



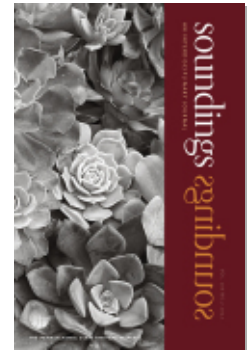
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Unruly Audience: Folk Interventions in Popular Media by Greg Kelley (review)

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Unruly Audience: Folk Interventions in Popular Media

by Greg Kelley

Utah State University Press, Logan, UT. 2020. Pp. 242. Paperback
\$29.95. ISBN 978-1-60732-989-3.

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Greg Kelley's new book is a spirited analysis of how, across the cultural and technological changes of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, people have taken the cultural resources supplied to them from elsewhere and reshaped them in unpredictable, almost capricious ways, leaving behind a trail of artifacts that represent an important object of study. A series of engaging case studies ranging from early-twentieth-century popular songs, to tour guide narratives at a Jamaican mansion, to online fan communities for the sitcom *The Office* illustrate the lengthy and complex chains of cultural production that unwind from these nodes of audience activity and the ongoing conflicts and changes that sustain them. The methodological choices in the book are motivated less by disciplinary concerns than by understanding the shape and the implications of "disruptive and participatory folk interventions in popular media" (193), following emerging versions and variants of a source across medium, genre, and form. In every case Kelley not only documents the transformations of the source material he starts with, but also

reflects on the insights generated by analyzing both the details of individual artifacts and the broader patterns revealed by the relationships among different recreations and interpretations.

Kelley's work is theoretically informed (especially by work on creative communities and convergence culture from John Fiske and Henry Jenkins) but presents advanced concepts in the context of specific analyses, keeping them accessible to a broader academic readership. One signal that the project is trying to keep its academic trappings low-profile is the position at the book's conclusion of an overview of how its chapters challenge or extend the field of folklore. Here Kelley situates his work in the larger context of the methodological adaptation of folklore, a field once devoted almost entirely to the oral tradition, to the reality that the sorts of collaborative, contrarian interventions studied here shows contemporary lore performed and expressed both digitally and face to face, with and without the imprimatur of the owners of the intellectual property rights of materials they appropriate. Just as bodies of folklore transform over time, adapting to new material and cultural realities, Kelley's work adapts folklore methodologies to "share discourses with cultural, humor, consumer, and tourism studies" (192).

Backloading this discussion (which reads like a more conventional academic introduction) highlights instead the transdisciplinary connections throughout the body of the work. Any or all of these case studies would be instructive in an undergraduate class on cultural studies, popular culture, rhetoric, or communication—anywhere a goal is to help students think about the larger ecologies of meaning and making formed by the texts they produce and consume. In addition to the scholarly value of the research and synthesis Kelley has done here to reconstruct these diffuse cultural networks, *Unruly Audiences* represents a resource for illustrating diverse methods and methodologies for popular culture research. "The connecting thread," Kelly writes, "is the transactional nature of folklore and popular media, each providing energy and action for the other" (192).

The book is not without moments where a greater emphasis on accuracy at the cost of a little accessibility would be worth it. For example, in the chapter on Jamaica's Rose Hall, Kelley lets the language of the tour guides blur with his own analysis, referring to the White Witch's "lovers" from among the "slaves" (76) in ways that clang especially loudly after a year of intense debate about race and

representation. This is not to say Kelley ignores the political problematics of the material he studies—though his primary emphasis is on those examples, he does not hesitate to discuss how folklore practices create and sustain racism, sexism, homophobia, ableism, and other hateful impulses in the popular imagination.

With that in mind, it was odd, at moments, reading this sometimes-celebratory (if clear-eyed) account of unruly audiences in the wake of the events of January 6, where a specific unruly audience not only attacked the Capital and murdered policemen in an attempt to forcibly disrupt the Constitutional processes of a peaceful transition, but also staged it as a popular media-making event, generating a wave of cultural production and reproduction across every kind of medium and platform, materials being transformed in myriad ways. We arguably witnessed the deliberate weaponization of folkloric processes by bad actors propagating myths of election fraud and pandemic denial and race war whose consequences are still playing out. Obviously, Kelley could not factor in these events—his book was in production before 2020 really intensified—and it is to his credit that I find myself wondering what he would say about how those events both challenge and confirm his core ideas. *Unruly Audiences* could similarly be a helpful springboard for classroom discussion of recent disruptive and participatory interventions of all sorts.

Gods, Games, and Globalization: New Perspectives on Religion and Sport

edited by Rebecca T. Alpert and Arthur Remillard

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Alpert and Remillard's edited volume, *Gods, Games and Globalization: New Perspectives on Religion and Sport*, adds valuable analysis to the interface