



Elliot Oring, *Just Folklore: Analysis, Interpretation, Critique*

Long Beach, CA: Cantilever Press, 2012. xix + 388 pages. 13 photographs. Hardcover, \$59.95; paperback, \$29.95. ISBN 978-0-9855214-1-7 (hardcover); 978-0-9855214-0-0 (paperback).

IN THIS ANTHOLOGY of largely previously published articles, Elliott Oring confronts many of the most central issues in folklore studies. The eighteen essays spanning his career range from early explorations of whaling songs to recent interrogations of theoretical positions that have, in Oring's estimation, undermined the field of folklore and its standing in the academy. Throughout, Oring's writing is insightful and engaging, bringing to his later essays a nearly encyclopedic knowledge of the history of the discipline. The geographic reach of the volume mirrors Oring's own fieldwork, from the study of Jewish communities in Israel and the United States, to his substantive work in more localized American communities.

The opening essay, "The Arts, Artifacts, and Artifices of Identity" (orig. 1997), emphasizes the role of identity in the study of folklore. The essay provides a potentially unifying perspective to the volume. In his introduction to the opening essay, Oring proposes that "Identity would seem to be a concept that corrals the diversity of definitions and theories [in folklore research] within a comprehensive program of research" (3). He interrogates this proposition, reaching the conclusion that identity is "under theorized" in folklore, thus charting a fertile direction for future study. Indeed, this pattern of identifying a research problem and laying the groundwork for broader disciplinary attention to that problem resurfaces in many of Oring's essays. Consequently, by the end of the volume, the reader has a historically situated and well-documented understanding of several fundamental challenges in folkloristics, as well

as a series of potential avenues for further inquiry.

Several of the essays in the first part of the volume deal with specific traditions (2, 3, 4, 5, 6), revealing Oring's ability to ask provocative research questions and reach meaningful conclusions through a rigorous interpretive approach to folk expression. The third essay in the volume is perhaps the most unsettling, with its exploration of the use of gruesome totems among military personnel. Oring's conclusion, that Linton's observation on the analogous nature of "primitive" and contemporary totemism is "on the mark" (54) could be tested with more recent fieldwork. Unfortunately, the retrospective nature of the anthology precludes bringing studies such as this up to date, and one cannot help but wonder the extent to which the thoughtful theoretical perspectives generated by this and other essays could have been more substantively addressed in the short introductory paragraphs.

"Legend, Truth and News" (7, orig. 1990) was written long before the emergence of the Internet, and consequently cries out for someone to extend the observations presented here. The essay moves quickly toward a critique of folklore studies as practiced, and raises profound issues about the relationship between the values of the academic discipline of folklore and the values of the expressive cultures that form the object of study. Oring's conclusion that, "The newspaper stands as a distinct challenge to folklorists to examine their own ideology and their own program" (103) could easily be extended to the Internet and social media. As Oring points out, "if folkloristics ever expects to regain its position as a critical force, it will have to discover a way to look at the center of things without losing a distinctive folkloristic perspective" (103).

A long article on "Legend and the Rhetoric of Truth" (8, orig. 2008), which occupies a central place in the volume, provides a reasonable overview of discussions of the legend genre that have been a mainstay of folklore study since Jacob Grimm made his famous statement in *Deutsche Sagen* about the difference between the fairy tale and legend (1816). Yet Oring's model of the rhetoric of truth in the legend is far too complex and list-like to actually be applied in any meaningful way to a collection. The observations Oring proposes could perhaps be better characterized as a series of features that frequently can be found in legends or legend performances than a comprehensive model of the rhetorical aspects of the genre.

The remaining articles alternate between largely theoretical articles (10, 12, 14, 15, 16, 17, 18), and those grounded in data (9, 11, 13). The theoretical articles are well argued and focus largely on fundamental problems in folkloristics. Oring provides an important discussion of the concepts of devolution and evolution in folklore (10, orig. 1975); a reconsideration of the theoretical underpinnings of Victor Turner's work on symbolism that Oring anchors in the writings of Freud (14, orig. 1993); and a brief meditation on the meaningful nature of the "trivial" (18, orig. 1996). In the only previously unpublished article in the anthology (12), Oring provides an incisive discussion of the fundamental concept of "tradition" in folklore, noting, "Only when the term *tradition* directs folklorists to frame substantive questions, can it gain any conceptual value for the discipline" (239). This essay alone is worth the price of the volume.

Several additional essays (16, orig. 2006; 17, orig. 1998) take direct aim at the "theoretical turn" in folklore that has challenged the very premises of the discipline, leading to an institutional retreat from investment in the field. In his masterful "Missing Theory" essay (15, orig. 2006), Oring notes that "folklore theory" should not be driven by "recourse to abstract statements" (291), a phenomenon that has become far too

frequent at meetings and in folklore journals, as well as in the humanities as a whole. Instead, theory, according to Oring, must meet several criteria to rise to the level of actual theory: “It is: (1) interesting (2) plausible (3) generalizable and (4) testable” (291). Folklorists would be well advised to take this advice to heart.

Two of the data-driven articles are of particular note. The first of these (9, orig. 1997) on counting out rhymes offers an excellent example of how interdisciplinary collaboration—here with mathematicians—can extend the scope of folkloristic enquiry. The problem, properly conceptualized, is one of interest both to mathematicians and folklorists, and illustrates how domain expertise from widely disparate fields can lead to significant advances in understanding. The second essay (11, orig. 1978) illustrates how folklore could contribute to experiments that focus on communication and memory. There are significant opportunities to extend the work presented here, given advances in neuroscience and in computation.

My only quibble with the volume is the almost random organization of the essays. While some of the articles are grouped thematically (for example, the two articles on legend), the majority of the articles have little connection to their adjacent articles. If there in fact is an organizational principle, simple section headings would make that more apparent. Although a strictly chronological ordering of the essays would have been equally chaotic, providing a date immediately after the title would allow a reader to try to follow the development of Oring’s ideas over time—as it stands, creating such an ordering requires a bit of spelunking in the acknowledgements section of the front matter. This organizational problem is one that haunts most anthologies and by no means detracts from the intellectually stimulating material Oring presents here, particularly those essays that challenge heterodoxy and confront developments in the field that do little to further knowledge. The essays are uniformly well written, and the short introductory paragraphs help situate the essays in the broader disciplinary context. The critical apparatus could be augmented with an index to make the anthology cohere a bit more, but that is a small oversight. The volume should find a home on any folklorist’s bookshelf, presenting as it does a one-stop shop for the major articles of one of America’s leading folklorists. Instructors and researchers alike will find the comprehensive downloadable teacher’s guide online (www.cantileverpress.com) to be particularly useful.

Timothy R. Tangherlini
University of California, Los Angeles