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Meaning of Folklore

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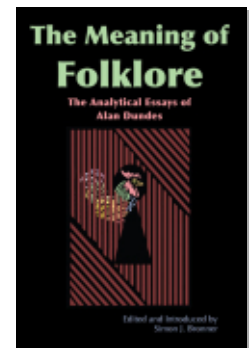
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PREFACE AND ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

THIS IS A BOOK THAT Alan Dundes should have put together, or so I told him. He probably would have done it, had not death in March 2005 put a halt to his tremendous production. The project came about after I read his proposal for a new compilation of his essays following *Bloody Mary in the Mirror* (2002a). I wanted him to do something different from what he planned. Rather than adding another capsule of writing, I cheekily told him it was time to reflect on the body of his major work covering more than forty years. He appreciated my suggestion that he should thematize his studies under analytical headings and produce a critical, retrospective work twenty-five years after his monumental essay collection, *Interpreting Folklore* (1980b). Still a vital voice in cultural inquiry, Dundes accepted the challenge and was ready to plunge into the project with his characteristic ebullience. He even invited me to write the foreword.

Dundes did not foresee that his life would suddenly be cut short. Or maybe he did. He predicted on several occasions that heredity was not in his favor because of the premature death of his father, and he opined, often with humor, that his diet did not fit into the “healthy fare” category. Still, with his giving barely a hint of slowing down, news of his heart attack came as a shock. When the University of California press office called me on the day he died, asking me for a quote to put in the public announcement, I quickly responded, “Alan Dundes will undoubtedly go down in history as one of the most influential folklorists, indeed one of the most influential minds, the world has known. That mind had an incredible range, reaching into cultures around the globe, and all manner of material including literature, narratives, art, customs, speech, and games. His specialty was not in a single genre, but in the provocative interpretation.” It fit his devotion to learning that his final context when he was struck down was a Berkeley seminar room, as he was about to instruct and inspire another eager flock of students. This book, in part, elaborates on my soundbite, with the hope of reaching new generations of students with Dundes’s insights.

Even if he had not died, I thought that a project to elucidate, and evaluate, Dundes’s contributions to folkloristics was imperative. The season before he died, he had touched off a lively debate with an address to the American Folklore Society on the role of psychological perspectives and what he called “grand theory” in the future of folklore studies (2005c). Outside of the meetings, Dundes’s ears must have been ringing with invocations of his name and work in global Internet discussions, symposia (including one in the Netherlands in which I was a participant), and classrooms. With his correspondence and essays stacked high on my desk, I put my words of advice into action. I checked with several of Dundes’s confidants, and I consulted his widow, Carolyn Dundes, on the project. She sagely encouraged me to organize it as my book, rather than his, but commented that he would have liked the title and sections I had mapped out. The result of my effort testifies

to his lasting legacy, offers products of his most fertile mind, and reflects on his contributions to the study of culture that he pursued vigorously through the materials of folklore and encapsulated as an analytic endeavor of folkloristics.

Why “meaning” as an organizing theme? It comes from Dundes’s frequent reference to finding “patterns of meaning” as the goal of folkloristics. Meaning for Dundes was often hidden, frequently elusive, but uncoverable through folkloristic analysis. He saw meaning as the thinking underlying, and explaining, puzzling images, fantasies, and actions that pervade cultural life, often outside the awareness of participants in it. Rather than being random creations, the expressive texts of folklore—brought together in aggregate, traced historically and socially, identified and compared textually, understood in their cultural context, appreciated for their texture or performance, and mined for structure, belief, and symbol—showed patterns that the folklorist was trained to discern, and indeed *analyze*.

In Dundes’s view, the scholar’s role was more than reporting native exegesis or performance, but rather that of broad-based analysis involving scholarly organization and interpretation of folkloric materials. If ethnography reported culture on the natives’ own terms, his folkloristics defined the terms, and expressions (and “projections”), by which natives could be understood. It should be emphasized that for Dundes, his “natives” were frequently “ourselves” rather than exotic others, attested to by his studies of children, students, musicians, scientists, and folklorists, in his family as well as his classroom and country. Frequently relying on the collections of others (his Berkeley folklore archives is one of the world’s largest), his strength was to set up in the library and archives a kind of folkloristic operating table where he laid out his “corpus of data,” as he liked to say, and surgically probed it, thereby revealing its inner workings to an anxious audience. Once the material was put back together, the analysis led to ideas on its *meaning*—with social and psychological implications—that would not be evident from a surface inspection. In fact, I could continue the metaphor by saying that he had a reputation akin to a famed master surgeon, bearing the aura of risk-taking ability that surrounds an authoritative figure who develops novel procedures and ingenious, if controversial, solutions. Elliott Oring (1975a) recognized this persona when he referred to folklorists informed by his incisive “operations” and taking on the role of “surgical interns.” Noteworthy in this regard are Dundes’s groundbreaking essays on the folklore of the medical profession (Dundes and George 1978; Dundes, L. Dundes, and Streiff 1999; also see chapter 13 in the present volume).

The body of material that Dundes worked on was, broadly stated, culture. Dundes pointed out that culture worked in strange, sometimes disturbing ways, and he sought to explain and even remedy it. Folklore is prime evidence of culture, indeed of humanity, he declared, and he came up with memorable phrases to drive the point home—folklore is a people’s “symbolic autobiography,” folklore gives an “inside out” view of society. Folklore, he affirmed in keywords of essay titles, was a *mirror* of culture, a *lens* for society, a *key* to behavior, a *projection* of mind. “Folklore is as old as humanity,” he wrote for a definitive entry in the *World Book Encyclopedia* (1970). Negating the elitist view of folklore as an irrational relic of the past, however, he pointed out that folklore is alive and well today. He emphasized that folklore is always created anew, because people need it—for their identity, indeed for their existence. The paradox, and intriguing quality, of folklore was that it was always changing, and yet ever the same. It was local and universal; it was old and new. As for his resolution of this paradox, he spent his career showing that folklore is a product of mind that responds to and constructs culture.



Simon Bronner and Alan Dundes at the American Folklore Society's annual meeting, 1984.

I should explain my relationship to Dundes to contextualize my “analytics.” After all, I was not one of his students, but I have made frequent use of his ideas in my work. Nonetheless, I have been known to dispute some of his cherished interpretations. We were friendly, and I held him in high esteem, but I hardly call myself one of his disciples. Then again, he claimed he did not have any (from my vantage, he certainly had devotees and followers), although one might say that all folklorists and psychological anthropologists owe him an intellectual debt. I know he appreciated my endeavor to integrate psychological theory and critical inquiry into folkloristics, and we shared a common mentor in Richard M. Dorson at Indiana University (and instruction from professors Felix Oinas and Warren Roberts). We talked about our common ethnic roots, and I provided him with sources for his studies of German and Jewish customs. We had a strong bond in a shared desire to promote a discipline of folkloristics, and he encouraged my research on its history and sociology (see *Following Tradition* [1998], also published by Utah State University Press, and *American Folklore Studies: An Intellectual History* [1986a] for the University Press of Kansas, for which he wrote an endorsement on the back cover). He wrote an afterword (2005a) for my volume *Manly Traditions*, we shared many a podium together, and he invited me to Berkeley to teach. In fact, after I edited his afterword, he told me I should edit more of his work. I was taken aback, since he had a reputation for maintaining tight control over it. At the time, I did not fathom how prophetic his words would be.

In my selection of his essays, I endeavored to show connections among data in the terms Dundes helped to define for the field—expressions of group, identity, worldview, and mind. He laid out the basic questions to be addressed: “Why does a particular item of folklore exist? And what does it mean to those who transmit and receive it?” Like a coach explaining his game plan, he wrote, in an unpublished manuscript, “It is precisely these questions which constitute the principal challenge to all of us in the field of folkloristics, the academic study of folklore, and which we need to address if this field is ever to achieve its rightful place in the academy.” With these questions in mind, I created a sequence of essays to tell a story of his quest for meaning, beginning with what he would call structurally a “lack” (the absence of analysis in folklore classification and collection) to a “lack

liquidated” (meaning revealed through analytic means). I included essays that I thought had stood the test of time and will be useful to students and scholars working with folklore today and in the future; since some essays do go back a way, I updated some of the prose in the text and made corrections where necessary.

I once asked Dundes to explain his preference for the intellectual platform of the essay. He acknowledged that he was “inclined to use the shorter medium of the article or note” rather than the “monograph or book format to report research findings,” but he did not elaborate on the folkloristic essay as a literary form, for which he was recognized as a master. Like the short story writer, Dundes used the essay to explore a variety of themes, situations, and settings. Always one to see layers of meaning, he often compressed his pointed messages into memorable *double entendre* titles and themes (e.g., “Getting to the *Bottom*” of “Sweet Bugger All,” “*Second String* Humor,” and my favorite, “Gallus as Phallus: A Psychoanalytic Cross-Cultural Consideration of the Cockfight as *Fowl Play*”). The pedestrian view of his productivity is his curiosity about all manner of cultural expression—in his familiar American home and abroad in exotic locales, in historical and contemporary events, and in material as well as oral forms. To be sure, he was naturally inquisitive and, some would say, obsessive. His wife was among those making the latter observation; when asked about his hobbies, she said that he did not have any—his work was his life. He was always pressing for answers to the “why” questions that others had not asked, and he was amazingly well-read in a wide range of disciplines. His book collecting in any number of languages was legendary. His long reach did not necessarily translate into a lack of concentration or specialization, since he had a special attraction to evidence present in speech and narrative, based on the presumptions that people “speak their mind,” and language constitutes a cognitive as well as a structural system.

It became quickly evident, from the first time I met him more than thirty-five years ago, that the essay was his strongest vehicle for the driving idea. Each essay set forth a core idea that he often presented as a proposal, supported by evidence drawn from an array of library, ethnographic, and archival sources. He then invited commentary, critique, and application in extensive tomes by others (sometimes allowing for collaboration), but upon forming the thesis, he was ready, as he said to me at one shared podium, to “move on to the next idea.” He hinted at self-analysis of this tendency in “On the Psychology of Collecting Folklore” (1975f), where he referred to the anal-ejective personality who prefers to “spread” his output in many outlets rather than “holding on” to his stuff. Most of all, what has distinguished Dundes as a writer is not just his prolific output, but the admirable accomplishment of having so many of his core ideas ripple widely into cultural scholarship.

As my introduction will show, he was often misunderstood or dismissed as preoccupied with sexual symbols in folklore, but he saw these, in Freudian terms, as among the sensory layers of meaning, and also trenchantly interpreted the ideological and sociological ramifications of cultural expression. I summarize this approach as perceiving cultural *response* (or adaptation) to anxiety and ambiguity (particularly evident in the critical concept of projection), *reflection* of belief and worldview (hence his rhetoric of mirror), and *intention* (or consequence) in identity formation and communicative strategy (often represented by the idea of folklore as a key). He called himself a Freudian folklorist (his book *Parsing Through Customs* [1987h] was subtitled “Essays by a Freudian Folklorist”), but I find the appellation of “adaptive” or “post-Freudian” more fitting, considering the systemic shift which occurred once he displaced Freud’s emphasis on penis envy with male birth or womb envy and its anal implications. Dundes’s citations, in fact, make frequent reference

to the post-Freudian, symbolist works of Otto Rank, Ernest Jones, Sandor Ferenczi, Karen Horney, and Bruno Bettelheim, not only because of their consideration of folkloric evidence, but also because he carried the importance of feminine development and culturally relative context further than Freud. Moreover, Dundes distinctively adapted, and revised, selective aspects of Freudian theory—particularly the concepts of dream symbolism, anal eroticism, and repression—while rejecting notions of evolutionary origins and collective unconscious; and emphasized, *as a folklorist*, variation, text, and style, rather than pursuing the clinical interests of a psychologist.

Dundes was hardly a Freudian “one trick pony,” however. He underscored this in an unpublished manuscript written before he died: “Unlike most academics that have a lifelong specialization in a particular time period or individual, e.g., nineteenth-century Russian novels or William Faulkner, I have been fascinated by a wide variety of subject matters in my forty-year career as a professional folklorist. Each topic presents its own challenge to someone who seeks to understand it.” As the essays in this volume demonstrate, he pursued cultural enigmas with a variety of methods, including linguistic, historical, cross-cultural comparative, ethnographic, feminist, and structural tools. To be sure, he was attracted to psychoanalytic theory for its exploration of mental and developmental processes that could explain folkloric fantasy, taboo, and ritual, but he also proposed corrections and alterations, such as his development of the themes of male cultural display, procreation, and aggression.

Folklore Matters, he proclaimed in a title of a previous book (1989d) as well as many presentations, to underscore both the range of materials in the subject and the significance of the expressive tradition, not coincidentally showing how speech takes on multiple meanings. The heart of the matter for him, I daresay, was the analysis that the compelling symbolic texts of folklore invite, and indeed demand. As the main platform for this inquiry, his essays had a lively, often polemical format—the problem statement or intellectual complaint, followed by his detailed exposition of folkloristic identification with a discerning eye for underlying structures, and reasoned, if provocative, interpretation. The scholarly audiences he addressed were prepared to be surprised, aroused, or offended. “Scholarship is not a popularity contest or about feeling good, it’s a search for truth, which can be painful,” he was wont to announce when an objection arose. He reached beyond academe, on television talk shows and in popular magazines, to get the significance of folklore as a subject and a field across to the public. His studies often had a reformist agenda, so that by making the “unconscious conscious” through cultural inquiry, social problems—including racism, sexism, anti-Semitism, homophobia, and the human proclivity for war—could be addressed at their fundamental sources.

Dundes did not claim that his analytic approach was embraced by all folklorists. Anything but. Still, he encouraged, and indeed wanted to provoke with his essays, a healthy theorizing about the existence and emergence of folklore in everyday life, past and modern. “Without symbolist perspectives or other grand theories,” he told the American Folklore Society in 2004, “folklore texts will forever remain as mere collectanea with little or no substantive content analysis” (2005c). His concern was that folklore be more than a subject of descriptive inquiry; he declared often that its study should form a body of knowledge and analysis constituting a discipline. Accordingly, he unswervingly promoted the folkloristic enterprise, especially in the academic settings of folklore programs. He also was a missionary among psychologists, anthropologists, sociologists, literary scholars, historians, and linguists, urging them to become enlightened by the use of folkloric evidence, and the intellectual heritage of folkloristics.

Besides applying grand theories, Dundes advanced the identification of folklore genres and categories. Wide acceptance of what he called the “modern” idea of folklore (as expressive items enjoying multiple, variant existence, rather than restricted by the criteria of time and orality), and of the definition of folk groups as two or more people with a trait in common (removing the association of folk with a level of culture or class of society), greatly expanded the type of material considered as traditional, or “cultural.” Dundes had a gift of discerning patterns and connections—among global cultures, across genres, and certainly between texts—based on an extraordinary recall for everything he read and experienced. His knowledge was encyclopedic; in fact, he wrote many high-profile encyclopedia entries defining folklore and the work of folklorists. He was elected president of the American Folklore Society and was a worldwide leader of the field, starting early in his career. Nonetheless, he often mentioned that his interpretations met resistance among a dominant stream of literal-minded colleagues who seemed timid or unable to propose “deep” meanings outside the awareness of informants. Having said this, he delighted in cutting against the intellectual grain (his critique in this volume of the “standard” tools of the motif and tale-type index in the essay on “emic” units is an example [1962]) to suggest meanings that had not been proposed before for well-known items, or to draw attention to overlooked or avoided material as folklore. Examples in his work are risqué jokes, photocopied lore, and the speech of scientists and medical professionals. He relished debates with skeptics (evident in his plaint in “How Indic Parallels to the Ballad of the ‘Walled-Up Wife’ Reveal the Pitfalls of Parochial Nationalistic Folkloristics,” [1995a], also reproduced here), and frequently even brought his friends and students to task.

Dundes brought into his arguments a world of knowledge compassed by folklore and an astounding bibliographic breadth. His importance as a folklorist, as well as a public intellectual, is significant for defining what he called the “modern” terms by which tradition is identified, and framing the questions in, and of, the field. Doubters of his symbolic readings still acknowledged that Dundes’s definitions and methods had become standard equipment in the field’s intellectual package, and he had a loyal legion of students and colleagues who absorbed, if not exactly replicated, his approach.

It is a formidable challenge to find all of Dundes’s writing and take in his work as a whole. Besides being prolific, he issued his prose in far-flung publications. Part of the reason was that he was a peripatetic scholar. Accepting many invitations to speak around the world, he often gave the texts of his presentations to a local host publication, and tended not to reread his material. Although lodged in the disciplinary confines of the anthropology department at the University of California at Berkeley, he had an agenda of showing the applicability of folklore study to any number of fields, writing for psychological, linguistic, literary, scientific, philosophical, and historical journals in addition to anthropological publications. He acknowledged this tendency when he wrote on the manuscript I had that “one problem with that style of presentation [the essay] is that one’s findings are often scattered in a variety of outlets, so much so that even the most dedicated student cannot locate all the writings of a particular scholar. My writings on folk speech and folk humor (including jokes) have appeared in such forums as *Zyzzyva*, a prominent West Coast literary magazine, *American Speech*, *Notices of the American Mathematical Society*, and in several festschrifts (volumes honoring scholars on the occasion of their retirement or birthday) in addition to regional folklore journals such as *Western Folklore* and *Midwestern Folklore*.”

I therefore predict that there will be selections in this book that will be unfamiliar to even the most devoted of Dundes’s followers. My goal, though, was not so much to unearth

buried treasure (although there is some of that) as it was to feature notable statements of Dundes's core ideas, so as to inspire new analyses of "patterns of meaning." With the agenda of a sequel to *Interpreting Folklore* (1980b) in mind, I made an effort not to duplicate its contents, and avoided selections placed in recently published anthologies. Several seminal essays included here have not been generally available because they appeared in foreign, localized, or specialized publications. Folklorists may be familiar with the crux of the idea, but have not had the benefit of studying its original exposition. And for those new to his approach, there are classic statements of the method and theory of using folklore to address various cultural issues.

The selections show a range of analytical work, stretching from the beginnings of his career in the 1960s ("Folklore of Wishing Wells" from 1962 is the earliest) into the twenty-first century ("As the Crow Flies" was first published in 2004). In several places, I attached notes he penned to serve as postscripts to groundbreaking essays. The guiding principle for inclusion was his call in his last public address to folklorists in 2004, to show ways "to understand data that would otherwise remain enigmatic, if not indecipherable." The data include not only what folklorists study, but folklorists themselves (as the concluding essays "On the Psychology of Collecting Folklore" [1975] and "The Chain Letter" [1966] demonstrate). I have added headnotes to the essays to place these texts in an intellectual context, with attention especially to ways that Dundes's ideas have been applied or challenged in other studies.

The selections proceed generally from identification (with statements of definition and method) to interpretation (with special emphasis on sources of expression in the realm of the mind). The first section, entitled "Structure and Analysis," sets the stage for theoretical inquiry with explications of folklore as a concept and type of expression; definitions of basic terms such as "folk group," "folk idea," "folkloristics," and "metafolklore"; and demonstrations of comparative, historical, and structural approaches that were essential tools on Dundes's operating table. The section opens with the keynote (a term which Dundes, as a musician, approved) for the entire volume, looking at "Folklore as a Mirror of Culture," (1969a) and closes, in the controversial "Devolutionary Premise in Folklore Theory" (1975c), with a contemplation on the way that folklorists make, and skew, their subjects. Essays in the second section on "Worldview and Identity" explore the social functions of folklore in expressing the identities of people interacting within multiple, small groups; and the broader worldviews inculcated through national and often transnational beliefs and narratives. Dundes especially defied expectations of "the folk" being characterized as a lower sort by showing the high-context lore of the learned elite; as an illustration, part 2 includes discussions of folklore's meanings among scientists, musicians, and medical professionals. Religious and national identities are treated with analyses of narratives and trans-Atlantic folk speech.

Part 3 gets at the psychological and symbolist analysis, based on Freudian theory. At this point, Dundes would probably mention the predominant cognitive patterning of tripartite division in academic disciplines, as well as in Western civilization. The section includes his distinctive contributions to modern psychoanalytical interpretation of projective inversion and womb envy, relations of masculine play to combat, and the symbolist approaches of using allomotifs and symbolic equivalence. The signification of part 3 for the entire book is located in the emphatic opening that "folklore *means* something," in answer to the anti-intellectual popularization of folklore as ephemeral material or "mere" entertainment, and that what it means is critical to understanding how and why people express themselves. The closing words of this section, "there will always be folklore," are

also a resounding reminder of the pervasive theme of the book, that folklore exists for a reason: it is a social and psychological necessity.

I am grateful to Carolyn Dundes for her cooperation in this project, critical reading of the manuscript, and kindness toward me. I also benefited from the sage counsel of Alan's beloved colleagues Wolfgang Mieder, Jay Mechling, Elliott Oring, Ronald L. Baker, Gary Alan Fine, and Haya Bar-Itzhak, and from the reflections of his former students Rachel Lewis, Perin Gürel, Rosemary Lévy Zumwalt, and Maria Teresa Agozzino. I also benefited from time with his daughter, Alison Dundes Renteln, who also was a collaborator with her father on several publications. Of the many dinners I shared with Dundes filled with his wit and wisdom, and commands of what to do with my life, one that stands out is a reunion of fellow travelers in Salt Lake City at the American Folklore Society in 2004, where he revealed much of himself in the company of Jan Harold Brunvand, Linda Dégh, and Patricia Turner, in addition to the usual collegial suspects I previously mentioned. Jay Mechling gave me the occasion to drop in on Alan's classroom at Berkeley, and we gained much from the experience. Marjolein Efting Dijkstra, Peter Jan Margry, and the wonderful staff at the Meertens Institute in Amsterdam, where I was in residence in 2005, were tremendously helpful in tracking down Dundes's European material and sharing their perceptions from what he would have undoubtedly called a European worldview. I should also recognize the many conversations I had with the late Sue Samuelson, a deep font of Dundesiana and one of his devotees, who became my colleague at Penn State. After Dundes's death, two special occasions filled with reminiscences of and tributes to Alan by numerous participants helped me outline the impact of his work: the Western States Folklore Society meeting held at the University of California at Berkeley in April 2006, and a symposium on folklore and American studies at Columbia University in New York City in March 2006.

At Penn State, School of Humanities staff member Sue Etter graciously helped with permissions and much more, and my colleague Michael Barton, Professor of American Studies and Social Science, suggested the title of the introduction and kindly passed along material on Dundes that he had accumulated. John Alley, executive editor at Utah State University Press, deserves special recognition for ushering the work along and deftly steering the project through various daunting channels. John Bealle enhanced this book by bringing a sharp folkloristic sensibility to his masterful crafting of the index. At home, my wife Sally Jo Bronner understood the need to complete this work and tell Dundes's stories.

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American Anthropological Association for "Earth Diver: Creation of the Mythopoeic Male," *American Anthropologist* 64 (1962): 1032–51.

American Folklore Society for "From Etic to Emic Units in the Structural Study of Folktales" (75 [1962]: 95–105), "Study of Folklore in Literature and Culture: Identification and Interpretation" (78 [1965]: 136–42), "Folk Ideas as Units of Worldview" (84 [1971]: 93–103), (with Victoria George) "The Gomer: A Figure of Hospital Folk Speech" (91 [1978]: 568–81), and "How Indic Parallels to the Ballad of the 'Walled-Up Wife' Reveal the Pitfalls of Parochial Nationalistic Folkloristics" (108 [1995]: 38–53), all from the *Journal of American Folklore*.

Analytic Press for "Gallus as Phallus: A Psychoanalytic Cross-Cultural Consideration of the Cockfight as Fowl Play," in *Essays in Honor of Alan Dundes*, ed. L. B. Boyer, R. Boyer, and Sonnenberg, 23–65 (Hillsdale, NJ, 1993).

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Folklore Society (England) for “Much Ado about ‘Sweet Bugger All’: Getting to the Bottom of a Puzzle in British Speech Play,” *Folklore* 113 (2002): 35–49.

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Utah State University Press for “As the Crow Flies: A Straightforward Study of Lineal Worldview in American Folk Speech,” in *What Goes Around Comes Around: The Circulation of Proverbs in Contemporary Life*, ed. Kimberly J. Lau, Peter Tokofsky, and Stephen D. Winick, 171–87 (Logan, UT, 2004).

Western States Folklore Society for “Worldview in Folk Narrative” (54 [1995]: 229–32); and “Binary Opposition in Myth: The Propp/Lévi-Struass Debate in Retrospect” (56 [1997]: 39–50), both from *Western Folklore*.

