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Material Culture and Heritage Studies Laboratory

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COLLEGE OF ARTS AND
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**DEPARTMENT OF FOLKLORE
AND ETHNOMUSICOLOGY**

Material Culture and Heritage Studies Laboratory

A Companion to Folklore

Edited by Regina F. Bendix and Galit Hasan-Rokem. 2012. Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell. 676 pages. ISBN: 9781405194990 (hard cover).

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The publication of *A Companion to Folklore* is a milestone for our field. For folklorists working in English language contexts, it will take a place alongside and, as a contemporary assessment, supersede older stocktaking-handbooks such as *Folklore and Folklife: An Introduction* (Dorson 1972). Distinguished editors Regina F. Bendix and Galit Hasan-Rokem have worked with a talented, international group of folklorists to produce a compelling, up-to-date survey of folkloristics. The volume is smart, optimistic, plural, and sophisticated.

The collection has been published by commercial publisher Wiley-Blackwell as a title in its Blackwell Companions to Anthropology series. This framework accounts for the volume's format, scope, and editorial approach. It also prominently positions folkloristics alongside subfields of anthropology (such as medical anthropology and linguistic anthropology) and prominent thematic nodes in that field (such as the anthropology of the body and cultural resource management). Being situated vis-à-vis anthropology in this way creates opportunities, and perhaps also difficulties, relative to various regional, national, historical, and personal framings of folkloristics as an autonomous discipline or inter-discipline. But as implemented, *A Companion to Folklore* will be immediately recognizable to folklorists of diverse perspectives, including those who understand the field as distinct from anthropology. The volume successfully engages with the concerns of literary, historical, and ethnological folklorists and also addresses public folklore in an integrative fashion.

A particular hallmark of the volume, beyond its combination of contemporaneity and historical awareness, is its internationalism. While every national or regional setting could not be addressed, the volume's Part II, Location, offers thirteen accounts of the history and present state of folklore research in a diverse selection of regional (e.g., Latin America, Oceania) and national (e.g., India, Finland, Ireland) contexts. While these chapters are a straightforward way of gathering in a diverse group of authors and perspectives, a welcome cosmopolitanism characterizes all of the volume's sections. The editors, central to numerous overlapping networks in international folkloristics, have made excellent use of their collegial ties. While I have not consulted all volumes in the Blackwell Companions to Anthropology series, it seems evident that *A Companion to Folklore* is an unusually international collection, one that reflects well upon the diversity and multicentrism of international folkloristics.

Although doing so would bring many rewards, few folklorists will likely read this 675-page volume from front to back. Its uses will likely be different. The chapters gathered in Part I, Concepts and Phenomena, provide broad, theoretically-informed accounts of key issues in the field (e.g., Poetics, Performance, Tradition) or generic areas (e.g., Material Culture; Myth, Ritual, Symbol). This section holds the chapters most likely to appear on graduate seminar reading lists and to be turned to as foundational building blocks in our new scholarship. While the authors here have consistently made an effort to fairly represent the diversity of the field and the complexities of its intellectual history and ambitions, the volume does not have the averaged-out quality of many reference works. As throughout the volume, the authors here generally communicate with us in recognizable, personal voices and make their own unique arguments about where we are and where we should be heading. The volume's authors very often extend, rather than just build upon, their earlier writings. I note with pleasure that, in the graduate program at Indiana University, *A Companion to Folklore* is a new staple on doctoral reading lists.

Following the international surveys presented in the large Part II, Part III, Reflection, complements the earlier theory, genre, and locational accounts with six chapters that are broadly thematic in orientation. These include treatments of "Folklore and Literature," "Folklore and/in Music," and "Cultural Heritage." As is true of the volume as a whole, these chapters are authored by leading figures who have already made major contributions to these areas. A final section, Part IV, deals with Practice in three chapters. One of these concerns the ethnographic study of present-day lives, another accounts for contemporary public folklore practice and advocates for its future, and a final chapter surveys the ways that the field is institutionalized around the world.

As Hasan-Rokem noted during a panel devoted to the volume at the 2012 American Folklore Society meetings, the editors worked hard to produce a volume that would extend, rather than close down, conversations in the field. They were clearly aware of the impossibility of complete coverage and of the downsides attendant in trying to achieve an approximation of it. A useful contribution to folkloristics for folklorists, the volume will also serve, as several commentators at the AFS event noted, as a very suitable introduction to the field for scholars active in neighboring fields who need to gain entry to folkloristic scholarship at a sophisticated level. This is the spirit of the Companions series as a whole. While it cannot escape the unevenness inherent in all edited collections, this is a volume that folklorists can be proud of and that they can enthusiastically share with both colleagues and serious students.

It is hard to imagine an active folklorist not engaging with *A Companion to Folklore*. The editors and authors are to be commended for their valuable contributions and for getting a volume of this scale and complexity into print within a brief enough timespan that the content could still seem fresh and contemporary. I feel confident that *A Companion to Folklore* will be a valued companion for many years to come.

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Coda. While folklorists can learn much from the volume's scholarship, *A Companion to Folklore* is also an object lesson in the complexities of contemporary publishing. The benefits accruing to folklore studies from having an impressive volume of this sort published in a major academic series alongside other volumes that are already go-to works in world anthropology are very real. This is a book that will generate positive attention for folklore studies and that will give our field enhanced legitimacy in neighboring disciplines and interdisciplinary areas. This is a book that will be noticed in a different way than would be typical of a similar work published with, for instance, an American or European university press.

At the same time, folklorists will be quick to notice the volume's list price of \$207.95 (USD). Most folklorists will want to own this book, but many will not be able to afford to. While there is some reasonable hope that a paperback edition will be forthcoming, it is crucial to understand that the volume is not meant to be only, or even primarily, read as a physical text. Students at elite universities will more often encounter fragments from *A Companion to Folklore* as online database content paid for as part of expensive licensing agreements for giant bundles of academic content, while scholars otherwise lacking access to the volume now have the ability to rent digital *à la carte* access to individual chapters for \$35 per 24 hour period (via Wiley Online Library). It is beyond the scope of this review to unpack the implications, some positive and some negative, of these transformations of scholarly publishing and its political economy. It is enough to note here that the project is a prominent instance for folkloristics, of the disaggregation and remediation of a once relatively stable form--the edited book. Books are increasingly a means to another, for publishers, more crucial end--the filling up of more economically viable/lucrative subscription databases. A print-text object is a bounded and stable object, one that is paid for only once, but that can only be read by one person at a time. A database is an open-ended, multi-user property that is rented rather than ever being owned by a library or reader. It can be improved upon constantly, but it cannot be loaned or bought in the used book market. Like electricity, water, or other utilities, commercially databased scholarship goes away when we can no longer afford the monthly bill and, for most potential readers, it will never have been accessible in the first place. The transformation of own-able books and print journal issues into rented data is one of the crucial facts of contemporary scholarly life. As a key example, *A Companion to Folklore* is worth thinking about seriously on more than one level.

One upside of this transformation is that it offers an opportunity to see more clearly than we otherwise would the open-endedness of a project such as that initiated in *A Companion to Folklore*. Scores more national surveys, for instance, stand waiting to be written and to thereby flesh out the account available in this volume. While Wiley-Blackwell may commission such works to further extend the folklore corner of their database, established journals in our field could readily pick up the work where Bendix and Hasan-Rokem have left off. Beyond the national and regional settings waiting to be accounted for, there are countless additional themes (e.g., social networks), genres (e.g., epic), and perspectives (e.g., applied folklore) that could be usefully treated in an ongoing program of disciplinary survey and assessment. *A Companion to Folklore* suggests the forms that such continued work could take. While it could be pursued in a range of ways, a dedicated editorial department in a major journal would perhaps be the easiest and best way to extend the accomplishment of *A Companion to Folklore*.

As a scholar committed to avoiding involvement in publishing projects with Wiley-Blackwell and other large commercial publishers, I focused my initial thoughts about this project on the downsides (Jackson 2011b). Having witnessed this firm's aggressive move into a position of considerable dominance in anthropology, I could not help but be fearful about this volume's status as Wiley-Blackwell's first foray into folklore publishing (Jackson 2011a). It may be the case that this volume is a fluke and that our field is too small and too wedded to other publishing approaches to be worth enclosing. If so, we will have gained tremendously through the one-time exposure that this high-profile, and intellectually rich, project will have provided us, as well as from the technical and political-economic lessons that it can teach us. These are among the upsides, for which I am very grateful. At a simple level, I am tremendously appreciative of the work undertaken by the editors and for the gift of a review copy, which I know I will be consulting constantly in the years ahead.

Works Cited

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