IDEAS, KERNELS, METAPHORS

Reconsidering the Idea of the Folk Idea

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1

Two years ago, in my prior appearance before the Society, I treated a small corpus of treasure tales that I had collected as part of my efforts to understand the folk imaginary of south Louisiana inhabitants. The inquiry with which I began that work was how do those inhabitants understand the landscape on which they live and work, a landscape that shifts so readily between land and water. The question that became the focus of my inquiry into the corpus of treasure tales was why one such legend would feature a pirate who threatens African Americans. As you may recall, the treasure tales represented the only forms of verbal folklore that I felt treated the intersection of land and water in a significant fashion. Much of that prior presentation focused on the ideo-historical network of topics in the various legends that seemed to suggest a relationship between slaves and treasure, and I concluded with a suggestive resolution to the question raised by the elision within the network that historical accounts of pirates in Louisiana reveal that, more times than not, the real treasure in which they trafficked were slaves.1

At the time, I mentioned the possibility of a morphology, and I offered a simple scheme that, first, offered two essential modes for the texts, origin and experience, and, second, for those texts whose modality was focused on experience, there was a fork that resulted in two complementary, and also somewhat contrary, conclusions: if you went looking for treasure, you were going to encounter a spirit, or, if you were instead engaged in some practical, usually agricultural, labor, you would find treasure. This primitive morphology is something most folklorists will recognize, having appeared in both Gerard

1. The way this particular text held certain pieces of the puzzle together in memory is not unlike the commemorative function of treasure tales in Dominica that Deidre Rose discussed.

Hurley's mid-century survey of treasure tales and again in Pat Mullen's later re-consideration. As Mullen notes:

> Hurley says the plots of treasure legends have a simple two-part structure: (1) the treasure is hidden or accounted for and (2) the search is made for the treasure. I think a third structural element should be added to this one, one which Hurley recognized but did not identify as structural. The seeking of the treasure leads to the third element: (3) the outcome of the search is success of failure. (209)

While my version offers some degree of semantic, or at least causal, precision--if this, then that--it is only a minor improvement of Mullen's revision, giving me good reason to conclude that treasure legendry, or at least treasure legendry scholarship, has remained remarkably stable for something like seventy years.

More importantly, the structural inversion elicited from the Louisiana corpus supports Mullen's contention that American treasure legends are not, as Alan Dundes had suggested, about *unlimited good*. In Dundes' understanding of treasure tales, which he used as a foundation upon which to elaborate the concept of the folk idea, the tales instantiate and/or reinforce the American conception that "there is no real limit as to how much of any one commodity can be produced" (96). He backs up his claim with traditional American sayings, proverbs, that do, in fact, directly reference a world without limits: "There's more where that came from" and "The sky's the limit." The tie to treasure tales is "that most accounts end with the treasure not recovered. This suggests that Americans think that America remains a land of opportunity, that boundless wealth is still readily available to anyone with the energy and initiative to go dig for it" (97).

As Mullen points out, and my own work substantiates, if you dig for treasure in these legends, you are not going to get it. Yes, the Protestant work ethic is alive and well, but it's alive in the work you do, and you will be rewarded through doing your regular work, as is the case in the story below which tells of a hired hand who dug up a treasure while plowing:

> 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. [LOH 158[2]]

In other stories, individuals find treasures while out doing some other kind of work, but the treasure eludes them in the usual ways. In this next text, two brothers go out into the woods to gather moss, an agricultural activity of some kind, and stumble upon a potential treasure. Like other treasure tales, something arrives that drives them off and removes all traces of the treasure being there:

> 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. [ULS 2]

In this version of *work produces reward* variant of the legend, the narrator renders an account that doubles the actants in featuring both her husband and his brother. In looking for something else, they come across a telltale sign of treasure--here a stone slab but elsewhere a tomb or grave or, as we will see in a moment, a plate--and they attempt to dislodge it, to work it free. No manifest spirit appears, simply a sense of something being wrong. They climb out of danger, perhaps moving heavenward, and when the unexpected happens, they ground themselves again and leave.

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2. See Appendix A for collections legend.

Mullen's collection of Texas treasure tales leads him to conclude that the texts are not about unlimited good but about human frailty. As he notes, in some cases treasures are found by children, who are understood as not yet fully formed, or deformed, moral agents. In the case of a legend recently collected in Louisiana, this is emphasized by the role of children's play:

> Me and my brothers would hear this story a lot from one of our neighbor's parents, she said she was a fortune teller. Supposedly, there was treasure buried by a stump and only a child could find it. The treasure would rise up out of the ground and appear to the children. The only time a child could find it is if they were playing by the stump, but if they left to go get help to get the treasure, when they came back for it, it was gone. It had disappeared. It didn't pay for a grown up to go look for it because they wouldn't find it. [ULS 5]

So not only is it only a child can find it, but only a child that is playing, which we can recognize as a kind of doubling of the distance from the world of adults. (See Appendix B for three more examples of this legend type.)

In addition to who can find, and successfully seize treasure, Mullen took a closer look at the losses associated with the search for it. Among the things that happen are there is a physical loss of the ground itself, or of clues, as well as the potential loss of life, usually by metaphysical forces (e.g., spirits) or the loss of oneself. In both the Louisiana and Texas corpora, treasures are guided by ghosts whose lives may have been taken. Taking such a treasure, it is suggested, would mean taking something which is not yours, and the murder of a human soul is narrative proof of the danger of seeking such riches. Finally, Mullen notes, seeking and/or finding treasure can lead to treachery in the present, a kind of loss of innocence, if you will. None of the Louisiana legends feature a split in human intentionality or behavior in the act of treasure seeking: everyone acts much the same. The consistency in this regard is worth considering, especially if we want to continue to refine the concept of a folk idea.

2

I recognize that the relationship between ideas and narrative has been a topic of considerable discussion within the multi-braided stream of contemporary legend

scholarship. It is particularly appealing, as more than one of you in this room has noted in your work, because legends themselves can be so changeable in form. And yet, as changeable as legends are they somehow remain the same. So, the first question we have to answer is about *likeness*: how is this text like this other text, especially when they appear to share so little of their lexicon in common. (That is, not function words but nouns, proper nouns, and verbs.) This is more of a problem for the computational methods I discussed at the last meeting, and on which I continue to work. The second question we have to answer is about *stickiness*: why do certain story elements stick together and why are others optional? It's not always the case that it's the exact same elements, but more often than not it is a reasonably fixed constellation with elements like stars that wink in and out of the larger formation.

Likeness, I think, is a higher level abstraction than *stickiness*. (Forgive my fancy terms: I stole *likeness* from Tim Tangherlini, and I am sure I stole *stickiness* from someone--I just can't remember who now.) Folk idea is one way of talking about likeness: these texts are alike because they are about the same idea. Tale types are another form of likeness: these texts are alike because they possess the same story elements, the same motifs, and these elements, these motifs, occur in roughly the same order in most versions. Stickiness is what is at issue in the current corpus, as I argued previously, in trying to understand how pirates and slaves kept getting stuck together. But that was a particular cluster within a larger network of elements to which I would now like to turn. The stickiness was a matter of the topics involved within each text and how those topic clusters revealed a network of ideas that informed, in some fashion, many of the texts. (You may recall that I had to code some of the texts myself, since a straightforward topic model of the corpus, depending as it is does on the actual words used and not their possible synonyms and connotations, would not necessarily have revealed the core relationships: I would like very much to discuss this more within anyone interested.)

At work in the tension between Dundes' and Mullen's readings of treasure tales is the relationship between folk ideas and types of stories -- here, types of legends. Mullen's revision hinged upon a consideration of the tales he had in hand, which suggested that "energy and initiative cannot pay off if forces beyond individual control are protecting the

treasure" (212). In the Louisiana corpus, it would seem that the experience of finding treasure, those tales I have previously called type *tau*, really comes down to either/or: either individual control is exercised, dramatized in these narratives as work, or control lies outside the individual, typically in the form of some kind of spirit. Given this dynamic, we do not have the folk idea of limited good, but we do have the idea of "work hard and you will be rewarded," which would make Max Weber very happy.

But if we return to the question of likeness, in the case of these legends, we have two subsets of the larger corpus that are, honestly, frighteningly alike in terms of events: an actant goes to a non-urban location -- what Oscar Babineaux stated as a "a place called the country" -- where if they dig for money they will be punished and if they work they will, perhaps, stand a slim chance of being rewarded. It is the ambiguous nature of the payoff that I find so compelling. If these legends are manifestations of the work ethic, then the reward for work should be clear. It is certainly the case that actively coveting wealth that is not one's own, and making plans to lay one's hands on it, is discouraged. We have already seen this ambiguity above in the legend about two brothers who come across a stone slab and then get a weird feeling while trying to move it. Two other texts from the corpus display the ambiguity of outcomes:

> He said that two relatives of his went hunting out in the woods one night. When and where exactly, I don't know. They too saw the stone slab. Upon returning to the woods again to find it, it had disappeared. My friend said that the mysterious stone slab never stays in the same place. And if one sees it, you're supposed to dig in front of it to find buried treasure. My friend also mentioned how some people see a tombstone instead of stone slab. Some people also see a man standing next to or is sitting on the stone. [ULS 3]

> I had a cousin, he's dead now, he served during Vietnam as a navy seal, and when he came back-. In the same woods, there's like a legend saying that -- it's an old Indian legend -- that if you find this kind of like plate ... it looks kind of like, some sort of like Indian, like Native American ... writing, or just mosaics like that, so, if you find this plate, according to the legend, where that plate sits, right underneath is a great treasure. Well, my cousin Glen was in the woods one day, he might have been hunting or something, he finds this kind of plate, and he remembered that legend, so

> what he did was he tried to make a trail on the way back, like scratching trees, like carving certain stuff in trees, to make sure that he could make his way back, he didn't have shovels or anything. So he comes back, I think with someone else, maybe a friend, to come and dig it up, and where the plate was, was gone, and according to another little part of that legend, the reason why it shows up is the spirits are trying to kind of play a trick on you, to get you lost in the woods, cause he's like "oh, yeah, I wanna come back and" ... he was just smart and scratching his way, like marking his way back. [ULS 7]

In these two texts, part of the subset of the corpus where actants find at least the sign of treasure while in the woods, they leave the thing which signifies the treasure in order to get help and upon there return, the signifier is gone. That is, if they re-enter the woods with the intent of claiming the cache, it is as lost to them as it would be had they started out on a treasure hunt in the first place. In the case of the last example, it is probably just as well that the actant, and later the actant and a helper, cannot find the treasure because it would appear to be the work of malevolent spirits, which is suggested in the first text above by sightings of a "man standing next to or sitting on the stone."

A more elaborate version of the tale can be found in *Swapping Stories*. Told by David Allen, an African American living in Homer, Louisiana (very near the Arkansas border), the text has two prefaces and two distinct narrative episodes, one hinging upon the other. The first preface positions the narrator as someone who has "seen things, heard things" that he cannot, in the moment of the narration explain--and, here, explanation is understood as rational explanation. The second preface offers a version of a kernel for the narrative, while also further warranting the narrator's account by projecting its validity onto individuals outside his experience, literal outsiders to him and his community, who have heard of his experience and want to use it to seek treasure. In the first episode of the narrative, the narrator experiences a vapor that sings, or moans.[3] Scared, he runs home and tells his father, who then proceeds to investigate, armed with a shotgun, only to come running back to the house. The second episode occurs, in the narrator's words, "twenty-

3. The kernel narrative, as a form, was first defined by Susan Kalcik (1975) as a brief reference or piece of a longer story that suggests a longer, more structured narrative that is more widely known among the

five, thirty years later." In it, the narrator as an adult is approached by two or three men who are equipped with a metal detector, a Bible, and "some other kind of little gimmick." In the first, half of the episode, the ability of the group to locate treasure is established by their finding a half dollar. Having done that, the second half gives the narrator the opportunity to refine his recall and locate the treasure "between these two cedar trees." As the group works, apparently successfully again to locate the treasure with the metal detector "making this whining noise and going on," they are suddenly beset by a merle of blackbirds. Far from disquieting the group, the narrator's companions regard the blackbirds as confirmation of the presence of treasure, but, of a treasure already found. They pack up, but, the narrator tells us as the conclusion to the second episode and to the text as a whole, that he thinks the other men went back out to the location he had shown them and dug the treasure up in order to keep it all for themselves. There is no proof of this, however, and so the text leaves us with a dual ambiguity: did the other individuals in the narrative betray the narrator, and keep with the topic, or idea, of human treachery, or is it simply the case that we can never know. The narrator assures us, after all, that he "wasn't about to go back there himself" to see if the treasure was there.

3

Whatever the ambiguity, the protagonists in legends rarely, if ever, end up with the treasure. Perhaps this is a matter of self-selection: successful treasure hunters simply are not interested in telling their stories, but for all those other tellers, why keep telling stories of missed opportunities or other-worldly threats or scares? It helps to know more about the contexts of these stories, but nor do those contexts, at least as I have observed and/or experienced them explain the fascination these tales seem to hold over people in the gulf region of the U.S. In general, these legends surface in conversations among well-established friendships as well as in situations where the suspension of disbelief that the invocation of metaphysical ambiguities requires. Just as importantly, these texts require a consideration of the role and nature of spirits in an often deeply religious region, whether

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performer and her audience. Often offering the kernel in this way allows not only for the audience to choose whether to hear the story again but also how its meaning will be determined.

Baptist or Catholic, where such spirits are either not a part of dogma or are, dogmatically, understood as evil. (The agency of the spirits in these tales is quite diverse and worth examination in their own right.)

What's at stake, I think, is the explanatory power of legends: their ability to organize elements, usually understand as events within a plot, into a larger, intelligible whole. It is the organizational ability of narrative that has drawn the interests of others, as Diane Goldstein pointed out in her presidential address before the American Folklore Society, and it has long been the work of members of the present Society to complicate that ready explanation, as anyone who's read Bill Ellis knows.

So what do these narrative possibilities mean? Specifically, what do the restrictions on the narrative possibilities mean both for the possible *ideologeme*, as Frederick Jameson once termed it, and for our understanding of narrative in general?

The tales as I have encountered them, living for fifteen years in the region, are almost always told with wide-eyed wonder, and, quite frequently, with a slight smile that suggests that there is pleasure in not knowing what can, and cannot, be known. There is rarely, if ever, however, a hint of *you don't get goods that don't belong to you in the first place*, which would seem to be the chief morality to be derived from these narratives. More often, there is a sense of *the one that got away*. The tension between the dominant semantic dimensions of the text and the dominant pragmatic dimensions might perhaps be the engine that makes these takes go: *you shouldn't want such a thing, but, oh, wouldn't it be nice to get it!* This might be one way to negotiate apparent differences in fortunes, while also abating possible social tensions that such differences often create.

Carroll thinks that the successive events in a narrative must occur not just post hoc but also propter hoc. Carroll goes onto suggest that the causal content of a narrative underlies its explanatory potential.

Dundes argument, of course, is based on his reading of George Foster's treatment of Mexican treasure tales in which Foster had concluded that such tales exemplified the "principle of unlimited good" ().

At the recent symposium on Visualizing Wonder, a joint effort of Brigham Young University and the University of Winnipeg, the conference organizers, Jill Rudy and Pauline Greenhill asked participants to consider what possible innovations computation might bring to their extant efforts.

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APPENDIX A

The present corpus draws upon four separate collections for its contents, coded as follows:

ANC: Ancelet 1994 (as published)

LAU: Laudun (both materials appearing in Laudun 2012 and unpublished materials)

LOH: Lindahl, Owens, and Harvison 1997 (all but one text, LOH 162b, published)

ULS: University of Louisiana at Lafayette Student Research Collection

APPENDIX B

The other three texts that feature children being able to find things that adults cannot are:

ANC 90

> Mom said that they used to dig a lot for money. Lots and lots of money was taken out of the ground like that. And she said that her little brother had gone in the woods to get the cows. And he stayed longer than he was supposed to stay. So his mother spoke to him, and she wanted to know where he had been. So he said he had seen a little tomb in the woods. And he said there was a pile of leaves on the grave. And he had cleaned the tomb and he had danced on it. So he had had fun on this little tomb in the woods. "Well," she said, "if you did this, come and show me where it is. "He went, but they were never able to find the place.

ULS 1

> A relative of ours lived in the country near the woods of Morse and Crowley when she was a little girl. She lived in an house that was stilts so that when a flood came their house would be okay. When she was a child, our relative would play with the other kids under the house during the summer to stay out of the heat. The story goes that our relative, along with the rest of the children, saw a man sitting on a wooden chest beneath the house. This apparition did nothing to the children, although it did frighten

them for a time. Strangely, only our relative and the children could see it. Not the adults.

LOH 162b

Her (his wife, Maggie) father one time, when he was a boy, there used to be a store just west of here, Field's. It's still there. He was playing there on the porch, and he had a nugget. One of what they call a drummer, a salesman, come by and said, "Let me see that, son."He looked at it and it was supposedly silver. He gave him fifty cents. Told him, "I'll pay you more if you take me"-- now, there's a little creek out there, Windham Creek -- "If you take me back and show me where you found this."He said he was just about eight or nine years old, playing along this creek. He was sure he could find it, so he took this fellow up there to show him where it was. He never could find the place where he found it.

APPENDIX C

You know, some people believe in haints and some don't. Ghosts or whatever they call 'em. But it's something. Something that I couldn't explain now. I've seen things, heard things. A lot of people don't believe it. But I have seen things happen on different occasions, living in the country. It's unexplainable. I don't know why or what it was, but I've seen things that I just couldn't explain what it was.

I was trying to remember the time that three fellows came up and asked me to go with 'em and show 'em where I had seen, what they said, the haints, spirits. I actually seen it, and they said wherever you see somethin' like that, well usually treasure, money buried around. These three fellows came up and asked me would I show 'em where I seen this spirit or whatever it was. I'm gettin' ahead.

What I really seen, must've been about nine, ten years old. About first dark one night, I was on my way home. First I heard something that sounded like singin', moanin' a song or somethin'. I stopped to see what it was, and then when I did see it, it looked almost like them clouds out there. But it wasn't as big as that cloud, it was just like a vapor like. But it was just floatin' through the air.

I couldn't make out what it was, and when I realized it wasn't real, when it passed by the chicken house, the chickens started cuttin' up. And it came in front of me, and went

out in the [inaudible] and just settled down. But it was still like it was singin'. By that time, I done got up enough nerve in my feet to run. And I taken off to the house. Run in there and told my dad about it. And so he said, "Oh, it's just somebody out there tryin' to scare you." And he got up, got the shotgun, went outside. I told him, I went out to the porch and showed him where the last time I seen it was.

So he went on out that aways. I come on back in the house, waitin' to hear the gun to go off. Few minutes, still hadn't heard the gun go off, I heard him comin' back runnin'! He said when he got out there, when he raised that gun up to where I had told him that thing was, said somethin' got all over him and that gun. Man, he come back in that house. Said somethin' was out there.

After that, these two men came along must've been about twenty-five, thirty years later, wanting to know where did I see this at. And I told 'em. They asked me could they go back there. Well, the house had been torn down and all growed up out there now. So anyway, I'm takin' 'em out there, and these fellows had one of these treasure things, like you hunt buried treasure with. He had one of those, and one of 'em had some other kind of little gimmick. Another had a little Testament, a New Testament.

I got to the place we was supposed to go. So this fellow with the little Bible, he went out and sat down on a log and started readin'. Fellow with this treasure deal, he started movin' it around on the ground. Finally this thing started makin' some kind of whining noise. Gettin' louder and louder. And so he said, "Somethin' down here." We got a shovel and dug down in there. Kept in and dug a little more.

Finally didn't did no more. We takin it out the hole, and that's where they found it. When we did find it, a fifty cents piece. Search and search, couldn't find nothin' else. I said, "Well, this ain't where I seen the haint at. It's over here between these two cedar trees. We went over there. He got in between them trees, and I said, "It's closer to the one on the right." And so he went over that way, and that thing started makin' this whinin' noise and goin' on.

At this time, a great big, I say a blackbird. Looked like a blackbird to me, but it was real black. It looked like it was blue. But it had a real yellow beak, and two big orange eyes, and he lit up in that cedar tree and he starts making croakin' noise like a crow. Then

another'n, then another'n. The more we searched, the more them big old birds get in that tree.

Finally, them birds, got so many got in that tree it look like it was just leanin' backwards and forwards. This man told me, said, "I tell you what, somethin's been here. But somebody done found it now." Said, "We better go!"

He packed up his junk, we left. But I honestly believe they went back out after I had helped them locate where I thought. I didn't know what was there, but I believe they located somethin' and they went back after they got rid of me. Keep from dividin' with me. If there was anything there, keep from dividin' with me. It was near night, so they carried me back home, and I wasn't about to go back there by myself! But anyway, that's what happened that particular night.