Book Reviews


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Unsettling Assumptions is, first and foremost, a compelling and readable book. Each chapter examines a folkloric or popular “text,” exploring the intersections of tradition, gender, and/or drag. Editors Pauline Greenhill and Diane Tye follow Jeff Todd Titon’s “notion that a text is any object of interpretation,” and accordingly these texts range across a variety of media and cultural practices (p. 4). This “broad generic and topical span” includes dress, family folklore, folktale, food, heritage, humor/legend, mumming/custom, personal experience narrative, music, and occupational folklore (p. 3). While this incredible variety might at first seem chaotic, the richness and diversity of the materials actually underscore the importance of recognizing and evaluating gender performativity in traditional materials and suggest multiple directions for further research.

The topics of the chapters, as well as the accompanying analyses, are often interdisciplinary, but folklore provides a grounding and unifying thread for the collection. In their introduction, Greenhill and Tye explicitly situate the book within the discipline of folklore. Concepts such as group, art, text, genre, performance, context, tradition, and identity serve as touchstones throughout the book, though chapters are not formally associated with particular terms. Indeed, the chapters are deliberately not grouped or organized thematically—rather, they are listed alphabetically by the authors’ surnames—in order to promote discussion across texts and categories and reinforce the editors’ resistance to hierarchies and rigid categorization.

This book adds to the growing body of work investigating the intersections between folklore and queer studies. While much folkloristic scholarship has addressed issues of gender, the heteronormative, cisgendered perspective has been privileged, and comparatively little work has been done from a queer or trans perspective. Unsettling Assumptions is an important contribution to this area of interdisciplinary folkloristics, particularly because it is relevant both to the teaching and study of folklore. The entire collection is clearly and accessibly written, and individual essays would be appropriate for undergraduate or graduate classes in folklore, gender studies, queer theory, or cultural studies.

As the title suggests, the book is, quite literally, unsettling to read at times. The chapters address identities and representations often shaped by patriarchal and colonial forces, and these influences can be reinforced or mimicked in cultural practices. For this reason, the content itself can be unsettling, and the authors actively work to bring these discrepancies and uncomfortable issues to light. This is perhaps most pronounced in chapter 1, “Three Dark-Brown Maidens and the Bromttopp: (De)constructing Masculinities in Southern Manitoba Mennonite Mumming,” by Marcie Fehr and Pauline Greenhill. This essay examines gender and “ethnic drag” in the Southern Manitoba Mennonite Bromttopp mumming tradition. In this holiday performance, male mummers cross-dress in female garb, reinforcing female stereotypes in their actions but maintaining enough masculine markers to avoid inadvertently passing. Some Bromttopp mummers also appropriate an ethnic identity through ethnic drag, dressing in order to mimic or evoke Chinese, Jewish, or First Nations identities. As is evidenced by this description, this performance is, in many ways, a minefield of sexist...
and racist stereotypes. Fehr and Greenhill choose to “employ feminist, queer, trans, and postcolonial lenses and theories” in order to show how the Brommtopp “once gave young men—and now gives older men—opportunities for] transgender, transethnic, and/or transracial identity exploration” and how this offers “insight into the fragmentation of hegemonic masculinity in Mennonite societies” (p. 20). While the analysis is thoughtful and sophisticated, I remain troubled that the gender/racial/ethnic exploration of the male informants discussed in the essay is possible only at a cost to the dignity and identities of women and people of color.

Standout essays in the collection include chapter 2, “Cutting a Thousand Sticks of Tobacco Makes a Boy a Man,” by Ann K. Ferrell; chapter 4, “From Peeping Swans to Little Cinderellas,” by Kendra Magnus-Johnston; and chapter 8, “Sexing the Turkey,” by LuAnne Roth. In her essay, Ferrell discusses the history and traditions surrounding Kentucky tobacco work, a very gendered occupation. Defining gender as “traditionalized performance,” she explores how the performance of masculinity, a kind of drag, impacts not only individual identity but also that of the community and corresponding class (p. 43). Continuing the discussion of male sexuality, Magnus-Johnston explores the queering of masculinity in cinematic depictions of Wilhelm and Jacob Grimm, the collectors and editors of Kinder- und Hausmärchen. The brothers’ fraternal bond and their scholasticism, Magnus-Johnston argues, open them to queering and feminization by the screenwriters and actors who re-create them. By contrast, Roth destabilizes female sexuality and the body in her chapter. Noting the stereotypical division of labor and sanctioned roles characteristic of American Thanksgiving celebrations, Roth complicates the gender binary by interrogating the latent sexual possibilities of the turkey.

The only essay that seems at odds with the rest of the collection is chapter 9, “Listening to Stories, Negotiating Responsibility,” by Patricia Sawin. She explores the complexities of international adoption through personal narrative and ethnographic research. The essay is thoughtful and beautifully written, and the topic is certainly worthy of scholarly discussion, but it does not directly engage with queerness, gender, or drag. Sawin does discuss how adoptees and their parents can reimagine identity, either through assimilation or national/cultural pride, which could relate to performance and drag, but this connection is not pursued at length in the essay.

Perhaps the most exciting aspect of the collection is its ability to foster conversation and open new lines of inquiry. Unsettling Assumptions demonstrates that the intersection between queer studies and folklore is marvelously generative and worthy of further scholarly study. The concept of drag, explored across ethnicity, gender, and even species, proves to be particularly compelling and provocative, as it offers a new avenue to negotiate issues of representation, identity, tradition, nostalgia, and progress. The collection is thoughtfully composed and well researched with a good balance of theoretical framing and ethnographic content, and it should be of interest to academics in the fields of folklore, queer studies, cultural studies, and anthropology, as well as to lay readers with interest in any of these areas.


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Elaine Eff’s film The Screen Painters is one of the finest folklore documentaries. Eff made the film almost three decades ago, and it serves as a vital documentation of a unique urban folk art. The paintings create an effect similar to a one-way window. A viewer on the street sees a colorful image that brightens the window of a somewhat uniform row house façade while shading the gaze from the room’s interior. Curiously, the painted screen also allows residents of the home to look out into the street. When the film was made during the 1980s, the art was