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INTRODUCTION

The Value of Recursion

JEFFREY A. TOLBERT



Folklore is referenced constantly in both contemporary media and ordinary speech.¹ Advertising, films, literature, television, video games, and all forms of social media transmit folkloric content even as they communicate ideas about that content and its connections to actual lived experience, history, and culture. In these popular invocations, folklore often appears as old “customs” of various kinds, mystical and magical beliefs, and especially traditional narratives. Items of folklore are typically framed as clear and unproblematic reflections of regional, religious, ethnic, or national identities or as links to a largely forgotten but culturally or spiritually important past.

This book is an exploration of these uses of folklore, and it attempts to strike a balance between scholarly critique (popular uses of folklore can replicate problematic understandings of culture) and empathetic engagement (folklore is an important part of people’s lives, and their views of it deserve to be taken seriously). Accordingly, I begin this chapter with a glance at some specific cases that suggest, among other things, that folklore *matters* to people. It matters because it indexes qualities and concepts often perceived as absent from other areas of social life. By pointing out these ideas and connections, which lie at the heart of what we call the

folkloresque, I hope to illustrate their pervasiveness and vitality—and also, perhaps, some of their potential consequences.

Many popular uses of folklore are rather explicit. For example, HBO Asia’s horror television series *Folklore* (Anwar et al. 2018) draws on supernatural belief traditions from several Asian countries to tell frightening new stories. In a decidedly less horrific vein, during the Covid-19 pandemic, pop music megastar Taylor Swift released a surprise album, also titled *Folklore* (2020a), about which she tweeted, “I’ve told these stories to the best of my ability with all the love, wonder, and whimsy they deserve. Now it’s up to you to pass them down” (2020b). Swift’s tweet encapsulates the common understanding of folklore as stories, specifically, stories that are “passed down.” Aside from their focus on narrative, the shared name of these two wildly different popular works raises the question of what they could possibly have in common. Why should a pop album by a Western musician known for catchy, upbeat songs share a title with a violent, dark, frightening television series based on traditional cultures from East and Southeast Asia?² It seems unlikely that most audiences would note anything in common between the show and the album; yet the titles hint at something shared, however vaguely. So what does folklore *mean* here?

Other corners of contemporary mediated culture provide possible clues. In the retail world, a surprising number of businesses enlist the word *folklore* to suggest traditionality, “hand-madeness,” and “authenticity,” and also to highlight particular ethnic identities. An online retail platform called Folklore Connect claims to offer increased visibility to emerging clothing brands, which to join “must be based in an emerging market (Africa, South America, Asia, Caribbean, etc.) or be founded or co-founded by someone of a diverse racial background (a person of color or POC).” Folklore Couture is a wholesale fashion brand from Missouri that sells leather goods from India with the tagline “a little boho and a little boujee.” Supposedly among the customers of clothing manufacturer Folkwear are “individuals who want to reconnect with their culture.” Folklore and Tradition wants visitors to its website to know that it embraces “handmade items made from scratch to its last stitch.” With Folklore Surf—stylized as FLKLR—and Folklore Skateboards, the concept has made its way, at least superficially, into youth/sport cultures. And Folklore Gourmet Syrups are “created with the quality of European tradition.” Whatever else they may do, these examples suggest that the word *folklore* and its derivatives have considerable brand power.³

Of course, not all contemporary uses of folklore are so positively coded. I noted one “horrific” use of folklore above. A related example is the increasingly popular literary and filmic subgenre called *folk horror*, which positions “folk” cultures—usually represented by geographically isolated communities practicing mysterious customs from bygone eras—as sources of fear. Films like *The Wicker Man* (Hardy 1973), *Children of the Corn* (Kiersch 1984), and *Midsommar* (Aster 2019) exemplify this type of horror, which relies on “folk” traditions (here embodied in cults and sacrifices, “paganism,” and dark magic) to index its distance from what audiences imagine to be normal, modern life. Folklore and the “folk” in folk horror are icons of mystery and atavistic danger.⁴ Folk horror’s foregrounding of “folk” identities makes it worthy of special scrutiny by scholars. Simultaneously, the understandings of “folk” cultures it reflects tend to appear elsewhere in popular culture, horrific or not. I consider several more “horrific” examples below, as do Kimberly Lau, Paul Cowdell, Craig Thomson, and Paul Manning in their chapters (chapters 7, 8, 9, and 10, respectively) in this volume. This introductory chapter attempts to untangle the threads that unite these disparate “folk” media, thereby, I hope, illuminating the assumptions that somehow connect pop musicians and horror fiction, clothing brands and boutique food items.

FOLKLORESQUE RECURSION AND THE FOLKLORESQUE REGRESS

All these allusions to folklore, both the term itself and the things it connotes, are instances of what we have come to call the *folkloresque*. The folkloresque names those objects, processes, narratives, and other cultural miscellanea that are worked into (or invented for) new media contexts specifically *because of* their seeming “folk” qualities. As emphasized in our previous volume (Foster and Tolbert 2016), the folkloresque embraces the diversity and creativity of folkloric adaptations and new folklore-like creations in various contexts; it is a critical but nonjudgmental term. Far from a recapitulation of concepts like fakelore and folklorism (Foster 2016b, 8–10), the folkloresque enables us to begin to understand how folklore and its related concepts—for example, tradition, heritage, legend, myth—are invoked in non-scholarly contexts and the various ways new cultural products perform their connections to existing folklore. Michael Dylan Foster’s (5) original definition emphasizes this performative aspect

while privileging the performer's understandings over scholarly ones: "Simply put, the folkloresque is popular culture's own (emic) perception and performance of folklore." The present volume continues in this spirit, further exploring the folkloresque as a category of expression that is concerned, first and foremost, with how folklore or its likeness is incorporated, reworked, adapted, and reconstructed in new contexts. But this volume expands the scope of these explorations by considering a broader range of popular invocations of folklore, including those that are not explicitly commercialized—and, the editors hope, by demonstrating the utility of the folkloresque concept beyond the academic discipline of folkloristics.

Part of this expansion requires that we break down the divisions on which the folkloresque seems to depend. Foster (2016b, 4, original emphases) previously emphasized the folkloresque's value as "a heuristic tool," one that "encourages us to reenvision categories such as *folklore* and *popular culture*, to explore how they mutually influence each other, and to productively problematize distinctions between them." This capacity of the folkloresque to problematize is crucial. The re-envisioning Foster calls for means understanding that the vernacular (everyday, ordinary) cultural processes that we (scholars) think of as characterizing folklore are active in all cultural contexts, including those usually marked as *popular/mass* culture.

The -esque suffix seems at first glance to reify these distinctions rather than challenge them: the folkloresque is like folklore—it is like ordinary, lived culture—but it is *not* ordinary lived culture. And yet, as we will see, the folkloresque in fact subverts this seeming polarity by flowing between the very poles it appears to reestablish. Its shifting boundaries depend, in the initial encounter, on a sense of being similar to, related to, or connected to folklore, whatever that term designates. It begins life as one component of something else: the inspiration for a film, a minor plot element in a graphic novel, a nebulous aesthetic of "authenticity" tying a consumer product to a well-known traditional handicraft. The folkloresque in fact trades in appeals to authenticity, depending on a relation or similarity to "real" cultural forms that themselves have value because of their traditionality. As Regina Bendix (1997, 8) notes, "Once a cultural good has been declared authentic, the demand for it rises, and it acquires a market value." Yet by acknowledging the perspectives of the people involved, we believe the folkloresque serves to rehabilitate the badly damaged notion of authenticity by locating it "within the minds of the participants in

popular culture” (Tolbert 2016b, 37) and recognizing that it has real-world value, economic as well as cultural and emotional.

Deployed in popular contexts, the folkloresque is marked as different from other cultural products by its discernible (if not always explicit) associations with the traditions it is made to resemble. Not all movies are folkloresque; a folkloresque movie is one that adapts (or invents) something understood as *folklore*, that is, one that makes use of folklore in a recognizable way. *The Blair Witch Project* (Myrick and Sánchez 1999), for example, resembles the real-world legend of Moll Dyer, wrongly accused of witchcraft and exiled from her southern Maryland community in the seventeenth century.⁵ The film “looks like” folklore, both visually (e.g., the frequent appearance of the iconic and ominous stick figure) and in terms of its narrative content. It also features characters who are explicitly studying local (fictional) folklore, with its central focus on the legend of Elly Kedward, the Blair Witch. But the film itself is not folklore, and the legend at the heart of its narrative is an invention of the filmmakers (Meslow 2015).⁶ More recently, *The Witch* (Eggers 2015) is not just a film about supernatural happenings in Puritan New England; it is explicitly subtitled *A New-England Folktale*. Folklore is apparently present both in the film’s content, and, somehow, in its form—and the subtitle suggests that audiences are expected to recognize this.

Yet it is important to emphasize that the folkloresque does not name a *thing* rigidly divided from other *things* but rather designates one part of, or better, one moment in, an ongoing process of cultural movement. There is always the potential for the folkloresque, which is initially based on but distinct from vernacular culture, to overcome that separation. Once the folkloresque is taken up and used by people in ordinary cultural expression and interaction—for example, when it influences subsequent tellings of a traditional story or serves as the basis for a totally new storytelling tradition—then it has shed the *-esque* suffix and become the thing it was made to resemble. Whether it does so by looping directly back into the tradition(s) it originally referenced or by serving as the foundation for new traditions, the folkloresque is always able to become folklore. This potential is always theoretically present, even if it goes unrealized in practice.

The cultural movements I am describing speak to a kind of recursion, a returning to or re-calling, that characterizes much of what we call folkloresque. This is evident in the looping-back motion of the folkloresque into

folklore (and vice versa); it is also present in the feeling, often expressed in contemporary media, that folklore harks back to a better experience of cultural life, one more authentic and pure. This feeling is what I call the *folkloresque regress*. The use of the noun *regress* here is strategic, intended to highlight the assumption that the past and its culture(s) were somehow better and the (usually implicit) desire for that lost past. Its intent is not derogatory, yet the folkloresque regress does gesture to the romantic underpinnings of many folkloresque forms. (In pointing out these underpinnings, I build on the work of previous scholars who have likewise observed that non-scholarly understandings of folklore are generally outdated from a disciplinary perspective.)⁷ The folkloresque regress acknowledges this but also emphasizes the folkloresque's creative backward gaze, one that may be ahistorical but nevertheless speaks powerfully to the present (Tolbert 2016a, 139–40; cf. Magliocco 2014). The folkloresque is often about re-mystifying the world (sometimes explicitly), a critical-creative process that demands further scholarly attention.

The question I initially posed—what does folklore *mean* in popular usage—has no singular answer. But the possible answers that begin to emerge when we consider specific popular works do suggest certain patterns. One such pattern is this assumed connection to an imagined past, the deliberate resituating and revaluing of things felt to be forgotten or lost. The folkloresque speaks, in other words, to nostalgia, long of interest to folklorists and other cultural scholars. As Ray Cashman (2006, 137–38, 148, 152) has argued, nostalgia can be both “critical”—reflexively evaluating the present in terms of the past—and “future-oriented,” that is, concerned with the building of a future world that resonates with “a yearned for past.” Foster (2009, 177) has similarly argued for nostalgia's critical potential, which can serve as a “productive stimulus toward a future that incorporates ideals without ignoring the realities of the present.” Dace Bula (2016, 227–28) has amplified the argument for a revised understanding of nostalgia, noting that “nostalgia is not a scholarly invention. It is a rhetorical, interpretative, and productive cultural practice, a popular means for reacting to and coping with the change and loss endemic to the human experience of living.”

Like nostalgia, the folkloresque regress may be utilized to critique or celebrate both present and past. Yet from a scholarly perspective, it complicates the idea of the past by raising questions about *whose* past it is.

Who are the “folk” whose traditions, whose *lore*, inspires the folkloresque? Are they drastically Other? Are they our “ancestors,” our forebears, whose cultures have come down to us in decontextualized fragments? The folkloresque regress looks past the nostalgic realm of idealized personal pasts to imagined collective ones, often extremely distant and disconnected from personal experience. These connections, the endless recursion of the folklore-folkloresque dynamic, are complicated. The flow of one into another is not easy to document, and the feelings evoked by these terms are not easy to articulate. This book is an attempt to clarify these rather muddy waters by understanding how creators and audiences of popular expressive forms define their own relationships with the concept of folklore. The remainder of this chapter attempts to sketch a map of the circular flows of production/performance, consumption/reception, and creation/re-creation that characterize the folkloresque. As will become clear, the folklore-folkloresque continuum is defined by motion.

FOLKLORIC FLOWS AND MÖBIUS MEDIA

I noted above that the folkloresque names a “moment” in an ongoing process. This moment is the creation of a new expressive form that self-consciously incorporates/adapts/invents/mimics elements of “folk” culture(s). Yet because the ideas in play in this initial moment are themselves so indeterminate—What criteria establish something’s “folkness?” On whose authority? How is the “authenticity” of folkloric forms affected by their mediatization?—the folkloresque is always on ontologically shaky ground. In disciplinary terms, folklore is characterized by its existence in multiple versions/variants (Dundes and Pagter 1992, xx–xxi). If we accept that popular media can adapt folkloric materials into new versions, then isn’t the folkloresque participating directly in the process of folklore? If a character in a Hollywood blockbuster sings a traditional ballad, is that fixed, fictional, diegetic performance “part of” real-world folklore? What does that being “part of” mean, in concrete terms? And how would we document and analyze this new addition to the folk “canon?” Clearly, on one level, the folkloresque raises as many questions as it answers. As a heuristic, however, this shakiness is precisely what makes the folkloresque effective, what gives it power to illuminate—if not disentangle—the complex entanglements of the various cultural modes in which we all participate.

In this book, we represent this shakiness, this indeterminacy, with the symbol of the Möbius strip. Previously, Foster (2016a, 42) argued that the connections between folklore and the folkloresque “ultimately work in a Möbius-strip-like fashion, so that today’s folkloresque may become tomorrow’s folklore, which in turn supplies the folkloresque of the day after tomorrow.” Borrowed from mathematics, a Möbius strip is characterized by having “only one side: we can go from any point on one side of the strip to any point on the ‘other’ side along a continuous path, without ever penetrating the surface or going over its edge!” (Maor 1987, 139). When we look at a Möbius strip from our ordinary, limited perspective, it can appear that it consists of two opposing surfaces or that any point along its (single) edge can stand in “opposition” to another, in the sense of being literally on opposite sides. In reality, though, the strip is a single, continuous surface, unbroken and unitary. There is only *one* side, and the ordinary polarities with which we are accustomed and in which it seems to take part—top and bottom, front and back, beginning and end—are illusory, limitations imposed by our three-dimensional thinking. A Möbius strip therefore becomes an emblem of infinity, a single surface infinitely (self-)connected and endlessly recursive. *Möbius Media* thus gestures to the interplay of popular/mass and traditional/vernacular cultures, which exist not in opposition to each other but in a state of constant creative tension and connection. They are, in fact, on the same “side” of things, even though they sometimes appear not to be.⁸

Some aspects of the Möbius dynamic are familiar to scholars. It goes without saying, for example, that commercialized (or otherwise recontextualized) forms of folklore enter into lived culture in various ways. As Linda Dégh (1994, 1) pointed out long ago, when folklore reappears in mass-mediated contexts, it still bears the traits that mark it as folklore. Dégh was at pains to show how mass media aids in the transmission of variants of folklore texts. Examples of such transmission might include published collections of folk narratives or newspapers reprinting contemporary (“urban”) legends. Dégh suggested that contemporary media not only transmit folklore but also affect people’s understandings of and engagements with it (24). She goes on to argue, “It is not enough to recognize that mass media play a role in folklore transmission. It is closer to the truth to admit that the media have become a part of folklore. Interacting with oral repetition, they may constitute the greater part of the folklore conduit” (25).

Certainly, the entextualization, decontextualization, and recontextualization of cultural texts (Bauman and Briggs 1990, 73–78) are normal, and indeed constitutive, parts of vernacular cultural expression. These processes refer, in sum, to the ways certain performances or discourses are made into “texts” that can be moved from one context to another. As *metadiscursive* processes, they reveal issues that matter to the people engaging in expressive acts, including the “differential values attaching to various types of texts” (76). Folkloresque media provide similar insights. As a form of metafolklore (Dundes 1966), the folkloresque offers implicit (and sometimes explicit) commentary on the meanings of folkloric expression. Its *meta* qualities also position the folkloresque within the rubric of *metaculture* as described by Greg Urban (2001). Urban is concerned with the movement of culture through time, describing metaculture as consisting of “native” judgments about the resemblance of new cultural forms to old ones (3).⁹ Importantly, as Alan Dundes (1966, 509) reminds us, “metafolklore is still, after all, folklore.” Likewise, Urban (2001, 3) notes, a meta-cultural form “could be studied by an outside observer as just another part of culture.” The folkloresque, which is always metafolkloric/metacultural, might also be interpreted as an extension of the folkloric materials on which it draws. The point here is that by distinguishing an expressive form from its “parent” category by appending the *meta*- prefix (or the *-esque* suffix), we are not necessarily excluding it from the phenomena it comments on. We *are* de-centering cultural texts as the focus of our inquiry, even though we may begin with them: the *meta*- aspect of cultural processes reminds us that the movement of cultural forms requires human agency. The Möbius strip of folklore-folkloresque interaction is not self-powered.

In a relevant recent work, Charles L. Briggs (2020, 82) describes the process of traditionalization as one “through which a broad range of cultural forms—not simply those explicitly commodified, popularized, or invented—are constructed so as to link them to the emergence of similar forms in the past.” Traditionalization, in Briggs’s view, infuses cultural items with “affects and patterns of expectation” regarding the items’ historical associations. He pairs traditionalization with mediatization, in which discourses are taken up into and help to shape media flows, which simultaneously construct and reconstruct aspects of the social worlds they mediate. Despite their seeming opposition, Briggs argues, traditionalization and mediatization “are coconstitutive” (82). The editors of the

present volume share this view, and indeed, Briggs's (2020, 81) project of "disrupt[ing] common perspectives on 'folklore and the media'" parallels our own. But where Briggs sees previous scholarly models of the folklore/media relationship—including the folkloresque—as reproducing problematic dichotomies such as popular/traditional (93), we argue that these dichotomies remain important on at least two levels. First, it is possible to point to meaningful differences in the production and dissemination of popular/mass materials versus the texts, performances, and other "products" generated within or emerging from vernacular culture—even as we understand that these contextual differences are, at most, temporary. As a continuum, the folklore-folkloresque relationship must be understood as dynamic, shifting, and flexible; but for purposes of analysis it can be useful to mark out starting points, even though they will inevitably be swept into the endless flow of creation and re-creation.¹⁰ The processes by which a novel is written and published, or a film is shot, edited, and produced, or a video game is coded; the contexts in which these processes occur; and the power dynamics structuring all of these moments in the creation and circulation of expressive forms are quantitatively and qualitatively different from the interactions between members of a nuclear family sitting down to dinner or school friends telling stories at a sleepover or gamers playing a video game together. In contexts of use, literary, filmic, or other popular cultural texts and processes may become parts of vernacular culture—but they do not begin there (cf. Dundes and Pagter 1992, xx–xxi).

Second, the attachment of the "folk" qualifier to new cultural expressions does mark them, from the perspective of both creators and audiences/consumers, as qualitatively unlike other forms. Folklore is generally thought (and felt) to be *different* from popular/mass culture; as a result, it is *valued* differently. A folkloresque film is significant to most audiences precisely *because* it is a specific medium (a film) that adapts a different medium (e.g., an oral narrative) and thus translates and transforms it, bringing content understood as "folkloric" or "traditional" into the world(s) of popular media—which are often felt to be distinct from, even inimical to, the *folk* worlds from which their source material comes. Often, a key quality of folkloresque works, as we have already seen, is a feeling of *distance* from the quotidian world of its audience, whether spatial, temporal, or cultural.