

# American Folklife

American Studies 6561/Anthropology 6561

Fall 2013 Thursday, 6:10-8:00

American Studies Building [2108 G. Street] Room P201

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**American Folklife** (and its related category, folklore) spring from and embody an astonishing array of cultural groups and artistic forms: African folktales and Chinese ghost beliefs, Irish songs and Cajun food, Native myths and Mayan weavings, Kansas barns and Georgia jugs, ancient old-country recipes and the latest and most bizarre urban legend. In this course, we will discuss some of the groups that we call "folk," some of the contexts that we call "life," and some of the expressive traditions that we call "lore." We will discuss how these traditions originate, how they develop over time, and how they become part of - or remain separate from - mainstream popular culture. We'll talk about how people use folklife in different cultural spheres, including libraries, festivals, and museums. Along the way, we will raise important questions about the meanings that folklife holds for cultural groups and for individuals.

## TEXTS

The Books listed below are online at the GWU Library. We will not read the entirety of each book, but a good portion of each.

Bendix, Regina and Galit Hasan-Rokem, ed., *A Companion to Folklore*

Feintuch, Burt, ed., *Eight Words for the Study of Expressive Culture*

Baron, Robert and Nicholas R. Spitzer, ed., *Public Folklore*

Bauman, Richard, ed., *Folklore, Cultural Performances, and Popular Entertainments*

Burrison, John, *Southern Folk Culture*

There are also a number of academic books in folklore and folklife freely available via the Folklore Commons and Open Folklore. Use the links below to find them. In the case of the Walls and Schoemaker book, I will upload it to Blackboard:

Blank, Trevor J., ed., [\*Folklore and the Internet: Vernacular Expression in a Digital World\*](#)

Brady, Erika, ed. [\*Healing Logics: Culture and Medicine in Modern Health Belief Systems\*](#)

Goldstein, Diane E., Sylvia Ann Grider, and Jeannie Banks Thomas: [\*Haunting Experiences\*](#)

Griffith, James S. [\*A Shared Space: Folklife in the Arizona-Sonora Borderlands\*](#).

Lau, Kimberly J., Peter Tokofsky, and Stephen Winick: [\*What Goes Around Comes Around\*](#)

Narvaez, Peter, ed., [\*Of Corpse: Death and Humor in Folklore and Popular Culture\*](#)

Walker, Barbara, ed., [\*Out of the Ordinary: Folklore and the Supernatural\*](#)

Walls, Robert E. and George H. Schoemaker, ed., *The Old Traditional Way of Life*

Other readings will be assigned from journals to which you have online access, or distributed directly by the professor. Articles to be distributed directly are marked by an asterisk (\*) below.

## **LEARNING OUTCOMES:**

As a result of completing this course, students will be able to:

1. Knowledgeably discuss folklife and folklore, and their importance in contemporary culture
2. Discuss or demonstrate several major approaches to studying folklife, and many of folklife's genres
3. Document folklore and folklife through fieldwork and ethnography
4. Design and implement a research project studying folklife in its historical or contemporary context
5. Critically analyze, give advice or consultation about, and practice the use of folklife in different cultural spheres, including popular culture, libraries, festivals, and museums.

## **GRADING**

- Attendance and Participation (25 %)
- Response papers (10 %)
- Short project (25 %)
- Final Project (40 %)

## **CLASS POLICIES**

**Attendance policy:** As a student you are expected to attend class unless you have an emergency or a serious conflict with an important life event. Whenever possible, you should inform me in advance if you have to miss class. If you do miss class, you are responsible for understanding what was covered on that day, and for this reason I recommend you have phone numbers of a few classmates you can call upon to fill you in. Participation is graded on the scale described above.

Late work may be accepted, provided that it is late because of a genuine emergency. At my discretion, I may lower your grade on a late assignment. Each situation is different, so your fate will depend on how late it is and how good your excuse is!

This course is intended to be a seminar. This means that it is primarily about discussions, not lectures. I will sometimes lecture, but most of our class sessions will be spent in discussions, taking the required readings as our starting point. Each student is expected to complete the readings and come to class ready to participate. To ensure productive discussions, I'd like students to have thoughtful questions and comments prepared in advance. For this reason, each meeting requires a 1-2 page response paper, except the days our major projects are due. The response papers themselves will factor into your grade, but only in aggregate. The main criteria for judging them are (1) that you took them seriously and that (2) your comments and questions show that you read and thought about the readings. You will keep your response papers with you as notes and prompts during class and turn them in at the end of the meeting—so think of them as notes intended to prompt discussion.

There are two other written assignments. In the first, you will document folklife through audio recordings, photographs, drawings, artifacts, and/or notes, creating a collection of folklife documentation. You may choose any community, any genre, or any combination to document: woodworking among Chinese-Americans in Washington, D.C., for example, or spiritual beliefs in Alcoholics Anonymous. In the second, you will create an interpretive frame in which to present your collection. The most obvious is a research paper in which you analyze and interpret the material, but other formats are possible: a museum exhibit design, for example, or a grant application or course proposal. If you have an idea of a way to show your collected materials and your original thinking about them in the context of previous research by others, let me know! More detailed descriptions of the two written assignments will be distributed after the professor knows a little more about you as a group.

# Course Schedule

## August 29: Folklore and Folklife

An introduction. We'll go over the syllabus and reading list, get to know each other, and talk very generally about folklife.

## September 5: Concepts from the Field

Today we'll talk about some crucial elements of the field of folklife: Text, Context, Tradition, and Fieldwork

**Read:** "Text," "Context," and "Tradition" from Feintuch  
Dundes, Alan: "Who are the Folk" and "What is Folklore" \*  
Bronner, Simon: "Exploring American Traditions: A Survey of Folklore and Folklife Research in American Studies" *American Studies International*, Vol. 31, No. 2 (Articles Plus)  
Yoder, Don: "The Folklife Studies Movement"\*

Begin looking at "Folklife and Fieldwork" <http://www.loc.gov/folklife/fieldwork/index.html>

## September 12: Group, Ethnicity, Region, and the Social Base of Folklife

One of the concepts most central to the study of folklore is that of the group. Folklorists are often studying the expressive traditions of a given community, be they young Hmong women or elderly gay men. In this meeting, we will discuss the importance of various group memberships as ideas about ourselves and about others. These ideas are shaped by, and in turn shape, our expressive folk traditions, and we will consider their importance to those traditions.

**Read:** "Group," "Identity" from Feintuch  
"The Social Base of Folklore" in the *Companion*  
Griffith, James S.: "Introduction: A Fence in the Desert" and "Respect and Continuity: The Arts of Death in a Border Community" in *A Shared Space*.

## September 19: Occupational and Regional Folklife

Two of the important types of folk groups that carry folklore are the regional group and the occupational group. People who live in the same area or share the same job also carry a shared frame of reference and a shared set of needs that lead to the creation of rich folk cultures. We'll talk about these kinds of groups today.

**Read:** "Work and Professions" in the *Companion*  
McCarl, Robert: "Occupational Folklife: A Theoretical Hypothesis" *Western Folklore*, Vol. 37, No. 3, (Jul., 1978) (Articles Plus).  
Green, Archie: "At the Hall, In the Stope: Who Treasures Tales of Work?" *Western Folklore*, Vol. 46, No. 3. (Jul., 1987) (Articles Plus)  
Winick, Stephen: "You Can't Kill Shit" in *What Goes Around Comes Around*

## September 26: Small Verbal Genres

Folklorists examine not only what we say but how we say it. Folk Speech includes regional dialect speech, which can vary in accent, vocabulary and even grammar, as well as occupational jargon and in-group speech patterns of social folk groups. We'll talk about this, and also about short poetic and gnomic genres such as the proverb and riddle.

**Read:** "Proverb," "Riddle," "Speech Play," "Insult," "Gossip" in Bauman.  
Mieder, Wolfgang: "Old Wisdom in New Clothing"\*  
Pralhad, Anand: "Fire, Corn, and Pots"\*  
Lau, Tokofsky, and Winick: "Introduction" in *What Goes Around Comes Around*

### October 3: Longer Verbal Genres

Today we will examine some of the longer verbal genres of Folklore, including myths and folktales, two classic “prose narrative” genres—although, as we’ll see, they’re not always recounted in prose. We’ll discuss what distinguishes these genres, and how they have become the basis of much mythic literature and film, from the *Iliad* to *Star Wars*.

**Read:** “Myth, Ritual, Symbol” from the *Companion*

“Folktale” from Bauman

Ramsey, Jarrold: “The Wife Who Goes Out Like a Man, Comes Back as a Hero,” *PMLA*, Vol. 92, No. 1 (Jan., 1977), pp. 9-18 (Articles Plus)

Gould, Stephen Jay: “[The Creation Myths of Cooperstown](#)”

Jorgensen, Jeana. “Innocent Initiations: Female Agency in Eroticized Fairy Tales.” *Marvels & Tales* 22.1 (2008) (Articles Plus)

### October 10: Musical Folklife

Like other forms of folklore, folk music genres and styles carry great meaning within various cultural groups. We’ll talk about what “folk music” means to most modern people, discuss some song forms and styles in American folk music, and examine living folk music traditions.

**Read:** “Folklore and/in Music” in the *Companion*

“Ethnomusicology” in Bauman

Winick, Stephen: “[The World’s First ‘Kumbaya’ Moment](#)”

Spitzer, Nicholas: “Cultural Conversation” in *Public Folklore*.

### October 17: Folk Architecture

Folk or vernacular architecture refers to the ways in which folk communities use space and containers for space such as houses, barns, and even boats, for living our lives. I will be in Providence for the American Folklore Society meetings. I will try to find someone to give a guest lecture...stay tuned!

**Read:** Glassie, Henry: “Vernacular Architecture and Society” *Material Culture*, Vol. 16, No. 1 (Spring 1984), pp. 4-24. (Articles Plus)

Marshall, Howard Wright. “The Sisters Leave Their Mark” in *The Old Traditional Way of Life*

Lund, Jens: “Nomadic Architecture” in *The Old Traditional Way of Life*

Primiano, Leonard: “Bringing Perfection in These Different Places”: Father Divine's Vernacular Architecture of Intention *Folklore*, Vol. 115, No. 1 (Apr., 2004), pp. 3-26 (Articles Plus)

**NB: Your First Paper (the Collection Assignment) is due Oct. 17 by email or blackboard.**

### October 24: Belief Traditions and Medicine

Our beliefs about both the natural and the spiritual world are very much bound up with our notions of health, disease, and healing. We’ll explore those connections this week.

**Read:** Hufford, David: “Beings Without Bodies” from *Out of the Ordinary*

Hufford, David and Bonnie O’Connor: “Understanding Folk Medicine” from *Healing Logics*

Jones, Michael Owen and Patrick A. Polk: “Invisible Hospitals” from *Healing Logics*

Lloyd, Timothy: “Folklore, Foodways, and the Supernatural” in *Out of the Ordinary*

Howard, Robert Glenn: “Crusading on the Vernacular Web: The Folk Beliefs and Practices of Online Spiritual Warfare” in *Folklore and the Internet*

### October 31: Legends and the Supernatural (Halloween)

Since we’re meeting on Halloween, we’ll discuss supernatural beliefs and the stories that reflect them.

**Read:** Goldstein, Grider, Thomas: “The Usefulness of Ghost Stories” in *Haunting Experiences*

Kingston, Maxine Hong: “[No Name Woman](#)”

Addams, Jane: “[The Devil Baby at Hull House](#)”

Brunvand, Jan Harold: “New Legends for Old” and “The Hook and Other Teenage Horrors.”\*\*

## **November 7: Cultural Heritage, Intellectual Property, Folkloristic Ethics**

One of the most important ongoing debates in the world of folklife is: who owns it? Individual acts of folk creativity are, as we have seen, the product of individuals. They are also the products of communities and traditions that transcend the individual, so we can say that they are community property. But which community? Can a traditional African-American design from Georgia be claimed by Georgia? By African-Americans? By the United States? We will discuss some of these issues in today's class, as well as issues of ethics in cultural work.

**Read:** "Cultural Heritage" and "Cultural Property" in the *Companion*

Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, Barbara: "[World Heritage and Cultural Economics](#)."

McCarl, Robert: "Public Folklore: A Glimpse of the Pattern that Connects" in *Public Folklore*

Proschan, Frank: "Fieldwork and Social Work" in *Public Folklore*

## **November 14: Furniture and Textiles**

Material Culture refers to the physical objects and spatial arrangements that make up our culture, from cities and houses to buttons and bobby-pins. Today we'll discuss a few of the most-studied categories of material folk culture, furniture and textiles.

**Read:** "Material Culture" from the *Companion*

Carter, Thomas: "Spindles and Spoon-Racks" in *The Old Traditional Way of Life*

Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, Barbara: "Objects of Memory: Material Culture as Life Review"\*

Pershing, Linda: "'She Really Wanted to Be Her Own Woman.' Scandalous Sunbonnet Sue."\*

## **November 21: Art and Craft, Foodways**

We have discussed the artistic dimension of folk cultures already, but today we will discuss "folk art" and craft traditions to see what they can tell us about culture. We'll also discuss food, one of the universal aspects of culture. Because all human groups need food, it is often central to our beliefs and practices in ways that we are not aware of.

**Read:** Vlach, John: "Quaker Tradition and the Paintings of Edward Hicks: A Strategy for the Study of Folk Art" *The Journal of American Folklore*, Vol. 94, No. 372 (Articles Plus)

Griffith, James: "Cascarones" in *A Shared Space*

Burrison, John: "Goobers, Grits, and Greasy Greens" and "The Journey of the Jug" in *Southern Folk Culture* (Articles Plus)

Gutierrez, Paige: "Cajuns and Crawfish in South Louisiana."\*

## **December 5: Ritual, Festival, and Celebration**

Ritual, Festival and Celebration are often large enactments that incorporate many of the genres we have been discussing: architecture, clothing, food, song, story, talk. We'll discuss the different ways communities can put it all together on this, our last day of class.

**Read:** "Ritual" and "Festival" in Bauman

Kugelmass, Jack: "Wishes Come True: Designing the Greenwich Village Halloween Parade" in *The Journal of American Folklore* (Articles Plus)

Wiggins, "Juneteenth" in *The Old Traditional Way of Life*

Stoeltje and Bauman: "Community Festival and the Enactment of Modernity" in *The Old Traditional Way of Life*

## **University Policies and Other Information:**

### **University Policy on Religious Holidays:**

1. Students should notify faculty during the first week of the semester of their intention to be absent from class on their day(s) of religious observance;
2. Faculty should extend to these students the courtesy of absence without penalty on such occasions, including permission to make up examinations;
3. Faculty who intend to observe a religious holiday should arrange at the beginning of the semester to reschedule missed classes or to make other provisions for their course-related activities

### **ACADEMIC INTEGRITY**

I personally support the GW Code of Academic Integrity. It states: "Academic dishonesty is defined as cheating of any kind, including misrepresenting one's own work, taking credit for the work of others without crediting them and without appropriate authorization, and the fabrication of information."

For the remainder of the code, see: <http://www.gwu.edu/~ntegrity/code.html>

### **SUPPORT FOR STUDENTS OUTSIDE THE CLASSROOM**

#### *DISABILITY SUPPORT SERVICES (DSS)*

Any student who may need an accommodation based on the potential impact of a disability should contact the Disability Support Services office at 202-994-8250 in the Rome Hall, Suite 102, to establish eligibility and to coordinate reasonable accommodations. For additional information please refer to: <http://gwired.gwu.edu/dss/>

#### *UNIVERSITY COUNSELING CENTER (UCC) 202-994-5300*

The University Counseling Center (UCC) offers 24/7 assistance and referral to address students' personal, social, career, and study skills problems. Services for students include:

- crisis and emergency mental health consultations
- confidential assessment, counseling services (individual and small group), and referrals

<http://gwired.gwu.edu/counsel/CounselingServices/AcademicSupportServices>

### **SECURITY**

In the case of an emergency, if at all possible, the class should shelter in place. If the building that the class is in is affected, follow the evacuation procedures for the building. After evacuation, seek shelter at a predetermined rendezvous location.