

2025 Journal of Folklore and Education Reviews



GRADES 6-8

Listen What I Gotta Say: Women in the Blues

The blues, a music genre that developed in the American South at the turn of the 20th century, offers commentary on everyday life. Most often, the songs and contributions of men dominate lessons about blues music. Instead, this Music Pathway amplifies how women have been fundamental to the creation and popularity of this genre.

Smithsonian Folkways *Music Pathways*, <https://folkways.si.edu/learn>.

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The Smithsonian Folkways *Music Pathways* is a fantastic free multidisciplinary online resource that offers a vibrant, multimodal approach for educators looking to expand their students' understanding of music, cultural arts, and history. Folkways describes *Music Pathways* as “an integrated, thematic, and fully customizable journey of discovery that places music from the Smithsonian Folkways collection and other Smithsonian Institution primary resources at the center of the educational experience.” Developed for grades 6-8, educators can adapt it for most grade levels and subject areas.

The three selected modules, “Listen What I Gotta Say: Women in the Blues,” “Cajun and Zydeco: Flavors of Southwest Louisiana,” and “Estoy Aquí: Music of the Chicano Movement,” offer a fresh and engaging way to connect students to stories and traditions often not included in typical classroom settings. Drawing on ethnomusicological methods, each lesson plan offers hours of content, with historical context and participatory activities weaving together music with broader themes like identity, place, and social change. The curriculum encourages students to engage with the material not only intellectually, but also experientially, reminding them that it's not just about listening to songs—it's about understanding the people and communities behind them.

1. Listen What I Gotta Say: Women in the Blues

This module focuses on the role of women, particularly African American women, in shaping the blues genre, featuring the voices of Bessie Smith, Big Mama Thornton, and contemporary artists. The lesson is particularly helpful in challenging male-centered narratives and allowing educators to explore intersections of race, gender, and power.

2. Cajun and Zydeco: Flavors of Southwest Louisiana

This module introduces students to the musical traditions of Southwest Louisiana's diverse communities, focusing on Cajun and Creole cultures. Educators are provided with a rich toolkit—historical readings, audio examples, and even dance instructions—making the content immersive and culturally responsive.

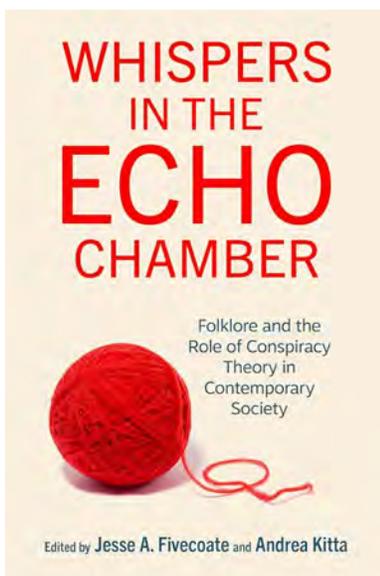
3. Estoy Aquí: Music of the Chicano Movement

This module explores how music was a vehicle for resistance and identity during the Chicano Civil Rights Movement. Featuring songs by artists like Little Joe and El Chicano, it invites students to consider how musical expression contributes to political mobilization and cultural affirmation. The inclusion of oral histories and protest music links well with high school curricula in U.S. History, Ethnic Studies, and Spanish-language classes.

As a visual arts teacher who loves to incorporate music into the classroom, I've found that exploring sound and rhythm alongside visual expression deepens students' understanding of both.

Music Pathways enhances and supports visual art by helping students connect artistic movements with cultural stories, emotions, and lived experiences. The detailed teacher guidelines are particularly helpful. They walk you through each lesson step by step and offer helpful background information so you can feel confident teaching even unfamiliar material, making the modules accessible for any educator. The materials are flexible enough to use in many classroom settings—whole group discussions, small projects, or even self-guided student work. Because it’s all aligned to national standards, it fits easily into existing curriculum goals without adding extra work.

Music Pathways provides students with unique opportunities to think critically and creatively. They’re not just learning facts— they’re making vital connections between music, their own lives, and their communities and traditions. *Music Pathways* encourages exploration, empathy, and a greater understanding of different cultures, making it a valuable tool for any educator who wants to enrich their classroom experience. By integrating performance, analysis, and storytelling, Smithsonian Folkways equips educators to cultivate more inclusive and equitable learning environments through adaptable and engaging lessons.



Whispers in the Echo Chamber: Folklore and the Role of Conspiracy Theory in Contemporary Society, Jesse A. Fivecoate and Andrea Kitta, eds. (Madison: The University of Wisconsin Press, 2025, 294 pp.)

Susan Eleuterio is an Adjunct Professor in the Master’s in Cultural Sustainability Program at Goucher College and a former classroom teacher.

This is a timely book that divides its contents into three sections. Part I examines Folkloric Approaches to conspiracy theories and helps to define them. Part II (De)Constructing Conspiracy Theories examines them through cartoons, as a form of literature and using a computational method for studying them. Part III looks at Circulation and Political Contexts of conspiracy theories (including in Iran and Malawi).

This review is from the perspective of a teacher of graduate students, a former high school classroom teacher, and a member of the general public who prides herself at being able to identify contemporary forms of folklore such as legends and conspiracy theories and yet is subject to the same onslaught of information as the rest of the world linked through social media and the internet.

The most important teachable and useful tools in this volume are the strategies for using critical thinking and analysis through folkloristic approaches to “assess conspiracy theories and their functions” (4). Fivecoate and Kitta begin by defining the difference between a conspiracy and a conspiracy theory; the first being “typically understood as a secret agreement between at least two people to do or attempt to do something illegal or socially iniquitous, while a conspiracy theory proposes the existence of a conspiracy to explain an event or occurrence” (5). They point out that “everyone engages with conspiracy thinking and its spread” ...partially because such theories are “built from and sustained by an unofficial resource of everyday life: folklore” (8).

Using contemporary examples such as beliefs related to QAnon, Covid-19, Bill Gates, Mask cartoons, vaccines, witch scares, blood libels, organ harvesting, and January 6th (along with older beliefs about the Kennedy assassination, the disappearance of Amelia Earhart, and the sinking of the Titanic), the authors (who include folklorists, historians, political scientists, English professors, anthropologists, ethnographers, computer engineers and scientists, and African Studies specialists) thoughtfully review and reflect on both the theories and the communities who believe and transmit them.

My favorite strategy, which would be an excellent classroom tool for teaching critical thinking, is the SLAP test developed by Jeannie Banks Thomas, who has reviewed more than 50 years of legend, rumor, and conspiracy theory research using pattern analysis. She outlines SLAP as “Scare/Shock, Logistics, A-List, and Prejudice” and includes an excellent infographic designed by the Utah State University Folklore Program’s Meagan Roach and Maggie Mercil. She encourages asking, does the narrative “attempt to scare or shock, rely on complicated or far-fetched logistics, involve famous people, products or events and/or demonstrate prejudice by demonizing or portraying a person or group as an ‘Other’” (71)? In addition to “SLAPping” some “sense into yourself,” she encourages research using reliable sites. Snopes.com is one most folklorists will recognize, but she also recommends “Lead Stories,” which has a feature to analyze photographs for fakes as well. Ironically, given recent history, she includes a martial law rumor during the Covid-19 era about using the National Guard in California and notes that rumors of “widespread” rioting and looting are “common, old and often exaggerated or untrue” (73). The power of the SLAP test is that it relies on narratives that can also appear as memes or short stories that are either “too good to be true” or “too bad to be true.”

The tricky part of conspiracy theories is that, like legends (formerly called urban legends), they often contain a kernel of truth to quote the folklorist Jan Brunvand, or at least some factoid that can be used as a building block. The final chapter of the book examines a strategy of using narratives to counteract conspiracy theories. Darin DeWitt and Matthew D. Atkinson, who teach and research political communication, point out that “fact-checking does not work” in countering conspiracy theories, but they have done intriguing research into instead using “collective-action narratives” to “promote people’s sense of self-efficacy” (240). For those who work with cultural communities, this strategy could be very powerful in helping members feel empowered in the face of conspiracy theories based in prejudice.

Some of the statistical research described in this book can be a bit dense. However, those who teach math, science, and social science (not to mention computer science) could easily use these chapters as a basis for teaching strategies for research as well as data compilation. As a folklorist, I am impressed by the detailed research compiled by many of the authors to examine the role played by conspiracy theories in daily life. I’m also encouraged to see techniques for teaching students of all ages to think about the role of these often-dangerous theories in our daily lives and to consider ways to counter them through exploration of their role in folklore. Finally, the inclusion of examinations by Afsane Rezaei and Anika Wilson of conspiracy theories in Iran and Malawi help to establish the global nature of these elements of folklore and provide thoughtful recommendations for examining the impact of belief on worldwide events such as the Covid-19 pandemic.