerland. These are just a few examples of the many wild-thing/human hybrids that parade through European village centers cracking whips and ringing bells on

³⁴ Bronner, "Toward a Definition of Folklore", 22.

³⁵ Alan Dundes, *Holy Writ as Oral Lit: The Bible as Folklore*, (New York: Rowman & Littlefield, 1999), 4.

primarily Catholic feast days throughout the winter months. These festival performances have been characterized by scholars and participants as syncretisms of potentially apotropaic rituals designed to cleanse communities and mitigate the harshness of the winter season.³⁶

In a broad sense, these various regional practices include traditional masking activities calendrically positioned from the beginning of December extending into the Pre-Lenten period (January 18 through March 9), with a few occurring around the Autumnal Equinox (September 21). Conventional enactments often focus on animal/human hybridity and/or associations with wild forces, suggesting a form of culturally useful inversion achieved through an admixture of Bakhtinian carnivalesque and publicly performed ludic recombination. The carnivalesque is represented by man-beast inversion, parody of normalized social action, masking, and representations of the grotesque body. Often the masking involved seems to work toward establishing a dichotomy that favors the carnal lower-body and transgressive license. Ludic recombination is achieved through a remixing of human and animal symbolism with an exaggeration of physical features, perhaps underscoring humanity's relationship with wild forces and unpredictable energies. Many attributes of these calendrical ritual enactments have been borrowed and recontextualized by grass roots groups in the US as part of their organization of and participation in *Krampus*-themed processional guising events. While the animalesque, demonic figure of Krampus and the increasing presence of Christmas imagery is sourced from traditional Austrian *Krampusnacht* performances,

³⁶ Monica Iorio and Geoffrey Wall. "Beyond the masks: continuity and change in a Sardinian rite." In *Rituals and Traditional Events in the Modern World*, ed. Jennifer Laing and Warwick Frost, (London: Routledge, 2015), 135.

fieldwork reveals that many of these groups are including other European midwinter ritual figures in their processions.

According to the founder of Portland, Oregon's Krampus run, "Krampus is a kind of gateway drug into the world of seasonal procession."³⁷ Images from Philadelphia's Parade of Spirits – formally Krampuslauf Philadelphia – and the Los Angeles Krampus events include masqueraders embodying Romanian *Capra*, *Wüeschten Silvesterklausen* from Switzerland, and the Germanic witch-spirit *Frau Perchta*. Figures like Frau Perchta and her Icelandic counterpart *Gryla* also materialize alongside the Krampus in a seasonal, mass-media forms produced in the US. This chapter will set the stage for later analysis of motivations and interpretations behind the ritual and semiotic bricolage generated by an emergent American Krampus culture. A brief exploration of a selection of these oicotypical practices, observances, and ritual figures provides a scaffold for one of the main questions this thesis will address: Why are these wintertime European traditions – often popularly cast as archaic pagan survivals – suddenly being embraced and altered by groups of people in the United States? Are they a way to reshape the Christmas holiday landscape through variable, vernacular practice?

European Midwinter Beasts

Charles Fréger's 2012 photo essay book *Wilder Mann: The Image of the Savage* features over 150 plates capturing beast masquerade suits and masks from all over Europe.³⁸ Fréger's contribution to the semiotic flattening of these traditionally performed

³⁷ Arun Ragan, interview by Kirk A. Peterson, February 2017, transcript.

³⁸ Charles Fréger, *Wilder Mann: The Image of the Savage* (Manchester: Dewi Lewis, 2012).

figures exemplifies processes of ethnographic fragmentation that are further discussed in chapter five, but his collection of images provides a useful – if limited – point of discovery for the wide range of midwinter monster embodiments that are increasingly being included in US Krampus celebrations, likely as a result of outsider confluences of symbolic and ritual conventions. Fréger's book features a whimsically illustrated index – searchable by small black and white graphics of each figure in comic book style – that identifies each beast and provides annual dates of performance. Compiled by the Musée international du Carnaval et du Masque in Binche, Belgium, these short descriptions of each character/creature/activity include very brief ethnographic details regarding ritual utility and (supposedly) esoteric constructions.

Fréger's work includes a dizzying array of European beast embodiments from a wide range of regional traditions. Animal/human hybridity features heavily but many plant matter disguises are documented, including the pine bow covered *Sauvages* of Jura, Switzerland's pre-Shrovetide full moon procession and Scotland's spiny *Burrryman*. Many of the suits embrace animal hybridity to such a degree that the represented figures defy any living zoomorphic referent, instead evoking images of ominous spirits, mythical monsters, or demons. The feathered *Survakari* of Bulgaria's Pernik region are associated with a propitiatory procession that takes place annually on January 13. Ritual participants wear masks featuring elaborate, towering crown structures that vary in shape from village to village. The *Babugeri*, another type of Bulgarian beast, are embodied by performers in suits entirely covered in long animal fur, topped with monolithic, featureless heads. Other notable examples of fantastic processional European monstrosities include South Tyrol, Italy's *Schnappviecher*, depicted as a furred, bipedal

gaping maw with impossible teeth that terrifies carnival goers during the procession of *Egetmann* on Shrove Tuesday; the grinning, goblinessque *Tschägättä* of Löschental, Switzerland; and the leather-headed *Ours* of Arles-sur-Tech, France whose eyeless face and sharp-toothed grin somehow represents a legendary bear during ritual plays that are performed over three Sundays every February.

Moving closer to the Krampus in its native habitat, the first plate in *Wilder Man* features the lichen covered *Wilder* of Telfs, Austria. This full-body disguise is associated with the *Schleicherlaufen*, a carnival that takes place every four or five years. The *Wilder* wears an impressively mustachioed, long nosed mask of carved wood with large white eyes. The image is easily comparable to the figure of the Basket Carrier, or *Korbletrager*, a mainstay figure associated with Krampusnacht house visits. The *Perchten* of Werfen and Bad Mitterndorf's Krampus troupe are represented in the immediately following plates. The book's back matter rightfully conflates these ritual beasts. Traditional Austrian participants in *Krampusläufe* see them as essentially the same, identified as *Perchten* when they appear at Epiphany and as *Krampuses* on St. Nicholas Eve. In fact, those that assert that certain variations in suit conventions (number of horns, style of mask, etc.) delineate a Krampus from a *Perchten* are pegged as underinformed outsiders by some village participants.³⁹

Goat disguises are heavily represented throughout Freger's collection. Some are relatively straight forward such as the *Capra* of the Romanian New Year or the *Nuuttipukki* masqueraders connected to the Day of Knut (January 13) in Finland. Other examples, not unlike Krampus, rely more heavily on human hybridity and are

³⁹ Ridenour, *The Krampus*.

subsequently identified as devils. These figures include the Czech *Cert* and the *Teufel* of Tauplitz, Austria. These disguises are both explicitly associated with St. Nicholas, fulfilling essentially the same function of the Krampus, introducing yet another level of variation surrounding these traditions: the “dark companions,” a stable of figures that will be addressed later in this chapter.⁴⁰ The devils of Hungary are known as *Busó* and come out at Shrovetide. The masks are traditionally painted with animal blood and a *Busó* costume is burned on the night of Mardi Gras in Baranya to drive away winter. Upright horned disguises are among the most ubiquitous types collected in Fréger’s work and these ritual characters are performed in a variety of processions, in many regions, and appear throughout the festival year.

Masking Matters

These European varieties of costumed festival processions have garnered little academic attention from professional folklorists, anthropologists, or cultural studies scholars operating in the contemporary US. Despite related regional events such as Austria’s Bad Gastein *Perchtenlauf* being added to the UNESCO list of Intangible Cultural Heritage (in this case, as recently as 2011), very little exploration of the endogenic social dynamics and cultural utility of these unique festival observances finds its way through to academic publication. Speculating on the reasons behind this dearth of analysis may be of little use, but popular conceptions of certain beast masking traditions as ancient, pagan survivals and anxieties surrounding Eurocentric scholarship may be to blame.

⁴⁰ Ibid.

In her 1998 article for the *Journal of American Folklore*, Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett calls out a problematic in folkloristics that she refers to as the “poetics of disappearance” to identify issues that arise around disciplinary foundations of subject rooted in a mythic construction of the long, long ago:⁴¹

...the peculiar temporality of folklore as a disciplinary subject, whether coded in the terminology of survival, archaism, antiquity, and tradition, or in the definition of folkloristics as a historical science, has contributed to the discipline's inability to imagine a truly contemporary, as opposed to contemporaneous, subject... Folklore is by many (though not all) definitions out of step with the time and context in which it is found.⁴²

Kirshenblatt-Gimblett's position warrants reflection for anyone engaging in folkloristic research today. Valorizing concepts of survival and archaism at least implicitly reawakens legacies of cultural evolution, a long-stalking bugbear in the history of disciplinary canon that threatens any progress professional folklorists make toward moving conceptions of folk material away from counter-normative descriptors and associations with backward thinking or falsehood. American folkloristics' embrace of performance theory addresses these concerns. Performance oriented pursuits work to anchor topics of study in the present by focusing on the *event* as a primary unit of analysis. Much is gained from the critical consideration of disciplinary terminology and where it positions the work one does in time and space.

That said, it is worth being aware of what might be missed as American folkloristics maintains its defensive stance. Kirshenblatt-Gimblett's inclusion of the keyword *tradition* in her list of terms that contribute to the *poetics of disappearance*

⁴¹ Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, “Folklore’s Crisis,” *Journal of American Folklore* 111, no. 441 (1998): 302.

⁴² *Ibid.*, 283.

deserves pushback. It contributes to wrong-minded conceptions of tradition as unchanging, unintentional, and transmitted by rote. The greater consequences of this kind of thinking presents a threat to an entire field of cultural scholarship, scholarship that trained folklorists are particularly well suited to explore. Festival and holiday traditions carry incredible emic value for those that practice them and are often representative of sociocultural processes that can only ever be described as contemporary.

In the case of the winter zoomorphic masking processions addressed in this chapter, questions of origin only matter in terms of how participants and their communities make meaning from them. This is almost universally the case with calendrical holiday material. As folklorist Jeana Jorgenson points out:

Many holidays have their roots in ancient festivals, whether devoted to the worship of deities or the turning of the seasons (like solstices). However, ...that's not always relevant to why and how holidays are celebrated today. If you've got the data to make assertions about the past, cool; if not, focus on the present.⁴³

The quote addresses likely impediments to the scholarship of holiday and festival tradition in the United States today. There is a sense of practice theory in Jorgenson's statement that could ameliorate whatever negative connotations that have emerged around this subject. Study of tradition is not (or should not be) situated entirely in the past, it is not frivolous, and it is culturally and socially important. The practice theory lens – primed to widen and tighten in diachronic and synchronic analytical movements – allows for a view of tradition as dynamic and intentionally altered over time based on the needs of those who enact and transmit it.

⁴³ Jeana Jorgenson, “#FolkloreThursday: Holiday”, *Foxy Folklorist: Folklore, Culture, Sex* (blog), October 27, 2016, www.patheos.com/blogs/foxyfolklorist/folklorethursday-holiday/.

In 2016, cultural anthropologists Matthäus Rest and Gerti Seiser published their edited volume *Wild und schön: der Krampus im Salzburger Land*. Translated as *Wild and Beautiful: The Krampus in Salzburg*, this collection contains seventeen ethnographic essays that, “[present] Krampus running as a contradictory global youth culture within which tradition, innovation, commercialization, violence, and eroticism interact.”⁴⁴ Sadly, an English translation of Rest’s and Seiser’s one-of-a-kind look at the dynamics underlying Krampus events in Austria is yet to be published. To underscore how nuanced cultural processes inform (and are informed by) these kinds of traditional activities, addressing academic work on seemingly related festival practices is in order.

Mamuthones, Issohadores, Survarakari, and Kukeri

The following section represents examples of close, scholarly engagement with two examples of midwinter beast, ritual masquerade. Cultural heritage scholar Monica Iorio’s and tourism specialist Geoffrey Wall’s treatment of the San Antonio Day festival in the Sardinian village of Mamoida will reveal how issues of esoteric, social cohesion interact with increasing outsider interest perpetuated by the rise of ethnotourism. In anthropologist Gerald W. Creed’s discussion of examples of Bulgarian mumming, festival praxis unfurls as a living map that tracks local constructions of community.

⁴⁴ Matthäus Rest and Gerti Seiser, *Wild und schön: der Krampus im Salzburger Land*. Münster: LIT Verlag, 2016.

Mamoiada, Sardinia

The Mamuthones of the village of Mamoiada wear carved black masks with exaggerated features including prominent oversized, hooked noses, protruding cheekbones and heavy brows. Their bodies are covered in black or dark brown calf-length sheepskin tunics, slung over dark long-sleeved shirts and pants. They cover their heads with black caps and dark handkerchiefs. The Mamuthones disguise is completed by a rig of multiple large, oblong bells mounted on the ritual performer's back.⁴⁵ The dark and distinctive Mamuthones are an amalgamation of death imagery and the animalesque. These shadowy, therianthrope figures are accompanied along the route by the Issohadores. The Issohadores contrast their beast-like partners in white masks and white pants. They wear red jackets with bell-adorned bandoliers and ornamental scarves tied around their waists. Arguably the most important ceremonial feature of the Issohadores is the lasso, which they use to wrangle women observing the performance. Notably, this lassoing was also historically aimed at high ranking village officials suggesting a carnivalesque inversion at the root of the tradition. The entire procession is led by a single "chief" Issohadore.⁴⁶

As with many of the European beast masquerade customs, the exact origins of Mamoiada's San Antonio Day ritual are a matter of emic interpretation and etic speculation. In their article on the ritual event, Iorio and Wall present multiple possibilities posited by villagers and foreign scholars. Theories developed by scholars regarding the origins of the event vary. It has been suggested that the festival

⁴⁵ Fréger, *Wilder Mann*, 113.

⁴⁶ Iorio and Wall, 128.

commemorates a historical Sardinian victory over Muslim assailants. Others have interpreted the event as an enactment of self-inversion invented by the villagers. The presence of the Mamuthones has been attributed to the Sardinian ritual of *imbovament* – the ritual reduction of man into animal.⁴⁷ This theory suggests that the beastly masqueraders are meant to enact “... the exorcism of the man-beast relation through ironic beast-man inversion.”⁴⁸ This assumption is based on the village’s dependence on sheep herding for survival. Still another possibility is that the ritual originates with the native *Nuraghe* culture and represents a prosperity rite. Current village residents still identify the function of the Mamuthones ringing bells as apotropaic in nature. They describe the procession as not only a ritual of purification but also a celebration of life’s cyclical quality. The dark Mamuthones represent death and the light Issohadores are symbols of birth.⁴⁹ The internal multiplicities of meaning associated with these ritual figures is significant. The exact origins of Mamuthones/Issohadores masking may be lost to time, but Mamoiada’s yearly event illustrates instances of ritual continuation and innovation within an historically isolated community.

The danced procession of the Mamuthones and Issohadores marks the feast of St. Antonio, January 16, the most important day of the village’s festival year. Multiple bonfires are constructed in predetermined spaces throughout the village’s irregular system of narrow streets. After a community mass dedicated to St. Antonio, Mamoiada’s priest lights the first bonfire, signaling that the other fires can be stoked. The ritual performers – all men – enact the procession, blessing each blaze and accepting gifts of

⁴⁷ Ibid, 132-133.

⁴⁸ Ibid, 133.

⁴⁹ Ibid, 133.

wine and traditional deserts before moving on to the next conflagration. The pace and rhythmic gait of the maskers is set by the lead Issohadore and intended to optimize the effect of the Mamuthones sixty pounds of clanging bells. The lesser Issohadores whip their lassos in upward sweeps as the group makes its way through the village streets. This procession lasts all night as every bonfire is visited and maskers stop to interact with village families.⁵⁰ Iorio and Wall describe the first night of the event:

The first night of festivities is predominantly for local people and very few outsiders attend the event. It is an occasion to renew and reinforce social relationships. People gather around the fires, talking, singing, occasionally dancing, eating snacks and drinking red wine. Participants walk from fire to fire where they are greeted with more conversation and more red wine. This involves people of a wide variety of ages and both genders...⁵¹

The local, insular enactment of this ritual on the first night of the carnival is juxtaposed by the character of the village event on the following day. On January 17, the community of Mamoiada presents the festival – and itself – for the spectacle pleasure of outside visitors.

On the second day of the feast of San Antonio, people from surrounding Sardinian villages join large numbers of foreign tourists to view a reenactment of the ritual procession. Starting early in the day, outside festival goers gather in anticipation of the arrival of the Mamuthones and Issohadores. In 2013, approximately 2,000 non-village residents were in attendance according to an estimate provided by the head of the Mamoiada cultural district.⁵² The crowds collect throughout the day to stake claims to optimal viewing and photo-snapping positions, competing with a considerable media

⁵⁰ Ibid, 131.

⁵¹ Ibid, 131.

⁵² Ibid, 131.

presence. When the Issohadores and Mamuthones emerge, people form chaotic lines for the opportunity to follow one of the two contingents of ritual maskers. One group completes its procession through the upper village while the other visits the bonfires in the lower village. The ritual events on the second night of the village carnival have all the flair of cultural performance. A 2016 YouTube video shows the otherworldly figures engaged in a full routine, the Mamuthones and Issohadores leaping around a blazing bonfire encircled by a crowd of delighted tourists lifting their devices to record every minute.⁵³ The outside draw of the ritual's spectacle reenactment results in a singular economic opportunity for Mamoiada as visitors buy local food, purchase mask-related souvenirs, and visit the village's Museum of Mediterranean Masks.

In response to criticisms that their promotions favor commodity over authenticity, locals insist that the capital generated by outside tourism ensures the continuation of the ritual and benefits Mamoiada and the island of Sardinia. As the director of the Museum of Mediterranean Masks puts it, "The dance is still a propitiatory rite – in the past, it propitiated the good harvest, today it propitiates a good tourist season. To live, we need to work and the dance and the masks bring work to us, so it propitiates our lives and the prosperity of our village, exactly like it was in the past."⁵⁴ Here the esoteric innovation of ritual meaning allows a community to not only respond to exoteric interests, but to turn cultural tourism to their advantage. By holding the embodied material of their cultural product close they are able to offer its symbols as a means of exchange that ultimately poses no threat to internal processes of community reinforcement.

⁵³ Peppino Canneddu, *Mamuthones – Mamoiada – Sant'Antonio 2016*, Youtube Video, 04:34, February 16, 2016, <https://youtu.be/66RwkqAc9gY>.

⁵⁴ Iorio and Wall, 137-138.

Bulgaria

In his investigation of *Survakari* and *Kukeri* festival processions, cultural anthropologist Gerald Creed refers to these traditions as Bulgarian mumming, applying the term generically to refer to European winter masking rituals. His work specifically engages with *Survakari* guising which occurs on or around the turn of the New Year and *Kukeri* masking rituals historically associated with the Pre-Lenten period.⁵⁵ Both traditions share a varied historical trajectory that ostensibly begin as pre-Christian apotropaic, supernatural embodiments, a common emic conception of these kinds of traditions. During the period of early communist suppression, the continued enactments were a form of localized resistance before being recast as “national culture” in service to the socialist state. Contemporarily, the *Survakari* and *Kukeri* ritual events are primarily considered opportunities for entertainment. The rituals’ forms have changed over the last half-century in response to industrialization and state control. Strict calendar day observance has given way to approximate dates and the day-long activities have been compressed over short periods in response to work schedules and other responsibilities. In the past, the mummers were exclusively unmarried young men. Today middle-aged men, children, and women guise and participate as well.

Both rituals include several discrete categories of figure. The most striking are the masked, beast-like creatures represented by costumes of animal hides, horns, feathers, fabric, and entire bodies of taxidermized wildlife, including indigenous birds and foxes. The second figure type represents a bride and groom. The bride or virgin is cross-dressed

⁵⁵ Gerald Creed, “Constituted Through Conflict: Images of Community (and Nation) in Bulgarian Rural Ritual,” *American Anthropologist* 106, no. 1 (2004): 56-70.

and portrayed by a man. Other “wedding party” figures are sometimes present including the priest, in-laws, and godparents. This group is traditionally escorted by a drummer and other musicians. Third are the “gypsy” or “darkie” maskers, respectively depicted as Roma or Middle Eastern. Creed points out that this problematic depiction of an ethnic other is not considered politically insensitive to village participants. This is followed by a costumed pair, depicting either a Roma and a dancing bear or a camel driver and a camel. Burlesque figures such as bawdy cross-dressers, doctors, and nurses also appear and bandy about, independently miming lewd acts.⁵⁶ Creed acknowledges the carnivalesque quality of the overall event but contends that these rituals function beyond the realms of inversion. For the author, the actual process of village enactment includes instances of meta-ritual that navigate community conflict through performance.

These ritual events include the customary house visits common to European mumming traditions. Creed sees much of the imbedded layers of localized conflict negotiation play out during these these customary enactments. House visits involve participants entering the yards of village residences where they dance and cavort before calling the presiding family out to the yard. After blessing the residents with invocations of prosperity, the masked entourage may raid the house and throw domestic objects into the yard or start mock fights with the men of the family. This often includes a lot of pinching to “drive out the devil.” Once the expected action is complete the mummers are rewarded with prepared food, homemade alcoholic beverages, and raw agricultural product. Money is considered the highest offering and is given to the bride figure. The “gypsy” figure may then beg for additional funds but might be declined. This money is

⁵⁶ Ibid.

pooled to fund a communal banquet, contribute to ritual costs, or applied toward important village expenses. Creed sees this practice as a way to weed out the “stingy stranger,” considered a threat to collective village success.

Sometimes the performed “fights” associated with the house visit will escalate into actual altercations based on personal enmity. Mummers will often react badly when they visit houses with young men present, causing significant damage to homes, because the young man’s failure to participate in the masking is viewed as a slight. While the mummers parade through the village or proceed from house to house, men who are not mumming will attempt to “steal” the bride figure or mime sexual acts on the character. The other guising participants spend a lot of the time retrieving or protecting the bride and will even break windows and doors in the process.⁵⁷

Back to the Krampus

Krampus takes a variety of forms throughout the Alpine regions of Austria. The monstrous figure can be found as a single companion to the ecclesiastical St. Nicholas or multiplied into a beastly horde. While variations exist, all the common attributes are present in the Krampus of Bad Mitterndorf: a shaggy coat of animal skins covering the entire body; a vicious, wood-carved mask featuring exaggerated pointed teeth, large nose, and an impossible, grimacing face warped by curving lines; imposing animal horns; a belt festooned with melon-sized steel bells; and a punishing bundle of switches in hand.⁵⁸

Krampus’s grotesque animal hybridity is mirrored by the image of the Perchten. These

⁵⁷ Ibid.

⁵⁸ Fréger, 31.

embodied processional costumes associated with Austrian Epiphany (January 6) include many of the same attributes and given the regional overlap it is easy to conclude that the two ritual figures share an origin. While the ritual dress of these respective masqueraders is clearly related, the character of the events in which Krampus appears diverge significantly from those of the Perchten. On Epiphany, Perchten appear in two contrasting forms; *Schiachperchten* (ugly Perchten) feature as lower-body carnival opposites to the high-ranking ritual maskers known as *Schönperchten* (beautiful Perchten), who parade through towns with ornate crowns that tower above their heads. Early description of the Schiachperchten – made up of large groups of young men – suggest that they covered their heads not with hideous, artfully carved beast masks but cloth sacks with holes for eyes and mouth.⁵⁹ Recognizing the connections between early Perchtenläufe and Krampus’s current ritual presences reveals grounded context for parsing the contested history of the custom. This suggests that Krampus’s association with the ecclesiastical St. Nicholas may be a result of an eventually sanctioned syncretism of folk traditions and official Catholic doctrine. The Krampus’s wild nature allows him to instill the fear of punishment where St. Nicholas cannot. House visits are historically at the center of the Austrian Krampusnacht celebrations, during which Krampus troupes roam the countryside and stop at individual homes to alternately reward and threaten local children. The troupes consist of at least four Krampus masqueraders, a basket carrier, one or more angels, and a St. Nicholas. Only the angels are portrayed by women and are intended to provide children with a “comforting female presence.”⁶⁰ St.

⁵⁹ Natko, “Ritual Rebellion and Social Inversion in Alpine Austria.”

⁶⁰ Ridenour, 41.

Nicholas will test the children of the house, encouraging them to recite psalms and poems. Once they prove their piety, St. Nicholas provides them with small gifts of fruit or candy. After these happy events, Krampus takes his place in the foreground and frightens the children with threats of corporal punishment or worse. This element is employed to provide real incentive to maintain good behavior throughout the coming year. Over time, the house visits were deemphasized, and chaotic Krampus processions made up of costumed young men were brought to the fore. Eventually, these Krampusläufe proliferated from mountain villages to city centers throughout Austria and Germany before making their way to the United States in the early twenty-first century.

References to these carnival processions are scant before the eighteenth century. Some of the earliest documentation explicitly referencing the *Perchtenlauf* emerge from municipal efforts to outlaw the performance in Austrian towns as early as 1601. By the nineteenth century, accounts of complaints filed by church officials begin to emerge.⁶¹ Often assumed to be a survival of pre-Christian animism, Krampus-themed ritual events likely evolved from an ecclesiastical attempt to control the wild behavior of early Schiachperchten carnivalesque ritual action. While the true origins of Krampusläufen and related ritual events are notoriously hard to pin down, the animal-like demon's traditional casting as St. Nicholas's subservient punisher suggests active syncretic operations by the Catholic Church in Austria. Wherever the customary visits from this punishing figure are rooted, its association with St. Nicholas have aligned the Krampus with Christmas in Austria and beyond.

⁶¹ Natko.

Variation All the Way Down

The Krampus celebrations of Austria exhibit an array of variable, traditional practices. The creature's name even changes depending where it appears and the vernacular leanings of community participants. In regions in which Krampusnacht observances are considered by many as closest to their original character, the creature at the center of the festivities is rarely referred as the Krampus. Austrians often simply designate the costumed performer as a devil: *Teufel*, *Toifi*, or *Tuifl*, depending on dialect. In Southern Germany and around Salzburg it is called *Kramperl*. Early written references use *Klaubauf*, a name still used throughout Austria but particularly favored in East Tyrol.

Variation here occurs beyond preferences of beast nomenclature. The *Klaubauf* of East Tyrol represent a localized species of the Krampus, appearing without the horns, horsewhips, and switches customary to so many other ritual performances. These *Klaubauf* still function as threatening companions of St. Nicholas during processions and house visits, but other traditional activities in the region heavily foreground the creature's association with savagery and aggression. According to Ridenour, "...encounters with the creature in the East Tyrolian town of Matri are notoriously violent, so much so that the city discourages tourists from taking part in the celebrations and does not welcome news reports, video, and photography documenting the event."⁶² These celebrations feature public wrestling matches (*Rangell*) in which *Klaubauf* slam spectators to the ground and *Tischrucken* competitions where villagers vie with the *Klaubauf* in an intense game of tug-of-war with a large dining table. The chaos culminates as more than 300

⁶² Ridenour, 87.

Klaubauf are set loose in the town square to melee with the townspeople and one another. In 2013, this “ringing out” (*Auslauten*) resulted in a head injury that put a teenage boy in a coma. Denizens of the town see the high violence surrounding their event as a sign of authenticity.⁶³

Other regional variations manage to perform the Alpen beast without quite as much dangerous fury. The *Klausen* of Oberallgäu in the Bavarian Alps do not take part in St. Nicholas house visits, but appear as part of the public procession called the *Klausentreiben*. Known as the “wild Clauses,” participants wear a hood of fur that completely enshrouds their head and face instead of the more detailed carved masks of other regions. In fact, it is understood that the whole body must be covered by their fur suit, with no skin or clothing visible. The Klausen do sport the impressive horns typical to most Austrian Krampuses and they wear a single large bell at the front of their belts. As part of the public event, Klausen will often descend as a group on a spectator and threaten them with long willow switches until they fall to their knees and recite the Lord’s Prayer. Still further variations of Klausentreiben exist in Bavarian towns and villages outside of Oberallgäu. These are mostly differentiated by details of customary masking and costuming.

Alpen observances regarded as clear variations on the Krampus theme include the straw encased *Buttnmandl* of Bavaria’s South Eastern border and the *Klosn* of Stilfs, Italy. The *Klosn* appear in two distinct types – donkeys and devils – and engage in procession on the Saturday before or after St. Nicholas day. Notably, the donkey *Klosn* wear bells and their masks feature the long, dangling tongue often associated with

⁶³ Ibid, 88.

Krampus today. The devil Klossn wear masks carved of wood, more in keeping with ritual performances in central Austria. Instead of fur, both Klossn types are covered in robes constructed of layers of brightly colored strips of fabric.⁶⁴ In the case of Krampus-themed festival events it seems to be variation all the way down. From the plethora of midwinter beast masquerade customs throughout Europe, to the more localized and explicitly related St. Nicholas day ritual observances in Alpine villages, an incredible scope of folkloric material emerges. Focusing on the version of the Krampus most recognizable to US enactors may help clarify how the figure became a distillation of this vernacular material and a transnational envoy of variable tradition, both in name and image.

Wide use of the Krampus designation is relatively recent, and its international ubiquity and transmission can likely be attributed to the popularity of the Krampus-themed postcards of the late nineteenth century. In etymological terms, scholars have speculated that the word is either derived from the Middle German word *Kralle*, translated to English as “claw” or the Bavarian word *Krampn* which refers to something desiccated and without life.⁶⁵ Connections with the underworld aside, the latter assertion seems tenuous, considering the general sense of animal virility the embodied Krampus brings to traditional performances. Associating the monster’s name with the word “claw” generates an interesting opportunity for anecdotal speculation. The claw could be a reference to the character’s implicitly predatory activities or presumed infernal origin. However, the Krampus of the Austrian village – regionally performed for generations – is

⁶⁴ Ibid.

⁶⁵ Ibid, 15.

generally clawless. Could the claw here represent less of a physical attribute than a localized corruption of Klaus (think: St. Nicholas) or a bit of Middle German wordplay?

Al Ridenour references seventeenth century tensions arising from certain Austrian St. Nicholas revelers: "...the Vicar of the Tyrolean town of Mayrhofen complained about riotous behavior in 1815, writing, 'on the night of Advent Sunday, December 3, so many costumed Nicholas ran from one tavern to another and created such a tumult that no decent person could sleep... merely masked individuals seeking all night long to cause the greatest mischief possible.'"⁶⁶ This description of what seems to be some Alpen antecedent to the American SantaCon suggests an association between St. Nicholas masquerade and the kind of carnival license often associated with Perchten celebrations of the same era. Having already discussed the connection between these Perchten and the Krampus, the possibility of rhetorical superimposition of the devil figure unto the Catholic saint could be there. Maybe this etymological thought experiment reveals a historical signpost for what eventually leads to the Krampus' inseparable connection to St. Nicholas in traditional village enactments. Without any way to prove the theory, perhaps it is now best to explore how that relationship plays out in different contexts and how variable practices are changing the dynamic of Krampus expressions.

St. Nicholas Companions

Given the level of variation already discussed in this chapter, it is important to consider how the Krampus is positioned in its own conventional sphere of festival practice. Midwinter beast processions occur over a significant stretch of feast and saint's

⁶⁶ Ibid, 104.

day celebrations throughout the European Catholic ritual year. Identifying more distinct levels of related customary material that help shape the many forms of Krampus-oriented holiday practices in the United States requires the acknowledgement of figural and performed subsets of tradition that inform how a presumably iconic Austrian Krampus comes to be constructed. The Krampus in the US is fully intertwined with the increasingly secularized Christmas season. This association is no accident considering the Krampus's membership in a very specific group of folkloric figures: The St. Nicholas companions.

Variants of this punishing or ambivalent partner to the patron saint of children take many forms and go by many names not only in Austria, but in Germany, The Czech Republic, Poland, Italy, and the Netherlands. Not to be confused with the myriad versions of "Father Christmas" throughout the Christian world, these wild men and devils exist as separate entities acting as the stick to St. Nicholas' carrot. There are some examples of the punisher and the gift-giver inhabiting the same form. Figures such as Ruklaus (Rough Claus), Aschenklau (Ashy Clause), and Pelznichol (imported to North America as the Bellsnickle in the eighteenth century) are all furred and/or filthy wild men bearing gifts *and* switches appearing on or around December 5, generally described as being active in medieval Europe.⁶⁷ These figures likely did not suit the syncretic activities of The Church, violating a kind of spirit/body duality that sorted daily activities into more codified conceptions of naughty or nice. After all, an ecclesiastical figure – a messenger of goodness and right action – doubling as a threatening presence for young

⁶⁷ Linda Raedisch, *The Old Magic of Christmas: Yuletide Traditions for the Darkest Days of the Year*, (Woodbury: Llewellyn Publications, 2013), 82, 88.

members of The Church might muddy canonical waters. At the same time, encouraging an ethos of unmerited reward – a world where the disobedient go unpunished – was likely out of the question. Here the punishing companions of St. Nicholas take their places and the built-in utility of social control ensures their longevity of practice.

In Germany, particularly the northern regions, the most well-known example of a St. Nicholas companion appears in the form of *Knecht Ruprecht*. Essentially translated as “Servant Ruprecht,” this figure differs from the Krampus and other of its ilk in that it only appears as a single companion to the saint, never in groups. As opposed to being associated with a kind of species of demon or spirit, Knecht Ruprecht exists as a singular identity. He wears dark robes of fur, sports an unkempt beard, and hauls a large sack as he accompanies St. Nicholas on his rounds. The sack was originally a symbolic nod to the possibility that Knecht Rupert intended to carry misbehaving children away, driving home the themes of abduction and (potentially) cannibalism so often associated with dark companion figures. The character carries the now familiar switches, but the threat here is not immediate, on-the-spot corporal punishment. The switches act as an alternative gift to whatever small prizes good children might receive from St. Nicholas, symbolizing eventual consequences for continued bad behavior. Contemporary Germans tend to downplay Knecht Ruprecht’s darker aspects. As Ridenour explains, “Distaste for the more vicious role assumed by the Krampus tends to now emphasize Knecht Ruprecht’s role as gift-bearing servant over punisher... and this friendlier guise is today suggested in the television show, *The Simpsons*, where the family dog’s name, “Santa’s Little Helper” is rendered in German as “Knecht Ruprecht.”⁶⁸ This is a fine example of the necessary

⁶⁸ Ridenour, 17.

variability of traditional practice. Knecht Ruprecht had to evolve or die, as it were, transforming over time to exist inside new cultural positions and interact with new modes of cultural expression, including references in mass media products.

The softening of Germany's premiere dark companion is only one example of how St. Nicholas' servants, like any festival material, are subject to alteration and contestation as cultural attitudes shift overtime. Part of Knecht Ruprecht's iconic regalia can include a bag of ashes used to mark the misbehaved, a feature symbolically extended to his sometimes soot-blackened face. Face blackening, if not always present, can occur in a variety of winter masking traditions across Europe and the United Kingdom. Many contemporary participants in these events position these practices as racially neutral; a call-back to the easy-to-come-by disguise materials available in hearth and forge. Whatever the origins, the contentious aspect of this tradition is made especially problematic by the Dutch St. Nicholas companion known as *Zwarte Piet*. Translated to English as "Black Peter," the figure is undeniably performed in blackface.

The *Zwarte Piet* costume includes an "afro" wig and "Moorish" clothing, representing an 1850 literary creation by Dutch school teacher Jan Schenkman. The children's book, *Sint Nikolaas en zijn Knecht* (Saint Nicholas and his Servant) tells the story of the saint and his black servant, explicitly identified as an African.⁶⁹ Yearly, a Dutch television event in November features the "arrival" of a ship to Amsterdam carrying *Sinterklaas* and scores of *Zwart Pete* maskers. Activists and scholars have rightfully linked the depictions of this particular St. Nicholas companion to the Dutch

⁶⁹ Yvon Van der Pijl and Karina Goulordava, "Black Pete, 'Smug Ignorance,' and the Value of the Black Body in Postcolonial Netherlands," *New West Indian Guide* 88 (2014): 263-291.

history with the slave trade.⁷⁰ The transformation of what usually denoted an otherworldly and dangerous presence into a black body generates a multitude of social difficulties that are only exasperated by the invented tradition's association with important ritual practices throughout Europe. Here we see how the idea of tradition can be turned to unwarranted justifications. Efforts to deracialize Black Peter, such as performers appearing in a rainbow of colors or downplaying the character's blackness as chimney soot, are politicized plays at intentionally variable praxis. For many Netherlanders, changing Peter is preferable to abandoning him. Unfortunately, the practice's national construction as an embedded tradition makes such movements difficult. In the Netherlands, participants, politicians, social justice activists, and ethnocentric fringe groups are locked in a tumultuous battle over this festival material, the stakes of which seem to rise every year.⁷¹

The relationship between the Krampus and the corrupted variant of Black Peter inevitably emerges in popular and academic treatments, for better or for worse. It is important to resist succumbing to false equivalences here. Conflating figures like the Krampus or the Cert with recently minted material incubated within the racist world view of an individual author writing in the mid-nineteenth century misrepresents the nature of traditional praxis.

⁷⁰ Ibid; Becky Little, "This notorious Christmas character is dividing a country," National Geographic, last modified December 6, 2018 <https://news.nationalgeographic.com/2017/12/black-pete-christmas-zwarte-piet-dutch/>.

⁷¹ Ibid.

Finding the International Krampus

Annually in Bad Gastein, Austria, troupes of furred, horned man/beast hybrids take to the streets on the nights of December 5 and 6. Young men in layers of up to six mottled, long-haired animal skins growl, caper, wrestle and swat behind monstrous masks carved from Swiss Pine and crowned with multiple pairs of ibex horns. Steel bells hang from their leather belts and create a deafening clatter as they advance in a procession, performing a series of inhuman jerks. Drunk on brandy, they threaten the gathering crowd as they sweat through the Austrian winter freeze under the eighty-pound weight of their full regalia. Onlookers jostle for position to view the chaotic parade and squeal against the rattle of chains and the inevitable strike of the monster's switch.⁷²

Contemporary Krampus processions take many forms depending on the region in which they occur. In Bad Gastein, the Krampus only appears on December 5 and 6. The first night primarily features Krampus events that focus on activities in the town center. These customs include Krampus wrestling contests called *Remplern* in which men in Krampus suits butt horns and shove one another as well as raucous processions where spectators have a chance to interact with the threatening performers. On the night of December 6, the *Krampuslauf* and *Hausbesuch* – or house visit – are the primary events for the Gasteiner ritual performers. While this traditional custom is downplayed elsewhere in favor of public parades, in Gastein the procession and in-home ritual performance remain at the center of celebration.⁷³

⁷² Ridenour.

⁷³ Ibid.

Addressing the roles of the ritual actors, it's easy to parse how the figures of the saint and the monster relate to each other in the context of performance. St. Nicholas leads the Krampuses in their procession and a Krampus follows the saint's cues in the home, waiting to be "released" upon the kids. Here we have a subservient beast, set loose by an agent of Christian "goodness" as a signifier of potential punitive measures, thereby keeping the saint's pureness and piety intact. This emphasis on children and social control is abandoned as Krampusläufe proliferate into urban environments in Austria, Germany, and further abroad.

The elements of the central Austrian Krampus described above are most identifiable as influencing the form that the Krampus began to take in the US. Bad Gastein's material and visual conventions are often present at events in American cities, remixed as they are with horror tropes and images from the widely circulated *Krampuskarten*. The *Krampuskarten* were circulated extensively throughout Europe in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century and continued to be exoticized as oddball collector's items through the 1960s.⁷⁴ Despite their popularity, the Krampus would take considerably longer to reach the United States. Al Ridenour, in his 2016 book *The Krampus and the Old Dark Christmas*, posits that Krampus came to America via the internet in the early 2000s. That is certainly my experience as an enthusiast and researcher, and it seems to be the experience of fieldwork participants. Images of the *Krampuskarten* and video recordings of Krampus events from Austria and Southern Germany were discovered by Americans on English language websites.⁷⁵ People in the

⁷⁴ Beauchamp.

⁷⁵ Ridenour, 8.

United States embraced what they perceived as a transgressive holiday figure: The Christmas Devil. Eventually, the Krampus would appear in American television programs, popular fiction, comic books, and Hollywood films. Concurrently, American subgroups were following the Krampus back to its traditional roots and discovering a new ritual opportunity in response to an increasingly materialist holiday landscape. Krampusnacht celebrations in US draw upon these traditions but vary widely in character and interpretation.

CHAPTER III

KRAMPUSNACHT: (RE)BORN IN THE USA

In cities across America it is becoming increasingly likely to encounter a raucous parade of horned beasts on downtown sidewalks during the first two weeks of December. Switch wielding, bell ringing monsters are becoming a regular fixture of the holiday season, surprising and confusing Christmas shoppers all over the US. These processions are organized by small, grassroots groups that have adopted the Alpen, vernacular tradition of celebrating Krampusnacht.

The first organized American versions of Krampus celebration events occurred in 2010 in Portland, Oregon and Columbia, South Carolina. The timing of these first on-the-ground events is likely the result of a variety of intersecting factors, including the contemporaneous increase of accessible organizing platforms on social media. Notably, the two event groups were unaware of each other at the time.⁷⁶ After that first year the two groups connected, and a long list of other regional groups have since created events of their own. As of 2014, an unofficial number of thirty distinct US events was referenced in popular media reports. A quick search on social media reveals several Facebook groups and pages dedicated to organizing events and disseminating information in several US cities including Portland, Columbia, Los Angeles, Philadelphia, New Orleans, Dallas, Baltimore, Washington DC, Asbury Park, NJ, and Bloomington, IN. There are also established events in Detroit, Green Bay, and Houston. This is by no

⁷⁶ Arun Ragan, Interview.

means an exhaustive list. Some established organizers suggest that there are too many US events to identify unequivocally, especially if private events and performances that do not focus on processional elements are considered.⁷⁷ In a relatively short period of time, Krampus-related holiday celebrations have spread across the United States primarily through the efforts of small groups connected by a shared, specialized interest and by the internet. While they differ in size, execution, and character, many focus on ritual components of embodiment that organizers and participants view as important cultural activations. Individuals engage in the thoughtful work of mask making, costume construction, and self-education to connect their enactments of Krampus processions somewhere close to the traditional processions of Europe. Some American Lauf organizers maintain partnerships and regular communication with Austrian Krampus masqueraders.

Issues of authenticity occasionally arise, but innovation is foregrounded as participants focus on new crafting techniques and personal interpretations to invite other representations of European mid-winter beast masquerade into their yearly observances. American Krampus celebrations illustrate how exoteric agents in the US are employing festival bricolage to reactivate sometimes obscure European ritual material in reflexive, respectable ways and create new layers of meaning for positive outcomes. This example of variable traditional praxis represents a postmodern form of ludic recombination that relies on the post-mediated vernacular tactic of intertextuality for efficacy. In many cases, these new takes on older forms of procession and embodiment are viewed as ameliorative seasonal interventions for event participants. Joseph (Arun) Ragan - the

⁷⁷ Ibid; Al Ridenour, Interview.

founder and organizer of the Portland Krampuslauf - explains: “[Krampusnacht] suddenly animated this quadrant of the year that was mostly about coping and overconsumption...”⁷⁸ Krampus celebration events in the United States may look like messy appropriations of ritual traditions from Alpen Austria and beyond, however the communities that create and maintain these yearly processions use the embodied material to create multivocal levels of meaning made possible by the new media fragmentations that originally provided access.

While specifically rooted in an identifiable expressive tradition, Krampusnacht celebrations in the United States can differ significantly in ideology, aesthetic, and execution. This localized variation revealed itself through the fieldwork methods employed to ground my research. Some – like Medford, Oregon’s Krampus Krawl – operate as costumed pub crawls with the added expressive elements of transformative masking and carnival spectacle. The Portland and Philadelphia events focus on developing an opportunity for ritual experience through costumed procession and community building. In New Orleans, the Krewe of Krampus merges an Alpen aesthetic with the city’s famous parade culture, foregrounding creativity and performance to contribute to positive images of the still-rebuilding city. The Los Angeles Krampus celebration group invites a variety of perspectives by offering several events during the season. The Krampus Run is specifically concerned with traditional Austrian representations, while their Krampus Ball and satirical music event focus on parody and inversion. Eugene, Oregon’s Krampus Krawl – organized as a promotional event for a local craft cider company and co-sponsored by the Lane County Arts Council –

⁷⁸ Arun Ragan, Interview.

insinuated itself on the downtown area by way of an extended procession route, maintaining a grounded, DIY vibe despite its corporate or institutional generation. The multivocality of Krampus themed events in the United States create a particularly American phenomenon in which a variety of levels of practice and idiosyncratic interpretations play out through reimagined traditions.

Notes on Fieldwork

Much of the material that follows represents the theoretical treatment of fieldwork with Krampus event participants that I engaged in from 2017 to early 2019. Part of this grounded research is sourced from interviews – both in-person and remote – conducted with organizers of and contributors to variously enacted, localized celebrations in Portland, Philadelphia, Los Angeles, New Orleans, and Medford. I also engaged in online ethnography on social media, primarily Facebook, where so many members of US Krampus communities seem to prefer to share their thoughts and ideas.

Interestingly, many of the contacts I was fortunate enough to make are consummate creative types (artists, writers, performers, and community organizers) and have granted me access to blog posts, presentations, and popular media contributions to flesh out their narratives of participation. This kind of generosity was integral to my research, and I include those materials as a kind of ethnography product for the mediated age.

The culmination of my fieldwork occurred in December of 2018 when I engaged in participant observation in three Krampus events in Oregon: Krampus Lauf PDX, the Inaugural Eugene Krampus Krawl, and the Medford Krampus Krawl. Though

experiences at all three events will be referenced to various degrees throughout this thesis, the section that immediately follows will focus primarily on my experience at Krampus Lauf PDX.

Krampus Lauf PDX: A New Ritual Case Study

Krampus celebrations in the US adhere to and revise ritual structure to communicate inner and outer festival priorities across the ritualesque/carnavalesque spectrum. These expressions rely on compartmentalized ritual liminality to manifest elements of ludic recombination through masquerading as horned beasts, witches, and other midwinter spirits. Through this process, group participants may experience personal transformations situated around their perceptions of winter holiday traditions in the United States. For many, the carnivalesque nature of these public events create a specialized space that inverts social expectations and suspends dominant culture standards of behavior associated with American Christmas. Exploring these relationships through Edith and Victor Turner's ritual theory, Jack Santino's concept of the ritualesque/carnavalesque spectrum, and Bakhtinian ideas of carnivalesque utility reveals how a new traditionally inspired, often secularized practice informs a contemporary American recasting of European vernacular tradition to negotiate cultural *and* existential experiences. Investigating these theories in conjunction with the perspectives of organizers and participants of Krampusnacht events in Portland, Los Angeles, and Philadelphia demonstrates how grounded concerns regarding ritual expression, reordered identity, and the presentation of a cultural counternarrative drive the perpetuation of these

events and allow them to continue to generate interest through meaningful symbolic activity.

Krampus processional events inherently include acts of ludic recombination as defined by Edith and Victor Turner, featuring the "...free, playful... recombination in any and every possible pattern however deviant, grotesque, unconventional or outrageous."⁷⁹ Krampus masks and suits present an amalgamate form that combines animal attributes like horns, fur, and claws with exaggerated human anatomy such as lolling tongues and protruding noses or chins. Here, mainstays of the aggressively playful, ludic feature of liminality are exemplified by two specific criteria: exaggeration and the monstrous. Ludic recombination is meant to encourage ritual participants "...to think anew about persons, objects, relationships, social roles, and features of the environment hitherto taken for granted."⁸⁰ These shocking remixes of everyday symbolic material are cast as a ritual strategy designed to initiate societal reflection. The Turners describe the characteristics of ludic recombination processes:

...certain physical and cultural features are often represented as disproportionately large or small. A head or nose or phallus or breasts may be out of proportion, or incongruous forms may be created from components of familiar, culturally defined reality. These might include 'monsters,' compounded of elements from human or animal forms...⁸¹

Online Krampus event group material is heavy with images of participants manifesting these incongruities in ways that are both unique and thematically connected. The presence of these features of ludic recombination in Krampus celebration events raises the question of how ritual and liminality are reformulated and employed by group

⁷⁹ Turner and Turner, "Religious Celebrations", 202.

⁸⁰ Ibid., 205.

⁸¹ Ibid., 204.

members. To what extent are these seasonal processions emically viewed as intentional ritual events? A closer look at the organized structure of Krampus Lauf PDX reveals a complex internal view of the personal efficacy of the event as alternatively secular and ritual in nature.

As part of my initial research, and in preparation for my participation in the Portland event, I spent some time engaging with the event's informational page. There were a lot of commonalities in event page interactions over the course of my online research, but organizational posts leading up to the 2018 event were more frequent and more detailed. The large uptick in interest compared to previous years likely encouraged this increased activity. This information provided important insight into the group's overall intention and ethos for newer participants. Aside from numerous posts in which the organizer shared photos of regional variants of midwinter spirit costuming opportunities, expectations regarding performance and symbolic ritual materials were shared. In a post from November 28, Arun shares a photo of a birch switch he made for the 2017 event:

Here is a birch flogger left over from last year. I encourage everyone to notice the birch switches now abundantly available on our sidewalks and yards. Just gather some, bundle them together and bind with ribbon or chord. You can attach bells, ornaments, or bones. This is a simple way to participate in the crafting aspect of this procession which we highly highly encourage. This is about making culture and festivity together rather than consuming it.⁸²

In an interview with Arun conducted in 2017, he told me that collecting fallen birch switches around Portland in October and November has been integrated into his own

⁸² "Krampus Lauf PDX," Facebook page, Accessed November 28, 2018, <https://www.facebook.com/Krampus-Lauf-PDX-171683562863437/>.

spiritual, magical practice since founding the Lauf in 2010.⁸³ Referencing bones as potential ornaments for the switches hints at how he positions the items as ritually important. The emphasis on crafting here communicates a more secular concern that surrounds his involvement in the Krampus run. This DIY element, though not entirely adhered to by participants when I attended, is a common theme in Krampus Lauf PDX's informational posts throughout the season. The switches represent one in a series of materials that Arun and his core group of collaborators construct and share in order to communicate a handmade ritual aesthetic. Silkscreened banners, "noise-scepters," and extra masks constructed of masking tape and tin foil are provided (in limited number) for participants on the night of the event.

Concerns on the secular/ritual spectrum are also made evident when references are made to the character and dynamics of the actual procession. As part of a general description of the Krampus run, the event page makes intentions clear: "There is no fourth wall and no tickets. We are not on a bar crawl. This allows us a great opportunity to transcend so many limitations of a costumed encounter. We can be an archetypal vision that burns itself into people's psyches forever rather than a clumsy public nuisance."⁸⁴ Similarly, multiple posts throughout the season remind participants that the event is meant to be a collective experience as opposed to a "performance for an audience" and encourage newcomers to "...show up and join in as any of the Winter Spirits...with an emphasis upon Krampus."⁸⁵ Using Krampus Lauf PDX as a case study, and acknowledging that similar processes play out differently at other events, it becomes

⁸³ Arun Ragan, Interview.

⁸⁴ Ibid, Nov 30 2018

⁸⁵ Ibid, Nov 18 2018

obvious that ritual intention and social perspectives share space in US Krampus-oriented enactments. Investigating this further requires a deeper look into how ritual structures are proving to be as variable as they are repeatable in the contemporary United States.

In *Les Rites de Passage*, Arnold Van Gennep asserts that all forms of ritual “...accompany transitions from one situation to another and from one cosmic social order to another.”⁸⁶ Pulling away from the early twentieth century assumption that ritual events are primarily associated with “tribal” activity, a contemporary interpretation of ritual requires broadening the concept of *transition*. While some participants in the Portland Krampuslauf incorporate their involvement into a larger spiritual (often Neo-Pagan) practice, many casual contributors interpret the event as entirely secular. What seems to unite these perspectives is the acknowledgement of the event as a structured, socially separate act of seasonal celebration. To position the presence of ludic recombination in this expression, a liminal stage must be identified. By considering how the Portland event is structured, the presence of the *separation, marginal, and reaggregation* phases of the ritual process can be determined. As these phases are explored in the context of Krampus Lauf PDX, intentional and implicit emphases on any particular ritual period will be revealed.

The Krampuslauf in Portland, Oregon begins with participants meeting in a Sewallcrest Park to prepare for the procession. When I attended on December 2, 2018, I saw group members connecting, completing costumes, sharing Krampus related props, and milling around to appreciate one another’s suit and mask work. After an opportunity for participants and curious members of the public to take photos, we eventually made

⁸⁶ Arnold Van Gennep, *Les Rites de Passage*, (Paris: Emile Nourry, 1909), 13.

our way through a small residential neighborhood to a predetermined commercial stretch on Hawthorne Street. The processional route stretched several blocks, a distance made to feel longer by my head-to-toe faux fur suit and limited visibility. My glasses were consistently fogged, a result of breath and pent up body heat colliding with crisp December air. Our processioning group was large, possibly more than eighty people, and interpretations of the Krampus and related spirits ran the gamut of seemingly all potential combinations of traditional bricolage. Taking over the sidewalks and stretching across two or three blocks at our most robust, we rang bells, sang songs, and chanted, as a weird chimeric unit. Every now and again, small groups of witches, horror Krampuses, and hard to identify monstrosities with Christmas trappings would peel off from the group to menacingly peer into storefronts or shake switches at the crowds of people gathered outside of restaurants and bars who watched us pass. At the end of the procession, many participants trailed off and a smaller group of us reconvened at the same park to connect and wind down before disbanding.

My overview of the event might be insufficient to begin parsing how canonical ritual structures interact with Krampus Lauf PDX. To set the stage for the theoretical application that follows, a more removed description of the event is in order. Consider this excerpt from an informational post written by Arun on the Krampus Lauf PDX Facebook page on November 30, 2018:

Greetings all. Here is a little walk through the Lauf for those unfamiliar and for those who want to share the idea with friends. We meet at the park between four and four thirty. This gives a chance to complete costumes, take pictures and to practice our carol/chants. Extra costume items, banners, birch switches and printed lyrics to the carol will be there to hand out. However, everyone is encouraged to bring your horns, masks, chains, furs, claws, bells, drums, Birch switches, etc.... After we group up, we proceed over to Hawthorne where we slowly make our way down the north sidewalk to 39th and then back up the

sidewalk to the park. We go very slow so that everyone can keep up and savor the interactions. We stop every few blocks to wassail various places with the chant. It's a delight to see the reactions of people not expecting to be sung at by a horde of demons...⁸⁷

The pre-procession meeting in Portland's Sewallcrest City Park arguably represents the preliminal ritual period of separation. The collective preparation provides a time for group participants to interact and share important symbolic material. Participants arrive in various stages of costume completion and spend some time with one another interacting without masks or heavier suit elements. This period includes a lot of milling about and connecting through mutual acknowledgement of the work evidenced by peoples' masking materials and accoutrements. In many cases, this process involves participants identifying one another's traditional or innovated inspiration for their Krampus suits. The meeting area fills up as the light begins to fade and participants can be seen helping one another finish their transformations, straightening masks and adjusting horns or wigs. By nightfall, the entire group is fully costumed, and any separate clusters come together around a picnic table where extra bells, switches, banners, and scepters are handed out. Participants start to change their behavior, embodying their versions of the Krampus and interacting with other processioners. Any non-participants present automatically separate themselves from the group, most lifting mobile devices and digital cameras to document the cohort of monsters. The process of becoming fully costumed alongside other participants creates an essential detachment from everyday positions of social stratification and individual identifications. The activity of becoming Krampus *en mass* dissolves delineations of profession, age, class,

⁸⁷ Krampus Lauf PDX, Facebook, Nov. 30, 2018.

and gender and allows participants to enter the ritual procession as a socially flattened “horde of demons.” This preparatory step of the event is active and meaningful semantic products are exchanged to construct a thematically unified group.

Before the newly separated festival performers set out on the procession route, the group is called together by organizers to gather tightly together and participate in the singing of the Krampus Carol. Many participants come with their own copies of the carol, printed from the Krampus Lauf PDX event page on Facebook. Others access the online version directly on their mobile phones. Those who come unprepared are encouraged to take from the pile of printed copies that sit on the picnic table amidst the extra bells and switches. An original piece of ritual material, the song was written by organizer Arun and is sung as a chant with rhythmic inflections mimicking the beat of a drum. An excerpt from the carol illustrates how the lyrics underscore the ritual nature of the activity in which the group is about to engage:

Long night comes and cold it is
Winters claws now tear the veil
Between the children's world and his
Krampus! Krampus! Hail!
[...]
Winter passes spring will dawn.
Darkness holds us in its chill
Perchten come with crashing drums
to threaten and the thrill.⁸⁸

Group chanting is a common ritual element often used to create a sense of single identity in which every day social affiliations are rendered moot. Here the collective action reads as a culmination of a phase of ritual separation that takes place in a city park in the

⁸⁸ Arun Ragan, *Krampus Carol Tutorial*, Youtube Video, 01:08, November 8, 2012.
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=n8WMolNjXd0&fbclid=IwAR28LsfJSGe8RAybNw3BHYFM8sG6ePaBM4kmceouPVMoakMEkWiJbMrLNUI&app=desktop>

northwestern United States. The carol will be repeatedly chanted at predetermined locations throughout the processional route, but the gathering here at the start is the only time in which the participant group is singularly focused, still, and completely unified in embodied activity. Once the chant is complete, a line of Krampuses and other spirits file out of Sewallcrest Park and, hooting and cavorting, begin the festival procession.



Figure 3.1 Krampus Lauf PDX participants stop to take a group picture before heading out from Sewallcrest Park. Photograph by Nicole Baker.

The marginal stage of liminality the Turners describe as the true center of the ritual process is highly emphasized in the Portland Krampuslauf. The Lauf itself is the culmination of the group’s organized existence. It is inside this field of public liminality that the process of ludic recombination is highlighted. In an interview, Arun explains the important liminal process of intentional marginalization: “When you actually have the

whole procession... you have the period in which the people, the exact segment of the population that gets to become the monster... [embody] the energy that... ricochets around and terrifies everyone in society.”⁸⁹ This illustrates the inherent utility of ludic recombination in the ritual sphere. Here, usually backgrounded cultural negotiations are forced into relief through the disruption of processes that are generally taken for granted. Arun also highlights the public nature of the Lauf, “...people expect us and run out to join us... people run out of pubs demanding to be swatted... and then people temporarily join us and then get wigged out and run away.”⁹⁰ The highly playful activity that Arun relates in juxtaposition with the terrifying aligns with the Turners’ suggestion that “...the public liminality of joyous seasonal celebrations... may serve the purposes of caricature, satire, or lampoonery” and “encourage the liminaries to ponder.”⁹¹ While the liminal feature of ludic recombination is certainly foregrounded in the Portland Krampusnacht celebration event, the additional features of *communitas* and even *communication of the sacra* are arguably present.

Communitas is described by the Turners as “...direct, total confrontation of human identity which is rather more than the casual camaraderie of ordinary social life.”⁹² This collective bond is made possible in the liminal sphere through social leveling processes that move toward the erasure of established roles and identities. Issues like class, gender, and race are made invisible. This kind of deep, situational community connection is an obvious part of the manifest activity mentioned above in the context of

⁸⁹ Arun Ragan, Interview.

⁹⁰ Ibid.

⁹¹ Turner and Turner, “Religious Celebrations,” 205

⁹² Ibid., 205

the pre-processional event, foregrounded by the shared period of guising preparation that occurs before the event. The early communal separation into a group of beasts carries over and intensifies as the procession takes place. Embodying the beast in the company of so many other maskers, and in the close quarters provided by city sidewalks also in use by the non-participating public, results in a kind of proxemics of unity. Movements necessarily align, and members of the uncanny cohort improvise position based on opportunities for public interaction only to seamlessly meld back into the throng. Maintaining a borrowed identity in the massive unlicensed event in a busy metropolitan district requires processioners to collectively assume an appropriate gait and loping improvisations spread through the line. Customary bells (of which there are hundreds) envelope the maskers in a clattering miasma. Individually employed, noisemakers erupt chaotically, eventually coalescing into a concert of pointed clangs as one rhythm or another is picked by the group. Howls and whoops follow the same unifying pattern. For some participants this represents a kind of community building that lasts after the event and creates an important space to return to year after year. For Arun, "...it results in family formation to a large extent. Especially, it appeals a lot to outcast and orphan-feeling people, a lot of people who feel like they've never quite synced up with the holidays as presented in the US."⁹³ Although 2018 was my first year attending the event, I can relate to this sentiment. Participation in the event introduced me to a few like-minded individuals I may not have otherwise met and the group processional activity allowed me to feel a level of connection with those I would have designated as strangers prior to the event.

⁹³ Arun Ragan, Interview

The masquerading participants are meaningfully aligned not only by their out-of-the-ordinary actions and appearances, but also by juxtaposition in the space they share with spectators and ordinary citizens. Playfully menacing interactions with the crowds that gather outside of Hawthorne Boulevard establishments are encouraged and, in my experience, hard to resist. The fact that the procession takes place in one of Portland's more patronized shopping and entertainment districts is not lost on participants. Miming predation at well-light storefronts is a pack activity (figure 3.1). The deep connection that arises from collectively imposing strangeness on normativity is almost palpable at these events, a sensation common to all three that I attended. This *communitas* can be read as a cultural emission released by unified representations of the grotesque body in response to dominant culture intextuation. As theorist John Fiske asserts, vernacular representations of the grotesque arise in opposition to intextuation, the process in which dominant culture superimposes its structures on the social body.⁹⁴ By processioning in a boutique district, Krampus event participants in Portland are taking a safety-in-numbers approach to challenging that dynamic. Through deep connection predicated by collective embodiments of the unpredictable beast, US Krampus groups superimpose the grotesque on the social abstractions of a capitalist ethos.

⁹⁴ John Fiske, "Offensive Bodies and Carnival Pleasures." *Understanding Popular Culture*, (Boston: Unwin Hyman, 1989).



Figure 3.2 A Krampus Lauf PDX processioner interacts with a shop employee on Hawthorne Blvd. Photograph by Nicole Baker.

The communication of the sacra, a key feature of the Turners' ritual process model, is admittedly not apparent, but the incorporation of chants, songs, and handmade props fashioned to depict iconic items associated with Krampus certainly communicate the symbolic narrative of a supernatural figure. Some of the handmade ritual material mentioned earlier may be employing a punk-style bricolage to communicate certain cultural truths valued by Krampus run participants, such as anti-commercialism and creative involvement. Many of the *Teufelsgeiger* (noisemaking scepters) Arun constructed for the 2018 procession consisted of spray painted, plastic doll heads with devil's horns affixed to poles. Not only does this example represent the Lauf's already discussed DIY aesthetic, but it also visually expresses disdain for mass produced toys,

arguably one of the most ubiquitous symbols of holiday consumerism. These materials represent the very beginnings of what can be considered the collective sacra of US Krampus group culture and more explicit ideological formations will be investigated in chapter four.

The reaggregation phase of Portland's Krampuslauf is easily the event's least emphasized ritual element. The circular nature of the processional route brings the group back to Sewallcrest Park where participants are encouraged to debrief and share the excited energy from completing the Lauf. The number of processioners that actually return to the park for this part of the event likely varies year-to-year, but in 2018 only a fraction of the group joined in. Most maskers scattered as we approached the park, making their way to their cars or planning after-event meet ups in smaller groups. Those who return to the park remove costume elements, especially masks, and engage in a cool down period that functions as a meet and greet mixed with post-event commentary. In 2018, this period included the performances of a choreographed dance by a group of women dressed (with varying amounts of whimsy) as archetypal witches. The lead dancer's costume included visual referents to winter, topped off with strings of icy, white electric lights. The performance functioned as a sort of closing event, after which participants unceremoniously parted ways. These activities diverge from ideas of ritual reincorporation in that any significant change in social status seems to be largely absent. Framing this as irrefutable evidence against a reaggregation phase would likely be a mistake. Just as other phases and elements of the Turners' ritual structure need to be adjusted for transformational opportunities in the heavily mediated sphere of the contemporary US, reincorporation may be taking place more personally and in new social

forms. Krampus-related social media pages often provide a space for participants to share the experiences of personal transformation that procession participation generates. A member of the Krampus Society Facebook community speaks to how the ritual activity affects him in a post from the end of the 2018 season: “I feel like Krampus offers a kind of therapy for those of us who are burned out on the saccharine sweet falseness of the holiday in the media.... I like to face the ugly head on, to wear it like a mask and harness it into a creative spirit that keeps me moving until the days start to get longer.”⁹⁵

Transitioning from the conception of the liminal to theories of the liminoid is a useful turn for addressing how these ritual structures are being revised by on-the-ground actors today. According to Victor Turner, “...for most people the liminoid is still felt to be freer than the liminal, a matter of choice not obligation... but these already have something of the stamp of the liminal upon them and quite often are the cultural debris of some unforgotten liminal ritual.”⁹⁶ Portland, Oregon’s Krampuslauf could easily be situated as this kind of “cultural debris.” Krampus Lauf PDX (and other events like it in the US) represent the “cultural pluralism” of liminal/liminoid processes described by Turner.⁹⁷ Liminoid phenomena are generally associated with artistic and recreational activities, and usually contain a degree of sociocultural criticism. Liminal activity is undertaken collectively and is often associated with seasonal observances. Both the liminal and the liminoid are present and foregrounded throughout the Krampus events, resulting in a new form of meaningful activity predicated by a perceived lack of ritual opportunities in contemporary US culture.

⁹⁶ Turner, “Liminal and Liminoid,” 86.

⁹⁷ Ibid.

Krampus on the Ritual/Carnival Spectrum

Krampusnacht celebration events in US cities not only access liminality and ludic recombination in the service of personal change, they also utilize the symbolic language of Bakhtinian carnival to implicitly communicate counterculture responses to prevailing dominant culture ideas associated with the celebration of winter holidays in the United States. If participation in these events seems to inhabit an ambiguous place on a ritual spectrum related to the Turners' liminal/liminoid binary, Krampusnacht expressions also appear in various positions on Santino's sliding scale of the ritualesque in relation to the carnivalesque. Santino coins the term ritualesque as a descriptive counterweight to strictly carnivalesque expressions. For him, the carnivalesque refers to festivity and the ludic elements therein. The ritualesque, then, refers to "...the performative use of symbols – images, music, movement – to effect social change."⁹⁸ Obviously, these concepts are not mutually exclusive. The presence of the element of play in an event does not rule out the participants' intention to communicate the primacy of an alternate worldview. In Santino's model, it is exactly the *intention* that matters. If rituals are "...precisely a means to a self-evident end among the community and participants," then the ritualesque refers to "...events that address a wider social problem or ill..."⁹⁹ Examples of events that combine the ritualesque with the carnivalesque include Gay Pride Parades and masked political protest events like the J18 carnival held in London in

⁹⁸ Santino, "The Carnivalesque and the Ritualesque," 62.

⁹⁹ Ibid, 64.

1999.¹⁰⁰ Krampusnacht celebrations in the United States hold a unique place on this spectrum due to the implicit nature of their counter-cultural message. The pure-form ritualesque requires that the desire to affect perceived social ills is intentionally communicated by event participants and the outcomes of these expressions are meant to resonate long after the event itself has ended. US Krampus processions likely cannot be described as purely ritualesque or entirely carnivalesque. Some participants express a desire to embody an alternative view of holiday practice meant to intervene on messages of uncritical, passive consumption, but these interventions are usually tacitly communicated. Similarly, carnivalesque features like inversion and parody do not only signal officially sanctioned social release. By claiming public space and celebrating a

¹⁰⁰ Ibid.; Lone Riisgaard and Bjørn Thomassen, “Powers of the Mask: Political Subjectivation and Rites of Participation in Local – Global Protest,” *Theory, Culture & Society* 33, no. 6 (2016).

demon-like figure that many view as antithetical to US Christmas observances, Krampus group members exhibit performed, social critique to various degrees.

Krampus event participants necessarily employ Bakhtinian carnivalesque images to transgress perceptions of normative dominant culture objectives. The nature of these events essentially invokes a place out of place where hierarchies are immaterial and people who identify as outsiders use exaggeration and parody to amplify their figurative voices. In *Bakhtin and Carnival: Culture as Counter-Culture*, Lachmann et al. describe this process: “The provocative, mirthful inversion of prevailing institutions and their hierarchy as staged in the carnival offers a permanent alternative to official culture – even if it ultimately leaves everything as it was before. It is this irrepressible, unsilenceable energy issuing from carnival’s alternative appeal... that disrupts official, institutionalized



Figure 3.3 Krampus Lauf PDX procession on Hawthorne Blvd. Photograph by Nicole Baker.

culture.”¹⁰¹ American Krampus masqueraders employ symbolic carnival language to this end. This is liminal activity and ludic recombination turned outward and unleashed. Participants take animal forms to project representations of the grotesque body onto the dominant culture as they gambol and caper amongst holiday shoppers on city sidewalks. Their exaggerated, beast-like behavior parodies reserved, socially dictated ways of being while potentially illuminating bad behavior precipitated by the consumerist pre-holiday frenzy. Mimed transgressive behavior at these processions could be read as parodies of holiday shopping mob scenes, like those recreated for holiday movies or included in media coverage of big-box Black Friday sales gone wild.

These carnivalesque, festival processes further suggest Santino’s concept of the ritualesque when Krampus-themed events are cast as opportunities to suspend imposing rules of accepted social behavior. Al Ridenour, author and co-founder of the Krampus LA group, references this process: “That’s something that Krampus represents...this sort of physical encounter and this sort of lifting of the rules and the daring and the thrill of seeing the rules lifted and knowing you might get hit...this sort of physicality and interactivity is something that’s kind of unparalleled...”¹⁰² This “interactivity” suggests a subordinate culture mechanism designed to underscore active connection over passivity. The individual experience is characterized as being essential to group activity and mundane social structures such as class and status are dissolved.

A related focus on positive personal agency and identity is addressed in a quote from the founder and lead organizer of the Parade of Spirits (formerly Krampuslauf

¹⁰¹ Renate Lachmann, Raoul Eshelman, and Marc Davis, “Bakhtin and Carnival: Culture as Counter-Culture.” *Cultural Critique*, no. 11 (1988-1989), 125

¹⁰² Al Ridenour, interview by Kirk A. Peterson, March 2017, transcript.

Philadelphia), Amber Dorko Stopper: “[Americans] are short on... creating temporary identities. We’ll buy them. It’s okay for Iggy Pop to do it. We’ll go to the concert. We’ll buy the t-shirt but when one of our loved ones wants to paint themselves blue and change their gender for a few hours in December... that’s some kind of yellow light.”¹⁰³ For organizers and participants in American Krampusnacht celebrations, these processions and events create valuable spaces where their alternative ideologies can be symbolically expressed and promoted through public activity that oscillates between carnivalesque and ritualesque expression.

Although US Krampus events might serve ritual and spiritual needs, whether they initiate lasting change is arguable. They do, however, suggest other ways of seeing how festival enactments can be culturally useful. Processes of personal transformation, community bonding, and utopian space creation are certainly in play for some participants. Ultimately, Krampus event group members are developing new modes of negotiating increasingly commodified environments through holiday praxis by reformulating conceptions of liminality, ritual, and carnival.

Arun credits his involvement in Krampus Lauf PDX for changing the way he experiences the winter holiday season. His disenfranchisement with American Christmas has been replaced with, “genuinely celebrating... going into creative overdrive, making things, [and] organizing with people...”¹⁰⁴ Amber addressed the ritual element directly during a presentation at the “Ignite Philly” event in 2015: “The important thing about doing the procession is keeping the procession important... going from here to there:

¹⁰³ Amber Dorko Stopper, Ignite Philly 15, *Krampuslauf Philly & Processional Arts*, Youtube Video, 06:09, November 5, 2018, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Y77LSWB1Wa0&t=2s>.

¹⁰⁴ Arun Ragan, Interview.

You're walking together. Contemporary Americans are really short on ritual... It's wrong to think these things are packaged as entertainment. They are really important internal work."¹⁰⁵ Considering these events in the context of ritual theory not only allows for the investigation of contemporary processes of ludic recombination but reveals how vernacular communities in the United States are using traditionally informed, emergent expressions to access the liminal and explore personal and social questions of meaning.

While ludic festivity is heavily foregrounded in Krampus processions, organizers and other group members often identify broader social messages that encourage their continued participation in these events. Some of the concerns cited include monocultural attitudes associated with US Christmas celebrations, consumer culture ideologies, and issues of inclusivity. When asked why people are attracted to the Portland event, organizer and founder Arun suggests a subversive level of meaning:

[Group members] want to...short circuit... the monoculture approach to Christmas. [That is] what I think a lot of people are rejecting. The rootless, anesthetizing version of Christmas that has been propagated through strip mall culture is one of the things that people are rebelling against...¹⁰⁶

Krampusnacht celebration events in the United States are often characterized in popular media as off-the-wall mini festivals. Some are simple pub crawls while other groups host professionally organized, ticketed events. In the case of the event in Eugene, Oregon the procession was sponsored by a cider company, and the event cross promoted a limited-edition Krampus Cider. It is not surprising that the Krampus tradition has taken on a somewhat sensationalized, primarily secularized form in its new American incarnation. The cultural utility of Krampusnacht celebrations in the US is thus layered,

¹⁰⁵ Amber Dorko Stopper.

¹⁰⁶ Arun Ragan, Interview.

idiosyncratic, and emergent. Issues of meaning are often individually determined within the sphere of shared performance and practice. In the increasingly materialist and rationalist landscape of the United States today, relatively small groups of people are gathering around an alternative cultural interest to interact with reconstructed forms of ritual liminality through aggressive ludic recombination. These participants are also discovering new models of communicating subcultural views and ideologies through public spectacle and festivity. What is significant are the ways in which the interconnected communities that create and maintain these yearly processions and parties have used the figure of Krampus and the traditions and associations it evokes to create multivocal levels of meaning.

CHAPTER IV

KRAMPUS CULTURE AS PRAXIS IN THE US: IDENTIFYING EMERGENT STRUCTURES

“This is your chance to monster. What does that mean to you?”¹⁰⁷

-Arun Ragan

Investigating Krampus-related activity in the United States as traditional practice – that is, as amalgamations of repeatable *and* variable vernacular processes – requires engagement with constructions of an identifiable cultural unit emerging around the figure and its embodied event material. *Culture*, as a keyword, is loaded and overdetermined. Its scholarly use is generally so ubiquitous that its definition is often assumed, relegating it to the nebulous status of *a priori* concept. Popular conceptions are similarly diffuse and often fall victim to denotation by synonym exchange. In the social sciences, culture and tradition are often conflated, leading to occasional interchanges of use. Alan Dundes’ famous (to professional folklorists, at least) folklore definition serves as an example:

It does not matter what the linking factor is - it could be a common occupation, language, or religion - but what is important is that a group formed for whatever reason will have some tradition which it calls its own... A member of the group may not know all the other members, but he will probably know the common core of traditions belonging to the group, traditions which help the group have a sense of group identity.¹⁰⁸

Here, tradition represents culture in its most basic conceptual sense. The “common core of traditions” stand in for a group’s repertoire of expressive and structural shared

¹⁰⁷ Arun Ragan, Interview.

¹⁰⁸ Alan Dundes, “What is Folklore?” in *The Study of Folklore*, ed. Alan Dundes, (Inglewood Cliffs: Prentice Hall, 1965), 2.

material. Acknowledging that Dundes proposed this relationship in 1965, the overall concept is still useful and its relationship to the idea of Krampus culture that this chapter explores will become clear in the sections that follow. To proceed from a practice theory perspective, however, tradition as a form of praxis needs to be critically excised from its association with culture as an aggregate concept. Folklorists have since noted that tradition and culture can operate as qualifiers of one another in shared rhetorical space or provide insights into group perceptions of temporality and collective staying power.¹⁰⁹ Separating the two terms in this way perhaps does not go far enough. In terms of practice, tradition (as a constitutive unit) must join the myriad other human processes widely accepted to exist under the broad umbrella of culture. This analytical turn will reveal how Krampus group members in the US are using newly adopted traditional practices to individually, locally, and multilocally construct a new, situational kind of culture.

The last chapter addressed how Krampus event participants in the United States are using embodied procession to engage in personal and collective meaning-making processes. An aerial view of the emergent practice suggests that a nascent, nationwide Krampus culture is forming. This culture, like any, is in no way monolithic. Motivations for participation are varied. Associations with the Krampus (and related ritual figures) resonate across a spectrum of individual and collective social utilities. Notably, this traditional material seems to enjoy more unified cognitive alignment in the European communities from which it is sourced. In the US, Krampus culture exists as a

¹⁰⁹ Dan Ben-Amos, "The Seven Strands of Tradition: Varieties in Its Meaning in American Folklore Studies," *Journal of Folklore Research* 21 (1984); Bronner, *Explaining Tradition*.

complicated collection of expressions held together by shared (and sometimes contested) interpretations. It is important to note that this could be said of any culture, and particularly any culture emerging across so broad a social geography. In *Culture as Praxis*, Zygmunt Bauman explains culture construction as a human act of structuring:

...the generic notion of culture is coined in order to overcome the persistent philosophical opposition between the spiritual and the real, thought and matter, body and mind. The only necessary and irreplaceable component of the concept is the process of structuring, together with its objectified results – man-made structures. The continuous and unending structuring activity constitutes the core of human praxis, the human mode of being-in-the-world.¹¹⁰

Bauman's positioning of culture as resulting from active structuring processes provides analytic space for the treatment of participant perspectives to follow. First, this concept intervenes on interpretations of culture as a crystalized field inhabiting only the highest sphere of human processes. Second, Bauman opens the way for the idea that discreet cultures can and do form within "larger" cultures. The existence of vernacular culture is not only assumed but, similar to Leonard Primiano's assertions on vernacular religion, all cultures are vernacular.¹¹¹ The point here is not to ignore interactions between dominant and subordinate cultures, but to intervene on constructions of primacy. Third, this practice-oriented approach expands on subcultural studies that rely exclusively on explicitly unified ideologies. The relationship between subcultural identification and US Krampus culture will be addressed, but fieldwork reveals less rigid group dynamics in play. Krampus group structuration within larger cultural structures reveal more subtle counterculture associations. Lastly, viewing culture as a process of structuring will allow

¹¹⁰ Z. Bauman, *Culture as Praxis*, 56; Bronner, *Explaining Tradition*, 174.

¹¹¹ Primiano, *Vernacular Religion*

for more fluid identification of the shared conceptions of Krampus activity in the United States.

Participant Voices & Shared Perspectives

Attempting to characterize a developing, collective Krampus culture in the United States is no easy task. Events occur all over the nation and localized events vary in execution and influence. They are necessarily group activities, often open for public participation, allowing for individuals to bring their own motivations and interpretations into the mix. The list of US events grows every year, making it hard to perform fieldwork in any exhaustive context. I began making contacts with Krampus group members from Portland, Los Angeles, Philadelphia, Dallas, New Orleans, and Medford, OR in winter 2017, a process that lasted into early 2019. In addition to the challenges that any fieldworker could easily cite, the nature of this particular topic came with its own set of limitations. Krampus events generally only occur once a year and group members collect situationally. As masking activities, many participants remain anonymous within the larger group context. Coupled with the public nature of the processions, this creates a peculiar kind of folk group in which members connect in relative anonymity, contribute to space creation in their otherworldly forms, and return to their everyday personas. US Krampusnacht's on-the-ground ephemerality feels appropriate given the elusive and liminal beasts that group members embody. That said, these dynamics result in a relatively small group of contributors for parsing such an expansive expressive movement. In the course of my field research, I connected with ten individuals involved in Krampus celebrations on various levels. They ranged in age from mid-twenties to

mid-fifties and most were white. Five of the participants identified as woman and the other five identified as men. Online research into regional groups and observations at Oregon events suggest that these participant demographics are relatively standard across US Krampus culture. It is worth noting that the high number of women participants is unique to US Krampus expressions. The Krampuses of the Alps are exclusively performed by men, mostly in their late teens to early thirties. Contributors hail from a handful of US cities, including Portland, Eugene, Medford, Los Angeles, Philadelphia, and New Orleans.

Through in-person and remote interviews, I was able to identify certain shared perspectives amongst the more varied points of view one would expect to surface around personal conceptions of a resituated holiday tradition. The sections that follow will focus on three key words that represent concerns of praxis that emerged most often across respective discussions of Krampus event involvement: *traditionality*, *creativity*, and *alternativity*. Presenting these key words as common structures of US Krampus culture will reveal the active formation of a prevailing ethos that repositions Krampus activity in ways specific to the relatively new US observances.

Traditionality

“There's a validation that people seek knowing that their tradition is grounded in something old.”¹¹²

-Al Ridenour

¹¹² Al Ridenour, Interview.

Considering that this work is exploring a topic steeped in traditional practice, it's not surprising that *traditionality* arises as an important keyword for exploring US Krampus culture. The analysis to follow is predicated on Simon Bronner's practice oriented definition of folklore: "*traditional knowledge put into, and drawing from, practice.*"¹¹³ This formulation intervenes on tradition's general associations with stasis. Acknowledging how ubiquitously the concept features (and how differently it positions itself) throughout the various turns of research presented here, it might be worth engaging with the term in yet another sense. When the Krampus participants invoke ideas of traditionality it is largely in the popularly conceived connotation, referencing temporality and continuation. This perception of traditionality works to imply credibility and, in some cases, claims of authenticity. Bronner's observations about notions of traditionality address the process:

Saying that something is *old* implies that it can be dated, whereas labeling an artifact or story as *traditional* means that it has been transmitted *through* time. Tradition's time can refer to the last millennium or last week, but in popular usage it suggests "time immemorial" because tradition's non-linear associations result in uncertainty about how traditions get started.¹¹⁴

As evidenced by the survey of Krampus embodiment in the first chapter, questions of origin are certainly present at the source of the materials US practitioners' access for their processions. This allows group members to position Krampus traditionality differently but to largely the same ends. Some Krampus maskers focus heavily on the traditional elements of Alpen enactments, situating the practice in its known space as an old-world syncretism with medieval roots. Others find the Krampus and bypass those origins to

¹¹³ Bronner, "Toward a Definition of Folklore," 22.

¹¹⁴ Bronner, *Explaining Tradition*, 34.

place the creature within an assumed pre-Christian ritual past, making space for broader monstrous interpretations. In either case, these associations with lasting festival activity are esoterically cast as important motivators for yearly participation in a new US holiday observance.

Monica Sears attended Portland's 2018 Krampus Lauf PDX as Julbok, or the Yule Goat, in an exquisitely constructed felted mask and a well-appointed, fur-lined robe accessorized with bells, a staff, and a large woven basket on her back. She was accompanied by a diminutive Krampus with an equally impressive mask that referenced the Alpen aesthetic intermixed with a bit of postcard-inspired Krampus (Figure 4.1). When I approached Monica after the event she agreed to contribute to my research. Later in the season, she contacted me on Facebook Messenger and pointed me toward an essay she wrote about her motivations for engaging in these kinds of events.

In every part of Europe, guising and mumming traditions continue on from ancient times with costumed celebratory or ritual figures... These cyclical mask celebrations mirrored the cycles of nature: the lengthening of the days in early spring, the quickening of the soil, the planting and fertility of crops, the harvest that sustained the people throughout the long, dark half of the year, and then the final banishment of the winter spirits to allow the spring to return.¹¹⁵

Monica is a former professional mask-maker. She discovered the Krampus and its variants after she “decided to follow the threads of the two most significant mask-themed celebrations in the United States, (Mardi Gras and Halloween) into history.”¹¹⁶ Now a nature educator, Monica views these masks and suits as surviving artifacts of an ancient, earth-based ethos. In this way, guised processioning contributes to her connections with

¹¹⁵ Monica Sears, “Masks & Mummers,” *Wildland Roots* (blog), http://www.wildlandroots.com/p/masks-mummers.html?fbclid=IwAR3OpGptjS5Ht2RvAt4_AKZNRcWkIsK_R_Dt9t5GMV_IomVXF9h7oWI3-LA

¹¹⁶ Ibid.

the natural world and heightens her sense of place. For Monica, accessing traditionality at the Portland Krampus event is not only structured as a gateway to heritage but a way to tap into something that predates the nature/culture divide generated by modernity.



Figure 4.1 Monica Sears as Julbok (L) with a Krampus masker. Photograph by Nicole Baker.

Krampus Lauf PDX organizer Arun’s attraction to the traditionality that arises around US Krampusnacht enactments is similarly positioned. He references the Krampus chant he created for the procession, which includes spelling the Krampus’s name in Elder Futhark, a Proto-Germanic runic alphabet: “...that's where that element came in, seeing this as a continuation of pre-Christian, winter celebrations that went through a form in which they existed within Christianity. And now people are getting back into those earlier cultures and figuring out how to go forward with them, without just inventing

things.”¹¹⁷ Arun also enthusiastically embraces the traditionality of the variant spirits that follow the Krampus into US processional events. As he puts it, “I love looking further into folklore and realizing that we come from this rich and amazing tapestry of interrelated traditions...”¹¹⁸ His focus on tradition as continuation, a temporal line from which “we come,” illustrates how engaging with these source materials results in a general sense of connection to a larger process of expressive diffusion.

Other event contributors place the Krampus’s traditionality as essentially Germanic and vernacularly Catholic. For these participants the point of masking and embodiment is to stay as close to the Austro-Bavarian source material as its new position in the United States will allow. This perspective is often held by people who identify strongly with German-American family backgrounds. Here the Krampus is conceived as a generally Germanic figure and the defining feature of a tradition that references a rich cultural history. Krampus LA organizer Al Ridenour discusses this when asked why he feels connected to these festival practices.

[The] idea of connecting with something really old and historical fascinated me. Particularly, you know I'm in LA, our history runs kind of thin. And maybe in some way I felt that it connected with my family's traditions because they were German and I did end up studying that and it was important to me. It was an aspect of German culture that was important because of my family background.¹¹⁹

Al’s positioning of traditionality and heritage is evidenced by the organizational steps he takes to keep the Krampus Run’s aesthetic pointed in the direction of Austrian village enactments. As he puts it, “Some of the troupes, there's more variety and there's looser guidelines of what a suit should be. I don't really have written guidelines, but I think we

¹¹⁷ Arun Ragan, Interview.

¹¹⁸ Ibid.

¹¹⁹ Al Ridenour, Interview.

put an example out there that the suit... has to adhere to some kind of European prototype.”¹²⁰ In 2015, Al began holding mask-making workshops as a way to model this philosophy. Masks are constructed from kits and Al provides fur and real animal horns that he largely acquires on eBay. In addition to the Krampus Run, Krampus LA hosts a variety of events throughout the season, including a lecture at the Goethe Institute, a Krampus Ball, and a Nicholas Play performance. The Krampus Ball was a featured event from the beginning and was initially conceived by Al and group co-founder Al Guerrero as an alternative to the run for those that may want to “just buy a pair of horns.”¹²¹ This was a conscious move to keep the Krampus Run as a space for participants who are “willing to conform to a loose prototype of what a Krampus should look like” and who are “dedicated to creating these costumes, which really take a lot of time and effort.”¹²² Al’s take on the traditionality of the Krampus LA procession is expressed by reaching toward regionally accurate portrayals of the Krampus. This orientation not only likely influenced his book, *Krampus and the Old Dark Christmas*, but also led him to establish connections with European Krampus troupes. The importance of interacting with this source material is obvious when Al talks about his efforts, “I’m proud that we’ve reached out to European groups and we’ve had the first Europeans to come... that’s something I want to really keep going. That to me is really essential... I think that it’s a great thing to offer the city, to bring people in the suits over and let them see the traditional performance.”¹²³

¹²⁰ Ibid.

¹²¹ Ibid.

¹²² Ibid.

¹²³ Ibid.

The above represents only a few participant perspectives illustrating how constructions of traditionality contribute to an emerging ethos that characterizes the form Krampus culture is taking in the United States. Leslie Wade, a member of the Krewe of Krampus, describes what appeals to him about the New Orleans group: “I have very much appreciated the melding of traditions, as we have taken the basic Alpine pattern and added NOLA touches...”¹²⁴ For Ramon Martin, a contributor to both the Portland and Houston events, issues of traditional authenticity are a major concern: “Why is it that when I look at the people in Austria, that they are just running through the streets. They're in the full-on heavy things. It's like you can't joke around about it. This stuff has been done for generations. I'd like to go to the original... and learn what I can from people who do it for real, who grew up doing that kind of thing.”¹²⁵ Krampus practice's connections to traditional endurance, while variously conceived, is ever present in the United States. Traditionality charges processional event space with an atemporal energy that may provide release from the cynicism that some people experience from being rooted in the present, particularly in the era of late capitalism. Celebrating something conceived as culturally continuous, a *survival*, could be read as a useful antidote to anxieties generated in response to a perceived dominant ethos of disposability. Embracing structures of traditionality could also be culturally useful in ameliorating social fatigue caused by navigating one's place in a nation constantly oriented toward the future. Whatever modes of “being-in-the-world” are being responded to by structuring

¹²⁴ Leslie Wade, interview by Kirk A. Peterson, November 14, 2018, transcript

¹²⁵ Ramon Martin, interview by Kirk A. Peterson, March 4, 2017, transcript.

traditionality into their practice, Krampus event participants in the United States have taken this up as a core unit of the discrete culture they are in the process of creating.

Creativity

“When I made my first Krampus suit it was because I wanted a Krampus suit. It wasn't like, ‘Where do I get a Krampus suit?’”¹²⁶

-Ramon Martin

Despite the emphasis that Krampus communities place on costume construction, the choice of the keyword *creativity* to represent one of the prevailing culture features was not immediately obvious. The processes of creative practice referenced by group members are complex. As such, any number of synonyms could stand in here (productivity, activation, craftiness, artisanal, etc.) but also somehow fall short as useful descriptors for the varied ways in which this aspect of the US Krampus ethos plays out. Here again, the ambiguous nature of the liminal creature at the center of this material imposes itself on the vernacular praxis that surrounds it. The term *creativity* will suffice for this bit of analysis, in part because of its associations with accessibility. Art and craft suggest specialty where *creativity* is often construed as an essential part of the human condition. This keyword references the generative act of making. The desire to create, to make something new, is a common motivator for members of the Krampus communities that I engaged with. *Creativity* also more inclusively represents the work the participants do in the community as a whole. Not all costumes are entirely hand-made or expertly crafted. Many regular and casual processioners use bricolage, repositioning mass-

¹²⁶ Ibid.

produced items in order to construct their own interpretations of the holiday monster. Even for those who incorporate store bought items, the emphasis is as much on the process of mask and suit construction as the product. At the events I attended and those I encountered in online research, even heavily Americanized or popular media influenced Krampus embodiments suggested creative preparation going far beyond pulling on a latex mask. Regardless of “production value,” this work is often described by participants as a kind of personal activation, a result of the creative act itself.

The foregrounding of creativity in US Krampus events is partly illustrated by acknowledging how many of those who participated in this research are professional artists. As already mentioned, Monica Sears is a former mask-maker. Ramon Martin is a leather worker, craftsman, and musician. Arun Ragan is professional screen printer. He founded Krampus Lauf PDX after exploring possibilities as a member of a counterculture art collective. Frederick Zal counts performance art among his many creative endeavors. Those who do not professionally identify as makers tend to operate in the humanities and other creative fields. Al Ridenour is a writer with a successful podcast on folk horror literature, and Leslie Wade is a playwright and a theater professor, specializing in performance studies. This list represents half of the people interviewed for this thesis, an unintentional result of the connections made during fieldwork. It is important to note that many participants are not officially working in the arts, but the drive to create was obvious across the three events I attended in December 2018.

My own experience in Krampus suit construction illuminated how embracing creativity as an ethos is not only essential to event participation, but inescapable. Once the process of designing the suit and obtaining materials was under way, the urge to

create seemed to emanate from the idea of the suit itself and only intensified through the stages of completion. Conceptualizing how I would embody the Krampus was the most challenging part. Early research into the variant European source materials complicated decisions regarding which of the myriad possible features to include. The final product included a hand-sewn, head-to-toe faux fur suit with a matching, sack-like hood that entirely obscured my head. The hood had holes cut out for eyes, mouth, and plastic horns bought in the costume section of a local drug store and painted to better resemble the ibex horns used in many Austrian village embodiments. I also crafted the customary bundles of switches from twigs taken from a decorative besom I bought at a St. Vinnie's second-hand shop, and a Christmas ribbon. The decorative broom came with a long leather strap that had three large "jingle bells" attached to it. This was affixed to an old black belt from my closet that I lined with smaller, round bells purchased at a craft store. I took the medium-sized oval bell I keep on my front door and tied that to the belt as well. Obviously, the bells were an important element for me. I was unsure about the long tongue, more indicative of postcard Krampus, but decided to represent it with a red, glittered ribbon. The end result referenced the Klausen of the Bavarian Alps with a touch of disco Czech Cert (Figure 4.2). I wore this iteration to the PDX Krampus Lauf, and modified elements for Eugene and Medford. I hand painted a plain, cardboard mask from the craft store to give the impression of carved wood, altered the bell array, and constructed new switches (Figure 4.3). Though some of the alterations were in response to logistical lessons learned at the Portland event (my first of the season) including continuously fogged glasses caused by hot breath in a full hood, the changes throughout the season became almost compulsory. This kind of cumulative, practiced creativity is

common in Krampus culture whether the events are cast as innovative or closer to the source.



Figure 4.2 Author in costume at Krampus Lauf PDX. Photograph by Nicole Baker.



Figure 4.3 Author in costume at Eugene Krampus Krawl. Photograph by Nicole Baker.

Creativity, as an essential structure of participant experience, is celebrated and encouraged by organizers. Arun explains how this element is paramount to his continued involvement: “I love seeing what people bring to it. I love what it brings out in artists... all the different art [and] media... their own take on it is a delightful thing.”¹²⁷ Arun’s take on mask construction is centered around a DIY approach that is accessible to almost anyone. He uses a simple technique in which tinfoil and masking tape are the primary media. The process starts with pressing a reasonably thick sheet of foil onto the head and

¹²⁷ Arun Ragan, Interview.

face to make kind of molded base for the mask. The next step involves layering strips of masking tape to reinforce the foil. When the basic shape is finished, more foil and tape can be added to create more pronounced features and protrusions. According to Arun, “It lends itself to such a wide variety of idiosyncratic styles and ranges and its relatively inexpensive. It’s very entry-level accessible and very forgiving so you don’t have to be an artist. You can just be somebody who wants to make a mask.”¹²⁸

The tinfoil and tape mask-making process is catching on, likely for the reasons Arun points out. Amber introduced the same technique to participants in Philadelphia, a group that keeps entry-level making close to the center of its philosophy. In Amber’s words, “I always wanted to make sure the we did not become the ‘biggest or best’ event, that a paper bag mask was as good as a museum-quality costume from Austria, or something that someone worked on all year and spent hundreds of dollars making.”¹²⁹

The organizers of the 2018 Eugene Krampus Krawl posted a tutorial of the foil and tape method on their Facebook event page and one of the leaders of the procession wore a creation that illustrated its versatility. Arun uses this technique to create impressively grotesque masks that are staggering in their complexity. Another important feature of masks constructed by this method, according to Arun, is their impermanence: “They don’t necessarily last. There’s an ephemeral quality to them and that’s a fun thing about it too: Each year’s masks, making those.”¹³⁰ This idea underscores the role creativity plays in US Krampus culture. Most Krampus maskers in Austria commission trained artisans to make their masks and, carved from pine, they are meant to last. For participants in the

¹²⁸ Ibid.

¹²⁹ Amber Dorko Stopper, interview by Kirk A. Peterson, March 18, 2017, transcript.

¹³⁰ Arun Ragan, Interview.

United States annually, creating new material is as much a part of their seasonal practice as the processions themselves.

For many in the US, the discovery of the Krampus instantly folded into their art practices and affinities for making. Ramon's primary involvement in Krampus event culture is centered on suit and mask construction. In addition to doing commissioned work for Krampus enthusiasts nationwide, he annually constructs an impressive suit for a friend to wear during procession. Previously in Houston and now in Portland, he joins the Lauf primarily as what he refers to as a "Krampus Handler."¹³¹ The suit he created for Krampus Lauf PDX 2018 fully references the Krampus of Austrian villages. It is a hulking mass of fur with a single, large cattle bell at the front. The mask is made from shaped leather instead of carved wood, but the shift of medium is almost impossible to visually determine. The exaggerated facial features are artfully achieved in the warping planes and protrusions that he teases out of the material. The customary towering horns are also present, shaped in leather. Ramon explains how his leatherworking practice and preferred Krampus aesthetic merge in his work:

I knew how to shape leather, so I could replicate something in leather. Sculpt it, wet shape it, and then lacquer it. Then I've got basically kind of like a carved mask. All of the Krampus suits that I've made are all based on my sort of interpretations of suits that I've seen in photos [from Europe]. *Not* modern ones. A lot of the modern ones become sort of grotesque - they seem to me like they are borrowing from a lot of American horror films. Or a horror film aesthetic and I actually think that the older stuff is creepier.¹³²

Ramon acknowledges that not all participants take this approach to the creativity structured into US Krampus events: "And there's everybody else that just put together

¹³¹ Ramon Martin, interview.

¹³² Ibid.

what they can... and you know, there's like financial stuff. 'I don't have the money or the time to invest in the Krampus suit.'" He recalls how organizers of Houston Krampus Krampage address these kinds of limitations in order to keep creativity front and center: "The people who put it on like to have costume workshops, so people just don't go costumeless. So, you'll have some sort of element of an outfit... They're good because they're trying to, based on what little things that they have, they're trying to create something."¹³³ This emphasis on creative practice across the spectrum of participants is obvious as the season approaches and Facebook event pages activate. After event dates are set, early posts are almost exclusively geared toward suit and mask making tips, leads on acquiring materials, and visual examples of traditional embodiments.

Creativity as a structure of praxis in US Krampusnacht activities is cyclical in nature, acting as a kind of perpetual motion machine fueling energies of motivation, inspiration, and lasting commitment. Al Ridenour attests to how creativity functions as a significant point of entry for people seeking an alternative seasonal tradition, "In a way it sort of began with me wanting to make costumes and masks and I think for a lot of other people too. What's really important is sort of the creative, technical, artistic challenge."¹³⁴ Creativity, in this sense, may be functioning to offset larger structures of abstracted consumption that seem to define the Christmas season experience for many in the United States. Amber suggests this when she talks about Krampus activity, "Well, it certainly keeps one from being too focused on the commercial aspect of the long Christmas season."¹³⁵ By embracing creativity as a core element of their seasonal

¹³³ Ibid.

¹³⁴ Al Ridenour, interview.

¹³⁵ Amber Dorko Stopper, interview.

practice, members of US Krampus culture seem to be privileging active, generative productivity to drown out capitalist, pre-holiday messaging.

Alternativity

“The Krampus is embraced as a sort of rebellious figure. The more I got to know the figure, I realized there was a tug of war between tradition and innovation and rebellion that occupies an interesting place.”¹³⁶

-Al Ridenour

In the context of this analysis, the keyword *alternativity* refers to the various levels of counter-narrativity that research participants differently acknowledged or embraced when discussing their involvement in US Krampus events. Etically, it seems easy to parse an at least implicit countercultural ethos emerging in the construction of a larger Krampus culture in the United States. The Krampus is a devil, making semiotic associations with oppositional activities and ideologies impossible to escape, particularly in western cultures. In fact, when taken together, all three of the keywords addressed in this chapter seem to work to construct a counternarrative in their own discrete ways. In the previous chapters, communities that gather around Krampus-related activities have been referred to as subgroups, and as having subordinate culture positioning. I acknowledge that not all casual *or* heavily involved participants would necessarily identify with that designation. Engaging with Paul Hodkinson’s four indicators of subculture is an appropriate way to address emic and etic considerations here, and a nice movement

¹³⁶ Al Ridenour, interview.

toward illustrating how the concept of alternativity recuperates on-the-ground discrepancies.

Hodkinson introduces four features that seem to be common to subcultural expression: consistent distinctiveness, autonomy, identity, and commitment. These criteria are neither essential nor exhaustive. As Hodkinson points out: “Rather than these four comprising a definitive blueprint, each of them should be regarded as a contributory feature which, taken cumulatively with others, increases the appropriateness of the term *subculture*, in the relative degree to which each is applicable.”¹³⁷ Briefly unpacking how these indicators function will reveal that casting US Krampus group activity as subcultural is in some sense appropriate but, like so many aspects of this expressive material, operates on a sliding scale determined by seasonal enactment and widely distributed localities. Krampus groups in the US certainly qualify as being collectively distinctive. For Hodkinson, this element of subculture relies on “the existence of a set of shared tastes and values which is distinctive from those of other groups and reasonably consistent, from one participant to the next, one place to the next, and one year to the next”¹³⁸ This feature of US Krampus event culture is evidenced by the common structures currently being identified. Participants are also easily distinguished from other groups in a number of ways, most obviously by their desire to gather in public places disguised as demons and monsters. Krampus groups in the United States also exhibit autonomy in that “...a good proportion of the productive or organizational activities are undertaken by and for enthusiasts.”¹³⁹ This is illustrated by their foregrounding of

¹³⁷ Hodkinson, 29.

¹³⁸ Ibid., 30

¹³⁹ Ibid.

creativity and the fact that in most cases Krampus event organizers are also active processioners.

Less relevant, but still present, are identity and commitment, as Hodkinson defines them. The degree to which participants see themselves part of a “...distinct cultural grouping and share feelings of identity with one another...” is arguable and likely varies from group to group.¹⁴⁰ Some veteran organizers and participants operate in a consistent network, but the seasonality of the events coupled with the built-in anonymity of masking likely intervenes on formations of shared identity outside of the event space itself. This kind of ephemerality rules out sustained commitment as a reliable subculture indicator for US Krampus event participants. Notably, more consistent identification can be tracked to a slightly greater degree in social media interactions. Commitment, in the sense Hodkinson proposes, is almost entirely situational for event group contributors. The extent that involvement in Krampus activities “...influence extensively the everyday lives of participants in practice...” probably varies individually but this kind of commitment spikes seasonally and might, for more casual members, only be relevant in the days leading up to the event.¹⁴¹ It is telling that even the least appropriate of Hodkinson’s signifying processes emerge around the culminating activity of the Krampus celebration. This being the case, it may be appropriate to cast US Krampus culture as a subculture provided it is qualified as situational or even seasonal. Leveraging cultural studies frameworks that cast culture as a system of structuring activities in praxis provides much needed analytical elbow room

¹⁴⁰ Ibid., 30-31

¹⁴¹ Ibid, 31

for positioning the subcultural interests presented by US Krampus event participants as expressions of alternativity.

Members of the emerging Krampus culture in the United States structure the alternativity of their interest and involvement in a variety of ways. One of the most common acknowledgements in this direction centers explicitly on opportunities to participate in personally meaningful festival opportunities within the inescapable schema of the Christmas season. Many contributors were quick to separate their activities from the messy terrain suggested by US culture conflict buzz phrases and the so-called *War on Christmas*. For them, the alternative nature of Krampus-themed celebration is part of a much more subtle process of space-making through a kind of sub-traditional practice that is related to – and exists alongside – more familiar winter holiday expressions. As Al Ridenour puts it:

I think people in... less traditional areas, are always looking for ways to accommodate the common mainstream culture. Ways to fit with it but still define themselves. Christmas is one of those times when there's so many cultural signifiers. Where do you fit in? There's sort of always that search for what's this holiday that you can't really escape no matter what variation you're confronted with.¹⁴²

Throughout the 1990s, Al was a member of an enclave of grassroots, underground expressive activity operating on the west coast of the US known as the Cacophony Society. The Cacophony Society began in San Francisco in 1986 and spawned multiple “lodges” in a variety of west coast cities. Notably, members of this group were responsible for the creation of the Burning Man festival, now a well-known site of counterculture contestation. Al founded the Los Angeles lodge of the Cacophony Society

¹⁴² Al Ridenour, interview.

in 1991. One of their first initiatives was the organization of the “Santa flash mob” they dubbed the Santa Rampage.¹⁴³ Like Burning Man, this event concept would proliferate, eventually outgrowing its vernacular roots to inspire drunken, chaotic SantaCons in cities all over the world. While Al is quick to point out that the Los Angeles Krampus run is an entirely different event, he acknowledges that the original motivations that predicated the formation of the Santa Rampage are similar to those that make participation in US Krampus events appealing to some people: “I think that was embraced by a lot of us for the same reason I'm describing: Looking for some kind of alternative holiday tradition. So we felt like we didn't miss out. We were doing something fun too.”¹⁴⁴ Often, the alternativity that Al describes necessarily intersects with how traditionality is structured within US Krampus event culture. According to Al, “People like the idea that this is not only an older tradition, but it is morally embraced as a sort of dark and light. A wider spectrum of the holiday, of our lives. There's a darkness that's not allowed in the strip mall Christmas.”¹⁴⁵ Many participants are drawn to these seasonal enactments precisely because they make space for literal and figurative references to darkness inside a prevailing system of festival symbols preoccupied with illumination.

Krewe of Krampus member Leslie Wade hints at the allure of the events' darker aspects when considering what incited his interest in the tradition, “I was drawn by the frightening aspects of the costumes and the what-the-hell attitude.”¹⁴⁶ Al positions his initial attraction to the Krampus and its performed material similarly, “I always had kind

¹⁴³ Al Ridenour, interview.

¹⁴⁴ Ibid.

¹⁴⁵ Ibid.

¹⁴⁶ Leslie Wade, interview.

of a dark sensibility. I like horror films. I like gothic literature. So, that scene, coming to Christmas and the holiday in that way was very appealing to me.”¹⁴⁷ For Arun, the interplay of light and darkness made available through participation in the Portland Krampus procession provides physical and psychological benefits that mainstream constructions of the Christmas holiday in the United States would otherwise impede.

In my own story, Christmas was just this very weird, dead time of the year emotionally. I was finding ways to ignore it. I would get so down... because I was messing up my seasonal emotional clock... this little emotional clock that was set up as a child. And then suddenly, there is a way to participate. And it's a way that totally appeals to where so much of my own art and inspiration comes from... everything that I wanted was there.¹⁴⁸

Krampus Lauf PDX has had many mottos in its nine years of activity, including “Bringing the Horror back to the Holidays” and “Invite the shadow to your party and it's much less likely to creep up behind you.”¹⁴⁹ These sentiments underscore how the insertion of the darker and less predictable festival material Krampus traditions grant participants are used to structure abstractions of traditional alterity.

The space where dark and light meet during the winter holiday season is celebrated by some Krampus group members and occasionally actively resisted by outside spectators. A Krampus enthusiast I met while participating in the Eugene event explained to me that her earlier efforts to organize an event in the city were abandoned after being accused by a group of people on social media of trying to ruin Christmas. Also in Eugene, a mother shielded her seemingly middle-school aged son's eyes as our Krampus procession passed by the restaurant they were patronizing. Reactions like these

¹⁴⁷ Al Ridenour, interview.

¹⁴⁸ Arun Ragan, interview.

¹⁴⁹ Ibid.

erroneously cast US Krampus culture alternativity as aggressively menacing or even Satanic. More often these esoteric-versus-exoteric constructions are more nuanced. In addition to the Krampusnacht procession, Arun will sometimes invite Krampus maskers to collect at Portland's Peacock Lane on the Winter Solstice. Peacock Lane is one of many neighborhoods in the United States that pool together unofficially to create a holiday light and decoration spectacle. Arun recounts an experience of this auxiliary Krampus season event at what he calls "The local, compulsory, totalitarian Christmas street":

When we did go to Peacock Lane, it was a little bit more confrontive. It was a little bit more like, 'War on Christmas, or we're just trying to take our kids in from out in the burbs and show them some Christmas. Why do you guys have to come and mess it up for us.' There was a little bit more of that whereas other people loved it. Some people who actually lived there gave us their front porch as a stage on which to do our carol. They loved it because they're trapped in this dystopian Christmas nightmare. That is like everything that this is a reaction to. Once again, it's one of those things where people are like, 'what are you guys doing?' And we're like, 'This isn't the War on Christmas, this *is* Christmas. This is just the Christmas that hasn't been neutered and turned into a diabetic by all the sugar.'¹⁵⁰

Vacillations between explicit counterculture narrative and less threatening characterizations of event participation are common in US Krampus culture. In his presentation on the New Orleans Krewe of Krampus at the 2018 European Popular Culture Conference, Leslie Wade acknowledges the oppositional draw of the event referencing a fellow Krewe member who "confessed to joining for the darker side," but goes on to position the duality of light and dark – as performed at the New Orleans events – in a very different ways: "...the interplay of Krampus and St. Nick dictates the triumph of good, the affirmation of hope, the celebration of creativity and reanimation of a

¹⁵⁰ Arun Ragan, interview.

wounded, often maligned city.”¹⁵¹ The use of the term triumph here seems to be a particularly American way to parse the relationship between Krampus and St. Nicholas, a figure often absent (or at least backgrounded) at many US processional events. Al pushes back against ideas that performing the Krampus in the United States suggests open opposition to contemporary celebrations of US Christmas: “There’s plenty of darkness in there that a lot of people want but as for destroying the idea of Christmas... The Christmas that people are rebelling against is perhaps [from] the 1950s, or whatever their parents came from, not even that old. It’s sort of a small, petty battle to be fighting.”¹⁵² Alternativity in US Krampus culture is generally approached as a given element of participation, while explicitly oppositional ideas are carefully navigated. It would be wrong to assume that Krampus group members are out to dismantle the contemporary US Christmas holiday. In fact, they seem to be optimizing internal and external conceptions of the *alternative* to find a place within it that suits them. Many still celebrate Christmas on December 25 with a Krampus ornament hanging somewhere on their tree. By structuring alternativity into the ethos of their emergent culture US Krampus group participants are at least tacitly embracing a counternarrative. That these events generally occur in early December, at the height of the commercial holiday frenzy, could be a clue to what dominant narrative is being countered. Ultimately, embracing an alternative requires some level of rejection of the *other thing*; an act of opposition in itself.

¹⁵¹ Leslie Wade, “European Folkloric Performance in Post-Katrina New Orleans: Welcoming Krampus to the Big Easy.” (presentation at the 2018 European Popular Culture Conference, Prague, CZ, July 26, 2018).

¹⁵² Al Ridenour, interview.

The Folk Devil's Next Steps

Structures of traditionality, creativity, and alternativity were easily the most pronounced US Krampus culture elements that emerged from the event participants I interacted with directly, whether formally or informally. These shared associations were also evident in online spaces. Each of these elements intersect and seem to point toward a praxis of response to generally commercial or specifically consumer-based formulations of traditional holiday observances. Practiced traditionality reacts to a newer-is-better ethos, essential to advertising strategies and mass-production. Creativity favors generation over consumption. US Krampus culture's inherent alternativity creates a protected space for its sister structures to evolve in practice, preferably unsullied by dominant culture radiations.

Many of the organizers who participated in this research expressed various levels of disquiet over the Krampus's increasing popularity (likely a result of mass cultural diffusion) and what it might mean for the longevity of their grassroots enactment. According to Al: "Because the Krampus stuff attracts the counterculture, there's always this huge sensitivity to when something has peaked. There's fear of mainstreaming. As things are embraced by the mainstream, will we lose people that consider it played out?" Amber shares a similar concern when addressing why she changed the event name from Krampuslauf Philadelphia to Parade of Spirits: "...it does not take long for these things to reach their saturation point. I still don't understand how these things go from being sort of fringe... to bargain-bin craft store saturation. It seemed very likely to us that Krampus would have the same thing happen to him, and I think that by 2016 it had started."¹⁵³

¹⁵³ Amber Dorko Stopper, interview.

Arun puts it in much simpler terms, “We're all cautious of something becoming a thing. As soon as something is a thing its doomed. Its doomed to die. As soon as it's a thing, there's the anti-thing, and now there's the post-thing.”¹⁵⁴ What is being described here is conspicuously in line with the description of subculture trajectories that cultural studies scholar Dick Hebdige presents in *Subculture: The Meaning of Style*.¹⁵⁵ In his formulation, any subculture begins as a communication of counternarrative through expressive and material means. Once the subculture becomes recognizable enough to generate anxiety in the mainstream its ideological and symbolic output are detoothered by dominant culture commodification. This incorporation can be accelerated through media representations or the mass production of the subculture's material signifiers. The result is the dissolution of the subculture. Drawing the connections between Hebdige's theory and the perspectives of on-the-ground Krampus event organizers again moves US Krampus event culture close to the subcultural sphere. There is no doubt that latex Krampus masks available for purchase at Walmart.com and depictions of the figure in mass media as a creature-feature antagonist (or a pantomime of over-the-top bad behavior) could suggest that the US Krampus is being “...trivialized, naturalized, domesticated... [and] transformed into meaningless exotica.”¹⁵⁶ This certainly seems like a real possibility to veteran Krampus event organizers in the United States.

If the emergent, discrete cultural structures identified above position US Krampus event participants as (at least) subculture adjacent and “subcultures express forbidden contents... in forbidden forms,” how much of a threat does the Krampus' interactions

¹⁵⁴ Arun Ragan, interview.

¹⁵⁵ Hebdige, “Subculture.”

¹⁵⁶ Hebdige, 358.

with mediated spaces and mass culture pose to the expressions of counternarrative in play?¹⁵⁷ According to Hebdige, “As the subculture begins to strike its own eminently marketable pose... the fractured order is repaired and the subculture incorporated as a diverting spectacle within the dominant mythology from which it emanates: as ‘folk devil’, as Other, as Enemy.”¹⁵⁸ In the current US popular culture landscape, this may not be where the story ends. The interplay between Santa Claus’s late-capitalist associations and Krampus’ oppositional symbolic power suggests that the marketable pose might just boost the counternarrative. After all, seasonal celebration and popular consumption are hard to separate in the United States. Investigating the dialogics that emerge around Krampus-related material across presumed levels of culture as a kind of traditional praxis will reveal a more complicated view of how this particular folk devil is consumed and employed to reinforce or contest dominant culture representations of Christmas tradition. The following chapter will reveal the complications that intentional practice introduces to rigid interpretations of subculture and popular culture separation.

¹⁵⁷ Ibid., 355.

¹⁵⁸ Ibid., 356.

CHAPTER V

THE US KRAMPUS WRIT LARGE: MEDIATED TRANSMISSION AND MASS CULTURE REPRESENTATION

Having investigated the multivocality of meaning-making as it relates to the interplay of tradition and cultural utility among members of grounded US Krampus event groups, a broader look at the interactions between the repositioned festival material and heavily mediated communication processes is in order. The Krampus has a long history of mass culture representation and transmission precipitated by technological innovations and their effects on modes of vernacular practice. From the early proliferation of mass-produced postcards in Europe to widely shared images from tourism websites, the Krampus can credit its transnational locomotion to an eddy of incorporation and excorporation processes. These mechanisms illustrate the “...cyclical link between thought and action in the organization of culture – folk, popular, and elite as well as analog and digital...” that Simon Bronner identifies as part of his practice-oriented definition of folklore.¹⁵⁹ Juxtaposing the Krampus’s origins and longevity in its syncretized festival incarnation with its consistent, contemporary presence in English-language online communities and popular culture spaces raises important questions: How did St. Nicholas’s punishing, therianthropic partner make its way from Alpen passes to trample through the supposed barriers of folk, institutional, and mass delineation in United States public culture, and in what ways has the journey changed what the Krampus represents?

¹⁵⁹ Bronner, “Toward a Definition of Folklore,” 22.

Addressing these questions from the perspective of practice theory allows for analysis to comfortably occur in spaces where the tripartite vernacular/official/popular conceptions of cultural processes perforate. Regardless of (or perhaps, due to) the undulations of US Krampus activity through cultural fields, this emergent holiday tradition is undeniably definable as folklore in the most contemporary sense of the word. Here we have material that relies on traditional knowledge for expression and requires dynamic practices of expression to drive its continued enactment. What may complicate this definition for some folklorists is the mediated wells from which that traditional knowledge is often drawn and the unexpected forms the “tradition bearers” may take. Bronner asserts, “As a fundamental human capacity and need, the production of folklore to represent tradition is a continuous vital force, and it is imperative to view how it is enacted with and problematized by the media, old and new.”¹⁶⁰ Embracing this view facilitates a more nuanced exploration of what differently characterized interpretations and uses of Krampus-related materials in online (folk) networks seem to have in common. Mass culture representations emerge from those commonalities only to be continuously reemployed to contest or reinforce a perceived ethos of consumption associated with the US Christmas season.

US Krampus (Digital) Culture

The following section represents an analysis of US Krampus culture processes as they unfurl in online spaces. I performed online research involving two overlapping methodological approaches. First, I leveraged the internet in its archival sense, accessing

¹⁶⁰ Bronner, *Explaining Traditions*, 449.

Krampus related material across a variety of digital platforms including YouTube, Tumblr, Instagram, and Facebook. Second, I participated in social media participant observation and online ethnography by interacting with US Krampus culture members in multiple Facebook groups and pages. Facebook easily exhibits the most identifiable and organized interactions of Krampus event participants and general enthusiasts operating within the United States. Interactions with these online communities reveal how participants in US Krampus culture are using digital networks as what Bronner refers to as “folk systems” to connect and express shared ideologies similar to those outlined in the previous chapter.¹⁶¹ Recognizing folk systems on the internet relies on the assumption that culture is constructivist in nature. As Bronner explains:

In a constructivist concept of culture individuals choose with whom they affiliate and the customs in which they participate; they may hybridize different traditions to create a distinctive cultural persona... This constructivist outlook, which does not have a baseline for the extent, location, economic status, literacy, or antiquity of the group, lends itself to the centrality of network as the social basis of folkloric communication on the internet.¹⁶²

Referencing the Krampus’s digital introduction into the contemporary seasonal calendar in the United States alongside early organizational efforts by event group founders on social media highlights the folk network in exactly the sense that Bronner suggests. The reality that these folk systems operate in an ambiguous locality where vernacular and official interests comingle complicates assumptions about how the transmission of traditional praxis operates. Analysis of the new processes of online, constructivist culture formation in the context of the US Krampus reveals how enactments and productions of the figure are evolving as its symbolic material continues to diffuse.

¹⁶¹ Ibid., 399.

¹⁶² Ibid., 419.

The Krampus's entryway into the United States through online spaces is commonly acknowledged by event participants. What started with digitized images of nineteenth and early twentieth century Austrian postcards of a long-tongued devil offering Christmas greetings would expand into widely shared videos and images of European Krampusläufe. In his previously mentioned book *The Krampus and the Old, Dark Christmas: Roots and Rebirth of the Folkloric Devil*, Al Ridenour identifies Krampus materials that circulated online in the early 2000s: "...photographs of dozens if not hundreds of people impressively costumed as the creature and massing on clearly contemporary European streets."¹⁶³ Ridenour is referencing images from urban Krampusläufe. These Krampus runs have been occurring in Austrian and German city centers since at least the 1970s and differ in character from the village enactments. While many include the Krampus in more traditional forms, these carnivalesque parades focus on spectacle and adult license. Some participants in these events have embraced a shift from the traditional masks and suits toward more wearable latex masks pushing the Krampus into the realm of Hollywood-style horror, complete with melting skin and blinking, red, LED eyes. Exposure to the urban events led some North Americans to follow the Krampus further into the internet, discovering more traditional village enactments and a wide array of related variants. By the onset of the 2010s, this festival material was being embraced by groups of people in the United States as an alternative way to celebrate the winter holidays.

It was around this time that Arun Ragan created the Facebook group Krampuscon 2010 to archive Krampus related digital materials and begin organizing a "Krampus party

¹⁶³ Ridenour, 8.

slash performance play-party, burlesque thing” at what he referred to as the “anarcho-art space” Autonomy.¹⁶⁴ The art space folded while Arun was in the process of planning the event, and his efforts turned toward organizing a Krampus procession in a largely commercial district of southeast Portland. Since this first event, Arun has created the page Krampus Lauf PDX to continue organizing the Lauf which has occurred every year since. Arun describes his first Facebook community:

If you go to Krampuscon 2010 you can find a lot of these links and large albums of pictures that were collected when I was just combing through more of the traditions and a lot of early things. You kind of have to go back and go back and go back on it. It’s just a page on Facebook, which sounds kind of funny but that’s the cheap and easy way to organize.¹⁶⁵

Arun’s first organizing page exemplifies network hybridity in its most basic, early interpretation as an acknowledgement of lives being actively lived in both physical and digital spaces. The Portland group’s founder and organizer was using Facebook’s mediated connectivity potential not only to archive online Krampus materials, but as a base of operations for a grassroots event in which like-minded people are invited to gather and procession as the Krampus. As folklorist Robert Glenn Howard points out, “This sense of hybridity is... rapidly becoming obsolete because the ubiquity of network communications is rendering this distinction less and less meaningful”.¹⁶⁶ For Arun and other early US Krampus event organizers, this kind of network hybridity was essential to their missions to superimpose the Krampus on urban spaces of holiday commerce. The concept of delocalization in online communication may be more useful to understand the role social media played in further proliferating the performed Krampus in the US.

¹⁶⁴ Arun Ragan, interview.

¹⁶⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶⁶ Howard, 252.

Lynne S. McNeill identifies how digital communication technologies lead to this delocalization process and the subsequent phenomenon of multilocalization that then results in translocality:

...we have redefined the idea of ‘where’ our social relationships take place – they have become *delocalized*. Similarly, place no longer determines our social roles... With regard to our identities in different locales, we have become *multilocalized*, embodying multiple localities – and our roles within those various localities – all at once... The increasing separation of social space from physical space has been noted by social scientists for many years now, and the opportunity for a more functional *translocality* is still emerging.¹⁶⁷

Early interactions on the Krampuscon 2010 community page provide interesting examples of this process in practice. Unbeknownst to Arun and his collaborators at the time, Krampus enthusiasts in Columbia, South Carolina were also planning a Krampusnacht procession in 2010. The two groups became aware of each other through their respective social media presences. In a post from December 5, 2010 a participant from the Columbia Krampusnacht Gruppe commented “Good luck SisterLauf from your friends in the Southeast!”

Arun recounts another important connection that he made through the Krampuscon 2010 page:

Amber Dorko Stopper who is one of the people of the family that’s at the center of the Philadelphia Krampuslauf, which is now the Parade of Spirits... she was just like this mysterious person that came out of the blue who was really present with this. You know, it’s like post by post has input and thoughtful responses. It was one of those rare examples of Facebook precipitating genuine friendships that materialize in real-time.¹⁶⁸

¹⁶⁷ McNeill, 93.

¹⁶⁸ Arun Ragan, interview.

Amber explains how this interaction incited her interest in Krampus processions, “The traditional Krampus was something I just came across in a friend’s Facebook feed in 2010, and in searching further I saw ...videos of Krampus events where the ‘participants’ outweighed the spectators...”¹⁶⁹ The following year Amber and her family would organize the first Philadelphia Krampuslauf which still takes place as the Parade of Spirits. These online experiences are not uncommon and support Bronner’s observation that, “...the internet *facilitates, mediates, and produces* tradition on the computer screen.”¹⁷⁰ As more Krampus material circulated on social media, more localized events were organized in US cities. Organizers and participants from all over the country would “like” one another’s pages and join each other’s groups in order to share ideas for mask making, costume construction, and images from European events. The Krampuscon 2010 page features the tagline “You have had enough of Santa, now is time for Krampus.” Today, the Krampus Lauf PDX page motto is, “The Krampus Lauf marches on and gets craftier as it goes.” These mottos represent an evolution of an implicit anti-commercial ethos Krampus groups seem to share regardless of the character of their respective localized celebrations. With a noted annual increase of events taking place all over the United States, such groups are optimizing online multilocality to develop events in their towns and build on an emergent shared culture via digital networks unbounded by physical distance.

The Krampus Society Facebook page was created on November 18, 2013. The page is listed as a “community” and the “about” section of their profile reads:

¹⁶⁹ Amber Dorko Stopper, interview.

¹⁷⁰ Bronner, *Explaining Tradition*, 401.

“@KrampusSociety is made up of people who LOVE the Krampus Legend. We are driven to spread this legend throughout all of North America. JOIN US!”¹⁷¹ The page seems to be tied to processional events in Texas – specifically the Dallas Krampus Walk and Krampusnacht Denton – but unlike some other event organizing pages, the Krampus Society is quite active in encouraging a broader conversation among Krampus culture participants across the United States. During the festival season, the page administrator regularly solicits its followers for updates on Krampus related events near them in order to boost their visibility. The page also features regular posts in which members of the community are asked to share photos of their costumes or provide commentary on how they make meaning from Krampus event participation or interactions with the Krampus in other cultural forms. On November 17, 2018, the Krampus Society posted the following message: “SHOW US YOUR KRAMPUS IN THIS POST!!!!!! DO IT! Share your passion for Krampus.”¹⁷² The post received 127 replies featuring photos of event participants from all over the country embodying various interpretations of the Krampus. Other responses featured images of Krampus artwork, handmade toys, Christmas trees decorated with Krampus ornaments, previous processional events in other cities, and one tattoo. Earlier in the season, on October 29, the page administrator posted, “OK... Spill it... What is Krampus to you? Many people have different opinions.”¹⁷³ This post received 21 replies and the following sentiments were included among them:

Since I am a progressive, open minded Catholic, a way to celebrate all types of traditions, ancient and universal and appreciating the shared symbolism.

¹⁷¹ “The Krampus Society,” Facebook page, accessed November 19, 2018. https://www.facebook.com/pg/krampussociety/about/?ref=page_internal

¹⁷² Ibid.

¹⁷³ Ibid.

Krampus brought our family closer together. My brother in law introduced my daughter to Krampus when she was small. The next year, she asked Santa for a Krampus doll, which I made myself. Each Christmas we have exchanged some sort of Krampus item with the family. It is a tradition that will not be forgotten in our home.

For me, Krampus is a reminder of how ancient the celebration of Christmas/the Winter Solstice really is. He's a reminder of the cold and dark that separates us from the warm light of goodness. And while he's frightening there is a righteousness to him. He makes us appreciate the opportunities we have every day to be kind to our fellow man and to spread glad tidings of comfort and joy.

For me Krampus is the counter point to the sickening sweetness of Christmas. I have despised Christmas for many years, as an adult I couldn't see what there was to get excited about? Christmas is full of expectations, such as I'm going to go broke buying gifts! Or I have to run around to everyone's Christmas dinner... Then I heard about Krampus, and I fell in love with the idea. It's a way of having spooky fun during "the most wonderful time of the year" a way of honoring my ancestors and a way of taking out the trash figuratively and spiritually!

On December 20, toward the end of the season, the Krampus Society posted a similar question, "What is Krampus to you? As the Krampus time winds down... there are many thoughts. Is this an exclusive club that only the talented folks who make costumes or the ones who can afford them can join? We don't think so. Let's dialog. We would love to hear all sides."¹⁷⁴ This post received twenty-six replies in which many of the same nods to personal forms of cultural utility were referenced. There is clear variation in these responses, but many of the meaning-making formulations overlap. The Krampus Society's purposefully delocalized nature emphasizes the constructive aspect of culture-making as it plays out in social media spaces. By sharing their expressive material and individual meaning-making processes on the Facebook page, enthusiasts and participants

¹⁷⁴ Ibid, accessed December 18, 2018.

contribute to the formation of a US Krampus culture that continues to shape their traditional practices.

The US Krampus's presence on Facebook is not limited to event planning, tip sharing, and references to traditional material. As Krampus related pages and groups – generated by US actors – gain followers and members, new digital expressions increasingly emerge alongside organizational and inspirational posts. As the online folk network of digital Krampus culture becomes more established, contributors are more likely to adopt modes of communicating social cohesion that reference the vernacular languages of internet practice. Whether devoted to localized events or general interest, Krampus communities on Facebook are embracing the internet meme as another way to structure their alternativity. In *Memes in Digital Culture*, Limor Shifman offers a definition of the internet meme that highlights user agency, intervening on the assumptions of passive transmission essential to earlier movements in mimetic studies: “Instead of depicting the meme as a single cultural unit that has propagated successfully, I suggest defining an Internet meme as (a) a *group of digital items sharing common characteristics* of content, form, and/or stance; (b) that were created *with awareness of each other*; and (c) were circulated, imitated, and/or transformed *via the Internet by many users.*”¹⁷⁵ The image macros and instances of widely shared Krampus “fan art” that circulate within online US Krampus networks meet all of these criteria, the emphasis here falling on stance, awareness, and repetition. Unpacking the content of some of the most common US Krampus memes from Facebook communities reveals how the nuanced

¹⁷⁵ Limor Shifman, “Introduction,” *Memes in Digital Culture*, (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2013), 7-8.

ideologies constructed by individual group members begin to undergo a flattening process that foregrounds a general narrative of opposition.

On December 18, 2018, a member of the Medford Krampus Krawl's public, organizational Facebook group posted an image macro meme featuring art from an Austrian Krampus postcard. The illustration shows the long-tongued, devil Krampus holding a frightened, struggling child by his ears. The Krampus's hands are bound by a long chain and it strikes an appropriately threatening pose. The added text above the image reads, "OH SURE, EVERYBODY SAYS THEY WANT TO KEEP CHRISTMAS TRADITIONAL" and continues at the bottom, "BUT WHEN I DRESS UP LIKE THE KRAMPUS AND PUT THEIR BRATS IN A SACK AND BEAT THEM WITH REEDS, SUDDENLY I'VE GONE TOO FAR."¹⁷⁶ This meme, and several iterations of it, appear in posts across the larger US Krampus Facebook network. The sentiment can be read as a response to outsider conceptions of Krampusnacht events as aggressions against traditional Christmas in the United States or could allude to the recent "put the Christ back in Christmas" movement. The meme's stance is oppositional and rhetorically weaponizes claims toward traditionality that set it against contemporary Christmas in the United States. Another meme referencing traditionality in this way appeared on the Krampus Society and Krampus DIY Projects Facebook pages. Krampus DIY Projects (as one might surmise) mostly posts links to make-up and costume making tutorials that maskers can adapt to the fabrication of Krampus suits. On December 1, 2018, the page posted an image of a fur-clad, masked guiser holding a pitchfork and standing in front of

¹⁷⁶ "Medford Krampus Krawl," Facebook page, accessed December 28, 2018 <https://www.facebook.com/groups/340018856470654/>.

a bonfire. Typed in white text at the top the image are the words, “ME: I PROMISE I WON’T TALK ABOUT THE PAGAN ORIGINS OF CHRISTMAS THIS YEAR” and in larger font size below, “3 DRINKS LATER.”¹⁷⁷ (Figure 5.1) The Krampus Society posted the meme weeks before, on November 22, with the disclaimer that it was a “total repost.” That post was then shared 539 times.

The Facebook page Krampus – Klaubauf, described by its creator as a “roleplay page about Krampus,” features meme sharing in addition to art posts and Krampus-themed fan fiction.

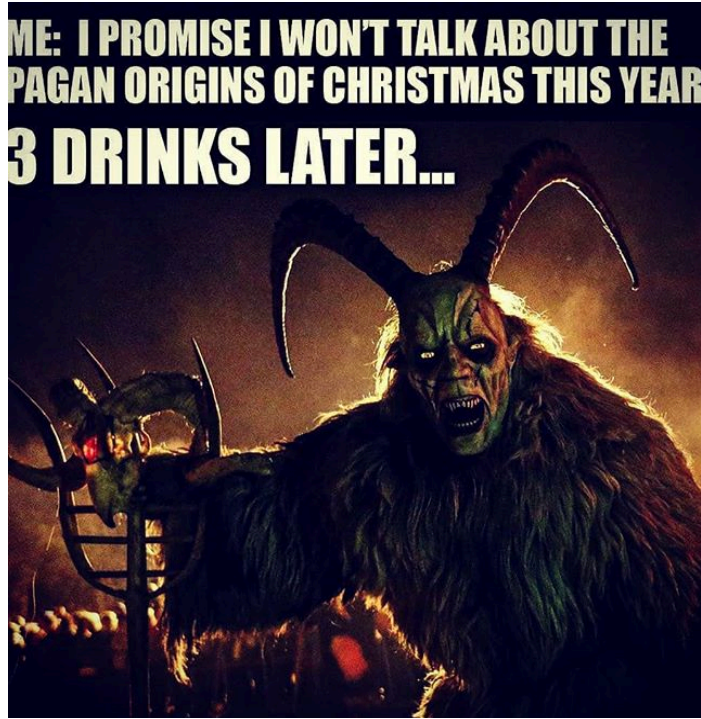


Figure 5.1 Krampus meme referencing the pagan origins of Christmas.

Two internet memes posted on the page during the 2018 season juxtapose Santa Claus with the Krampus to perpetuate another oppositional stance. On December 13, the page posted a photoshopped creation featuring an image of a well-appointed Santa above a photograph of a horror-style, latex masked Krampus complete with long gashes running down its face. Superimposed over the picture of Santa Claus in an Old English style font are the words “Your December” and across the photo of Krampus it reads “My

¹⁷⁷ “Krampus DIY Projects,” Facebook page, accessed December 1, 2018 <https://www.facebook.com/pg/Krampus-DIY-projects-916738781815761/posts/>; “The Krampus Society,” https://www.facebook.com/pg/krampussociety/posts/?ref=page_internal

December.”¹⁷⁸ Another meme that casts the US Krampus as binary opposite to Santa Claus was posted to the Krampus – Klaubauf page on December 14. Created at memegenerator.net, this image macro features a photograph of a man dressed as Santa sitting on a park bench with someone in a bulky, goat-like Krampus suit sitting next to him and leaning their head upon his shoulder. The caption reads: “SOMETIMES I WRESTLE WITH MY DEMONS/ SOMETIMES WE JUST SNUGGLE”¹⁷⁹ (Figure 5.2). Again, this meme will find its way into other groups and pages throughout the Krampus Facebook network. Many examples of Krampus fan art also make the rounds.



Figure 5.2 Krampus meme featuring Santa Claus.

This material, usually done in comic book or fantasy art style, consistently places the Krampus in the horror genre realm, leveraging the usual visual referents: imposing horns, grotesque tongue, terrifying claws and teeth. These images employ transgressive violence and humorous recontextualizations casting the Krampus as the anti-hero foil to the sanitized, capitalist Santa Claus. Often the fan art features the Krampus clad in Santa Claus’s

¹⁷⁸ “Krampus – Klaubauf,” Facebook page, accessed December 14, 2018
<https://www.facebook.com/Lord.Of.Winter/>

¹⁷⁹ Ibid.

unmistakable red and white suit, set against trappings of American Christmas. These images, likely inspired by relatively recent treatments in Anglophonic popular media, sometimes bear the greeting “Merry Krampus.” This term becomes shorthand for alternative seasonal expression.

Facebook features over 200 pages and groups devoted in some way to the Krampus, many operating as participatory fan sites for the Americanized version of the figure. Here the complex dialogics of sub and mass culture interactions are useful to suss out the transformations that the Krampus undergoes as it is moved through vernacular, institutional, and mass-mediated spaces by US consumer-producers. To consider this repositioning, Robert Glenn Howard’s concept of network hybridity as cultural hybridity in digital space sets the stage: “Vernacular voices can emerge in participatory media only in the ways that institutional interests have enabled. Institutional forces structure the content as the software adapts it to fit onto the institutional site... these sites require that advertising be placed on some personal webpages. As a result, individuals provide the content that corporations then use to forward their own interests.”¹⁸⁰ Users are increasingly aware that Facebook is as much adspace as it is community space. The intertextual material that is posted in, commented on, and shared across feeds drops the Krampus into a system of commodified American Christmas images that the figure is necessarily in conflict with.

While the Austrian Krampus is subservient to St. Nicholas, the massified, Americanized Krampus is aggressively defiant in the face of Santa’s jolly, rightminded,

¹⁸⁰ Robert Glenn Howard, “How Counterculture Helped put the ‘Vernacular’ in Vernacular Webs,” In *Folk Culture in the Digital Age: The Emergent Dynamics of Human Interaction* ed. Trevor J. Blank, Logan: Utah State University Press, 2012.

consumerist “Christmas magic.” Arun identifies this common gateway to the Krampus in the US in his own words: “In terms of counternarrative, there was this whole *bah* Christmas is this stupid consumer, blah, blah, blah. And then at first to be attracted to Krampus... it is kind of like a definite finger to Christmas.... And it was lashing a complacent decadent and self-indulgent American strip mall Christmas reality.”¹⁸¹ The Krampus’s transformation and repositioning in US-based online communities exemplifies the necessary relationship that the vernacular and the institutional share. Participants in Krampus digital culture are using the vernacular/mass cultural hybridity of Facebook to generate a folk media counternarrative that offsets mass media’s barrage of more socially sanctioned seasonal expressions in the United States. The mediated nature of internet communication ensures that this process is no one-way street. As these consumption and production strategies interact with Facebook’s suggestion algorithms, transmission takes on new forms and the more tacit countercultural concerns of Krampus group members are flattened into outright antithetical symbols.

Identifying the Fragment

The introduction of Krampus-related traditional practice to the United States was made possible by processes of fragmentation. The enactments were embraced as a result of exposure to visual snippets of what many research participants referred to as exotic or strange ritual and festival activities. Out of context, images of beasts and devils sharing space with what (from a North American point of view) could be described as an old-world Santa Claus seemed thrilling and transgressive. For many organizers of more

¹⁸¹ Arun Ragan, interview.

established US Krampus events these excised images of foreign, traditional activity initiated self-led research that perhaps situated Krampusnacht observances more holistically. As the Krampus continues to shapeshift its way through the winter holiday landscape of the United States, it may be of some use to critically investigate processes of ethnographic fragmentation as identified by Kirshenblatt-Gimblett and explore how these cultural dynamics have interacted with Krampus-related traditional praxis in the past.¹⁸²

Complicated cultural interactions often occur around embodied, performed ritual objects as they are removed from their traditional context and symbolically re-employed by exogenous agents. Not only are questions of interpretation and meaning-making brought to the fore, but blurry issues of activation, fragmentation, and appropriation emerge and must be grappled with. In *Destination Culture: Tourism, Museums, and Heritage*, Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett identifies the ethnographic fragment.¹⁸³ The creation of that fragment is the inciting moment of the cultural activity that leads to the recontextualization of Krampus in the US. As Kirshenblatt-Gimblett observes, “the artfulness of the ethnographic object is an art of excision, of detachment, an art of the excerpt.”¹⁸⁴ When embodied objects - such as the Krampus masks of Austria - are made excerpt they are stripped of an often-complex system of metonymic associations that represent a variety of culturally esoteric concerns. Separated from its sociocultural context, the once-activated ritual object is vulnerable to mimetic reactivation from outside sources. In this way, the excerpt of the thing is carried away to become the thing entire which often becomes an entirely different thing.

¹⁸² Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, *Destination Culture*.

¹⁸³ Ibid.

¹⁸⁴ Ibid, 18.

Questions of appropriation regularly surface in relation to traditional masks and processional disguises, like those associated with some European calendrical customs. These ritual events - centered around the traditional crafting of carved masks and constructed suits that feature animal/human hybridization – seem uniquely positioned for ethnographic detachment, being simultaneously exotic and “of the West.” These qualities generate an increasing public interest in the embodied ritual materials and traditional symbols of the discrete cultures that produce them, resulting in upswings of public tourism, museum exhibition, online video and image proliferation, and references in popular media. While many of these European rituals share elements of human/animal hybridity and zoomorphic masquerade, taking a multivalent ritual embodiment and relegating it to the category of archetypal wild man can be culturally destructive. These ritual events are performed amidst discrete, regional issues of community identity, social control, and the dynamics of hierarchal structures. By embracing the fragment of European beast masquerade traditions, outside interests risk not only ignoring those processes but also obscuring their original, endogenic relevance.

Massifying the Krampus

In 2004, Fantagraphics Books published a collection of ninetieth and early twentieth century Krampus-themed post cards curated by art director Monte Beauchamp entitled *The Devil in Design: Krampus*.¹⁸⁵ These *Krampuskarten* transformed the image of the traditional Austrian village Krampus and created a non-indexical vision of the once-performed ritual entity that continues to alter outside interpretations of what

¹⁸⁵ Monte Beauchamp, *Devil in Design: Krampus*, (Seattle: Fantagraphics, 2004).

Krampus is and what Krampus does. A far cry from the bestial image of animal hybridity, the postcard Krampus is the medieval devil in Victorian dress. This version of Krampus may be ground zero for contemporary portrayals outside of Austria. Alternatively depicted torturing children, carrying off Victorian ladies, or leering around corners at amorous couples, this is the prototype for the Anti-Santa Krampus of contemporary American popular culture.

The history of this early, Krampus-centered product provides insights into the interactions of tradition and mass-production. The first officially sanctioned postcard was produced in 1869.¹⁸⁶ Created in Austria, the item was called the *Correspondenz-Karte*. While the first cards were austere and functional, they were popularly embraced as an inexpensive way to communicate by post. Given their economic accessibility and their word-count limiting size, it's easy to imagine this new communication format as the tweet or status update of its time. By the turn of the twentieth century, the process of chromolithography created new possibilities for postcard design and production. Throughout the early 1900s, the yearly production of postcards skyrocketed to annual numbers in the high millions. Holiday cards and Christmas themes were in the highest demand, and of the Christmas cards produced and circulated, the cards featuring Krampus were wildly popular.¹⁸⁷

It's important to note how the images on Krampus postcards contributed to the symbolic transformation of the figure. The performed Krampus of the Alpine village would have a hard time recognizing itself in this new visual form. The postcard

¹⁸⁶ Ibid., 14.

¹⁸⁷ Ibid.

illustrations streamlined the Krampus' amorphous, shaggy body, added a distinct tail and hooves, reduced what were often multiple horns to two, and left the cattle bells behind. The rictus of impossible teeth was downplayed, focusing on a long, lulling tongue, an expression of Bakhtinian grotesque and a feature that still dominates in most popular images of the US Krampus today. Essentially, the mass-produced Krampus was no longer implicitly demonic but fully reminiscent of the medieval Christian devil; a punisher yes, but more importantly a long-encoded symbol of opposition in the West. The postcards, many printed with the phrase *Gruss Vom Krampus* (Greetings from



Krampus), often left St. Nicholas out of the picture altogether (Figure 5.3). Depictions of carrying off, punishing, or otherwise torturing children were common, but adults were increasingly included in the tableaux. Krampus canoodled with women and spied on romantic interludes from behind curtains or rocks. The Krampus card presents a figure that is not only removed from any religious context but also turned toward transgressive adult interests. The circulation of the Krampuskarten reached its peak in

Figure 5.3 *Krampuskarten* featuring a naughty child punished by Krampus.

Europe between 1898 and 1914.¹⁸⁸ The cards reemerged as collectible items in the mid-twentieth century, but few made their way to the United States. Most Americans wouldn't meet the Krampus until scans of Krampuskarten began to appear on English language websites in the early twenty-first century, more than one hundred years after its mass-mediated transmission throughout Europe. As the Krampus continues to be encoded as an oppositional figure in the US, its transgressive power, boosted by its association with the United States' premier holiday season, exhibits a kind of multiutility for dominant culture contestation.

Scholars have long identified popular culture as a site of hegemonic struggle, where cultural mythologies are contested and/or reinforced through a constant dialogue of representation and practice. Holidays and festivals, positioned on the borders of public and private life, represent complex cultural ecologies in which these tensions rise to the surface in some of the most visible ways. Specialized event materials are dialogic in and of themselves, simultaneously ambient and localized, personalized and of the masses. As aligned as these traditional observances are with a ritually powerful and numinous time-out-of-time, interactions between differently situated cultural interests are ever present as negotiations of ambiguous social power play out. Edith and Victor Turner suggest these seasonal festivals may act as opportunities to reinforce community structures and cultural *truths*.¹⁸⁹ This explains why different cultural ideologies vie for power using the popular culture materials that these events generate. If this connection seems tenuous, consider the glut of spending that occurs specific to these rarified points on the US festival

¹⁸⁸ Ibid., 18.

¹⁸⁹ Turner and Turner, "Religious Celebrations."

calendar and the array of mass-culture products distinctly associated with holiday signifiers. Folklorist and festival scholar Jack Santino points out, "...popular culture refers not simply to mass media, but to the popular uses of mass media. We can view contemporary holiday celebrations as popular culture events themselves... Some of the ways people celebrate holidays have to do with the personal use of mass media products..."¹⁹⁰

In October of 2013, Harper Voyager published *Krampus: The Yule Lord*.¹⁹¹ The dark fantasy novel was written by author and fantasy artist Gerald Brom and positioned the Krampus within a complicated cosmology in which post-Ragnarök Norse gods have evolved into the figures of contemporary US Christmas through the use of dark magic. In Brom's sumptuously illustrated universe, Santa Claus is Baldr, the Norse god of light in a new form, and the Krampus is a long-forgotten god of Yuletide joy. The author provides his Krampus with a completely invented heritage, making the Austrian figure the son of the Norse underworld goddess Hel and the grandson of mythology's headlining trickster, Loki. This take on Krampus would gain traction in the US thanks to an article that appeared on nationalgeographic.com in December of 2013. The article "Who is Krampus? Explaining the horrific Christmas beast" was written by Tanya Basu and reposted to the website on December 5, 2018. Basu states, "Krampus's name is derived from the German word *krampen*, meaning claw, and is said to be the son of Hel in Norse mythology."¹⁹² The sentence includes a hyperlink that leads to pantheon.org, a buggy

¹⁹⁰ Santino, *New Old Fashion Ways*, 19.

¹⁹¹ Brom, *Krampus*.

¹⁹² Tanya Basu, "Who is Krampus? Explaining the horrific Christmas beast," last modified December 5, 2018, <https://news.nationalgeographic.com/news/2013/12/131217-krampus-christmas-santa-devil/>

search engine with the heading “Encyclopedia Mythica,” making the author’s source for this bit of information almost impossible to track. This new genealogy for the Krampus, probably the result of a fantasy author’s creative license, is proliferated widely online and could be the basis for the figure’s popularity with North American Heathens and other Neo-Pagan practitioners. Here is an example of how messy processes of mass cultural transmission contribute to the alteration of traditional practices and meanings. The concept of the *folkloresque* provides a handy analytical framework for investigating the way popular culture interacts with vernacular employment of massified and narrated versions of the Krampus.

Introduced by folklorists Michael Dylan Foster and Jefferey A. Tolbert, the folkloresque is a framework that intervenes on earlier considerations of mass culture interpretations of folkloric materials and provides space for popular culture’s formulations of folk material to be seriously engaged with within the discipline.¹⁹³ As the human world is increasingly mediated, instances of massified transmission lead to new constructions of vernacular practice that are situated on the borders of pop and folk expression. As Foster rightfully points out, “If folklorists study people (= folk), then it is critical to explore what people think of *as* folklore – regardless of how a folklorist might categorize it... Whether or not the product in question can be traced back to an oral tradition or some other ‘genuine’ source is less important than the fact that people *feel* it is folkloric.”¹⁹⁴ Embracing this point of view will go a long way toward illuminating the

¹⁹³ Foster.

¹⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, 9.

looping cultural paths that the US Krampus takes, and how these chaotic routes change the figure's meaning for those who contribute to the new traditional material.

Mass media treatments of the Krampus in the United States dress the figure in various symbols of opposition, elements that become part of practiced activities on the ground and in the network. Brom's *Krampus: The Yule Lord* could be considered a kind of cultural ground zero for explicitly casting the Krampus as the Anti-Santa. Single-authored narrative treatments of the figure in the contemporary US often either pit the Krampus against Santa Claus in a battle-for-Christmas or present the Krampus as a dark version of Santa primed for a punishing onslaught. Brom's novel opens in present-day Appalachia with the novel's human protagonist witnessing a group of wild beings attacking Santa Claus and ripping away the figure's customary red sack. As the story proceeds it is revealed that the sack once belonged to the Krampus. It was stolen by Santa Claus (who dyed it with blood in order to appropriate its magic) after he imprisoned the Krampus inside a West Virginia mountain. The main character eventually falls in with the newly freed Krampus and joins the creature on its mission to kill Santa Claus and reinstate Yuletide as the primary winter holiday. Notably, Brom's Krampus ultimately succeeds but the human population views the shift in tradition simply as a new kind of Christmas. Santa Claus is later brought back to life by biblical angels and everything returns to holiday business as usual. Throughout the narrative, it is revealed that Santa Claus is actually a self-serving villain. In one memorable scene the Krampus gleefully kills crazed meth addicts to rescue his party. This places the creature squarely in anti-hero territory, a reoccurring semiotic repositioning of the Krampus in popular treatments that seems to drive interest in the figure. This version of the US

Krampus leverages an older claim to the winter holiday season to unseat the capitalist villain Santa Claus through open opposition.

Released December 4, 2015, Michael Dougherty's feature-length horror film is the only Krampus-themed film to receive wide theatrical release in the United States to date, though many lower budget movies featuring the Krampus are available to stream on a variety of services.¹⁹⁵ *Krampus* begins with a scene that likely depicts a Black Friday sale. The camera tracks in slow motion as desperate shoppers tear at one another and fling mass produced goods across a department store sales floor. The director sets an anti-commercial stage from frame one. It is immediately understood that the towering, howling Krampus of this narrative will mete out punishment to any who forget the true meaning of the holiday season. The plot of the film focuses on a boy and his extended family, the members of which exhibit various levels of distaste for the obligatory Christmas gathering that brings them together. The boy still believes in Santa Claus and is bullied by his cousins because of it. The cousins find his letter to Santa and read it aloud to the family in a move to embarrass him. Humiliated, the boy runs to his room where he rips up the letter and throws it out of the window. This is the film's inciting incident. As it turns out, the boy has inadvertently summoned the Krampus by denying his holiday spirit. An eerie blizzard descends on the suburban neighborhood, stranding the entire dysfunctional family inside the house. Family members are summarily terrorized by demonic versions of standard symbolic expressions of US Christmas: looming snowmen, a crazed gingerbread man, a monstrous jack-in-the-box, and a vicious angel tree-topper. Eventually, the German speaking grandmother exposit the Krampus's

¹⁹⁵ *Krampus*, directed by Michael Dougherty (2015; Hollywood: Universal Pictures, 2016), Motion Picture.

infernal origins before sacrificing herself so that the rest of the family can attempt escape via snowplow. Krampus succeeds in hunting the family down with the help of his mob of diminutive masked minions, identified as the Icelandic Yule Lads in the film's credits. After a scene in which the boy confronts the Krampus, the entire family is thrown into a fiery pit, presumably to hell. In the last scene of the film, the boy wakes up on Christmas morning to his family unwrapping presents in uncharacteristic harmony and assumes that Krampus's violent intervention was simply a dream. The scene widens to reveal that the family home is contained within a snow globe on a shelf in the Krampus's lair, imprisoned together forever in an eternal Christmas tableau.

Dougherty's Krampus is the Americanized Anti-Santa performing its other oppositional function. Pushing the Austrian Krampus's relationship to St. Nicholas to its absolute extreme, this interpretation of the US Krampus is a numinous, punishing agent ready to violently activate the traditional trappings of Christmas when self-interest and commercialization overpower holiday cheer. *Krampus* exceeded commercial expectations, earning second place status for the weekend in which it opened with 16.3 million dollars in ticket sales.¹⁹⁶ The production team's design for the Krampus continues to influence fan art depictions, and some participants in Krampusnacht events essentially cosplay the character for their embodied processioning. In a video posted to YouTube of the 2017 Krampus Lauf PDX, the film version *Krampus* is present complete with the red and white hooded robe that references its conflation with Santa Claus. The mask, while seemingly homemade, reproduced the static yawning maw and empty eyes

¹⁹⁶ Anthony D'Alessandro, "'Krampus' Rises During Ho-Ho-Hum Holiday Frame – Monday Final Update," *Deadline.com*, last modified December 7, 2015 <https://deadline.com/2015/12/hunger-games-mockingjay-krampus-creed-good-dinosaur-post-thanksgiving-box-office-1201652456/>

of the horror movie beast. When I attended the Medford Krampus Krawl, one of the most impressively constructed costumes drew heavily from this massified version of the midwinter beast. Brom's illustrations from *Krampus: The Yule Lord* are also widely shared on participatory, online Krampus networks. His rangy Krampus is depicted with a devious grin, holding a bundle of switches, a sack slung over its back, and shattered Christmas ornaments at its feet. The book was reprinted in 2015 and has been rated by almost 5,000 users on goodreads.com.¹⁹⁷

The reception of these pop culture treatments of the Krampus, and perhaps the creators' motivation for making them, loops into vernacular online expression. Mass media interests have access to the materials archived by US Krampus online networks. Acknowledging that relationship, it becomes clear that the perpetuation of the figure in the United States represents a cyclical relationship between dynamic traditional practices and the power of the folkloresque. In the introduction to *The Folkloresque: Reframing Folklore in a Popular Culture World*, Foster explains how these processes seem to work:

...the folkloresque is popular culture's own (emic) perception and performance of folklore. That is, it refers to creative, often commercial products or texts (e.g., films, graphic novels, video games) that give the impression to the consumer (viewer, reader, listener, player) that they derive directly from existing folkloric traditions. In fact, however, a folkloresque product is rarely based on any single vernacular item or tradition; usually it has been consciously cobbled together from a range of folkloric elements, often mixed with newly created elements, to appear as if it emerged organically from a specific source.... In addition, the folkloresque concept includes products that, while clearly born through commercial processes, explicitly or self-consciously showcase their relationship with folklore by alluding to folk knowledge... In short, the folkloresque signals popular culture's recognition that folklore is a valuable brand... in some cases this inspires a feedback loop in which the folkloresque version of the item is (re)incorporated into the folk cultural milieu that it references.¹⁹⁸

¹⁹⁷ "Krampus: The Yule Lord," Goodreads.com, accessed January 23, 2019
<https://www.goodreads.com/book/show/13505670-krampus>

¹⁹⁸ Foster, 5.

The feedback loop Foster references becomes evident when US Krampus culture expressions are viewed as praxis that occurs through various levels of interaction in differently mediated spaces. As Al Ridenour puts it, “What I really believe is that sort of yearning for the beyond and the other is really fed by our mass culture of fantasy films... People want an escape. They want some magical reality... They want to embody it a little more. I think the Krampus thing fits in very well with that. It gives people something that they hunger for.”¹⁹⁹ For many more recent US Krampus participants, it is likely that the figure’s appearances in film, television, and comic books provide the entryway to a seasonal expression that they can mold toward their own interests. The symbolic flattening that occurs through hyper-mediation creates a Krampus soaked in liminal alternativity and its associations with tradition result in a unit of folkloresque material ripe for personal, active practice.

By 2016, the Krampus was well positioned as a popular text due to mass culture incorporations precipitated by online vernacular interest. According to John Fiske, “...the popular text [invites] procedural readings; they allow it to ‘speak’ differently in different contexts, in different moments of reading, but this freedom is always a struggle against textual (and social) forces that attempt to limit it.”²⁰⁰ On December 13, 2016, just over a month after the presidential election, Vice.com published an article entitled “Krampus: The Fucked Up Santa We Deserve This Year.”²⁰¹ Primarily an info piece on Krampus traditions featuring an extended interview with Al Ridenour, the title clearly

¹⁹⁹ Al Ridenour, interview.

²⁰⁰ John Fiske, *Understanding Popular Culture*, (Boston: Unwin Hyman, 1989), 126.

²⁰¹ Seth Ferranti, “Krampus is the Fucked Up Santa America Deserves This Year,” *Vice.com*, last modified December 13, 2016 https://www.vice.com/en_us/article/vvdp53/the-story-of-krampus-the-original-bad-santa-pulled-from-german-folklore.

alluded to the American Left’s heightened anxieties about the stability of its governing system. Just two days later, the Krampus made an appearance on the internet-centric, late-night Comedy Central show *@Midnight* as a dirty, horned, parody *Alt-Santa* promising to “make Christmas great again.”²⁰² Political memes made the rounds online, most often employing remixed imagery from the Austrian Krampus postcards. These memes conflated Donald Trump with Krampus (creating *Trumpus*), showed an infantilized Trump being punished by the Krampus, or presented photoshopped images of various politicians stuffed in the Krampus’ basket (Figure 5.4). Without the figure’s newly established standing as an American mass-culture text, these political parodies wouldn’t have been possible. This could be interpreted as a variation of the processes Henry Jenkins suggests (following De Certeau) regarding fandoms and textual poaching.²⁰³ The poaching here presents a dialogic process in which alternative minded consumer/producers in the United States are superimposing their own culturally useful messages onto once-performed folk material.

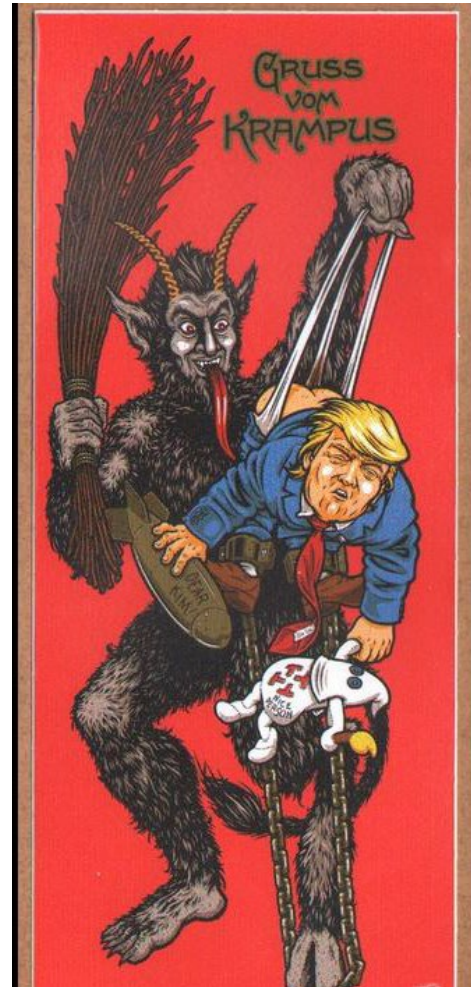


Figure 5.4 Krampus punishes an infantilized Donald Trump.

²⁰² Chris Hardwick, *@Midnight* Episode #4.38, Directed by Martin Pasetta, 2016, Funny or Die/Comedy Central, Television Program.

²⁰³ Henry Jenkins III, “Star Trek Rerun, Reread, Rewritten.” In *Popular Culture: A Reader*, ed. Raiford Guins and Omayara Zaragoza Cruz, (London: Sage Publications, 2015).

Exploring the Krampus figure's transmission and transformation through digital portals and the myriad levels of public culture in the United States reveals a snarl of processes related to culture construction, meaning making, mediated expression, and new modes of tradition bearing. Whatever brought the Krampus to US online communities, downtown thoroughfares, and television screens, this now oppositional figure is insinuating itself into winter holiday traditional practice in the United States, its profile rising every year. Is this the emergence of a new US Christmas figure poised to take its place as a surly alternative to saccharine Santa Claus? In *New Old-Fashioned Ways: Holidays and Popular Culture*, Jack Santino states:

Holidays begin with people doing things that they recognize as relating to and deriving from a particular set of ideas that are more or less shared in their social group. 'Old fashioned' ways are always being made new; if they did not, they would die. New ways of celebrating, of imagining special occasions, become 'old fashioned' in the sense that they fit the occasion and allow people to participate in it.²⁰⁴

A December 2017 search for Krampus products on Amazon returned over 2,000 results, many of them designed to slide tidily into your Christmas gift-exchange tradition: tree ornaments, gift bags, wrapping paper, stockings, toys, and more. Still, the Krampus is available to bloody up Santa in popular media or invade the space of last-minute shoppers on the ground. Either way, the phrase "Krampus, the Santa we deserve" means different things to different people. Krampus culture is being perpetuated in the US festival landscape through the push and pull of established and emergent cultural interests.

²⁰⁴ Santino, *New Old-Fashioned Ways*, 24.

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