

Feminist Theory and Folklore

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Feminist theories and approaches, while they have been extremely valuable to the development of folklore as a discipline, have only recently begun to be recognized for their importance (Mills 1993; Stoeltje 1988b). Contemporary folklorists have begun to ask what can be learned from women's experience—whether that experience includes being a homemaker, rodeo cowgirl, or well-known rap artist (Keyes 1993; Lanser 1993; Levin 1993; Stoeltje 1988a). Feminist folklorists have looked to women's experience and their expressions of this experience in all its various forms to examine the reality of women's lives in various cultures and contexts. By focusing on women's experience, these feminist scholars have explored areas and genres previously ignored or overlooked by male fieldworkers and folklorists. In addition, they have developed new theoretical perspectives and methods that extend the scope and applications of folklore studies.

In order to discuss the various relationships folklore has had with feminist theory it seems necessary to first explore two fundamental questions—what is feminism? and is there *a* feminism? Certainly all feminist theory “posits gender as a significant characteristic that interacts with other characteristics, such as race and class, to structure relationships between individuals, within groups, and within society as a whole” (Rosser 1992:536–37). Feminists have argued that gender is a fundamental organizing category of experience; sexual inequality is a cultural construct; and male perspectives have dominated fields of knowledge, shaping paradigms and methods (Babcock 1987). However, the ways that each of the many existing feminisms posit gender as an organizing category of experience vary widely. Furthermore, every discipline has its own approach to applying the tenets of these varying feminisms.

Feminist theory began its relationship with folklore in an era of radical questioning of previously held assumptions. During the 1970s as the “young Turks” (Dorson 1972:45) developed new perspectives and laid waste to old definitions, feminists coming out of the late 1960s women's liberation movement stepped in and added to the general deconstruction of folklore theory and method (Paredes and Bauman 1972; Farrer 1975). While these two revolutionary

movements perhaps had different specific goals, their larger goals were similar: to broaden the scope of folklore study and redefine the parameters of who might be called the folk (Babcock 1987; Stoeltje 1988a, 1988b).

Feminist folklorists, using the consciousness raising movement as a base, argued that, "traditionally, knowledge, truth, and reality have been constructed as if men's experiences were normative, as if being human meant being male" (Personal Narratives Group 1989:3). In a specific sense, feminist approaches in the field of folklore have been concerned with establishing gender as a fundamental category for the analysis of cultural experience and creative artistic expression. Feminist folklorists took their cue from early practitioners of feminist theory who attempted to reveal ways in which female experience was ignored, denied, and devalued in the production of knowledge. From this point of emergence, feminist theories have developed, spread, and become increasingly more complex until today it is difficult to identify one system of thought that could be called feminist theory. In our current state of post-deconstructionist critique it is most accurate to speak of the various *feminisms* that exist alongside one another, sometimes in harmony, other times in strife. Feminist theorists struggle to find alternative voices, methods, and structures in which to present gendered experience. This struggle has taken feminist theory through various phases, causing it to develop into what is today a polyvocal philosophy—a Pandora's Box of critical approaches. As Patricia Clough writes, "academic feminist thought increasingly has been marked by debates, often difficult but profoundly productive, about how to articulate the differences among feminists and therefore how to theorize a feminist politics characterized by diversity" (1994:1–2).

Today, the different branches of feminist theory construct, argue, and analyze gender as a significant category in a variety of ways. Like most theories, feminist theory has a long and complex history. In Western European political and social thought, its roots date back at least to the 18th Century. In the 1700s early liberal feminists such as Mary Wollstonecraft attempted to advance the political and social status of women through their activist writings and labors. Contemporary feminist theories and theoreticians range from essentialist to existentialist to psychoanalytic to Marxist to womanist to radical and separatist to the inclusively titled feminisms of difference; they derive from anthropological, psychoanalytic, linguistic, historical, deconstructionist, and literary sources and schools. Yet, feminisms generally fall into two basic divisions: feminisms of equality and feminisms of difference (Grosz 1994a). In other words, some feminist theorists begin with the assumption that men and women are basically the same, while others begin with the assumption that men and women are fundamentally different. I have chosen here to generally discuss the broad

divisions which can be drawn between these two general types of feminist theories in order to lay out some of their basic assumptions, and then I focus on those forms of feminist theory that are most often used by and applicable to folklore and folkloristic methodologies.

Feminist theory, in the United States, is closely linked to the women's liberation movement of the late 1960s and has been connected to political activism and struggle within and outside the academy. At a basic level the fundamental goal of feminist theory has been dual in nature: to provide a perspective that relies on female experience and uses this female experience in the production of knowledge, and to respond to women's political struggles and objectives (Grosz 1994a:82). Both their connection to political activism and their focus on personal experience have left feminists open to criticism for a lack of academic "rigor" and "objectivity." This tension between experiential theory and activism also finds expression in the two camps of egalitarian and essentialist theories.

While various essentialist theories of "the feminine" attempted to plot a basic and fundamental character or essence of "woman" as a general (and perhaps superior) category, egalitarian feminists such as Simone de Beauvoir (1989[1949]), Betty Friedan (1963), Kate Millett (1970), and Germaine Greer (1971) attempted to open up social, sexual, economic, and political positions for women by arguing that culture, not nature, is the determining factor in inequality. These pioneers of feminism's second wave argued that men and women are formed similarly in nature but culturally socialized to behave differently (Grosz 1994a). If, as Elizabeth Grosz wrote, "feminism began largely as a struggle for a greater share of the patriarchal pie and equal access to social, economic, sexual, and intellectual opportunities" (88), then it makes little sense to argue that women's essence is fundamentally different from men's. In fact, those arguing this position were most often the defenders of patriarchy who looked for natural or biological reasons to maintain the status quo and keep women from active participation in social and political life (Clouston 1882; Geddes and Thompson 1889). It is only in more recent years that feminists successfully have posited theories of difference—theories that assert the differences between women's and men's culture—without automatically being labeled as essentialist and/or pro-patriarchy.

While feminist theory has changed radically since the early 1970s, the general criticisms leveled against it remain roughly the same. Overall, these objections come from those who feel that any theory based on improving the conditions of one gender is flawed by an inherent bias. For those relying on the scientific model, "objectivity" is crucial to any academic research. Because feminism is linked to political and social goals and objectives, it is often criticized

for lacking an objective perspective on cultural experience and practice. Essentially, many argue that because feminist theory can never reveal an objective view of the world, it can never be a valid theoretical base for social science research. Other critics object to the combative perspective that many feminists take against what they see as the hegemony of the patriarchal order. For some, taking a combative perspective ultimately means to dissect and divide cultural experience into rivaling camps. These objectors fear that feminist scholars create tension where it need not exist. Similar objections arise with regard to post-colonial theory, class theory, lesbian and gay theory, and race theory. Additionally, critics of feminist theory object to the language in which some of its treatises are written. As feminists attempt to combine the personal with the theoretical, they sometimes express themselves in “autobiographical or even confessional criticism” (Showalter 1985:4). Scholars concerned with “universal truths” and “objectivity” find some feminists’ personal writing style too subjective, introspective, and unscientific.

On the other hand, some feminist scholars have criticized, perhaps rightly, essentialist feminist theories for their overgeneralizations and lack of attention to historical and social context and detail. Yet one might argue that biologist and naturalist arguments that attempt to “objectively” use the scientific model to prove the differences inherent in the sexes are no better. Whether the case is argued that women are inherently weaker than men, or that they are inherently morally superior, the same overgeneralizations are used to justify cultural practice or its reform.

In general, feminist folklorists tend to move away from essentializing the concept of group. As Joan Radner writes, “in its rooted aversion to essentialism, the study of folklore also has much to offer feminist theory across the disciplines. Folklorists are trained to see groups from the inside, to honor their individual and particular worldviews, creative styles, and coping strategies...” (1993:ix). However, this does not mean that no essentializing has occurred in the study of women’s folklore. Just as folklorists are generally careful about social group definitions (Mills 1993), feminist folklorists struggle to make a place for the study of women’s lives without asserting the existence of a universal women’s culture. Perhaps the biggest challenge for contemporary feminist folklorists is asserting female difference without essentializing a female nature or culture.

As feminist theory has been applied over time to the study of various academic disciplines—including literature, psychology, sociology, political science, anthropology, folklore, and history—it has developed in “phases” that reflect the political and social climate of its use. I find it useful to address some of the phases of feminist theory within literary criticism as folklorists often follow

trends of literary criticism in their own use of theory. Some folklorists maintain that American folklore scholarship can be divided into two branches—the anthropological and the literary. Both of these branches have seen the impact of contemporary literary theory in the application of deconstructionist, structuralist, and linguistic approaches and theories to folkloristic inquiry.

In *The New Feminist Criticism* (1985), Elaine Showalter argued that feminist theory within literary studies has followed at least three phases. The first phase concentrated on exposing the misogyny of literary practice, emphasizing the relationship between the social treatment of women and their literary treatment. The second phase focused on finding women writers and lauding their accomplishments and artistic validity. In its third phase, feminist literary criticism “demanded a radical rethinking of the conceptual grounds of literary study, a revision of the accepted theoretical assumption about reading and writing that have been based entirely on male literary experiences” (8).

Folklore studies of the 1960s and 1970s presented a shift from concentration on text to exploration of process and context. In this era the contemporary paradigm of performance developed and spread (Paredes and Bauman 1972). Performance theorists emphasized the context in which an individual shapes and performs a text for an audience. Folklorists came to view artistic expression as a process of creation shaped by, but not controlled by, community standards. Researchers began to look into the individual’s role in shaping tradition, the negotiations that take place within communities, and the value placed on cultural forms within specific communities. As more emphasis was placed on definitions and genres that originated inside communities, feminist scholars began to look into women’s expressive behavior as reflective of the intentional creation of identity (Farrer 1975). Feminist folklorists argued that there was more to study among women than quilting, herbal remedies, and foodways. These folklorists eventually expanded the range of possible genres available for folklore study by asserting that many forms of women’s expression were in fact valid genres of interest to folklorists. Jokes, ‘bawdy lore,’ and gossip became legitimate or important genres (Green 1977; Weigle 1982).

In the first collection of writings about gender and folklore, the 1975 special issue of the *Journal of American Folklore*, “Women and Folklore,” editor Claire Farrer argued that women’s genres have been downplayed and even ignored by folklorists. Farrer cautioned that cultural expectations of gender roles affect what is studied by ethnographers as well as how it is studied. She argued that the women’s genres studied by folklorists seemed to fit the prevailing cultural images of women as nurturing, domestic, and residing in the private sphere. In the early days of post-1970 consciousness-

raising, the emphasis was on getting more women's voices and genres into academic consciousness (Kalcik 1975; McLeod & Herndon 1975; Stoeltje 1975). This period had its share of essentializing because scholars problematized the concept of genre rather than that of group.

Early feminist folklorists' work with narrative provides a good example of the exploration and extension of genre categories. In the process of emphasizing female forms of expression, the "new" genre of personal narrative was "discovered" as an entering point into women's lives. Early work on personal narrative focused on genre description in the hopes of securing a place for this new genre in the folklore canon. Sandra Dolby Stahl's 1975 Ph.D. dissertation, "The Personal Narrative as Folklore Genre," specifically attempted to gain acceptance for personal narrative as a folklore genre. Susan Kalcik's 1975 article presenting what she called the "kernal story" in personal narratives told in women's rap groups further defined the genre (1975). Feminist work done in this period combined with work done by William Labov and Joshua Waletzky in the late 1960s established personal narrative as a genre that could provide ethnographic understanding of women's experience (Dolby 1975; Kirschenblatt-Gimblett 1972; Labov and Waletzky 1967).

Several collections focused on finding new women's genres and creating theory that reflected women's concerns including: Rosan Jordan and Susan Kalcik's *Women's Folklore, Women's Culture* (1985), symposium issues of the *Journal of Folklore Research* (1988), and the *Journal of American Folklore* (1987)¹; Susan Hollis, Linda Pershing, and Katherine Young's *Feminist Theory and the Study of Folklore* (1993), and Radner's *Feminist Messages* (1993). These and other genre specific collections such as the Personal Narratives Group's *Interpreting Women's Lives* (1989) demonstrated that women's repertoires included "unladylike" genres, women performers could exist in the public sphere, women scholars could be rigorous in their application of theory, and ethnographies could be done that reflected feminist issues and applied feminist theories to the in-depth study of women's lives.

The edited volume, *Women's Folklore, Women's Culture* (1985), attempted to relegitimate and redefine the private sphere. As Margaret Yocom argued in her article "Woman to Woman: Fieldwork and the Private Sphere," the private sphere is not so much a space as it is a *mode* of social interaction that bonds women together (1985). Moving beyond the functions of women's speech, the volume addressed issues of women's power and folklore, aesthetics of women's storytelling, male versus female worlds and worldviews, and gender and group identity. The more recently published *Feminist Messages* (1993) and *Feminist Theory and the Study of Folklore* (1993), were important because of their presentations of feminist theory appropriate for folklore. The articles in these

collections took previous folklore theories and methods to task and engaged in feminist critique as a revisionary enterprise.

Along these lines, work in feminist theory has had a significant impact on folklore theory more generally. Feminist work in folklore made inroads in the important areas of genre and fieldwork and began to deconstruct previously unquestioned assumptions about authority, agency, and power hierarchies (Appadurai, Korom, and Mills 1991; Shuman and Briggs 1993). Margaret Mills noted in her 1993 assessment of the field twenty years after the publication of the groundbreaking *Toward New Perspectives in Folklore* (1972) that this early volume, while it had a radical and changing influence on the field, was striking in its lack of deep discussion of class, race, or gender issues. The two 1993 collections attempted to remedy this lack in folklore theory. This latest phase of feminist folklore emphasized deconstructing concepts of "group" and "identity," and moving from essentializing to describing difference. The feminist folklorists whose essays were presented in the two 1993 volumes relied on performance theory, the ethnography of speaking, l'écriture féminine, African-American feminist theory, personal narrative theory, and phenomenological approaches, and attempted to create work that "fit" theoretically as well as methodologically.

Amy Shuman, in her 1993 article in *Feminist Theory and the Study of Folklore*, entitled "Gender and Genre" addressed Dan Ben-Amos' concern for "ethnic genres" (Ben-Amos 1976). While advocating his approach, she also problematized it in terms of gender and power relationships. In her look at genre as context specific she drew on Richard Bauman's and Charles Briggs's work in "Genre, Intertextuality, and Social Power" (1992) to argue that "ethnic genres" are important to strive for but perhaps problematic to find. While there may be no such thing as a neutral text, there may also be no such thing as a neutral context. Who has the authority to define genres and designate their boundaries? And how does this process affect what is subsequently found? Shuman wrote, "A feminist approach to genre (as one aspect of a feminist folkloristics) is concerned with identifying the gendered instabilities in classification systems through which women can negotiate and thereby appropriate traditional forms for their own purpose" (1993:84).²

In the same volume, Deborah Kodish echoed this concern in her essay, "Absent Gender, Silent Encounter" (1993), wherein she examined the old-style patriarchal conventions previously engaged in male ethnographers' accounts of their encounters with female performers.³ She deconstructed some of these written conventions by placing them alongside two women performers' accounts of these same encounters. This problematization of voice and identity is especially salient in contemporary reflexive ethnographic

theory. Reflexivity forces the ethnographer to become aware of the role that she or he may play and of the power relationships that are created and defined in ethnographic situations (Clifford and Marcus 1986; Abu-Lughod 1993).

It is this same concern that prompted feminist ethnographers like Elaine Lawless and Lila Abu-Lughod to develop new ethnographic methodologies and styles of written presentation in their studies of women's narratives. Abu-Lughod, rebuffing the somewhat anti-feminist stance of James Clifford & George E. Marcus *Writing Culture* (1986), described her approach as "writing against culture" to get to the root of power difference in ethnographers' representations of "the other" (1993:6-15). Lawless, in her 1993 work *Holy Women, Wholly Women*, brought feminist folklore theory and ethnography together, tackling gender, genre, experience, and reflexivity. By focusing on the polyvocality of women's life stories and problematizing them as created texts, Lawless challenged herself to develop new methodological approaches that addressed the process of text-creation in the ethnography.

Phenomenological anthropology significantly impacted this movement toward presenting ethnographies in a way that corresponded more closely to lived experience (Jackson 1996). Lawless wrote from this theoretical base, assuming that women's experience shapes their stories as well as the way they create meaning. She attempted to find a methodology that could include women's expressions of their experience in various forms. In her work using "reciprocal ethnography," authority did not rest solely with the "author" of the ethnography but came out of a collaborative process between two women negotiating meaning, identity, and text. It allowed women collaborators to censor, change, and respond to transcriptions and take active roles in the process of interpretation.

While ethnographers have begun to move toward conducting reflexive ethnography that allows for a diversity of voices in written texts, feminist theorists working within the realm of African-American feminism, post colonial feminist theory, and lesbian and gay theory have extended feminist theories developed in the humanities in order to rewrite fundamental elements of social science (Clough 1994:4). Increasingly in recent years, feminist theory developed new ways to assert difference without essentializing gender, race, class, or genre characteristics. Grosz wrote, "In opposition to egalitarian feminism, a feminism based on the acknowledgement of women's specificities and oriented to the attainment of autonomy for women, has emerged over the past ten years or more" (1994a:90). Feminist folklorists have been quick to note the problematics of social group coherency (Mills 1993) and, with their focus on artistic expression, have drawn on the new French feminism or *l'écriture féminine* (also called feminisms of difference)

of Julia Kristeva, Hélène Cixous, and Luce Irigaray. This feminism looked at the ways the feminine has been “defined, represented, or repressed in the symbolic systems of language, metaphysics, psychoanalysis, and art,” and developed its interest in the study of language through the institutes and seminars of psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan, deconstructionist Jacques Derrida, and the structuralist Roland Barthes. *L’écriture féminine* advocated writing in the feminine, undermining the narrative logic of traditional western literary discourse and connecting this to female ways of knowing and experiencing the world (Showalter 1985:9). Some of the most radical of these writers believed that writing in the feminine was connected to experiencing the rhythms of the female body and to female sexual pleasure (Moi 1985:114; Showalter 1985:9). Showalter wrote, “They urge the woman writer to ally herself with everything in the culture which is muted, silenced, or unrepresented, in order to subvert the existing systems that repress feminine difference” (1985:10). Women ethnographers and writers on culture have asserted their gendered identities as both women and scholars and have challenged and subverted norms of writing and representing women’s experience (Abu-Lughod 1993).

Feminist ethnographers, like Lawless and Abu-Lughod, extended this concept to the study of ethnographically situated narrative, challenging ideas about not only women’s narrative but the presentation of scholarly discussions of form and content. Theoretical work on genre, such as Shuman’s “Gender and Genre” (1993), deconstructed the authority of genre definition and classification. Mills argued that what was still needed in feminist folklore was dialogue between performance-oriented and phenomenological folklorists. She suggested that feminist folklorists could extend the work of French feminist criticism by examining cultural constructions of the body and difference (1993). Along these same lines Grosz, in her recent work *Volatile Bodies: Toward a Corporeal Feminism* (1994b), argued that feminist research must begin phenomenologically to link bodily experience with ways of knowing (18). Recent work by feminist folklorists/anthropologists Young (1994), Deborah Kapchan (1994, 1996), Julianne Short (1996), and ethnomusicologist Michelle Kisiuk (1997) explored some of this newer territory.

Work of this kind in folklore and anthropology responded to a more general call within women’s studies for transdisciplinary, qualitative research that acknowledged difference, critiqued previous epistemologies, prioritized experience, and advocated for new approaches and methodologies (Allen 1992; Harding 1991; Stoeltje 1988b; Tiefer 1995). It was these feminists’ commitment to deconstructing academic definitions of class, race, sexuality, ethnicity, and group that allowed them to reformulate notions of identity, power, experience,

and agency in both ethnographic and text-based studies. By questioning the authority of academic discourse to name and create meaning and by exploring reflexive research methodologies, feminist folklorists and anthropologists brought new dimensions to contemporary feminist theory.

The methodologies and theories of contemporary feminist research in folklore and anthropology have much to offer a transdisciplinary dialogue in women's studies. New innovations in feminist ethnographic technique allow women to speak the body—to discuss and explore how their physical experiences shape the way they form meaning. Examples of qualitative research in women's health and sexuality show feminist scholars beginning to develop approaches that connect the study of bodily experience with ways of knowing (Davis-Floyd 1992). My own research combines a clinical approach (the therapeutic support group) with an anthropological one (the ethnography) in order to explore the long term effects of childhood sexual abuse on women survivors' lives. This project is the collaborative effort of an ethnographer, two feminist therapists, and a focus group of survivors. Reflexive, clinically relevant research of this kind allows for a more equal dialogue between those who have been formerly constructed as passive patients and those who have been constructed as experts in the medical model of health and illness. Ethnographic studies of women's bodily experience can aid in our cultural understanding of contemporary women's health concerns such as breast cancer, fertility treatments, contraceptive use, and AIDS prevention. Leonore Tiefer in her book of essays, *Sex Is Not a Natural Act* (1995), argues that what is currently needed in the multidisciplinary field of sexology is a pluralistic approach that embraces difference rather than rejecting it (192). Applied work of this kind has potential to challenge knowledge production beyond the academy. By combining the study of personal experience with political activism, applied feminist research has the potential to change cultural practice.

Notes

1 Many of the articles in this special issue were later republished in Hollis, Pershing, and Young 1993.

2 Shuman's article reflects the current attempt to view genres as dynamic rather than static forms that can be easily divided along gender lines (cf. Briggs and Bauman 1992; Harris 1995). Thus, feminist ethnographers in recent years have urged us to listen closely to how and what women express rather than to focus on creating genre categories around that expression.

3 Kodish is describing the writing of male ethnographers published mainly before 1975.

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