

AMERICAN FOLKLORE STUDIES:
THE TRADITION AND THE FUTURE

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The study of American folklore--like the folklore itself--involves traditions. One ignores such traditions at considerable peril in pondering the future of our field. Thus I began the task of thinking about the future of American folklore studies by reflecting upon the traditions of past and present. Those traditions seemed to resist simple description; rather, I found myself expressing their complexity by using terms of polar opposition. Let me approach our subject, then, by describing five dilemmas that face all of us in the study of folklore. I should hasten to say, when I use the word "dilemma," that a dilemma is not necessarily bad; nor must it be resolved by choosing either one or the other horn. We need not knit our brows too much because what will be described here as dilemmas. Rather, they are creative tensions which, by polar opposition, define what seems to me to be the nature and history of folklore as a subject of study in the United States. Perhaps it is only a verbal conundrum to call them dilemmas; but, for what it is worth, let me enumerate them.

First of all--you are familiar with it--is the **text vs. context** dilemma. It gets reargued in every generation of folklore study. Most folklorists first enter their chosen field by being riveded to some particular kind of expression or expressiveness, and they thus begin with attention to what metaphorically we may call texts. Perhaps in graduate school they are expanding beyond that, and in their anxiety to show that they are not simply collectors they spend all their time talking about context. But in fact there seems to be in folklore a permanently established creative tension between text and context.

"Context" means many things to many people, so to be more specific let me talk about myself. I happen to be interested in traditional fiddling in the United States, and I have spent time with a number of traditional fiddlers over the past

couple of decades--unfortunately, less in the last than in the previous decade. I was originally attracted to the people I visited because of fiddling itself--the tunes they played and their style of playing them. I myself had been a classically trained violinist and had worked as a professional musician early enough to know I did not want to do that for a living. I then immersed myself in literary studies. But it sometimes happens in life that when you push something down in one place, it pops up in another. Thus it was that, during my first year at graduate school, I suddenly found myself getting interested in oldtime fiddle tunes.

I was at Duke University at the time, and I began to visit oldtime fiddlers in the Upper South, first in Durham and then in points west, working my way into the romantic mountains. Fiddlers, and cultures, sometimes live up to the romance about them, and there were many wonderful oldtime fiddlers in the mountains, just as there were supposed to be. At first I visited them wanting simply to record their tunes, and I found myself reliving as a young would-be professional what every generation seems doomed to relive in getting interested in folklore--wanting to collect it before it dies out. I am glad that I focused my particular version of this syndrome on fiddling, since not enough people had paid attention to fiddling up to then. I thought that if other people could collect ballads before they died out, I could certainly collect fiddling before it died out. What I rapidly found, at both the intellectual and the emotional level, was that recording the tunes was not enough. There was a context that interested me.

There were actually many contexts; we abuse that word when we use it loosely without specifying which context we mean. For example, I visited Burl Hammons in Pocahontas County, West Virginia and (together with my colleague Carl Fleischhauer) recorded many fiddle tunes from him. First, there was a social context to his performance. I had to think about where, when, and for whom the tune was performed and in what context it sprang to life from the reservoirs of Burl's mind. We are all familiar with this kind of context, for our generation of folklore studies has dwelt on it almost overmuch. Then there was the context of other ver-

sions of the tune. That was a context to which the historic-geographic method in folklore studies had introduced me: a contextual approach to historical and geographical distribution that had been elevated to a whole methodology in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. And there was the context of Burl's fiddling style. When I heard him play a tune like "Three Forks of Cheat," which I recorded from him, I had to weigh that tune and its performance against all the other tunes he played and their style of performance. Style of performance, though basically similar in the same performer, varies somewhat depending on the particular tune. Not only do different genres of tunes call for different styles, but all tunes are usually a creative compromise between a person's own individual style and the style of the person from whom the tune was learned. The tune in performance thus stands as a sort of emanation of culture representing both the person playing and the person from whom the tune was learned.

The particular tuning of the violin lent itself to a certain style in which all the tunes in that tuning of the instrument are likely to be played, and that was another context. Then there was the context of the title. "Three Forks of Cheat" refers to a place on Cheat River, which rises in central West Virginia and flows northward, ultimately into the Ohio River at Pittsburgh. The title "Three Forks of Cheat" conjures up and commemorates both the locale and the general region for Burl Hammons and everyone else from central west Virginia. There were also more personal associations for Burl in the tune, which moves us from what you might call observable data into the mental sphere. When he played that tune, what did he associate it with in his mind? He of course associated it with the person he learned it from. He associated it with all the times he had heard and played it throughout his life. He associated it also with certain stories, and there were certain other cultural associations--say, with the hunting time of year, with going into the woods in winter to shoot deer and do other things that men do during the winter in Burl's traditional way of life. Finally there was the context of me. I was there visiting with him, and our relationship in

certain ways shaped both the tunes he played and the way he played them. It even led to his making up new tunes. So I became conscious of the folklorist's function as a context.

Folklorists have talked about context virtually till they are blue in the face for the past generation. Before that they took it more for granted terminologically, but still talked about it in particular ways. But what I come back to, as I think about folklore and folklorists as a group, is not so much their emphasis on context. Interest in context we probably share with most of the world, who of course, if they reflect on anything, think about context. Rather, it is the attention to and respect for the text itself that seems, if not solely characteristic, to be very typical of us. We have a sense of the text--meaning all expressive items, including artifacts, which are physical texts--as being somehow potent beyond the context which helps us understand it. That respect for texts, it seems to me, will continue to characterize folklore studies in the future. In any given generation the pendulum of discussion will swing to the textual or contextual side, to try to balance the emphasis of the last generation. Nevertheless, it is a special trait of folklorists that they respect the existential importance of the text as a quintessential expression of human values.

Folklorists share their interest in texts with literary critics, art historians, archaeologists, and people in other disciplines, who similarly are riveted by the potency and cultural power of what I metaphorically call the text. As I cast about for a term for this intuitive inclination, I do not find it within our network's own terminology. We are not very good, perhaps, at expressing our intuitive gravitational pulls. Jacques Mauritian, in his discussions of esthetics, uses the phrase *splendor formae*--a Latin phrase befitting a disciple of St. Thomas Aquinas. *Splendor formae* captures nicely the sense of the potency of an expressive form, not simply because of the form itself but because of that *splendor* which invests the form with a glistening human/divine significance. We do not want to be dully text-oriented; neither do we want to chase solely after context and under-

stand only larger patterns and structures of meaning. We as a network of scholars, researchers, and concerned citizens are best served when we keep text and context poised in creative balance.

The second dilemma is what I call the **past-present** dilemma. Perhaps it is because folklorists have a sense of the text as a profound emanation that they seem forever to intertwine past and present. Or perhaps because folklorists are interested in forms that are shared by large numbers of people, they invest a great deal of significance in the word "tradition," and tradition helps us to bridge past and present. But whatever the reasons, from the very beginnings of the study of folklore in the United States there has hovered around it a creative tension between past and present. Is it the past that we are trying to discover, or is it the present that we are studying? Are we studying a person in order to find out about cultural history, or is it that emanation of the present that is our focus?

When I share Burl Hammons's "Three Forks of Cheat" with some people, they say, "Boy, that's a great example of how fiddling used to be long ago in the Appalachian region!" That gives me pause. I think, "Why do you say it is a great example of what was? Why do you assume that it is out of date, has lost its timeliness, no longer functions as a living tradition? For me, his fiddling is very much here and now, and furthermore he is a taxpayer and a voting citizen. I am certainly not going to relegate him to the past." Furthermore, when Burl says, "This is 'Three Forks of Cheat'" and plays it as a fiddle tune, the tune's evocation of the three forks of Cheat River and the old way of life he associates with it in a sense brings that way of life right up to the present. If the way of life were fading, the very act of playing the tune makes it again contemporaneous, alive in the timeless presence of art.

But there is yet more than that. When I first encountered and recorded Burl, he was probably the only person in the world that played "Three Forks of Cheat." Now I play "Three Forks of Cheat." A number of other young fiddlers have started playing "Three Forks of Cheat," too, and it is now fairly widely circulated in the United States

amongst younger fiddling devotees. The title of an album that a young West Virginia band recently put out is **Three Forks of Cheat**. This is all a new, "future" development in the career of a tune that was in Burl's sole possession when I first encountered him. So in very literal ways that folklore that engaged me then was not then and is certainly not now past. Or you might put it another way: if it was past then, it is future now.

Folklorists habitually gravitate towards a non-linear concept of cultural history and distribution. They do not think of culture as being like a jet plane taking off into the future, moving in a straight line from this point and going in that direction. The old historic-geographic school saw culture distributed through time and space, and that to begin understanding its complexity you had to combine your unilateral sense of time with your unilateral sense of space. We are often inclined toward a cyclical view of culture. We see patterns of culture where something seems to be dying out, only to take on a new life with a younger generation, perhaps in a new and modified form. The idea of cultural continuity, not in a straight line but through constant recycling and recirculating of cultural expression, is something we are accustomed to and instinctively understand. This is why it is difficult to talk with people who do not understand the tension between past and present that surrounds the elements of culture we are engaged with.

Thus, for example, folklorists not only are greatly interested in patterns of culture such as grandparent education, but in many ways actually live it out themselves. I certainly did. Hanging out with Burl Hammons, I was functioning not simply as the documenter but literally as the younger-generation student, learning to play as well as recording the fiddle. He certainly thought of my visits both ways. He was teaching me; I, two generations removed from him, was functioning as a sort of alter-grandson in art and knowledge, insuring that though one generation be skipped over, cultural expressions of significance were nevertheless preserved. Thus it is that though one generation rebel against the previous generation, a later generation will rebel further by embracing the grandparent generation, insuring both continuity and change in culture through time.

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What are we then as folklorists to make of questions such as "Is folklore oral history?" Oral history to most of us seems to imply a unilateral or single-line view of culture. Its goal, we feel, is to extract information that elucidates the past. Few folklorists think of their function as solely that. When we are engaged with people as carriers of tradition, we think of their traditions as being both past and present, or, to speak in a cyclical way, past but future to become.

A third dilemma: Are we a **discipline**, or are we **interdisciplinary**? Is folklore a discipline--that is to say, a group of people who approach a similar body of knowledge with a similar system of addressing that knowledge? Or is it a profession, which is a bit looser and gives us more elbow-room? A profession, as I conceive it, is a special grouping of people who have common interests and problems and common networks through which to exchange information. Or is folklore even broader? Is it a calling?

As Carl Fleishhauer and I worked on the Hammons family project--documenting their cultural expression, living with them, talking with them, working in collaboration with them, developing products out of the project--we asked ourselves, "Is it a music project?" Well, it was, in one sense; the music is what attracted us in the first place. But it rapidly became much more. We became interested in verbal arts--not just lore, but arts in the broadest sense of the word, because we realized that talking expressively was very important to the family, and that no serious study of their cultural traditions could ignore talking expressively. That, of course, got us into interdisciplinary problems. Were we folklorists, musicologists, linguists, literary scholars? Then we were drawn into family history, working both with the Hammonses and independently to try to document the history of the family in the United States. Did that make it a history project? Was it oral history? We found ourselves exploring their own self-concept, both of their history and of their way of life. There we may have resembled anthropologists in their approach to their field. What we did in that project was not extraordinary; it was typical of the interdisciplinary concerns of folklorists, Cultural expressions

have inevitably led folklorists to explore a variety of means of understanding them. We have never hesitated to cast about for any theory, any approach, that might serve our purposes. So interdisciplinary we will always be, and yet we will always bind ourselves together as a network. Thus, whether we call ourselves a discipline, or a profession, or broadly speaking, a calling, we will always feel a tension between maintaining the network itself, and reaching out beyond the network for other approaches, theories, or knowledge by which we may illuminate the fundamental experience we are trying to illuminate.

It is interesting, as we contemplate the nature of our group, to reflect that folklore has always engaged both people that we nowadays would call professionals, and people that would label themselves folklorists, and people that we would call devoted amateurs. There has never been a period of our history as a discipline--or profession, or calling--where we did not embrace devoted amateurs as part of us. That is a very extraordinary thing in the world, and worth our serious contemplation. We of course have periodic fits about it. We decide that we have either too many amateurs or too few, and we behave in ways to bring them in or drive them out. Nevertheless, if you look at the longer history, they are always there, in some numbers, and in many periods they are a major presence. I recall Richard Dorson citing Vance Randolph as a great folklorist. Dorson had some scruples about who was and was not a folklorist, but he had to acknowledge not only the importance of the contribution of a person like Vance Randolph, but the fact that our whole network's history was bound up with the vigorous participation of devoted amateurs.

This brings me to what I call the **us vs. other** dilemma. Folklore studies in many ways have pioneered in what has by now become a widespread twentieth-century breakdown of the ideal of detached scientific observation. I do not mean by this that we are not detached when we need to be and in such degree as is useful. But folklorists have gravitated to an understanding that they were not simply gathering data for science, but participating as an integral part in a cultural process. I do not mean that every folklorist has thought this, or that every folklorist should. But most

of us who have worked in the field have had searing experience of this **us vs. them** dilemma. Is it ourselves we are studying? Is it somebody else? Is it the interrelationship between the two that we are studying? Let me give an example again from Burl Hammons.

I once visited Burl Hammons for a weekend, and Sunday afternoon found us fiddling. He put the fiddle in a tuning of the violin that I had never used before. I said, "Ah, let me try that," so I put my fiddle in that tuning too. He played several tunes, and I followed along behind him. I was not recording at the time. I tried to imitate him, to get used to the fingering patterns--any time you change the tuning of the strings, you have to learn new fingering patterns. We were riveted to this tuning and the whole artistic ethos that went along with it. Finally I packed up and headed back to Washington. Driving back, I was in a sort of daze. It was a foggy night, I was tired and weary, the drive was long and took me over a series of mountain ridges. I found myself drifting into a dream-like state, not knowing whether I was awake or asleep.

Suddenly a tune came into my head. It takes a normal fiddle tune about thirty seconds to elapse, but I have to report that it came completely and immediately into my head. I heard it as played on the fiddle, of course, not just as a tune in the abstract, and it was in the tuning we had been using all afternoon. It was as if I knew it already and knew how to play it, but I could not remember the name of it. I thought, "That's one of those tunes Burl was playing this afternoon. I'll just have to ask him what the name is." I got home and went to bed, and the next morning I woke up and still remembered it. Whenever you wake up the next morning and still remember a tune, you know you have learned it. A week or two later I got the fiddle out and tried it, and sure enough I knew just how to play it. But I still could not think of its name.

About six weeks later I went back to visit Burl; by and by we got the fiddles out and started playing. I put the fiddle into that same tuning and said, "Burl, let me play a tune I think I learned from you last time. But I don't know the

name of it." So I played the tune. He listened to it. "Gee, that's a nice tune," he said, "but I don't think I've ever heard it before. Play it through again, I want to learn it." I said, "What, do you mean you never heard this tune before?" He said, "I don't think so. It sounds a little bit like--" and he played another tune that was a little similar, but different. And he said, "But it's different. Let me play it a little bit." So he picked up his fiddle and started imitating me. I was baffled by all this. Did he teach it to me, then forget it, then think he heard it first from me? Did I dream it and think I learned it from him?

The question was further complicated by a visit to his house about eight years later. He put the fiddle again in that same tuning, and he played the same tune. I looked at him, and I said, "Burl, what's the name of that tune?" He said, "Gee, you know, I can't think of the name of that." I said, "Well, where'd you learn it?" And he said, "You know, I can't remember where I picked that tune up." Now it will forever remain a mystery. If he created it and shared it with me, or I with him, we will never figure out how. I have to conclude that in some way we created it.

I tell the story because it is perhaps the most dramatic instance I have experienced of this growing together of the "us" and the "other," the student and the studied. It is a symptom of folklore studies that I think proceeds from our intensity of focus on the text itself, on the emanation and the power of the cultural expression, as opposed to simple curiosity about a way of life and how it functions. There is a sense that it is impossible to be a completely detached observer. That powerful growing together of us and other seems to me typical of folklore past and present, and I think will remain typical of folklore in the future.

Hence the intimate relationship between "folklore" the profession and "folklore" the thing studied. We have periodically tried to establish a term that distinguishes between the thing studied and the student. We have said, "Well, if folklore is the stuff, then the study of the stuff cannot be called folklore. We will have to call it

folkloristics, or something like that." We experiment with other terms like trial balloons. Everybody nods and agrees, "Yes, it is a real problem; we need two terms, not one." Yet dual terms never catch hold. I think one reason they do not is the subliminal sense on the part of our profession that there is a blur between the student and the studied; that we are all participants in a larger cultural process; that we are not just detached, scientific observers of data, though we use those techniques amongst others in our approaches to the field. Thus we cling, not knowing quite why, to the same word, **folklore**, to describe the stuff we study and the study itself.

If **us** and **other** are conjoined, that fact has powerful implications for understanding our final dilemma, **study vs. action**. In a world in which study were easily detachable from the thing being studied, it would be easier to separate the world of study from the human actions we all take as citizens of our community, our state, the United States, and the world. But folklorists have never been able to separate themselves from the world of actions, and they have regularly involved themselves, as advocates or adversaries, in the social process leading to actions and effects. They tend to view the people they visit as fellow citizens, not simply informants. Therefore, study is action. It is a joint undertaking of the student and the studied, which affects them both and creates mutual results of the study. If the student and the studied are conjoined, all study is in some sense political action in the world. Folklorists have always fretted and worried about getting sullied by the problems of political action. Those anxieties are proper. Nevertheless, I think the implications of our whole field's natural inclinations is that folklorists will always be involved both in study and in actions which have direct and immediate impact on the body politic in which we live.

In a curious way this is not an argument for developing "applied folklore" in the university, but an argument for the opposite. The fact that folklore is ultimately powerful and political--both historically, contemporaneously, and in our future--is actually the strongest argument for developing university programs that are not simply practicums

to prepare people for working in public-sector jobs, but rather include intense philosophical and moral inquiries into the nature of our field and the nature of our understanding of it. We need for future generations of folklore students a strong university base unfettered by the practical needs of accomplishing day-to-day tasks in the body politic. The academy needs to have a symbiotic relationship with the body politic, and I think in folklore it always will. But in that symbiotic relationship the academy has certain special functions, needs, and values within the totality. It should not imitate in its structure the body politic into which it sends its students.

It is important for us to think about the potency of folklore, the potency of what we are participating in when we study it, and the galvanic potential it has for influencing the world around us. When I think of that potential, I do not mean simply that we can help put on festivals. Rather, we may begin answering the question I heard recently, "Why are folklorists so influential in Washington?" There are actually more anthropologists than folklorists in Washington, yet anthropologists are less visible. I think it is because anthropologists have professionalized their Washington role in certain ways. They fulfill certain special professional missions within the larger totality of Washington politics, and they do them well; then they send the results up to the people upstairs who make the decisions. Folklore from its beginnings in Washington has never been willing to send the results of its work to somebody upstairs to make decisions. It has always insisted on participating in decision-making, as a result of its special vision as well as its special knowledge. That I think has been its strength.

I think we will continue to be influential in government--not just in Washington but in state government and local government, too. In many ways the real future expansion of our field's impact lies not off in Washington--though there are important things to be done there--but at the state and local governmental level. But the reason folklorists continue to have important impact is precisely because of their refusal to be pigeonholed into special categories. We won't be just historians, we won't be just one discipline in many

contributing to the whole of knowledge upon which somebody else makes a decision. We seem to have this instinct as a field to act as a sort of microcosm, to try to embrace everything within us. This is in a sense a romantic folly; we cannot embrace everything. But in another sense it is an attractive virtue, because trying to--insisting on a full participatory role rather than a specialized role--gives us our special magic and impetus and accounts for our special degree of influence.

It was instructive to me to reread recently the statement "On the Field and Work of a Journal of American Folk-Lore" which appears in the first issue of the Journal in 1888. The text makes it clear that the founders of the American Folklore Society thought of themselves as gathering important cultural materials from Anglo-American, Afro-American, and American Indian cultures and from cultures of other groups in the United States. So certainly the focus on texts was there. But what fascinated me most about the statement is the sense it imparted of launching a national mission as well as a scientific, disciplined undertaking. Readers today should note how broadly the founders of our society conceived their work, how personally they were engaged, how much they thought of it as a larger cultural mission by and for the benefit of citizens of the United States, not simply for scholars. The rules for the Society, printed at the end of Volume II of the Journal, also mention that "Any persons who desire to become members... may address the Secretary." You, too, can be a folklorist. That has not changed, and it is not likely too.