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Locating Louisiana Legends at the Intersection(s) of Land and Water

INTRODUCTION

First, thank you for having me: it's good to be here. The work I am discussing today is really the first time I will publicly present what will be my research program for the foreseeable future, both in terms of content as well as in terms of methodology. Some of you may have recently read my exploration of an African American speech community in south Louisiana, "Talking Shit in Rayne" which appeared last year in *Journal of American Follkore*. Some of that content, the legendary material, makes an appearance in today's presentation, but the methodology will more closely match an essay that will appear in JAF later this year.

In that essay, I explore, along with my collaborator Jonathan Goodwin, the intellectual history of American folklore studies through the lens of a statistical method called a topic model. Our argument is that folklorists, like most practitioners in a field, understand the history of their discipline through a combination of their own reading and the consensus inherited from their graduate training and professional interactions. Disciplinary history, an effectively oral form of communication, codifies quickly. And so, while in the present we understand the process as highly contingent and and subject to random factors, it is fascinating how quickly the past becomes widely understood as historically inevitable. Such a dynamic is captured rather well in contemporary topic modeling algorithms. Our goal in the project was to determine if we could use topic modeling as a way to examine the ebb and flow of topics and paradigms within a domain: we chose folklore studies because of my own fondness for and, to an arguable degree, expertise in the field. The content of that project was 6778 articles drawn from three folklore studies journals (JAF, WF, JFR), representing 125 years of research publication. Of particular interest to us was the legendary, if I may, "turn towards performance" in our field. I will leave to your future selves our success in sketching out such a map.

Today I want to explore similar kinds of descriptions and analyses using a much smaller collection of materials. I have been drawn down this particular path not by a fellow folklorist but by computer scientists who have been drawn to folktales because of their "Darwinian-like natural selection process, in which portions of the narratives that are congruent with the culture are retained and amplified, and those that are incongruent are distorted or discarded" (2009: 127). As it turns out, computer and cognitive scientists have spent the last few decades building

computational models of narrative using Proppian morphologies as their foundation.[1]

The goal of these scientists has been to develop computational methods for arriving at morphologies for a given set of stories.[2] Their goal in doing so is both to speed up the process as well as to remove the ambiguity inherent in many morphologies. That is, how much a particular morphology owes to the analyst, who may have been influenced by other morphologies; how much a morphology reflects the narratives being examined; and how involved any verification of a morphology must be. Most methods, for all their interesting moves — using such things as Bayesian model merging and analogical story merging, unfortunately depends upon a transcoding of narratives into a computer-readable format.

Quite often this transcoding means that larger chunks of discourse get reduced to plot summaries and the analyst must, perforce, transform actual words used to analytical terms that are capable of comparing one narrative to another. Folklorists face much the same conundrum and the work I present today will suffer from it as well, but my goal today is not only to construct a morphology of a small collection of tales by hand to see what it might offer us in terms of abstraction but also, having moved away from the text, to then move in the opposite direction, back towards the text, to see just how close we can get to the actual language of the narratives involved.[That is, it seems to me that the tension here remains between plot and discourse. The enduring fascination of Propp's work is that the tables, the matrices, at the back of the book capture the plot of the tales so well and that the formula presented in the text is suggestive of emergent discourse, especially when we read it, as most of us do, with The Singer of Tales somewhere in the back of our minds. [This is especially true for how Rubin reads Propp?]]

THE TEXTS

The focus of my discussion today are Louisiana treasure legends. The texts are split fairly evenly between two kinds of materials: texts collected by folklorists and texts that appeared on a number of web sites dedicated to treasure hunting. My preference was for web sites that offered accounts of Louisiana treasures and that also seemed to reflect a fairly active, if also virtual, community, as we have come to use that term.[3] Active in this instance means that there were more than a few correspondents in any given thread, and that the accounts themselves were subject to some discussion and thus, to the best of my ability to calculate such things, to some form of acceptance by the larger group.

There are thirty-six texts in all: twenty from contemporary folklore collections; sixteen from various internet sources. Since both sets of texts seem to me to have various folkloric dimensions that can be attributed to them, it seemed to me that the best way to distinguish them was to refer to the texts drawn from folklorists as the oral collection and the texts drawn from web sites as the web collection. Such designations are only working distinctions and have no depth beyond convenient handles within the current discussion.

The oral collection is drawn from four sources. In alphabetical order by author, they are:

- Four texts are taken from Barry Jean Ancelet's *Cajun and Creole Folktales*;
- Four texts are taken from field research done by Jeffrey Broussard, a student in my colleague Shelley Ingram's American folklore course this spring;
- Two texts are taken from my own research among African American speakers in the Louisiana town of Rayne; and
- Nine texts are taken from the *Swapping Stories* collection, edited by Carl Lindahl, Maida Owens, and C. Renee Harvison, with a tenth text taken from unpublished materials and made available to me through the generosity of Maida Owens.[4]

The smallest text in the oral collection weighs in at a mere 67 words (BRO 004) and the largest text at 1026 words (LOH 164).

The web collection is drawn from three sources: eleven texts were copied from the TreasureNet website, which describes itself as the "original treasure hunting website," on April 13 of this year; a trio of accounts were found at Lost Treasure On-Line and appear to have been published in the November 2010 issue of *Lost Treasure* by Anthony Belli; and two texts were found on *Treasure Trove Dreams*, dated 8 May 2012 and copyrighted by Jim Rocha. Of these sixteen texts, those from the TreasureNet site strike me as most folkloric in nature, but such distinctions are best left for more finer-grained exploration and analysis.[Removed for now: List of collections scanned:
Collections not used: Collection Preparation.]

I tell you all these details about the texts first because there is a striking contrast between the oral legends and the written legends: the written legends are all origin stories whereas the oral legends are predominantly about the experience, be in first person or third person, of seeking a treasure. To represent these two basic orientations toward the treasure, I have chosen Greek letter *alpha* (α) to stand for those narratives or parts of narratives that detail how a treasure came to be in a particular place, and I use the Greek letter *tau* (τ) for those narratives or parts of a narrative that describe the experience of seeking and/or finding treasure.

DESCRIPTION

Let's begin with an objective description of the collection, or collections, just to see what interesting facets of the text might turn up. In terms of verbatim texts, the two collections are evenly matched, with sixteen of the oral texts representing, to the best of my knowledge, fairly rigorous transcriptions of original oral discourse. The four Broussard texts are fairly close representations of the original texts, but they should probably be considered reports more than performances. Such a distinction is not, I think, terribly important for the plots represented in those texts, but it does have some impact when considering the overall corpus. For example, the reported nature of the Broussard texts skews the lexical diversity of the oral collection upwards, drawing it closer to the numbers for the web collection.

Collection	Lexical Diversity				Length		
	Count	Average	Minimum	Maximum	Average	Mininum	Maximum
Oral	20	0.47	0.31	0.60	402	153	1025
Web	16	0.50	0.29	0.70	989	155	3081

Table 1

A quick glance at the table reveals that the lexical diversity of the oral collection is lower than the internet collection, but both fall within average measures for a number of oral genres.[5] If anything is notable in this basic set of statistics, it is that the range of diversity is more limited in the oral texts than in the web texts. The two collections also achieve parity when it comes to the shortest texts, but the longest text of the web collection is three times the length of the oral collection. But with such a small sample size and so early on in building this corpus, none of this is more than anecdotal information reported here only to provoke discussion. It is not yet a foundation for any conclusions to be drawn.

Text	Total Words
ANC 88	331
ANC 89	153
ANC 90	175
ANC 91	176
BRO-01	117
BRO-02	122
BRO-03	136
BRO-04	67
LAU 13	375
LAU 14	655
LOH 157	364
LOH 158	193
LOH 159	282
LOH 160	761
LOH 161	295
LOH 162	332
LOH 162b	194
LOH 163	209
LOH 164	1025
LOH 165	905

Another reason to qualify the Broussard texts as reports is that they represent some of the

shortest texts in the collection (BRO-04):

> Upon hearing this,
> I couldn't help but think of
> pirates who buried their treasure in southern Louisiana.
> I learned in history this semester that
> pirates would bury their treasure on land
>> and ask one of the crewmen to protect it.
> The one to protect the treasure was shot dead,
> so that his soul would guard the treasure forever.
> Perhaps these two stories are connected in some way.

That noted, the second text is quite close to other fully transcribed legends in the collection. I offer here in advance:

> The same relative had a husband
>> who went out into the wooded region in that area.
> Along with his brother, they went looking for cypress moss
>> for cushioning their pillows and blankets.
> This was way back in the day.
> As they were searching, they noticed a stone slab on the ground beneath a tree.
> It was odd
>> because the husband and his brother weren't able to move the slab of stone.
> It seemed to be stuck in the ground.
> Then, they got this weird feeling.
> Something wasn't quite right with the stone.
> The two men freaked out,
>> and they climbed the tree in fear.
> When they looked down, the slab of stone disappeared.
> They jumped down from the tree
>> and ran home.

At 122 words, it is still relatively short, but not that much shorter than Ancelet texts. The two texts from my own work represent middle and longer length texts, and are thus more in line with the size of texts from the Lindahl, Owens, and Harvison collection.

ANALYSIS

Objective measurements aside, the goal of this examination of Louisiana treasure legends is to perform a bit of an analytical loop: to attempt a morphology of this small collection of oral tales and then to move from that abstraction to layers of increasing resolution such that, while we will begin with a rather grand abstraction, that all legends are of one form, we will, as we increase the granularity of our examination, discover interesting differences that might lead to better questions. And so while we will begin with one big blob, we will eventually get to words — as analysts concerned with what and how people actually do things in the world, we are of course most interested in the building blocks they use.

Let me begin with a conclusion that in fact quite startled me: all Louisiana treasure legends have the same form, let us call it τ-α. In this case, *tau* is the experience of seeking treasure, often located within the personal past, and *alpha* is the securing or loss of the treasure in the more impersonal, or perhaps *legendary*, past. Not all texts have both parts, but I am confident enough in the similarities between those that do and the standalone legends that are either *tau* or *alpha* to say that in some fashion the other part's presence can, analytically, be inferred. This is an important distinction. I am not suggesting in any way a devolution of an uber-legend that has all its constituent parts, but making what I think is the rather interesting observation that I have twenty texts, and of those twenty texts, fourteen consist solely of the experience of seeking treasure (τ); four are only about how a treasure came to be where it is (α); and two contain both parts, one in an τ-α sequence and one in actual chronological sequence, α-τ.

Upon realizing this, that I had so many stories that were so much the same, I double-checked the procedures I had used for acquiring texts: had I left out stories that should be included? Had I intuited earlier than I realized a pattern that then determined what texts I chose to accept into the collection? So far as I can tell, nothing of the sort occurred. I went looking for any and all texts that mentioned treasure in some fashion, whether it was called simply money or gold or coins or anything else. I gradually broadened my scope to include stories that suggested the possibility of an unknown reward or bounty, but such broadening should only have brought more variety to the possible structures of the texts, not a narrowing.

An example of each component should be helpful here. Let's begin with the dominant narrative component, τ, taken from Ancelet's *Cajun and Creole Folktales*:

> I went to meet an old man in Marrero,
> and he told me a story.
> He went to look for a treasure with some other men.
> And there was a controller
>   who had brought a Bible to control the spirits.
> And when they arrived at the site,
> they saw a big horse coming through the woods with a man riding it,

and when he dismounted,

it was no longer a man on the horse.

It was a dog.

And he said the dog came and rubbed itself against his legs.

He said it was growling.

He said he knew the dog was touching him,

but he didn't feel anything.

It was like there was just a wind.

And he said they all took off running.

He lost his hat and his glasses

and he tore all his clothes.

And even the controller ran off

and he never saw his Bible again after that.

The first thing to notice is the presence of a preface to the text — "I went to meet an old man in Marrerro, and he told me a story." Such prefaces occur in fourteen of the twenty texts and typically establish the speaker as part of a diegetic chain. (Those of you who read my recent JAF essay know that I am fascinated by such chaining, especially as a form of text making.) In some cases, the preface seeks to establish historical veracity, or, in true hybrid fashion, seeks to negotiate the divide that is commonly understood to exist between being the receiver of a story and being able to vouchsafe the historical truth of the story's contents.

After the preface in this short text comes the *tau* component, and it offers up one of two variants within the *tau*: that of the actant who digs for treasure. The other *tau* variant can be seen in the following text taken from *Swapping Stories*:

> In the little town of Duson over near Lafayette, on Highway Ninety near Lafayette, you'll notice there's a little Catholic church on the left side of the road when you're coming this way, just a little out of town.
>
> There's a man named Judice who was very active in public affairs.
>
> He had a man plowing his field
>
> and the plow hit something.
>
> They opened it up
>
> and it was a big chest full of jewels and gold coins.
>
> All of them had early dates,
>
> and there were French coins and early American coins.
>
> They were buried there.
>
> They said it was Lafitte.
>
> They don't know who it was.
>
> But this negro man who found this built the Catholic church and the school there with part of the money.

> Seven years later, I guess jealousy, it burned down.
> He rebuilt it.
> Seven years later, it burned down again.
> He rebuilt it again.
> How much he had left I don't know.
> That's one case,
> and there's well-established fact on it.[6]

In the second variant of the tau component ($\tau2$), the actant does not dig for treasure, though they often engage in other forms of digging, which typically leads to them actually finding it. The event states for the two forms of tau are as follows:

- In τ_1 the actant goes to a location, digs for treasure, and experiences a spirit.

- In τ_2 the actant goes to a location, performs an agricultural task (plows, gets cows, gathers moss, hunts), and finds a treasure.

Interestingly, the location the actants go to in both variants is often the same: woods dominate, and are either directly mentioned or suggested in six out of the fifteen tau components.

If we compare the two *taus* as a series of narrative states (or functions), then we see that while A is exactly the same, and B is quite often similar on its face, it is C that is inverted. The only explanation for the difference is human intentionality. If you go to a location with the intent of finding treasure, you will not only not find it, but you will probably find yourself a spirit from which you will then have to escape. If, however, you go to a location with the intent of doing some kind of work, the kind of work that in some texts is tied to the regular accretion of wealth, like gathering pine knots, then you may very well find treasure. If you do not find treasure, then you will encounter a tomb or stone slab that in other texts is associated with treasure.

$$\tau_1: A \longrightarrow B \longrightarrow C$$

$$\tau_2: A \longrightarrow B \longrightarrow C^{-1}$$

Figure #: The arrows in these diagrams are only meant to indicate *followed by* relationships, as would be the case in narratives, and not any form of causality.[The slide actually has these merged already.]

Both versions of the *Tau* component have their additional complexities, with a number of the texts displaying interesting repetitions of events, which can also be imagined as loops through various states, but I would like to describe the alpha component quickly in the time we have remaining.

The four texts in the oral collection that consist of only the *alpha* narrative include the Broussard report (BRO 4) and two texts from the *Swapping Stories* project (LOH 157, LOH 163). The legend of the Fisher family gold will serve as our example:

The man whose story I'm going to tell you
as far as I know actually lived,
      because I played around his grave a lot.
He was buried, still buried,
where we lived.
He was buried in the yard
where I lived.
They had built a cypress picket fence around it.
By the time I was old enough to know anything,
the picket fence was falling apart.
But it was still intact, partially.
This was a guy by the name of Fisher,
which is obviously not a Cajun name.
Supposedly Fisher and his wife and Fisher's wife's son, whose name was Billy, came to live
    in that house.
Where they came from,
nobody knows.
The story is,
and this is rumor and speculation,
      that he was a bank robber.
He had moved into that house to sort of disappear.
He was a drunk.
Every time he'd go to town,
he'd get drunk.
This would have been Church Point, the closest town.
He'd go on horseback
and go to town
      and come back drunk
         and beat up on Billy.

One afternoon he came back drunk
and Billy shot him.
Killed him.
His wife and Billy buried him right there.
That night as it was dark,
they left in the buggy, supposedly with a lot of gold.
They came up to Jean Jannise Jr.'s house.
This is not the loup garou,
this is his son, who was living
--and the house is still there, not the house but the place.
When they got there,
she looked upon Jean Jr. as a reliable man.
She stopped there right after dark.

> It's always after dark!
> He told her,
> "If you try to cross this forest at night,
>   you're going to be robbed.
> Why don't you stay here tonight
> and tomorrow you can go."
>
> Supposedly she was returning to Mississippi.
> That night, supposedly, she buried her money on the other side of Jean Jr.'s house, a lot of
>   gold.
> Tremendous amount of gold.
> She never returned
> so the gold is still there.
> I had a friend of mine
> who told me
>   that was true
>   because all drunks have a lot of money to bury!
> And that's my reaction to that story.

On the face of it, it seems a rather rambling story with little to recommend it beyond the idea of there being gold still buried somewhere. However, that there is a dead man attached to the treasure and that transportation is involved in the legend is a regular feature in the *alpha* narratives, the stories that tell of a treasure's origin.

- ○ In BRO 4, pirates shoot a crewman to protect the treasure.

- ○ In LOH 160, the outlaw West is said to "throw people in wells" and he also buries his money.

- ○ In LOH 162, the Perkins family fortune is first buried in the flour and then when the money is transported west by a family member and two slaves, the family member dies and is buried with the money.

- ○ In LOH 164, a slave is killed after promising to look after the family fortune so that his spirit "would continue to guard the money."

- ○ And, finally, in my own LAU 14, a pirate still guards the treasure and, in fact, engages the narrator in a conversation over his worth to receive the money.

Such are the general trends in terms of theme.

Because there are fewer examples of the *alpha* narrative in the current collection, it is harder to begin to build a morphology for these texts. If we turn, however, to the web collection, we can see that much of the focus on the haunted nature of the sites drops away, though the narratives are, to some degree, haunted by slavery, which figures in five of the sixteen texts. More

importantly: all five of the texts are taken from the more active community forums of TreasureNet. The following example makes it clear, through association with Lafitte, that there was an alternate version of treasure:

> By 1817 the privateers of Jean Lafitte and his predecessor, Luis de Aury, were capturing numerous Spanish slavers off the coast of Cuba. The pirate's barracoons, or slave pens, on Galveston Island were often swelled beyond capacity, containing a thousand or more African chattels. Many buyers came to the island to buy slaves at $1.00 per pound, and three brothers, John, Rezin, and James Bowie, were among the pirate's best customers. In 1853 John Bowie recorded in "DeBow's Magazine" that the brothers, who channeled their illicit slave trade via Black Bayou on Lake Sabine or via the Calcasieu to Lake Charles, realized a net profit of $65,000 in two years time from the sale of 1,500 Africans in Louisiana. [TN 8]

Such an account seems a likely association of slaves with treasure, and also with piracy, is revealed in one of the longest texts in the collection, LOH 162, which not only has both alpha and tau components but has them in chronological order. It begins:

> Okay, people a long time ago (pause) they claimed they buried their money.
> That was back when they had the slaves and all that there.
> And they, this old slave owner, he'd have a lot of money to bury.
> Well, he'd take his most-trusted slave he had.
> His old slave.
> And he'd take him with him.
> Well, he'd go out
> and he'd pick him out a spot where he wanted it.
> And he'd tell the old slave, "Now, I want you to dig right here."
> And he'd put it about four or five foot deep.
> Well, the old slave'd be down there digging.
> When he thought it was deep enough,
> the old slave owner'd tell him,
> "Now, look. I want you to promise me something.
> That you'll guard this money as long as you can."
> And the old slave'd say, "Yeah, I'll do that, boss."
> Well, then he would, he'd shoot him.
> Kill him. Well,
> then the owner'd cover the hole up.
> He was the only man that knew where it was.
> That slave down in there, the belief was, that the slave, his spirit, would continue to guard
>   that money.

Well, these people decided how to get around that.

What follows is the typical tau account in which there is an interdiction not to have sex in the week before the trip and not to talk during the trip. The trip ends not with a spirit bull charging at the treasure hunters, but rather in a coughing spell that breaks the interdiction.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

My father likes to tell the story about the time my great-grandfather decided to build a machine that would make his life easier. And so one summer he pulled the spokes out of an old bicycle wheel, wrapped wires around it to form a coil, and then attached it to a box big enough to hold a battery and the necessary electronics to transform the changes in electrical signal into signals he could understand. His two foot by two foot by eight inch wood box — because none of these parts were small in the 1940s — had both a gauge as well as a set of earphones he had ordered from a catalogue. Box in hand, or in hands since it was by my father's account both big and heavy, he easily found pipes and reduced the labor of the men who worked for Mr. Guidroz, as he was known at the salt mill, by half. (As a steam engineer, it was his job to repair broken transmission pipes or to route energy from extant pipes to new locations.)

But such a magical machine was surely capable of more. Word spread of his "gold-finding machine" and it wasn't long before men began to show up at the front door of his house at all hours of the day and night — because some quests are best left for the twilight hours when we believe we can see and understand more — asking if Mr. Felix, as he was known away from work, wouldn't mind coming out and bringing his gold-finding machine with him. This time, they were sure, they had puzzled out a lost pirate treasure or a lost cache of Civil War gold. It was, they were sure, at the base of this tree and they only needed a little bit of help to make sure they were digging in the right place.

My great-grandfather, so far as can be remembered, never said no to any of these requests. He would always retreat back into the house, grab his hat and his machine, and return to be led away. He did, however, have one thing on which he always insisted in return for leaving his house and family on nights and weekends. When asked to come out, he would always say: "Okay, I'll come. But I get a share and the machine gets a share, same as every man there. And I don't dig."

It's not hard to imagine the series of transformations that took place in mens' minds when they saw a wooden box with a bicycle wheel that could find where pipes lay in the ground and suddenly knew, just knew, that it could find other buried things. What better to be buried than gold? And so, for a short time on Weeks Island, there was gold to be found almost anywhere. A machine had made the place magical.

It would seem that high-tech solutions to age-old legends seems to run in the family, but I have been fascinated by these legends and by the attempt to develop a morphology for them.

Prompted by computer scientists to re-examine the possibilities for morphological analysis, I have learned just how hard this work is. As I tabulated results, looping myself again and again through texts, I discovered one text did not fit the pattern to which I initially assigned it on my first few readings but rather to this other category, or, that I needed to introduce an entirely new set of criteria, a new set of attributes, to an existing list of items. (Such was the fate of LOH-162b, which I had first imagined was an *alpha* narrative but on further consideration realized was a *tau* narrative.)

My goal in this, has been to test recent conjectures by scientists that narratives can be successfully graphed. I had no pre-determined outcome for my exploration, only a sense that maybe their accounts made it seem simpler than my memories of oral narratives would indicate. So far in my exploration, my memory served me well. It is indeed a complex business, and while I think I have found the stable portions of a small collection of a certain genre of texts, I already see more variability in the actual language than my own understanding of algorithmic discovery leads me to understand can discern.

My next step in my analysis of these texts and others, is to look to other kinds of abstractions, both in terms of parts-of-speech structures as well as discursive management of time and space to determine if there is any way to distinguish these narratives from other forms of discourse in a way that could be done computationally. If not, then I think there is am important qualification to be made to algorithmic approaches to the study of the human mind and its expression in the world.

NOTES

Notes

[1] Mark Alan Finlayson was fascinated by the idea that "all morphologies seem to share a common high-level structure … and have significant overlap in rough identity of the functions, but vary considerably in specific function sequences and other details" (2009: 128).

[2] The morphologies have had many different names.

[3] I have not seen any critical dialogue over the distinction between the communities and associations as Weber understood those two entities and the nature of on-line communities as something more like associations.

[4] For ease of reference, I adopt the following schema to refer to each of the collections: Ancelet: ANC; Broussard: BRO; Laudun: LAU; and Lindahl, Owens, and Harvison: LOH. Each text is individually identified by a three digit number, reflecting the larger two collections. Thus the first text from Ancelet's text, numbered 88 in *Cajun and Creole Folktales*, is referenced as ANC O88. (The file names only vary in having a hyphen between the collection identifier and the number, e.g. LAU-013.)

[5] "Lexical diversity is a measure of how many different words that are used in a text, while lexical density provides a measure of the proportion of lexical items (i.e. nouns, verbs, adjectives and some adverbs) in the text. Both measures have the advantage of being easy to operationalise, and also practical to apply in computer analyses of large data corpora. Further, both lexical diversity and lexical density have been shown to be significantly higher in writing than in speaking" (Johansson 61). [See Ure 1971, Halliday 1985.]

[6] I have, for the purposes of this presentation, removed the preface from this text.

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