

Performing Off Stage: Oral Tradition Under the Radar

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Oral tradition for me has been playground basketball, music, jokes, and a party organized by a cohort of janitors for their retiring boss.¹ Jokes, games, and music as aspects of oral tradition will surprise no one, so I'll use the party for my stab at "interesting new directions." Here's what happened: over a period of several weeks a group of seven custodians designed and then (on June 30, 1983) successfully pulled off a surprise retirement party for their supervisor. The party itself developed into a complex event—though it started as a straightforward plan to "get him something." The final version featured a "big one" or straight gift with an engraved message, a "gag" gift with its own jocular (obscene) message, a decorated cake with yet another message, a "gag" wrapping of the straight gift in a series of nested boxes, presentation of this gift by three "bathing beauties" (coeds in swimsuits), an appearance by the honoree's own supervisor, and a series of snapshots providing a record of the occasion.

From the beginning I was most intrigued by the shape of the party—I didn't fully appreciate it at the time, but I'm now convinced that the competence shared among its designers is usefully comprehended as an instance of oral tradition. They knew, for example, without reference to etiquette books or professional party consultants, that "everybody" gave watches to people when they retired. (I asked all seven about this, one at a time, in terms verging upon sarcasm: "Why hand him a watch, when the whole point of retiring is you don't need to worry about what time it is anymore?" Again and again I got the same answer, in terms verging upon incredulity—"everybody" did it. Surely I knew that.)

I did. And surely this is oral tradition in operation, no matter the absence of ascertainable textual precepts. The party's every feature originated as one man's idea and survived by not violating six others' notions of appropriate festivity. Generalizing from this instance, I would

¹ For more on playground basketball, see Cochran 1976; for music, Cochran 1999; for jokes, Cochran 1989; for the custodians' retirement party, Cochran 1992.

hope for more studies focused upon the utilization of various codes/lores/repertoires by “tradition bearers” who possess them and are in turn formed by them. It’s been long understood that folks don’t just lug their culture around. They use it—knowingly, creatively, most of all interestedly (even selfishly)—to shape their behavior. They even exploit it to shape themselves, for better or worse.

Two examples from one Arkansas family: a young man exhibits a special liking for “badman” songs like “Rovin’ Gambler” and “Bad Companions” and goes on to a life of spectacular restlessness and domestic turmoil. His Arkansas sisters know several slavery songs; one loves “Massa’s In De Cold Ground,” with its idealization of plantation life, while the other loves “Nellie Gray,” with its sympathy for a Kentucky wife kidnapped into slavery in Georgia. The first becomes a fan of Governor Faubus; the second despises him. I’m convinced both were guided in their thinking by their songs. Does it go too far to suggest that the second’s ballots against Faubus constitute off-stage performances of “Nellie Gray”? I’d love to hear more of these stories.

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References

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