

FOREWORD

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The untimely death of Richard M. Dorson in 1981 left a vacuum in the ranks of American folklorists and affected most painfully the faculty and student body of the Folklore Institute of Indiana University. During Dorson's twenty-four year directorship of the Institute he had founded, folklore established itself as an academic discipline, in America and in the world. In this evolution, he had a dominant role. From the microcosmic base of his international program at Indiana, Dorson combined ingenuity as a teacher, scholar and organizer to fight for folklore with devotion and passion on both the national and international front. And he won his battle. These twenty-four years were particularly crucial for laying the foundation-stone of American folklore as a subfield of folkloristics.

The intellectual, social, and political atmosphere was receptive to the programmatic statements of this cultural-historian-turned-folklorist. He anticipated a new breed of American folklorists, scholars who would interpret folklore in terms of the American experience: "...the folk traditions of countries colonized in modern times...must be correlated with their major historical developments from colonization to industrialization."²

Dorson's ideas were launched and seasoned in heated debates and controversies. He emerged the victor from the warfare he initiated against "fake-lore," the commodization of pseudo-folkloric materials that flooded the market, misled the public, and overshadowed sophisticated scholarly endeavors. He began his work when "folklore was a dirty word, in the public sector and to some extent in the academic sector"³ as well; and it was largely as a result of his commitment to high academic standards and his uncompromising devotion to folklore that the "folklore boom" reached a never-anticipated peak in the late 70s. "Suddenly"---Dorson remarked---"one recognizes that the federal and the state governments, the endowments and the foundations, various museums, institutes and centers, and the media and the academy are rushing into folklife

and folklore from all directions with a hundred projects⁴ on oral history, ethnic heritage, and 'roots'". Dorson was indeed the master architect of American folklore, and at the time of his death was planning to harvest the fruits of his work, to synthesize and summarize results, in the form of an "Encyclopedia of American Folklore," a sequence of regional folklife monographs covering the United States.

In the immediate aftermath of Dorson's death, the Folklore Institute faculty felt concern for the future of American folklore studies. We asked ourselves: where do we go from here? What avenues should his colleagues and students follow? What is the legacy of this uncompromising, versatile scholar? How will his guidelines be further developed?

We began the 1981-82 academic year without him in the classroom, but we adapted his course outlines and bibliographies to create our version of the topics he had taught for so many years. We needed time to find the scholar who would help continue his work and maintain the excellence of our American folklore program. In the interim, we proposed a lecture series for the second semester to address the "Future of American Folklore Studies." This proposal was generously funded by the College of Arts and Sciences. The choice of speakers was not easy to make. We wanted variety in methods, perspectives, and areas of expertise. We wanted to hear the broadest possible interpretations of the present state of the art and the delineation of future goals.

Approaches to American folklore have evolved as a result of the accumulation of knowledge as well as social changes, and the field today is not the same as when Dorson published his *American Folklore* in 1959. Since then, approaches have become broader, clearer, more focused and interdisciplinary, and the "folk," more inclusive and representatively multilayered, multicultural.

The speakers represented different generations of scholars. We tried to bring folklorists who had not been frequent or recent guests in Bloomington, whom our current students perhaps had not met, and who were not Ph.D.s from Indiana. This last criterion was particularly difficult, and we felt it quite an achievement to have kept their numbers down to two (Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett and

Lynwood Montell). All in all, we chose from the most active and respected scholars currently making nationally significant contributions to American folklore. They were teachers, researchers, field-workers, and thinkers, systematizers and politicians: movers and shakers, spokesmen for folklore preservation, application and public education, as in these days folklorists need to be.

During their visit, the speakers presented an evening lecture, the text of which they revised to some extent for publication in this volume. Each of them stayed on campus for three days to participate in an intensive exchange of ideas with students and faculty. In each case, the evening lecture was followed the next day with a seminar discussion in the required F517 Theory and Techniques class, which was taught by John McDowell that term. In the 1960s, Dorson had similarly incorporated guest speakers in F517. Meetings with the guests were both scholarly and social. During one afternoon, students met for coffee and consultation with each guest in the Folklore Archives; faculty attended a luncheon for each visitor; both faculty and students hosted friendly gatherings at their homes. After this intensive immersion in folkloric discussions, we all felt closer to each other, reassured in our goals, happy--and exhausted.

If there is a common characteristic of these lectures, it is the speakers' expression of care and deep, almost emotional, involvement. As they recaptured the past, surveyed the present, and pondered the future, these distinguished folklorists grappled with the issues by combining social scientific analysis with an intrinsically subjective perspective. Most overtly, Henry Glassie set the tone in his opening appeal to our moral obligation to scrutinize folklore and offer our findings to the service of people. The rest of the speakers did not deviate much from Glassie's credo, although their subjects of study and personalities resulted in less direct references. This underlying unison reinforced our belief that folklore is a humanistic discipline that addresses the subjective, expressive behavior of human beings. The more refined our instruments and techniques of scientific inquiry into how human beings feel and think become, the more we must subject our own selves to scrutiny, in order to establish conditions for more dependable description and understanding.

Taken together, the lectures raised the crucial issues and marked out the necessary tasks for the eighties. In essence, it was stated again that we never can stagnate or settle the definitions of our field or limit the boundaries of our quest. We have to continue to re-evaluate and re-examine the rules of our game, so that they can be adapted to the continuously changing needs of scholarly interpretation, ever-ready to observe suddenly erupting and unexpected phenomena. There are no valid dogmas and canons any more and there is no real separation between academe and public sector, for neither can exist without the other. In approaching the twenty-first century, the science of folklore becomes more and more the understanding of the metaphors by which people live, individually and in groups, how they communicate and survive the hardships of an efficient technological world.

Two years after the lecture series, these essays are still timely. The editorial staff of **Folklore Forum** deserves special laudation for this labor of love: the taping, transcribing, and the patience to wait for the authors to find the time to convert their talks into articles.

NOTES

1. **Journal of the Folklore Institute** 15:2 (181-2): 181.
2. "Fakelore," **American Folklore and the Historian** (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1971), p. 14.
3. **Journal of the Folklore Institute** 15:1 (83-90): 83.
4. *Ibid.*