

Folklore and Communications: A Special Issue

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In the early months of our collective search for New Direction in Folklore, we discovered in each other a [range of interests](#) that far exceed traditional definitions of folklore. Folklore did not have a relevance problem, as many detractors had claimed; it seemed, rather, that folklore studies had a public relations problem. We were studying living, exciting, expressive culture all around us, some finding insights into the mind of contemporary America while others studied the world farther afield. Our methods were sound, our theories productive, and our debates lively.

Among our differences, we recognized a common denominator that bound us together: a more exacting definition of relevance than some in our field have used. Our work was relevant in the world outside of academia, in the public sector, and our work was relevant inside the academy, across disciplines. In folkloristics, precisely because it is so interdisciplinary, we had a powerful tool for understanding the world and ourselves by looking at expressive culture. So, in those early months we decided on a goal: to bring an understanding of the field of Folklore to a wider audience, including the many disciplines whose paths we cross in the academy.

This issue of the Impromptu Journal, I am proud to say, makes a first powerful step in that direction. Our three articles each approach a topic of interest in the field of communications--comic books, the spread of conspiracy theories, experimental film--and bring to those topics the broad range of approaches available to folklorists today. In [Folklore and the Comic Book: The Traditional Meets the Popular](#), [Amanda Carson Banks](#) and [Elizabeth E. Wein](#) begin with the quote, "What is the functional equivalent of the folktales and myths of the past in the technological and commercialized world of today? The answer is to be found in comic strips, movies and dime-store literature. It is to these that the folklorist must go if he wishes to avoid becoming antiquated." They continue by questioning the very foundation of the split in folklore scholarship that divides us: the cultural folklorists v. The literary folklorists, and determine, with Alan Dundes, that the study of folkloric influences in literature, including the literature of comic books, must be a study of culture. It is culture, they tell us, that keeps certain traditional motifs alive in the literature and lets others die. And in the popular literary form of comic books, we find a complex use of these motifs both in pictures and in text.

Tyrone Yarbrough begins his article, [Consider The Source: Conspiracy Theories, Narrative, Belief](#) with an analysis of the conspiracy theories that proliferated on the internet after the death of Princess Diana. By parsing the most complex of these, the Merovingian conspiracy, Yarbrough uncovers a deep and intricate history of belief in and explanation of conspiracies. He goes on to examine briefly a wide range of topics about which conspiracies have been widely theorized, and then critiques the most common scholarly "debunkers" who classify believers on conspiracies as paranoid and illogical. By demonstrating that many conspiracy theories fall into well known tale-types, Yarbrough moves us in a more fruitful direction, studying conspiracy

theory as folklore.

Few would intuit a connection between experimental film and folklore, but in [*"Something Rich and Strange: Technologies of the Sacred in Glassie and Greenaway,"*](#) [Liz Locke](#), takes us on a thoughtful mediation about life and finding beauty and the sacred in the post-industrial world. She rejects Fricke's depiction of the contemporary world as mad and out of control, and finds beauty, the sense of awe that is the sacred, in the culture she inhabits. In the artistic collaboration between director, actor, and the hundreds of participants in the making of the multi-media film *Prospero's Books*, Locke finds something "rich and strange" and sacred in its affirmation of beauty through contemporary technology.

These three articles engage materials that have recently come to be considered the province of Communication and Media Studies. But Folklore has been around much longer as a discipline, studying related phenomena and bringing to that study the insights of more than a hundred years of theory and method for the examination of artistic expression. As these articles show in their diverse ways, that depth of experience can unfold the hidden history of the most contemporary of expressions and bring to light the hidden cultural significance in even the most unlikely sources.

As editor, I stand in awe of our authors, who have brought to this first special issue of the *Impromptu Journal* such a depth of scholarly thought while opening their own hearts to give us rich personal insight. We've set a high standard here. I challenge you, the folklorists looking for a *New Direction in Folklore*: you won't find it--but you can make it happen by putting your work, and your heart, on the frontlines, as our authors have in this issue.

Bibliography

Brednich, R.W. "Die Comic Strips als Gegenstand der Erzählforschung," *Studia Fennica* 20 (1976): 230-240.

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New Directions in Folklore

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Camille Bacon-Smith is a folklorist and co-founder of [Newfolk](#) and [New Directions in Folklore](#). She has authored two scholarly books on the topic of popular culture and several novels in addition to a number of articles for both academic and popular press. She has a Ph.D. in folklore from the University of Pennsylvania.

Bibliography

- [The Goth Explosion in Science Fiction Culture](#) (article)
- [Pomofemmes Strike Back](#) (article)

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