

• *Notes* •

NewFolk Re...

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Editor's Note:

Tyrone Yarbrough is one of the founding members of NewFolk, and in this reflective note he chronicles his experience with co-founding the online community while offering a personal narrative that contextualizes New Directions in Folklore's origins.

In the summer of 1997, the online discussion group NewFolk was launched. Shortly after the forum began posting, the companion *Impromptu Journal* (later *New Directions in Folklore*) appeared, carrying articles by a distinguished, innovative, and underappreciated folklorist (David Hufford); a less-established, equally innovative folklorist (Camille Bacon-Smith); and myself, a recent Ph.D. recipient in folklore. We were, on the surface, quite different—a white male, a white female, and a Black male—with different research interests and emphases. What we had in common was our respect and passion for the undeservedly obscure field to which we found ourselves drawn. Camille Bacon-Smith developed the architecture for the site and contributed the idea of having a companion online journal. We reached out to people whom we thought would be interested, they responded, and the NewFolk community was born.

David, Camille, and I had often discussed the state of the field of folklore via the online forum, and we exchanged thoughts and ideas about what we thought was

wrong in folkloristics, what was good, and what should be done to improve things. For my part, I learned a great deal from these discussions with David and Camille, and I was certain that similar encounters were taking place in other places and spaces. That spirit of open critical exchange was one of the seeds for *New Directions in Folklore*.

During the first decade of NewFolk's existence, a visitor to the site would discover the online community or the accompanying journal; or a longtime lurker would chime in. The question asked was always the same: How did NewFolk get started? I would never reply when the question was initially posted. Instead, I would wait for another member to respond; after all, folklorists are accustomed to multiformity and variation, and I was curious to see how others participating on the list would answer. I would eventually respond if no one else did, and as others began to participate, the community continued to grow. The result became the standard back-and-forth within NewFolk and helped to inspire the subsequent content of the journal.

At its inception, NewFolk was meant to be a movement, an activist venture for folklorists to engage in an ongoing critique of folklore. More specifically, it was based on a distinctly nonlinear, nonhierarchical notion that offered an alternative to the way things were. It was (and still is) a place and a space for ideas and interests that were often ignored, trivialized, or marginalized. The goal was to see what would happen when an organization that was built to accommodate qualitative interactions between diverse participants in the field. The overall results of

NewFolk as a movement were varied. There were lows, such as the periodic fallow periods when NewFolk and *New Directions in Folklore* seemed abandoned and were often presumed dead. These periods were often punctuated by new peaks of activity and interest, interludes that saw bursts of energy, and brought forth rounds of discussion, only to see another long round of inactivity. This ebb and flow of activity, however, has been one of the paradoxical strengths of NewFolk and its organ; its participants never really gave up on it.

There were obvious highs, also, such as the journal, which saw the publication of timely, inventive, and original works from diverse scholars on subjects such as Columbine, September 11th, and military folklore. When John Dorfman's infamous "That's All Folks" essay appeared in *Lingua Franca*, the NewFolk Listserv carried some of the first rejoinders to the article. When Alan Dundes' concise and cogent "Folkloristics Redivivus" was denied publication in the pages of *Lingua France*, it found a place on NewFolk's homepage.

The listserv provided lively, often heated discussions of subjects rarely heard at AFS meetings, or seen in the *Journal of American Folklore*; it gave a forum to topics that were met with silence elsewhere. More important were the formation of friendships, both intellectual and personal, that would not have otherwise occurred. Indeed, NewFolk stands out as one of the first attempts by folklorists to make use of emerging information technologies to counter the longstanding notion that folklore was a parochial, antiquarian field.

A recent resurgence of activity has led to a reemergence and reorganization of NewFolk, and this new round of interest has seen the establishment of a new editorial board for the *New Directions in Folklore* journal. New people have stepped up to engage NewFolk in yet another round of intellectual exchange and research. A fresh spirit of activism can be detected in this iteration of NewFolk. And this is the purpose. NewFolk is meant to be an evolving project. It is meant to offer the opportunity to change, structurally, the field that many of us found lacking. It provided an opportunity for anyone interested enough to get involved to effect lasting and significant changes in folklore. Another thing that we folklorists know, despite our reputation for quaint antiquarianism, is that change comes. It does not come easily, and sometimes things get worse before they get better. Still, NewFolk and the journal, *New Directions in Folklore*, offer all those who are interested a place and a space to try something new.