Folklore: A Discipline in Transition

Throughout the past ten years, ethnographic research and theory have been taking giant steps toward the path of greater understanding. Not only has folklore improved how we study people, tradition, and cultures, but there is a more humble sense of how we interpret our findings (Noyes 2008). This makes folklore a discipline that I am proud to be a part of, one that I am glad to claim as my profession. As I study this phenomenon, I have realized that with ethnographic study there is a tendency not to state that what researches discover as the ultimate understanding; it is merely one individual’s interpretation of the data, and one that can be re-interpreted, and built upon. With theory, the fears that have plagued the discipline are diminishing and ideas are coming from many new and exciting directions. Both aspects of folklore, ethnographic research and theory, are crossing disciplinary boundaries, enveloping new ideas that can help improve other areas of research and study.

Ethnographic Research as it Moves Forward

Folklore research and ethnographic study is changing, and I believe for the better. Many new ideas are beginning to be unfolded and research is being conducted in new genres. Technology is changing the field and how exactly we see our texts and what they entail. Education and folklore are creating a partnership that allows new generations of students to become interested in folklore at an early age. Folklore is expanding and other disciplines are beginning to recognize the potential in our methodologies; they are beginning to utilize them in their own areas of research. Ultimately folklore is moving to a more humble form in ethnographic study which allows us to be better practitioners of the people and their culture.
Some folklorists believe that in our modern society, “the folk are striking back” (Anagnostou 2006: 66). Most objects of representation were created by what were considered the dominant classes such as intellectuals, administrators, and academics. The lay individuals are increasingly becoming more in control of their own representation, and they are re-configuring themselves as the source of authority of their documented information. This is exhibited through what seems to be an explosion of ethnographies that have been written by nonprofessional ethnographers which Yiogous Anagnostu refers to as “Popular folklore” (Anagnostou 2006:68). To define this term more precisely, this trend occurs when people who were once considered anthropological subjects author their own ethnographies.

These popular ethnographies will ultimately direct attention to a methodical and investigative topic that has not always been at the forefront of study in either anthropological or folklore fields. This new type of ethnography invites these disciplines to embrace these types of texts such as auteothnographies, memoirs, novels, popular ethnographies, films, and documentaries. The author states that ethnographic practitioners need to expand their reading material and sources to texts that go beyond the common literature of ethnographic study. This will allow further study of research to a wide range of genres that reflect social representation. Scholars from many different academic backgrounds will be able to capture the contents of ethnographic fieldwork and research as it shifts and changes within societies in many new forms (Anagnostou 2006). There are many new types of ethnographic studies that are examining different areas that may be of interest to folklorists. Gabriele Adowd is one example of the many that are taking ethnographic research to new levels. She examines how people often ignore the everyday of vernacular structure and how artists in the Midwest use these buildings to create and inspire their artwork (Abowd 2008).
In *The Trial Lawyers Art*, Samuel Schrager (2000) presents ethnography in a new perspective and context. He recognizes that it is difficult to convey the idea that folklore does not only exist in rural areas. It is through his presentation that he expresses that urban culture contains folklore as well. In the late 1980s, professional trial lawyers dressed in their suit attire, which is fitting of their profession, became an exhibit in the annual Smithsonian Folklife Festival in Washington D.C. This controversial matter was presented in a quite humorous fashion. The lawyers were placed next to the more commonly accepted notion of what folklore is; they were positioned next to wood carvers who were from New Mexico and moonshiners from Tennessee. Schrager makes the point that like other occupations in the United States, lawyers have folklore too. These law school graduates adequately demonstrated to the festival audience that like other members of the community, they are also bearers of tradition. The narratives that they learn in law school demonstrate occupational strategies that are used in the context of a trial. Techniques that are presented in the court system such as hand movements and gestures are often used to successfully sway a jury (Schrager 2000).

In *Other Peoples Stories*, Amy Shuman (2005) looks at the role that personal narratives play in the context of expression. She brings two important perspectives into light within the folklore discipline. First, she recognizes through her ethnographic research that individuals formulate their stories by referencing cultural models. Secondly, the viewpoint of the person telling a personal narrative or story references cultural models that they have been previously exposed to. She recognizes that some of these stories that have largely been unrecognized hold both folklore and ethnographic value within the dominant academic discourse. Through the narratives the researcher learns to listen for the research purposes but also to strive for a greater understanding of the people and the culture as a whole (Shuman 2005). Kirsi Haenninen (2010)
is currently examining narratives in a similar fashion. She is looking at the ideas of modern society and how this reflects narratives of supernatural encounters. The modern idea of success promotes the idea that an individual should have self-control and be self-sufficient; however, having a supernatural experience demonstrates a lack of these ideal characteristics. How these narrators organize their experience and how they explain their experiences to others reflects both their culture and their beliefs. Numerous techniques are employed to make the event plausible, and to show that the narrator is competent and not fanatical.

Folklore Within the School System

Folklore techniques have gradually been improving how we study people and their traditions. This is where folklore and education share a common ground of understanding. Folklorists, despite the national testing standards, budget cuts, and high stakes testing that is common in most school systems, strive to provide classes and programs that introduce their discipline to a younger generation. The purpose of this, according to Paddy Bowman (2006), is that it boils down to personal interests and passions. It is the belief that folklore has the potential to open doors to both teaching and learning that other disciplines may miss. Bert Wilson in the 2004 American Folklore Society plenary address says that “Folklore can help us to lean what it is to be human” (Bowman 2006:29). The theory, content and fieldwork methods of the discipline of folklore engage the young students in ways the build and enhance their skills. This allows for the discovery of family members, individuals in their communities, and even that they too are a vital part of a folk culture.

Bowman notes that when teachers take an introspective look at their own folklore, they often discover ways that they can effectively enhance their teaching and discover exciting new ways to learn about their students and their lives. This in turn allows for students to learn skills
of observing, interviewing, listening, and presenting their fieldwork findings for a class project. They gradually begin to understand that culture is a complex process that is combined with many different experiences and circumstances, all of which lead to a more meaningful definition of life. Folklorists today often collaborate with K-12 educators to accentuate the integration of folklore content and fieldwork methodologies. When the students and the community are the focus of the curriculum, this makes what folklore is and what it can accomplish an effective approach to any subject matter. Examples of successful integration of school themes and folklore methodologies range from weather stories project which combines science and folklore to kindergarteners collecting lullabies as a part of their music curriculum.

There are many educational trends that can be valuable resources for research that are present and currently being applied in the school curriculums. These include: situated learning, reflective practice and critical pedagogy, multicultural education, and service learning. These elements share a fundamental ground with the folklore discipline such as the use of content relevant to students, close observation and documentation of cultural expressions and processes, the study of power relationships, the preservation of voices in cultural groups, and the connection of generations of family traditions that are currently being passed on. Another example of how folklore can improve research and study within other disciplines is demonstrated by Doris Fair (2009). She examines how ethnomusicologists tend to study instruments. This form of research is often focused on the organological perspective which is concentrated on classification rather than description of the experience or event. Folklore material, cultural methodology, and analysis allow the scholar to examine specific musical instruments as tools. This includes how the item itself creates sound and its historical development within a culture.
Folklore and K-12 education are compelling partners for various reasons that are vital to the discipline. Bowman believes that it makes us better educators and that we learn from the teachers and students in numerous ways. Investigation of community cultures develops into a broader knowledge base, and this will create a larger audience for folklorists and folk artists. This connection will help to reduce the mistaken preconceptions of folklore within the general public. Studying folklore can diminish cultural assumptions and ethnocentrism, which will encourage tolerance. Folk Arts in Education in the Schools Movement (FAIE) practitioners and partners help to build a stable future for those academic and public sectors of folklore that ultimately gives students and professors knowledge and experiences that can ling generational data and strengthen community ties. This ultimately allows folklorist to preserve the invaluable texts that the discipline strives to identify, study, defend and hopefully maintain (Bowman, 2006).

Lynne Hamer (2000) also expanded on the notion of what ethnography can accomplish within the education and school sector. In her mind, FAIE suggests that the significance of what this program contributes could potentially be missed by readers who do not share a common understanding of the discipline of folklore. This includes information that is presented that discusses both theoretical and ideological implications. The work that has been accomplished within FAIE may still be dismissed as material that deviates from the real business of school or information that fails to address political and economic issues that comprise the accepted definition of adequate schooling. Hamer notes that, “reframing the body of our work with the discourse of contemporary multicultural education theory, and explicitly delineating the aspects of our work that make the study of folklore a potentially powerful tool for promoting instructional change, will challenge us to develop our work in important directions, and will
make the value of our work more readily apparent to significant numbers of teacher educators and teachers” (Hamer 2000,48). Hamer suggests that there are five predominate themes: (1) valuing nonprofessional, everyday artistic expressions; (2) instilling local and family pride; (3) challenging the authority of elite and popular culture; (4) recognizing "indigenous teachers" as authoritative; and (5) promoting collaborative action. These concerns are worth noting not because they will be theoretical news to folklorists but because they provide a starting place for describing in broad terms the theoretical and ideological commitments that folklorists have put into practice in school settings (Hamer, 2000). Ethnographic research is taking new perspectives in other way that relate to the theme of family pride. Cynthia Byrd (2008) has realized that diaries, scrapbooks, and photographic albums express artistic communication within the context of family groups.

_Folklore is Changing along with Technology_

Mikel Koven (2003) notes that in recent years folklorists have recognized the importance of examining popular cinema from several different perspectives. Through these texts, folklorists can accurately examine and trace the process of creating and demonstrating cultural expressions that are developed through mass media. One way to recognize this is through television advertisements which often appeal to characteristics of the products. Koven notes that, “The television commercial is the American adult equivalent of the folktale-for example, magical assistance, and promise of riches beyond our dreams” (Koven 2003:179).

Folklore studies in film and media identify motifs and tale types in popular films and on regular television programming. Some of these studies identify the folklore that is being used in their construction which Koven refers to as “motif-spotting” while others analyze the changes to the story’s meaning over time when they are transferred to other mediums. Fan ethnography has
also been a dominant player in the game of new ethnographic research. These types of cultural studies have adopted ethnographic methodologies from the social sciences, and this research is concentrated on issues of audience in an experimental sense as a counter development to the ideal sector-type research. The notion of the films being a fixed text is also being challenged as more research is conducted on these topics (Koven, 2003).

Matt Bradley (2008) examines how documentary film production can be used to form counter stories and how the act of telling a story becomes a conscious form of political activity. Lynn Gelfand (2008) discusses how folk narratives are being developed in new forms because of emergent technology and the effects of mass media. The new forms are not complementary with the long held oral and print forms of popular culture that have been formed within the field of folklore. Her work looks at how the impact of past development of technologies has had on narratives and how this affected their form and content.

**Ethnographic Research Today Defines Much More**

Steve Zeitlin (2000) recalls a moment that changed his life in which he met with Kenneth Goldstein in Logan Hall at the University of Pennsylvania. Kenneth described “the discipline as a religion and folklorists as its missionaries” (Zeitlin 2000:3). I believe that folklorists are indeed cultural advocates but not necessarily missionaries. Folklorists use ethnography as a form of cultural activism that concerns itself with bettering the lives of ordinary people. Zeitlin notes that, “We are concerned with the beauty of the ordinary…It is the out of the ordinary character and their presence, their connoisseurship and their talent that render the songs, dances, customs, and stories embedded in everyday life vivid and real” (Zeitlin 2000:5) How we demonstrate this understanding comes about in two predominant forms which he defines as expansive and delimited strategies. The delimited position carefully defines exactly what the field is and
simultaneously limits the field; it studies its own history, and meticulously gathers its resources. This position defends the fields from outside intruders. The expansive position explores other disciplines liberally and asserts in an informal way that the disciplines of arts and humanities can practice our field techniques and theories and that we have just as much justification to practice theirs; it attempts to form alliances between these fields. When this is successful, the boundaries, audiences, and resources of folklore can be expanded. When this measure is used incorrectly, the idea of the field may be promoted while the discipline may not be recognized (Zeitlin 2000).

Expansive and delimited strategies can be equally employed in both the academic and public sectors. Each approach seems to be effective in particular situations and in different circumstances. Often the two strategies will accompany one another to advance the foundational ideas of the field. The expansive and delimited strategies in a direct way can affect funding agencies and public programs. This could potentially result in positions and funding for folklore field research. Recently folklore ethnography has discovered that the work that is accomplished within the field is not just studying the “folk” but collaboratively working with them to achieve results that satisfy both the scholar and the interviewee. This has interesting implications and ultimately I believe it is the correct path to follow. Our research in folklore has to consider not only the people that we study but also the implications of our research. The folk are not ignorant, and now our studies are becoming more accessible to the very same individuals that we are researching. With their collaboration not only can we more adequately describe their culture and traditions, but we can represent them in a more appropriate fashion.

The AFS guidelines passed in 1988 titled “A Statement of Ethics for the American Folklore Society” were created for the purpose of clarifying the professional obligations of folklorists within the contexts of the public, the discipline, their students, and research sponsors.
This statement addresses important issues that need to be taken into consideration when dealing with, planning, and creating provinces of study within different cultures. Patricia Wells (2006) realized that ethnography is no longer a simple matter of research; it goes beyond that. The statement provides emphasis that ethnography is a complex issue that has consequences. How we describe a culture can have ramifications upon the author as well as the discipline itself. The statement makes the point when folklorists work with other cultures they must do whatever is necessary to not alter or change these traditions. The focus of the folklorist’s responsibility should be centered on the people that they are studying. They should honor these individuals and take their considerations seriously.

Wells notes that when we identify cultural groups as folk and attempt to interpret their culture and their way of life as traditional, we are imposing political, social, ethnic, and religious constructs of identity. These identities are often ascribed by outsiders because it is a rare occurrence that native individuals receive the opportunity to study their own culture in a true ethnographic sense. This causes the dominant society to reflect the relationship of a group or class as it is being compared to it. It is also true that cultural traditions can be potential assets that can be modified for monetary gain. This problem with studying cultures is a major issue not only within the field of folklore but also within other fields such as public policy, economics, community development, rural development, art management, tourism, and conservation studies. Wells states that, “culture and commerce are becoming increasingly intertwined. Globally, the commoditization of culture is a new form of late capitalism” (Wells 2006:7). Folklorists look at traditional forms of expression as a cultural production or a result of traditional processes in which their behavior is expressed. Tourism and art dealers regard the art as simply products—things that can be offered to consumers to create economic gain. Folklorists often use their
education and ethnographic skills to analyze community cultural resources and to develop surveys, engage in strategic planning, product and program development, and marketing and promotion (Wells, 2006).

Dorothy Noyes in *Fire in the Placa: Catalan Festival Politics after Franco* (2003) demonstrated extensively that communities and scholars can effectively work together when conducting ethnography. This book explores the Catalan festival in the form of contemporary ethnography. She presents the data in many layers which subsequently gives you several ways to look at the data and interpret it in your own way. Her writing is like a journey. She presents the material as if you are actually experiencing the festival, and you decide the outcome and the meaning of it. The work is very postmodern in that it is not searching for the ultimate truth and Noyes does not present herself as the authority on the subject. Noyes approaches her analysis in a way that goes beyond participant observation. She presents a strong emphasis on participation that is sensory related and one that she feels physically. She relates her observations to an internal sensory experience. She also makes the point that political processes effect the interpretation and representation of the festival itself (Noyes 2003).

I hope that through the examples that I have presented, I have made several points about the development of ethnography. To begin, folklore is conducting research in new genres. These studies are adapting and changing with the expansion of technology and the development of people. Ethnographic practitioners are expanding their references and resources to include new ideas and texts that were never considered to be folklore before, but that are undoubtedly just that. Occupational folk groups are being documented in new professions, individuals are examining narratives that tell both the peoples stories and the greater context of the culture itself. In education, folklore is creating new connections that help the general public to know and love
what folklore is. Through their appreciation of what we do, our discipline will continue to grow. Through these new bridges that we have crossed, we have gained access to a larger audience and more accessible resources to texts that we so deeply desire to preserve. Our discipline offers techniques to study people, culture, and humanity in general that can prove beneficial to other disciplines. We are crossing cultural boundaries to expand our knowledge base, to study new forms of life and tradition while promoting our humble postmodern way of promoting this knowledge. It is one interpretation of the data, and it can be improved on. Tradition adapts to changes and is molded into new forms with the passing of time. Folklore is studying, watching this metamorphosis, documenting it, and simultaneously trying to understand it.

We are studying media, the new forms of technology and how this affects culture and the people’s traditions which create societies. We are expanding our discipline while consciously being aware that it can’t be like the other sciences. We are more than that. Our guidelines are addressing new important issues that reflect a more humble approach to documenting tradition and people. Noyes’ work is the accumulation of all of these small steps into one framework. It is radical in that it finds the medium between interpretation and documentation. It does not define a complete and true theory of her research, but rather presents her findings in a manner that everyone can interpret in their own particular way. It continues with the tradition of ethnographic study, while improving the technique of documenting information in a culturally conscious form. Folklore is moving to a more humble form in ethnographic study and a better one. In all of its various changing forms folklore is everywhere and in the past we have just been too blind to see it, to know where to look for it; finally we are beginning to open our eyes.
Theory and Its Journey

A major issue within the discipline is the belief that we should focus on developing theories. This will present folklore as a more formal discipline, and some believe that if we do not create theories our discipline will fall on the already slippery slope in which we stand. Many of the people who have made the discipline what it is today share these fears and some believe that the creation of a grand theory will solve some of these insecurities. Others think it will create more issues than it will resolve. I do not believe that a grand theory is the right way to go simply because very few (if any) theories stand today that have not been rightly criticized in some form. How can we create a grand theory when we represent and document such large and diverse concepts as tradition and culture?

Charles Briggs (2008) also believes that folklorists should rightly reject grand theory; he is not stating, however, that theories should not continue to be produced. Through boundary work, debates will be generated that can renew disciplinary objectives and methodologies. Ethnography of speaking which utilizes folklore and performance approaches often stress theory in linking folklorists with anthropologists, linguists, and literary scholars to develop new analytic frames. One way that theory can be redefined is to document the practices of the vernacular theorizing that are excluded from the communities that are created by academic theorizing. There is a common ground that must be addressed between vernacular theorizing and theorizing the vernacular. Briggs wants to trace the intersections and exchanges that take place between them. This can be accomplished by examining performance and vernacular theorizing which can produce, circulate, and receive knowledge. Once academic and knowledge based practices developed by public folklorists are placed into this debate, this can generate new forms of understanding. What folklore can offer other disciplines will be crucial for the future of the
discipline. Creating knowledge bases across boundaries of other disciplines will generate fresh approaches to study within our own field.

Ultimately, he is arguing for the development of a broader community of theorists. Established links should be created through study and documentation to demonstrate how different theoretical communities produce knowledge, how discourses and practices move between them, and who receives recognition for the theories once they are constructed (Briggs, 2008). This will be the way that ultimately expands the network with folklorists. I do not agree that molding folklore into anthropology, cultural studies, performance studies, or cross-disciplinary programs would prove productive. It will diminish the recognition of authority that folklore has established for itself. On the other hand, I do believe that creating links with other disciplines will allow our field to grow and develop new areas of study and research.

Richard Bauman (2008) believes that the creation of a grand theory within folklore would be useless. This would create universal generalization, an a priori understanding and abstract notion of culture that would flatten the very elements and notions that make human study and existence interesting. Folklore does have a prevailing theory that follows the following guidelines: a conceptual frame of reference, a common engagement within the intellectual program that is coherent, it is based on a set of premises that acknowledge different societies and cultures that are derived from intellectual tradition. He defines this prevailing theory as the “philology of the vernacular.” This theory is text centered, and it is relativist, meaning that we realize that texts are expressions of cultures in which they were formed. You cannot study one without understating the other. Texts are formal, thematic and pragmatic. These characteristics make the text durable and sustainable but not subject to change across time and circumstances.
The study of philology of the vernacular provides important implications for the discipline by providing a basis to confirm and reaffirm that the field has been guided by a productive and durable program of intellectuals. It creates a base for new directions such as structuralism, performance studies, and intertextuality (Bauman 2008). This provides a vantage point on interests that need further exploration. This recognition of convergent interests creates advantages by pulling folklorists together by means of these common goals. The reflexive awareness of the problems that have followed the discipline creates a path for future directions to follow while creating alliances on a more informed basis thorough connections with other disciplines.

Some theorists simple believe that the reason that there is no grand theory in folklore is because American folklorists simply do not like theory, and they prefer to focus on the vernacular practice. Lee Haring (2008) sees the concentration of folklore in America moving away from abstract formulas to concrete interactions, ones that focus on human being themselves. Grand theory makes folklorists uncomfortable because they have studied lower tiers of society specifically ones that they come to recognize, appreciate, and hold dear. Folklorists practice methodologies that mediate between theory and method which holds truth in thoughtful investigation (Haring 2008). From this notion, Dorothy Noyes developed the humble theory. I believe that this is one of the discipline’s strongest traits. Folklore cannot be separated from human activities. We may not necessarily be able to create a grand theory but we can create meaningful insights into why cultures and traditions change and adapt. This knowledge can be used to demonstrate that folklore is unique and that other disciplines may want to model our methodologies to create new developments and methods to further understand the people and communities in which they live.
Newton Garver (2008) describes many different histories of theories and how folklore is unique among them and in many ways more efficient. In the social science realm, theory is used for the purposes of seeking explanations. In the disciplines such as science and physics the focus is on data. When historians and sociologists attempt to say why things occur, they are examining different sets of facts. There is not a decision for what theory is right or wrong in history or sociology because assessing human responsibility, which is a major factor in these fields, does not occur when it is applied to scientific approaches. But these theories in hard science are restrictive because of their precise definitions and limitations on how to measure data (Garver 2008). Folklore is a more humanistic approach, one that focuses on the people, their culture and attempts to mediate the balance of both when creating theoretical constructs.

Some folklorists think that one of the main reasons that it is difficult to develop theoretical models in folklore is because the discipline has so many origins. John Roberts (2008) explains that each of these beginnings carries with it its own history and traditions that must be acknowledged within the theoretical framework. Each one also has nationalistic implications from programs of study that are different for every nation that is represented. American nationalism has made the study of folklore tradition in this country problematic in many ways. One prime example that Roberts uses is African American studies scholars in the past have tried to make this culture conform to the American ideal that used the melting pot theory as a basis rather than visualizing this culture and its properties with its own characteristics. It destroyed the very cultural pluralism that many believe is the basis for folkloric study today. This controversy is relevant to the ongoing debate of theory because the lack of definitions that have been established within the field make the scholarly pursuit difficult for some to grasp. New fields that are emerging, such as ethnic studies, are engaged with the
field of folklore and to use folklore theories and methods as a means to further their understanding of these different cultures. But the dialogue between these disciplines has often failed to continue because of what Roberts states, “We are a discipline that is more concerned with championing the cause of the marginal than with contesting the cultural and social stereotypes that marginality makes possible in society,” (Roberts 2008: 49). I believe that folklore can be used to further knowledge in other disciplines, but I also believe the fact that we don’t necessarily concern ourselves with the specific aspects of different cultures, such as stereotypes, does not make our field less influential or important. We concern ourselves with broader notions and if we limited ourselves to focusing on specific causalities, then our findings would not be as meaningful or useful to the larger framework of the field.

Margret Mills (2008) examines interpretative theory and how this should not be judged for its ability to exclude or prevent other theories from being developed but rather for its ability to adapt - its capacity to work well within a knowledgeable and meaningful system. Often cultural theory is interpretative, metaphorical, independent of method, and often developed within a dialog within a community. The idea of “aptness” and “resonance” becomes the criteria of productive theory, not exclusiveness, comprehensiveness, or abstraction. “Aptness” encompasses and enables the ideas by culturally constructing domains of meaning. Part of our responsibility as folklorists is to identify how these meaning are associated within the larger context of cultural framework. Aptness and indeterminacy, however, are not a viable excuse to not conduct and formulate theory (Mills 2008). If we take our studies seriously, then understating tradition and folklore is not only about documenting the people but understanding their worldview as well. There cannot be a grand theory that could ever be created that can take every civilization into consideration and adequately represent all of them simultaneously.
Kirin Narayan (2008) extends the notion of grand theory from C. Wright Mills by arguing that theory should be flexible and capable of moving between levels of generality and the registers of language used should be more concrete and apparent. His view reflects Mills in obvious ways. Creating a theory brings a certain focus to categories and processes that might have not been considered in the larger disciplinary framework. Narayan says that, “theories represent perspectives that are embedded in social worlds and power relations, and such are forms of situated knowledge” (Narayan 2008: 89). This understating of theory creates conversations across disciplines and intellectual communities that discuss these ideas. These conversations within other disciplines use theory to share, re-work and refine disciplinary communities in a variety of places. These include classrooms, conferences, and publications (Narayan 2008). But some of what Narayan credits with the creation of theory can be accomplished without having to actually construct a theoretical paradigm. If the theory is flexible and generalizable then does it really apply to all cultures, all expressions, and all forms? The communication that can be established among other disciplines can be influential and beneficial but this should be complete without having to lose sight of what folklore is. We should not create theories just to feel better and more professional as an academic discipline.

Kathleen Stewart (2008) points to the fact that the notion of theory should not be so concrete and grounded. She believes that cultural theory should reflect forms of living. The textures, rhythms, modes of attachment and compositions are important features that should be discussed and analyzed. The purpose of the theory is not to get the representation of the culture correct per se but to hypothesize where these cultural traditions and forms of expression may go and what potential they have in the larger cultural framework. The point of a theory should not be to judge the representation of people but rather focus on how knowing, relating, and attending
to things are already present in these modes of expression (Stewart 2008). If folklorists create
theory then the theory we develop should not be based on the notions and insecurities of the
discipline. I see that in the research of theory many scholars are following Stewart’s ideology.
We want meaningful theories that can be applied and used, not ones created for the sake of
making a name for ourselves in the larger academic discourse.

Folklore theory can be useful if it is applied and utilized appropriately. It can function not
only as a concept but also as a form of expressive opinion. Gary Allan Fine (2008) believes that
theory provides a means of networking scholars in a common project which justifies the
discipline. It also creates a collective point of reference in a center of understanding that can
either be accepted or dismissed. A successful theory can relate to or even network a folk
community in a sense. When a project is given a title, individuals realize that they are working
together on a common goal and it leads to the understanding that the scholars belong together for
the accomplishment of their shared purpose. The writings themselves do not have to be the
same, but as long as the common goal of the project is understood and recognized by insiders
and outsiders, scholars feel linked, which creates a boundary and opens new dialogs.

The political position that theory plays into brings people together and forms of theory
bring the overall concepts of the discipline together. This then creates networks of research and
project developments. This network brings a sense of cohesion to the discipline and a
recognized purpose. Theory is also a status marker in the academic field. It is a form of
communication where individuals judge an academic sector by important matters that are being
discussed among the colleagues of that discipline. Theory makes a field appear relevant for
other domains. If core concepts are not established folklorist may find it difficult to build new
models. Folklorists may not need a grand theory but they are in need of analytical synthesis that
explains the intersection of the local the collective through the powers of tradition (Fine 2008). Folklore needs to be challenged to explain society just not every unique factor of the society itself. On the other extreme it does not need to be so broad that it can be applied to anything and everything. Most scholars are recognizing this and understanding that to develop new theories in our generation it needs to find some middle ground (Noyes 2008).

Dorothy Noyes (2008) believes that we are currently in more of a position to criticize grand theory than to build it for our discipline. I agree. This is due in part because folklore had what Noyes suggests as status anxiety. I believe that almost every scholar would agree with her as well. It is obvious that our discipline is insecure; we are a young discipline. We hide under the stigma of the f-word (folklore) and are constantly having to explain it or place it in another context. She makes a very important point, however, that we are not the only discipline suffering from this type of anxiety. Political scientists for example experience a desire to be more concrete and quantifiable. Many other disciplines also suffer from folklore envy. Their theories have failed to predict many aspects of their study and they discover that they wish to find explanations that are closer to the ground, ones that have “softer voices” (Noyes 2008). I hope that the examples I have provided have demonstrated this. We may not be the most renowned field, the most scientific, but we are good at what we do. To go further in theory, the discipline must realize that folklore is a complex trinity where three sectors come together that cannot be separated, according to Noyes. These are the ethnographer, the practitioner and the theorist. They are mutually dependent and constitutive. This is often overlooked because this triad has developed into three primary intuitions which includes the archive, the public practice, and the academic program.
The field cannot produce theory if it is not grounded in engagement within the world attempting to understand the processes that create folklore and the stigmas that follow it. When any of these three areas are neglected, the discipline suffers. Noyes believes that we are currently at the end of a reaction phase to an earlier over-emphasis to theory. A restored focus on ethnography has resulted in improved ethnography as a successful method for understanding culture. Noyes wants the discipline to reclaim theory in a humble spirit. Grand theory would not be a likely creation currently within the field because folklore does not have the resources and security that older disciplines do. She states that “Our history has given us a smaller garden to cultivate, but not an infertile one” (Noyes 2008:43).

Noyes seems to me to be on the forefront of both ethnography and theory development. We are insecure, but other disciplines do look to us for a greater understanding in the humanistic realm, the realm that does not hold just data, but people and lives. Data can explain lots of things but when you exclude the human aspect of it, the responsibility, the context is removed. Our communication and development can be improved on with the connections that are developed with other disciplines. Our texts can be increased as we study new forms of tradition that we may not have realized existed before. I do not believe that a grand theory in folklore will resolve any of the insecurities that have plagued the discipline from the beginning. Theory should not be forgotten however. It should be developed in a humble fashion that neither claims to explain everything but nothing at the same time. I believe that most scholars are recognizing this step in our theoretical development of today. We are simultaneously going in the direction of greater understanding while remaining true to what we have set forth to accomplish.

There are very few artists in the world that are considered to be “famous.” The majority of people who define themselves as artists and their vernacular surroundings have been largely ignored by scholarly research. This author looks at how people often disregard the everyday (or vernacular) structure and how artists use these buildings to create their matter. The dissertation also focuses on the lack of attention to non-formal art and education. The narratives used for the research look at women artists that express gender, family, and history. The method of study uses a feminist approach to question this creative style and it discusses traditions of folklore practice and data collection as well as video documentation.


Folklore research is changing. Ethnographies written by nonprofessional ethnographers, in what the author refers to as a mode of cultural production titled "popular folklore." She focuses on two tasks in the article. The first is the function of professional folklore and anthropology. Second, she discusses the metaethnographic perspective on popular folklore within the discipline. Anagnostou relates this to the politics of feminist popular ethnography of Greek America. The author attempts to make a case for the combined efforts of popular folklore and professional ethnography. This would allow not only folklorists but other disciplines to view folklore as a productive means in which they could merge ideas and develop new methods of research.


The theories that currently exist in the folklore discipline seem to best be understood by defining them as the philology of the vernacular. The author notes that to create a Grand theory in folklore would be understood as a misguided enterprise. He believes that there is a prevailing theory within folklore that consists of the following characteristics: A conceptual frame of reference, a common engagement within the intellectual program that is coherent, it is based on a set of premises that acknowledge different societies and cultures, that provide a framework for inquiry, and that are derived from an intellectual tradition. He also notes that the common ground that he refers to may not be completely understood by all individuals within the tradition; however, there is a consistent goal that is demonstrated through our field’s history. There is a basic knowledge that is expressed through these premises.


Folklore and education share a broad and common ground. Folklorists have made attempts to bring their information and skills to K-12 education and this has created new collaborations, approaches, and resources that are useful to both fields. The article attempts to make these
aspects more noticeable and to make the commonalities of both education and folklore more visible. Bowman surveys both the past and the present and identifies the promises as well as the difficulties of integrating folklore into education through the opinions of individuals from both fields.


Folklore theories of narratives and identity provide a means to analyze, critique, and the tools to help determine different forms of political and social discourse. This dissertation examines how folklore theories and approaches can inform applied research when the act of telling a story becomes a conscious form of political activity. It examines how documentary film production can be used to form “counter stories.” The author argues that the collection methods and analytical tools developed by folklorists can be informative about ideologies that are present in communities and can be used to deconstruct power structures that thrive in these locations.


The author identifies two styles that are related to twentieth-century constructions of folkloristics in the United States. The first consists of boundary work which constructs an autonomous discipline that must be defended against amateurs and scholars from other disciplines. The second style looks at ethnography of speaking folklore and performance approaches and stressed theory in linking folklorists with anthropologists, linguistics, and literary scholars to develop new analytic frames. The author suggests that theorizing should not be perceived as a threat to disciplinary autonomy but as a way to develop new and creative alternatives.


Diaries are used by historians to document the past, but few realize the importance of examining the diary by using the context of the writer’s family. When this is taken into consideration, the books and texts that are usually excluded from folklore, important elements of contemporary material behavior are often not recognized. Diaries, scrapbooks, and photograph albums express artistic communication within the context of family groups in three primary ways: through their physical handling existence, within the diary or text itself, and through family members' exposition and expansion on the interior text. The author attempts to explain the role folklore can play in book culture and booklore (and vice versa) by examining the diary of Edith Workman Minnix. The diary contributes to scholarly conversations about material culture, feminist studies, life writing, family folklore, and performance.

Using an interdisciplinary approach, this dissertation examines the sociological impact and ideological work of stereotypes. Looking at the Crack mother icon, the author studies how misrepresentations in films, media, and literature influence legislation and laws that target poor women of color for punishment. The Crack Mother represents another cultural icon that presents African American women as deviant through narratives of addiction. These women are participants within a folk culture that values differ greatly from the western notion of expertise, organization and other social factors. The study focuses on cultural studies, folklore and African American studies.


In Germany there is not a single composed grand theory in folklore. This idea was formally dismissed in 1970 not to be raised again by the academic elite in this field. This conclusion was brought about because of the abuses that occurred in the years that Hitler was present and the National Socialism that took place. The mistreatment of folklore that contributed to the romanticized image that Germany was supposed to identify who was German and even more importantly who was not considered German. The decision to not accept a grand theory in folklore has lead, in the author’s opinion, to a broader understanding of the culture as a whole.


Ethnomusicologists tend to study instruments form organological perspective which is concentrated with classification rather than description of the experience or event. Folklore material culture methodology and analysis allows the scholar to examine specific musical instruments as tools. This allows for full description and analysis of how the item creates sound, and its historical development within a culture. This allows the scholar to have an advantage by acquiring inside access to folk music idiom that makes sense to the musicians. This study describes the Irish Button accordion suing material culture methods and analysis. Specifically, the author studies music and how it is defined as humanly organized sound, and he attempts to trace idioms through the musicianship of an individual’s to determine his or her role in a community.


This article reflects the notion that theory creates a type of community within a discipline. The concern for theory and its development is to bond scholars together to work on common goals and projects. This in turn helps to establish networks and provide a recognizable status that is visible to other disciplinary fields. This connection and publicity of theory could establish the field as a noteworthy area of knowledge that other disciplines may use to further their own research. The author recognizes and attempts to address his belief that the uncertainty of theory within folklore challenges the authenticity of the discipline in the context of the larger domains.
of scholarship, and the idea that this may pose challenges in both the political realm and in an intellectual sense.


Theory for a discipline can be considered as important as the aspect of observation is to the realm of science. According to the author, the best designed theories are those that explain clearly the purpose, and can allow for other explanations that could be applied and that could possibly expand the theory itself. Newton also recognized that most theories currently possess characteristics that are too varied to combine and place into a single grand theory within folklore. Other complication arises because theories also contain moral issues and constructs that may be diluted and ignored if several theories were combined as one. The author cautions combining theories because of these particular circumstances.


Due to emergent technology and the effects of mass media, folk narratives are being developed into new forms that are not compliant with long-held oral/ print and folklore/popular cultural categories. This new development is not new to folklore however. In the past writing and the printing process modified oral folklore narratives in a similar way that the creation of electronic and digital media are currently transforming written and printed folk narratives. This dissertation looks at how the purposes of narratives in general, the impact of past development of technologies have had on narratives and how this affected their form and content. It also assesses the impact that electronic and digital media has had on narratives and what this means for contemporary studies of narratives.


Modernity promotes the belief that anyone should be self-sufficient, have self-control, and exhibit self-regulation; having a supernatural experience demonstrates a lack of these preferred characteristics. This dissertation inquires on how narrators organize their experiences and how they explain these events to others. It also studies how these narrators normalize the supernatural and how they fight the stigmas that exist in society about these occurrences. The narratives about supernatural experiences follow social science paradigms and humanities. The research is interdisciplinary drawing sources form folklore studies, cultural studies, narrative studies, and social psychology. The study shoes that numerous narrative techniques are employed when talking about supernatural experiences. Most narrators use comparisons, direct and embedded evaluations, overlays and detailed orientations; they call to witness, address the reader, use internal dialects to balance between the traditions of belief and disbelief.

Published materials from the Folk Arts in Education in the Schools movement (FAIE) are analyzed which reveals common themes. Both value non-professional artistry, instilling local pride, and both challenge the dominance of popular or elite culture. The author reviews several approaches to multicultural education and suggests expanding on parallels of FAIE and folklore. This collaboration will create many promising new possibilities in both areas while integrating folklore in education and spreading the knowledge of folklore authors to a sector where little attention has been given to it.


This article is a response to the American Folklore Society forum in October 2005 which seeks to answer the question, “Why is there no Grand theory in Folkloristics?” He believes that American folklorists do not like theory, and that they prefer to focus on those actualities of vernacular practice. The American conception of folklore moves away from the abstract and into the concrete which focuses on human beings and the interaction amongst them. The author states that folklorists are much more likely to accept methods because folklore cannot be separated from other human activities. This knowledge can be used to integrate folklore and other disciplines to create developments of new methods to further our understanding of people and the communities in which they live.


Folklore has been useful in various fields including popular film and television. Despite the cross discipline development, this area of research has been ignored by folklorists and film scholars alike, yet this collaboration had produced several articles, ideas, and theories. This research and data has proved effective for both its own study and for other disciplines as well. Folklorists and film scholars would benefit by acknowledging one another and work on creating studies that will inevitably prove useful for both fields.


Cultural theory is interpretative, metaphorical, interdependent of method, and often developed in dialogue within a community. The author begins by giving a suggestion list for a few theoretical endeavors not unique to the field of folklore but ones that are shared by all disciplines. It is to be understood that folklore theory and study can incorporate ideas from other disciplines and then develop unique theories that are catered to our own field. The author believes that interpretive theory should be judged by its ability to exclude or prevent other theories from being developed, but rather for its ability to adapt; it’s capacity to work well within a knowable meaning system.

Examining the Delaware Bay Oyster schooner, this dissertation observes the culture and the people of Maurice River Cove in New Jersey. The author combines theoretical perspective from folklore, ethnography, material culture, social anthropology, and cognitive linguistics to analyze how metaphors and various meanings are placed on the local individuals through their social landscape. The cultural metaphor that is examined emphasizes the connection to the physical and historical experience of the community itself that implies understanding, evaluations, and interpretations of people. Port Norris, otherwise known as the Oyster Capital of the World, is the center of the socially constructed population that reveals characteristics that follow this ideology.


While considering C. Wright Mills notion of grand theory in Sociology, Narayan extends this idea to the concept of theory in a more general sense. The author argues that the flexibility of being able to move between levels of generality and registers of language when composing a theory is useful to folklorists. Theory is usually constructed from fieldwork observations and interdisciplinary dialog. These sources and perspectives that are derived from different cultures create a structure that reflects the predominant worldview of the people. When different theories and their associated meanings are combined, this could potentially generate new formulas that could be significant in the academic discourse of folklore.


This book is the first full-length study in English of the Patum, a Corpus Christi fire festival unique to Berga, Catalonia, Spain that has been celebrated annually since the seventeenth century. Participants in the festival are transformed through drink, sleep deprivation, crowding, dance, and the smoke and sparks firecrackers. The festival serves as a grassroots equivalent of grand social theory; it moves from a representation of social divisions to a forcible unity among them. Cities like Berga serve as excellent examples of what happens to towns that are experiencing globalization. Noyes reports her findings and observations in a very humble new way. She gives the people the ability to speak through a very post-modern perspective, and she identifies interpretations of the festival without defining it as the overall truth or answer.


So many in the folklore discipline have pondered over the question, “Why is there not a grand theory in folklore?” Noyes believes that folklorists can bring to an end to being insecure about this issue by not accepting a grand theory but approaching conclusions through a more humble means. This theory is created by addressing how events occur in ethnographic practice rather than ultimately trying to identify and understand why they happen. This is the middle ground
between the actual experiences as how the participants see and interpret it and the laws of reasoning that are trying to surmise the event. Noyes believes that taking a stance in-between these two places folklorists can create their disciplinary legacy.


There is a great amount of recognizable difficulty when attempting to understand and produce a grand theory of folklore. This is in part due to the fact that folklore is a discipline that has many origins and that is affected by many nations and their perspectives. This influence makes it impossible to have coherent research methods, expected guidelines, and ultimate proof to create a single grand theory within folklore. Roberts notes that nationalism, although often denied, has played a key role in the conception of theories within the field. The author states that it is this denial that has produced apolitical disciplinary development within the United States and this has ultimately led to the failed attempts to create theoretical models that can accurately respond to the rapidly changing aspects of society.


Using the texts and transcripts of South Africa's Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC), this paper examines the nature of the TRC’s process, effects, and outcomes as they relate to the social science and humanities. This exploratory study attempts to create enhanced accounts of agency in performance and the dynamics of will that exist in human communication. The conclusion determined by this research shows that a great deal of intergroup conflict over these issues in post-apartheid South Africa is influenced the ways local groups and political entrepreneurs interpret the recent South African past. This study demonstrates how law and society interact, and shape one another in a globalized society specifically examining why people choose to use or avoid law; and how new elites in South Africa have appropriated and used folklore, tradition, and memory in order to form strategic alliances in international relations and build rapport with the new actors in the human rights administration.


It is often difficult to convey the idea that folklore does not only exist in rural areas and that urban areas may contain folklore as well. This book examines an event in 1886 where professional trial lawyers, dressed in suits, became an exhibit in the annual Smithsonian Folklife Festival in Washington D.C. They were placed next to a more accepted idea of folklore which consisted of wood carvers from New Mexico and moonshiners from Tennessee. Despite the skepticism of the general public, the trial lawyers showed extensively that law school graduates who are well educated active members of the community may also be bearers of tradition. Schrager makes his point clear when he discusses that notion that like many jobs in this country such as carpenters, farmers, and coal miners, lawyers are also occupational folk groups as well. Many of the narratives that are presented in court demonstrate occupational strategies that are learned by law students such as expressions, body movements, and gestures that are employed to successfully sway a jury.

Shuman focuses on the reconstruction and the deconstruction of personal narratives. She notes that folklorists who study these particular types of narratives focus on two perspectives. The first is that individuals formulate their stories by referencing cultural models. The second viewpoint reflects the idea that people create narratives using the recourses that are available within the culture in a mobilized form. She attempts to make the voices that have gone unheard stand on their own so that they could potentially be vital sources of information in the dominate academic discourse. It is also important to listen to these narratives not as much for just research purposes but for a greater understanding of the people and the culture.


Stewart acknowledges that the type of cultural theory that the folklore grand theory should be constructed of consists of characteristics that revolve around the lives of the individuals in a cultural setting. The specific elements that comprise the culture such as textures, rhythms, and the emotional aspects that play a part in their daily lives should be what the theory values and it should attempt to take all of these aspects into consideration. The main objective is, however, not to judge these values or to represent them correctly but to study them. This analysis will inevitably lead to a greater understanding; knowing the smaller elements in a culture which create the atmosphere of its existence can lead to more accurate comprehension of it as a coherent whole.


Folklore has, in the past, practiced both expansive and enclosed strategies within the field of folklore. This tendency to limit the field has narrowed the field in a variety of ways including the creation of its history, strive for professionalism, and justification to make the field independent. The expansive stance within the discipline would allow for exploration of other fields. Expanding research and knowledge techniques from other area captures new audiences, new members, and fresh perspectives. Delimited stances create the opposite outcome; inclusion in the field. Zeitlin believes that both strategies need to work together for further the discipline in all aspects of study.


The guidelines proposed by the AFS in 1988 titled “A Statement of Ethics for the American Folklore Society” was created for the purpose of clarifying the professional obligations of folklorists within the contexts of the public, the discipline, their students, and research sponsors. This statement addresses important issues that need to be taken into consideration when dealing with planning and creating provinces of study within different cultures so that folklore both
reflects and meets the people’s needs. The statement emphasizes that folklorists working with individuals from other cultures and different backgrounds should do everything within their power not to alter or change these traditions. The main focus of the folklorists responsibility should be to those in which they are studying and they should honor them and take their considerations seriously.


The performances at Girth and Mirth group events began in the 1970’s as a national social movement to examine body image. They specifically reflected the weight discrimination in the gay community. Sociological research is used to understand the role of social organizations and how this effects the formation of identities and how these identities are re-examined. This study also reflects on the publications of Mikhail Bakhtin and his work with Folklore performance research to provide a model for understanding the club’s events like carnival. This incident involves rituals of inversion and exaggeration. The study examines how performance can be used a strategy that simultaneously acknowledges and resists the existence of stigmatization.
Works Cited


