

American Folklorists' Voices in Print: A Critical Survey

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For as much as folklorists extol the value of hearing voices of tradition-bearers, one would expect an extensive record of folklorists offering narratives of their experience. Oral histories conducted of American folklorists during the 1960s came relatively late in the history of American folkloristics and when they did begin, the enterprise was prodded by scholars from outside North America, usually from Asia. Leading up to the "Collecting Memories" project launched by the American Folklore Society and the Utah State University Special Collections and Archives in 2010 to produce new transcripts of interviews with American folklorists online, only a handful of scattered interviews appeared in print. The value of this effort was anticipated by Richard M. Dorson in 1972 when he included "history of the study of folklore" as an essential technique that all folklorists must know (1972: 29-30). He observed that the story of folklorists' endeavors would be distinct from a history of historical writing or literary scholarship, because folklorists are to "a large extent cooperative and collaborative and require the contributions of the living as well as the dead" (1972: 30). Dorson was fond of giving personal anecdotes in his own books, but he recognized that most folklorists in the name of objectivity kept their distance from their subjects and consequently the story of collaboration or fieldwork challenges rarely made it into the scholarly monograph. Experiential accounts, when revealed, were more commonly related as narratives told at conferences, in classrooms, and informal gatherings.

Dorson advocated for history-taking in folklore studies to establish an intellectual heritage separate from other fields of inquiry such as literature, anthropology, and history. Defensive about the academic standing of folklore studies, Dorson asserted that "In the richness and complexity of its history lies the best proof of the integrity of folklore studies" (1973a: 128). He worried that students would not take up the urgent task because workers in the field were primarily attracted to the materials of folklore rather than the history of folklorists. Dorson from his perch as director of the degree-granting Folklore Institute at Indiana University therefore underscored that theoretically "the history of folklore studies offers as many problems to the folklorist as does the neat archiving of the materials of folklore" and encouraged historiographical dissertations (1972: 30). When he became president of the American Folklore Society in 1968, he formed a Historiography Committee in the Society and published the results of a historiography panel from the Society's annual meeting in 1969 that included Dorson, Richard Reuss, Neil Rosenberg, Joseph Hickerson, and Dan Ben-Amos (Reuss 1973: 4).

Dorson's exemplary historiographical publication was the *The British Folklorists: A History* (1968) focusing on nineteenth-century folklorists and consequently relied more on documentary rather than oral sources in an effort to chronicle the roots of professional folklore studies. His Indiana University student William K. McNeil used Dorson's book as a model for his dissertation "A History of American Folklore Scholarship before 1908" (1980) and others around the same time at the University of Pennsylvania (supervised by Dan Ben-Amos, who also created the first course on the history of folklore studies) and University of California at Berkeley (supervised by Alan Dundes) also relied primarily on archival material for an assessment of early American folklore scholarship (Dwyer-Shick 1979; Zumwalt 1982; see also Bronner 1986; Zumwalt 1988). With the passage of years and

development of folklore studies since Dorson's crusade, additional uses of the folkloristic past can be identified. Recording experiences and social backgrounds in oral and documentary histories, for example, contextualizes present scholarship and allows for sociological and psychological—and yes, folkloristic—analysis of the field's workers.

Many of the figures involved in the historiographical movement cited the emerging sense of folklore studies as an independent scholarly inquiry during the 1960s with its own Ph.D. programs, institutions, and reference works as a signal for history-collecting. Dorson in "Is Folklore a Discipline?" noted that a discipline has a "sense of its own identity, as manifested...in the history of its unfolding and the biographies of its luminaries" (1973b: 201). With this purpose in mind, and the establishment of a sufficient legacy stretching for over 160 years (he traced the beginnings of the discipline to the Grimm brothers), he cited a project within the American Folklore Society to conduct "an oral history of itself based on tape-recorded interviews by younger folklorists of its elder statesmen, turned into informants" (1973: 202). One of those youthful folklorists was Richard Reuss (1940-1986), who had completed his Ph.D. in folklore under Dorson at Indiana University in 1971 and moved to Wayne State University to teach (Ben-Amos 2010; Kornbluh 1993). He briefly issued a mimeographed newsletter that he called "The Folklore Historian" but the project and the publication fizzled out in a few years. Before the project waned, Reuss organized a panel on "American Folklore Historiography" for the American Folklore Society meeting in Austin, which was published in the *Journal of the Folklore Institute* but it did not contain interview materials (Reuss 1973). The "Folklore Historian" would be revived as a journal in 1983 in anticipation of the American Folklore Society's centennial in 1987-1988. Still, the main effort in those years in keeping with a retrospective on the birth of American folklore studies 100 years before was to document the founding narratives of the society rather than interviewing elder representatives of the field.

Tapes of interviews conducted as part of the Society's oral history project were deposited in the archives of the American Folklife Center after its founding in 1976. The recorded interviews included Richard Reuss questioning Richard Dorson and Thelma James; William Wilson with Austin Fife; Frank de Caro and Roan A. Jordan with Américo Paredes; Roger Abrahams with Mody C. Boatright; and Patrick Mullen with Francis Lee Utley. The questioning focused on the elderly scholars' career trajectories and occasionally reflections on the general state of the field. Transcripts did not appear in print, but Reuss published "'That Can't Be Alan Dundes! Alan Dundes is Taller Than That!' The Folklore of Folklorists" (1974) that incorporated legendary and jocular material about folklorists drawn from interviews. The material underscored the distinctive group identity of folklorists much as folklorists had used speech, rituals, and narratives to make a case during the period for the folkness of urban, professional occupations. Reuss noted that what he "once viewed as a light-hearted exercise in collecting humorous stories about each other has tended to become a more serious attempt to probe the traditional details of our professional interaction" (1974: 304). Reuss showed that interviews with folklorists revealed not only the historical outline of their careers but inevitably transmission of folklore about being a folklorist that defined their professional identity.

Historians of folklore studies in Reuss's day treated interview transcripts as raw materials from which to create a summative essay. Notable examples that incorporate interview material into a summary of a folklorist's life and career during the formative period of American folklore historiography in the 1970s are Michael Edward Bell's "Harry Middleton Hyatt's Quest for the Essence of Human Spirit"

(1979) where interviews revealed the previously unreported contributions of Hyatt's sister to his collecting and Angus K. Gillespie's *Folklorist of the Coal Fields: George Korson's Life and Work* (1980) where interviews with Korson's contemporaries showed the importance of his political ideology and Jewish cultural background on his work. Autobiographies of folklorists who had attained the status of public intellectuals also began appearing, suggesting that their life stories mattered to an audience familiar with their popular scholarship. In 1975, Helen Creighton's *A Life in Folklore* was published with the major trade press of McGraw-Hill that built on the interest of folksong collecting "adventures" suggested by John Lomax's earlier autobiography, *Adventures of a Ballad Hunter* (1947) published by Macmillan. It was Dorson who broke ground with an interview of a folklorist as publication-worthy when he contributed "A Visit with Vance Randolph" in 1954 to the *Journal of American Folklore*. The quoted material that Dorson included in the brief sketch concerned the meager pay that the prolific Randolph received. Writing in the context of his vocal campaign against commercialized "fakelore" that Dorson charged had been fabricated to generate profit rather than scholarship, he portrayed Randolph's remarkable devotion to collecting folklore and respect for the people from whom he collected. Dorson editorialized from his oral interviews that Randolph stood as "The outstanding collector of our time, who perhaps alone knows how to avoid commercial shoddiness and scholarly dullness, without sacrificing readability or integrity, deserves the best tribute American folklorists can tender" (1954: 260).

Dorson's excerpt was embedded into a hagiographic narrative of his visit to Randolph's home, but a much fuller transcription of an interview as history with an American folklorist did not appear until 1968 when *Asian Folklore Studies* published Hari S. Upadhyaya's recordings of Stith Thompson (1885-1976) made in 1965. Upadhyaya had come from India and completed his dissertation in folklore at Indiana University the year before. Upadhyaya in the piece did not explain the circumstances that led him to make the recording and prepare it for publication, but he hints that his father, the eminent Indian folklorist K.D. Upadhyaya who idolized Thompson and exchanged correspondence with him but had never met the compiler of the motif-index had suggested it (Upadhyaya 1968: 143). In the interview, Thompson narrated the origins of his major works and reflected on some of his folklorist teachers such as Francis Gummere, Walter Morris Hart, and George Kittredge. Countering the expectation of a well-planned research agenda, he admitted that his discovery of tale types and motifs was largely serendipitous. He described stumbling in 1920 upon a copy of Antti Aarne's *Verzeichnis der Märchentypen* (1910) in the Harvard library and foreseeing its usefulness, he wrote out its contents in longhand. Showing the power of social connections, Thompson told Upadhyaya that the motif-index that preoccupied him for the next forty years owed to the intervention of his Harvard friend Archer Taylor (1890-1973) who handed a draft version of the motif-index to Kaarle Krohn on a trip to Finland in 1925 (Upadhyaya 1968: 111-12). That connection resulted in a meeting of Thompson with the renowned Krohn in Europe in 1926 and subsequently plans for revision of *The Types of the Folktale* (Thompson 1996: 91-93).

In the twenty-first century, Henry Glassie is notable for having multiple interviews printed with him in historical annals as well as folkloristic journals (Glassie and Truesdell 2008; Hansen 2000). In 2000, folklorist Gregory Hansen interviewed him for *Folklore Forum* and emphasized his involvement in public folklore work. Glassie repeated the motif of "lucky accidents" in his narrative to explain to Hansen that he did not intend to become a public folklorist but "fell into it," despite the appearance to the contrary. He did use the opportunity to reflect on the political uses and misuses of folklore, more so

than he had previously in his books. He disarms his interviewer by telling him, “The person who does quick and dirty fieldwork to bring performers to the Mall is complicit in the reaffirmation of American power” (Hansen 2000: 94). The oral interview draws attention because it catches the luminary in a more critical, frustrated tone than one expects from reading his references to himself in self-authored work. Perhaps because he is addressing scholars outside of folklore, Glassie takes a more promotional tone in the interview with him by Barbara Truesdell eight years later in the *Public Historian* (2008). He thematizes his oral remarks by pointing out that both as a field and befitting his personality, folklorists contribute to public history by engagement of fieldwork. If the interviews appear rhetorically crafted to make a point, they do allow for reflection on the influences beyond “lucky accidents” that shaped his career. He especially remembers the influence of childhood experiences on his grandparents’ farm in northern Virginia which contained a log cabin that fascinated him.

Glassie’s texts points out several narrative tendencies of published interviews that differ from the autobiographical or biographical summative essay. The most obvious is that the narrative is not arranged linearly in time. Its organization often begins with early experiences but may resist following chronology in an effort to highlight pivotal moments of a career and tie them to multiple influences. One strategy to accomplish that is to tell stories as exempla of patterns in a life journey rather than relate facts about a career. Reuss sought framed legends or jokes he could call folklore of folklorists, but more generally one can find personal experiences framed in plots or told anecdotally to relay a theme or even a moral. There is also an expectation that oral interview is more personally reflective, allowing for introspective statements involving emotional response rather than observations on the field in biographical treatises. Historians of folklore studies are drawn to the individual or social contexts provided in oral interviews that may not be apparent in writing. Related to this search is the value placed on interviews for revealing ambivalence of individuals toward practices in which they and others engage or especially conflicts that arise between them. In the autobiographical or biographical summary, consensus is more pronounced as a narrative strategy. In Glassie’s first interview, for example, a nugget that folklorists point to is his criticism of Bess Lomax Hawes at the National Endowment for the Arts for not placing state folklorists in universities and overusing the term “folk art.” Calling it a “mistake,” he cites her stubbornness and frets that her decision explains how the “dichotomy which we are now cursed with arose” (Hansen 2000: 97). Dorson’s beef with Botkin was aired in his essays reviewing the state of the field, and drew attention for their unusual acrimonious tone (Bronner 1998: 349-412). I would argue that this tone is more typical of interviews that make their way into print, or at least is what makes these interviews newsworthy.

The most extensive series of published interviews with American folklorists appeared as *Voicing Folklore: Careers, Concerns and Issues* edited by M. D. Muthukumaraswamy (2002), director of the National Folklore Support Centre in Chennai, India, who also conducted the interviews contained in the book. He traveled from his native India to the United States with the purpose of bringing “out the artistic, scholarly and professional achievements of the interviewees” who hold a “special importance to the readers in India” (2002: 6). The volume did not have a wide circulation, unfortunately, because it was published in a limited edition by the National Folklore Support Centre in India and the transcripts were heavily condensed. The editor arranged transcriptions of seventeen American folklorists divided into sections for academic and public sector folklorists. Two additional parts include eight “South Asianists” and representatives of five supporting agencies for folklore. The folklorists from American

institutions interviewed included Roger D. Abrahams, Duane Anderson, Dan Ben-Amos, Lee Haring, Mary Hufford, John H. McDowell, Dorothy P. Noyes, Robert Baron, Barry Bergey, Peggy Bulger, William R. Ferris, Alan Jabbour, Richard Kurin, Barbara Lloyd, Timothy Lloyd, Elizabeth E. Peterson, Steven Zeitlin, and Margaret A. Mills. The editing emphasized the professional outlooks of the folklorists contextualized by their occupational experiences more than life stories. Muthukumaraswamy nonetheless sought narratives that connect “personal histories and disciplinary engagements” (2002: 7). A theme that particularly comes through is the development of a public role of folklorists from the twentieth century into the twenty-first century. Muthukumaraswamy does not analyze individual transcripts as texts or contexts, but he summarizes the array of interviews by stating, “Perhaps this volume will stand as an eclectic testimony to the fact that the folklorists are the new public intellectuals of the twenty-first century addressing issues of integrity and representation, cultural freedom and justice, aesthetics of tradition and change and contributing to the development of civic republicanism” (2002: 7).

For a new generation of folklorists in the twenty-first century, the “Collecting Memories” project holds the potential for providing a wider cross-section of folkloristic work rather than a focus on a single institution or figure. Having wider access to transcripts that provide life stories and anecdotes in addition to narratives of professional accomplishments has the potential for allowing wider analysis of folklorists’ accounts as texts to be more deeply analyzed as well as providing information for the histories of the folkloristic enterprise begging to be written. Muthukumaraswamy sagely observes a theme of public engagement emerging in new interviews that were commonly left out of the narratives in the past concerned primarily with the academic respectability of the discipline. It may also be time for wider reflection on connections to other disciplines and the expansion of the folkloristic subject and the agenda of its objects. Among those objects is the questioning of tradition’s places and spaces, nationally and transnationally. If this movement constitutes an inquiry outward, another one is also inward into the heads of folklorists as agents of culture and tradition. That “depth interview” may involve the social psychology of the motivations, purposes, and practices of cultural work represented by folklorists. The structure of interviews with individuals suggests biographical approaches to history-taking, but my hope is that thematic inquiry can proceed from the ideas expressed as well as the events narrated.

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