

2004 Annual Conference of the American Folklore Society

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[Al Berres, Sheila Bock, Olivia Caldeira, Kevin Degnan, Connie DeJong, Andrew Salinas, and Nancy Yan](#)

Graduate Students at Ohio State University

AFS Conference Review

December 3, 2004

On December 3, 2004, seven of the Ohio State University folklore students who attended the 2004 Annual Meeting of the American Folklore Society came together in the Folklore Archives on campus and had a discussion about their impressions of the meeting as well as how the meeting affected their views of the state of the field of folklore today. This is a transcription of segments of that discussion.

The participants were:

Al Berres (AB), a Ph.D. candidate in the Department of English. This was his sixth AFS.

Sheila Bock (SB), a second year Master's student in the Department of Comparative Studies. This was her first AFS.

Olivia Caldeira (OC), a second year Master's student in the Department of Comparative Studies. This was her first AFS.

Kevin Degnan (KD), a second year Master's student in the Department of English. This was his first AFS.

Connie DeJong (CD), a second year Master's student in the Department of Comparative Studies. This was her first AFS.

Andrew Salinas (AS), a first year Master's student in the Department of English. This was his first AFS.

Nancy Yan (NY), a first year Ph.D. student in the Department of English.
This was her fourth AFS.

SB ... We are here today to talk about what we as graduate students expect from AFS, what we hope to get out of it, and how this AFS fulfilled our expectations...

AB Well, one of the things I wanted to say about this AFS is that, well, as far as problems with this one, probably the major issue that we kept running into, and I know that this isn't something AFS has a hell of a lot of control over, but it is something to bear in mind for later on. We need to pay attention to reputation of hotels for AV equipment (laughs), because other than my panel which only used overheads, every other panel I went to, especially those poor people of that computer presentations, every one of them had major technological problems, and the hotel people were just scurrying around trying to stopgap everything... and as AFS people become more technologically reliant, especially with slides and AV material, we need to watch out for that in the future and that needs to be high, high priority, and I don't think it was this time around.

SB Has that been a problem in the past?

AB Not that I can recall. I mean, there are always problems, but

SB yeah

AB At one presentation maybe, but not all of them (laughing). I mean there is always a problem of bringing your home equipment to a place you don't know what kind of cables they are going to have. People who are pretty much new to technology to begin with, it can be pretty tough, but I just saw widespread problems and a lot of complaints, which is one of the reasons I don't use AV materials at all... At least if I screw up it's my fault and not the machine's fault. That's kind of a Luddite attitude to have in an age where we want people to use multimedia, especially for folklore for crying out loud, you want samples of your fieldwork, you want stuff to be on display, that's the entire point of doing fieldwork presentations

SB Did you find that that was an issue in your presentation, Connie?

CD I just used a DVD

AB Did it work?

CD I was really pleased, actually

AB good

CD I thought it was really easy. I didn't actually talk to anybody, I just went in. I had asked to be in a place it was available, but I just went in and set it up beforehand to make sure it worked. It worked fine, so I wasn't worried about it, and I didn't have any trouble with it

...

CD That's interesting, because I remember when I was filling out the abstract, it asked very specific questions about what kind of technology I was going to use

AB That's always been the case. They have always been very good about having a wide range of options for people to select. Obviously this is a priority for the program...

CD So maybe it's just the hotel

AB I think it's the hotel and the nature of it

CD Maybe they should have a technology person to run around

AB some kind of liaison, someone to yell at the hotel

SB I'm surprised that they wouldn't, though...

AB Yeah, that's something that you'd think would be a priority with all this stuff. It isn't like we haven't always had tape recorders at this thing. I mean, even before PowerPoint and all this other stuff, audiovisual stuff was primary was primary to AFS, probably more so than at other conferences

SB Wait, say that again

AB AV materials are always primary because with field recordings and stuff like that, if you are doing a presentation on fieldwork, you want your fieldwork there, and just reading it... and especially since the performance shift which was facilitated by recording equipment being portable, obviously, certainly the entire time I have been going to AFS, AV presentations were all very important

SB This one, at least in the panels I went to, it seemed that the panels were very paper- oriented

CD Yeah, I actually saw that, too

SB I didn't notice a lot of AV materials being used or highlighted

AB Part of that issue may be school variance, because I know that at the panel I saw the most problems with, I'm trying to remember the school they were all from...one of the presenters had just been hired at Bowling Green, he was doing a presentation on comic book merchandise, and his presentation was fine, he didn't have any AV stuff, but two of the other people on the panel, they were doing power point presentations, very elaborate, because they were doing electronic work. One woman was doing her presentation on Friendster, and she had screen shots, she had everything. She eventually managed to get it to work, but it was a vastly changed version of her product in the end. You could tell he was a little uncomfortable as a result. She had practiced with it working right and it was not working right at that point

SB What about in terms of the people who are new to folklore, and this was their first conference at AFS, their first introduction to folklore in general. Kevin, you were saying how the conference turned you more towards the possibility of identifying yourself as a folklorist. Why?

KD I went to AFS because I had been encouraged to go by Amy Shuman. I had taken a class with her last fall, and my paper was accepted and I thought it would be a good opportunity to get some experience presenting as well as to learn more about folklore, and mostly what convinced me to move more toward folklore myself was that I found that folklore was a good home for my interests in travel and tourism, both in the actual real phenomenon as well as in the literature associated with it. Also, for one of my classes I am doing a project on surf travel, I really did not expect to go to AFS and find out that somebody else was already doing a fairly significant project on surf travel, so finding that out, that "Oh, Geez, this looks like it could be a great home for my interests," as well as finding out

that there are many interesting, obscure things going on in the world of folklore

SB Like what?

KD Well, I think, Sheila, you and I talked about this while we were still in Salt Lake City, was that I was worried that my presentation was not very well grounded in any specific locale, there was no specific kind of fieldwork, whereas every body of presentations seemed to be grounded in something incredibly local, and I think perhaps toward the end, I'm not sure Alan Dundes has a problem with that

SB With your topic or with the local

KD The local versus the grand theory, as he puts it, and I'm not exactly sure how his final speech's emphasis on the need for grand theory, how that affects my perceptions of folklore and my place in it

OC I had a similar experience, that was my first time at AFS, and I was worried also about not having grand theory for my project. It was preliminary... When I presented it, what were encouraging were the comments afterwards and the connections that I made because of AFS. I met Stephanie Smith from the Smithsonian and other people because of academia, because conferences are occasions that allow connections to happen when you are in the right place at the right time. You have these lucky happenstance occasions, and you meet someone who says, "I am interested in similar bodies of work and you can look at people who have done this framework and work from there," and I wouldn't have had that opportunity, I feel, if I had not been to AFS

SB I have heard that AFS is particularly more welcoming to graduate students than other conferences, like AAA, and so, I know that you presented yours as a work in progress, and Connie and I did, too, so its nice to have a forum for doing that, having something that is not quite formed and being comfortable enough to say, I don't know where to go from here, (PERIOD) Help...

OC Right, I wouldn't have been able to go if it had been something where you have to have a finished project and you have to have this set of tools, it wouldn't have been useful, but being able to go their and have people encourage you and talk to you afterwards and make those connections is extremely valuable

CD I had the experience where, after my talk, someone came up to me to and said, I'm a public folklorist, and made his comments about what I did, and I had never heard of a public folklorist before, and I come to find out this is what I already am, I am a public folklorist, I just didn't know it. I am already working with this nonprofit and I am already doing what you call public folklore, I just didn't know that you put that title on it, and it has help me be able to frame my work much better. The conference was this awakening moment for me just to know that such a thing existed and that people do that was fascinating to me

AS Yeah, that is a traditionally ignored area of folklore, and my favorite presentation of the whole conference came from a public folklorist. It was Simon Lichman, it was part of the panel Folklore and Social Change

OC yeah

AS and he was talking about bringing together Arab and Jewish schoolchildren through folkway exchanges, and that was particularly meaningful, showing that folklore can actually encourage and foster some kind of social relevance, it can be socially relevant

KD That folklore can do something

AS Yeah, folklore can do something. That was refreshing

KD That was an awesome panel

...

SB What is interesting though is that public folklorists definitely have a strong presence at the conference...but outside of schools like Western Kentucky

AS and Chapel Hill

SB Chapel Hill, too, there doesn't seem to be a lot of academic training in public folklore, you know? It seems that it is looked at "Well, if you can't get a job in academia, then you do public folklore," it's the fall-back job

KD That's something that I think is, academia doesn't seem to train anybody that well explicitly or value anything other than academia. I have told most of my professors that I do not plan to apply to a Ph.D., that I do not want to continue in the academe, and at that point everybody is welcoming...but I do get the impression from at least a couple of professors, well, "that's nice that you have decided not to go the high route of academia"

CD right

KD And I guess, oh, you want to actually teach or do something in the world beyond. "Oh isn't that nice, get your hands dirty, but we all are really smarter up here"... I mean, there is that impression, and I think it is something that would be great to change

SB Its so funny that that is something going on in the field of folklore because, I mean, when you are trained in literary studies, for example, there are only so many things you can do, but when you are trained in folklore and you have this background

AS That's where a majority of the jobs are

SB You can do useful things. Olivia, in your project on Irish travelers, you are trying to get outside of the glorification of academic scholarship, and trying to think of what you can do beyond that in your work

OC Well, there is a big move in the traveler movement, especially with Rosaleen McDonagh, who is a traveler, feminist activist, and she is basically calling academics to task for making travelers another research project and she is saying, well, what are you doing for us? Which I think is a common question and criticism, and I think that folklore is the way to get at those questions by encouraging reflexivity. But I think there is also the complication, and I've been discussing this with Amy Shuman, about celebrating, if you become too celebratory of a culture, or if you become too much of an advocate it is almost as if your academic standing becomes tenuous, I'm not quite sure how to articulate this

KD If you get too involved with your subjects then your academic subjectivity is compromised?

OC Yeah, right, but when you are working with disempowered groups, you almost find yourself doing that

AB Has Amy [Shuman] given you the strategic romanticization idea yet?

OC She says we're going to talk about this (laughs)

AB That is I think the most useful thing that Amy [Shuman] has ever come up with, and Amy's been full of good ideas

OC Yeah, she has

AB Strategic romanticization is this idea that it's a very, it allows us to do both. It's this nifty little rhetorical trick she came up with, she gave it a theory-like name, of course to make sure the academic people realize it, but it is a means of, pretty much a stance that acknowledges that folklorists require a certain level of romanticization in order to do their jobs, for the most part, for the majority of us. There are some of us who do critical folklore, specifically going after harmful, or what we see as negative elements, negative uses of folklore like the entirety of legend scholarship seems to be attacking folly more than anything else. But like folk medicine, I mean the vast majority of folklore work has at least some of that element of we want to protect folk knowledge, it is worth protecting, we want to continue it going, and it's a strategy that pretty much puts this celebration, well, celebration may be a little strong from that perspective, but it is still that, ultimately, it's the idea that there is something to be protected that must be there and openly acknowledging that while at the same time saying well this is still a theoretical stance, let's also bear in mind that this something we need to do to do our work and beyond that it allows us to do both. By looking at what we really do in doing the work as in we are still claiming this is good, we have to protect it, but at the same time saying we can study it as academics, again it's the nice little combination of both, it's really brilliant, and it's not even that, and the brilliance is it's simplicity, it's just a word

SB yeah

AB or just a phrase, and it can be applied in a wide variety of ways, it's not even a theoretical, it's not a theory really, it's just a phrase that we can use to kind of situate ourselves. Amy and Nan Johnson did a rhetoric of ethnography class that was all about trying to articulate this idea of how does the ethnographer balance the rhetoric of advocacy with the rhetoric of understanding and critique, and that idea was something Amy was working on about that time, so again it's not a specific, it's not anything we

can say that had specific tenets or anything like that, but again it's a convenient way of thinking about the project...

SB Another thing I want to talk about is that one of the big issues that kept coming up at the conference was how the field of folklore in decline, in danger, all these programs are falling apart...I thought that we could talk about that, coming from OSU, a program that doesn't necessarily have the acknowledgement of other programs even though there are a lot of folklore faculty and students here, and also just given the fact that most of the folklore students do not come here specifically to study folklore, they kind of fall into it, like Kevin, Olivia, Connie, Al

NY I came here specifically as a folklorist

SB I did, too, actually, but how do you guys feel about that whole discussion going on about the danger the field is in, and how can we address that issue?

AB The folklore in decline narrative had been going on since they were trying to get it established as a profession to begin with, ultimately, and the bad part about the "let's save folklore" movement...is it's always done at the expense of public folklore and lay folklorists...but that heavy emphasis that we need to be serious, that we need to be serious like academics, we need THEORY, and not just little useful theory, we need big theory that'll make us feel big and strong and comparable with more established departments because that's where the power is, in theory, and that's, first of all, that comes at the expense of public folklorists, and who are already a stigmatized group in the academy, they are actually better known outside than the academic folks are, but that's the fine irony of folklore studies, but on top of that, the heavy professionalization, and I'm thinking of Alan Dundes' plenary address here, when he specifically made a statement about all those applications they get in his program from those people who have been readings Joseph Campbell and how he just tosses them away. OK, so the only people you admit to your program are people who are reading you? Or people who are reading other academic folklorists despite the fact that there are fewer academic journals now than there have been in the past and that most schools don't get them? It seems to me that the trick there would be to take the Campbell readers and turn them toward folklore

KD That's absolutely a good point

AB And he's got the tools to do it. That's what is so frustrating about it. His critique of Campbell is good. There is nothing I saw wrong with it. But it destroys, it does not build up. All the classic, successful debunking movements, have always been about replacing what you destroy with something better and the folklore, with some of the older folklorists, it is our perception or nothing, without realizing that our perception as academic folklorists, first of all is not nearly as strong as it used to be

NY Its getting outdated

AB Its really outdated, and folklore is supposed to be about learning about other people in the first place, so there is not really an academic core of knowledge to really draw on because we took it from everybody in the first place. I mean, again talk about lost knowledge...that's one of the big things that Dundes talked about, about lost knowledge, that folklorists for example did not know that "folkloristics" was an old term, now that's nitpicking in comparison with the willful forgetting that our knowledge is borrowed, and that ties into don't be bullied by your informants stance, and that goes against everything I've learned here at OSU, plain and simple

CD ...I didn't feel like he even supported that idea, being bullied by your informants, it was more like him talking about being critiqued and not appreciating it. It really had nothing to do with informants, I thought, when he actually expanded on it. And except for his critique of the person who destroyed their data

...

CD Oh, about grand theory. You are saying this maybe, Al, but I'm just thinking another way and I was talking to Katie Borland in the airport and she was saying the thing is, folklore is made up of small theory, of small useful, feminist theory is meant to break down grand theory, the whole idea of grand theory doesn't work for us, we don't want it, so why create something that is not useful when we have been working on creating things that break it down and are better, like feminist theory or postcolonial or other types of approaches, like performance

AB And what gets me is that we are still able to talk to each other, see, what Dundes seemed to be attacking was this older idea about folklore...he specifically was talking about the butterfly collector, that folklorists just do their little bit of work and they just collect it and they just put it on display, and that was what was happening way, way back

when, that's what some collectors do now, but they are not the ones who are generally talking at AFS. Academic folklorists are pretty aware of at least some of the theories we use to talk to each other and we don't have a problem seeing connections in other people's works and trying to create them and that's what theory is really supposed to be about

CD right

AB If we talk about the old emic/etic, or the native categories versus analytical categories, the entire point of having the analytic categories is for having communication among scholars and to allow comparative work, and as long as we preserve that we don't need to add more theory. If we get to the point where we are losing that common language, where we really start becoming butterfly collectors, then we need theory, and there always need to be that idea of communication, and also the ease of categorization, just for the benefits of pure scholarly work or just classification and presentation to an audience in the case of those who write books and present at conferences and that sort of thing, but I just, again the theory thing is important, and he was essentially right, but I think his picture of the status of the field is skewed at this point. It's a problem that is not really happening

NY But I think it's the fault of the people of his generation for not fighting for the programs to survive

...

NY You have programs that are shrinking rapidly, the program at Penn, which was the program is now really disintegrating and you can blame it partly on politics and how people don't take folklore more seriously but I think that this is an indication of how folklorists perhaps in the past have really sequestered themselves and not have built the kind of connections that they really need in order to survive, and I think that our generation, we can do both. We can be academic and we can also be public folklorists and try to find that bridge and build up our own programs

CD I really agree, I think that... That's what I am interested in, that's why I am at the university, it is to try to make those connections. I think partnering with public folklorists and writing grants together where the university gets part of it and the Smithsonian gets part of it, or the Global Gallery gets part of it, Amy and I have talked about that, and there is no reason why we shouldn't be making those connections and gaining strength and clout through that. I think that's great

KD It does seem like that is the best kind of global strategy for folklore to move forward. What I wonder about was Dundes' push for grand theory to elevate the status of folklore. I am pretty sure it is just to elevate the status academically...so I what I wonder is, rather than saying that folklore needs to step up and take on these grand unifying theories, which in itself isn't necessarily a bad move, I think there needs to be a partnership between the lay-folklorists, the public folklore that is actually happening in the world, and the interpretive theory that Dundes was talking about, but rather than putting excessive emphasis on the theory, to perhaps tear down the premise of more established and recognized disciplines and their theories, and point out that they really don't have a lot to do with the real world anymore and that folklore and that folklore does deserve a higher spot because it does do something somewhat practical, to see that there are a lot of people interested in public folklore. At our last meeting, I mentioned some of my interests in surfing folklore and I have always been afraid of approaching a professor about doing a project on it because I didn't think that it was serious enough and then I thought, well, that is what folklore is. I shouldn't be afraid to do that.

SB There were some panels at AFS, like the one on Folklore and Social Change, that are bringing these two elements together, but I guess it just needs to be more highlighted at the conference instead of just being a part of a few panels

OC Well, it says in the actual AFS position statement that the application of folkloristic research leads to an important part of community service, and I think this is something that is crucial, that we need to highlight more, because you have to get the community involved, and I think another important thing they brought up was the call to look beyond evaluating everything based on a text you produce, so for tenure positions not just how you publish, but accepting other forms such a public performance and multimedia ...

SB But how do you think AFS can highlight these issues, because obviously it is something that is recognized as important. It's in the mission statement, the ideas are there. How can we give it more attention at the conference itself?

OC There were some panels on social change and there were documentaries and individual presentations

NY I'm just thinking...It's up to us now. We are the new generation. We need to reconfigure or reshape folklore into something that can survive academically and in terms of public sector and I think folklore is definitely becoming visible for political and social change because that's how I came into folklore, coming from an organizing background, and I was doing organizing but I felt the techniques they were teaching me to use had some validity, but I also felt it was kind of outdated. I was doing union organizing and they were using techniques from the 1950s that I didn't think worked today, and people felt really disenfranchised and cynical because promises were made and they weren't kept. So I felt like, well, how can I make politics more relevant and accessible to the general public who want to work, take care of their family, and live their lives, and I thought, well, maybe if I go to folklore, that's something that everybody can identify with, everyone can examine where their histories are and their belief systems in folklore and make their connections to politics because that's how your belief systems are shaped, by what's around you, and I think that's political as well. And that's how I came into folklore, hoping for more training in that. And it has helped me, in helping me to articulate my ideas and learn to connect it to the big picture, and I want to take those tools and use them to make those connections for political organizing and I think that is where, my impression is that most people are interested in going in that direction using folklore to actually do something very active with that.

CD I keep trying to visualize what the conference would look like, or what it would feel like, how it would feel different if we were making these connections better, and I can picture the hotel set up different, for starters. Not having the rows of chairs with the speaker at the front. I liked yours (Olivia), where everybody was down in a circle. Maybe also an acknowledgement of who the public folklorists are and what they do as well as the academics. Even physically setting it up differently would make a difference.

SB There is an acknowledgement of public folklorists, especially at AFS, but I think there needs to be more to minimize the distinction between the two. Perhaps there could even be some kind of award or official presentation for most effectively bringing the two together... Regardless, we are going to be the ones who are able to move the field in new directions