

Local Character Anecdotes: A Nova Scotia Case Study

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Definitions & Background

Anecdote: A usually short narrative of an interesting, amusing or biographical incident¹; a brief narrative current in oral tradition that tells something unusual about a person, an event or a thing.²

Local Character: A non-threatening individual within a community – often seen as humorous by other members of the group – whose behaviour is thought to be in conflict or contrast with the community's social norms. This term has become so widespread many people self-identify as a local character.

Explanatory Anecdote: An anecdote in which the character is the victim of others' injustice or their own.

Exploratory Anecdote: An anecdote which explores the private lives or behaviours of the character.

Metonym: A fragment of a narrative which represents the whole narrative.

Amherst, Nova Scotia: A town of about 10,000 on the border of Nova Scotia and New Brunswick, inhabited mainly by English and United Empire Loyalists with Black and Acadian minorities. Once an industrial centre, it now maintains a service-based economy. [Location](#)

Overview

- Using fieldwork completed in Amherst, NS, the article seeks to answer the following questions:
 - Where, when and by whom are local character anecdotes told?
 - Can they be structurally or thematically classified?
 - What is their value to tellers and audience?
- Local character anecdotes are analyzed according to their context, form, content and function

Performance Context

- Local character anecdotes are often transmitted in three different “informal speech contexts”:
 - Public Space: shops, parks, malls, barbershops, restaurants, undertaker's office etc;
 - Semi-Private Space: Exchanges occurring between members of formal community groups
 - Informal Friendship Groups & Family Interaction:
- Tye's idea of the function and elements of public spaces correspond very closely with those of Richard Bauman in his articles on oral literature in LaHave. For example, the role of the general store (which in Amherst has been replaced over time by the mall, coffee shops and various other venues) parallels exactly with Bauman's fieldwork.
- Tye also draws a comparison between performance types in the public space of LaHave and Amherst, though in many cases, local character anecdotes can shift between categories depending on the teller, audience and function of the anecdote, it can range from a bit of passing gossip to an artfully crafted piece of oral literature depending on their purpose and context
- Similar to legends, as defined by William Bascom, these anecdotes are often an opportunity for belief negotiation of sorts, in that there is not always just one storyteller, but collective input from many others presents.
- Though this collective contribution can cause differing views, it rarely becomes the basis for an argument
- All spaces mentioned remain fairly male-dominated, though none are gender exclusive; expect perhaps certain formal community groups. This could be due a result of the difference in men's and women's work cycles.

¹ “Anecdote” *Merriam-Webster Online Dictionary*, 2011.

² Archer Taylor, “The Anecdote: A Neglected Genre.” *Medieval Literature and Folklore Studies*. Ed. Jerome Mandel and Bruce A. Rosenberg, Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1970.

- Semi-private spaces are the main arena for verbal exchange between women of the community and places such as school meetings, women's clubs or church groups are integral to their knowledge of local character anecdotes.
- Though some are told in families purely for entertainment, they also exist to give warnings and social comment
- Certain elements present in the public sphere are considered off limits to young members of a family.
- Children participate just as much in the exchange of anecdote as adults do

Form & Content

- Anecdotes normally have just the basic elements of narrative, containing an "in-joke" quality or metonym.
- Anecdotes move from normal to abnormal experience and always employ much exaggeration
- Humour often arises out of the character's extreme behaviour in a normal situation
- They normally focus on developing a central image

Function

- Local character anecdotes help to explain events or people (what happened/who they are and why).
- Anecdotes "protect community members from fear of envy"
- They also help to balance community beliefs (i.e. individuality vs. conformity)
- Local characters are not seen so much as strangers, but offer an opportunity for the community to come together, through the way they view, care for and are concerned the person
- The narratives help to make local characters more "mainstream" within the community
- Issues present in some local character anecdotes (i.e. drug abuse, sexual content) offer proof to the community of what can happen when social norms are ignored.
- Local character anecdotes often contrast the narrator and the character in the story.

Conclusion

Local character anecdotes are a very common form of narrative in Amherst, in all spheres of informal communication. Though there is much variation among them created by differing contexts and tellers, local character anecdotes can be seen as serving many explanatory and cautionary functions within the community.

Discussion Questions

1. Can you think of any local characters within your own community that have recognized stories told about them?
2. Do the views you have about local characters align with those expressed in this article or are they different? How are they different?
3. Speculate on the importance of local characters to a community. How would the community change if there were no local characters? Would it be better? Worse?

