

Ensuring Vitality Through Diversity: Folklorists, the Comparative Impulse, and the Appreciation of Culture

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Folkloristics is essential to the appreciation of human culture and creativity—inside and outside the academy—for two main reasons. First, the comparative impulse in folkloristics and the accompanying concept of “version” permits thought beyond one bounded culture area and time period. Second, contemporary folklore studies, due to its interdisciplinary perspective, represents a potentially powerful force for intellectual vigor in the academy.

Folklore is a vital field of study because of its comparative impulse (and the concomitant notion of “version”). This encourages us to think beyond a single closed culture area and/or historical time period. The idea that there is something real or tangible that a number of different groups of people did, said, or made over an extended time period that was also changed to fit each local circumstance supplies a “missing link” that can make the study of people truly meaningful. For example, “Cinderella” (AT 510) could be told in any number of ways but that tale tellers choose to portray her so similarly again and again is a potentially revolutionary concept. This perspective—that humans share certain ways of life across time and space, yet exhibit an awe-inspiring diversity in the way these shared cultural lifeways are expressed—is one that everyone needs to know because it encourages both an appreciation for diversity and a sense that we are all connected. Folklore research and teaching “spreads the word” about this in a variety of ways. This, in turn, leads to my second point.

The scholars devoted to contemporary folklore studies display a fascinating, eclectic mix of theoretical and moral standpoints. In this age of downsizing, subsuming departments into other disciplines, and the rise of cultural studies and other departments with names like “world cultures” in the place of folklore or anthropology, we risk over-homogenizing the fields of social science and the humanities into one dominant paradigm with little or no room for movement. At any given time, theses and dissertations written by folklore graduate students are so diverse, theoretically and methodologically, that a variety of worldviews are successfully being represented. It is not our unity that makes folklore so appealing to me, it is precisely the opposite—our diversity.

This is not an aesthetic preference of mine; it is a deeply held moral conviction. Folkloristics, because of its interdisciplinary character, can serve as a powerful force for intellectual vigor in the academy. Every time I try to “toe the line” at the ideological center of our field, I fail miserably. And that bodes well for intellectual pursuits as well as for fostering appreciation of the complexity of human beings on the part of other human beings, including the public at large. Diversity ensures vitality and disallows a tyranny of the majority that would lead to fascism or totalitarianism. I am painfully aware, as the annals of history teach us if we would only listen, that nothing good can come when one perspective is permitted to prevail too completely. Such predominance leads, in the smaller picture, to strangulation and stagnation of cultural studies (anthropology, literary theory, and so on)—after all, how many times can you say the same thing in the same way? In a larger sense, however, such predominance of one way of looking at people can only lead to further oppression, whether in overt action or in covert maintenance of the status quo. One paradigm cannot, now or ever, do adequate justice to the rich complexity that is human culture. The more perspectives we adopt in our search for understanding the better, because I believe that the worst crime we can commit is to convince ourselves that we have people “all figured out.” Folklorists, with their interdisciplinary perspective, utilize a number of theoretical and methodological paradigms to help them interpret cultural phenomena. This both reflects and engenders a respect for the complexity of human beings and their creative expressions.

We need to study folklore because the comparative impulse and the idea of “version” allows us to see beyond merely one group at one time, and because contemporary folklore studies, in its very diversity and interdisciplinary nature can ensure resistance against over-homogenization from theoretical, methodological, and ethical perspectives. Listening to, or observing, the “stuff” that people “put out there” in the world is a respectful and humane way to think about humans. People “doing stuff” creatively, intentionally, and intelligently—these are the words I want to hear associated with human culture and its study. And that is what folklore can offer.