Martha Warren Beckwith and the Rise of Academic Authority

If the "folklorist" was to be looked to as the expert and adviser on America's traditions, then the folklorist label needed professional recognition in a society that increasingly valued institutional authority. While folklore as a field commenting on American culture had made substantial headway in museums and some notable Ivy League universities, its supporters did not necessarily identify themselves as folklorists. Franz Boas at Columbia, for many years editor of the *Journal of American Folklore*, called himself an anthropologist with an interest in the subject of folklore. The legendary Harvard professor George Lyman Kittredge billed himself a literary scholar who pursued ballad and belief in folklore. When Stewart Culin, president and curator of the American Folklore Society, had his portrait painted by the famed artist Thomas Eakins, he captioned it "The Archaeologist." Even British leading light Edwin Sidney Hartland, who boldly declared the study of folklore as having special issues that set it apart as "the science of tradition," admitted folklore as a "portion of Anthropology," or "the science of man" (Hartland [1899] 1968, 231).

One sign of the rise of the folklorist as a discrete academic type interpreting traditions for modernizing society is the first chair of folklore in the United States. It was held by Martha Warren Beckwith (1871–1959) and her story deserves attention for portending the growth of a publicly recognized academic discipline out of the subject of tradition. Her vision of an American cultural field that was ethnically complex, contemporary, and borderless offered a major counter to historical and literary uses of folklore and issued a social agenda that confirmed the exceptional identity of the folklorist. She conceived folklore as an umbrella term for many forms of traditional practice worthy of focused study such as dance, music, narrative, art, and belief.
Beckwith may at first seem an unlikely candidate for breaking new ground. She did not fit the profile of the young, dashing firebrand, often given in academic hero stories, when she started her cause. Maybe that explains why she has often been overlooked as a founding mother of academic folklore and folklife scholarship. Advanced in years and associated with Victorian propriety when she proposed a foundation for folklore studies, she perceived the relation of tradition with the understanding, even the support, of modernity. Shortly before she served as president of the American Folklore Society, she produced a standard guide to American folklore methodology and had a grand vision for a widening scope and potential of folklore to serve the public interest in social reform. Her writing produced six books, twelve monographs, and over fifty essays and reviews. Her publications mainly reported field research among Native Hawaiians, Jamaican Blacks, and Native Americans in the West, but she also collected among peoples as far-flung as Portuguese Indians, Dutch Americans in New York State, and Vassar College women. More dissatisfied as her career developed with the scattered analysis of surviving tales and songs, she prophesized an intellectual movement toward conceptualizing tradition belonging to and emerging from social groupings. She encouraged use of folklife terminology and proposed mapping America's ethnic-regional folk cultures in their totality.

In 1920, when she took her chair in folklore at Vassar College, she blazed a path of her own. She took the bold move of declaring herself in academe neither anthropologist nor literary scholar, but rather a professional folklorist. Beginning her career studying folk dance, she went on to cover a wide spectrum of folk arts, especially narrative genres such as myth, legend, and tale, and she made significant contributions to the study of beliefs, customs, festivals, games, songs, riddles, proverbs, religion, and folklife generally. But it was not the material she studied as much as her insistence on the ethnic complexity of American culture that set her apart. Folklore was her hard evidence of ethnic cross-fertilization in a diverse American society. Her devotion to work among many ethnic influences bore out her cause. And she could appear mighty feisty when exclaiming the use of her studies for social reform. As much as she established a university foothold for folklore studies, she did not restrict her work to the ivory tower. She went out on the festival stage and inside the museum laboratory to spread the mission of folklore studies. Her teaching and advising encouraged the professional folklore research of many young scholars, particularly women, including notables such as Dorothy D. Lee, Katharine Luomala, Elisabeth Greenleaf, Laura Green, Constance Varney Ring, Margaret Treadwell, Mary Pukui, Elaine Lambert Lewis, and Helen H. Roberts.

Beckwith's saga offers insight into the emergence of American folklore studies and women's roles within it, and the broadening of its subject to examine the function of tradition in everyday life. Her story also takes folklore from New York to California and into the Pacific, reflecting the expansion of transnational views of
American culture. To invite an interpretation of Beckwith’s vision and her achievements, I will tell her story with special consideration to the circumstances that led to the formation of her chair in folklore and her activities while at Vassar.

Martha Warren Beckwith was born on January 19, 1871, in Wellesley Hills, Massachusetts, west of Boston, to schoolteacher parents George Ely and Harriet Winslow (Goodale) Beckwith. Harriet’s mother was the great niece of a pioneer missionary to Hawaii, and Harriet was raised in the mission home at Kailua. George also had been on the islands as a teacher and met Harriet there in 1861. Two years after their meeting, Harriet and George were married. In 1867 the family moved to California, and a few years later to Massachusetts. Three years after Martha’s birth, the Beckwiths returned to Hawaii. In addition to teaching at Royal School and Punahou College, Martha’s father developed the Haiku Sugar Plantation on Maui that was eventually managed by the large shipping company of Alexander and Baldwin. While on Maui, Martha befriended Anne M. Alexander, who had family ties to the company. As youths, they were among the few English-speaking white children at Haiku, and thus learned the Hawaiian language and participated in many native festivals and customs.

Martha Beckwith eloquently described her interest in native folklore “grown out of a childhood and youth spent within sound of the hula drum at the foot of the domelike House of the Sun on the windy island of Maui. There, wandering along its rocky coast and sandy beaches, exploring its windward gorges, riding above the cliffs by moonlight when the surf was high or into the deep forests at midday, we were aware always of a life just out of reach of us late comers but lived intensely by the kindly, generous race who had chanced so many centuries ago upon its shores” (Beckwith 1970, xxxi). As there was no school for white children on the island, Martha’s parents educated her and her sister Mary at home and insisted on their special attention to language and botany. As one chronicler recalled, “Mr. Beckwith often took the girls on long trips. Together they climbed Haiku Hill, and rode to the top of Piilolo, and into the woods to collect land shells and rare ferns. Mr. Beckwith loved nature, with ardor and enthusiasm that were contagious. His sense of humor was keen, enlivening even the rudiments of Latin grammar.” While Martha’s father explored the island with his children and drilled them on French and Latin, her mother, “an expert teacher and a wise counselor,” instilled in the girls a love of folk narrative. Fleming recalls that Martha’s mother was a gifted storyteller: “Please Mother, tell us a story’ was the prelude to many hours of entertainment.”

Martha returned to Massachusetts for her higher education at Mount Holyoke College, a pioneering liberal arts college for women and her mother’s alma mater. Martha graduated with a B.S. degree in 1893, having taken a “Scientific Course” of study. This track included study in French, German, art, rhetoric, and Bible, in addition to studies in psychology, geometry, trigonometry, botany, zoology, astronomy, and physics. Reminiscing in 1928 on her college days, Beckwith wrote,
Martha Beckwith, c. 1900. (Archives, Mt. Holyoke College Library)
"I know now that it was folk-lore I sought after when I chased butterflies for Miss Clapp, dried flowers for Miss Hooker, and attended to Oriental Literature under that pretty woman the magic of whose interests sent me far afield to India to stand on the famous old battle-field of the Bharata." Reflecting back, Beckwith connected this quest for human origins and its scientific discipline to her later endeavors in folklore and folklife. In her words,

A museum record of intangible things, that is the business of the folklorist to provide... Our first dictum then of scientific method is the purely detached and objective gathering of the actual facts about folk thought, either direct from the field of folk life today, or from literary records (as Homer, Herodotus, or the Vedas) where folk ideas may be distinguished from their literary form. These facts furnish the specimens on our museum shelves, and for their sorting and arrangement and the clarifying of their relations to each other and to the whole field of kindred ideas the scientific folklorist is responsible. (Beckwith 1928a, 281, 278)

After graduating from Mt. Holyoke, Beckwith returned to Hawaii to teach in Honolulu elementary schools, but came back to the mainland in 1896 to take courses in English and anthropology at the University of Chicago. The following year she accepted an appointment as instructor of English at Elmira College in New York State. Her father died in 1898, and the following year, looking to advance her linguistic knowledge, Martha pursued language study in Europe. She studied Old English at Cambridge and French and German at the University of Halle an der Saale. Returning to the United States, she obtained an instructorship of English, this time at Mt. Holyoke College. The folk customs and literature she adored, particularly from Hawaii, seemed to have little place in the English curriculum at the time, however, and she searched for a disciplinary home that would be hospitable to her folk cultural interests. She thought she found it in the blossoming study of anthropology, and in 1905 went to Columbia University in New York City to work toward the master's degree, which she received in 1906. Under Franz Boas's direction, Beckwith completed her thesis on the traditional dances of the Moqui and Kwakiutl Indians, and he helped arrange to have it published (Beckwith 1907).

In addition to being informed by anthropologists with interests in folklore and folk arts, Beckwith also came under the influence of William Witherle Lawrence, a scholarly dynamo who excitedly lectured on relations between folklore and literature, particularly for English epics during the medieval period. Lawrence looked to folklore to reveal the sociocultural influences on literature, and published studies of Chaucer and Shakespeare in which he brassily pointed out the common folklore sources of so-called "original" or "great" works. Beckwith quoted him extensively in her Folklore in America (1931) for developing the important "social value" thesis that "the point of view of the audience for which the artist writes determines the form which his narrative takes, and that when a popular tale is the source, the story
will be shaped, not after the current conception of reality and good taste, but after the traditional form familiar to his hearers” (Beckwith 1931b, 63–64).

Lawrence had a kindred spirit in Laura Johnson Wylie, who had published *Social Studies in English Literature* and chaired the English department at Vassar (Wylie 1916; Morris 1934). With Lawrence’s recommendation, in 1909 Beckwith joined the faculty at Vassar, a liberal arts college for women, as instructor of English. Beckwith taught courses on the “Development of English Literature from Beowulf to Johnson” and “Exposition.” Also on the small English faculty at the time was Constance Rourke, who later gained fame for her view of national folklore, although at odds with Beckwith’s anthropological views of cultural diversity in America (Rourke 1942, 1959; Beckwith 1931c, 1943). The claims of America to a native folklore justifying its national character was a hot topic of debate at Vassar, and the two professors were not shy about grabbing the podium to express their views.

Beckwith firmly held to a heterogeneous view of America formed of many ethnic-regional communities adapting to one another, while the irascible Constance Rourke insisted on a master narrative arising from an American historical experience (Beckwith 1931b, 64). While allowing that the “whole story of pioneer colonization is one of extraordinary importance for our understanding of American folklore, as of American literature itself, so far as it is a native product,” Beckwith warned of overstating “national aspirations” of “the high-powered mechanical culture” and passing over existing communities constituting folk cultures (Beckwith 1931b, 55). She agreed that American literature could reflect folk sources but should not be confused as the real stuff of folklore. Beckwith thought that Rourke’s argument for a national tradition was more applicable to “European cultures with their long history of folk imagination” but granted that “even here in America a native folklore is discoverable whose pattern dominated the imaginative conceptions and the style of American writers” (Beckwith 1931b, 64; emphasis added). With her multilingual background and reading in Hawaiian and German writing as part of the United States experience, Beckwith additionally worried that Rourke had privileged the English tradition in conceiving an evolving American culture naturally moving toward unity.

In 1913, Beckwith returned to her beloved Hawaiian Islands and stayed until 1915 when she took another appointment in English at Smith College. During this stay, she began to intensively collect the native folklore and mythology of Hawaii. Hawaii wielded a great influence on Beckwith’s thinking about American cultural formation. She saw in her experience there a complex process of ethnic displacement, fusion in some cases, separation in others, and often adaptation to changing conditions. As she reflected in *Folklore in America* (1931), “Our new primitive race, the Hawaiian, has shared American culture now for almost a hundred years and although it has lost much that was native and primitive in its highly developed prehistoric art, there are signs that *living forces are still at work* shaping the composite race cultures, native and foreign, into fresh forms of fantasy” (Beckwith
1931b, 55; emphasis added). She first appeared in the pages of the *Journal of American Folklore* in 1916 with an essay on the Hawaiian Hula dance. She built on the work of Nathaniel Emerson, who took the evolutionary stand of the dance as a tradition that “survived into modern time.” But she called for a view of performance, style, and function in the dance. She speculated that the dance was “like a sign-alphabet, of conventionalized physiological reactions to special emotional suggestions, perhaps to the excitation of rhythmical beats. Added to this, the ready play of metaphor in the Polynesian fancy, stimulated by the desire to aggrandize social rank, has imposed the literary form of the accompanying song, and no doubt modified both gesture and symbolism” (Beckwith 1916, 412).

Also in 1916, Franz Boas’s *Tsimshian Mythology* appeared, and its reliance on folklore to describe the essence of a historical culture propelled Beckwith deeper into Hawaiian mythology. The close study she made of the work is indicated by her eleven-page review in the *Journal of English and Germanic Philology* (1918). Her opening line anticipated her case for the intercourse of anthropology and literature to form a new hybrid of folklore study. She wrote: “Important to students of medieval literature who are interested in comparing their conclusions with the findings of modern ethnologists is this monograph on Tsimshian mythology, in which Dr. Franz Boas establishes certain principles for the diffusion of story material, by observing what actually happens among a distinct group of North American Indian tribes whose mythology has assumed marked individuality” (Beckwith 1918, 460). Rhetorically, she connected the “distinct group” with the “individuality” of its folklore. Folklore, in other words, was a “mirror of culture,” relativized to represent the uniqueness of separate cultural histories. Following this relativist thinking, the search for folklore required fieldwork to find native viewpoints, “going to the myth-makers themselves for their terms of thought” (Beckwith 1918, 465). She became most excited about the process of folklore’s formation and performance suggested by Boas as a direction for the professional folklorist. Emphasizing the professional label, she proclaimed that the work helped “start the folklorist on the right road towards a critical analysis of his particular problem” (Beckwith 1918, 467).

Inspired by *Tsimshian Mythology*, Beckwith completed her anthropology dissertation in 1918 at Columbia University on the Hawaiian romance of Laieikawai, but not without irritating Franz Boas (Beckwith 1919). Beckwith bucked Boas’s purist tendencies to seek out the relic forms of primitive tradition untainted by modern society. She took as her subject a nineteenth-century newspaper serial based on an oral narrative which Haleole, a native Hawaiian writer, reinterpreted in the hope of instilling “old ideals of racial glory” on the islands. Another significant detail of the romance, and a source of Beckwith’s interest in gender roles, was the fact that it centered on the actions of a *heroine*. Boas would have preferred that she continue her work in salvaging the tribal lore and language of Native Americans, and he questioned her preoccupation with modern literary texts. Beckwith was less interested
in the “pure” forms of untainted tradition that Boas sought than the process of cultural production, in her words, “the single composition of a Polynesian mind working upon the material of an old legend and eager to create a genuine national literature” (Beckwith 1919, 294). She sought to sift the creation of a Hawaiian epic from its complex Polynesian sources “a common stock of tradition.” “A close comparative study of the tales from each group should reveal local characteristics,” she wrote, “but for our purpose the Polynesian race is one, and its common stock of tradition, which at the dispersal and during the subsequent periods of migration was carried as common treasure-trove of the imagination as far as New Zealand on the south and Hawaii on the north, and from the western Figi to the Marquesas on the east, repeats the same adventures among similar surroundings and colored by the same interests and desires” (Beckwith 1919, 297). More than a study of a literary text, her dissertation used fieldwork to analyze a creative process of cultural formation set against the background of ethnic migration and localization.

Although working in anthropology, Beckwith had already begun making a break toward folklore by studying literary traditions in contemporary society. As Katharine Luomala pointed out, “At the beginning of this century, when Miss Beckwith was starting out in anthropology, the emphasis was more on recovering or reconstructing the pre-European culture of natives than on what the natives had done with European culture. Alien European influences were weeded out of source materials to reveal the old. Miss Beckwith, it appears, early realized the significance of studying the post-European period in itself, of describing it as it existed, and of valuing it, first and foremost, regardless of what alien influences blended with the old, as still the culture of the natives” (Luomala 1970, xv).

From Boas, Beckwith adopted the idea of folklore as a reflection of culture, and especially the proposal of artistry as a relative concept explored historically within a culture (Beckwith 1918). In The Hawaiian Romance of Laieikawai, Beckwith devoted a section to the story “as a reflection of aristocratic social life.” “In humanizing the gods,” she wrote, “the action presents a lively picture of the ordinary course of Polynesian life.” She went beyond a simple equation, however, by asserting social distinctions, and especially gender roles, particular to the romance form of tradition. She wrote: “Polynesian romance reflects its own social world—a world based upon the fundamental conception of social rank. The family tie and the inherited rights and titles derived from it determine a man’s place in the community” (Beckwith 1919, 308). She in fact identified the priority of women in the social order. Breaking with the line of previous male ethnographers of Hawaiian culture, she argued that “even a successful warrior, to insure his family title, sought a wife from a superior rank. For this reason women held a comparatively important position in the social framework, and this place is reflected in the folk tales” (Beckwith 1919, 309).

The first sentence of Beckwith’s Hawaiian Mythology (1940) amply demonstrated Boas’s influence: “How traditional narrative art develops orally among a nature-worshiping people like the Polynesians can be best illustrated by surveying the whole
body of such art among a single isolated group like the Hawaiian with reference to the historical background reflected in the stories and to similar traditions among allied groups in the South Seas" (1970, 1). But arguably her attention to style and performance inspired by literary study questioned more than Boas did the creative process of folklore forms. In *The Hawaiian Romance of Laieikawai*, she devoted a chapter to “The Art of Composition,” and anticipated later oral-formulaic explanations set forth by Milman Parry of storytellers’ abilities to perform long recitations. She observed: “Counting-out formulae reappear in story-telling in such repetitive series of incidents as those following the action of the five sisters of the unsuccessful wooer in the *Laieikawai* story…. The story-teller, moreover, varies the incident; he does not exactly follow his formula, which, however, it is interesting to note, is more fixed in the evidently old dialogue part of the story than in the explanatory action” (Beckwith 1919, 321). This is probably what she had in mind when she mentioned that her study “claims a kind of classic interest” with connections to European epics.

Beckwith used Boas’s phrase for artistic process, “perfection of form,” to describe Polynesian ideas of beauty, and she viewed them relatively (See Boas [1927] 1955; M. Jones 1980a). She explained that Polynesians attribute beauty to divine influence made visible in nature. She read the intersection of aesthetics and social function in the folktale. She thus cited the examples of

Dreaming of the beauty of Laieikawai, the young chief feels his heart glow with passion for this “red blossom of Puna” as the fiery volcano scorches the wind that fans across its bosom. A divine hero must select a bride of faultless beauty; the heroine chooses her lover for his physical perfections. Now we can hardly fail to see that in all these cases the delight is intensified by the belief that beauty is godlike and betrays divine rank in its possessor. Rank is tested by perfection of face and form. The recognition of beauty thus becomes regulated by express rules of symmetry and surface. Color, too, is admired according to its social value. (Beckwith 1919, 322)

With these observations Beckwith suggested that folklore more than reflects culture, it structures social relations.

In *Hawaiian Mythology*, Beckwith declared the converging influences of anthropology and literature in her folklore study with a dedication to Professors Franz Boas from anthropology and William Witherle Lawrence from literature (Beckwith 1970, xxxii). The convergence resulted, Beckwith began to realize, as a separate study of folklore. Yet until the 1920s no distinct curricula or professorial chairs existed for folklore, although students could study folklore as part of English, anthropology, German, and Spanish (Boggs 1940). Students of Franz Boas such as Alfred Kroeber and Melville Herskovits prominently taught folklore, but shared with Boas the relation of folklore to anthropology as field to discipline (Boas 1938b). Luomala observed that “despite the training the students of Boas got in folklore and the work many of them have done in it, Martha Beckwith was one of the few to become better known as folklorist than anthropologist although she
also contributed to the ethnography of Hawaii, Jamaica, and Dakota Indians. Ethnography and oral narrative art are united in her work; one illuminates the other" (Luomala 1970, xvi). The common thread for Beckwith was the way tradition brought groups and their arts together, and this view deserved special attention and special methods, she argued (Beckwith 1931b, 1-10). Her focus on tradition that bound groups provided an answer to the problem of reconciling the diversity of subjects in folkloristic work (e.g, narrative, belief, art, speech) with the conceptual unity of a discipline (see Oiring 1996b).

Beckwith credited Franz Boas with planting the idea of her teaching folklore “in connection with my college work.” For Boas it was a practical suggestion to accommodate her anthropological training within the English department at Smith. Beckwith had grander ideas for the future of folklore studies as an intellectual pursuit. Meanwhile Beckwith had many conversations with her friend Anne Alexander about their mutual concern for “the fast disappearing customs and tales of the Hawaiian natives,” as well as her uncertainty as a woman setting on a new academic path at the age of forty-eight. In November of 1919, Alexander responded with a proposal to endow a folklore research position, specifically at a women’s college, with the stipulation that Beckwith would hold the position for five years. Alexander insisted on making the gift anonymously. Alexander had scholarly interests and previously had founded the department of paleontology at the University of California at Berkeley. Vassar apparently was the first choice for the folklore position from the beginning of the conversations.

Vassar did not have an anthropology department, and the social work pursuit of many of its graduates appealed to Beckwith’s sense of the way that folklore study in America could be applied. Because of the opportunities afforded her at women’s colleges, she asked to position the folklore foundation at a small women’s institution such as Vassar. More than gratitude was on her mind. She thought that women cooperating in a team approach to field research, under her direction, in that environment, could specially develop folklore as a separate field. Encouraged by Ruth Benedict, probably the school’s most famous folkloristic alumna, Beckwith anticipated that she could be a major force there and could get students to respond to her cause. She envisioned calling upon the loyal extended alumnae network of the school and creating folklore correspondents around the country. C. B. Bourland of the Smith faculty lamented to Henry Noble MacCracken, President of Vassar, that “my first reaction on hearing of it, was regret that Miss Beckwith had not offered the opportunity to Smith College.” Yet Bourland graciously supported Beckwith’s decision to leave Smith to pursue folklore: “Certainly she should be a competent person to direct studies in Folk Lore since she is so whole-heartedly interested in the subject, and has devoted so much time to research in that field.... And if, as I believe, people are most effective and useful when their heart is in their task, Miss Beckwith as a teacher of Folk-Lore ought to be a real addition to your faculty.”
A letter from Elizabeth Hanscom to President MacCracken offers further clues to Beckwith's choice of Vassar. She wrote, "She values Vassar highly and would, I think, be ready to find society and college congenial. I think that she has found the routine of her position at Smith irksome; and I know that she has been disappointed in not having the opportunity to teach folklore, to which she looked forwards." Hanscom commented openly on Beckwith's tendency to march to a different drummer: "She is so marked an individualist that she would probably be happier in a somewhat indefinite position than as a regular member of a department where she might have to share work with others. Throughout her connection at Smith I have felt that she had power that was not brought out; at Vassar it might be exerted, and then you would have a unique addition to your staff."9

Despite Hanscom's portrayal of Beckwith as stubbornly going her own way, letters show faculty members at Vassar shared her interest in folklore, and that, along with the strong women's liberal arts tradition at Vassar, swayed Beckwith. Laura Wylie from English, who had previously influenced the cultural studies of Vassar graduates Ruth Benedict and Constance Rourke, and Grace Waverly from Greek wrote MacCracken to extend their enthusiasm. Indeed, Gertrude Loomis from English taught folklore previously at the University of Illinois and wrote Beckwith, "I have always wished I might begin my education all over again to be a pupil of Dr. Boas. So you are my more fortunate self, and you may be sure that I am interested in your work at Vassar. I gave a course in Folklore at Illinois but I see from your outline that you are presenting the material far more effectively. We shall enjoy talking over our variant ways. My work was more particularly Folklore in literature."10 Boas recognized Loomis's folkloristic interest and commented to Vassar's president that the combined efforts of Loomis and Beckwith "will interest your students in a field that has been altogether too much neglected." For Boas, Beckwith's "strong side lies in the literary aspect of the study of folklore" and he observed that she was particularly "devoted to investigations of folklore."11

While Boas praised Beckwith's literary expertise, her literary mentor W. W. Lawrence drew out her ethnological work for special praise. He thought that in establishing a chair in folklore combining ethnology and literature Vassar would have "the honor of initiating a movement which might well be imitated by other institutions."12 Columbia English professor A. Thorndike added in a letter to the president of Vassar, himself a professor of English and literature, that folklore "is a field in which, I think, we all ought to plan to do much more in the future."13

According to the terms of the fund, a "Research Professorship on the Folklore Foundation shall be established at Vassar College for five years," "the incumbent of this Chair shall have rank not less than that of Associate Professor," and "the work done by the incumbent of this chair shall be divided between research and teaching."14 The chair was reserved for Beckwith, and by agreement she would not teach more than one course in any semester and devote her remaining time to
research, publication, and management of the Folk-Lore Foundation. A brochure published on the foundation baldly stated that "The Folk-Lore Foundation is not established primarily as a teaching post. Its aim is to furnish a center at Vassar College for scientific research in the field of Folk-Lore."

Beckwith balanced her passion for a "scientific" approach to folklore with a recognition of its appreciation as art. "Anyone today will admit the value of folklore to art," she wrote with something of a challenge to the canon of great works. "The drama battens upon it. Since Gauguin and Matisse, especially since the amazing animal paintings of prehistoric man have come to light, carvings of the Eskimo and the elaborate art of alien civilizations like the Japanese, it has been borne in upon us that western civilization has scarcely reached the point where early art left off. Our dance shows nothing so good as the extraordinary muscular flexibility and control of primitive rhythms" (Beckwith 1928a, 277).

With folklore conceived as a new "modern" study out of art and science, literature and anthropology, history and psychology, geography and sociology, Beckwith embraced the Folk-Lore Foundation as an opportunity to establish a disciplinary tradition. As she told the press, "It is the hope of the donor that similar foundations may be established which will add the science of folklore to those of anthropology and ethnology in bringing the whole subject of man's primitive life into the range of the curriculum of modern science." Charles Peabody, secretary of the American Folklore Society, recognized the implication of the post for the scientific pursuit of folklore. He wrote Beckwith to "offer you my congratulations, and at the same time to offer them to ourselves; for many years it has been an unfulfilled wish to see our science recognized in this way." Henry MacCracken, president of Vassar, reported an orally circulating anecdote that exemplifies Beckwith's seriousness in her endeavor:

Sometimes the unexpected self-assertion of women professors came from the same dynamic that makes professors absent-minded—devotion to truth in one's special field. Among my best friends on the faculty was Miss Martha Beckwith, who held at Vassar the chair of Folklore, a rare if not unique position. In her researches she had lived with the Hawaiians of the older stock, Negroes in Jamaica highlands and reservation Indians.

"Come, Miss Monnier," she said one day; "the paper advertises a genuine Hawaiian hula at the theatre. I want you to see it. A car just went by with a big poster, too. Genuine hula, think of it!"

"This is unscholarly," said Miss Beckwith. "I must protest."

"Please, Martha, don't make a scene. What is the use?"

Martha rose and addressed the audience. "In the interest of truth," she said, "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 theatre was in an uproar. "Go ahead, old lady. Speak your mind. Tell us about the hula!" "Sit down!" Miss Martha did not sit down. She told them what the true hula was, until the petrified manager came to life and started off the hula once more.
“Come, Mathilde,” said the scholar; “we will not stay for such an unscholarly performance.” Miss Monnier followed Miss Beckwith’s stately withdrawal while the customers cheered. (Luomala 1970, xxiv–xxv)

The anecdote showed that Beckwith was hardly shy about publicly airing her views as a professorial authority on tradition, and she had more to say about the popular staging of folklore. In a review of the National Folk Festival in the nation’s capital, she bluntly announced, “It is probably impossible to reproduce a pure folk art under such artificial conditions.” Yet she recognized its value for promoting a pluralistic American culture and artistic appreciation of folk tradition. She asserted: “A folk art brought to high perfection by the people to whom it belongs does bring aesthetic delight to the great mass of our American people and hence has a very real function to perform in awakening our interest in and appreciation of the varied strains of folk life which make up our whole American culture. It is by extending perception of those traditional forms which are a part of folk memory among different groups of our people, and by reviving and perfecting them, that we may ... enrich our national art and add to our range of aesthetic enjoyment” (Beckwith 1938, 443). She warned that folklorists as a profession still needed to find their materials “among the folk in their own setting.” But toward the building of a nation, she declared, “Let us amend to perfect a living art upon the old native tradition” (Beckwith 1938, 443; see also Beckwith 1933).

Beckwith came to Vassar in the fall of 1920 as research professor of the Folk-Lore Foundation and associate professor of comparative literature. The first course she taught was “Folk-lore” and it carried the following description in 1920: “The art of oral tradition. A study of folk-tales and other forms of oral art, their origin, distribution, and variations in the type; and of folk thought as reflected in oral tradition.” She also submitted a longer description of the course with special attention to the special theme of individual creativity and group tradition in cultural expression:

The course aims to study folk-stories with a view to determining their origin, their distribution, and variations in the type. The development of literary forms will be considered, and an attempt made to characterize the body of oral tradition belonging to particular areas and to relate it to the whole culture of the group. Well-known European folk themes and typical European folk characters will first be studied in relation to their analogues in the oral tradition of other races and to the customs which may throw light upon the meaning or origin of the story. The question of independent origin or of historical dissemination will give an opportunity for fixing attention upon the geographical distribution of particular themes. The beginnings of such literary forms as the epic, drama, lyric, hymn, romance, as well as of the fable, proverb, riddle, and ballad, are to be traced in oral tradition. The influence is to be tested of symbolism or realism in determining the art form, and of group or individual production. The social value of storytelling is emphasized, and its dependence as an art upon social activities. Finally the
attempt will be made to distinguish in the folk-lore of a group the distinguishing characteristics of that group, and if possible to discover the part which individual initiative plays in the variation from a typical form."

Beckwith tinkered with the description of the course several times in the years she held the chair. In the catalogue copy for 1925–1926, the listing referred to the subject matter of "folk art": "The first semester will be occupied with the consideration of those beliefs which lie at the basis of folk tales and of other forms of oral art.... The second semester will be devoted to the survey of popular literature as it appears in written records of the past and in the folk art of primitive people today. Some attention will be paid to field work." In each version of the course, she stressed folklore as art, its study as science, and in later versions increasingly emphasized collections in the field. Here is how she described the class's activities in 1928:

In the folk-lore study in the tower of the Vassar library, liberally loaned to us by the department of philosophy, we labor our texts from Hawaii, endless notes from the negroes of the British West Indies, Urdu songs from the East Indians of Jamaica, proverbs from Urdu and Marathi of India, texts in Konkani and in Portuguese from New Goa, stories from the Dakota Sioux and Dutch songs from our own Hudson Valley. One student brings a Chinese ghost story collected in Chinatown. Another has Porto Rican connections, another Czech. Ballad songs come from ex-Grenfell workers in Newfoundland and this summer an expedition thither is financed which Mrs. Greenleaf of Middlebury will conduct to gather folk material from that island. (Beckwith 1928a, 280–81)

Beckwith meanwhile sought to strengthen the visibility of folklore at the college. At Vassar, Beckwith resisted the listing of folklore under the heading of Comparative Literature. Although her title as professor of comparative literature was dropped in 1929, Beckwith's courses continued to be listed under Comparative Literature in the college catalogue. Beckwith protested in a memorandum she called "Folklore: A Statement for the Course in Advancement of Learning" (November 24, 1933). She cited the uniqueness of folklore studies and suggested a curriculum of related classes.

The courses listed under Comparative Literature do not constitute correlated subjects making up a major field and hence can not be treated as constituting a department .... The position of folklore in the curriculum of a liberal arts college presents a special problem, due to the fact that there is, except among specialists, the vaguest ideas only as to the relation of folklore to the traditional and well established subjects of a college curriculum, and, second, that in most colleges where folklore is offered as an undergraduate subject, it is directly correlated with and, so to speak, under the patronage of the department with which the specialist offering the course is connected and through which therefore the approach is made to the subject. That is, it is affiliated with one of the literature and
linguistic courses such as English, German, French, or the Classics, or with a course in social science such as Sociology, Anthropology, History, Geography, or Religion. One who attempts therefore to offer any sequential course of study in connection with folklore is at once confronted with an arbitrary division into subjects coordinated under special aspects but which have no necessary sequential bearing upon a subject like folklore. The aim of the course is to relate the imaginative life of the folk to their social culture. It studies the concrete forms which popular expression takes as influenced by custom and belief and by contacts with the outside world, the influence of such forms upon literature on the one hand, upon social culture on the other. It aims to bring the student in touch with modern theory in the field of folklore in the light of older methods of interpretation and 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.

As to the applicability of folklore studies for Vassar graduates, Beckwith wrote the Committee on Vocational Guidance of several opportunities. “There are some teaching posts in this subject for women and the number of such posts will doubtless increase.” She added “art” and the “opportunity for women in museum work,” although ever the scholar wary of the romanticization of folklore, she cautioned that “its emotional value must always depend upon the intelligence with which the material is handled.” Finally, she emphasized that “folklore is of especial value for those who intend to take up social work of any kind, especially among primitive peoples and in foreign countries. It gives a key to the folk mind.”

Beckwith utilized the loyal network of Vassar alumnae for the work of the Folk-Lore Foundation. She published a brochure on the foundation that was circulated to graduates; the brochure asked for details of field work or folklore collections that alumnae may undertake. She also solicited donations of books and funds for the publication of monographs reporting folklore fieldwork. Finally, she urged alumnae to join the American Folklore Society and “to contribute to the support of its Journal, which is edited by the leading Folk-lorists of this country and is the means of communicating results in Folk-lore. A strong Alumnae representation and interest in this Association will add to the influence of the college as a center for research.” The alumnae responded with generous support of the monograph series, called the Publications of the Folk-Lore Foundation of Vassar College. Particularly generous were Jennie Gouldy, Vassar class of 1875, who supported publications on Hawaiian folklore, and Elisabeth Howe (a friend of American Folklore Society founder William Wells Newell), Vassar class of 1882, who underwrote many Folk-Lore Foundation publications and contributed field collections on Polish immigrants to Buffalo.

Before the Vassar publication series in folklore ended, it featured fourteen monographs mostly on Jamaican, Native-American, and Hawaiian folklore. In addition, Beckwith arranged to have leading folklorists lecture at Vassar, and the American Folklore Society met there in 1929 to further reinforce the influence of the college as a center for folklore scholarship.
Martha Warren Beckwith and the Rise of Academic Authority

Folk-Lore Foundation in 1931, she was able to write that "Between 1920 and 1930 interest in folklore has greatly increased in America. Scholars are much more willing to recognize the relation of folklore to art and literature and to the history of culture. In giving a place on its curriculum to this subject therefore the college is working in the same direction as modern educational theory."

After five years of supporting the folklore chair, Alexander agreed to renew her contribution on a year-to-year basis. After three years on this arrangement, Alexander made a commitment to support the chair until Beckwith's retirement. The terms of the chair allowed Beckwith generous amounts of research and writing time in addition to granting regular sabbaticals and leaves. Looking for comparative data to examine folklore, she divided her research during the 1920s and 1930s mainly among three different racial groups: Jamaican blacks, native Hawaiians (of Polynesian descent), and Native Americans in the Dakotas. Concentrating on the influence of culture and history over racial or mental characteristics among these groups, Beckwith furthered the scholarly and political agenda of cultural relativity championed by Franz Boas. Refuting the racial theories of "psychological unity" by nineteenth-century evolutionists, Beckwith in each case study focused on culture contact, geographical and social context, and historical uniqueness rather than genetics or mental development as forces shaping the group's society and its artistic expressions. Although her fieldwork took her far from Poughkeepsie, she did not neglect folk groups close to home. She worked with Mid-Hudson descendants of Dutch settlers, from whom she collected folk songs, and modern Vassar College women, from whom she collected courtship and divination beliefs (Ring et al. 1953; Beckwith 1923).

With the Vassar collection, Beckwith had several goals. She wanted to show that "literate American homes," as she wrote, had an abundance of living folklore that functioned in everyday life. She desired to examine contemporary women's values as a special field of inquiry in addition to the beliefs of ethnic-regional groups that dominated the pages of the Journal of American Folklore and other journals of culture. Instead of dictating the types of folklore she sought, she hoped to get a picture of tradition from the tradition bearers themselves, much as she conceived the idea in her Hawaiian research. She recorded the beliefs that women used most commonly, thus suggesting gender as a significant social category for the production of folklore in America. She asserted women did not have to be "primitive" or ethnic to have a shared folklore. She emphasized that "certain classes of signs" repeatedly reported in folklore journals through collections of body signs, weather, and dreams were "negligible." At Vassar she found an overwhelming majority of material referred to, first, matters of luck and, second, love and marriage. She did not see the good-luck signs as survivals of superstitions, but instead as reflections of the everyday life of the women. She noted in the collection references that "relate to the interest of the group" such as obtaining wealth in careers, riding cars, writing letters, and finding company. She thought the generalized form of the
Following Tradition

Following Tradition

good-luck signs was a tip-off that they lacked supernatural content but were sig-
ificant nonetheless for framing identity at the intersection of femininity and col-
lege life. She categorized them as “a species of play” that “extends to mature folk in
social life.” She underscored the creativity in tradition by pointing to folkloric uses
of “modern innovations” replacing horseshoes and flower petals and invention of
new beliefs that served the purposes of the group. She argued that folklore was a
renewable resource that could be sought among “modern” groups, exemplified by
college women. Arguing for the constant adaptation of tradition as part of moder-
nity, she wrote, “Even when the faith is lost, the form remains, and a fresh stock of
similar forms are fashioned like them, but differing in content and direction
according to the particular tastes and interests of the group by which they are cul-
tivated” (Beckwith 1923, 2). It was a dramatic case at the time for the situational
uses of folklore among small, often temporary groups as part of the diverse
American cultural scene (see Beckwith 1931b, 4–7).

Beckwith traversed the globe to locate traditions that crossed national bound-
aries and to make a case for a discipline of folklore based on that search. She told
Vassar’s president that “during the summer of 1923 I was the guest of a friend to
places of archaeological interest in England, France, and Spain; and during my
sabbatical year, 1926–27, I visited for the first time Italy, Greece, Palestine, Syria,
India and familiarized myself as far as possible with their present folk life and the
literature of their traditional past.” Beckwith’s international experience played a
major role in her guide to the method, and discipline, of folklore studies, which
she published as Folklore in America in 1931. Her global concern for tracing cultur-
al migrations and settlements is evident in her choice of “folklore in America” as
opposed to the “American folklore” preferred by Constance Rourke, and later,
Richard Dorson. Instead of taking a perspective emphasizing the exceptionalism
of the United States, Beckwith wanted to show the many spirited ethnic “strains”
that contributed to cultural formation across the American social landscape. She
called for more consideration of cultural process of adaptation within the
American scene. By way of example, she wrote, “Certainly the negro art which is
coloring our American culture today is not African but Afro-American, as anyone
can distinguish who is familiar with the clearly separate pattern of any other even
English-speaking colony like the Jamaican. We need the emotional response to
other national strains in the process of creating an American cultural life”
(Beckwith 1931b, 64).

Folklore in America was also distinctive because it singled out a scholarly audi-
cence for the establishment of a folkloristic discipline. Anthropologist Melville
Herskovits at Northwestern University wrote Beckwith promising to assign it in
his folklore class (December 19, 1931). “I think it is a much-needed job and I am
sure the students in my Folk Lore class will find it useful when I put it into their
hands,” he wrote. From the literary side of the fence, Benjamin Botkin at the
University of Oklahoma also planned to use it in a new course on folklore he
instituted, and asked Beckwith for suggestions on its content in a letter dated January 12, 1932. “It is a work that needed to be done and you have done it well,” the future author of numerous “treasuries” of American folklore wrote. As late as 1959, Daniel G. Hoffman wrote in the *Journal of American Folklore* that “I have found no theoretical discussion which supersedes Martha Beckwith’s suggestions, made almost thirty years ago, about the nature of those groups in America among whom folklore is found” (Hoffman 1959, 226).

Beckwith made several theoretical principles evident in *Folklore in America*. First she recognized the adaptive nature of tradition: “Folklore—that is, poetic fantasy based on tradition, custom, belief, or on some fresh form brought in from outside—is to be recognized in every form of folk expression, European or primitive. Every new folk grouping is a fresh problem in acculturation, which means the adaptation of experience, either traditional or acquired from a new environment or from fresh contacts, to those special forms of fantasy which arouse popular emotion within the group” (Beckwith 1931b, 10). “Folklore as a subject of intellectual discipline,” she wrote, takes from literature the appreciation of “individual composition” and from anthropology the “expression of the development of human culture.” Yet her goal was to define folklore broadly and distinctively to include a type of approach to material and social aspects of culture as well as the oral material (Beckwith 1931b, 6–8). By conceptualizing the scope of folklore in this way, Beckwith put forward folklore studies as more than a field combining anthropology and literature. It is an intellectual discipline that becomes, in her words, “a means of interpretation of the phenomena of culture studied under the more generally accepted disciplines of Religion, Art, Literature, Social Anthropology, Technology, and Archaeology” (Beckwith 1931b, 10).

Favoring a German-American concept of folklore over English, Scandinavian, and French models, Beckwith offered that folklore could be “more precisely” thought of as “folk art” (from the idea of *Volkskunde*) combining the collective culture and individual artist. “Every folk fantasy,” she explained, “begins originally from an individual source, but it takes on, through infinite repetition and variation, the character of a group composition” (Beckwith 1931b, 3). Viewing folk expression from this dynamic perspective, she offered diverse examples of changing folk arts in family and age groups, from the ballads of isolated Newfoundlander to the songs and rituals of college students. “Every social group,” she generalized, “preserves bonds of fixed group observance whose preservation does not depend upon their practical but upon their traditional and aesthetic value” (Beckwith 1931b, 5). “Folklore,” she summarized, “represents a living force taking shape in our midst today as in the past, building up tradition and governing the shaping of fantasy” (Beckwith 1931c, 66). Beckwith consciously tried to fashion a “modern” view of folklore as (1) tradition found in various types of artistic expression—literary, oral, social, and material; (2) emergent in everyday life as an interplay between individuals and their various group
connections; and (3) adapting to new conditions to take on new forms and significant functions.

"According to the modern conception of folklore," as she put it, Beckwith offered guidelines for methods that followed her theoretical principles. "The folklorist is first of all a collector of verified data. He selects a carefully limited field for investigation and comparison in order that his results may be fairly inclusive within that field and he reports his data in the exact language of the folk with enough repetitions from the same and from other informants to check lapses of memory or individual variations in the relation." Taking the missionaries she knew so well to task for being "the most prejudiced recorders of customs whose standards differ from their own," she underscored the folkloristic "dictum" of "interpretations ... from the standpoint of the people themselves" (1931b, 50; 1928a, 278–79). Beckwith added to this call a special attention to the historical, cultural, and geographical context of the data:

The folklorist wants to know what actually happened in the past to bring about the particular folk form he is studying. He cannot rely upon any generalization to establish these facts but must put them to historic proof. He must treat each case as a particular problem within its own limited field and be sure that he is comparing similar data in drawing conclusions from the variants within that field. He must observe folk data in relation to their setting. He must know, that is, what habits of life and custom and what particular style in art have determined their form. He must study each form in relation to the culture pattern of the group in which it is found. Thus folk data should never be isolated from their historic, geographic and cultural surroundings. (Beckwith 1931b, 65–66)

Refuting the sweeping evolutionary assumptions about racial unity in Frazer's *Golden Bough* (1890), Beckwith argued that "the same color woven into one pattern may be a quite different thing in another in which it appears under quite different conditions" (Beckwith 1928a, 279).

Beckwith had a special concern for American cultural conditions. She recognized that in their zeal to record "primitive" groups, anthropologists had neglected groups other than the "Indian and negro" and avoided discussion, she felt, about popular and European cultural influences. Beckwith had a vision for the eventual integration of American folklore collections considering such influences into a "regional characterization of folk groups" in America. Pointing to ethnographic models in France and Germany, she thought that the collections of individual folklorists could culminate in a folk atlas of American traditional practices in particular localities. She managed to acquire the endorsement of folklorists from anthropology and literature including professors Stith Thompson, Franz Boas, Alfred Kroeber, George Lyman Kittredge, Roland Dixon, and W. W. Lawrence for the project, but the Depression hurt her fundraising efforts. As she explained to the American Council of Learned Societies, the project would cover "early settlers of this country from Europe and later immigrants who have settled in groups in
one locality either in our large cities or in country districts and have contributed a particular character to the folk culture of that locality, as well as those who have been brought together by a common occupation. It will not attempt any collection of specific folk data, leaving such to the individual initiative of collectors in special areas, but it will attempt to map out these special areas and determine accurately their character and provenience."

Although the grand atlasing project never got off the ground, Beckwith anticipated a movement within folklore studies to consider the regional and ethnic patterns operating in American folklife (see Glassie 1968; Yoder 1990). Her major contributions toward this end were in Hawaii, Jamaica, and in the Dakotas. Beckwith began working her collections from Hawaii made between 1914 and 1920 after she arrived at Vassar. Hawaii provided a prime example of a changing culture and history that can be viewed through traditional expressions. An island culture with influences from various Polynesian migrations and European contacts, Hawaii included a distinctive native language, religion, and folk literature. Beckwith published an extensive report on Hawaiian riddling in *American Anthropologist* during 1922. In the article, Beckwith drew attention to riddling as a process and ritual used in specific cultural contexts, rather than treating riddles as isolated literary texts. Archer Taylor, the premier scholar of proverbs and riddles of the day, wrote Beckwith, “I am glad to have it, because it is well done—and because it is so hard to get information about riddling among foreign peoples. The literature gives chiefly, nay exclusively, references to European, Indogermanic riddles.”

Corresponding with Laura Green who resided in Hawaii, Beckwith also developed several articles regarding beliefs and customs, especially those relating to birth and death. In these analyses, Beckwith hoped to show generally the functional cultural significance of folklore at times of life crisis, and specifically Hawaiian attitudes expressed in responses to passages through these periods (Beckwith and Green 1924, 1926, 1928). After 1928, the Bishop Museum awarded her the title of honorary research associate in Hawaiian folklore and she took several leaves between 1928 and 1938 to pursue folklore research on the islands. In 1931, she wrote President MacCracken to explain her situation there: “The museum offered every facility in the shape of an office, materials, library, typewriter and assistance during the entire period of my stay, and free access to the accumulation of manuscript texts from the royal collections and others. In return I filed and classified the papers bearing on ethnography, a task which gave me insight into the whole field of Hawaiian folk thought as it survives in text today. This view was supplemented by two months in the field in remotest parts of the islands.”

Beckwith’s research into Hawaiian folklore culminated in the publication of *Hawaiian Mythology* in 1940. Luomala frankly considered the title “overly limited and modest.” "The title does not reflect her comprehensive consideration of the oral art of the Hawaiians and other Polynesians in relation to their total culture," Luomala wrote in the introduction to the reprint in 1970. Luomala quoted a letter
that Beckwith wrote her to explain the hope for the book: “My special interest in writing the mythology was to produce a book which covered what I conceive to be the province of a true mythology—not merely a series of tales, but, with the tales as major illustration or formal expression, to point out the ideas of the relation of man to the world he lives in, geographic, historic, social and political, which result in such expression, and to connect the particular forms of expression developed in Hawaii to those common with his throughout the known Polynesian area” (Luomala 1970, vii–viii; letter dated May 1955). Beckwith covered riddling contests, trickster stories, and romance legends, for example, in addition to documenting stories of Hawaiian gods and their offspring. While making a contribution by recognizing the individual creativity and social tradition that marks storytelling or “narrative art” in Hawaiian everyday life, she also faced criticism for her inattention to migration theory, particularly among the various Polynesian groups influencing Hawaii (Luomala 1970, vii). Coming to Beckwith’s defense, Dorothy Lee promoted the significance of Hawaiian Mythology for its presentation of storytelling on native terms. She contended, “She draws no distinctions where the Hawaiian does not draw them. She has steeped herself so thoroughly in her material, that she accepts what most of us would have tried, at best, to justify. In this way, she can transfer directly to the reader, Hawaiian concepts unacceptable to the reasoning of the Euro-American mind” (Lee 1941).

Another island culture, this one in Jamaica in the Caribbean Sea, commanded much of Beckwith’s attention during the 1920s. Her location of fields associated with, or symbolic of, the process of America but not on its mainland, indicated her transnational views of culture in the Americas. The islands she chose appeared isolated, but showed considerable influences from far-off shores. They were colonized and featured hierarchical social divisions that ranged from an educated aristocracy to a racialized folk. Beckwith first went to Jamaica for a vacation in 1919. Intrigued by the native folklife of the island’s blacks as part of a colonized society, she returned for eight weeks during the winter of 1920–1921 and again in 1922–1923; then in 1924, she spent the entire spring semester exploring the island. She was accompanied by Helen H. Roberts, who recorded and transcribed music. During these visits, by Beckwith’s own account, she “spent long hours in peasant homes listening to songs and stories; made several expeditions to the free Maroon settlements of Accompong and Moore Town; attended Sunday School picnics where ring-games were in progress, John Canoe performances at Christmas time, a revival meeting and a wake at Lacovia, a morning service at Mammy Forbes’s balm-yard; and sought an interview with the healer, Bedward, during the excited period of the Christmas holidays preceding his predicted ascent into heaven and the ending of white rule in Jamaica” (Beckwith 1929, vii).

Beckwith saw the island’s situation as a special problem of American acculturation that captured her interest in Hawaii and elsewhere. “Not African or Indian, east or west; not Spanish or British, it is a blend of all these into a fresh product reflect-
ing the material background of the sunny fertile island itself and the mixed culture of those alien races who have come to call it home" (Beckwith 1929, xi). Her early collections were transcriptions of folklore genres that natives, many of them children at the roadside to whom she would offer pennies, felt little conflict in giving to the white stranger. She raised questions of culture contact with studies of African “Anansi” stories and English ballads among Jamaican blacks (Beckwith 1924a). She published several small studies on folk games, Christmas mummmings, proverbs, and ethnobotany during the 1920s in her Folk-Lore Foundation series and then reprinted them together under the heading of Jamaica Folk-Lore in the American Folklore Society Memoirs Series in 1928. “Later, when the confidence of the people had been won and my own knowledge widened,” Beckwith wrote, she probed deeper into the villages and into the protected traditions of custom, belief, and material and social life (Beckwith 1929, vii). While the Folk-Lore volume presented studies of traditional forms, her ambition for the professional folklorist was to uncover the inner life, the total life, of a culture, which she underscored as Folk Life.

The result of Beckwith’s exploration was Black Roadways: A Study of Jamaican Folk Life, published in 1929. It was a pivotal study for presenting black culture as a rational system, and as a book held the distinction of being the first folklife study of blacks in the New World. Her special problem in the work was to assess the influence of colonial rule, and poverty, on the functional integration of culture. Jamaica’s blacks retained their cultural separateness, she found, largely because of poverty imposed by British rule. Yet she maintained that black traditions “penetrate the life and thought of white and colored alike of the literate classes, and leave an impress upon their speech, attitude, emotion” (Beckwith 1929, x). In her conclusion she wrestled with tough questions of social reform. She wondered whether British rule could help blacks rise out of poverty and retain their traditions. She called for action “to bring the great mass of the folk out of their present social isolation into a more robust and wholesome way of thinking and living” (Beckwith 1929, 223). Modernization in the form of centralized education was not necessarily the answer, she thought. She argued that while education opened “the way for a few able,” it “left the great masses bookless with no means of satisfying any possibly awakened curiosity” (Beckwith 1929, 224). She saw a healthy interaction of American tourists with the black folk to encourage consumption of traditional products, but bemoaned “the practice of the ruling classes to keep down folk prices to the folk level instead of stimulating excellence by paying commensurate prices” (Beckwith 1929, 223). Ultimately she believed in the value of colonialism and thought that blacks respected it. Her controversial closing answer was to call for “enthusiastic and tireless and wise leadership ... in the hands of trained social workers under government employ. The native respect for the government and for the white ruling class is a healthy sign in this little island group of African immigrants which augurs well for its ultimate solidifying upon a higher plane of genuine folk culture” (Beckwith 1929, 225–26).
Beckwith viewed in Jamaican folklife the integration of British and African traditions that formed a distinctive New World culture. She admired the “practical philosophy,” “native wit,” and “harmonious social life” of black Jamaican culture, while deriding its fostering of “shiftlessness.” While one might expect the chapters on the settlements and religious centers, her section on the family appeared unusual for its attention to women’s roles and life cycle. Her culminating chapter, entitled “Folk Art,” covered the way that “the Jamaican Negro gives emotional expression to his inner life through the medium of voice and motion” (Beckwith 1929, 198). The book’s scope and its confrontation of social issues extended well beyond the usual contents of folklore studies in the period. With the rhetorical shift to “folk life,” Beckwith emphasized living tradition as a continuous process integrated into modern-day communities. She offered photographs, drawings, and maps to illuminate the everyday life of the island’s black communities. In the text, she sifted through the many influences on black folk expression from adaptation to the environment and contact with European and American Indian populations.

Melville Herskovits, who used Beckwith’s contribution in the preparation of his landmark work, *The Myth of the Negro Past* (1941), thought she needed more attention to variations of individuals, but he praised her for providing “the first ethnographic study of the life of any New World Negro which, to my knowledge, has been attempted. She tries to see the culture of the Jamaicans as a whole, and she describes it as a unit as she would describe the culture of any distinct people” (Herskovits 1930; Beckwith 1931a). Herskovits recognized the folklife approach in Beckwith’s work that set it apart from folklore studies as a “portion of anthropology.” It is less of a textual comparative study that marked other previous folkloristic works, including her own, than an exploration of tradition and all its complex social influences. To be sure, folklorists today bristle at Beckwith’s use of stereotype-raising phrases such as “backward race” and “shiftlessness,” and her colonial assumptions of deference of natives to the ruling population, but one has to admire, in the words of famed belief collector Newbell Niles Puckett, her “ethnographical zeal” and “folklorist enthusiasm” (Puckett 1929).

*Black Roadways* can be read not just as her suggestion of a folklife approach, but also an interpretation of New World nations that contain multiple cultures formed from the hybridization of traditions. This view explains her rejoinder to Herskovits that as an anthropologist he overstated the exclusive transplantation of relic African traditions. As a folklorist, she thought she understood the modern reality of interplay between tradition and modernity, transatlantic cultural sources and ethnic hybridization. “When we attempt to differentiate the purely African traits among these colonial Africans,” she cautioned Herskovits, “it is necessary to take into account not only contacts with European superstitions in the New World but also with Portuguese, Dutch and British traders on the coast of Africa itself” (Beckwith 1931b, 223). Again, she invoked the separate identity of the folklorist for the special problems of folk cultures in modern societies as issues of tradition.”In
all these matters,” she chided Herskovits, “it seems safer for the folklorist to describe accurately the data in his own field than to hazard a guess as to original national sources” (Beckwith 1931b, 223; emphasis added). Folkloristic interest, she implied, lay in the contemporary formation and function, rather than origin, of culture.

On the islands of Hawaii and Jamaica, Beckwith had familiarity with the languages used by natives, but on the mainland she needed the aid of interpreters for major field experiences on American Indian reservations. On the recommendation of Franz Boas, and with government permission, Beckwith set out during the summer of 1926 to the Pine Ridge Reservation along the South Dakota-Nebraska border to record the “story forms” of the Oglala Dakota Sioux. She had three interpreters assisting her from the reservation. Other collectors had preceded her, but she hoped to make two distinct contributions to set her collection apart. She wanted first to define the stories and storytelling art from the Oglala perspective, and second, she wanted to identify the narrative forms used by the Oglala so as to assess the style and meaning of their oral art. She revealed that although ethnologists had divided Dakota stories into European-American genres of myth, legends, tales, and so on, natives themselves divided stories into two classes: “myths” and “stories which tell about a tribe.” She found that to the Dakota, myth is considered an “invention” rather than a story of an earlier age. With each of the classes of stories, she documented styles and structures used that characterized the performance of the tales, and she identified individual storytellers and their backgrounds. She published her collection with comparative notes and an introduction to the role of storytelling in the tribal culture as a special issue of the Journal of American Folklore (1930).

Beckwith turned her attention to other branches of the Sioux on three summer trips to the Fort Berthold Reservation in North Dakota between 1929 and 1932. There she collected “fast disappearing” traditional stories and accounts of ceremonies from aged members of the Mandan and Hidatsa. Again she documented storytelling forms from native points of view and discussed the stories as reflections of cultural life and formations of worldview. Yet in her focus on story forms, she stopped short of elaborating on the backgrounds and performances of individual artists that would mark later narrative research. Two “excellent story tellers,” as Beckwith described them, related most of the stories in the collection. She faithfully transcribed and translated their tales with the help of interpreters, particularly one provided by music collector Frances Densmore (Densmore 1923). Beckwith originally published her collections in the Folk-Lore Foundation series and reprinted the work in the American Folklore Society Memoirs Series under the title of Mandan-Hidatsa Myths and Ceremonies (1937).

When the American Folklore Society reprint came out, Beckwith was already sixty-six years old and had shown a remarkable record of activity including prolific publishing and rigorous fieldwork since taking off on her new career path at an advanced age. During the 1930s, the size of her folklore classes grew and she
noticed a growing interest in folklore studies generally. She answered Mt. Holyoke College's query about her activities during the early 1930s by writing, "True to type, surrounded by books, bespectacled, an incurable scribbler, and finding life more interesting every day." As the decade neared its close, Beckwith planned her retirement from teaching at Vassar and a move to a locale closer to Hawaii. It had appeared that Anne Alexander might permanently endow the chair in folklore at Vassar, but as Beckwith explained, "The gift would probably have been secured had not the depression year and the many other interests in scientific and educational fields for whose financing the donor had made herself responsible, put an end to that hope, a result rendered still more conclusive by the increased demands of the government, both state and national, since that time upon higher incomes."

Beckwith appealed to Vassar to continue the line in folklore as a growing "modern field." She made the case to the college's president in 1932 that Vassar now holds a considerable reputation in this modern field and is gaining representation in national societies. In making new appointments in some allied field either of literature or of social science would it not be possible to look out for some candidate fitted to carry on the folklore as part of his program? Such a candidate should have ideally both literary-historical and ethnological training in order to give introductory work in folklore as affiliated here in America. Some of our ablest American folklorists such as Archer Taylor of Chicago, Louise Pound of Nebraska, Stith Thompson of Missouri, have the literary training alone. I should be ambitious for Vassar to include the two lines of interest and training.

Such a person came on board the faculty when Dorothy D. Lee, one of Beckwith's former folklore students, joined the newly formed anthropology department. Yet the Folk-Lore Foundation and the introductory folklore course disappeared after 1939.

Beckwith left Vassar in 1938 with the title of research professor emeritus of folklore and established residence in Berkeley, California. When the end of World War II eased travel, she returned to Hawaii regularly to continue work on Hawaiian folklore. "I have found Berkeley," she wrote, "a half-way home between Hawaii and the East"; her home "became a center for literary folk, and for all who loved Hawaii and its people." Berkeley also became a symbol of her approach to American culture as a matrix made from influences East and West. It was able to maintain various ethnic "strains," particularly from Asia, and develop new traditions. In her work at Berkeley, she constantly reminded American colleagues of influences into American culture from Asia to balance the transatlantic emphasis on European borrowing on the Eastern Seaboard.

Through the 1940s and 1950s, Beckwith reexamined Pacific traditions. Set against the background of social changes brought by war and modernization, she interpreted the changing functions of Pacific folklore. She especially looked more deeply into the mix of traditions around Hawaii and Polynesia. Beckwith's last major work, published when she was eighty years old, was The Kumulipo, A
Martha Beckwith in Honolulu, probably after 1945. (Archives, Mt. Holyoke College Library)
Hawaiian Creation Chant (1951), which she had translated from Hawaiian and to which she added extensive commentary. Reviewing the book in the Journal of American Folklife, Katharine Luomala commended it as “a milestone in Polynesian research, and for folklorists and anthropologists who wish to learn of Polynesian chants and their function in culture, this book on the most famous chant of all, is a fascinating introduction to the subject” (1951, 429–32). Besides this contribution, Beckwith worked on ethnobotany and folk medicine of her childhood home in Maui, projects that brought her back to her earliest scientific and cultural explorations. She also conceived of expanding or revising Hawaiian Mythology to include other Polynesian cultures, and wrote incisive articles on Polynesian mythology and story composition in preparation for a fuller treatment (Beckwith 1940, 1944). She even applied in 1949 for funding of new fieldwork in New Zealand to collect Polynesian narratives; she withdrew at the eleventh hour because, as she lamented, “I am having some trouble with my eyes and although they are still good, may not be able to work in future so intensively as I am accustomed to work and as I should wish to under government subsidy.” The work in New Zealand would have brought her to the farthest reaches from which her Hawaiian, and American, homeland received ethnic Polynesian “strains.” Ever determined and independent despite her elderly years and physical problems, she added, “I still hope to get to New Zealand for work on Polynesian mythology, but have other projects in mind for immediate attention, and should prefer to be on my own on such an expedition.”

Beckwith’s vision worsened in 1950 and she suffered a stroke that curtailed her publishing after 1951. Her by-line still appeared in the Journal of American Folklife in 1953, however, when professional folklorists Tristram Coffin and Samuel Bayard edited a collection of songs made by her students in upstate New York in 1929 and 1930 (Ring et al. 1953). She must have smiled to see her efforts being expanded by authorities on tradition identifying themselves as professional folklorists. In her introduction written in 1937, she spoke of relying on a music specialist and Dutch scholar. Sixteen years later, the folklorists analyzed “Anglo-American texts and tunes,” “fresh Dutch-American matter,” and ultimately “local” ballads that showed a creative living tradition on the diverse American landscape.

Beckwith died on January 28, 1959, at her Berkeley home shortly after her eighty-eighth birthday. According to her wishes, her ashes were sent to the family burial plot on her beloved Maui. Back at Vassar, students and faculty offered a memorial tribute. Calling her “an inspiring teacher,” with “single-minded devotion to scholarship” and “courage in the many difficulties of research in her chosen field,” the tributaries praised her as “a charming and beautiful woman, the best type of Victorian lady and scholar.”

The Victorian label for Beckwith is meant lovingly to add dignity to her memory, but it is misleading. Certainly informed by Victorian ideas of scientism, Beckwith nonetheless helped usher in twentieth-century, modern ideas of cultural
relativism and diversity in her scholarship and public work. Indeed, she helped move folklore and folklife studies out of Victorian anthropology and into a new interdisciplinary combination for post-World War II folklorists. Most memorable in her scholarship are her Hawaiian and Jamaican studies. Her work came to the fore for a new generation of folklorists with the republication of Hawaiian Mythology in 1970. Beyond her work in Hawaii, Jamaica, and the Dakotas, Beckwith’s ideas and collections merit attention for their contributions to the study of ethnic and regional lore, narrative and custom, race and gender, method and theory. She affected many associates with “the delights of the quest” for folk art, as she called it. She was instrumental in drawing women to the special problems of that quest. Her clarion call to women at Mt. Holyoke College sums her remarkable journey and her hope for fellow travelers:

Squatting on the rug of an Indian tent on the Oglala Sioux reservation or watching the Fourth of July festival dance in the great camp circle; listening to African stories at night in a mountain village of Jamaica or sitting day by day with the old blind ex-sheriff who was born with a cowl and can see ghosts, or walking miles through the bush to visit an obeah sorcerer. Chatting with Dutch-American housewives in some farm-house in the valley; or going farther afield to a native coast village of Hawaii; to a Druse princess in the Lebanon mountains and a silk-worm cultivator in the village below; learning women's games at a girls’ school in Delhi; touring country villages in the Punjab from the Grand Trunk road up into the Salt Range. If all these things will bring you too delight, then may you also bite the fatal apple and follow the toilsome ways of folk-lore. (Beckwith 1928a, 281–82)

Perhaps even more than inspiring followers of folklore’s ways, Beckwith publicized the label of folklorist as an academic scholar of tradition. She developed a vantage for the folklorist from the university, where that figure could wield authority over public discourse about uses of American traditions. Applying the label of folklorist in her teaching and public presentations, she conceived a new intellectual hybrid formed from anthropological and literary concerns. It held a special place in America with its openness to innovation, she declared, and she surveyed the American field in a way that would lend the folklorist distinctiveness. She emphasized methods that would recognize the living traditions of America’s groups, and the adaptive, artistic character of their lore. She took her stand for the folkloristic search for the authentic quality of tradition, and thereby laid a foundation for later debates about the diverse nature of American culture. She might have been better known if she could have established a department as well as filling a chair. Nonetheless, she served a pivotal role for the ensuing generation, who established academic programs by charging the folklorist with the main responsibility of explaining traditions in America. She also left issues on the table to enliven debate about ways that traditions should be presented, and indeed administered.