Review: Folkloristics in the Digital Age

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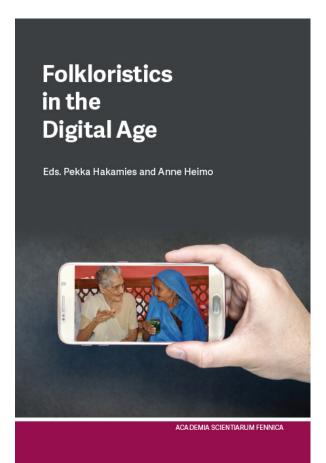
Pekka Hakamies and Anne Heimo (eds.), Folkloristics in the Digital Age, FF Communications 316, Helsinki 2019, 181 pages.

The Folklore Fellows Summer School is a singular experience for those lucky enough to take part in it. It is a heightened intellectual environment where a handful of junior and senior scholars live and work closely together for a few intense summer days. It is the kind of thing that cannot be scaled up. It follows that every time a few of our colleagues gather somewhere in Finland the rest of us become, inevitably, those who have Missed Out. This volume gives all of us who were not there at FFSS 2015 a fleeting taste by collecting eight of the instructors' presentations in one place with an introductory essay. The theme of the Summer School that year was Folklore in the Digital Age, and that phrase reappears as the title of this 2019 volume.

The subject of the book as laid out in the introduction is the *vernacular* in the sense of *non-institutional*. The use of *vernacular* in this sense is somewhat confusing in context given the importance of Robert Glenn Howard's concept of the *electronic vernacular* to studies of web-based folklore phenomena. Whereas the *electronic vernacular* is always inherently hybrid, characteristic of spaces where folk creativity emerges on digital platforms owned and administered by official or commercial entities, this *vernacular* is more straightforwardly contrastive with the institutional. That there is no mention of the former in a volume on this topic is odd.

The editors set up the reader with a short history of folklorists' engagement with all matters digital, very broadly conceived, whether through using digital tools to gather, analyze, or archive data or by studying the genres that emerge on electronic platforms. Looking back, they note the optimistic and enthusiastic tone of much scholarship of the first decade of the twenty-first century, when cyber-utopianists promised a radically democratic future. Here in the third decade, Pekka Hakamies and Anne Heimo are well aware of the scarier developments in the digital and networked age, an age of virulent trolling and election interference, and they are appropriately concerned for our collective future.

Liisa Granbom-Herranen's contribution is a preliminary treatment of the use of proverbs in short letters-to-the-editor submitted via SMS to a Finnish print newspaper. This is a novel dataset drawn from a quirky intersection of old and new media, though the implications of that intersection are not explored. The essay demonstrates handily that the proverb genre is alive and well in today's Finland. Alas, the essay's placement immediately after the introduction is unfortunate, as it would have benefitted from further editing for clarity. Those who press on will find Anneli

Baran's essay, "Internet Creativeness: From Individuation to Social Force", which explores Estonian, political memes (in the sense of image macros) as an example of the sometimes very local folklore on the very global internet. Individual creativity online can add up to social effects offline, some of them political. Local politics are very relevant to Anastasiya Astapova's essay, a workmanlike investigation of the names and nicknames of the president of Belarus as used both in person and on the internet. Plenty of folk creativity is on display in the verbal expression of individuals living under an authoritarian regime from which they could reasonably expect surveillance and worse. Given the theme of the volume, Astapova could productively have engaged with the role of text-searchability, as this characteristic of much digital media distinguishes it from analog forms and seems relevant to both data collection and the anxieties of surveillance treated in her analysis.

Robert Glenn Howard's essay demonstrates the indispensability of computational methods for making sense of massive digital datasets, in particular the discussion forum attached to the *Guns & Ammo Magazine* website. Howard uses computational tools to locate the most frequent posters and identify their primary topics of discussion, and – having identified a representative sample of 34+ *million* posts – close-reads the data. He argues that the aggregate influence of heterogeneous volition (i.e., a lot of people with a lot of different intentions) explains a specific conversation's shift from humorous to serious and one participant's deployment of a proverbial comparison of the Colt 1911 and Glock handguns.

Lynne S. McNeill's essay is a useful discussion of ubiquitous online practices little analyzed by folklorists. "Lurking" and "going down Internet rabbit holes" in search of understanding of the latest borderline-nonsensical meme are significant parts of life online. These are private activities but not passive, and McNeill suggests Barre Toelken's term *gleaning*, descriptive of the "highly skilled work in simply being able to personally parse the message behind a traditional presentation" (p. 99). Naming this activity will help folklorists see it as part of a larger pattern in online vernacular culture in which process is frequently more important than content.

The last three essays in the volume all concern digital archives in one way or another. In "Constructing Our Own Heritage", Kirsi Hänninen and Anne Heimo examine participatory community and spontaneous archives online where non-institutional heritage is "born digital". Their subject is not just digital folklore but the vernacular practices of Web 2.0, which supports crowdsourcing, shared stewardship, and other forms of cultural participation. Hänninen and Heimo ask us to "re-examine the boundaries of official and unofficial heritage" (p. 127) and give attention to the activities of those archiving and making heritage rather than on the products themselves. Most of Hänninen and Heimo's examples are Finnish, but their insights are broadly applicable.

The final two essays stress the importance of international cooperation to realize the true potential of digital folkloristics, a realization that will require the interoperability of disparate databases and corpora. Christoph Schmitt's contribution is a detailed discussion of the challenges in building one web-based archive, WossiDiA, based on a collection of Mecklenburgian folklore and Low German language recorded in a networked card-index system. Schmitt offers many deeply considered thoughts about what archives are for and what they can do, and his cogent explanation of hypergraphs and their promise as research tools is appreciated. The true subject of the essay is the importance of connections and relationships to folklore research. Hypergraphs allow researchers to discover surprising relationships in bodies of data, and international projects like ISEBEL (in which WossiDiA participates) allow researchers to access several folktale databases through a single search engine. Lauri Harvilahti closes out the volume with a history of computational folkloristics in Finland and many thoughts on the promise of digital tools and platforms for future folkloristic endeavors. He also considers affinities between traditional folkloristic tools like the type index and modern computational design principles like Linked Open Data.

Some of the material surveyed above will be familiar to readers of this bulletin, who will already have read versions of Heimo and Hänninen's, McNeill's, and Schmitt's articles in FFN 47, available in pdf form on the Folklore Fellows website, though all have been updated to a greater or lesser degree. Granbom-Herranen's essay appeared previously in much the same form in a 2014 volume published by the University of Maribor, Slovenia; a version is available at https://jyx.jyu.fi/bitstream/handle/123456789/58921/zora-2014final.pdf. The book as a whole would have been stronger had more of the FFSS 2015 keynotes been represented – they were briefly described by Astapova in FFN 47. That said, the editors do not portray the volume as anything akin to a proceedings and do not mention the Summer School in their introductory essay, so my framing the collection here in relation to that event may be unfair. An explicit rationale for the collection of these essays in a volume could have given the book cohesion and the potential to be more than the sum of its parts. That said, all the parts assembled therein engage with interesting phenomena deserving of further consideration.