

Everyday Practice and Tradition: New Directions for Practice Theory in Ethnology and Folkloristics

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While a practice orientation has arguably been at the core of fields like European ethnology for decades (Klein 2009, 10; see also discussion in Bronner 2012, 23), there has more recently been a great proliferation of work on the subject in a wide variety of humanities and humanistic social science fields, a “practice turn in contemporary theory” (Schatzki et al. 2001). To some extent, the increasing centrality of everyday practice in cultural scholarship has seemingly come at the expense of other theoretical orientations, most especially the theories of performance which have long been a mainstay in American folkloristics. Billy Ehn, Orvar Löfgren, and Richard Wilk, for example, have recently articulated a clear vision along these lines for cultural research on “everyday life”:

In much cultural research, there has been a preoccupation with the explicit: the visible and dramatic. Therefore we want to turn the gaze away from such front-stage activities and move backstage. Instead of beginning with issues or statements that are constantly voiced, we argue for the use of side entrances. By starting in the everyday, it is possible to find surprising connections between small matters and large issues. Seemingly trivial routines may hide important conflicts or carry strong moral messages...the subtle details of daily life still hold many secrets. (Ehn, Löfgren, and Wilk 2015, 1)

This notion of the trivial and mundane, what Löfgren and Ehn call the “non-event” (Löfgren and Ehn 2010), can be taken as standing in direct opposition to the heightened expressive context of performance, for which the “event” has been a key conceptual piece (Bronner 2012, 31)¹ Yet, though it may initially seem so, a turn toward practice in cultural scholarship need not necessarily entail a turn away from performance, but rather a reframing the concepts of performance and practice as compatible. Margry and Roodenburg, for example, have argued that both performance and historical approaches are crucial to the study of the everyday, concluding that performance “is not opposed to everyday practices” and leaves “latitude for the unexpected, for the generation of new practices and meanings” (Margry and Roodenburg 2007, 5; see also Bennis 2006).

This volume of *Cultural Analysis* forms a response to both the fluorescence of interest in establishing new directions for practice theory and the longstanding rift between practice and performance orientations. Its work is threefold. First, it will

continue recent efforts to systematically assess the state of practice theory in ethnology and folkloristics by Harris Berger and Giovanna Del Negro (2002; 2004), Peter Jan Margry and Herman Roodenburg (2007), and Simon Bronner (2012), among others.² Second, through an international and interdisciplinary dialogue, this volume seeks to close the historical gap between concepts of performance and practice in the works of ethnologists and folklorists. Finally, it offers a view of a diverse array of new avenues for practice-based research in ethnology and folkloristics.

To that end, Simon Bronner's historical overview and look to the future in his essay "Toward a Definition of Folklore in Practice" provides a perfect launching point for the volume. Defining folklore as "traditional knowledge drawn from or put into practice," Bronner seeks to create an over-arching practice-based framework that can link together practice, knowledge, and performance instances, as well as "an array of materials with similar dynamic qualities," which can be used to delimit the material of study for folkloristics (p. 22). Moreover, Bronner argues, this reconsideration of one of the central tenets of American folkloristics is especially pressing, given the rapidly shifting everyday communicative dynamics that have arisen from the widespread use of digital technologies. Noting that "[t]he use of technology channels communication in ways that are different from face-to-face interactions but nonetheless produces actions that are recognizable as traditional," Bronner concludes that a practice-based definition for the field can better account for cultural interactions in digital spaces, but also that "the idea of practice, rather than performance, does not negate applications in 'analog' and pre-industrial culture" (p. 18).

Taking on a different aspect of practice, Matthias Klückmann's "Practicing Community: Outline of a Praxeological Approach to the Feeling of We-ness" follows some like terrain. He argues that folklorists, European ethnologists, and other cultural analysts would benefit by understanding the nature of "community," an important if diffuse category in cultural scholarship, in terms of the practice of "we-ness." Drawing on the work of Theodore Schatzki and Etienne Wenger, Klückmann points out that while community, that feeling of "we-ness," exists only in practice, scholars must also be sensitive to the framing of action "in a world with presuppositions" (p. 43). Thought and action must be joined to systematically understand the way community is established, maintained, and changed.

Rachel V. González-Martin in her "Digitizing Cultural Economies: 'Personalization' and US Quinceañera Practice Online" takes a similar approach. Her study examines how digitized forms of knowledge and practice increasingly work hand-in-hand with offline cultural practices. Through a focus on practice rather than identity or authenticity, González-Martin argues, we can expose how the digitization of the culture of *quinceañera*, a US-Latinx coming-of-age celebration, challenges the communalist traditions associated with the celebration by placing them within a neoliberal economic framework. At the same time, she points out, it also repositions both Latina identity within traditional gender hierarchies and, more broadly, Latinx identity within American culture.

Following González-Martin's emphasis on the significance of digitized knowledge

and practice, Anthony Bak Buccitelli's essay "Hybrid Tactics and Locative Legends: Re-Reading de Certeau for the Future of Folkloristics" seeks to place with work of a single practice theorist, Michel de Certeau, in a new framework that can better account for folk practice in our current, highly-mediated cultural conditions. Buccitelli offers an in-depth consideration of de Certeau's scholarship on the history of folklore studies in France, arguing that an examination of his treatment of this history can usefully inform our understanding of his larger theoretical program. From this historiographic base, Buccitelli makes the case that, especially in a world increasingly layered with digital information, certain aspects of de Certeau's platform must be altered to account for newly emerged possibilities of joining the individual and social in the practice of everyday life.

Roma Chatterji, in her essay "Repetition, Improvisation, Tradition: Deleuzian Themes in the Folk Art of Bengal," offers a similar re-thinking of questions of practice in response to globalized media flows. Engaging Gilles Deleuze's work on repetition, Chatterji posits that in repetition we can locate a form of artistic agency that is "multiple and synthetic rather than autonomous and subjective" and embodied in "their practices rather than their finished artworks" (p. 100). In framing her study of *chitrakars*, traditional narrative performers who make use of painted scrolls in West Bengal, she seeks to chart a middle ground between the habitual learning model of folk craft and the autonomous novelty model characteristic of the modern art world.

Following up on the notion of aggregated repetition of vernacular action, Casey Schmitt argues in "The Tactical Trail: Sense of Place and Place of Practice, that individual repeated actions represent aggregate forms of resistance against (and, sometimes, support for) structures of power. Schmitt uses a case study of the practices of trail hikers to bring forth and analyze tactical actions that are synchronically isolated but diachronically linked through the repetition or aggregation of observable behaviors, narratives, and or durable traces of past actions on pathways. He argues that calling attention to "trailways as *doxa*" and to hiking practices as a folk response that both shapes and is shaped by these trailways will provide insight into the "relationship between humans and biophysical surroundings" in ways that can usefully inform efforts to create a sustainable ecology (p. 140).

The final article of the volume, Harris M. Berger and Giovanna P. Del Negro's "Reasonable Suspicion: Folklore, Practice, and the Reproduction of Institutions," turns one of the key elements of the foregoing discussion on its head. Rather than looking at folk practices as responses to institutional structures, Berger and Del Negro examine the role that folklore plays in the reproduction of institutions. Analyzing the legal and bureaucratic means by which modern organizations are established and legitimated, Berger and Del Negro call attention to the critical role that everyday folk practices of both workers and managers play in the production and reproduction of institutions.

Taken as a whole, the essays in this volume form a diverse yet, in many ways, cohesive statement about the central need for practice orientations in folklore, ethnology, and other cultural studies that can link together our understanding of the individual and social, synchronic and diachronic action, and marked performance

with everyday tactics. This need is only underlined by the increasingly blurriness that many of these articles highlight between the institutional and vernacular in the media-heavy cultural terrain of neoliberal capitalism.

Joining our article authors in signaling the need for new directions in practice theory in folklore and ethnology, Maria Schwertl's thoughtful debate essay offers the concept of "enactment" as a possible middle ground concept that can fuse many of the dichotomies discussed in the volume's articles. Similarly, Monique Scheer, in her thoughtful discussion of the volume as a whole usefully points out that we must consider not just the functioning of knowledge, cognition, or individual agency against a backdrop of structure, but also the "sensory, affective, and emotional dimension" of practice. She observes that "[t]he body as the medium for experience is produced by practice, making experience itself historically and culturally situated" (p. 179), and yet notes that the everyday cultural conditions created by the pervasive use of digital media calls for the question of how to analyze practice without "bodily co-presence" (p. 181). As Scheer's response also suggests, although engaging with issues of practice through a range of approaches and concepts, the editors and authors of *Everyday Practice and Tradition* are brought together in our shared desire to begin a new kind of conversation about practice theory and, more broadly, the conceptual bases of folkloristics and ethnology. We hope that this volume will form the basis for much future discussion.

Notes

- 1 As an example of how this opposition can be structured, Slavoj Žižek, amplifying the transcendent notion to its limit, has described an event as a moment of emergence in which we locate "a change of the very frame through which we perceive the world and engage it" (Žižek 2014, 12).
- 2 It should be noted that several contributors to this volume have long called for further attention to issues of practice in folkloristics. See Bronner 1986; 1988; Berger 1997; 1999; and Del Nergo and Berger 2001.

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