

Reviews

Pauline Greenhill and Diane Tye, eds. *Undisciplined Women. Tradition and Culture in Canada*. Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1997. 306 pp. ISBN0-7735-1614-x (bound), 0-7735-1615-8 (paperback)

This is a truly important folklore anthology for several reasons. As it claims to do, it not only brings to light an interesting cross-section of folklore by women, a group marginalized in previous anthologies, but also challenges the way folklore is done. The authors unpack how the exclusions of women as subjects relate to the very constitution of the discipline (not just folklore but also Canadian Studies and Women's Studies). Their essays reveal the gate-keeping that regulates how amateur and professional, public and private, traditional and modern, original and transformed are defined and valued. The title, risky both in its implications of excess and its oppositionality, alludes to these very important reflexive tasks. In my view, the book is important for an additional reason: it is one of the few anthologies where the evidence of true collaboration is pervasive, contributing to the coherence and depth of the individual essays. The editors and authors have found various ways to put their voices in dialogue, by exchanging and commenting on one another's papers, and by using introductions and footnotes to cross-reference in an extremely effective manner. The introductions to each section and to the volume as a whole are beautifully crafted by Greenhill and Tye. Growing out of the 1991 meeting of the Folklore Studies Association of Canada and the American folklore society, the group that prepared this volume constituted itself as the Undisciplined women Collective. This book seems to embody some of the energy of friendship as well as professional interaction.

The cover art, replicating a painting by Ukrainian Canadian artist Nataalka Husar, is aptly chosen. On one hand, it looks anything but "undisciplined," depicting two rather staid Ukrainian women (one seemingly an older version of the other) clad in flowered cotton dresses, reading to sell tickets for the \$5 dinner advertised on a hand-written sign. The ordinariness is confused, however, by a traditionally costumed young woman – apparently a dancer, perhaps ready to entertain the diners – painted upside down in the top right corner. The implications can be read in various ways. Are we being told that the commodification of folklore upends its meaning, subverts its power? Or is this a depiction of a ritual inversion that confirms the rules of everyday life by the breaking of those rules in controlled formal performance situations? Who is modern here: the tradition clad youth, the middle aged woman connected to "tradition" by the colour of her dress, matching that of the young girl, or the rather independently dressed oldest woman? What are we being told about cultural continuity across generations? The image relates to the book it frames by acknowledging the wholeness of lifeways, some marked as "authentic" folklore and some not so marked, and by insisting on the validity of different generations' experiences and viewpoints.

The tripartite structure of the book clusters around three types of "indiscipline" (a term seemingly used interchangeably with "undiscipline"). The first group of essays concerns collectors and representers of traditional and popular culture. The second group examines representations of women, with a view to "open[ing] our exploration of cultural constructions and perceptions of women to a range of possibilities and valences"

(p. xii). The third group looks at women's resistance to the social constraints exposed in the first two sections, through forms of their expressive cultures ranging from the formal (ballads, quilts), to the informal (conversation).

In section one, Laurel Doucette offers a critique of the founding paradigms of folklore studies, particularly romantic nationalism, and suggests what a feminist framework – one she sees as more inclusive – might look like as an alternative. Labelle's deescription of Catherine Jolicoeur and Edith Fowke's candid auto-reflection provide accounts of two very different "professional" folklorists, each "old school" in some respects and marginalized in various ways, but also distinctly individual and political (even iconoclastic in Fowke's case) in their work. Tye, on the other hand, examines the social formations and contingencies that shaped the work of Jean Heffernan, a Springhill, Nova Scotia commentator/historian who one might regard as a folklorist without the markers of legitimation. It is here that we really begin to think about the constitution of the discipline, about its emphases on authenticity (something that did not concern Heffernan) and objectivity. Tye's analysis challenges the highly influential depiction of Ian McKay of Nova Scotia as "anti-modernist." The last paper in section one, St. Peter's appraisal of the political implications of using the non-native author Anne Cameron's widely acclaimed book *Copper women* as a women's studies text, challenges us to think about voice, appropriation, and the complex, politically nuanced responsibilities with which teachers are charged, either knowingly or naively. Hence, we see folklorists at work in multiple dimensions, as community members, academic scholars, and also teachers, and are made aware that none of these positions can be discounted if we seek a deeper understanding of how folklore is constructed as a praxis in Canada.

Most of the essays on the representation of women in section two raise, in one way or another, the difficult issue of how symbolic cultural forms relate to actual lived experience. The topic is engaged with regard to Newfoundland stories about violence against witches (Rieti), to debates about the use of a controversial female image – the adoption of the mythic *fjalkona* as a symbol for Icelandic Canadians in Manitoba (Brydon), - to apparent homologies between changing Acadian dance forms and social relations in Cheticamp (Le Blanc). Symbolic and real are also related through the range of interpretive responses to ballad texts about cross-dressing women – some that challenge heterosexist stances (Greenhill), and to various frameworks for interpreting the social significance of male transvestitism at mock weddings on the prairies (Taft). Similarly Ristock examines the imagery of lesbians in female buddy movies as "killer dykes" in recent psychofemme film, problematizing issues of representation in her own work on abusive lesbian relationships, while Labrie explores cross-media narratives of power negotiations in both folk tales and movies. I find that most powerful of these studies are the ones that allow for different perspectives, that reveal culture not as a *priori* or fixed but fluid and contingent, that reveal the scholar's own role in the process of negotiating meaning. Rieti, Brydon, Greenhill, Taft and Ristock manage these tasks commendably.

Finally, the essays in part three explore women who actively "transform their lives and traditions." Here, "folklore" encompasses things that might be thought of as "traditional" such as quilt-making or folk tales, as well as experiences that are not so easily defined or objectified such as the language of preachers and taxi drivers or informal conversation. Women's voices are not essentialized or narrowly defined but revealed as highly variable. Furthermore, in every case study in this section, we see

women refusing to allow their lives and work to be cast as traditional or modern, public or private, socially compliant or resistant. They/we are all these things. Susan Shantz describes Frances Mateychuk's sturdy fortrel quilts, objects that initially challenged her own aesthetic formed in Mennonite quilt-making circles. She insists that we do not separate the objects from the process, challenging stereotypes of quilt-making as women-only activity, insisting on both private and public dimension, and on social relations as integral to the artistic enterprise. While quilts might be thought of as a conventional folkloric topic, however, clothing is less often treated as such, unless it is marked as "special" clothing. Mathieu's analysis of Quebec women's preferences in clothing for both themselves and their families, resists such easy divisions between the authentic and the everyday. Grant's analysis of miracle lore, stories of healing circulating among a group of Anglican women who seek to emphasize the therapeutic potential of belief, similarly sits on the boundary between socially framed forms of expressive culture and everyday experience. Like the analysts of tall tales, she enjoys the extraordinary but insists on grounding the experience in relation to medical and psychiatric practice, dissolving the boundaries that often obscure understanding of such phenomena. Boyd reports on interviews with three female taxi drivers in Newfoundland, explaining such things as labelling practices, short-hand communication forms, and strategies they use to work successfully, resist sexism, and retain agency in a male-dominated profession. A few essays later we see rather similar sorts of discourse analysis in Klassen's account of a Mennonite preacher who finds a way to rationalize her atypical role in a male-dominated world. The Inuit women's autobiographies described by McGrath seem, at first, to conform more to cultural proscriptions on women's self-presentation. But, McGrath's contribution is, in my view, to insist on cultural embedded restrictions within which Inuit women's work must operate and with which they must negotiate. The ways in which Newfoundland women carve out time for informal conversation is studied by Desplanques in an essay that allows us to view what seems to be mundane experience as socially powerful. Finally, Stone, Jenoff and Gordon examine how contemporary storytellers work performatively with conventional tales, sometimes transforming the content, sometimes nuancing the presentation, in order to raise questions about subjectivity and female agency.

I loved reading this book from cover to cover. I especially loved articles that refused simple truth claims, insisting on reporting multiple interpretations (Greenhill, Shantz, Rieti, Brydon). I loved those that blurred the boundaries of disciplines and took responsibility for the explanations that scholars offer from perspectives that seem rather remote from folklore (ritual theory in the case of Taft or psychiatry/medecine in the case of Grant). And I loved the essays that allowed for controversy (as Brydon did, for instance), that represented difficult negotiations in communities and with researchers, negotiations that demonstrate how every utterance including our own has consequences.

But since reviewers are expected to step back from their enthusiasms, I also considered the place this volume now occupies in folklore study in Canada. I observe that about three quarters of the studies are still located in rural areas, that among the technologies of presentation considered by these scholars, only two essays allow for the extensive impact of electronic media, and that we continue to know more about certain parts of the country than others (25% of the essays are Newfoundland based, no doubt due to the strong folklore studies training at Memorial University). Images are curiously sparse. Is the rooting of Folklore in English departments still orienting us to language? The range of cultural diversity represented in these essays is still (necessarily) partial

and limited. In fact, except where First Nations cultures are concerned, ethnicity is curiously under-emphasized in these studies. These observations are not intended as criticism of this book or these scholars, but rather as a diagnostic about the state of folklore studies in Canada. Even in "undiscipline" there seems to be a lot of discipline in our midst. What is needed, in my view is a rather widespread acceptance of the importance of issues raised in this anthology in order to carry forward the significant work of this ground-breaking scholarly collective. Meanwhile, buy this book for everyone you love and those you don't.

Beverley Diamond