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The Folklore Muse

Frank de Caro

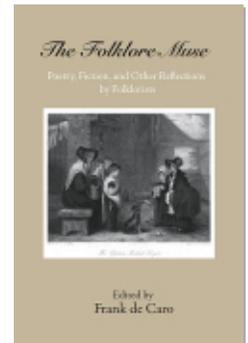
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Material Traditions, Material Things

Although folklorists long gave their attention mostly to verbal traditions, they have also been involved in the examination of material culture. They look at folk art and folk artifacts and at the processes of making and using folk objects, at the whole of folklife. Folk architecture has been of great interest, but so too have quilt making and blacksmithing, and even chainsaw carving, syrup making, and hide tanning. The popularity of Foxfire-type student and community projects and staged folk festivals has made the general public more interested in these aspects of traditional culture too, if perhaps out of a sense of nostalgia for the past.

Two poems here speak of quilts or quilt making. Steve Zeitlin's "The Quilters" depicts a group of Southern women now in New York City, who make quilts at a center for senior citizens, no longer in the domestic sphere of home or quilting bee somewhere else, no longer somewhere rural. But Zeitlin uses that slight disconnect to comment on the humanity of their activity. Laurel Horton's "Grandma Effie and the Heirloom" was written after a conversation Horton had with her paternal grandmother about handing down a family quilt. Although this was a very personal, family matter, quilt-expert Horton also thought about the larger question of the traditions that govern the transfer of quilts within families, thoughts reflected in the poem. Not only is a quilt in itself culturally significant; so too are the contexts in which the quilt exists, including its passage through time and through various hands. Both poems use their concentrated verbal space to evoke worlds of larger context, social and temporal.

In "The Quilters" a traditional art form, associated in some minds with a cherished past, exists quite happily in the modern world, and certainly traditional forms may continue to respond to the changing demands of life. Memorials to the dead are a very old form, but Holly Everett writes of a modern manifestation: the usually temporary erection of a memorial "shrine" to an accident victim at the place where the accident took place. Everett's memoir is concerned with her mother, other mothers, family relationships, and doing fieldwork, but the physical memorial and, less directly, the ritual of its enactment are at the heart of things here.

In other sections of this book, Rosan Augusta Jordan alludes in one poem to the physical constructs that are the altars erected to memorialize the departed in Mexico, and Steve Zeitlin and Jeff Titon both deal with traditional crafts: rock wall masonry and blacksmithing.

Of course, encountering the material is inevitable, as we do live in a world of the material (if not necessarily always of traditional folk objects), and folklorist writers may come upon objects in any number of ways. In “My Great-Great Half-Uncle Horace’s Bone-Handled Jackknife” Jo Radner alludes to family history, though history she discovered through an old newspaper clipping found when cleaning out a family house. The poem also relates to her attempts to “recapture . . . a tradition (whittling) that was my family heritage,” hence her late relative’s jackknife, an object itself, as well as one used in a traditional practice. The cane in Margaret Yocom’s “The Cane” relates to her earlier folklore fieldwork with her own Pennsylvania German family, family stories, and Yocom’s own memories of her grandmother, whose cane it was. It is a memory object, what Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett has called a “material companion,” and Yocom says, “As a folklorist who specializes in narrative and material culture, I find myself teaching about objects of memory and the stories people tell about them.”

One of My Mothers

My mother's response surprised me. "One of my mothers had a daughter who was killed in an accident. They put up a cross. It's not there anymore, but I think she would talk to you about it." If my mother had told me about this before, I had forgotten. "Where was the cross?" I asked. I could not remember seeing it at the location my mother described.

One of my mothers. It was a phrase my mother, a primary schoolteacher, used often to describe the female parents of her first-graders. Her mothers picked up their children from school, accompanied the class on fieldtrips, sat in on math lessons, helped their sons and daughters with their homework. Just like my mother was helping me with my homework.

In this case, my homework was my master's thesis in Folklore at Memorial University of Newfoundland. I had phoned home to Texas to talk to my mother that afternoon. One of the things I wanted to tell her about was my idea for the thesis—roadside crosses. I had realized, after a semester's worth of coursework in folklore, that the elaborately decorated crosses by the side of the road—the memorials to accident victims I had seen all my life—were a form of folklore encompassing belief, material culture, custom, and narrative. Straightforward and yet mysterious, beautiful and awful. But I was hesitant to bring it up with my mother. What would she think of the topic? Would she think it too morbid? Would she find it embarrassing to tell her friends? Death was the sort of thing I had been raised not to talk about.

I remember a hot summer day in the small west Texas town where many of my mother's relatives lived. My great-grandmother had died of a stroke. We gathered at her house after the funeral. The adults were inside, eating and commiserating. My younger sister and I were playing outside. I was determinedly balancing myself, carefully making my way along the cement block wall at the edge of Grandma Calhoun's front yard. My sister watched with her arms crossed behind her back, squinting into the late afternoon sun. I suddenly felt my mother's hand tight on my arm. Startled, I looked down into her stern face. "Get down from there and come inside." I caught my sister's eye. What had we done wrong? "It's not right to play outside now," my mother explained, "it's not a time to play."

“Why can’t we play now?” I couldn’t make sense of this. We weren’t engaged in any of the play we knew to be off-limits. We weren’t hitting, yelling, using bad words, or playing too near the street. I wasn’t picking on my little sister in any way. I was at a loss. “Today is a day to stay inside and think about your great-grandmother. Your grandmother and her sisters are very sad, and we need to be quiet.” This was the day I realized that death demanded more than proper behavior at the funeral and cemetery.

My great-grandmother’s death was the first of three in my mother’s family over a four-year period. Soon after my great-grandmother died, my grandfather had a heart attack. Some months later, my uncle—the baby of the family, just barely in his thirties—was killed in a farming accident. Crushed in a combine. A teacher at my junior high school had pulled me into an empty classroom afterwards and spoken to me in hushed tones about the difficult time my family was going through and the importance of talking to someone about my feelings. That evening, I glanced into my parents’ room as I left the kitchen. I wanted to tell them I was done with the dishes. My father stood with his arms around my mother, who was sobbing. Neither of them noticed me as I paused. I had never seen my mother so upset, overcome with emotion. I didn’t know what to do, so I went to my room and shut the door.

* * * * *

“It’s right down here,” she said. My sister, Christie, was driving me to a deteriorating memorial she had spotted a few months earlier. She sent me some photographs she’d taken of the small, wooden cross and silk flowers affixed to a bridge. Where are we, anyway, I wondered. I’d lived in Austin for over twenty years, but I’d never been to this part of my hometown. I had taken pride in my knowledge of the city, enjoying long walks spent mentally cataloguing houses, restaurants, shops, neighborhoods. These rambles, I now realized, had covered only a small portion of the city’s sprawl, namely the older neighborhoods within and ringing the city’s historic core. I had unconsciously avoided the suburbs in which my sister and I grew up, and the newer housing developments that had sprung up beyond them as the city expanded. My sister’s easy familiarity with this area, alien to me, took me aback.

I was reminded of the afternoon I watched her write an essay for a university class. She asked me to keep her company at a coffee shop across the street from the campus while she worked. We talked for about a half-hour upon our arrival, going over her ideas for the paper and people watching. A couple of hours later, she had a rough draft. I was amazed at both her speed and concentration, which she somehow maintained even in the face of my attempts to distract and pester her. She may have regretted her request for company.

Although I’m four and a-half years older, I have often felt like the “little” sister around Christie. When I was attending the University of Texas as an undergraduate, Christie, still in high school, would occasionally spend time with me on campus. I would often introduce her as my older sister, a joke between the two of us.

Already taller than I in her sophomore year, Christie knew secrets of hair styling and makeup which remain unknown to me to this day. People readily accepted her as the older, more sophisticated sibling. Male friends asked me if she had a boyfriend. Professors asked where she was going to university.

Later, while I was working on my master's degree in Folklore, she was pursuing a bachelor's degree in Social Work. She had also recently given birth. Christie took photographs and helped me when I was in town, in between keeping house, taking care of her new baby, and attending classes. My own time-management issues seemed ridiculous in comparison.

As we drove through the neighborhood, the fullness of my sister's life overwhelmed me. She knew these streets and could find her own way. And she was helping me find mine.

* * * * *

"I thought you'd want to see this," Lynda said, laying the paper down in front of me on the kitchen counter. I quickly scanned the article detailing a local controversy surrounding roadside memorials. The town council had sent letters to a half-dozen families, notifying them of plans to remove all memorials within the town's jurisdiction. Family members and their supporters were fighting the council's decision, speaking at town meetings and circulating petitions. Still weary from finishing my thesis on memorials in my hometown, I answered, "Oh yeah, thanks." I stuffed the article into my bag. I'm done with all that, I thought, but I'll hang on to this for now to be polite.

I hadn't known Lynda for very long, although she was my new stepmother. My father had called me one day in October 1999. "Guess what, kid? Lynda and I got married the other day!" With my father's mother as witness, they had been married on a small parcel of land my father had recently bought in the Texas Hill Country.

As I got to know Lynda, I also acquainted myself with the town in which she and my father were living, an upscale, planned community of about 90,000. Lynda had lived there for many years and raised her children there. She struggled with breast cancer there—it had been in remission for nine years when she found out it had metastasized.

"How'd it go?" Lynda asked one afternoon. Three newspaper clippings and several subtle prods later, I had just interviewed one of her friends, Laura, about the memorial for her daughter, Caitlin. The meticulously maintained assemblage stood for years near the main entrance to the community before a municipal road crew removed it. Laura and I had talked about Caitlin, her friends, and her funeral.

We had also discussed the detailed covenants that residents are required to follow, and the town council's wide-ranging efforts to control the community's image. Many viewed the council's desire to remove the memorials to be part of this impression management. I mentioned this to Lynda as she crossed back and forth, busily tidying the living room. She paused and looked at me sharply from beneath the brim of her navy blue baseball cap. "That's right," she said, returning

to her task. “There are no burglaries, no drugs in the high school, and no one ever dies.”

Two years later, I was shopping for clothes for a job interview. The campus visit would include four interviews, a public presentation, and various social events. Performance anxiety had manifested itself in an urgent desire for new socks. And that’s when I saw Lynda. My heart dropped into my stomach. It isn’t, I told myself angrily, you know it isn’t. Her baseball cap covered downy, post-chemo tufts of hair above her swollen, puffy face. I wanted to grab her, hold her. Tell her I missed her more than I thought I had right to.

But this woman was not my stepmother. Lynda had been dead for just over a year. The woman came around the display rack and stood beside me. I found it difficult not to stare at her as she looked over the socks. If I moved slightly to my right, my sleeve would brush hers. My heart, now back in its proper place, was beating unevenly. I had to walk away. It’s a sign, I told myself, glancing back over my shoulder. It’s a good sign. Breathe. My upcoming presentation, part of the campus visit for which I desperately needed those socks, concerned the memorial controversy Lynda had alerted me to years before.

* * * * *

I’ve kept my eye on these memorials. I visit the ones I’ve studied when I’m in Texas for Christmas or a searing slice of summer. Some assemblages are gone now, removed to make way for construction, or completely deteriorated. One mother told me that on the day her daughter, Julie, would have graduated from high school, she would stop visiting the memorial. She believed it was important to Julie’s classmates that it be kept up until then.

Another mother wrote to tell me that she had decided not to maintain the memorial for her daughter, Ashley, any longer. She felt that she was finished with that space, the place where Ashley’s car had slammed into a tree. She would not bandage the scarred tree with flowers and ribbon anymore. Someone still visits the site, though. I find the evidence.

And I leave some of my own. My mother surprised me one day by agreeing to come with me on my rounds. I had asked as a courtesy, expecting a polite refusal. “We’ll drive around and drink Dr. Peppers, okay?” I said brightly. My mother’s favorite soft drink. Mine too. We’ll drink sodas! We’ll drive around! We’ll bond!

More than a decade after I’d stopped wearing black clothes and makeup every day—a mid-eighties, central Texas variation of punk—I was still trying to convince my mother that I wasn’t irretrievably morbid. But I believed it to be a deep-seated notion. Before I started elementary school, we lived in Alaska. In Sunday school one morning, our teacher invited us to take a piece of construction paper in our favorite color and draw our favorite Bible story on it. When my mother came to pick me up, the teacher took her aside. They spoke quietly with expressions of concern while looking at my paper. Watching them from across the room, I knew I had done something wrong, but I didn’t know what it was. The problem, which was

explained to me after we got home from church, was the color of the paper I had chosen. “Black can’t be your favorite color,” my mother said. “Because it’s not really a color.” I must have looked puzzled. She studied me for a moment and continued, “Well, it’s not a good color for a *favorite* color, Holly. You need to pick a happy color, like red or yellow. Or pink. You like pink, don’t you?”

Now, my mother and I stand looking at a memorial, shaded by a live oak tree in the middle of a median. Three lanes of traffic race by on either side of us as we take in the new coat of yellow paint, the Christmas decorations in red, green, gold, and silver, the tattered notes anchored with small stones and angel figurines. I lay down some flowers. My mother knows I do this from time to time, but having her watch makes me nervous. I wait for admonition. “Well, . . .” my voice trails off. I turn and begin to walk back to the car parked around the corner. “Hey,” my mother calls after me, her gaze still roaming over the assemblage. “Aren’t you going to take some pictures?”

The Quilters

Sew themselves to one another
as they reminisce about the South
when all of life was structured
around a makeshift quilting frame.

Today, at the Harriet Tubman Senior Center
in Brooklyn
widows sew wedding ring patterns
in anonymous urban settings
engaged in the radical, subversive act
of quilting
for in this day
it's radical to be human,
sewing hearts on tattered sleeves

Grandma Effie and the Heirloom

I can't give you the quilt.
That's promised to your Aunt Virginia.
The oldest daughter gets it,
except that Leona left home
and I don't expect she'd want it anyway.

Here's something you might like, though,
but it won't hurt my feelings
if you don't want it.

It's sort of old-fashioned.
It's a pillow cover.
I forget what you call it,
this way you pull the yarn through.
It's made of linen, you see here.

Exie Cable made it, and she give it to Little Mother
or your Great-uncle Glenn, one.
Exie had an eye for my brother Glenn.

Turfig, that's what you call it.
You see here, you push the yarn
through from the back
and it puffs out here on the front side.
Makes them flowers stick out like that.

Exie made it and give it to Little Mother
as a present one time.
She done the words real nice,
here where it says "God Bless Our Home"
in the middle of all them flowers.

Tufting, that's what some people call it.
We always called it turfing.
Same thing, far as I can tell.

Exie Cable really had a liking for Glenn.
Poor thing.
She was a little hunchback.
Now it won't hurt my feelings none
if you don't want to take it.

My Great-Great Half-Uncle Horace's
Bone-Handled Jackknife

When I found it
in the shed
in the safe with the brass dials and tumblers,
it fit.
The gentle curve held my palm.
The worn steel blade grooved my finger
as if I had always whittled with it.
 I thought, he must have held it so.
 I thought, his hand must have been like mine.
 I thought, *we* fit.

For twenty years it rode in my pocket,
a comfort to my mind;
to my hand, a challenge:
could I carve the wood of Maine
as he had done?
My longing taught me—
first, an egg from a kindling scrap,
then, a finch (footless),
a loon (the fine neck, the long, cruel beak)—
delicacy building,
precision,
control.
 Somewhere he's watching, I thought.
 He knows I must be his kind,
 a shaper of the world,
 worthy of the knife.

Later I found the yellowed news clipping
in the pouch with the lock of hair.

A SAD CASE OF MANIA—

On Tuesday, the 13th inst. . . .

his mother

merciless

his baby brothers

Moose Pond

all drowned—

*. . . A third child, about eight years of age,
managed to escape her grasp,
and by this means its life was saved.*

Its life was saved? No—

Horace had saved himself.

Don't erase the boy, the terror, the control—

After such knowledge, what did he save?

No ordinary life:

A maniac's child must live carefully,

the knife always handy,

ready to comfort

ready to shape

ready to sever.

Margaret Yocom

The Cane

was never
in her hand
where doctors
said
it should
be
No

We bought her
another
and another
always wooden
no metal
no plastic
for
her

In her house
they
leaned
on kitchen closets
hung
on dining room
window sills
slid
down bedroom
stairs
Now

one stands
in my bedroom
corner,
waiting