
Gangsters, Pranksters, and the Invention of Trick-or-Treating, 1930–1960



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For most children in North America, Halloween is one of the most exciting holidays of the year. But some critics insist that its emphasis on ready-made costumes, store-bought candy, and trick-or-treating seduces children into cultural passivity and socializes them to mindless consumption. These critics argue that trick-or-treating was an inherited tradition, invented, initiated, or imposed by adults to control undesirable Halloween mischief. This article turns to newspaper accounts from the 1930s through the 1950s to suggest that these beliefs and conclusions about trick-or-treating are false and that, in fact, children originated trick-or-treating and shaped it to their own ends. In her view of trick-or-treating as part of the development of children's culture in twentieth-century America, the author presents the role of children in initiating their own forms of play and contesting and negotiating such play with adults, all of which suggests a more complex understanding of Halloween and trick-or-treating in the contemporary context. **Key words:** beginning rituals; children as consumers; gangsters; Halloween; Halloween rituals; Halloween sadism; pranking; trick-or-treating

WHEN I WAS A KID in the late 1960s and early 1970s, Halloween was a very big deal. Picking a costume could take weeks. Then, there were special decorations on the streets, haunted houses, church parties, a costume parade at school, and most important of all, trick-or-treating. The neighborhood kids would all go together, with a parent when we were little, and with a high school neighbor when we got bigger. As soon as it started getting dark, we would fly from house to house, ring doorbells and shout “trick-or-treat!” and get some goodies in our slowly filling bags. When the bags were full and our feet too sore to go on, we'd rush home to dump our bags on the floor, sort the sparkling treasures, compare and trade and, of course, gobble some candy. This ritual sounds familiar to almost anyone who grew up in America in the late twentieth century. Halloween has become perhaps the most “universal” American holiday. It proposes no ethnic identity, no national allegiance, no specific religious affili-

ation. Some evangelical Christian groups have agitated to rebrand Halloween as “satanic,” but most Americans seem to agree that Halloween is just for fun. Fully 93 percent of children surveyed by the candy industry said they planned to go trick-or-treating in 2009. Adults celebrate Halloween with costume parties and, in some cities, with masquerades and parades. But what especially excites kids about Halloween is the trick-or-treating.

Given my own store of memories and nostalgia—and my new experiences as a parent of a six-year-old Halloween fanatic—I was alarmed to discover that the critical consensus on trick-or-treating is not so rosy. About fifty years ago, the influential and prestigious academic journal *American Quarterly* published the first critical account of trick-or-treating. In “Halloween and the Mass Child,” University of Missouri sociologist Gregory P. Stone declared the ritual observance of Halloween in children’s trick-or-treating to be nothing more than “a rehearsal for consumership without a rationale.”¹ Stone grumbled that there was no trick at all—the kids who came to his door on Halloween merely expected to receive a treat. Some twenty years later, Margaret Mead sang much the same tune in a 1975 *Redbook* article: “Halloween is all treats and no tricks. There’s no mischief at all.”² This is, of course, true today no less than in 1959 or 1975. It never occurred to me as a child—or as an adult hosting trick-or-treaters—that there was any threat or even suggestion of a trick. We said “trick-or-treat,” but everyone knew it meant “I’m here to get a treat.” Was that so bad?

“Halloween and the Mass Child” is an odd bit of criticism, veering between a polemic on mass culture and the “other-directed” consumerism of midcentury, a sort of parody of sociological method in the form of Stone’s “survey” of eighteen trick-or-treaters, and a personal recollection of the author’s own childish play on Halloween in the 1920s—a tale quite different from the passive waddling of children who arrived on his doorstep in 1959. Stone considers the real children’s Halloween of his day involved “tricks,” and his critical vernacular elevates pranking to a sort of authentic creativity he dubs “productive destruction.” Stone fondly recalls elaborate mischief making—detaching a the gutters and porch steps of the neighborhood “crab” and throwing the gutter on the porch to make a clatter, then laughing at the neighbor as he stumbles when he gives chase. Stone notes, approvingly, “I do know it was long, hard, and careful *work*.” Trick, Stone concludes, is an authentic production. Treat is passive, implicitly degraded consumption. In trick-or-treating, adults “ease and expedite” their children’s consumption by costuming them, providing them with “shopping bags” for their treats, and accompanying them on their rounds. In this,

adults are “agents of socialization, teaching their children how to consume in the tolerant atmosphere of the mass society.”³

True, a look at a child in a store-bought Hannah Montana costume holding out a “trick-or-treat” bag with a Wal-Mart logo waiting for the mini-Milky Way calls to mind, more than anything, “mass consumer.” So it is easy to see how Stone’s dismissal of trick-or-treating as nothing more than a training ground for future adult consumption should be echoed and amplified by subsequent Halloween scholars. Major studies of Halloween as observed in North America repeatedly assert that trick-or-treating constitutes a passive consumption, devoid of creativity or authentic activity, which originated in adult attempts to deflect and co-op destructive Halloween pranking traditions.⁴ In these accounts, trick-or-treating serves adult needs for social order and the protection of property by displacing more aggressive and antagonistic Halloween activities.

But this adult-centered explanation suffers from several shortcomings. A close reading of the historical record suggests that trick-or-treating as practiced by children emerged out of a hodgepodge of extant festive practices and a dose of pop-culture imagination. Adults wrote about trick-or-treating, but there is no evidence that they suggested or initiated the practice. In most communities, when trick-or-treating appeared, it was an entirely novel element of Halloween fun, even as it incorporated various preexisting practices such as dressing in costumes, pranking, and treating. Furthermore, many adults consider trick-or-treating as harassment and even juvenile delinquency—not only because of the threat of a trick but also because of the appearance of unknown children at the door expecting a treat. Most importantly, critical accounts of the practice omit any recognition of children’s own inventiveness and agency in enacting and contesting trick-or-treating rituals. While trick-or-treating did displace other Halloween activities (this is Stone’s lament), trick-or-treating itself created new opportunities and new forms of creative expression for children.

Before Trick-or-Treating: Precedents and Antecedents

Most scholarly accounts and popular histories of Halloween conventionally understood trick-or-treating as a variation of ritualized begging. Since the Middle Ages, annual festivals in many European societies have permitted and encouraged begging from some classes. Trick-or-treating most closely resembles the English and Irish custom of “souling,” the ritual begging for alms and “Soul

Cakes” on Hallowmas (November 1) in return for prayers for the dead on All Souls Day (November 2). The resemblance and coincidence of the calendar have led many to conclude that trick-or-treating descends from souling. Other candidates for trick-or-treat’s ancestry include traditions of begging associated with Britain’s Guy Fawkes Day, Scotland’s traditional guising, and medieval Europe’s various masked ritual solicitations during Christmas and other Christian holidays. While all these bear some similarity to trick-or-treating, no direct line connects them. There exists several gaps and discontinuities. After a more detailed consideration of possible antecedents for trick-or-treating, Tad Tuleja concludes “which begging performance you choose as a point of origin for the American custom may depend as much on nationalist bias and intellectual fashion as on an examination of the indistinct record.”⁵ Tuleja demonstrates that the idea that trick-or-treating directly descends from one or several of these begging performances is mere fiction. By insisting on direct continuity with previous festive traditions, these fictions of origin obscure the question of how trick-or-treating, in its specific, local, Halloween form, came to be.

While evidence for historical antecedents remains murky, we do know that trick-or-treating was a very late addition to the observance of Halloween in North America. References to anything resembling the practice in the United States do not appear before the 1930s. In the 1919 *Book of Halloween*, Massachusetts author Ruth Edna Kelley fails to describe any begging ritual associated with Halloween in America, despite living in a community with a significant English, Irish, and Scottish immigrant population. Kelley’s extensive description of parties and traditions includes various pranks, revelry, and merrymaking: “It is a night of ghostly and merry revelry. Mischievous spirits choose it for carrying off gates and other objects, and hiding them or putting them out of reach. . . . Bags filled with flour sprinkle the passers-by. Door-bells are rung and mysterious raps sounded on doors, things thrown into halls, and knobs stolen. . . . Hallowe’en parties are the real survival of the ancient merrymakings.”⁶

Kelley describes the ringing of doorbells as a prank, not a prelude to a solicitation. Her account of the principal Halloween festivities—pranking and parties—and her omission of any begging practice accord well with reports published in newspapers of other cities in the early 1900s. In North America, costumed revelers performing for pennies or demanding tribute were more likely to be associated with other holidays like Christmas and New Years. In New York at the turn of the century, the festive observance of Thanksgiving incorporated such exchanges.

The congruence between turn-of-the-twentieth-century New York Thanksgiving and midcentury trick-or-treating is striking. Tuleja postulates that the Thanksgiving practices that emerged in New York represent “the most plausible ‘missing link’ between European solicitation customs and trick or treat.”⁷ In New York by midcentury, children donned costumes of all sorts to celebrate Thanksgiving. These costumes mimicked adult dress or invoked fanciful characters and goblins, and kids corked their faces or donned masks and took to the streets. It was “a juvenile celebration almost exclusively.”⁸ Although boys seem to be the most frequent actors, some references claimed that girls also participated. Some performed in the mummer tradition, offering musical improvisations and various antics “in keen competition for ‘something for Thanksgiving.’”⁹ Some merely extended “grimy hands for pennies.”¹⁰ Despite the long-standing tradition, adults did not always tolerate these Thanksgiving “ragamuffins.”

Presaging later attacks on trick-or-treating, a 1903 editorial disapproved of children who went to private homes demanding a hand out: “The practice of ringing all the doorbells and demanding backsheesh is long past a joke. It is an abuse which should be restrained.”¹¹ By the late 1920s, city officials and civic groups sought to curtail or at the least to control children’s “turning out” for Thanksgiving. The combination of adult disapproval, civic alternatives, and the depression ended the tradition. By 1940 preparations for Thanksgiving in New York emphasized charity dinners and food giveaways. No accounts mention children’s antics or beggary. In the 1942 Ragamuffin Parade, an annual event organized by the Madison Square Boys Club, four hundred boys and girls competed for prizes for costumes portraying American and European personalities. The parade’s slogan emphasized the distance from the ragamuffin beggary of years past: “American boys do not beg.”¹²

But, if Thanksgiving mummery is the missing link, it is a strange one. We can observe in New York’s Thanksgiving mummery traditions a continuity of children’s practices that looks very much like trick-or-treating. Nevertheless, there is no evidence that the actual practice of trick-or-treating originated in New York. Quite the contrary, trick-or-treating appears to have arrived in the East quite late, sometime in the late 1940s. As I will discuss in greater detail, the earliest descriptions of trick-or-treating originated farther west in states such as Indiana, Washington, and Oregon. While it is impossible to locate the first time or place of trick-or-treating, we can consider Los Angeles as one example among those western cities that incubated different and distinct set of holiday traditions and observances which eventually led to trick-or-treating.

Los Angeles did not have a tradition of children's mumming or begging associated with any fall festival. In Los Angeles, as in most North American cities at the turn of the twentieth century, Halloween occasioned private parties, while boys of a certain age and disposition celebrated the holiday with pranks both petty and elaborate. Each year authorities determined anew to control the pranksters, but the boys outnumbered the police. By the second decade of the 1900s, cities offered Halloween festivals as an alternative to divert the pranks into more socially acceptable forms of fun.¹³ Such festivals spread quickly and grew in popularity. In 1914 the city of Ocean Park planned a Halloween carnival, one of the earliest citywide attempts to draw the entire community into a publicly sanctioned festivity.¹⁴ By 1915 the original carnival had developed into a three-day Harvest Home Festival, promoted throughout the Los Angeles area.¹⁵ By 1921 Los Angeles city center was "invaded" by "goblins, black cats, witches on broomsticks, yama-yama girls, clowns and some hoodlums . . . thousands in varied and unique costumes strolled through the streets."¹⁶ In the 1920s, civic groups sponsored costume parades and other public observations for children in playgrounds and at piers. Cities organized parades and decorated public spaces with banners, flags, and seasonal pumpkins. They decorated shop windows as well in an effort to keep pranksters from trying put up their own versions. City officials hoped to distract youngsters from more serious pranks. As one headline put it, "Halloween parties [are] not only [a] treat for children, but prevent expensive pranks."¹⁷

By the 1930s, in addition to descriptions of public festivities, newspapers offer accounts of costumed children traveling house to house in a private version of the playground and city parades. A 1930 society page paints the festivities planned on an exclusive block of Berkeley Square where the youngsters "under the personal supervision of their parents have made sport Halloween Eve, and this year have planned weird as well as fascinating costumes and going from house to house down the block to make merry."¹⁸ One reporter refers to "the processions of elves, goblins and pumpkin-heads from house to house [which is] so dear to and so good for the imagination of childhood."¹⁹ Another reporter first describes the art of pumpkin carving then continues: "Upon little wagons or kiddie cars the jack-o'-lanterns will be loaded, to be trundled through the neighborhood by masked and sheeted little figures on doorbell-ringing excursions."²⁰ This practice seems to presage trick-or-treating.

The sound of a doorbell on Halloween in the 1930s did not always signal the benign visitation of a wagon full of jack o' lanterns. As Ruth Edna Kelley had

noted in 1919, doorbell ringing was a popular Halloween prank (in my youth we called it “doorbell ditch,” a practice I do not remember being associated with Halloween).²¹ A 1932 story from Los Angeles describes “a band of wandering youths who rang doorbells and departing left a dead fish dangling on the door-knob.”²² Such pranks were not always appreciated; in 1929, a thirteen-year-old girl was injured by a shot fired from an air gun at a group of kids “engaged in the Halloween pastime of ringing doorbells.”²³ Ringing doorbells as a prank inverted the relationship between host and guest. It signaled, in many ways, a perfect prank: it annoyed without actually causing harm or damage; It intruded in a way that was unpreventable and unprovable; And it waged a sort of invisible war on the privacy and peace of the household.

Such was Halloween in Los Angeles and in many other American cities in the 1930s: costumes, parades, and—in some neighborhoods—privately arranged, door-to-door processions. And there were treats. We know from the women’s pages of local newspapers of the era that recipes for Halloween goodies were popular, although they were mostly served at Halloween parties. There was doorbell ringing. And there were the pranks. Throughout North America in the early twentieth century, communities celebrated Halloween in ways that incorporated some or all of these. The fundamentals of trick-or-treating were all in place, but they had not yet to come together in a single ritual.

And then, in widely separated, sporadic accounts, the words “trick-or-treat” appear. The first description comes from Blackie, Alberta, Canada, 1927: “Hallowe’en provided an opportunity for real strenuous fun. No real damage was done except to the temper of some who had to hunt for wagon wheels, gates, wagons, barrels, etc., much of which decorated the front street. The youthful tormentors were at back door and front demanding edible plunder by the word ‘trick-or-treat’ to which the inmates gladly responded and sent the robbers away rejoicing.”²⁴ The tone here is playful; this version of trick-or-treating offers pleasure both for the “robbers” and for the “inmates.” Over the next decade, stories describing (and sometimes decrying) trick-or-treating appeared in papers from the western and middle states including Oregon (1934), Montana (1934), Indiana (1937), Nevada (1938), California (1938), and Washington (1939).²⁵ In some cases, adults appeared as playful partners in the game, while in others they expressed dismay, distress, or anger at the ways children’s playful activities impinged on their property or sense of propriety.

Whether they participated willingly or not, adults clearly neither invented nor initiated trick-or-treating according to these early accounts. On the contrary,

many adults seemed unfamiliar with the practice and surprised by its sudden emergence. M. E. G. of Washington (D.C.) observed: “I have lived in some 20 other towns and cities and I never saw nor heard of the begging practice until about 1936. . . .”²⁶ A 1941 *Chicago Daily Tribune* article implied that the writer encountered trick-or-treating for the first time: “On Halloween we made the belated discovery that gangsterism has infected the pranks of modern boys. They come to the back door and say, ‘Tricks or treat?’”²⁷ This writer’s “belated discovery” shows that, while the pranks remained a familiar feature of Halloween’s past, the encounter at the back door signified something new.

As the geographically diverse antecedents suggest, there is no direct precedent for trick-or-treating. Rather than thinking about trick-or-treating in terms of origin and descent, we can best understand it as cultural *bricolage*, a novel assemblage cobbled out of available practices, images, and themes. Some evolved from previous community traditions involving adults as well as children. Some emerged from children’s play as passed on from older to younger children. And some developed from contemporary media and popular culture. The *Chicago Daily Tribune* article used the metaphor of “infection” to describe the transformation of the “pranks of modern boys” into “tricks or treat.” “Infection” aptly suggests a new cultural catalyst that shook the traditions and festivities into the particular form of trick-or-treating.

Trick-or-treating first appeared during the years of the Great Depression, a time when economic dislocation strained normal social relations. Contemporaries were unsure whether to view trick-or-treating as innocent fun, as begging, or as theft. Trick-or-treating was all of these, but not exactly. The innovation of trick-or-treating combined Halloween traditions with an inspiration from 1930s popular culture. Trick-or-treating transformed the Halloween prankster into the Great Depression–era antihero: the American Gangster.

Trick-or-Treating Gangsters

Print references to trick-or-treating in the 1930s appeared infrequently, but when we find them, they seem remarkably similar. The first documented reference—from Canada in 1927—describes “youthful tormentors” and “robbers” demanding “edible plunder,” a language of theft and criminality, but in a playful tone. Over the next decade, reporters refined the notion of theft from the image of the ordinary robber to the more glamorized and sinister “gangster.”

In the 1930s, daily papers offered stories of manhunts and shoot-outs, and Hollywood filled movie screens with images of gangsters. The language of gangsterism—in its attitudes and styles—pervades the earliest descriptions of trick-or-treating: “Other young goblins and ghosts, employing modern shake-down methods, successfully worked the ‘trick-or-treat’ system in all parts of the city” (Oregon, 1934);²⁸ “Pranksters were bought off when oldsters complied with their ‘trick-or-treat’ demand (Washington, 1939);²⁹ “‘Trick-or-treat’ was the slogan employed by Halloween pranksters who successfully extracted candy and fruit from Reno residents. In return the youngsters offered protection against window soaping and other forms of annoyance” (Nevada, 1938).³⁰

The pop-culture figure of the gangster provided rich metaphors for writers. Yet, insofar as gangster imagery appears regularly across such geographically disparate accounts—all of which appeared in small, local papers—I find it difficult to conclude that journalists by themselves created the gangster metaphor for trick-or-treating. The image of the gangster offered young people a new framework in which to enact their encounters with adults and adult authority.

A 1934 Montana paper suggested that both young people and adults were strongly influenced by a new awareness of the gangster narrative: “The ‘pranks’ Wednesday evening were to be staged in a different way than in former years. This particular gang meant business. . . . No foolishness would be tolerated—citizens would meet the demands of the gang or suffer the consequences.”³¹ The gangsterish sound of this language colors the account, and it also provides a backdrop and a rationale for the actions of the “gang.” While the gang in this particular account included fifteen- and sixteen-year-olds whose nearness to adulthood made the association with criminality more transparent, the same tone associated with gangs, goons, and gangsters pervaded other newspaper accounts from the period that described much younger celebrants.

Furthermore, staging pranks “in a different way” highlighted a new reciprocity of trick-or-treating. In the past, the anonymity of pranks helped dissociate perpetrator from the victim. With pranks on Halloween, young people retaliated for the powerlessness they experienced on the other days of the year. If trick-or-treating entails simple robbery, it merely continues just such an inversion. But when trick-or-treating fed off the new image of the gangster, it became, simultaneously, a theft and an exchange. Of course, such upending of power relations and the ritual enacting of theft and exchange characterized many ancient and traditional festivals, but the specific form of trick-or-treating combined these elements in a modern and surprising way.

Both children and adults seemed to recognize and acknowledge that while adults possessed the power of law and society, children at the door demanding treats and threatening tricks also had a kind of power. In trick-or-treating, the power of children (trick) and the power of adults (treat) met face to face at the threshold. The children who took up trick-or-treating may have been poor or middle class—regardless, as children they were by definition propertyless. In playing the role of the gangster—and being perceived by adults as enacting the role of gangster—trick-or-treating children upended the relationship between those who were powerful and those who were powerless. The exchange confused the positions of the haves and the have-nots, if only for one night. Begging rituals like souling called on charity and pity as the basis for donation; trick-or-treating, with its invocation of the gangster, more closely resembled extortion.

Accounts of Halloween in the 1930s make clear that the gangster pose was not merely a metaphor; and trick-or-treating, no idle proposition. A Reno resident complained of being besieged by a group of six or eight boys and girls. When the adults were unable to answer the doorbell, the children consulted among themselves: “If they don’t open up, let’s give them the works.” They emptied the garbage can, strewed its contents around the yard, and dragged the can down the road.³² One of the earliest trick-or-treating stories, this one from Montana’s *Helena Independent*, makes the gangster playing sound menacing: “Pretty Boy John Doe rang the door bells and his gang waited his signal. It was his plan to proceed cautiously at first and give a citizen every opportunity to comply with his demands before pulling any rough stuff. ‘Madam, we are here for the usual purpose, trick-or-treat.’”³³ The “gang” described here consisted of older—fifteen- or sixteen-year-old—physically intimidating youths, two boys and a girl. According to the *Independent*, when a woman refused their demands for treats or money, they retaliated by smashing an expensive birdbath in front of her house. “Pretty Boy John Doe” refers, of course, to the notorious gangster Charles “Pretty Boy” Floyd. Following a crime spree that lasted years and landed Floyd atop of the FBI’s most-wanted list, federal agents killed him in a shoot-out on October 22, 1934, just two weeks before the article appeared. The *Independent* presents the trick-or-treating as a gateway to the more serious crimes of theft and violence. As its headline proclaims, these teenage trick-or-treaters are “The Gangsters of Tomorrow.”

Despite the alarm sounded by such claims, most descriptions of early trick-or-treating (even as they acknowledge its “gangster” element) adopted a more tolerant tone, especially when it involved younger children engaged in seemingly

harmless play. The 1938 piece on Halloween in Reno describes the shakedown when “residents who refused to pay tribute found their lights turned off, their windows soaped, or toothpicks in their doorbells.” But the article then points out that the youngsters caused little material damage and that the police characterized the night as “one of the quietest Halloweens on record.”³⁴ Describing the pranks as mild and tolerable, and the article seems to side with those conducting the shakedown, implying that the victimized residents had it coming.

A 1938 *Los Angeles Times* article gives a fuller description of children’s trick-or-treat activities: “From house to house the boys and girls will travel, punching doorbells with nerve-jangling peals. ‘Trick-or-treat!’ is the terse command as the householder peeks warily around the door. ‘If you don’t give us something, we’ll play a trick on you. . . .’ So the diminutive Halloween goon squads are bought off with cookies, candy, tickless alarm clocks or the price of an ice cream cone.”³⁵ Angelenos anticipated littering the porch with paper, burning film to create a bad smell, putting flowerpots on chimneys, defacing political posters, and tying tin cans to the axles of cars, none of which seem particularly vicious. The *Times* called the children “goon squads,” but also “diminutive,” suggesting that the larger, stronger adult suspended his or her strength to play victim against the comical aggressor. The price of protection too was trivial, sweets and toys that, by virtue of their association with children and childhood, were considered insubstantial. It was all good fun, and adults were invited to play along. Those who would not were dismissed as “grumpy citizen[s].”

The *Times* includes a photo of two boys tying a bicycle to a post “as a prelude to Halloween.” These boys appear to be eleven or twelve years old. The article repeatedly calls the Halloween celebrants “little,” “small,” “youngsters,” “imps.” But they act independently, they travel in groups, and they stage all manner of elaborate pranks around houses, streets, and shops. If they can be bought off with ice cream cones and candy, they are nevertheless old enough to play Halloween on their own. In the absence of direct reference to ages, it is difficult to draw firm conclusions about the age of these trick-or-treaters. But this article, alongside many other descriptions, suggests that, in the late 1930s and 1940s, children conducted their trick-or-treating without adult supervision. The age of trick-or-treaters, it seems, most commonly spanned ages of seven to twelve years, although younger children might have participated. The children acted independently but decidedly playfully. Adult-led and -supervised trick-or-treating for preschool age children proved a later development.

Even when the gangster stylings of younger children appeared more often cute than threatening, youth in itself did not always offer a free pass. In one memorable 1952 account, a Brooklyn school principal named Dr. Mason ended up in court after he slapped ten-year-old Richard Wandeman, a neighborhood boy who had rung the principal's doorbell with a group of trick-or-treaters hoping for some candy. Mason claimed that after he had lectured the trick-or-treaters on the evils of begging and "gangsterism," the boy held his fist in Mason's face and growled "Hand it over or else!" In reply, Mason gave him the back of his hand. No treats enlivened that Halloween night; instead, Wanderman ended up with an icepack, and Mason ended up with an assault charge and a court summons.³⁶

Critical attacks on trick-or-treating that emphasize consumerism and adult control frequently posit a romantic state of anarchy and rebellion to which authentic children supposedly aspire: trick-or-treaters, in the words of one critic, "sold their rights to rebellion for some sugar in expensive wrappings."³⁷ Trick-or-treating, another critic concludes, "transforms the destructive 'essence' of the holiday into disciplined 'fun.'"³⁸ Why these critics rate destructiveness as the highest objective of children's culture remains unclear, nor do the critics explain why fun should be devalued as a subjective quality in children's activities. Anthony Rotundo's nuanced account of the nineteenth-century "boys culture" that cultivated and perfected the art of pranking makes clear that such activities, despite seeming—from an adult perspective—to be simply destructive or anarchic, were in fact highly rule bound and governed by a complex system of values.³⁹ The opposition between anarchic childhood and disciplined adulthood is entirely ideological—within the limited perspective that considers destructiveness and anarchy the essence of child authenticity, the critic may dismiss trick-or-treating because it "serves the adult need to harness, and thus control, the Other."⁴⁰ Many adults in the 1930s did not think so, as Mason's slap to Wanderman's tender face so eloquently demonstrated. Furthermore, such simplistic claims do not consider the ways in which trick-or-treating might have served children's own needs.

Unlike the boys-only traditions of Halloween pranking, accounts of trick-or-treating from the early 1930s described the participation of both boys and girls. For observers who saw only a fall from the real work of pranking to the passive consumption of trick-or-treating, the presence of girls served as both a symptom and a result of the feminization of real Halloween fun. In 1959 Gregory Stone exclaimed with dismay, "Twenty-five years ago the presence of

girls in my own Halloween enterprises was unthinkable.”⁴¹ Girls, one assumes, saw it otherwise. The practice of trick-or-treating for children suggested, instead, innovative mixed-gendered play where girls claimed the freedom of the streets and the daring of the threshold encounter and delved into previously boys-only forms of mischief.

Accounts from the 1930s make it evident the “pranksters” who might have fun soaping windows enjoyed playing “gangster” and “extracting candy and fruit.” But I wish to point out that even in its earliest forms, the fun of trick-or-treating lay not only in its proximity to pranking or extortion. Even when trick-or-treating expressed a ritual chant rather than an explicit threat, the activity involved more than simply the passive acceptance of a treat at the door. Trick-or-treating, from its beginnings, incorporated a fully elaborated scheme that included the preparations leading up to the doorbell, the encounter at the door, the accumulation of loot, and the accounting at the end of the night. As a variant of the gangster shakedown, trick-or-treating allowed children to challenge adult authority in person, rather than secretly or anonymously. The experience of trick-or-treating encompassed the thrill of confronting and overpowering the powerful, even if only in play. Trick-or-treating was not necessarily less authentic or less inventive or less productive than pranking. It was, instead, a different kind of production and a different kind of fun.

Debating Trick-or-Treating: Juvenile Delinquency or Innocent Fun

By the late 1940s, trick-or-treating, alongside the parades and parties, was firmly established as an American custom in white, European-descent communities. The ritual garnered recognition and discussion in national publications like *Jack and Jill* (1947) and *American Home* (1947), and it appeared in Halloween radio broadcasts including *The Jack Benny Show* (1948) and *The Adventures of Ozzie and Harriet* (1948). Reports of Halloween vandalism, which had declined during the war, increased in the second half of the decade, but by 1950 many cities were reporting the “quietist of Halloweens.”⁴² As Nicholas Rogers notes, “the 1950s saw the taming of Halloween. . . . By 1960 much of the mischief formerly associated with the holiday had ebbed.”⁴³ In this period of tranquility, gangsters and pranks were less likely to be invoked as reasons to condemn children’s Halloween observance.

Yet the wide practice and recognition of trick-or-treating did not mean that adults universally applauded it. Quite the contrary, throughout the late 1940s and early 1950s, adults continued to raise stern objections to the practice of children ringing doorbells and demanding treats. Even where the threat of a trick was no longer serious, some adults remained nervous, angry, or outraged at the spectacle of children begging door-to-door and at the prospect of dealing with trick-or-treaters ringing their doorbells. Trick-or-treating demanded that adults participate and collaborate in children's play. Many adults were uncomfortable with children and their playful activities, and some of the unease about trick-or-treating might have originated in prejudice against children. But underneath many of the debates about trick-or-treating lay a worry about the moral and social implications of giving and receiving, a worry increased by the appearance of strangers asking for or demanding a treat on one's doorstep.

Many objections to trick-or-treating expressed a concern for the moral character of children and for adult responsibility in building (or damaging) that character. In 1947 when the rationing required by the Second World War remained still a memory, the Los Angeles PTA objected to trick-or-treating as a means of saving food: "Extra food to well-nourished children who do not need it or waste it is utterly wrong in the thinking of those concerned with the world's hunger."⁴⁴ Mrs. Elinor Ashley seconded the PTA's assertion that well-fed children had no need for treats. Ashley went further, arguing that not only the treats, but the practice of trick-or-treating itself damaged children: "Most of us regard this form of juvenile blackmail with indulgence but it's bad for children, both psychologically and physiologically."⁴⁵ In Washington DC, Mrs. McIlwee called on the police to prohibit "beggars night and all this gangster 'trick-or-treating.'" Further, she insisted that "parents should be fined and jailed who put their children out to beg."⁴⁶ These objections presumed that children who participated in trick-or-treating were learning to be wasteful and greedy. If trick-or-treating represented, in fact, juvenile blackmail, then the children were also learning to be criminals. Adults, too, were implicated in the purported immoral cesspool of trick-or-treating. By treating a form of "juvenile blackmail" with indulgence, they condoned immorality and unlawfulness. The consequences, Ashley warned, would be dire.

Other objections focused on the disturbance and implicit threat that householders experienced on Halloween. In a 1949 letter, Mrs. Lucy L. Seay of Washington DC described the "nightmare" of trick-or-treating.

For the last two days of this month we householders have to put up with multitudes of the “young fry” disturbing us late into the night. They come with large bags to fill with a lot of fruit, candy, cake or anything they can beg, and some of them come to our door more than once in one evening! . . . Many of the ones we see are half-grown boys and girls, whom we do not know. They don’t always “beg,” they really demand treats, and our doorbell rings until we are quite nervous. We cannot read, and we dare not leave home, lest our clean windows and door screens be smeared with chalk or soap.⁴⁷

Smearing door and window screens with chalk or soap constitutes a nuisance, not a destructive act. It is, more truthfully, messy. And it takes time to clean up the mess. Of course, much more destructive and even dangerous pranking also took place. Even today, many communities continue to struggle with serious vandalism and even violence on Halloween (as in Detroit’s Devil’s Night). Yet it is striking that in Seay’s particular objections to trick-or-treating, the acts of trickery she specifically mentions seem calculated to annoy rather than destroy. The “delinquents” seem to cause more damage to Seay’s nerves than to her property. She is disturbed, her doorbell keeps ringing, she cannot read, and she cannot leave her house. The aim of the “half-grown boys and girls” seems not just to fill their sacks but to annoy the adults by intruding on their homes, abusing the rituals of hospitality and charity, and challenging the proprieties of adult-child interaction.

Disputes about the propriety of children going door-to-door and expecting hand-outs reflected broader anxieties about charity, generosity, and neighborliness in the aftermath of World War II. Echoing critiques of divisive nationalism that had culminated in the recent war, Mrs. Carroll of Arlington, Virginia, wrote that she found “distressing” the “spirit of unneighborliness, the tendency to detach ourselves into tight little groups with ‘no admittance’ signs raised high,” displayed by those who condemn children “put out to beg” at Halloween.⁴⁸ The idea that trick-or-treaters were “put out to beg” also raised the troubling spectre of economic disparity. The objections to trick-or-treating seemed to focus on youth “whom we do not know.” “They” were coming to “our” neighborhood and demanding “our” treats, filling their “large bags” and taking advantage of neighborly generosity. The nuts, candies, and cookies collected at Halloween might have satisfied a youthful craving for treats, but they were obviously not the same thing as the basic necessities of food,

shelter, and clothing that the truly needy sought. Nevertheless, the annual condemnation of trick-or-treating barely concealed contempt for the needy, both at home and abroad.

In a 1947 issue of *American Home*, one article pointed to conflicting interpretations of the “door-to-door.” “There are some folks who think this annual ‘gimme campaign’ is a sign that America is sliding downhill and fostering juvenile delinquency. But we know differently, as do any parents who have reared normal, active youngsters. The Halloween door-to-door trek is an American tradition.”⁴⁹

The implicit question addressed whether the “American tradition” celebrated in the door-to-door ritual represented neighborly hospitality or the “gimme” of lazy entitlement. The possibility that “America is sliding downhill” indicated that much more was at stake than the formation of children’s character. The issue of trick-or-treating paralleled, for some, the issue of the nation’s character and commitments. Was America like a “normal, active youngster”? Or was America as a nation “sliding downhill”?

A 1949 piece from the *Chicago Daily Tribune* entitled “The Social Significance of Tricks or Treats” compared the ethos of trick-or-treating with the politics of Britain’s Prime Minister Clement Attlee, known for his expansion of social services and social spending. Noting with disapproval one town’s tolerance for “crypto-Democrats,” the *Tribune* suggests, “It all arises from indoctrination of the young. The young collector at your door is in effect threatening that if you don’t pay off, he will go communist. A generation of little Atlees is in the making.”⁵⁰ The article concludes with a sardonic suggestion that trick-or-treaters should be sent “bawling to their mothers” or “punted into the nearest clump of evergreens” because “something must be done to revive private enterprise.” The article hinted, of course, that treats deposited in bags corrupted children as much as government handouts and that trick-or-treating indoctrinated youngsters in the liberal politics of the welfare state. Trick-or-treating corresponded, in the *Tribune*’s view, with such bogeys as socialism and communism, whose supposed disregard for individual effort endangered the entire fabric of American industry and achievement.

Gregory Stone’s “Halloween and the Mass Child,” published a decade later, reflected a similarly negative view of the “gimme campaign,” although from the opposite end of the political spectrum. Where “The Social Significance of Tricks or Treats” defended the American spirit of free market and individual effort against the encroachments of the socialistic handout, Stone emphasized the destruction of authentic freedom and “work” brought about

by the transition to a consumer-oriented mass society. These two views represented opposite opinions of American enterprise: For Stone, the market had destroyed freedom; For the *Chicago Daily Tribune*, the market was the space of freedom. But for both, the trick-or-treater at the door represented everything wrong about America.

Trick-or-Treating Skirmishes: Charity and Hospitality

Some cultural critics have viewed trick-or-treating as serving adult interests or as duping children into passivity, but the virulent attacks of the late 1940s and early 1950s saw something more disturbing in the Halloween ritual. The conventional accounts of the taming of Halloween pit wild adolescent pranks against the adult desire for order. These viewpoints interpret trick-or-treating as a settlement—childhood wildness has been tamed and channeled into acceptable forms. But, in truth, trick-or-treating itself resembles a battleground, one on which children struggle with adults to define the boundaries and locales of their play and adults attempt to impose their own values and preferences on something that they neither originated nor controlled.

Some who found appalling what they considered the spectacle of middle-class children descending into beggary suggested turning the ritual into a charity for the less fortunate. In 1947 Mrs. Ruth Y. Nelson, wife of a Lutheran pastor in Washington DC, organized children from fourteen schools to pass up sweets and instead collect nutritious food for the needy overseas. The children were instructed to say: “No tricks, just a treat, for starving children who want to eat.”⁵¹ A similar sentiment inspired Trick-or-Treat for UNICEF (United Nations International Children’s Fund), which started as a small church project in 1950. In 1952 UNICEF began sponsoring and promoting charitable trick-or-treating, raising thirty-two thousand dollars that year.⁵² Participation steadily grew over the decade, and by 1958 two million children raised one million dollars for UNICEF.⁵³ Other service organizations also experimented with Halloween begging. In 1956 the American Service Friends Committee sent two hundred thousand children on trick-or-treating rounds as “friendly beggars” with specially printed “shopping bags” to collect children’s clothing, school supplies, and sewing materials for overseas distribution.⁵⁴

The press noted these successful charity drives with approval, applauding the community’s generosity and the children’s unselfishness. We know less

about how or why children agreed to put aside their anticipated loot and apply their Halloween efforts for others. Some children may have embraced the charitable cause and engaged in friendly begging with enthusiasm. But others did not. Parental pressure may have played a large role for those children who did participate. The collecting of coins for UNICEF need not have precluded a subsequent tour of the neighborhood for cookies and candy or the taking of both a treat bag and a UNICEF box along on the trick-or-treating rounds. We also know little about the relation between the monies collected “for UNICEF” and the monies actually remitted to UNICEF. One UNICEF official admitted that “some children who are unconnected with the project use it as a ‘front’ for their personal solicitations.”⁵⁵ All of which is to say that there were many ways children might contest and resist the transformation of their own playful rituals into a charitable act serving someone else’s objectives.

Throughout the 1940s and 1950s, the women’s pages of newspapers and women’s magazines provided party recipes and tips for each Halloween. These sometimes incorporated suggestions that readers invite trick-or-treating children, both known and unknown, inside and offer them a party. Doris Hudson Moss wrote of avoiding a “candle-greasing” by diverting the potential mischief makers with her goodies: “Seeing me, they summoned nerve to speak the age-old salutation of ‘Trick-or Treat!’ When they learned that it was *treat* at our house they came shyly into the dining room where other children were nibbling at doughnuts and sipping cider—and there were no *tricks*.”⁵⁶ David Skal reads this exchange as evidence that adults initiated trick-or-treating as a deliberate bribe to keep kids from destroying adult property.⁵⁷ Moss advocates a sort of bribery, noting that “if you provide food and a hearty welcome, you can be sure that the little rowdies from the other side of town will join in the party spirit and leave your front gate intact.” Moss’s suggestion that destruction can be avoided with distracting treats is not an original idea. What is interesting about Moss’s article is not that she suggests treats to ward off tricks, but that she makes tactical use of doughnuts and cider to shift the rules of engagement. When the kids arrive for trick-or-treating, Moss is bound by the rules of their game to give a treat or suffer a trick. But when she invites them inside to her party and offers them hospitality and entertainment, she is no longer the potential victim but the party host. The mischief makers are placed in the more receptive and subservient position of guest.

Moss wrote her piece in 1939, when it was clear to all concerned that trick-or-treating was not an offer, but a (more or less) playful threat. As the pranking

aspect of trick-or-treating faded after the Second World War, the meaning of the practice became more malleable, and it became easier to deflect the gangster shakedown. In some communities, once trick-or-treating arrived on the scene in the late 1940s, it was conventionally understood to mean “trick for treat,” a dance or song or poem in exchange for a reward. No doubt, for some adults this was a more familiar practice, echoing as it did the festive ritual begging more common in Europe. In 1947 *American Home* suggested inviting trick-or-treaters in for an “uninvited guests party.”⁵⁸ The article proposes that the guests themselves provide the entertainment by performing party tricks in exchange for their treats. It counsels the host to have songs and poems on hand, should the trick-or-treaters arrive unprepared, a suggestion that reveals the significant gap between adults expecting to be entertained with songs and poems and children threatening prankish tricks (or just expecting a treat on demand).

Trick-or-treating might also be revised as tricks *and* treats. In this formulation, tricks are no longer what the child threatens. Instead, tricks are arrogated as an adult prerogative alongside the treats. Los Angeles food and entertainment columnist Marian Manners suggests in a 1949 article: “A tricks *and* treats reception for the kids this year—gather in a dozen or so of the witches, ghosts and grimacing pumpkin faces that ring your doorbell and give them a party” complete with festive refreshments and a variety of card and magic tricks.⁵⁹ The gentle menace of the witches and ghosts gets defused as they come inside and become guests at the party. The fun will last all night long, Mrs. Manners assures the reader, as each new arrival will fall victim to the tricks, thereby providing continuous entertainment for those already assembled. The homeowner who had formerly been the victim of trick-or-treating is now the host, and the trick-or-treaters themselves have become the victim of the tricks—magic and cards—and also of the tricky host.

Some adults wanted nothing to do with either tricks or treats. By the late 1950s, conventions began to emerge that would govern the process of trick-or-treating and allow those who found it objectionable to opt out without confrontation: “Some suburban neighborhoods cooperate in handling visits from the very young. If they do not object to a visit, their porch lights are left on; if they desire privacy, the porch is dark.”⁶⁰ This lights-out convention presupposes there is no longer any serious risk of pranking to be deterred by full illumination. But it also suggests something about what adults found objectionable in trick-or-treating beyond the threat of a prank. Once the youngsters ring the bell, the homeowner must answer. Once he opens the door, the host must give the trick-or-treater something. Trick-or-treating is a nuisance because, even in

the absence of a threat, the host incurs an obligation. If the host has nothing to give, or chooses to give nothing, the only escape is to signal in advance by darkening the house and thereby avoiding the ring at the door that sets the chain of obligation in motion. To hear the door bell and refuse to open the door—or to open the door but have nothing to give—is a failure of hospitality. Viewed this way, trick-or-treating is not a passive submission to adult order. The doorbell is a summons a householder cannot refuse; trick-or-treating is in fact a variation on the old doorbell prank. The innovative genius of trick-or-treating, from the child's point of view, is that it uses the adults' own codes of social obligation and holiday tradition to impose a social exchange and extract a treat.

Lights Out

The year of Stone's article, 1959, proved the end of an era for Halloween. Amid the reports of trick-or-treating for UNICEF and Halloween parties, a more disturbing note was sounded. Dr. William V. Shyne, a California dentist, was accused of giving laxatives instead of candy to the children who rang his bell. The story was widely reported across the country.⁶¹ The next year, stories of Halloween danger began to appear. In previous years, parents had been cautioned about the dangers of costumes, candles in jack-o-lanterns, masks that were too obstructive—dangers posed by the physical trappings of Halloween. But after 1960, the emphasis shifted to the "danger of abusive strangers."⁶² Rogers argues that the shift in Halloween from the congenial scene of trick-or-treating to the alarming spectacle of Halloween sadists poisoning candy and putting razor blades in apples reflected broader social changes and conflicts.⁶³ It is no doubt true that broad social anxieties about social conflict and changing family and community dynamics were reflected in the fears projected onto children's bodies and their Halloween activities. But in Shyne's attempt to harm anonymous trick-or-treaters, there was also a more direct attack on Halloween.

Where other adults had expressed their disapproval for trick-or-treating by turning out their porch lights, Shyne acted out the hostility to trick-or-treating that had been publicly expressed and debated for as long as youngsters had engaged in the practice. By 1970 Halloween produced rumors and accusations of such fearsome contaminants as rat poison, lethal razor blades, LSD, and ground glass—all would turn treats into toxins. Sociologist Joel Best's exhaustive study of reports of Halloween sadism in the 1970s and 1980s concluded that the threat

was greatly exaggerated and that most reports lacked authenticity.⁶⁴ Halloween sadism posed no real danger; rather it functioned as urban legend. While the suffering supposedly caused by such sadists was horrifying to contemplate, the repetition of these accounts in the absence of actual evidence suggests the apparent appeal of putting trick-or-treaters in bodily peril, even if only in the imagination.

The fear of Halloween sadism provided a powerful rationale to expand adult control over trick-or-treating and to reassert authority over children who, at Halloween, claimed streets and porches as their own domain and who imposed on adult hospitality with their demands for treat. The role of adults in trick-or-treating had expanded in the 1950s. During this decade, trick-or-treating became fully entrenched as a beloved Halloween tradition as well as an important marketing opportunity for candy, snack, cereal, and beverage makers who promoted their products as Halloween treats. Adults—as both parents and consumers—supported and encouraged the activity by purchasing costumes and treats and awaiting trick-or-treaters at the door. But in the wake of the Shyne incident, adult participation in children's trick-or-treating became much more active and anxious.

Halloween sadism served as a powerful metaphor for the increasing perception that children were in danger in the postwar decades. While adults had disagreed about whether trick-or-treating was harmless fun or juvenile delinquency, no responsible parent would willingly endanger their child by putting him or her in the path of putative Halloween sadists. Historians of childhood have noted a general shift in the postwar period toward securing, protecting, and controlling children. As Howard Chudacoff has noted, children's play became increasingly confined and controlled after the 1950s.⁶⁵ The rapid transformation of trick-or-treating exemplifies this trend. After 1960 parents moved quickly to protect children, severely curtailing their after-dark movements, imposing supervision where children would have been left alone, and claiming the prerogative to examine and confiscate any suspect treats or candies. Each Halloween during the 1970s and the 1980s brought dire warnings of what might befall a child who enjoyed Halloween without the proper adult protection.

Directions for Future Inquiry

Today, trick-or-treating is alive and well. Even the specter of the Halloween sadist cannot destroy children's creative powers in celebrating and enjoying Halloween.

These days, more children enjoy trick-or-treating than ever before. In the twenty-first century, 93 percent of U.S. children surveyed by the National Confectioners Association reported participating in trick-or-treating.⁶⁶ The practice has evolved to accommodate the increasing involvement of parents in the children's activity and the widely shared assumption that children out alone are not safe. In many communities, adults organize and direct opportunities for trick-or-treating in parking lots (trunk-or-treat) and shopping malls, or they escort children to the homes of friends. Apartment-dwelling kids may travel from floor to floor rather than venturing outside. Churches and other community groups sponsor trick-or-treating parties.

As Best demonstrated, parents and the American public exaggerate Halloween's danger. Perhaps today the perception of diffuse danger and the lurking Halloween sadist give a rationale to twenty-first-century parents who are more involved in their children's lives than previous generations and more likely to participate in activities previously considered kids only. At the same time, some signs suggest that we may have reached a tipping point in the trajectory toward a paralyzing obsession with safety. In the context of an ever-growing anxiety surrounding the safety of costumes, candy, trick-or-treating, and dark streets and sidewalks, some parents have even begun to question whether there is a need to monitor so closely children's Halloween activities. In her controversial book *Free Range Kids*, Lenore Skenazy advocates a return to "actual, old-fashioned, kid-directed activity" including trick-or-treating door-to-door (for advocating this and other hands-off parenting practices, she has been branded "America's worst mom").⁶⁷ Skenazy has sparked a small parenting revolution, but it is too soon to tell whether trick-or-treating will ever again resemble its earlier form.

As with many other North American cultural forms, trick-or-treating has rapidly spread to many other countries. Critics who see Halloween as only a celebration of American consumerism have decried this spread, which in the framework of cultural imperialism appears to supplant authentic, local cultures with American cultural exports designed to create markets for American products. Yet today, as much as fifty years ago, there are uses for trick-or-treating by those children who actively choose it, uses which are not completely captured by the image of the duped consumer.

On the surface, Gregory Stone's description of the transformation of Halloween into an infantilizing exercise in consumerism remains irrefutable: trick-or-treating is for little kids, who dress up in costumes purchased and perhaps

chosen by their parents, who trick-or-treat for candy that is also purchased from major brand-name companies. But scholars more attentive to questions about powers of subcultures have considered children's agency and production in relation to Halloween observance in more complex ways. For example, a recent study of six- and seven-year-olds trick-or-treating in the United States emphasizes empowerment and activity—to be “big for a day,” to “choose a costume to wear and step forward into the community while enacting the chosen role,” to “make demands on adults and to behave in counter-normative ways.”⁶⁸ Halloween allows very young children to make demands on both their parents and strangers. Mothers and fathers go to great lengths to satisfy their children's desires for the right sort of costume. Candy, too, is a complex signifier in the rituals surrounding trick-or-treating. Once the kids are back at home, the candy treasure may be examined, sorted and re-sorted, compared, and traded. Adults may control which candies children are allowed, but children's use and interpretation of that candy remains their own. Rather than asking whether Halloween is child directed or adult directed, such investigations begin from the assumption that children have agency but that their agency is shaped and exercised in a wider context of constraint.

As my account of the history of trick-or-treating in the 1940s and 1950s suggests, it did not belong entirely to either children or adults, but it was a hotly contested activity in which issues of children's autonomy and issues of adult responsibility clashed. To be sure, the forces shaping and constraining children's trick-or-treating today differ from those of the 1940s and 1950s. The little, costumed Hannah Montana clinging to mama's hand and holding out her Wal-Mart treat bag seems to be entirely defined by brand names and adult concerns, leaving little of the confrontational drama that animated the earliest scenes of trick-or-treating. Yet that distilled moment of trick-or-treating leaves out a broader context of anticipation, appropriation, and interpretation that children bring to their experience. Complex processes of contestation and negotiation between children and adults have been a continuous feature of children's Halloween play from the earliest days of gangsters and prankster tricks to the trunk-or-treating of today. Attention to the playful, creative, inventive energies that children bring to Halloween, even bounded and constrained by adult limitations, remind us that whatever we do, play happens.

NOTES

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