

INSPIRATIONAL INSIGHTS: THE PROBLEMATIC VERNACULAR

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ABSTRACT

Although many disciplines dropped the use of “vernacular” in the 21st century because of the term’s connotations of primitivism, classism, and marginalization arising from 19th-century colonialism, the term has risen in usage among folklorists and ethnologists in the early 21st century. Three distinct streams of usage are identified and analyzed for their nuanced meaning: linguistics, religion, and architecture. Folkloristic and ethnological usage is traced to concern whether ‘vernacular’, despite its problematic historic context, is preferable to ‘folk’ as a modifier of areas of inquiry, many of which are into fluid, non-objectified categories such as belief, faith, and play. A rhetorical shift coinciding with social change from analog to digital communication is apparent to binaries of official/unofficial and formal/informal in cultural analysis. A further and possibly fringe development has been an ideological strategy represented by the compound term ‘stigmatized vernacular’ that embraces rather than repudiates cultural hierarchy. The evaluation of the problematic adoption by 21st-century folklorists and ethnologists of ‘vernacular’ is that it reifies the very problems that the users intended to resolve.

KEYWORDS: vernacular • tradition • religion • stigma • practice • architecture • belief • rhetoric

In a commentary published in 2003 under the title of “Oral Tradition and Folkloristics” eminent folklorist Ülo Valk reflected on the folkloristic legacy of normative definitions as a strategy of claiming disciplinary status for the emerging field of folkloristics. In his brief but profound remarks, he pointed out that

There are certain key concepts in folkloristics that mark it as a distinctive, autonomous scholarly discourse, such as ‘tradition,’ ‘group,’ ‘variant,’ ‘type,’ and so on. I find it better not to fossilize them in international folkloristics as technical terms but to reconsider them time and again, that is, to maintain the discussion rather than establish normative definitions. (Valk 2003: 139)

He essentially called for a rhetorical approach to comprehend the way that frequently used terms in different social historical contexts reveal the philosophical basis of what folklorists do and how they think with ‘key concepts’.

The normativity of folkloristic definitions, particularly for a structural category of genre, still seemed to be on Valk's mind in a more recent piece "What Are Belief Narratives?" in which he contemplated the theoretical implications of methodological uses and dramatic shifts of key concepts since the 19th century to the present moment. He described that moment as one in which attention has shifted from "objects" to "subjects", that is, "to people whose minds, behavior, and expressivity bring folklore to life" (Valk 2021: 175). Within this moment, he viewed what he called the "loose concept" of "belief narrative" for providing more so than "myth, folktale, and legend" a non-colonialist, "flexible cognitive tool for interpreting narratives past and present in a variety of social contexts" (ibid.: 183). In his spotlight on "life" and "cognitive" as an outcome of underscoring the keyword of *belief*, he subtly makes a future-facing suggestion for moving beyond the behavioral rubric of "subject" which he finds currently standard toward one of mind that is not well borne out in the contemporary trends he outlines (see Bronner 2021).

Valk's statement brought me back to an essay I published in 1988 as an article "Art, Performance, and Praxis: The Rhetoric of Contemporary Folklore Studies" in *Western Folklore* and expanded in my book *Following Tradition: Folklore in the Discourse of American Culture* (1998b). Primarily observing trends in North America at the end of the 20th century, I argued that a reorientation of folklore studies as artistic and performative behavior informed the rhetorical shift from object to subject, but while providing interpretation to traditional expression, usually in the form of microfunctionalism to show that folklore thrives in the present day, it failed to offer explanation of the generation, variation, and persistence of traditions in daily lives. I further noted that the shift made less clear the boundaries of folklore and reignited a search for adequate definitions or guiding concepts to describe the phenomena suitable for a separate discipline of folkloristics (Bronner 2016). I suggested that a way out of this dilemma was to embrace an ethnological formulation of folklore as traditional knowledge drawn from and put into practice. Such a formulation offered historical and psychological explanations for generation, variation, and persistence of folklore that appeared lacking in American analyses of cultural expression (Bronner 1998b: 448–474; 2019d). I found that performance-oriented folklorists tended to narrow the scope of folklore to singular, incomparable events of oral expression and avoided cognitive issues inherent in expansive practice-oriented rubrics such as belief, ritual, custom, and play (Bronner 2021). As a result, the scholarly use of *folklore* as an overarching term for the material and study of distinctive phenomena perceived as being "cultural" came into question (Ben-Amos 1998; Bendix 1998; Kirshenblatt-Gimblett 1998; Bronner 2019b).

Yet another complication in the identification of folklore as both material and process that Valk acknowledges is the revolutionary change during the 1990s from analog to digital communication, particularly in the emergent expressive forms evident on the Internet and its implications for the perception of tradition (Blank 2009; 2012; Bronner 2011a: 398–450; Blank and Howard 2014; Hakamies and Heimo 2019). A rhetorical response to epistemological ambiguities raised by the Internet of the conventional social basis of folklore was to use 'vernacular' and 'informal culture' more as descriptors for phenomena studied by folklorists and ethnologists. The globalism of digital communication accelerated the reconsideration of 'tradition' that began with Dan Ben-Amos's event-centered definition in 1971 of folklore as "artistic communication in small

groups”, since much of the emergent material studied by folklorists appeared neither artistic nor emergent in small groups. Nor was it produced out of social interaction in an event (Bronner 1998b: 9–72; 2000; 2011a; 2016; Mechling 2006; Blank and Howard 2014).

In another way the digital revolution represented a wider ramification of modernism noted since the turn of the 20th century that challenged ethnological assumptions of cultural rootedness of groups in a natural environment and geographic place. Along with this mobility that is characteristic of modernity was the regional association of expressive culture beyond speech to include material and visual productions (Bronner 2006; 2019c). Indeed, the conventional notion of ‘fieldwork’ in translational ethnology and folkloristics as an in-situ observation of people and accumulation of cultural representations within a geographic place drew detractors from researchers of the Internet (Wittel 2000; Blank 2007; Vesna 2010; Manganaro 2014). In the process of re-examining folklore in a changing communicative context, many folklorists consequently questioned, and contested, conventional notions of folkloric (and non-folkloric) data, and their analysis (Ketner 1976; Bronner 2019b: 63–92; Kittilä 2020).

A conspicuous rhetorical move in the 21st century that commands my critical evaluation in this essay is the folkloristic adoption of ‘vernacular’ that diverts from the linguistic meaning of dialectical usage tied to locality. My concern and point of analysis are that in many cases, folklorists used it in place of ‘folk’ as a modifier of culture and expression. When doing so, ‘vernacular’ redirected attention away from an inclusive concept of ‘folk’ as a signifier of a learning and transmittal process by oral, customary, and visual means that is intrinsic in all human thought and behavior. The adoption of ‘vernacular’ that appeared to buck trends in related disciplines moved folklorists to consider the scope of their work toward a stylized mode of expression at a supposedly lower level of society, often with the implication that the mode represents the identity of a stigmatized group. In many cases, folklorists avoided the boundary between ‘folk’ and ‘popular’ by tying the vernacular to a cultural binary of unofficial/informal and official/formal, with the assumption that the ‘official’ representing imposing, monolithic structures of government, corporations, and institutions was intrusive, even destructive as well as unjust. Researchers in areas of inquiry distinguishing between informal and formal organizational behavior (for example, workers’ arts) faced special challenges, including ascertaining learning and transmittal patterns (for example, architecture), and were consequently especially attracted to ‘vernacular’ as a concept raising ideological issues, often in contradistinction to ‘folk’. Yet, debate ensued whether the use of ‘vernacular’ denigrated or promoted the kinds of groups and their traditions being studied for their cultural vitality.

THE FOLKNESS AND VERNACULARITY OF RELIGION

Religion as an area that raised questions of belief systems operating within supposedly formal and informal organizational structures was a prime area in which Valk and other folklorists grappled with vernacularity. Influenced by German ethnological scholarship of *religiöse Volkskunde* dating to 1901 (Schauerte 1953), Don Yoder (1974: 14), professor of folklore and folklife as well as religious studies at the University of Pennsylvania

introduced a symposium on 'folk religion' by proposing a broad definition of it as "the totality of all those views and practices of religion that exist among the people apart from and alongside the strictly theological and liturgical forms of the official religion". It was a "practical" approach, he wrote, because it covered the avenues of study from both the vantage of religion and ethnology; it also emphasized the way that ordinary people practice or observe religion, and act on their beliefs. Adapting the folk-official binary analogous to one of common people and the institutionalized church, he noted the influence of anthropologists who wanted "to show the interrelatedness of types of culture in a complex society, the relationships between the larger society with its official and sophisticated culture and the little societies that existed in partial isolation, in partial relationship to the larger societies" (ibid.: 5; for a sociological perspective on small group culture, or "little societies" see Fine 2018). None of the other four authors in the symposium used the term 'vernacular' to describe "the religious dimension of folk-culture" or "the folk-cultural dimension of religion" (Yoder 1974: 2). 'Folk' invoked images in the former of peasant or isolated locations and in the latter, issues of belief and practice among congregants (see also Clements 2019).

Leonard Norman Primiano, who had studied with Yoder and equally grappled with the challenge of the problematic cognitive category of belief to the general study of folklore and folklife, objected to the term 'folk religion' and its oppositional pairing with 'official religion', claiming that "folk" named "religious people's beliefs in residualistic, derogatory ways" (Primiano 1995: 38). In his view folk religion was residualistic because it represented a marginalized portion of belief after official religion was more broadly covered. Often used in the context of a group, "folk religion", he further complained, implies that "religion somewhere exists as a pure element which is in some way transformed, even contaminated, by its exposure to human communities" (ibid.: 39). This view proposes that 'folk' is not a learning and transmittal process but instead an object with ontological status. He called for focusing scholarship on the "reality of religion as it is lived [...] as it is expressed in everyday life" (ibid.), which in fact was at the center of Yoder's folklife approach. Primiano's suggestion was to represent the study of "lived" religion, especially by individuals, by referring to *vernacular religion*, thus creating a symbolic equivalence between "living" (activities) and "vernacular" (culture) (ibid.: 41; see also Moore 2022).

In touting 'vernacular' as a neutral term with reference to the *Oxford English Dictionary* (OED) Primiano bypassed the primary senses of the word as delineated in the OED that derided people and expressions using the 'vernacular' (Vernacular 2022). He settled on altered meanings of "vernacular" as "personal, private" and expressions representing a locality as used, for example, to delimit a type of architecture (Primiano 1995: 42–43). The OED offers several definitions that relate to distinctive language or dialect of a locality, often isolated and spoken by peasants, usually with the implication that it is inferior or characteristic of unlettered, lower-class, or isolated people (in relation to religion, see the dialectical use of 'vernacular' in the religious study of Watson 2022). The OED gives synonyms of 'native' and 'indigenous' for 'vernacular'. The OED traces references to "vernacular and independent tongues of Europe" to 1647 and its usage as an adjective to describe literature, music, and architecture by the mid-19th century. As an adjective 'vernacular' typically identified a style or aesthetic that was crude and earthy. As a noun, it represented unrefined expression used by lower-class, isolated, and uneducated people.

“Vernacular religion” in Primiano’s conceptualization purportedly avoids issues of locality, class, and hierarchy by being recast as “religion as it is lived: as human beings encounter, understand, interpret, and practice it” (Primiano 1995: 44; see also Bowman and Valk 2012; Bowman 2014). Several problems arise from his alteration of meaning to remove ‘folk’ and modify ‘religion’ with ‘vernacular’. First is that in the field of architecture, which he lauds as an enlightened model for use of ‘vernacular’, the term has been hotly contested because of its association with colonialism, primitivism, and classism (Vellinga 2011). Second, substituting ‘vernacular’ for ‘folk’ drops from analysis a basic consideration of folklore studies, namely the ways that knowledge, including belief, is traditionalized and cognitively understood and expressed (see Bronner 1998a; 2021). The goals of studying religion as it is lived, and from the perspective of the individual (implying a cognitive or psychological approach), are admirable, but his analysis, especially of practice and belief of the people ‘informally’ living religion, remains at the level of non-inclusive description of groupness and reifies, instead of disrupts, the binary of ‘unofficial’ with ‘official’ (see, for example, Smith 2012; Majestya 2021). Indeed, Primiano’s perspective on vernacular formed from his study of Catholicism for which the binary is particularly strong (Primiano 2001; 2009). Whereas Yoder’s folklife drew on his work with Protestant Anabaptist and Pietist groups, Primiano in his studies addressed differences between official centralized church doctrine and local practices. Such a concern and use of ‘vernacular’ to describe barely enters, however, in the local, custom-centered discourse of Judaism and Islam (Abd-Allah 2006; Bronner 2011b; Bedzow 2012; Majestya 2021). The very social hierarchy that Primiano seeks to remove is ultimately strengthened with the modifier of “vernacular” and the goal of explaining religious thought and action of individuals is obscured (Primiano 1995: 47; see also Primiano 2012; Moore 2022).

THE VERNACULAR DOWNTURN AND FOLKLORISTIC ‘TURN’

Linguists and literary scholars were the primary users of the word ‘vernacular’ in academic discourse through the 20th century until a decline became evident with concerns over the primitivism and colonialism implicit in the term. In the JSTOR database for literature and language, a search of ‘vernacular’ between 1900 and 2000 returns 22,356 hits. A search of the database for folklore journals results in only 931 titles. Even given the fact that JSTOR indexes more literature and language publications than folklore journals, the difference of the tallies is significant. Of the total number for folklore titles using ‘vernacular’ in the 20th century, more than half of the total appeared between 1980 to 1999. And that number was five times more than the number of titles using ‘vernacular’ between 1900 and 1950 (128). Between 2000 and 2022, however, folklorists used ‘vernacular’ more frequently. In that period the total number of folklore titles using ‘vernacular’ doubled the number from the previous 20 years to 1,148.

There is evidence that folklorists at the beginning of the 21st century increasingly used ‘vernacular’ in areas outside of religion and architecture. ‘Vernacular’ appeared to displace ‘folk’ in references to genres and ‘vernacular culture’ stood for ‘folklore’ or ‘folk culture’ (Green 2001; Revill 2005; Sciorra 2011). One global indicator is Google Books Ngram Viewer which indexes millions of texts in various languages in its data-

base and supports searches for words and phrases. Following the trajectory of ‘folklore’ since its popularization in the mid-19th century, one finds two peaks of usage in 1974 and the years before the new millennium. Although less frequently used, ‘vernacular’ shows a similar rise of usage from the end of World War II to the end of the century. Yet with the start of the 21st century, ‘vernacular’ surpasses ‘folklore’ and continues to move upward while the frequency of ‘folklore’ exhibits a sharp decline.

Diane Goldstein who taught in a department of folklore and ethnomusicology devoted her presidential address in 2013 to the American Folklore Society on what she called a “vernacular turn” evident in the rise of usage of “vernacular” by folklorists (Goldstein 2015). The trend she promoted apparently was away from the processual study of traditions conceptualized as ‘folk’ and toward a naturalistic view of culture in which people approximating an organic social system, or underclass, deserve attention and protection. Reflecting on 40 years of American folklore scholarship, she argued that “our intellectual context has pretty radically changed in light of a growing populism in the intellectual, bureaucratic, and popular world around us that (for better or worse) now pays greater attention to the voices and knowledges of *vernacular culture*” (Goldstein 2015: 126; emphasis added). “Vernacular” for her was a political statement of solidarity with disempowered groups. She declared,

that move toward appreciation or at least consideration of the vernacular is deeply tied to the theoretical and political crisis brought on by the poststructural and post-modern turn away from positivist modes of inquiry and the related lack of faith in grand or master cultural narratives (ibid.).

Invoking the rhetoric of elite dominance in “grand or master”, she idealized the “vernacular” as a harmonious, localized mode of living marked by a small-scale in-person social landscape in contrast to the homogenizing, commanding, and impersonal nation-state.

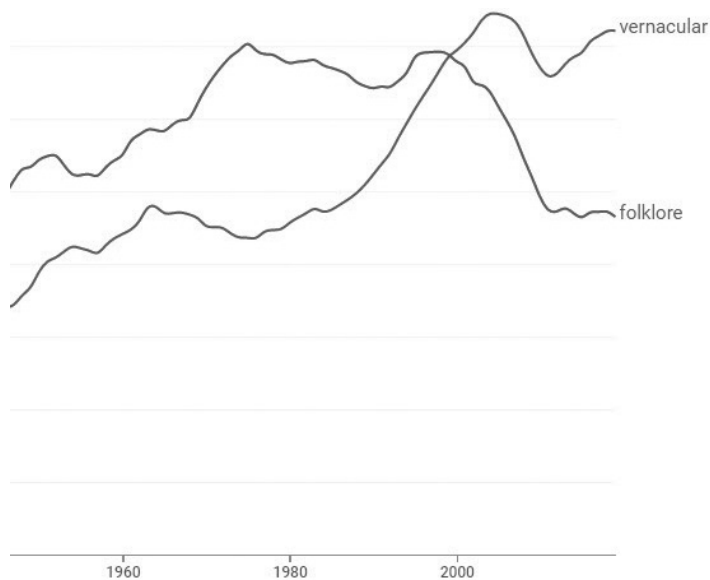


Figure 1. Google Books Ngram graph of terms *vernacular* and *folklore* between 1950 and 2020 (smoothing factor of 3).

One might argue that the introduction in the 19th century of 'folklore' as a rubric for people and traditions was also a political move to lament displacement of older organic systems of tradition by 'modern' industrialization and urbanization. William J. Thoms who in his famous letter in England to *The Athenaeum* of August 12, 1846 proposed "Folk-Lore" as a substitute for the antiquarian usage of "Popular Antiquities", or "Popular Literature" explained years later his motivation after reading a copy of Jacob Grimm's *Deutsche Mythologie* (1835):

Some time after the appearance of the second edition of that masterly work, I began to put in order the notes which I had been collecting for years, with a view to their publication; and feeling sure that the Iron Horse then beginning to ride roughshod over every part of the country would soon trample under foot and exterminate all traces of our old beliefs, legends, &c., I besought *The Athenaeum* to lend its powerful influence towards their collection and preservation (Thoms 1872: 339).

Although "vernacular" circulated in England at the time, Thoms does not mention "vernacular", probably because his concern was not on language but instead on action-oriented expressions of "manners, customs, observances, superstitions, ballads, proverbs, etc., of the olden time" and he wanted to represent broadly and nationalistically the "Folk-Lore of England" (Thoms 1963 [1846]: 5). Six years later, author William Bell included "vernacular" alongside "folklore" in his study *Shakespeare's Puck, and His Folklore, Illustrated from the Superstitions of all Nations, But More Especially from the Earliest Religion and Rites of North Europe and the Wends*. For Bell, "vernacular" described speech whereas folklore referred to the superstitions and rites. Reflecting the colonialist view of the British empire, James Burgess, the editor of the *Indian Antiquary*, in 1872 introduced the first volume of his *Journal of Oriental Research* with the linkage of people who speak a vernacular tongue with expressive folklore: "Local legends and Folklore, Proverbs and Songs, are subjects at every one's door *who can speak a vernacular tongue*, and besides their intrinsic interest, they often shed a most instructive light on the habits of thought of the people" (Burgess 1872: 1; emphasis added).

Given this distinction of vernacular as a linguistic category for commonplace dialectical speech centered in locality and folklore as a rubric for narrative genres, when did vernacular and folk become adjectival equivalents? A sign of discourse that sought an ethnological approach to folkloric material away from literary and linguistic analysis was an exchange that occurred in the pages of *American Anthropologist* during the 1950s and 1960s on the differences between folk culture and vernacular culture. Noting the need for including larger social units than the anthropological view of "primitive, tribal societies", George M. Foster led with the question "What Is Folk Culture?" in the title of his article of 1953. Crediting anthropologist Robert Redfield (1940; 1947; 1953) for suggesting "folk culture" and "folk society" for designating forms of culture that ethnologists study, Foster nonetheless was critical of Redfield's placement of folk culture in opposition to city and industrial life, and the negative categorization of folk as deficient by the standards of modern urbanized 'civilization'. Connections are apparent in the folk-urban dichotomy to the European folklife movement at the time that focused on rural peasant communities (Erixon 1962; Yoder 1963; Owen 1981). To be sure, Foster viewed folk as a stratum of society rather than a basic cognitive process of knowledge acquisition and transmission, but instead of a naturalistic model of an isolated folk, he

described a “circular phenomenon in which folk culture draws on and is continually replenished by contact with products of intellectual and scientific social strata, but in which folk culture continually, though perhaps in a lesser degree, contributes to these non-folk societies” (Foster 1953: 169). Given this developmental typology, it is not surprising that Foster forecast that no new folk cultures would emerge; he predicted that “existing folk cultures of the world will gradually lose their folk qualities as they are integrated with industrial societies” (ibid.: 171).

In 1960 Margaret Lantis, an influence on Primiano’s later conceptualization of ‘vernacular’ as lived religion, countered that city dwellers have an everyday culture, including speech that is different from the literary or official language of the day. Drawing on the association of localized speech with ‘vernacular’, she suggested “vernacular culture” for “culture-as-it-is-lived appropriate to well-defined places and situations” (Lantis 1960: 203). What holds for common or everyday speech, she declared, extends to “other behavior” for a variety of groups, including those that are mobile in a modern society. Yet she thought that “folkways” and “customs” are inadequate to describe such behavior because “their connotation is chiefly tradition, the past, even suggesting lack of present adaptation” (ibid.: 202). In her view, the non-vernacular portion of society is mass rather than elite culture, and people can simultaneously display vernacular and mass cultural behaviors, although the vernacular displays more variations than the mass cultural.

Folklorist Alan Dundes (1963) at the time agreed that commonplace behavior in modern society needed cultural attention, but he opted in an influential essay “What Is Folklore?” for retaining the use of folk rather than vernacular to underscore the process of sharing, creating, and transmitting tradition among all people. He railed against the assumptions made by Foster and Lantis that folk meant oral transmission in “the hoary past” by isolated, backward groups (Dundes 1963: 2). He offered an elastic, socially inclusive definition of folk as

any group of people whatsoever who share at least one common factor. It does not matter what the linking factor is – it could be a common occupation, language, or religion – but what is important is that a group formed for whatever reason will have some traditions which it calls its own (ibid.).

By this definition, every group has its own folklore, even institutional and ‘formal’ and learned groups such as military and college communities. The methodological challenge for folkloristic study is to show the process of forming, learning, using, altering, and spreading traditions, whereas study of the vernacular was more likely to be concerned with cultural manifestations and less so with the process – cognitive and social – of their formation (Lantis 1960: 211).

The vernacular cultural approach was especially entrenched in the study of vernacular architecture in which information about builders and formation is often elusive and emphasis is placed on environment and locality discovered through fieldwork (Upton and Vlach 1986; Glassie 2000; Carter and Cromley 2005; Oliver 2007; Bronner 2011a: 93–137; 2019a). Yet with the advent of technological changes in the 21st century, protests of colonialist terms, and increasing mobility of residents, using vernacular to describe architecture and communities came under fire (Asquith and Vellinga 2006). Dutch-English anthropologist Marcel Vellinga in 2011 loudly objected to the “latent

primitivism” of “vernacular” based upon “implicit social evolutionist ideas” of denigrating the Otherness of certain peoples compared to higher classes. Vellinga points out as Lantis did the incompatibility of “vernacular” with the analysis of traditions. He writes:

Because of their generalized nature, the common perceptions of vernacular architecture and the dichotomies with capital A architecture that they are based on do not serve to increase our understanding of specific architectural traditions, but mainly help to reify and essentialise vernacular architecture into a homogeneous category (Vellinga 2011: 180).

Vellinga observed that the concept of the vernacular thankfully is not widely used outside the fields of architecture, and is even rarer in linguistics, the field from which the term was borrowed. He called for more inclusive, non-hierarchical terms to comprehend cultural traditions and embrace diversity (ibid.: 181).

Vellinga obviously missed the increasing usage of “vernacular” as a keyword in folkloristics, and it bears contemplation, since folklorists have claimed to be champions of social justice for Others and advocated for critical approaches toward cultural diversity (Goldstein 2013; Buccitelli 2020; Mills 2020; Fivecoate et al. 2021). Then why have folklorists, especially in the United States, embraced “vernacular”, often eclipsing use of “folk”? The three American journals *Western Folklore*, *Journal of American Folklore*, and *Journal of Folklore Research* published 23 articles between 2000 and 2018 with “vernacular” in their titles whereas in the same period three comparable major European and Asian journals *Asian Ethnology*, *Folklore*, and *Folk Music Journal* published only four. And two of the four were by folklorists from the United States, including a contribution from Primiano. Valk published one of the four, titled “Superstition in Estonian Folklore: From Official Category to Vernacular Concept” (2008) from a lecture delivered to the Folklore Society based in England. Although Valk does not define “vernacular” in the essay, he contrasts it with “official” and uses it to describe native, non-institutional linguistic usage (Valk 2008: 14–15). His translation of an Estonian folkloristic category of *rahvausund*, which he calls “neutral”, cites both “folk” and “vernacular” to describe religion (in contrast to the Estonian equivalent of superstition *ebausk*, or literally “non-belief”) (ibid.: 15). Yet in his conclusion he refers to “superstition” being used within “the realm of lively folkloric creativity” before shifting to “vernacular forms of expression” that are tied to “ideological strategies” (ibid.: 26; emphasis added; on ideologies, see Green 1983; Bronner 1998b: 73–140).

THE STIGMATIZED VERNACULAR(S)

Such ideological strategies are especially apparent in a special issue of the *Journal of Folklore Research* edited by Diane Goldstein and Amy Shuman in 2012 devoted to the “stigmatized vernacular”. The editors further refer to items of folklore as “vernaculars”. The words in the phrase “stigmatized vernacular” appear redundant if one follows the linguistic usage of “vernacular”, but the editors add stigma to invoke sociologist Ervin Goffman’s work (1963) on identifying the material stigmatized by different groups. They point to the kinds of folkloric material that stands out because “official” society

belittles it, and the researchers such as folklorists and ethnologists who are prone to being belittled because of their interest in “vernaculars”. The editors explicitly state the goal of folklore research of “understanding the cultural politics of stigma” (Goldstein and Shuman 2012: 115). They issue a “call to arms” with “stigmatized vernacular” to act on the “political representation of stigmatized populations” (ibid.: 116). Comparing terms used for folklore such as popular antiquities, cultural heritage, and local cultural productions, they prefer “vernacular” because in their words, it “carries with it the possibility of stigma” (ibid.). Paradoxically, they take pride in and advocate for what formal or modern society devalues, even at the risk of undermining the inclusive concept of traditionalized behavior and thought represented by “folk” as an adjective and “folklore” as a noun (ibid.; for defense of an inclusive “folklore” see Dundes 1980; 2020; Webber 1991: 195–224; Ben-Amos 1998; Bronner 2019b). If Primiano thought that “vernacular” was appropriate to the study of religion because it could be rendered “neutral,” editors Goldstein and Shuman reinterpret “vernacular” more generally for cultural research as a concept because it conspicuously could not.

In another essay, Shuman joins Carol Bohmer, a lawyer and sociologist, to argue that the “stigmatized vernacular” represents a shift in folkloristics from “studying people at the margins to studying the conditions of marginalization” (Shuman and Bohmer 2012: 220). Although recognizing that societies and formal institutions often venerated folk practices and groups identified as “folk” became central to cultural diversity and pluralism, they see these responses as part of the cycle of stigmatization and repudiation of “not-quite-modern” people. Shuman and Bohmer’s view of the obsolescence of folk and folklore because of the enactment of exclusion in usage of the terms runs contrary to the Dundesian, and I believe Valkian, conceptualizations in which folklore plays a future-facing role for everyone and needs visibility to address fundamental human issues implicit in the ways that “minds, behavior, expressivity” affect reasons for bringing “folklore to life” (Valk 2021: 175). Those conceptualizations do not shy away from the political and ideological implications of a distinctive approach to learning and transmission. Although Valk has been part of the vernacular movement, he has not abandoned in scholarship what he calls the “heart” of lived folklore “as a domain of building, transmitting, and shaping knowledge” (ibid.: 176). Perhaps that is why areas of inquiry that deal with fluid categories of belief, emotion, and faith have commanded Valk’s attention in another kind of shift as the discipline progresses from object to subject to practice-centered cognition (Mechling 2019; Gatling 2020; Bronner 2021). As should be evident from my evaluation of the rhetorics of “vernacular” in folkloristics and ethnology I consider “folk” and “folklore” and the practice-centered cognitive approaches they can represent in the modern world to be desirable terms that should not be displaced with the negatively loaded categorization of stigmatized “vernaculars”.

THE DIALECTICS OF VERNACULAR AND TRADITION

The different trajectories of ideas that emerged from the 21st-century rise of folkloristic and ethnological use of ‘vernacular’ (along with related terminology of informality, unofficial, and heritage), even as other disciplines dropped it from their lexicon, should spark more inquiries into the explanatory potential, and distinctive concern, of

‘tradition’ in cultural thought and practice. As several historiographers of folkloristic scholarship have pointed out, although basic to folkloristics, researchers have treated it as a given, an assumption not in need of critical analysis, rather than the crux of the problematics of folklore and folklife studies (Bronner 1998b; 2011a; Blank and Howard 2014; Oring 2014; 2021). I have found in the literature I surveyed on ‘vernacular’ that authors evade or neglect the implications of ‘tradition’, even though the discourse of folk, vernacular, heritage, and culture all circle back to tradition’s impact on people, their identities, and daily life choices as individuals and as members of groups and societies (Bronner 1998b; 2011a; Anttonen 2005; Blank and Howard 2014; Oring 2021). Perhaps this evasion is a consequence of pursuing ‘vernacular’ as a type of externalized mode of living or the synecdoche of ‘tongue’ rather than locating the internalized source of choices that people make for their symbolic actions (or *praxis*) in the complex, multi-layered cognition of tradition (Bronner 2019d). Whether ‘vernacular’ remains as a folkloristic concept, and I have recommended against it, its hypervisibility in folkloristics has beneficially ignited, to paraphrase Valk via Claude Lévi-Strauss, a needed discussion of the primary concepts with which folklorists and ethnologists think, and reveal thoughts that might be outside of their awareness (Lévi-Strauss 1963: 89; Valk 2021: 184).

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