

KRISTIANA WILLSEY is a Lecturer in Anthropology at the University of Southern California, United States

KRISTIANA WILLSEY

The Work of Art in the Age of Technofeudalism

The circulation of artificial intelligence-generated art, which effectively mimics and weaponizes folk processes of communal creation in order to circumvent copyright claims, in many ways resembles the memes and mash-ups digital folklorists have studied for decades. But the counterhegemonic potential of those art forms relied on their resistance to dominant economic systems of capitalism and copyright law. If the power of capitalism is being superseded by “technofeudalism,” an economic system centered not on the circulation of goods (or art) for profit but instead on the consolidation of culture and the extraction of rents, folklore loses its political edge.

Keywords (from the AFS Ethnographic Thesaurus):

Digital media, social media, artificial intelligence, folk art, authenticity, politics

Over the past 30 years, folklore scholarship has come to embrace online culture as the resurgence of premodern modes of communication: anonymous, collaborative creation with little respect for copyright laws, essentially counterhegemonic. Yet in the time that it has taken the field to recognize the folkloric qualities of the internet, it has become markedly less so. Unlike traditional folklore, expressive culture online lives on platforms that are owned and monetized; our peer-to-peer communication is not organic but algorithmically driven. And particularly since the 2008 financial crisis, the real estate of the internet has been increasingly monopolized and consolidated into the hands of a few tech billionaires who, like the robber barons of the Gilded Age, buy access to government and manage our digital agoras in the interests of the powerful. The early internet—what tech writer Cory Doctorow jokingly calls “the old, good internet”—was a conscious reaction to the monopoly the culture industries had on human connection and creativity. Doctorow says, “we had a sense that our intermediaries (film studios, book publishers, television networks) had gotten too big for their britches ... we yearned for a way to cut out the

This is an uncorrected advance copy of an essay that has been formally peer reviewed and accepted for publication in *Journal of American Folklore* 140(556) but has not received final copyediting, typesetting, pagination, or proof corrections. The final published version may differ. The definitive, citable version will be published in Spring 2027.

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How to Cite: Please cite the final published Version of Record (VOR) upon its release. Alternative Provisional Citation: Willsey, K. (2027). The Work of Art in the Age of Technofeudalism. Accepted for publication in *Journal of American Folklore* 140(556). DOI: 10.5406/15351882.140.556.02

middleman and do business directly with the people who made and did the things we loved... But the early blush of disintermediation quickly faded. Waves of mergers and acquisitions consolidated the internet into ‘five giant websites, each filled with screenshots of the other four’” (2025:8). As online content becomes more professionalized (and now, generated by artificial intelligence), and fewer and fewer people post to social media at all (Chayka 2025; James 2023), the spaces for vernacular discourse that made the internet such a fertile field for folklorists are shrinking.

Doctorow coined the term “enshittification” in 2022 to describe the process of platform decay, in which websites first cultivate communities, then monetize them, and finally sacrifice both users and vendors to generate value for shareholders, rendering online spaces useless as either communities or markets.¹ The notion that the commercialization of “authentic” cultural forms risks hollowing out culture until there is nothing *but* a market, and consequently nothing to sell, is old news to folklorists. But this final stage, “enshittification,” in which platforms are neither functional spaces for socializing nor commerce, troubles the generative binary between folklore and copyrighted culture. An economic system in which the goal is not to generate profits from the creation of new art forms but rather to consolidate ownership, control access, and extract rents, is described by the radical economist Yanis Varoufakis as no longer capitalism at all, but rather “technofeudalism” (2023).

The concept of technofeudalism offers an explanatory (if still speculative) framework for the way decades of digital orality have remade our economic and political systems. Media scholars have described the rise of digital orality and the corresponding loss of authority of traditional publishing industries as the “Gutenberg Parenthesis” (Sauerberg 2009; Pettitt 2012; Jarvis 2023). The argument goes, the past 500 years of modernity, with its preference for abstracted and generalized (or “purified and hybridized”) information that can be entextualized, categorized, mastered, and used to generate social and political hierarchies, is a historical anomaly we are now recovering from (Bauman and Briggs 2009). Sauerberg writes that we are “effectively reverting to medieval and Renaissance thought from before Gutenberg, a pre-parenthetical phase which saw creativity as a re-forming, by memory and imagination, of what was available” (2009). Copyright invented the commercially useful concepts of originality and sole authorship, and now artificial intelligence (AI) is taking them apart.

It was the decline of feudalism in Europe and the emergence of industrial capitalism as the dominant economic model that created the conditions for the academic study of folklore in the first place. The field emerged in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries out of nostalgia for the disappearing age of oral tradition and handmade goods circulating in precapitalist economies. It was not the human impulse for connection and creativity that changed with modernity, it was only the container around them, the new economic and political contexts that made folklore suddenly rare and precious. Folklore was the exception that “proves” the rule, in both senses of the proverb: the ongoing existence of folklore both defined the boundaries of capitalism and copyright culture, and continually tested their weaknesses, pushing the center from the margins. Now that the container is changing again, the question is, given the increasingly central role of

folklore (or as some will call it, misinformation) in culture and politics today, what positions folklore as critical discourse?

European folklorists originally mined these reconstructed premodern pasts to bolster romantic narratives of autochthonous nationalism, of timeless ethno-linguistic ties to land that justified political sovereignty (Abrahams 1993). This model for nation-building was not a viable option for the young, settler-colonial United States, so the focus of scholars in the US shifted instead to living traditions and marginalized communities, the folklore of which could scaffold more usable political narratives like the melting pot and the American Dream. For American folklorists (Bauman 1971; Dundes 1966; Baron 2012), the emphasis was less on premodern survivals than on folklore as unofficial discourse, on voices and art forms excluded from mainstream media or institutional knowledge.

Documentation and celebration of diverse, living folk traditions were essential to keeping democratic government accountable to its ideals; people without power necessarily authorized those in power to use it on their behalf. As John W. Roberts writes, “American folklorists working in an established nation have tended to see nationalism as the property of those on the periphery rather than those at the center” (2008:49). This dynamic has given a particular critical charge to American folklore scholarship, a sense that studying the everyday art forms of ordinary people must be political (Kodish 2011; Mills 2020; Zeitlin 2021). If folklore studies can claim no “grand theories,” what we take pride in instead is what Dorothy Noyes calls “humble theory”: our contribution to the study of culture is a matter of perspective and relationality. As she assures us, “dealing with the residual, the interstitial, and the emergent gives us quite enough ground for the few of us there to occupy it” (2016:14). Our belief in the counterhegemonic (if not always realized) *potential* of folklore has been ballast for the discipline, both grounding us and holding us back. It primes us to seek out the hopeful, rebellious, or subversive qualities of vernacular culture, and to inevitably find what we look for. As the internet undergoes a socioeconomic transformation, our disciplinary training to trust our interlocutors and believe in their positive experiences with these new technologies risks obscuring or naturalizing the technocratic power structures closing in around us.

Since we could not use them to do ethnonationalism, American folklorists largely abandoned the search for origins and Ur-texts, focusing instead on folklore as a contemporary process. The rise of performance studies and the move from “folklore as ‘item’—the things of folklore—to a conceptualization of folklore as ‘event’—the doing of folklore” (Bauman 1972: xi) also allowed for the field to take on theories of reception and remediation from sociology and cultural studies (Hall 1973; Hebdige 1979; see also Zumwalt 1988:138-43). The shift of focus from text to context meant treating the recontextualization of consumer objects as a creative and even implicitly critical act, an assertion of individuality in a mass-produced world. Once we do away with origins, the creative act folklorists can follow is the framing and circulation of “found” objects. Creativity is not in invention but in recombination—in traditional forms like cooking and quilts, and in more recent subjects of folkloristic analysis like streetwear and song

mash-ups, the common factor is *bricolage*, folk art as “tinkering” with the world. Nothing is made from scratch.

Folklore scholarship on the internet has continued this pattern, celebrating hybrid art forms like fan fiction and memes as folk reappropriations of copyrighted culture, a process Henry Jenkins, following Michel de Certeau, calls “textual poaching” (1992). But given the aggressive marketing of artificial intelligence services to consumers, “poaching” no longer seems the appropriate word—this is not copyrighted material being pulled back into folk processes, but the recapturing of artistic communication by corporate power. AI-generated art effectively mimics and weaponizes folk processes of communal creation in order to circumvent copyright claims. The vernacular embrace of AI ensures online art will increasingly be created safely within corporate grounds, under the approving eye of the tech industry. How should folklorists approach this transition—as a difference of degree, or of kind? My concern in writing this essay is that, in grasping for the continuities between memes and AI art, and in extending our analysis of digital media as sites of resistance to copyright culture now to AI-generated content, we will become complicit in our own political disempowerment.

Neither Gift Economy nor Market Economy but a Secret Third Thing

In the old model of cultural production, creators could share their artwork on microblogging websites like Tumblr, or explicitly noncommercial/nonprofit websites for fanfiction like An Archive of Our Own, where it remained nominally legal because no money changed hands. These sites operate instead like “gift economies,” where users are compensated with comments, likes, and shares. Increasingly, the success of artists, writers, and musicians online has served as proof-of-concept for the investment of traditional publishing industries. Why would a record company need to “discover” talent, and spend years (and profits) on training, marketing, and promoting said talent, when they could simply sign an artist who had already done the work to build an online following and pocket the difference? Similarly, many bestselling novels now use their marketing and cover art to wink at their fan fiction origins. Readers who previously experienced this work for free, as fan fiction, are likely to buy it as an expression of alignment with an “online friend”—market economies monetizing the “authenticity” of gift economies are not necessarily even in competition. This is the binary folklorists are most accustomed to: the tension, or feedback loop, between community and commodity.

But the central battle is no longer between art as individual expression and art as “intellectual property” (IP), the property of a corporation, both of which are claims to the right to *circulate* art, just according to different market logics. Instead, increasingly, capital is not acquired through the circulation of art, but through consolidating rights to art, controlling access, and extracting rents. The transaction moves from the point of sale to the platform itself, from the commodification of the art object to the commodification of the user experience. As Varoufakis puts it,

Markets, the medium of capitalism, have been replaced by digital trading platforms which look like, but are not markets, and are better understood as fiefdoms. And profit, the engine of capitalism, has been replaced with its feudal predecessor: rent. Specifically, it is a form of rent that must be paid for access to those platforms and to the cloud more broadly. I call it *cloud rent*. (Varoufakis, 2023: xiii).

The end of feudalism and the shift to modernity can be best understood as a world in which the power of *profits* superseded the power of *rents*. It was a battle between the power of the aristocracy, whose wealth derived from the rents extracted from tenant farmers (usually not in cash but in kind, a portion of their crop or livestock), and the rise of the bourgeoisie, the “new-money” merchants, tradesmen, and eventually industrialists who extracted labor in exchange for wages and profited off the difference between them. Rents still existed, just as profit existed in various forms before the industrial revolution, but in a fight between rent and profits, profit would win. “The enclosure of the commons,” Doctorow writes, “produced two key factors of production: wool and workers. This came at the expense of the lords’ fortunes and their hereditary right to rent. For capitalists to win, rentiers had to lose” (2025:197). Varoufakis sees the monopolization of the internet as a kind of digital enclosure act that transforms vendors into feudal “vassals” and users into feudal “serfs,” too dependent on this small number of platforms to either leave them or meaningfully criticize them.

Economic theorists debate precisely how far this process has gone, and argue that technofeudalism is better understood as “rentier capitalism,” “cloud capitalism,” “corporatism” or “surveillance capitalism,” that we are still operating within capitalism because profits still exist, boards still continue to have shareholders and balance sheets and face some degree of government oversight, because Varoufakis’s narrative simplifies the degree to which feudal landholders cooperated with new industrialists, and because the historical and cultural conditions of feudalism are distinct from the present (Gane 2025; Crossa and Reyes 2025; Orhangazi 2025). But Varoufakis’s term has quickly gained traction because it so aptly describes the role that tech monopolies play in ordinary people’s experience of the present, a time of waning consumer rights and buying power, in which access to digital spaces is simultaneously essential to modern life and monopolized by a small number of companies whose power seems to supersede that of national governments. It is hard to dispute that the subscription model of capitalism, wherein consumers own nothing, all access to media is temporary, and rights to use can be unilaterally altered by the IP holder in contracts that bind users but not corporations, dominates art and culture today. Even the phrase “late-stage capitalism” presupposes that there is something (or nothing) after the present moment. As it is being invoked in vernacular political discourse, technofeudalism is an ongoing project, a looming threat that we could yet prevent.

Like feudal serfs, we pay for our platform use not in cash but in kind—identity is the new money. In an ironic riff on our status as serfs, social media users refer to posts that privilege the marketability of a post over its content, “ragebait” or “clickbait” or other bad-faith postures of human connection, as “farming content,” or “engagement farming.” The platforms in turn “harvest” our data. User data is sold in bulk to advertisers in order to place targeted

advertisements more successfully, but the real concern is what the social psychologist Shoshana Zuboff calls “behavioral futures markets”: platforms do not need to recapture money via direct sales; they profit from simply keeping you on the app. User engagement is not a means to an end, but an end unto itself. Zuboff writes, “The aim of this undertaking is not to impose behavioral norms, such as conformity or obedience, but rather to produce behavior that reliably, definitively, and certainly leads to desired commercial results” (2020). The inextricability of these markets from technological power and social control cannot be overstated: the “internet of things” saturates our world with information gathering devices, everything from vacuum cleaners and toothbrushes to mattresses and light switches become mechanisms for capturing and monetizing user data, which in turn minimizes investment risk by controlling both sides of the board, playing as companies and as consumers simultaneously.

Folklore was originally defined as that which survived modernity and escaped mass-production: “free” culture. But “free” culture takes on a different valence in the attention economy. As the web-based proverb goes, “if you’re not paying, you aren’t the customer, you’re the product.” This is where the emancipatory potential of social media gets particularly muddy, as users tend to experience the tightening of control at a higher level as release from the burden of choice at a lower level, and consequently as “liberating,” “democratizing,” or even “anti-capitalist.” An all-seeing information economy that makes it easier for users to buy things they like does not feel oppressive. AI that allows users to generate oil paintings or academic texts is claimed as individually empowering, leveling the playing field of formal study or higher learning. Social media users often experience their interactions with the algorithm as curation: iterative, creative, and agentic: “I built this feed brick by brick.”

But Zuboff’s point is that there is a vanishingly thin line between anticipating consumer choice and eliminating it—creating a world in which your desires are managed at a level above the transaction. A key example is the rise of “surveillance pricing,” which uses your data to set a personalized price based on the company’s knowledge of your location, spending habits, and the time of purchase (pricing bottled water higher on hot days, for instance). Health data from wearables is used to set insurance rates, biometric data is used in immigration raids and deportations, and data-driven polling and redistricting is undermining democratic processes (Joffe-Block 2025; Raber et al. 2019; Rogin and Corkery 2025; Huq 2020). Product boycotts, within capitalism, problematically shifted notions of people’s rights as citizens to people’s rights as consumers. But under technofeudalism, forget “voting with your dollar,” because the ultimate goal is not to sell you anything—the goal is to sell *you*, or rather, information about you, and with it the ability to predict and control demographic shifts, cultural movements, patterns of consumption and migration, politics and conflict, at a scale that makes individual consumer purchasing power largely irrelevant.

Under technofeudalism, there is no longer anything particularly radical about flouting copyright law, because corporations themselves no longer find the circulation of “pirated” content a threat. When, in December 2025, Disney signed a billion-dollar deal with OpenAI to license their characters to the short-video generator Sora, entertainment journalists marveled that

a company that had become synonymous with the expansion of copyright laws suddenly *wanted* users to remix its intellectual property. In the 1980s, Disney famously threatened to sue several Florida daycare centers for unauthorized use of their character images as murals (Chicago Tribune 1989). Disney's archives are closed to the public; scholars cannot get the rights to use Disney stills in academic books that are critical of the company (Sun and Picker 2001; Giroux and Pollock 2010:290-1). Disney is so cautious of managing impressions and controlling its brand that park rules prohibit guests over 14 from cosplaying characters within the parks. For Disney to not only invite fans in to play in their sandbox, but to pay OpenAI for the privilege, is a dramatic shift from the company's long-held position on copyright law and intellectual property. Is this decision empowering audiences, or exploiting them? *Hollywood Reporter's* Steven Zeitchik says of the Disney-Sora deal, "with short-form AI content you don't need to pay [to hire artists and writers to create films]—in fact they're paying you! Through an add-on to your Disney+ subscription or however they'll do it. And you get money every day instead of waiting years to put a movie out. That's their thinking. What's really happening here is the deprofessionalization of content" (Zeitchik and Sancton 2025). Though the deal ended up being dissolved a few months later when Sora was shuttered for budgetary reasons (Chia and Calder 2026), this was OpenAI's decision, not Disney's, and the sea-change within the entertainment industry the deal presaged is still ongoing.

It is possible to see corporations licensing characters to generative AI as a victory of collaborative creation, IP holders giving up and acceding to online "remix" culture. But there is a vast difference between "free culture" and paying a monthly subscription fee to access the fairy tales, mythic heroes, and legendary monsters that Disney built their brand on the back of.² There is also the question of whether these new revenue streams will drive the development of new productions, using the metrics of fan participation as market research, or eliminate the need for them entirely. At a time when theater ticket sales are cratering and streaming platforms are losing money, it is not clear that the goal of this deal was to fund new scripted content. The Supreme Court's decision that AI-generated art cannot be copyrighted was celebrated as a victory for artists, but there is no need for copyright protections for art that can only be monetized by the platform and never by the user. The anxiety that platform capitalism introduces is that shifting the role of "creation" (or "curation") away from creators and onto audiences means it is user engagement that generates capital and not the work of art or the artists themselves. If every individual user can generate AI-music that responds to their specific taste, what is the role of artists at all? It is hard not to read all this as a depressing coda to Roland Barthes's "death of the author" (1977).

Fighting Fire with Fire: The Limits of Vernacular Critique

I want to suggest that the generative binary between folklore and copyright culture, which has informed our sense of folklore as something marginal to and therefore critical of official and institutional culture, limits our ability to meaningfully push back against these emerging technofeudal structures. More recent scholarship has recognized that this binary is artificial, a reflection of academic disciplines divvying up cultural forms rather than a real description of how art operates in the world. Really, folklore and popular culture have constantly raided one

another for ideas, in a “symbiosis, and ultimately inseparability, of commercial production and folk creativity” (Foster 2016:27). As Jeffrey Tolbert writes in *Möbius Media*, the binary is really “a continuum...for purposes of analysis it can be useful to mark out starting points, even though they will inevitably be swept into the endless flow of creation and re-creation” (2024:12). But collapsing a binary is not so much escaping it (a Möbius strip is famously inescapable) as exploding it, retaining the critical edge that folklore offers to critique commercial culture, only with more freedom of movement. Similarly for Greg Kelley, audience engagement can be “disruptive” or “participatory”—audiences can accept and amplify dominant messages or mock and subvert them—but it is all still “folk intervention,” the people asserting ownership of popular culture regardless of what they decide to do with it (2020). Not all folklore is counterhegemonic, but its interstitial positioning always allows for that possibility, which is ironically pretty counterhegemonic of it!

We cannot get away from the binary between folklore and copyright culture because this tension is what gives our discipline its critical charge. Capitalism has been folklore’s good fight, our intimate Other. If, as Varoufakis warns, technofeudalism is “what kill[s] capitalism,” the commodification or mass-production of folk art becomes irrelevant, and (if we can keep calling it folklore) folklore becomes irrelevant too—all art will be “free,” because none of us will be. Folklorists have already begun to recognize the instability of this new ground. As Whitney Philips and Ryan M. Milner write in *Folklore and Social Media*, “in the contemporary hyper-mediated, hyper-networked, and frankly, just hyper-social media landscape, such boundaries—even the most basic distinction between folklore and *not*-folklore—are often impossible to demarcate” (2020:70). If we treat the rise of AI art as simply new technology, and not a transformation of political and economic frames, we will keep sparring with our familiar enemy and mistake even older forms of social control for new tools of liberation.

To demonstrate the limits of our vernacular critique, I first need to contextualize AI within the long history of folklore studies’ debates over technology corrupting the purity or authenticity of folk tradition. Early anxieties that the internet was antisocial or represented an abandonment of community were challenged by folklorists who found that the internet created new spaces for the sharing of culture in ways continuous with, not separate from, off-line interactions. As Trevor Blank writes, “the internet and modern technology are not displacing the traditions of folk culture. Instead, they are *hybridizing* expressive behavior” (2013:104). Though the early internet functioned more as an archive for information to be uploaded and downloaded, as more people “got online,” network speeds improved and web traffic became busier and more synchronous. Web 2.0, Anthony Buccitelli writes, was not simply a static record of folklore, but a site for new forms of mediated performance (2012).

The tension between online spaces as communities and as markets, as a tool for bottom-up liberation and top-down social control, is baked into the history of the internet. As Robert Glenn Howard and Copp  lie Cocq note in the introduction to their 2017 special issue of *Cultural Analysis*, the internet was birthed from “dual ideolog[ies]”: on the one hand, it was Bill Gates, Steve Jobs, and Steve Wozniak’s “HomeBrew Computer Club” and the dream of a networked

community of personal computers, and the other hand, it was the US military's goal of building a distributed communication system that could survive a nuclear war. "Born of the unlikely coupling of these two very different intentions," they write, "the devices that keep us continually networked together today are the inheritance of both a vision of individual freedom and a vision of bomb-proof institutional power" (Howard and Cocq 2017:1). Folklore scholarship on the internet has continually grappled with this foundational opposition and (as dialectics demand) expanded to contain its multitudes.

Since the internet was a hybrid space where the institutional and vernacular overlapped, studies of online performance were essential to navigating our new field site, feeling for seams of vernacular resistance. We could not assume the entire internet was vernacular, but we could identify the tensions and frictions, places where users rejected or negotiated with authority. As Howard writes, "vernacularity can only emerge into meaning by being seen as distinct from the mass, the official, and the institutional. In this sense, it relies on a shared notion of the institutional to be rendered meaningful" (2008:194). The dimensions of institutional power in digital spaces could be identified through, was made real by, the folk's engagements with it. The possibility of political change is located in performances that could be studied ethnographically, in classic folkloristic fashion, from the bottom up.

The impactful work of these scholars established a pattern wherein the role of folklorists of the internet was to locate examples of vernacular negotiations with the commercial or institutional, and to hold them up as proof of the counterhegemonic potential of online spaces. As Tok Thompson writes of the technologically hybrid but decidedly "folky" genres of beatboxing and musical mash-ups, remix culture was a triumph of the irrepressibility of folklore in the face of corporate control:

It is refreshing to see vernacular forms arising from people's artistic impulses, rather than being slavishly dominated by the "culture industry," as the Frankfurt School had at one time feared. Indeed, these new musical forms often find themselves in direct conflict with the culture industry, particularly regarding the issue of copyrights. This has caused great headaches for the recording industry and the copyright regime as a whole; both of these closely followed the model built to deal with the effects of the printing press—the same technological innovation that was supposed to spell the end of folklore (Thompson 2011:181).

Premodern art was resurgent online, a victory for folklore! But as John Dornst observed presciently in 1990, the internet both presented a challenge to our traditional binaries, and revealed the in-born limitations to the political scope of our discipline: how could artistic expressions so enmeshed with and reliant on commercial spaces be truly, or only, critical of them? Dorst identifies an already "quite familiar" type of scholarly analysis in which folk culture appropriates, recontextualizes, and challenges the power of dominant cultural forms. The temptation to focus on the counterhegemonic side, rather than the equally available ways in which these folk reappropriations *affirm* the power of dominant culture, Dorst worries,

“preserves a utopian conception of the vernacular (or folk) sphere that can blind us to important aspects of the relatively new conditions of cultural production” (1990:187-8). Dorst hastens to add that he is not resurrecting the Frankfurt School’s critiques of mass culture as inevitably oppressive and stultifying, only to observe that our disciplinary frames “do not equip us well to deal with these unprecedented and complex conditions of cultural production” (1990:189). Dorst was responding to the impact of performance studies, new criticism, and reception theory, critical frames that shifted scholarly focus away from texts to contexts, to audiences as co-authors and audience interpretation as the primary site for the meaning-making (Hall 1973; Barthes 1977; Bauman 1986). This reframing, which for scholars of the 1970s and 80s sought to empower the folk as active co-creators rather than passive conduits of tradition, also sets the stage for generative AI’s weaponization of folk processes.

The challenge that artificial intelligence presents to politics, law, and formal education derive largely from its essential “folkiness”: it is, in Valdimar Hafstein’s terms, “communal origination through individual re-creation,” (Hafstein 2004:310) and therefore a bad fit for the social systems of the modern world, built around concepts of copyright and individual ownership. A user, as the most recent and agentive link in the chain of cultural expression, claims “authorship” of a work of art that is both “original” (in the sense that this precise text or image has never before existed), and “traditional” (drawing on a shared vocabulary of images and ideas). It cannot be reliably caught by plagiarism checkers because it exhibits multiplicity and variation, and per a 2026 Supreme Court decision (Brittain 2026), like folklore, it cannot be copyrighted.

Copyright as a legal claim is premised on the idea of originality, in contrast to “traditional,” communally created art. This has historically been very useful in dispossessing marginalized and Indigenous communities of their traditional medicines, music, and clothing designs. If *everyone* made it, *no one* made it, and anyone can take it. Folklore scholarship has long recognized the strategic artificiality of copyright’s narrow claims to originality and defended collaborative creation as foundational not just to folk art, but to *all* creative work. As Hafstein writes, “rather than claim a measure of originality for folklore, we should repudiate originality itself and embrace instead a social concept of creativity, along the lines of theories of intertextuality and distributed innovation” (2004:309). For better or worse, we are discovering what the widespread embrace of distributed innovation looks like, because AI-generated content that “repudiates originality itself” is increasingly the default mode of communication online. Moreover, all online communication is grist for the technofeudal mill—over a quarter of ChatGPT’s citations are to Reddit or Wikipedia. Now that any internet user is subject to the same exploitative logics as the folk artists we study, more than ever, “we are the folk.”

From Brainrot to Fruitslop: AI and Digital Folklore

I want to entertain a bad-faith argument for AI “slop” as folk art, or rather, art whose circulation follows the same kind of folk processes as memes and can be studied in the same way. After all, the circulation of AI content in a range of noncommercial, vernacular contexts (memes shared in

group chats, AI art on flyers for neighborhood garage sales, AI-sourced recipes in cookbooks, AI-written pick-up lines and wedding vows) is in many ways contiguous with the kind of internet folklore scholars have taken seriously for decades. Because AI slop is produced by users chasing trends for monetizable content, it quickly demonstrates the multiplicity and variation we would expect from folklore. Similar to TikTok templates or trending audio on Instagram, users can download scripts that can be fed to AI video generators and contribute to an emerging genre of, for instance, anthropomorphic fruit cheating on each other (Maimann 2026; Kircher 2026). The audience for “fruitslop” videos could even be interpreted as a critical fandom—consumption of these deeply silly videos not mere escapism but self-aware resistance to AI’s more dangerous affordances. As content creator Adam Aleksik explains, “It’s funny because it’s bad” (quoted in Maimann); unlike political deepfakes, fruitslop is so obviously AI it becomes a parody of itself.³ This example demonstrates how easy it is to fall into the trap of claiming AI art as simply a continuation of meme culture, carrying the same subversive charge as we have now long credited to these art forms.

If AI art is not folk art, it can’t be because it is insufficiently creative (is writing prompts truly less creative than the recontextualization of movie stills for memes?) or even because it isn’t sufficiently critical of the source material it mines (there is plenty of fawning Disney fan art). Is AI-generated content spreading lies and misinformation, destabilizing our belief in consensus reality? Nothing new for folklorists. The process of sending your group chat an AI-generated video of (for example) rabbits enjoying a trampoline isn’t less *folky* because the rabbits are technological fakery. If it were, we could not also study other technological fakes, like nineteenth-century spirit photography. That AI-art is “slop” (unoriginal, amateurish, ugly, in poor taste) ironically makes it *more* suitable for folkloristic analysis—“derivative” art is our bread and butter, and we have often been in the position of defending vernacular aesthetics when they diverge from the rarified standards of “high art.” Folk artists have always worked within the strictures of tradition, finding ways to exploit the gaps between individual expression and cultural standards. This could also describe the challenges of a protracted verbal negotiation with extruded text and images, “prompting” the algorithm to produce something more personal than generic.

Accusations that the use of machines makes art “soulless” have also been thoroughly addressed by folklore scholarship, who have pointed out that an insistence that folk artists reject mechanization weaponizes the politically and commercially useful but semantically empty concept of “authenticity” (Bendix 1997). As Deirdre Evans-Pritchard points out in reference to New Mexico’s Indian Arts and Crafts Sales Act, guidelines intended to protect Native artists also policed them. She writes, “strengthened regulations freeze technological innovation. One potter complained to me that she could not use a pottery wheel without her pots losing their status as authentic” (1987:294). Mechanization itself cannot disqualify an object from folkloric inquiry; if all traditional works are in some ways “tainted” or “spurious,” all tradition is conversely “genuine,” authentic (Handler and Linnekin 1984). As early as 1961, Herman Bausinger noted that mechanization and urbanization were not killing folk cultures, but redefining them, and redrawing the lines of the discipline as they did:

It is a product of the technical world, an indirect result of technology, which creates not only a new world of objects but also of new social and spiritual realities. This process blurs the horizons, within which the traditional goods of folk culture found their validity. If we trace the disintegration of certain horizons which were once valid, we seem to draw nearer to today's folk culture. ([1961] 1990).

Around the same time, Alan Dundes was finding that the multiplicity and variation of folklore was alive and well in machine-assisted forms like xeroxlore (Dundes 2007).

Humans have always been cyborgs, always co-produced culture with non-human tools, and always, with affection or frustration, invested our tools with a little of our own humanity (Haraway 1985). In *Posthuman Folklore*, Thompson reminds us that Dundes' classic essay, "Who Are the Folk?" ends with a group of scientists asking a 1970s era supercomputer, "Will the computer ever replace man?" The machine beeps and whirs and spits out a response: "That reminds me of a story ..." Thompson says, "The digital realm is now no longer merely a conduit for folklore, but has become a performer in its own right as well" (2019:152). Guro Flinterud takes the same approach, seeing algorithms as digital participants in traditional processes: "the mechanisms at work on social media platforms are in fact not that different from the processes of tradition generally. Algorithms sort to sustain coherence, and in sorting they create something new. In this sense, it is fruitful to view the algorithm as a tradition participant" (2023:457). This does not mean we must consider bots our new interlocutors, any more than we consider ghosts or fairies research participants in and of themselves. Rather, it means these non-human entanglements will always reveal things about what we imagine it *means* to be human, for a particular group of people, at a particular place and time.

By these criteria, as long as there are still human (re)creators, human audiences, and human motivations in the circulation of AI-generated content, there is no compelling reason to discount these works from evaluation as folk art. This seems like a problem! Shouldn't a form of art that is being aggressively pressed upon us by the richest, most socially and politically destructive people in the world be a *worse fit* for folklore? This is not a call for narrower definitions of online folklore, definitions that try and inevitably fail to draw clear lines between the artisanal and the technological or between the vernacular and the institutional. Indeed, narrower definitions would abdicate responsibility to study the misuses of folklore that have created the present situation. If we restrict our areas of inquiry to art forms and communities that affirm our belief in the radical or emancipatory qualities of folklore, we abandon the political work we could be doing in favor of the fantasy that we do that work by default.

The vernacular embrace of AI does not necessarily make it subversive, rebellious, counterhegemonic, or any of the qualities we like to ascribe to folklore. Folklore's power to effect social change is not located in any individual use of it, but in its marginal positioning. If we accept AI art as digital folklore, we also accept that folklore has no power anymore—that the systems our discipline drew its critical charge from are sundowning. It is precisely because I do not want to abandon the subversive potential of folklore that I want us to expand our scope of

analysis, to more fully consider the economic conditions that make resistance possible. If we cannot scale our inquiries up, all we will be doing is fieldwork with fiddlers while Rome burns.

Conclusion: Make Folklore Marginal Again

It does not represent a significant departure from the history of the discipline to study AI-generated texts and images, because folklore has always been defined as much by its complex entanglements with technology as it has by its “purity” or “freedom” from it. The problem that AI presents for the study of folklore is not the loss of human creativity and connection— anxieties over the corrupting influences of technology are not just comfortably within the scope of the field; they have in large part defined it. New forms of creativity will arise from (and in resistance to) these technologies, and debates about the boundaries of humanity will not end with chatbots. If we want to resist technofeudalism, we should refer to our disciplinary history and remember what will be losing arguments.

Stakeholders in generative AI want it treated only as new technology, the transformative potential of which outweighs its social and environmental costs. But just as the printing press rewrote the rules for the ownership of culture, AI sets new conditions on creativity that pointedly recapture the voice the internet once gave to the folk and yoke it to technocratic power. As folklorists have documented for decades now, digital orality and communal creation of culture online represented an existential threat to the political and economic systems of modernity. Technofeudalism, as a project, exploits and nullifies that threat by replacing the powers we recognize (national governments and legal systems, university credentials, wage labor, the commodification of art) with new forms of social control (postnational technocracy, the commodification of identity). It is control that relies on our familiarity with the internet as a place of escape from and resistance to those old power structures, control that masquerades as play, self-expression, social critique, and community building.

Technofeudalism co-opts the power of the vernacular web; folklore is not marginal but central to these emergent political and economic geographies. Defining folklore in relation to the official, institutional, elite, or mass-produced has made the field marvelously adaptable and various in the communities and genres we study—our only center is the periphery. But this reciprocal relationship to the systems built by modernity ties the uses of folklore, and the work of folklorists, to a now-shifting frame. If we want digital folklore to retain its critical edge, we need a well-regulated internet with robust privacy and antitrust laws, where information doesn’t want to be free. Every hero needs a villain, and folklore needs capitalism and copyright law, its traditional foils. We need bad art, the friction of human connection, and the possibility of failure that is also the possibility of change. We need folklore to be marginal again, because that is where tricksters do their best work.

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How to Cite: Please cite the final published Version of Record (VOR) upon its release.
Alternative Provisional Citation: Willsey, K. (2027). The Work of Art in the Age of Technofeudalism. Accepted for publication in Journal of American Folklore 140(556). DOI: 10.5406/15351882.140.556.02

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Notes

¹ Amazon, for instance, in “stage 1 enshittification” was good to users (low prices, free fast shipping, effective search tools). In “stage 2,” it was good to vendors: it allowed them to pay to appear higher in search results, took a loss on sales to outcompete and shut down brick and mortar stores, and generally made a case that violations of antitrust law were in the interest of “consumer welfare.” In the third stage, it used its detailed information about merchant sales to clone their most popular products and place them higher in the search results, and used its “most trusted nation” status pricing (no vendor who offers their product on Amazon is permitted to sell it at a lower price anywhere else, even on their own website) to drive up prices at competitors. Even if you do not shop at Amazon’s website, you shop Amazon’s marketplace (Doctorow 2025:20-7).

²As legal scholar Lawrence Lessig (2004:8) says of Disney’s chokehold on folklore, no one can do to Disney what Disney did to the Brothers Grimm.

³ There are also content creators who re-enact fruitslop plotlines using props or costumes, as a way of (sincerely or strategically) avoiding the backlash against AI. As tempting as it might be to read this as subversive, we could also see it is on a continuum with an emerging market for writers and artists being paid pennies to recreate AI-generated images or humanize AI generated scripts.