

A Conspiracy of Cartographers: Folklore Studies and Postmodernism

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- Rosencrantz: What was the last thing I said before we wandered off?
 Guildenstern: When was that?
 Rosencrantz: I can't remember.
 Guildenstern: What a shambles! We're just not getting anywhere.
 Rosencrantz: Not even England. I don't believe in it anyway.
 Guildenstern: What?
 Rosencrantz: England.
 Guildenstern: Just a conspiracy of cartographers, you mean?¹

I would like to think that the editors asked me to respond to the various essays treating postmodernism in a recent issue of *Folklore Forum* because they believed that I had some startlingly fresh take on these issues, or that I represent an elder cohort of graduate students wizened by the years, or that my background in literary studies and literary theory suggests the possibility of a considered resolution of folklore study and postmodern theory, or that my sabbatical from graduate studies to work in the business world gives me some insight into how these issues are seen from a more quotidian (if not also equally troubled) point of view. I suspect, however, that it was simply that I agreed to do it and have since been unable to loose myself from the responsibility. I would like to thank the four contributors—Stephen Olbrys, Troy Boyer, Gregory Hansen, and Natalie Underberg—for making my job easier.

I think it would be a foolish response that wondered “Crisis? What crisis?” in the face of such serious complaints as the authors raise about the academy as they have encountered it. In what follows, I try my best to delineate a few patterns in the thinking of the contributors and to offer a few frameworks for thinking about our current context. As at least one of the essays makes clear, proffered solutions come with someone else's definition of the problem, which is often more dangerous.

Talking Postmodern Blues: Folklorists and the Postmodern Condition

Olbrys's essay urged graduate students in a number of directions. His chronicle *qua* history sidesteps defining the nature of the current crisis, as it is termed, and highlights a very interesting idea: crises in folklore studies

would seem to be the natural state of the discipline, calling into question the very nature and role of crisis itself. It is an interesting string of occurrences, with each advocate seeing a crisis and calling fellow folklorists to action: Utley pleaded for a resolution to antagonisms between anthropological and literary folklorists in order to save the stuff of folklore itself; Herskovits longed for an integration of knowledge; Dorson favored a pragmatism that would define folklore in distinction to other areas of inquiry; and Glassie a *greater record of publication to increase the visibility and accessibility of folkloristic scholarship*. I am sure that had he looked elsewhere, Olbrys would have found more crises.

So then, crisis is a traditional genre. What does it do? What is its function? For one, it would seem to give the individual sighting *cum* citing the crisis a certain authority to speak. After all, the person who first smells smoke has a certain responsibility to cry out “fire!” and in urging us out of the house, we are thankful for the guidance. An institutional crisis, which Olbrys occasionally elides with revolution, is an opportunity to sound the alarm, to utter a battle cry. And indeed, the martial metaphors seem to bear out: Boyer states his intention to hunker down and remain true to himself (95) and Hansen urges folklorists to take up arms, in the forms of “ballads, fiddle tunes, blues songs, and tall tales” (100), which will be used to beat back the decentering enemy.² In both these cases, the rhetoric employed here is one of propping up existing institutional structures in the face of the barbarians at the gate. Elsewhere and at other times, the call to crisis is the call to dismantle conventions or institutions, but in folklore the impulse seems historically to have been counter-revolutionary. For Boyer and Hansen, folklorists have become too concerned with “theory” and theorizing, and it is now time to return to the stuff itself and to the people(s) themselves.

While Olbrys fails to define the nature of the crisis as he perceives it all that clearly, it would seem that it is precisely this failure to integrate theory and material into useful scholarship that is his complaint. He notes:

Integrative work, then, is the consistent and central idea of folklore’s survival, regardless of how the crisis is operating in any given year. . . . Other disciplines gripped with postmodernism may or may not grapple with this issue of balance between the universal and the particular, and to be honest, this is probably a good card for us to have in our hand. (62)

Olbrys goes on to argue that the tension between theory and “the stuff of folklore” can be a productive one and that the concern with things postmodern within the academy can be used to folklore’s advantage (64). His fellow contributors do not agree: for Boyer, postmodernism is a kind of diletantism,

what he terms “middle-class pretentious liberalism” (95). For Hansen, postmodernism is a kind of solipsism where “what becomes centered is the subjective reflections and concerns of the postmodernist cultural critic” (100). Even for Underberg, there is some concern that postmodernism will lead to an “over-homogenizing [of] the fields of social science and the humanities into one dominant paradigm with little or no room for movement” (103).

As a respondent, I have an obligation to read the question of Olbrys’s title over and against the specter which gets raised most often in his essay and which is the more specific subject of the essays that follow. In all these cases, whether a crisis or not, postmodernism is a primary concern. Reading these essays, though, one is reminded of the Indian legend about the six blind men and the elephant, in which each came away with a different definition of an elephant based on what part of the elephant he encountered. Just as one of the subtexts of Olbrys’s essay is that crises in folklore are ongoing, I would argue that generalizing about “theory” (as it has come to be regarded in many quarters of the academy) based on a select set of attributes that an individual has encountered and then damning the whole enterprise is an ongoing tradition as well. In framing things in this way, it is not my intention to dismiss any of the misgivings or concerns that the authors involved may have: instead, I hope to begin to think through the current climate in which we find ourselves.

In *Deconstruction: Theory and Criticism after Structuralism*, Jonathan Culler notes that “if the observers of recent critical debates could agree on anything, it would be that contemporary critical theory is confusing and confused” (17). Writing in 1982, Culler is commenting upon debates taking place in the late seventies. And yet the same holds true today. A discussion of “what is at stake in today’s critical debates” (18) has been with us for some time now, and in fact Culler points to some of the very same features that our authors cite: the instability or lack of key terms, the inability to distinguish one camp from another, the shifts of individuals (or claims about them) from one arena of concern to another, and/or stupefaction in the face of trying to make sense of either the scene itself or any of the writing generated by members of the scene. I think it especially interesting that structuralism was once described as “an indeterminate radical force . . . perceived as extreme, as violating previous assumptions about literature and criticism, though there is disagreement about how it does so” (22).

If, as Henry Glassie once noted, culture is what we agree to argue about, then in a number of ways we are living in something that might very well be termed “postmodernity,” for in some form or another, in both public and academic discourses, postmodernism and its many itinerant subsets dominate our debates. Even today’s spin doctors seem to be capitalizing on

the idea that meaning is itself a product of a much more complex and sometimes arbitrary set of relationships than we were once willing to admit. I do have to disagree, however, with Glassie when he quarrels with poststructuralism or postmodernism for presuming to displace structuralism or modernism. Too many observers often assume that if postmodernism has succeeded modernism it must also have refuted it or transcended it: *post hoc ergo ultra hoc*.³ While many practitioners would make some sort of distinction between structuralism as an “attempt to develop ‘grammars’—systematic inventories of elements and their possibilities of combination—that would account for the form and meaning of texts” and postructuralism as investigation into “the way in which this project is subverted by the texts themselves” (Culler 22), most would also agree that such critiques were already under way in many of the early structuralist writings.

Postmodernism in one of its earliest formulations, in Arnold Toynbee’s *A Study of History*, described “the new historical cycle which started in 1875 with the end of western dominance, the decline of individualism, capitalism and Christianity, and the rise to power of non-western cultures.”⁴ While most of us would question the idea of capitalism’s demise within the postmodern, few would argue with the rest of Toynbee’s nascent description.⁵ While Toynbee’s usage was on the whole ambivalent—he was fairly skeptical as an historian—it was not long before the term came to be used polemically.⁶ By 1965, Leslie Fiedler had “tied [postmodernism] to current radical trends which made up the counter-culture: ‘post-humanist, post-male, post-white, post-heroic’” (Jencks 3). As Jencks continues his history of postmodernism into the 1970s, he notes that within the artistic realms of art, architecture, and literature, the manifestation of postmodern movements was to combat what were perceived as modernist orthodoxies that were elitist and bureaucratic. In the case of architecture, postmodernists were concerned with the destruction of the urban landscape that modernist building projects had wrought, and in literature, novelists like John Barth aspired “to a fiction more democratic in its appeal than such late-modernist marvels . . . as Beckett’s *Stories and Texts for Nothing* or Nabokov’s *Pale Fire*” (Jencks 7).

While we may dispute such evaluations of modernist works, it is safe to assert, I believe, that the impulses remain and are especially strong within the discipline of folklore. Are we not also interested in undermining conceptions and instantiations of the elite? Are we not also concerned with the destruction of landscapes that also mean the destruction of cultures and ways of living that have existed for decades if not centuries? Are we not interested in a more democratic understanding of artistic and intellectual activity? Postmodernist concerns would seem to be ours. Perhaps a reconsideration of postmodernist concerns is worth dedicating a little time to here.

Signs, Signs, Everywhere Signs: Another Map of Postmodernity

However you want to name the current questioning occurring across an ever-broadening range of disciplines and fields and however much you evaluate this shift as real or pretended—names and terms change but practices do not—there has been a shift towards drama in theories of knowledge. Drama here is not incidental to the larger discussion. Whether it be rear guard actions fought by conservative stalwarts of some form of positivism or avant-garde manifestos advocating nominalism, rhetorical grandstanding sometimes seems to preoccupy us. While it is true that much of the work that serves as a foundation for different, but essentially, semiotic theories of language, culture, and subjectivity originated in such late nineteenth, early twentieth century comparative projects like folkloristics and linguistics (often focused around the issue of “personality and culture” in the Anglo-American traditions), the social science nature of the comparative project gave way to one of textual interpretation. As old monoliths fall, a lot of “deaths” or “ends” are announced (see, for example, Tyler 1985 or Dorst 1987). The social sciences seem especially hard hit, where their reliance on empirical methods and metaphysics would seem to have left them vulnerable. I exaggerate of course. But I am interested in how these claims play themselves out and what phoenixes may arise from the ashes. I am invested in the possibility of the ethnographic project, in the exchange that takes place both on the ground and later in discursive production.

Fundamentally I take the postmodernist project to be the deconstruction of mind, truth, language, reality, and philosophy. In doing so, meaning becomes conventional and formal, and life becomes a continuance that is always looping outside those conventions, stretching beyond the bounds of the conventionally meaningful, in effect demanding meaning-making. In short, I understand the postmodernist project as an attempt to banish forever any and all notions of transcendence, replacing the self of old with a subjectivity that is simultaneously embodied, social, desiring, autonomous, and interrelated with others. Or as Jane Flax puts it: “The Real is unstable and perpetually in flux. Western metaphysics creates a false appearance of unity by reducing the flux and heterogeneity of experience into binary and supposedly natural or essentialist oppositions” (1990:36).

As others have noted, a major problem with the various postmodernist projects is their inability to account for the very “taken-for-granted” that they seek to unnaturalize: the list of ‘no-longer-possibles’ (realism, representation, subjectivity, history, etc.) is . . . long in poststructuralism” (Huysen 1990:259). A debate has arisen around the reification of both the essential self and the fragmented subject, with those opposed to the latter

claiming that it depletes the oppositional forces of individual agents engaged in political struggle (cf. Paul Smith 1988). What has been confused, though, is the nature of such proclamations of the “death of the author” (cf. Barthes 1977:142-148; Foucault 1988:197-210); that is, what these essays herald is actually the end of transcendent meaning, or superordinary explanation: “we know now that a text is not a line of words releasing a single ‘theological meaning’” (Barthes 146). Thus the real loss is the transcendent critic, not the originating author. Meaning is multiple and diffuse, and most importantly, since it varies even across the same audience, it is contextual. Thus the critic’s job is not to specify meanings but to detail available meanings and ascertain, as much as possible, the relevant hierarchies—“preferred” meanings—that impinge on the discursive utterance such that a dominant meaning may be discovered (cf. Jakobson 1978: 82-87).

While the loss of determinate meaning is certainly true in literary discursive production, the same cannot be said of discursive productions occurring at other levels. It is certainly possible to determine the range of possible meaning as well as the dominant meaning at the microlevel of folkloric discursive production, since we are readily able to follow flows of action as well as interview both authors and audiences. As such, what postmodernism demands is that we study local economies of thought and action. (That is about as close to a manifesto as I will get here.) Any number of scholars and observers have followed this logic as well (cf. Speer 1992), seeing critical, literary theory as a starting point for studies that more closely resemble ethnographies of speaking (cf. Hymes 1974), where by charting linguistic relationships, researchers hope to reveal concretizations of social relationships and thus have a place from which to start thinking about power and the way it is produced and reproduced in different instances.

What literary studies and the social sciences share now is the problem of the referentiality of language. As Hayden White notes: “The disappearance of language into literature and of language into signs inevitably inflates the value of the critical performance while at the same time investing that performance with the aspect of a mystery” (1978:267). What it has meant is that anthropologists now worry about their textual productions, and literary scholars are now doing cultural studies in order to anchor their interpretations. Social scientists and literary scholars alike worry about how their own texts possess accuracy.

The matter is in the foreground in the social sciences, especially as they adapt and think through theories of literary discursive production. The empirical project posited a distance between observer and observed. The ethnographer was expected, as a result, to be able to get at the essence of a culture and/or society and report it back using a kind of unreflective realism

that revealed a one-to-one equivalency between events and their representations. Theories of postmodern ethnography—not a fortuitous term—working out of textual theories of language and discourse that highlight the inextricability of everything, have arrived at the conclusion that the gap is unbridgeable.

At the root of the so-called postmodern crisis of representation is a radical cultural relativism juxtaposed with a certain kind of cultural determinism: that is, culture (here linguistically conceived) determines our patterns of conception so completely that it is impossible to know other kinds of cultural patternings except through reference to our own, which is not knowing the “other” patterns as they are. Elaborations in the social sciences take a variety of forms, but they are usually aimed as revealing the politics of representation beneath all textual productions. I do not mean this to seem dismissive of the matter, because the politics of representation is a key modality in the politics of culture. The gaze, be it scholastic or popular, shapes and is shaped by very real power relations that I am interested in. To arrive at a just image, we must pursue a just means of production and (re)presentation, and that entails exchanges on the ground.

Several things once distinct have been fused in recent thinking about the nature of knowing, or perhaps more aptly, the distinctions have been refused. Ontology, the nature of ultimate reality, succumbs to epistemology, what we can know of reality and how we know it, because we can only know the world through structures or systems of thought, be they linguistic or other. Most scientific discourses, which turn out to be kinds of realistic fictions, deny this representation aspect of their work. These discourses rely upon objectifying practices in order to persuade, under the guise that there is no persuasion but simply the truth being presented. Science then means that “disciplined and self-denying ordinance of method” which keeps a safe distance between its subject of study and the discourse that seeks to comprehend it (Norris 1982:16). What recent theorizing of discourses and practices tries to do is collapse the distancing of objectifying protocols in order to foreground whatever ideological machinations might underlie particular projects.

Hermeneutically-influenced theories of discourse and texts bring with them, however, some equally disturbing presuppositions, the impossibility of getting outside the hermeneutic circle being one of them. As Heidegger noted, “any interpretation which is to contribute understanding, must have already understood what is to be interpreted” (1962:194). This kind of theory of cultural communications severely limits the type and degree of connection that can be achieved. Susanne Kirschner notes that, for ethnography,

knowledge “as it evolves over the course of fieldwork, and as it is fixed in the form of the [ethnographic] text . . . is not seen to be derived from any sense that . . . separateness and distance have been dissolved or attenuated” (1987:212). In the discussion that follows, she distinguishes between two different approaches to ethnographic knowledge. The first is of the kind I have been discussing, radically hermeneutical, which she calls “interpretive”; the second is the “subjectivist” approach, which she describes as “nonrational.” The latter would seem to have the strength of taking even more seriously arguments latent in certain theories of subjectivity and discourse—those that notably circumscribe the realm of language and stability—and of also being able to absorb recent explorations by various sciences into the process of cognition.

The chief problem with the interpretive approach is that despite all attempts to make this seem an incredibly rich method of study—and I cannot help but believe that possibility remains—the externality of all transactions that transpire in the field make ultimately for a thinness:

Things become more secure as this liminal world is mutually constructed but, by definition, it never really loses its quality of externality. . . . What is given form is this communication. . . . This informing [goes on] in interpersonal interaction. It is intersubjective, between subjects. At best, it is partial and thin. (Rabinow 1977:154-155)

In some way, when everything becomes text, or open to textual interpretive methods, everything becomes superficial. Reading has increasingly become to mean more than scansion of words on a page and now refers to any process that is temporal, limited, and essentially planar. We now speak of reading paintings, reading a situation, and most importantly, of reading relationships. Michel Foucault discusses a similar effect being produced by the redoubled discourses of sexuality in the nineteenth century:

By no longer making the confession a test, but rather a sign, and by making sexuality something to be interpreted, the nineteenth century gave itself the possibility of causing the procedures of confession to operate within the regular formation of scientific discourse. (1978:67)

The possible texts for analysis become a series of concentric circles: the abstracted item (story, joke, song), the item *in situ*, performer and item, performer and audience, or finally the performer and fieldworker. All of these are available as texts for analysis, synchronically and/or diachronically.

Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Can't Be Dead

One of my favorite definitions of postmodernism came in a conversation with Wahneema Lubiano who noted that postmodernism is not a historical moment so much as a moment in history, a moment when those who had not thought of themselves as having bodies of a particular gender, color, or status—in other words, they had not thought of themselves as having bodies at all—suddenly realized that they not only had bodies but were bodies, bodies among many other bodies. She summed it up thusly: “It’s a kind of ‘welcome to the world’ for white guys.”⁷ The result has often been that figures like irony and the ultimate indeterminability of meaning have gotten far more play than they have deserved. And those dimensions of postmodernist critical practice are certainly worth our skepticism and abashedness.

What I hope to have shown in this brief consideration of the kinds of issues that the four initial contributors first raised is that postmodernism is something worth confronting and attempting to think through. Many of its fields of inquiry, such as in the nascent cultural studies, are still too unformed. I think folklorists could potentially play key roles in helping form them. With the appointments of Bill Ferris and Bill Ivey to the endowments, no one would mistake folklorists for not being able to negotiate the fine institutional lines between art with a capital A and the other arts we have long championed.

Stephen Olbrys in his chronicle makes clear two things: crises are a matter of perception, and in the case of postmodernism, the nature of the instigating factor is a matter of perception as well. There are as many maps of postmodernism as there are maps of the world produced by postmodernists. That doesn’t mean we should give up on either of them. That wouldn’t make for a very good ending, now would it?

Notes

1. Tom Stoppard, *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead* (New York: Grove Press, 1967), page 115.

2. Indeed, this determination to recenter the subject over and against the decentering threatened by postmodernism seems a central concern of both authors and a dimension of Olbrys’s essay, when he explains that “Roemer passionately noted that everywhere except in academia, [sic] the individual needs to be revalidated, not undermined” (72).

3. Both these references to Henry Glassie are from public presentations, the former from September 1991 in his F51: Proseminar in Folklore Methods, and the latter from March 1996 in his F840: Structuralisms. The confusion of a "post" appellation with some claim to transcendence is an observation that Culler makes about structuralism and its "post."

4. Charles Jencks, *What is Post-Modernism?* (New York: St. Martin's Press), page 3. Jencks also notes that while *A Study of History* was not published until 1947, after the second world war, Arnold Toynbee in fact conceived of and wrote about postmodernism in this light in 1938. For an apparent first coinage of the term, see Federico De Onis's *Antología de la poesía española e hispanoamericana* (1934).

5. Indeed, most contemporary thinkers, whatever their investment in the postmodern, would agree that far from being inimical to capitalism, postmodernism and what Frederic Jameson and others have termed "late capitalism" are often allied.

6. See Irving Howe (1963), Gerald Graff (1979), and Harold Levin (1966) for negative uses of the term. Jencks also notes that E.H. Gombrich, in "The Origins of Stylistic Terminology," discusses how such ill-willed uses of a term can be inverted by those who stand accused into something positive.

7. Lubiano's comments and the ensuing conversation took place during an invited talk at Syracuse University in the spring of 1991.

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