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TEN ESSENTIAL BOOKS NOT WRITTEN BY FOLKLORISTS

ABSTRACT

Folklorists need to acquire a cognitive map of all the disciplines that have something to offer the study of folklore and that, in turn, can benefit from what folklorists have to offer. This essay discusses ten books from various disciplines and interdisciplinary fields that should be on the folklorist's bookshelf. The author realizes that other folklorists would make a list with different choices. Running through the list are a few themes, including the emphasis in American Pragmatism on the individual's experience and the dialectical relationship between the individual's internal reality and external reality.

In order to realize folkloristics' interdisciplinary aspirations, folklorists must read beyond the canon of folklore scholarship and consider what other disciplines have to offer. Many do read outside the discipline, of course, some going to psychology, some to sociolinguistics, some to anthropology, some to sociology, and many to history. All of my academic training is interdisciplinary—interdisciplinary American Studies—and I have given a lot of thought to how one learns and teaches interdisciplinary thinking. I still have not figured that out.

What I do know is that the scholar, the folklorist in this case, should have in her mind a map of the disciplines. Unfortunately, it is the nature of disciplinary communities to guard their borders, to build walls against poachers, to claim a unique understanding of reality, despite evidence that many disciplines are really studying the same thing, just with their own ideas and language. The natural scientists are better at ignoring the borders than are humanists or social scientists, but that is a matter for another time. How does the folklorist acquire a working map of the disciplines that might have something to offer to the study of the symbolic behavior we call folklore?

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In an article addressing this question, the noted psychologist Donald Campbell (1969) recommends spreading faculty members across the campus such that in any office building professors of English and history and anthropology and psychology and even the natural sciences inhabit offices side-by-side, forcing conversations across the disciplines. His example when he published the article was the University of California, Santa Cruz, then a new campus and (unlike the other UC campuses) arranged by interdisciplinary colleges. This radical idea is rarely adopted, and even UCSC has pretty much abandoned much of what was radical and exciting about the campus in its early days. An example from folklore is the fact that the graduate program in Folklore and Mythology at the University of California, Los Angeles, was housed in the building for the Graduate School of Management, and before long Michael Owen Jones discovered in casual conversation that the management faculty who studied the symbolic lives of corporate cultures in essence did what folklorists do when they study the symbolic culture of a group, including groups of workers. Jones organized a conference and then an edited book, *Inside Organizations* (Jones, Moore, and Snyder 1988) to examine the phenomenon.

Since by their nature many academic administrators and their faculty tend to be risk-averse, there is little chance that schools will suddenly mix up their faculty offices. The next best thing is for folklorists to undertake the interdisciplinary project on their own, and I am offering this list and discussion of “ten essential books not written by folklorists” as my substitute for a walk down the interdisciplinary hallway, poking my head in one office or another to chat with the occupant.

There are books on this list that I always turn to when I am trying to understand human (and not always human) symbolic behavior, which I attempt to understand and interpret for readers. If I face a puzzling bit of behavior, I ask myself “what would Gregory Bateson say about this?” or “what would Berger and Luckmann say about this?” or “what would Mary Douglas say about this?” These thought experiments almost always lead to a breakthrough in my understanding of what I am observing.

This list is idiosyncratic, of course. Every reader of this essay would construct a different list, and my hope is that in the pages of

this journal readers will, in fact, write short commentaries about a book they find essential but not written by a folklorist. The books I have chosen have the virtue of being written for a general audience, which means the writing is clear, accessible, and usually free of disciplinary jargon; or, at least, if a term is essential, the author defines it for the reader in equally clear prose. In an article titled “Ten [New] Axioms for an American Cultur[al] Studies” (Mechling 1997), I offer as one of the axioms “eschew obfuscation,” a funny bumper sticker I saw on a car once. The authors here certainly eschew obfuscation.

The order of my presenting the books and offering a brief assessment of what I see so valuable in their ideas is alphabetical by the author’s last name. I limit myself to no more than one thousand words in each of the ten descriptions.

The reader will detect a few key ideas running through most if not all of these books. One thread derives from the perspective of American Pragmatism about the mind. A passage from William James’s Fifth Lecture published in his 1908 book *Pragmatism: A New Name for Some Old Ways of Thinking* puts it this way:

Our minds grow in spots; and like grease-spots the spots spread. But we let them spread as little as possible; we keep unaltered as much of our old knowledge, as many of our old prejudices and beliefs, as we can. We patch and tinker more than we renew. The novelty soaks in; it stains to ancient mass; but it is also tinged by what absorbs it. Our past apperceives and co-operates; and in the new equilibrium in which each step forward in the process of learning terminates, it happens seldom that the new fact is added RAW. More usually it is embedded cooked, as one might say, or stewed in the sauce of the old. (James 1908, 168–169)

James, one of the “fathers of American psychology,” put the individual’s mind at the center of his psychology and philosophy. What the folklorist can take from this passage is that the symbolic acts we call folklore, acts in the public world, become part of the individual’s internal reality, and the individual then projects back into the external, public world some of these thoughts and emotions. This dialectic of introjection and projection (as the psychoanalyst would call the process) should be the central topic of folkloristics, though too often

the folklorist looks only at the public symbolic acts, only half of the dynamic system. The folklorist needs to be as adept at analyzing the interior, private, often unconscious thoughts and emotions as she is the external events we call folklore. And the folklorist needs to be adept at analyzing all of the public channels of communication that carry messages about collective thoughts, emotions, and motives, including verbal and nonverbal communication, of course, but also print and electronic communications—mass-media messages in film, television, and video games, for example.

Many of the authors below view the dialectic between internal reality and external reality as the puzzle of human behavior to solve, and though not all of them are explicit about the role of psychoanalytic methods and concepts in unpacking the dialectic between our internal reality and the external world in which we live, the concept of the unconscious permeates the ideas in these books. The individual internalizes (introjects) public fantasies into her mind, where they mix with the individual's private fantasies (see James on grease spots) and then sometimes are projected back into the public world.

This is enough preface. Here are my ten books.

GREGORY BATESON, 1972, *STEPS TO AN ECOLOGY OF MIND* (NEW YORK: BALLANTINE)

I am a fan of the natural history essays by Stephen Jay Gould. He asks interesting questions and poses interesting puzzles, such as “is the zebra a white animal with black stripes or a black animal with white stripes?” (Gould 1983). He approaches the puzzles of evolutionary natural history much as a detective would when presented with a crime scene, observing the facts and constructing a story that makes “best sense” of the array of clues. And, like the author of so many detective novels, Gould makes the reader wait for the end of the story to reveal the solution.

Gould's approach reminds me of Clifford Geertz's (1973) argument that interpretive anthropology is “scientific” in the same way clinical inference is scientific. Like the clinical diagnostician, the anthropologist gathers an array of facts (symptoms in the medical version, symbolic acts in the anthropological version) and constructs

a story that makes “best sense” of the data, a hypothesis that then becomes the map for treating the patient who gets better or does not, in which case the physician gathers more evidence and formulates a new story. And so on. The anthropologist rarely can actually “test” her hypothesis, as can the physician, but she can usually explain why her “story” connecting the known facts is superior to competing stories.

I begin this discussion of Gregory Bateson with Gould and Geertz because finding the “pattern which connects” was Bateson’s goal. He and his wife, Margaret Mead, were among the group of scientists and social scientists who explored how insights into cybernetics (the science of communication and control) could help to make sense of everything that has the elements of a system, from machines and people to ecosystems. Thinking about patterns within systems and noting the importance of feedback proved very useful as Bateson explored human and nonhuman animal behavior, from ritual to therapeutic communication (he held the position of “ethnologist” at the Veterans Administration hospital in Palo Alto, California, from 1949 to 1962).

Elsewhere (Mechling 1983) I have explored the usefulness of Bateson’s application of cybernetics to cultural systems, so I shall not look here at the many provocative chapters in *Steps* but instead make the case for Bateson’s chapter “A Theory of Play and Fantasy” as essential reading for folklorists. This chapter, with ideas first presented at a conference of psychiatrists in 1954 and published in *Steps* in 1972, had its origins in the “puzzle” Bateson encountered during visits to San Francisco’s Fleishhacker Zoo. Observing otters and monkeys playing at the zoo, Bateson wondered how the animals could engage in acts of play that to the observer appeared to be fighting. Bateson realized that there must be some metacommunication between the playing animals, a metamessage “This Is Play,” and if the invitation to play was accepted, the animals understood that the messages (symbolic acts) within the play frame did not mean what they meant outside of that frame. The play frame is fragile and easily broken, though the players can re-establish the frame if they value the use of the frame in signaling their trusting relationships.

Nonhuman animals extend the invitation to play with nonverbal signals, and though human animals have language to initiate the invitation to play, in many cases the body language and initial acts

function as invitations. For example, two male adolescents do not say “let’s trade insults,” they just launch into the verbal duel with a trusted friend. Handelman (1977) and others have observed that the play frame and the ritual frame resemble each other.

Bateson’s frame theory of play (and fantasy) informs much of my writing, but Bateson got one thing wrong. His view of play is too romantic, assuming that play is always voluntary, that players exercise the same power in the play frame, and that the motives for entering the play frame are benign. Erving Goffman’s *Frame Analysis* (1972) shows how a socially constructed frame like play can be used to manipulate others (social relations as a confidence game); not everyone in the play frame shares motives nor does everyone have the same power. Sutton-Smith and Kelly-Byrne (1984) add that players can use play to “mask” other motives.

The “fantasy” part of Bateson’s “theory of play and fantasy” actually leads the inquiry into psychoanalytic theory, where the individual’s fantasies and the collective cultural fantasies we find in popular culture interact. Bateson does not mention Freud in his discussion, but he does note that the play frame “implies a special combination of primary and secondary processes” (1972, 185), that is, of both conscious and unconscious thoughts and desires. Two of the best psychoanalysts of childhood and youth—Melanie Klein (1960 [1932]) and Anna Freud (1937, 1965)—see children’s play as the royal road to the child’s unconscious life of the psyche. Klein puts it in a way strikingly similar to Bateson’s point: “in certain strata of [the child’s] mind communication between the conscious and the unconscious is as yet comparatively easy, so that the way back to the unconscious is much simpler to find (Klein 1960 [1932], 30).

Folklorists who are interested in the complicated relationship between the individual’s private fantasies found in dreams and fantasy play and the collective public fantasies acted out in cultural symbolic acts, from rituals to films, television, and videogames, actually are working in this realm mapped out by psychoanalysts, even if the folklorists do not adopt psychoanalytic concepts and language. Another book on my list—Nancy Chodorow’s *The Power of Feelings* (1999)—explores this dynamic from a sociological and psychoanalytic perspective (see below).

PETER L. BERGER AND THOMAS LUCKMANN, 1966, *THE SOCIAL CONSTRUCTION OF REALITY: A TREATISE IN THE SOCIOLOGY OF KNOWLEDGE* (GARDEN CITY, NY: ANCHOR/ DOUBLEDAY)

When faced with a puzzling bit of human behavior, I ask myself “what would Peter Berger say?” as often as I ask that question of Gregory Bateson. I read *The Social Construction of Reality* (SCR) as a new assistant professor in 1971; I knew immediately that this “treatise in the sociology of knowledge” addressed my interest in epistemology, an interest sparked in high school and then ignited the fall of my first year in college when I read William James’s *Pragmatism* (1908). My University of California, Davis, American Studies colleagues and I liked the SCR book so much that for much of the 1970s the “Introduction to American Studies” course for majors consisted of reading that one book, only 189 pages (plus notes), one small piece every week for the quarter, and writing a 750-word essay each week applying the ideas of that section to other cultural events they encountered in everyday life. To this day, former students write to me to say that reading this book was a transformational experience.

The academic year 1975–76 I was the youngest Fellow at the Yale National Humanities Institute where I met another Fellow, Henry Glassie, who that year guided my reading in folklore (Bill Ferris was at Yale then and frequently joined the Institute seminars). Peter Berger, then at Rutgers University, was a monthly guest scholar at the Institute, and since I seemed to be the only one of the twenty Fellows who even knew who Peter Berger was, I got to spend hours talking with him every month. I went on to write and publish articles on Berger’s work (Mechling 1979, 1984, 1985, 1986). I begin with this history of my engagement with Peter Berger’s work to signal how powerful and lasting has been his influence on my own work. I shall refer to the author of SCR as Berger, since I am familiar enough with Berger’s writing style that I know he likely wrote this book, consulting with Luckmann.

It is clear to me that Berger works in the Pragmatic tradition (see Mechling 1986), as I do. Like William James, Berger casts aside the simple correspondence theory of truth and reality. Berger is as interested in everyday knowledge, “commonsense” knowledge, as he is in

more specialized knowledge, all constructed through social interaction. Commonsense knowledge is taken-for-granted, in the “natural attitude” as social theorists would put it. Geertz on “Common Sense as a Cultural System” (1983 [1975]) is worth reading in this regard. The line of Pragmatic thinking from James through Dewey and Berger and Geertz and Goffman and Kenneth Burke (see next section) and Abrahams (1985, 2005) is clear to me.

SCR establishes a vocabulary for understanding “society as objective reality” and “society as subjective reality,” a distinction that runs through many of the books on this list. We create objective reality in social interaction, from small institutions like families to larger ones. Public knowledge in an institution becomes “sedimented” as “tradition” (1966, 67), a familiar idea to folklorists. The author adopts role theory, which also should be familiar to folklorists. When the author turns to “the internalization of reality,” the role of the small group, starting with the family but then in larger circles of small friendship groups, becomes clear. The family is the site of primary socialization, a foundation on which secondary socialization in friendship groups and school and youth groups is built.

In considering individual identity, the author posits a personality type that can practice “cool alternation” (1966, 172), moving effortlessly between roles learned and played in different settings, a kind of code-switching. So count Berger and Luckmann among the others (Goffman, Toelken, Wallace, and Sutton-Smith, for example) who insist that people “perform” an identity that can be false and manipulative.

SUSAN BORDO, 1993, *UNBEARABLE WEIGHT: FEMINISM, WESTERN CULTURE, AND THE BODY* (BERKELEY: UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA PRESS) AND 1999, *THE MALE BODY: A NEW LOOK AT MEN IN PUBLIC AND IN PRIVATE* (NEW YORK: MACMILLAN PUBLISHERS)

The specialty dubbed “bodylore” in the study of folklore draws upon a much larger body of interdisciplinary scholarship on how we “think” with and about our bodies. Breaking free from the longstanding mind/body dichotomy, natural scientists, social scientists, and humanists continue to explore the unity of mind and body. One of my favorite

books in this body of body scholarship is Frank Wilson's *The Hand* (1999). A neuroscientist who treats a range of people with damaged hands, Wilson explains how the hand teaches the brain as much as the brain teaches the hand. Folklorists already are familiar, I hope, with Lakoff's and Johnsons's *Metaphors We Live By* (1980), and Mary Douglas's (1970) attention to the body as a condensed symbol of society. Susan Sontag's *Illness as Metaphor* (1978) is in this vein, as is Murphy's (2001) book on "the metaphors men live by." This is a small sample. The focus here is on Bordo.

I do not consider the inclusion of two books for this entry a violation of my single book rule since these two books by Bordo are really two aspects of the same body project—the first on females and the other on males. Her 1993 book *Unbearable Weight* cemented her reputation in the cultural analysis of bodies. She charts what she calls "the empire of images," and she surveys a range of visual images of women in popular culture (film, television, advertising), documenting the history of a normative female body—an impossible norm. Bordo's project is to show how these images harm women, most dangerously in the eating disorders that sometimes kill women, but also in the practice of seeking cosmetic surgery to reproduce on one's own face and body the normative "ideal." If the folklorist chooses not to read the book, I recommend reading the eighteen-page Preface to the tenth anniversary edition of the book (2003) for a concise look at "the postmodern body" and the state of the body problem she wrote about in 1993. Bordo argues that the images of women in the mass media "offer fantasies of safety, self-containment, acceptance, [and] immunity from pain and hurt" (2003, xxi), yet another book on my list that examines the relationship between private and public fantasies, a reason for folklorists to constantly ask what fantasies in public culture show up in the symbolic action we call folklore.

I shall focus here on her 1999 book, largely because I work so much in masculinity studies. The title of the book is *The Male Body* but really it is primarily about the penis as a cultural object and, I should add, about the gaze at the penis as a cultural practice. She opens the book with a long prologue titled "My Father's Body" (1999, 3–11), and she soon offers a chapter named "Hard and Soft," where she writes "[w]e live in a culture that encourages men to think of themselves as their penises" (1999, 36). She affirms that both bi-

ology and culture are relevant in thinking about bodies (1999, 39). She pursues the meaning of hard bodies and the paradox of the hard and soft penis through several genres, from art and photography to popular culture genres such as advertising, film, and television. Like other cultural historians (e.g., Jeffords 1994), Bordo sees the male body as a condensed symbol of the society, a bounded system—as Douglas (1966) would say—with an inside and an outside and the fear of invasion. The language of “soft versus hard” permeates political discourse, from international relations to domestic politics.

Bordo notes that American boys are socialized in a public culture (but also in most private families) that values strong, hard bodies in males. Many boys are ashamed of their weak, soft bodies and work to value muscles and strength (1999, 56–57), suffering “muscle dysphoria” in parallel with female anorexia (1999, 221). Another part of the body the male does not want soft is the penis, and Bordo explores in her chapter “What is a Phallus?” the contrast between the phallus as a cultural symbol of masculine strength and patriarchal authority, on the one hand, and the actual male organ, which often does not “measure up” to the phallus as “an impossible ideal,” on the other (1999, 95).

Those folklorists devoted to charting the linkages between folklore and mass-mediated, popular culture will appreciate Bordo’s chapters on “public images” of the male body found in 1950s Hollywood films, the emergence of gay male bodies and stories in the 1960s, the display of the ideal male body in print and electronic advertising (mainly underwear and male beauty products), and more.

If Bordo’s cultural analysis of male bodies seems far from what interests and assists folklorists, I can point to what is useful to me as a scholar who has written a lot about masculinity, and in particular masculinity as constructed, maintained, and repaired (if necessary) in the male friendship group, a folk group. The key insight is that males create bonds and communicate thoughts and emotions in the male friendship group far more often with their bodies than with their words. This insight helped me understand the meanings of the organized games and spontaneous play I observed over two decades of studying a California Boy Scout troop at their summer encampment high in the Sierra Nevada (Mechling 2001), and then in my analysis of the ways male warriors use their bodies to manage relationships in

their friendship groups (Mechling 2021; Wallis and Mechling 2019). Many folklorists are working in the area of bodylore without realizing it.

KENNETH E. BOULDING, 1956, *THE IMAGE: KNOWLEDGE IN LIFE AND SOCIETY* (ANN ARBOR, MI: UNIVERSITY OF MICHIGAN PRESS)

I easily could have listed *Plans and the Structure of Behavior* (Miller, Galanter, and Pribram 2013 [1960]) and *Culture and Personality* (Wallace 1970 [1961]) as books I turn to often, but instead I include Boulding's book, which provides so many ideas to the other two. I see William James's *Pragmatism* in all of those books, as they provide ideas and a language for understanding the individual mind and how it guides choices of behavior, and in this regard I also see connections between Boulding's book and the books by Berger and Luckmann and Chodorow and Sapolsky on this list. Each employs a slightly different language to describe the relation between individual, subjective knowledge (ideas and impulses and emotions), and behavior in the external world of other people, objects, and public events. Boulding uses the word "image" to name the internal "knowledge" the individual possesses and draws upon for action.

Boulding begins his book with a few fundamental "propositions," the first of which is "behavior depends on the image" (1956, 6). Just as James would put it, the "image is built up as a result of all past experience of the possessor of the image" (1956, 6). His second proposition, the "meaning of a message is the change which it produces in the image" (1956, 7), reflects his fairly new (in 1956) embrace of cybernetics, which interested Bateson so much (see above). In cybernetics and in the social, behavioral science adaptations of those ideas, meaning is created only in difference. Images do change. Boulding sounds like James when he avers that "there are no such things as 'facts'...only messages filtered through a changeable value system" (1956, 14).

At this point, Boulding stumbles into an error, I think. He correctly makes the relationship between the individual's private image and the public image (from individual conversations to grand cultural discourses) the focus of his laying out the idea of images, but he seems to

think that every individual exposed to the public image incorporates those images into her private image. Wallace (1970 [1961]) makes an important correction to this assumption of shared images. Wallace's model of the relationship between culture and individual personality posits that for society to work, the actors do not need to share cognitive maps (images), which would be impossible in a complex culture. All the actors need to share is complementary cognitive maps. Social interaction and larger organizations of society can "work" so long as people act "as if" they share private images, even if that is not true. Humans (like many animals) do learn to read external cues about the other's internal thoughts and emotions, but these are just guesses that can be wrong. Wallace's point that culture is not about the replication of uniformity but instead is about the organization of diversity makes the folklorist rethink the accepted view that in folk groups the actors share "high context" (restricted communication)—that sense of sharing is not necessary, as Toelken points out in his article on the superstitions of Northwest fishermen (1985).

Boulding (like Bateson) draws upon ideas from cybernetics (1956, 20–21) to understand the exchange of messages in all sorts of "organizations" (organized systems), from simple cells to forests to large groups to whole societies. The communication patterns within folk groups have the same patterns as other systems; the challenge is to find (as Bateson puts it) "the pattern which connects." A few folklorists have paid systematic attention to the feature of feedback in the symbolic actions we call folk performances, like the role of an interruption when someone is telling a story, for example (Georges 1981).

Boulding does not discount the unconscious and subconscious elements in an individual's private image (1956, 52–54). The public image circulating in a society shows up in all forms of communication, from simple conversations between two people to large-scale narratives in the mass media. Boulding says that "every public image begins in the mind of some single individual and only becomes public as it is transmitted and shared" (1956, 64). The individual incorporates some of the public image into her private image, though the incorporation is not always conscious. Chodorow (see below) uses psychoanalytic language to discuss the individual's projection of her private reality into the public sphere, possibly for others to absorb into their personal image, while she introjects elements of the public

sphere into her private world. Some folklorists write about the travel of public folk images to the mass-media of television, film, and videogames, but most of those folklorists write about the link in the other direction, from images in the folk group back into the individual's image. Those who write about popular culture are familiar with the ways those media "poach" ideas and images from folklore.

Boulding notes that public images produce a "transcript," a "record in more or less permanent form which can be handed down from generation to generation" (1956, 64). A system of public transcripts becomes a "map" of shared knowledge, an idea that likely led Wallace to write about cognitive maps and non-sharing. Folk traditions carry such "transcripts." Boulding sustains his model of private and public images as he continues with chapters on "economic life," the political process, and American history (e.g., the image of "Manifest Destiny" and other cultural myths).

KENNETH BURKE, 1945, *A GRAMMAR OF MOTIVES* (BERKELEY: UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA PRESS)

I owe to Elizabeth Walker Mechling, my wife and coauthor of several essays in rhetorical criticism, my familiarity with Burke's work, and in particular his book *A Grammar of Motives* (GoM). In graduate school in Speech Communication (rhetoric), she had a teacher well-versed in Burke's method "dramatism" and its application to a range of symbolic acts. In the course of our writing together, I came to appreciate Burke's explicit connection to the Pragmatism of James and Dewey. Later, I saw how much Roger Abrahams drew from Burke in his work on the "poetics of everyday life" (2005). Elizabeth and I appreciate the relevance of rhetorical theory to folklore and of folklore studies to rhetorical criticism, though we are in a minority in both scholarly communities.

The opening sentence of GoM announces a goal familiar to folklorists. "What is involved," asks Burke, "when we say what people are doing and why they are doing it?" (1945, xv). He then introduces his "pentad," five key terms in his method: Act, Scene, Agent, Agency, Purpose. The most important of these is Purpose, or Motive. Any "complete statement about motives will offer some kind of answers

to these five questions: what was done (act), when or where it was done (scene), who did it (agent), how he did it (agency), and why (purpose)” (1945, xv).

I immediately began to see the pentad as folklorists might pose the questions. “Who performed what traditional symbolic act, in what context (time and place), how, for what audience, and why?” I added a sixth question—“what was the outcome?”—because I think we need to consider the failures of folklore performances (Mechling 1991). Note that all of these elements of the symbolic act can be observed with the important exception of motive. We must infer motive from everything else we know about the actor, even if the actor offers a motive (people lie and there also are unconscious motives for most acts). The method, as Geertz says, is “clinical inference.”

NANCY J. CHODOROW, 1999, *THE POWER OF FEELINGS: PERSONAL MEANING IN PSYCHOANALYSIS, GENDER, AND CULTURE* (NEW HAVEN, CT: YALE UNIVERSITY PRESS)

My first acquaintance with the work of Nancy Chodorow was back in the very early 1980s when I read *The Reproduction of Mothering* (1979), a book drawing on both her sociological expertise and her training in psychoanalysis, and I saw immediately its usefulness for the analysis of the social construction of masculinity in young people, a topic I was immersed in then, having been doing fieldwork with the Boy Scout troop since 1976. During that time I was reading a lot of psychoanalytic literature by feminist scholars, always keeping in mind what those books had to say about masculinity. The 1970s was a moment when feminist scholars turned their tools from the analysis of women to the analysis of men, just in time for my extended work on the Boy Scouts.

I returned to Chodorow recently when I began reading widely in the scientific literature on emotions (the unconscious biology) and accompanying feelings (the conscious experience triggered by the emotion), fed mainly by Sutton-Smith’s argument that play and games evoke secondary emotions in order to keep primary emotions under control (2017). Moreover, I had been reading much on primatology, a field interested in the ways nonhuman primates communicate

their emotions without language. When Chodorow's 1999 book came along, I was ready.

The first sentence of the Introduction reads "[t]his book is a contribution to our understanding of individual subjectivity" (1999, 1). That sentence should suggest to folklorists why they should pay attention to Chodorow. When folklorists pay attention to the individual, it is usually the performer of a tradition, but it is always seen in the context of the group. Chodorow is saying something different. She brings to her work both the "sociological eye and the psychoanalytic ear" (Chodorow 2020), which is to say she sees the meaning of any symbolic act as drawing both from inner reality (emotions, thoughts) and external reality, as the individual projects meanings out into the public world and introjects public meanings into her private world. "Experienced meaning," she writes, "combines the individually idiosyncratic and the cultural, [and] is situated and emergent in particular encounters and particular psychic moments for the individual" (1999, 2).

Individuals have "unconscious fantasies" the psyche taps to reduce anxieties and fears (1999, 13), and these fantasies encounter public fantasies (group expressions acted out in symbolic behavior, but also in popular culture). In the case of gender, for example, "an individual, personal creation and a projective emotional and fantasy animation of cultural categories create the meaning of gender and gender identity for any individual" (1999, 69). Mapping the projection of the individual's fantasy into the public realm (in a friendship group, for example) and the introjection of public fantasies into the private psyche would force the folklorist to pay more particular attention to the cultural fantasies consumed by the individual.

This insight that the individual's particular experience of culture means that "different people in a culture might experience cultural meanings in different ways" (1999, 147) echoes the views above (e.g., Boulding, also Wallace) that people do not "share culture" as internal maps for navigating cultural scenes. Rather, individuals "share" a range of public fantasies, some of which they internalize and some of which they do not.

Chodorow draws our attention to emotions (the unconscious biological state) and feelings (the conscious experience triggered by the emotion) as primary materials for both projection and introjection.

She seeks to describe an “anthropology of self and feelings” (1999, 131), allying herself with the “anthropology of experience” pursued by Victor Turner and Edward Bruner (1986).

MARY DOUGLAS, 1966, *PURITY AND DANGER: AN ANALYSIS OF THE CONCEPTS OF POLLUTION AND TABOO* (LONDON: ROUTLEDGE AND KEGAN PAUL)

I am unsure whether I read this Douglas book or Barbara Babcock-Abrahams’s article “Why Frogs are Good to Think and Dirt is Good to Reflect On” (1975) first, but they both played a role in giving me an interpretive handle on the importance of symbolic “dirt,” matter out of place, in so much of the symbolic behavior we call folklore. This book links bodylore and ritual, but also play. Douglas’s *Natural Symbols* (1973) is another good candidate for this list, but I think *Purity and Danger* leads us to richer insights into the power of liminal things and the drive in the human psyche to resolve the ambiguity of liminal things (and experiences).

ANNA FREUD, 1937 [2018], *THE EGO AND THE MECHANISM OF DEFENCE* (LONDON: HOGARTH PRESS AND ROUTLEDGE)

This is the oldest book on my list, and I certainly could have pointed here to any of her father’s books—most likely *The Interpretation of Dreams* (1965 [1905]), the book familiar to folklorists if they entertain psychoanalytic interpretations of folklore and mythology at all. Instead, I recommend this book by Freud’s daughter for its elaboration of her father’s ideas about the defense mechanisms the ego deploys in its management of the demands of the id and the unconscious “repressed instinctual impulses, affects, and fantasies” (1937 [2018], 3) that rise to the surface, threatening to disturb everyday life. Whereas the ego operates on the reality principle, in the id the “primary process prevails,” the drive to derive pleasure (1937 [2018], 7). In this book, Anna Freud fleshes out her father’s mention of defense mechanisms with a catalogue of defense mechanisms the ego draws upon to keep disturbing instincts at bay, primarily sexual and aggressive instincts, both of which, if expressed openly, can damage the

cohesiveness of the group.

Reading Anna's book made me realize that we might consider all of the symbolic acts we call folklore defense mechanisms meant to control unwanted and destructive impulses and thoughts. That is a bold claim, but the more I thought about it, the more I could see in a number of examples of folklore performances the usefulness of a single defense mechanism or more than one in concert with the ego's management of the id. "When repudiating the claims of instinct," writes Anna, the ego must address the emotions and feelings (the affects) associated with those instinctual impulses (1937 [2018], 32). "Love, longing, jealousy, mortification, pain, and mourning" accompany sexual impulses while "hatred, anger, and rage" accompany aggressive impulses (1937 [2018], 32). It is worth entertaining the idea that all of the traditional symbolic acts we call folklore are manifestations of defense mechanisms in response to sexual and/or aggressive impulses driven by the id. This view reminds me of Roger Abrahams's (1968) point that so many short form folk performances function to allay social or psychological anxiety (even fear).

Brian Sutton-Smith makes a similar claim when he shows how the secondary emotions on display in games appear to keep primary emotions under control (2017), which led me to claim that perhaps a key function of all folklore is to make our emotions visible to others and to ourselves (Mechling 2019). In fact, Anna cites Melanie Klein's play technique in the psychoanalysis of children as the most useful access point to the unconscious of the child (1937 [2018], 38).

Anna discusses nine defense mechanisms and examines actual case studies of hers and others, focusing particularly on children's fantasies (dreams, stories, and play) as examples of defense mechanisms against sexual and aggressive thoughts and impulses. In my own work I have found a few of the mechanisms (repression, reaction formation, projection, introjection, reversal) very useful in puzzling out the meanings of observable symbolic behavior, such as my analysis of the social masochism involved in male hazing (Mechling 2021).

Of special interest to those who study the folklore of children and adolescents are Anna's chapters on the role of defense mechanisms in puberty, at a moment when the sexual and aggressive instincts are so much more powerful than the still-developing ego (1937 [2018], 137–172). She uses the word "dread" to describe the pubescent's re-

sponse to the strength of the sexual and aggressive instincts, an apt descriptor (1937 [2018], 166).

The reader should not assume that Anna's analysis of defense mechanisms applies only to children and adolescents. The hormones of puberty and adolescence certainly create new and dreadful instincts during a period of life when the pleasure drives of the amygdala far outrun the slowly developing frontal cortex in the brain (see Sapolsky, below). At the same time, trying defenses against those instincts, the young person makes new attachments and explores friendships, which both displace libidinal energies and provide new objects of sexual fantasy. The challenges of close friendships for adults resemble the challenges in youth, as men and women must navigate the complex feelings of close friendships, both opposite sex and same sex.

BARBARA G. MYERHOFF, 1979, *NUMBER OUR DAYS* (NEW YORK: DUTTON)

I could have chosen any of the very fine books and essays by Myerhoff on ritual (e.g., *Peyote Hunt*, 1974), but I very much admire *Number Our Days* as an example of reflexive ethnography, as she turns her interpretive skills back on herself, and she is very frank about her feelings and motives for studying a community of Jewish older people at a Jewish senior center in Los Angeles. She anticipates that she will be an "old Jewish woman" someday (alas, she died much too young).

Her description of the center and its members is both touching and funny. She admits that sometimes she does not like these people, with their petty arguments and their occasional selfishness. She feels guilty expressing that occasional dislike; I have encountered only one other ethnographer who admits he does not like his informant.

Myerhoff's narrative strategies impress me so much I adopted a specific strategy she employs in her text for my 2001 book *On My Honor: Boys Scouts and the Making of American Youth*. Myerhoff decides she needs to learn Yiddish to understand all the conversations she was witnessing at the center, so she approaches Schmuel, a Jewish man about the same age as those at the Center but who is

disdainful of those folks. He gives Myerhoff lessons in Yiddish, but he is also her sounding board for what she is seeing and hearing as she struggles to make interpretive sense of it all. She often explains to Schmuel clearly and without jargon whatever anthropological theory or idea she is trying out in order to understand the interpersonal dynamics at the center, and Schmuel offers his own interpretations. The narrative strategy I admire here is Myerhoff's "smuggling" anthropological theory and ideas into the book by using them in her conversations with Schmuel.

I used the book in both the "American Folklore and Folklife" and the "Religion in American Lives" courses I taught both as large lecture courses and as honors seminars for first-year students. In these courses, I asked the students "do you think Schmuel is a real person?" Their eyes opened in surprise, disbelief, and maybe a bit of panic. "What if Myerhoff invents the character of Schmuel in order to add some theory and ideas into the book?" I continued. "And does it matter?"

Of course, I knew that I was challenging their assumption that a teacher would not assign a book with such a "trick" in the narrative. Can't one trust a book's narrative? Sure, there are novels and memoirs that play with the reader's trust (e.g., John Crawford's 2005 Iraq war memoir *The Last True Story I will Ever Tell*), but *Number Our Days* is nonfiction. What else are you not telling us, Professor Mechling?

That leads to what I consider a fruitful discussion about writing, narrative devices, and more. After 2001, I would tell students that I did something like that in my Boy Scout book. I admit at the outset that my narrative of a two weeks' summer encampment by a California troop high in the Sierra Nevada is a composite of many things I observed over twenty years of camping with the troop. The book is a fiction, in that sense, something "made up," but I also assure the reader that everything in the book is "true."

Myerhoff's book inspired me to use the staff campfire conversation after the boys bedded down to do my own "smuggling" into the book ideas from the social sciences and psychoanalysis through conversations with the other adult men at camp, trying out interpretations for that audience, who pretty much bought everything except the psychoanalytic interpretations (not surprising).

What reading *Number Our Days* made me realize is that well-writ-

ten fiction and well-written ethnography are not much different. Some fiction reads like good ethnography; I would say that Stephen King's novella *The Body* (1982), the basis for the 1986 film *Stand By Me*, is the best ethnography of the friendship group of twelve-year-old boys I have read. Brian Sutton-Smith, the developmental psychologist and folklorist of the lives of children and adolescents, began his career writing novels about a friendship group of boys in his hometown in New Zealand (Sutton-Smith 1950, 1961, 1976). The American Folklore Society even has a "Creative Writing and Storytelling" Section.

What is gained or lost if we read *Number Our Days* as a novel rather than a "true" ethnography? Some folklorists will chafe at that question, holding tight to the notion that folkloristics is "scientific," with no room for fiction. Geertz (1973) insists that interpretive anthropology (including folklore studies, I would say) is scientific, but it is an inductive rather than a deductive science, more like "clinical inference" in medicine than anything else. The best novelists and short story writers and playwrights approach human experience much like the clinical diagnostician, observing human behavior and making up a story to make best sense of that behavior. Creative writing is not science, but its observation of the human condition can be as insightful as the best writing by anthropologists, sociologists, folklorists, historians, and psychologists.

To return to the question, does it matter if Schmucl is real or not? No.

ROBERT SAPOLSKY, 2018, *BEHAVE: THE BIOLOGY OF HUMANS AT OUR BEST AND WORST* (NEW YORK: PENGUIN BOOKS)

It takes a special kind of nerve to recommend that folklorists read this 790-page book by a neuroscientist who also has expertise in primatology, two fields which, in my view, offer the most interesting ideas to folklorists for understanding the symbolic behavior we call folklore. I could have recommended reading some key neuroscientists who discuss the brain and emotions (e.g., Damasio 2000; LeDoux 1996) and some key primatologists who examine what the study of primates teaches us about human empathy (e.g., de Waal 2009), but Sapolsky's dual expertise provides a comprehensive and readable introduction to

current understanding of the primate brain (we are primates too) and behavior.

Around 2019 or so, a few folklorists who were crossing disciplinary lines to see what the natural sciences might contribute to folkloristics formed the “Science and Folklore” interest section of the American Folklore Society as a gathering place for folklorists interested in the approach and any “fellow travelers” from science. Some folklorists, for example, see in neuroscience (especially the science of the brain and the mind) possible clues pertaining to how people form and cling to false belief (Shermer 2011). Some look to technological advances in brain science for insights into what is happening in the brain when we tell or hear stories (Armstrong 2020). Brandon Barker and Claiborne Rice consult the cognitive sciences in order to understand the *Folk Illusions* (2019) they find in children’s play. I see Sapolsky’s book as crucial in the folklorists’ exploration of the ways biology and culture, nature and nurture, interact in the creation of symbolic acts we call folklore. I would be a fool to try to summarize the book in one thousand words, but here are some important highlights for folklorists.

Sapolsky begins with the brain, of course, and early in the book he makes clear the puzzle of human aggression and violence, but (as the subtitle of his book avers) he is also interested in human behavior at its best. He asks what the biological bases of “cooperation, affiliation, reconciliation, empathy, and altruism” are (2018, 3). These are all important behaviors to consider in the study of folklore. His interest in aggression echoes the point made by Anna Freud and others that the two sorts of thoughts and impulses arising in youth and continuing throughout life are sex and aggression, and Sapolsky tells us that “both sex and aggression activate the sympathetic nervous system” (2018, 43).

As a primatologist, Sapolsky reminds us that we humans are animals, and that the line between us and other primates is not neat (see Mechling 2023 on some of this history). Moreover, the human brain is extremely malleable; our embodied experiences teach the brain as much as the brain teaches our bodies. Everyday experiences (folklore) add to the flexibility of the brain.

As a scholar who studies the folklore of children and adolescents, I have found very useful the neurologist’s point that the amygdala and

the entire limbic system of which it is a central organ are crucial to the impulses leading to aggression and sexual behavior. The psychoanalyst would say the limbic system operates from the pleasure principle, whereas the prefrontal cortex provides rational control (the reality principle) of the impulses. The problem is that the amygdala matures far faster in the brain than does the frontal cortex (as late as age twenty-four or so), leading adolescents into impulsive and risky behavior.

Sapolsky warns against a “false dichotomy” between cognition and emotion (2018, 54), a key point made by Chodorow and others. Sapolsky’s experience as a primatologist doubtless leads to his attention to the communication of emotion between actors, as other primates have only their bodies to communicate mood and emotions—crucial for group bonding and avoiding conflict. We humans also do a lot of communication of moods and emotions with our bodies, and my ethnographic work with adolescent boys affirms the importance of body signals among a male friendship group that does not talk much about their moods and emotions.

In an earlier book *The Trouble With Testosterone* (1997), Sapolsky makes the detailed case that human aggression and violence have both biological and social roots (chimps can be quite aggressive and violent). He picks up that argument in *Behave*, challenging the popular notion that increased testosterone increases aggression. In fact, he argues that testosterone “promotes prosociality in the right setting” (2018, 107). Testosterone, along with other hormones like oxytocin (the “love hormone”), can drive bonding and empathy (see de Waal 2009 on empathy in chimps). Significantly, both physical aggression and sex flood the brain with the same cocktail of hormones.

Sapolsky joins others on this list of essential books in seeing play as a rich interaction site for learning a range of solitary and social behaviors necessary for peaceful bonding in the family and in larger groups. Play is as important in human development as it is in other primates (recall that Bateson arrived at his frame theory of play and fantasy while watching mammals play at the zoo). Sapolsky also spotlights altruism and empathy as emotion-based behaviors crucial to avoiding violence (2018, 521–541).

I have had to skip over much of what Sapolsky has to say, but I leave the reader with this claim. The “new frontier” for folklorists is

and should be an understanding of the brain, along with its neurology and endocrinology, toward analysis of the symbolic acts we call folklore. Sapolsky's *Behave* is a good place to start.

HERE ENDETH THE LESSON

In the Episcopalian *Book of Common Prayer*, this phrase follows public readings from the Bible in a service. That seems an appropriate phrase to conclude the reading assignments I have given my fellow folklorists.

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