

Study and Development Fellowship for Sessional Lecturers (CUPE 3913 Unit 2)
Fall 2022 Final Report

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I TRULY APPRECIATE the opportunities that have been afforded by the Study and Development Fellowship. To recap, my research deals extensively with parrot lore. As a folklorist deeply invested in the study of narrative and its mediated forms, I have been able now to mount a comprehensive exploration of storytelling about parrots, and even *by* parrots (they do, after all, talk). And the developed research agenda on this topic has specific reference to and application in every course for which I currently hold a right of refusal.

THE PROVIDED RESOURCES enabled me to attend two pertinent conferences. The first was the 2022 meeting of the International Society for Contemporary Legend Research (ISCLR) in Ottawa, where I delivered a paper titled “The Last Word: The Prattling, Tattling Parrots of Contemporary Legend.” I analyzed old legends about notable parrots belonging to famous people—and more recent stories of parrots that swear uncontrollably, betray confidences, and otherwise insert themselves (in troubling ways) into the lives of humans around them. There is even a body of narratives about parrots tangled in the criminal world; sometimes they’re just in the wrong place at the wrong time, but other times they are surviving witnesses to scandals and felonies, and then, by their ability speak, *de facto* “witnesses” to the crimes.

LATER, I ALSO ATTENDED the 2022 meeting of the American Folklore Society (AFS) in Tulsa, Oklahoma. There I read a paper on humorous stories about parrots titled “Talking Back: An Analysis of Parrot Jokes.” This paper highlighted one salient feature of parrot jokes proper (as opposed to other parrot stories): while the interactive parrots in most non-joking parrot stories are *genus Psittacus mimus*, mere imitators of what they’ve overheard repeatedly or been taught, parrots in the joking world tend to be *genus Psittacus sapiens*— a sort of promotion up the evolutionary chart where they are “[paragons] of motivational psychology and . . . a rhetorical match for most of [their] human antagonists.”¹ In the lore of Western imagination, parrots are wise like their forbears in Indian folklore but then also humorously deceptive, vulgar, sacrilegious, impudent, and acerbic. That is the character profile of parrots that launched a thousand jokes, which often turn on a central leitmotif: parrots see too much, and then they say too much. The operative fantasy element in these jokes, as Gershon Legman observed, is that “[parrots] not only speak but speak to the point”—by commenting on emergent circumstances, or mocking their owners, breaking taboos, divulging secrets.²

IN THOSE SEPARATE conference settings, both papers were very well received, and I was able to engage other scholars who had suggestions for analogues, theoretical framing, and other useful feedback for the project. One of the most productive developments in all of this unfolded after the panel discussion at AFS. Conversations with acquisitions editors at the University of Wisconsin Press led to their enthusiastic solicitation for an edited volume on the relationship of jokes and legends. With one of my colleagues from the panel I will be co-editing a collection of

essays, which will include my own chapter on parrot lore (much of which is already done, thanks to the fellowship) and a co-written introduction. We are currently in the process of corraling contributors, and we have a working list of notable scholars in the field of folklore (several of whom have already committed to the project). Plans are to workshop the book with several of the authors at the 2023 meetings of both ISCLR and AFS. I am happy to report that the book project is off to an energetic start.

MUCH OF THE MATERIAL of the research project manifests in contemporary digital culture. As such, it becomes intrinsically relevant to the Social Media Issues and Perspectives course (MDST*2090) that I currently teach. Further, as I teach a unit on storytelling/narrative in my Presentation and Persuasion course (AHSS*2020), I will naturally bring in findings/insights from my research, which focuses sharply on narrative throughout.

WE'RE INTRIGUED BY PARROTS because they are provocatively liminal. We know they're animals, but their uncanny cognitive skills and remarkable abilities of human language situate them as outliers, beyond ordinary expectations—to the point of seeming almost preternatural. And the legends and jokes about them teach us that there in the background, in their cages and part of the décor, they see and hear a lot—and sometimes, afterwards, given a chance they say a lot. Again, I'd like to express my gratitude that this fellowship has given me the chance to explore and propel publication on this remarkable body of lore.

¹ Perry, John R. "Monty Python and the Mathnavi: The Parrot in Indian, Persian and English Humor," *Iranian Studies*, vol. 36, no. 1, 2003, p. 64.

² Legman, Gershon. 1968. *No Laughing Matter*. Vol. 1. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, p. 203.