Why Folklorists Should Care about TEI

Part 1 in a series of posts about [TEI and folklore studies](#).

We live, we are (probably too often) told, in a connected world. The internet, we are assured, has brought or will bring us all closer together. But such notions as connection and closeness are dependent upon actual relationships developing, and to do that we must use those two things to communicate. These are obvious things to folklorists, and yet we have been slow to take advantage of such a robust infrastructure as the internet to communicate in more than the usual ways: the exchange of PDFs or the submission of Word documents to journals. These are fine starts, but as anyone who has nurtured an essay or volume to publication knows, a lot gets left out.

Perhaps the most important thing that gets left out is all the material that we collect and record but do not have room for in the slim space of pages. This material, however, was not only useful in the development of our own thinking, but it also has far wider use potential: other folklorists could use it to teach or to develop their own research projects or the people themselves could use it for education or introspection or even simply a sense of acknowledgement that they exist and have something to add to the larger archeological record of humankind.

How to format this record has remained a puzzle for folklorists, who have engaged in robust conversations over the possible categories of human expressivity, over the uses of such expression, and how to transcode expression from one mode (e.g., spoken performance) to another mode (e.g., written). While the internet makes it possible to upload audio, video, and image files in addition to texts, it is not always the case that others can readily download such materials, and there remains the question of having downloaded the materials, are they able to view them, use them.

Matters having to do with audio, video, and image files we must leave to a longer, more comprehensive sorting out, but there exists today a format for capturing verbal materials in a written form that can encompass not only the words themselves, but the rich complexities of spoken discourse. Moreover, the format is also capable of embedding within a text a wide variety of analytical information–including, yes, type and motif numbers as well as the location, date, and nature of an event, such that folklorists can rest assured that users on the other end are receiving the fullest sense of the original that text can make possible.

[TEI](#), as the format for the [Text Encoding Initiative](#) has come to be called, has emerged as the foundation for any number of humanistic endeavors. It lies, for example, at the heart of the [Perseus Digital Library](#), which is now the standard library for students of the Greco-Roman classics, amounting to 69 million words now. Its collections of Arabic, Germanic, Renaissance, and nineteenth-century American materials are equally stunning not only in terms of amount, but also in terms of accessibility and usability: users are, in fact, encouraged to download materials and add their own annotations. The [Oxford Text Archive](#) was, like the Perseus Library Project, also a pioneer in the use of TEI, and its use of the format has meant that literary scholars and linguists are often using the same materials but for their own research agendas.

The current problem for humanistic research is that the texts available have largely been contributed by the disciplines of linguistics and literary studies, which means that the texts from which conclusions are being drawn are either sentences and utterances of a few to a few dozen words or texts of thousands upon thousands of worlds. The meaningful middle is missing. Folklorists of course specialize in this "middle" range of texts. From highly-structured short texts like proverbs, to interactionally-complex legends, to flexibly-organized narratives like myths or tales, folklorists have long recorded, transcribed, annotated, analyzed, and shared such materials, reminding the larger scientific and scholastic community of the importance of such texts and the social worlds which they help to create.

It's time then for folklorists to join the emergent social world of interactional scholarship, whereby our materials are widely available and accessible not only for fellow folklorists to appreciate and use but also for other scholars and scientists. In doing so, in establishing ourselves as the proverbial "middle men" we will continue to maintain the importance of folklore studies to the understanding of what it means to be human.

In the posts that follow in this series, which I am tagging as TEIfolk so that one click will get you all the posts at once, I hope to air out some of the work I have been doing this summer, as I try to advance thinking about *things digital* in my disciplinary home.

Please feel free to circulate this post, and those that follow, widely. I will gladly accept any, and all, feedback. I am going to make mistakes; I am going to leave obvious things out, revealing my ignorance.

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