

Introduction

Getting Here

The essays in this collection are some of the things I wrote about folklore and folklore study over more than a half century: articles, book introductions, reviews, field studies, and more. Sometimes I wrote for academic journals or in scholarly books, and sometimes I wrote for a wider audience. My writerly voice varied accordingly.

I like all the articles and excerpts here, though not for the same reasons. There was a period when I would use phrases like “one thinks” and “it is rather like . . .” The only time I use “one” now is as a number, not as a pronoun, and the only time I’d use “rather” now is when I’m making a comparative statement, such as “I’d rather eat worms.”

I also seem to have gone through a phase when I was dropping a lot of psychological jargon. It did not, fortunately, last long. I think that came about when I was spending a lot of time with folklorist Roger D. Abrahams. Then I noticed that every few years Roger seemed to shift to a different vocabulary. I realized he wore it like an everyday coat: he’d use those words until he came upon a set driven by an idea he liked better, so he’d move on to that one. When I realized that, I started examining my own writing to be sure I wasn’t doing the same kind of thing. I dislike jargon and try not to use it, save when I’m quoting someone else. Several articles I liked back in the day I can’t bear reading now because of the psychobabble or academic jargon, so I’m not going to resurrect them here.

Even though I’ve published a lot of folklore work, I’ve never considered myself an academic folklorist. Folklore was one of the things that interested me and some of the field’s theories and techniques fitted the work I wanted to do.

I had only one folklore course—a summer seminar on fieldwork with Richard M. Dorson at Indiana University in 1962. I took it under duress: my friend Judith McCulloh had gotten the ethnomusicologist George List, director of IU's Archive of Traditional Music, to hire me for the summer. The archive was under the Folklore Department, which Dorson then chaired. I found that odd because, so far as I could tell, Dorson had little or no interest in folk music. I'd already done a considerable amount of music and talk recording in Indiana State Prison and Missouri State Penitentiary, which Dorson knew. He insisted I register for his class as precondition to allowing George List to put me on the payroll.

I learned nothing about fieldwork in that class, but I learned something else that had a huge impact on my subsequent career. Dorson railed, again and again, against what he called “fakelore.” That word connoted work that used the word “folklore” but didn't submit to the academic standards Dorson thought should undergird any work using that word. “Folklore” was what he, his colleagues, and his students did; “fakelore” was like what Benjamin A. Botkin and a few others did. It was Botkin he named most frequently. For Dorson, Botkin was the quintessential “fakeloreist.”

It was only later that I understood that Dorson was on a mission: he was trying to make folklore as respectable an academic field of endeavor as history or English or pharmacology. For that, he needed a foil. I was, at the time, a graduate student in comparative literature. The whole thing seemed quite silly to me. It still does. Dorson's folklore/fakelore dichotomy is a perfect example of what someone who says, “That's meaningless; it's just academic,” might have in mind.

Later that summer, the Folklore Institute had a meeting in Bloomington, part of which was a picnic in nearby Beanblossom. A car arrived with two older men. They were George Korson (who had done important collections of songs of coal miners) and Ben Botkin. People talked to Korson; hardly anybody talked to Botkin. Ellen Stekert, a graduate student in the folklore program, said to me, “Would you like to meet Ben Botkin?”

“Damned right I would.”

She led me over to the picnic table where he was sitting and we fell into a two-hour uninterrupted conversation. None of the folklore graduate students were going to risk Dick Dorson seeing them in casual conversation with the Evil One.

Ben and I started corresponding. He suggested things I ought to read (he kept that up until shortly before his death). And he nominated

me for a Junior Fellowship in the Harvard Society of Fellows. That gave me four years to study anything I wanted: no reports, no speeches, all expenses paid. It was like a young person's MacArthur. I had the exquisite luxury of doing things without an end in sight, of risking failure. Graduate students can't risk failure on their thesis project if they hope to get a PhD before the funding runs out; assistant professors can't risk failure on their first book project if they hope to get tenure before the seven-year clock runs out. At least a dozen of my books, all of my records, two of my films, and the two plays based on my work came wholly or partly out of research I did in those years, hanging out I did in those years, conversations I had in those years. All of it a result of a conversation in Beanblossom, Indiana, with someone everyone else (except Ellen Stekert) had to pretend was toxic.

I say more about Ben in one of the essays here, so no more about him for now. But the polarity between Dick and him set up the two playing fields of my own work: I was as comfortable writing for the folklore journals as for general magazines, as happy doing academic work as being a director of the Newport Folk Festivals or helping set up the music program for the 1968 Poor People's Campaign, teaching a seminar or running in the Democratic primary as an antiwar candidate. From where I was, it was all seamless. The only thing I couldn't do is come up with a short, simple answer when someone asked, "What's your field?" I still can't. The closest I get is "To bear witness," but that's not an academic department so I don't tell it to very many people.

Now, all these years later, I think the primary difference between Dick Dorson and Ben Botkin about folklore had to do with their sense of time. Dick looked at folklore as data that validated the past; Ben looked at folklore as data that informed the present.

The boundaries between fields always blurred for me. I don't think I've ever identified as "folklorist" or "criminologist" when I was surrounded by folklorists or criminologists. Since I came to Buffalo, I've always been based in the English Department, but I've given seminars in the Law School, the School of Architecture and Planning, the Library School, and departments of Media Study, Sociology, and Art. My sociologist friend Howard S. Becker maybe put it best when he introduced me before a talk: "Bruce isn't a sociologist. But he's not *not* a sociologist, either."

I hadn't thought my books *A Thief's Primer* and *In the Life: Versions of the Criminal Experience* as folklore books until I read a few things by Richard M. Dorson, then the most prominent academic folklorist, referring to them as folklore books. Yeah, they are. I don't use academic

folklore jargon in those books but they go after the same kind of answers folklorists seek: How do people narrate their lives? How do they learn crafts not taught in schools or in books? How do they perceive the communities they inhabit and, at least in part, let them identify who and what they are? How does the past inform their future?

I've grouped the articles, reviews, prefaces, and extracts here under six rubrics.

- “Scenes” is a group of articles about folklore and communities, one published in a folklore journal, one a sociology journal, and one an anthropological journal. The way I looked at and engaged people in Pikeville, Kentucky, when I was there on assignment from *Harper's Magazine*, and Nome, Alaska, when Jean Malaurie asked me to join him on a trip there looking around is no different from how I looked and listened in the southern plantation prison farms and Texas Death Row years earlier.
- “Outside the Law” consists of extracts from two of my books, *A Thief's Primer* (based on the career of one criminal) and *In the Life* (based on conversations with dozens of them).
- “The Folksong Revival” consists of one article about the popular folk music movement in the 1960s and articles about two musicians I was involved with at the time, the blues musician Skip James and the singer-songwriter Phil Ochs.
- “Black Studies” consists of some of the articles, reviews, introductions, and essays about what has long been one of my primary concerns in folklore research.
- “People” is about four friends in the folklore research and presentation worlds: Ben Botkin, Alan Lomax, Gershon Legman, and Pete Seeger.
- “The Folklore Business” deals with issues in and about academic folklore studies, some of my editor's comments for *Journal of American Folklore*, public presentation of folk material, and my own engagement with all of that.

I think all the essays I've included here have current interest, but some are grounded, at least in part, in time. “Prison Folklore” was written long before free-world gangs became the significant part of our prison

culture they are now. Because of that, a current account of the structure of prison society would, for many institutions, look very different than what I encountered so many years ago. Our views and discourse on race, gender, and power have grown and changed significantly since much of this work was done.

I've tinkered with the text, but only a little. Articles and talks that did not have footnotes or endnotes in their original publication or presentation don't have them here. I got rid of a few then-trendy academic words, like *Weltanschauung*. I got rid of a few anachronisms. I also corrected a few errors that slipped in the first time around. That's it.

BJ