

Introduction: Folklore and Artificial Intelligence

There is little doubt that artificial intelligence (AI), particularly generative artificial intelligence, is a game-changing—even world-changing—technological innovation. Generative AI has the potential to make our work faster, more efficient, and (perhaps) better, from polishing sentence structures to transcending language barriers to analyzing massive amounts of data in what seems like the blink of an eye. But the ways it has been integrated into our lives have created a myriad of existential challenges to how we teach, research, learn, and live, and it has many of us rethinking the skills and modes of communication at the core of our disciplines.

In November 2025, the JAF Editorial Collective invited submissions for an AI-themed issue of the *Journal of American Folklore* in order to encourage folklorists to actively consider what this new technology means to the communities we work in, the classrooms we teach in, the research we engage in, and the world we live in. There are many reasons to approach generative AI critically. For educators, it has become a defining challenge of the twenty-first century, as we see students offloading critical thinking and writing to generative AI (Mah et al. 2025; Yu et al. 2025). The technologies are also closely intertwined with the climate crisis (Li et al. 2025; Bashir et al. 2024). Given that AI technology requires substantial resources such as water, electricity, and land for building large data centers, what are the implications for our climate and our planet? For some, AI also brings to the fore and re-actualizes questions (Lagerkvist et al. 2024) about human existence and human relations. And with major commercial actors driving the development and application of generative AI comes worrying implications about intellectual integrity, working conditions of AI developers, and human thriving and safety. In late 2026, for instance, the *New York Times* reported that OpenAI “went rogue,” with its systems “behaving in unexpected and concerning ways” (Conger et al. 2026), while Dario Amodei, the CEO of AI company Anthropic, warned of AI performing actions that could be “harmful” to humanity (Choe 2026).

These concerns and more highlight the need for a pointed and sustained exploration of the intersections between artificial intelligence and folklore as a discipline, a practice, and an expression of culture—and the response to our call exceeded all expectations. The breadth and depth of folklorists’ engagement with the topic convinced us to publish essays over two issues, with the second coming in Fall 2027. Central questions addressed in the current issue include:

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What is at stake when AI is used to generate traditional art? When it is used in service of preservation? When it is used by members of a community to create and re-create their expressive culture? How does AI work in service of oppressive forces? Can it be used to circumvent those forces? The essays here thus look at generative AI from a wide range of viewpoints, exploring the ethics of research and representation, the production of new forms of folkloristic expression, the role of generative AI in the classroom, and the responsibilities of both cultural and environmental stewardship.

Working on this issue precipitates another discussion, one that we have been eager to engage since the inception of our editorial collective. The emergence of generative AI has laid out complex ethical challenges to the ways scholars engage with research, analysis, translation, production of text, and editing and revising their work. Accordingly, we have finalized JAF's first AI policy.¹ In this policy we seek to balance innovation and integrity and encourage transparency and responsibility while acknowledging the diverse opinions on the use of generative AI that exists within our field.

We offer this policy not as a resolution to the “problem” of AI, but as a step toward learning how to live with it in a way that is ethical and responsible. Because of our deep commitment to community, to understanding how people create, share, sustain, and invigorate knowledge through expressive culture, folklorists are crucial to the conversation at large. We understand that these essays can only offer a snapshot of a specific time and that rapidly advancing technology means that what was cutting edge can quickly become antiquated. However, the central concerns addressed in this issue—about artificial intelligence, yes, but also about epistemological power, creative agency, and the value of situated knowledge—matter in ways that extend beyond the present AI-centered moment. It is our hope that these essays, and those that will follow, help us as a field engage questions raised by the advent of generative AI and prepare us to face what comes next.

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¹ You can find an updated version of the JAF AI policy on the American Folklore Society website. The full text is available at <https://americanfolkloresociety.org/journal/submissions/>