Horror Stories and Popular Representations of Folklore Studies[(1)]

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Folklore and the Folkloresque

The revolutionary claim Alan Dundes made in his classic article, "Who are the Folk?" (1980) was that *everyone* is "folk." It follows from this claim that folklore is part of everyone's culture, and indeed, folklore, as contemporary folklorists under-

[(1)] This paper is based on a public talk I delivered at Seijo University on January 18th, 2024, while serving as a visiting professor there, though it is significantly updated and condensed. It summarizes my ongoing research and developing thinking on the folkloresque and the folk horror genre, drawing on several recent publications and an in-progress book manuscript. A related talk delivered (remotely) to the Viktor Wynd Museum, London on January 4th, 2024 covered much of the same ground. Following the Seijo talk, I was asked to write a piece for *Gendai Shisō* (Tolbert 2024b) discussing the folkloresque. That article also touches on the folkloresque in the horror genre.

stand it, is simply vernacular (ordinary, common) culture. Yet outside of academia, as I and others have noted, a different perception of folklore endures (Kirshenblatt-Gimblett 1998, 296; Tosenberger 2010; Tolbert 2015; 2016b, 37; 2023, 25–26; 30–31; Tolbert and Keetley 2023, 161; Tolbert 2024a, 3; 13). In a nutshell, this is the view that folklore is a specific body of texts and material objects (to which specific values are attached), and that the *folk* are a specific group (or groups) of people with particular characteristics.

When folklore is included in popular media, it typically reflects these assumptions. My colleague Michael Dylan Foster (2016) named these popular perceptions of folklore the *folkloresque*. Foster is careful to note that the folkloresque is not a negative descriptor, and that the relationship between folklore and the folkloresque is not necessarily one of mutual exclusion: there is, instead, a reciprocal relation between them. As Foster writes, "In essence, the relationship of folklore to the folkloresque is like a Möbius strip in which folk culture and popular culture are magically, paradoxically, two different sides of the same surface, never intersecting because they are always already intersecting" (2016, 26). We explore the Möbius strip-like character of the folklore-folkloresque dynamic in our new volume on the topic (Tolbert and Foster 2024). The Möbius

strip symbol conveys the close connections and constant interactions between folklore and the folkloresque. It is an illustration of an ongoing process in which folklore is represented in particular ways in popular culture, which then influences popular thinking about the materials thus represented, which may then *become* folklore.

"Common Sense" Folklore

This all matters to folklorists because it tells us things about what non-folklorists think we study. Non-specialists often assume that folklore is primarily about monsters and old stories and ancient customs and quaintly archaic forms of material culture (Tolbert 2015, 93; 2016a, 125–26; 2023, 31; Tolbert and Keetley 2023, 161; Tolbert 2024a, 4). But there is a serious problem when folklore is *limited* to these things, because these things are too compartmentalized, too decontextualized, and too easy to connect in fixed, unproblematic ways to specific times, specific places, and specific peoples. If folklore is just old monster stories, for example, certain questions inevitably follow: who tells (or told) these stories? Why? Do they really believe them? Why are these stories no longer relevant in contemporary life? The cultural judgments embedded in these questions,

the insider/outsider or us/them dynamics they set up, can be serious and problematic. Often the clearest binary suggested by popular ideas about folklore is between the "modern" and the "premodern," as I have argued in recent work on folklore in horror. If folklore is premodern, then who, in this popular way of thinking, are the folk? Dundes' claim that it's *us,* all of us, does not seem to apply here. The "folk" often become, in non-academic usage, a strange group of people separate from us, out there somewhere in the wilds, doing things that no longer make sense in the world of today.

The differences between academic understandings of folklore and the thing we've called the folkloresque actually present us with a wonderful opportunity. Because, as I've argued previously (Tolbert 2015, 96), people are *very* interested in what we do, we have the chance to make our work accessible to an audience who already cares about it. In the process, we can address some of the troubling aspects of folklore, the ways it has been tied to problematic ideologies and exploited by nationalistic groups. We can spread Dundes' message that nobody is *not* folk in a way that can undo the harm caused by what Dorothy Noyes has called the "scarlet 'F'," the discipline's unfortunate association with ultra-nationalist regimes (2016, 39).

The Folkloresque and Horror

The processes and assumptions that comprise the folkloresque are especially prevalent in the horror genre. An example is the Internet monster Slender Man, which was created in the context of a relatively obscure discussion forum but soon exploded beyond the bounds of its original context in totally unpredictable ways. As I have argued previously, this monster is an Internet fiction, originally created by a single, known individual; but over time, the emerging Slender Man tradition accumulated a corpus of narratives designed to resemble existing supernatural legends—that is, Slender Man was a folkloresque construct (Tolbert 2018b, 27; 2018a). Simultaneously, Slender Man became folklore the moment its creator chose to participate in the vernacular activity that was taking place in the original Internet forum (where users were creating scary images for fun). This is a "folk" activity in its own right, so Slender Man was always already both folklore—part of a vernacular process exhibiting both tradition and variation—and "folkloresque," a hybrid construction meant to resemble existing folkloric monsters (Tolbert 2024b). And subsequently, as other users added their own materials to the Slender Man

"mythos," as it came to be called, the monster became folkloric in a more conventional way, as the star of its own complex of Internet legends.

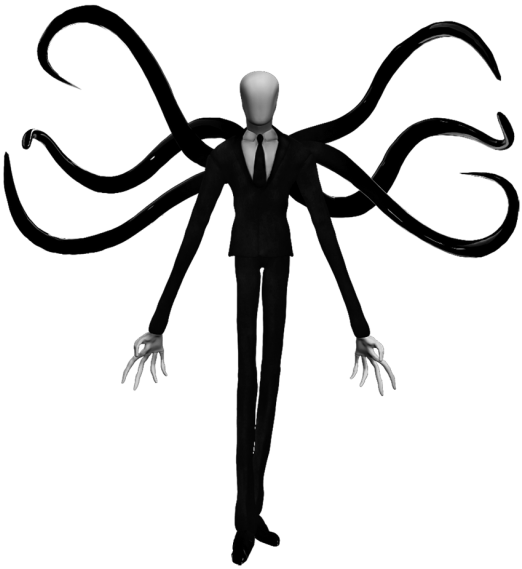

Fig. 1 Slender Man Resource/Stock by dimelotu on Deviantart

In other horror stories, an interesting manifestation of the folkloresque comes in representations of folklorists themselves, who usually appear as collectors of old legends (see Tolbert 2016a). This image of the folklorist works especially well in horror stories that rely on the trope of an outsider visiting a strange and isolated place where they encounter hidden dan-

gers.[2] (This basic premise is the foundation of the subgenre called *folk horror*, to which I return below.) One contemporary example is the Korean television drama *Revenant* (Lee 2023), which involves a professor of folklore who solves frightening supernatural mysteries. As I have discussed elsewhere, academic folklorists appear relatively rarely in popular culture, but when they do, they are nearly always framed in this way: they study the supernatural, and may in the course of their studies actually come into contact with it (Tolbert 2016a). Another example is the recent manga and light novel series *Associate Professor Akira Takatsuki's Conjecture* by Sawamura Mikage (2023a; 2023b). This series focuses on a mystery-solving folklorist at the fictional "Seiwa University." While not explicitly horror, the series deals with yōkai and yūrei and other potentially scary supernatural things. Professor Takatsuki is presented as a dashing young researcher who is obsessed with the supernatural. People contact Takatsuki for help understanding strange, seemingly supernatural occurrences.

The attitudes toward folklore study in this series are quite

[2] Stewart (1982, 44) makes a closely related point, noting, "Antiquarians and folklorists, those who awaken ambiguous objects into the inappropriate context of the present, are particularly likely to be victimized." Of course, the framing of folklorists as essentially synonymous with antiquarians is itself an example of the folkloresque perceptions I'm describing here.

Fig. 2 The cover illustration of the novel "Associate Professor Akira Takatsuki's Conjenjencture"

explicit. Addressing his first class of the semester, Professor Takatsuki explains,

> *Folklore* refers to the customs, legends, folktales, proverbs, songs, dances, and so on that have been passed down through the generations. In general, customs are the things that we continue to do to this day, even if we don't really know why we're doing them, simply because people have been doing them for a long time. … These customs

> are repeated for years and years, and legends are handed down from parent to child. We folklorists study why such things started and how they have evolved through the years. The background behind the birth of an old folktale, the reason a festival came to be. In this way, we can learn about the lives of groups of people and the state of their minds. That is folklore. Kunio Yanagita's folklore research and Shinobu Orikuchi's *marebito* theory are quite famous, so I'm sure some of you have read or heard about them somewhere. (Sawamura 2023b, EPUB edition)

What this fictional professor has just described, of course, is a very 19th-century approach to folklore and its study. Folklore here refers to specific types of *things*—he lists a number of folklore genres—which are framed as inheritances from the past.

The good professor essentially equates folklore with the Tylorian notion of cultural survivals, a point worth lingering on. In 1873, anthropologist E.B. Tylor famously defined cultural survivals in this way:

> Among evidence aiding us to trace the course which the civilization of the world has actually followed, is that great

> class of facts to denote which I have found it convenient to introduce the term 'survivals.' These are processes, customs, opinions, and so forth, which have been carried on by force of habit into a new state of society different from that in which they had their original home, and they thus remain as proofs and examples of an older condition of culture out of which a newer has been evolved. (Tylor [1873] 2016, 1:16)

This is the same model of folklore that Professor Takatsuki relays to his students on the first day of his folklore course at Seiwa University in the early 21st century. The contemporary academic understanding of folklore as ordinary expressive culture is absent here, replaced by the Victorian ideal of folklore as old stuff transmitted through countless generations.

It may seem trivial to focus so intently on what is, after all, a work of popular media intended primarily as entertainment. And, in fairness to the author, folklore does provide an avenue for understanding the lives of the people who engage in it, past and present; and many folklorists, myself included, do in fact study supernatural belief traditions, as well as the other folk genres Takatsuki names. Likewise, elements of cul-

ture do indeed survive from the past into the present. But contemporary folkloristics has progressed far beyond the Tylorian notion of survivals, evolutionary models of culture, and the search for origins or "ur"-forms (on "devolutionary" approaches to which, see Dundes [1969] 2007). Folklore study today is not only a quest for original forms, and folklore itself is not only an inheritance from the ancient past: it is, again, ordinary, everyday culture, much of which may of course be quite new. (Think of how quickly Internet cultures or popular culture fandoms form.) The study of the vernacular culture of the past is important and valid in itself, but to imagine that folklore in the present only exists in the form of cultural survivals is a very Victorian view. In this particular case, despite the outdated ideas, the folkloresque elements of Sawamura's stories are interesting, and could even encourage readers to pursue folklore studies. But I would argue that it's the very invocation of these outdated ideas that actual folklorists need to address—not to say that creators of popular culture should not engage with folklore, but to correct some lingering Victorian notions that tend to perpetuate the modern/antimodern dichotomy and related biases.

Folk Horror

A potentially more problematic example is the folk horror subgenre. This category of horror, according to a popular writer on the topic, includes stories with isolated settings whose inhabitants have "skewed belief systems and morality" (Scovell 2017, 18). Paul Cowdell has argued effectively that British folk horror closely replicates Victorian understandings of folklore (2019), and we can extend his argument to many examples of the subgenre. Folk horror works most often locate their horror among the rural "folk," echoing 19th-century assumptions about the relationship of the folk to the larger (national) society. The subgenre is often less than explicit in its use of the *language* of folklore—its characters seldom use the words "folk" or "folklore," unlike Professor Takatsuki—but it still relies, very clearly, on outdated ideas about both.

An example from Japan is the series *Gannibal* (Katayama and Kawai 2022), which focuses on a police officer in rural Okayama Prefecture. Officer Agawa Daigo is transferred to a tiny mountain village where he encounters the Goto family, a clan of hunters and loggers who practice strange rituals and engage in horrific acts of cannibalism. By locating its horror

among rural people who preserve strange and dangerous customs (especially that very old, imagined marker of "savagery," cannibalism), *Gannibal* emerges as a clear example of folk horror. It indexes deeply problematic ideas about rurality and its impact on local cultures, with the Goto family potentially reflecting popular stereotypes about certain real-world people. The countryside and the people who inhabit it, in *Gannibal* as in most folk horror, are frightening.

If we examine other works in the folk horror subgenre, it quickly becomes apparent that it evinces primitivism and cultural essentialism more clearly than virtually any other genre of contemporary fiction. The "folk" here are the people on the outside of the cultural "mainstream," whose cultures are brutal and violent because they are more primitive—and yet, because they have not fallen victim to the depredations of modernity, their culture is somehow also more "authentic" (Tolbert 2024a, 15). Folk culture in folk horror is very often as alluring as it is dangerous, echoing the ambivalence with which early scholars of folklore viewed the folk (on which, see Abrahams 1993, 4; Bendix 1997, 47). As my colleague Dawn Keetley has written, "If folk horror often serves to 're-enchant' the world with belief in the supernatural, its evocation of a prior and now vanished enchanted world can also serve to emphasize exactly

how profoundly disenchanted the contemporary world is" (Keetley 2020, 16). The subgenre relies on old and problematic understandings of community, place, and culture. And it often excludes us, its audiences, from the category of "folk."

Perhaps the most interesting question about folk horror, from a disciplinary perspective, has to do with the reasons *why* it continues to replicate such outdated thinking. Why are ideas that were popular in cultural scholarship of the mid-nineteenth century, which have been thoroughly debunked or superseded by newer, more inclusive and holistic scholarship, suddenly so resonant again? The idea of some "us," of some group rooted in a particular place, whose culture is also rooted in that place, which makes us distinct from other groups, and which is accessible only to people with deep personal connections to that place, is clearly a potent one, for good and for ill. And the idea of people in *that* place, over there—that *rural* place, that strange farming community far away from the city, that mountain hamlet, whatever—as fundamentally different from *us*, from the people here in *our* place, because *we* are modern and *they* are backwards, is deeply problematic. Of course, again, one could object that these are *just* movies and television shows and books, *just* popular media. They are fiction, they are often ambivalent about their own content, and

anyway, we shouldn't assume that the ideas reflected in popular culture are unproblematically accepted by everyone who engages with it. Popular media can be and do many things, and to take them at face value is often to miss the point. Yet, where discourse is concerned, unexamined assumptions *can* cause problems, even when deployed in seemingly innocuous ways. We are all, as Dundes said, the "folk," and while we and the various groups to which we all belong do indeed share histories, connections to and understandings of our places, customs and norms and values, our groups are never monolithic (despite what members may say), and neither are their cultures; and anyway, we all belong to multiple groups. We must be especially leery of locating horror amongst some *other* folk, some group to which *we* do not belong (even if we can supposedly trace our ancestry back to them). This is as true for spatially distinct groups as temporally distinct ones.

Moving Forward

How can folklorists intervene in the public discourses about folklore and the folk that I've described here? One way is by demonstrating, through accessible works aimed at general audiences, that *everyone* participates in folklore, and that

variation and newness are as much a part of folklore as tradition and "oldness." Because when we emphasize oldness, the ancient, traditionality, we risk dramatically defamiliarizing, Othering, the cultures we discuss; and simultaneously, we risk setting up rigid, overly simplistic constructions of heritage and the relation of past to present. Similarly, if we anchor tradition too firmly in specific locales, we risk obscuring the historical processes of interaction and exchange that are always parts of human culture. We may inadvertently create a "folk" that can only exist in the countryside, or the ghetto, or other places distant and different from "our" "modern" lives.

It seems to me that to combat the horror of folk horror, we need to dismantle once and for all the idea that "the folk" are mostly rural people who preserve quaint and weird cultures that are not part of our modern lives but are still somehow part of some semi-mystical collective inheritance. We need to shift attention away from folklore as a collection of *things*, stories or songs or material objects, and reframe it as the ordinary, repeated expressive practices that form part of *everyone's* daily cultural experiences. Yes, longstanding traditional practices encountered in rural places can be viewed as folklore; but so can fan cultures, digital cultures, cosplay, graffiti, ad hoc family celebrations, and "urban" ephemera of all sorts. We need

to convince people that folklore is not a thing or things, but a *way of doing things*, and that we're all doing it. We need to *familiarize* the folk, to un-Other them, to locate them here in the present: we need to make them *us*, because they *are* us. Obviously, this doesn't mean that cultural difference does not exist. People belong to many different groups and are enmeshed in many different cultural networks, and not every individual belongs to every possible group or participates in every possible configuration of culture. But as long as folklore is understood only as the property of some *other* group of people who are wildly, insurmountably different from us—but who are also somehow connected to us, maybe because they practice an earlier version of "our" culture—it will continue to carry Noyes' "scarlet F," or at least the potential of it. The folk will continue to be the source of horror until we can both accept and show, definitively, that *we* were the folk all along.

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