My (Re)Turn to Narrative

My first serious research project as a folklorist was an attempt to understand the constructed spaces of Urban Appalachians. I received a lot of nice attention for it, and Erika Brady, who was then editing *Southern Folklore*, shepherded it steadily through to publication. For my dissertation, however, I focused on a kind of sociolinguistic study or oral histories. My original plan had been to return to Louisiana to interview black and white men and women who had worked in the sugar cane industry. I was curious to see who remembered what and how. I couldn't, at the time, afford the project, and I knew of no funding agency interested in such work.

I took the basic idea, however, and re-focused my efforts on a set of speech communities in Bloomington, Indiana. I had, thanks to a friend, come across a murder that had taken place in 1946 that had galvanized the town and thus had become a kind of legend among middle-aged speakers and, as I discovered, a reference point for older speakers. The project was interesting to me for a number of reasons:

- it took place among members of the Bloomington community who had no direct connection to the university itself, which as anyone who has visited the area knows, dominates the town in the present;
- the speech communities reflected by the individuals I found were not unified, but they were related in ways that I could objectively describe;
- the two speech communities, one black and one white, had been themselves cohesive in the past by all accounts, though they were in the present fragmented with the passing of various members;

While the murder was my starting point, I never really got around to a fine-grained analysis of the different accounts. For one, my ability as a white male researcher to access the full range of accounts was stymied by social stigmas experienced long ago but still painful in the present. That is, the older black men who would speak with me did not want to talk about the incident, pointing, indirectly through the other stories they told, to the racism that frightened them during the period. Older black women felt more free, sense the murder revealed sexual peccadilloes in the white community. Those peccadilloes constrained older white women in their discussion and were transformed into a rape scene by older white men.

Fascinating stuff, and I will write about it one day, but what grabbed my attention in the moment was the range of materials that I gathered that were not in the expected *discursive mode*.[1] That is, all the literature about oral history and life stories focused on narrative, usually grand narratives of the kind one only encounters from avowed, and revered, tellers in a community.

And yet, and yet, as I listened to hours upon hours of tape on my Sony Walkman D3 (now fondly remembered), I found myself with a diverse collection of relatively small narratives and a whole lot of material which was decidedly not narrative in nature. Often it was what I came to call *oral exposition*, though I never really offered a thorough definition of that term. That is, I had a whole lot of discourse that, if it seemed narrative in nature, it was because the person was walking me through a neighborhood or landscape that had once existed and they used the walk as a way to tour a lost world. It is a highly effective technique, of course (and one I encourage inter-

viewers to use as a kind of memory prompt) but the narratives that are produced are not really stories so much as geographies: "This was here. That was there." in the form of "And then, if you kept on going down Third Street you'd get to old man McCullough's store."

The kind of analysis resulted in very discrete texts that were, I now understand, marked up:

> *We can, however, make some distinctions between durations, sorting out lines and clauses by how long a situation lasted, allowing us, as Jean Ellis Robertson notes to determine "what durations events were that people recall in chronological order or else not recall as a chronology" (1983:47). Such a scheme might also reveal whether people recall events of a fairly short duration or enduring situations. Robertson suggests the following time-scale index:*
>
> *Table 3.1: Time-Scale (D=duration)*
> *D0 – Period of time lasting up to a minute*
> *D1 – Period of time greater than a minute and up to an hour*
> *D2 – Period of time greater than an hour and up to a day*
> *D3 – Period of time greater than a day and up to a week*
> *D4 – Period of time greater than a week and up to a month*
> *D5 – Period of time greater than a month and up to a year*
> *D6 – Period of time greater than a year and up to a decade*
> *D7 – Period of time greater than a decade*
>
> *If we return to assign the following values to each of the lines: our "first example where Hugh Goble describes his work as an excavator, we can assign the following values to each of the lines:*
>
> *(D7) He was in the excavating business,*
> *(D2) so he called me to come up and showed me the job.*
> *(D6) And we dug house basements.*
> *(D6) And that was when they were remodeling a lot filling stations,*
> *(D6) making them super service and that sort of thing,*
> *(D0) so I said, yeah, I'll take it.*
> *(D6) So I worked there about two years and a half.*
> *(D2) And then we came back to Bloomington.*
> *(D6) At that time, my brother-in-law—*
> *he's passed away—*
> *but at that time he owned a furniture store, United furniture.*

At the time, I had no idea that people were writing about things like *TimeML*. I knew that some portion of sociolinguistics was interested in this kind of discourse analysis, but everything with which I was familiar was much more oriented toward making generalizations about particular kinds of performances or about particular kinds of groups or about particular kinds of performances within particular kinds of groups. But I was, and am, interested in something more like structuralism: how these texts are part of a generative model that might possibly be located in the human mind.

It's taken me a decade, *D6* above, to discover geeks like me who delight in this kind of thing. (Again, my thanks to Tim Tangherlini.)

Of course, I have thoroughly enjoyed in geeking out with the guys who make the crawfish boats and all sorts of other machines and tools that do real work like food come out of the dirt, but I have also observed that the academic audience for such work is very small and the interstice is an awkward one.

The number of folklorists who are interested in material culture studies has always been something you could count on two hands — at peak moments of when you also counted graduate students, you might need to take your sock and shoes off. It has been great to discover the history of technology, and I was delighted by the reception I encountered when I attended the annual meeting of the Society for the History of Technology, but there the interest in things agricultural and also regional meant a lack of sexiness that I had already felt at the annual meetings of the American Folklore Society. I could carp about this all I want, but it's not going to change anything. Folklore studies and anthropology have continued to drift apart, which means that academic folklorists in AFS are increasingly housed in the departments of literature and/or languages. They are going to be more interested in texts than in things.

More importantly, the number of folklore jobs will always be limited and occasional. The number of jobs for people doing textual studies is larger, and the number of jobs for those interested in doing so "digitally" is enjoying some prominence now. As the saying goes — and I'm a folklorist so I gotta go with the proverb: *carpe diem*.

So I love the boats, and I love the guys who make them. And I hope the door that it opens onto human creativity is as interesting to readers of the book as it has been to me to write, but it will be the last of that work for a while for me. As my editor generously offered when I last saw him at the annual meeting of AFS in New Orleans: material culture is hard to write about and do it well. It's been incredibly difficult to balance spending time with my family, attending to the non-stop parade of inanities my university produces, and to maintain a steady stream of fieldwork experiences that I then transform into useful texts that I can then review and fold into a scholarly script.

I'm not saying text studies are easier, but I am ready to spend some time with data that is already at hand and let's me focus on analytical models and possible connections with colleagues near and far.

1. I prefer *discursive mode* to David Herman's *text types*. Mode, I think, reflects the generative nature of discourse itself: clauses get strung together, and hang together *qua* texts, through different structuring principles: narrative, locative, descriptive, etc. I'll have more to say about this in the next few months, as I wrap up work on the boat book and turn to the narrative project/possible book which is tentatively titled *Everything Is Not a Story*. ↩

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