

Responses

The Folklorist as Translator: Translation, Folkloristics, and Disciplinary Self-Reflection

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Among the many core concepts of folkloristics, *translation* often operates behind the scenes—relied upon and indispensable, yet much overlooked and rarely critically examined. By bringing translation to the forefront, this special issue seeks to reposition translation as a core theoretical, methodological, and ethical concern in the discipline, rather than as a purely linguistic or mechanical process.

The focus on Chinese folkloristics provides a particularly compelling context for this rethinking. The history of Chinese folkloristics is, in many ways, a continuous history of translation. From the ancient collection of folksongs in *The Book of Odes*, to the adoption of the Japanese term *folklore* in the early twentieth century, and to the large-scale documentation of folk literature and ethnic oral traditions after the founding of the PRC—translation has consistently functioned as a mediating force. Across its various practices—collection, compilation, transcription, and publication—both state and scholarly forces have played active roles in organizing, codifying, and reimagining vernacular traditions. These intertwined processes reveal the complex character of translation as a form of cultural technology, a mode of scholarly practice, a vehicle of knowledge production, and a profound-

ly political act. This multi-dimensional complexity is effectively exemplified and highlighted through the cases studies featured in this issue.

In Bender and Thurston's collaboration with Nuosu and Tibetan communities, translation is reframed as a process of co-authorship and creative negotiation, raising crucial questions about authority, applicability, and the scholar's ethical responsibility in cross-cultural engagement. In Luo's study of Sino-American quilt exhibitions, translation becomes a curatorial and institutional dialogue, in which ethnographers and curators mediate between cultural systems and transform local expressions into shared representations. Zhang's analysis of twentieth-century English translations of Chinese folktales further highlights the ideological dimensions of translation, revealing the power structures embedded in unequal global discourses and cross-cultural mediation. Through interlingual, intersemiotic, intermedial, intercultural, and interdisciplinary engagements, translation emerges as a process, practice, and politics.

The in-depth exploration of this complexity shows an effort of conceptualizing folklorists as *translator*, which continues a long scholarly lineage of self-reflection on the ethnographer's subject position. Appiah's "thick translation" (Appiah 1993), as invoked in this issue as a central approach, recalls Geertz's "thick description" (Geertz 1973) that emphasized not only detailed engagement with the phenomenon and its context, but also "interpretive effort and self-consciousness about modes of representation" (Thermans 2017, 386–87). Within folkloristics, this reflective lineage extends from early feminist ethnography and fieldwork the-

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ory (Collins 1990) to Kurin's notion of the "cultural broker" in the context of public exhibitions (Kurin 1997), and to more recent reflections on the "mediator" (Wells 2006) and dialogism in public folklore (Baron 2016).

On one level, the rich translation practices in this issue—whether working collaboratively with tradition bearers, community intellectuals, or colleagues across linguistic and disciplinary boundaries—offer concrete, applicable methodological insights for such diverse engagements of the folklorist-translator. On another level, this conceptualization foregrounds what the folklorist-translator undertakes, including translation, is an "ethical and political act" (Haring 2012, 9)—"the harder project of a genuinely informed respect" for the autonomy of others (Appiah 1993, 818).

In a world marked by power asymmetries, this harder project is particularly crucial to generate a truly dialogic collaboration at the grassroots level—one that enables local and minority communities to voice their perspectives and construct alternatives to dominant narratives. As Haring reminds us, "Translation is, no doubt, the most telling instrument to awaken the hegemonic consciousness" (Haring 2012, 18), helping to make visible differences in interest and power. In this light, Bender's notion of *attendance* in translation—the translator's responsibility to remain present and accountable—becomes profoundly meaningful, reminding folklorists of their ethical duty to the continuity of local cultural traditions.

Along the same line, another intriguing effort of this issue is to theorize the discipline itself through the lens of translation. As Zhang quoted Haring, "all folklore studies are translations" (p. 91, from

Haring 2011, 32). This perspective refers not only to the translated texts upon which folkloristics depends but also to the discipline's fundamental concern with the interactions between cultures. In this sense, translation is not peripheral but constitutive of folkloristics. If we accept this premise, then re-theorizing through translation should not stop at the conceptualization of the folklorist as translator. It must also extend to the practitioners of folklore in everyday life—the "expressive contact zones" (McDowell 2010) and the processes of cultural creolization—to examine their "cultural proficiency" (Haring 2012, 18) in negotiating expressive boundaries.

The re-theorizing of folkloristics as translation in this issue also reminds us of a familiar phenomenon in our discipline, which is the "folklorizing" of theories from other disciplines. From feminist folkloristics, ethnography studies, to performance theory and now translation research, folkloristics continually absorbs and reinterprets interdisciplinary insights. In today's era of methodological and theoretical hybridity, such cross-fertilization is inevitable. Yet, as Haring warns, not all voices survive the process—folkloristics sometimes remains unheard, as seen in the neglect of oral literature within translation studies (Haring 2012).

Thus, the reaffirming of the field's empirical and ethnographic foundations through *thick* translation practices in this issue deserves particular recognition. As Mills' provocative call in her review on feminist folkloristics reminds us, as a "low-theory, experience-near" field, folkloristics must ensure that its distinctive field-based epistemologies and research practices are not diluted in the

course of theoretical hybridity, but rather foregrounded as indispensable sources of insight—“back to data and the practice—back to the future” (Mills 1993, 87). Seen in this light, whether the folklorist as translator or folkloristics as translation, this issue invites us to continually reawaken and sustain the self-reflective spirit at the heart of the discipline.

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