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Collecting and Classifying Folklore

FX-10

Competence Statement:

Understands the concept, function, and
methodologies of folklore and folkloristics
and

Can apply these principles to her work
and those of others.

2010

The study of myth and folklore has been of great interest to me for almost 20 years. In 1990 I discovered the play “Zora Is My Name,” written by Ruby Dee about the life and works of Zora Neale Hurston. Until this time I had always known of Zora Neale Hurston as the “Great Novelist” novelist whose name was synonymous with the Harlem Renaissance and the other great writers and critics of that age, Langston Hughes, James Weldon Johnson, Alain Locke and W.E.B. Dubois. However, this play, based on Hurston’s autobiography, “Dust Tracks on a Road” and her folklore collection “Of Mules and Men,” introduced me to world of Zora Neale Hurston, anthropologist and collector of stories. Hurston’s “visionary” fieldwork of conducting ethnographic research in her own “native land” of Eatonville Florida, “Decades before scholars who were members of ethnic-minority groups would conduct research in their own communities,” and her collection and presentation of tales, games, beliefs, music, rituals, and customs from New Orleans, Haiti and Jamaica (Stoeltje, et al. 1999) instilled in me a great admiration and inspiration to someday follow in her footsteps.

As the years progressed my interest in myth and folklore became heavily influenced by writings that combined creativity and academic scholarship such Clarissa Pinkola Estes’ *Women Who Run With the Wolves*, Barbara G Walker’s, *The Woman's Encyclopedia of Myths and Secrets*, and Zsusanna Budapest’s *Grandmother of Time*. Beginning in 1995 I wrote a series of what I termed original tales. Two of which, “The Girl Who Could Only Drink Tears & The Woman Who Never Learned to Cry,” and “The Black Wedding Dress,” I recited these works in public performance, included them in a play that was staged in New York City, and eventually saw them published in small literary magazines. “Tears,” a tale originally inspired by a line in a Neil Gaiman graphic novel, was my attempt at writing in the style of the West African and Native American oral tradition. As its title suggests this is a different kind of love story: two

women whose lives are cursed with these afflictions, possibly fated to walk separate paths, but in the end choose to walk together. Their love changes them but does not entirely cure them and the inevitable happens. “The Black Wedding Dress” was originally intended as a light hearted ballad in blank verse but later took the form of a small tale after many variations in performance. It is also a different kind of love story. This is a tale of the “fallen woman” turned “Trickster” in order to save the life of her lover and create her own happily ever after. Though they were performed orally, in the style of two distinct native traditions, and employed certain motifs found in folklore they were still creative and some would say literary works. They were tales but they were not folk tales.

At that time my approach to myth and folklore was to study them progenitors of literature. Other disciplines place an emphasis on the study of myth and folklore as a form of psychology and history, however, over time my interest evolved into what is considered by many to be a more anthropological view: the study of myth and folklore as the foundation of not only literature and language, but spirituality and law. It is this approach, the anthropological study of folklore, that Zora Neale Hurston took in her work. Over the past few years during my time at DePaul University I had the opportunity to research independently the concepts and methodologies of the study of folklore as well as apply it to my own work. My research led me to the textbook *Folkloristics: An Introduction*, written by Robert Georges and Michael Owen Jones; the opportunity to engage in my own ethnography and folkloric collection in Ireland in 2007 and the discovery of the most influential systems of within folkloric study, the tale type and the motif index. In accordance with the criteria of my FX Competence Statement, “Understands the concept, function, and methodologies of folklore and folkloristics and can apply these

principles to her work and those of others,” I will briefly discuss my findings on folklore, the discipline known as folkloristics, and how I’ve been able to use that knowledge in my own work.

Folklore, Folkloristics and Cultural Anthropology

Although there are precursors in the late 1700’s and early 1800’s English term “folklore” was not in use until 1846. (Dundes) In the August 22, issue of a periodical known as the “Athenaeum,” William John Thoms coined the phrase with the literal definition of “the lore of the people,” as part of his nationalistic plea to document and preserve the “manners, customs, observances, superstitions, ballads, proverbs, &c of the olden times.” Today, folklore has a broad definition. It is more than fireside tales of vicious fairies wandering the roads of County Clare or Anansi the Spider, outwitting Tiger along the Gulf Coast. Folklore runs the gamut from specific methods of spinning wool and knitting Aran sweaters; the construction of log cabin quilts, and split rail fences to burying a statue of Saint Joseph in the backyard of your new home, or forwarding a chain letter sent via email. In Folkloristics: An Introduction, folklore is defined as “expressive forms, processes, and behaviours (1) that we customarily learn, teach utilize, or display during face-to-face interactions, and (2) that we judge to be traditional (a) because they are based on known precedents or models, and (b) because they serve as evidence of communities and consistencies through, time and space in human knowledge, thought, belief and feeling.” The area of study, documentation, and analysis of these forms and many others is known as “folklore studies,” or “folkloristics.” (Georges and Jones)

In his essay “Who are the folk,” folklorist, Alan Dundes challenges what he views as an antiquated and inherently ethnocentric view of the producers of folklore as primitive, rural or “non-literate in a literate society.” He suggests, “The term ‘folk’ can refer to any group of who

share at least one common factor. It could be a common occupation, language, or religion. He asserts that it is not so much the key element that forms the group as it is the group's possession and development of traditions which it calls its own. Using the genre of the joke as folklore, Dundes proceeds to illustrate how this idea of 'folk' applies to various, if not all, forms of subculture from the traditions and stereotypes of differing clerical sects to specific family functions or sayings such as, "Don't Pull an Aunt Josephine on me!" "A member of the group may not know all other members, but he will probably know the common core of traditions belonging to the group, traditions which help the group have a sense of group identity."

(Dundes) If one agrees with Dundes definition of folk as one that transcends class and expands the realm of culture, the data base of folklore is expanded as well.

By the late 19th century folkloristics had become an established discipline of study beginning with the formation of institutions such as the Finnish Literature Society, in 1831, the English Folk-Lore Society, in 1878, and the American Folklore Society in 1888. (Dundes)

Throughout history and across disciplines the study of folklore has been approached one of three different ways. The first is to define folklore as individual items that exemplify specific forms, (e.g. folktale, folksong, folk speech or folk art) classifying them into 'folklore genres' and focusing upon their individual examples for study. Another approach is to consider folklore study a subfield of another discipline such as literary studies, anthropology, history, linguistics, or psychology, and to study folklore in the same manner as that discipline. A third view is that as previously presented by Dundes: defining folklore as the product and possession of certain groups, making these "folk groups" and their traditions the sources and subjects of folk lore study.

However, Georges and Owens identify folkloristics as an entirely self contained discipline that can be conceptualized in four alternative ways:

1. historical artifact
2. describable and transmissible entity
3. culture
4. behaviour

It is their belief that these perspectives have “as its intellectual foundation a set of assumptions about the nature and province of folklore. These assumptions determine what concepts are central to a folklorist’s inquiries and what question he or she poses and attempts to answer. They also dictate what kinds of investigative and documentation techniques the folklorist uses and how she or he represents and presents the folklore to others” (Georges and Jones) Though, often discussed separately and in order of historical usage by folklorists, it is their contention that all four of these perspectives are inherent to folkloristics. My personal experience with folklore has been through the genre of the folk tale and its study as a subfield of literary studies. Therefore, I am more familiar with the Georges and Jones’ first two perspectives.

When Thom’s made his impassioned plea for the collection of folklore in 1846 the process had already been well under way. In 1825, Thomas Crofton Croker published his collection of stories featuring fairies and tales of the supernatural, entitled, Fairy Legends and Traditions of the South of Ireland and in 1830 John Fanning Watson published his gathered “traditionary lore” in his Annals of Philadelphia and Pennsylvania in Olden Time. The two most notable works in the early history of folkloristics were those of Elias Lönnrot and the Brothers Wilhelm and Jakob Grimm.

Partly in reaction to growing dominance of neighbouring Sweden and Russia, Finnish intellectuals in the late 18th and early 19th centuries became convinced that the soul of the Finnish nation was hidden in its oral tradition. In his early years in Medical school Lönnrot encountered a teacher that began piecing together from different folk poems the character and story of the oldest known Finnish deities known as Väinämöinen. From 1828 to 1834, through his studies and his work with the government, Lönnrot collected narrative poetry, spells, wedding songs, epic runes, and customs. He first published his collected material in a two volume work known in English as the "Kalevala," or "Old Karelian Songs from the Ancient Times of the Finnish People." In 1849 he expanded the work. "New Kavela," which contained major poems featuring Väinämöinen and other heroes of his age, folk traditions such as making beer, charms, and incantations was highly regarded and still remains the national epic of Finland.

In 1812 and 1815 The Brothers Grimm, as they are commonly known, published the two Volume Anthology "Kinder - und Hausmärchen," "Children's and Household Tales," These collections consisted of tales recorded by living storytellers as well as select reprinted materials.

Many of these tales such as Cinderella, Beauty and the Beast, Hansel and Gretel are still known to this day in various forms. The Brothers presented their findings as historical artifacts, illustrating in commentaries the similarities between their tales and those in literary works of other cultures, most notably Charles Perrault's, "Contes de la ma mère l'oye" or "Stories of Mother Goose dating back to 1697 contained similar renderings of Cinderella, little Red Riding Hood (or Red Cap) and Bluebeard.

The Brothers stressed the need to preserve the stories and present them in print in the natural form that they had been collected that in the end their anthology became a guide book for many years. "The stories in the Kinder - und Hausmärchen served as exemplars of orally told

tales and as foundations for a rapidly growing data base. Thus the fairy tale became the principle kind of story upon which folklorists focused and it remained so from the early nineteenth until the middle of the 20th century.” (Georges and Jones)

Ethnography

It is from the perspective of folklore as describable and transmissible entity that the work of the folklorist is most known. In an ethnography, the most commonly used case study method of research in the field of anthropology, an entire culture, or community is studied through the observation of that group in their natural setting (Leedy and Ormrod). The Brothers Grimm and later Zora Neale Hurston took up the role of the folklorist as a “fieldworker,” the one who enters an environment or culture to be studied and systematically questions, observes and documents, its traditions, products and customs. These activities, long associated with but obviously not limited to that of the anthropologist, the sociologists and the linguists, are methods of gathering information that were first implemented by those recording folklore in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century. How folklore is documented is dependent on a various, factors, such as availability, appropriateness, local custom and belief, as well as the specific information the folklorist wishes to record. These methods include journaling one’s experience, making direct verbatim transcriptions, or photographic and video documentation. In regards to the collection of folktale, music, and speech the tape recorder is one that folklorists have used most extensively and that has had the greatest impact on their work. “It is the least intrusive or objectionable mechanical recording device available.” (Georges and Jones) It was this method I used in my own attempts at compiling ethnography when I traveled to Ireland in 2007.

In Fall of 2007, I took part in an Externship course through DePaul University's School of New Learning. This course included a period of travel study in Clifden, Ireland, where my fellow students and I took part in activities of the 30th Anniversary Clifden Community Arts Week, a gathering of writers, musical, visual and performing, artists from around the world. Our instructor, was Dr. Patricia Monaghan, editor and author of many books, most notably, *The Encyclopedia of Celtic Myth and Folklore*. This was an amazing opportunity for me because it presented me with the chance to explore the Irish approach to folklore and storytelling. Our first class activity in Ireland was the meeting and hearing the tales of noted seanachí (storyteller) and folklorist Edmund Lenihan at Hassett's Pub, Barefield, County Clare. During my study in Ireland I possessed a digital camera with an audio recording option. This allowed me in turn to record Eddie's performance, as well as interviews and performances of other artists and residents throughout my stay. Eddie Lenihan has used audiotape and in some cases video recorders in his work collecting tales (Lenihan). The actual device of the audio recorder has evolved in such a way that the materials are light enough to be utter portable and virtually invisible allowing one to amass many hours of music or speech.

Author of over a dozen books of folklore for children and adults, Eddie, as he is "simply called," made it to the pages of New York times in June of 1999 for his efforts to save Fairy (Hawthorne) Tree from being bulldozed for the construction of a bypass, around the County Clare town of Newmarket-on-Fergus. In 2003, he published, *Meeting the Other Crowd: The Fairy Stories of Hidden Ireland*, a collection of stories concerning the Fairies that he gathered entirely from "oral sources" from his native region, the southwest of Ireland. (Lenihan)

Baibre Ni Fhloinn, an archivist and fairy story collector in the University College folklore department in Dublin described Eddie as "theatrical, [but] a serious folklorist, not merely a

performer.” (Clarity) This was very true. In an interview with me after his performance Eddie shared that it was through his doctoral studies of listening to various people to study their accents that led him to collecting the tales. He came to the conclusion that what they had to say was more fascinating than the way they said it. He made me very aware his commitment and passion for collecting tales from the older generations before their stories were lost. That week, an older gentleman of the community was killed by a car while crossing the road. Eddie lamented slightly not only this lost life but reflected on the lost knowledge. The loss of community based traditions and views in the wake of Ireland’s new prosperity was an issue expressed in his introduction to “Meeting the Other Crowd,” as well (Lenihan)

Inside the pub set within a long humorous conversation Eddie energetically told us three tales that he had gathered in his travels and encounters with the “older people.” I have recorded these stories and referred to them as “The Enchanted Field,” “The Haycutters,” and “Biddy Early’s Cure for Baldness.” The first was the story of a field that can not be crossed after dark, once in you can not get out until morning. The second was of a man who as a result of his own act of compassion, encounters two mysterious men when dealing with the daunting task of cutting the hay from his land by himself. The last was of a man who goes on a journey to see Biddy Early, Ireland’s legendary woman healer in the hopes of curing his baldness. These stories, which included the origin of their collection were rich with personal, details, and historical cultural. In the “Enchanted Field,” Eddie touched upon the practical and political roles of both the police and the clergy during the area’s history. In the “Haycutters,” Eddie indirectly introduces the communal notions of “Cuaird” (night visiting) and “Meitheal” (communal farming) as well as the motif of the “Blessing.” The construction of his stories and his informal

approach to performing caused me to reflect upon my own work and my experience with what I believed to be folklore and storytelling.

Motifs and The Motif Index

Another responsibility of the folklorist is identifying and classifying the results of their documented work. From the days of the Brothers Grimm to the present, folklorists have collected examples of expressive or artistic forms readily identifiable by well established and commonly used names such as myth, legend, proverb or ballad. Folklorists have labeled their data in familiar ways sometimes adding the term “folk” to indicate additional aspect of tradition or custom to the work, such as “folktale,” “folk song” or “folk belief.” Though it was not their intention, the Brothers Grimm to document a particular kind of story, their work led to the categorization of the Märchen or “Fairy Tale.” This in turn led to a series of texts throughout the history of folkloristic creating the system of classifications for most of folklores expressive forms. (Georges and Jones) During my research I discovered two systems of classification that are integral to this area within folkloristics. These are the “Antti Aarne Index of Folklore Types” and Stith Thomson’s “Motif-Index of Folk-Literature”

In the early 1900’s, Finnish Folklorist Antti Aarne sought to create a system which folklorists throughout the world could identify, classify, and locate versions of particular folktales. In 1910, Aarne published, “Verzeichnis der Märchentypen,” “Index of Foktale Types,” the first tale type index. Due to the fact that Aarne’s type sets were limited to the range of folktales known in Northern Europe at the time, he intended the index to be a simple yet practical research guide. However, as its use grew his combination of generic and type sets

became the basis for the principle methodology for classification that folktale researchers still employ to this day. (Georges and Jones)

Aarne divided folktales into three principle generic subsets: (I) Animal tales, (II) Ordinary folktales, (III) Jokes and anecdotes (University of Victoria and English) Formula Tales and (V) Unclassified tales. Within these main groups Aarne created subsets based on the principal characters, the nature of the tales content, or select aspects of a tale. Within the category of the ordinary folktale divisions were made among the magical, the religious or the romantic. Among humorous tales distinctions were made according to who their principle characters were: numskulls, married couples, parsons, liars, etc. In this system, the series of clerical jokes used by Dundes to illustrate his definition of folklore would be classified as “1725 – 1849 Jokes about parsons and religious orders,” under the heading (I) Jokes and anecdotes. Eddie’s tale of the “Haycutters” would fall within (II) Ordinary folktales and identified as “500 -559 Supernatural helpers.” In addition to these general groupings, the core of Aarne’s index are individual entries, classified by a number and descriptive title, that identifies a particular story, multiple tellings, and versions of the same tale type.

Aarne isolated and indexed 540 distinguishable tale types in his work and included 1,940 numbered slots, a majority of them left open so the index could be expanded with the addition of new types. After his death, Finnish folklorist Kaarle Krohn invited an American folktale scholar, Stith Thompson to complete the envisioned expansion of Aarne’s work. This resulted in two new works “Types of the folktale: Antti Aarne’s Verzeichnis der Märchentypen,” in 1928 and “The Types of the folktale; A Classification and Bibliography,” in 1961 Thompson added the subsets (University of Victoria and English) Formula Tales and (V) Unclassified tales. He increased the number of slots in the system from 1840 to 2499. In the 1961 revision Thompson identifies 3,229

distinguishable tale types and sub types and broadened the geographical coverage to include folk tales found in all of Europe, Western Asia and places settled by peoples from these areas.

(Georges and Jones)

In the study of folklore the term “motif” is used to denote a theme, phenomena, relationship, or behaviour that is repeated in an artistic, musical or traditional work. Many critics of myth and folklore also refer these themes as archetypes. (Leeming) Many folk tales and ballads contain plot devices such as the hero’s journey. Another example is the token of recognition such as Cinderella’s glass slipper or the broken wedding ring in Grimm’s “Bearskin” (Grimm and Scharl). Some contain archetypal characters such as the trickster god, the animal groom, and our modern femme fatale. (University of Victoria and English) Many tales and legends such as Beauty and the Beast or the Epic of Gilgamesh, have the motif of love transforming the ugly or the animalistic. (Mitchell)

These motifs are so pervasive among so many cultures today that they can be seen throughout modern literature and media. One of my own original tales, “The Black Wedding Dress,” begins with an abbreviated form of the Cupid and Psyche myth. The main character, named “She” as a bit of solidarity to the namelessness of female heroes in tales and history, falls for “the Count” who enchants her so powerfully, that when She learns the Count is not a man but a woman, it matters not at all. Like Psyche after Cupid’s revelation, She is willing to do anything to keep her love from being destroyed. In this story there is a motif, dear to my heart that I always referred to as “the reluctant bride.” This is the archetypal princess who devises a riddle or a vow to stave off bridegrooms like Homer’s Penelope undoing her work at the loom. She may be the self sufficient daughter like the Cochiti tale of, “The Industrious Daughter Who Would Not Marry,” who is too busy weaving to notice suitors dancing before her house. In this case she

is the willful girl in a hoop skirt. The one who must always be reminded to act a lady, mind her manners and her place. She is commanded to bat her eyelashes, fan her fan, to be seen but not heard. (Estes) In most tales the reluctant bride is eventually forced, tricked, or outsmarted into being married. In this case, the traditional “tricks of the trade” used in snaring the reluctant bride, are used by her to gain her freedom.

Between 1955 – 1961, Stith Thompson, compiled, published and revised a five volume list of these narrative elements, and a one volume index, entitled, “Motif-Index of Folk-Literature: A Classification of Narrative Elements in Folktales, Ballads, Myths, Fables, Mediaeval Romances, Exempla, Fabliaux, Jest-Books and Local Legends.” In this work Thompson divided folkloric motifs into twenty-three alphabetical index categories with varying subdivisions. These include: (A) collects Mythological Motifs; (B) Animal Motifs; (C) Motifs of Tabu; (D) Magic;(E), the Dead; and (H)Tests (Science.Jrank.org)

Similar to Aarne, Thompson provides entries with a numerical classification, known as its “motif number,” a description of the motif and an indication to a variation of the motif. For example, the reluctant bride that I chose for the “Black Wedding Dress”

H386.

Descriptor: Bride test: obedience. AType 901. (cross reference to the Aarne-Thompson Index)

or

Because of the dress she eventually makes as alluded to in the title the tale also can be identified as:

H383.2.

Descriptor: Bride test: cloth-working.

Eddie's "Haycutters" can be found in:

H976.

Descriptor: Task performed by mysterious stranger.

And if the mysterious strangers we indeed revealed as Fairies the tale would have been:

F271.

Descriptor: Fairies as laborers.

cross references:

H973.1. Task performed by fairy. (Talesunlimited.com)

In his 1957 review of the work, anthropologist, Mac Edward Leach, wrote "The influence and usefulness of the Motif-Index can best be seen in the large number of significant, specialized studies that it has inspired, such as Tom Peete Cross's huge index of traditional Irish material, Keller's index of Spanish exempla, Dov Neuman's index of Talmudic- Midrashic literature, and Balys' index of Lithuanian traditional narrative." (Leach) I can see why. I found the discovery of both Aarne's and Thompson's massive undertakings and works, fascinating, awesome and inspiring. In my research I was only able to acquire virtual representations of both systems. I look forward to continuing my research on these works and the others they have inspired such as the "A Type and Motif Index of Japanese Folk Literature" by Hiroko Ikeda.

By the very nature of its broad definition folklore is a vast area of study. Even though I have had a long love and fascination with the folk tale as a genre I realise that I have barely scratched the surface of folklore, the discipline of folkloristics and its methodologies. In the past I have approached folklore in relation to its role in the schools of literature. However, during my externship with De Paul's School of New Learning and in the years that have passed since I have

become more aware of folklore and its relation to the field of cultural anthropology in addition to how that learning can be applied to not only the analysis of others work but the creation of my own. By its nature folklore is an ever evolving source of information and production. Therefore I view the discipline of folkloristics is as life long study. One that will continue to influence not only my intended post graduate academic endeavors but my creative work as well.

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