Nuclear Lore Folklore of the Atomic Age. The development, use, and proliferation of nuclear weapons fundamentally and irrevocably altered American culture and thought. Advancements in nuclear technology since the 1940s have symbolized military superiority and the promise of a techno-utopian future, but also have fueled fears of global annihilation and evoked widespread fatalism about the future of humanity. The feelings and fears associated with the nuclear era have precipitated various types of folklore, including religious and secular beliefs, legends, songs, folk art, jokes, and speech forms. Since the dropping of atomic bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki in August 1945, the most widespread and persistent folklore associated with nuclear weapons reflects die belief that their use will bring about the end of the world. The folklore about nuclear apocalypse has flourished in both American religious and secular cultures. Since the 1940s, religious apocalyptists have interpreted the invention of nuclear weapons and the prospect of nuclear war as a fulfillment of divine prophecies, and they have readily incorporated the idea of nuclear holocaust into vernacular religious cosmologies. Premillennialist Christians, for example, frequently regard the symbolic and cryptic language of the Book of Revelation as a prophetic description of a foreordained nuclear apocalypse. The biblical passage “The heavens shall pass away with a great noise, and the elements shall be disintegrated with intense heat; the earth also, and all its works, shall be burned up” (II Peter 3:10) is commonly interpreted as a description of nuclear holocaust. Such beliefs have mythologized and sanctified the threat of nuclear annihilation, by regarding it as a meaningful part of a foreordained, supernatural plan for humanity. In 1991 some premillennialists, watching for the “signs” of imminent doomsday, interpreted the war in the Persian Gulf as the beginning of an “end times” scenario, foretold in the Bible, that would culminate in a nuclear conflagration. Roman Catholic popular belief during the nuclear era has included prophecies about imminent nuclear apocalypse, often communicated through apparitions of the Virgin Mary. For instance, the “third secret of Fatima,” conveyed during a Marian apparition in 1917, is commonly believed to predict nuclear holocaust. A related popular belief is that nuclear annihilation may be averted by the conversion of Russia to Catholicism. Numerous other religious groups maintain beliefs about nuclear apocalypse, and similar ideas are expressed in New Age prophecies as well as beliefs about the predictions of Nostradamus and Edgar Cayce. Beliefs about the existence of unidentified flying objects (UFOs), which emerged in the 1950s, also seem directly related to nuclear apocalyptic fears. Often characterized by expectations of worldly destruction and salvation, early UFO beliefs frequently assert that extraterrestrials would intervene and save humanity (or a chosen people) from nuclear holocaust. Unlike religious beliefs about nuclear apocalypse, which promise the salvation of the faithful and a redemptive millennial realm to replace a world destroyed, secular beliefs about nuclear holocaust rarely express such hopes. Popular beliefs and narratives that arose during the Cold War era are often explicitly fatalistic, implying that humanity could not reverse its inevitable path to nuclear destruction. The physicists who worked on the development of the atomic bomb, for instance, were portrayed in narratives as evil geniuses who would ultimately destroy the world because of their obsessive pursuit of A-Z 1085 power and forbidden knowledge, similar to the legendary Faust character. Speech forms, neologisms, and euphemisms associated with nuclear weapons also seem to reflect feelings of powerlessness and fatalism. Individual helplessness concerning the uncontrollable destructive power of nuclear weapons is expressed through assorted beliefs about nuclear technology, such as the “Doomsday Button,” a red button that supposedly existed in the White House and the Kremlin and that, when pushed, would destroy the world. Even the common use of the expression “the bomb,” when referring to the multitude of nuclear warheads that exist, seems to reflect popular perceptions of nuclear weapons as a single, massive, omnipresent force of destruction. Other forms of nuclear lore include beliefs about government secrets concerning the harmful effects of radiation on humans and animals, and the attribution of bizarre weather patterns and natural disasters, such as hurricanes, floods, and unusual heat waves, to nuclear testing. Jokes about nuclear war and technology are relatively scarce, but those that exist tend to express a sense of ironic inevitability about nuclear doomsday. (What do you do if they drop the bomb? Answer: Hide under a table, put your head between your legs, and…kiss your ass goodbye!) A similar sense of gallows humor is expressed in the jokes, narratives, and speech forms created in the aftermath of the accident at the Three Mile Island Nuclear Power Plant near Harrisburg, Pennsylvania, in 1979. (Popular greetings among residents included, “My, you look radiant! and “You’re glowing today! [Milspaw 1981:60].) After the disaster, beliefs and rumors about the effects of exposure to radioactivity, such as sterility, genetically mutated offspring, and increased rates of infant mortality, spread rapidly, a reflection of the suspicion that authorities were withholding information, as well as uncertainty about the long-term effects of radiation. The nuclear disaster that occurred in Chernobyl, Ukraine, in 1986 provoked similar beliefs and rumors, as well as jokes with ironic and macabre themes that expressed anxieties about uncontrollable nuclear technology. (What has feathers, glows in the dark, and cooks by itself? Answer: Chicken Kiev. What do you serve with Chicken Kiev? Answer: A black Russian. What’s the weather report from Kiev? Answer: Overcast and 10,000 degrees.) Although fears of nuclear apocalypse have decreased since the end of the Cold War, 1990s nuclear lore continues to reflect anxieties about potential nuclear disasters, stemming not only from concerns about nuclear accidents, but also the magnitude and seeming uncontrollability of nuclear weapons and the possibility that such weapons will be developed and used by hostile nations or extremist organizations in the future. Such feelings and fears will no doubt continue to inspire an abundance of folklore in the years ahead.

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The lore created in response to natural or human-made disaster. Events such as floods, earthquakes, hurricanes, tornadoes, or toxic chemical spills can permanently alter cultural landmarks and the natural landscape, rupturing the common body of knowledge crucial for everyday patterns of communication and living. Common activities, such as driving, cooking, eating, and washing become major tasks following a disaster. While struggling to reestablish accustomed lifeways, disaster victims may also grapple with the alien bureaucracies of state and federal agencies as they seek emergency aid. Survivors struggle to build new life understandings out of nightmarish experiences that often defy their previously held assumptions about life order (Erikson 1976). Folklore helps victims make meaning of their disaster experience, wresting a new order from surrounding chaos. Psychological research with trauma victims indicates that the shared narratives and traditions that people create to cope with disaster play a crucial role in recovery. Story swapping encourages a renewed sense of partnership, countering the sense of loneliness that is often associated with widespread disorder (Ochberg 1993:780–81). Disaster folklore is not limited to the lore created by victims. Outsiders, intrigued and disturbed by the news of a major disaster, often respond by creating sick jokes that make light of others’ misfortune (Oring 1987; Simons 1986; Smyth 1986). Although each disaster generates its own unique body of folklore, commonalities encourage the generation of jokes and legends that can float from disaster to disaster. For example, South Carolinians jokingly referred to 1989’s Hurricane Hugo as a “fourbillion-dollar blow job.” Following Hurricane Andrew, Floridians sported T-shirts that described their experience in similar terms. Some regions are especially prone to certain types of disasters: earthquakes on the West Coast, tornadoes and floods in the Midwest, hurricanes along the East Coast. In these instances, disaster folklore is integrated into regional lore, shaping notions of regional identity (Danielson 1990). There are at least six phases of the disaster experience: warning and preparation, the disaster event, postdisaster damage assessment, cleanup and rebuilding, the first anniversary, and historification. Each disaster phase generates a new set of folklore. Warning and Preparation. Many disasters strike without warning, yet even unexpected disasters are presaged by a body of lore that admonishes humans to “expect the unexpected.” Preparation lore includes homemade emergency kits; traditional methods for securing person and property, such as taping windows before a hurricane or constructing a tornado shelter; preternatural warnings, such as the appearance of the “Greyman” before violent storms in South Carolina or apparitions foretelling the loss of a loved one; and family stories of past disasters used as exemplars to prepare future generations for intermittent catastrophes. Some predisaster rituals are designed to flaunt danger, such as bacchanalian “hurricane parties.” A-Z 425 The Disaster Event. Lore associated with the unfolding of a disaster event usually resembles disjointed and fantastic dream narratives. Some stories may boast of heroic or creative rescue. Disaster stories from this phase are fantastic accounts of personal experience, often embellished as they are later shared with other survivors (Ward 1991). Damage Assessment. In the aftermath of a disaster, survivors evaluate present confusion within the frame of lost order. Documentation necessitated by insurance or relief-fund claims, which might include photos of fallen trees, crushed cars, or ransacked buildings, is often used to create homemade disaster “shrines.” Pictures tacked up on an entry wall may remain for years after the completion of repairs as a testimonial to the magnitude of the disaster experience. Owners of property prone to flooding may permanently mark and date annual water highs for all passersby to see. Cleanup and Rebuilding. An often lengthy and uncomfortable process, cleanup generates stories that are grounded in situational humor, like the family without plumbing who develops humorous narratives about sharing bath water. Resentment toward long waiting lines, unscrupulous outsider repair firms that exploit survivors, and the morass of bureaucratic relief-agency paperwork may generate aggressive joking. FEMA (Federal Emergency Management Agency) jokes often circulate freely in federally declared disasters. Conspiracy theories, coupled with wishful thinking, may spontaneously transform into urban legends, such as the claim that federal authorities downgraded a 1994 California earthquake from its true Richter-scale reading because a reading greater than 7.0 allegedly would have exempted survivors from paying income tax. The First Anniversary. The one-year anniversary, often a time of reflection, may be marked with community celebrations that applaud survivor recovery and ceremonies that honor the memory of victims. It is often at this time that disaster lore begins to become integrated within the fabric of local history. Historification. As years pass, trauma stories, jokes, legends, and other traditional artifacts of disaster are pooled, transformed, and fashioned into traditional accounts that reassimilate the chaos of disaster within the larger historical understanding of the community. As accounts become normalized, the disruption in communication is healed. Disaster lore is folklore in the making, a response to a systemic breakdown requiring the regeneration of patterns of communication. Careful examination of disaster folklore elucidates the process a community undergoes when it breaks down and must regenerate itself.