
NOTES AND REVIEWS

INTERVIEW WITH PROFESSOR SIMON J. BRONNER

According to an American Folklore Society (AFS) inside joke, Simon Bronner bears a striking resemblance to Alan Dundes. Many a true word is spoken in jest, and this comparison goes beyond facial similarity: Bronner is a renowned figure within folklore studies with wide knowledge and an impressive record of influential writing. He has written about topics as diverse as Jewish and children's folklore, material culture and masculinity, campus traditions and Internet folklore, to name just a few. His most cited works are monographs as different as *American Folklore Studies: An Intellectual History* (1986), *Consuming Visions: Accumulation and Display of Goods in America, 1880–1920* (1989), and *Explaining Traditions: Folk Behavior in Modern Culture* (2011). What distinguishes Bronner's writing is an accessible style that attracts more and more readers, without watering down complex ideas. Moreover, Bronner is a highly regarded teacher who mentored several generations of influential folklore students. He has been a vivacious promoter of folklore studies in academia, as well as outside of it. Just to name one of his multiple activities, Bronner assiduously popularises folklore studies in the American Folklore Society's History and Folklore Section Facebook page, regularly posting meaningful pieces on new publications, dates important to folklore studies, and biographies of folklorists (in doing so working toward the creation of a much-needed international biographical dictionary of folklorists). Continuing the tradition of Indiana's prominent folklore program, where he studied, Bronner masterfully conveys his prizewinning knowledge as a Distinguished Professor Emeritus of American Studies and

Folklore at Pennsylvania State University, Harrisburg; and yet, this knowledge goes far beyond academia and the USA.

You wrote your dissertation in the 1970s and early 1980s at Indiana University, the acclaimed research centre for folklore, ethnomusicology and humanities. Who were your teachers? How did these years shape your later academic career and your understanding of folklore?

I came to Indiana University with my MA from the Cooperstown Graduate Program, which was organized on the European model of ethnology or folklife with a heavy emphasis on American material culture and community life. Louis C. Jones, Roderick J. Roberts, and Bruce Buckley, who were experts in folk art, architecture, and music were the prominent folklorists there. At Indiana, I became more exposed to the study of oral tradition in a global context. One of the unexpected surprises of that experience were classes with Estonian folklorist Felix Oinas who taught Finnish, Baltic, and Russian folklore. I was in awe of his erudition, linguistic abilities (in addition to speaking multiple languages besides Estonian and English, he also taught Church Slavonic at Indiana), and global bibliographic knowledge. He was especially influential in guiding my thinking about the link of folklore and politics, particularly on issues of nationalism. I had already read about American nationalism, but he gave me a profound comparative perspective from his work on Finland, the Baltic countries, and the Soviet Union. There is no doubt that Richard Dorson was the face of folklore at Indiana, and from him I learned historical

perspectives on the United States. I also served as his editorial assistant and in that capacity I learned life-long lessons about writing, editing, and publication in addition to administrative visions for expanding and promoting folklore studies (I later directed a folklore program and thought of him often). My research – field study of woodcarvers in southern Indiana – that led to my dissertation was with Warren Roberts, who had made the move from the historic-geographic school of narrative studies to ethnological studies of art and architecture. A valuable experience with him was the fieldwork class that he led away from campus in southern Indiana. It was from that experience that my dissertation research arose and other lasting work on foodways, architecture, and legendry. Allowing me to make more connections of North America to European ethnology and ethnic studies was the eminent Hungarian folklorist Linda Dégh who served as an adviser throughout my career in addition to my undergraduate folklore adviser at Binghamton Bill Nicolaisen. Other professors were probably less renowned and prolific, but nonetheless influential on emphasizing the broad scope of folklore: Mary Ellen Brown on literature and British folklore, William Wiggins on African and African-American lore, and Roger Janelli on anthropological perspectives and Asian folklore. Certainly those years at Indiana were also shaped by my student cohort with many late-night discussions about the future of folklore studies. We also worked together on establishing Trickster Press and editing ambitious publications such as *Folklore Forum* (which I edited), *Journal of the Folklore Institute*, and *Indiana Folklore*. Many of those relationships in public and academic folklore work (for example Carl Lindahl, Steve Siporin, Tom Carter, Elissa Henken, Egle Zygas, Erika Brady, Peter Voorheis) have continued to be maintained at conferences, publications, and projects. Annually, we pick up threads of conversation that began long ago.

What kinds of change have you seen in American and international folkloristics since you entered the field?

I would say that the biggest change is the rising inquiry into the mediation of folklore and processes of traditionalizing. When I first studied folklore, there was a certain purist attitude in defining as well as collecting folklore. Folklorists wanted to find primarily oral material unpolluted by popular culture and from people usually in isolated rural enclaves that had remained stable over centuries. There was a great skepticism of organized ‘folk festivals’ and commercialized ‘folk singers’ (or for that matter, the value of ‘race’ and ‘hillbilly’ records, although now they constitute a trove of evidence for traditional music and regional culture). Dorson, who I mentioned earlier, encouraged thinking about “folklore in the modern world” and the emergence of new folklore rather than the search for unadulterated relics of tradition. At the same time, he drew a sharp line between folklore and ‘fakelore’. Moving beyond those early controversies, folklorists have been eager since the 1970s to address folklore mediated, and indeed generated, by television, copiers and facsimile machines, computers, and now the Internet and smartphones. Instead of dismissing ‘fakelore’, folklorists have increasingly examined the process of traditionalizing events and texts within the context of a modernizing world. They represent a more objective consideration of this process with terms such as ‘folklorism’ and ‘invented (or what I call ‘managed’) tradition’. Indeed, tradition, once taken for granted, is also receiving more critical inquiry. Along with that inquiry about tradition as a malleable process is the expansion of the social worlds that produce and maintain folklore. Whereas regional and ethnic groups dominated the textbooks of an earlier generation, today’s handbooks cover family, occupational, urban, LGBTQ, organizational, gender, fan, and friendship interactions, among other identities. Not only is the awareness of

multiple and overlapping identities within our experience evident in folklore and folk-life studies, but so too are those out in the world as a result of the digital revolution. And the mediation evident in computers that allows us to communicate all over the globe also leads to thinking about digital culture in relation to what came before, and what might come after.

Most recently, in 2017, the AFS held its 128th annual meeting in Minneapolis. What were the highlights of this meeting for you?

On a personal level, the meeting was an opportunity to connect with many contributors to an ambitious reference-work project I am editing for Oxford University Press: *Oxford Handbook of American Folklore and Folklife Studies*. With 43 chapters (projected over 1000 pages), you can imagine that I was engaged in many hallway conversations about the scope and content of the work. I was heartened at the meeting to see many presenters who I had mentored as students coming through our program at Penn State. Spontaneously, I organized a dinner and sent word out through social media, not knowing who would respond. With the packed schedule of the meeting, I expected only a handful of attendees, and we kept needing to add chairs until we had more than 20 students and alumni present. I felt a parental pride in seeing the success that graduates had enjoyed. I had a similar feeling at a reception for mentors and participants in a Mellon Foundation publishing initiative called *Folklore Studies in the Multicultural World*, which ended last year. I served as a mentor for a dozen or so writers over the last five years, and at the reception was able to see the fruits of their labor in attractive books on display. I always appreciate forging community with long-time colleagues at the meeting, such as Wolfgang Mieder of the University of Vermont, Elizabeth Tucker of Binghamton University, Dan Ben-Amos of the University

of Pennsylvania, Henry Glassie of Indiana University, and Patricia Turner of University of California, Los Angeles, but this year that circle expanded as I was happy to meet participants at the meeting who I have been or will be able to greet again in my planned 2017–2018 lectures in Latvia, Estonia, Finland, India, and China.

How would you characterise the AFS and its roles in scholarship and in society, both in the US and internationally?

The American Folklore Society has embraced a role in responding to current events and movements. Probably more than in other folklore organizations in which I participate, the AFS features in its communications and its annual meeting opportunities to relate scholarship to news of the day. Perhaps because of the large proportion of members in the public sector, and concerns for the contemporary world, the AFS has had an activist component. At the 2017 annual meeting, many sessions, for example, were concerned with the ‘fake news’ and dealing with the ‘age of Trump’. Of major concern this year has been a proposal by the controversial US President to abolish national endowments for the arts and humanities, which would not only adversely affect many folklorists, but would also impair traditional communities across the country. Many sections of the AFS, such as the Latino, Social Justice, and Environmental sections, took up discussion of recent natural disasters in Puerto Rico and Texas. Issues of racial, sexual, and gender equality both within the profession and the world permeate many forums. The AFS as the largest member organization devoted to folklore has also been active in forging international ties and arrangements with SIEF and Chinese folklore organizations, but more can be done to enhance global connection. For my part, I chaired the AFS committee to recognize outstanding folklorists with the accolade of “honorary international members of the Fellows of the American Folklore Society”.

You are the convener of the History and Folklore Studies section of the AFS, which is also active in Facebook. What is to be gained from engaging in the history of folklore studies and disciplinary histories more broadly?

In 1973, Dan Ben-Amos wrote an influential essay coinciding with the founding of the section titled "History of Folklore Studies: Why Do We Need It?" It set the tone for much of the movement to document and interpret the history of folklore studies. He was concerned as I am today with establishing a continuous intellectual legacy for folklore and folklife studies that culminates with the establishment of a 'discipline' to take its place alongside major branches of learning. Especially at that time, it was important to differentiate what a folklorist does, and did, from anthropologists, historians, and literary scholars. Much of the effort was to profile outstanding individuals who identified as folklorists (and the paths they blazed), and inquire about the origins and development of folklore as a field of inquiry. Since then, the function of disciplinary history has shifted, some at my behest as editor of *Folklore Historian* and various publications, to joining folklore to intellectual history and epistemology broadly. I asked for histories to engage the sociology of ideas and contemplate how folkloristic work initiated as well as joined intellectual movements in the context of their time and place. Thus folklorists can contemplate the significance of their contributions alongside others as well as the communities with which they work on broad concepts such as democratization, multiculturalism, nationalism, individualism, and of course, tradition. Another development, and function of the history of folklore studies, is organizational. In assessing the role of folklore as a branch of learning, histories take up the processes, and strategies, for integrating folklore programming in the university, schools, corporations, government, and the professions.

At the last AFS meeting you received an award for your research in the field of children's folklore. Congratulations! In your work you have shown that children's culture is something autonomous formed of distinct expressive agency, and that it cannot be seen as an adapted version of traditions passed on by adults. Indeed, some folklorists have claimed that children adapt beliefs and elements of culture that have been abandoned by adults, that the world of children is a kind of conglomerate of survivals. In your view, what are the characteristic features of children's culture? How does children's culture relate to that of adults?

My view of children is couched in a life-course perspective. I introduced a folklore course at Penn State on culture and aging that proceeded from the theory that folklore has persisted and is meaningful behaviorally because it serves an essential human need of adapting to life changes. Children engage in folklore a great deal because they go through more social, physical, and cognitive changes than at any other time of their lives. Such a life-course perspective demands attention to developmental psychology and awareness of the physical as well as cognitive changes occurring in our lives and the ways that parents and communities frame traditions to guide or alter life journeys. Rather than view children as 'little savages' (from whence the evolutionary idea of survivals comes from), 'little adults', 'passive vessels of information', or representatives of some 'collective unconscious', much of the contemporary work in children's folklore interprets the simultaneous continuity of children's folklore through generations and the change in it as well as innovation wrought by every generation. This is where your reference to "expressive agency" comes in and is particularly important to not only thinking of the impact of childhood traditions on the formation of ethos throughout our lives but also about the distinctiveness of childhood as a

subaltern group culture. For folkloristics, many questions of the origin of narrative, belief, and fantasy can be addressed in the dynamic process of adult cultural transmission to children (for example game, gesture, story), and how they are interpreted and reframed, often subversively (for example joke, parody, play) by children.

In your recent monograph *Folklore: The Basics* (2017) you have used an action-oriented approach and define folklore as “traditional knowledge put into, and drawing from, practice”. How does your conceptualisation of folklore differ from textual or philological approaches?

Centering practice in the conceptualization of folklore emphasizes the question “Why do people repeat (express) themselves?” The question frames what most people do relative to the force of modernization, which implies value placed on individualism, novelty, and originality. Textual and philological approaches often work to identify outstanding forms and lofty talents responsible for culture rather than locating the ways that people navigate everyday life. That is not to say that practice approaches do not analyze texts and speech. They often do, but as representative of practices – that is, repeatable, variable actions. So, practice-oriented folklorists might ask about speaking, singing, working not only as behavior but those that in their actions are symbolic in themselves. It is not just what is said, but engaging in saying it. Separating this action and identifying symbolism helps reveal the way people think – before they act – and how it figures in their lives.

Conceptualisation of folklore not as heritage but as practice means an open approach. You have not seen folklore as a bounded and autonomous realm but rather as a pervasive expressive phenomenon. You have studied versatile fields such as folk arts, architecture, masculinity and gender, blues music, and hunting. One of

your current interests is strongman competitions. What can be learned about such events, physical culture and athletics in general, by means of looking at them from the point of view of folklore studies?

Well put. Sports have often been overlooked because they appear too organized to constitute folklore, but I find that they encapsulate fundamental beliefs and customs about age and the body – and the embodiment of cultural values. As bodylore, sport is basic to our expressive communication; many common proverbs, legends, and folk vocabulary come from sport, and have national contexts in sport preferences. In my book *Following Tradition* (1998), I presented quantitative data from keyword searches of American newspapers that the most frequent pairing of *tradition* was with the rhetoric of sports, community, and family – in that order. Teams are considered intense high-context communities that promote insider rituals and stories among participants, even in highly organized sports such as baseball, soccer, and basketball. Even though at a college and professional level many sporting events are televised, people still flock to stadiums and arenas so that they can participate as fans in the event framed to represent a special cultural identity. One can appreciate their significance in the recent headlines over ritualized protests by players (“taking a knee” during the playing of the national anthem to bring attention to racial inequality and violence) at National Football League pre-game ceremonies. I have been drawn as a folklorist to strongman contests because of the way they incorporate mythology of giant heroes in events such as *Atlas Stones*, *Hercules Hold* and *Fingal’s Fingers*. The sport, however, is hardly a reflection of society’s values; in emphasizing strength associated with pre-industrial life (speed is often associated with a corporate service and information economy) it appears to represent pre-modern community that crowns in the contests a Hercules hero. The human-machine struggle comes into play in events

such as the truck (airplane, bus, train) pull, Viking lift, Conan's wheel, and car deadlift. The relation of the dominant strongman to the rise of strongwoman contests also introduces gender issues that are projected into the arena, or cultural frame of the event that contains paradoxes of our lives. Its function has also evolved from localized status to national identities. Many of the countries featured in strongman contests are locations desiring attention on the world stage: Iceland, Denmark, Finland, Latvia, Lithuania, Estonia, Scotland, Poland. The influence of strongman is also apparent at a vernacular level with gyms in many communities that promote a cultural identity of a strongman and strongwoman. Traditional knowledge of nutrition, drugs, and techniques is passed, often within sight, and earshot, of signs such as "Change Your Body, Change Your Life", "Know that Commitment is a Muscle", "When Life Gets Harder, Challenge Yourself to Be Stronger", "Feeling the Burn", and "Who's Your Daddy?"

You visited Estonia in connection with the 10th anniversary celebration for the *Journal of Ethnology and Folkloristics*, published jointly by the Estonian National Museum, the Estonian Literary Museum's Estonian Folklore Archives, and the University of Tartu's departments of ethnology and of folklore. What were the main messages in the talk that you gave at the Humanities within International and National Scholarly Contexts seminar at the University of Tartu on November 13, 2017?

I have served as an administrator of a school of humanities as well as a professor of folklore. In publication, I served as editor of a broad American Studies encyclopedia as well as more focused folklife reference works. As both dean and editor, my background as a folklorist was often questioned, especially by the dominant wings of history, art, and literature. In interviews, I was often asked how my disciplinary background prepared me to relate to the broad expanse

of the humanities and arts in these units. My message at the seminar is to elaborate on the answer I usually gave. I often had the pluck to insist that the question should not be about my preparation in the past, but on why reforming humanities folkloristically was imperative for the future. Focusing on my comparative scholarly experience for extended stays in the United States, Japan, and the Netherlands, I presented three themes of folkloristic thought that present challenges to the way the humanities are organized, and suggested the ways that reorienting future work toward these themes can result in a solution to the ballyhooed "crisis in the humanities". The themes that I addressed were *democratic*, *vernacular* and *incipient*.

Democratic. In keeping with the ideal of the United States as the first modern democracy, folklore-minded humanists established a cultural study that would be diverse, rather than seeking romantic nationalism, by representing the participation in national culture of various groups. That is not to say that Americans thought all these groups to be equal, and a task for many folklore-minded humanists was to recognize inequities by giving attention to groups facing domination or not given credit for their artistic, and therefore intellectual, capabilities. Folklorists showed artistry and tradition, and therefore claims to cultural integration, in the traditions of often marginalized groups. In this way folklorists contributed to the larger movement to democratize the arts and open up the humanities to participation in everyday life. Even in Japan where social hierarchy and cultural homogeneity are firmly entrenched, I found that folklore raised inquiry in a number of disciplines about representing various communities rather than treat the monolith of the society. In the Netherlands, I encountered a long-standing legacy of multicultural tolerance, but 'Golden Age' thinking meant that it was the 'Dutch masters' who were held aloft as learning worth knowing

rather than thinking about process and local authority. Thinking of folklore philosophically reoriented this thinking toward the cultural ramifications, and hybridizations, of various groups being involved in polity as well as society.

Vernacular or localization. Because of attention by leading American folklorists to the separation, interaction, and hybridization of various groups in the production of practices viewed, and heard, as 'tradition', folklore studies emphasized the 'folk', or social aspect, in folklore. This perspective did not isolate "folk" groups as static peasants or remote, often romanticized occupations such as sailors. It was vernacular in the sense of often being localized, even if connected to apparently global, often mobile traditions. As studies evolved, the goal of identifying community with folkloric evidence extended to different situations as mobile social frames for the emergence of folklore. The artificial boundary wall of the humanities with social sciences therefore often came into question, since folklorists were concerned for social contexts as well as texts of culture. Those texts in a vernacular-centered perspective were analyzed for connections to everyday culture rather than a canon of work known by a learned or refined person.

Incipient. The European as well as Asian humanistic tradition was built upon reverence for ancient civilization and learning of the classics. To be sure, American higher education emphasized this tradition to the mid-20th century, but affecting scholarship was a movement of American studies reflecting a developing 'modern' American culture. As the United States proclaimed itself a new nation that separated from its sources in Europe and Africa, so did folklore presented as American reflect an incipient contemporaneous quality. It was in process. That is, it was developing and constantly being created anew, theory held, in the context of peculiar historical and geographic conditions. American folklorists certainly

found evidence of intact transplanted customs, but they specially pointed to traditions that emerged with American characteristics. Folklorists challenged the ancient foundation of the humanities by noting how American traditions observed as they were practiced reflected a forward-looking, inventive nation. What if the humanities were less about the past and lofty talents, and more about how people think and act humanistically? That would incorporate folklore not necessarily as an object or text for which a canon could be devised but a frame around *culture* that invites grasping the way the things we do express we are. In this mode of inquiry, we can also adjust our manifestations or applications to plow back ideas from whence they came in communities so as to make the humanities relevant to the issues and problems of the day.

Introduction by Anastasiya Astapova
Questions formulated by Anastasiya
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