



On Difference

Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett

The Journal of American Folklore, Vol. 107, No. 424 (Spring, 1994), 233-238.

Stable URL:

<http://links.jstor.org/sici?sici=0021-8715%28199421%29107%3A424%3C233%3AOD%3E2.0.CO%3B2-F>

The Journal of American Folklore is currently published by American Folklore Society.

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of JSTOR's Terms and Conditions of Use, available at <http://www.jstor.org/about/terms.html>. JSTOR's Terms and Conditions of Use provides, in part, that unless you have obtained prior permission, you may not download an entire issue of a journal or multiple copies of articles, and you may use content in the JSTOR archive only for your personal, non-commercial use.

Please contact the publisher regarding any further use of this work. Publisher contact information may be obtained at <http://www.jstor.org/journals/folk.html>.

Each copy of any part of a JSTOR transmission must contain the same copyright notice that appears on the screen or printed page of such transmission.

For more information on JSTOR contact jstor-info@umich.edu.

©2003 JSTOR

- Seitel, Peter. 1980. *See So That We May See: Performances and Interpretations of Traditional Tales from Tanzania*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.
- Sharp, Cecil. 1907. *English Folk-Song: Some Conclusions*. London: Simpkin.
- Sjöman, Marianne. 1992. Current Research in the Nordic and Baltic Countries. *NIF Newsletter* 4:13-23.
- Smith, Robert J. 1989. Introduction: The Folk in American Folkloristics. In *The Folk: Identity, Landscapes, and Lore*, ed. Robert J. Smith and Jerry Stannard, pp. 1-8. University of Kansas Publications in Anthropology, 17. Lawrence: Department of Anthropology, University of Kansas.
- Spicer, Edward H. 1971. Persistent Identity Systems. *Science* 174:795-800.
- Stahl, Sandra K. D[olby]. 1977. The Personal Narrative as Folklore. *Journal of Folklore Institute* 15:9-30.
- Dolby[-]Stahl, Sandra K. 1985. A Literary Folkloristic Methodology for the Study of Meaning in Personal Narrative. *Journal of Folklore Research* 22:45-69.
- Stahl, Sandra [K.] Dolby. 1989. *Literary Folkloristics and the Personal Narrative*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.
- Taylor, Charles. 1989. *Sources of the Self: The Making of Modern Identity*. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press.
- Thoms, William J. 1965[1846]. Folklore. In *The Study of Folklore*, ed. Alan Dundes, pp. 4-6. Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice Hall.
- Thorat, S. K. 1979. Passage to Adulthood: Perceptions from Below. In *Identity and Adulthood*, ed. Sudhir Kakar, pp. 65-81. Delhi: Oxford University Press.
- Tylor, Edward Burnett. 1958[1871]. *Primitive Culture*. 2 vols. New York: Harper and Row.
- von Sydow, Carl Wilhelm. 1948. *Selected Papers on Folklore*. Copenhagen: Rosenkilde and Bagger.
- Whittaker, Elvi. 1992. The Birth of the Anthropological Self and Its Career. *Ethos* 20:191-219.
- Wilgus, D. K. 1959. *Anglo-American Folksong Scholarship since 1898*. New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press.
- Wilson, William A. 1973. Herder, Folklore and Romantic Nationalism. *Journal of Popular Culture* 6:819-835.
- _____. 1976. *Folklore and Nationalism in Modern Finland*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.
- _____. 1983. Mormon Folklore. In *Handbook of American Folklore*, ed. Richard M. Dorson, pp. 155-161. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.
- _____. 1989. Richard M. Dorson as Romantic-Nationalist. *Journal of Folklore Research* 26:35-42.
- Workman, Mark E. 1993. Tropes, Hopes, and Dopes. *Journal of American Folklore* 106:171-183.
- Wright, Thomas. 1969[1846]. *Essays on Subjects Connected with the Literature, Popular Superstitions and History of England in the Middle Ages*. Volume 1. New York: Burt Franklin.

DISCUSSION

On Difference

BARBARA KIRSHENBLATT-GIMBLETT
New York University

ELLIOTT ORING'S ARTICLE enacts what it is about. After asserting that the field of folklore has *always* been concerned with identity—indeed, that the identity question is its reason for being—Oring makes the boldest claim of all: our enduring concern with identity is the source of our own identity as a discipline

and the *one* thing we have in common and have always shared. As he says, "Identity seems to be what integrates our diverse interests into some sort of comprehensible configuration. Identity is what binds an idea of folk to a notion of lore" (p. 223). That our concepts of identity have changed radically since the days of Herder does "not alter the fundamental commitment of folklore studies to the identity project" (p. 229, n. 30).

In this way, Oring conflates our disciplinary predicament (Who are we?) and our disciplinary subject (Who are they?). Our preoccupation with their identity is what gives us our own identity. What is really at stake, then, is the identity of the discipline. We might therefore ask: what is the self-understanding and what are the analytical outcomes when we find common ground and name its location identity? If the term *identity* is used so flexibly, so inclusively, what does the exercise produce besides a stronger sense of our own identity as a discipline?

And, why this question, at this particular moment, as postmodernism announces the death of the subject? The death, that is, of a subject that is unified, stable, and centered. It is this prepostmodern subject, with its roots in a utopian vision of organic community, of *gemeinschaft*, that has long been at the heart of folkloristic understandings of identity. Paradoxically, however, the alleged death of the subject is occurring on the grounds of proliferating difference and along the shifting faultlines of gender, sexuality, race, class, and resurgent primordialism. From the pyre of the dead subject rises the phoenix of identity.

Everyone, it seems, is now concerned with identity, folklorists least of all. I just searched a database of four million articles in 14,000 periodicals from 1988 to the present and found 3604 citations that included the word identity in the title of the journal or article. Only nine of them also included the word folklore, and most of those were for articles in a special issue of *Western Folklore*. In contrast, identity occurred with each of the following terms in higher numbers: *culture/cultural* (261), *nation/national/nationalism* (249), *American* (246), *social* (242), *history/historical* (184), *psychology/psychological* (165), *ethnic* (139), *gender* (121), *politics* (111), *personal* (88), *women* (83), *race/racial* (71), *Jewish* (61), *gay/lesbian/homosexual* (62), *religion/religious* (59), *Black/Afro-American* (55), *philosophy* (54), *sociology/sociological* (53), *community* (48), *art* (46), *Asian* (34), *children* (34), *Hispanic/Latino* (30), *region/regional* (30), *class* (29), *difference* (28), *music* (28), *anthropology* (26), *narrative* (24), *performance* (19), *theatre* (18), *multicultural/multiculturalism* (16), *dance* (11), and *geography* (10).¹ For a field whose enduring concern is identity, folklore makes a poor showing at a time when identity seems to be on everyone's mind.

Oring gathers a wide variety of instances of folkloristic interest in identity, whatever "it" has been called during two hundred years of our disciplinary history. The terms he cites are *spirit, mind, consciousness, peoplehood, soul, character, germ, imagination, thought and opinion, ideas, ethos, values, originality, feelings, original elements, uniqueness, national peculiarities, dispositions* (conscious and unconscious), *emotional lives, attitude and approach, ideology and worldview, value system, self-conception, self-consciousness, dynamic essences, premises, anxieties, and mentalities*, among others. As folklorist Katharine Young noted to me, Oring's

argument has the virtue of offering a concept to hold together a lot of disparate material. By so doing, he provides the sense of a common rallying point, even if that rallying point does not distinguish us from other fields that seem to be paying more attention to identity, strictly speaking, than we do.

Oring's cogent exposition, by its very juxtaposition of such disparate material, also has the opposite effect, which is to suggest new points of departure. This is its greatest value. In the spirit of a splitter—the greater the lump, the happier the splitter—I will argue that the field of folklore is not defined by a continuous interest in identity and that the various terms Oring cites are evidence to the contrary. Rather than fold all these terms into a unified, or continuous, concern with a concept of identity, I will propose that we map distinctions in the conceptual field, that we ask how the notions of identity so familiar in our work today emerged, how they entered disciplinary consciousness, and why.

Such a project would start, then, with the problem of discontinuity. It would take the many terms that Oring cites and gloss them to show their differences. It would use them to illuminate historically specific disciplinary formations that are discontinuous with the present moment and that, in some cases, we have repudiated—for example, such concepts as folk soul, primitive mind, and national genius. It would proceed by asking: to which question is identity, by any name, the answer? It would imagine a conversation with Herder, Tylor, Lönnrot, Boas, Herskovits, or Dorson, in which each of them posed a question to which identity was the answer. It would consider writing a history of the discipline on the basis of these questions, rather than on the basis of the answer—identity, by whatever name. In his magisterial sweep of the discipline's history, Oring provides a foundation for just such a project.

Or, consider taking *difference* as the point of departure. Where is difference located and to what is it referred? Identity and difference are, of course, linked. They are mutually constitutive. But that does not mean that they are the same or that what flows from them will be the same. This is especially clear in policies of affirmative action, antidiscrimination, and multiculturalism.

Difference does not make a difference. Two approaches to achieving parity, one marking difference and the other ignoring it, start from the premise that difference has been an impediment to parity; both approaches have as their objective its eventual irrelevance. They proceed by compensating for bias, seek to prevent it from occurring, and eventually hope to eliminate it entirely. Affirmative action requires that difference first be marked, for only then can we act affirmatively to redress the damage of bias. North Star Fund, a foundation committed to "progressive social change and equitable distribution of wealth, resources, and power" requires on its 1993 application for funding that applicants specify how many of their organization's members, board members, and staff fall into the following categories: low income, American Indian, Asian, Arab, Black, Latino, white, other (to be specified), women, gay/lesbian, older, youth, and disabled. Presumably, the higher the numbers, the more eligible the applicant. In other words, reverse the bias in order to correct it. Taking the opposite approach to parity, antidiscrimination provisions insist that differences

must *not* be marked. They are not even to be mentioned. Agencies instruct the writers of letters of recommendation not to mention the candidate's age, religion, race, physical appearance, and so forth.

Difference does make a difference. This is the basis for multiculturalism in its many forms, affirmative racialism, and the biologizing of difference, most recently in the form of the gay gene. This is also the arena in which folklorists operate, particularly in public folklore. We are major players in the diversity industry. With all due respect to the very positive aspects of our work, we must also guard against the reactionary potential in the affirmation of difference.

Underlying much celebratory diversity is an affirmative racialism coded in the terms of culture. It reveals itself in the privileging of origins and originality, true character, precedence, preeminence, uniqueness, and authenticity, especially when linked to primordial claims. Add essence, spirit, genius, and purity. Keep in mind creative transformation on the part of those who borrow from those who create. What we have is a discourse of paternity and property. Who is the legitimate father? Who owns the patent, the copyright? Who created and who copied?

What bothers me about defining the discipline of folklore in terms of its concern with identity is the displacement of the political onto the psychological. Sigmund Freud, about whom Oring has himself written so cogently, was a master of just this displacement. Carl Schorske has shown precisely how (1980:181–209). As folklorists know all too well, the paternity and property claims that drive the quest for origins and uniqueness, right from our philological beginnings, are linked to claims of territory and sovereignty. And it is in the interests of those claims to promote the illusion of the given and natural link among all the terms in Oring's list. This is what makes me uneasy about the displacement of a political analysis to the realm of psychology, to identity, no matter how distinguished the precedents for so doing. The potential end point is a fully realized racialism that transmutes readily into racism, even when we are sophisticated enough to shift the grounds from visible physical characteristics to cultural ones and from debasement to affirmation.

Who originates and who borrows? And who makes the determination? The history of Jewish folklore (and the history of African American folklore) are prime sites for exploring the problem. The entry on Semitic folklore by Theodor Gaster in Maria Leach's *Standard Dictionary of Folklore, Mythology, and Legend* reads as follows:

A loose overall term used for convenience to designate the sum total of what are really the separate and distinct folklores of the peoples who spoke (or speak) Semitic languages. For the purposes of this article, however, the area is restricted to the ancient civilizations of the Babylonians and Assyrians, Canaanites and Israelites. Modern Semitic folklore, including especially that of the Arabs and Jews, has been excluded, on the grounds that so much of it is due to direct borrowings from other peoples and can therefore not be described as distinctive . . . just as a great deal of what passes today for Jewish folklore really represents direct borrowings from the Gentile peoples among whom the Jews happen to have been dispersed. [Leach 1950:980]

Needless to say, there is no entry for Jewish folklore. We might also read the history of African American folkloristics—the debate over African retentions and the debates over copying, imitating, and mimicry in characterizations of African American culture—in these terms.

Purity assumptions have dominated the history of the field. The notion of hybridity, which was the subject of several panels organized by Deborah Kapchan at the 1993 AFS meetings, is an attack on such purity assumptions (and an adjustment to its limitations). This is work that starts with an assumption of diaspora and transnational flows of cultural material, rather than with provenance as the determinant of distinctiveness and distinctiveness as the grounds of identity. Borrowing is a bankrupt notion. Spin it out. With or without interest? On loan for how long?

Oring has focused our attention on a topic of general concern to many fields and at the forefront of folkloristic attention in recent years. Most of all, I see his argument as signaling our desire for a disciplinary subject that is stable, centered, and unified. We seem to want a subject around which we can all rally, one that will “center” us in an era of decentering, one that will display our continuity and commonality. This is all the more true as we try to cope with a recession, tight academic market, folklore “in crisis,” the field fractured, the discipline’s territory eroded by competing players, its place uncertain as disciplinary boundaries, and institutional structures, shift.

We are experiencing the repercussions of specific historical experiences. Laid out decade by decade from the 1960s to the present—the era of Oring’s cohort, of which I am part—they include the civil rights movement, postcolonialism, the Vietnam war, the women’s movement, the sexual revolution, the new ethnicity, the new immigration, and the AIDS crisis. Just when we least expected it, race comes back in new and affirmative forms, as well as in its old form of hate. At the same time, the grounds of difference are proliferating beyond the more familiar terms of race or nation, religion or ethnicity or class. The stakes are high—life and death—which accounts in part for why nationalism, race, gender, and sexuality should turn up with such frequency in articles published over the last five years.

Poststructuralism and postmodern and postcolonial theory, while contemplating the death of the subject and decentering the sure ground on which it had once been postulated, offer hybridity and new discourses of difference to deal with such particular historical circumstances. Much of the most powerful thinking is coming from new cadres of intellectuals who stand tall and firm in places of difference and speak loud and clear. Visibility politics, one way of addressing identity politics, asks if being seen, being represented, will solve the problems of parity.

Ours is a different time. So, I would end by saying that difference, as I’ve outlined it here, does not necessarily produce identity as an organizing concept for the discipline. Rather, I am calling for a political analysis of the preoccupation with identity. In whose interest is it to fix identity? To speak in terms of identity? And to what end the discourse of difference?

Notes

¹These calculations are imperfect since many entries contain several of the designated terms and, therefore, appear in more than one category. However, as a record of the frequency with which particular terms appear, it is useful.

References Cited

- Leach, Maria, ed. 1950. *Funk & Wagnalls Standard Dictionary of Folklore, Mythology, and Legend*. New York: Funk and Wagnalls.
 Schorske, Carl E. 1980[1961]. *Fin-de-Siècle Vienna: Politics and Culture*. New York: Knopf.
-

On Identity

HENRY GLASSIE
Indiana University

TO BE CLEAR: I admire Elliott Oring as a thinker and a stylist, and I stand in agreement with his central thesis. My comments will not be critical; they will elaborate a positive response.

Leaping over the long, historical third section of his article, I intend to concentrate on connecting his second section of philosophical refinement with his fourth section on definitional logic as a prelude to praxis. In his historical passage Oring does not retell the discipline's history so much as he snatches facts from the past to illustrate his thesis. As the history of our discipline becomes known in richer detail, he will, I am convinced, be proved more, not less, correct. Tylor and Krohn provide his narrative with its most disruptive episodes. But it was not Tylor's evolutionism, so influential on anthropology, but the romantics' twist of the evolutionary tale that inspired folklorists. While Krohn tightened the historic and geographic interest into a rigorous method, most folklorists following him practiced more loosely, continuing the old search through art for culture. That is certainly true in the United States. Warren Roberts's excellent *Kind and Unkind Girls* fulfills the historic-geographic program, but Richard Dorson's *Bloodstoppers and Bearwalkers* and Roger Abrahams's *Deep Down in the Jungle*, to cite two key historical texts, can be easily interpreted as quests for identity.

Elliott Oring's thesis, as I read it (and if I read it correctly, I agree), is that, despite our talk of multitudinous definitions, there has been, from the middle of the 18th century to the present, a single center, one defined point of orientation for the folklorist's discipline. At different times, responding to different needs and fashions, men and women have used different words to call us to the center of study. That center, to use the language of his philosophical passage, is a recognition of the reality of the individual and the collective, with a mediating term of synthesis that he calls personal. The words he uses are good ones, better than those I had been using for the same ideas before reading his