Prologue

The Past and Present in Tradition

This book is about an American tradition—arguing about it. Americans through their history have stood up to claim tradition passionately, shape tradition, and break tradition to define their special status in the brave new world. The United States, an upstart nation of myriad communities, was assuredly a place to reevaluate tradition, and view it from various social angles. Americans have hailed their basic beliefs, customs, and myths—in short, their folklore—to epitomize this tradition. Basic indeed. Whatever this tradition was, it presumably beat at the heart of the society. As a point of social argument, “tradition” undoubtedly has been one of the most common as well as most contested terms in English language usage, and its intimate connection with another politically, indeed emotionally, charged keyword—culture—only added to its great significance in public exchanges.

Toward the present, invocations of “traditional values,” “cultural tradition,” “multiculturalism,” “cultural diversity,” and “culture wars” on the floors of legislatures, at school board meetings, in the popular press, and at many universities across the country proclaim the struggle of Americans to distinguish their nation and communities at a time when social and physical boundaries in a technological, mass society appear indistinct. Against this background many calls of tradition connote the ways that identity—national, social, individual—becomes expressed, and folklore and history, often compressed into our “culture” and “heritage,” become key evidence to fashion a vision of the future that will clarify the meaning of living in mass society.

This book illuminates the debate on the character of American culture as a struggle to rationalize diverse American traditions into a coherent identity. It examines ways that the recovery of these traditions became translated into a conceptualization of American folklore. It brings into focus the prominent figures—often called folklorists—who have guided the translation of academic views into
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public perceptions. It offers rhetorical and philosophical interpretations of folklore “talk” to provoke thinking about the significance of ideas of tradition in American intellectual history.

While sometimes bitter commentary on whether American culture can be, or should be, unified makes today’s headlines, the issue is hardly new. In 1887, Lee J. Vance evoked heated responses by highlighting America’s “composite” cultural character borne out by folklore that refused to fade from diverse immigrant and black communities in America. He asked readers of the popular magazine Open Court, “What have our American students of Folk-Lore done toward contributing their share to the History of Culture?” And being a popularized “subject of the day,” folklore, he realized, had been central to magnifying views of culture, views that mattered so much to a nation struggling with rapid changes wrought by large-scale immigration, industrialization, and urbanization. In this book, I have altered Vance’s question somewhat to ask about the contribution to the discourse of culture, especially in intellectual life. This includes the very invention and spread of the words “folklore” and “folklife” in the nineteenth century to represent the traditions—beliefs, customs, narratives, crafts—that compose and explain culture.

Vance recognized folklore as a buzzword for the kind of recoverable expression that offered “scientific” evidence of culture. In the new perspective he described, culture grew from roots deep in the gritty soil of past everyday life. It appeared to his readers as a kind of localized, even “vulgar” culture contrasted with civilized or “high” culture within a modernizing society. His readers were well aware that in Europe the Grimm brothers had sparked a movement to gather the folk literature of the unlettered and that this led to speculation on the relation of traditional life—defined then as a bottom layer to civilization—to ideas of a modern nation-state formed from a shared cultural root. It also led to a discourse on social and political issues ranging from nationalism to international socialism. Then, as now, mentioning “folklore” and “culture” raised differing attitudes toward the importance of individual will and collective authority. It can equally inspire argument over the significance of the past and the influence of one’s surroundings on behavior. It can have associations with class, gender, age, and ethnicity. In America, it can raise voices taking stands on minority rights and education standards, among other issues that spin off from issues of American tradition.

The substance of the discourse on culture involves the relation of self and community to the nation. The ways that this discourse have been communicated, contested, and altered over the last century reveal historical struggles to declare sources for streams of the American experience. Spurred in the nineteenth century by industrialization, urbanization, and immigration, it has been renewed and heated in the late twentieth century by immigration again, in addition to perceptions of racial divides and social upheavals in the composition of family and community. Set against this social background, arguments over cultural identity today are colored by ideas that might be summarized as nationalist, pluralist, and
behavioralist. Other terms can be heard for these ideas such as progressive, communitarian, multiculturalist, and universalist, and various shades of meaning can be drawn in, but consider some basic differences in outlook.

In the nationalist view, the American story is one of continual material and social progress, building a nation through cultural democracy with citizens accepting, even embracing, an American identity. As the story is variously related, American culture evolved from a few major sources into a national spirit involving core values of democracy and individual freedom. The narrative of America’s traditions is tied into the surprising and glorious historical emergence of the nation, distanced from other cultures by huge oceans and an untamed land. Richard Dorson’s words bear out one common view: “A new nation, born suddenly in a seventeenth-century wilderness, possessed neither cultural nor folk traditions to call its own. Yet in a relatively short span an American civilization has arisen on the naked earth, endowed with distinctive institutions, literature, behavior, and folklore” (Dorson 1959a, 7). For Dorson and many kindred spirits in American studies, American historical conditions were exceptional—or the combination of themes such as mobility, individualism, and democracy was distinctive—and gave rise to American traditions influencing a common culture that integrates immigrants and racial minorities.

The pluralist view values the diversity of local traditions in a nation that legitimizes the rights of social difference. In this view, America from its inception has been home to an array of persistent social heritages of language, religion, ethnicity, occupation, and region thriving in self-defining communities. Under the pluralist umbrella, reference can also be heard to communitarian and multiculturalist perspectives, to cite two special movements frequently invoking pluralist manifestoes of early twentieth-century critics Horace Kallen and Randolph Bourne. As the spin-off terms indicate, there can be dispute under the pluralist umbrella about political impositions upon distinctive communities and their ability to define themselves, especially when primary social categories in the American experience are presented as being broadly of race, class, and gender rather than more ethnographic concerns of ethnicity, religion, occupation, and region. More socially and geographically relative than historically progressive, the pluralist hand maps many continuities existing between traditions adapting to America and those abroad. This variety presumably gives America its vitality and ensures openness to new ideas. The nation is a political idea supporting a “pluralism” of communities rather than a cultural unity. In envisioning pluralism, there can be different opinions on the amount of intercultural connection as well as the level of national conflict and consensus that ensues from a diverse society. There can also be vigorous disagreement on the degree to which government should manage and encourage communal difference. This is especially true with the thorny matter of race and gender of special concern in multiculturalism. Yet there is a basic agreement that multiple identities are possible, even desirable, and traditions inherited as well as invented help perpetuate the varied social landscape.
Often overlooked is a "third force" that takes culture and its social aspects in a behavioral or psychological direction. It reflects on the emergence of mass society and conversely on individualism in the course of human experience. It is behavioralist or universalist in the sense that it views experience as less national or communitarian than based on individual intentions and responses to different social contexts. These contexts are changeful and relate to conditions of human making; humans are actors that have to adjust cultural roles in their daily performances on multiple stages. There is an implication that nation-states have reduced significance in cultural experience, and increased mobility across borders—political and social—suggests that communities are shifting and temporary: they are essentially intellectual constructions. Questions of cultural production are themselves objects of inquiry into relative (that is, without value judgments about hierarchies of art and culture) human urges to create, needs to express, and desires to organize experience. In this view, individuals belong less to groups or communities than to themselves. They respond to factors, such as age, gender, sexuality, and body presentation, that may not be a matter of community but of image and representation. Another issue that receives different interpretations among those working with the universalist idea is the systems of behavior that guide lives, such as organizations and living and working arrangements (i.e., families, friendship and professional networks, schools, stores, and institutions). Traditions do not carry the deep sense of a localized past as much as broad structural and aesthetic concepts that transcend group and national limits.

In assessing American cultural identity, folklorists, anthropologists, and now a growing number of historians and students of "cultural studies," have referred to the keyword of tradition. Folklorists, I will argue, have been primarily responsible for the use of tradition in the discourse of culture, and their rhetorical shifts over time are clues to shifting orientations toward American society. These shifts, I will show, are a result of political events, national and social movements, and some outstanding individuals from the late nineteenth century to the present. My title of Following Tradition has a double meaning, then, to refer to the subject of such concern—life and expression that responds to social precedent—and its object—consideration of the ways that modern existence builds on or breaks away from tradition, indeed defines tradition itself.

Working in a society that is often characterized as future-oriented, American folklorists have had a special problem. Working against a conventional view of tradition as comprising an ancient lineage and shared racial stock, American folklorists have fashioned ideas of tradition against the background of the country's relative youth among the world's nation-states and the diversity of peoples settling over a broad and varied landscape. The domain of Americans has dramatically changed from one coast to another and to areas outside the continent. All this commonly leads to a kind of apology in American culture studies for never really giving full account for the extent, socially and geographically, of the country's cultural
reach. While recognizing America's European, African, and native roots, many writers uncomfortably admitted that the nation did not neatly apply the idea of tradition from the Old World. Conventional wisdom holds that the United States, after all, is all about a progressive, some may even say revolutionary, basis of seeking new patterns to follow. America is often viewed as youth oriented, not responsive to the inherited wisdom of old age or the past. Yet it is also home to longstanding "folk cultures," such as the Amish or Cajuns, who are said to be authentically perpetuating "tradition." Further, political rhetoric in the country makes constant reference to the plan of the "founding fathers" and the inspiration of the Mayflower. What makes the United States so significant to contemplate is the special problem of joining tradition and modernity in a diverse, emergent social landscape to fashion a distinct cultural identity.

In presenting the title Following Tradition, I offer that the philosophy of folklore study and its relation to public ideas of culture reside in the keyword of tradition. I am specially concerned with folklore studies because, more than other fields, it centrally engages questions of tradition in its mission and has had in America a notable public role in government, cultural agencies, museums, and historical societies. To be sure, folklore is not alone in its concern for tradition. In the interdisciplinary mix I formed with historical American studies, the question of national ramifications couples with the problem of tradition. My experience has been that historical American studies tended to speak in broad abstract terms about the basic ideas that characterize the United States, while folklore referred often to local communities bound by traditions observed as specific practices. Although folklore studies and American studies come at tradition from somewhat different directions, they share thoughts on the way that tradition is "followed" as idea and expression. Both studies, however, have often stopped short of discussing a philosophy of tradition that becomes apparent from the emergence of so many kinds of cultural practices. In bridging the studies of folklore and America with philosophy, I needed to reassess the concept that they seemed to take for granted—tradition—and the way it brings into its orbit other highly charged concepts in American public discourse—identity, community, race, ethnicity, and art.

Many readers may think of my effort as "cultural studies," in which I explore the ways that attempts to objectify culture from investigations of tradition have in fact sprung from personal, social, and political agendas. I am viewing scholarship itself as a significant cultural production and evidence of ideology in addition to a supposedly objective record of cultural practices. This book may well be used by folklorists as a way to look inward at the foundational matters that have concerned them. For others, the essays will be a move outward toward questions of the process of intellectually constructing society and culture. Overall, my book makes the point that justification for an American tradition has been a cause, as well as a study, for folklorists to show the special role of culture within the American experience. Various tensions exist over defining that role, especially between hopes for
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a land of humane significance rooted in the face-to-face experience of diverse ethnic-regional communities and a nation transforming, indeed often escaping, the past, offering new opportunities to build a unified, mobile, progressive culture. Set against this background, talking about folklore is a discourse about belonging in America.

The first issue with which this book is concerned is the "problem of tradition." I do not mean to rehearse arguments for definition as much as I am interested in finding the perceptions of tradition for the purpose of persuasion in public and scholarly discourse. At moments when the terms of tradition become contested, when they become laden with values, when they reveal self-concept, they become political and historical artifacts worthy of interpretation. I begin with a discussion of the protean nature of "tradition" and attempts to objectify its meaning. In this effort, one of the contested moments to which I refer is apparent: the issue of the authority carried by tradition. Spilling over into public discourse, the problem of tradition is evident in different forms. To get at this usage, I examine applications of tradition in the press and its reflection of popular attitudes. Another reflection of popular attitude that I explore is the rhetoric of recent political campaigns, especially in constructions of "liberal" and "conservative" sides in the debate over "traditional values."

I then ponder the historical change in views from nineteenth-century intellectuals assessing modernism to twentieth-century scholars mulling over post-modernism. If this move implies a move from the mission of uncovering an ordered natural science of global civilization to understanding the capriciousness of individual human endeavor, then the history of folklore studies and its attention to "tradition" and other cynosures should be recognized for their contribution to this century's significant turns of thought. I examine the ideology, for example, implicit in the uses of folklore, as it reflected evolutionary doctrine in the politics of America's Gilded Age at the time folklore studies were being organized. In the era's exhibitions of "primitive" traditions at new museums dedicated to natural history, in the organization of a folklore congress at the Chicago World's Fair, and in the cultural recollection of slavery at black colleges will be found efforts to guide a dramatically changing nation.

In the chapters that follow, I interpret the conflict and convergence of two main strains on American cultural literacy, English and German, much as they represent two major ethnic movements to the United States. Apparently oppositional ideas of national progressivism and evolution of culture, I find, have been adapted from English anthropological methodology in the late nineteenth century, while similarly juxtaposed concepts of pluralism and romantic nationalism owe greatly to German Volkskunde. Volkskunde has had peculiarly American interpretations in folklife and material culture, especially in the receptive atmosphere of Pennsylvania, and I explore these interpretations in seeking explanation for the nationalization of community as a cultural concept. I argue in the sixth chapter
that the ideological basis of folklife and material culture owes largely to the force of Alfred Shoemaker, who turned his devotion to Pennsylvania-German tradition into a national cause for appreciating America's diverse regional-ethnic folk cultures. Charges of political maneuvering (not to mention "madness") hurled at the outspoken Shoemaker are part of the story of representation of the ethnic scholar in America engaged in a social mission. The sometimes touchy issue of public representation of his Germanness is also there in the popularization of the Grimms, and I give particular attention in the fourth chapter to American uses of the famous brothers' fairy tales in popular culture and the rise of an origin legend tracing scientific views of folklore to the scholarly duo.

I am interested in the way folklore studies emerged to objectify tradition and the way scholars viewed its role in society. History is an issue in folklore studies because of disputes over the form that a retrospective on the field should take. In addition, folklorists and cultural historians in their studies have displayed an uneasiness that probably results from dealing with a past based on tradition and collective wholes rather than historic events and outstanding individuals. As the history discipline has increasingly embraced the rhetoric of narrative, memory, and tradition in the last decade, it has come closer to folkloristic concerns for culture and society and should join in the discourse on the past as well as historiography in folklore studies. To give an example of that intersection, I consider individuals who had "folklore firsts" and helped formulate influential outlooks on tradition. I begin with Martha Beckwith, America's first chair of folklore, who I credit with pragmatically emphasizing folklore as a distinctive study of multicultural tradition and women's roles within that study. I cover the dramatic career of Alfred Shoemaker, who founded America's first college department of folklore, organized America's largest folk festival and folklife society, and helped tradition take an ethnological turn in America. I devote a separate chapter to his nemesis, Henry Shoemaker, America's first state folklorist, and their fight over the ways that folklore would be conserved in the public sector to encourage a nationalist viewpoint.

Implicit in the phrase "American folklore" is the presence of a distinctive national identity, even as folklorists' collection of American traditions showed a decidedly international inheritance. This is the substance of the third issue I present. In nineteenth-century England and other nations of Europe, folklore had been used to rally nationalism and rationalize race. Could the same be said for twentieth-century America? This issue of the use of tradition has spilled over into controversies of the 1990s over "multiculturalism" and "cultural diversity." Invoking American studies, Richard Dorson set the debate during the 1950s with, first, the questions of identifying authenticity and variety in American tradition, evaluating social and political uses of folklore's popularization, and, finally, reconciling an international view of "folklore in America" and a nationalistic "American folklore." It is his polemic that I discuss in the chapter on "Richard Dorson and the
Great Debates,” and moving beyond the university setting, I show other forms of the public debate in the last chapter on popular strategies of displaying American folk arts in galleries, festivals, and communities. The final discussion allows for a closing reflection on the contested interpretations of tradition in the modern present as art, performance, and praxis, and the translations of tradition for America’s future.

It is admittedly a wide subject that I begin to probe here, and to encourage further inquiry I attach a bibliographic essay on the substantial contemporary literature of studying American traditions. My work should not be construed as an attempt for comprehensive historical coverage. Instead, it introduces the problems of tradition as a created object as much as a subject of inquiry. It raises critical issues and identifies key figures and moments in the conceptualization of tradition in America. It may begin to answer how American tradition came up for grabs.