

Folklore and British Cultural Studies*

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As an American folklorist studying postcolonial literature in a cultural studies centre in England, I felt a bit colonised myself when, upon browsing in Fred Inglis's *Cultural Studies*, I read about "the large vacant spaces now being staked out by cultural studies" (p. 181). It reminded me of the nineteenth century maps of Africa, made by Europeans, that depicted the continent as an unfilled void, even though it teemed with people, cultures and boundaries. So, too, with cultural studies, which now is settling into intellectual territory also claimed by a number of other disciplines, including anthropology, popular culture studies, and folklore.

I have become a resistant reader of cultural studies texts, thinking sometimes as I read: *But what about folklore? Folklore did this long ago. Folklore does this better. Folklore has an answer to this problem.* I have concluded that folklore and *folkloristics* (a term recently adapted from European usage to refer to the study of folklore) are absent from cultural studies discussions and programmes in England because they are inadequately or wrongly understood – yes, in the land of their origins. As Gillian Bennett has pointed out, folklore has never thrived as an academic discipline in England, apparently because it has not been able to separate itself from its origins in a genteel English antiquarianism.

Consequently, many English academics tend to think that folkloristics is obsessed with inconsequential *survivals* and *revivals* – such as, for the former, the soulcaking play still given in Cheshire and, for the latter, the 1960s revival of folksongs. Of course, these, too, are manifestations of traditional folk culture, worth studying by folklorists or cultural studies scholars. But contemporary folklorists are much more interested in the emergent and dominant folk traditions that they find in everyday life right now, whether that be Monica Lewinsky joke cycles, AIDS Mary urban legends, Diana Princess of Wales grief rituals, or dense cultural descriptions and analyses such as Jack Santino's of U.S. railway porters' lives or Henry Glassie's study of Ulster village life.

To clarify how folklore complements cultural studies, I will discuss four important aspects of folkloristics as currently understood by folklorists: its analysis of cultural spheres, its sense of genre, its creative resistance, and its function in building and expressing communal culture across time and space.

A. Cultural Spheres

Although folklorists agree, with Raymond Williams, that "culture is ordinary" and that it constitutes a "whole way of life", and, with Susan Bassnett, that culture is "a complex network of signs, a web of signifying practices" (xviii), folklore offers a more discriminating analysis of the "whole" of culture than cultural studies does. Cultural studies seems to see culture as consisting of two competing spheres, "high" culture as opposed to "popular" culture – with popular culture covering a large territory that is undifferentiated, except on occasion when "mass media" is separately regarded from the rest of popular culture.

Folklore sees culture as consisting of three interacting spheres – academic, popular, and folk – each one of which is characterised by a different means of transmission. *Popular culture* is transmitted by the mass media to mass audiences, usually for the financial profit of the culture-producers. *Academic* (or *high, elite*) culture is transmitted in formal situations, such as classrooms, galleries and concert halls, to specialised audiences by the formally spoken word or the esoteric use of mass media. Usually it is sponsored by non-profit institutions, including the government. *Folk culture* is transmitted by *oral tradition* and *customary imitation*, usually in face-to-face situations, by members of informally organised groups. Although particular instances of the transmission of folklore may be laden with class meanings, folklorists find no inherent class bias in any of the three spheres. That is, in current European cultures the working class is affected by academic culture, the upper classes have their own oral and customary traditions, and all classes are affected perhaps equally by popular culture, which folklorists say is therefore the normative sphere for our cultural situation.

Cultural studies regards high culture as *official* culture and popular culture as *unofficial* culture. Folklorists tend to regard only folk culture as truly unofficial. Like academic culture, which is selfconsciously sponsored by non-profit organisations, popular culture is deliberately sponsored by for-profit agencies. Both manipulate their audiences toward a pre-determined end. Folk culture, on the other hand, is only unselfconsciously promoted by the groups and individuals who pass it on, usually with no intent to manipulate in the manner of academic or popular culture-producers.

In lumping together, in effect, popular and folk culture, cultural studies blurs some important distinctions between agency and reception and also ignores very important distinctions between culture transmitted by mass media (popular) and culture transmitted by word of mouth and customary example (folk). To some extent, the medium is indeed the message. By tending to ignore folk culture entirely, cultural studies ignores a vast area of human experience that is controlled by “ordinary” individuals and groups who, in the act of transmitting their lore, have no particular vested interest in the high culture or for-profit establishments and, are, in fact, typically resistant to both.

B. Culture and genre

The most useful contribution that folkloristics makes to the study of culture is a longstanding interest in the genres of cultural expression. In each of the three cultural spheres, one can distinguish, for instance, *verbal, customary* and *material* genres of expression. Verbal genres, or *mentifacts*, include names, proverbs, riddles, rhymes, legends, tales, ballads, among others. Customary genres, or *sociofacts*, include superstitions, customs, festivals, dances, dramas, gestures, games, etc. Material genres, or *artifacts*, include architecture, crafts, costumes, foods, etc.

Usually the genres of folk culture have equivalents in popular and academic cultural spheres. For instance, in *verbal* academic culture the art song, in popular culture the rock lyric, in folklore the children’s game song. Or in *customary* academic culture the specialist physician’s care, in popular culture the non-prescription drug, in folklore the herbal remedy.

Or in *material* high culture the custom-designed house, in popular culture the houses in a council estate, in folklife the stone cottage or log cabin. Hence one can fruitfully compare and contrast the official representation of Diana Princess of Wales in the formal funeral ceremonies (high culture) with tabloids' coverage of the event (popular culture) and with ordinary people's informal grief rituals for her at Kensington Palace and elsewhere (folk culture). Such distinctions are seldom made in cultural studies.

In fact, cultural studies seems shy about discussing and defining the genres of cultural expression, as is apparent in Corbett's modest proposal that cultural studies begin noticing, for instance, such generic expressions as the business memo, the club newsletter, the football fanzine, news reports and phone-in shows. In oral-traditional culture folklorists have identified hundreds of genres and subgenres, with new ones constantly being generated, thanks to new cultural phenomena such as office photocopiers, computer operations, and internet communication. Corbett prefaces his suggestions with a kind of apology for even raising the question of genres, which, because they are structured cultural practices, threaten to impose a hegemonic direction upon their users. (The same, of course, can be said about all communication by language.) But, like the sea, genres are there – at least in long-established constructions of them – and students of culture ignore genres to the peril or impoverishment of their enterprise.

The impoverished discussion of genres in cultural studies is illustrated by the work of Inglis and Denzin, both of whom claim that *narrative* or *story* can reveal the deepest insights into cultural experience. However, both critics have more in mind the notion of *discourse* – as in Lyotard on master narratives – than the traditional notion of story as a sequence of events, and consequently their categories and analyses become unnecessarily diffuse. Denzin, for instance, wants to elicit his informants' response to the film *Natural Born Killers*, but what he gets is explanation, not storytelling. In effect, he seeks not narrative but *folk literary criticism*, which seems to be a brand new idea to him but has been a longstanding concern of folklorists. Similarly, Inglis seeks out the “art” that lies in life histories, but he also accepts “theory” and “nationalism” as discourses fitting into the genre of “narrative”. Also, like Denzin, Inglis seems unaware that the *personal experience narrative* has been of longstanding concern to folklorists, who have identified conventional features of the genre, as these conventions are found both in a culture as a whole and also in the repertoire of an individual performer.

C. Resistance and Creativity

If the mainstream of cultural studies (at least in the U.S.) can be defined as a critical ethnography of ordinary life, then the common concerns of cultural studies and folkloristics are obvious. Folklorists have used anthropological methods at least since the 1950s, when William Bascom introduced the insights of Malinowski's functional anthropology to folklore studies. According to Jack Santino, folklore “has always produced resistant and oppositional scholarship” (1999) – selfconsciously since Amerigo Paredes' work in the 1970s and especially since the 1993 issue of *Western Folklore* devoted to the “politics of culture”.

Our folklore contains many obviously sexist, racist and homophobic practices – such as jokes, stereotypes, beliefs, proverbs and legends – that call for resistance. One reason for the abundance of seemingly oppressive forms is that folklore is often very private – even covert and underground – communication that enables people to express in such venues what they cannot express in public. The oppression inherent in other folklore is often more disguised, requiring closer critical examination. Conservative social rituals like hazing and racist-inclined urban legends like The Choking Doberman are examples.

Yet another kind of resistance in folklore that should be of keen interest to cultural studies is the way that much folklore shows resistance to – or at least re-visioning of – messages that all of us as *folk* receive from both academic and popular culture. Bearers of the folk tradition often convert popular culture to their own needs and tastes, as in teenage boys' conventionalised retellings of stories from their favourite horror films. The best example, though, is virtually the whole of *childlore*. Schoolchildren's own culture is almost entirely that of oral tradition and customary example. It often converts messages from popular and academic culture into resistant, subversive forms. Note, for instance, the horror experienced by parents and other grown ups – representing official, academic culture – when they are privileged to overhear genuine childlore and are shocked by its scatology, profanity, brutality and knowing sexuality.

In fact, most of the dynamically developing folklore genres today – office photocopy lore, computer lore, urban legendry – demonstrate that the ordinary person does not accept uncritically messages from official culture, whether popular or academic. Many, if not most, urban legends are cautionary tales about modern culture as it has been mediated to consumers through mass media and the academy. Teenage horror legends such as The Hook, The Dead Roommate and The Killer in the Backseat are often revived when horrible things happen in the local community. Nationwide, product legends like Kentucky Fried Rat, The Cat in the Microwave or Red Velvet Cake reveal consumers' deep suspicion of technology and modern business practices, as the analyses of Gary Allan Fine have convincingly shown.

Although cultural studies theorists often ponder the apparent victimisation of ordinary people by academic and popular culture, folklorists know otherwise because they see the creative ways whereby the folk modify and challenge the cultural messages that bombard them. If culture-producers at the top choose what they think others should accept, then the folk in their own ways also choose what they will accept, how, and to what degree. Here is the beginning of the cultural consensus that cultural studies practitioners sometimes despair of ever finding. Folklorists, like students of cultural studies, covet the opportunity to be present when culture is enacted. Ever since the collection of folklore items was superseded by the study of folklore items in their context of being transmitted, folklorists have focused on such moments of culture in action. Since the 1960s an *ethnography of speaking* approach has become a productive tool for the analysis of folklore, and the field has, more recently, blossomed into that of *performance studies*.

D. Community and Tradition

Two characteristics of folklore – its *traditional* nature and its association with *folk groups* – enable us to move beyond an atomistic understanding of discrete cultural practices and relate them to the evolving historical experiences of communities of people. Folklore examined in its performative context usually reveals something about an entire community's culture because folklore almost always expresses the identity of a group, whether defined by age, gender, occupation, ethnicity, association or region. Folklorists use a liberal definition of group: *Any two or more people with one or more things in common, meeting in face-to-face situations*. Since oral transmission will always result in *multiple and variant forms*, the extent to which folklore items are the same from performance to performance will be a kind of index of the common images and ideas that any one group holds about itself or others. The variant elements will indicate what is new or creative in the particular performance situation.

There always will be common elements, of course, because folklore is not just anything oral but, rather it is *oral tradition* – meaning that any one instance of folklore has a history of multiple prior uses, stretching back in time for at least several days – or even hundreds of years, as is the case, for instance, with urban legends such as The Spider in the Hairdo, The Vanishing Hitchhiker and The Child Castrated in the Mall, even though they seem as contemporary as today's newspaper headlines. The persistent elements in the transformation of any one folklore item through time speak to a history of cultural endorsement by the group who use it. Jan Brunvand's analysis of the historical evolution of The Choking Doberman legend is a brilliant recovery of changing cultural experiences, fears and biases. Cultural studies sometimes recovers a similar cultural evolution in the reception of literary texts. My point is that the same can also be done with texts from the oral tradition that have been unselfconsciously endorsed by folk groups in our culture.

E. The Sibling Relationship

When it occurs, the encounter of cultural studies with folkloristics will replicate that fine moment at the beginning of Book 2 of Edmund Spenser's *The Faerie Queene*, when Guyon encounters a strange knight in the wasteland. Goaded by the scheming Archimago, Guyon attacks the stranger, assuming that he is an enemy. But Guyon soon discovers that his seeming enemy is actually the Red Cross Knight, his brother in the service of Gloriana. So they raise their visors and embrace instead. What will the embrace of folklore and cultural studies – brothers-in-arms – entail?

Folklore will acknowledge that, in its analysis of culture, it is not always resistant, it limits its concerns to one cultural sphere – the oral traditional one – and it often ignores the academic and popular cultures that impinge upon it and overlap with it. It will also admit that its categories blur and leak and that it is more of a “studies” than an academic discipline as such.

Cultural studies will think hard about its claim that its field “... includes all cultural practices and products and the assessment of the processes of their production and consumption; the process of their representation and exchange; and the interrelationship of all

these” (Ashcroft, 127). It will probably admit that, although it has succeeded in levelling the claims of high culture, it tends to neglect analysis of high culture in favour of analysis of popular culture – and to ignore folk culture altogether.

Fortunately, folkloristics continues to move toward cultural studies in theory and practice, as witnessed by the article “Cultural Studies” in Brunvand’s encyclopedia and by the exchange in the *Journal of American Folklore* between Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, who says folklore should become cultural studies, and Elliot Oring, who says it should not. Alas, I see no corresponding movement toward folklore in British cultural studies. Folklore remains a neglected or scorned field of study in England, even though, despite sporadic identity crises, it flourishes in the United States. For instance, in 1999 both directors of The National Endowment for the Arts and The National Endowment for the Humanities were folklorists. Although a number of British universities offer classes in folklore, the only graduate folklore degree programmes in Britain are at the School of Scottish Studies in Edinburgh and the University of Sheffield. The best degrees in the commonwealth are offered at Memorial University in Newfoundland. Especially in this multicultural era, when many cultures of a richly traditional nature are flourishing – and changing – in England, folklore deserves a renewal in the academy.

Departments of cultural studies, which are on the ascendancy in English higher education, can do something about it – by hiring a folklorist, by offering a class or even a degree in folklore, and by seeking out the insights of folklore studies in order to gain a more holistic view of human beings living in community.

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