
Book Reviews

Robert Baron and Nicholas R. Spitzer, eds.

1992 *Public Folklore*.

Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution Press.

[xiv + 370 pp., photographs, notes, bibliography]

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Public Folklore's diverse essays, written by a mix of academics, practising folklorists, and folklorists who administer government programs promoting folk activities, offer information on the history of public folklore; examples of what public folklorists do and the dilemmas they face in their relationships with their research subjects and their "publics"; and thoughtful, albeit limited, material on the interface between academic theory and public folklore. While many of the projects described are fascinating, there is an odd reluctance in these essays to engage the challenging practices and circumstances of public folklore with the equally challenging issues surrounding representation, ideology, and practice being articulated by ethnographers and other cultural theorists.

This reluctance to articulate theory may be due to public folklore's attempt to distinguish itself from academic folklore. Whether this is so or not, I find it disconcerting that nowhere in this book is "folklore" defined, nor is the distinction made between folklore and ethnography, or public folklore and applied anthropology. Since when, for instance, does a study of the occupational culture and traditions of firefighters in Washington D.C., the subject of one of the essays in this book, constitute folklore rather than ethnography?

Even more serious theoretical omissions are the lack of discussion of the problematic concepts of "folk," "tradition," and "authenticity" which are central to public folklore, and/or references to the literature on these issues which have developed within ethnography. The book's introduction acknowledges the centrality of issues of representation, authority and ideology, and hints at problems caused by the nostalgia and utopianism inherent in the notions of "folk" and "traditions," but the editors do not actually discuss these issues. It would be most interesting for them to do so in terms of the relationship between public folklore and the literature on "primitive" and non-Western peoples and their relationship to ethnography and museums, to suggest just a few interesting frameworks. Who decides, for instance, what is a legitimate, authentic folk tradition that should be studied or preserved: the folklorist, usually a member of mainstream, elite society, or the "folk" themselves? Nor does anyone in this book cite Sally Price's *Primitive Art in Civilized Places* (1989), a work which is surely germane to the study of "folk" art and activities discussed here, including the staging of "folk" performances at Carnegie Hall. The most theoretical paper in this collection is Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett's, which *does* examine these and other issues, often quite critically, yet no fewer than three times elsewhere in the book do the essayists state that they disagree with her perspectives, though they never state which ones or why.

If the emphasis on "public" in this kind of folklore leads to a "just do it" approach, I must say that the way these "folk" do their work could teach us ethnographers a lesson or two. Implicit in the cases discussed in this volume is a refreshingly honest, humane, and ambitious approach to the people and the subject under study. Bess Lomax Hawes writes unequivocally of the need for researchers to not "pay back," but to recognize the changes set in motion in subjects' lives by research. When she argues that researchers must be prepared to follow through on these changes to maintain relationships, and ensure that the results of the research are in keeping with subjects' desires and best interests, she's talking about lifetime commitments. It is also intriguing how many of these case studies show folklorists' willingness to let the subject actively shape the direction of research and its presentation, something very current in ethnography. I get the sense from these essays that ethnographers would do well to study the ways in which public folklorists have faced the implications of representations controlled by outside elites for the members of marginalized peoples with whom they work, and how they have dealt with the long-term effects of fieldwork on research subjects.

I also admire the ambition of anyone willing to speak in terms of research intended to "purposefully refram[e] and [extend]... tradition in collaboration with folk artists, native scholars, and other community members" [p.1], or to create "public dialogues about traditional culture within and often beyond a community" [p.80]. As minority groups attempt to maintain their identities through heritage activities, among other means, such work has the potential to assist many peoples in adapting distinct heritages to serve them in the present and future. Given that much folklore is oppositional to mainstream society, though, this is very political work, fraught with the perils and the possibilities of cross-cultural miscommunication on all sides. I am leery therefore, of the general lack of critical attention in this volume to the broader issues surrounding such relations between folklorists and their subjects. How does public folklore find a balance between what elite outsiders value in "folk" cultures and how minority groups use folk activities to represent their own identities to themselves and others? How do folklorists justify preserving specific cultural activities which are, in many cases, relics of a past with no future, remnants of a culture destroyed by the culture which seeks to preserve them? I find much of value in this book, but much that is also irritating and, ultimately, disturbing.

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Bernd Herrmann and Susanne Hummel, eds.

1994 *Ancient DNA*.

New York: Springer-Verlag.

[236 pp, 50 illustrations, index]

\$69.00 US: hardcover.

The study of ancient DNA is a very young but exciting field in archaeology, anthropology, palaeontology, medicine and forensic sciences. So-called ancient DNA refers to the DNA preserved in remains of organisms such as archaeological materials,