Folklore's Crisis

The field of folklore is experiencing topic drift, as the gap widens between the name of the field and what it now signifies. This article traces the history of a mutating disciplinary subject and its relationship to the discipline's formation, institutionalization, and name. Three themes are of special importance: folklore's temporality or the problem of a contemporary subject, orality and the question of technology, and folklore as a mode of cultural production. This explication of folklore as a keyword goes to the root of our history as a field, to the atavism that popular understanding preserves in the notion of folklore as error, and to the revolutionary energy that Walter Benjamin found in its embrace.

There was a time when the field of folklore would periodically sound the death knell of particular forms like the märchen and ballad, and the ways of life that supported them. Such rallying cries located the disappearing subject outside our disciplinary concepts and practices—in the "real" world. Today, it is our disciplinary subject, and with it our discipline, that is threatening to disappear.

The litany of our complaints is long. Scholars trained as folklorists seem to vanish into other fields. Those whom we recognize as folklorists may identify their work—or find their work identified by others—as anthropology, literature, sociolinguistics, performance studies, cultural studies, American studies, gender studies, ethnomusicology, or oral history. Many bookstores no longer shelf our books in a separate folklore section. If such a section still exists, it will feature the work of James G. Frazer, Joseph Campbell, and Mircea Eliade. Our books, like our discipline, are dispersed. Look for them in cultural studies, anthropology, and literature, and in sections devoted to a proliferation of various groups and parts of the world.

Still worse, the argument goes, folklorists who continue to identify themselves as such are not really studying folklore. They are busy with commercial culture, popular entertainment, mass media, or tourism. And those who presumably are dealing with folklore are uneasy with the designation. If they cannot do away with it altogether, by substituting the terms oral tradition or culture, they associate folklore with fields that have greater cachet at the moment. At the Smithsonian,

Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett is Professor of Performance Studies at the Tisch School of the Arts, New York University.

our colleagues now work in the Center for Folklife Programs and Cultural Studies. At The Ohio State University, they teach in the Center for Folklore, but only because turf wars with the Center for Comparative Studies prevented them from calling themselves the Center for Folklore and Cultural Studies. At the University of Oregon, they will be found in the Folklore and Ethnic Studies Program. At the University of Texas, folklore, once associated with oral history, is now a partner to ethnomusicology. The choice of allied discipline is only partly a function of faculty interest or institutional priorities. In a disciplinary archaeology to be excavated, cultural studies succeeds ethnic studies. This sequence marks a series of related displacements—diversity yields to difference; ethnicity to race, class, and gender; community to diaspora—with consequences for the fate of folklore.

We also complain that other disciplines, old and new, are gaining ground that we should be occupying. We ask why we are not more visible in the national debates about multiculturalism and heritage politics, including their implications for university curricula and public cultural life, in a way that cultural studies seems to enjoy (Bennett 1992). By the very nature of our work, and particularly that of public folklorists, we are shaping the public sphere and the terms of the debate, even when we are misunderstood. If anything, the stakes increase as the World Bank, Unesco, and other large organizations are investing in "cultural heritage," whether or not they understand it as we define it (see Glassie 1995; McDonald 1997).

The AFS recently celebrated its centennial. As we approach the end of a millennium, a sober view of where we find ourselves is in order. We are experiencing "topic drift," as the gap widens between the name of the field and what it now signifies. To better understand this gap, I trace the history and explore the links between a mutating disciplinary subject and its relationship to the discipline's formation, institutionalization, and name. Of special importance are folklore's temporality or the problem of a contemporary subject (Bloch 1990), orality and the question of technology, and folklore as a mode of cultural production (Fabian 1990:270--275).

The first section, "Disciplinarity," explores the formation of folklore as a field of study in relation to changes in the U.S. university during the latter half of the 19th century. Two shifts—from the classical curriculum to one based on national literatures in the vernacular and from an oral pedagogy to one based on reading and writing—contributed to the emergence of "oral literature" as a category. Philology provided the methodology (and ideology) that linked the study of folklore to cultural nationalism (see Whitman 1984). However, by the early 20th century, after literary scholars had moved on to other approaches, philology had become the hallmark of folklore methodology and contributed to a negative view of folklore as a conservative discipline. The notion of oral literature, however, was to mutate into a broader concept of orality and eventually performance.

The second section, "Folklore's Destiny," explores how the institutionalization of folklore within the U.S. academy during the post--World War II period was predicated on the autonomy of folklore as a discipline with a distinctive subject (oral tradition), unified theory, specific methods, and intellectual coherence.
Richard M. Dorson's programmatic statements and handbooks were written in this spirit. In the decades that followed his death, disciplinarity itself has come under attack. While folklore is not the only field to find itself destabilized as divisions of intellectual labor shift, it suffers from the association of its name with falsehood, both now and in the past. Section 3, "Atavism of Misunderstanding," historicizes this association. It explores how we have formed our disciplinary subject through processes of repudiation and recovery whereby scandalous errors become cherished archaisms.

These processes offer a prime example of folklore as a mode of cultural production, the subject of "A Poetics of Disappearance," the fourth section. I try to show how the peculiar temporality of folklore as a disciplinary subject, whether coded in the terminology of survival, archaism, antiquity, and tradition, or in the definition of folkloristics as a historical science, has contributed to the discipline's inability to imagine a truly contemporary, as opposed to contemporaneous, subject (Fabian 1983). Folklore is by many (though not all) definitions out of step with the time and context in which it is found.

The implications of this temporality, how it positions the "folk," is the subject of "Folklore's Disenchantment" and "Folklore's Canonical Subject," the fifth and sixth sections, respectively. I track the pejorative connotations of the term folklore in academic circles as scholars become painfully aware that to designate a particular cultural form as folklore is to position it within a cultural hierarchy, even if only to declare folklore's parity, if not superiority, to other forms in the pantheon. Whether we are correcting popular misconceptions of folklore as error or valorizing folklore as cultural expression (and folkloristics as an intellectual endeavor), we are often forced to operate in a defensive mode both inside and outside the academy.

Attempts to make folklore a more inclusive category by identifying it with the quotidian and flattening the hierarchies with which folklore is associated do not eliminate the problem because they do not address the synergy between the discipline and its mutating subject. Neither do they address the temporality of folklore's contemporaneity: folklore continues to be in the present without being fully of the present, in part because folklore, understood as oral tradition, tends to be defined over and against technology, first writing and print, then recording and broadcast technologies, and finally digital media. Folklore persists, and is created, in spite of, not because of them (see Scharfe 1993).

"Two Oralities," the seventh section, relates the "oral" to the history of these technologies and theories of them. I contrast artifacts of inscription (writing and print) with phonic artifacts and argue that, while the concept of oral literature arises in relation to writing and print, the concept of orality emerges in tandem with sound recordings. The concept of orality was important to the emergence of the performance paradigm within folkloristics, but orality also has its limitations. It is predicated on problematic assumptions about the history of communication technologies, folklore's historical independence from them (if only conceptually), and a sensorium dominated by sound. While my focus here is on the historical formation of orality in relation to folklore's disciplinary subject, I want to
acknowledge important new work that has taken the subject far beyond these limitations (Foley 1991, 1995; Mudimbe 1991; Okpewho 1990).

Digital technologies further complicate matters. What do terms like group or community mean when strangers at computer terminals at the far ends of the world type messages to each other? In the absence of face-to-face communication and oral transmission, they are producing "not word-of-mouth folk culture but word-of-modem folk culture," in the words of television scholar Robert Thompson (quoted in Grimes 1992:14). The electronic vernacular is neither speech nor writing as we have known it, but something in between, and increasingly, with the convergence of technologies, it is multimedia (Kirshenblatt-Gimblett 1996a).

This web of connections between orality, temporality, technology, and cultural production offers clues to the historical roots of the crisis faced by folklore in the U.S. academy today. Would changing the name change the game? If indeed we are experiencing topic drift, we have several options. First, we can, as we now do, proceed defensively, correct mistaken notions of what folklore is and what folklorists do, and continue to identify our field as folklore—even if what we do bears little relation to the historical meanings of a term that often carries negative connotations. We could continue to rehearse our intellectual history, first as a legitimizing genealogy and then as a legacy for which we assume responsibility to the death. Second, we could reassess what we now do and find a new name for it, one that better reflects the field, carries more positive associations, and plots a future (see Korff 1996). Third, we could rethink our history in relation to the issues raised here. We could find in the outtakes of our own disciplinary formation a new footing for a new intellectual formation in a new relationship with our history. We could consider defining folklore as the study of a particular mode of cultural production. We could reinvent the field as a new kind of "science of tradition" by converting our historic repudiation of the "inauthentic" into the critical study of "heritage." My goal is not, however, to offer solutions, but rather to explicate the current crisis in a way that brings our intellectual history to bear on our future course. Critical histories—and historiographies—of folklore point the way, as do critical practices. It is in this spirit that I explore folklore's crisis.

**Disciplinarity**

In 1972, two works appeared at a defining moment in the history of the discipline in the United States—Folklore and Folklife: An Introduction, edited by Richard M. Dorson, and Toward New Perspectives in Folklore, edited by Américo Paredes and Richard Bauman. Toward New Perspectives was actually a reprinting of a special issue of the *Journal of American Folklore* that had appeared the previous year. Each collection of essays made a case for folklore as a discipline, but in very different ways. Several panels at the annual meeting of the American Folklore Society (AFS) in 1992 addressed Toward New Perspectives, the work of "the young turks" of the period (Briggs and Shuman 1993). I will focus here on Folklore and Folklife, a work of consolidation by an institution builder. Dorson, one of "the graybeards,"
set out the disciplinary question explicitly: "What then are the skills, perspectives, and methods that set the folklorist apart from the anthropologist, the historian, the literary critic, the sociologist, the psychologist, and the political scientist?" What is the distinctive subject matter of the discipline, its unique goals and purposes, its "particular contribution to knowledge," and its "guiding intellectual and conceptual frameworks?" (Dorson 1972:6) Such questions are part of a longer history of disciplinarity, a notion that Dorson could take for granted and that we no longer can in a postdisciplinary era.

Dorson not only succeeded in institutionalizing the discipline within the academy, but he also trained a generation of "young turks," whose very challenge to his view of the field was a mark of his success, a story of fathers and sons. Rather than defend folklore’s disciplinarity, as Folklore and Folklife did, Toward New Perspectives shifted its ground. It showed the power of performance as an organizing idea for the study of folklore and the usefulness of particular theories and methods for developing this "new perspective." The history of folklore’s disciplinarity is instructive.

Disarticulating Omnibus Disciplines

Fusion and fission in the logical division of intellectual labor produced the disciplines we take for granted today. It is precisely this process—the breakup of omnibus disciplines during the latter half of the 19th century—that produced folklore. The process continues. A recent newsletter of the American Anthropological Association asked,

Is anthropology coming apart at the seams? Is it breaking down into academic specialties that are unable or unwilling to speak to one another? Are departments that are organized around the traditional four-field [archaeology, physical, linguistics, cultural] approach of anthropology clinging to a myth about the unity of the discipline? [Brown and Yoffee 1992:1]

American anthropology’s crisis can shed light on folklore’s historic place as a subfield of a subfield of anthropology. I remember well William Bascom’s course in verbal art at the University of California, Berkeley, in the 1960s. He classified verbal art, which he identified with folklore, as a subfield of cultural anthropology (Bascom 1953, 1955).

Disciplines are not forever. One need only note the passing of the great omnibus disciplines of the 17th and 18th centuries, among them cosmography, geography, statistics, and philology. Geography, one of the oldest omnibus disciplines, once encompassed all that is on the earth’s surface. Its divisions included meteorology, geology, oceanography, botany, zoology, and topics we associate today with anthropology and folklore. During the latter half of the 19th century, more and more of its subfields defected, leaving less and less under the umbrella. By the latter half of the 20th century, geography had developed into urban planning and tourism on the one hand and theorizing of space on the other. Today very few
departments of geography remain, whereas there was a time when virtually every U.S. university had one.

As political science took over the study of the state, statistics withered from a discipline devoted to the study of all that pertains to the state, including what we understand as folklore and folklife, into a field devoted to what can be expressed numerically. By 1918, in a volume devoted to Jewish statistics, Joseph Jacobs expressed astonishment that the old statistics, which he understood as synonymous with *Volkskunde*, had shrunk so radically to a science of numbers (Jacobs 1918). Folklorists such as Max Grünwald were quick to condemn the application of statistics to a pseudoscience of racial typology and hierarchy, a fate it shared with European anthropology (Kirshenblatt-Gimblett 1990).

Philology offered itself as "a total science of civilization" seen from the perspective of language (Wellek and Warren 1956:27). According to Gerald Graff, "The word was revived in 1777 by Friedrich Wolf of the University of Göttingen, who included in it 'attention to the grammar, criticism, geography, political history, customs, mythology, literature, art, and ideas of a people' " (Graff 1987:69). As "a total science of civilization," philology contributed the evidence of etymology to debates about race which were fueled by physical anthropology during the 19th century. These debates raged with special force in the United States in the 1880s, the decade in which mass emigration from Eastern and Southern Europe began and the AFS was founded.

As a conjuncture of subfields disarticulated from their respective omnibus disciplines, folklore bears traces of its multiple disciplinary genealogies, to take only statistics and philology as two examples. Eighteenth-century statistics produced what Uli Linke calls "administrative folklorists," who "sought to enhance the governing power of single German states" by surveying regions and producing "detailed ethnographic studies of whole communities" (Linke 1990:119). In contrast, philology produced the "romantic folklorists," with whom we have tended to identify the history of the discipline in the United States. They collected and interpreted texts identified with a lost and recovered national heritage in the service of a politically unified nation. Such disciplinary genealogies illuminate distinctions we make today between folklore, which we ally with oral tradition, language, and folk life, which preserves the concerns of statistics and geography in the specificities of locale, habitat, and material culture (Yoder 1963). These genealogies also point to the applied character of folklore's early disciplinary formation—as an ideological tool of either social reform or resistance to foreign domination, and as a practical instrument of administration at home and abroad. These applications have in turn given folklore both its conservatism as a cultural category and its potential radicalism as a cultural practice.

From Oratory to Literacy in the Academy

Folklore's institutionalization, like departmentalization more generally, is a relatively recent development within the U.S. academy. Furthermore, it was folklore, rather than folklife, that found a home in literature departments as oral
literature and in anthropology departments as verbal art (see Wellek and Warren 1956:34–42). To better understand the formation of a disciplinary subject in relation to its intellectual and institutional settings, I will trace changes in U.S. academic culture from a classical curriculum based in oratory to a modern curriculum based in literacy. Not only were new specializations in vernacular literatures created, but also an interest in their oral counterparts. As vernacular literatures were departmentalized—the idea of departments was itself a new development—folklore’s institutionalization began, first as a subfield of a new specialization, to be followed decades later by departmentalization as an autonomous discipline. The first phase of folklore’s institutionalization is the focus of this discussion. I will link the decline of oratorial pedagogy with the rise of interest in oral literature through the mediation of philology.

A radical reorganization of the U.S. university between 1860 and 1900 produced the modern college department. Before then, “the standard college curriculum consisted in two to four years of Greek and Latin, plus mathematics, history, logic, theology,” and during the last two years, some natural science and electives in foreign languages, English, and other subjects, the idea being to offer a liberal studies education that would prepare men for the law, medicine, and the ministry (1987:22).

To appreciate the appearance of oral literature as a subject of research, and to a lesser extent of instruction, within the U.S. university during the latter part of the 19th century, consider the importance of oral pedagogy in the history of U.S. higher education. During the Colonial period, students were expected to acquire “oral prowess” by means of lectures and recitations, formal original speeches, declamations, disquisitions, dramatic dialogues, and essays and poems read aloud in four languages—English, Hebrew, Greek, and Latin. In the 18th century, during a period of religious revival, virtually everyone at Harvard was studying for the ministry, and well into the 19th century the demand for good speakers continued, not only in the pulpit, where the nature and delivery of the sermon was much at issue, but also in “the courtroom, the legislative hall, the town meeting, and the stump,” and at the meetings of business and trade organizations (Bohman 1954:73). The professional lecturer and platform speaker of the mid–19th century was one response to the Puritan resistance to theater. As this resistance weakened, an interest in theater was renewed and spurred demand for other kinds of oral competence.

Respect for the spoken word, whether read from a page or delivered extemporaneously, was cultivated in educational institutions to a degree we can hardly imagine today, so fully have we given literacy—and more specifically the ability to write—precedence over oratory. Remnants of the earlier emphasis on the ability to speak can still be seen today in lectures, oral reports, oral examinations, oral defenses of dissertations—where they survive—commencement and convocation ceremonies, and college debating, if not in papers read at academic conferences, which are notorious for poor delivery.
Oral Literature, Philology, and Nationalism

The career of Francis J. Child (b. 1825) marks the changing of the academic guard—from 1846, the year he graduated from Harvard and became a tutor in mathematics there, until his death in 1896.¹ He only began lecturing on the English and Scottish popular ballad, the great love of his life, two years before he died. Child’s career, which spans the transition from a classical to a modern curriculum, reveals how folklore benefited and later suffered from its association with philology. Traces of that history bedevil the field of folklore to this day and account for some of the more conservative aspects of the field.

Appointed Boylston Professor of Rhetoric and Oratory in 1851, Child taught within the trivium (grammar, rhetoric, logic) of the seven liberal arts that formed the foundation of a curriculum as old as the university itself. But much of his time was devoted to undergraduate composition, for this is what had become of the teaching of rhetoric when it no longer focused primarily on the art of speaking. Courses today in freshman composition and expository writing are the legacy of this change in the status of rhetoric and oratory within the curriculum.

When English literature appeared as a curricular subject in the 1850s, it too was an outgrowth of the study of rhetoric, but newly allied with criticism rather than oratory. Given how small universities were at the time—there were only 14 faculty at Harvard College in 1856—it was not until the 1870s that universities underwent departmentalization. At Harvard, the vernaculars achieved departmental status in 1872. They in turn made homes for folklore, not only in English but also in Germanic, and later in Slavic, areas. Only after Johns Hopkins University tried to hire him away from Harvard did Child become professor of English literature in 1876, a position that freed him from the burden of grading undergraduate themes and allowed him to play a major role in the professionalization of English literature as a discipline. His tool was philology, a method that made the study of what “any body can teach” a science that only trained professionals could tackle (Graff 1987:67–68, emphasis in original). He was now freer to teach what interested him. However, he did not start lecturing on the ballad until the very end of his life, even though he had been working on the subject since 1856, when he added ballads to a series entitled The British Poets. George Lyman Kittredge, who arrived at Harvard in 1888, was allowed to teach such courses as Germanic mythology, and by 1897 was teaching the ballad course every other year (Zumwalt 1988:50).

Child’s death in 1896 marked the end of a life’s project, if not an era, that began when he went to Germany in 1849 to meet the Grimms. He heard their lectures on German philology and classical antiquity at Berlin University, as well as those of their colleagues at Göttingen University. Philology, as Child encountered it, liberated the study of literature from oratory and the classical curriculum. Though it arose in connection with classics, philology became a tool for constituting vernacular languages and literatures as subjects for study and for making the study of them scientific, by the standards of the day. This was a mixed blessing, for at the same time that philology helped create new subjects, including folklore, and rigorous ways of studying them, philology suffered from both its association with racialist
notions of nation and a methodology that came increasingly under attack as sterile of ideas. As Graff notes, “The vision of a national culture which animated the founding of English was becoming detached from and turned against the methodology it had spawned” (Graff 1987:72). Writing retrospectively from the vantage point of the worst abuses of nationalism during World War II, René Wellek took an even harder line: a worthy ideal—“a total science of civilization”—had become debased as German Romantics transferred it from the study of classical antiquity, for which it was first formulated, to the study of modern languages (1956:68–69).

The notion of race—the term was used interchangeably with nation—was instrumental in departmentalization along national lines. Brander Matthew’s statement in 1896 that “English literature . . . is the record of the life of the English speaking race” and is “likely to be strong and great in proportion as the peoples who speak the language are strong and great” captures the cultural nationalism that gave to philology, and to folklore studies in particular, its racialist tendencies, the cosmopolitan claims of the comparative method notwithstanding (quoted in Graff 1987:71). Philology and physical anthropology, which was preoccupied with racial typology and hierarchy, made for a deadly partnership. Max Müller’s hypothesis of the Aryan brotherhood of all Indo-European nations and Arnold’s conviction that the Anglo-Saxon national character was more Celtic than Teutonic represented all that Franz Boas fought. Thanks to Boas, William Wells Newell, one of the founders of the AFS, was less inclined toward the speculative evolutionism of British anthropology and the positivistic pseudoscience of racial types and philological genealogies than he might otherwise have been. The battle between literary and anthropological folklorists during the 1890s should be seen in this light.

As literary studies distanced themselves from philology, folklore became an academic relic area for the practice of an outmoded philology. Kittredge (and the school of folklore he represented) came to be identified with the sterility of specialization: “Stuart Sherman, who took a Harvard PhD. in 1906, blamed scholars like Kittredge for turning students into ‘zealous bibliographers and compilers of card indexes,’ calling Kittredge himself, ‘a potent force in bringing about the present sterilizing divorce of philology from general ideas’ ” (Graff 1987:109–110). It was precisely at this point that John A. Lomax arrived at Harvard to pursue a masters degree.

An American Folklore

Lomax’s undergraduate education recapitulates in the compressed span of two decades the history of change in university curricula through which Child lived and which he helped to bring about. It also reveals how a classical education shaped Lomax’s understanding of the American ballads and folksongs he collected in the field from living singers—Child’s work had been based on manuscripts and printed texts—even though it was in the context of American literature that his collections attracted the interest of his professors.
During the late 1880s, when Lomax was a freshman at a small school in Texas, his course of study preserved many aspects of the older curriculum. He took mathematics, physiology, spelling and grammar, Latin, and elocution, and consistent with the older oratorical culture of the university, he "made a ponderous final oration." As he recalled, "English literature, history, and civics were not taught at Granbury College" (Lomax 1947:24).

When Lomax arrived in the 1890s at the University of Texas, which did have a department of English literature, he expected the classical curriculum and older oratorical culture. As he was to recall many years later, thoughts of the A. B., Artium Baccalaureus, "brought visions of philosophers strolling among Grecian pillars, of senators discussing grave matters of state in the Roman Forum. So, in addition to English and mathematics in my freshman year, I plunged into beginners' Greek and Freshman Latin. . . . To these four subjects, I added chemistry, history and Anglo-Saxon" (Lomax 1947:29–30), followed by French, government, and philosophy. The imprint and prestige of the classical curriculum to which Lomax was first exposed stayed with him till the end of his days. American Ballads and Folksongs, prepared in collaboration with his son Alan and published in 1934, identified African American singers and their songs with the ancient bards. Iron Head is like the "blind Homer" and Clear Rock's repertoire is as long as the Iliad. Work songs are like a page of Ulysses: both seem disorganized at first (Hirsch 1992:191). Not until the 1930s, with the work of Milman Parry, would the identification of Homeric epic with living performance traditions do as much, if not more, to dignify contemporary performers as to illuminate Homer.

At Granbury College 45 years earlier, Lomax had showed his sheaf of cowboy ballads to the chairman of the English department, a specialist in Anglo-Saxon, who told him that "there was no possible connection . . . between the tall tales of Texas and the tall tales of Beowulf" (Lomax 1947:32). Only after Lomax arrived at Harvard did Barrett Wendell, a generalist who taught writing, encourage his interest in cowboy songs and introduce him to Kittredge. Lomax took American literature as one of his English courses and remembers Wendell, bored "with reading, year in and year out, dissertations on Emerson, Hawthorne, Thoreau, Holmes, and Poe," exhort the class: "You fellows come from every section of the country. Tell us something interesting about your regional literary productions" (Lomax 1947:33). Wendell, who held a masters degree and mainly taught writing, was part of the generalist opposition that formed during what Graff has characterized as the early professional era, 1875–1915. With the aim of adapting "the old college ideal of liberal culture to the challenges of modern times," generalists like Wendell, according to one of his students in the 1890s, "felt out of place in a modern German-trained American college Faculty, surrounded as he was by research scholars and philologists. He had never studied Anglo-Saxon, he knew no German, he had never studied for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy, which had in general become the sole gateway to college teaching" (Graff 1987:87).

While Wendell's assignment was a somewhat radical departure, academically speaking, it belied culturally conservative values. As Jerrold Hirsch has noted, Wendell considered "waves of inferior immigrants" a threat to New England
culture, whose success he attributed to its homogeneity and Anglo-Saxon nature (Hirsch 1992:186). Even as late as 1900, Wendell regretted the freeing of the slaves. He thought that “modern ethnology” had proved that “though native Africans are not literally neolithic, they certainly linger far behind the social stage which has been reached by modern Europe or America” (Graff 1987:83; see also Hirsch 1992:186). This position was consistent with both an ethnology preoccupied with race and a philology concerned with national genealogy.

By the 1890s, as philology found itself caught between “broad, humanistic generality and narrow, positive science,” the study of literature forged an independent path (Graff 1987:69, 72). Formal experimentations in literature itself, avant-garde art movements, and a repudiation of the national principle in the study of literature would lead to the formal analysis of folklore associated with Vladimir Propp, Petr Bogatyrev, Roman Jakobson, and others during the interwar years, although it would not be until the 1960s before key works would be translated from Russian and read in the United States to fuel the new criticism. In the wake of the worst abuses of nationalism during World War II, literary scholars such Ernst Robert Curtius, Erich Auerbach, René Wellek, and Austin Warren would attack the provincialism and latent racism of literary studies based on national genius and offer new criticism as an antidote. But, while they displaced the problem, they did not solve it. As they responded to the recent experience of fascism, their affirmation of “the unity of Western civilization, the vitality of the heritage of classical antiquity and medieval Christianity” still left unexamined troubling assumptions of gender, race, class, and cultural homogeneity (Wellek and Warren 1956:38–39). Furthermore, the departmentalization of folklore as an independent field in the postwar period was closely connected to a nationalist American folklore project, nowhere more clearly than in the career of Dorson, who was among the first to receive a Ph.D. in American civilization during the 1930s.

The Academy and the Public Sector

While folklore courses, or courses in which folklore played a part, had been part of the university curriculum since the latter part of the 19th century, it was not until 1940, when Ralph Steele Boggs created the Interdisciplinary Curriculum in Folklore at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, that folklore appeared as an independent field of study in the U.S. university. Institutionalization at other universities followed in quick succession. In 1942, Stith Thompson established the summer folklore institute at Indiana University, which met every four years (S. Thompson 1996:181). Luc Lacourcière founded the folklore program at Université Laval in 1944, and Thompson created the first doctoral program in folklore in 1949 at Indiana University. After Thompson retired in 1955, Dorson took over and succeeded in achieving departmental status, as the Folklore Institute, in 1962. MacEdward Leach established the second doctoral program in folklore in 1959 at the University of Pennsylvania, while Wayland Hand, together with Sigurd Hustvedt, formed the Interdepartmental Program in Folklore
and Mythology at the University of California, Los Angeles, in 1954—UCLA’s doctoral program was finally approved in 1979. According to Ronald L. Baker (1986), periodical surveys of U.S. colleges and universities, starting with the first one by Boggs (1940), record the growth in numbers of universities offering folklore courses from 23 institutions in 1940 to 60 by 1950, 170 by 1969, 404 by 1977, and 509 by 1986, with some increase in the number of institutions offering concentrations, minors, majors, and bachelors and masters degrees in folklore.

The names of programs reflect differences not only of orientation, but also of emphasis, resources, and intellectual history, so that while some simply designate themselves as folklore (Indiana University, Memorial University, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, Pitzer College, Utah State University), others stand out as folklife (George Washington University), folk studies (Western Kentucky), oral tradition (University of Missouri), or some combination thereof—folklore and folklife (University of Pennsylvania), folklore and mythology (Harvard, UCLA), and folklore, mythology, and film (SUNY–Buffalo). At the University of Missouri, the Center for Studies in Oral Tradition redefines the terms so that oral tradition is defined as “a rapidly evolving consortium of disciplines,” according to its brochure, and subsumes folklore and other fields, among them anthropology, literary studies, and linguistics.

While many public folklore programs are identified as either folklore or folklife, others map a somewhat different terrain with variations on art (folk, traditional, community, regional, documentary, ethnic), culture (cultural studies, cultural heritage, cultural conservation), and tradition (traditional culture, urban traditions). This terminology allies them with the arts agencies in which many find themselves or with colloquial usage (heritage, tradition, ethnic) more appealing to their constituencies. The proliferation of these programs is a product of the last 25 years, thanks in large measure to the initiatives and support of the Folk Arts Division, led by Bess Lomax Hawes, at the National Endowment for the Arts.

At the time of this writing (1998), both the National Endowment for the Humanities and the National Endowment for the Arts, much weakened since their golden days in the 1970s and 1980s, are headed by folklorists—William Ferris and William Ivey, respectively—a truly astonishing development and sign of the times. While as folklorists we rejoice at the vote of confidence that this represents for our field and our colleagues, it is chastening to reflect on how the image of folklore as populist, conservative, and safe is being used to “save” the endowments at a time when they have been attacked for their liberal, if not radical, tendencies. The considerable successes of folklorists in the public sector, which is increasingly concerned with “cultural heritage,” points again to the importance of theorizing folklore as a mode of cultural production and understanding our history and our future in relation to this process. These issues have been productively debated (Baron and Spitzer 1992; Feintuch 1988, 1995; Hufford 1994) and now, with folklorists at the helm of both endowments, are sure to reach far beyond our discipline.

Indeed, the question before us 26 years after Toward New Perspectives in Folklore and Folklore and Folklife: An Introduction is disciplinarity itself. The issues of distinctive
subject, unified theory, and intellectual coherence are holdovers from an older notion of disciplinariness that assumes an isomorphism of discipline and disciplinary subject. In uniting the subfields of anthropology (verbal art) and literature (oral literature), the newly independent field of folklore set off a custody battle over which one, anthropology or literature, is the fittest parent and over whether the child deserves independence. This returns us to the battles of the 1890s that pitted folklore as “a body of material” best studied as part of anthropology against folklore as “a separate science,” but closely allied with literature, as Newell put it (Zumwalt 1988:25–26). This also delivers us to the present moment. Folklore programs and departments are forming new alignments with art, culture, and performance, and in some cases are being absorbed by them, willingly or not.

_Folklore’s Destiny_

Having achieved a degree of disciplinary autonomy and the security of departmentalization, folklore had still to fight for respectability in relation to the more prestigious fields with which it was allied—literature, linguistics, anthropology, and history, among others. Many of those who have produced folkloristic studies over the last century did not (and still do not) identify themselves as folklorists—even Stith Thompson identified himself first and foremost as an “English teacher,” commenting that folklore was a “side issue,” an “avocation” (Zumwalt 1988:57). I will never forget asking Bertrand Bronson for a recommendation for the Ph.D. program in folklore at Indiana University. I was finishing the masters in English at the University of California, Berkeley, in 1967 and doing well in his two ballad seminars. He refused to write the letter because he would not be party to my professional suicide. He told me that it was a mistake to pursue a Ph.D. in folklore, when I could “do folklore on the side,” as he had done, and get the Ph.D. in a legitimate field like English. I knew then that he was acting in what he understood to be my best interest.

When _Toward New Perspectives in Folklore_ appeared in 1972, it did not represent the engineered interdisciplinarity of the interwar years, in which fields that had broken away from an omnibus discipline were encouraged to find new points of intersection. When disciplinary lines later crossed, they did not reconstitute the older arrangements. There is news at the nexus, which is a place of articulation not necessarily seen before. Less an exercise in disciplinary diplomacy than an attempt at theoretical synthesis, _New Perspectives in Folklore_ was relatively unconcerned about provenance—about “borrowing” ideas from, or being “influenced” about loyalty to, folklore’s disciplinary autonomy.

As we near the end of the 20th century, the disciplinary map is changing yet again. Institutional arrangements that have outlived the best days of the disciplines they house are under attack as the relationship between subjects, disciplines, and institutionalizations shift. Folklore’s contours are also being redrawn. Hard economic times bring unforgiving scrutiny. University administrations are using the convergence of retirement and recession to restructure the disciplinary map of the academy, for not only do scholars age, disciplines age too. Universities are not the
final resting place of dead fields. Departments are disbanded if entire fields (or their institutional realizations) are weak.

Literature, which would seem invulnerable, has also had its problems. Where the analysis of the canon has exhausted itself, a field can enlarge the scope of material it will examine to include all literature written in the English language, not just British. It can reframe the boundaries of the literary work, as in the new historicism. Or it can extend an organizing concept, like text and discourse, to other media (film and television) and to (popular) culture. "Comparative literature," a designation that has outlived its usefulness, is a primary site for cultural studies. At Tulane University, the Department of Literature and Orature designates a discipline widened to include, at the very least on a terminological par, written and oral expression. New names such as Department of English and Textual Studies signal a compromise between the old definition of the field and new attempts to enlarge its scope.

Theater history departments have emancipated themselves from dramatic literature and the English departments in which theater history was taught, while speech and communication departments that offered oral interpretation have moved beyond interpretation, in the case of Northwestern University, for example. In several cases, both fields have rethought their raison d'être in terms of performance studies. Using performance, rather than theater or speech or oral interpretation, as an organizing concept, "performance studies" as understood at New York University deals with all the arts, and particularly the performing arts, in an integrated way, and from intercultural and interdisciplinary perspectives.

"American civilization" has become "American studies" or "American cultures" or "American cultural studies." What used to be "area studies" is playing a strong role in retheorizing the conventional disciplines. Of special importance in this regard are newer areas (Africana, Native American, Chicano, Asian-American, and subaltern studies), in part because of the social engagement of scholars, artists, and cultural activists within them and their ties to communities and diasporas rather than states. Rather than assuming the local, scholars in these areas are asking how locality is produced in the contexts of diaspora, transnationalism, globalization, and postcolonialism (Appadurai 1997). New fields are being structured as interdepartmental programs rather than as independent departments, while some interdepartmental programs are supplanting established departments. UCLA's Department of Dance has become the Department of World Arts and Cultures and is absorbing the Interdisciplinary Program in Folklore and Mythology. World Arts and Cultures was previously an interdepartmental program.

Other convergences have produced interest groups, collectives, journals, and institutes that may or may not coalesce as formal disciplines and university departments—for example, "cultural studies" and "public culture." Even as it becomes a tidal wave, "cultural studies" may disavowdepartmentalization in a show of principled antdisciplinarity (Grossberg et al. 1992:2). As represented in the volume that grew out of an international conference on the subject at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign in 1990, cultural studies takes as one of its projects the critique of disciplinary formations and is proud to be a field with "no stable
disciplinary base" and "no distinct methodology" (1992:2). Rather, "Cultural studies draws from whatever fields are necessary to produce the knowledge required for a particular project," though some fields are clearly privileged over others, as can be seen from the emphasis on literature and film (1992:2). The guiding ethos is "to remain open to unexpected, unimagined, even uninvited possibilities" (1992:3). Despite the disdain for codification, cultural studies has developed an almost canonical thematic and style of work as "a location where the new politics of difference—racial, sexual, cultural, transnational—can combine and be articulated in all their dazzling plurality" (Mani 1992:392).

These new developments should surely create new niches for folklorists. As disciplinary birds of passage who have historically nested in anthropology and literature departments, we could play a pivotal role in reorienting both national literature departments and area studies programs in a cultural direction, while making common cause with cultural studies. First, however, we need to understand where the intellectual histories of folklore and cultural studies have parted ways even as their trajectories in the United States increasingly converge. A key to the relationship of these two fields is how they have approached the theorizing of difference. Folklore came of age in the U.S. academy in the 1960s, the period of the "new ethnicity." Studies of immigrant and ethnic folklore dating from this period tended to work with the culturally conservative categories of primordial identification and a thematic of diversity, rather than difference—Richard Buman's early essay (1972) on differential identity seems to have fallen on deaf ears until recently (Glassie 1994; Kirshenblatt-Gimblett 1994; Oring 1994a, 1994b). The concern with primordial identification accounts in part for the celebratory character of much of this work and its contrast with postcolonial conceptualizations of identity in the context of diaspora (Clifford 1997; Hall 1990, 1997).

Stuart Hall distinguishes two approaches to "cultural identity." The one based on "shared culture" is familiar to folklorists. The other, "a conception of 'identity' which lives with and through, not despite difference," is more characteristic of cultural studies (Hall 1990:235; see also Gilroy 1995). This formulation is inspired by Frantz Fanon's call: "We must not therefore be content with delving into the past of a people in order to find coherent elements which will counteract colonialism's attempts to falsify and harm . . . . A national culture is not a folklore, not an abstract populism that believes it can discover a people's true nature" (Fanon 1968:233).

Cultural identities, as Hall defines them, are positionalities in retrospect (Hall 1997). Or, in Paul Gilroy's terms, "Diaspora's discomfort with carelessly over-integrated notions of culture, and its rather fissured sense of particularity, fits readily with the best moods of politicised postmodernism which share an interest in understanding the self as contingently and performatively produced," while resisting the reifications and ethnic absolutisms that arise from a preoccupation with origins and essences, notions that are alive and well in tourism, the heritage industry, national museums of ethnography, and multicultural programs (Gilroy 1995:24). Informing the statements of Hall and Gilroy is J. L. Austin's notion of performative, as refracted through the work of Judith Butler and applied to gender
and race. In contrast, American folklorists have been more concerned with performance, first in relation to orality and more recently in relation to sociolinguistics and the ethnography of speaking (Austin 1975; Butler 1993; Foley 1995). And, while folklorists have theorized identity as socially constructed and contingent, this approach to identity does not translate well into multicultural public programs, which are generally predicated on the identity claims associated with "heritage."

What is the fate of folklore? Folklore has held resolutely to the terminology of folklore and folklife, folk art, and folk culture. It has also sustained a fairly stable disciplinary subject, whatever forays individual scholars might make to its outer limits. But most academic folklore programs in the United States are not growing. Nor are they large, relative to English and history departments. All but the two that give doctorates in folklore (Indiana University and the University of Pennsylvania) are programs rather than departments, which makes them specially vulnerable when universities face budget cuts. The demographics of the 1990s reflects the retirement of senior scholars. But the economic recession has soured the promise that more jobs would open up as they stepped down, even as the Long-Range Planning Committee of the AFS is entertaining proposals to declare folklore a primary humanistic discipline on a par with literature and history. This prospect seems increasingly remote as we contemplate tectonic shifts within the academy and the vulnerability of the humanities more generally.

The Atavism of Misunderstanding

How did we come full circle from Sir Thomas Browne’s Enquiries into Vulgar and Common Errors (1646) to Dorson’s complaint that “to the layman, and to the academic man too, folklore suggests falsity, wrongness, fantasy, and distortion. Or, it may conjure up pictures of granny women spinning traditional tales in mountain cabins or gaily costumed peasants performing seasonal dances” (Dorson 1972:1). Notwithstanding the claim of the Oxford English Dictionary that only recently has folklore been extended to mean “popular fantasy or belief” and “misinformation,” we are dealing here with an atavism, a return of the repressed, a deep layer in an archaeology of our knowledge. So fundamental is repudiation to folklore as a mode of cultural production that it demands explication in the spirit of Raymond Williams, who says of a keyword that its meanings are “inextricably bound up with the problems it was used to discuss” (Williams 1983:15). This requires that we take common usage as seriously as we do specialized understandings, even when they are at great variance. Indeed, in the discussion that follows, I will suggest that common usage today preserves specialized understandings from the past. I use two concepts, the rehearsal of culture and shameful ethnology, to show how the claim of misinformation prepares the ground for the emergence of folklore.
Rehearsal of Culture

The early history of our field is consistent with what Steven Mullaney calls the rehearsal of culture. During Henry II’s royal entry into Rouen in 1550, re-created Brazilian villages stocked with Native Americans for the occasion and supplemented with appropriately attired Frenchmen were the scene of a mock siege and French triumph. Mullaney’s analysis of this event focuses not so much on its recreation as on its erasure: “The ethnographic attention and knowledge displayed at Rouen was genuine, amazingly thorough, and richly detailed; the object, however, was not to understand Brazilian culture but to perform it, in a paradoxically self-consuming fashion” (Mullaney 1983:48). He argues further that the interest in Brazilian culture displayed at Rouen served “ritual rather than ethnological ends, and the rite involved is one ultimately organized around the elimination of its own pretext” (1983:48). Such performances, he continues, are rehearsals, in the legal sense of the term, and are to be understood within a dramaturgy of power that first exhibits what it “consigns to oblivion” (1983:48, 49, 52). It is in such rehearsals of culture that our disciplinary subject begins to emerge.

In England, where the term *folklore* was coined in 1846, it referred to “survivals” in a civilized society of behaviors that had their origins in earlier stages of cultural evolution. The original context of these behaviors had vanished and they should have disappeared as well, but somehow did not. On the Continent, the term or its rough equivalents (Volkskunde, *traditions populaires*) referred to the purity of national culture preserved in rural backwaters outside the cosmopolitanizing reach of the metropole. In both cases, folklore was out of step with its time and surroundings, which can be taken as its very diagnostic.

Just how reform works to create the domain of the popular can be seen in Robert Muchembled’s study, *Popular Culture and Elite Culture in France, 1400–1750* (1985). Defining popular culture as “one of history’s losers,” Muchembled sets out to prove that “popular culture does exist,” despite attempts to repress it, including its absence in the historical record (1985:1, 3). While Muchembled is arguing for the existence of popular culture, I am suggesting that whatever the practices he may identify with it, the category “popular culture” is itself a historical formation coincident with the repressions he describes. By examining the “archaeology of the centralizing power,” whether that power be in the hands of the church or the state, Muchembled’s study of popular culture shows that repression in the name of reform has a long history and that popular culture has long provided an arena for the struggle (1985:312).

Shameful Ethnology

Long processes of “cultural evolution,” violent revolutions, systematic programs of reform, and processes of absorption leave behind what they have rejected. Zones of repudiation, where the outtakes of a cultural editing process are to be found, form a *geniza* (repository) of sorts. In this way, Catholic Europe
became a source of fascination for Protestants eager to see what the Reformation had repudiated, and to this day is a rich field of study for students of folk religion.

As Mona Ozouf demonstrates, the French Revolution entailed not only the rejection of the old cultural order, but also the systematic creation of a regime of social experience in which new forms of festivity were to play a central role in educating and transforming the citizenry. This process produced what Ozouf calls a "shameful ethnology" (Ozouf 1988:218). As instruments of the Revolution's "repressive militantism," negative accounts of traditional practices not only measured the success of the Revolution in eradicating what it repudiated but also the rebellious potential of what persisted (1988:223).

Similarly, the attempt to reform Jewish life by repudiating customary practices created a large domain of "cultural trash," which was to return as "folklore." During the early 19th century, Sulamit, a popular little magazine in German for Jewish readers, ran a column entitled "Gallery of Obnoxious Abuses, Shocking Customs, and Absurd Ceremonies of the Jews." Writing in what might be called the ethnographic burlesque, the author first contrasts the "simplicity" and naturalness of life in the Bible with the "bizarre ceremonialism" introduced by the rabbis. He then urges readers to adopt the aesthetic and refined manner of cosmopolitan Jews (Kirshenblatt-Gimblett 1990). Reform is here promulgated not at gunpoint but through a process illuminated by Norbert Elias's notion of "what may be described as an advance of the threshold of embarrassment and shame, as 'refinement,' or as 'civilization'" (Elias 1982:101). The ethnographic burlesque induces shame at thresholds of its own making. This art of rhetorically induced estrangement mobilizes the will of the reader to abandon established custom and internalize new forms of sensibility and conduct. But, by narrowing the domain of what could be considered normative, critics of traditional ceremonies and customs simultaneously expanded the field of the non-normative. What one was too ashamed to do, one could collect, study, and display. Fifty years later, the vituperation we see in Sulamit would give way to nostalgia. The very wedding customs that had been burlesqued in Sulamit would be offered as a critique of Jewish respectability, which came to be seen as formal and sterile in comparison with the artless warmth of disappearing folk customs. Those customs would now need to be inscribed rather than interred.

The process of negating cultural practices reverses itself once it has succeeded in archaizing the "errors." Indeed, through a process of archaizing, which is a mode of cultural production, the repudiated is transvalued as heritage. The very term folklore marks a transformation of errors into archaisms and their transvaluation once they are safe for preservation, exhibition, and even nostalgia and revival. How safe is another matter. In the words of John Comaroff, "Folklore, let me tell you, is one of the most dangerous words in the English language," because it often obscures "a highly unreflective populism" (quoted in Gray and Taylor 1992:2). In the words of Walter Benjamin, "appreciation as heritage" is a "catastrophe," even as picking up the repudiated can be a revolutionary gesture (quoted in Buck-Morss 1989:331).
The Soviets attacked the archaizing tendencies of the old category of folklore. They repressed earlier content and its positive identification with repudiated ways of life, as well as the ideological content of the category itself. In its stead, they promulgated folklore as a mode of contemporary, if not futuristic, cultural production consistent with the ideology and objectives of the Soviet state. What could not be found was to be fabricated—programmatically, systematically, on pain of death (Porter 1997). It is for these and other reasons that, for Morag Shiach, folklore helps to sustain “imaginary and reactionary categories of cultural analysis,” even outside repressive regimes (Shiach 1989:112). Folklore, and also folkloristics and public folklore, are vulnerable to these pressures. Folklore as a discipline is thus poised between its conservative role as an instrument of nationalism and its radical potential as a critique of the abuses of power (see Limon 1983).

The very existence of our discipline has stimulated the production of folklore. European immigrants to the United States during the 19th and early 20th centuries had participated in the mass production of tradition that characterizes this period, according to Eric Hobsbawm (Hobsbawm 1983:263–307). Photographs of immigrants passing through Ellis Island show them in their “native costumes,” not because they arrived that way, but because one of the processing officers, who was also an amateur photographer, asked them to wear the costumes for his photographs. These costumes have a complex and in many cases a recent history. In his account of the costume movement (Trachtenbewegung) in Germany in the 19th century, Bausinger explains that a

process of ideologizing, and not a natural, rural conservatism . . . made sure that costumes were preserved and at the same time stylized to become festively solemn, even though they were more colorful than the old forms of peasant dress. The increasing colorfulness is related to the new, indirect commercial function of costume, for which the way was paved by the process of ideologizing. [1990:154]

Hofer (1980) traces a similar elaboration of locally distinctive rural costume in Hungary during this period (see also Hofer 1991). It is such costume fragments and other examples of “folk art” that are displayed in the “Treasures from Home” exhibit at the Ellis Island Immigration Museum, but with no hint of their history in the terms suggested here.

Ours is a field built on paradoxes. The collecting of error is an overture to its eradication. Cultural forms are destroyed under the pretext of their preservation. Remembering is a prelude to forgetting. “Errors” acquire value as archaisms and exotics. The processes whereby errors become archaisms, objects become ethnographic, and ways of life become folklore are both evidence of folklore as a mode of cultural production and a test of the alienability of what was found at the source (see Kirshenblatt-Gimblett 1998a; Weiner 1992).
A Poetics of Disappearance

Thanks to these paradoxes, folklore is by definition a vanishing subject. The time of our operation is the eleventh hour. Before the eleventh hour there is life, after the eleventh hour death. But in that threshold moment between the two is the disjuncture from which our disciplinary subject has historically emerged. It is for this reason that the eleventh hour is always with us, shifting its location with the imminence of the next disappearance. In the discussion that follows, I use the work of William Wells Newell to explore how the preoccupation with disappearance has shaped folklore’s disciplinary subject.

Long abandoned because of its association with a repudiated model of cultural evolution, the notion of survivals has been a protean and generative concept for the field. Itself a relic of its time, this concept continues to shape folklore’s disciplinary subject, under other names and purged of explicit evolutionary explanation. Survivals produced a disciplinary subject that was broader in many ways than a European notion of Volkskunde as the study of peasant life because survivals could be found anywhere, not just among peasants. On these and other grounds, we need to distinguish British folkloristics from German Volkskunde, rather than collapsing them into “European folklore scholarship” (Zumwalt 1988:20). For this reason, I would rethink Rosemary Zumwalt’s claim that “[William Wells] Newell was making a revolutionary break. He was striking a new path for American folklore scholarship,” because “the study of American Indian folklore distinguished American folklore scholarship from European folklore scholarship” (1988:20). While it would have been revolutionary for a Volkskunde of the peasant to include Indians (more properly the domain of Volkerkunde), the British concept of folklore as survivals included all peoples, and especially “primitive peoples,” as Zumwalt herself notes (1988:21).

Actually, Newell worked with three categories (the lettered, the unlettered, and Native Americans), not in order to study all three, but rather to separate those who could read (and had print) from those who could not (see also Abrahams 1989; Bell 1973). While the evolutionists would have arranged the three categories in a progressive sequence and studied all three in terms of survivals, Newell was primarily interested in the unlettered, which would have included the Native Americans. In essence, his concern was oral literature, that is, the lore that circulates outside of print. That lore was vanishing, from his perspective, and required urgent attention.

Newell’s primary frame of reference was the British folklore tradition. While he argued with its evolutionism, his work bears traces of some of its arguments. Newell retained a residual notion of survivals, even as he proposed a revolutionary theory of folklore transmission from the court and aristocracy to the unlettered. He too produced a social hierarchy, but not on the basis of an evolutionary sequence (savage, barbarian, civilized). Instead, he argued that technology, specifically print, produces the social distinction between high and low that generates folklore. Genuine folklore is lore that escapes print (Newell 1883:v).
For Newell, "inferior rhymes of literary origin," which circulated with the assistance of print, lack "poetic interest" (Newell 1888:4). The oral has a particular charm. Here we see a poetics of the relic, whose survival depends on oral transmission. This is a poetics that emanates from "that attraction of freshness and quaintness which belongs only to the unwritten word" (1888:4). The unwritten word lacks the uniformity of songs and stories that circulate in print, in part because oral lore is peculiar to a locale. Indeed, the very incongruity between its aristocratic origins and the site where it has been preserved adds to the charm of genuine oral lore, as can be seen in the ballad "Little Harry Hughes and the Duke's Daughter" that Newell discovered in Manhattan:

The writer was not a little surprised to hear from a group of colored children, in the streets of New York City (though in a more incoherent form) the following ballad. He traced the song to a little girl living in one of the cabins near Central Park, from whom he obtained this version. The hut, rude as the habitation of a recent squatter on the plains, was perched on a rock wall projecting above the excavations which had been made on either side, preparatory to the erection of the conventional "brown-stone fronts" of a New York street. Rocks flung by carelessly managed explosions flew over the roof, and clouds of dust were blown by every wind into the unswept hovel. In this unlikeliness lingered the relics of old English folk-song, amid all the stir of the busiest of cities. The mother of the family had herself been born in New York, of Irish parentage, but had learned from her own mother, and handed down to her children, such legends of the past as the ballad we cite. A pretty melody gave popularity to the verse, and so the thirteenth-century tradition, extinct perhaps in its native soil, had taken a new lease of existence as a song of negro children in New York. [1883:75]

This epiphany exemplifies the poetics of disappearance and its corollary, survival.

The effect of Newell's account might be called folkloristic surrealism. Whereas in ethnographic surrealism, elements removed from one setting are installed elsewhere and "continually proclaim their foreignness to the context of presentation" (Clifford 1981:563), folkloristic surrealism operates at the site itself. It is the gap between the folkloristic gem and the unlikely circumstances in which it is harbored that produces the effect. Newell's accumulation of detail serves almost exclusively to characterize the singer—a poor, Negro child—and where she lives. Not only is New York the world's busiest city, where nothing is expected to survive, but her makeshift home is in a no man's land. With each detail, the location becomes more and more unlikely. It is the shock of the location of the material that produces the effect of folkloristic surrealism.

The classic notion of survivals produces this effect by demonstrating the presence of the most primitive atavisms in the most civilized quarters—that is, the persistence of elements from an earlier and lower stage of evolution into much higher stages. The result is a sense of the primitivism of modern life. Reversing the direction, devolutionary models find antique gems that have survived against all odds in the most unlikely of low circumstances.

Herein lies the poetics of the survival, which by its very definition is out of step and out of context. That is how it signals its presence, but only to the trained folklorist. By alienating parts of the picture, we produce folklore where there was a
seamless literary work or ordinary newspaper or unnoticed habits in everyday life or songs taken for granted. We annotate to demonstrate how old, rare, aristocratic, or primitive—how out of step—the lore is with the context in which we found it against all odds. In Newell’s case, the odds were set by print, the motion and novelty of life, rural mail delivery, public education, increased communication, and the increasing absorption of oral tradition in to the “uniformity of the written language” (Newell 1888:4).

In the 20 years between the first and second editions of Games and Songs of American Children (Newell 1883), Alice Bertha Gomme published The Traditional Games of England, Scotland, and Ireland in two volumes (1894 and 1898). Newell felt compelled to comment in the preface to the second edition of his collection that

In the general remarks of the Introduction [to the first edition of his own book] I find little to recant. As between English and Continental usage, I explained similarity as due to constant intercommunication. In England, at the time of writing, it was usual to consider such correspondences as owing either to common inheritance or parallel invention. [Newell 1963(1903):xvi]

Newell is careful to avoid the term survivals in both his book and the mission statement for the AFS. For British folklorists survivals were cultural elements that persisted from one evolutionary stage of culture into a later one. Nonetheless, an attenuated notion of survivals can still be detected in his approach to folklore as atavism, albeit aristocratic rather than primitive in origin, and recourse to “natural selection” to explain why some forms survive and some do not (Newell 1883:27). However much he has purged the notion of survival of its evolutionary taint by attributing parallel invention to universal principles governing a particular evolutionary stage wherever it may be found, Newell still speaks of finding civilization’s unconscious “concealed in the playing of children” (1883:5). Children’s folklore reveals how “the social state and habits of half a thousand years ago unconsciously furnish the amusement of youth, when the faith and fashion of the ancient day is no longer intelligible to their elders” (1883:5). If folklore was not to be evolutionary science, it was still a historical science of a particular kind.

Like Newell, we have historically located disappearance outside of our disciplinary concepts and practices—in the “real” world: “Always the cry is that the flowers of tradition are being crushed by the steamroller of industrial civilization. In a few more years, there will be no more folklore, and ergo, no need for any folklorists,” in the words of Dorson (1972:41). Dorson responded by looking elsewhere and found folklore in the media and a folk in the city.

The very duration of the eleventh hour indicates that it is our disciplinary subject, and with it our discipline, that is threatening to disappear. Indeed, the persistence of the phenomena we like to study does not guarantee the survival of our disciplinary subject. Every time anthropology, ethnomusicology, and cultural studies take up “our” topics, they remind us of this axiom. Herein lies the crisis.
Folklore’s Disenchantment

To make matters worse, the very term folklore continues to carry negative connotations in both general and academic parlance, and even our various constituencies resist being folklorized, or as John Roberts puts it, “folked up” (Roberts 1992). Melville Herskovits rejected the term folklore because, as William P. Murphy reports,

The word had pejorative connotations which offended Africans. . . . It sets up derogatory distinctions between oral and written forms of literature: calling the former folklore invokes connotations of something simple, crude, and less ‘civilized.’ These negative associations in the word ‘folklore’ have adhered to the term throughout its intellectual history. Although professional folklorists argue that they use the term technically without those associations, it is an unavoidable fact that nineteenth-century ethnocentrism weights heavily on the term in its present-day usage. [Murphy 1978:114]

Consistent with the “basic principle of scholarship that only words which hold no invidious connotation are to be used,” Herskovits preferred the term oral art (Murphy 1978:114; see also Herskovits 1946, 1951). This leaves unexamined the problematic nature of terms such as anthropology, ethnography, ethnomusicology, and natural history.

Arguing that the distinction between anthropology and folklife was “not based on any intrinsic difference in the phenomena studied—both are concerned with customs and social institutions” (Murphy 1978:114), Ward Goodenough saw both scientific and ethical reasons for treating the study of culture as a unified field: “The important point, whatever terms we use, is that laymen be encouraged to perceive the study of the customs and traditions of non-Western peoples as indissolubly connected with the study of the customs and traditions of Western peoples” (quoted in Murphy 1978:115). Better to get rid of such highly charged terms as folk, with their invidious distinctions and implicit hierarchies, and adopt more neutral designations like social group and community, in Murphy’s view. Whatever the merits of the argument, it also strengthened anthropology’s claim to a broad disciplinary subject that included that which folklorists were claiming as theirs.

In the late 1970s, Charles Keil and Dorson exchanged words on Keil’s provocation, “Who needs the folk?” Keil asks, further, “how to get past the ever broader, more coopting, and presently confusing concept of the folk’ to some better leverage points for liberation?” (Keil 1979:210). Keil was motivated by how terms, concepts, and methods “mystify the class forces and power difference that structure the current crisis” (1979:209). That crisis he defines in terms of the “common humanity of the exploited,” who are the victims both of our bourgeois definitions and of mass media manipulations (1979:210). Dorson responded to the provocation that folklorists and their imitators operate as if class does not exist, everyone is folk, and everyone has folklore by arguing that what Keil objects to is “fakelore”—what the Europeans call folklorismus—not genuine folklore (Dorson 1978b:267). Contrary to Keil’s characterization, it is not about making blue-collar
workers into peasants and putting them on display, Dorson insists. Rather, "Folk-
lore, the word and the subject, has a long and honorable history, which I for one
am prepared to uphold; it is the soundness of the discipline, not the name of the
game, that should concern us. As for the folk, they represent a common humanity,
out there somewhere" (1978b:269, emphasis in original). As for the discipline,
"The field and the folk are both mystical concepts, but the folklorist knows they
are real enough" (1978b:269).

What precipitated Dorson’s response was Keil’s criticism first that folklore
makes art out of other people’s misery and second, that the term refers to
"wannabe” folk, including middle-class people spending their weekend in some
kind of folk experience, “the amateur ‘folk’ in the counterculture,” “amateur and
professional folklorists—collectors and appreciators of things folksy” (Keil
1978:263). Recall that Keil was writing in the wake of the folksong revival that
had blossomed in the 1950s and 1960s. Keil advocates “abandoning the concept
of ‘folk’ and the process of ‘folking’ over people’s lives and skills for scholarly and
 commodification purposes, purposes which are not mutually exclusive, one must
add” (1978:264). He proposes concepts with an oppositional thrust as alternatives
to folklore, which he sees as a reactionary category:

Unlike “primitive,” folk has only positive, friendly meaning. The folk are not the oppressed whose
revolution is long overdue, but the Quaint-not-quite-like-us, the Pleasant peasants, the Almost-
like-me-and-you, to be consumed at leisure. The folk are not neutrals to be fought over by left and
right. They belong to the bourgeoisie, just like “High Culcha.” [1978:265]

For these reasons, Keil continues, “changing the name might just change the
game” (1978:265).

By the 1990s, folklorists were complaining in a loud and clear voice that the
name and the game were handicaps (Ellis 1992). David Kerr, in an article brazenly
titled “On Not Becoming a Folklorist: Field Methodology and the Reproduction
of Underdevelopment,” explains that the association in Africa of folklore with
colonial administration has “brand[ed] Folklore Studies with a kind of original
sin” (Kerr 1991:48). Earlier, the problem was that the term and manuals actually
instructed the researcher not to mention the word folklore. Now the problem was
with the discipline—not just the name, but the game. As Kerr explains, it is not
enough to identify and confess the colonial sins associated with folklore, because
the stigma carried by the term remains. He then goes on to explicate the special
circumstances in Africa, and especially in Zambia, based on his work there from
1975. First, the binary model of developed and developing countries produces
First World nostalgia for Third World oral culture. Second, rescue efforts ori-
tented to the past not only divert attention from the pressing needs of the present
but are also easily exploited for commercial gain, especially by the state and by
tourism. He objects to the vested interest of folklorists in “poverty and cultural
conservatism” and their need for “a compliant, illiterate underdeveloped peas-
antry as a reservoir for information” (1991:52). He turns instead to “the produc-
tion of performance which would help rural communities (through the transformation
of existing culture) to understand and mediate the socio-economic changes occurring in Zambia” by “linking folklore to the development process” (1991:54–55, emphasis in original).

Theatre for Development, an organization that mobilizes community action groups through plays that address social issues using local genres, offers “an alternative method of folklore collection, one which does not fossilize the collected items, but which helps to revivify them for the altered conditions of a modern, capitalist underdeveloped economy” (1991:58). The academic prestige of recording folklore is of less importance than the re-creation of folklore to meet the developmental needs of the players. This is “progressive folklore,” which he links to the “provocation anthropology” of theater artist Eugenia Barba. “What I am saying is that if the folklorist is to be more than just a taxidermist of a people’s culture, there must also be scope for a different kind of folklore methodology—one which allows for creative transformation of folklore to mediate the rapidly changing roles which rural communities have to play in the modern world” (1991:60).

When Latin American intellectuals object to folklore, it is often on these grounds, for they associate folklore with official notions of heritage, rather than with popular resistance (Canclini 1993, 1995; Rowe and Schelling 1991). Or, folklore is seen as a stage through which to pass in the creation of a postcolonial national culture—first, native intellectuals identify with colonial culture, then they recover native folklore in an archaeological mode, and finally, they work toward a new national identity based on a rejection of the culture of colonial power and a resignification of native culture (Fanon 1968:206–248). Folklorists have tended to view that resignification, so important to the project of postcolonialism, with suspicion, as folklorismus.

All folklore is made, not found, which does not mean that it is fabricated, although fabrication does of course occur—the 18th-century ballad-forgers, 19th-century inventors of tradition, and 20th-century fakeloreists are obvious cases of fabrication, in the sense of making false claims (see Dorson 1976; Hobsbawm and Ranger 1983; Legman 1964; Stewart 1991). Folklore’s facticity is rather to be found in the ways that particular objects or behaviors come to be identified, and understood, as folklore. This is the enabling moment for the discipline, for folklorization is something we do in order to create our disciplinary subject, even if those caught in our disciplinary drift net protest. Hasidim among whom I have worked look with disdain upon the idea that their Purim plays or music or legends would be studied as folklore. To think of what they do as folklore is to be an unbeliever; by not believing, folklorists devitalize what Hasidim do. A second life as folklore is just not as good, from their perspective, as a first life as faith.

Folklore is not only a disciplinary subject and disciplinary formation (we use one and the same term for both), but also a mode of cultural production. Because the term folklore is alien to what it designates (we like to think that the “real” folk never refer to what they do as folklore), folklorists produce folklore through a process of identification and designation. The subjects of folklorization may object. They may reject the term. Or, they may come to designate as folklore, heritage, or tradition that which they no longer take for granted (or even once
repudiated), a process discussed in the section “Atavism of Misunderstanding,” above.

Paul Gilroy calls for a rethinking of “the concept of tradition so that it can no longer function as modernity’s polar opposite” (Gilroy 1993:188). Haym Soloveitchik approaches the problem differently when he distinguishes between orthodoxy, the “implementation of what one knows,” and tradition, the “replication of what one has seen,” which he identifies with the “mimetic society” (Soloveitchik 1994:72). These concepts emerge not in relation to the project of building an autonomous discipline but from the historical specificity of the “slave sublime,” in the case of Gilroy; humra, or the stringency of modern forms of Jewish orthodoxy, in the case of Soloveitchik; and klezmer music in my reading of their concepts through the “revival” of East European Jewish instrumental music (Kirshenblatt-Gimblett 1998b).

**Folklore’s Canonical Subject**

The discipline of folklore finds itself today in a serious case of topic drift, to use a term from electronic communication. Our 19th–century name is drifting further and further away from our 20th-, not to say 21st-century, topic. In 1972, Dorson located the threat to the discipline outside itself in the disappearance of its canonical subject—folk culture. He tried to salvage the discipline by making the boundaries of folk culture as a concept permeable to all that it was not: “Whether in self-defense, or with a new enlightenment, folklore scholars in the 1960s have reinterpreted the opposition between the mass and the folk cultures. They have begun to see interpenetration instead of confrontation” (Dorson 1972:41).

First, Dorson pointed to folklore studies that identified the presence of folklore on television. Thomas A. Burns found “101 folkloric themes and items” on the television programs he watched from 6:15 A.M. to 1:30 A.M. on a single day (Dorson 1972:42). Charles Keil’s *Urban Blues* (1966) examines “the mechanisms that transmute folk into mass performance in Chicago recording studios” (1966:42). He frames this discussion with Marshall McLuhan’s *The Gutenberg Galaxy: The Making of Typographic Man* (1962), a book that folklore students at the time were reading in tandem with Albert B. Lord’s *The Singer of Tales* (1960). Second, Dorson also praised the study of folklore in “urban enclaves,” particularly Linda Dégh’s work on Hungarians in East Chicago—she has since moved on to folklore and mass media (Dégh 1994). Finally, he cited Hermann Bausinger: “We no longer believe that industrialization necessarily implies the end of a specific folk culture, but rather we attempt to trace the modifications and mutations undergone by *folk culture in the industrialized and urbanized world*” (quoted in Dorson 1972:43, emphasis in original).

All that American folklorists knew of Bausinger’s work on the subject was the article that Dorson cited—Dorson had arranged for it to be translated and published in the *Journal of the Folklore Institute* in 1968. The book on which it was based, *Volkkultur in der technischen Welt*, had appeared in 1961 but was not published in an English translation until 1990. Reading it today is to experience what
I would call the Rip Van Winkle effect. We can only speculate how it would have shaped our work had we read it when it first appeared, rather than more than 35 years later. Reading it now—and it bears close examination despite the passage of time—that book, together with *German Volkskunde: A Decade of Theoretical Confrontation, Debate, and Reorientation (1967–1977)* (Dow and Lixfeld 1986), offers a fascinating contrast between the history of folklore studies in the United States and Germany during the postwar period.

Dorson offered a "revised concept" of folklore studies as "contemporary, keyed to the here and now, to urban centers, to the industrial revolution, the issues and philosophies of the day" rather than to "some idyllic backwater" (Dorson 1978a:23). He suggested that "to avoid the taint of antiquarianism . . . we substitute oral culture or 'traditional culture' or 'unofficial culture' ” (1978a:23). He then claimed that "what might be called the contemporaneity, as opposed to the antiquity, of folklore" was the thesis of his *America in Legend* (Dorson 1973), an indication that folklore was still a contemporaneous, rather than fully contemporary subject—tellingly, the volume in which he makes these claims is titled *Folklore in the Modern World* (1978a), not folklore of the modern world.

Like Bausinger, Dorson attempted to formulate a notion of folklore as a contemporary subject by rearticulating its relationship with mass culture, but with important differences in how Dorson defined that relationship. Mass culture uses folk culture. Folk culture mutates in a world of technology. But instead of radically challenging folklore's canonical subject, Dorson reaffirmed the folk community as a unit of study, its low or marginal social status, and its lack of articulation within a larger social structure—in a word, cities and technology have not displaced folklore, but harbor it. Though not quite the survivals of lower stages of cultural development that British folklorists found in civilized society, this model promised a contemporary folklore subject but delivered a canonical one, albeit in an expanded and sometimes hostile terrain. Dorson found his folklore subject in spite of literacy, urbanization, bureaucratization, technology, and mass media, not because of them. While in the present, his material was still not fully of the present.

**Definitional Exercises**

All definitional exercises are situated, even dictionary definitions, and they have economic, institutional, political, and legal consequences (see Shiach 1989:19–34 on the entry for *popular* in the *Oxford English Dictionary*). As rhetorical statements, definitions make claims, command resources, and define their appropriate allocation. We have sustained ourselves as a discipline by consistently loosening the definition of folklore, while preventing new material from destabilizing the working assumptions of the discipline. We find folklore in the media and study the impact of the media on folklore. We fully attenuate our most fundamental categories—"The modern definition of folk as any group whatsoever that shares at least one common factor—language, occupation, religion, ethnicity—
makes it possible to consider the folklore of various urban groups"—without shifting the disciplinary paradigm (Dundes and Pagter 1978[1975]:xv).

Rather, declaring academics or steelworkers or doctors to be folk groups and claiming written and xeroxed chain letters, cartoons, and jokes as folklore serves the primarily rhetorical function of staking out a broad territory for folkloristic study and defending problematic material as a legitimate subject. However live rhetorically, such terms are dead analytically. *Folk group* either has predictable analytic outcomes—affirmations of community, shared traditions and identity—or, once asserted, it ceases to drive the analysis, which takes off in other directions. Attenuated to the point that *folk group* can refer to anyone, the notion is devoid of agency and analytic consequence, which is, of course, very consequential. Its sole purpose is to identify the enterprise as a folkloristic one.

The Quotidian

Attenuation of folklore's canonical subject has brought the quotidian to the center and flattened the hierarchies that once situated our subject at the bottom of the social ladder and on the margins of power. Our contemporary subject has become everybody's everyday life. Though we may disagree on whether the quotidian is utterly saturated with mass culture (Denning 1991) or the last enclave of the face-to-face, we now compete for the quotidian with habitus and social field (Bourdieu 1977), ordinary culture (Williams 1989), common culture (Willis 1990), practices of everyday life (de Certeau 1984), the identification of the popular with the quotidian (Fiske 1992), and everyday life with the society of the spectacle (Debord 1983). We complain that others are studying folklore, the implication being that they are not qualified and we have been snubbed, when in fact we are competing for the quotidian, which has emerged as a powerful site of analysis in European social thought and critical theory (see Kaplan and Ross 1987).

Folklore as a discipline has tended to conceive the everyday in largely aesthetic terms—whether Ben-Amos's "artistic communication in small groups" (Ben-Amos 1972:13) or the American Folklife Center's "community life and values, artfully expressed in myriad forms and interactions" (Hufford 1991:1). We generally anchor our work in a particular community (or some other version of folk group) and circle within it. But the quotidian is a contested area, and concepts such as custom, folklore, and the popular are produced by and mark that contest. When an elite withdraws from particular arenas or restricts access to areas it reserves for itself, there arise discontinuities in the cultural field that produce what comes to be understood as folklore, popular culture, the lowbrow, and the vulgar—not only from the perspective of that elite, but also in the form of solidarity and opposition from the other pole. Peter Burke (1978) has traced the process in Europe, E. P. Thompson (1991) in Great Britain, Robert Muchembled (1985) in France before the revolution, Mona Ozouf (1988) in France after the revolution, Tamas Hofer (1991) in Hungary, Hermann Bausinger (1971) in Germany, and Lawrence W. Levine (1988) in the United States.
The Two Oralities

Technology plays an important role in structuring the discontinuities in the cultural field that produce folklore. Whereas Dorson claimed that folklore persists in the modern world in spite, not because, of technology, I would argue that folklore is a discipline made and defined by technology and especially by technologies of communication. The very technologies that we use to inscribe and record verbal art have brought orality—and not just oral literature—into focus as an organizing concept for the field.

It could be said that print made our subject twice, and in both instances by allowing us to constitute the oral in relation to a distinctive technology of detachment and extension. Print is the pivot. As theorized by Walter J. Ong, before print there was primary orality. After print, with the advent of electrical and electronic technologies such as telephone, radio, and television, there was secondary orality (Ong 1967:17–110; 1982:11). Such periodization produces primary and secondary orality on either side of the press—orality that can only be understood in relation to print. It also produces an explicit history of folklore’s ideal subject as primary orality and an unstated history of folkloristics in relation to secondary orality. These asymmetries (and the schematic nature of types and stages) are consequential for the history, historiography, and future of the field.

Artifacts of Inscription

Inscription separates words from speakers and enables a distinction between itself and what it is not, between writing and speech. The recent work by Susan Stewart (1991) on “crimes of writing” and “distressed genres,” Charles Briggs (1993) on the textualization practices of the Grimm brothers, and Richard Bauman (1993) on schoolcraft reveals in theoretically important ways not only how the oral was historically constituted as a category, but even fabricated. Such forgeries and other liberties of textualization were themselves constitutive of folklore as a discipline. Indeed, the very genres, the einfache Formen, that we take for granted “were recognized as forms of literary invention before they were marked as preliterate by early folklorists” (Abrahams 1993:14; see also Ben-Amos 1969 and Hoggart 1957).

Print, in particular, was instrumental in the development of modern forms of nationalism, and folklorists played their role in this process by bringing the oral not only into writing, but specifically into print. Without wanting to suggest technological determinism, I would nonetheless point to print as the line that demarcated the canonical folklore subject, oral culture. Oral culture was thought to be found in its purest and primary form among those without literacy, that is, among those in the condition of primary orality. Literacy threatened to destroy oral culture, to displace oral modes of transmission with written and then printed ones. As Ong is quick to point out, however, “writing from the beginning did not reduce orality, but enhanced it,” even if it brought about the demise of primary orality (Ong 1982:9). Historians of folksong and its study have noted the importance of printed versions of song texts, from as early as the 16th century, in
stimulating local singing (Shiac 1989:101–138). New technologies do not necessarily displace, replace, or eliminate earlier ones. They alter the relations among them and incorporate one another—with far-reaching effects.

Furthermore, Benedict Anderson (1991) argues that by bringing the vernacular into sight, print helped to create “anonymous” or “invisible” communities of readers—virtual communities. First, Anderson notes, print languages laid the basis for national consciousness by operating beneath Latin and above the many spoken vernaculars (1991:44). Readers of print vernaculars formed embryonic national communities, even though print language, national consciousness, and the nation-state have never been isomorphic. Folklife as a discipline has historically been part of the larger effort to both establish and contest such isomorphisms.

Second, he continues, the reason that print and nationalism entail one another is because the vernacular in print lets readers literally see themselves as a people for the first time. By bringing the oral into print, a way of making the vernacular visible, folklorists were implicated in the process of making vernacular languages into instruments of the state and not only of the nation. Our very name, folklife, exemplifies the golden age of vernacularization that Anderson identifies with the 19th century (1991:71). In its very history and etymology, folklife is an assertion of national consciousness, even as the concept of survivals is ambiguous on this count—for survivals are at once generic, marking a universal stage of cultural development, and specific, as evidence of an ancient national heritage. William John Thoms recommended the term “folk-lore” in 1846 to the readers of The Athenaeum as “a good Saxon compound” and substitute for popular antiquities, inspired no doubt by the term Volkskunde.

Print also threatened to level local difference by disseminating mechanically reproduced texts over larger and larger territories and unifying a widely dispersed readership through a single form of a single (print) vernacular. One trajectory of our history emanates from the fear that print, “the first modern-style mass-produced industrial commodity” (Anderson 1991:34). Paradoxically, then, folklorists used the very technologies that they saw as destroying their object as tools first for constituting it as a subject and then for capturing it. Their tools were implicated in the formation of their subject as well as their discipline.

Technology, nationalism, and disciplinary formation are thus linked. We might heed Richard Handler’s warning about practicing a discourse we are supposed to be analyzing and the need to disentangle the “interpenetration of nationalism and social-scientific theory” (Handler 1988:18, 20). According to Anderson, nationalism, while a source of enormous political power, is marked by its philosophical poverty, if not incoherence—not a great foundation for building a discipline (Anderson 1991:5). He notes a series of paradoxes. Nationalism is a modern phenomenon, but it makes primordial claims. Nationalism occurs in many different places in largely modular fashion, but it appears to be sui generis and makes claims to uniqueness.

What Anderson characterizes as “[t]he fundamental contradiction of English nationalism, i.e. the inner incompatibility of empire and nation” helps to explain
both the power of the doctrine of survivals and why folklore never developed as an academic field in England (1991:93). In the administration of colonial empire, the more evolved ruled those at earlier stages of human development, even as the civilized recorded their own progress (and antiquity) by documenting “survivals” from earlier stages in their own history. In the United States, the doctrine of survivals could never produce a truly American folklore, as envisioned by Benjamin Botkin (Hirsch 1987) or Dorson, for example, but only protestations of its imposibility. Because the “earlier stages” were offshore, survivals could only demonstrate the derivativeness of American folklore, identify its prior homes, and delineate the prior histories of its citizens, or so argued Alexander H. Krappe and others during the first decades of this century.

Folklore as a discipline has contributed to Anderson’s paradoxes of nationalism in various ways. Indeed, the use of one and the same term for the discipline and its subject contributes to the illusion that the subject precedes the discipline and not the other way around, an illusion in the service of the nation’s heritage project. But, as Uli Linke notes, folklorists (Linke specifies those working on German folklore, but the statement is true more generally) have rarely “attempted to investigate the bond between social knowledge and political power in the history of their own field,” though that is changing (Linke 1990:125; see also Cantwell 1993; Whisnant 1983). Our scholarship and teaching, the practices of academics, are not prior to the political implications and practical applications of our work. They are constitutive of them. Indeed, without such an awareness we are in danger of constructing “imaginary and reactionary categories of cultural analysis” (Shiach 1989:112).

Phonic Artifacts

Print may have preceded the discipline, but the new technologies of photography and phonography were coincident with its formation as the field we know today. Technologies of sound recording and broadcast were as definitive for the study of folk performance as print for the study of oral literature—I use the term advisedly. Béla Bartok allegedly said that “the father of modern folksong studies was Thomas Edison” (Yates 1982:265). A window on the role of the phonograph in our disciplinary formation is offered by debates surrounding its early use as a recording instrument. American anthropologists were recording material from as early as 1889 (see Brady 1985). Bela Vikar was recording folksong in Hungary from 1896 and Bartok from 1906, while Percy Grainger, working between 1906 and 1908, is credited as the first to make sound recordings of folksong in England. Michael Yates presents a fascinating series of documents in his discussion of how members of the Folk Song Society in England responded to Percy Grainger’s statement about collecting with the phonograph.

The perplexity of Cecil Sharp and Anne Gilchrist upon confronting the transcriptions Grainger had made from recordings reveals a nascent discipline confronting a nascent medium, to paraphrase Jeffrey Shandler (in press)—and resisting it for almost half a century. As they preferred to notate from live performance,
it was not until the 1940s that British folklorists embraced sound recording techniques, by which time the tape recorder offered considerable advances over earlier technologies of sound capture.

The cylinder recording had its limitations. First, the cylinder recording produced a single impression of a single performance. It was in this respect like the daguerreotype in the early days of photography—a medium of capture, not reproduction. Second, it was impermanent because it wore out with repeated playing. Third, the equipment was cumbersome and the prospect of strapping the apparatus to one’s bicycle before setting out to do fieldwork was daunting. Fourth, some singers were extremely uncomfortable in its presence. Of course, notation from live performance had its limitations, too. Some collectors repeatedly stopped the singer or asked him or her to slow down or repeat parts of the song. Besides, this was a slow way to accumulate songs because the scholar could only collect as many songs at a session as he or she could notate. Finally, notation produced an inscription, not a phonic record, which for all its limitations was the only way to convey directly to the ear something of the singer's actual voice.

By far, the most interesting problems arose from the problematic relationship of the phonic artifact to a contested disciplinary subject. The debates centered around notation. Was it better to notate from a live performance or from a recording of it? Which notation was truer to the performance? For scholars such as Cecil Sharp, neither the recording nor the notation were ends in themselves. They were an intermediary stage in the production of a national music for performance on the stage and in schools—settings that were far remove from those who had sung the songs to the recording machines and human notators. And, since musical notation was a specialized skill, those who knew how to write down tunes were themselves musically trained and had acquired their notational skills in conjunction with a whole constellation of musical values, including the ability to arrange the tunes for choirs and concert musicians and to create new compositions on the basis of them.

It follows that the core issue for Sharp was artistic truth. It was not to be found in the minutiae of a particular performance mechanically recorded but in "a faithful artistic record of what is actually heard by the ordinary auditor" (quoted in Yates 1982:269)—a concern that continues to bedevil folklorists and ethnomusicologists alike. The battle, while framed as man versus machine, was actually about the disciplinary subject and whether it would be claimed by art or science. Sharp elaborated on the problem by comparing two technologies:

In this connection, an analogy may be drawn between the photograph and the photographic camera. It is often said that the latter cannot lie, that it can only record what is as a matter of fact in front of it. This is, of course, only partly true, scientifically speaking; but even if it were strictly accurate it would diminish rather than increase the value of the camera as a picture maker. The artist does not want to put upon his canvas just what is in front of him, but only that part of it that he sees, and even that, not as it is, but as it appears to him. [quoted in Yates 1982:269, emphasis in original]
From the advent of photography, detractors feared that the camera would replace the artist and the photograph would supplant the painting. These fears proved unfounded. Photography freed painting from description and opened up untold possibilities. What is most striking about this passage, however, is the way Sharp’s comparison between painting and photography positions the notator himself— or herself as an artist and notation itself as an act of interpretive reception.

As analog media, both phonography and photography made an imprint from life that was ostensibly free of the observer’s limitations, in contrast with artifacts, which did not need to be “recorded” to be carried away from the site. A new kind of artifact, phonographic imprints, unsettled the relations of event, observer, and notation. Sharp queried Grainger, “When . . . your experience of folk-singers and their songs seems to be diametrically opposed to mine, I cannot help wondering whether this denotes a real difference between the Lincolnshire singer and him of the West country, or whether it is simply the consequence of different methods of collection” (quoted in Yates 1982:269). The phonograph was unnerving precisely because it unsettled the epistemological assumptions of folk-song notation and revealed to what extent notations, whether from live performances or recordings of them, were disciplinary artifacts.

What exactly did the machine produce? And what was it good for? Grainger stated his objectives in modest terms. He wanted to present the tunes he transcribed from recordings “in as merely scientific a form as possible, for the time being” (quoted in Yates 1982:266). Sharp protested, however, that recordings and detailed transcriptions made from them were too scientific. “Our aim,” he wrote to Grainger, “should be to record its artistic effect, not necessarily the exact means by which that effect was produced” (quoted in Yates 1982:269). Recordings, in his view, might actually “convey an utterly erroneous impression of the artistic effect produced, and presumably intended to be produced, by the singer” (quoted in Yates 1982:269). The human ear and the machine heard different things, and Grainger’s scientific notations from recordings brought those differences into distressing relief.

At the same time, both Gilchrist and Sharp objected that the recordings were not scientific enough—that is, the machine did not hear everything or it heard too much or it distorted what it heard. To more clearly define the problem, they established an equivalence between human being and machine, the better to define the differences between them. Gilchrist spoke of Grainger’s “exaltation of the machine over the human recorder” (quoted in Yates 1982:266). She expressed doubts as to “which instrument—the human [singer] or the artificial [phonograph]—was a little out” of pitch (quoted in Yates 1982:266). She debated the relative value of the phonograph as substitute or corroborator for the “trained ear of the musician,” but insisted that it not be its supplanter (quoted in Yates 1982:267).

Perhaps most important, recordings and notations put into question the ontological status of the song itself, its essential and accidental features, its distinguishing characteristics. Sharp explained that while the phonograph made it easier to note the slightest rhythmical irregularities:
The question is, is this worth doing at all? The majority of these rhythmical minutiae have nothing to do with the song itself, but only with the artistic presentation of it; and these, of course, are present in art-singing just as much as in folk-singing. The difficulty, which is perpetually confronting the collector, is to decide which of these small aberrations he should record and which he should omit, in other words to settle when a rhythmical irregularity belongs to the song itself and when it is merely a personal idiosyncrasy, or arises from some mechanical cause, the taking of breath, fatigue, clumsy vocalization, hesitation due to the forgetfulness of the words, and so on. Now surely it is easier to decide into which of these two categories any particular rhythmic irregularity shall be placed by observing the demeanor of the singer (making him repeat if necessary, etc.) than by merely studying the phonographic version in the absence of the performer. [quoted in Yates 1982:269–270]

Because it captured too much and too little, the recording unsettled the notator’s assurance about the boundaries of the research object. It gave added urgency to the perennial question of determining what “belongs to the song itself.” The larger project was not about capturing the singer’s performance, but the songs as sung. Recording was at this stage in its history an aid, not an end. It would take several decades of technological refinement and new disciplinary concepts for recordings of the minutiae of performance to become valuable—for the distinction between song variants and performance variations to become a subject in its own right.

When sound recording and broadcast were threatening to displace traditional forms of music making, or at least to radically transform them, the very tools that threatened to efface our object produced our subject again. With respect to the study of American folk music, Neil V. Rosenberg noted,

In the twenties and thirties, American record companies and folksong collectors were sometimes recording the same individuals and groups. Usually neither knew of the other. Frequently the performers were asked for different kinds of song by each. Folksong collectors wanted the older traditional material which they recognized as folksongs, while the record company executives, after the first few years of experimentation, wanted what they considered “fresh” material. Occasionally a performer’s traditional repertoire might be obscure enough to seem “fresh” to the record company, and it was the presence of recognizable folksongs on hillbilly records—like B. F. Shelton’s “Pretty Polly”—which kindled the interest of folksong scholars in country music. Later, folksong scholars realized that they had recorded new compositions, especially those of Jimmie Rodgers, under the impression that these “fresh” songs were old folksongs. [Rosenberg 1986:150]

But recording and broadcast technologies had other consequences at least as important, not least of which was letting us imagine a phonic artifact, the recording.

Primary Orality

The work of Milman Parry is inconceivable before the advent of “schizophonía” and its associated technologies, not only because sound recording allowed him to capture a performance and listen to it many times for the purposes of a detailed analysis not possible otherwise, but also because it encouraged him to conceptualize epic as a phonic event in the first place. Phonography is a technology
of schizophrenia, a deliberately nervous term that R. Murray Schafer defined as "packaging and storing techniques for sound and the splitting of sounds from their original contexts" (Schafer 1977:88). In contrast, writing and print are inscription technologies.

Phonographic technologies, which date to the 1870s, are the site of orality as a concept. It is first and foremost the phonic artifact that gets fully theorized as oral—a condition partially posited by the perceptual world of the blind bard himself. Not until the technologies of schizophrenia, however, could the phonic artifact fully emerge and with it the conceptual possibilities of orality. As Schafer explained, "With the telephone and the radio, sound was no longer tied to its original point in space; with the phonograph it was released from its original point in time" (1977:89). At the point that Milman Parry did his fieldwork in Serbia in the 1920s, it was almost half a century since the inventions of the telephone (1876) and phonograph (1877), and it was during the advent of broadcast radio (1920). Parry recorded 12,500 texts on 3,500 12-inch aluminum phonograph discs and by dictation during his fieldwork in Yugoslavia in 1934 and 1935 (Lord 1965:279).

The maturing of the early technologies of schizophrenia in the first half of this century made it possible to conceptualize orality, not simply as transmission, as conduit, as something other than writing and print, or as a type of literature and stage in its history, but as a phonic event and constitutive process, as performance—and eventually, as a stage in the history of culture, consequential for the structure of the sensorium and of consciousness itself.

Consider for a moment Ong's struggle to imagine a world without writing: "How can the status of the word in such a world be described?" (Ong 1967:88) His answers to this question are predicated on a telephonic concept of orality, a detachment of sound enabled by electroacoustical technologies and their phonic artifacts (recordings), events (broadcasts), and processes (telephonic communication). The very terminology—the spoken word—is a peculiarly disembodied way of talking about talking. Print may have separated speakers from their words, but it was electroacoustical technologies that separated them from their speech. Even though Ong posits the electronic stage as new, the notion of secondary orality assimilates it into a conceptualization rooted in print. In this way, Ong goes beyond the model of oral transmission as conduit and makes it possible to conceptualize orality itself.

The conduit model is captured in such terms as oral transmission. Conduit models of folklore are less concerned with verbatim transcripts of unique tellings than they are with the more general contours of tales—their plots, tale-types, motifs, and formulaic elements—that which transcends the idiosyncracies of particular tellings. Conduit models therefore produce a very different sense of what orally transmitted tales should look like on the page. In other words, conduit models take seriously the differences between oral and written transmission and actively produce those differences, which is how we get both our essentialized type and motif indices and the heavily edited, rewritten, literary, and fabricated folktales. By contrast, the performance model seeks to preserve the characteristics of live performance in whatever channels we use to record it (see Fine 1984). For this
reason, sound recording is less consequential for the oral transmission model—it is just a better pencil, an aid to researcher's imperfect memory. After all, you can write down what is in the conduit, oral or recorded, but you cannot record the conduit, conceptualized as such, nor does that seem to be the point.

Consistent with this contrast, Johannes Fabian distinguishes two models of ethnographic knowledge—informing and performing. The informing model, which deals in the transfer, or the transmission, of information, is epistemologically deficient, in his view, because of its failure "to account for historically contingent creation of information in and through the events in which messages are said to be transmitted" (Fabian 1990:11). The research and researched differ in ways that serve the purposes of informative ethnographies, which have historically produced information useful in administering and controlling those about whom they report. In contrast, "'Performance' seemed to be a more adequate description both of the ways people realize their culture and of the method by which an ethnographer produces knowledge about that culture" (1990:18). The debates surrounding the early use of sound recording in folksong studies address precisely this distinction between informing and performing.

Secondary Orality

The conditions that came to be understood as secondary orality produced primary orality by way of a walk backward from the global village to premodern print culture, medieval manuscript culture, and primary orality—itself a condition reconstructed from texts of ancient epics and observed in our own day in parts of the world where epics continue to be composed orally. Ong says as much himself:

Only as we have entered the electronic stage has man become aware of the profundity of differences, some of which have been before his eyes for thousands of years, namely, the differences between the old oral culture and the culture initiated with writing and matured with alphabetic type. Apparently it is impossible for man to understand the psychological and cultural significance of writing and print and oral expression itself, with which writing and print contrast, until he had moved beyond print into our present age of telephonic and wireless electronic communication. [Ong 1967:18]

We can take as a threshold moment in this process Ong's utter revulsion at the term oral literature—the ridiculousness of the term had been observed even earlier by Harry Levin in his 1959 preface to The Singer of Tales (Lord 1960).

In 1967, and subsequently, Ong condemned the term oral literature as "monstrous," "strictly preposterous," and "anachronistic and self-contradictory," complaining that

To this day no concepts have yet been formed for effectively, let alone gracefully, conceiving of oral art as such without reference, conscious or unconscious, to writing. This is so even though the oral art forms which developed during the tens of thousands of years before writing obviously had no connection with writing at all. [Ong 1982:10]
Having backed into orality from writing, Ong leapfrogs from primary orality, which by his own admission hardly exists today, to the "secondary orality" of present-day high-technology culture, in which a new orality is sustained by telephone, radio, television" (1982:11). This is McLuhan's move as well, when he conceptualizes new media in the atavistic terms of tribe and global village—radio is "the tribal drum" and "electronic man is no less a nomad than his paleolithic ancestors," gathering information rather than food (McLuhan 1964:248).

But the term oral literature is useful precisely on the grounds that Ong condemns it, because "concepts have a way of carrying their etymologies with them forever" (Ong 1982:12). Ong's problem with oral literature is its root in writing, from litera, letter of the alphabet (1982:11, 13; see also Ong 1967). That is, the etymology of oral literature first posits writing and then derives the oral from it by a kind of undoing—the oral is the not-yet-written. Historically, of course, writing followed oral expression. But most useful is the cautionary image that Ong offers to capture the way that terminology writes history in reverse: "A parallel, again, would be to refer to a horse never as a horse but always as a four-legged automobile without wheels" (Ong 1967:21).

Ong's objection to the term oral literature is that it denotes speech in the terms of writing. My objection is to the written-oral dichotomy itself because it privileges language over other communication modes (movement, music, iconography, et cetera). Ong suggests that we use terms like voicings, oral creations, oral art, oral speaking, or oral performance to keep the spoken word at the conceptual center, consistent with his inclusion of both written and oral forms under the term verbal art forms (1967:9, 14). Our tongues are tied between an oxymoron (oral literature) and a redundancy (oral speaking). Given that "our new sensitivity to the media has brought with it a growing sense of the word as word, which is to say of the word as sound," it follows that "the word is originally, and in the last analysis irretrievably, a sound phenomenon" (1967:18).

Oral expression, conceptualized retroactively from writing as historically prior to it, is still narrower than the live event in which speaking occurs because it operates in a single channel—the sound channel. Inevitable as it might seem, this move—from the single-channel artifacts produced by the technologies of schizophrenia to a history of communication as "transformations of the word"—is anything but inevitable. Indeed, there is an aural bias in the theoretical models of McLuhan and Ong, both of whom came from the study of literature. They idealized orality. They posited a kind of golden age of primary orality and hoped that secondary orality would indeed create the global village. The aural bias can be seen in the nature of McLuhan's visuality, which is more orthographic than optical.

The lesson, for my purposes, is precisely the way that new technologies offer new ways to think about old ones, how they defamiliarize them. This is what Ong describes when he says that only after we moved into the electronic age could we fully see what had been before our eyes all the while—the differences between oral and print cultures and orality itself. But while the electronic stage enabled a reimagining of orality, it did not prompt as radical an imagining of itself, for it is not enough to read orality forward, to posit "secondary orality" as a high-tech
atavism. This is the problem that I address elsewhere as the electronic vernacular (Kirshenblatt-Gimblett 1996a). Our own "secondary orality" can illuminate the conditions under which the concept of orality entered and has figured in the discipline, as well as the tension between orality and performance, which I see as markers of related but different paradigms and intellectual traditions. Fabian, for example, notes that anthropologists have started to study our own graphocentrism and "the invention of 'orality' as a counterworld to our own" (Fabian 1990:90). The problem is more complicated.

The Limits of Orality

Recent theories of the new communication technologies tend to apply Ong's conceptualization of orality schematically; that is, they accept the positing of types and stages of communication, orality being one—Ong writes of "oral man" and "chirographic and typographic folk" (Ong 1982:75, 77). However, orality as a concept is limited by its location in the mouth. With schizophrenia, the oral "is no longer tied to a hole in the head but is free to issue from anywhere in the landscape" (Schafer 1977:90). The oral designates first and foremost a mode of emanation, from the mouth, rather than from the pen or the press—"uttered or communicated in spoken words; transacted by word of mouth; spoken, verbal" (Oxford English Dictionary). The earliest citations provided in this entry relate to religion and law, and the one dated 1628 signals the suspicion that has dogged folklore to this day: "As for oral Traditions, what certaintie can there be in them." Its landing on the ear, which gets assimilated to a diffuse notion of context, is less elaborated theoretically than its launch from the mouth. Hence we speak of oral, rather than aural, tradition. Orality is thus defined by how it is produced, rather than by how it is received.

Orality in the work of McLuhan and Ong is indebted to the notion of bias of communication formulated by Harold Adam Innis (1951). The problem of bias—under what conditions one sense takes precedence over others—is not only an empirical and historical problem, but it is also built into orality theory itself. In a gentleman's agreement over the division of labor, Ong operated at the interface of primary orality and print, which is why the work of Parry and Lord figure so prominently in his thinking. McLuhan worked at the interface of print and secondary orality. Both outlined a history of sensory bias that is part of a larger history of textualization. Print, more than any other medium, informed their thinking about seeing and hearing. Their preoccupation with print drove them not only toward an orthographic rather than optical visuality, but also toward an acoustic bias. For all his specificity on the subject of print, Ong characterized vision briefly, in general terms, and for the purposes of contrasting it with sound (see Ong 1982:72).

The acoustic bias in folkloristics is coupled with an undertheorization of the other senses. The question is not simply a matter of bias, seeing taking precedence over hearing. Rather, we might ask how the senses are separated and develop their autonomy (see Howes 1991). Writing in the context of art history, Jonathan
Crary defines modernity in relation to the separation of the senses in the 19th century. He shows how the prying apart of seeing and touching was necessary for the emergence of visuality in its own right as an autonomous faculty—sight made visible to itself—and how, according to Michel Foucault, “human subjects became objects of observation” (Crary 1990:18). This process informed and was enabled by the changing epistemologies of optical devices such as the panopticon, camera obscura, and panorama.

Our disciplinary subject is wedded to an older sensorium that privileges the mouth and the hand. Both are sites of production and defining organs—they account for the acoustic and tactile bias in our division of labor between oral tradition and material culture. So deep is this division that theories of orality tend to imagine a world so fully acoustic that it emerges as a world without artifacts. Not only is it complete without books, but also without things. Only that which is already fully discursive can be seen in the privileged site of the book. The book is virtually the only artifact to appear in theories of orality, though even those theories celebrate the absence of the book in the fully oral world. With such rare exemptions as Hibbitts (1992), touch is missing from theories of orality. The hand that produces writing and operates the press is absorbed into the reading eye. Touch is registered in the artifact. What the ear is to orality, the hand is to artifactuality.

Folklorists and folk art historians have been divided in their approach to the material world in ways that suggest differing alignments, in sensory terms, of objects, disciplinary subjects, and scholars. If modernity produced folk art through the very process that it produced itself—by separating the visual and the tactile—then it follows that folk art historians would not only privilege folk painting but also the specifically visual character of any images they selected for study. The disciplinary practice of connoisseurship produces folk art by providing the criteria for reclassifying things as art. The disciplinary practices for producing folk art are related to those for producing folklore (Metcalf and Weatherford 1989; Vlach 1985).

Digital Media

Writing about electronic communication, the latest of the communication technologies to challenge folklore’s disciplinary subject, John Dorst refers to the “ongoing struggle between hegemonic forces and anti-hegemonic impulses” as a concern in folkloristic analysis (Dorst 1990:188). He suggests that “as productive and compelling as this critical strategy usually is, its rhetoric preserves a utopian conception of the vernacular (or folk) sphere that can blind us to important aspects of the relatively new conditions of cultural production” (1990:188). Finding oppositional practices everywhere we look—we do know where to look—and celebrating the vernacular transformation of mass-produced objects is not enough, because even these apparently oppositional gestures are governed by the hegemonic. Distancing himself from the familiar critique of mass culture by the Frankfurt School, Dorst reflects on the electronic transmission of folklore:
I am raising the possibility that in the sort of expressive forms I've been discussing, we begin to see emergent symptoms of a kind of ecstatic (and disturbing) apotheosis of the vernacular sphere. The dilemma I find myself with as a folklorist is the possibility that we are in the historical moment that marks, not the end of folk culture or the vernacular mode of production, but the end of that discursive practice which sustains the distinction between the vernacular, the folk, the marginal, and so on, on the one hand, and the dominant, the mainstream, the official, the mass, on the other. [1990:188–189]

This he sees as arising from the new technologies of reproduction and dissemination. Because they embody the dominant order while obscuring the workings of its power, they destabilize the critical stance of folklorists and confuse their reading of cultural resistance. The content may look oppositional, but hegemony is there in the structure of the very medium.

While I agree in part with this cautionary note, I see much greater possibilities, both of cultural production and of folkloristic analysis, in the "teleelectronic age." I do however agree with Dorst that "our discursive practices as folklorists do not equip us very well to deal with these unprecedented and complex conditions of cultural production" (1990:189); nor do our material practices in the actual siting of our work, whether at the geographic or social margins; nor does our suspicion of organizational folklore or our definition of our field over and against "official" and "dominant" culture. The folklorist’s predicament is again framed in contemporaneous, rather than in fully contemporary, terms. Older print models are guiding the analysis of electronic communication, as is an antimodern ethos, whether framed in terms of opposition to industrialization, commodity capitalism, or other sources of folkloristic dystopia.

In Dorst’s analysis, the dominant order is the genie in the bottle of technology, and the very distinction we make between the vernacular and the dominant blinds us to the total penetration of the hegemonic. This is a position he develops from his analysis of seriality in the electronic medium, which he treats as if seriality were occurring in a print or other broadcast medium, in "mass media," rather than as electronic interaction. As a result, he easily assimilates the “simultaneity of mass media communication” and “serial reproduction” to the commodity form. It is seriality itself, a topic dear to the heart of folklorists, that must be rethought in light of the electronic vernacular. It is here, in the heat of a nascent technology, that we can contemplate what folklore’s contemporary subject might be (see Kirshenblatt-Gimblett 1996a).

The value of explicating keywords, Raymond Williams suggests, “is not resolution but perhaps, at times, just that extra edge of consciousness” (Williams 1983:24). This article has attempted to bring that extra edge of consciousness to a consideration of folklore as a keyword, particularly as the gap between common and specialized usage widens. The solution to our crisis, if indeed there is a solution (or even a crisis), does not lie in defending our intellectual tradition or wearing our stigmatized name as a badge of honor or correcting the misperceptions of what folklore is and what folklorists do. A more radical approach is called for—radical in the sense of going to the root of our intellectual history and disciplinary
formation, to the atavism that popular understanding preserves in the notion of folklore as error, and to the revolutionary energy that Benjamin found in its embrace.

What then to call ourselves? What is at stake? These questions point beyond the fate of our field to disciplinarity proper. The distinctive subject, unified theory, and intellectual coherence that Dorson could assume are holdovers from an older notion of disciplinarity. His efforts to build a discipline and institutionalize it were predicated on clear boundaries of subject and method and on unique identity, autonomy, and loyalty—not unlike the way in which his generation understood folk groups themselves. We can no longer assume an isomorphism of discipline and disciplinary subject. The debates of the 1890s—is folklore “a body of material” best studied as part of anthropology or is folklore “a separate science”—are not the terms in which we must think today (Zumwalt 1988:25). Nor is it a matter of demonstrating that folklore is more inclusive than our detractors think, both substantively and intellectually. The issue is rather what our future might look like as a postdisciplinary formation informed by a distinctive intellectual history whose character we more fully embrace. As we bring that formation into focus, we will find its name.

Notes

I would like to thank Roger Abrahams, Robert Baron, Regina Bendix, Charles Briggs, Ilana Hal- low, Tamar Katriel, Barbro Klein, Deborah Kodish, Susan Levitas, Elliott Oring, Jack Santino, Amy Shuman, Sonya Spear, Nicolas Spitzer, Gisele Welz, and Rosemary Zumwalt for their comments, helpful criticism, and support in developing the ideas presented here.

This article is based on the presidential address that I delivered before the AFS in Jacksonville, Florida, in October 1992. Since then, parts of that address have been published in revised form (Kirshenblatt-Gimblett 1995a, 1995b, 1995c, 1996b, 1998a).

1This section is based on Bynum 1974, Graff 1987, Smith 1954, and Zumwalt 1988.

2For an effort to theorize vernacular culture and not just the city, see Kirshenblatt-Gimblett 1983.

3Technologies of schizophrenia have had profound repercussions on the creation of music and its circulation, as Feld (1992; Keil and Feld 1994) has so eloquently demonstrated. This discussion is indebted to his work.

References Cited


Fanon, Frantz. 1968. The Wretched of the Earth. Translated by Constance Farrington. New York: Grove Press.


Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, *Folklore’s Crisis* 325


Korff, Gottfried. 1996. Change of Name as Change of Paradigm: The Renaming of Folklore Studies Departments at German Universities as an Attempt at “Denationalization.” *Europaea* 2:9–32.


