

Agonistic Disciplines and Existential Anxieties A Reflective Response¹

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This volume gathers a set of articles that is at once heterogeneous and unified, even if those similarities do not cut across all four perspectives. Consequently, the emergent similarities speak volumes about the present state of the scholarly domain covered by folkloristics, ethnology, and anthropology. Due to my interdisciplinary background and position (professor of cultural research), I do not tote a single disciplinary allegiance, which may grant me some neutrality in the matters discussed here in *Cultural Analysis*.

This special issue celebrates the fiftieth anniversary of a scholarly organization: SIEF (Société Internationale d'Ethnologie et de Folklore). Considering the time span, we observe a venerable age encompassing experience from two centuries, and numerically bridging two millennia. It is an age that, by human standards, typically connotes prominence, position, successors and legacy. Nevertheless, we are called upon now to think "outside the box," and to reflect upon the metaphor of "box" suggested by the anniversary symposium title. The phrase can refer to a certain dynamic (imagine a Jack-in-the-box!) or a forward look (exiting the confined space to enjoy a limitless cosmos), and either is indicative of how diversely contributing authors understand, or reflect upon, the notion of "box." What is the substance of a box? How does one appear to be boxed? What does such boxing mean? To what extent is this metaphor related to signification, or to location and positioning? What kind of experiential or existential reference does it entail? And what does it mean to be *outside* the box?

All in all, regardless of the celebratory occasion, these writings are draped in anxiety, which appears to be existential and representational. This tone does not reflect simply personal predicaments or misgivings, but testifies to a wider concern. Disquiet in regard to signification and concurrent representation has a historical aura and mark by itself that was expressed decades ago in the programmatic alert to "folklore's crisis" (Kirshenblatt-Gimblett 1998), or the notoriously inspirational inquisition into "writing culture" (Clifford and Marcus 1986). The prevailing anguish emanates from the past and naming, from placing and positioning. Even if the anxiety is not new, an exploration into organizational or disciplinary history appears poignant, presenting a recurrent and ceaseless existential apprehension. An existential situation denotes

a challenge that derives from the etymology of “existence”: standing or being positioned out(side). It creates a vacuum in the meaning of being; it is a search for and interrogation of being, while previously established truths crumble. We find ourselves standing at a crossroad, beckoned to undertake a quest for a new meaning and a new truth ...

Ironically, Konrad Köstlin’s piece addressing the practice of celebration is not too reassuring when registering irritation with the current culture of commemoration. The modernist memory boom testifies to an obsession with the past which simultaneously appears to be triggered by recognizable insecurity and anxiety towards continuity. A celebration of an anniversary is indicative of the modernist culture of remembrance, which thrives on, as well as generates, moments of meaning. Such celebratory meaning-making around the experience of temporality corresponds with the cult of heritage and imposes power: it claims diachronic dimension through experienced past, as well as synchronic extension by recognition and signification. Köstlin detects a particular void in the scholarly endeavor of European ethnology today: can we recognize the problems of the contemporary, or are we too engaged in reminiscing? The predicament that all these contributions fundamentally face is being caught in a relation to the past that is juxtaposed with a relation to the present.

An anniversary brackets through a process of naming in a powerful way: it refers to past experience, of a physical place habited and a mental space with which it is associated. Nevertheless, naming and status are instrumentally reciprocal. Just the other day, I came across a thought-provoking name-change: a regular cultural event in Estonia called *folkloorifestival*, which had been occurring for thirty years, has been newly dubbed *pärimuspidu*, meaning “traditional fete.” This change demonstrates a visible preference of a vernacular word in opposition to international loanwords. It appears symptomatic of claiming turf and expressing sensibilities that (re)order ideological space. This act of naming entails a semantic function when carrying information, revealing identity, and giving meaning. This act is descriptive and multidirectional, charged by extension and intention: it extends a connotation while it intends a denotation. It refers to and expresses, with intentional and representational meaning. According to Kantian epistemology, human inquiry makes the truth and then structures the world by representing it. Naming fixes reference, and by studying the activity of representation, we may reveal formal, conceptual, or structural truths about the world experienced.

In his contribution, Bjarne Rogan expresses anxiety related to naming, which at the same time indexes disciplinary histories that morph into organizational politics. The naming debate was appended with propositions and acts

of renaming that were permeated by the agon between disciplines, a long lasting struggle between adversaries. An agonistic perspective illustrates well a basically democratic situation where, according to Chantal Mouffe, one shares with the “adversary” a common allegiance to principles, while disagreeing about their interpretation (Mouffe 2013, 7). The strife between or engagement with the designations folklore-ethnology-anthropology (give or take the sequence or pairing preferred: ethnology-folklore, folklore-anthropology, ethnology-anthropology) indicates disciplinary transitions, or overlap, in a diverse manner that becomes about institutional politics. The scholarly organization celebrated in SIEF represents historical acts of institutionalization: ones that refer to particular knowledge formats and disciplinary knowledge production within institutionalized genealogies.

However, the descriptive aspect inherent to the process of naming appears to be relative, if only in the linguistic sense, calling us to contemplate whether language structures *or* copies the world. An answer to the question of whether a name should be considered constructive or referential is actually indicative of politics. It comprises the act of knowledge production that relates to the tension between ontology and epistemology, the basis of any scholarly inquiry. The representational nature of language has an important function here, alongside location and place of origin. It depends on where a particular institution is situated, on the academic conventions and contingencies in that country or region, and on disciplinary histories. In addition, one notices an equivocal use of scholarly terms in English by non-native speakers who utilize a *lingua franca* with vernacular conceptions tacitly guiding their expression. Based on the historiographical scuffle he renders, Rogan needs to draw a clear distinction between “ethnology” and “folklore” in the English version of his text. This case stands in contrast to the discussion of the discipline of folklore (folkloristics, folklore studies) in the comprehensive recent publication, which smoothly traverses that space as a basically unified field of scholarly inquiry, corresponding to the academic tradition in the United States (see Bendix and Hasan-Rokem 2012).² There remains the question of whether (folk) narrative and verbal art are treated inclusively with material culture and social practice, or independently, and what their relationships have been with philological investigations in particular academic territories. A vernacular term that has been usually historically expedient in the nation-building process may be indicative here. If the Swedish *folklivsforskning* refers to “folklife research” with a general connotation of materiality, practice and repertoire, then the Finnish *kansanrunouden tutkimus* denotes the study of folk poetry as a separate field from folklife studies in Finland (covered by *kansatiede*). Understandably, institution-

al camps have once mattered greatly when politically motivated taxonomies defined the fields and textual relationships were opposed to social interaction. Today, however, broader research perspective “ceases to warrant distinct epistemology” according to Michael Herzfeld, who points out that once prominent philological studies have been tempered with social and performative contextualization (Herzfeld 2002, 237).

Even if there are “institutionalized forms” of transmitting particular concepts and establishing methodology or terminology, Regina Bendix brings forth “porous disciplinarity” that is historically built on an interdisciplinary foundation (Bendix 2012, 364). Engagement in a discipline’s present has significantly changed particularly due to reflexive awareness of the fields past. If *Völkerkunde* in the German-speaking academia dealt with the cultural history of external others, and *Volkskunde* with the historical others within the national cultural tradition, they both derived from a historicist and museum-oriented tradition, which were widely criticized for being politically instrumentalized in the enterprises of nation- or empire-building.

In the present, academic folklore studies are situated among a number of other fields and share large portions of discourse with them, where Bendix and Hasan-Rokem suggest an inconclusive situation between the humanities and the social sciences (2012, 2). But exactly the same has been stated about anthropology, whilst institutionalized genealogies may overlap in many countries. Clifford Geertz, for example, has claimed that anthropology “was born omniform” (1983, 21). What matter, though not in a contentious or definitive way, is the research location with certain concomitant idiosyncrasies of research practice. There appears a particular spatial difference when research at home is juxtaposed with explorations carried out overseas or to investigations conducted in an archive. However, even this does not define disciplinary allegiance in these days of global access, mobility, and IT environments. Also, presentist practice should retain reflexivity: knowledge about the historical dimension should be balanced with a critical reassessment of organizational or disciplinary legacy.

In the academic context, we deal with the meaning and reference between identifying a field and the question of subject matter, which simultaneously means claiming presence and establishing ontology. The naming process has not happened due to the “metaphysical necessity” of confronting things—and then baptizing them—but by adjusting to the “epistemic necessity” of an institutionalized field, an established rigidity of designation, and of formal and structural truths. Richard Rorty has argued such necessity when pointing out the pragmatist claim in naming something with an intention of attaining a particular goal, of having an agenda (Rorty 1980).

In her contribution, Jasna Čapo expresses anxiety about established disciplinary hierarchies, and about positioning in these imaginary scales (with rather material consequences). She observes particular historical constraints of institutionalization that at the same time illuminate particular practices of research, defined by disciplinary borders, which are foremost seen to be ideological. Such problematization is paralleled with the question of “othering”: othering of folklorists or othering of “native” research in post-socialist condition, even though the application of othering implies a constraining homogenization of the counterpart. It seems that fixation on locational East-West (European) dichotomy may be paralyzing, and presenting perhaps an agenda of “the Other” who “writes back.” Nevertheless, it still points, again, to the location of school and to disciplinary idiosyncrasies. These factors depend on distinctive research practices in Britain that may not correspond to those in the United States, as they derive from certain academic history, politics of methodology, and politics of practice. The American Anthropological Association, for example, claims to advance the study of humankind through ethnological research, which is listed as one of the four fields besides archaeological, biological and linguistic ones. In many cases the use of ethnology and anthropology appears to be interchangeable, even prominent encyclopedias see them to be broadly the same (e.g., Byron 2002, 208; Bendix 2012).

However, the crucial factor lurking in the background is obviously a struggle for a position vis-à-vis an academic institution and its inherent hierarchies, which defines access to financial resources. The aggravating debates in (and about) Central Eastern Europe suggest that the authority of knowledge is essentially about issues of indoctrination. Yet it should be pointed out that disciplinary compartmentalization no longer assumes serious validity outside the institutional politics. Čapo (in reference to Chris Hann) does not dispute so much disciplinary fields but particular disciplinary histories—about scholarly practices that have established certain hierarchies of knowledge (in and for CEE). However, what sticks out is a separate existential problem, whether CEE is treated as an object or a subject in the research process. Such tension reflects the circumstance of knowledge production that has, alternately or concurrently, been imbued by imperial colonial, national communist, and post-socialist post-colonial context and ideology.

For the sake of fairness, these grievances should be balanced also with the existential anxieties and misrepresentation concerning anthropology. The latter has never been homogeneous or substantially grounded, since it is similarly diverse and torn by struggles or a sense of demise (even subordination) when anthropology compares itself to sociology or cultural studies. Claims for “the

end of anthropology” have appeared (see Jebens and Kohl 2011), although one should admit that narratives of “the end” may be a popular literary device. Anthropology, prominently conceptualized and criticized in the past as aiming at an immediate understanding, subduing, and taming of the Other (Kohl 2011, 5), has likewise attempted to free its scholarly production from the naïve empiricism of predecessors when facing modern societal and cultural change alongside with the challenges of global transformations. To boot, in addition to the general reconceptualization of alterity and distance, the overarching restructuring of university systems has apparently compelled anthropologists to cede their field of study to political scientists, economists, and sociologists, or to feel threatened supposedly by post-colonial studies, cultural studies, literary criticism, etc. (Jebens and Kohl 2011).

Orvar Löfgren, instead, places his anxiety outside of disciplinary positioning when discussing a research topic in another locus: the domestic space of “home.” He deals with the subject matter, and thus reflects on the knowledge production. He considers a contemporary problem that recognizes transdisciplinary “turns” in theory and practice, as well as focus. In his treatment of ethnology and cultural analysis, the spotlight falls on the everyday and foregrounds a research problem, appearing negligent of disciplinary allegiance. It could be either ethnology or anthropology of the quotidian, where “home” is seen as a moral economy. On the one hand, he has been inspired by the leading anniversary metaphor when discussing “the black box” of everyday life, clutter, and memories (cf. Stocking 2010). On the other hand, one may discern a certain type of positioning in this argumentation, as the existential anxiety of material affluence is clearly a Western (or European?) concern, making a geopolitical allegiance transparent.

In conclusion, my elaboration on the topics raised by the current journal issue of *Cultural Analysis* and the occasion of celebrating the SIEF anniversary dealt with the agonistic concerns that are simultaneously inspired by the suggestion to “think the world politically” (Mouffe 2013). From my perspective, the bottom line is that these existential reflections are all about politics, when one feels the need to (re)consider positions of institutions, positions of disciplines, their allegiance and histories. All the while, the underlying question emerges: how do we relate to the modern world?

Existential problems—an agonistic stance and the search for renewal—strike me as ubiquitous. Perhaps we may hope together with Marilyn Strathern that a renewed cogent discipline emerges from its own history, “from its fortunes and misfortunes” as a “fresh instrument” of education, which appears to be paramount (Rabinow *et al* 2008). The moral necessity for our field

of research urges us to learn more about the human condition and disseminate this knowledge. Therefore, even though it is good to know your history (to practice a culture of remembrance), an academic venture should stress forward-looking, alongside retrospect wisdom, as well as the search for prospective experimental practices.

What comes “after” should be important, both in our research and in our organization. I do not think that these disciplines participate in a movement with a particular end in themselves. Under revised circumstances, we face new themes and new topical arenas, with shifting attention on contemporary events and problems, because the research objects have changed for everybody. We are obliged to be far-reaching in our reflection on the human condition outside of parochial confinement, while being charged by interdisciplinary theoretical thought. In this contemporary flux of transition, mobility, and also insecurity, we all undergo restructuring of university systems and academic institutions. Disciplinary allegiance appears to be necessary when protecting institutional camps, but the current dynamics and trends call for openness and motion in research. It seems essential to retain reflexivity towards (your disciplinary) concepts. Both our research environments and objects of study have fundamentally changed. Thus our inquiries, our research questions, need to be critical and generative, and not so reconstructive.

When we design and contemplate these new research questions, we come to realize the vital importance of scholarly networking and collegial support. There is no better opportunity for reaching that goal than a scholarly society: such association secures exchange of knowledge and networking, it creates a collegial family where disciplinary divisions no longer matter. While I have been writing this commentary over the course of a few weeks, several people with different backgrounds and from many different countries have asked me if I shall go to Zagreb! This is quite a telling sign that testifies to the importance and scope of such a get-together. We are assembling in one location as a scholarly network to hold the twelfth SIEF Congress, to debate, to share knowledge, and to extend our minds among people with similar goals and interests.

Notes

- 1 This work is supported by the European Regional Development Fund (Centre of Excellence in Cultural Theory) and by the Estonian Ministry of Education and Research (institutional research grant IUT34-32).
- 2 Wiley-Blackwell’s 2012 edition *A Companion to Folklore*, edited by Regina Bendix & Galit Hasan-Rokem. Notably, this may be paralleled with *A Companion to the Anthropology of Europe*, edited by Ullrich Kockel, Máiréad Nic Craith and Jonas Frykman in 2013 that significantly encompasses the perspective of European ethnology.

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