Folk Research: A Query and a Critique

Stephen Olbrys Gencarella
University of Massachusetts, Amherst
USA

Abstract
This essay is a commentary on the rise of "folk research," the "research" conducted by individuals who claim the status of folklorist in public venues without formal training, engagement with learned societies, and other markers of expertise. Drawing upon examples from contemporary southern New England, this essay describes and critically analyses three stances of the folk researcher: the enthusiast, the self-proclaimed expert, and the professionally unreasonable. This essay further argues that folk researchers should be considered a concern for academic and public sector folklorists and their intellectual allies. It contends that folk researchers pose serious issues for professionalism in the discipline and as potential perpetuators of anti-intellectualism, misinformation, and even racist or otherwise socially problematic perceptions of folklore and folklore studies.

Keywords: Folk research, New England folklore, expertise, anti-intellectualism, public, folklore studies

Introduction

Permit me to begin with two representative anecdotes. The first is a direct quote from Richard Dorson, penned in his indelible combative style, from his essay "Is Folklore a Discipline?":

> At a meeting of the American Folklore Society back in 1957, a panel of two well-known scholars and a dentist who wrote children's books on folklore addressed themselves to a topic such as I am presenting here. At that time the society was treading slippery ground between the pulls of amateur enthusiasts and university professors. Many of the academics themselves felt only a secondary interest in folklore, having been trained in other subject matters. The first American Ph.D. in folklore was only granted in 1953. At any rate our writer of juveniles bounced up and down on the podium flailing at the pedants who squeezed all the juice out of folklore with their dusty monographs while enviously criticizing the successful nonacademic authors whose folklore books sold widely. (1973, 177)

The second anecdote is personal. As Halloween 2019 approached, an article by the travel writer Natalie Compton appeared in the *Washington Post*, "Seven Spooky Places to Visit according to a Ghost Hunter." It featured the recommendations of a "paranormal investigator," Greg Newkirk, and promoted his website and media company. I wrote to Ms. Compton:

Cultural Analysis 22.1 (2024): 1–51
© 2024 by The University of California.
All rights reserved

> Although I fully understand the appeal of such a topic for readers and for journalists, I feel compelled to reach out to you as a professor with a Ph.D. in folklore studies, and as someone concerned about both the misunderstanding of science in our society and the potential exploitation of storytellers by so-called "paranormal investigators." Inadvertently, by promoting "ghost hunters" who make money selling such "expertise," you run the risk of denigrating the work of trained folklorists, as well as talented storytellers in local communities. Paranormal investigators do not, as whole, hold any credentials. Professional folklorists, on the other hand, are often very adept at conveying and explaining stories and selecting and promoting interesting tourist destinations.

Ms. Compton sent a gracious reply and informed me that she had never heard that professional folklorists existed prior to my email.[1]

In other words, from the battle recounted by Dorson to the paranormal tourism of the present day, we have lost the campaign against folk research.

This essay is a query about whether my colleagues consider this loss an issue warranting redress. It is also a critique of certain popularizers in response to their folk research. For clarification, this commentary is not a criticism of folklore studies or research into folk practices. The inflection in the term "folk research" instead is on *folk*, akin to *folk psychology*, *folk epistemology*, and *folk science*—that is, a means of describing a phenomenon without rigorous methodology or thorough attention to empirical data. The utilization of "folk" further underscores the identity construction of those who, by engaging in such practices, constitute themselves as an allied group of individuals, often in opposition to other groups. In this configuration, "folk researchers" could exist for any topic—as, for example, the COVID pandemic saw people claim to do their own research on vaccines. Given space limitations, however, the subject of this critique is modest; it concerns claims of "research" conducted by people who lack formal training and expertise yet purport to investigate folklore.

I am also posing this query to ascertain if this is a widespread problem. From my purview in southern New England (Massachusetts, Connecticut, and Rhode Island), we are inundated with imposters. There are only a handful of professional folklorists and allied anthropologists, historians, literary scholars, and curators employed in the public sector and higher education. However, the region is a hotbed for so-called paranormal investigators, cryptozoologists, and others forming what Sharon Hill, in her perspicacious book *Scientifical Americans* (2017), terms ARIGs: Amateur Research and Investigation Groups. These individuals and teams—many of whom self-identify as folklorists or "folklore researchers"—flood the market with books, websites, documentaries, radio and television series, public lectures, and related media. Some have lucrative contracts with "edu-tainment" outlets or even with public radio and television stations such as WGBH. As Halloween approaches, local and regional newspapers—including the venerable *Boston Globe*, the *Hartford Courant*, and the *Providence Journal*—often feature interviews with such so-called experts. With the spotlight upon them, these folk researchers opine on matters they have not researched carefully or offer absurd statements about folklore, routinely merging it with pseudoscience.

There are other grave problems with folk researchers / ARIGs beyond their lack of attention to data. In their ardor, self-interest, and lack of standards they often propagate and perpetuate xenophobic, racist, misogynistic, and classist folklore. In many cases, they proliferate anti-intellectualism and anti-science attitudes, thereby contributing to what Tom Nichols has called "the death of expertise" (2017). Although there is little chance that these non-experts would gain employment in academic or applied settings in educational institutions, they have an impact on public opinion and perception about the work that trained folklorists do and, arguably, what it means to conduct legitimate research of any subject.

In the pages that follow, I offer a critique of three stances taken by folk researchers: the enthusiast, the self-proclaimed expert, and the professionally unreasonable. I do not intend these as hard categories but as recognizable patterns of practice regarding professional responsibilities to the presentation of public knowledge. As stated briefly, the enthusiast recognizes the amateur nature of their work but their zeal for the material cannot rein in the compulsion to participate in the production of knowledge. The self-proclaimed expert upholds themselves as the sole authority for judgments about the nature of the material to create the rhetorical appearance of being a possessor of knowledge. The professionally unreasonable operates within a fantasy reality and is unbound to any checks or professional standards. All three types rarely (if ever) publish in reputable journals or form alliances with legitimate institutions. Nevertheless, they seek—and sometimes exploit—laudatory attention from intellectuals in the academic and public sectors. I provide a specific example culled from southern New England for each stance. Again, given space limitations, I cannot review all the errors, misconceptions, and rhetorical strategies of the named practitioners in detail, but I am prepared to offer an extensive critique of each of them if called upon.

Professionals and Popularizers in Folklore Studies: A Review

The primary audience of this commentary are readers of *Cultural Analysis*, an academic community "dedicated to investigating expressive and everyday culture." Fortunately, the journal's online existence also guarantees availability to other scholars facing similar concerns, to folk researchers and their fans, and to relevant institutions such as libraries, historical societies, schools, and media outlets. I am keenly aware of the need not to abuse the patience of those additional readers, but I am also compelled to provide a review of the historical basis for this topic in folklore studies. Although that history warrants a lengthy and thorough explanation, in this section I will only summarize a few of the most poignant previous exchanges for the sake of general orientation.

The Fakelore / Folklorism Debates

Arguably, the oldest debate concerning professionals and popularizers in folklore studies arose in accusations by academics in the United States and Europe that certain practices advertised as folklore were spurious traditions and recent inventions by specific creators rather than products of community transmission and adaptation over

time. Richard Dorson coined the term "fake lore" in an essay published in 1950 in the *American Mercury* to address such perceived violations. Therein he laments:

> In recent years folklore has boomed mightily, and reached a wide audience through best-selling books, concert and cabaret folksingers, even Walt Disney cartoons. But far from fulfilling its high promise, the study has been falsified, abused and exploited, and the public deluded with Paul Bunyan nonsense and claptrap collections. Without stirring from the library, money-writers have successfully peddled synthetic hero-books and saccharine folk tales as the stories of the people. Americans may be insufficiently posted on their history and culture, as the famous New York Times survey indicated, but their knowledge of these subjects is erudition, compared with what they know about their own folklore. The saddest aspect of this fraud is that the spurious article is so dull and thin, and the genuine material so salty and rich. (1950, 335)

Dorson's specific targets in that earliest configuration were promoters of Paul Bunyan stories, especially the writer James Stevens, and fellow folklorist (and Ph.D.) Benjamin Botkin, who had published three folklore treasuries, all well received by the wider public. In subsequent decades, Dorson continued a campaign against "faklelore," those expressions that he regarded as falsehoods or not genuine expressions of folklore, and "fakelorists," the "[a]mateurs, dilettantes, popularizers, [and] charlatans" who promoted it (1976, 1).[2]

Stevens, in his response to Dorson, drew a different distinction. He suggested that Dorson himself was confused "between the tasks of the anthropologist and those of the artist with folklore" (1950, 343). Stevens continues:

> The scientist of long technical training and expertise will use folklore to reflect the vital phases of human tribes in times past. The artist adopts folklore for the work of his imagination. He sees Paul Bunyan as substance for art, in the tradition of Twain with King Arthur's court, of Byron with Don Juan, of Marlowe with Faustus, of Homer with Odysseus. …
>
> So much for my main difference with Dr. Dorson. There are other points of his argument on which I have to go to bat against him. And on some prime points, of course, I would have to support him. He is a scientific authority on folklore. I have never pretended to be a folklorist. (1950, 343–44)

That distinction, I contend, lies at the heart of this present commentary. Stevens willingly recognizes that he is an artist—and one operating in the entertainment industry—and does not pretend to be a folklorist. Dorson may not have respected authors who popularized folklore or anyone who brought folklore into commercial ventures, but Stevens clearly respected academic folklorists in this reply and did not represent himself as such an expert. As will become apparent, contemporary folk researchers refuse to muster similar respect. They are willing to pretend to be folklorists even as their primary social function is entertainment.

To clarify the position that I am arguing in this commentary, I stand with Stevens,

even as I applaud Dorson's desire to dignify folklore studies and promote professional folklorists. I have no objection to the notion that artists would utilize folklore in their works. I would further submit that Botkin's treasuries served a radically different social purpose than "research"—they were, after all, collections of excerpts from previous writers for a general readership, a far different creature than the studies he published in academic folklore journals. My argument against folk researchers is not that they engage folklore, but that they represent themselves as experts in research (including such ill-defined fields as "paranormal investigation") rather than as entertainers. I have no qualms with those who identify as storytellers, although I may criticize the content of a given story.[3] Furthermore, I would never suggest that raconteurs cannot do research or that entertainment cannot instruct or offer critique. Instead, I wish to draw a distinction between the work of researchers and entertainers and recognize that there are social consequences when the former's mechanisms collapse into the latter's expectations.

Successful entertainment warrants the production of pleasure in audiences. Successful research has no such obligation. Folklore *can* be decidedly entertaining. Folklore also can be weaponized to denigrate and demonize others for the pleasures of only certain parties. Folklore research requires a different commitment than entertainment, including the pursuit of accuracy. In folklore studies, accuracy may necessitate examination, disclosure, and critical analysis of patterns and productions of deeply problematic expressive culture such as colonialism and colonialist mentality. Such revelation may produce the antithesis of entertainment, namely an unpleasant unmasking of social realities that cause harm and pain for those subject to it.

Folk researchers often maintain the status quo because it is profitable to do so as long as they find audiences who derive pleasure from their work. On the other hand, scholarly folklorists may pursue research and draw conclusions that disturb, disquiet, or disconcert. In this manner, folklore studies differ from the aims of folk researchers, who generally seek to promote folklore rather than analyze and criticize it.

The role of entertainment plays significantly in debates concerning folklorism in Europe. Folklorism, as Saša Poljak Istenič succinctly explains, "denotes a social and cultural phenomenon that presents and revives folk culture forms in a series of versions ranging from scholarly reconstruction to (folk) performance" (2011, 51). In a similar vein, the recently coined term "folkloresque" identifies usages of folklore within popular culture (see Foster and Tolbert 2016). Representative examples include modern renditions of folk dancing (and concurrent folk music and costumes), festivals of recent invention that claim ancient vintage, rituals of newly emergent identity groups that borrow from or hearken to earlier traditions, and numerous expressions of heritage tourism.

Scholars often dismiss folklorism as an expression of fakelore, although the concept historically predates Dorson and involved different inflections within the European context (Šmidchens 1999). Criticism of folklorism concerns authenticity and applica-

tion of standards that something is a "genuine" tradition according to an arbitrary set of standards. Proponents of folklorism (whether scholars or performers) counter that such demands are capricious and misunderstand the folkloric process itself.

The dominant concern in the fakelore and folklorism debates—a practice's potential status as an invented or spurious tradition—is not centrally relevant to this present commentary. For the most part, the folk researchers identified herein do not invent folklore out of thin air, although they often embrace claims by "paranormal investigators" of longstanding traditions that do not hold up to historical analysis and scrutiny (I discuss one such case, the so-called Bridgewater Triangle, below). The community of paranormal investigators frequently return the favor and cite sympathetic folk researchers in their accounts.

New England folk researchers, for example, often examine established—if not outright classic—folklore, especially historical legends and social phenomena such as witchcraft. The problem, then, is not that they produce fakelore or folkorism per se but that they claim the authority to interpret recognized folklore and do so without attention to legitimate research methods. It is also my contention that many contemporary folk researchers deliberately seek to befuddle lines between research and the expression of uniformed opinion and often do so to gain capital in the form of money and prestige. Folk researchers benefit from misinforming in ways that delight the public. In this manner, I agree with Dorson about threats posed to research when it must satisfy the commercial marketplace and not the marketplace of ideas.

Indeed, I would go further and sharply distinguish between folklore used for entertainment or social commentary and the expectations for best practices in folklore research. For example, in 2016, a group of women who formed the Wolfshäger Hexenbrut in Wolfshagen im Harz, Germany, performed a public choreography celebrating Walpurgis at the end of April. The women dressed as stereotypical European witches and danced to a German reggae song "Schüttel deinen Speck"—"Shake Your Bacon"—by Peter Fox.

Videos of the women went viral and inspired pagan organizations, covens, and feminist groups throughout the globe to perform The Witch Dance, often signaling commitments to female empowerment. In the United States, celebrants incorporated the dance into Halloween in October. It became all the more poignant in 2017, in the aftermath of the #MeToo movement and the Women's March protests against Donald Trump. Variations have begun in earnest. The performers of The Witch Dance that occurred near my home in Connecticut at Halloween 2019 included gay and straight male allies to women's rights, including one dressed as the devil.

I do not dispute that The Witch Dance has become folklore, even as it may have begun as an expression of "popular culture." I would wholeheartedly disagree with scholars who disparage it as fakelore or "mere" folklorism and refuse to recognize how it has spread rapidly and evolved as a global phenomenon. I would dispute, however, any claim that the song used by the Wolfshäger Hexenbrut in 2016 is "Witchy Woman" by the Eagles or that the group near my home in Connecticut danced at *Walpurgis* (April 30) in 2019. I would also dispute that men invented the dance to mock feminists or that the dance is a *direct* descendent from secretive medieval Hexennacht celebra-

tions. I would do so because each of those hypothetical claims are erroneous—that is, they are inaccurate, unreasonable, or lacking in evidence. I believe that professional folklorists and all those who claim expertise have an ethical responsibility to correct error. Folk researchers, on the other hand, take no such responsibility. That lack of responsibility is the reason for this critique.

I am also not dismissing the notion of fakelore entirely. As an example, I apologize to the reader for employing a personal example. For a few years, I consulted with Essex Steam Train and Riverboat, a major tourist destination near the mouth of the Connecticut River, to design entertainment events inspired by New England folklore. Working with Free Men of the Sea, a history reenactment troupe specializing in pirate performances, I helped create two commercial adventures, one for children and one for adults. Free Men of the Sea had long performed as Captain Kidd's crew members and incorporated the global historical data and folklore concerning that infamous figure. For our events, we expanded the crew, giving each an identity of another pirate in New England folklore, well beyond Connecticut.

We also incorporated mermaids, drawing loosely upon a regional tradition, including from the town of Stratford, Connecticut, about an hour west of Essex. Kidd legends permeate the Connecticut River, where our events occurred. Mermaid legends do not; indeed, there is no case in the record. In inserting folkloric materials into a new setting, I recognize that we did so for entertainment, not historical accuracy. I would readily accept this gesture—and the resulting spectacles—as an act of fakelore. I would also indict myself if I suggested that the mermaid tradition was deep-rooted on the Connecticut River and would criticize any researcher who, based solely on these entertainment events, erroneously argued that mermaid lore was prevalent there.

The Public Perception of Professional Folklorists

The second site of tension involves the public perception of what professional folklorists do. It too has a complex history that is impossible to summarize quickly, so instead I will point to a similarity in three works spanning three decades. In 1991, Robin Evanchuk noted a widespread interest in folklore among the general population, of a similar strength that Dorson identified in 1950. Evanchuk's expressed intention was to provide insights to professional (and particularly academic) folklorists for improving their relations with the public, especially by "refining communication techniques" (13). Drawing from a vast range of phone calls into the UCLA Folklore and Mythology Program and a 1984 AFS survey conducted by Frank de Caro, she observed that "there is some confusion among members of the public at large about who folklorists are and where and how to find one" (15).

At UCLA, perhaps not surprisingly, one of the most frequent seekers of the professional folklorists' attention were those in the entertainment industry, who sought inspiration or clarification for projects. Evanchuk noted with concern that the general practice of that industry was not to credit or even adequately compensate folklorists for their research and time. However, despite several associated problems, she hoped

that "dialogue can develop to explore new ways of presenting folklore and folklorists on radio and television news programs" (17). Evanchuk further advised other basic public relations tactics, including "films, advertisements, phone information services, brochures, and public-oriented magazines," press releases, and syndicated newspaper columns (18-19), all in an effort to explain what folklorists do.

In 2015, Jeffrey Tolbert published an essay entitled "On Folklore's Appeal: A Personal Essay." Akin to Evanchuk, Tolbert advised academic folklorists to take public perceptions seriously and engage them, to foster dialogue and collaboration with interested members of the public. Tolbert recognized, however, that for many consumers, folklore implied a traditionalist and romanticized notion of a specific material, especially supernatural narratives and practices. Non-academics, he continued, desired something different than did scholars, namely examples that could help them learn about a topic "before any further analysis or criticism can occur" (103). If folklorists provided such information, Tolbert argued, they would create a productive means for the transition from popular perceptions to disciplinary ones. He was convinced that professional folklorists who were "rankled" by non-academics using the title (as, for example, in the series *The Folklorist*) should recognize that "there is nothing preventing them from answering this portrayal with one of their own, equally accessible to non-scholars but reflecting contemporary theories and trends in the discipline" (103). "We are in a position," Tolbert concluded, "by virtue of our credentials and the pervasiveness of digital technologies, to address popular audiences directly, to work with filmmakers and television producers and other creators of popular culture to produce works which draw on folklore as material and simultaneously reflect disciplinary understandings of the social significance of that material" (106–7). His examples, an updating of Evanchuk's, included documentaries, blogs, social media, coffee table books, public lectures, and the kinds of work that public sector folklorists accomplish daily.

In 2021, Andrea Kitta, Lynne McNeill, and Trevor Blank published an essay in *Advancing Folkloristics* with a similar intention to advise professional folklorists on the means and benefits of engaging with the broader public, including popular media. In contradiction to Dorson and other anchoring figures of the discipline's past, they ambitiously recommended embracing certain popularizers:

> The thing is, popularity is great—it should be something that strengthens our field, rather than weakens it. Amateur interest in folklore is what got many of us here today. People who are engaged by legend-themed shows or podcasts and who read world folktale books from general bookstores should be discovering that the things they are interested in are encompassed within folklore studies. We need to bridge the gap and find straightforward ways to communicate the basics of our field to nonexperts. This is not an easy thing to do, and it will require intentional, thoughtful preparation. (206)

Among the tools for such connection, Kitta, McNeill, and Blank recommend "writings or interviews for the general public in magazines, blogs, podcasts, and social media" (207), including outreach on Twitter, Facebook, and meme creation. The metaphor of bridging and positive examples of outreach permeate their essay.

I could not more strongly agree with the opinion that academic folklorists need to engage and educate the public. I have, on the record, encouraged AFS to launch a series of books on folklore for widespread consumption. I am a tenured professor, but I have published three books for the general reader and am working on a fourth—and have given partial to total royalties from all to nonprofit organizations. I served as the resident folklorist for a regional museum for five years, bringing to completion two exhibits, and did so pro bono. I have hosted several folklore-oriented series on an internet radio station for years, again entirely without remuneration. I regularly present public lectures on New England folklore and do not ask for compensation if the organization serves the public good. I offer hiking tours of folkloric sites to benefit outdoor organizations. I give media interviews throughout the year, provide free advice to fiction writers and visual artists, and volunteer on the board of a state governmental agency to promote cultural heritage tourism. I also teach large lecture, General Education classes on the folklore of New England, the global folklore of alcohol, and humor and comedy studies.

I mention these activities to demonstrate my bona fides for a differing opinion of the ease with which professional folklorists can influence the public by embracing popular media. While I deeply appreciate the optimism and successes expressed by colleagues, I also speak from experience—I am not a cloistered academic—when I say that the problem is not that we academic folklorists are too reticent to reach out through popular technologies. Rather, folklorists committed to accuracy cannot compete with the entertainment industry, which has little to no regard for such precision or critical analysis. Sensationalism sells. Accuracy can be dull or impossible to reduce to soundbites. Furthermore, to underscore the point of this present commentary, one problem with folk researchers—especially those who make a living selling their "expertise"—is their willingness to play by the rules of the entertainment industry rather than by, for example, the ethics statement of the American Folklore Society regarding responsibilities to the public:

> Folklorists are responsible to all presumed consumers of their professional efforts. To them they owe a commitment to candor and truth in the dissemination of their research results and in statements of their opinions as students of human behavior.

Candor and truth are not the goals of entertainers. While I have no problem with creatives who employ and adapt folklore for projects, I still believe that candor and truth should be the guiding principles for anyone who represents themself as a researcher aiming to inform and influence the public.

The Debate over Who Is and Who Is Not a Folklorist

As with the previous sections, the many debates concerning who qualifies as a folklorist are too demanding to repeat even in summary. Still, for clarity among my colleagues, I wish to be clear that this present critique is not a revisiting of the false dichotomy between academic and public sector folklore (Kirshenblatt-Gimblett 1988;

Zeitlin 2000), an artificial division that I hope has forever ceased. It is not a criticism of contributions by all amateurs or by "citizen folklorists" (to adapt a term from citizen scientists) or of collaborative ethnography. It is certainly not a criticism of organic intellectuals in Antonio Gramsci's sense of the term. It is also not a rehash of the Walter Lippmann-John Dewey debate over expert control of public policy in a democracy, although there are implications for a robust democratic society when anti-intellectualism and entertainment in the guise of education reigns.

This present commentary most closely resembles one initiated in 1991 by Robert Georges. To provide some context, Georges was the guest editor for the journal *Western Folklore*, then celebrating its fiftieth year of existence. The theme of the special issue was "Taking Stock: Current Problems and Future: Prospects in American Folklore Studies." Another issue lingered, however, beside that anniversary. In 1989, the American Folklore Society's Executive Board initiated consideration of altering the nature of the organization from a learned society to a professional association more akin to the American Medical or American Bar Association.

In a series of exchanges in the society newsletter in 1990, Elliot Oring, Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, and James Leary debated the move. Oring proposed the establishment of a related but separate organization for professionalism, noting it could provide benefits for its members and require licensing and related restrictions to identify a certified folklorist. Kirshenblatt-Gimblett considered such a move destructive and countered that a folklorist is not a profession that requires accreditation. Indeed, she argued that since AFS membership was relatively small, the issue of debating who is and who is not a folklorist was ill-founded. Leary defended public sector folklorists and reiterated that a folklore degree was not the sole mark of a folklorist but further expected that anyone "hired" as a folklorist fulfill a set of responsibilities, including the AFS code of ethics. In response, Oring agreed that stringent definitions of a folklorist were unproductive but challenged the implications that AFS should champion anyone who identifies this way. "*Anyone*?" Oring inquired, "Even if they do not possess the requisite knowledge and skills to do the job?" (5).

Georges insisted that his opinion was unrelated to the certification debate and that he did not support efforts towards professionalization in that manner. Nevertheless, his commentary raised a host of issues concerning who is a legitimate folklorist. His opening statement recalled a discussion he shared with a colleague—later self-revealed as Bill Ellis (1992)—who identified as a folklorist without a formal degree (but holding a Ph.D. in a related field). "Identifying oneself as a folklorist when one has had no formal training in the field had certainly once been the norm," Georges insisted, drawing attention to the distinguished contributions of laypeople and academics to the founding of the American Folklore Society (4). Georges was incredulous, however, that such a practice could continue after the establishment of degree-granting institutions in the 1950s. Ruminating further, he identified nine ways in which people "became" folklorists—that is, "appropriated the folklorist identity" (4)—since the 1960s despite little or no academic training in the subject. Self-declaration was first on his litany and generous acclamation by well-meaning folklorists was his last, but the middle seven require pause for this present essay. Georges notes such tactics as:

- Focusing in their own work on the kinds of phenomena that folklorists study
- Organizing or participating in performing groups that have the word *folk* or *folklore* in their names
- Joining folklore societies
- Presenting papers at folklore meetings
- Getting essays published in folklore periodicals
- Authoring books with the word folklore or some derivative thereof in their titles
- Obtaining jobs requiring folklore training, even though they have none (4-5)

"Why do some individuals feel," Georges pondered, "that all it takes to be a folklorist is the desire or willingness to be so identified?" (5). His answer concerned the nature of folklore itself, namely that so many people in public "continue to conceive folklore to denote phenomena that they regard as—and/or feel that others consider to be—archaic, fantastic, or trivial" (6). In the minds of many, he continued, "one need have no special training to be a student of the archaic, fantastic, and trivial, and hence one need not 'study' to be a folklorist" (6). Georges contended that folklore societies and journals even promoted this impression in hopes of garnering widespread support and did not dutifully criticize fakelore publications whose authors claimed the status of folklorist. He argued that because interest in folklore served as the sole criterion for identification as a folklorist, the belief that anyone could be one was widespread in academia, to the discipline's detriment.

Georges' counterpoint is worth quotation in full:

> I have taken the position that folklorist is an identifying label that people should earn, and that formal academic training is the way to earn that right. I have repeatedly criticized the view that anyone who wants or is willing to be identified as a folklorist should be recognized and identified as such. I have noted, with an implicit mixture of anger and sadness, that many academically trained folklorists prefer, or are forced by circumstances, to conceal or deny their folklorist identity; and I have implied that many academically trained folklorists continue to contribute to the perpetuation of the view that it is acceptable in this day and age for individuals to be identified as folklorists by appropriate or conferment. I have given some reasons for, and consequences of, the fact that the identity of folklorist can be appropriated, concealed, and denied as well as earned; and I have implied that the persistence of this fact has unsettling implications for the future of folklore studies. (9–10)

Bill Ellis' response was equally passionate in decrying Georges' conclusion, which he considered "hopelessly—indeed recklessly—unrealistic in its elitism" in requiring formal training in folklore studies (180). Ellis, however, concurred with Georges that "folklore's image is tarnished by the common perception that no specialized training is needed to study the subject" (181). He continues:

> To that extent, I agree that we should criticize self-declared folklorists who simply apply the methodology specific to their own discipline to material that they intend to marginalize as archaic, foolish, or trivial. I did get the message early on that facile application of one field's methods to folk materials was not acceptable: I needed to become familiar with the concepts and analytical skills proper to folklore. (181)

Echoing Georges, Ellis himself presents a list of basic expectations for would-be scholars, namely they:

- Know what they are talking about, in all its textual and contextual complexity
- Know what other people have said about the material
- Have something fresh to say about it
- Take pains over Getting Things Right
- Have a modicum of chutzpah
- Show professional courtesy (181–82)

Ellis' greater point, however, was that one became a scholar not through the earning of a specific degree but through accomplishments "that an audience of trained professionals felt was worth doing" (182). He concludes on this same point, offering that "a scholar becomes a folklorist in the same way that a performance becomes folklore: by being 'accepted, influenced, and recreated' … by an audience of chosen peers" (186). I will return to that point of the social nature of expertise in the next section. Here, it bears notice that both Georges and Ellis consider folklorists to be experts housed within higher education or public institutions dedicated to education or minimally those in regular interaction with learned societies, conferences, and journals. While they certainly differ on the necessity of a formal degree in folklore studies, neither makes the case that one deserves to call oneself a folklorist without attending to the cultural expectations of folklore scholarship. By identifying and criticizing folk researchers, I am arguing that those who represents themselves as folklorists in public can and should be held accountable to standards of scholarly practice, just as those who claim the status of storyteller or entertainer are open to critique by aesthetic standards. My aim is to forefront the ethics of candor and truth in the representation of research and claims of expertise.

The Nature of Expertise

To complicate matters further, there is no consensus on the nature of expertise. Indeed, in the past two decades, the topic has become a hotly debated concept in academic and popular circles. Rather than work through the extensive weeds, in this section, I draw attention to two highly influential contributions to the debate, the work of British sociologist Harry Collins and US American political scientist Tom Nichols.

In a series of publications, Collins persuasively argued for an understanding of expertise that is not solely a possession of a body of knowledge by individuals nor a

process of increased skill and experience. He admits those capacities as essential components of expertise, but he further recognizes a social dimension. Collins maintains that expertise occurs when individuals progress through a society of domain experts. He asserts that the foundation of such activity is exposure to, and transmission of, domain-specific tacit knowledge and "esotericity" (2013). He does not use the terms "folklore," "tradition," or "folk group," but Collins opens the conversation to an understanding of expertise as the mastery of knowledge, habits, expectations, and ways of communicating in communities dedicated to specialized practices. Collins does not, however, regard an "expert" as someone who is simply declared so by a group. On the contrary, he recognizes that although groups define expertise and that awareness and accumulation of their tacit knowledge is essential to navigating such social dimensions, there exists actual bodies of knowledge, standards, and best practices that are relevant to knowing what one is talking about.

Collins takes a realist rather than a relational approach to expertise. He recognizes explicit knowledge, tacit knowledge, and the need for social interaction with other experts as the core ingredients of expertise. This idea stands in opposition to an approach that fosters the "folk wisdom" view, which claims "that ordinary people are wiser than experts in some technical areas" (Collins and Evans 2007, 5). In a damning exhortation that is strikingly relevant to this present commentary, Collins and his colleague Robert Evans inquire:

> [U]nder the folk wisdom view it is the ordinary person that is said to understand the closed and narrow world of science merely by observing its surface—just as the colonialists and Victorian anthropologists were said to be able to understand the world of the natives without direct experience. Here the ordinary people are thrust into a position like that of the elite, Oxbridge-trained, amateurs of the pre-Fulton Report Civil Service—"we do not need experts among us, good thinking is sufficient."… Finally, we find, implicitly, that the ordinary people are not in need of the specialist experience championed by those who believe in extreme standpoint epistemologies when it comes to understanding and researching ethnic or other minority groups. Could it be that under this implicit model it is the ordinary person represented by Alf Garnett (*'Til Death Do Us Part*) or Archie Bunker (*All in the Family*), who must be taken to hold a robust, commonsense view of minorities, in no need of refinement from arcane academic analysis? (6)

Accordingly, the difference between expertise and folk wisdom lies in the depth of knowledge and practice gained through social interaction with other experts.

I recognize that to many folklorists, Collins' use of "folk" in "folk wisdom" (and mine in "folk researcher") may seem pejorative. We folklorists often take great pride in defending everyday experience and the socially marginalized and I applaud those efforts. Collins' point, however, is that there is a vast difference between expertise and folk understandings, the latter of which can exist in a vacuum or unchallenged by domain experts. He further recognizes a distinction between the arts and the sciences in a manner complementing a distinction between entertainment and research:

> The folk wisdom case—the case for the general public as the ultimate audience—is also much more easily made in the case of art than in the case of science. "I may not know much about art but I know what I like" is less frivolous than "I may not know much about science but I know what I like." In the case of art we might be inclined to come down on the side of the skilled viewer as opposed to the public consumer, but at least the tension between lay and trained judges is easy to understand. Science, by its nature, is not directed at either kind of consumer but at the truth; this means that if we want to preserve it as we know it the audience should have less in the way of interpretive rights in respect to its meaning. (Collins and Evans 2007, 119)

Collins is not opposed to folk wisdom, then, but to its misapplication or valorization.

Nichols does not employ the same terminology as Collins nor overtly emphasizes tacit knowledge and embedding in social domains, but his definition of expertise is consistent with those observations.[4] The key, he argues, is specialized knowledge within occupations. Experts are "people who have mastered particular skills or bodies of knowledge and who practice those skills or use that knowledge as their main occupation in life" (2017, 29). True expertise, Nichols continues, "is an intangible but recognizable combination of education, talent, experience, and peer affirmation" (30). Such marks of expertise include formal training and credentialing where appropriate, but Nichols recognizes that degrees and similar institutional recognition are only a start. Experience plays an important role, which includes how experts "stay engaged in their field, continually improving their skills, learn from their mistakes, and have a visible track record. Over the span of their career, they get better, or at least maintain their high level of competence, and couple it to the wisdom—again, an intangible—that comes from time" (33).

For example, Nichols describes the Sovietologist Marshall Shulman, who had become an expert in discerning important policy news from the seemingly banal liturgies of Soviet newspapers. When questioned about the practice, Shulman could only explain that he read *Pravda* until his "nose twitched." Nichols, initially dismissive of this explanation—a fine image of internalized tacit knowledge, incidentally—came to understand that what Shulman meant was "that he'd spent years reading Soviet periodicals, and thus he had become so attuned to their method of communication that he could spot changes or irregularities when they passed before his trained and experienced eye" (34).

Nichols' final component of expertise is especially prescient to my present commentary:

> Another mark of true experts is their acceptance of evaluation and correction by other experts. Every professional group and expert community has watchdogs, boards, accreditors, and certification authorities whose job is to police its own members and to ensure not only that they live up to the standards of their own specialty, but also that their arts are practiced only by people who actually know what they are doing. … Mechanisms like peer review, board certification, professional associations, and other organizations and professions help protect quality and to assure society—that is, the

> expert's clients—that they're safe in accepting expert claims of competence. (35)

Nichols' point complements Collins on the social dimension of expertise and hence offers a means to distinguish between hobbyists or dilettantes and experts. Experts willingly engage other experts, seeking feedback, critique, and opportunities to learn, improve, and practice their explicit and tacit knowledge. This perspective—which supports Ellis' response to Georges—also demonstrates why self-trained experts "are rare exceptions," because such isolation (or echo chambers) prohibits people from gaining tacit knowledge and from confronting how they may be mistaken (37). Another poignant marker of expertise is that experts are less inclined to make mistakes and more importantly, "know better than anyone the pitfalls of their own profession" (36).

Given the nature of folk research, I would like to reiterate the specific responsibilities and requirements of peer-review. Nichols explains:

> This process—when it works—calls upon an expert's colleagues (his or her peers) to act as well-intentioned but rigorous devil's advocates. This usually takes place in a "double-blind" process, meaning that the researcher and the referees are not identified to each other, the better to prevent personal or institutional biases from influencing the review.
>
> This is an invaluable process. Even the most honest and self-aware scholar or researcher needs a reality check from someone less personally invested in the outcome of a project. …
>
> In modern life outside of the academy, however, arguments and debates have no external review. Facts come and go as people find convenient at the moment. Thus, confirmation bias makes attempts at reasoned argument exhausting because it produces arguments and theories that are *nonfalsifiable*. It is the nature of confirmation bias itself to dismiss all contradictory evidence as irrelevant, and so *my* evidence is always the rule, *your* evidence is always a mistake or an exception. It's impossible to argue with this kind of explanation, because by definition it's never wrong. (52–53)

The present commentary in this essay, for example, was peer-reviewed by four colleagues and the journal's editors. I only submitted it after two trusted friends, who are also professional folklorists, provided initial critique. All four reviewers suggested radically different improvements, with three concluding that it could be publishable following redress of those concerns and one recommending rejection (but also providing sound reasoning and suggestions for the judgment). That social process not only greatly improved the work, but it raised the stakes of the commentary to become serviceable to a community by instigating a larger conversation or a debate. Peer-review can be a brutal process, but it is one of the essential elements of expertise conceptualized as a social exchange. Folk researchers, of course, do not submit their work to peer-review and therefore do not benefit from such interactions with a community of domain experts. On the contrary, they often cite each other, or sympathetic ARIGs, in imitation of scholarly practices but maintain no mechanisms to check opinion and

demand evidence for assertions.

Another aspect relevant to folk research is that peer-review and related evaluation often mean slower content production and publication. For example, in the original draft of this commentary, I mentioned nearing the one year anniversary of retreating to my home office due to a global pandemic, made all the more deleterious by a rising anti-vaccination movement. As I write these lines, we have now passed the *second* anniversary of that retreat. The rewards of peer-review make such a meticulous pace worthwhile, but they also illustrate what professional folklorists are up against when pursuing candor and truth. Folk researchers have no guardrails, especially on the internet or digital media. They are free to publish or perform at any pace that pleases them and their fans. Local bookstores often stock their continuous stream of publications, which become selling points for the authors to secure additional gigs.

Thomas D'Agostino, for example, advertises he published "thirteen books and counting" with The History Press (a subsidy of the mass market Arcadia Publishing that does not require peer-review or maintain standards for judging the intellectual integrity of a contribution). His other major qualification for speaking to southern New England folklore is that he and his wife "have been extensively studying and investigating paranormal accounts for more than thirty-seven years with well over 1,200 investigations to their credit" (2020, 144). Yet virtually everything he writes about the folklore of Indigenous people in the region is incorrect or otherwise problematic. For example, he routinely misidentifies "Indian romances"—motivated and prejudiced tales concocted by white storytellers about Indigenous people—as genuine Native stories.

His representations of the history of Indigenous people are often cringe-worthy in their misconceptions and their neocolonialist (or sometimes simply colonialist) pronouncements. His record on other folkloric items fares little better and often contains copious errors and dubious claims of paranormal activity. D'Agostino, nevertheless, presents himself as an expert in New England folklore because he has published so many books, given so many public talks, and conducted so many paranormal investigations. In other words, quantity supersedes quality or standards.

The general lack of quality among folk researchers partially arises due to a related common practice, epitomized by the title of a chapter in Nichols' book: "Let Me Google That for You." Nichols argues that the internet "has accelerated the collapse of communication between experts and laypeople by offering an apparent shortcut to erudition," allowing people "to mimic intellectual accomplishment by indulging in an illusion of expertise provided by a limitless supply of facts" (106). Against this trend, Nichols offers a sober conceptualization of research attentive to best practices:

> Plugging words into a browser window isn't research: it's asking questions of programmable machines that themselves cannot actually understand human beings. Actual research is hard, and for people raised in an environment of constant electronic stimulation, it's also boring. Research requires the ability to find authentic information, summarize it, analyze it, write it up, and present it to other people. …
> The deeper issue here is that the Internet is actually changing the way we read, the way

> we reason, even the way we *think*, and all for the worst. We expect information instantly. We want it broken down, presented in a way that is pleasing to the eye—no more of those small-type, fragile textbooks, thank you—and we want it to say what we want it to say. People do not do "research" so much as they "search for pretty pages online to provide answers they like with the least amount of effort and in the shortest time."… Sometimes, human beings need to pause and reflect, to give themselves time to absorb information and to digest it. Instead, the Internet is an arena in which people can react without thinking, and thus in turn they become invested in defending their gut reactions rather than accepting new information or admitting a mistake—especially if it's a mistake pointed out by people with greater learning or experience. (110–12)

The rush to produce and rely upon as few sources as possible is precisely the problem animating folk research. Many folk researchers equate expertise with locating something on the internet or a previous statement, whether scholarly or entertaining. They follow the logic that if someone else articulated an idea, discovery and recognition of that previous attempt constitutes research, regardless of whether it was vetted by legitimate processes or domain experts. I argue that such action is neither research nor a hallmark of expertise. With that distinction in mind, I now proceed to the three stances of folk research.

The Three Stances

In this section, I outline three stances of folk research and illustrate each with a specific representative who assumes such a position regarding New England folklore. I hope that the terminology proves useful to intellectual disciplines and commentary beyond folklore studies. These three positions are the enthusiast, the self-proclaimed expert, and the professionally unreasonable.

The Enthusiast

Although far less intellectually odious than the self-proclaimed expert and the professionally unreasonable, the enthusiast often epitomizes the proverbial wisdom that a little knowledge is a dangerous thing. The enthusiast is well aware that previous research exists and attempts to draw upon it, but frequently does so in woefully imprecise ways. In attempting to share knowledge—and often to show how much they know—enthusiasts sacrifice careful analysis and evaluation of sources for displays of avidity.

With respect to southern New England folklore, Peter Muise has occupied the quintessential role of enthusiast for some time. I confess that I do not know him personally, but regard him as an affable fellow based on his online presentation of self. However, that judgment of character cannot inoculate him—or any of us—from criticism, and the reasons for criticizing Muise's contributions are manifold. Since 2008, he has maintained a blog, *New England Folklore*. Each entry retells a folkloric tale or practice in an appealing, often whimsical, rhetorical style. It lacks the braggadocio of the self-proclaimed expert's pronouncements and the sheer detachment from reality perpetrated by the professionally unreasonable. Muise is a genuine enthusiast; his ad-

miration and passion for New England folklore are abundant and apparent. Furthermore, he has obtained a Master's Degree in Anthropology in pursuit of his interests.[5]

Muise has published two books to date. The first, *Legends and Lore of the North Shore*, is in the American Legends series from The History Press. It is effectively a collection of his blog posts. As a result, it carries all of their sincerity and vigor without adding anything new and potentially distracts from public knowledge in its plentiful missteps. Rhetorically, it is chatty work. There's nothing wrong with informality, even in academic writing. But it must serve a purpose, and an evaluator certainly may critique the use of informality under conditions that require decorum or seriousness.

Take, for example, Muise's summary on Hobbomocko, a complex supernatural being associated with shamanism among the Indigenous people of southern New England:

> Hobbamock was associated with the northeast, the direction from which the most unpleasant weather emanates. While Cautantowwit dwelt in the sky, Hobbamock could be found in the swamp, marshes and darkest forests. His sacred animal was the snake, and he controlled darkness and disease. After reading this, you might think, "Hmm, that Hobbamock guy sure sounds like the Christian devil." The Puritans who settled in the area definitely thought he was, and they sometimes used his name when talking about the devil. (2014a, 14–15)

This is an egregious understatement of the demonization of Hobbomocko (and the religions of Indigenous people) by European Christian colonialists. That demonization began early—the first written reference appeared in 1624 when Edward Winslow, a Plymouth governor, directly identified Hobbomocko as the Devil. It continued unabated into the 1800s, including in the early works of John Greenleaf Whittier, who came to express regrets about them and the horrific images of Indigenous people they conveyed. The rhetorical diabolism of Hobbomocko and his presumed devil-worshipping human minions was instrumental in propagandistic justifications for the genocide and removal of Indigenous people from southern New England. Chattiness is probably not the right tone to capture the implications of the association of Hobbomocko with Satan.

The folklore enthusiast may recognize that there are narrative patterns in folklore but rarely invokes tale types, motif indices, or awareness of transmission by the oral tradition or in newspapers. Having found a single example of a legend, the enthusiast often rests. In his second book, *Witches and Warlocks of Massachusetts* (2021), Muise identifies several witch legends on Cape Cod. He does not examine all of the surviving variants of each tale. He seems entirely unaware of, or simply ignores, their relationship to one another, their relationship to Kidd treasure tale legends circulating throughout the region, and their relationship to racist, sexist, and ageist worldviews. This pattern continues throughout the book for every region in the state. By treating each tale as a separate entity, Muise fails to go beyond the surface of a complicated storytelling legacy.

Similarly, the enthusiast often knows to cite sources but not enough to evaluate

them. Muise routinely closes his blog posts by citing the originating source for his entry. Unfortunately, his sources are as varied in trustworthiness as Dorson's meticulous *Jonathan Draws the Long Bow* to the spurious works of paranormal investigators and inclusive of the sensationalist tourist pamphlets penned by Robert Ellis Cahill. In his books, he equally cites fellow folk researchers and ARIGs as legitimate sources of information and interpretation. In a vigorous attempt to show audiences *something*, there is no attempt to adjudicate, perhaps because the enthusiast lacks the expertise to do so.

As a result, the enthusiast often produces and reproduces errors or misinformation from impoverished sources, including overcorrections, projections, and simplifications. It has become customary, for example, for contemporary folk researchers into southern New England folklore to declare that the copious range of place-names associated with the Devil have their origins in Puritan demonization practices. Muise dedicates four pages of text to this topic in *Legends and Lore*. He writes:

> Why are so many places named after the devil around here? One theory is that many of the locations the English settlers named after the devil were originally connected with local Indians. The English thought the Indians were heathens, and heathens worshipped the devil; therefore, Indians worshipped the devil, and the places they frequented were named to reflect this. … Another possibility is that when the English encountered New England's abundant weird rock formations, they assumed they were created by some supernatural entity. They weren't aware that retreating glaciers has scoured the earth and dropped thousands of boulders across the landscape. Other than the devil, the only other supernatural entity that could have done it was God, and they couldn't believe that God would have made such inhospitable natural features. (2014a, 69–70)

Muise is not in error that some diabolical nomenclature represents deliberate attempts to denigrate sites sacred to Indigenous people. He is also correct in assuming that some weird shapes were given devilish names. However, he is profoundly incorrect in his assertion that Puritans would not assign inhospitable marvels to their God. Early colonialist literature brims with references to natural wonders—including earthquakes that left reminders in the scarred landscape—believed to be sent as admonition by the Christian God of his power and moral authority.

More importantly, the error here lies in the degree of omission. To state the obvious, early English colonialists did not name all places in New England. Many devil names are traceable to the 1700s, 1800s, and even 1900s, including playful ones associated with scouting groups or even former ski runs. Moreover, even those named in seriousness did not always regard Satan. Many diabolical names were so called because of their inhospitable natural features, such as terrain difficult for farming or settlement or travel. Some were associated with natural creatures considered 'devils' of a problem, including raccoons, wildcats, and snakes—especially rattlesnakes. It is a much more sober starting place to assume a location in southern New England named the Devil's Den, for example, was a dwelling of copperheads than a Puritan nightmare

of the Evil One.

The enthusiast is prone to make connections where they are not appropriate. On his blog, Muise frequently attempts to link New England witchcraft—either actual accounts such as the Salem Trials or later folk narratives—with scholarly analysis. He is usually wrong in his application, just as he frequently is misguided in asserting historical matters, despite being cognizant of high-caliber scholarship such as Stephen Nissenbaum's. In a rumination, for example, on the "witches" associated with the Moodus Noises (personages that were, incidentally, inventions of yellow journalism by *The Sun* of New York), Muise attempts to link them with Carlo Ginzberg's study of the battle between *benandanti* and the *streghe* in Italian tradition (2014b). The two are simply incomparable when one examines cultural specificities, but again, Muise's tendency to universalize is an element of enthusiast rhetoric.

Finally, and perhaps obviously, the enthusiast is not wont to be critical. As a result, utterly ridiculous notions receive attention rather than dismissal. In *Legends and Lore*, for example, Muise entertains the question for several pages as to whether the Deep Ones from horror writer H.P. Lovecraft are fact or fiction. (The answer is fiction.) The Deep Ones are monsters appearing in "The Shadow Over Innsmouth" but, as Muise muses, "in the years since the story was published, many people have wondered if Lovecraft was actually writing about real supernatural entities" (2014a, 105).

That construction—"many people are saying"—is stylistically useful for an enthusiast to introduce absurdities into discourse without taking responsibility for them or critiquing their inanity. For the most part, Muise's commentary is a basic summary of Lovecraft's tale, which is set in coastal Essex County, Massachusetts. Following this explanation of diegesis, Muise then invokes actual occultists who conduct magical rituals invoking the Deep Ones, including celebrity practitioner Michael Bertiaux. Bewilderingly, Muise concludes as follows:

> If you're skeptical about the reality of the Deep Ones, you might want to contact the Esoteric Order of Dagon with your questions. An occult order of this name was created in 1980, dedicated to "exploring the connections between the fiction of H.P. Lovecraft and other occult concepts." You can find it online, but members might not be willing to answer your questions. The group is made up of prominent occultists and is somewhat secretive. (2014a, 109)

Admittedly, we all need hobbies. Unfortunately, the hobbies of the folk research enthusiast provide no justice to explaining to the public the beneficial work that professional folklorists actually accomplish. I think a case could be made that the excesses of the enthusiast proportionately demonstrate the necessity of genuine expertise.

I am willing to concede that the underlying impulse of the enthusiast should not be discouraged solely due to its propensity for error. When nourished by additional training and experience, it can be the impetus for genuine contributions to public knowledge. I also have no objection to enthusiasm. Who among us did not follow an enthusiasm into folklore studies? Nevertheless, I have significant objections to substituting enthusiasm for expertise and misidentifying enthusiasts as experts. By the

very nature of their rhetorical endeavors, enthusiasts lack the skepticism and critical reflection necessary to be on guard against nonsense. Accordingly, they may inadvertently pass along highly problematic materials or valorize anti-intellectual positions in pretending to know more than they do and in convincing audiences that it is easy to become an expert by sheer will alone.

The Self-Proclaimed Expert

The defining feature of the self-proclaimed expert is their deference to their own authority regardless of whether they possesses the training, skills, experience, or comprehension of the explicit or tacit knowledge in question. Like the enthusiast, the self-proclaimed expert is aware that previous research exists and may utilize it to advance their agenda (often without attribution). However, the routine aim of such citation and incorporation is narcissistic: a confirmation that one knows more than one does. Creating the veneer of expertise is the lifeblood of the self-proclaimed expert's rhetoric, often in pursuit of personal benefit.

According to his website, Jeff Belanger "is one of the most visible and prolific researchers of folklore and legends today." That may be news to members of learned folklore societies. His accolades do not end there:

> A natural storyteller, he's the award-winning, Emmy-nominated host, writer, and producer of the *New England Legends* series on PBS and Amazon Prime, and is the author of over a dozen books (published in six languages). He also hosts the *New England Legends* weekly podcast, which has garnered over 2 million downloads since it was launched.

According to a second website for *New England Legends*, Belanger "is one of the world's most visible and prolific paranormal researchers, authors, and public speakers. Born and raised in New England, Jeff investigated his first haunted house at age ten during a sleepover at a historic home. Since then, the journalist has interviewed thousands of eyewitnesses to paranormal occurrences. He's the ultimate insider and knows how to connect with people from all walks of life when it comes to the unexplained" (Belanger has since removed this second ascription and replaced it with the first, deemphasizing his role as a paranormal investigator and amplifying his identity as a folklorist).

For clarification, Belanger's publications include *World's Most Haunted Places* (in which he authoritatively declares that "Oral traditions are mostly dead in our world" except ghost stories; 2009, 11); *Communicating With the Dead: Reach Beyond the Grave*; *Encyclopedia of Haunted Places*; *Our Haunted Lives: True Life Ghost Encounters*; *The Ghost Files*; *Picture Yourself Legend Tripping*; *The Mysteries of the Bermuda Triangle*; and *Who's Haunting the White House?* among others. Most of them are published with New Page Books, a company specializing in the occult and the paranormal.

In the spirit of full disclosure, Belanger contacted me to be a guest on *New England Legends* to speak on the Micah Rood / bloody apples story, which was one of the most popular legends in Connecticut during the 1800s. He had read the chapter on it in my book on hiking the folkloric sites of Connecticut. I declined the request because his podcast is rife with errors, and as a representative of a university, I had to consider

where I lent my expertise. He invited constructive criticism of his podcast. I provided an example and recommended that he solicit the assistance of a professional folklorist, whether me or otherwise, and encouraged him to reach out to AFS. The conversation deteriorated quickly from that point, and he eventually informed me that he would not promote my work to his fans. I am fairly certain my response made clear that I do not need his permission to educate the public on the folklore of New England.[6]

In our exchange, I raised the concern that the folklore of Massachusetts has a long history of problematic material that requires critical analysis instead of celebration. Belanger's best-known book, *Weird Massachusetts*, provides copious examples of that disconcerting material. It is part of the *Weird* series inaugurated by Mark Sceurman and Mark Moran and includes *Weird New England* by Joseph Citro (2005), another self-proclaimed folklorist with no credentialed training whose books are often laden with misconceptions.

Weird Massachusetts is replete with classic legends from the Commonwealth. It is also awash with errors. In recounting the "legend" of Bash Bish Falls, for example, Belanger identifies it as "a story from Mohican folklore" (2008, 46). In the tale he narrates, Bash Bish is a Mohican woman accused of adultery and sentenced to death. In protest, she leaps from the waterfall that now bears her name and disappears into the midst. Her daughter, White Swan, later joins her in a Lover's Leap variant. Belanger seems utterly unaware that Mary Bolté composed this version in 1972. He is further unenlightened that the original tale of Bash Bish Falls, which featured only the White Swan character, was a literary invention of a white writer and former public relations specialist, William Coxey (1934). Coxey's tale was subsequently enlisted by the local tourism district and the Works Progress Administration guide to Massachusetts to promote a newly cut Civilian Conservation Corps trail to the waterfall in the 1930s. The "legend" of Bash Bish is not a Mohican tale and, in its earliest manifestations, is a potentially racist story about the Mohicans, who had been forcibly removed from the Berkshires in the previous century.

Following this headstrong fallacy, Belanger offers the following in another entry:

> The heart of the Bridgewater Triangle is the Hockomock Swamp, a six-thousand acre wetland located in southeastern Massachusetts. The mystery behind the swamp dates back to the Wampanoag Indians, who felt that the land had an inherent magic. … And the Wampanoag knew the swamp well. If their enemies could be drawn into the area, they clearly had an advantage in knowing where not to step.
>
> This knowledge served them well during King Philip's War (1675–1676), when the Wampanoag rose up against the English settlers and their allies in one of the bloodiest conflicts in American history. One in twenty were either wounded or killed, and more than a few met their end in Hockomock Swamp. Some English went in and were never seen again. Others managed to make their way out and spread tales of the frightful scenes and monsters that lurked inside. (2008, 78–79)

If verifiable, this remarkable account of English forces encountering monsters in Hockomock Swamp during "King Philip's War" would be astonishing news to any

historian. Belanger does not cite a single source for this remarkable claim, however. As presented, it appears to be his fabrication. For contextualizing, this statement is from the same writer who in introducing the Pukwudgees, the purported Little People of the Wampanoag, proffered that they were known to push hunters off ledges to their doom. Belanger then ponders in conclusion:

> Between 1616 and 1618, eighty percent of the Wampanoag nation died from plague. Or did the Pukwudgees perhaps work their horrible magic on them? (2008, 51)

You read that correctly. Belanger trivializes the mass death in a population of Indigenous people by a relentless epidemic—there is debate as to whether smallpox or leptospirosis—an event that contributed significantly to subsequent colonialism and seizure of land, with a quip about a legendary being.

These are only three examples from *Weird Massachusetts*, but they demonstrate the typical pattern of the self-professed expert. No bibliography exists, sources are scant, and there is only occasional mention of an originating document. It is abundantly clear to anyone with expertise in New England folklore that Belanger consulted very few legitimate sources. There is undoubtedly no evaluation of previous texts or source integrity. Rhetorically, there is little distinction between travel writing, storytelling, and reporting on historical or folkloric matters. The writing style continually refers to the "expert," establishing a presentation of self as a celebrity and arbiter of truth. Fact-checking is irrelevant, and "facts" appear when they are convenient. Similarly, no challenges (scholarly or otherwise) to that self-proclaimed authority manifest that would risk interference with a fan base.

Weird Massachusetts commences, however, with a disclaimer that it "is intended as entertainment" and that the authors and publishers make no claim as to the factual accuracy of the legends (2008, 4). That admission presents a curious dilemma for a self-proclaimed expert. How can one be both an entertainer and "one of the most visible and prolific researchers of folklore and legends today?" The answer hinges on a paltry definition of "research" as looking things up on the internet or someone else's book.

Belanger provides another perfect, even comical, example of this tendency to mistake the nature of research as simply googling and expertise as having googled. In one of his *New England Legends* podcasts, he attends "The Dinglehole," a purported site of supernatural activity. In this episode, Belanger visits a small pond tucked between two yards in a suburban neighborhood in the town of Millis. He is seemingly ignorant that Dinglehole—the original name of the location—was three miles away in Sherborn near the "Gate" of the Charles River.

The detective work to determine how Belanger ended up in the wrong place is not difficult. In 2010, Peter Muise featured the Dinglehole on his blog. Muise confessed that he did not know its location but mentioned two sources for the information, one of which was the WPA guide to Massachusetts. In a fascinating turn of events, a handful of residents from Millis responded that the small pond in question was indeed the Dinglehole. Muise considered the mystery solved and has since embraced that location (2021, 166–67). Having done no research beyond consultation of two books, he

was nescient that there were copious documents from the 1800s and early 1900s that located Dinglehole in Sherborn. I still cannot determine the reason why Muise's first source, a town history from the nineteenth century (Jameson 1886), relocated it to a farm in Millis. The WPA guide, hastily culling the information solely from that Millis history, was ambiguous in locating this site in the town (such imprecision is common in the WPA guide to Massachusetts, whose compilers rarely fact-check folkloric tidbits).

Residents' responses in Millis reveal that the WPA guidebook's attribution was accepted by the neighborhood and incorporated into local lore. In other words, there *was* something interesting to report here about the migration of the tale, but Muise was unprepared to see it. Belanger, in turn, adopted the location from a local source, Muise, or a book (Vecchi and Krimmel 2012) on Millis in the Images of America series, also owned by Arcadia Publishing (incidentally, that book, for some inexplicable reason, erroneously suggested that witchcraft panic gripped Millis in the 1690s, a mass anxiety that resulted in superstitions regarding the Dinglehole). At no point in his podcast did Belanger demonstrate any comprehension of the legend's genealogy.

Of course, comprehension and thoroughness are not the points of such an activity. *New England Legends* is self-referential entertainment, designed to heighten Belanger's celebrity status—and, of course, to secure financial benefits for him and his crew. Routinely during each podcast, he and his broadcast partner encourage listeners to contribute money and support their sponsors. While I begrudge no one making a living, Belanger's dilemma is to be constantly entertaining in order to cultivate an audience that can be monetized; that dilemma compromises any ability to do critical work even if he wanted to do so, as people might find the results less than enjoyable and abandon him. It is far safer to produce jejune and juvenile reenactments of folkloric scenes that appeal to the lowest common denominator. In many ways, then, Belanger's podcasts and books represent the pinnacle of self-proclaimed expertise: a considerable amount of poor work building on poor work that is entertaining to those desirous for simplistic narratives.

The Professionally Unreasonable

The professionally unreasonable earn capital by asserting the outlandish. The defining feature of such an approach is willful disengagement with institutional intellectual traditions to establish a fantasy in which they stand as the authority and font of expertise. Since this rhetorical endeavor is predicated upon demonstrating mastery of phenomena purportedly beyond the comprehension of the academic establishment, the professionally unreasonable requires no awareness of previous research, However, the use of such material may be incorporated if it benefits the impression of an alternative reality.

Christopher Balzano's Twitter page announces that he is a "Writer, Researcher, Analytical Folklorist." I am tempted to reference the Inigo Montoya joke from *The Princess Bride* that the word may not mean what he thinks it means, but that would only underscore the attempt by the professionally unreasonable to create their own

reality in which words denote what they wish them to denote. Nevertheless, Balzano again self-identifies as a folklorist on his Amazon pages and in related publications describes himself as a paranormal investigator; a teacher and writer; founder and director of Massachusetts Paranormal Crossroads (an online collection of legends); a contributor to Jeff Belanger's *Encyclopedia of Haunted Places* and *Weird Massachusetts*; and a contributor to newspapers including the *Boston Globe*. He has published several books, including *Ghostly Adventures*; *Haunted Objects*; *Haunted Florida Love Stories*; *Picture Yourself Ghost Hunting*; and *Picture Yourself Capturing Ghosts on Film*. He hosts a podcast, *Tripping on Legends*.

Balzano's earliest two publications are relevant to this essay. The first is *Dark Woods: Cults, Crime, and the Paranormal in the Freetown State Forest*. The second is *Ghosts of the Bridgewater Triangle*. Both are products of Schiffer, another publishing house that encourages local authors on supernatural matters. One does not have to read any further than the Introduction to *Dark Woods* to witness the stance of the professionally unreasonable. Entitled "The Cursed Land," it commences:

> Do curses exist or are they the product of superstition and retrospect? Why does the evil in the world seem to find the same ground time and time again? Why does the same land become the stage for tragedy played out over time, taking different forms and affecting different people from varied walks of life over centuries? Can a place be born bad? (2008a, 6)

Within a few pages, Balzano explains how he, a paranormal investigator, became a believer in curses. He further details how he has come to understand that Freetown State Forest—another contribution by the CCC—is a supernatural "beacon for misery." He explains the simple methodology behind this claim: he feels it. Feeling, Balzano explains, is the most powerful sense. In the same way that one can feel love or hate but cannot see or hear those emotions, feeling must be the guide when seeking the supernatural. He continues:

> The sense of anticipation or anxiety creates electricity you can *feel*. There is a link between energy and the paranormal that moves far beyond the hairs on the back of your neck. In the study of the paranormal, an investigator comes across this connection regularly. The most common haunting involves what investigators call a psychic recording. An event quickly gives off a massive amount of energy, imprinting the event in its environment. The right situation, whether it is another emotional trigger or the weather or the right person to perceive it, then triggers this energy and replays the event, like listening to the same song over and over again on the radio. (2008a, 9)

Balzano subsequently explains how demonologists, paranormal investigators, and ghost hunters follow this energy in pursuit of their research. Freetown State Forest, he avers, is a place of such high levels of uncanny energy—it is a "crossroads"—that it is now "tainted," causing spillage of paranormal activity, disproportionate criminality, and mental health issues (2008a, 11). In his introduction to *Ghosts of the Bridgewater Triangle*, Balzano clarifies by further explaining that the area may be a site of an "energy

rift" that allows forces and beings from different dimensions to enter our world, but he is willing to admit that he does not quite understand the quantum physics behind it. In consolation, he offers a few other possibilities for how the paranormal broke through into our world (2008b, 16).

From that introduction in *Dark Woods*, Balzano offers nineteen chapters on a range of supernatural activities, quoting from direct experience or anonymous sources. Some of them include localized variants of legends such as the Vanishing Hitchhiker, and typical Lovers Leap stories centered at The Ledge, an old quarry filled with water. Ghost stories are plentiful, as is a tale of a "zombie," described by one of Balzano's informants as "being of Latino descent" and "covered in dirt" (2008a, 95). Memorates are numerous in this collection, including encounters with a witch and a "mad trucker." Many of these stories are standard examples of contemporary legends narrated by teenagers and young adults since the late 1960s. If there is any value to Balzano's book, it is that he reproduces this potential data, although one cannot trust that he did so diligently, and he does not provide field notes or transcripts as evidence.

More troubling, *Dark Woods* relies heavily on an undercurrent of Native American tropes. Having invoked in his Introduction a haunting theme reiterated in *The Amityville Horror*, *The Shining*, and *Pet Sematary*, Balzano waxes with irrepressible fervor on the Forest's role in the history of Indigenous people (the Wampanoag people maintain a 227-acre reservation in the Forest). He gives credence to those who claim that the events and aftermath of "King Philip's War" may have produced supernatural conditions:

> Many see [King Philip's War] as the beginning of the curse on Freetown. The bloodshed and death (often of children and noncombatants) and betrayal felt could produce enough negative energy to punch a hole into another dimension or imprint themselves in the air and replaying themselves over like a skipping record. Perhaps the souls of all those lost are trapped on earth trying to find a reason for their deaths. Maybe the negative intentions on both sides could become an actual curse left behind to fall on future generations. (2008a, 23)

Balzano, however, offers an alternative theory, namely that "King Philip's War" was not the *cause* of the curse but a *symptom* of a still greater evil, a dark force that had tainted the land prior to European colonialization and conflict. He continues this implication in a chapter on Native American ghosts and another on the Wampanoag reservation, which he claims is a shelter of spiritual serenity in an otherwise cursed land and where informants claim to have seen Wampanoag ghosts performing ceremonies.

Here is my direct query to colleagues: May I call this the racist claptrap that it is? And if so, do I have an obligation to criticize it and encourage media and other public outlets not to take the bait? (I do so in an academic article; see Gencarella 2022.) Moreover, if this is not an isolated example but a growing norm, do we professional folklorists have a responsibility to call it out?

In addition to exploitative fantasies about Indigenous people, Balzano demonstrates all the rhetorical indulgences that characterize ARIGs as defined by Hill. These

include an emphasis on "having an experience" and feelings; reliance upon tropes circulating in popular culture; the use of "scientifical" language to mask pseudoscience; routine and improper use of the word "theory;" the employment of readily-explained anomalies in video and audio technology as evidence of supernatural activity; the conducting of "case studies" to confirm preexisting beliefs; lack of skepticism; and conspiratorial thinking. These elements appear brazenly in Balzano's chapter in *Dark Woods* on the so-called Bridgewater Triangle, a topic that inspired his second publication.

In that second book, he follows the work of "renowned cryptozoologist Loren Coleman" (2008b, 14). Coleman's vast contributions to public ignorance deserve a critique of their own, but in summary, he began "research" into UFOs and cryptozoological beasties in the Massachusetts area in the 1970s. He was extremely successful in attracting the attention of reputable newspapers willing to put their reputation on the line for eye-catching headlines and interviews. In 1983, Coleman parlayed that successful public relations campaign into a book, *Mysterious America*, which included several entries from southern New England. Key among them was the Bridgewater Triangle, a term Coleman coined (obviously inspired by the Bermuda Triangle) to designate an area originally restricted to three adjacent towns of Bridgewater, East Bridgewater, and West Bridgewater. He soon widened the Triangle to include a wide swath of land in southeastern Massachusetts between the towns of Abington, Rehoboth, and Freetown. This includes the Hockomock Swamp, where Coleman posited numerous cases of spectacular creatures ranging from Sasquatch to a pterodactyl. Coleman provides the Preface to Balzano's second book, in which he erroneously contends that "Hockomock" is an Algonquian term for the Devil (It is not; Coleman follows an established pattern of white people mistaking a word for hook-shaped natural places with Hobbomocko, the aforementioned supernatural being demonized by Christian colonialists) (Balzano 2008b, 8).

Balzano's agenda in *Ghosts of the Bridgewater Triangle* is no different from *Dark Woods*. In each chapter, he provides memorates and commentary as proof that supernatural phenomena exist within the Triangle. He doubles down on the notion that Freetown State Forest is the eeriest site in the region but implies that Hockomock Swamp is yet another place where the inherent evil of the land has broken through into this world.[7] Fantasies about Native American history continue in these pages, equally controversial in their potential adherence to prejudiced beliefs.

There is a serious problem for the professionally unreasonable in their assessment of this phenomenon: the Bridgewater Triangle spans a much greater land mass than Freetown State Forest. It comprises at least 18 towns, 200 square miles, and 15–18% of the current population of Massachusetts depending on accounting. For a majority of citizens it is not a hellscape of paranormal activity. Accordingly, Balzano faced an uphill task to be persuasive regarding its eldritch horrors. To accomplish this goal, he—observing a common pattern wrought by ARIGs—elects to nominate any unusual, criminal, or folkloric phenomena occurring within that massive space as evidence of supernatural malfeasance that binds them together. The effect of this umbrella is to flatten or starve local storytelling traditions. All narratives of haunted spaces collapse

into a single purpose, to serve as testimony for the existence of the Triangle.

There are several colleges and universities within the area, for example, all of which have robust campus ghostlore that pre-existed the declaration of the Triangle and follow typical patterns fruitfully analyzed by professional folklorists (see Tucker 2007 for a recent example and summary). Balzano wholly lacks engagement with these works; the single approximate in his bibliography is Jan Brunvand's *Encyclopedia of Urban Legends*. Most of his other citations are works by allied "experts," including Citro, Coleman, and D'Agostino—an echo chamber. In a telling chapter, for example, Balzano recounts an investigation and attempted exorcism of a haunted house with D'Agostino and other area paranormal investigators. The results were ongoing at the time of publication.

I am tempted to quote the now clichéd observation by Emerson that a foolish consistency is the hobgoblin of little minds. The greater problem is that the rhetorical productions of the professionally unreasonable may alternate wildly between consistency and inconsistency. To search for reasonableness in them is a fool's errand. Nevertheless, quite often, these "analytical folklorists" represent what we professionals do to a public waiting with anticipation for answers, indulgence, or bias-confirmation.

Conclusion

In closing this commentary, I wish to raise the issue of potential responses and corrective actions from professional folklorists to folk researchers. I have made the case that folk researchers fail in numerous ways to rise to the best practices that constitute expertise and the specific basic expectations for folklore scholarship, including their lack of interaction with the community of folklore scholars and their reliance upon echo chambers. Yet they are in no threat of disappearing. On the contrary, there is every reason to think that the influence of folk researchers will only increase in the decades ahead due to the machinations of the internet, social and digital media, and the contemporary entertainment industry as it influences publishing and broadcast arenas. What options are available to resist this tide?

First, I propose as imperative that we recognize that these folk researchers are currently winning the *public relations* campaign. The reasons for that are beyond our control and intimately and irrevocably tangled up in the compromised nature of contemporary journalism, especially regional and local newspapers that must compete for attention to survive. However, if professional folklorists accept an understanding of expertise grounded in social exchange, we are poised to flex our strength. That said, we need unwavering institutional support to do so. I am not recommending rekindling the debate around certification, but I think international, national, and regional folklore societies need to go on the offensive through their media and public outreach divisions. While I do not consider Dorson's relentless use of martial metaphors (Bronner 1998, 364) productive, I believe treating this as a competition that can be lost for good is important.

Moving forward, I do not see anything gainful in working with the enthusiasts, self-proclaimed experts, and the professionally unreasonable. They operate on the

fundamental logic of the next gig. They need to continue the endless production of podcasts, publications, and public talks to obtain and maintain social and economic relevance. Fact-checking (and facts), critical reflection, and collegial assessment frustrate that voracious practice. Experts in folklore who hope that they may influence "from the inside" are more optimistic than I am, but they may also miss that the entertainment industry that sustains folk researchers is uninterested in change as long as the current configuration remains profitable. I am certain that some colleagues will disagree on this point, and I welcome the discussion and remain persuadable.

Newspapers and other media may be the unwitting accomplices to folk researchers' agendas—although many in "edu-tainment" media are willing partners—so it behooves us to intercede there. The same applies to local organizations dedicated to public knowledge such as historical societies and libraries, which often host these forays into folk research, frequently unaware of how to judge between experts and non-experts. Although individual folklorists reaching out to these venues (and to publishers—and folk researchers) to correct the record and encourage engagement with legitimate scholars of folklore can have some impact, imagine the benefits of those communications coming from international, national, and regional folklore societies. Our learned societies can take stands against misinformation; they should do so. Imagine, as well, a *rigorously promoted* Speakers Bureau of folklore experts. When I wrote the original draft of this commentary, AFS was planning to launch a "Find an Expert" database. As a positive sign, it has since gone public. However, this database must be advertised and promoted widely by the organization, overtly reaching out to important venues, not solely waiting for those venues to contact them. Folk researchers already control the ground game; professional folklorists must catch up and exceed them.

I hope this is an obvious statement, but I think it would be a mistake not to recognize the appeal of folklore to the public in our contemporary era. We should recognize that the public does not know how to judge accurate folklore scholarship and often resorts to entertainment. In this manner, expert folklorists, who have always been vanguards of public intellectualism, have much to offer in teaching how to distinguish the viable from the ill-advised. Professional folklorists already have a beachhead in museums, art commissions, universities, and related institutes that can attract the attention of the public and the press. Responsibly engaging the public's desire for ghoulies and ghosties to frustrate the anti-intellectualism that thrives out there cannot be an injudicious venture. We need good folklorists to compete with the shoddy work of folk researchers.

Accordingly, and in agreement with earlier sentiments, I advocate for the potential benefits of podcasts, documentaries, and book series written for the general reader under the auspices of learned folklore societies and organizations. If I were to have one wish fulfilled (or the wealth to finance projects), however, it would be for the creation of an online news and opinion website dedicated to amplifying the voices of folklorists, ethnologists, and related fields invested in cultural expression from academia, the public sector, and the private sector. I have in mind—with apologies for the reference to mainstream political US American examples—sites such as Salon, Talking Points Memo, The Bulwark, The Daily Beast, and Vox. As readers of these sites are surely

aware, the exchange of opinion can be acerbic, but it is also timely in a manner that is impossible with our current means of academic publications. Such a site would likely preclude peer-review, of course, but its purpose would be commentary and debates on cultural issues and the kinds of sociality required for achieving and maintaining expertise and public relevance.

Finally, I propose it is essential that professional folklorists review the books, documentaries, podcasts, and related products of folk researchers with a critical eye, especially on internet sites accessible to the general reader. The readership of folklore journals pales in comparison to the spectatorship of some of these celebrities, but so be it. There is something to be said for putting objections in print and on the record, especially for the sake of future generations. There is also ample precedent for this commitment; professional folklorists have assessed popular works as far back as William Wells Newell's reviews of Alice Morse Earle's books on New England traditions in the late 1800s (1891 and 1893).

I recognize that colleagues of good faith may dismiss these concerns and potential remedies. I can think of three objections to my objection. Against cause for alarm, one could argue that folk researchers are merely harmless entertainment, undeserving of attention. Alternatively, one could insist that they provide a service to the public sector and academic folklorists by stimulating interest in the subject. Finally, one could suggest that folk researchers are creators of new lore and that their frequent mistakes testify to the inherent dynamism of any living tradition as it evolves. I am certain there are other arguments to ignore or be charitable to folk researchers, and I invite colleagues to share them.

Nevertheless, I contend that the problems posed by folk researchers are very serious and must be taken seriously. They are shaping public perception of what folklorists do, not for the better. Furthermore, they often spread falsehoods, misunderstandings, and prejudiced narratives. So I ask again: If we do not take a stand against this, what do folklorists stand for?

Acknowledgments

This article is dedicated to the memory of Charlie Johnson.

The author wishes to thank Ray Huling, Anthony Buccitelli, and the four anonymous reviewers for their critical commentary and collegiality. He also wishes to thank Semontee Mitra and Deldar Golchehreh for their generosity and support through its publication.

Notes

1 I passed this information along to Lorraine Cashman, who generously offered to send it to the AFS Media and Public Outreach Committee.

2 Although there are numerous accounts of Dorson's evolving campaign against fakelore, Simon Bronner (1998) offers the most productive example for this present commentary. This account is helpful for its depth and organization of the sprawling amount of moves by Dorson, as well as Bronner's contexualization, which include his relationship with Dorson and his awareness of the historical permutations of the struggles in the discipline and society as a whole.

3 This does not suggest that storytelling alone is out of bounds for critique. As a case in point, S.E. Schlosser's *Spooky New England* retells a story entitled "The Loup-Garou," concerning a werewolf in Woonsocket, Rhode Island (2004, 125–27). It is a compelling tale. It is also apparent, however, that Schlosser misunderstood the original narrative published in Benjamin Botkin's *Treasury of New England Folklore*, in which a French-Canadian immigrant to Woonsocket recalls traditions in Canada (1965, 222–23). The story is not a representative of folklore set in New England, although Schlosser has every right to make it so in her creative retelling. That decision, however, has increasingly inspired local audiences to think that there is longstanding werewolf folklore in Woonsocket, which is historically inaccurate.

In a similar vein, the Mohegan scholar Rachel Sayet offers (2011, 110–12) a politically poignant critique against the portrayal of Indigenous people in *The Good Giants and the Bad Pukwudgies* by acclaimed children's book author Jean Fritz (1982). Fritz's book received wide praise in New England, but it is both historically inaccurate and culturally insensitive. Sayet's astute criticism is an important corrective to white exploitation of Native stories and demonstrates that the role of the storyteller is not above reproach due to artistic license.

4 Nichols invokes folklore throughout his book and points to (as does Hill) potential collaborations between folklorists and experts across fields equally concerned about anti-intellectualism in contemporary democratic liberal society. See especially Buccitelli 2020 for a sustained analysis of the ethical and political concerns in the work of contemporary folklorists going forward. See Eyal 2019 for a differing opinion on expertise, one that resists Nichols but embraces Collins and extends the notion that expertise is a historically significant way of speaking.

5 Unlike Georges, I make no argument about degrees as a prerequisite for expertise. Progress in folklore studies often hinged upon people who did not have formal degrees, starting with William Wells Newell. Southern New England folklore studies would be penurious without the contributions of Clifton Johnson, whose publications (including one essay to *JAF*) are highly regarded. Nor do I think that a Ph.D. solely counts for expertise. One need only consider the contributions of Edward Rowe Snow, who held a Masters from Boston University; his books remain influential to this day with good reason, as they are both informative and entertaining. Finally, any appreciation of expertise must take into account experience in the public sector or journalism. I invoke the issue here only in response to Muise's mention of his degree as a qualification of his presumed expertise to comment on New England folklore. As is often the case with enthusiasts, it becomes clear under assessment that he would benefit from additional training.

6 I will also mention that one of Belanger's podcasts (2019) concerns the legend of the XYZ bandit in Deep River, Connecticut. It followed an interview that I gave on the subject to *Connecticut Magazine*, in which I revealed information associated with a Bloody Mary in

the Mirror practice (Ofgang 2018). I gathered that information firsthand in interviews with former students who lived in Deep River. Belanger dramatized it in his podcast. If he used my interview as the source, he did so without attribution.

7 As evidence of supernatural evil afoot, Balzano includes a personal incident of being bitten by a tick in Hockomock Swamp (2008b, 15). This hyperbole would be laughable were it not an attempt to prove the existence of a curse functioning outside the realm of science, science that readily explains the existence of ticks in swamps throughout southern New England.

Works Cited

Balzano, Christopher. n.d. "Christopher Balzano." Accessed August 8, 2023. https://www.amazon.com/Christopher-Balzano/e/B001PH5BA6%3Fref=dbs_a_mng_rwt_scns_share

———. n.d. Twitter page. Accessed August 8, 2023. https://twitter.com/spookybalzano?lang=en

———. 2008a. *Dark Woods: Cults, Crime, and the Paranormal in the Freetown State Forest*. Atglen, PA: Schiffer Publishing Ltd.

———. 2008b. *Ghosts of the Bridgewater Triangle*. Atglen, PA: Schiffer Publishing Ltd.

Belanger, Jeff. n.d. "About Jeff Belanger." Accessed August 8, 2023. https://jeffbelanger.com/about-jeff-belanger/

———. n.d. "About Jeff Belanger." Accessed August 8, 2023. https://ournewenglandlegends.com/about-new-england-legends/crew/

———. 2008. *Weird Massachusetts: Your Travel Guide to Massachusetts's Local Legends and Best Kept Secrets*. New York: Sterling.

———. 2009. *World's Most Haunted Places*. New York: The Rosen Publishing Group, Inc.

———. 2019. "Podcast 112 – XYZ Marks the Spot." October 10, 2019. Accessed August 8, 2023. https://ournewenglandlegends.com/podcast-112-xyz-marks-the-spot/

———. 2020. "Podcast 160 – The Dinglehole." September 10, 2020. Accessed August 8, 2023. https://ournewenglandlegends.com/podcast-160-the-dinglehole/

Bolté, Mary. 1972. *Haunted New England: A Devilish View of the Yankee Past*. New York: Weathervane Books.

Botkin, Benjamin, ed. 1965. *A Treasure of New England Folklore*. Revised Edition. New York: Bonanza Books.

Bronner, Simon. 1998. *Following Tradition: Folklore in the Discourse of American Culture*. Logan: Utah State University Press.

Buccitelli, Anthony Bak. 2020. "(Folk)Life, Interrupted: Challenges for Fieldwork, Empathy, and Public Discourse in the Age of Trump." *Journal of American Folklore* 133, no. 530: 412–29.

Citro, Joseph. 2005. *Weird New England: Your Travel Guide to New England's Local Legends and Best Kept Secrets*. New York: Sterling.

Coleman, Loren. 2007. *Mysterious America*. New York: Paraview Pocket Books.

Collins, Harry. 2013. "Three Dimensions of Expertise." *Phenomenology and the Cognitive Sciences* 12: 253–73.
Collins, Harry and Robert Evans. 2007. *Rethinking Expertise*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press.
Coxey, Willard Douglas. 1934. *Ghosts of Old Berkshire*. Great Barrington, MA: The Berkshire Courier.
D'Agostino, Thomas and Arlene Nicholson. 2020. *Haunted Litchfield County*. Charleston, SC: The History Press.
Dorson, Richard. 1946. *Jonathan Draws the Long Bow: New England Popular Tales and Legends*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
———. 1950. "Folklore and Fake Lore." *American Mercury* 70: 335–43.
———. 1973. "Is Folklore a Discipline?" *Folklore* 84, no. 3: 177–205.
———. 1976. *Folklore and Fakelore: Essays toward a Discipline of Folk Studies*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
Ellis, Bill. 1992. "The Self-Declared Folklorist: Howlings of a Lone Wolf." *Western Folklore* 51, no. 2: 179–87.
Evanchuk, Robin. 1991. "'…As Others See Us': What Others Think Folklorists Are and Do." *Western Folklore* 50, no. 1: 13–19.
Eyal, Gil. 2019. *The Crisis of Expertise*. Medford, MA: Polity.
Foster, Michael Dylan and Jeffrey Tolbert, eds. 2016. *The Folkloresque: Reframing Folklore in a Popular Culture World*. Boulder: University Press of Colorado.
Fritz, Jean. 1982. *The Good Giants and the Bad Pukwudgies*. New York: Putnam Juvenile.
Gencarella, Stephen Olbrys. 2022. "Soft Racism in the Contemporary Legend of Anawan Rock: A Critique." *Journal of Folklore Research* 59, no. 1: 59–100.
Georges, Robert. 1991. "Earning, Appropriating, Concealing, and Denying the Identity of a Folklorist." *Western Folklore* 50, no. 1: 3–12.
Hill, Sharon. 2017. *Scientifical Americans: The Culture of Amateur Paranormal Research*. Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Company.
Istenič, Saša Poljak. 2011. "Texts and Contexts of Folklorism." *Traditiones* 40, no. 3: 51–73.
Jameson, Ephraim Orcutt. 1886. *The History of Medway*. Providence: J.A. and R.A. Reid.
Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, Barbara. 1988. "Mistaken Dichotomies." *Journal of American Folklore* 101, no. 400: 140–55.
———. 1990. "Response to Elliot Oring." *The American Folklore Society Newsletter* (April): 2 and 7.
Kitta, Andrea, Lynne McNeill, and Trevor Blank. 2021. "Talking Folklore: Getting Others to Take the Discipline Seriously while Remaining a Serious Folklorist." In *Advancing Folkloristics*, edited by Jesse Fivecoate, Kristina Downs, and Meredith McGriff, 202–15. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.
Leary, James. 1990. "Response to Elliot Oring." *The American Folklore Society Newsletter* (June): 2 and 4.
Massachusetts: A Guide to its Places and People. [*The WPA Guide to Massachusetts*.] 1937. Cambridge, MA: The Riverside Press.
Muise, Peter. 2010. "A Scary Place with a Silly Name." August 27, 2010. Accessed Au-

gust 8, 2023. http://newenglandfolklore.blogspot.com/2010/08/scary-place-with-silly-name.html
———. 2014a. *Legends and Lore of the North Shore*. Charleston, SC: The History Press.
———. 2014b. "The Witches' Sabbath in New England: Part 2." September 14, 2014. Accessed August 8, 2023. http://newenglandfolklore.blogspot.com/2014/09/the-witches-sabbath-in-new-england-part_14.html
———. 2021. *Witches and Warlocks of Massachusetts*. Guilford, CT: Globe Pequot.
Newell, William Wells. 1891. Review of *The Sabbath in Puritan New England* by Alice Morse Earle. Journal of American Folklore 4, no. 15: 356–58.
———. 1893. Review of *Customs and Fashions in Old New England* by Alice Morse Earle. Journal of American Folklore 6, no. 23: 326–27.
Nichols, Tom. 2017. *The Death of Expertise: The Campaign against Established Knowledge and Why It Matters*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
Ofgang, Eric. 2018. "A Botched Bank Robbery, the Lady in Black, and a Mysterious Headstone: The Strange Tale of 'XYZ.'" *Connecticut Magazine*, December 18, 2018. Accessed August 8, 2023. https://www.connecticutmag.com/history/a-botched-bank-robbery-the-lady-in-black-and-a-mysterious-headstone-the-strange-tale/article_1cdf8a2e-02f4-11e9-94b4-6312ac978f71.html
Oring, Elliot. 1990a. "On the Professionalization of the American Folklore Society." *The American Folklore Society Newsletter* (February): 2–3 and 8.
———. 1990b. "Response to Kirshenblatt-Gimblett." *The American Folklore Society Newsletter* (April): 2 and 6.
———. 1990c. "Response to Leary." *The American Folklore Society Newsletter* (June): 2 and 5.
Sayet, Rachel. 2011. *Moshup's Continuance: Sovereignty and the Literature of the Land in the Aquinnah Wampanoag Nation*. Master's Thesis, Harvard University.
Schlosser, S. E. 2004. *Spooky New England: Tales of Hauntings, Strange Happenings, and Other Local Lore*. Guilford, CT: The Globe Pequot Press.
Šmidchens, Guntis. 1999. "Folklorism Revisited." *Journal of Folklore Research* 36, no. 1: 51–70.
Stevens, James. 1950. "Folklore and the Artist." *American Mercury* 70: 343-349.
Tolbert, Jeffrey. 2015. "On Folklore' Appeal: A Personal Essay." *New Directions in Folklore* 13, no. 1-2: 93–113.
Tucker, Elizabeth. 2007. *Haunted Halls: Ghostlore of American College Campuses*. Jackson: University Press of Mississippi.
Vecchi, Charles and Elizabeth Krimmel. 2012. *Millis*. Charleston, SC: Arcadia Publishing.
Zeitlin, Steven. 2000. "I'm a Folklorist and You're Not: Expansive versus Delimited Strategies in the Practice of Folklore." *Journal of American Folklore* 113, no. 447: 3–19.

Responses

Standards and Boundaries of Folklore Studies

Simon J. Bronner
University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee
USA

Stephen Olbrys Gencarella in his complaint about pseudo-research in folklore recognizes that the issue of academic authority has erupted periodically through the history of folklore studies. He provides telling examples and could have gone back even further to the roots of the American Folklore Society organized by William Wells Newell in 1888. Newell underscored "scientific character" of the Society's journal and derided idle dabblers and dilettantes aroused by the rise of popular interest in folklore. He declared that the "collection of folk-lore is not an amusement for leisure, but an important and essential part of history" (Newell 1888, 5). Newell counted academics and museum curators among his charter members to emphasize that the study of folklore was a professional and time-consuming endeavor.

Writing eight years earlier about the formation of the Folklore Society in England, George Laurence Gomme even slighted the work of antiquarian William John Thoms, who in the mid-nineteenth century was the first to claim the title of folklorist. Gomme listed contemporary scholars who gave the study of folklore at the end of the nineteenth century "the dignity of a separate department of study, with a title specially its own" (Gomme 1880, 13). Probably thinking of literati creatively adapting folklore rather than those who wanted to build a scientific field for culture akin to natural history, Gomme sought authority for an educated class holding the folklorist title and thought that the proper academic home for these experts was in the social science of anthropology. The learned society, he offered, was the key to the study's legitimacy by acting as a guild to maintain high standards of scholarship. Under the auspices of the Folklore Society, Gomme prepared a handbook to guide intelligentsia on proper methods to pursue what he called the "Science of Folk-lore" (Gomme 1890, 5).

The first journal to tout the title of "folklorist" in its masthead was *The Folklorist* published in 1892 by the Chicago Folk-Lore Society (later the International Folklore Association), which carved out a literary niche among the other emerging anthropologically oriented folklore societies (Bassett 1892b). The Chicago Folk-Lore Society, too, issued the *Manual of Folklore* as a handbook suited, according to its author and Society organizer Fletcher Bassett, "to the wants of the Folk-Lorist in the Field." Despite its more humanistic tone, the publication carried the acknowledgment that "*Folk-Lore has become a science*, and there is a pressing call for more material, fresh from any unworked field" (Bassett 1892a, 3; emphasis added). The categorization of folklore studies as a science implied systematic, objective study, and a deference to scientists-folklorists as expert, credentialed authorities (see Samuelson 1983).

Several other handbooks followed that shared the paradoxical goals of on the one hand encouraging the spread among lay authors studying and writing about folklore while on the other limiting popular productivity by imposing scientific

standards (see Bronner 2019c). Folklore studies was hardly alone in dealing with this apparent conflict. With the spreading adoption of a liberal arts model in universities at the end of the nineteenth century were other increasingly popular fields driven by lay knowledge mentioned by Newell, Gomme, and Bassett of modern history, literature, and ethnography. This array of fields suggests that the professionalization of American folklore studies was influenced and grew out of popular interest and took a humanistic turn by the mid-twentieth century that represented public, and often amateur, engagement (Bronner 1986; Zumwalt 1988). Differences in the American situation could be discerned from a class-based, nationalistic European academic model in which academic chairs were assigned responsibility for a discipline (Dégh 1965; Hautala 1969). With this intellectual history in mind, my contribution to the discussion here is to comment on trends and conditions that folklorists seeking academic authority in the twenty-first century America have seemingly accepted but should re-consider for the future of a discipline, whether scientific or not.

The two major episodes in the second half of the twentieth century that Gencarella presents involve Richard Dorson and Robert Georges, both of whom were in leadership positions in doctoral-degree-granting folklore programs. Their vantage in academe therefore has features that Newell and Gomme in the nineteenth century did not address. The debates carried on in print and at conferences are notable primarily in their reference to the standards and boundaries—and earned credentials--of folklore studies as a separate degree-granting discipline and secondarily in the emergence of "public folklore" as a distinct vocational field and expansion, and in many cases displacement, of folklore with alternative rhetoric such as "heritage" (Ben-Amos 2019). Having known Dorson and Georges, I can say they had a pragmatic, and often defensive, objective of convincing their colleagues as well as the public that folklore is a demanding study that requires serious, devoted study and training (Dorson 1976). A more general concern evident from their debates, if not overtly stated, is the questioning of the certification, and ultimately redefinition, of the "folklorist" in an open, democratic society (Bronner 2006; Frandy and Cederström 2022; Jones 1994; Lloyd 2021). Implied is the difficulty of managing a branch of knowledge that is by its nature both popular and esoteric in addition to being fluid academically. I add here for consideration of these latter points an especially germane war of words between the first state folklorist and first chair of an academic folklore department after World War II that is worth analyzing because it presaged later developments. I will suggest lessons in their dispute and reflect on the distinctive circumstances of twenty-first century America that have caused their issues to arise again.

The first state folklorist position held by Henry W. Shoemaker (1880-1958) and first academic department of folklore (chaired by Alfred L. Shoemaker, 1913-c. 1968) in the United States were both established in Central Pennsylvania in the years 1947-1948 (Bronner 1998a, 266-348). The location and timing for the landmark advancements in folklore studies were not coincidental. Central Pennsylvania was drawing national touristic interest as a "folk" region because of unprecedented post-World-War-II interest in the

Amish, America's colonial roots, and pre-industrial pastoral landscape that were promoted for auto excursions a short distance away from America's largest urban-industrial center (Yoder 1990). Henry Shoemaker was a Harrisburg-based newspaper publisher and self-identified folklorist who wrote a widely read daily column for the *Altoona Tribune, Reading Times,* and other newspapers in Pennsylvania (Bronner 1996). He had attended Columbia University and was active in literary and journalistic clubs but did not have formal coursework in folklore studies, although he attended a school in New York City with a classical curriculum that included studies of Greek and Roman mythology. He commented, however, that upon spending summers in the Central Pennsylvania highlands, for which he invoked mythological terms of Eldorado (Shoemaker 1917), he became aware of storytellers and songsters that he considered contemporary bards and balladeers. He used this material for many books beginning in 1912 with legends, songs, speech, and anecdotes about Central Pennsylvania, often drawing on its distinctive landscape features and frontier history. More than other regional writers, he wrote on hunting and logging lore which drew popular interest and were neglected areas of study among academic folklorists. However, Shoemaker did not cite his sources and took creative license with narratives he presented. Academic folklorists such as Harvard-educated Samuel Bayard, who was a student of George Lyman Kittredge, president of the American Folklore Society in 1904, accused Shoemaker of fabricating the stories out of whole cloth rather than collecting them from oral tradition. Moreover, Bayard recoiled at Shoemaker's "empty gesturing of the past" and "publicity effects resorted to in order to hold the attention of an uninformed public" (Bayard 1959, 12).

With his political connections to the Herbert Hoover presidential campaign, Shoemaker in 1933 was appointed ambassador to Bulgaria where he was impressed by what he called "the Bulgarian idea, that the government should subsidize the work of preserving folklore" ("Introducing" 1936). Upon his return to Pennsylvania from Bulgaria, Shoemaker was appointed to the post of State Archivist responsible for governmental written records and he lobbied for the creation of a complementary State Folklorist position to compile folklore that he defined as oral "unwritten history." On March 11, 1948, the Pennsylvania Historical Commission based in the state capital of Harrisburg announced Shoemaker's appointment as the country's first governmental state folklorist. Shoemaker in this post circulated articles on Pennsylvania folklore to newspapers around the state and he made numerous presentations as the state's designated folklore expert. In the post-war period, folklore in the form of nationalistic hero legends and often sensationalized regional folklife, particularly in the romanticized frontier West, as Richard Dorson (1971) had pointed out, was all the rage, and Henry Shoemaker endeavored to publicize Pennsylvania's role in this trend. In his writing, he publicized Pennsylvania as culturally rich compared to regions of the West, South, and New England.

For his detractors, Shoemaker's promotional work meant exaggerating and even concocting folklore texts for public consumption. For supporters, Henry Shoemaker was a prominent public fig-

ure and resident writer who brought out lively, entertaining stories that were distinctive in literature for featuring the overlooked cultural lives of rural Pennsylvanians. For his fans, Henry Shoemaker fit into Gencarella's category of an enthusiast who gained attention because of his governmental and newspaper roles. Detractors protested his self-proclaimed (non-academic or analytical) expertise and "professionally unreasonable" (exaggerated) claims, as Gencarella describes these roles. Yet those protests did not affect his popularity or folkloristic endeavors. In fact, it is fair to say that with his outpouring of books and newspaper articles Henry Shoemaker through the mid-twentieth century was Pennsylvania's best-known writer, if not expert, on folklore. Further, as head of the public-oriented Pennsylvania Folklore Society (established in 1927) he was often sought for advice on collecting and writing about folklore by local organizations. At the national level, in 1952 he was named a "councillor" of the American Folklore Society. Did that make him a bonafide folklorist representing the dignity of a separate department of study, as Gomme avowed?

Alfred L. Shoemaker meanwhile had established the nation's first college department of folklore at Franklin and Marshall College in Lancaster, Pennsylvania, with a curriculum focused on ethnological research that in a Bachelor of Arts degree (Bronner 2020). The Pennsylvania-born Shoemaker had his Ph.D. in German from the University of Illinois with a dissertation on the Amish and had studied in European centers of folk cultural studies in Sweden and Ireland. Alfred Shoemaker was not against public folklore in the form of festivals and museums but wanted programming to be guided by academic principles and organized by professionals. To break down the town-gown divide, especially as tourism to the Amish areas boomed, he established a Pennsylvania Dutch Folk Cultural Center with two fellow professors-- Don Yoder and J. William Frey—to issue publications, compile archives and artifact collections, create museum exhibits, and manage festivals (Louden 2022). He also set out to correct tourist literature on folklore penned by the likes of Harrisburg-based bookseller Monroe Aurand, who issued pamphlets sensationalizing Pennsylvania witchcraft, bundling, and humor (Louden 2022, 268-69; Weaver-Zercher 2001, 114-21). Alfred Shoemaker at Franklin and Marshall together with Samuel Bayard at Penn State hurled criticism at Henry Shoemaker for distorting folklore study with political and romantic leanings.

Alfred at first tried to transform the Pennsylvania Folklore Society into an academic organization and when that takeover bid was unsuccessful, then formed the rival Pennsylvania Folklife Society. Alfred became especially annoyed at Henry's invitations to creative writers and amateurs to adapt folklore, and resisted associations that the state folklorist made between the Pennsylvania Folklore Society and amateur storytelling leagues and poetry societies. Brandishing his expertise as an experienced publisher and journalist, Henry made unflattering remarks about the bland appearance, narrow scope, and academic tone of Alfred's *Pennsylvania Dutchman* which morphed into the broader-based *Pennsylvania Folklife.* Bayard who became president of the American Folklore Society in 1965-1966 was even more assertive than Gencarella in condemning pseudo-research

by calling Henry Shoemaker "as arrant a faker and 'fakelorist' as ever existed" (Bayard 1993; see also Bayard 1959).

Henry Shoemaker died in 1958, and so did the Pennsylvania state folklorist position. When it was revived in 1967, it was with doctoral candidate Henry Glassie from the recently established folklore program at the University of Pennsylvania. Alfred Shoemaker's department of folklore did not last either, but the festival based on ethnological principles he began still runs as the Kutztown Folk Festival, although critics claim that his original academic vision has been corrupted by tourism and commercialization. An academic chair has been named for Alfred, ironically not at Franklin and Marshall but rather at the University of Wisconsin which has a folklore program with a specialist in Pennsylvania German language and lore (Louden 2022). This outcome could appear on Gencarella's scorecard as a win for academic authority, but the reality is that Pennsylvania is as vulnerable as New England in the twenty-first century to self-declared folklorists exploiting popular touristic interest in a purported regional legacy of witchcraft and ghostlore with the rhetoric of "weird," "bizarre," and "strange" in their titles (see Nesbitt and Wilson 2006; Schlosser 2006).

So what's different now? And what if anything can be done about it? I return to the themes I introduced earlier for the twentieth century episodes and add two critical twenty-first century differences. First, undoubtedly academic involvement in "public folklore" is more conspicuous at present and I reflect on its linkage to the heritage movement in the twenty-first century. A second factor is the redefinition of folklorist in the context of digital culture in what many would call the flattening or democratization of academic authority.

Public Folklore and the Heritage Movement

I argue that an unintended consequence of folklorists adopting "heritage" as a keyword to join professional folklore studies to public appreciation of folk culture is the undermining of authority of folkloristically trained experts. I write this as a university administrator who introduced a folklorist-led "public heritage" curriculum and certificate program to link history, folklore, museology, and sociology with a title and field that would be appealing our regional communities (Bronner 2020). The program took off, despite skepticism from historians and sociologists who thought that the folklore part would introduce fictions into their fact-filled mix. They worried, too, that heritage ceded authority to community-based enthusiasts who "do history wrong." To be sure, an implication of the public heritage program was that community voices and efforts should be valued, and that university-trained specialists would guide rather than initiate projects. Inspired by the legacy of Alfred L. Shoemaker, another goal was to have the university take responsibility for providing accessible training and organization to community enthusiasts, especially with the end in the 1990s of the third Pennsylvania state folklorist office in Pennsylvania rebranded as "folklife" within a governmental Heritage Affairs Commission (Staub 1988). On a national level, in 1999 the Smithsonian Institution renamed its office organizing the Smithsonian Folklife Festival as the Center for Folklife and *Cultural Heritage*. And internationally, many scholars adopted the legalistic term "intangible cul-

tural heritage" to refer to practices that had formerly been under the purview of folklorists (Foster and Gilman 2015; Stefano and Davis 2017).

Supporting this move to reconceptualizing folklore as part of a larger cultural heritage movement to engage local publics was Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett's often-cited essay "Mistaken Dichotomies" in the *Journal of American Folklore* (1988). Kirshenblatt-Gimblett sought to disrupt a binary she imagined between "pure" and "applied" folklore. The heritage movement, she thought, was a way for folklorists to get out of the ivory tower and broaden their significance. Referring to the example of conflicts between folklorists and art collectors over the meaning of folk art, she complained that with their narrow esoteric definition of heritage as inherited tradition, "folklorists have drawn and policed boundaries that, until recently, have left to the American folk art specialists what folklore as a discipline has not been able to assimilate" (Kirshenblatt-Gimblett 1988, 147). Of relevance to Gencarella's irritation is Kirshenblatt-Gimblett's observation that "The public sector has tended to embrace received notions of ethnicity and ethnic group, of heritage and tradition, without considering the historical formation of these notions in the postwar American context" (Kirshenblatt-Gimblett 1988, 149). Kirshenblatt-Gimblett hoped that folklorists could reform the heritage movement by bringing a multicultural perspective to the table and in return folklorists would loosen their strict transmission-based definition of tradition.

Checking the assumption that folklorists had mummified their study of traditions, I found data that suggested that American folklorists by and large in their embrace of performance and vernacularism have since the 1980s actually drifted away from transactional criteria of tradition (Bronner 2019b; Bronner 2022). I have used those approaches myself but I have come to the realization that they detrimentally eschew social and psychological guidelines and on the basis of superficial evidence impose a class-based aesthetic judgment on the kinds of expressions considered "folk" or traditional (Abrahams 1993; Bronner 2012; Bronner 2022; Dundes 2005; Mechling 2006; Morris 1995).

Although Gencarella is not willing to critique "Mistaken Dichotomies," I am. Besides the false dichotomy Kirshenblatt-Gimblett presents of "pure" and "applied" folklore, the essay validates the undermining of folkloristic expertise that Gencarella bemoans. My larger concern is that the folding of folklore into a preservationist concept of heritage in the way she proposes opens the door to any claim to the material (see Ben-Amos 2019). No policing of boundaries is necessary because in essence folklore no longer exists, at least as a social reality. If it does, it is objectified, and I fear commodified, as a relict artifact of the past or esoteric knowledge that can only be known by insiders. It is rendered incomprehensible by learned individuals and can only be interpreted as a staged or mediated performance of identity. Another consequence is that no need exists for academic programs if the knowledge is not one that can be gained intellectually, subject to scholarly standards, and analyzed in aggregate. Breaking with nationalistic and regionalistic rubrics that in her historiography had been part of the history of folklore studies leaves a gap for dabblers and dilettantes to fill once again. With the ac-

celeration in twenty-first century America of "fast capitalism" fueled by digital media, the effect is that the conspicuous authorities are those who are not academically credentialled and further, explore macro-level folkloric commodities for mass consumption (in contrast to micro-functionally oriented academic folklorists) (see Bronner 2019a; Cross 2017). Is that not what Gencarella draws out as the current problem?

As I have pointed out in *The Practice of Folklore* (2019d), the separation of noble "public heritage" goals and academic folkloristic interests does not necessarily lead to conflict. I observed as a resident academic during the "Year of Folklore" throughout the Netherlands that was managed by cooperating separate centers devoted to public and academic work. Although those professionals who were involved did not refer to "policing" of boundaries, it was evident that the kind of self-proclamation of authority over folklore was not tolerated, largely because of the centuries-old role of universities as knowledge centers that integrated with public organizational work. This high-context environment in Dutch organizational life may explain why academics in the Netherlands do not worry about the paradoxical inclusiveness involving the sharing of authority on the one hand and promotion of deference to professionalism that American folklorists frequently strive, probably quixotically, to achieve.

Participatory Culture and the Flattening of Academic Authority

The first endowed chair of folklore in the United States was held beginning in 1920 by Martha Beckwith (1871-1959) at Vassar College. Having studied with Franz Boas in anthropology at Columbia University, she used the prestige of the new chair to declare the exceptional identity and discipline of the folklorist while her mentor still referred to folklore as a subfield, albeit an important one of anthropology (Beckwith 1931; Bronner 1998b). Known for her self-assertiveness, Beckwith was not shy about criticizing distortions of folklore she witnessed in public venues. One story that the president of Vassar told was of her outburst at a theater performance of Hawaiian hula dancing. She confided to her companion, "This is unscholarly, I must protest," to which the reply was "Please, Martha, don't make a scene. *What is the use?*" Not to be deterred, Beckwith rose and bellowed to the audience, "In the interest of truth, I must denounce this performance. It has nothing about it that in any way represents the true hula, except the skirt, and even that is artificial. You are being taken in!" The show halted and according to the president's account, she began to lecture the audience about "what the true hula was" and then stormed out to the cheers of the crowd (Bronner 1998, 249-50). The president does not say if the show changed because of Beckwith's ire, but he does add that it resumed after she left.

One might interpret the president's intent to show the feistiness of the folklore professor and her admirable devotion to maintaining scholarly standards. Yet considering Gencarella's comments, the narrative might also be read to indicate the futility of academic intervention in popular presentation of folk traditions. Beckwith also sought to change pre-conceived notions about the narrow boundaries of folklore research among her academic colleagues. She objected to her folklore courses being listed under Comparative

Literature and requested an independent prefix of "folk" for a curriculum centered on a broad definition of folklore's scope. She argued that folklore studies is a wide theoretical field representing advanced multi-disciplinary learning. Concerned about the misinformation in the popular press about immigrant and regional American folklore, she dashed off a memorandum to the president that such a curriculum bridging humanities and social sciences "aims to bring the student in touch with modern theory in the field of folklore in the light of older methods of interpretation to give practical help in recognizing folk forms of the past and in collecting and preserving disappearing forms alive today in oral art and in the practice of the folk group" (Bronner 1998, 252). Speaking out against the view of folk customs as survivals or relics of the past, she underscored the contemporariness and functionality of folklore to argue for its necessity in a liberal arts curriculum. She vowed to educate students on the many ethnic "strains in the process of creating an American cultural life," and she assured the president that this knowledge would be applicable to a number of occupations, particularly social work (1931, 64).

Gencarella shares with Beckwith a frustration that he cannot stop the show or at least was not consulted to make it better. However, Beckwith's vision of folklore playing more of a role in the liberal arts curriculum has materialized in the twenty-first century with courses offered in many universities across North America. Yet the spread of independent degree-granting programs with academic authority in folklore that she sought has not fared as well (Sawin and Zumwalt 2020). Public recognition of the study of folklore as an academic specialty in which one needs advanced training would perhaps prevent the easy appropriation of the folklorist title. Having taught in the Netherlands and Japan where there is more public deference to academic authority I observe that even if such recognition suddenly shot up credentialing by or affiliation with the American university does not wield the clout that scholars expect. Terminological attempts to aggrandize, or avoid, the discomforting populist implications of "folklore" such as "vernacular culture" have only exacerbated the problem (Bronner 2022).

One might point to an attributed trait of anti-intellectualism in America as an explanation for acceptance of amateurism (Hofstadter 1963), but I would also open for consideration the effect of spreadable new media on the rapid democratization or flattening of learning and the arts in the twenty-first century (Bonk 2011; Friedman 2007; Gurri 2018; Jenkins, Ford, and Green 2013). The digital media resources of Wikipedia, YouTube, and the blogosphere have led many cultural critics to observe an undoing of the divide between expert and lay authority. I am aware of this phenomenon because in my enrollment management role, I have been told that a wave of digital natives graduating from high school are less convinced that they need a college education (see Tapscott 2009).

With the merging of performers/producers and spectators/consumers, several social theorists have announced a move beyond cultural democracy to a broad participatory culture (Graves 2004; Delwiche and Henderson 2013). Media scholar Henry Jenkins refers to participatory culture growing out of fandom in a way that could apply the phenomena that

Gencarella describes. Jenkins observes a change in the twenty-first century from fans as consumers to a prosumer, "creative community that took its raw materials from commercial entertainment texts and appropriated and remixed them as the basis for their own creative culture" (Jenkins 2016, 1; see also O'Neil and Frayssé 2015). Whereas many cultural critics hail this development as fostering social and economic equity, Jenkins points out the possibilities of exploitation by commercial platforms as well as by the prosumers.

If one accepts the rise of participatory culture, there appears to be a Gramscian hegemonic scenario in which the apparent positive trend of lay prosumer folklorist commercialism in various forms of media, and consequently into popular culture, appears to foster a populist inclusiveness while contributing to a negative entrenchment of inequities that folkloristic study serves to uncover and remediate. One answer has been new versions of the nineteenth century handbooks in which credentialed folklorists guide users to professional applications, rather than methods, of folklore studies (Frandy and Cederström 2022; Lloyd 2021). Apparently in answer to the advent of participatory culture, most of the occupations that the editors of these volumes describe are in the public sector and do not carry the title of folklorist. Nonetheless, the editors suggest that folkloristic education within the realm of the humanities is helpful to succeed in agencies for community advocacy, social services, and public policy. One of those editors, Tim Lloyd, who served for many years as Executive Director of the American Folklore Society, proclaims that "the robust development of public-sector work in the 1970s brought folklore studies into a richer and more diverse version of today's 'alt-ac' [alternative academic] business quite some time ago, and both educational curricula and professional development efforts in our field for many years have reflected this commitment to opening more doors to folklorists' professional orientation and practice" (Lloyd 2021, xvii). The obvious implication is that the future of folkloristic professionalism lies outside of the academy, and leaves in doubt, at least in my mind, the viability of folkloristic credentialing. It leaves to many of the prosumers the title of folklorist.

Maybe as Kirshenblatt-Gimblett reflected, it is difficult if not impossible to police the standards and boundaries of folklore studies under such post-modern conditions. Nonetheless, effort is needed to revitalize academic programming with attention to folklore and folklife studies as a distinctive field, instead of subsuming it or ceding it to heritage, vernacular, and cultural studies (Ben-Amos 2019; Bronner 2022). And I daresay that credentialed folklorists might take a cue from Martha Beckwith to review and critique prosumer appropriations and distortions of the folkloric subject. That might be a start to reclaiming, in Gomme's words, "the dignity of a separate department of study, with a title specially its own" (Gomme 1880, 13).

Works Cited

Abrahams, Roger D. 1993. "After New Perspectives: Folklore Study in the Late Twentieth Century." *Western Folklore* 52: 379–400.

Bassett, Fletcher S. 1892a. *The Folk-Lore Manual.* Chicago: Beatty.

———. 1892b. "The Chicago Folk-Lore Society." *Folk-Lorist* 1: 5–12.

Bayard, Samuel P. 1959. "English-Language Folk Culture in Pennsylvania." *Pennsylvania Folklife* 10 (2): 11–13.

———. 1993. Letter to Simon Bronner, April 21.

Beckwith, Martha Warren. 1931. *Folklore in America: Its Scope and Method.* Poughkeepsie, NY: Folklore Foundation.

Ben-Amos, Dan. 2019. "Between Intangible Cultural Heritage and Folklore." *TFH: The Journal of History and Folklore* 36: 17–73. Accessed September 7, 2023. https://journals.psu.edu/folklorehistorian/article/view/1/8.

Bonk, Curtis J. 2011. *The World is Open: How Web Technology is Revolutionizing Education.* San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

Bronner, Simon J. 1986. *American Folklore Studies: An Intellectual History.* Lawrence: University Press of Kansas.

———. 1996. *Popularizing Pennsylvania: Henry W. Shoemaker and the Progressive Uses of Folklore and History.* University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press.

———. 1998a. *Following Tradition: Folklore in the Discourse of American Culture.* Logan: Utah State University Press.

———. 1998b. "Martha Warren Beckwith and the Rise of Academic Authority." In *Following Tradition: Folklore in the Discourse of American Culture*, 237–65. Logan: Utah State University Press.

———. 2006. "Folklorists." In *Encyclopedia of American Folklife,* edited by Simon J. Bronner, 423–26. Armonk, NY: M.E. Sharpe.

———. 2012. "Practice Theory in Folklore and Folklife Studies." *Folklore* 123: 23–47.

———. 2019a. "From Farm to. . . Farmers' Markets: Amish Folk Society in the Age of Fast Capitalism." In *The Practice of Folklore,* by Simon J. Bronner, 201–37. Jackson: University Press of Mississippi.

———. 2019b. "Folkloristic Practices in a Converging Hyper Era." In *The Practice of Folklore: Essays Toward a Theory of Tradition,* by Simon J. Bronner, 272–96. Jackson: University Press of Mississippi.

———. 2019c. "Introduction: Definition, Concepts, and Questions of Folklore and Folklife in a Diverse, Mobile Nation." In *Oxford Handbook of American Folklore and Folklife Studies,* edited by Simon J. Bronner, 3–37. New York: Oxford University Press.

———. 2019d. "The Year of Folklore and Other Lessons of Public Heritage." In *The Practice of Folklore,* by Simon J. Bronner, 238–54. Jackson: University Press of Mississippi.

———. 2020. "The Folklife Connection: Ethnological Organization at Franklin and Marshall, Cooperstown, and Penn State Harrisburg." In *Folklore in the United States and Canada: An Institutional History,* edited by Patricia Sawin and Rosemary Lévy Zumwalt, 48–62. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.

———. 2022. "The Problematic Vernacular." *Journal of Ethnology and Folkloristics* 16 (2): 1–15.

Cross, Gary. 2017. *Consumed Nostalgia:*

Memory in the Age of Fast Capitalism. New York: Columbia University Press.

Dégh, Linda. 1965. "Folklore and Related Disciplines in Eastern Europe." *Journal of the Folklore Institute* 2: 103–19.

Delwiche, Aaron, and Jennifer Jacobs Henderson, eds. 2013. *The Participatory Cultures Handbook.* New York: Routledge.

Dorson, Richard M. 1971. *American Folklore and the Historian.* Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

———. 1976. *Folklore and Fakelore: Essays Toward a Discipline of Folk Studies.* Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Dundes, Alan. 2005. "Folkloristics in the Twenty-First Century (AFS Invited Presidential Plenary Address)." *Journal of American Folklore* 118: 385–408.

Foster, Michael Dylan, and Lisa Gilman, eds. 2015. *UNESCO on the Ground: Local Perspectives on Intangible Cultural Heritage.* Bloomington: Indiana University Press.

Frandy, Tim, and B. Marcus Cederström, eds. 2022. *Culture Work: Folklore for the Public Good.* Madison: University of Wisconsin Press.

Friedman, Thomas L. 2007. *The World Is Flat: A Brief History of the Twenty-first Century.* Updated and Expanded. New York: Picador/Farrar, Straus and Giroux.

Gomme, George Laurence. 1880. "Folk-Lore and the Folk-Lore Society." *Antiquary* 1: 13–15.

———. 1890. *The Handbook of Folklore*. London: David Nutt.

Graves, James Bau. 2004. *Cultural Democracy: The Arts, Community, and the Public Purpose.* Urbana: University of Illinois Press.

Gurri, Martin. 2018. *The Revolt of the Public and the Crisis of Authority in the New Millennium.* San Francisco, CA: Stripe Press.

Hautala, Jouko. 1969. *Finnish Folklore Research 1828-1918.* Helsinki: Societas Scientiarum Fennica.

Hofstadter, Richard. 1963. *Anti-intellectualism in American Life.* New York: Knopf.

"Introducing Our Personality of the Week." 1936. *Lock Haven Express* (December 5), 2.

Jenkins, Henry. 2016. "Defining Participatory Culture." In *Participatory Culture in a Networked Era: A Conversation on Youth, Learning, Commerce, and Politics,* edited by Henry Jenkins, Mizuko Ito, and danah boyd, 1–31. Cambridge, UK: Polity Press.

———, Sam Ford, and Joshua Green. 2013. *Spreadable Media: Creating Value and Meaning in a Networked Culture.* New York: New York University Press.

Jones, Michael Owen, ed. 1994. *Putting Folklore to Use.* Lexington: University Press of Kentucky.

Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, Barbara. 1988. "Mistaken Dichotomies." *Journal of American Folklore* 101: 140–55.

Lloyd, Timothy, ed. 2021. *What Folklorists Do: Professional Possibilities in Folklore Studies.* Bloomington: Indiana University Press.

Louden, Mark L. 2022. "Shoemaker, Frey, and Yoder and the Pennsylvania Dutch Idea." In *Culture Work: Folklore for the Public Good,* edited by Tim Frandy and B. Marcus Cederström, 267–76. Madison:

University of Wisconsin Press.
Mechling, Jay. 2006. "Solo Folklore." *Western Folklore* 65: 435–53.
Morris, Rosalind C. 1995. "All Made Up: Performance Theory and the New Anthropology of Sex and Gender." *Annual Review of Anthropology* 24: 567–92.
Nesbitt, Mark, and Patty A. Wilson. 2006. *Haunted Pennsylvania: Ghosts and Strange Phenomena of the Keystone State.* Mechanicsburg, PA: Stackpole.
Newell, William Wells. 1888. "On the Field and Work of a Journal of American Folk-Lore." *Journal of American Folklore* 1: 3–7.
O'Neil, Mathieu, and Olivier Frayssé, eds. *Digital Labour and Prosumer Capitalism: The US Matrix.* London: Palgrave Macmillan.
Samuelson, Sue. 1983. "Notes on a Sociology of Folklore as a Science." *New York Folklore* 9: 13–20.
Sawin, Patricia, and Rosemary Lévy Zumwalt, eds *Folklore in the United States and Canada: An Institutional History,* edited by 48–62. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.
Schlosser, S. E. 2006. *Spooky Pennsylvania: Tales of Hauntings, Strange Happenings, and Other Local Lore.* Guilford, CT: Globe Pequot.
Shoemaker, Henry W. 1917. *Eldorado Found, The Central Pennsylvania Highlands: A Tourist's Survey.* Altoona: Altoona Tribune.
Staub, Shalom. 1988. "Folklore and Authenticity: A Myopic Marriage in Public Sector Programs." In *The Conservation of Culture: Folklorists and the Public Sector,* edited by Burt Feintuch, 166-79. Lexington: University Press of Kentucky.
Stefano, Michelle L., and Peter Davis, eds. 2017. *The Routledge Companion to Intangible Cultural Heritage.* London: Routledge.
Tapscott, Don. 2009. *Growing Up Digital: How the Net Generation is Changing Your World.* New York: McGraw Hill.
Weaver-Zercher, David. 2001. *The Amish in the American Imagination.* Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press.
Yoder, Don. 1990. "The Discovery of Central Pennsylvania." In *Discovering American Folklife: Studies in Ethnic, Religious, and Regional Culture,* by Don Yoder, 185–97. Ann Arbor, MI: UMI Research Press.
Zumwalt, Rosemary Lévy. 1988. *American Folklore Scholarship: A Dialogue of Dissent.* Bloomington: Indiana University Press.

Anthony Bak Buccitelli
Pennsylvania State University, Harrisburg
USA

Stephen Gencarella's commentary on this issue of *Cultural Analysis* is a needed provocation. He offers a wide-ranging discussion of the issues faced by experts, including experts in folklore, in rendering usable knowledge to a broader public within the rapidly changing information landscape of the early 21st century. Undoubtedly, some of Gencarella's arguments will generate significant debate among folklorists, and many may disagree with some or even most of his points. Yet, I think he has done a tremendous service to the field by provoking us to push past our typical hand-wringing over concerns about the low visibility of our discipline in the academy or the need to promote our work better to the broader public.[1] Along a second line, he has reopened some of our long-past considerations about how to mark off the boundaries of expertise but has done so in a way that attempts to mitigate some of the elitist sensibilities that have rendered previous discussions distasteful.

Perhaps the most needed intervention that Gencarella makes in this essay is to distinguish between academic experts, tradition participants, and community experts, creative artists, and the group he dubs pseudo-researchers. From my perspective, this discussion helped clarify a conflict I have long held in my own mind: how to preserve the important role of "amateur," or to use Gencarella's better term "citizen," folklorists from the puerile work of pseudo-researchers. In fact, the long history of inclusiveness in folklore studies with regard to citizen folklorists is a unique and, I think, quite valuable feature of our field.[2] Yet, Gencarella is right to assert that there is a fundamental problem with allowing simply anyone to identify as a folklorist. Many of these problems are well-detailed in Gencarella's essay. To this list of problems, I suggest adding an additional one: the inclusion of pseudo-researchers under the term "folklorist" makes it harder for us to comfortably identify ourselves professionally by that label. Of course, there have been some high-profile instances when individuals or institutions have refused to acknowledge the field because of the unserious connotation the terms "folklore" or "folklorist" carry with them (see, for example, Dundes 2005, 392). I can't imagine many folklorists who have *not* encountered numerous minor situations where they felt uncomfortable applying the label to themselves or, when they did so, were met with a profound misunderstanding of who folklorists are and what we actually do. To be clear, I do not intend to resurrect the debate over the naming of our field (see, for example, Ben-Amos 1998; Bendix 1998; Kirshenblatt-Gimblett 1998; and Oring 1998); instead, I suggest that with more sustained efforts to address some of the issues raised by Gencarella in this essay, using the terminology we already have might simply become easier.[3]

In this essay, Gencarella begins by reviewing some of the most well-known debates around the delimitation of folklore expertise. These include Dorson's formulation of the concept of "fakelore" (1950), the rise of discourse on "folklorismus"

(Moser 1962; Bausinger 1969; Voigt 1970, 1979; Gusev 1980; Newall 1987; Bendix 1988; Smidchens 1999); and the exchange between Robert Georges, Bill Ellis, Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, Jim Leary, and Elliot Oring on the boundaries between professionalism and amateurism in folklore and the appropriate role of the American Folklore Society (Kirshenblatt-Gimblet 1990; Leary 1990; Oring 1990; Georges 1991; Ellis 1992). Gencarella then attempts to distill some of the central points of the exchange from the early '90s into a consideration of the "social nature of the expert." While it certainly no longer seems revolutionary to suggest that the ideological construction, persona, and role of the expert are social phenomena, Gencarella usefully elaborates and deepens Collins' argument, which considered expertise as a form of tacit knowledge and social practice that can only take shape within the habitus of a community of scholars. In fact, Collins' argument seems to capture one of the most contradictory experiences that many scholars have during their careers. On the one hand, one's body of knowledge certainly increases, and to greater or lesser degrees, this is accompanied by some confidence in one's mastery of that knowledge. On the other hand, however, as one develops the critical and methodological capacities required to do good scholarship, there is also a tendency to become increasingly aware of the fuzziness of categories, the ambiguities of concepts, and the fragility of fact. [4]

As Gencarella nicely points out, it is exactly this kind of intellectual nuance (I hesitate to use the term humility—in some cases, though, this might fit), developed through the long training required of scholars, that pseudo-researchers often lack. Though I agree with Gencarella that "sensationalism sells," it may be this lack of nuance that is also part of the attraction. After all, in a complex world, what is more attractive than easy certitude, even if that certitude concerns something supranormal? In this respect, it's interesting that we've seen a flourishing of narratives and vernacular subcultures that seem to celebrate the romanticized figure of the elite scholar at the very moment that, as Gencarella notes, actual experts, with our careful method and circumspect speech, are increasingly distrusted and disparaged in the public eye and marginalized within the academic system. For example, we might note the increasingly popular "dark academia" aesthetic online, a culture that celebrates the putative exterior trappings of the academic world (ivy-covered stone buildings; cavernous, dimly lit reading halls; crisp uniforms; readings of languid Romantic poetry; etc.). New York Times columnist Pamela Paul recently characterized this aesthetic as "a deeply romanticized view of higher learning with its idealization of paperbound matter, leather book bags, and unapologetic elitism." However, Paul speculates:

> It may be that the very real world of academia feels a little *too* dark and unhappy of late. The towering, all-powerful professors of yore are now often adjunct or contract instructors, with lower pay and tenuous job security…In this dimmed light, Oxford and Hogwarts and small New England colleges can feel like safe harbors. You can understand the allure of an aesthetic that offers TikTokers "a version of a dream life in which they can spend their days reading the classics in a centuries-old library," as CNN put it (Paul 2022).[5]

Like any good folklorist, of course, we should begin by formulating answers to the questions we have about the popular reception of experts, including in our own field, by paying attention to these kinds of folk expressions and images and learning from them how we might best address ourselves to a broad audience.[6] This requires us to understand the appeal of pseudo-research from a vernacular perspective and, in doing so, learn how to craft more effective and appealing modes for the communication of our research. It also requires us to push back strongly against the exploitation of what I have referred to, following Michel de Certeau, as the "specialist/expert gap" (Buccitelli 2020, 421–25). While I have argued that this gap has been increasingly exploited and manipulated by malign political actors, the various sorts of pseudo-researchers described by Gencarella, even if they don't explicitly participate in this process, lay the groundwork for such exploration by polluting the public discourse with falsely authoritative information while devaluing the decidedly less enticing, but much more responsible, research of professional and serious citizen specialists.

Notes

1 Handwringing, I am likely guilty of myself. Gencarella and I first began discussing these issues following the publication of my article "(Folk)Life, Interrupted: Challenges for Fieldwork, Empathy, and Public Discourse in the Age of Trump" in the *Journal of American Folklore* in 2020. In that essay, I devoted considerable attention to long-standing questions about whether to approach the scholarly study of folklore as empathic translation or critical intervention, as well as broader questions about the status and role of the expert in contemporary society. While ultimately, as I noted, that "essay offers no definitive answer to either set of issues," I was hoping, as I think Gencarella is, to "reframe some of the long-standing issues we confront and articulate a clear, forceful, and unified response to the challenges we all now face" (Buccitelli 2020, 425).

2 This inclusiveness appears to have had certain boundaries, however. I explored these boundaries to some extent in my 2014 article "The Reluctant Folklorist: Jon Y Lee. Paul Radin, and the Fieldwork Process." In that article, I focused on the life and works of Jon Y. Lee. Even though he was employed professionally to collect folklore as part of a WPA-funded project led by Radin, Lee was a citizen folklorist since he had no formal training in the field prior to taking this job.

3 This does not, of course, resolve the range of important issues with the name raised especially by Bendix and Kirshenblatt-Gimblett.

4 Some scholars, like sociologist Kieran Healy (2017), have argued that these dispositions toward nuance are a relatively recent feature of the scholarly habitus. Certainly, it may be true that these kinds of dispositions have become increasingly common among scholars in the wake of postmodernism, post-structuralism, and other important theory movements of the late 20th century. Yet one might also think of works like that of Peter Novick in his landmark study *That Noble Dream: The "Objectivity Question" and the American Historical Profession* (1988), which have nicely demonstrated the long-running internal debates that have taken shape within academic disciplines over a variety of epistemological concerns, even in periods when professional practitioners

outwardly projected façades of certitude.

5 For a brief but brilliant analysis of the intertwining shifts in the economic, social, and intellectual structures of universities in the late 20th and early 21st centuries that explores similar ideas, see Graeber 2014.

6 Jeffrey A. Tolbert, among others, has examined this issue in recent years. See, for example, Tolbert 2015; 2016.

Works Cited

Bausinger, Hermann. 1969. "Folklorismus in Europa: Eine Umfrage." *Zeitschrift Fur Volkskunde* 65: 1–8.

Ben-Amos, Dan. 1998. "The Name Is the Thing." *Journal of American Folklore* 111, no. 441: 257–80. https://doi.org/10.2307/541311.

Bendix, Regina. 1988. "Folklorism: The Challenge of a Concept." *International Folklore Review: Folklore Studies from Overseas* 6: 5–15.

———. 1998. "Of Names, Professional Identities, and Disciplinary Futures." *Journal of American Folklore* 111, no. 441: 235–46.

Buccitelli, Anthony Bak. 2014. "The Reluctant Folklorist: Jon Y. Lee, Paul Radin, and the Fieldwork Process." *The Journal of American Folklore* 127, no. 506: 400–24.

———. 2020. "(Folk)Life, Interrupted: Challenges for Fieldwork, Empathy, and Public

Discourse in the Age of Trump." *Journal of American Folklore* 133, no. 530: 412–29. https://doi.org/10.5406/jamerfolk.133.530.0412.

Dorson, Richard. 1950. "Folklore and Fake Lore." *American Mercury*, March 1950.

Dundes, Alan. 2005. "Folkloristics in the Twenty-First Century (AFS Invited Presidential Plenary Address, 2004)." *Journal of American Folklore* 118, no. 470: 385–408.

Ellis, Bill. 1992. "The Self-Declared Folklorist: Howlings of a Lone Wolf." *Western Folklore* 51, no. 2: 179–86.

Georges, Robert A. 1991. "Earning, Appropriating, Concealing, and Denying the Identity of Folklorist." *Western Folklore* 50, no. 1: 3–12. https://doi.org/10.2307/1499392.

Graeber, David. 2014. "Anthropology and the Rise of the Professional-Managerial Class." *HAU: Journal of Ethnographic Theory* 4, no. 3: 73–88. https://doi.org/10.14318/hau4.3.007.

Gusev, V. J. 1980. "Principal Types of Present-Day Folklorism." *Folklorismus Bulletin*, 12–14.

Healy, Kieran. 2017. "Fuck Nuance." *Sociological Theory* 35, no. 2: 118–27. https://doi.org/10.1177/0735275117709046.

Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, Barbara. 1998. "Folklore's Crisis." *Journal of American Folklore* 111 no. 441: 281–327. https://doi.org/10.2307/541312.

Moser, Hans. 1962. "Vom Folklorismus in Unserer Zeit." *Volkskunde* 58: 177–209.

Newall, Venetia J. 1987. "The Adaptation of Folklore and Tradition (Folklorismus)." *Folklore* 98, no. 2: 131–51.

Novick, Peter. 1988. *That Noble Dream: The "Objectivity Question" and the American Historical Profession.* Cambridge [England]: Cambridge University Press.

Oring, Elliott. 1998. "Anti Anti-"Folklore"." *The Journal of American Folklore* 111, no. 441: 328–38. https://doi.org/10.2307/541313.

Paul, Pamela. 2022. "Opinion | The Season of Dark Academia." *The New York Times*, October 30, 2022. https://www.nytimes.com/2022/10/30/opinion/dark-academia-halloween.html.

Smidchens, Guntis. 1999. "Folklorism Revisited." *Journal of Folklore Research* 36: 51–70.

———. 1970. "Neofolklorismus in Der Kunst." *Acta Ethnographica Academiae Scientiarum Hungaricae* 19: 401–23.

Tolbert, Jeffrey A. 2015a. "On Folklore's Appeal: A Personal Essay." *New Directions in Folklore* 13 no. 1/2: 93–113.

———. 2015b. "A Deadly Discipline: Folklore, Folklorists, and the Occult in Fatal Frame." In *The Folkloresque: Reframing Folklore in a Popular Culture World*, edited by Michael Dylan Foster and Jeffrey A. Tolbert, 125–43. Logan: Utah State University Press.

Voigt, Vilmos. 1979. "Folklore and Folklorism Today." *Folklorismus Bulletin* 1: 21–29.