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The Territorial Impulse

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Response by Stephanie Kane

The Territorial Impulse

Folk performances—and folkloristic discourse about them—abound with place and space markers. The latter may refer to a refuge, a stage, a community, an epicenter; to a genealogical landscape, a bureaucratic maze, or an ideological split.¹ These markers help orient and ground our activities, but to what extent are they also a means of *claiming* the places and spaces we reference? I believe that it is useful to analyze the ways in which territorial impulses, such as mapping, structure our fieldwork, writing, and social action so that we may begin to contemplate their effects. Following the writings of David Harvey, “Cartography [or mapping] is about locating, identifying and bounding phenomena and thereby situating events, processes and things within a coherent spatial frame” (2001:220). These operations impose a spatial order on phenomena and play a key role in the formation of personal and political subjectivities. In this sense, mapping includes mental and cognitive maps, as well as externally visualized representations based on grids. My hypothesis is that *culturally specific spatial codes* underlie the intertwining discursive currents of folklore and ethnography in particular ways; that the folk—those elusive, embodied objects of our disciplinary desire—are textually realized (in part) by us through patterned invocations of place and space. Take, for example, de Certeau’s mythic surveillance peak on the 110th floor of the World Trade Center in New York City. He brings our attention to the textured land of urban folk as surveyed with a pilot’s-eye view:

The ordinary practitioners of the city live “down below,” below the thresholds at which visibility begins. They walk—an elementary form of this experience of the city; they are walkers, *Wandersmänner*, whose bodies follow the thicks and thins of an urban “text” they write without being able to read it. These practitioners make use of spaces that cannot be seen; their knowledge of them is as blind as that of lovers in each other’s arms. The paths that correspond in this intertwining, unrecognized poems in which each body is an element signed by many others, elude legibility. It is as though the practices organizing a bustling city were characterized by their blindness. The networks of these moving intersecting writings compose a manifold story that has neither author nor spectator, shaped out of fragments of trajectories and alterations of spaces: in relation to representations, it remains daily and indefinitely other. (1984:92)

I would like to use this panoptic portal as an entry into the uniquely imagined, empirically verifiable, and walkable set of landscapes in which Martha Norkunas, Barbara Chandler and Carl Lindahl, Kwesi Yankah, Philip Nusbaum, and Rachel Fleming engage with various folks and institutions. This commentary builds on my observation that the impulse to tie image and narrative to some cognitive and/or geographical map is a methodological necessity for an engaged research logistics (see Kane 2004). Here, I consider this collection as a composite semantic domain within which the territorial impulse can be explored. It is testimony to the richness and depth of these essays that one can approach them experimentally in this manner. What follows is a series of space-code readings that focus on 1) the range of ways that folklorists imagine the spaces and places of the folk, their audiences, and funders; 2) how spatial concepts function as implicit ordering principles in folklore discourse; and 3) how territoriality—the naming and claiming of places and spaces—is emplotted in the narratives that result from fieldwork exchange.

Linking Silenced Ancestral Narratives to Public Sites

On Martha Norkunas's "Narratives of Resistance and the Consequences of Resistance"

By drawing three narratives from the heirs of those once silenced by sexism and racism into the world of the *Journal of Folklore Research* readers, Norkunas turns life histories of apparently ordinary people into history-writ-large. Each narrative is founded on a displacement and/or a disappearance involving some refusal, alienation, or forgetting communicated across a landscape. She creates intimacy in her essay by beginning with, and in a sense repairing, her own “broken home” story, which is also her mother’s 1960s “single mom” story. The founding moment involves the five children, dishes, and furniture moving across the country back to wherever it was her mother had come from. The folklorist compares her work with that of filmmaker Rea Tajiri, who watches with her audience a film sequence of a woman kneeling before a spout, filling a thermos, and splashing water on her face, the framed scene illuminating her mother’s silenced past in the American Japanese internment camps in California. The folklorist and the filmmaker, two daughters,

“broke through the silence and politicized the places, images, and story fragments.”

The second story is about racial injustice, linking Virginia to Texas and slavery days to the present. It begins with an eight-year-old girl born into slavery in Virginia who is given away as part of a dowry, sold twice without her family, and eventually taken as far away as Texas. The teller is the slave girl's great-granddaughter, African American educator and civil rights activist Dorothy Robinson speaking from her own white house on a hill, itself an appropriated monument on the Texas landscape. The genealogical impulse gives way in Robinson's telling to a more immediate crisis: the recent murder of her husband, who, like herself, was an activist. His absence from the airport arrival terminal triggers a foreboding in her that proves justified. The subsequent declaration by the sheriff and the chief of police (apparently verifying without proof) that the shotgun blast to her husband's chest was not a homicide, but a suicide, resonates with the slave girl's life story and serves as a reminder of the perpetuation of American racism.

The third story is about an historic place named Winedale, owned by the University of Texas. Norkunas and her students do an archaeological reading of its landscape, looking for evidence of African Americans who once lived and worked there but whose presence has largely disappeared beneath the history of their German owners. The researchers ask: Whose story of the past is the official site telling? They look to the landscape to narrate what the tellers, dead and gone, cannot.

Monuments mobilize arrangements in space, tying public memory to landscape (cf. Trouillot 1995). In Norkunas's interpretation, museums are monuments of a special kind, active sites for the negotiation of a nation's past in the present. She believes that discovering narratives of resistance tied to public places can open up and provide a stage for a wider range of meanings than those that usually circulate in our contests over regional and national history. Thus the process of doing folklore, linking sites to changing narratives, she argues, can preserve the space of resistance.

Configuring museums and historic sites as contexts for social interaction creates open yet protected places for peaceful confrontation among folk with different perspectives on truth and reality. This project strikes me as a crucial element in building a healthy public-cultural sphere. One question that arises in different ways in all the collection's essays pertains to the push-and-pull of particular places:

where and for whom do these sites pull their stories, their audiences, and their financial resources?

The Historic-Geographic Method and Narrative Truth

On Barbara Chandler's and Carl Lindahl's "Lloyd Chandler's 'Conversation with Death'"

One day, folklorist Carl Lindahl met a Washington, D.C., copyright specialist named Jan Sohayda who was researching a copyright case for the Chandler family at the American Folklife Center in the Library of Congress. Drawing and storing materials from many places, this monumental national archive served first as a point of intersection and then as a point of joint departure for the folklorist and copyright specialist, who subsequently traveled together to North Carolina where Sohayda introduced Lindahl to the Chandler family. Lindahl's and Sohayda's goal was to reverse what they believed to be a folkloristic error of received tradition that attributed the song "Conversation with Death" to British broadsides via the southeastern U.S. through "tradition" rather than to a specific individual named Lloyd Chandler. Eventually, the folklorist and the copyright specialist were able to establish a case that Chandler composed the distinguished song in 1916.²

Lindahl's essay explicitly focuses on mapping as a tool, for he uses the historic-geographic method with excellent results. Combining syntax and cartography, he compares lines of song texts and plots them precisely on a regional map. Traveling to Tennessee, North Carolina, Kentucky, Virginia, Alabama, and Georgia, he activates the landscape of the song, documenting through interviews the song's performance and content. In this way, he sifts through the lyric correspondences that become the facts on the way to the very particular kind of *evidentiary* truth that can substantiate copyright claims. He combines this evidentiary truth with that derived from a different method, life history. That alternative mode of data collection gives him access to the complex and more ambivalent *emotional* truth of the Chandler family, whose passion to claim the song for the patriarch's memory motivates this collaborative work.

Barbara Chandler is Lloyd's daughter-in-law, but had known Lloyd Chandler since she was a little girl. She recalls running and jumping off the porch of her family's house, which was about five feet off the

ground, and being caught in the preacher's arms. Lindahl opens the essay in Barbara Chandler's voice, telling how her father-in-law came to compose his song. She reconstructs his conversion in the barn and its consequences—how when drunk as a skunk he faced death, met his maker, and lived to preach about it through the song in question as he walked his painfully lame body around the region that Lindahl would retrace many decades later. Much of the time, while spreading his doleful tune to singers in other audiences, he left his faithful wife, Nola, at home with the children.

Place and space form a dynamic grid underlying the genealogical impulse motivating this telling. Emphasizing his dissolute state, his extenuating circumstances, the barn becomes a monument of spiritual transformation, the place of the miracle that activates the rural folk through walking, talking, and song.

I understand Lindahl to mean that folklorists are by definition advocates, and that we should put folk understanding of the truth before our own in order to make it palpable to other folk (our audiences) via our crafted representations of the facts and feelings involved.³ I can accept this assessment of our role, but would like a better understanding of the function of mapping in the making of the composite truth at which Lindahl arrives. Do the spatializing practices inherent in the two research methods (historic-geographic and life history) have the same significance or effects? What about the way some scholars classify folk performance by geographical location? Are these schemes so fundamental to the scholarship on expressive culture that without them there would be chaos? Spatial coding strikes me as an efficient way of ordering the world, but I can't help wondering whether, as a general orientation, it distorts our sense of stewardship by emphasizing certain social, material, and symbolic relationships, and leaving others in the shadows by perpetuating models of static—rather than dynamic—spatial frames of reference (Harvey 2001:223).

Geography and Rhetorics of Denial

On Kwesi Yankah's "Narrative in Times of Crisis: AIDS Stories in Ghana"

Both AIDS and superstition are emblems of African desperation, unacceptable elements of cultural identity. In Yankah's telling turn of

phrase, sub-Saharan Africa has become one of the “stigmatized geographical entities.” In the folk and folkloristic discourse on AIDS in Ghana presented in his essay, place and space are key terms in the negotiation of risk and illness; stigma hangs over all like a sky with a tornado in it.

Concepts of place and space mediate realities of risk and illness, while the connections between them are actively repressed. The most general example is the association of AIDS with foreigners and sojourners to foreign lands. Repressed in this formulation is knowledge of how sex among locals contributes to HIV transmission patterns. Vague distancing gestures attributing HIV risk to geographic and ethnic distance are flexible. By pushing feelings of unpredictability and vulnerability from here to there, toward those unlucky enough to be categorized as “other,” people can explain disease events in any particular locale in such a way that stigma and anxiety are deflected away from themselves (which would be satisfactory, if reliance on such explanations didn’t also increase risk and rely on scapegoating). In this way, place and space metaphors can be readily used to logically organize representations of myriad types of encounters (risk behaviors), real and imagined.⁴

Geography is deployed most explicitly in the rhetoric of denial as a cause of disease and also as a cure—not for disease, but for the associated stigma. Yankah collected Abeku’s and Mama’s narratives in 1987, early in the pandemic. They represent in microcosm male and female versions of the story of thousands of Ghanaian laborers who migrate to Côte D’Ivoire to work, living apart from family. Many eventually return HIV-infected; many return home only to die. In 1987, there was no effective treatment for HIV/AIDS, and although the doctors may have known that Abeku’s and Mama’s opportunistic infections were indeed symptomatic of it, they apparently did not share the diagnosis with their patients. Neither this man nor this (unrelated) woman indicated to Yankah that they understood that they had AIDS. It was easier, perhaps, to mistake it for cholera, which similarly causes diarrhea and vomiting.

They did seem to know enough to vaguely link their illness with their sexuality, though the link may have primarily been a result of Yankah’s prompting. Abeku’s wife originally went with him to Côte D’Ivoire, but she did not stay. In her absence, he looked for sex with Ghanaian prostitutes countless times (no mention of condoms).

Mama's husband left her and nine children in financial hardship. She went to Côte D'Ivoire in search of work, eventually selling bread for a living. She became the lover of a man who got her pregnant and asked her to see a doctor, which she was afraid to do because she lacked immigration papers. Eventually she went to a physician who told her that her pregnancy carried some disease, whereupon her man disappeared. Another lover also had a disease, she said. She knew several women in town who returned to Ghana and died—as did she not long after the interview.

There is an underlying assumption in these two early stories that the unknown fatal disease came from outside Ghana, from Côte D'Ivoire. But think about it: With all the coming and going, and all the millions of exchanges of sexual fluids taking place in these locales, what might have been outside initially could not stay outside for long. Surely by 2002, when Yankah did his next set of interviews, the recognition of HIV/AIDS must have become commonplace, one would think. But evidently not. Solo was a man who became friends with a wealthy European and went to Nigeria with him in 1980, leading the high life and breaking off communication with his family in Ghana. Then, Solo's father said:

Last year, November 4th, 2002, I sat in the courtyard here, when a taxi stopped by this house. Who was this, I wondered. It was 3:30 P.M. The driver and his assistant got down and took the stranger's hand luggage to my sitting room.

Whoever it was did not come out of the taxi, but was helped by the driver and his assistant to walk. A fragile man it was, extremely thin, weak, pale: he looked like a living skeleton. He crawled slowly towards me and picked himself up to embrace me. I asked myself, who is this that wants to embrace me? Who is this? Who is this?

Less than two months after his son Solo's arrival, his father said:

I heard three birds cry out in the neighborhood. One was perched on the roof of my building, and one on the wall. Another was in the tree. The birds let out a shrill cry. I rushed to the bedroom and brought out my local shot gun; but I was too late. They had flown away. The birds are death announcers. They were akpavi, crows. This happened three days before Solo died.

Given his understanding of his household's respectability, and how that respectability had to be maintained, Solo's father attributed his son's illness to supernatural causes. And, if the cause was to be something medical, tuberculosis was thought more likely than the unmen-

tionable AIDS. Indeed, Yankah finds that both TB and cholera (which can also be fatal) provide an acceptable camouflage for those with AIDS. In addition to sharing symptoms with HIV/AIDS, TB and cholera have the benefit of being transmitted innocently, merely by breathing air and drinking water. I often wonder, how powerful are the illusions of safety smoked in the pipe of deviant imaginings? Mass death does not seem to be making enough of an impression! Even so, in the panorama of forms of denial, more respectable than even cholera or TB is the father's spatialized image of the three ensorcelled birds.

A bare skeleton on all fours, Yaa and her spectral story come last. She carries a message from a spiritualist: Her mother bewitched her. Bravely resisting the powerful instinct to die at home, she secretly boarded a bus at the market (having secured the aid she needed to get on). By that act she at once distanced herself from her family and her family from the stigma of AIDS. As Yankah tells this story, which he managed to get from one of her cousins, her suicidal journey left the family able to believe that they were somehow protected by the witchcraft diagnosis she received, and able to receive the pity that was withheld from those families otherwise touched by AIDS.

I believe that we can work with folk discourse to create culturally appropriate models of risk reduction. It would be a mistake to be overly general in our dismissal of African (and African diasporic) understandings of HIV/AIDS, unscientific as they may be (see for example Kane 1998). An instance of something I might take seriously when doing HIV prevention is this Kenyan woman's perception of safe sex: "If you must have sex with him, insist on him going down, and you coming on top" (from Nzioka 1996:572, in Yankah p. 185). This bodily arrangement does not strike me as all that preposterous, given the coercive implications of the words "if you must." Being on top gives the woman some degree of control over how much rough treatment she will allow her vagina, very probably lowering the risk of transmission from (his) semen to (her) blood in some cases. This is not to say, of course, that a condom would not be better. But the notion of the woman taking control could be the first step in condom use for a woman who has access to condoms. In any case, folk perceptions should not be easily dismissed as mere superstitious barriers to rational understanding.

Regional Cash Distribution Centers for the Arts

On Philip Nusbaum's "Folklorists at State Arts Agencies: Cultural Disconnects and 'Fairness'"

The regional cash distribution centers called state agencies for the arts have a lot of rules to follow. The folk have to fight for what they get, and state folklorists like Philip Nusbaum locate them, help them to apply for agency funding, and help the agency recognize the usefulness of their talents. He finds that if the folk are defined as "underserved constituents," if a little low culture is mixed with the high, if the intensive cultivation of elites is balanced out a bit with some support for rural, ethnic, and/or native folks who learned their art from *their* grandparents (not *other* people's grandparents), then there might just be a niche for folk arts in the arts establishment—or at least a toehold.

The spatial practices of being a folklorist in this context provide an interesting contrast to participant-observation-based ethnography. As staff in an agency, you don't get time or resources for doing long-term fieldwork because there's really no need for the in-depth understanding of art that hasn't already been digested as high art. The relationship between narrative and map, so enlivened by the rhythms and unpredictabilities of everyday life in long-term participant observation, snaps shut. Nusbaum finds that the further folk are from the center of power, the lower their level of interest in applying for funding; it's too much work for a long shot. The scales of judgment are tilted toward operating support for organizations—preferably those with a staff and buildings—such as symphony orchestras. The scales are tilted away from project support, a category that includes ephemeral events and artists without institutions (like small music ensembles that have to load and unload instruments before and after each performance).

The conclusion we must draw from Nusbaum's work is that state agencies primarily distribute funds according to a pattern of institutional self-reproduction. At the same time, he is careful to point out the triumphs of the folk arts field. There is now a "critical mass of products and projects" and "meaningful dialogue about them." In addition, he writes, "Folklorists at state arts agencies are empowered to do projects that derive from the insights they have gained from study-

ing folklore and that result in benefits to the cultural lives of community members.”

Nusbaum’s suggestions for the development of the role of folk art are spatialized: He advocates establishing an expanding system of networks of folk artists, linking region to nation and world (creating a folk artist directory on the Internet, for example) and fostering partnerships among agencies. In tandem with this multi-leveled information net, he proposes the mobilization of “performance packages” that will thicken community interconnections at event sites (he says that many performances are by definition folk occasions because of the community connections they engender) as well as in-community folk arts education. What happens to a cultural locale when it is hooked up with all the other locales? This key question, which Nusbaum no doubt will confront in future work, is central to understanding folk art in a globalized, mass-mediated terrain.

It is also a question that Rachel Fleming asks in the final essay on traditional Irish music.

Local Talent and National Identity

On Rachel Fleming’s “Resisting Cultural Standardization: Comhaltas Ceoltóirí Éireann and the Revitalization of Traditional Music in Ireland”

In Fleming’s analysis of the Irish-based cultural organization Comhaltas, the compelling creative tensions that fuel the lively debate about the authenticity of Irish music are governed by spatial metaphors. She identifies three parallel and interacting sets of tensions associated with music as an Irish cultural symbol and Comhaltas as a stage for debate: 1) tension between traditional music as a form of communication that, on the one hand, develops over time in isolated localities and as one that, on the other, functions as a unifying symbol of national and ethnic identity; 2) tension between a national history committed both to locally based resistance to centralized rule and to reproducing a distinctive, uniform Irish identity that functions as a clear contrast to the English other; and 3) organizational tension between local and national levels of Comhaltas itself and between the organization as a whole and unaffiliated musicians.

The institutional infrastructure of Comhaltas is hierarchically elaborated using a series of nested spatial metaphors: local branches, county boards, provincial councils, and a central executive council (CEC). The CEC is the public face of the organization and, as such, has a building, i.e., a monument on the public landscape; for some, that monument is a controversial use of resources that (recalling the tensions brought up in Nusbaum's essay) might otherwise be spent for programs of musical education and performance. There is also an international diasporic dimension: Comhaltas has branches in New York City constituted in part by Irish Americans.

The creative tension inherent in the organization's structure and in its cultural and historical context is also manifested in the spatial arrangement of performance. Fleming describes her experience of observing, one afternoon at the 1999 Fleadh Cheoil, both an informal session and the type of formal competitions that Comhaltas cultivates:

. . . First, I joined some teenaged musicians gathered in the street for a spontaneous session. The musicians sat on crates and chairs borrowed from a nearby pub and faced each other in a rough circle, with a crowd standing around them. . . .

In contrast, the senior fiddle competition was much more performance oriented, similar to a formal music concert. At least a hundred people—parents, spectators, and competitors—were seated or stood facing the stage in the small theater of a local school. At the front of the room, two judges sat at a table and a lone chair stood on the stage.

Place and space operate here in cognitive, organizational, and performance modes. Spatial practices are central to the very definition of this musical tradition, which is locally rooted and yet operates on the world stage.

As Lindahl's essay shows, geographic data can become especially salient around issues of song ownership (see also Goodman 2002). There is, however, a fascinating contrast to the commitment to fair ownership determinations that is represented by a fiddler named Maighréad Ní Mhaonaigh, who plays with a successful music group: "The best thing is to compose tunes and not have people recognise them as newly-composed, that they slip back into the tradition. For me, that's the biggest thrill of all" (in Fleming, n. 11, p. 254; cf. McCann 2002:81). If the thrill for him is creating music that is so attuned to a musical and social experience of some place in Ireland that it enters the dynamic flow of tradition without mark, then what happens if and when many of the musician's transactions transcend this inspirational geography?

Conclusion

Can an area of knowledge, a song, a locale and its people be territorialized and thereby be prepared for conflict? How deeply embedded is the need to claim and defend a territory in the work of folklore advocacy? To what extent is the territorial not merely an impulse but an imperative in this work?²⁵ These are questions we need to examine not just retroactively as I've done here, but while we are engaged in the field and in the museums and agencies where we work, so that we can recursively build an understanding of the complex effects of our cognitive reliance on spatial codes. I thank the authors of this collection for providing such a rich ground for beginning to consider these questions.

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Notes

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1. Following de Certeau's definition, a place is any delimited field with an instantaneous configuration of positions that implies stability. A space comes into existence when one considers the intersections of mobile elements, the ensemble of movements deployed within it (1984:117).

2. As Lindahl points out, the song has also become a possibly lucrative commodity, since its lyrics were quoted in the Grammy-winning song in the film *O Brother, Where Art Thou?* (though money does not seem to be the issue here).

3. Rather than get caught up in the conundrums of self and other, I tend to think that we best imagine the other as always more or less a part of ourselves, at least in so far as folklorists and ethnographers desire human contact and understanding.

4. Always remember Lévi-Strauss (e.g., 1975): Magical thinking is also logical thinking.

5. The *Oxford English Dictionary* defines "territorial imperative" as the need to claim and defend a territory. The earliest usage refers to the following 1920 quotation from E. Howard's *Territory in Bird Life* (vi. 228): "Do these battles . . . contribute towards the attainment of the end for which the whole territorial system has been evolved?"

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