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# Contemporary Folklore and Podcast Culture: Towards Democratization of Knowledge and Re-Oralization of Culture. A Conversation between Ceallaigh S. MacCath-Moran and Aldona Kobus

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**CEALLAIGH S. MACCATH-MORAN** is a PhD candidate in the Folklore Department at Memorial University of Newfoundland, a writer, a poet and a musician. Ceallaigh's research interests include animal rights activism as a public performance of ethical belief, which is the topic of her dissertation, and creative applications of folkloristic scholarship for storytellers. Her *Folklore & Fiction* podcast, "where folklore scholarship meets storytelling craft", launched in 2021.

**KEYWORDS**: podcasting; folklore; contemporary folklore; oral culture; aural culture

**AK:** What is *Folklore & Fiction* about?

**CM:** The purpose of the podcast originally was, and continues to be, bringing good folklore scholarship to people who are writers, storytellers and creators of various kinds. I thought this would be a really good opportunity to explain, as a folklorist, what a myth is, what a legend is, what a tall tale is, what a fairy tale is. Give it some folkloristic context, talk about what scholars have had to say. There is plenty of useful research for writers in narrative scholarship. I was a writer first and then a scholar: when I started school in 2016, I had already been writing and publishing for about 14 years, and I had put aside my writing career and gone back to school for my doctorate. So I wanted to help creators to write myths that sound like myths, legends that sound like legends. These old patterns resonate with us because we have heard them over and over again already in various versions. I believe as a writer that taking these patterns, the bones of a story, and putting them into something new, perhaps very different or alien, can make your writing more approachable for readers.

Because when you are giving readers something they encountered before, they may not know why they feel so comfortable in the story already and you can use these folk narrative patterns to express something new without alienating the audience.

**AK:** What compelled you to start a podcast?

**CM:** Back in 2016 it just sort of ruminated around in the back of my head, because, as you well know, as a graduate student, you have no time for anything but your studies. And then in 2018 I also went to a writer's conference called *When Words Collide* in Calgary. I talked with some friends about this, asked for their opinions. I got wonderful advice from them. And so in January 2019, I started it as a blog series. For two years I wrote on folklore genres: on myths, legends, tall tales, fairy tales, but also personal experience, narratives, memorates. I talked about performance theory and conspiracy theories. And after two years, I thought, well, I need to do more with this. I have this little sound studio; I'm going to start podcasting. My blog was quite academic. The podcast is more approachable, I think, because my numbers went up with the change of the form. I had nearly 2000 listens last year, and I'm almost at that now, in March. I wanted to reach more people. And, as my husband said, people like podcasts. I try not to make my register too high, and I try not to speak in academese all the time.

**AK:** But you did your first year of podcasting on Aarne-Thompson-Uther-Index which is one of those field-specific things where if you're not really part of the field you won't know about it.

**CM:** From my experience a lot of writers are using the *ATU Index* in science fiction and fantasy anyway, some have written stories specifically based on the *ATU*. This year, my second year of podcasting, I'm working from various motif indexes: Thompson's *The Motif-Index of Folk-Literature*, *Motif Index of the Child Corpus*, which is for Child ballads, various other indexes which get right down at the motif level, which is a favorite place for me to be as a writer because you can take those motifs and do anything with them, even something incredibly strange. Frankly, I'm doing it because those books are really hard to get hold of, especially if you are not an academic. It's not a matter of approachability but accessibility. I would like to break that barrier of knowledge between academic and non-academic. In the podcast, when I cite the motif, I give you a full number and the name of the motif; I bring those citations right into the podcast so you would know what you are working with. It democratizes the knowledge.

**AK:** Podcast seems to be a democratic form because it is easy to start one and put it out there for people to listen to.

**CM:** It's easy to start a podcast but it's difficult to do it well. My podcast takes place in a soundproofed room, I have a mike and a sound kit, and I'm very careful about sound quality production. My partner does all the post-production on it, adding music, bringing it all together. There are technical production steps in the process of making a podcast if you want to do it well. I care if I produce something that is listenable. And it depends on what kind of podcast you want to have. You can just talk into microphone with all the background noises, but I personally like more produced sound. I am also a singer; I use the same setup to produce music, so I'm very sensitive of how I sound. Also my podcast is read. I write and read the transcript, which comes from me starting as a blogger. I still want to give people the information they came for.

**AK:** Popularization of an academic knowledge is always at the crossroads between approachability and accuracy. What is your experience with it?

**CM:** I needed to make a decision about what sort of podcast I wanted to produce. Even my own niche – folklore podcasting – is a wide, receptive and often competitive market. There are podcasts made by non-academics for non-academics, talking about folklore tales, beautiful illustrations in folklore books, ghost stories etc., and I think there is a place for that. There are people who love a sort of traditional, vernacular understanding of folklore, and podcasting provides it for them. I struggle with that, because the most popular podcasts, the most appealing ones, are made in those terms of vernacular approach to folklore. But then I hear from people like you, who recommended my podcast to their students, who are using it in their research, and I know I do a good job within my field. I've gotten requests from teachers, musicians, and writers to cover specific topics. At the same time I feel like I don't fit into the fully developed, popular, vernacular folklore podcast culture which is weird because I am a folklorist. Or maybe it is because of it. One of the most popular definitions of folklore comes from Dan Ben-Amos: "folklore is artistic communication in small groups". Vernacular understanding of folklore sees it as something static, as an object, and so do most podcasters within folklore podcasting. A story, an old piece of lore is an object for them, to be presented and analyzed as an artifact from the past. It was very common during 18th and 19th Century when folklorists were doing what we call today "saved from the fire" folklore: the conviction that the old stories are dying, the people who know old tales are going to die so we have to collect everything quickly or it will be lost forever. There is this sense of folklore as fixed, static. But I was taught very differently: to see folklore as a communicative process and as a process of performance, as an interaction. In this way you are always looking for what is in motion, what is changing, for nuances. However, vernacular ideas of folklore are comforting; they look at the past, they're nostalgic. It comes back to the idea of "authentic folklore" popularized in contemporary consciousness.

**AK:** So what people expect from a folklore podcast is another discussion of Grimm's tales.

**CM:** Exactly. And I contributed to this to some extent by focusing on traditional narratives for the first year in *Fiction & Folklore*. I try to avoid framing said narratives as "old stories". I try to bring up the examples, mostly from the public domain but also from TV series and contemporary novels, of the modern use of folk narratives. This is also why I sing so much in the podcast. If there is a ballad I am talking about, I am going to sing it because this is how it should be experienced but also for copyright reasons, which is one of many elements that you have to take to consideration during the production of a podcast.

**AK:** A lot of folklore-as-communicative-process is happening now on Internet as it is the main medium of communication: memes, urban legends, creepypastas, and documentation of urban exploration, dark tourism and fan practices as cosplay and fan works. Most of these practices are our way of storytelling: to communicate our understanding of world and our place on it. Internet has emphasized our need for storytelling and podcasts are just the next form of satisfying this need. Do you think that popularity of podcasts marks the comeback of oral culture?

**CM:** Yes, but I don't think it is going back; it is going forward. Oral culture becomes literary, at least within folklore, by writing down a few versions out of hundreds of variations. For instance, *The Maid Freed from the Gallows* – Francis James Child wrote 11 variations of it in his *Child Ballad Index*. He created an official record by omitting most of the folklore practice surrounding this ballad. And in a literary culture we have the tendency to see everything written down as more valid than the orality that preceded it. Now we see the second part of this cultural process that started in 18th Century. From literalization of oral culture we are going into re-oralization of literature. So now when I want to introduce to the podcast *Child Ballad No. 10 The Twa Sisters*, which I did in Episode 4, I can change it. I can subvert it. The recorded version always vexed me. In my version, instead of one sister pushing the other to her death, they push the boy off the cliff together (and this version will be included on my EP album, coming soon). It is a good example of re-oralization. We can see it also with folk performers today who are not afraid anymore to change and subvert recorded folk songs.

**AK:** The structure and formality of the academic text is a way of legitimizing the knowledge we produce but it also excludes everyone without a proper training within the field. With the rapid changes in the media landscape we should at least try to adapt other forms than text – video, podcast etc. – as learning tools. Podcast is not so far from a lecture. But also new media could be incorporated

as a device for conducting analyses. It is not only easier but also more efficient to use video to analyze a movie and a podcast to analyze folklore, especially in the vernacular sense of it, or the storytelling.

**CM:** How wonderful it would be if universities paid and provided for those academics who want to podcast! And how useful! I am developing teaching material with *Folklore & Fiction*, there are webinars, and I will write book on folklore topics for writers. Every episode requires research.

**AK:** But so far your podcast is a time-consuming hobby, unrecognized by academia because of its extremely narrow and outdated sense of what is a proper way of producing and distributing knowledge. Meanwhile people are already using various social media – Youtube, TikTok etc. – as learning devices and we are staying behind. For universities social media are tools of promotion and information, not teaching. There is suspicion and reluctance toward new media and alternative forms of teaching and I think is partially because text is seen as objective and impersonal while podcast is immediate and personal. With podcast and video essay you cannot hide behind the wall of written words.

**CM:** The voice conveys emotion; you emphasize or deemphasize. In a podcast, this makes a difference in the way someone is receiving what you are saying. Podcasts are quite intimate and immersive. It is a different experience from a voice actor who was hired to read a novel, so there are two narrative consciousnesses happening there: of the author and of the actor. But with a podcast it is often one narrative consciousness. If the podcaster is also a reader and a producer you can feel that, as an audience, you are closer to the person. I have written a short science fiction story titled "For Want of an Ash Fall" about archive recordings of letters – the archivist or the collector was writing letters and people would write him back, contributing to the archive – about global tragedy. I love writing in this form because it is immediate. You have to remember to write in the voice of person who is speaking at a given moment.

**AK:** "The voice of the character" is what you have, as an audience, in the very immediate way in the podcast. It that sense podcasting is taking some aspects of literature – like polyphony – to the next level. At the same time the phenomenon of popularity of podcasts marks a cultural shift away from "the Gutenberg Galaxy" to re-orality in culture.

**CM:** Not only podcasts but audio books as well. I have had for almost 20 years now a subscription to an audio book service, and I listen to audio books constantly. I listen to podcasts from time to time. I am not an avid podcast listener, but when I do, I also listen to stories. There are several science fiction magazines – "Beneath Ceaseless Skies", "Clarkesworld Magazine", "Lightspeed" – that

have podcasts where they read the stories from the magazine. Besides interview podcasts, I don't think there is a big difference between listening to an audio book and listening to a podcast. So the re-oralization of culture started before the emergence of podcast culture. Maybe the pandemic made it more visible: not only that podcast culture is a fully shaped phenomenon but also the basic human need to listen to someone's voice, to tell and to listen to a story.

**AK:** What is your experience of podcasting after almost two years of doing it?

**CM:** I'm better at it now, and I still enjoy doing it. However, the work is time-consuming, and my efforts to earn an income from it have been modest at best. It occurs to me that digital content is popularly seen as a sort of extension of the Internet itself; a perpetually free resource. But it isn't. Podcasting costs the podcaster first; in time, expertise, and equipment. It should cost the listener as well, but it often doesn't because the paradigm of digital content creation favours the consumer and not the creator. Indeed, this paradigm also holds for writers, musicians, and other artists, whose ability to earn an income has plummeted in the face of ebook piracy, digital music streaming services, and the like. There is a separation of interests here that doesn't exist in electrical repair and grocery shopping; I wouldn't ask an electrician to repair my wiring for free and only pay him if I felt so inclined, nor would I pirate chocolate from a grocery store. The same should hold true for those of us who create digital art and scholarship, but I'm not certain how to help that cultural shift along without losing my audience.

**AK:** Is podcasting a way of communication? Does it create a community or is it a solitary experience?

**CM:** I think this depends on how it's advertised. A podcast by itself can be a solitary endeavor, but sharing that podcast online invites interaction and communication. Sometimes that communication is satisfying, and other times it's frustrating! Does podcasting create community? Well, I do have a Facebook group associated with my podcast, and there are several people who post somewhat regularly to it, so my group could be called a community of sorts. But that's the extent of the communication and community I've experienced. I've seen larger communities around more vernacular, non-academic folklore podcasts. They appeal to a larger crowd with different needs, while my work is more narrow in scope and appeals to learners and teachers. So I think the issues of communication and community may be contextual and related to content and popularity.