

• *Book Reviews* •

Folklore and the Internet: Vernacular Expression in a Digital World. Edited by Trevor J. Blank. (Logan: Utah State University Press, 2009. x + pp. 260, acknowledgements, introduction, 9 black and white photographs, appendix, references, contributors, index.)

Folklore and the Internet is an elegantly edited and supremely accessible book in which folklorist Trevor J. Blank sets out to examine how we can begin to apply traditional constructions of vernacular culture to contemporary digital contexts. Blank ably constructs an edited volume which collects various definitions and applications of folklore and explores how the discipline is currently in a state of flux, predicated on the rise of the Internet and constant technological changes in the processes of interpersonal communication. This volume aims to open a dialogue that can redefine folkloric interaction in a contemporary context while simultaneously offering practicable examples of this redefinition in useful scholarship. Yet, more than that, Blank states that the purpose of the volume is to “use a folkloristic perspective to critically examine and contribute to the literature on the sociocultural and performative nature of the Internet” (13). In these goals, the book does not disappoint.

Folklore and the Internet is expertly structured allowing for an exceptionally clear understanding of how Blank conceives of the intersection of folklore and the Internet. The first chapter, “Digitizing and Virtualizing Folklore” written by Simon J. Bronner, builds on the ideas laid out by Blank in the introduction and raises questions about traditionality in online cultural practices. Indeed, Bronner

encourages folklorists to reconsider what we may conceive of as “traditional,” a concept still considered central to the study of folklore. In particular, he asks the reader to reassess tradition with regard to methods of transmission so as to apply current modes of folklore theory to virtual texts. The author utilizes as case study centered on comparisons of orality and virtuality within the same narrative event, the 1987 publicly broadcast suicide of R. Budd Dwyer. This methodology offers the reader an exemplary model from which we can begin to build a conceptualization of tradition on the Internet.

Each chapter following the first delves more deeply into very specific intersections of folklore and the Internet. Elizabeth Tucker examines parallelisms between virtual iterations of missing women narratives and legends of murdered women’s ghosts in “Guardians of the Living: Characterization of Missing Women on the Internet.” Through this examination Tucker is able to bring into sharp contrast the function of legend dialectics as transmitted through virtual media. In applying folkloristics to these virtually transmitted narratives the author illuminates the functional use of the field in online spaces, validating the ideas presented by Bronner and the greater theme that Blank is driving towards.

The third chapter, “The End of the Internet: A Folk Response to the Provision of Infinite Choice,” sees author Lynne S. McNeill investigate the creation and propagation of folklore through an analysis of “End of the Internet” websites, some of the earliest folkloric forms to emerge on the Internet. McNeill suggests in this study that folklore is, in essence, knowledge created from social interactions and

that by examining the presence or lack of digital native-ness we can come to understand a literal digital culture. By studying the “End of the Internet” meme she is able to reveal much about the acculturation of digital natives, allowing the reader to understand how nativity and expressive traits builds a folk culture. The use of digital media reconceptualizes existing modes of face-to-face interaction, and this transformation naturally allows for the transmission of folklore just as much as previous folkloric forms.

The book is structured in such a way as to offer a clear, concise, and accessible text for the reader detailing the intersection of technological and folkloric factors in the context of the Internet. In addition to the three mentioned above, the book is organized into five more easily digestible chapters (“The *Forward as Folklore: Studying Emailed Humor*” by Russell Frank; “Epistemology, the Sociology of Knowledge, and the *Wikipedia* User Box Controversy” by William Westerman; “Crusading on the Vernacular Web: The Folk Beliefs and Practices on Online Spiritual Warfare” by Robert Glenn Howard; “Ghosts in the Machine: Mourning the MySpace Dead” by Robert Dobler; and “Public Folklore in Cyberspace” by Gregory Hansen). Each article is interesting and builds upon Blank’s themes by focusing on specific aspects of the dialectical contextual intersection of folklore and the Internet. Each of these works stand well on their own, yet by placing them together Blank is able to create a thorough and compelling case for the study of the Internet as a locus of folkloric activity.

Blank and his contributors offer many interesting examples of the Internet as folkloric conduit and site of vernacular culture, yet there is the possibility that one could criticize this collection based on the materials explored in the case studies provided. It could be argued that many of the particular virtual technologies investigated may seem dated, particularly to younger audience in the undergraduate classroom, and this critique will certainly grow stronger as this work ages due to the dynamic nature of the Internet. However, this criticism is easily answered as this anthology is not, in essence, about the idiosyncrasies of very specific cases of Internet folklore. Instead this book is about how to approach a subject that is intensely cultural, utterly dynamic, continually emergent and practically ubiquitous. Blank has skillfully crafted an excellent model for examining the intersection of folklore studies in the context of the Internet as we move further into the twenty-first century. This study allows us a form through which we are able to better conceive of virtual folklore, and opens a dialogue through which scholars can continue to build practicable methods of studying this new digital field as we move forward.

Folklore and the Internet is an invaluable addition to the field of folklore and should be required reading for anyone with an interest in modern folkloristics. However, this work has applications to a wider academic audience as well. Any scholar who desires to undertake an exploration of the Internet would be well served by reading this work, which demonstrates that online spaces are, perhaps more than anything, a locus of social interaction. This excellent piece of scholarship

has value to a wide range of interdisciplinary fields from cultural anthropology to history to popular culture. This work eschews essentialist portrayals of mediated interaction and is broad enough to have applicable lessons to the global academic community. It is accessible enough for use in the undergraduate classroom (with a teaching guide readily available online), challenging enough for the most invested scholars, specific enough to be of use to folklorists interested in virtual ethnography, yet broad enough to be of use to other fields of study as well. *Folklore and the Internet* is an exemplary work that lays a firm foundation for expanding the study of folklore as we currently envision it.

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