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The Folklore Muse

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The Folklorist's Endeavor: An Introduction

Folklorists perform signal service to American culture, although seldom are they celebrated for doing so. Finding, recording, and presenting traditions that might otherwise remain known only to a subculture or a small region; making verbal art less ephemeral in the historical and social record; trying to understand the vernacular contexts of the nation; bringing to wider awareness the arts and expressions that are self-made and community-made by those who are not our aesthetic and intellectual elites: these undertakings might be called the folklorist's endeavor.

This endeavor requires discovery—of communities and individuals who have created and preserved the traditional songs or stories or rituals or customs that may be little known to or comprehended by a larger world. To establish understandings and to make better known their discoveries, folklorists communicate with that larger world through lectures, documentary films, broadcasts, and public presentations and exhibitions, but—historically at least—particularly through writing and publishing, concentrating on both books for a popular audience and specialized journal articles for fellow scholars. Folklorists' writing may be diverse, but mostly it has been descriptive and analytical, focused on presenting the creativity of others—transcriptions of songs and stories, descriptions of folk performers, delineations of folk heroes and events—or has dissected the meanings of vernacular forms. It is prose which, at times, has been scholarly or claimed as scientific; it certainly has been ethnographic and explanatory.

This book presents folklorists' writing of quite a different kind: not ethnographies and analyses, but poetry, fiction, memoirs, and informal essays—their "other reflections."

In recent years, folklorists, along with others in the social sciences, have moved toward new modes of discourse. That folklorists have sometimes been talented and creatively inclined performers may have helped to stimulate this trend. In general, social scientists increasingly have become reflexive and self-reflective—more aware of the subjectivity inherent in their work and of how much they insert themselves into their ethnography and their socio-cultural analyses. In their professional writing they have been more willing in recent days to speak of the "I," their personal involvement with those they study, and the impacts their involvements have had. Such awareness inevitably has led to more creative and informal kinds of writing and certainly has been a factor in leading to poetry and fiction as writing that can express ideas about people and cultures encountered in the course of study.

In folkloristics, as in other fields,¹ this is by no means a recent development. In the 1930s, Texas icon J. Frank Dobie chafed at the bounds of scholarly writing on folklore and sought to publish writing on the subject that was more literary. More brilliantly, his contemporary, Zora Neale Hurston, pressed by the demands of trade publishing, created in *Mules and Men* a novelistic framework within which she could present her research into folk narrative and folk religion and belief.² But despite such illustrious landmarks as Hurston's work, serious folklorists resisted until recently modes of writing beyond the objectively scholarly, although there have been a few notable exceptions, such as Henry Glassie's books stemming from his Irish fieldwork. A special issue of the *Journal of American Folklore* devoted to "creative ethnography" and "autoethnographic writing" was an excellent collection of more personal forms of writing about folklore that appeared only in 2005.³

The writing in *The Folklore Muse* is, in some ways, something new. Of course folklorists can pen fiction or poetry that has nothing to do with folklore or the ethnographic, but the authors represented in this volume were asked to contribute work—poetry, fiction, creative nonfiction—specifically related to their being folklorists. This writing speaks of many things: people, places, families, past realities, love, growing up, quests and dead-ends, death and resurrection. However, it does, in varying ways—sometimes more, sometimes less directly—engage with the folklorist's endeavor. This work is not ethnography, "creative" or otherwise, but—whatever else they may be—these stories, poems, and other writings are indeed reflections on folklore and on folklorists, the cultures they study, and the matters that concern them.

Sometimes the writing in this book speaks about folklorists themselves, how people happen to become folklorists, and how folklorists think and do their work. Essays by Steve Zeitlin and Daniel Peretti muse on connections between writing and their work in folklore; in his poems, such as "Julia" and "Margaret," Zeitlin writes of folklorists and the "kindred spirits" who also do ethnographic work, and in "Madhulika" and "The Quilters" of his encounters with folk artists in the course of his work as a public-sector folklorist. "I have long realized," he writes, "that we are not so much studying the folks we interview and celebrate as collaborating with them." Quite a number of the poems, essays, and stories here speak of the fieldwork experience, of the most basic thing folklorists do: go out and encounter the people who tell them about their cultural lives, their memories, their lore. Holly Everett's essay "One of My Mothers," for example, may deal with realizations about her own family relationships but interwoven with her fieldwork on roadside death memorials. Although Teresa Bergen's main character in her novel *Bigfoot Stole My Husband* is not an ethnographer, the first chapter, in which her narrator moves into a group of Bigfoot enthusiasts, recounts an experience very much like that of a folklorist looking at a folk group. Bergen herself researched the subculture of those who search for Bigfoot, the "sasquatch" of Northwest folklore and rumor, for her novel. Jens Lund remembers a singular fieldwork encounter in the Midwest, while several of Margaret Yocom's poems comment on the physical landscape of

the region where much of her fieldwork takes place. Cindy Levee takes us around a Southern town with one of her informants; Ted Olson into the countryside of his work.

Of course, folklorists, because of their training and interests, bring particular perspectives to the observation of life. Leslie Prosterman's three poems observe custom and ritual in a cultural group not always known for their folkways, yet she speaks of them as presenting an "ethnography of poetry readings," suggesting that folklorists are always observing (and sometimes participating in) cultural performances in certain ways. Jeannie Banks Thomas sees her poems "Woman, 41 (Motif GYN041)" and "Instructions for Installing Blinds" as stemming from her "ethnographic impulse" and her folklorist's interest in everyday realities. Libby Tucker's accounts of her treatment for cancer and the events surrounding it are full of a folklorist's perspectives and ways of referencing the world.

The writing here not only tells us about how folklorists think and have developed and dealt with their lives; it also extends the folklorist's endeavor. Though not ethnography, it is another way of engaging and explaining the folk culture that folklorists encounter and try to share their knowledge of. Jens Lund introduces us to a real community and gives us some of its ethnographic detail. Holly Everett is writing about both her fieldwork and American attitudes toward death. Kirin Narayan in her memoir and Steve Zeitlin in several of his poems address the issue of the importance of oral storytelling. Teresa Bergen's "Haints," though a powerful story about love and tense relationships, lays out conflicting social attitudes toward traditional belief systems. Margaret Yocom's "Eating Alone" shows how traditional foods mark cultural differences and barriers as well as personal ones. Norma Cantú is concerned with her protagonist's personal development but against particular cultural backgrounds. Jeff Todd Titon's story "Percy" comments on how what is authentic in folk art may challenge common conceptions while it raises questions about folk and non-folk aesthetics and the consuming of traditional arts. The role of visitors from outside and of tourism in the perception of folklore, with which the story deals, is something Jeannie Banks Thomas also touches on in her poem "Salem, Massachusetts, Playground at Gallows Hill," wherein the oblique reference to the gallows evokes memories of the famous witchcraft executions that strangely enough have led to a modern tourist economy.

Other writers here examine or play with or muse upon folklore genres (though the examination or the musing may not be the main point). In my own poem "Ballad Girls" I lay out some of the characteristics of the "murdered girl ballad," posing questions about the meaning of this type of narrative song. Neil Grobman works from folktale motifs in his fiction. Edward Hirsch brings the work song genre into new contexts, and Susan Stewart reminds us of the joys of children's games. In recent years, folklorists have been particularly oriented to performance-centered approaches; several contributions—by John Burrison, Matt Clark, Leslie Prosterman, Danusha Goska, and others—present fictionally realized performances or speak of performance in other ways. Although folklorists are hardly

alone in being interested in the nature of storytelling, they are inevitably interested in the narrative process, and they examine it in their ethnographic and theoretical writings, and in their creative work as well. "Ballad Girls" is about a narrative pattern, and Mary Magoulick's poem "A Cosmology of Women" came out of a course she taught on the nature of story and in particular what stories reveal about human relationships to the natural world. In addition to Magoulick's, other poems, like those by Carrie Hertz and Paul Jordan-Smith, grapple with those ur-stories, myths, and classical legends. Matt Clark's short story is indeed about how stories are constructed, his literary narrative taking shape as a storyteller is supposedly weaving his oral narrative. Clark even provides a poet and academic as a character who comments on the processes of myth and legend creation. Several of Zeitlin's poems are concerned with stories and how stories function and what they mean.

That several sections of the book deal with particular folk genres ("Legend and Myth," "Rituals and Customs") suggests that folklorists' interests in types of folklore can spill over from their scholarly to their creative imaginations.

Additionally, a number of the pieces in this book speak of families—in several cases, a folklorist's own—suggesting the closeness of personal and professional lives. Everett deals specifically with the role her family members played in her fieldwork, but other folklorists use creative work to explore their families, particularly in relation to folklore. The birthday ritual William Bernard McCarthy lovingly describes in "The Birthday Horse" draws from his own family's narrative lore. Elaine Lawless's compelling account of family and personal history ties that history to her professional work with battered women's personal narratives. Laurel Horton's "Grandma Effie and the Heirloom" was written after a conversation Horton had with her paternal grandmother about handing down a family quilt.

Steve Zeitlin proposed the creation of the Family Folklore project at the Smithsonian's Festival of American Folklife, and he directed that program from 1974 to 1976, so it's no surprise that several of his poems touch on family folklore and families, his own as well as others. In "My Great-Great Half-Uncle Horace's Bone-Handled Jackknife," Jo Radner alludes to family history, though history she discovered through an old newspaper clipping while emptying out a family house. Kirin Narayan's memoir, though it focuses on a family friend, the photographer and surrealist painter Stella Snead, is very much a memoir of family, yet one of its important insights is how folklorists become folklorists. And as Joanne Mulcahy remembers her mother and sketches out her discoveries about women's use of language, we get a mini-autobiography of her own progress toward becoming a folklorist.

Of course, folklorists long have been interested in how writers "use" folklore in their literary productions, and certainly most of the authors in this volume "use" folklore for some sort of literary effect or purpose. Do folklorists engaged in creative writing use lore differently than non-folklorist literary artists? One thinks that perhaps only someone like Danusha Goska, a folklorist who studied Asian shadow-puppet folk theater with a former *dalang* (puppeteer), would have thought

to re-frame the Ramayana stories as social satire in modern, feminist context while retaining the idea of a shadow-puppet performance. Other authors of creative non-fiction have written of their experience with cancer, but Libby Tucker's identity as a folklorist is so bound up in her own account that it would seem impossible to separate her folklorist self from the experience of encountering a dangerous disease. On the other hand, couldn't any fiction writer sensitive to local culture have drawn on local folklore as Matt Clark did on the tales and legends of the Texas Big Bend region? (Clark, more fiction writer than folklorist, particularly drew on the lore passed on to him by the "boatmen" who guide tourists on the rough waters of the Rio Grande.) Neil Grobman, in his fantasy novel *Lost in Redskirt Forest*, sought to "weave into the novel as many sacred stories, myths, legends, folktales, oral narratives as well as puns, riddles, acronyms, anagrams, jokes, games and word games as possible. Whether genuine folklore or folklore-like, the intention was," he goes on, "to simulate folkloric performance situations." As a folklorist, Grobman simply knows a lot of folklore, but many other fantasy writers have been caught up in and have used folk materials too; the genre is known for that.

This question as to whether folklorist writers who "use" folklore will do so differently from other writers is a legitimate one but surely is too complex to adequately answer here. It is, however, a question that I hope this book will stimulate discussion of, as well as the new ways in which folklorists can approach their endeavor. Steve Zeitlin notes that his "articles and books have encompassed ethnographic observations and set down the stories" he collected, whereas his "poems became a way to express my love for the people I was meeting, and a more personal set of meanings." Though the ethnographic and the creative are quite different approaches with somewhat different uses, the gulf between them does not necessarily loom large. Jeannie Banks Thomas says, "poems sometimes more quickly and effectively capture the *feeling* of the experience than do my field notes." Jo Radner argues that folklorists' fieldwork and research have their roots in personal issues that find expression in creative pieces. Joanne Mulcahy suggests that in setting out "a shared passion for the vernacular," personal writing can help to move beyond the academic/public sector split that has sometimes been a problem in folklore studies.⁴ The fiction, poetry, and other personal writing in this book, then, function as multivalent pieces. They pull together a range of feelings and observations on life and offer literary approaches to human experience. Being by folklorists, they stem from or focus on particular cultural interests and offer personal, less formal insights into folk tradition, while they bring new perspectives and a new excitement to our comprehension of that tradition.