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Folk Criticism and the Art of Critical Folklore Studies

This article continues a call for the development of a critical folklore studies as a mode of activist research to redress human suffering and domination. It examines folk criticism as a vibrant, everyday practice and encourages folklorists to embrace critical perspectives as a continuation of this essential human activity. It draws upon Kenneth Burke, Michael Walzer, Thomas McLaughlin, and Antonio Gramsci to illustrate the intimate relationship between folk and professional criticism. Finally, it offers four forms of critical rhetoric intended to complement traditional folklore scholarship and to pursue social change: formal criticism and critique, performance ethnographies, unmaskings, and genealogies.

We can bring to birth a new world from the ashes of the old.

—Ralph Chaplin

LAMENTING THE CREEPING DEMISE OF programs and departments of folklore in the early twenty-first century, Alan Dundes (2005) offered a resolute and resounding diagnosis. The principal reason for the decline, he argued, was lack of innovation in grand theory by contemporary folklorists; others include the failure of professional folklorists to counter works by amateurs, the loss of previous disciplinary knowledge, and intimidation by informants that compromises research. Dundes's emphasis on grand theory led him to treat several contemporary movements in folklore studies uncharitably. He dismissed both feminist theory and performance theory, for example, suggesting they are "simply pretentious ways of saying that we should study folklore as performed, and we should be more sensitive to the depiction of women in folkloristic texts and contexts" (2005:389); public folklore is likewise relegated to a single passing statement (2005:387). The aim of this essay is to offer an alternative diagnosis.

Recently, I (2009) presented a case for the development of a critical folklore studies, drawing upon Roger Abrahams, Kenneth Burke, Antonio Gramsci, Ernesto Laclau, and several contemporary rhetorical theorists and critics. "Critical" in this sense concerns the active pursuit of emancipation from oppression, the recognition and address of domination and privilege, and the promotion of democratic social change, akin to the intercessory work of, for example, critical cultural studies, critical ethnography,

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and critical pedagogy. In advocating a closer relation between folklore studies and rhetorical studies to assist this project, I raised the possibility that the production of criticism and critique would be an essential component for a robust critical folklore studies. I missed the opportunity, however, to articulate what such critical practices might look like. This article intends to make that contribution and to argue that critical research is not radically distinct from everyday life.

It is important to recognize up-front that the production of criticism and critique are not the only means to sustain a critical folklore studies. Public sector work offers another avenue, grassroots organizing another, and perhaps most importantly, many folklore practices themselves offer yet another. The intention of this article, then, is not to privilege one expression of political engagement, nor to determine a specific method for its production. My aim is, rather, to bring the status of critical research into the conversation, acknowledging that it often is not a pivotal aspect of training for folklorists and well may be an element most in need of debate and development.

As a guide to the possible activities of a critical folklore studies, this article seeks to accomplish several moves that would ask the reader to rethink the conventional relationship (or lack thereof) between criticism, critique, folklore, and folklore scholarship. In the first section, I detail expressions of everyday critical practice in order to demonstrate how criticism is vibrantly interwoven with, rather than divorced from, social life. In the second section, I describe the particular inflection of “critical” in critical research, in order to encourage a closer relationship between folklorists-as-critics and critical advocates in local communities. In the third section, I propose four experimental writing forms as critical rhetorics that might complement traditional folklore studies.

Criticism and Everyday Life

“All living things are critics.” So declared Kenneth Burke as the opening salvo of *Permanence and Change* ([1935] 1984a:5). This maxim inaugurates a chapter dedicated to the concept of “orientation,” a general view of reality—or as he says more playfully, “a bundle of judgments as to how things were, how they are, and how they may be” (14). Burke’s contribution is a fortuitous place to initiate a discussion about critical research, not only because of his own monumental influence upon folklore studies through the performance turn, but also because he provides an early example of criticism conceptualized as an activity of all humans in our search to make sense of our social and natural environments. His analysis also portends a question of particular importance to folklorists, namely how people come to make judgments for action through reliance upon artistic communication.

To be alive is to be struggling to make the world sensible. An orientation is fundamental as a guide for survival, then, but any orientation is inevitably incomplete and improved upon through criticism. For Burke, criticism is a faculty that all creatures share, in being able to reorient themselves to the world in response to and in expectation of certain lived experiences. His proposition unites criticism with animality—Burke’s first example of critical action is a trout that survives the hook and learns to

avoid similar bait—through a common ability to interpret signs and revise judgment ([1935] 1984a:5). Human beings are not unique in their critical capacity, therefore, but distinguished rather by the degree of this faculty in relation to other animals. This heightened capacity itself derives from abstractions and inventions made possible only through language and other advanced symbol use, such as the invention of the category of the negative. To be living is to be a critic of experience; to be human is to be a critic of experience and the judgments of oneself and others.

In Burke's view, the tricky thing about humanity is that we become human through learning language and other symbol use; as a result, we inherit orientations from those who socialize us and teach us how to communicate. Tradition plays a significant role as language instruction enables the possibility of identity, and many of these orientations stay with us as sense-making equipment for as long as do our names, even as we develop critical, self-reflexive capacities through our unique experiences navigating the natural and social world. Furthermore, our species's capacity for criticism is double-edged, generative of personal and collective solutions and problems. Noting, for example, that sharp critical faculties of abstraction have allowed humans' conquest of the environment through the building up of cultural structures, Burke also decries "the stupid national or racial wars which have been fought precisely because these abstractions were taken for reality" ([1935] 1984a:6).

Any orientation—and any act of criticism—is a way of "linkage," a putting together of concepts in a particular manner, so that, for example, Catholics link priests with guidance and Marxists link them with deception ([1935] 1984a:13). Moreover, orientations impose limitations, and criticism, although a refinement of an orientation, may never serve as a means to encompass the totality of experience. A perspectivism thus animates Burke's early work and allows him to make the claim that orientations "can go wrong" in a *pragmatic* sense: certain ways of linkage in a given orientation may produce ill effects for those who hold them or for those who are subject to them ([1935] 1984a:6). Drawing upon Thorstein Veblen's notion of "trained incapacity," Burke identifies how certain orientations promote a blindness to alternative ways of interpreting the world and judging actions.

For Burke, no more problematic formation of trained incapacity exists than what he calls the scapegoat mechanism. Originating in an orientation predicated upon the cause-and-effect understanding of magic, the scapegoat mechanism promises purification of a people through the transference of sins to another animal. Within the milieu of Burke's time, however, he regards it as an "error in interpretation," an irresponsible justification for—as one example—whites who link their economic misery to African-American bodies and purify themselves through lynching ([1935] 1984a:15). Later in *Permanence and Change*, Burke associates expiation and purgation with tragedy, both as a literary genre and a general orientation toward existence that blames others for one's inability to make sense of the world (195). Yet the solution to this paradox haunting the human condition was not a retreat from critical endeavors, but rather the unending pursuit of "still better criticism" (6). Burke himself recommends the development of a "perspective by incongruity," a critical venture that breaks common sense and pious orientations through the deliberate linkage of ideas whose connection was formally ignored or prohibited.

Burke refined this notion of criticism in *Attitudes Toward History*, published two years after *Permanence and Change*. He returned especially to confront the political problem of a tragic orientation and its emphasis on fatality, crime, and human viciousness, distinct from the charitable operations of comedy ([1937] 1984b:41). In this later work, anti-Semitism and fascism appear not only as an error in interpretation, but as an egregious tragic frame taken to a level of mystification that “shunts criticism into the wrong channels” (169). As an antidote, Burke introduces a “comic corrective,” an ecumenical orientation that stresses human beings as social creatures and political animals, whose collective survival is dependent upon both “accommodation to the structure of other’s lives” (174) and a self-reflexivity that enables people “to be observers of themselves, while acting” (171); he regards these practices as the “maximum opportunity for the resources of *criticism*” (173; emphasis in original).

Burke argues that a comic orientation would open “a whole new field for social criticism” ([1937] 1984b:167), but he does not claim originality in the device. To the contrary, he insists that the materials for such a frame already exist about us. First, he notes resources for a comic perspective as varied as psychoanalytic criticism, Machiavelli, and Frazer’s *Golden Bough*, which provides a point of comparison between contemporary and ancient purification rites. He then cites the importance of “error” (including superstition) as a resource, in that errors so-identified call for correction. And finally, Burke suggests that a comic frame would draw readily from folklore. “This strategy,” he contends, “even opens us to the resources of ‘popular’ philosophy, as embodied not only in proverbs and old saws, but also in the working vocabulary of every-day relationships” (172). He continues:

You have heard tributes to “folk art.” You should also give thought to “folk criticism.” We are not here proposing to cultivate such terms “esthetically,” for their purely “picturesque” value. We are considering them as a collective philosophy of motivation, arising to name the relationships, or social situations, which people have found so pivotal and so constantly recurring as to need names for them. The metaphorical migration of a term from some restricted field of action into the naming of acts in other fields is a kind of “perspective by incongruity” that we merely propose to make more “efficient” by proposing a *methodology* for encouraging still further metaphorical migrations. (173)

To be clear, Burke did not recommend folklore unconditionally. He recognized that it may just as easily promote unnecessarily tragic orientations or scapegoating as it would more comic and impious perspectives. Nevertheless, in conceptualizing folklore as equipment for living ([1941] 1974), he envisioned it as a critical resource available to humans in adjusting orientations toward the world.¹ In so doing, he underscored the claim that criticism is a ubiquitous human phenomenon, not an elitist act reserved only for the few. (He additionally depicted criticism as constitutive of identities—a point I return to in the final section.)

Michael Walzer advances a similar proposition in *Interpretation and Social Criticism*. Therein, he identifies social criticism as a common human activity, distinguishable from more specialized forms that emphasize emotional and intellectual detach-

ment from the object of study, such as literary criticism (1987:36). Rather than a subscriber to “radical detachment,” Walzer’s social critic is

the local judge, the connected critic, who earns his authority, or fails to do so, by arguing with his fellows—who, angrily and insistently, sometimes at considerable personal risk . . . objects, promotes, and remonstrates. This critic is one of us. Perhaps he has traveled and studied abroad, but his appeal is to local or localized principles; if he has picked up new ideas on his travels, he tries to connect them to the local culture, building on his own intimate knowledge. . . . [H]e does not wish the natives well, he seeks the success of their common enterprise. (39)

Often, social critics are men and women who resist and stand as adversaries to a ruling intellectual class, those who assume control over the “activity of cultural elaboration and affirmation” (Walzer 1987:40). Social criticism in this vein is not predicated upon scientific claims of truth or falsity, but rather upon “evocative . . . renderings of a common idea” (44), the active participation in the fashioning of morality and the defining of ethical action. Walzer’s social critic takes sides, then, but does not function as an enemy of the society, maintaining instead concern for the welfare of the community as a whole.

For Walzer, humans become critics by telling stories about more just societies than their own, and in this manner, social criticism is the “educated cousin of common complaint” (65). This attunement to narrative is significant and resonates with Burke’s assessment. For both, insofar as the human condition entails our capacity to tell stories, all of us command a penchant for criticism. Walzer’s emphasis on social criticism may place the onus on more tragic expressions, but for both him and Burke, criticism is a rhetorical expression natural to human beings, practiced through artistic means and enacted for the purpose of influencing others within the local community and establishing conditions for living together.

Thomas McLaughlin’s analysis of street smarts offers a copacetic perspective. For McLaughlin, the task of critical theory *qua* critical theory is the “uncovering [of] cultural assumptions that dominate in a society” (1996:4). In alliance with Burke and Walzer, he rejects any notion of criticism as an exclusively elite academic exercise and advances instead a notion of “vernacular theory”—that which occurs in everyday life by those “who lack cultural power and who speak a critical language grounded in local concerns” (5–6). Vernacular theory and criticism, while not reliant upon the terminologies of formal critique, are no less rhetorically inventive, as they require the creation of certain ways of communicating to address fundamental concerns through local issues. Fanzine writers, conservative religious activists, advertising professionals, New Age visionaries, and “whole language” teachers populate McLaughlin’s study as examples of critics in the vernacular mode, and certainly other performers of folk expressions could easily be included.

McLaughlin’s most important contribution is his overt declaration of that which is implied in Burke and Walzer’s notions of criticism: academic theory and criticism is simply “a rigorous and scholarly version of a widely practiced analytical strategy”; what distinguishes the two is status and style, not goals and strategies (6). Drawing

upon Michel Foucault and Michel de Certeau, as well as Houston Baker and Henry Louis Gates (among others), McLaughlin demonstrates that critical consciousness and resistance is possible among all social and economic classes, even as a certain higher-classed performance of skepticism is held in more prestige within mainstream societies. Drawing upon Paulo Freire and other critical pedagogues, he contends that revolutionary action will not serve the doctrinal positions of either the political Left or Right, but rather will promote dialogue between critics and the oppressed such that a critical consciousness emerges from an attentiveness to, not a imposition upon, vernacular theory and expression.

McLaughlin's appraisal of the vernacular would certainly not be novel to folklorists, but it is noteworthy here as a bridge between everyday human expression and formal critical research, the latter understood as an extension rather than a wholly divisible activity. I would like to draw three implications from Burke's folk and comic criticism, Walzer's social criticism, and McLaughlin's vernacular criticism. First, in criticism, as with any artistic endeavor, one improves through practice, both in developing a style and in mastering an interplay of tradition and innovation. Second, understanding criticism as an artful performance—where artful is not divorced from everyday—requires attention to audiences as well as to performers. Third, criticism is not merely a technical art, for it concerns the domain of subjectivity; that is, it is generative of identities both personal and collective and makes claims upon others to orient toward the world in particular ways.

The implications for a critical folklore studies are compelling. It would suggest that we folklorists have been remiss in under-developing an appreciation of folk or vernacular criticism, including those "meanings attributed to folklore texts by the people who use them" (Narayan 1995:243). Such an inclination became manifested, albeit in rudimentary conceptualization, as early as Jean Olive Heck's (1927) work on children's singing games, in which she endorsed inquiring into opinions held by young performers about their songs. Decades later, Dundes himself forwarded the idea of oral literary criticism, first in collaboration with E. Ojo Arewa (1964; cf. Arewa 1970) and then in his own studies of metafolklore (1964, 1966). Although this concept of folk criticism was employed with scarcity throughout the decades since (e.g., Baker 1983; Limón 1983b), Kirin Narayan (1995) revitalized the idea and observed its resonance with other scholarly movements such as reception theory. Attention to folk criticism as an everyday artistic performance would also foster the need to engage more directly critics within local communities and the audiences she or he creates.²

From Folk Criticism to Formal Critique

Although research into folk criticism and the artistry of vernacular critics would provide a strong foundation for a critical folklore studies, such analysis alone could not cement a sustained project. Critical research does not terminate in description or observation; rather, regardless of the subject matter, it takes seriously Marx's admonition in the *Theses on Feuerbach* that the point of philosophy is to change the world, not simply to interpret it. In this section, I will discuss a second meaning of the term "critical" as it modifies folklore studies—one promoting the notion that

folklorists themselves (individually or in collaboration with local critics) take up the mantle of producing formal critique.

Arguably the most influential usage of “critical” in the manner I am describing derives from the notion of Critical Theory as practiced by the Frankfurt School, those members of the Institute for Social Research such as Theodor Adorno, Walter Benjamin, and Max Horkheimer. While José Limón (1983a) recommended engagement between folklorists and the Frankfurt School in his commentaries on Western Marxism long ago, reception remains sporadic.³ There is, however, a reasonable conjecture for why this general avoidance has occurred: members of the Frankfurt School ultimately (and often despite their commitment to justice) positioned themselves and their criticism as a detached rather than everyday or embodied activity, and underestimated the possible forms of resistance and critical consciousness the “masses” might produce.

Nevertheless, the influence of the Frankfurt School in propagating the notion of critical research is profound, and their explorations help delineate its scope. In Horkheimer’s (1972) distinction, “critical” theory and research juxtaposes “traditional” theory and research. A critical perspective is “wholly distrustful of the rules of conduct with which society as presently constituted provides each of its members” (207) and therefore serves as “an element in action leading to new social forms” (216), specifically the promotion of freedom (230) and the abolition of social injustice (242). Critical theory promotes “constructive thinking rather than empirical verification,” and the task of the critical theoretician is “to reduce the tension between his own insight and oppressed humanity in whose service he thinks” (221). The debt to Marxism is evident in this early formulation, as most of Horkheimer’s agenda for critical theory responds to bourgeois and capitalist ideology. A critical theory of economics might, for example, demonstrate how exchange economies end up in wars and thereby attempt to thwart such action (226).

Despite the promotion of freedom and the redress of injustice at the base of Horkheimer’s description, this initial conceptualization of critical theory was limited by a certain pessimism and elitism. For Horkheimer, the critic thinks *for* oppressed humanity but is not necessarily among them. As a result, he admits that the advantages of critical theory are not recognized by most people (218) and, indeed, the masses may even demonstrate a certain public hostility to critical research and intervention (232). There is quite little attention to vernacular or folk criticism in the corpus of the Frankfurt School, and remarkably few gestures of immediate solidarity with the masses, whose consumption of popular culture presumably keeps them quite removed from an intelligentsia. Hence, a dilemma informs critical theory in the Frankfurt School: a desire to theorize and practice emancipation for all humanity, but an inability to reconcile their emphasis on rationality with the ways of shared experience lived by most humans in society.

As suggested by the work of scholars attached to the Center for Contemporary Cultural Studies at the University of Birmingham, an alternative to the Frankfurt School may be found in the work of Antonio Gramsci, who maintains the benefits of a critical agenda, but who also provides a model for critique that is more acutely engaged with everyday life. It is not surprising, for example, that both Walzer and

McLaughlin cite Gramsci as an important antecedent to their research, and I will echo the sentiment that a thorough engagement with Gramsci is necessary for any serious development of a critical folklore studies. Regrettably, reference to Gramsci is largely still quite limited in American folklore studies, perhaps because he did not champion folklore and often found it problematic.⁴ Still, his observations on human critical capacity resonate well with those already discussed and help move us from folk criticism to formal critique.

In an oft-quoted citation, Gramsci claimed that “all men are intellectuals . . . but not all men have in society the function of intellectuals” (1971:9).⁵ He thereby distinguishes *traditional* from *organic* intellectuals, a distinction that has held productive resonance over the decades. Mary Strine’s review of critical theory in cultural studies, for example, identifies the impetus for critical research not in grand theories, but in address of “grievous problems”—problems that evolve and demand attention to timeliness and local praxis (1991:196). She relies upon Gramsci to locate traditional intellectuals “whose specialized roles and relatively stable socio-economic status appear to set them apart from the drift of partisan political life,” and organic intellectuals, “who emerge from within (and in immediate response to) the political energies, pressures, and contradictions of marginalized or oppressed social groups” (195). Strine continues:

Traditional intellectuals are tacitly partisan, serving as functionaries within the dominant social order. Even on those occasions when they overtly oppose particular actions of the state or deplore conditions of civil society, the professional work that traditional intellectuals do typically sustains prevailing conceptions of the world including their privileged place within it. On the other hand . . . organic intellectuals are . . . in a unique position to intervene in hegemonic conceptions of the world, in Gramsci’s terms, to bring into being a new mode of thought. By closely aligning their theoretical work with their identified social group’s internal struggles for self-empowerment and local sovereignty, organic intellectuals can ideally generate counter-theories of social and cultural process, explanations that are once historically grounded, contextually nuanced, and politically emancipating. (195)

For Gramsci, the task of organic intellectuals is a transformation of “common sense” (*il senso comune*) into “good sense” (*il buon senso*) for counter-hegemonic action and infiltration of the dominant by the subaltern.⁶ Folklore enters the conversation in this context, although in a strikingly abrupt and rarely flattering way. As the “conceptions that are imparted by the various traditional social environments” (1971:30), folklore occupies “the lowest level of popular culture” (Gramsci 1985:141), against which “nothing [is] more contradictory and fragmentary” (Gramsci 1985:194), and, in certain forms, nothing more “elementary and primitive” (Gramsci 1985:351). Folklore is akin to dialect and other provincial expressions (Gramsci 1985:123), but is even “more unstable and fluctuating” than language (Gramsci 1985:195). It is related to—and perhaps best described as the base constituent of—common sense, “which is philosophical folklore” (Gramsci 1985:189). Both folklore and common sense are unlike philosophy and modern science in that the latter pair are “elaborated, systematic, and politically organized” whereas the former are “many-sided” in composition as historically stratified bricolage (Gramsci 1985:189). A “conception of the world and life,” folklore associates with stra-

ta of society distinct from the “official” or from “the cultured parts of historically determinate societies” (Gramsci 1985:189). Similarly, common sense occupies a midway position between folklore and philosophy, but Gramsci also suggests that each social class bears its own common sense (1985:421).

Gramsci's comments may seem harsh in comparison with the more generous depictions of everyday criticism in Burke, Walzer, and McLaughlin. They easily could be mistaken for the elitism that marks much of the history of folklore studies, and within their wider sociopolitical context—such as the “Southern Question” that partitioned Italian peasant and working classes of the South against the industrial North—they reveal a way of thinking about folklore prevalent in the early twentieth century. I would ask the reader to reserve judgment, however, for Gramsci's point is not to disparage folklore but rather to draw attention to more problematic manifestations of it. His comments are astutely reconcilable with Benjamin Botkin's expressed concern over the “essential viciousness . . . especially in their treatment of minorities” ([1944] 1983:xxvi) of many American folk narratives. Put simply, both Gramsci and Botkin (and Burke) recognize that folklore may attend to nefarious purposes. Gramsci's refusal to valorize folklore or common sense as a whole appertains to his radical politics, for he scrutinized both as potential repositories for much base ideology and for an isolationism thwarting the coalitions necessary for social change.

Although Gramsci juxtaposed folklore with official culture, he regarded their co-existence as symbiotic. The official exists in no small measure because it defines folklore, but folklore exists (and with it, ways of living beneficial to certain groups or people) in part because it officiates as the Other for the official. Ideological traces of domination are shared throughout both official culture and folklore, producing the hegemony of one class over others. The incoherence of folklore consequently permits the State to justify folklore's eradication through formal education; folklore concurrently may provide shelter for those self-identifying with the non-official to refuse the political work necessary for social change. To bring this charge into a contemporary milieu, Gramsci's position is certainly not to blame the victim, but to demand those relegated to the subaltern refuse to accept marginalization and reject the game whose rules are set by the dominant (cf. Sassoon 2000).

Thus, Gramsci wanted to challenge folklore through education as well, but for a very different reason than the bourgeois state intended. Social change, in his view, requires solidarity and more systematic thought among subaltern groups, a transformation from folklore and common sense to a good sense that forges a coherent, new political order out of fragmentary experiences. All of this is a critical work, and all of this is activity that any human being may accomplish with practice. As Gramsci asks, is it better for someone to “to take part in a conception of the world mechanically imposed by” the social group into which one is “automatically involved” at birth, or to “work out consciously and critically one's own conception of the world” and “take an active part in the creation of the history of the world” (1971:323)? Such a turn would necessitate that people comprise and assert themselves as intellectuals and political actors, a self-conception that folklore and common sense (at least of his time) often deny.

In saluting all humans as philosophers (1971:323), then, Gramsci recognizes the human potential for philosophy as “renovating and making ‘critical’ an already exist-

ing activity” (1971:331). That is, he advances a progression, first of a reflexive and critical awareness of one’s own folklore and common sense as it might promote (or resist) domination or oppression, then a critique of the philosophies of traditional intellectuals that serve a specific hegemonic order, then a movement to establish a new hegemony; this is poignantly comparable to Burke’s notion of recalibrating orientations through criticism. Gramsci describes this as a transition from ethics to politics proper (1971:333), since “the choice and criticism of a conception of the world is also a political matter” (1971:327). His aspiration is nothing short of a “cultural battle to transform the popular ‘mentality’” (1971:348) and a demolition of the elitism separating traditional intellectuals from those regarded as “simple,” in order “to construct an intellectual-moral bloc which can make politically possible the intellectual progress of the mass and not only of small intellectual groups” (1971:333). Hence, revolutionary social change is a process, not a moment, and to update Gramsci’s configuration, it would require an alliance between intellectuals operating within the academy and organic intellectuals outside it.

Recognizing this process, I would align Gramsci’s notion of the development of philosophers from folklore to the development of professional critics from everyday criticism as detailed by Burke, Walzer, and McLaughlin. All four recognize that criticism is a human activity, and thereby accord a certain agency (albeit one mediated through language use and convention) for humans to produce social change. Neither Burke nor Gramsci recommend folklore simply because it is folklore; both rather concern themselves with how it is used, whether as medicine or as poison. And lastly, all four depict emancipation from oppression as assisted through a collaboration between professional and everyday critics, demarcating social change not as an elite activity but an accomplishment wrought through and emergent from solidarity with local communities.

Where they most differ are the contexts for deployment of various critical endeavors. Burke’s comic corrective, for example, places an onus of responsibility for transformation upon agents equally and in good faith, even while acknowledging material conditions of inequality. Comic criticism is preemptive; it attempts to prevent conditions of political mystification from occurring, but does not quite fully address the means to manifest maximum consciousness en masse once a certain political order—particularly a fascistic order—is established as common sense. The comic frame is quite suitable to remedy misunderstanding between interlocutors, then, but it is not necessarily helpful for demolishing colonialism, as it presumes all involved agents be committed to, or at least willing to consider, the advancement of equity. In this way, the distinction between comic criticism and Gramscian critique may lie in the usage of different tools for different purposes. While both are allied in explicating educational components for demystification, comic criticism may work best in charitable circumstances of interpersonal communication, and Gramscian critique may work best where idols must be destroyed.

An appreciation of this everyday-professional nexus would imply that a critical folklore studies not only examine folk criticism in vernacular contexts, but also promote the folklorist in working toward the critique of domination through critical research. As Della Pollock and J. Robert Cox identify, such research would involve

the “reappropriation of discourse to emancipatory interests” (1991:170). Providing a platform for such research, they contend that contemporary critical studies—those inspired by the Frankfurt School but not beholden to its elitism or pessimism—must respond to “the problem of the postmodern,” be understood within historical formations, and must itself be made “the subject of intense skepticism, doubt, and scrupulous attention to error” (171). Finally, they recognize the creation of values and discourses constituting collective identities as a central front for critical work, which Laclau (2006) defines as the main task of radical politics. Well-accomplished critical research, for Pollock and Cox, “avails us of the power to participate in inevitable value-formation” (1991:173) and “enables local practice, and it compels contest, debate, and dialogue . . . [I]t promotes an ethic of skepticism grounded in the production of a more humane world. It equips us to contradict—to open up—discourses of domination and it warns us of the excesses of our own reason” (177).

Active participation in the creation of values and identities among local communities may strike folklorists as dangerously irresponsible and potentially ethnocentric and colonialist. This is a fair and abiding concern. It should not, however, be perceived merely as a replication of folklore studies’ historical alliance with certain intellectual hierarchies and political order through which an academic elite observed and disciplined a “folk” underclass. Value-formation here is not importation of a particular dominant order but an active, dialogic engagement between professional and everyday critics toward a new hegemony, an always open conversation of how people come to live together without violence or subjugation. Such a commitment necessitates that folklorists consider—and forever reconsider—how they engage local communities, especially through the practice of ethnography. Warmer embrace of critical ethnography, for example, may help push folklore studies away from a reliance on traditional (that is, predominantly descriptive and interpretive) expressions of scholarship, through what Dwight Conquergood calls “the borderlands terrain between rhetoric and ethnography” (1992; cf. 1989) en route to a thriving critical cultural politics (1991).

Unlike traditional ethnography, critical ethnography positions the researcher in radical ways to the Other and entails an awareness of how knowledge may be produced through an affinity between both (Marcus 1998:206). Similarly, D. Soyini Madison describes critical ethnography as

an ethical responsibility to address processes of unfairness or injustice within a particular *lived* domain. . . . The conditions for existence within a particular context are not as they *could* be for specific subjects; as a result, the researcher feels a moral obligation to make a contribution toward changing those conditions toward greater freedom and equity. The critical ethnographer also takes us beneath surface appearances, disrupts the *status quo*, and unsettles both neutrality and taken-for-granted assumptions by bringing to light underlying and obscure operations of power and control. Therefore, the critical ethnographer resists domestication and moves from “what is” to “what could be.” (2005a:5)

Madison’s account describes the rigorous procedures by which to thwart solipsism and interrogate one’s positionality (such as the privileged position of the folklorist) vis-à-vis a community before, during, and after critical research; attention to posi-

tionality evokes a critique of subjectivity as well as objectivity (8). In so doing, she aligns the work of the critical ethnographer with organic intellectuals rather than traditional intellectuals, and with critical theory rather than traditional theory.

Following Gramsci and the critical ethnographers, we may summarize several aspects of any critical study. First, critical research is attuned to process as well as to outcome—to means as well as to ends—and the determinability of any research's emancipatory or democratic qualities are not established prior to performance. In this way, critical research is not solely the advance of a specific political agenda, ideology, or policy, but a critique of systems of power and domination, including the role that research may play in domination. Second, critical research is local and timely in scope, attuned to contingencies and exigencies, and thereby accountable to standards of judgments that correspond to those contexts rather than universal formations. Third, critical research denaturalizes and promotes skepticism toward totalizing narratives or naturalized signifiers of arbitrary power relations, but this requires rigorous interaction with communities and their discourses—not answers known beforehand. Fourth, critical research actively seeks participation in the constitution of political subjects but perceives always the temporality and alterability of subjectivity, starting with the positionality of the researcher. Fifth, critical research recommends holistic praxis, a merger of theory and practice and rigorous and reflexive critique of research; it views scholarship and critique in collaboration, not in competition. Finally, and perhaps most importantly, critical research is not just invested in a crude redistribution of resources. To the contrary, it seeks to rectify "the suffering of living beings" (Madison 2005a:5). And while human suffering can be understood only phenomenologically, its redress may well define the most important task of politics (Halpern 2002), to which folklore studies surely could contribute.⁷

That said, if critical research in folklore studies aspires to alleviate human suffering by drawing attention to limitations of certain ways of being and subsequently encouraging alternative ways of becoming, it cannot turn a blind eye to structures of oppression even within host communities. The means by which any group understands justice within a historical context and responds through expressive forms to name situations would be a fertile ground for a critical folklore studies, but such research would also necessitate vigilance so as not to valorize the wisdom of all folk criticism, certain expressions of which (such as many performances of racist jokes) may easily support domination and traditional cultural hegemony. As with all rhetorical performances, there is no absolute imperative for employing or judging expressions of folk criticism; rather, judgment (and participation in value and identity formation) will depend upon appreciation of the subtleties that mark the complexity of human social existence.

Permit me a personal reflection as a representative anecdote. I was raised in an Italian-American, lower middle-class family and environment, one always staring at the working class and immigrant experiences of my grandparents (who lived next door) and great-grandparents. I understand how traditional Italian-American masculine performativity can be bound to a common sense of paternalism, misogyny, homophobia, racism, and an ideology of violence or criminality, all in an attempt to gain

immediate respect within the local community and access to the American Dream without becoming fully “Amerigan.” I also know how it can be conjoined to intense familial devotion, lifelong friendships, *la dolce vita*, and often, complicated religiosity in reflexive atonement for one’s failures. The folklore shared between and constitutive of Italian-American men’s experience and identity is a marker of the conflicting discourses and existing criticisms of these ideologies within the community. Any movement toward an internal critique of the rehearsals of traditional masculinity would run the risk of destroying relationships with community members. This is precisely why, however, I think folklorists are able to contribute to the critical project of dismantling domination: unlike the detached critic, the folklorist commits herself or himself to understanding the complex relation between resources, symbols, and language practices available for negotiating inevitable tensions.

A critical paradigm, in which the researcher vigorously debates her or his own positionality and ethical responsibilities to particular communities situated in particular contingencies, and, in dialogue with community members, produces academic work and critique, serves Gramsci’s and Burke’s insistence upon the transformation of dominant configurations that privilege some groups at the expense of others. Folklore studies furthermore may assist the invention of ways of communicating critique while demonstrating respect for a given community and its discourses formative of collective and personal identities. In this manner, critique is not a pronouncement from on high, but an enactment with others to influence the constitution of political subjects—one that is rhetorically savvy in analyzing current configurations salient to the community. This aligns critical research with an artistic rather than scientific endeavor, whose premise is not to “report on” but to call attention to itself for judgment as a constellation of critical engagements with its interlocutors. Hence, the critiques produced by critical research are openly understood as performances of rhetoric, responding to specific contingencies and communities. Successful expressions require solidarity between a plurality of local responses, even if in relation to systemic structures of domination, privilege, or cultural hegemony.

It would be a fallacy to claim that folklore studies lack these critical dimensions; indeed, any critical turn is more appropriately a *re*-turn, a renewal, and a reaffirmation of the political activity that planted the seeds of American folklore studies (such as the Federal Writers Project). The work of many early American folklorists and ethnomusicologists was critical in that in championing marginalized communities, they offered an implied—and sometimes overt—critique of classism, racism, or sexism. And in drawing attention to contemporary underprivileged groups, many academic and public-sector folklorists offer a critical edge or explicit critique of oppression. Likewise, a fully-developed critical folklore studies would owe an enormous debt to predecessors who identify as (among others) feminist, Marxist, and LGBT-issue folklorists, as well as those whose recent work in folklore studies advances rhetorical and political analysis (e.g., Abrahams 2005; Garlough 2008; Gilman 2009; Howard 2008; Stoeltje 2009). Where a critical folklore studies might bloom, however, is in the search for additional and alternative means of representation beyond descriptive and interpretive models.

Critical Rhetorics of Folklore Studies

Proponents for a “scientific” folklore studies (Oring 2004, 2006a, 2006b) often presume that people, communities, and groups exist to be known as stable subject positions. Critical research paradigms, however, maintain the subtleties of a rhetorical perspective, which apprehends that any collective identification is partially configured by discursivity (such as the “lore”), and that a “folk” is not merely a gathering of persons, but a shared identity constituted through aesthetic performances and other discursive actions. As many folklorists (e.g., Shuman and Briggs 1993) and others compelled by the writing culture movement have long demonstrated, scholarly discourses are no less inoculated from the rhetorical constitution and enactment of power/knowledge. If criticism—both everyday and professional—is understood as artistic expression, responsible to and emergent within local communities, then it produces opportunities for collective identification just as any other folk art.

It would also be implicated in the processes of interpellation that are formative of subjectivity itself, in the way that we humans are, to quote Judith Butler, “dependent on the address of the Other in order to be” (1997:26). For Butler, the importance of language as that which sustains the body in providing the very possibility of social existence brings to bear a responsibility to communication. Butler references hate speech in her discussion, but the point is well taken in the context of representing the self and Other in research, as such naming practices (broadly conceptualized) initiate and enable subjectivity and raise similar ethical questions. Primarily descriptive or interpretive research may not always well-serve redress of injustice. A robust critical folklore studies, therefore, would need to consider alternative ways to represent and perform knowledge in addition to the traditional article. A successful endeavor lies, I contend, in an applied appreciation of the difference between rhetorical criticism and critical rhetoric. In order to explain this distinction, I will return to Burke.

Although he does not spend considerable attention on the matter, Burke implies that folk criticism is not simply a product of a “folk,” but a practice constitutive of a folk (and their antagonists) and of a wisdom that emerges from lived experience. As a migration of terms and a naming of situations to gain a semblance of control over them, folk criticism is a resource for influencing motivations and linkages within orientations. While related to pastiche, such folk criticism is a *pasticcio* for nourishment in dealing with life and the recurrent situations that humans find themselves in, whether grief or happiness or death or sexuality—or oppression. It is an invention of coherence out of the fragmentary, and as such, echoes strongly with Gramsci’s concept of the transformation of common sense to good sense.

Furthermore, folk criticism as Burke describes resembles formal critique, as both are strategies for identity-construction and identification with others. Operating in the shape of aesthetically ratified forms, folk criticism permits a normative cast for ethical action and value-formation. Union songs, for example, are patterned responses that give names to situations—and power to those victimized by the common sense of industrial capitalism—by transfiguring fragmentary experiences into a manageable whole. While not formal critique, such songs are embodiments of folk criticism, at once artistic and subversive, a legacy shared today by much underground

hip-hop.⁸ Given the increased colonization of the lifeworld by scientism and instrumental rationality, folk criticism remains a significant means to draw attention to alternative visions of justice and counter-hegemonic positions. This concept of folk criticism as rhizomatic and inventive—patterns put to use in specific situations—resonates with the “critical rhetoric” trend developed by a number of rhetorical scholars since the 1990s.⁹

As Michael McGee construes in an early commentary, critical rhetoric differs from traditional rhetorical criticism in that instead of furnishing close analyses of presumably finished texts, the critic “*make[s]* discourses from scraps and pieces of evidence” (1990:279). In McGee’s view, American culture has largely fragmented, in part due to new communication technologies that have reversed the traditional roles of speaker and audience; audiences now primarily construct texts—and identities—through fragmentary experiences (for example, channel surfing or hyperlinking). Critical rhetoricians commit to produce provocative rhetorics from combinations of social fragments, a renovation of the Burkean idea of criticizing through perspective by incongruity. Critical rhetoric is, accordingly, an artistic practice akin to speechmaking. The critic, like the politician, “orchestrates fragments to which we should pay attention” and “instructs us on how to put them together” through an interpellative process, “constructing the discourse that calls us into being” (McGee 1998:82).¹⁰

A critical rhetoric is performative. It attempts to accomplish an action and to arouse others to identify with an orientation to the social world, and does so through recourse to artistic conventions meaningful to specific audiences. In brief, this means that any performance of a critical rhetoric is attentive not only to content, but also to form. While a critical approach might question how practices in contemporary folklore studies could inadvertently or deliberately assist domination, or promote certain folk criticisms as resistance to domination, or critique certain folk practices as constitutive of domination, it must also do so aware of how that message is communicated. It would also demand that we reconsider the kinds of writing encouraged for publication in folklore journals and other public venues and extend our range of acceptable forms of representation. In this section, I will identify four critical rhetorics that might accompany the traditional academic article.

The first is, perhaps obviously, *formal criticism and critique*. Although folklorists have generally been reticent to assume the role of a critic, a movement toward this position would not require reinvention of the wheel. For example, Jay Mechling and Elizabeth Walker Mechling have long argued for a relationship between folklore studies and critical approaches, and have contributed numerous works undertaking a range of contemporary social problems. Discussing the assumptions guiding what they call “cultural criticism in a pragmatic attitude,” they highlight the importance of everyday experience and recommend that critics engage folklore scholarship (1999:143). They describe the critic’s task as stepping “outside the naturalized, commonsense, taken-for-granted attitude towards a text” (145), including texts “created by critical practice” (148); the goal is to develop “doubt where, before, there was affirmation and trust” of symbols made to seem natural (149).¹¹

The second are *performance ethnographies*, including auto-ethnographies (Denzin 2003), mystories (Bowman 2000), and other expressions of performative writing

(Pollock 1998) and interventions (Conquergood 2002). Madison (2005b), for example, reflects upon her status as an African-American woman doing ethnography in Ghana. There, she encountered a heated debate over a ritual in which a child (usually a young woman) is sent away from her family to live in a shrine for a period of years in atonement for the family's or community's crimes. Human rights activists regard this as slavery; traditionalists regard it as essential to communal harmony and preservation. In response, Madison recorded commentaries from all perspectives and constructed a dramatic script from them, which she and members of the community performed in public as a means to provoke fruitful conversation.

I will call the third kind of writing an *unmasking*, to honor the contribution of Stetson Kennedy's *The Klan Unmasked* as a critical folklore study *avant la lettre*.¹² The exclusion of Kennedy from the academic canon—one that persists to this day—demonstrates the longevity of an avoidance of a critical perspective in folklore studies. And even if accounts of Kennedy's infiltration of the Ku Klux Klan entail controversial embellishments and conventions of fiction, when understood as a critical rhetoric that renamed situations and literally combined fragments to create a powerful narrative for rallying mass audiences to attention and action (rather than the few hundred academics who read folklore journals), Kennedy's interventions had substantive impact upon public consciousness (see Kennedy 1990). Moreover, Kennedy's daring example draws attention to the need for exposés of groups whose reason for being is the oppression of others.

Genealogies are the final critical rhetoric for folklore studies that I wish to identify, and by this I mean those experimental forms of writing akin to Friedrich Nietzsche's *On the Genealogy of Morals*, a work that includes aphorisms as well as essays. I suspect this form might be the most difficult for folklorists to admit into our journals. Yet *The Birth of Tragedy* and *The Gay Science*, for example, are replete with critical appropriations, importations of terms, and combinations of folklore fragments—the former of myths and legends, the latter of proverbs and songs. Although they reveal gross inaccuracies in the historical reconstruction of ancient Greek or Provençal culture, they are highly inventive critical pieces that arguably shattered the course of popular moralities. In the same way, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* employed folkloric elements and narrative structures to critique virtually all hegemonic moral systems of Nietzsche's day.

In advocating these four critical rhetorics, my claim is not that folklore studies should embrace fiction writing nor abandon contemporary research protocols. I do suggest, however, that folklorists admit certain genres as profitable complements to traditional research presentations, for such provides opportunities for a wide-ranging and lasting public engagement with folklore and folklore studies. I further hold that there is a vast potential for folklore studies to promote critical perspectives through greater inclusion of personal narratives, collaborative ethnographies, and expressive forms still dormant, awaiting future realization. Located at the nexus of the social sciences and humanities, folklore studies is an apt barometer for the state of academic inventiveness. If scholarship dedicated to "artistic communication in small groups" (Ben-Amos 1972) will not allow for experimentation in representation, what hope is there for other fields or disciplines dedicated to human expression?

A critical approach begs for re-evaluation of the writing conventions and target audiences of folklore research. A critical folklore studies, like the folk criticism and formal critique that animates it, is at its heart pedagogical; it wishes to influence other folklorists, policy makers, and the communities of people that folklorists work with, and recognizes that writing and other performances of re-presentation create audiences and enable subjectivities. In this way, a critical folklore studies is more akin to art than science—or walks the razor’s edge between them, or blends them—and it is unabashedly willing to attest that one does politics when one does scholarship. It also follows a simple demand: if folklore entails an ever-evolving craft of constituting a folk or an assemblage of ever-evolving crafts of constituting a folk, then folklore studies had best remain evolutionarily adaptive to keep pace with its subject matter.

Conclusion

Critical research is a bringing forth for judgment and a provision of alternatives as warranted by certain social conditions and institutions that move swiftly and repeatedly toward the recalcitrance of domination. Critical studies are predicated on particularities, not essentialisms; contingencies, not absolutes; lived experiences, not abstract propositions; fitting responses to exigencies, not discovery of immutable laws; persuasion, not neutrality; and the discursive constitution of political subjects, not objective observation of such constitutions. In this article, I have sought to make clear the benefits and historical antecedents of a critical turn in folklore studies. Looking at the overlooked is regrettably not enough to accomplish the goal of intervention. Critical folklorists would seek the creation of pluralities and polyphonic stages for expression of marginalized voices in tandem with redress of suffering caused by domination and, when appropriate, of subaltern group conduct that replicates domination. While a critical folklore studies would not be monolithic, examples would share a commitment to break the commonsense acceptance of oppressive hegemonic order.

To Elliot Oring’s dismissive question, “Should folklorists devote themselves to developing concepts and practices that they believe to be beneficial or liberating (for certain people)?” (2006b:460), critical folklore studies answers a reverberating yes, recognizing that the “certain people” whom Oring places in that parenthetical are not only traditionally oppressed bodies but, more importantly, *fellow human beings* and not merely artifacts of study. Commitment to the construction of a new hegemony predicated on more equitable—and comic—social formations requires striving for a popular democratic extension of equity to all human beings and awareness and respect of the multiplicity, incompleteness, and ethical potentiality of the subject in the face of difference.

Embracing an orientation of those who view professional criticism as an extension of everyday criticism, this article has attempted to bolster the task of critical research as a uniting of the academic and the non-academic, and “to take an interpretive position for the purpose of both understanding and political change” (Zompetti 1997:71). In so doing, it forefronts the development of new coalitions, subjectivities, and hegemonic order for social change, while pinpointing the need for relations

with local demands and articulations. The benefits of this venture are clear: critical folklore research opens doors to resist structures of domination and may prevent valorizing folk expression or the “folk” themselves. Its possibility raises important ethical questions for folklore studies, such as whether a scholar should critique communities to which she or he does not command insider positionality, understanding that critical discourse contributes to the constitution of that community. It also would locate folklore studies as a vanguard of the intersection between the intellectual and the political, whose sustained social relevance derives from dialogue with marginalized communities for the purpose of building coalitions and constructing political subjects that challenge the inequities of contemporary social life.

A critical folklore studies submits that those whose research concerns common sense (and aesthetic displays that reshape and confirm common sense) are readily poised to contribute to it, and with communities to whom the folklorist commits, to reform social problems that arise as humans confront the frictions sparked between alterity and commonality. Critical folklore research takes sides, therefore, not only because taking sides is an inevitable expression of humanity, but also because such action impinges upon the social imaginary and the rhetorical constitution of political existence. Or to respectfully borrow the resounding words of Florence Reece, “Us poor folks haven’t got a chance/Unless we organize” ([1931] 2006).¹³

Notes

1. See also Garner (1983); Norkunas (2004); and Read (1988–89).
2. See, for example, Bauman (1986).
3. See Bendix (1997); for other uses of “critical theory” in folklore studies, see Berger and Del Negro (2004); Evans (2000); and Mills (1990).
4. Notable exceptions are Byrne (1982); Limón (1983a); and Porter (1993). Dundes (1995); and Magliocco (1992) briefly mention Gramsci, and Dundes (1999) includes his work. See also Cirese (1982); Crehan (2002); and McCarl (2006) for Gramscian studies relevant to folklore.
5. I have not changed Gramsci’s original language here, but he included women in this paradigm.
6. On the translation of these terms, see Finocchiaro (2005); see also Coben (2002); Fontana (2000); and Nun (1986).
7. For relevant examples, see Briggs and Mantini-Briggs (2003); Calderón and Saldivar (1991); Lawless (2001); and Moore (2005).
8. Gramsci comments on popular songs (1985:195); cf. Abrams (1995).
9. McKerrow (1989) introduced the idea, which was later expanded by several critics such as Ono and Sloop (1995) to include vernacular practices. Most recently, Dicochea (2004) has adapted the concept for Chicana social movements.
10. See McGee (1990:282) on the difference between professional and everyday critics, and McGee (1998:85) on authorization for criticism.
11. Mechling and Mechling further provide seven working assumptions of critical practice; cf. the four maxims of criticism offered by Nothstine, Blair, and Copeland (2003).
12. Kennedy first published this work as *I Rode With the Ku Klux Klan* in 1954; the book was reissued in 1990 as *The Klan Unmasked* (see Kennedy 1990). A second edition of this book, with a new introduction, was published in 2011.
13. Reece composed “Which Side Are You On?” the union song from which these lines are taken, in 1931. The recording I have drawn from is included in the 2006 collection *Harlan County USA: Songs of the Coal Miner’s Struggle*.

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