

On Professional Discourse in Folklore: A Response to Oring

Robert E. Walls
Indiana University

Elliott Oring raises some good points in his discussion of student journals, reviewing the past twenty years of *Folklore Forum* and expressing his ideas for future directions. The mere fact that *Forum* is still alive and kicking after two decades is indeed strong testimony to the energy, initiative, and commitment of students at Indiana University's Folklore Institute. I know of no other student journal—whether in folklore, anthropology, or literary studies—that has endured as long. As a former editor of the journal, I would like to comment on some of Oring's statements about *Forum's* heritage. But more importantly, this seems to be an appropriate occasion to discuss some of the issues that Oring's note raises, or alludes to, regarding the nature of professional discourse in American folklore studies today.

Without question, *Forum* has served very nicely as a training ground for graduate students aching to cut their academic teeth somewhere beyond the classroom setting. What better place to learn first-hand the process of peer-review publishing, editing, and reviewing books: if anything ever goes wrong, the culprit can always hide behind the "student" label! But of course students working with *Forum*, or writing for it, do indeed take their efforts seriously, and consequently the journal has evolved into an animal which strives to mimic "the real thing." Perhaps this is inevitable in a discipline where the quest for recognition and respectability seems eternal—students are bound to develop a yearning to be taken seriously as well. It is worth noting that *Forum* is not alone in this trend. The only other student folklore journals of which I am aware, UCLA's *Folklore and Mythology Studies* (1977-1985) and the University of Texas-Austin's *Folklore Annual* (1969-1980), both published student articles and reviews (and an occasional faculty contribution) in a format similar to that of *Folklore Forum*.

Unfortunately, however, despite many very solid student contributions, and despite improvements in physical appearance (from mimeographed and stapled sheets to computer disk, laser print, and perfect-bound vellum paper), *Forum* seems to have failed in its overall attempt to compete with other professional journals. In the recent survey of folklorists conducted by the American Folklore Society (De Caro 1986), *Folklore Forum* is not even mentioned, nor was it included in a list of folklore journals published in the recent AFS booklet *Folklore/Folklife* (1984). There are, of course, a myriad of possible reasons for this, and *Forum's* editors will be the first to admit that after all we are only a student journal that often publishes marginally acceptable material. Yet those who follow *Forum* know of its accomplishments. *Forum* seems to have published something from just about everyone who is anyone in folklore scholarship, albeit often at an early stage of their career. Special issues of the journal have appeared frequently, often containing excellent contributions which have been widely cited since (see, e.g., the issues on conversational folklore, the future of American folklore studies, folklore and medieval studies, material culture, occupational folklore, folklore and literature, urban folklore, and ethics and the law). Finally, as Oring correctly observes, *Forum* is the only folklore journal that consistently publishes translations of important articles written by the likes of Bausinger, Bogatyrev, Dömötör, Eberhard, Holbek, Jakobson, Köngas-Maranda, Lüthi, Pentikäinen, Ranke, and others. So, at least in some small measure, *Forum* can claim its status as a professional journal to be a true success.

But then let us consider Oring's proposal: let *Forum* seek out a new publication niche and do what no other journal is doing. Let it become an open forum for pointed essays and editorials, "a vehicle for much of what remains unsaid in our discipline."

Certainly, this type of move would provide a unique service to professional discourse in folklore and make *Forum* into something much more than just a worthy endeavor of enterprising graduate students. The problem is this proposal has been made time and time again in the pages of this very journal! First, it was made in 1968 by Oring and Durham, then in 1970 by Barre Toelken, in 1973 by Janet Gilmore, in 1978 by Virginia A.P. Lowe, in 1981 by editors Voorheis, Harrah, Walker, and Galvin, and in 1987 by Truesdell and Livesay. Each renewed call was met with silence. Just where *are* those individuals with the "qualities long associated with the student role—brashness, naivete, energy, and a demand for novelty"? While we all have learned of the excitement generated by those students and

young professionals that Dorson once labeled "The Young Turks," we now have to ask where are their equivalents today? Are there students anywhere, from any of the folklore programs, with something to say, willing to be critical (and not just cynical), eager to test their embryonic ideas and be in the vanguard instead of on the periphery? Or are we all too shy, too timid, or suffering with the same malaise or indifference that seems to be characteristic of so many American students today, challenging policies and methodologies with all the voice and vigor of an army of inert TV-holics? How *do* students feel about AFS, competition for jobs in academia, selling their souls to public sector work, professional ethics, or getting their parents to tell others that their child is a f.f.folklorist?

But is professional discourse in folklore as a whole really any different? Are there any disciplinary models for students to follow or learn from? Are there any readily accessible places for folklorists in general to conduct ongoing dialogues concerning "what remains unsaid in our discipline"? I find it just a bit sad and ironic that a discipline with so many authorities on the nature of traditional discourse and small conversational communities cannot seem to conduct an informal dialogue with any sort of regularity within the confines of its own membership. True, there are conferences (although summaries of conference highlights for non-attendees are rarely published, as they are in European journals such as the *NIF Newsletter* or *Zeitschrift für Volkskunde*), and there are special issues of journals, but folklorists just don't seem to have the appetite for more informal, more immediate debate. Reflexive and critical examinations of our discipline seem to be limited to articles and books—things which get us tenure.

Yet, open forums are rife today, both in larger society and in other academic disciplines. Moreover, while some are only exercises in chest-beating and triviality (e.g., authors miffed at unfair reviews of their books) many others can be quite productive. For example, *American Anthropologist* devotes a good thirty pages each issue to "Commentaries" on topics raised in previous issues of the journal; the AAA Newsletter routinely publishes dozens of letters annually, usually addressing the Association's policies and practices. The Organization of American Historians' *Journal of American History* devotes about ten pages each issue to "Letters to the Editor," which usually includes replies. *PMLA* has a section called "Forum," often ten pages in length, in which individuals can comment "on articles in previous issues or on matters of general scholarly or critical interest"; the MLA Newsletter also has a "Correspondence" section.

Upon close inspection of folklore publications, however, we find little to compare with the above examples. There are often brief descriptive research notes in *Western Folklore*, *New York Folklore*, *Journal of Folklore Research*, and *Journal of American Folklore*, and once in a blue moon there is some sort of brief exchange or commentary in *JAF*, but nothing to match *AA*, *JAH*, or *PMLA*. The obvious place, of course, for an open forum in an AFS publication would be the AFS Newsletter; but the style and tenor of the Newsletter has never lent itself to stimulating serious dialogue. (At least the folk dancing illustration no longer graces the Newsletter front page.) Instead, the Newsletter (first issued in 1972) has limited itself to formal discussion of AFS affairs: meeting news; *JAF* editorial matters; award and grant announcements; book notices; a smattering of job notices; public sector projects; and general trivia (e.g., odd uses of the word folklore; interesting photographs; and signatures of the "great folklorists"). Only on rare occasions does the Newsletter print letters addressing concerns of the discipline and/or the society, although there have been some dandies: the Jones-McCarl exchange on occupational folklore; Null, Hunt, and Seitel on cultural conservationists; Rosenberg on academic and applied folklorists; and Noyes on the AFS Centennial celebration. Jack Santino's heroic effort to introduce a "Statement on Ethics" elicited but *two* letters (Cohen and Oring). The new inserts to the Newsletter, "Folklore Notebook," definitely show some promise towards the right direction, but there is still nothing proposed to encourage open dialogue.

So what is the problem? Certainly AFS members have things on their mind, if the recent questionnaire was any indication. Members seem quite concerned with employment in the profession; recognition of folklorists in public sector jobs and nonfolklorist occupations; public understanding of folklore; and AFS politics, including involvement in issues concerning wider American society. And judging by all the strident voices raised at the 1988 annual meeting, there is concern with more immediate matters as well, such as the recent brouhaha over *JAF* editorial policies.

Are folklorists afraid that intense internal debate will somehow appear to many of the uninformed as unnecessary feuding, and that such apparent dissension will hurt our reputation as a newly autonomous discipline, thereby stalling our progress into the university scene? Are some folklorists afraid of actually becoming a fully autonomous discipline, one that would have to make more concerted efforts at addressing and resolving serious issues such as ethics? (Ethics seems to be a particularly elusive issue. I've already noted the

weak Newsletter response to the proposed "Statement on Ethics"; I would add that no one, including students, ever responded in any way whatsoever to an editorial on ethics which I co-wrote in 1986 with Guntis Šmidchens in *Forum*.) Are academic folklorists so consumed with producing articles and books that will get them jobs, promotion, and tenure in non-folklore departments that they ignore addressing "the little things?" Are students so worried about the harsh realities of the scholarly arena that they save themselves for their long-term marriage with major journals? Or are students timid of entering into any possible fray and committing their thoughts to print because it is simply too difficult to contemplate the fragility of their own futures?

Why is there still so little critical discussion of public sector folklore issues? Have we even begun to adequately examine our roles in the politics of culture (i.e., will we go beyond Whisnant 1983; Feintuch 1988; and Kirshenblatt-Gimblett 1988)? Shouldn't folklorists—especially those in the public sector—be charging full force into the new public culture criticism (e.g., Appadurai 1988; Moore 1989)? Couldn't these issues be addressed—if only informally—in a forum such as Oring proposes?

Of course, any remarks regarding *why* we should have an open forum for improved communication within contemporary folklore studies will only be stating some pretty obvious things. Without question, such a forum could be useful for discussions of pedagogical concerns, or the kinds of ephemeral matters that rarely are discussed in articles but most certainly will be of interest to historiographers fifty years down the line. More importantly though, such a forum could be a valuable place to exchange thoughts and ideas on our very existence as folklorists, to outline tried and proven methods of surviving and even thriving in other academic departments or public sector jobs. Wouldn't most folklorists be interested in learning how others succeeded in discussing cultural performances, folk architecture, or occupational folklife *without* getting blank stares from their non-folklorist colleagues? Visions of post-modern departmental changes dancing in our heads must be shared visions, not sheltered from view, for many could benefit from them.

As Dorothy Noyes points out so eloquently in a recent AFS Newsletter (February 1989), folklorists in the academy must speak out ever so much more forcefully in the age of Bloom and Bennett and their tribe of adherents. William Wilson echoes that sentiment, noting that "we folklorists ought to be doing a better job of defending the legitimacy of our discipline and arguing for its primacy in the humanities curriculum" (1988:157). Folklorists today should be at the

very heart of the current "cultural studies" movement, yet we are frequently forgotten as potential major players, invisible to all but a few of our peers. In his wonderful discussion of the chaos that is called "American Studies," Giles Gunn (1987) mentions not a single folklorist (Geertz excluded); sadly, Gunn is not alone among the new cultural critics in his omission.

While we might heed Henry Glassie's warning (1983:148) about the dangers of becoming too absorbed in professional problems, and instead maintain a resolve to be "brave amateurs," I believe folklorists need to begin grappling with some tough questions regarding our sense of selfhood and our place within the humanities, the social sciences, and the public sphere. And, as the recent German-American conference here at Indiana University, "Folklore and Social Transformation," made clear to many, there is a considerable need to see ourselves in a more global perspective, challenging our own notions of folkloristic endeavor with those that exist abroad. Maybe it is even time to consider a truly international folklore publication, a folklore journal along the lines of *Current Anthropology*.

All of this is a long, belabored way of saying that I applaud Oring for reintroducing the idea of *Forum* being "a vehicle for much of what remains unsaid in our discipline," a place where folklorists can "respond in a timely and meaningful fashion" to forces and issues which other folklore publications simply are not accommodating. *Forum* can escape the hierarchical chain of journals, where publishing so often seems to be an acknowledgement of social differentiation within the profession, and instead serve a unique function in contemporary folklore discourse, something accessible to all those concerned. *Forum's* editors will need help—especially from the editors of other journals—in maintaining a steady flow of appropriate submissions; students, no matter where they are, simply are not tapped into the currents of voices and events as well as their elders. And, of course, *Forum* should not become simply a basket for AFS's dirty laundry, even if there are a few things that need to be washed and hung out to dry.

I don't want to overestimate the potential transformative power of a *Folklore Forum* reading experience, but then neither do I want to sell it short. *Forum* just might become essential reading—if enough folklorists feel they have something to say.

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