



# The Folklorist in the Marketplace: Conversations at the Crossroads of Vernacular Culture and Economics

Edited by Willow G. Mullins and Puja Batra-Wells. Logan: Utah State University Press, 2019. 302 pp. Illus. \$32.95 (pbk), \$26.95 (ebook). ISBN 978-1-60732-784-4 (pbk), ISBN 978-1-60732-785-1 (ebook)

Ceri Houlbrook

To cite this article: Ceri Houlbrook (2021): The Folklorist in the Marketplace: Conversations at the Crossroads of Vernacular Culture and Economics, *Folklore*, DOI: [10.1080/0015587X.2021.1923962](https://doi.org/10.1080/0015587X.2021.1923962)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/0015587X.2021.1923962>



Published online: 26 May 2021.



Submit your article to this journal [↗](#)



View related articles [↗](#)



View Crossmark data [↗](#)

## Book Review

**The Folklorist in the Marketplace: Conversations at the Crossroads of Vernacular Culture and Economics.** Edited by Willow G. Mullins and Puja Batra-Wells. Logan: Utah State University Press, 2019. 302 pp. Illus. \$32.95 (pbk), \$26.95 (ebook). ISBN 978-1-60732-784-4 (pbk), ISBN 978-1-60732-785-1 (ebook)

Folklore is 'big business'; Richard Dorson was saying so back in 1950. So when Willow Mullins and Puja Batra-Wells open their edited volume with 'Folklore sells' (3), they are not claiming anything new. What they are doing, over the course of thirteen chapters, is demonstrating how integrally intertwined folklore and economics are. Indivisible, in fact. And this is not presented here as a negative condition—the notion of 'fakelore' belongs in the last century—but neither is it romanticized. It is simply inevitable. You cannot separate 'the folk' from the marketplace because every individual engages to some extent with the economy, be it in producing, selling, or consuming. As economic actors, 'the folk' *are* the marketplace.

Although editors Mullins and Batra-Wells are both folklorists, the volume's contributors hail from a range of disciplines, from business studies to psychology, permitting us access to the topic from numerous entryways. And as dry as some may perceive the subject of economics to be, these chapters are anything but. Rich in ethnographic details, honest reflections, and thought-provoking case studies, *The Folklorist in the Marketplace* is a lively testament to the relevance of folklore today.

The first set of chapters explore how the local and the global interact. John Laudun demonstrates how the economy is a collection of sociocultural networks in his study of Louisianan crawfish boats. Hand-built by a distinct 'folk group', they are local objects, but they are also made from internationally sourced modern materials, thus reflecting a global economy. Julie LeBlanc combines folkloristics with consumer studies in her chapter on a Québécois brewery. By referencing local folktales on its labels, the brewery maintains its local identity as it enters the global marketplace, demonstrating how folklore can be transmitted, promoted, and safeguarded through commercialization. James Deutsch and Halle Butvin, both of whom work at the Smithsonian Center for Folklife and Cultural Heritage, provide insight into how local cultures are 'packaged' for consumption by delving into the Smithsonian's annual Folklife Festival. Anthropologist Michael Lange considers how Vermont sugarmakers (maple syrup producers) view and present their products within a global context. Here, the processes of buying and selling are seen as authentic and integral components of a historic local practice. The combination of the traditional with the modern is also the focus of folklorist Christofer Johnson, who explores Orkney fishermen's efforts to make small-scale commercial fishing more viable in the long run. Here, Johnson demonstrates how local cultural knowledge can be harnessed with an eye to the future.

The following chapters transition into more micro-level explorations. Cassie Patterson, assistant director of the Center for Folklore Studies at The Ohio State University, delves into the moral geographies of commemoration. By studying a set of over sixty murals in Portsmouth, Ohio, Patterson traces how a local citizen-run revitalization project turned the city into a vast commemorative landscape, with local culture commoditized for outside (i.e. tourist) consumption. Folklorist Zhao Yuanhao presents an ethnographic study of a Hui marketplace in China, demonstrating how people interact with economics on a daily basis, by viewing the literal marketplace through an anthropological lens. Co-editor Batra-Wells pens the following chapter, engaging with a group of visual artists struggling to preserve their livelihoods to explore how art is monetized. Similar themes colour Rahima Schwenkbeck's chapter on Twin Oaks, Virginia, an egalitarian community of shared goods and labour, which

enjoyed economic success by making and selling hammocks. Writing from a business perspective, Schwenkbeck presents a blurry division between ideology and implementation, examining how a community reconciles its economic needs with a utopian opposition to capitalism.

The next two chapters provide valuable insights into how other disciplines can employ folklore to better understand their subject areas. Economist Irene Sotiropoulou reflects on how she drew on a Cretan folktale to gain insights into economic issues of distribution, exchange, and technology. Social psychologist William Ashton demonstrates how trickster figures in mythology can be usefully drawn on in analyses of the politics of exchange and business ethics.

The volume ends on a particularly reflective note with the final two chapters. Amy Shuman explores the role of knowledge transmission and value negotiation in the marketplace of artisan production by focusing on the workshops of Pietrasanta, Italy. In this chapter, our assumptions about distinctions between tradition and modern, handmade and machine-made, local and global, are challenged. In the final chapter, by co-editor Mullins, it is the distinction between the folklorist and the economy that is denounced. Drawing on ethnographic observations of folklore conferences, Mullins presents the folklorist as a broker of culture, whose celebration of 'authenticity' reveals us to be commodifiers and consumers of 'authenticity'. This was an evocative chapter to end on, provoking me to consider the impact of my own scholarly gaze. Indeed, the whole volume—expertly but accessibly written—left me pondering my place, not only as a folklorist *in* the marketplace, but *as* the marketplace.

Ceri Houlbrook, *University of Hertfordshire, Hatfield, UK*

© 2021 Ceri Houlbrook

