

Articles

Parsing the Popular A Communicative Action Approach to Folklore

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Hommage à Peter Narváez
In Honour of Peter Narváez

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Résumé de l'article

Cet article défend l'idée d'un engagement en faveur de la culture traditionnelle et d'une analyse de ce mode d'expression à partir du concept d'action communicative et des pratiques culturelles qui y sont liées. Cet article est né d'un besoin critique de situer le folklore au sein des courants dynamiques et incontestables de la culture populaire. Il y est suggéré que le folklore, à titre de culture populaire, permet de renouveler et de donner aux études ethnologiques une poussée et une pertinence pour des rencontres analytiques avec les médias, la culture et la société contemporains. Les concepts fondateurs et les trajectoires théoriques en ethnologie et en communication sont détaillés, remis en question et révisés avec pour objectif de saisir la substance et la signification de la culture traditionnelle en tant que culture. L'analyse présentée est basée sur l'idée que les concepts et pratiques liés à la culture traditionnelle et populaire se rejoignent dans une telle mesure que les limites de leurs définitions respectives sont imprécises et indéfendables. Ce travail explore la façon dont la culture traditionnelle, comprise comme culture populaire, s'articule, négocie et est porteuse de sens à travers des codes, des pratiques, du savoir, des espaces et des stratégies d'expression dans des situations et des environnements culturels contemporains.

PARSING THE POPULAR

A Communicative Action Approach to Folklore

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A Tangle of Definitions

The inadequacies and impoliticness of the term “folklore” have been highlighted in debates over a number of years, and indeed, the name of the discipline has been examined with encyclopaedic exhaustiveness.¹ These terminological struggles have tended to offer up historical detail in impressive density to somehow situate, if not recuperate the term, and certainly to bemoan the discipline’s lack of recognition and the failure to achieve its proper influence and legitimacy within the academy. Alan Dundes, for example, characterizes the currency of folkloristics as “depressingly worrisome,” and offers sobering

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1. This essay is deeply inflected with lessons learned from Peter Narváez during and after my doctoral studies at Memorial University of Newfoundland. Peter has remained a vigorous, articulate, and thoroughly compelling advocate for a critical and comprehensive embrace of “the popular”. The trajectory of my own academic career in Communication was determined under Peter’s influence, particularly by his scholarly interventions on behalf of the integrity and significance of popular dimensions of cultural practices. He demonstrated not only that there was vitality and importance in such practices, but also enlightened us on how folkloric expression gives depth, complexity and direction to the communicative substance and purpose of cultural creation. Unencumbered by disciplinary and conceptual borders and boundaries, Peter’s way of thinking was quite simply and profoundly interdisciplinary. I, among many, have been the beneficiary of this liveliest of minds.

details on the institutional erosion of the discipline and the continuing avoidance and devaluing of the word in the academic context (2004: 385). It has been argued compellingly that as a term, folklore does not appear to be particularly sustainable (Bendix 1998; Dundes 2004; Keil 1978; Kirshenblatt-Gimblett 1996, 1998), and all of the historical inventories and excavations neither lighten its conceptual baggage nor redeem the term as one that inspires the confidence or the intellectual curiosity of those outside the discipline.

This is not to deny the capacity of folklore studies to make important critical excursions, especially with regard to the broader areas of communication and popular culture. A basis for a recuperative effort for studies in folklore could begin with a challenge to the persistent and nagging affliction of most academic disciplines to engage in vigorous territorial battles over disciplinary border regions despite the emerging emphases on the values and practices of interdisciplinarity. In this respect, folklore — the progeny of both the humanities and social sciences — offers a unique strength and relevance in terms of its “interdisciplinary flexibility” (Abrahams 1993: 29). While folklore studies have been irrefutably undervalued in the wider academic universe, the increasing prominence of interdisciplinary approaches in the social sciences, humanities, and applied social research opens up possibilities for folklore to contribute substantially to critical analyses of media, popular culture and communication.

In the interests of proposing a communication or communicative action foundation for the understanding and analysis of folklore, a brief deconstruction of some terms and concepts is helpful at the outset, if only to answer Ben-Amos’s fine and persistent question, “What is in a name?” (1998: 268). Ben-Amos posed this question with reference in part to his contention that the term folklore suffered mightily as it became popularly synonymous with falsity, error, and irrationality. Ben-Amos is especially critical of analysts who conflate scholarly and popular understandings of folklore. He critiques those who engage with uncritical and detrimental references to folklore in the domain of popular culture as they suggest that the historical depth and integrity of the discipline has been compromised and even abandoned under the influence of popular understandings of the term. In Ben-Amos’s historical account of the evolution of the discipline, folklore is a science, no less, and he insists that popularizations of the term folklore should not diminish its intellectual depth and significance. Clearly, there is a great deal at stake in a name, as is evidenced by the sheer weight of analysis

generated by the question. While summary answers are elusive, a few terminological qualifications can at least provide some direction. First, the term popular culture merits attention.

As a term, “popular culture” gets as bad a rap as “folklore” in popular presentations and even in academic treatments when “popular culture” is used interchangeably with “commercial culture,” “promotional culture,” or worst of all, “pop culture.” Similarly, popular culture is often understood as a terrain cluttered with commercial ephemera and detritus (Laba 1999). In essence, Ben-Amos argues that the authority of linguistic/terminological meaning (as in the meaning of folklore in terms of its progress in intellectual history) is degraded by the levelling influence of the popular. Yet popular culture ranges over as much cultural space as folklore (in definition, and as lived culture), and struggles with a similar indeterminacy. It therefore seems rather paradoxical to critique the popular sense and usage of “folklore” the term when it is the popular sense and usage that constitute the subject matter (in part) of folklore the discipline. The point to emphasize here is that there is a decisive intersection between the concepts and actual social communicative practices of folklore and popular culture. This intersection renders definitional boundaries between folklore and popular culture imprecise, if not unsustainable.

The social communicative dimension of folklore provides a particularly fertile theoretical ground for apprehending and analysing cultural practice. Broad, complex and determining factors in social communication and discursive orders of culture — context, to be precise — are implied in commonplace and performative cultural expressions such as folklore. There has been considerable and robust debate around the concept of context in folklore studies, to be sure. At the risk of further wearing that extremely well trodden ground, it must be emphasized that the field has been crucially influenced by contextualism to the extent that context is an imperative in theoretical accounts of folkloric communication and a foundation of methodological rigour in apprehending and analyzing such communication (Bauman 1986; Ben-Amos 1993; Hufford 1995; Muana 1998). With a broadening of the analytical purview of context from “the recovery and analysis of texts-in-context” to “contextual practices” (Hufford 1995), context has properly become the sum of its situational and cultural parts, its micro-level and macro-level sites and processes. The practices of context necessarily involve the invocation and activation of the widest range of knowledge and behaviours that inform, and are informed by, the

particularities of the situation or event and by the breadth of culture. Context offers an account of how and why folkloric communication emerges to comprehend, interpret, and act upon both the situational and wider cultural circumstances. As an expressive resource in social communication, folklore emerges and has consequence through and because of the dynamics of context.

Malinowski's (1922, 1961) functional approach to anthropological method and analysis is a key source for the conceptual trajectories and detours around the notion of context. In particular, Malinowski was concerned with how a myriad of cultural understandings, assumptions, and practices work to create and sustain coherence and cohesion in a wide range of social processes. The later turn to the contextual analysis of folklore (Bauman 1969; Ben-Amos 1971; Georges 1969; Paredes and Bauman 1972) was clearly inflected with Malinowski's theoretical and methodological insights. The eventual and comprehensive theorization of the artistry and context of texts as communicative action (Bauman and Sherzer 1989; Ben-Amos and Goldstein 1975) was evidence of a significant conceptual shift toward context in folklore, a shift that was indebted to contextually specific analyses of speech acts and speech events in the "ethnography of speaking" (Paredes and Bauman 1972). "Context" was a framing principle in Ben-Amos' influential definition and analysis of folklore as "artistic communication in small groups" (1971: 13), a resilient and ever relevant concept that understood social communication, verbal art, and the contexts of cultural discourses as charter elements of this emergent analytical direction.

Despite early resistance to the emerging emphasis on context (Wilgus 1973), astute analyses since this conceptual shift have properly taken to task the questionable dichotomies between "text" and "context." For example, Ben-Amos argues for the co-determinacy of "text" and "context" (1993). Likewise, Muana emphasizes that such dichotomies are impediments to engaging with critical issues such as the assertion of social identities and the question of how social structure might be articulated or even transformed in the context of discourse (1998). Accordingly, Ben-Amos maintains that contextual analysis demands that a "valid interpretation" of verbal art "must consider the entire cultural, social and situational context" (1993: 210). With a bolder stroke and on the basis of a meticulous review of the progress of contextual analysis and theories of cultural discourse, Muana notes the

“central strand” of this progress is that “folklore is in a perpetual contextual state” (1998: 43).

Folklore as a specialized form of communication in context thus involves a complex of cultural, social, and historical factors that inform, orient, impel, and ultimately constitute the conditions for the emergence and sustained relevance of folkloric expression. In other words, communication in particular times and spaces can embody and resonate with broader social and cultural contexts and histories. As noted above, cultural practices, cultural spaces, and cultural knowledge all demonstrate a situational character or micro-context within which and by which expressive practices take place, gain traction, and have impact. An understanding of the decisive role of the micro-context/situation in the meaning of artistic verbal communication has evolved from Malinowski’s excavation of systems and structures of meaning in his ethnographic approach to language as “situation,” or more precisely, as the event and moment within which and by which specialized speech acts emerge and unfold (1923, 1946). It is precisely this communicative dimension of folklore that should be the foundation for contributions to emerging interdisciplinary fields.

Communicative Action

The communicative significance of folklore has been explored previously from different analytical approaches and with different objectives in relation to the interpretation of the communication in folklore. Communication became a serious concern and an analytical focus for folklorists well over thirty years ago, and was driven by the formative influence of anthropological, cross-cultural explorations into the nature and function of speech in everyday social life — the ethnography of speaking. Hymes (1971, 1972, 1975), Bauman and Sherzer (1989), Gumperz and Hymes (1972), and others brought the social communicative significance of those specialized folkloric speech acts into the analytic purview of folklorists. Again, their emphasis on context offered an approach that helped to focus analysis on the relationship between “folkloristic materials and other aspects of social life in situ, as it were, where that relation actually obtains, the communicative events in which folklore is used” (Hymes 1972: 46). The expressive and stylistic attributes and dimensions of particular speech behaviours took on a much greater significance with the recognition that verbal art was a form of communicative action. This action was

then seen as inflected with the determinants of speech communities and ways of speaking, with culturally-based assumptions and practices, with the imperatives and nuances of social life and interaction, and with the organization, repertoires and genres of situational speech or speech events.

Increasingly, folklorists faced the limitations of definitional criteria and analytical parameters that were text-centred. More broadly, the discipline also faced the drag of persistent or residual antiquarianism on its progress. Instead, and under the influence of the ethnography of speaking (an inquiry that introduced, among other notions, the key concept of the systematic social nature of language use), folklorists came to emphasize the speech situation, the contextual and social dynamics of expression as a foundation of meaning, and textual and textural considerations. For emerging folklore approaches, the ethnographic rendering of speech behaviours, contexts, and actions became a means of analyzing the rules of speech use and appropriateness. This rendering also allowed folklorists to apprehend the transformational moment in which ordinary speech becomes folkloric performance and takes on an aesthetic dimension as well as social and cultural resonance.

As an analytical trope in folklore, communication offers a critical pathway into dynamic, contemporary, and popular electronic media contexts and environments. If tradition is the *sine qua non* of folklore (Ben-Amos 1984: 97), then communication decisively opens up this definitional foundation to some healthy expansion. In a prevailing media and technological culture that privileges the contemporary such that demographics of youth, in particular, tend to live in a perpetual present tense, tradition should take on an especially urgent significance. Tradition is vital to encounters with the ways and complexities of modern life, especially given the velocity and acceleration of contemporary culture with its conditions and qualities of dislocation and compression, distraction and impatience. Alan Gailey's simple and succinct insight into traditions as "the constituents of the worthwhile life" (1989: 159) infuses the idea with meaning appropriate to such encounters while eschewing a romanticism typically invoked as a counterpoint to the modern. Tradition is not residue; rather, it is an active, vital and supremely current expressive action that imparts substance, direction, and quality to cultural and social lives. Gailey correctly observes that while tradition has been reconceptualized by social scientists (sociologists and folklorists, especially) to embrace "process" as well as

“content,” the dearth of systematic approaches to tradition as process is problematic (1989: 144).

Folklorists, anthropologists, archaeologists, oral historians, and others have rigorously dissected the definitional criteria for the recognition and qualification of tradition, rendering the notion of tradition itself as, at least, malleable (Ben-Amos 1984; Gailey 1989; Handler and Linnekin 1984; Hobsbawm 1983; Shil 1981; Vansina 1985). Tradition has been not just the core concept of folklore but, for some, the *raison d'être* of the discipline. Challenges to the term folklore therefore necessarily reference similar challenges to the long established acceptance of, and assumptions about, tradition. Such challenges suggest the limited value of approaches to tradition that focus primarily on the endurance of particular cultural expressions or products in terms of transmission and temporal depth or longevity. Pastness and transmission have been central to understandings of tradition, including those that have elaborated the concept to engage with the process of tradition and not strictly its objects. At issue here is how the concept of tradition achieves resonance and relevance in social and mass communicative contexts given the speed, magnitude, and quality of change in contemporary media environments.

Moving beyond instrumental models of transmission, James Carey conceptualized communication in cultural terms from the perspective of ritual. This idea offers a valuable communication-based bridge between complex, technologized and mediated culture and folklore/tradition (Carey 1988). The ritual view of communication departs substantially from mechanistic notions of communication, which emphasize, above all, the process of transmission and how messages are disseminated over distance through technologies of communication. Instead, in the ritual view, communication becomes inscribed with agency, especially culturally based and collective agency. Carey argues that a ritual view of communication is linked to terms such as “participation,” “association,” “commonness,” and “community.” As he notes, the ritual view of communication “is directed not toward the extension of messages in space but toward the maintenance of society in time; not the act of imparting information but the representation of shared beliefs” (1988: 18). This view has had considerable and sustained analytical value in Communication studies. With its emphasis on collective agency and communicative action, the ritual view imparts an important dynamic social dimension to the concept of tradition.

Tradition is an “interpretive process” of constant revision and reinvention, of shifting premises and identities (Handler and Linnekin 1984:273). In contemporary and complex media environments, tradition is not residual or persistent expressions and objects in transmission. Rather, it is a process of collective agency and communicative action whereby significant symbolic resources are called upon, rearticulated, renewed or reinterpreted, utilized and applied, and ultimately provides a ground upon which common culture is shaped.

On another interpretive tack, “communication” in folklore has also referred to “media” or “mass communication” and the electronic media environments and popular and commercial cultures within those environments. At times, folklore has been encumbered in its encounters with such media environments by a view of its subject predicated on static rather than malleable and dynamic views of tradition, and with a continuing “collection” or object/content focus that has always seen folklorists excavating for remnants of “lore.” Yet many media-based approaches to folklore have understood their subject as dynamic, contemporary, and rather antipathic to traditional categorization. The current and emergent media environment, and the technological torque of communication within that environment, has focussed concern in communication and cultural studies on the relationship between electronic, mass-mediated communication of commercial culture and the everyday social communication of popular culture — two contexts of communication that inform, influence, and structure each other.

Conceptualized as a form of communicative action, folklore has a great deal to impart to communication and cultural studies in analyses of the complex relations between cultural practices, cultural possibilities, social communication, and current and unfolding media environments. In particular, within the intensely commercial and technological environment of contemporary media, the understanding of cultural practices and their substance and integrity demands a keen and comprehensive grasp of the social communicative dimensions of media. More specifically, it is crucial to analyse how and by what conditions expressive resources are created and called upon to give meaning in everyday encounters with media forms and media content. Communication, folklore, and other popular culture approaches to the contemporary media environment must attend to the intersection of mediated and social communication, and to the co-dependent nature of the relationship between media and socially based expressive culture.

The political economy of media includes numerous and complex determinations, including: the engineering of global media markets; deregulation in the service of corporate media interests; international regulatory regimes and new media technologies; conglomerates, mergers and concentration of ownership; democracy in the digital age; the ideology of consumerism; and other vitally important themes and issues that are not normally in the analytic purview of folklore studies. Yet, within this purview, social contexts of communicative action are determinations of another sort. As I have noted elsewhere, new socially dominant practices (such as peer-to-peer file sharing) that have emerged in ongoing techno-cultural shifts signal an active engagement with developing and in enabling digital technologies (Laba 2006). Harold Innis observes that cultural changes, shifts or “disturbances” can occur in the introduction of new communication and technology. These changes challenge and even destabilize the relations of power into which such new communication is introduced (Innis 1951). Similarly, emergent and socially dominant practices (renegade technological practices such as peer-to-peer, mentioned above) serve as uncontrollable communicative actions that undermine corporate control, concentration and the profitability models of the industries of popular music (Laba 2006). Communicative action, then, can be understood as part of a production/meaning loop of media by which popular communicative culture defines the vital and intersectional ground between broad determinations (the political economy and power relations of media) and social practices that make meaning, and that may actually challenge such determinations.

Electronic media continually shift the terrain upon which culture and communication are understood and practiced. Contradictorily, media has had the capacity to limit or constrain imaginings and at the same time, provide the conceptual and expressive means by which imaginings are formulated and articulated. Communicative action is critical in this highly complex media environment — it offers access and insight into the substance and significance of agency in, and the responses of cultural practice to, this environment.

Folklore and Popular Culture

The romantic and, at times, apolitical tendencies of the term and treatment of folklore are clearly an issue in communication-focused studies of contemporary culture, and have prompted some folklorists

to investigate the overlap and interplay between folklore and popular culture in the media environment (Abrahams 1993; Dorst 1990; Narváez and Laba 1988; Story 2003). Peter Narváez for example, argued for qualitative distinctions between the social contexts of mass cultural events and small group, folkloric events, and detailed four areas of folkloric activity in popular, commercial culture that demonstrate an interface between folklore and popular culture (1992). His analysis was primarily concerned with the content and genre of folkloric materials as they are incorporated by commercial media; embedded within the content and forms of commercial media; generated by commercial media; share discursive patterns with commercial media forms; or constitute new bodies of lore created through the uses of media technologies and through the small group experiences of mass-mediated events.

Narváez urged critical folklore studies to consider the theoretical approaches of cultural studies to address the obvious and prevailing ideological dimensions of folkloric expression and expressive practices that have been a substantial lacuna in folkloristics. Issues of class, race, gender, and the broader framework of social structure have been noticeably absent from romantic treatments of expressive practices of folklore. Similarly, Richard Bauman argued that the term folklore can be particularly problematic in the numerous and varied debates and issues that arise in the analysis of the politics of culture. He notes:

“Folklore”...may carry a positive valence as a rubric under which vernacular expressive culture is given its due, recognized for its durability, social efficacy, and beauty. Yet folklore also tends to romanticize and idealize traditional peoples and social formations, and this makes the term suspect in the eyes of those who see folklore as anachronistic and the romanticization of dominated peoples as itself an instrument of domination (1992: xvii).

Bauman’s argument concerning folklore’s tendency to romanticize and idealize is echoed in Pauline Greenhill’s incisive critique of the manner in which some American folklore scholarship reifies ethnicities and regionalisms as “others” (1999). While Greenhill does not develop this critique in detail, she does remind us that romanticism, paternalism, and colonialism are at the roots of the discipline, and that it suffers residual effects of these roots even today. This tendency towards reification obscures the political dimensions of popular expression and cultural practice, dulls the analytical acuity for reading cultural politics

into folklore, and betrays a neo-colonial sensibility that is always problematic, but increasingly so in a distinctly postcolonial world. The terminological and conceptual limitations of “folk” and “folklore” are a product of a history of aesthetic and philosophical discourses that sentimentalized folk culture, often with a distinctly anti-modern bias (Abrahams 1993; MacGuigan 1992). The emergence of both folklore and popular culture were inextricably linked to the Romantic rejection of Classicism, especially in aesthetic theory and artistic practice. In reaction against Classicism’s formalism and dispassion, Romanticism found inspiration and direction in “ordinary culture,” and especially in the myths of folk purity, naturalness and communalism (MacGuigan 1992:9-11). According to MacGuigan, the sentimentalizing of a pure and untarnished communal peasant culture took root in the early “folk inflection of popular culture” (1992: 10).

This sentimentalism has persisted in the form of cultural populism, and idealized notions of agency in folk and popular cultures. John Clarke suggests that in contemporary media and cultural studies, cultural populism glosses over the power and decisiveness of the commodification of culture while privileging and inflating expressive practices, folkloric or otherwise, as almost heroic resistance (1990). As Clarke argues, “Cultural populism has been right to argue against the notion of the people as cultural dupes, but the alternative is not necessarily a population of cultural activists conducting a cultural guerrilla war” (1990: 42). This point is key to a definitional analysis of popular culture and merits elaboration.

The search for progressive and hegemonic meanings in, and consequences of, popular culture has been a prominent focus in the development of cultural studies, where much is made of the concepts of struggle and resistance. Studies of spectacular youth subcultures in the UK, for example, explored popular cultures of resistance in the form of disenfranchised and alienated working-class youth in groups (teddy boys, mods, punks, rastas, skinheads, and others) who employed commodity symbols (fashion and music above all) as expressive resources to encounter and struggle with the constraints and contradictions of their everyday lives (Brake 1985; Hall and Jefferson 1976; Hebdige 1979). These resistances were neither coherent nor strategic political movements, and lacked both the substance and direction of political action. Rather, these popular cultural practices were ritualistic in nature, and were modes and styles of consumption

that invested individuals and groups with conspicuous identities of difference, and in this conspicuousness offered a means to assault social norms and conventions.

While these subcultures emerged under very particular social, economic and political conditions in the UK, their example has been influential and persistent, and has been generalized to a wide range of cases in cultural analyses that seek to theorize the active audience. These analyses tend to emphasize use in social practices of consumption, and demonstrate that the meaning of those practices and of commodities is not completely inscribed in the political and economic conditions of production and the marketplace. Clearly, these analyses provided an important critique of the more deterministic models of cultural production and have produced compelling resumes of the ideological, political and economic reflexes of culture industries. However, with a focus on the consumption and use of media materials and commodities of commercial culture, these analyses glossed over or ignored the ideological dimensions of consumer industries, media and the marketplace. Use, creative or otherwise, does not automatically make for oppositional practice, and to employ the term “resistance” in such cases overstates the ephemeral and contradictory character of consumption practices in everyday life.

Still, popular cultural expressive practices create conditions of possibility. Motivated by Stuart Hall’s theory of the popular and active “re-working” of tradition (1981), George Lipsitz argues for a consideration of the “transformations” within popular culture instead of a search for “forms and meanings” construed as “innately emancipatory or hegemonic” (1990: 13). Lipsitz argues that popular culture should be viewed in terms of the multiplicities of meanings and discourses it includes, and its wide, diverse, and dynamic range of understandings and reception. In this way, the analysis of popular culture, its substance and its significance, focuses on the capacity of popular culture to transform tradition and broad cultural currents. Lipsitz was particularly concerned with how these transformations involve the expression of popular collective memory, and how such transformations rework tradition. Within such transformations, contemporary cultural products may bear the evidence of memory (in vernacular traditions, for example) that can serve to critique, structure, and modify cultural products and knowledge. In this sense, popular culture is not a synonym for commercial culture, but is rather a site of intersection between commerce and culture; between economic, political and technological

orders and the expressive practices of social communication; between structural power and social possibility.

From a folkloristic perspective, an encounter with the transformations of popular culture becomes infinitely more than a search for traditional antecedents or retentions in cultural products; rather, this encounter considers how these “memories” work upon and change the present. As a form of popular culture, folklore is a specialized practice of communicative action that speaks to “residual memories of the past” (Lipsitz 1990: 13) while demonstrating a capacity to engage with, comment upon, and influence contemporary expressive practices in the social fields of the popular.

Cultural Studies and Folklore

Two seminal studies in cultural criticism, Raymond Williams’ *The Long Revolution* and E.P. Thompson’s *The Making of the English Working Class* (both arising out of earlier literary approaches to cultural analysis), challenged established literary-based understandings of the concept of culture, and opened up the concept to political and sociological dimensions and debates (Williams 1965; Thompson 1988). In Thompson’s work, culture was tied to class, class formations, and class struggles. He saw culture as the collective, “popular” experience of the English working class involved in reshaping the conditions of its existence. In Williams’ work, cultural criticism departed from its traditional aesthetic sense and came to refer to a more anthropological understanding of culture as patterns of an entire way of life. Particularly under the influence of Williams, culture became increasingly framed in sociological and anthropological terms, rather than literary and aesthetic terms. This reframing offered new and important perspectives on the capacities of cultural practices.

Among other enduring critical insights, Williams’s cultural criticism established a concern with the relationship between everyday popular experience and the effects of industrialization on tradition. His analysis defined a ground between tradition and the culture of the popular classes in Britain, and he departed substantially from literary/aesthetic readings of culture. Leaving behind Arnoldian notions of high culture, Williams widened the franchise of culture to acknowledge the substance and significance of popular culture, and the critical role of the popular in social and political struggle. He also refused to see culture as a by-product of class or a referent in a broader socialist project, and he rejected

the Marxist disparagement of non-socialistic cultural practices of the working classes. Williams actually understood and valued everyday, lived, popular culture, and his work suggested the possibility of a decisive and forceful popular culture — often symbolic and expressive in form — that inscribes, and is inscribed by, politics and social process.

The development of cultural studies in the legacy of this conceptual shift, however, was not at all uniform, and debates around the substance and significance of culture posed culturalist perspectives against structuralist perspectives. Culturalist approaches developed through theories of youth subcultures and the symbolic resources and strategies by which these groups responded to, and ultimately resisted, the dominant culture of society. The method of description and analysis was often ethnographic, and emphasized the “lived” experiences and culture of these groups as they attempted to work through their subordination (Cohen 1987; Hall and Jefferson 2006; Hebdige 1979; Willis 1977, 1978). This ethnographic method privileged agency and treated culture as the expressive product of a subculture’s intentional and strategic response to social conditions.

In many ways, culturalist theories and methods arose as critiques of structuralist approaches which analyzed media consumption patterns and expressive practices as already determined by social, economic and political structures (Althusser 1971; Murdock and Golding 1974). Structuralist perspectives focussed on determining macro-structures, particularly economic determinants, in the analysis of media and society, and understood culture as reproducing capitalist social relations. They analyzed culture as ideology, as a relatively autonomous system of representation that was situated in, and organized through, the dominant vehicles of state and commercial institutions and industries (media is a prime example). In this theoretical line of analysis, human agency was minimal, if not illusory, and the complexities of the relationship between conditions of production and consumption of cultural forms were not addressed.

The resolution of this debate was largely the consequence of the revitalization of the work of Antonio Gramsci in cultural studies. It was Gramsci’s insight that popular sentiments and convictions “flow from the exigencies of everyday life under capitalism” (Bocock 1986: 32) that complicated and melded the opposing notions of culture (culture as a site for subcultural expression and practice versus culture as an ideological support for the reproduction and entrenchment of modern

capitalism). Through the concept of hegemony, culture could be viewed as part of a continual process of negotiation between dominant orders in society and the popular classes, whose consent must be won and managed for dominance to be sustained. For cultural studies, winning and managing consent involved the negotiation of the terms upon which popular desire was constructed in a marketplace of goods and images. In the shifting dynamic of hegemony, popular culture became viewed as a “terrain” upon which the processes of social structuration and cultural practice interact. Gramsci offered further insights into the social process of the popular through his analysis of folklore.

In the early 1930s, Gramsci critiqued both the romantic tendencies of folklore studies and the limitations of its research (1985: 188-195). He noted that folklore was treated “primarily as a ‘picturesque’ element,” and that folklore studies consisted largely of the methodological concerns of how to collect, select and classify folkloric materials. He provided a detailed statement of an alternative approach:

Folklore, should instead be studied as a “conception of the world and life” implicit to a large extent in determinate (in time and space) strata of society and in opposition (also for the most part implicit, mechanical and objective) to “official” conceptions of the world (or in a broader sense, the conceptions of the cultured parts of historically determinate societies) that have succeeded one another in the historical process (1985: 189).

As a “conception of the world and life” that is “implicit” in social structure and cultural process, folklore can be approached as a response to lived social, political and economic conditions. As well, folklore is both the knowledge and expression of social and cultural life that may, at times, exist outside the official and sanctioned versions of social order and practice. Here folklore’s political dimension and its synonymous relationship with popular culture are evident: folklore does not exhibit an organized or systematic political nature, but rather a political *character* demonstrated in the broad social relations within which popular expression is inscribed. In Gramsci’s conceptualization, the realm of the popular is pluralistic, highly differentiated, and capable of embodying the tensions, conflicts, negotiations, compromises and struggles of numerous and varied cultural stratifications (1985: 195). Folklore as communicative action in the realm of the popular, then, demonstrates considerable expressive capacity to articulate perspectives and positions in opposition to dominant, preferred, or prescribed practices.

While cultural studies has assiduously defied a disciplinary orthodoxy, and some would argue a methodological or theoretical coherence and foundation, its attention to the materials, the understandings, and the expressions of the commonplace and everyday (that is, to the popular) is vitally important. Throughout its development, cultural studies has been consistent in its project to validate popular culture, or in more precise terms, in its commitment to the analysis of how everyday lives are constructed through cultural forms and how such forms are located in broader social and political currents. Of course, one cannot provide a condensed or summary account of cultural studies, and indeed numerous and substantial compendia have been dedicated to the capture of the interdisciplinary breadth of the field and the demonstration that cultural studies is beholden to neither a set of theoretical canons nor prevailing subject matter, themes, or categorical approaches. But as Graeme Turner notes, cultural studies has been historically constant in its focus on the examination of “the everyday and the ordinary,” and therefore, on the very popular cultural processes through which we come to know and assert our social subjectivities (2003: 2).

It is in this focus that folklore and cultural studies have the most productive intersection. Notwithstanding folklore’s frequent tendencies to romanticize the ordinary, its most important and enduring critical insights have been precisely in encounters with, and analyses of, popular cultural expression and practice in everyday life. Often taken to task for the thinness or indeterminacy of the object of its study (Readings 1996: 97) and for its chosen exemption from the demands of actual empirical evidence and analysis, cultural studies could benefit most profitably from those folkloric approaches to the popular that locate the nuances, complexities and consequences of cultural practice in everyday life and describe them with precision.

Conclusion: A Resource For the “Worthwhile Life”

Contemporary approaches to communication and popular culture have demonstrated that critical and aesthetic divisions between cultural categories are thoroughly exhausted. It is particularly hazardous to make such invidious discriminations between the numerous and dynamic dimensions of the “popular.” Tending and maintaining hierarchies of culture is an entirely spurious enterprise in the face of the complexities, ambiguities, and contingencies of contemporary life and culture.

Folklore must be renewed continually in the context of interdisciplinary cultural analysis that has democratized, deconsecrated, and ultimately politicized the concept of culture (Bourdieu 1984; Carey 1988; Certeau 1984; Harvey 1989; Hoggart 1990; Laclau and Mouffe 2001; Thompson 1988; Williams 1965). And in this project of renewal, folklore must find its place in the disorder and diversity of contemporary culture; in the “mashup”² of cultural codes and practices; in the effacement of private space and the consequences of such effacement on cultural knowledge and expression; in the expansiveness of media environments and the diminishment of bordered cultural spaces and practices in those environments; in popular commercial cultural sensibilities that privilege the present tense.

It is appropriate to return to Gailey’s notion of traditions as “constituents of the worthwhile life” to address these overarching questions (1989: 159). Compelling contemporary ruminations on the concept of the “worthwhile life” have had philosophical, political, and cultural torques, and have focussed particularly on the foundations and achievement of meaningful social engagement. For some critical perspectives, the worthwhile life is a project of developing and nurturing the capacities of informed and decisive civic engagement in the public sphere; that is, a sense of duty, belonging, commitment to, and action in the public sphere. Herein lies the substance and significance of culture. Mark Kingwell argues that the making of shared social spaces is, at its foundation, cultural action:

An action-oriented conception of citizenship is, first and foremost, engaged with other people in the creation of shared social spaces and in the discourse that such spaces make possible. Through participation and conversation, we reproduce our social meanings through time: that is what culture is (2001: 172).

Attending to the communicative action dimensions of folkloric expression to which this essay has been dedicated offers the possibility

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2. Originating in Jamaican ska, reggae and dancehall, the term “mashup” has come to designate the mixing, cutting, sampling, and repositioning of musical segments, forms, phrases, and hooks into new musical hybrids. “Mashup” also refers to web/online building practices, and in particular, the practice of bringing together data from different sources into a new integrated use and website. The term is used here in its most expansive sense to capture the hybridization, malleability and complexity of new and emerging cultural forms through dynamic media/technology environments.

that such expression elaborates and gives depth, texture, and substance to the very cultural ground upon which the “worthwhile life” is articulated. It is this cultural direction and purpose of folklore — and more specifically, its capacities as communicative action — that helps to recuperate folklore from the definitional and conceptual drags on its progress and relevance, as noted at the outset. As popular culture, folkloric expression is ultimately a means of creating and sustaining shared social spaces; such spaces are vital cultural terrains, and are irrefutably the sites of discourse upon which social engagement is made meaningful and important. Simply stated, in the velocity and complexity of contemporary culture, folklore is a popular expressive means of finding a point of anchorage in the maelstrom; a means of creating, understanding, and articulating social meaning. As communicative action, folklore is a powerful, yet commonplace resource for negotiating the “worthwhile life.”

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