Dorfman, John. 1997. That's All Folks. Lingua Franca (October): 8-9.

Field*Notes*

THAT'S ALL FOLKS!

When exiled president Jean-Bertrand Aristide of Haiti came to speak at UCLA in 1992, Donald Cosentino, chairman of the folklore and mythology department, was asked to make the introduction. Before the event, the university's vice-chancellor told him, "We have a head of state here. Under no circumstances will I introduce you as the chair of folklore and mythology. I will introduce you as from the English department. Let's not embarrass ourselves."

If merely invoking the name of the field has such power to shame, it's no wonder folklorists themselves are suffering from a bad case of Wissenschaftschmerz--disciplinary inferiority complex. The presidential address at last year's meeting of the American Folklore Society (AFS) turned into a veritable jeremiad. "Over and over the field is being asked to both defend and define itself," lamented the president, Jane Beck, who is executive director of the Vermont Folklife Center. "Because of this, as academic departments are feeling the pressure of downsizing and retrenchment, folklore is the first to go." According to a 1996 AFS survey, only 20 percent of its members "always" identify themselves as folklorists in describing what they do--presumably because the term "folklore" connotes things like fiddles and quilts and sounds less like scholarship than an eccentric hobby.

Nowhere is the malaise felt more acutely than at the University of Pennsylvania. Since its founding in 1962, Penn's Department of Folklore and Folklife has been the discipline's bellwether, spreading Ph.D.s across the country. But three years ago, Penn announced a $9 million budget shortfall and decided to save money by phasing out departments that were perceived as marginal or unproductive. The administration has since abandoned such unpopular talk, but, as far as the folklorists are concerned, the writing is on the wall. Two of the department's five tenured professors, Margaret Mills and John Roberts, have just migrated to Ohio State University (where they will teach folklore under the aegis of the Near Eastern and English departments, respectively). Before Mills left, she asked Penn to match Ohio State's offer. The university declined. Students and faculty alike have been "told orally" by university officials that faculty who leave or retire won't

be replaced. With Roger Abrahams, the senior member of the department, on the verge of retirement, folklore as an autonomous discipline at Penn may well be doomed.

"Folklore is considered undertheorized, which in today's climate is a devastating charge."

That leaves Indiana University and UCLA, the only two other Ph.D.-granting folklore programs in the country. And the future of the UCLA program looks bleak. According to Cosentino, it will likely soon be folded into an omnibus department known as World Arts and Cultures.

One reason for folklore's endangered status is that it has never been completely clear--even to practitioners--what it actually is. Distilling the manifold definitions yields a description along these lines: Folklore is the study of vernacular cultures--that is, cultures that are local and oral. Among folklore's early trailblazers was Jacob Grimm of the brothers Grimm, whose mammoth four-volume Teutonic Mythology, studded with quotations in languages from Gothic to Lettish, is still taken seriously today. In nineteenth-century Europe, folklore bolstered the cause of romantic nationalism, as its philological researches became a propaganda tool for validating the blood-and-soil politics of the newfangled nation-state.

In this country, by contrast, folklore was always associated with grassroots fieldwork. "Folklore became the department of low culture when the universities were studying only high culture," says Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, an NYU performance studies professor and folklore Ph.D. At Harvard, for example, turn-of-the-century pioneers like Francis James Child and George Lyman Kittredge were especially interested in old English and Scottish ballads and their atavistic survival in places like Appalachia and the Ozarks. By the 1930s, American folklore began its ongoing association with the left, as activist archivists like Alan Lomax recorded the songs of country-blues singers and hillbillies. (Until a crippling stroke in 1995, the octogenarian Lomax was still working, compiling what he calls a "Global Jukebox"--an interactive sound and video database of the folkmusic and dance of over six hundred cultures worldwide.) In retrospect, the 1960s were folklore's glory days, when most of the current programs were launched, enrollments surged, and seminal works, such as Richard Dorson's American Folklore, were written.

If folklore is losing the Darwinian struggle for academic survival, the fault lies partly with folklorists themselves, who have never been particularly good at explaining themselves to outsiders. Four

years ago, the journal Western Folklore devoted a special double issue to soul-searching and stocktaking, and in their introductory essay, Amy Shuman and Charles L. Briggs argued that folklore "is always already (in Derrida's terms) a politics of culture." The discipline, they wrote, can "contribute to the critique of modernism by rupturing the hold of high culture." This sounds heady--and familiar: After all, nearly every new field, from cultural studies to postcolonial studies, has adopted a similar mandate. And as the distinction between "authentic" folk culture and "artificial" pop culture grows more and more tenuous, folklore is losing ground to the upstarts. Trying to co-opt the political and theoretical stance of the Young Turks has all the earmarks of a last-ditch effort--one that may render the discipline more, not less, dispensable.

Some folklorists freely admit that their work could be done within the context of other fields, such as anthropology or literature. ("I've quit going to AFS meetings," says Indiana University folklorist Richard Bauman. "My most important constituency is in linguistic anthropology.") But will all folklorists thrive in the climate of other disciplines? Alan Wolfe, a sociologist at Boston University, diagnoses a contempt for hard facts in folklore's competitors, including anthropology and cultural studies. "Specific knowledge is the low man on the totem pole these days," he says. "Folklore is considered undertheorized, which in today's climate is a devastating charge."

And then there is another, perhaps insurmountable quandary for folklore: what Kirshenblatt-Gimblett calls "the vanishing subject." Traditional close-knit communities, rural and urban alike, are under siege by the forces of social and geographical mobility, and such arcana as ballads and tall tales are being squeezed out of existence by aggressive entertainment media. The great collectors of the past performed an invaluable service, and just in the nick of time, but what's left for today's would-be collectors? Although University of Utah English professor Jan Harold Brunvand's popular books on urban legends are widely dismissed by folklorists as lightweight, similar inquiries into so-called Xerox-machine and corporate folklore are increasingly occupying the attention of scholars in search of fresh material.

Indeed, the main attraction of UCLA's program seems to be its receptivity to nontraditional subject matter. "UCLA is very open to looking at contemporary phenomena as true folklore," says Montana Miller, who will begin the program this fall. "How could they not? They're in the middle of Hollywood!" She plans to undertake an "ethnography of high-risk performance," focusing on such communities as stunt people, circus performers, and high divers.

All this may be more paradigm stretch than paradigm shift. "I don't see it as a strategy to save folklore from the flight into intellectual and institutional irrelevance," says Bauman. "When it comes to studying these modern forms of community, folklorists don't have any proprietary claims. I don't see any sense in calling any community in the United States an oral community."

John Dorfman

Copyright © 1997 Lingua Franca,Inc. All rights reserved.