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Tobacco Harvest: An Elegy (review)

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managed to reconstruct viable identities in their new situation and new home. Much of the documentation comes from detailed and eloquent biographies published by three patients and from interviews conducted by Gaudet. Throughout the book, she sensitively balances well-chosen extended quotations with synthesis and discussion.

The borders of Carville—and of the community it contained—were semipermeable. Chapter 3, “Through the Hole in the Fence: Personal Narratives of Absconding from Carville,” examines the long-term equilibrium between the strict regulations concerning confinement and the lax enforcement of those regulations. Patients slipped out now and again, sometimes for fun, sometimes for serious tasks like getting married (Louisiana required a blood test, while Mississippi did not), and always to explore the boundaries of their lives. Tellers of these stories relate justifications for fleeing, details of passage to the outside, and returns to Carville (voluntary or not). These personal escape narratives allowed patients to assert some limited, but psychologically critical control of their fate. Their common stigma inspired escape and then also return: patients would grow weary of hiding the truth or would need medical attention. Punishments were just harsh enough to assure that “escaping” would remain infrequent yet lenient enough to allow some possibility of respite, thus balancing sanity and physical health.

The fourth chapter, “‘Talking it Slant’: Personal Narratives, Tall Tales, and the Reality of Leprosy,” feels a bit crowded. Gaudet explores disease as a multivalent metaphor, and then she cites casual vernacular uses of the word “leper” to illustrate the crudity of the stigma and the patients’ frequent need to creatively temper the truth. Teenagers who slipped out of Carville to attend football games often simply lied about where they were from. One patient managed to tell a saloon audience on the outside that he was a leper in a way that almost guaranteed being disbelieved; this is the only narrative closely examined in the chapter. In contrast to the brevity of chapter 4, the sixth one is a bit overlong. “‘Under the Pecans’: History and Memory in the Graveyard at Carville” focuses on grave-

stone inscriptions in the hospital’s two cemeteries. Many quarantines continued in death, since permission for burial elsewhere was elusive. Just as patients in the early eras of Carville received new names on arrival, these pseudonyms appeared on the stones. To protect their families from discrimination back home, those early markers were inscribed simply with initials, a first name, or a patient’s number.

Chapter 5, “The World Turned Downside Up: Mardi Gras at Carville,” is my favorite. There, Gaudet narrates a real twist on festival identity transformation: “The carnivalesque world upside-down is challenged, decentered, reversed upon itself when the carnival inversion includes those who historically have been the ultimate Others” (p. 118). Set apart in daily life, the citizens of Carville became “normal” when fantastically masked and costumed. They were able to participate in a delightful, gaudy pseudo-anonymity for a few hours, building up to this with weeks or even months of anticipatory labor. A tradition including thousands of people, which was still a modest minority of the citizenry, Mardi Gras participation is an avid (and expensive!) hobby for its self-appointed culture bearers. But at Carville, nearly everyone was passionately involved; the permanently stigmatized were happy to join a broad community of the annually abnormal.

This book is short but elegantly conceived and written, and it will be useful in the classroom. Illustrating and analyzing Carville’s sub-species of common folklore genres, most chapters are self-contained. Gaudet’s *Carville* is an immediate classic, a wonderful combination of scholarship and compassion.

Tobacco Harvest: An Elegy. By Wendell Berry. Photographs by James Baker Hall. (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2004. Pp. 78, 47 black-and-white photographs, photograph identifications.)

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Tobacco Harvest: An Elegy is in most senses a coffee table book. The text covers only nineteen

pages; it has more photographs than text pages; it is wider than it is long. It is a great book to flip through when whiling away your time. But, as with all things Wendell Berry, this simple book is much more than it seems. In fact, simplicity is the medium for its complexity.

An elegy is “a mournful poem,” or, more broadly, any creative piece that mourns. Such works are premised on the assumptions that that which has passed is worth mourning and that others share the elegist’s grief. To mourn the passing of the traditional tobacco farm and the folklife that it generated might, thus, appear odd. Truly a curse for many people, tobacco is more demonized than praised today. However, precisely because of the cultural discourse it evokes, *Tobacco Harvest* is instructive, and not only for folklorists. Environmentalists, rural sociologists, and cultural researchers should examine this book and take it to heart. In the context of the family-farm movement, about which Berry has written extensively, this work provokes reflection on the creation of social and cultural meaning and continuity.

Wendell Berry is a regional writer, focusing on the traditional way of life in Kentucky’s rural areas. He has written at least ten books of fiction, thirteen books of essays, and well over a dozen books of poetry. Although he does write with a rural Kentucky focus, his work has been enormously influential across the United States among environmentalists and especially among the family-farm movement. He is as well known in South Dakota as in Kentucky, among Sierra Club devotees as among bluegrass literati. He has created in his body of fiction a Faulkneresque town he calls Port William, complete with neighboring communities. The message in his fiction is that the human condition, in its positive and negative aspects, emerges fully in simple rural communities. It is a Jeffersonian view, with warts. Berry emphasizes the rural complex: the space of community where people are tied together through experience, culture, society, and the land itself. Importantly, the interweaving of these strands actually creates the fabric of each person’s character. People maintain mutualistic relationships with one another, which create their society and culture, and mold their character; here, the land

itself is as important as the people. We as humans, in any region, are native to our place and must come to understand ourselves through our relationship to the land. In this book, Berry mourns the passing of the traditional family farm, in which the family and the community would come together to work the land and harvest the crop; in so doing, he mourns the loss of our sense of humanity and our sense of ourselves. Poignantly positioning the traditional family-farm culture between the antebellum slave culture and today’s migrant-worker culture, Berry writes, “The people who work the land should own it” (p. 3).

James Baker Hall, the book’s photographer, is also a writer. In fact, he is the former poet laureate of Kentucky, but he writes not a word in this book. His pictures express his poetry. He and Berry have known each other for over thirty years, and it was thirty-one years prior to the publication of this book that Hall shot these pictures. The tobacco harvest being documented happened in 1973 on a farm in Henry County, Kentucky, where neighbors came out to help Owen Flood and his wife Loyce harvest their crop. Among the twelve neighbors were Wendell Berry, his son Den, and his daughter Mary. *Tobacco Harvest* is a personal elegy as much as a cultural one, because Berry and Hall mourn the passing of friends (for six of the crew have since died), the passing of the farm itself, and the passing of the communal spirit residing in the land. Both the photographs and the essay document the entire process of the harvest with a reflexively ethnographic thoroughness.

The Berry reader would perhaps recognize in Owen Flood the model for Athey Chatham, the traditional, environmentally conscientious farmer from Berry’s 2000 novel, *Jayber Crow* (Counterpoint, 2000). Athey represents the consummate farmer, one who respects both the land and his community because they fulfill his humanity. The land itself, the flora and fauna, and the rural human society—the “Membership,” as he calls it, of a community—all intertwine into one entity, an entity that is consonant with the full fostering of the potential of its human inhabitants. To amputate one from the rest is to maim our humanity. For Berry, the harvest itself as a fully human, enriching en-

agement transcends the issue of how tobacco is used. The farmer's harvest represents a fully reciprocating humanity, where neighbor helps neighbor, where people nurture the land, where the land provides for the people, and where the flora nurtures both the people and the land. The elegy invoked in *Tobacco Harvest*, then, is a celebration of that human ecological spirit that Berry has witnessed eroding over the decades.

I recommend reading *Jayber Crow* at the same time as *Tobacco Harvest*, because absorbing the synaesthesia of *Harvest* while inhabiting the lives of the farmers and townspeople of *Crow* will enrich both works for any reader, while making the world seem, at least for a moment, comprehensible.

African Folklore: An Encyclopedia. Ed. Philip M. Peek and Kwesi Yankah. (New York: Routledge, 2004. Pp. xxxii + 593, introduction, 7 black-and-white maps, 87 black-and-white photographs and illustrations, list of contributors, list of entries, appendices, filmography, acknowledgments, list of M.A.s and Ph.D.s in African folklore in the United States, index.)

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A timely book in all senses, *African Folklore: An Encyclopedia* is the most accurate as well as the most recent English-language reference tool on African folklore. There are more than three hundred alphabetically arranged entries in this text. In addition to the expected discussion of oral and musical traditions, the encyclopedia provides entries on ethnic groups and communities (for example, "Jews in Ethiopia" and "Oyo Tunji: A Yoruba Community in the USA"), concepts ("Cosmology," "Myths," and "Religion"), material culture ("Musical Instruments"), and a few persons important in the study of African folklore (including "William Bascom," "Daniel Crowley," "Leo Frobenius," and "Robert Rattray"), as well as many examples of classic case studies. Only the entries about countries (mostly one-page articles, from "Algeria" to "Zimbabwe") lack biblio-

graphical references. However, these entries give population numbers and key historical facts for every African country, including island nations—Cape Verde, Mauritius, Madagascar, and Comoros. In this international reunion of scholars, almost one third of the 150 contributors are Africanists or ethnologists from African countries. About another third are from the United States, while the remaining third hail mostly from Europe, Canada, and South America.

In their introduction, Peek and Yankah define folklore as "those esoteric traditions (oral, customary, or material) expressed in the form of artistic communication used as operational culture by a group within the larger society (primarily to provide group identity and homogeneity)" (p. xi). In the following pages, one finds entries related to almost every imaginable kind of traditional folklore. Entries include "Animals in African Folklore," "Body Art," "Children's Folklore," "Dances," "Dress," and of course "Folktales," "Food," "Gestures," and "Superstitions," plus many more on music and songs in specific countries. The average entry is about one page long; most overviews are twice that length. Among the most comprehensive entries, Jean-Paul Colley's ten-page chapter titled "Films on African Folklore" not only lists numerous examples of ethnographic films related to ritual, gender, funerals, games, and masks, it also provides a fine analysis of several documentaries, using concepts and core themes included in other entries of the encyclopedia (pp. 125–34).

The very first entry in the book is a reference to "African Americans," an indication that the general sentiment here is comparative and interdisciplinary. Several other articles seem inspired by the thoroughly cross-cultural perspective of Atlantic studies, notably those on African diasporas (in the United Kingdom, the United States, and Brazil) and on the presence of the Jamaican Rastafari in Africa.

Some fine entries emphasize historiography, such as "French Study of African Folklore" and "Japanese Study of African Folklore." The entry "Institutional Study of African Folklore" provides an account of the many existing approaches and key scholars in this field. The