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“When people fuss about definitions, the word in the ‘X’-place is almost always an abstract noun whose primary importance is as a label for a problematic area of discourse, not as the name of an elusive essence.” (A. W. Sparkes, Talking Politics, p.5. London: Routledge, 1994)

The problem of the F-word

Much has been written about the outdated, ambiguous, embarrassing, stigmatized word that gives the name to our field.1 “Folklore” is a word we can neither live with nor, apparently, live without. The term is a moving target, impossible to pin down. “The folk,” to some, denotes a submissive lower class deluded by paternalism and not yet awakened to political self-consciousness. To others, folklore is a rich repository of resistance and alternative histories. Folklore can evoke both the pseudo culture imposed by authoritarian governments and the presumably authentic culture that resists this. The word is tinged alternately with condescension, nostalgia, and defensiveness.

If folklore is a spoiled concept, “bad to think with” even in Europe where it was created, it is still more problematic when applied to non-Western societies. Arriving with colonialism or other forms of modernity, it is imposed without understanding of local cultural distinctions or simply applied as a blanket framework to all non-Western expressions. How do we, the folklorists who persist in believing there is a there there, save ourselves? Is it reasonable to talk of folklore and the folk in non-Western societies? Or even in the West itself?

The dominant recent North American response to the problem of the “F-word” has been to attempt to define it more precisely or, more recently, to find a satisfactory substitute—in fact, a euphemism. But these are not solutions. As we know from the work of Bakhtin and his collaborators, the imposition of a definition from above does not erase the history of a term nor prevent it from circulating among new users whose agendas will continue to reshape it. And euphemisms, as the history of social discrimination tells us, progressively acquire the stigma of the phenomenon they label. While social inequality persists, cultural goodwill will ultimately be ineffective—a point that is especially important in the current global climate.

Tied to subaltern status, “folklore” has recently benefited from a broader euphemistic move in global discourse: the emergence of “culture” and “identity” as positive veilings of such concepts as “race” and “inequality”. Less contemporary and global in resonance than its neighbor concepts, folklore has not been fully rehabilitated, but both multiculturalism within Western nation-states and international initiatives such as UNESCO’s Intangible Heritage Convention or the World Intellectual Property Organization’s Intergovernmental Committee on Genetic Resources, Traditional Knowledge, and Folklore are expanding the institutional space in which folklorists operate. Today culture is widely credited with explanatory power, as in the “clash of civilizations” account of conflict. In the economic realm as well as the political, “Let them eat culture” has become the most charismatic solution to the problem of inequality. Culture and identity, treated as synonymous and associated with readily distinguishable, preferably ethnically defined “communities,” are more visible than society, economy, or politics. Although these other abstractions have their limitations also, there are dangers to making a god term of “culture.”

Sociocultural differentiation through categories

In this special issue, we propose an alternative strategy to that of the rhetorical cleansing that would strive to free our field of stigma. At the same time, we hope to open up the larger question of how cultural strategies are used for social, economic, and political ends. We suggest that a major theoretical mission of folklore studies is the study of sociocultural differentiation: how and why and under what circumstances societies begin to distinguish social actors through their cultural markers. (This formulation relies on assumptions we may eventually wish to reject, but it provides a starting point.)

As part of this larger mission, we propose to examine the explicit sociocultural categories used to make such distinctions as they move in and out of more general classificatory systems. The Western and particularly American examples are innumerable: folk, superstition, subculture, cult (as in “cult movies”), world (as in “world literature”), classical, traditional, popular, longhair, chickflick, canonical, primitive, multicultural, archaic, kitsch, survival, ethnic (not all cultural forms are understood as ethnic), countercultural, Philistine, mass, radical, fundamentalist, alternative, outlaw, trash. Some of these are of long standing and have been accepted by
society or scholars as legitimate conceptual categories, inherent to the nature of things rather than tied to a particular historical moment. Some may be more ephemeral. What do they have in common?

- They identify certain cultural practices with a certain social milieu or actors, distinguished by class/status, generation, gender, ethnic origin, ideology, education, lifestyle, or mode of consumption/production.
- They are abstract, capable of encompassing multiple cases. In this we distinguish a category (e.g. “folklore”) from a label (e.g. “hiphop”). It is worth exploring, however, the movement back and forth between these two levels.
- They carry a heavy evaluative charge, positive or negative depending on the user’s position. They are contested across social locations. Thus
- Over time they accumulate powerful mixed resonances and multiple meanings. All of these terms, even the most localized, are moving targets. Although they are often used as if they were “natural” categories, in fact their meaning cannot be separated from their history.
- They tend to emerge as descriptive categories, seeking to recognize and name a newly visible cultural phenomenon. Over time, however, they become prescriptive, used as guidelines for the generation of new work. This is true not only of controlled hierarchical societies in which creators are pressured to conform to a certain aesthetic, but also of capitalist cultural economies in which a sociocultural category is also a potential market niche.
- Their significance is contrastive, by definition. Each category has one or more implicit Others. Thus sociocultural categories tend to accumulate and come to constitute a more or less open classificatory system. Some scholars may develop rigid schemata intended to be all-encompassing (e.g. High Culture/Mass Culture/Folk Art [MacDonald 1953]), and some societies may draw sharp boundaries intended to maintain threatened distinctions (e.g. “la cour” and “la ville” in seventeenth-century France [Auerbach 1953 (1946)]). Or systems may be fluid, the extreme case being that of global market capitalism in which categories compete for adherents and boundaries are not considered desirable.

The scholarship and the challenge of comparison

A great deal of work has been done on the history of sociocultural categories in the West in the past seventy years. Landmark works include Norbert Elias’ Über den Prozess der Zivilisation (1939); Raymond Williams’s Culture and Society (1956) and Keywords (1983); Peter Burke’s Popular Culture in Early Modern Europe (1978); Pierre Bourdieu’s La Distinction: critique sociale du jugement (1979); Lawrence W. Levine’s Highbrow/Lowbrow: The Emergence of Cultural Hierarchy in America (1988) and, in our own field, Richard Bauman’s and Charles Briggs’ Voices of Modernity: Language

Ideologies and the Politics of Inequality (2003). Within anthropology and literary studies, there has been intensive recent discussion of the culture concept. Folklorists and historians have addressed specific sociocultural categories such as “folklore” and “tradition” along with related terms such as “authenticity.” Furthermore, much has been said within postcolonial thought about the imposition of Western categories on non-Western phenomena and in general the problem of putting “singularities” into categories at all (c.f. Chakrabarty 2000, 82-83). Undoubtedly much work has also been done on cultural differentiation in non-Western societies. But this work has not reached me, a specialist in Europe, and it is certainly not familiar to North American folklorists or cultural studies scholars in general.

Both Western scholars needing to deprovincialize themselves and non-Western scholars struggling with the overweening presence of Western theory can benefit from a comparative discussion of sociocultural labelling in a wide variety of societies. Where do we find socially marked style choices or a high degree of explicit cultural categorization? Where is cultural difference a means of claiming social distinction or stigmatizing social difference? The obvious starting point for a search is the highly stratified societies stretching from South to East Asia. Here we might expect to find lexicons similar to those that emerged in Europe, with analogous social uses. But we also need to look at less stratified societies to examine the existence and nature of sociocultural differentiation, as well as the effects of colonialism and other processes of cultural contact.

To be sure, comparison in this vein immediately raises the specter of evolutionism. Indeed, the comparative venture has since the 1970s become suspect to right-thinking ethnographers, and a cordon sanitaire has been set about such projects as the comparative sociology of Jack Goody (which addressed cultural stratification directly, e.g. 1982) because of their various reductionisms. Now that the categories of social theory stand revealed as cultural, not universal, and the historical context of comparison is recognized to be imperialism, we do not know how to move forward. But we know that to linger eternally in particularisms is to be deprived of our theoretical and our political power. In practice, when we need to make claims regarding an ethnographic case to a larger audience, we are obliged to fall back on those discredited Western categories and speak of folklore, heritage, authenticity, and so on: this has been a worrying, if not a surprising, feature of North American folklorists’ recent interactions with national and international institutions (cf. Noyes forthcoming). Better than the shambling justification of “strategic essentialism” would be to deprovincialize our theory.

Indian scholarship has much to teach North Americans in this regard. In addition to the well-known
Subaltern Studies school, I have in working on this essay discovered the comparative sociology of André Béteille and his students, which traces the social and institutional trajectories of Indian social categories and compares these to equally well-contextualized Western conceptions of status, equality, and so on: a model for what needs to be done in the cultural field. Recent Western revivals of the comparative project offer other helpful frameworks. Gingrich and Fox (2002) propose the recovery of “subaltern comparativisms,” plural methodologies that emerged in various local anthropological projects but were overshadowed by grand-theory projects assuming the objectivity of cultural units and the universality of the categories of comparison. Along with Urban (1999), Gingrich and Fox point to the cognitive basis of comparison: to think at all is to compare new information to previous instances and form provisional, constantly revised schemata. They also point to the comparativism implicit in constituting a slice of social life as an object of study, shaped by scholarly labels and methods. Explicit comparativism, mindful of its foundations in vernacular and scholarly practices of comparison, may become useful again, provisional and exploratory. Most germane to our purposes here, Urban as well as Gingrich and Fox propose that a reconceived comparativism, unburdened by the old culture concept’s assumption of bounded units of comparison, can focus instead on flows and the transmission of cultural objects through time and space. And Kuper suggests that the task of the social anthropologist is precisely to mediate between vernacular and scholarly models, such that “conceptualizing society” is recognized as an activity shared across social locations (1992).

The notion of vernacular models takes us to other literatures. Cognitive science has had much to say about the categories of “folk psychology” and its construction of difference from the self outward (e.g. Hirschfeld 1996). Sociology and anthropology have done more to link categories and social process. The Durkheimian tradition, particularly as developed by Mary Douglas, examines classification systems as symbolic forms crystallizing social structures. Sociolinguists have traced empirically the differentiation of speech styles as “acts of identity” (Labov 1972, Le Page and Tabouret-Keller 1985). Pierre Bourdieu’s work reveals the power struggles that operate through classificatory practices, while insisting that their efficacy depends precisely on their inaccessibility to consciousness; the American tradition of the ethnography of communication, on the other hand, emphasizes culture’s capacity for reflexivity. Already in the 1970s this group was engaged in identifying native or “emic” categories of experience and expression (e.g. Ben-Amos 1976). More recently, Urban (2001) and others have produced a body of sophisticated theoretical work on culture’s self-consciousness as it is shaped in discourse and creates new metadiscursive objects, such as the sociocultural categories which are our subject here. This work offers a viable model for cross-cultural research that begins by not taking the categories of comparison for granted. But it makes heavy demands on both readers and practitioners, and if folklore research is to recover a critical mass of scholars engaged in comparative conversation internationally, it might usefully begin with the cruder “keyword” approach, tracing the social life of culture concepts in their broad outlines and, in particular, their interactions with one another.

Ethnographers tend to take face-to-face interaction as the ground of social life on which all institutions are constructed, crediting ordinary people with shaping power (and perhaps helping to explain their frequent investment in institutions they neither control nor profit by). Cultural studies scholars begin at the opposite extreme, privileging elite discourses and allowing subaltern actors to resist or appropriate these. It behoves us not to prejudge the theoretical dispute, but to trace the movement of concepts across milieus and demonstrate the interactions between them. Face-to-face interaction is already complex, encompassing both the “backstages” of different social groups and their public encounters (cf. Scott 1990). Then there are the various institutional discourses in which categories are rationalized, hardened, and perpetuated:

• scholastic traditions in poetics, theology, philosophy, and eventually social science (Bourdieu 1990)
• administrative structures: for example, the much-studied interaction in Colonial India of administrative and scholarly discourses of caste and tribe, with the opportunistic reifications that followed in social life (Xaxa 2003)
• political movements, whether hegemonic or resistant, in which categories become slogans, as in the history of the Volk in nineteenth-century Europe.
• marketing labels, as in the much-studied cooption of youth subcultures. But market categories also influence everyday, political, and academic formations, as in the following case.

An example: “world”

Here is a sketchy outline of one sociocultural category. In the U.S. and more broadly in the West the word “world” is increasingly fashionable as an adjective, globalization’s replacement for the nation-state’s “folk.” According to Feld, it appeared in the phrase “world music” in the early 1980s, promulgated by ethnomusicologists as a relativizing framework that could foster the inclusion of non-Western local musics in both syllabi and record shops. In the same period, an Austin, Texas radio host, Dan Del Santo, began using “world beat” to refer to urban musical hybrids such as salsa, reggae, and conjunto, a usage picked up by the music industry (1994, 265-67). Today the two have fused as “world music,” which has its own (smallish) place in Western record-store racks as the residual category for international music once existing market niches are exhausted.
Following on world music (and a boom in university ethnomusicology programs), world history, world literature, and “world arts and cultures” have recently emerged as specializations within North American academe. To be sure, world history and world literature have been seen in the curriculum before: both were important general-education courses in the period after the Second World War, and both fell into discredit and desuetude during the 1970s for their Eurocentric universalizing (Geyer and Bright 1995, Jusdanis 2003:110). The label “world” continues to raise anxieties about imperial ambitions: see, for example, Kirshenblatt-Gimblett on “world heritage” (2004).

The ground for the current institutionalization of “world” was laid, I suspect, not only by ethnomusicology’s example but by the music-driven global solidarity movements of the 1980s: recall the Band Aid and Live Aid concerts, with their refrain of “We are the world.” This new category is in a sense euphemistic: it reproduces the old West-and-the-Rest opposition, while positively valorizing the Rest. It is a friendlier, more “inclusive” way of dealing with the far side of the Western/ non-Western binary; another repressed Cold War antecedent is “Third World.” Thus “world music” designates all music that is not Western (eliding any distinctions that may be drawn in non-Western musics between, for example, court and village traditions).

More insidiously, “world literature” tends in practice to refer to non-Western literature written in Western languages, particularly English. In the first instance, this means postcolonial literature (Jusdanis 2003:123). But the horizon is moving: the category “world” identifies a new and expanding zone of cultural production by non-Western artists for largely Western audiences. This zone is, obviously, far more limited than the totality of world cultural production. “World music” and “world literature” are distributed through Western-owned channels; there are other channels. “World music” hybridizes local and Western genres and technologies. “World literature” adapts Western genres, primarily the novel. It has often been noted that what is marketed as “world literature,” energized by the influence of One Hundred Years of Solitude, tends to rely on the magical- realist formula, with its lush sensorium. Some have argued that this mode simply internalizes Western primitivism, forcing non-Western authors to exoticize themselves in order to reach a global market (Gabilondo 1999, Jusdanis 2003:119).

The most recent development is that the West itself is becoming “world.” Former folk musics are redefining themselves as world—Ireland, Brittany, Spain, and southern Italy provide good examples. The musics are becoming both more refined in their production values and more exotic in their form and performance, drawing on heavier, often more “African” rhythms, and invoking erotic and religious experience more explicitly. Minority-language and regional literatures within Europe are also imitating the “world” model, as is “multicultural” literature within the United States.

“Multicultural” is of course the intranational equivalent to the international “world.” Both labels indicate a kind of difference that can be incorporated within a larger system—first, because its distinctive signs are decorative rather than structural, and second, because its content belongs to certain zones of experience—the personal, the embodied, the erotic, the exotic, the past, the leisurely—that in Western modernity are less valued, less “serious.” Culture, identified with the West’s outer and inner Others, becomes a kind of tourism even for those others themselves: it does not participate in or challenge the ordinary working life of its consumer.

To be sure, ordinary working life is not what it was in Western thought. Increasingly, the precious modern construct of the individual self and the collective identities that magnify it are bound up not with working life but with consumption and leisure, the chosen and desired. Desire leads souls astray, beyond the anticipations of those industries that would excite, direct, and domesticate it. The emergence of a new category thus creates room for maneuver, a contact zone with open possibilities. Much “world literature” does open up new experience and new politics to its Western and indeed its “world” readers. And for every multinational that sells “world” culture in the same commodity forms used to push the conventional product, there is also the “world” of Porto Alegre and the alternative globalization movement, in which the rich countries are not taking the lead. The point is that a sociocultural category such as “world” is a moving target. It identifies not a fixed object but a zone of attention—and tension. As such, it incorporates conflicting resonances. “World” can be the human face corporations put on globalization to entice consumers or a banner of solidarity in the face of Western exploitation.

Modular forms of modernity and local revisions

In this special issue we begin to sort out the diffusion and revisions of the “F-word.” The essays that follow deal with the category of “folk” as one of the modular forms of the modern nation-state (Anderson 1991), showing how it has been translated and adapted in four national settings. Roma Chatterji describes the career of the categories “desha” and “marga,” proposed by Ananda Coomarasawmy as an indigenous Indian redrawing of the distinction between “folk” and “high.” Jing Li shows the framing of the folk as a source of national revitalization in late imperial China. Ipek Celik traces the recurrent Turkish reconfigurations of “the people” in political struggles over democracy and ethnic diversity. Mbogua wa-Mungai examines the popular refusal in Kenya of the school-promoted category, “oral literature.”

We hope that this issue, a collaboration between scholars from five countries, will foster further transnational discussion in a field where this has often been constrained by the nationalist framings of both theory and institutions. We invite the readers of Indian Folklife to help us fill in the larger history of sociocultural
differentiation, particularly looking for settings in which the debate is not framed by terms of Western origin. A genuinely global history of “folklore” and “the folk” has yet to be constructed.

End notes
2 A large emerging literature, much of it inspired in opposition to Samuel Huntington’s “clash of civilizations” argument, considers the hazards of “culturalism,” that is, the use of culture to account for and legitimate difference. A good sampling of culturalism in U.S. policy circles may be found in Harrison and Huntington ed. 2000. For large-scale accounts and critiques of the cultural turn from a variety of perspectives, see Handler 1988, Kuper 1999, Al-Azmeh 1999, Eagleton 2000, Yúdice 2003. For culturalism as it affects folklorists most directly, Kaschuba and Bendix 1999.
3 A sampling is cited in the previous footnote.
5 E.g. Béteille 2002 and the section on “morphological categories” in Das ed. 2003
7 To be sure, the “authentic” or “traditional” end of the spectrum is acquiring its own category as “roots” music, an earthier equivalent of “heritage” that similarly revives the problematic genetic analogy.

Works Cited