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Folklore and Knowledge

American Folklore Society "Big Questions and the Disciplines" Project

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Narrative

The American Folklore Society will convene a working group of folklore scholar-teachers to undertake focused discussions of the Big Question "What is the relationship of lay and expert knowledge in a complex society?" Based on those discussions, we will develop, test, evaluate, and disseminate courses and course units designed to use our Big Question as a point of entry leading toward deeper undergraduate student engagement, in our field and others, with questions of meaning and value.

Background

Folklore is the vernacular knowledge, art, and practice coexisting with formal institutions. Not everyone is a novelist, but everyone tells stories. Not everyone is an artist or a theologian, but everyone works to give satisfying order to the material world and the cosmos. Not everyone is a politician, but everyone negotiates power relationships in his or her social milieu. And not everyone is a doctor, but everyone looks after body and soul according to conceptions of health shaped in long-term conversation with other people.

Folklorists study the social processes of communication in which vernacular expression takes shape, circulates, and is transformed. Drawing on ethnographic methods such as participant observation and oral interviewing, they work to make explicit the understandings implicit in everyday community interactions. Folklorists thus study the grounding of human creativity in social life. In addition, they study the interactions of vernacular cultural processes with formal institutions and professional practice. How are the codified messages and procedures of institutions incorporated into the continuous improvisation, recycling, and rearrangements of everyday life? How does vernacular process reshape institutions in turn? How does social power interact with cultural forms?

The "lore" studied by folklorists has long been the object of learned suspicion. In the Middle Ages, theologians labored to eradicate peasant superstition. In the early modern period, grammarians purified the rudeness of vernacular speech and

early scientists criticized "popular errors." With the triumph of professionalization in the late nineteenth century, medical authorities shut down the practices of midwives and nutritionists criticized the traditional diets of immigrant groups. In the twentieth century, scientific agriculture overrode traditional practice in the developing world and urban revitalization schemes disrupted neighborhood economies and systems of social control.

Today the stigma is as likely to go in the other direction. Clashes over science, ethics, politics, and economics have destabilized the authority of expert knowledge, whether of evolution, the definition of life, climate change, international conflict, or mortgage-backed securities. "Street smarts" are prized and the "ivory tower" mistrusted. Populists find applause in denouncing "cultural elites." Political theorists question the viability of democracy in a society wholly dependent on specialized technical knowledge for its everyday functioning. Critics of the failures of modernist city planning or agriculture praise the particularistic knowledge embedded in local lifeways and landscapes. Alternative and traditional forms of medicine find adherents even among physicians. Pharmaceutical companies fight to capture the "traditional knowledge" of indigenous peoples, while intergovernmental organizations strive to transform it into intellectual property and an instrument of economic development.

Since its formal inception in the late nineteenth century (indeed, since its foundations in the seventeenth), our field has studied local and lay knowledge, whether of health, nutrition, climate, agriculture, history, or the social order. It has documented and theorized the ways in which everyday knowledge is constructed and transmitted, the relationship of knowledge to practice, how knowledge is granted authority or brought into question, and how informal knowledge is codified into systems. These issues are of scholarly interest in their own right, but their practical importance is also widely recognized, both by educators trying to impart codified forms of knowledge in the classroom and by professionals obliged to exercise their expertise in a complex social world (e.g., Paulo Freire, Paul Willis, Shirley Brice Heath, and others in educational theory; and the burgeoning of such fields as "translational medicine," intended to bring laboratory research into effective clinical practice in communities).

The accumulated learning of the field gives us four layers of access to our Big Question:

1. Rich documentation of lay and local knowledge in a variety of fields of practice, formalized by the late nineteenth century as "ethnology" (Continental Europe and Latin America) or "folklife" (the English-speaking countries and Scandinavia). Areas of special attention include agriculture and animal husbandry, climate lore, foodways, natural history, traditional medicine, supernatural belief, and architecture. While much of this work is distorted by the collector's assumptions and much of it is purely descriptive, it nonetheless constitutes a rich archive which, carefully read, can be used to reconstruct the history of specific

vernacular practices, and to derive more general models of knowledge, education, and apprenticeship in particular situations. More recent work assesses the social, environmental, economic, and political impact of traditional bodies of knowledge (e.g., Mary Hufford's work on foraging practices in the mountaintop removal regions of Appalachia). Folklorists have also examined the impact of new communicative technologies on the revitalization of vernacular knowledge systems and their spread from traditional "communities of necessity" to new communities of affiliation (e.g., Ruth Finnegan, Bill Ivey, Jason Baird Jackson, and Dorothy Noyes).

2. Theoretical frameworks emerging after 1968 brought new arguments to the study of folklife. Scholars began to examine both the cultural logic and the empirical foundations of folk belief, while also turning the lens back upon institutional knowledge-building and its claims to objectivity. Their findings bear upon many current challenges to expert knowledge. Thus, while tensions over the teaching of evolution are understandably typified as a conflict between belief and science, nuances are often missed by lining up the lay and the expert positions in this fashion. For example, Patricia Turner and others argue that widespread African American skepticism toward medical institutions, government declarations, and certain mainstream news media finds considerable justification in a history of past deceptions. David Hufford, Diane Goldstein, and others who study often-pathologized accounts of illness or extraordinary experience have found that doctors are often more blinded by ideology than patients are by cultural tradition: certain "superstitions" have been demonstrated to have verifiable experiential and medical foundations. Many traditional diets and remedies have been similarly vindicated as being grounded in accurate observation. Likewise, as James C. Scott has shown most synthetically, the unforeseen consequences of modern scientific agriculture have frequently revealed the better adaptation and stronger empirical foundations of traditional practices in a given ecological milieu.

3. Folklorists have recently been heavily engaged, as both participants and critics, with the widespread initiatives of intergovernmental organizations (particularly WIPO and UNESCO) to codify and protect local traditions, including so-called "traditional knowledge" (e.g., Valdimar Hafstein, Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett). While all of the ethnographic disciplines are studying the global commodification of tradition—for example, the preponderance of work on multinational pharmaceutical firms' appropriation of indigenous botanical knowledge has been done by anthropologists—the particular disciplinary history of folklore offers vantage points from several positions within the debate. Folklorists have never resided within the academy alone: they are employed also in libraries and archives, community associations, nonprofits, and government agencies. Folklorists are often called upon by local communities to substantiate claims of ownership or document the histories of traditions. Folklorists in ministries of culture abroad or at the Smithsonian Institution and the Library of

Congress at home are increasingly called upon by their governments to construct inventories and finding aids. Folklorists established in archives are working with indigenous communities to construct appropriate controls on the circulation of in-group knowledge deemed secret or dangerous. Communicating (and disputing) among themselves from across these divergent positions, folklorists understand what is at stake on all sides when local knowledges move into institutional circuits of exchange.

4. Folklorists also study what we might call knowledge regimes: the rhetorical and political processes through which knowledge claims acquire social authority (e.g., Charles Briggs and Richard Bauman); the social economies in which knowledge circulates (many ethnographies of artisanal traditions); and covert knowledge flows that serve to raise consciousness, share access to resources, or coordinate social resistance (e.g., Carl Lindahl, Bill Westerman, and many scholars of totalitarianism, slavery, and colonialism). Some studies by folklorists add historical and circumstantial context to psychologists' accounts of why seemingly irrational beliefs are maintained within certain communities: not only to maintain identities or status but to metaphorize and call attention to ongoing social problems and contradictions. Furthermore, historians of folklore research note the importance of provincial, minority, female, working class, and otherwise peripheral intellectuals in both the past and the present of the field, as well as folklore's frequent implication in nationalist and other political projects. Because college and university folklorists are in constant dialogue with the communities they study as well as with their colleagues working outside of the academy, they can more easily understand the specificity of the conditions that shape academic knowledge and why both students and the general public are sometimes inclined to reject it.

Folklore and Undergraduate Liberal Education

At the departmental level, our discipline is extensively networked. Folklore programs sometimes take the form of traditional departments, but more often they constitute programs or centers that actively reach out to other fields in the humanities, arts, social sciences, and health professions. Many of our members in academe serve as solo scholars or in small collectives within departments with another field's name over the door: anthropology, English and other language and literature departments, area studies, history, and the like. Other newer areas of concentration are emergent: following the University of Pennsylvania, for example, Harvard and Princeton have both relied on folklorists to manage their writing programs in the last fifteen years. Folklore is thus more quietly influential than the paucity of folklore departments might suggest. Addressing first-year freshmen, the masses in general education programs, and both disoriented and brilliant refugees from the traditional disciplines, folklorists are always wrestling in practice with students' own tensions as they try to reconcile the assumptions of liberal arts education with their own experience and priorities. It behooves us to theorize the pedagogic challenges we encounter routinely, and as we do so we can perhaps shed light on the academy's larger perplexities.

It is no accident that folklore programs are most often found in public institutions: here the diversity of student backgrounds, the norms of the academy, and the duty of accountability to the government and to the public come most sharply into play, and often into conflict. While visible tensions over divergent sources of knowledge often emerge between the traditional disciplines, cultivating a generalizable expertise, and identity-based programs in which particular insider knowledges are privileged—women's studies, LGBTQ studies, Asian American studies, and so on—folklore courses at their best provide quiet accommodation between different modes of knowledge-making.

Folklore courses are discovered by the nursing student who wants to understand why some of her patients resist certain treatments, by the medievalist who wants to understand the oral processes embedded in his literary texts, and by the historian whose documents are clearly telling her only part of the story. Folklore courses also provide experience in fieldwork, and the constraints of academic terms mean that, especially at undergraduate level, this fieldwork will take place in the surrounding community and will draw on the knowledge students bring with them to the university. Thus folklore courses have always obliged students to weigh different kinds of knowledge against one another and to consider their commensurability and the possibilities of translating between them. Awareness of the diverse social contexts in which knowledge is constructed can enhance students' control of their own learning process, both inside and outside the academy.

Nonetheless, the potential of undergraduate folklore curricula has not been fully realized. For external historical reasons and internal theoretical reasons—the two of course closely intertwined—the curriculum has in recent years become somewhat narrowly focused on the performance of cultural identity. Folklorists at undergraduate liberal arts institutions most often work alone, often without the opportunity to develop curricula in concert with others from the field. The broader tradition of folklife studies—looking at the full range of practices in the everyday lifeworld—persists most fully in folklore programs with a clear regional focus, found in places like Western Kentucky, North Carolina, Utah State, and Louisiana, but the general lessons of these regional traditions of enquiry have not been synthesized in recent introductory textbooks. The interdepartmental graduate programs of such large research universities as Ohio State, Wisconsin, Missouri, and Berkeley have constructed curricula able to speak to graduate students across the disciplines, but we have not yet learned how to articulate theory in ways accessible to undergraduates. So there is work to be done in a dialogue among solo folklorists, programs grounded in a regional way of life, and those focused on theory and comparison, and this we propose to do with the mix of faculty assembled for this project.

Bringing the legacy of the field to bear on current tensions between lay and expert knowledges, we can redesign our curriculum to address them more explicitly. How does lay knowledge negotiate between experience, events, and social conventions? How is it transmitted in the absence of codification, and in what sense does it persist over time? How do informal and codified knowledge interact—or fail to interact—in different social and historical settings? How do the rhetorical strategies of each affect their reception? In studying these empirical matters we will also eventually come to normative and prescriptive questions. In addressing social problems and seeking social consensus, how do we decide whose knowledge should count, and how? How can lay and professional knowledge be brought into useful complementarity? Folklore courses can provide students with a perspective on their general educational experience, helping them to render unto the academy what is due to the academy without losing sight of the ways in which their own communities have come to view the world or the ways in which institutional power has shaped professional and governmental accounts.

Most introductory undergraduate folklore courses are taught as surveys of genres (e.g., narrative, music, belief, or material culture). We expect that the course modules we develop will be especially useful in particular sections of those courses. For example, a unit on belief systems might explore a current issue such as the resistance to child immunization on the part of a variety of populations, including Christian Scientists, African Americans, and upper-middle-class whites. Such a case study would explore the interaction of scientific practice not only with conflicting religious belief but also with powerful traditions of skepticism or suspicion found in multiple social groups. A module on foodways

might explore how a set of dietary and culinary habits is developed from a local ecology in, say, Vietnam or the American South, then examine how migrants reconstruct and adapt that diet in an American urban setting. Different kinds of interacting knowledges could be seen in migrants' creation of community resources such as urban gardens, entrepreneurial ventures such as restaurants, and responses to new prescriptions (for example, in reconciling traditional dietary preferences to doctors' guidelines for diabetes management). Such modules could offer general background readings and theoretical frameworks for addressing a variety of case studies, so that instructors could choose locally relevant issues on which students could conduct fieldwork outside the classroom as well as drawing on their own experience. Developing this kind of template could also provide a model for incorporating a wider range of field projects into introductory courses.

Full courses are most likely to emerge at more intermediate and advanced levels, attracting students who want to go farther in the field as well as students from other fields looking for interdisciplinary insight. These courses would most likely take two paths. One type of course would be devoted to an in-depth ethnographic field study in a community surrounding the campus. Howard Sacks, for example, has taught a Kenyon College course in which participants carry out a field study of local lifeways along the watershed of the Kokosing River as it flows through Knox County, Ohio (Kenyon's home county). The other would provide a comparative survey of how lay knowledges are affected by some aspect of the ecology and economy of knowledge in contemporary societies. It might focus on a content domain, such as medicine, or on the special status of certain knowledge communities, such as indigenous peoples, or on the institutionalization of informal knowledge, such as the current intergovernmental efforts to codify "traditional knowledge" and convert it into intellectual property.