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Folklore, History, and the Hillcrest Building

It has been such a tremendous honor to be able to return to UMBC as an alumnus to share how my experiences as an undergraduate ultimately prepared and inspired me to pursue a career as a folklorist and educator. Without question, my journey to becoming a college professor really sparked here, at UMBC. Now, as an assistant professor of communication at the State University of New York at Potsdam, I have a much deeper appreciation for just how special my time at UMBC truly was, particularly in reflecting upon how meaningfully impactful my American Studies faculty mentors were in shaping the course of my subsequent life trajectory. Through their guidance and support, as well as from the greater UMBC community as a whole, I found unwavering encouragement to develop my own interests and scholarly abilities. Perhaps most importantly, I learned the value of pursuing an active research agenda and to be undaunted by the challenges of documenting and analyzing the dynamics of everyday life—folklore and folk culture—in the United States of America.

Before I discuss my time and work at UMBC in greater detail, I should pause to provide a little additional information as to how I even made it to UMBC in the first place. I hail from Damascus, Maryland, a formerly rural (and now bustling) town on the outskirts of the Montgomery County line, backed right up against the converging boundaries of Frederick, Howard, and Carroll counties. I was always a good but not great student in high school—not for lack of intelligence or ability, but rather my penchant for reliably prioritizing “play” over work, especially with subject matters that I didn’t find particularly interesting or relatable (which, admittedly, included most subjects outside of English, art, and social studies). Nevertheless, I’m sure that if my former teachers were asked to select only one word to describe me, most would choose *enthusiastic* or something synonymous. And that has always been the case for me. Since I was little I’ve been curious about certain aspects of the world around me, eager to learn about all the small details within the larger picture, and along the way sometimes sparking downright obsessive measures to consume and then share new information with anyone who would listen. While I may not have risen to my full potential in high school, my thirst for knowledge was firmly in place... I just didn’t know what to do with it most days, and I certainly had no idea that it could be eventually channeled into a career. A few weeks after graduating from high school in June 2002 I enrolled full-time at Montgomery College, a great community college with campuses in Rockville and Germantown, Maryland. There, I was initiated into the rigors of student life and learned how to be successful as an undergraduate, committing serious time to

reading, writing, and the refinement of my own planning and organizational strategies. I found the classes mostly fulfilling and frequently challenging, and with more space to flesh out my own thoughts and feelings about courses' contents, I started to see a potential path forming in which I could envision becoming a public school teacher.

After a year of classes at Montgomery College I applied for admission to UMBC, and after being accepted, moved to campus in Fall 2003. (I am proud to say that UMBC was the *only* four-year college that I ever applied to for undergraduate admission.) I bounced around a couple of majors until one fateful day when I sat in on an "American Studies" class (AMST 260, I believe it was) about folklore in the United States. The instructor, Charley Camp, was the former Maryland state folklorist, and he beamed with joy in discussing Baltimore foodways, and later in lecturing about the works of Zora Neale Hurston and how the materials that comprised her work, both fictional and non-fictional, revealed so much insight into the human condition and the local and regional traditions and contexts therein. I was hooked. In short order, I decided to major in American Studies which, I think it's safe to say, is one of the best decisions I ever made. Under the tutelage of some of the best teachers and mentors I have ever had the pleasure to work with—Kathy Bryan, Warren Belasco, Ed Orser, Jason Loviglio, and Nicole King, among others—I finally found myself in an environment where I was tasked with actively exploring all the things that I was really interested in, which I could finally articulate: American folk and popular culture (from urban legends to comic books); ethnography and community studies; oral history and material culture; and mass media. Throughout the course of my academic studies and teaching career those topics have come under scrutiny from unfeeling friends and family who would ask why I chose to study "stuff that doesn't really matter." But on the contrary, they *do* matter a great deal; after all, these elements constitute a substantial part of the sociocultural, historical, and expressive makeup of the states, counties, towns, neighborhoods, and families that populate the U.S.A. They are reflections of us. I was so fortunate to not only have found encouragement from my faculty mentors in American Studies, but conviction to reinforce that encouragement—folks who said "Yes! This is worthy of research; and *you*, Trevor, should be the one to find out more about it because *you* are capable." And so I did.

The big research project that I undertook as a senior at UMBC involved a very large abandoned building that stood eerily just across the small parking lot among the Terrace Apartments on campus where I lived. Dressed in Georgian style architecture and dilapidated in appearance, no one seemed to really know what this 23,000 square foot behemoth once was or why it was no longer in use on campus, but rumors about the place certainly abounded. As it turned out, this place was the Hillcrest Building, which had been built in 1921 as a satellite facility for nearby Spring Grove State Hospital, located a little over a mile away. But a more compelling fact popped up during the initial stages of my research: the Hillcrest Building (also

noted in the historical and hospital's record as "The Spring Grove Psychopathic Hospital for Criminals," or simply "Criminal Building") was the first structure in the history of the United States to be designed specifically for the containment and rehabilitation of *criminally* insane patients (which, at the time, was the appropriate terminology for describing individuals who experienced bouts of psychosis and other forms of mental illness in conjunction with violent, socially deviant, or negligent lawbreaking actions or patterns of interaction). From March 1922 to 1965, the facility catered to these individuals in need of care and incorporated occupational rehabilitation into their routines, which included patients growing some of their own food. With the rise of the Clifton T. Perkins Hospital in Jessup, Maryland, the Hillcrest Building was phased out as the primary location for treating the state's criminally insane. The building and land surrounding it were eventually sold to the University System of Maryland, then pursuing the creation of a new Baltimore County campus for the state's public university array. In 1966, when UMBC opened its doors, the Hillcrest Building served as the new institution's first administration building. In the years to follow, Residential Life, numerous campus groups and organizations, and even a popular student hangout known as the Rathskeller, were based out of the structure. Sometime in the early 2000s, the doors were closed and plans for Hillcrest's demolition were made. Finding all of this information required visits to archives throughout the state (since no published scholarship about Hillcrest existed outside of Spring Grove's own publications), which led me to conducting interviews with former Hillcrest employees, and later talking to students about what they knew or thought they knew about the building and its seemingly hidden history. In chronicling the larger story, and in response to learning of plans to raze the building, I formed the Hillcrest Historical Society, a historic preservation group comprised of UMBC students and several members of the Catonsville and Arbutus community. While our efforts did lead to historic preservation surveys by the Baltimore and later Maryland Historical Trusts, the Hillcrest Building was ultimately demolished in 2007. Even so, the experience of navigating through a difficult subject matter and the often emotional struggles that accompany preservation work, I learned so much and carried my experiences with me into graduate school. Indeed, being so immersed in the research process, and then the process of sharing that research with others via written work or public presentations, caused me to realize that I wanted to do more than just teach; I wanted to be part of bigger intellectual conversations and contribute something to scholarly discourse. I learned from my experience studying the Hillcrest Building that I wanted to bring greater attention to topics that do not receive as much attention from academics and work to demonstrate how even somewhat unsavory or complicated issues and histories can still produce valuable insights for our collective understanding of the past and present.

Emboldened by the success and genuine fun I had while conducting my undergraduate research I decided to forego completing student teaching, with only four months to go before graduating (my parents, who paid for my college education, were not too thrilled, needless to say!). Instead, I applied and was accepted into graduate school; first, at Indiana University's top-ranked Folklore Institute, where I received my Master's degree in 2007, and later at Penn State University, Harrisburg, where I came full circle and earned a Ph.D. in American Studies in 2011, the first person to graduate from the school's new doctoral program. I've since authored or edited seven books (including *Maryland Legends: Folklore from the Old Line State*, which includes some materials culled from preliminary field interviews I conducted while still enrolled at UMBC), numerous articles, chapters, and book reviews, and have been an active participant within the folklore discipline. I am now getting to do what I was trained and encouraged to do throughout my formative years spent within the robust confines of Hilltop Circle. Getting to conduct ethnographic fieldwork—now a staple of my career as a folklorist—was enriching, fascinating, and so telling. Chasing down leads in an archive or hard to find book, and condensing vast amounts of notes into engaging, readable form prepared me for the kinds of tasks that frequently occupy my time these days.

At all points in life we, as humans, crave to be reassured of our worth and the value of what we bring to society. I submit that the college years, especially as students reach the precipice of entering the “real world,” that this reassurance is particularly critical. I came here as an overly energetic lad with ambition, but lacked direction, and I left with a mission to pursue my passion for the study of American folk culture without reservation (and to find a way to get paid to do it!). I was told that I mattered and that things I wanted to research mattered. I look back now and realize how uncertain *I* actually was about the validity of what I was trying to do, and I am so grateful and impressed at how the devoted folks of the American Studies department never gave me a chance to *really* doubt myself—I was always encouraged to press on. What a gift it was to have been surrounded by such a wonderful crowd of professionals. And now all of you, by virtue of being a part of this year's URCAD event, are a testament to that gift and its enduring spirit. Take advantage of the incredible resources and talent that surround you. Don't back down. Be bold. But most of all, *believe in yourself*. Research isn't some laborious task. It's personal and enjoyable. There is so much to be gained from embracing your own intellectual curiosity and fostering that thirst for knowledge that so many of you share. UMBC hosts that in spades!

Thank you so much for the honor and privilege to return to campus in shared celebration of the marvelous research that all of you have worked so hard to share with the world around you.