



Digital Folklore
UNPLUGGED EP 6
Dr. Lynne S. McNeill

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[Intro]

Perry Carpenter:

Hey there, I'm Perry Carpenter, one of the hosts of the Digital Folklore podcast, and this is Digital Folklore Unplugged. Unplugged episodes allow us to strip back all of the production elements and the fancy things that we like to do so that we can focus on the content of the interviews and bring you those in a very unedited and raw way.

On today's episode, my co-host Mason and I had the chance to sit down with Dr. Lynne McNeill. If you've studied Digital Folklore or even folklore at large for a while, you've probably heard the name Lynne McNeill before. Her name is nearly synonymous with the study of Digital Folklore and her voice has been instrumental in helping people understand that our online world is just an extension of our lives in general, and because of that, it's not only a place where folklore can arise but thrive at a speed and a scale previously unimaginable.

On this interview, we all got so excited about the topics that we're covering that we went over two hours. From a release perspective, we're breaking this into two parts. This is part one and in it Lynne shares her thoughts on the intersection of AI and folklore, conspiracy theories, the interesting paradox of studying folklore from an academic perspective and a whole lot more. There's a ton packed into both of these parts that we're releasing.

Okay, with that, let's get unplugged with part one of our interview with Lynne McNeill.

[Transition to Interview]

Perry Carpenter:



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We thought we'd start off with maybe talking about some of the things that have you excited right now. When you think about having a career as a folklorists and somebody that teaches others. Where do you get your passion from right now? What are the things that have you interested?

Dr. Lynne McNeill:

In general, the things that keep me and I imagine any folklorists really engaged is that folklore does not dilly-dally with things that are no longer relevant, which is paradoxical to a lot of people. We think of folklore as being this outmoded, maybe outdated older way of thinking, but really it is the up-to-the-moment cultural barometer that we have at our fingertips to say what's going on right now. And that's frustrating because sometimes you really get into something and then two days later you look around and it's gone already. But I find that that ability to keep up is one of the things that keeps me most interested. I have a student right now working on the AI crypted as some people are calling her Lobe, the creature who is emerging through this almost ritualistic method of AI image generation, which I love.

It's almost an unintentional, "Oh, you were doing a ceremony and you didn't know it." And now here's this lady. That idea as a means of symbolically expressing how uncomfortable we all are right now with artificial intelligence, I just feel like is perfect. It's this incredible illustration of the role folklore plays in absolutely entertaining us, challenging us, scaring us, but also in articulating for us what we are stressed about, what we're worried about, what we're afraid of, or what we're really into right now. It's not the work of practiced artisans to create a poetic turn of phrase. It's everyday people communicating on this symbolic level, and I love it.

Perry Carpenter:

Yeah, I want to touch on Loab for a second and I've not done a deep dive. I've seen some of the surface level news reports and some of the original Twitter thread and things like this, and it does look like one of those issues where there are questions around whether this is a phenomenon that actually happens or whether it was manufactured and propagated by the first person to tweet about it. I think either way it gets into those more existential questions that you're talking about, about what are some of the



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horrors that AI may bring forward, but then there's probably a couple other things that come, which I would love for you to touch on, does it matter whether some of these are true when they come out that way? Then also maybe some of the darker side of that, which could be some of the othering of disfigured people or things like that that come through. Do you have any thoughts there? I know I hit a whole bunch of stuff at one time.

Dr. Lynne McNeill:

Yeah no, definitely. I think what makes this so compelling, we have this technology that's available to us right now that appears to do things we did not intend it to do, which is distressingly similar to things we might think of as autonomy and free will and mind of its own. We have sci-fi about that. We have literature about that. Now, we potentially have reality about that, and it's hard to not color that reality with those other speculative, fictional things that we've had throughout time that always tell us what it's going to do is kill us in the end. We are burdened with that presupposition, that invention. But I think what we have here is a situation as with so many legendary situations, it doesn't matter at all if it's true. There's a multilayered quality to the truth of a legend. It can be true as in literally true. It can be true as in true folklore.

Is this true folklore? That's a question that was asked a lot early on about Slender Man, not people saying, "Is Slender Man real?" But, "Is Slender Man a real legend?" And the answer is yes. Even though we know to the day a time when he wasn't, he is now, and it's breaking that expectation of age of ancientness even as a marker of folklore. We don't need that for something to become a legend. The same is true with Loab. Was this a really great creepypasta? Was this a performance art project? Who cares? Now it's folklore. Now it's a legend, and now it belongs to all of us, which is handy. We know there's a person who originated this, whatever ideas they had about what this would be, they've set it in motion, but now it's running downhill really fast on its own, and we're going to get a lot of other artistic folkloric, perhaps even filmic versions of this before we're done talking about it.

One of the things that strikes me is how classically folkloric the creation of Loab was. We get this origin narrative of a prompt that is something like, "Give me the opposite of Marlon Brando." And we get this abstract image that's in there. Then as logical humans, "All right, if I asked for the opposite of this, is it



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going to give me Marlon Brando?" That's an interest, is that how this machine works? We have that reversal and dating back as far as we know in the study of folk belief, reversals are big ritualistic moments. We invert things. We turn 180 degrees. We turn our pockets inside out so we don't get kidnapped by the fairies. We love to reverse things and then have magical stuff happen. Here we have this reversal and this woman shows up with these red, ruddy, perhaps even bloody cheeks, eyes, this very piercing expression looking out at the user, and it is a instinctively shocking thing.

As more requests are made and more images are generated, we start to see what elements of this image become conservative or consistent in this, and a lot of it is the bloody eyes. A lot of it is that it's women and then children, and we do start to see a big question, which is, where is this coming from? Is this us or is this a reflection of what we've put into AI and it's being spit back at us or is this something else? Paranormal investigators have long used the idea of instrumental trans communication to say that entities, spirits creatures will speak to us through our technology, through flickering lights, through electrical charge, all of this.

Is this simply an open gateway that something is coming through? Or is this really creepy because a lot of the stuff we input into AI is really creepy. We've seen it before with artificial intelligences that went from naive newborns to Nazis within a matter of days because of what we fed it. There is precedent for that. I think existing in a world of legend and folklore allows for both of those things. This is a polyvalent tradition. It is both. It is a reflection of us and it is perhaps the gateway through which something is coming.

Perry Carpenter:

That's really cool. As you were talking about this, and I don't know that I've ever had this thought before, but when you're training an AI with a large language model and you're taking a big subsection of the internet and human communication, you'll naturally get folk belief injected into that because you have the way that people communicate across different cultures. It's interesting, especially when you get to the generative AI models where they're competing against each other for supremacy, that the thing that represents the fundamental bits of human consciousness or the way that we would approach things start to surface and you get the distillations of things, whether that be like a Lobe or something else.



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Again, whether that was intentionally manufactured or not, maybe beside the point, but I do think when you start to get to some of the different manifestations of things that come back from AI generated prompts, you will naturally have the way that some human communities might get together and represent those ideas.

Dr. Lynne McNeill:

Absolutely. I think it was Jan Brunvand, very famous, amazing legend scholar and folklorist who described folklore as syntax. It's the unconscious way that we express ourselves. We use words, we speak sentences, all of this, we are not thinking like subject, verb, object. As we speak, it just comes out that way, and yet if we speak natural language into a machine, it will divine that syntax for us and communicate back with us that way. AI really is divining the syntax of our folk belief in a lot of ways that we may be wholly unconscious of. In some ways, that's the job of a folklore is uncover the unconscious syntax of what are we not aware we're saying as we're saying it. It's interesting to think about the greater processing power and data crunching capabilities of a machine. Is that more accurate in its reach and breadth, or is that less accurate, perhaps inability to do what we might call ethnography? Can a machine conduct ethnography? That's an interesting question.

Mason Amadeus:

Well, I think part of that is the thing that seems shocking when interacting with these artificial intelligence is their ability to contextualize things now. That seems to be the level that has made things weird, and there's enough of it to give the illusion that they're capable of so much deeper thought that, yeah, those questions do arise. Also, just to comment on the way you described something that somehow never clicked in my brain, the way we interact with these is almost so much of a literal summoning ritual of prompting like, "Give me this. Create this for me." Using the proper words to get the results you want. That's a weird parallel that I never noticed until just now, and that's fascinating, I think.

Dr. Lynne McNeill:



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It really is, and the focus on prompting, there's going to be a skill set out there on the horizon of how to construct a prompt. What is that if not a proper awareness of ritual invocation.

Mason Amadeus:

Right. Your grimoire includes things like RTX, ultra HD, ultra realism or whatever.

Dr. Lynne McNeill:

Exactly.

Perry Carpenter:

Well, and if you don't do that right, you may get something that comes through that you don't want that is undesirable or potentially dangerous. One of the interesting things that comes out when you start to read what the security scientists that start to evaluate things like OpenAI and the ChatGPT model is they talk about the fact that AI has the ability to hallucinate, and it does it with a certainty behind that. I'm wondering if that hallucination is kind of the distillation of whether that is collective belief because there's enough indicators out there that it would put together and make an inferential model that would then say that that is certain, or if there's something else there.

I don't think that something else there is woo-woo or anything like that. I think the model will be naturally tainted by or greatly influenced by the subset of data that's been fed into it and the inferences that can come and that subset of data will naturally have a bias if you're not sampling the dataset appropriately, which is a folk group type of belief. Right? You've essentially created an AI folk group.

Dr. Lynne McNeill:

Yes, absolutely. And what do we not realize we're programming it with. What inferences, what assumptions, what traditional beliefs are we unaware are infusing our lives maybe at such a scale that we can't perceive it as an individual, but when something that can look at that much data at once, they see a pattern that we don't see and they feed us back that pattern and we are freaked out by it. I think that's fairly reasonable. We're getting into really great metaphors for divinity and religion and scale and



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all of these questions that I think make this such a ripe place for telling stories because, of course, we are going to tell stories about this because we don't understand it. That's a big thing that we see in legend study and rumor study is that when there is an information vacuum, we fill it in with folklore sometimes.

That's not to say that folklore is therefore incorrect or inaccurate or misleading, but just to say that we are rarely using it most when we have other information at our disposal. There's early rumor scholarship by these two psychologists, Allport and Postman. This is like the 1940s, and they came up with what they called, this might be their later work, the rumor equation, and it was basically that the spread of any given rumor and a rumor as a folklorist, I would understand that to be a short form of a legend. A legend is a whole story. A rumor is just like the kernel statement of what's behind that legend.

The reach of any rumor they said is the product of the ambiguity of the subject multiplied by its importance. If we have a subject that in our contemporary society is really ambiguous but not that important, we don't feel provoked to spread rumors about that. If we have something that's incredibly important but super unambiguous, we know what there is to know about it. Yeah, we're not going to need to speculate to spread rumors or legends to think about the plausibility of that. But if we have a situation where something is both ambiguous and incredibly important to us, it is just going to all be this constant symbolic articulation of concerns because we need something to latch onto when it comes to something that is that important to us and also that totally incomprehensible.

Mason Amadeus:

That is such a cool way to think about that and that really makes a lot of sense. I love that.

Dr. Lynne McNeill:

Yeah, and I think it's not an equation that holds up mathematically to anything. I think it's more of an ethnographic idea, but they used a little algebraic symbols to express it. But it's one of those things that speaks to a pattern that absolutely exists.

Perry Carpenter:



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Well, and you can see people intentionally exploit that as well, right? That is what early Q drops were in the QAnon world. There are people that are looking for meaning, looking for information, have a certain worldview, and I'm going to throw out an ambiguous statement that anybody now can start to put whatever dots together they want to and come up with all these interesting theories, and that's what keeps that group going until the next ambiguous bit of information.

Mason Amadeus:

That's a whole sidebar. I really think we should explore later. I think one of the things we want to do when we get into season two is get into [inaudible 00:17:15] and disinformation, astroturfing and all of that stuff. I think we should circle back to that later.

Perry Carpenter:

Yeah, I do too. I was getting ahead of us a little bit. Why don't we back up and go general folklore for a second.

Dr. Lynne McNeill:

All right.

Perry Carpenter:

From your perspective, you do have a very well-known definition for folklore. Imagine that you have a group of all of our listeners in a classroom and somebody says, "Well, what is folklore anyway, and why am I here?" How would you answer that?

Dr. Lynne McNeill:

Yeah. Well, I'd answer it with probably an hour long lecture. Step one-

Perry Carpenter:



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We're here for it.

Dr. Lynne McNeill:

Thank you. It's always going to take more explaining than it would seem to merit as a subject. Nobody thinks folklore. I'm going to need an hour to have that one explained to me. The way I define folklore is succinctly as informal traditional culture. Three tidy words, whole lot of ideas encapsulated in those three tiny words. Each of them need unpacking a bit. I usually begin explaining folklore by trying to draw examples of it out of people. One of the examples I like the most to distinguish folk culture from institutional culture is things that we learn in an institutional setting or in a region that's guided by institutions but that are totally non-institutional. Driving a car is a really great example of this.

In order to drive a vehicle in this country, you need to be licensed. In order to get a license, you have to pass a test. That test has the rules of the road on it. We take it, they are the same, maybe not state to state, but when you take the test, they're the same for the people taking the same test as you. And we know what the rules of the road are because we took a driver's ed class and studied for that test, but we also know all these other things, that you hold your breath when you drive through a tunnel or passed a cemetery or that you pick your feet up when you drive over train tracks or a cattle guard, and that's not on the driver's test.

How do we all know that? We know that when you drive through a yellow light, you kiss your hand and slap the roof of the car, and we know that a one headlight car is called a padiddle or a perdidle or a [inaudible 00:19:19] or a spadoodle, and we have all of this knowledge about this totally institutionalized thing we do that is shared, but that was never on the test. That was never formally taught to us. There wasn't the day in driver's ed where they were like, "And here's what you do when you drive through a tunnel." Other than, I guess, put your headlights on. That's maybe legit.

That level of awareness is never what people are thinking of when they think of folklore. They're thinking Grimm's Fairy Tales. They're thinking genealogy. They're thinking quilts and handmade furniture. All those things are folklore as well, but so is this stuff, what we do in a car when we're driving, and the awareness of that is really that what these things share in common is that they are informal traditional culture. Informal meaning that they do not come to us from institutions. These are



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things we learn, whether it's a story or a way of behaving or a particular term or phrase that we use for something.

Maybe it's a way we make a paper airplane. We learn that from the people around us, from everyday people, from our families, our friends, through observation, through non-specific learning. We grow up hearing songs and jump rope rhymes, and therefore we know them. We might learn them at school, but we don't learn them through school. That's that informal quality of it. The traditional quality of it gets at the idea that we're dealing with repeated patterns so that it's not new content every time. The conversation we're having now is informal. We're not scripted. We're not reading from provided material, but it's not necessarily traditional. Something becomes traditional when we recognize, "Hey, I've heard that before. I've seen that before. I've heard another version of that. I've done this in another place. I've done this jump rope rhyme, this hand clapping game. I've heard this urban legend. I've used this customary greeting with someone before." When we recognize that traditional element that, "Okay, this is something that more than one person knows, it exists in more than one place."

It has what other folk artists have called multiple existence. That tells us that this thing is traditional. It's pass on from person to person and because it's informal, there's no single correct version. Knowing that it is a culturally expressive form helps us get at the idea that it is a particular thing that we express to other people. It's not just, though it certainly touches on, the abstract knowledge of informal and traditional things. It's when it takes form the form of a story, the form of a custom, the form of a material object, the form of a belief, and that's where we derive what we would call the genres of folklore, the lore, the actual way this stuff manifests.

There's a lot of folklorists out there who are interested in the non-specific stuff, who, in fact, feel that in the history of the discipline, that focus on the lore on the stuff was maybe a little bit distracting from the people behind that stuff. When we really zeroed in on, I've collected five superstitions today and I've got 10 versions of this legend. We're so text oriented, what folklore call item oriented, that we forget there are people behind that. But, I think the discipline is coming to this really great balancing point now where we understand that, yeah, we don't want to erase the people for the sake of the stuff, but we also should never forget that the people are there in the stuff. We can't erase them. They're there. That's why it's taken that form. People choose a proverb, they choose an urban legend. They choose a



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custom to do at that moment because it speaks to something that makes sense to them. That holistic view of people does include these pieces of folklore, these items through which they express themselves.

Perry Carpenter:

More of our interview with Dr. Lynne McNeill after this. Welcome back.

Dr. Lynne McNeill:

I will say I don't want to get too deep down this rabbit hole. This is something I could talk about forever, but the phrase informal traditional culture, and that concept is not inherently unique to me as a folklorist. Other folklorists have defined folklore using the same idea with different terminologies. Alan Dundes, he's a very famous folklorist. He was my mentor when I was an undergrad at UC Berkeley, and he defined folklore as anything that exhibits multiple existence and variation. Those were his phrases. Multiple existence variation. We can overlay that on my terms. Variation means informality. There's no single correct version. It's a little bit different each time. And multiple existence means traditional. We see it in more than one place. It crops up again and again. It's passed on multiple existence and variation. Another folklorist, Barry Tolkien, I was very lucky in my mentorship, he was my mentor when I did my master's degree at Utah State University. He uses the phrases dynamism and conservatism.

He calls these the twin laws of folklorist stuff that is both dynamic and conservative. Dynamic, of course, means variable. It means informal. Conservative means multiple existence, means traditional. I see the same elements over and over again. It's the way we recognize a Cinderella story, even when the name Cinderella isn't used and there's no glass slipper, but when there are enough elements there, we go, "Oh, hey, I'm hearing a Cinderella story." It's those conservative elements that tell us it's the same story. It's the dynamic elements that let folklore adapt itself to different cultural and communicative context. I can tell the same political joke, but about a contemporary politician rather than a past politician so that it's more relevant to my audience and that really is the inherent power of folklore. We're not stuck with the way something happened the first time it was told. We get to be constantly evolving and updating it



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so that it remains the most relevant, whether that's to contemporary society on a broad scale or to my friend group when I'm telling the joke.

Perry Carpenter:

There was one other definition that a professor that I had gave, and this was from Zora Hurston, where she says that folklore is the boiled-down juice of human living or the pot liquor of human living, doesn't really account for the tradition and variation of that, but there's a different heart to that as well, the thing that just comes out of people being people and people being people in community, I think is an interesting take that she brings to that as well.

Dr. Lynne McNeill:

Absolutely, and I do think that Zora Neale Hurston definition is so perfect because it is so perfectly resonant, right? That idea that folklore is this distillation of people being people. That is the feel of it. What academics boringly are constantly trying to do is account for the specifics of it. How can I factually say in a way that is maybe applicable across examples what makes all these disparate things the same type of thing? How can I say that? These deconstructions into informal traditional culture or conservatism and dynamism or multiple existence and variation become a tool, but what the essence of it is absolutely that boiled-down nature of humanity. That's the value of it. That's what it gives us. The tools to study it and articulate it are what academics spend their time working on.

Mason Amadeus:

It just got me excited because in a very similar vein, there was a friend of mine who started listening to Digital Folklore the podcast and had no prior background in learning about folklore at all. Something that he said to me that I thought was really interesting, and I want to know your opinion on. Very similar to this, they're like, "It's like social metadata." And I thought that was a really interesting way to put it, because it's all the little underlying metadata encompassed by these other things.

Dr. Lynne McNeill:



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Yeah, that's really interesting because when I think of metadata, when I think of meta anything, I think of an upper scale, like almost a super organic understanding of things. And when I think of folklore, I think that is correct, but I would almost call it a subtext like that idea of syntax is that it's an underlying idea. It's not necessarily the conscious discussion about society or whatever, but it's more the subconscious meta conversation about what's going on. Alan Dundes had a term that is not in regular use these days. He called it oral literary criticism. It's everyday people doing the work of literary criticism on themselves basically, that people are aware, people can give you. You don't need a folklorist to say, "What does that story mean to you, grandma?" Grandma knows what it means to her. A folklorist might have a larger read by knowing there are multiple examples of that story out in the world, but we would never turn away from a person's own explanation of their own tradition or their own story.

I actually think that's what sets folklore studies apart as an academic discipline is that there's not trust in the sense of uncritical belief, but there's trust in that everyday people are saying valuable, viable things, even if they haven't trained to say them. They are not published authors. They're not fine artists. They're not symphonic musicians, but kids singing a parody about burning down the school are saying something worth listening to. And we can even ask them in a reflexive, ethnographic way, "What do you think this song means?" And they might say, "I don't know. It's funny." Or they might say something that opens our eyes to some perspective that we would not have had before. I think it's that collaborative relationship with everyday people, that acknowledgement that we are also everyday people that the discipline really grew into that really makes it unique.

Mason Amadeus:

I love that.

Perry Carpenter:

Can I get you really quick? Because we've used the word ethnographic and ethnography a couple of times now. That's a folkloric term that not everybody may be familiar with. Can you describe what that is and the significance of that approach?



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Dr. Lynne McNeill:

Yeah, ethnography is at its most basic semantic level description of culture, writing, graph, specifically writing about culture. And it's a practice that grew up around the idea that people, often Western European people wanted to go out and explore the world and describe it to the people back home and be able to say, "Hey, here is this culture. It is different from ours. I'm going to describe it to you." And it was related in a lot of historical ways to the process of ethnology, which is the comparison of two cultures. Here's how this culture is doing things, here's how this other culture is doing things. We have both the practice of ethnography. Someone goes and observes and perhaps participates in a culture that is different from their own, and that might be a national culture or an ethnic culture. It might be a occupational culture or a hobby-based culture.

We can scale that idea to a bunch of different levels. People have done ethnographies of hubs on a Friday night. That's a cultural group we could come to understand. One of the things that has grown out of this study of ethnography is that the most responsible way to do it is to, one, never assume that we can be objective, that we are always aware that we are looking at a culture through our own culture. That was something that was not present for a long time in early ethnographic work. That reflection on what biases, what assumptions am I bringing to this, that my outsider perspective is causing me to not see certain things, and it might similarly be causing me to see certain things that someone on the inside might overlook as normal. We understand this when we look back at history. Everyone has always been looking through their own lenses.

When the Romans were describing the Gauls and the Celts, they described what stood out to them and they didn't mention what didn't stand out to them. We can assume that what they didn't mention was pretty much the way the Romans were doing it because it didn't catch their attention, right? We have that same idea now. We try to not assume that we can be objective, and we also understand that the work we're doing is partial. No ethnographer is ever getting the totality of a culture when they look at it, and that doesn't negate the value of it. It just sets it in a more realistic vein. When we talk about doing ethnographic work, we're talking about looking at a culture or what folklorists might call a folk group and describing their worldview, describing the way that they apprehend reality and the expressions that they make about that reality.



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Mason Amadeus:

That leads me to a question that I really want to ask. I'm not quite sure how to form it, so forgive me for the phrasing of this question, but something like, I want to figure out a way to convey to listeners, at least for me, when I'm learning something like this, I'm trying to think of how can I look at things differently and how can I observe when I'm noticing something like Loab coming up. What frameworks can I have in my head to like, "Okay, how can I observe the context of this and the significance of what it means?" I don't know if there's a way for you to easily give out... When you see something like this, what is going on in your head? How do you look at something like a folklorist might?

Perry Carpenter:

Is there a forensic toolkit for folklorist where you can-

Mason Amadeus:

Yeah, what's something someone could take away?

Dr. Lynne McNeill:

I love that. Yes, I actually wrote a book chapter called The Folklorist Toolkit, which-

Mason Amadeus:

Oh, perfect.

Dr. Lynne McNeill:

... was building off a another of my mentors. I have been so lucky as a folklorist, Diane Goldstein, who for a long time was the head of the folklore program at Memorial University of Newfoundland and then ended her career at Indiana University. She wrote about The Folklorist Toolkit in an article distinguishing the work of an anthropologist from the work of a folklorist. I'll get to that in a minute though. I often talk with my students that folklorists have this sort of double vision because we don't stop being a member



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of the folk, an everyday person, a member of all of our varied and overlapping folk groups through which we code switch throughout the day, right? We have a mode of presentation at work that's different than at home and when we're hanging out with friends and when we're at a sporting event, we are constantly members of these folk groups all overlapping all at the same time.

And we are that even when we are a folklorist, and what the folklorist is doing at its most basic level is identifying something that seems base and trivial, but that's everywhere and saying, "What's going on here? Why is this persisting?" The informality of folklore, that key definitional trait of informality says, no institution is keeping this stuff in circulation. There's no AP test making sure that you've heard X, Y, Z urban legends in high school, right? There's no government licensing that's going to make sure that you know how to successfully put on a traditional holiday dinner or breakfast or whatever. And yet these patterns persist. The folklorist comes in and says, why? When a pattern is starting to persist or even starting to rev up, and I'm seeing it everywhere and there's no institutionalized explanation for it. There's not a big budget production company showing an ad for it every 30 minutes on television.

Why is it persisting? That's I think, learning to spot folklore, learning to see that informal traditional stuff and then asking yourself, why is this sticking around? If it didn't mean anything to us, it would disappear, and we've seen that happen. There's a lot of folklore that's disappeared because we didn't need it anymore. It wasn't saying anything of value to us. When it does stick around, it's our job to then say, "Okay, what's the value? What are we saying with this that's keeping it a useful tool for us?" To get into that idea of The Folklorist's Toolbox, more specifically, and this is much more a real academic leaning idea. Diane Goldstein tells us that the things that really make the work of a folklorist distinct are the concepts of tradition, fairly obviously, transmission, that concept of things being passed on from person to person and genre that we have this focus on.

It is something different to tell a fairytale than a legend. It is something different to engage in a rite of passage versus a calendar custom. And more than any other discipline, anthropology, sociology, other folks use ethnographic theories and techniques. Folklorists pay attention to tradition, transmission, and genre in a way that I believe really connects with that expressive mode of everyday people. People choose, even if it's a very unconscious or subconscious choice, we choose to communicate in a proverb rather than summing up an opinion with our own speech. We choose to deploy a meme when we want



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to make a point rather than just make that point in our own words. We are doing something, that means we're choosing a genre in order to transmit an idea in a traditional way when we share folklore. Those three concepts, yes, are useful tools for folklorist, but I think also really start to get at what this is, this vernacular communication that people are doing.

Mason Amadeus:

That makes so much sense. I never thought of genre that way despite all of the things I've read that never clicked until just now as a way of thinking about that. That is really cool.

Dr. Lynne McNeill:

Yeah, we need to be careful as folklorists to not impose our genres on other people. We know, of course, genres are learned through one's cultural upbringing, through one's worldview, and it's very tempting to go out into the world and say, "Oh, is that a song that you sing at night in front of children? That's a lullaby." No, that's a genre we. We have to parse out other people's genres. I find this fascinating because as a folklorist, we do have very specific academic definitions of many genres, and I was part of a Twitter conversation once where someone was asking, "Are urban legends folklore?" I came in and was like, "Yes." Here's official folklorist like, "Yes, they are." And other Twitter users, non-folklorist were saying very interesting things like, "Well, in my opinion, no. They're related, but different." And I'm going, "It's not a matter of opinion, guys. Come on, it either is or isn't." I'm trying to think of some other like, "Is five an integer?" It's like, "Yes." You don't have an opinion. But, I had to remind myself of the tenets of my discipline, which is that, "Hey, I'm not here to tell people, hey, that story, that's a myth, not a legend." Or vice versa.

I'm a little bit here to learn from them. Tell me why you don't think urban legends are folklore. What does folklore mean to you emically and intrinsically that I'm missing, that distinguishes it from urban legends. As an academic, my students still going to need to learn to articulate the difference because it's important and because those differences can alter how we perceive people. Fairytales are told knowingly as fiction, as fantasy, as transformative, marvelous escapism. That doesn't mean they don't contain truths, but they're not told as literally true.



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When someone tells you the story of Puss in Boots, you don't respond by going like, "Yeah, I don't really think that's possible because it's a fairytale. It opened with once upon a time, it closed with happily ever after. It framed itself in its fictionally." Legends on the other hand are told as true, right? If someone tells you a legend like The King of the Cats a very well-known Irish legend about a talking cat. Someone tells you that story, they are telling you that they think there's at least a passing chance that actually did happen, and you are absolutely expected to be like, "Yeah, I don't think that's possible."

Because as a genre, legends are rhetorically different than fairytales. And if I approach people and have them tell me a story and they tell me a story in which bizarre and miraculous things happen, it really matters. If I know that they are telling me that as fiction or as potential fact, and my understanding of what this persistent traditional pattern in their culture means is going to depend a lot on whether they're telling it to me as fiction or fact. It is an important distinction for an academic to make, but it's not for the goal of telling people they're wrong about what they would call any of their expressive content.

Mason Amadeus:

This just brought to mind a question that I am super curious about your answer on, but it's a bit of a weird question. The study of anything academically is almost in a way the pursuit of absolute truths that can be applied to analyze something. Is that directly at odds with the study of folklore, which is studying how we colloquially understand things? Is there an interesting headbutting going on there?

Dr. Lynne McNeill:

Yeah, it can be a paradox. And what it does for me though that helps reduce the impact of that paradox is we distinguish the stuff of folklore and its natural, we might be tempted to say organic processes from the study of it. That's something that we don't do as much with more institutionalized forms of culture like literature or art history or music appreciation where we study them in the academy because there are correct distinctions between those forms that are institutionalized. We start getting into music history and it turns pretty folkloric pretty quick, it turns out. But, when things are guided by institutions, it is easier to be definitive and say, "Oh, if you're calling a memoir a novel, you are incorrect." Right?



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Whereas with a folklorist, what you're trying to do is be a folklore student and you call a myth of fairytale, we might say you are incorrect.

But just everyday people in the world, our goal is not to say you're wrong about what you call these forms. It's more of a... This actually is key to the discipline of folklore studies because what we largely are not, and this is not to say that there aren't some instances of it, but we are not interventionist. A lot of sociological work, a lot of the say, medical humanities, the goals are interventionist. We want to change behavior. We want to fix this public health issue. We want to make different the way something happens in a society. And folklorists largely are like, "We want to understand. That's what we want to do. We want to get it. We want to get what you're saying. We don't want to change what you're saying." Now, this has gotten trickier. You guys brought up the advent of QAnon with fake news, the purposeful dissemination of sticky in a folkloric way, misinformation.

Suddenly folklorists are like, "Oh, maybe we do want to change the way people are doing things." That is a huge, enormous identity crisis in the discipline right now. We have thrived on agnosticism in a lot of ways as a real point of pride in our discipline. I am not here to say whether Bigfoot is real or not. I am here to take seriously the people who want to tell me that they think they saw him. And that's great. I believe in that. All of a sudden we cast that same legendary work in the frame of politics or public health, and we see an area in which it actually does matter to me if someone believes or doesn't believe the information that they're sharing with me. That is tricky. That is a place at which I hear folklorists now beginning these conversations.

Perry Carpenter:

After the break, the conclusion of our interview with Dr. Lynne McNeill. Welcome back.

Mason Amadeus:

Do you feel as though there's a tipping point in which the study of folklore now is almost more important than ever because of the advent of the internet and all of the things, but also the study of it is more difficult to justify. Something, Perry, you were telling me about before like you had a hard time finding online folklore programs or accessibility into it at the same time.



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Perry Carpenter:

Yes, there's my short answer, yes, absolutely. Understanding what folklore is, understanding how it moves, understanding how it influences people. It's tied to so many other disciplines, linguistics, psychology, sociology, anthropology. It is the understanding of humans, but uniquely it's the understanding of humans on their terms rather than the understanding of humans on Durkheim's terms or some previous scholars terms. I'm coming to understand you through you, and that is a really unique thing and a really important thing and a thing that, folklorists, I think we are coming quickly to a place where it's like, "Okay, how do we maintain that best practice but allow for this?" Okay, perhaps we need an interventionist bent. I think what we're going to end up with is a broad application of folklore studies. You can be a folklorist in a variety of contexts, and one of those contexts might eventually be a therapeutic, a culturally or societally therapeutic context where we can say, this is how our knowledge can help.

I teach a class called Legend, Belief and Conspiracy, and we talk about the blood libel legend, which goes back to recorded history and which brings us smack back to QAnon today. There are strategies that people from a variety of disciplines have talked about. How do you talk to a family member who's embroiled in this? How do you deal with friends who are leaning into these conspiracy thinking ways? I think that psychologists have a lot of really great stuff to say about those questions. I think that that's a conversation folklorists have a place in that is not widely recognized. I think it's that unique toolkit. It's that recognition of we are invoking genres, emic ethnic genres. It's subconscious genres, not the genres of academia, but the genres of everyday people that an understanding of would really help us parse out how best to handle the information that comes to us through those genres.

As I was doing some of my initial research into this and starting to realize how big the world of folklore really is, I did keep butting up against this almost like Star Trek prime directive type of thing, is that interventionist piece. Then, of course, you get to 2015-2016 and beyond, you start to see that, "Oh, there are these interesting traces of things that look like legend and things that look like traditional manipulation of belief for some other kind of more nefarious outcome." And you see that struggle. One of the things that keeps surfacing over and over and over cross discipline is the idea in grade school even, injecting some kind of media literacy. Would you then also advocate for not only media literacy,



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but the ways that folklore and belief intersect with that, and the ways that belief may be used to other people or to create distinct social differences for the purpose of something negative or propping myself up, maybe even.

Dr. Lynne McNeill:

Yes, I think that some sort of media literacy, vernacular culture literacy is something that should go along with this. The most difficult thing about it though, and you brought up the idea that a lot of the times we use these materials to other, a group of people or an individual or whatever, and this is something that we see happen on the microcosmic dyadic scale. Two people do this to each other. Angry people in a relationship will attempt to dehumanize the other person so as to be more comfortable with harming them or insulting them. And we see it on a societal scale, right? This is a human conundrum that we are dealing with. The hardest thing about it is that the people each of us most need to fact check are ourselves and the people that is most fun to fact check are our opponents in whatever realm we are working in.

Media literacy, learn how to find your sources. Learn how to fact check and stuff like this. Those are all wonderful skills for people to learn. It's that people don't deploy them on themselves and they don't deploy them in the true... I hate to use the word insidious, but insidious way that folklore enters our lives. We think about urban legends as these identifiable friend of a friend narratives that we hear, and when I talk about them in classes with my students, my students will say, "How could anyone believe that? That's so ridiculous?" It's like, "Yeah, it sounds ridiculous written in a textbook about global politics. Of course, that sounds ridiculous." That's not how you encounter it as folklore. You encounter it as folklore when you're in high school and you're at the dinner table with your family and your dad looks up and goes, "Did you guys hear what happened yesterday?"

And that's it. Then boom, urban legend. Urban legend comes next, and it's not a CNN article or a Fox News article or an MSNBC broadcast. It's our friends, our family, our parents, and it's not often bizarre and crazy sounding stuff because usually it's stuff that fits right in with our worldview. It's something that we don't like, but that we're like, "Yeah no, I bet that did happen." That is how the world works, and everyone is susceptible to this. Again, it's not fact checking a fake news article. It's fact checking my



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parents, my friends, my colleagues, myself. We don't do that instinctively. That's horrendously uncomfortable, and we aren't in that realm of formal research all the time. This really is highlighted by that informal versus institutional culture divide. Fact-checking informal culture is often impossible, and the genre differences.

What distinguishes a joke from a legend? Almost, the only thing is whether or not it's being pitched as true, because we have many urban legends that structurally have punchlines. There's the reveal at the end, and if it were told as, "Did you hear about the guy who..." You'd laugh because it would be a funny social commentary, but when it's pitched as, "No, seriously, my hairdresser's cousins next door neighbor did this." Suddenly it's not funny because now it's biting social commentary. We react differently based on how, again, the people closest to us who are not trying to defraud us. There are bad actors in the world. There are money making fake news generators. They are less the danger than when the story they create becomes so folkloric, has entered that folk transmission process that we hear it from a family member as something that happened.

That's the danger level of disinformation, and that's where it's so convoluted and difficult that those fact-checking skills, even when we've learned them, just don't get deployed. This happens also in ways that are neutral or benign and so don't seem problematic. An example is, I think all folklore have this moment. I was in a PhD level contemporary legend class. Folklorists call urban legends, contemporary legends. It's a slightly more accurate nomenclature. And someone was telling a story that I found myself, the words came out of my mouth before I could stop it, and I was like, "No, but that actually happened to a friend of a guy my dad worked with." And then I was like [inaudible 00:52:05].

Perry Carpenter:

Keyser Söze moment. Yeah.

Dr. Lynne McNeill:

Yes. I always think of it as the Simba in the wildebeest stampede moment where the cameras zooms in little Simba's and the Wildebeest are coming. And I'm like, "Ooh." It was the story that as I heard it, and my dad, it was like one of his favorite stories. As far as I know, he at least heard it as though it happened



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to a friend of this guy he works with. They were in the investing business, investment advisors, and this guy had a client down in LA and he went to travel down to LA to meet with his client in person, and he had to stay overnight. And his client was like, "Hey, I'm going to this party tonight. I know you're in town with nothing to do. Do you want to come with me? There's going to be a lot of Hollywood muckety-mucks there. You might get to meet some important people or whatever." And the guy's like, "I don't know. I wouldn't fit in. I don't know how I feel about this." And his client's like, "Oh, come on. Just come with me and there'll be good food if nothing else."

So he goes, and he ends up doing that awkward thing we all do at parties where we don't know anyone, just standing by the food and eating constantly. And there's this other guy standing by the food table just eating constantly. And he's like, "Well, at least I'm not alone in my awkwardness." And so he makes friends with this guy and this guy's name is Bob. He has all these funny stories about people in LA and all this stuff, and he's super friendly, and he makes this guy feel at home and he even introduces him to some big names, and he's like, "See, okay, cool. I was wrong. This was great." As he's leaving the next day he calls up his client to just be like, "Hey, thanks for inviting me to that party, and when you see him next, will you tell Bob that I really appreciated how he took me under his wing and made me feel comfortable."

And the client was like, "Which Bob?" And he's like, "You know, Bob, that guy I was talking to by the food table." And the client goes, "Oh, you mean Robert De Niro?" And that's like [inaudible 00:53:49], right? There's our punchline. And, of course, as we tell that story, it was Robert De Niro who is such a good down to earth guy that he is mistaken as friendly, non-famous Bob by an average Joe. We tell that story about a particular kind of actor. We tell different stories about other kinds of actors stories where actors are pretentious and think too highly of themselves and all of that stuff.

Anyways, as far as I knew, my dad told me that story as like a you will not believe this. That guy I work with, this happened to his friend. And it was like, "No way. That's crazy." And I totally believed it because I'm like, "Yeah, Robert De Niro's probably a pretty good guy." He seems like a good guy, totally. It was nowhere in that story when I heard it, when I was young, maybe like junior high, high school. Nowhere was the word legend ever said. It was never like a well, I heard, or a friend of a friend. It was just like, "Oh my gosh, you will not believe this. It had that veracity. What Folklorist Elliott Oring



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describes the rhetorical stance of the friend of a friend as being close enough to be validating, but just distant enough to not require immediate or not enable immediate verification.

It was that. It was perfect. I had no reason to disbelieve it until the evidence of it's in this book of Urban Legends. Like, "Are you saying it actually happened to your dad and is also in this book of urban legends?" And it was like, "Am I?" It gave me so much more sympathy for my students when we talk about a legend and they say, "Oh, well, that actually happened to my grandpa." And I'm like, "Maybe it did, probably it didn't." That was a very long and roundabout way of saying, we are up against an incredible challenge when it comes to what skill set it is that would make us question that mode of learning, right? Again, that's a benign one. Who caress if that's true or not. It's an interesting commentary on Robert De Niro, but if that story were about vaccines or elections or crime or the safety of children, I might act on it in a really different way while believing it just as much, and that's the danger really.

Mason Amadeus:

I know you said you loathe to use the word, but it is insidious. Even the things that are benign. I think the story is really illustrative of that.

[Transition to Outro

Perry Carpenter:

Thanks so much for listening, and thank you to Dr. Lynne McNeill for spending time with us.

Be sure to check out the show notes for more information about Lynne and her work. And if you haven't yet, please go ahead and go over to Apple Podcasts or Spotify. Give us a five star rating and leave us a review. Then, also, be sure to tell a friend about the show. If you have any questions, feedback, or ideas for a future episode, you can reach us at hello@eighthlayermedia.com.



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