Following Tradition

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The central problem of tradition is explaining the ways that people rely on one another, with reference to precedent, for their wisdom, their expression, their identity. The problem may not be immediately evident from the mechanical sounding definition of tradition in most dictionaries as the "handing down" of lore from generation to generation, especially by oral means. In common usage, tradition can refer to an item dependent on this process, such as a story or custom, or to a precedent given the force of repeated practice, or to knowledge whose official source cannot be verified but is held widely, or to a concept—"a mode of thought or behavior"—characteristic of people generally. As one goes down the list, more authority is ascribed to tradition. The suggestion of reverence due tradition means that people "follow" it, willingly or not, and may define themselves through its presence.

An emotional or even spiritual connotation to tradition exists that may belie objective chronologies or social inventories. To claim tradition, after all, is to bring into play the force, and guilt, of countless generations of ancestors, and perhaps the gaze of present-day neighbors. To follow tradition may be construed as keeping the faith; to break it a risk of apostasy. Hence, a vibrant legacy of writing on tradition exists from the view of how religion draws its meaning from continuities of shared ritual and belief and how individual expressions of art and literature respond to socially inherited aesthetics, symbols, and themes. That is not to say that attempts at clinically objectifying tradition do not exist. Tradition can be calculatedly viewed as a biological specimen and given the look of a genealogical chart. It may be stolidly recorded as a series of motions and minutely analyzed frame by frame. Traditions can be alternatively "collected" as empirical evidence of everyday practice or in the singular described as some conceptual, almost mystical whole, often outside the awareness of individuals. In both directions, scientific and humanistic, the problem of tradition questions the sources from which people draw the basis of actions and attitudes.
A problem with tradition, then, is its multiple meanings and conceptual softness. Given to emotional usage, tradition can appear imprecise, inconsistent, and infuriatingly elusive. At the same time, therein lies its significance, for it offers something essential in the human condition. Tradition is a term we all hear and use, even if it defies crisp definition. As a basic component of life in need of understanding, it seems to demand scholarship. Tradition, it is often assumed, is a source of basic learning, occurring even before formal education begins, and continuing through our lives. It is a font, therefore, for drawing a sense of the self from a social world. That font, that wisdom, has a sense of being part of a sequence of generations that many view as desirable for a sense of belonging. Thus being in a tradition suggests being a link in a social chain reaching well back in time.

The problem of tradition intensifies when value judgments intervene. Feelings about authority, about the virtue of the past, about the state of the present, shape the positive and negative value given tradition. Max Radin wryly remarked about tradition in the Encyclopedia of Social Sciences that “in all its aspects it retains enough of its primary characteristics of vagueness, remoteness of source, and wide ramification to make it seem peculiarly strong to those who have recourse to it and peculiarly weak to those who mean to reject it” (1935, 67). When celebrated writer Lafcadio Hearn described in the early twentieth century how in Japan “every act of domestic life” was “regulated by … tradition,” he suggested to Americans that this structure provided an admirable social model. He emphasized “the law of duty” — “obedience absolute to … tradition” (Hearn [1904] 1984, 287). Vehement argument can arise whether following tradition means unconsciously following a severe form of cultural authority or choosing from tradition that which one finds appropriate.

In America, abundant examples serve to highlight both attitudes toward the authority of tradition and images of ambivalence toward it in mass media. Communal groups such as the Amish, among whom “tradition” presumably carries authority and preserves social harmony, are represented in media from tourist presentations to mass-market movies such as Witness (1985) and are typically portrayed as odd, a conspicuous “other” in American culture. Especially warning of the dangers of authority in tradition, the movie Dead Poets Society, a box-office smash of 1989, opened with students at an exclusive preparatory school carrying a lead banner of “Tradition.” It announced a theme of the limitations of tradition placed on a creative individual by family and school. The movie would have its audiences believing that the severity of this tradition forced the suicide of the artistic boy wanting to define an identity for himself. Encouraged by an unconventional teacher, the boy is shown blissfully performing Shakespeare’s comedy A Midsummer’s Night Dream of man free in nature. He could also have invoked the resounding reminder of the authority of tradition in Henry V: “Will you mock an ancient tradition [begun] upon an honorable respect …?” (V, I, 70).

The Oxford English Dictionary impartially notes the value placed upon practices or collective wisdom deemed worthy of “tradition.” In the sense of practice,
narrative, or wisdom passed through the generations, tradition can be found in print well back to the Middle Ages, but the more recent call of "traditionalism" rings harder with the air of harsh authority from the past. Putting together his widely known vocabulary of culture and society, Raymond Williams suggested that the "time-honored" process of inheritance from an older generation implies respect for elders and a certain duty to carry on the process. But he warned that persistence through time is not necessarily a mark of honor if it is enforced irrationally. From his progressive viewpoint, he thought of the labels of traditionalist and traditionalism as authoritarian enforcement, and therefore negative (R. Williams 1983, 318–20). Amitai Etzioni, another prominent scholar concerned with the charge of authority implicit in traditionalism, drew a contrast between modernity, associated with an emphasis on universal individual rights, and the unfortunately negative view of traditionalism that he thought conjures up the rigidity of the Middle Ages. In fashioning what he called a communitarian movement for the future, he hoped to recover the legitimacy of order and the claim of appropriate social virtues from traditionalism (Etzioni 1996, xvii).

Associated with precedent, continuity, and convention, tradition is commonly put forward to direct future action. Whether one wants the future to break with or continue the pattern of tradition dictates judgments of tradition as negative or positive. Especially common in the modernist literature of culture are statements emphasizing tradition as a guide or choice. Many contemporary writers take the tone that in the modern push toward novelty, choosing tradition, a social connection hearkening back to a past, is a threatened freedom allowed humans. Barry McDonald offered an example in a study of musicians: "I see tradition as founded upon personal choice. In the Archibalds' case, this translates as the conscious decision to engage in a certain sort of historical relationship, involving a network of people and a shared musical activity and repertoire" (B. McDonald 1997, 58). Hence, folk musicians, folk artists, and folk tradition bearers may appear to be touted as exemplars of free will in a mass society that applies pressure to conform to change. There is noticeable irony here in the invocation of tradition, a social connection to the past, as a sign of individualism. In political usage, as discussed later in this chapter, tradition may variously refer to individual autonomy and social authority. It can suggest a so-called conservative virtue in stability through continuity, and deference to previous authority, while supposedly liberal views may credit tradition for encouraging a constant reshaping to form new, or "progressive," directions.

Culture is often confused with tradition, but the related terms can mean different things, and perceptions of them have gone through historical shifts. Most persistently, tradition, especially when referred to in the plural, has carried the connotation of practices of a society, while culture has been considered an encompassing idea of the society. There is an implication that one can grasp traditions, participate in them, invoke them, more easily than the abstraction of culture.
Tradition connotes a social connection and historical precedent that underlie a cultural presence. Tradition frequently means continuity of a practice through time with which people are familiar, a way of doing things, while culture often suggests an unconsciously experienced existence, a way of thinking about things. Henry Glassie summarized culture, for example, as “intellectual, rational, and abstract; it cannot be material, but material can be cultural . . . ” (Glassie 1968, 2). Culture in the past was a reference to place, often to a language group bounded in space, whereas traditions were more variably social, possibly referring to family, age, and gender. In humanities, traditions can be more broadly defined than culture, as in the widely used singular use of the capitalized Western Tradition and its supposed opposite Eastern Tradition, which suggests “pattern” as a synonym for tradition. Culture now can be heard as easily applied to all kinds of associations as well as bounded groups, but often there still is a view that traditions define a culture, rather than the other way around. In European-American intellectual history, “the science of tradition,” seeking to objectify and organize tradition, has been associated for better or for worse with folklore.

FOLKLORE AND THE STUDY OF TRADITION

You will not find “tradition science” or “traditionology” in an American university catalogue. To be sure, courses in history, literature, art, music, religion, and philosophy, among others, will undoubtedly make reference to tradition. Frequently encountered interdisciplinary combinations of American studies, cultural studies, and ethnic studies use it, but I have yet to find “tradition studies” as a separate program. As close as you will come to the “science of tradition” is the study of folklore, where you will find professionals calling themselves “folklorists.” As early as 1899, Englishman Edwin Sidney Hartland clarified, indeed encouraged, the professional pursuit of folklore as first the “study of tradition” and then the “science of tradition.” (Hartland 1894-1896, [1899] 1968; G. Bennett 1994). Even as methods and theories changed drastically from the Victorians to modern-day Americans, the flag of tradition continued to be waved over the territory of folklore. During the 1970s, updates of “folkloristics” were frequently defined as “scientific in the study of human traditions” (Ketner 1973, 1976; Georges and Jones 1995). If not always called a science, folklore studies is usually represented today as a “discipline” forming a bridge between humanities and social science, and American institutions such as Indiana University, UCLA, and the University of Pennsylvania offer the Ph.D. in it.

Folklore courses are most commonly found in English and anthropology departments and interdisciplinary programs. You can find folklore courses at over five hundred colleges in America, of which around eighty have some kind of folklore program (Baker 1986a). Reference to the study of “tradition” is a hallmark of these programs. Indiana University's Folklore Institute calls its newsletter
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"Traditions" and describes the academic study of folklore as "focusing on recurrent traditional aspects of life." The brochure for graduate study in folklore at the University of Oregon advertises: "Students study the extent to which tradition continues to enrich and express the dynamics of human behavior throughout the world." The University of Pennsylvania explains the subject matter of its folklore and folklife department as "traditional arts and aspects of life." UCLA's program in folklore and mythology "examines the ways in which human traditions both reflect and contribute to continuity and consistency in thought and life." Harvard's program in folklore and mythology "takes up the world of tradition in its many forms."

The link of folklore and its emphasis on tradition to other disciplines affects many programs throughout the United States. The catalogue listing for the folklore program at the University of California at Berkeley explains: "Since it is a study of the humanist expression which is handed down by tradition rather than by writing, it is related to all departments that deal with literature, art, music. Since folklore also deals with the entire traditional culture of mankind as manifested in customs and beliefs, it has close affiliations with anthropology, design, history, linguistics, philosophy, psychology, and sociology." Folklore's primary connection with "tradition" and "traditional" is distinctive when compared to the general orientations of "the past" with history, "society" with sociology, or "culture" with anthropology. Indeed, the study of tradition through folklore may be in social sciences or humanities, and sometimes in behavioral sciences (see Nicolaisen 1983; Bronner 1984b; Zumwalt 1988; W. Wilson 1996; Bauman 1996; Mullen 1996).

When twenty-one authorities were asked during the late 1940s to define folklore for Funk and Wagnalls's Standard Dictionary of Folklore, Mythology, and Legend (1949), fifteen referred to "tradition" or "traditional" to explain the subject. Stith Thompson, arguably the dean of folklorists at that time, was especially direct in his usage of tradition: "The common idea present in all folklore is that of tradition, something handed down from one person to another and preserved either by memory or practice rather than written record" (403). Another leading light, Archer Taylor, similarly offered: "Folklore consists of materials that are handed on traditionally from generation to generation without a reliable ascription to an inventor or author" (402-3). While they construed tradition as a learning process of primarily oral transmission, others referred to it as a body of material familiar to a people. MacEdward Leach referred to traditions as "the accumulated knowledge of a homogeneous people" (401), and John Mish delineated this body as "fairy tales, myths, and legends, superstitions, festival rites, traditional games, folk songs, popular sayings, arts, crafts, folk dances, and the like" (401). Folklore had the appeal of giving form to the abstraction of tradition. As literature allowed for a range of forms, so folklore was varied in its content but had a conceptual unity under the tent of tradition.

It may well be that literary scholars were attracted to tradition to describe the list of folk items because it elevated them alongside a canon of classic arts. A folktale, or
a ballad, emphasizing vernacular texts and social sources, had a dubious distinction
within literature organized by acclaimed authors and unique compositions. Responding to a canon of great works created by valued artists, literary scholars frequent­ly referred to “folk literature”—tales, epics, and ballads, and myths, for exam­ple—as worthy of attention because of their raw artistry, and their persistence through time. They often argued for an alternative view of literary art—that as traditions, these items were sources of great literature, high “culture,” or classical civilization. Stith Thompson (1975), for instance, entitled his multivolume reference work on the folktale *The Motif-Index of Folk Literature* (1932–1936), and Francis Lee Utley highlighted tradition in his case for the legitimacy of “folk literature” (1961). They taught the analysis of individual tales much as a critic reading a text for motifs, types, and themes; with their indexes, they established a cultural canon of traditional stories. Both Thompson and Utley realized the higher esteem afforded folk material as tradition within the Western canon rather than as part of “primitive” culture. They also wanted to make a place for folk material within industrial­ized nations of Europe and America that connected appreciation of culture with works in modern languages. In other words, they joined the oral and written word under the broad heading of tradition in studies of English, French, German, Italian, Russian, and Spanish, among others.

In the prestigious area of classics, Milman Parry in his short life (1902–1935) rev­olutionized the criticism of Homeric texts by arguing that they were products of “oral tradition” that dated back into a preliterate age rather than the work of a great single artist. If it was “traditional,” he argued, then forms of the epic could be investigated historically into the present with fieldwork, and he went to the Balkans to make recordings from which he formulated a lasting theory of oral composition (Parry 1971; Beye 1990). With his forceful argument, prominent position at Harvard, and the continuation of his project by Albert Bates Lord (1912–1991), “oral tradition” gained legitimacy (Lord 1960, 1991; Bynum 1974; Foley 1987, 1988; Finnegan 1977, 1991). Lord declared, for example, that “what is called oral tradition is as intricate and meaningful an art form as its derivative, ‘literary tradition.’ In the extended sense of the word, oral tradition is as ‘literary’ as literary tradition. It is not simply a less polished, more haphazard, or cruder second cousin twice removed, to literature. By the time the written techniques come onto the stage, the art forms have been long set and are already highly developed and ancient” (Lord 1962, 62). Oral tradition affected other hallmarks of “Western civilization,” such as the works of Chaucer and Shakespeare, which received similar scrutiny for their “traditional” influences (see Lawrence 1911; R. Loomis 1927; Ashton 1957; Mandel and Rosenberg 1970). Attention to relationships between oral and literary tradition made its way into American letters with their inspiration from regional folklore and “local color” in the canonical writings of Nathaniel Hawthorne, Washington Irving, and Mark Twain (see Rourke [1931] 1959; Collins 1957; D. Hoffman 1961; C. Brown 1987).
The literary scholars working with folklore in the early twentieth century set a process in motion of expanding the limits of literature as imaginative tradition, and laid the groundwork for the present growth of American literature conceived as anti-canonical "textual studies" and "cultural studies." In light of folkloristic efforts with oral tradition to break down the privileging of published original prose and poetry in literature, it is more common now to hear of "narrative" and even "narrative diversity" to describe the scope of literature (Bercovitch 1995). The construction of tradition as conventional knowledge and a form of narrative apart from a written or elite record has been especially useful to describe cultural histories of marginal societies or everyday life in industrialized nations.

There can still be scholarly resistance when using tradition as an overarching concept for documenting majority cultures in contemporary societies. Overall, it can be argued that national traditions have been categorized as histories while marginal groups have often been described in terms of culture or tradition. There has been a pattern of treating publicized events recorded in print as having a national bearing, translated as "major proportions," while orally communicated matters of social importance were relegated to localized, and hence marginalized, existence. Michael Kammen, a president of the Organization of American Historians, spread notice, for example, of "the weakness with which national tradition—as opposed to particular ethnic, or religious, or regional traditions—has been felt, perceived, and perpetuated" (Kammen 1978, 4).

The perception of history as subjective tradition of national dimensions raises the nagging question of how to assess the kind of truth represented by tradition, especially the way tradition, thought of as inherited wisdom representing some social collectivity, relates historical events and social patterns. Bridging scientific history with its reverence for the documentary source and classifiable fact and folklore with its attention to belief and narrative, Richard Dorson recognized that "oral traditions may well exasperate the historian of a literate, or at least print-glutted society, with their quick-silver quality and chronological slipperiness. But they can be trapped, and they offer the chief available records for the beliefs and concerns and memories of larger groups of obscured Americans" (Dorson 1964b, 234). As a historian, he described documents of history and folklore as equally based on belief and narrative, and therefore most revealing of attitudes, biases, prejudices, and outlooks. Indeed, the scholarly avoidance of the issue of tradition as a kind of knowledge in need of recovery and interpretation may be explained by the scientific historical tendency to search for external reality and reject cognitive perception as evidence. In this kind of rigid categorization, tradition has been located most often in a shadowy region between positive fact and created fiction rather than conceived as everyday cultural behavior.

Anthropological authorities in the Standard Dictionary of Folklore mostly cited culture, custom, and belief as central terms beside or in place of tradition. In this rhetoric, the synchrony of ethnography as the observation of behavior in
the context of place tended to be emphasized over the diachrony of chronologi­cal history, and hence tradition, arranged in time. One can find precedence for an anthropological uneasiness with tradition and preference for custom and belief. Influenced by evolutionary thinking, early anthropological citations of folklore found custom more scientific than tradition for generalizing about the universality of the civilizing process. When British antiquarian William J. Thoms coined the term “folklore” in 1846, he encouraged a study of “customs, observ­ances, superstitions, ballads, proverbs ... of the olden time” that he encapsulated as folklore and underscored as “the Lore of the People” (Thoms 1965). Custom had an appeal as a category of objects that could be classified into cultural types and species much as natural science, the center of scientific discourse at the time, had for higher and lower forms of life. Indeed, the common evolutionary classification of custom as a primitive predecessor of civilized “manners” connoted the irrationality of “lower stages of progress” and underscored the rude or crude otherness of the folk (Lang 1885).

Because of the interest in the nineteenth century in rationalizing racial types around the world and the evolution of civilization from primitive culture, anthropologists tended to favor custom because of the presumption that it was ritualized for a close-knit group of like-minded, or like-colored, participants. It tended to draw people together and it constituted generally public, collective statements of a race or society. Custom thus conceived referred to repeated rites and practices, often exotic in their nature. Custom was the documentable, observable material that could be classified, arranged, and “scientifically” compared. Tradition could hence be the process by which the material was unconsciously perpetuated. When referring to tradition, though, Victorians often implied an ancient body of knowledge. According to The Handbook of Folklore (1913) by Charlotte Burne, customs and beliefs were the “relics of an unrecorded past” that needed special documentation and were the focus of the folklorist’s effort. Yet they were part of what could be loosely described as tradition. Burne pronounced: “the scientific study of folklore consists in bringing modern scientific methods of accurate observation and inductive reasoning to bear upon these varied forms of Tradition, just as they have been brought to bear upon other phenomena” (Burne 1913, 2). The capitalization of tradition suggested a universality to the body of knowledge.

To many of the early British anthropological folklorists particularly, the concept of a universal tradition was similar to the idea of culture as Edward Tylor defined it: “that complex whole which includes knowledge, belief, art, morals, law, custom, and any other capabilities and habits acquired by man as a member of society” (Tylor [1871] 1970, 1). Tradition, however, was especially associated with the process of “survivals,” customs “which have been carried on by force of habit into a new state of society different from that in which they had their original home, and they thus remain as proofs and examples of an older condition of culture out of which a newer has been evolved” (Tylor [1871] 1970, 16). Tylor described tradition as some
fixed cultural content endlessly perpetuated. Tradition as a form of learning most characteristic of a primitive stage would be viewed negatively, especially when contrasted to the association of "science" with advanced stages. Tylor's rhetorical use of "survivals" suggested that tradition could and should only be found in relic form in the contemporary, industrialized societies.

The relativistic idea of tradition in plural cultures as particular local knowledge adapting to change, rather than as an evolving whole, took hold in the twentieth century within anthropological thought. In his definition of folklore for the *Standard Dictionary of Folklore* (1949), Melville Herskovits made reference to this shift when he opened with the explanation: "Originally the study of cultural curiosities, and held to be the survivals of an earlier period in the history of 'civilized' literate peoples, folklore has come more and more to denote the study of the unwritten literature of any group, whether having writing or being without it" (400). He expressed the influence of Franz Boas on American anthropological thought and his reliance on folklore as an oral literary product that reflected the local social life, or culture, of a bounded group. Boas used tradition as a noun to describe shared practice or as an adjective to describe an oral and customary process of learning. In his chapter on mythology and folklore for the textbook *General Anthropology* (1938), Boas wrote: "The continuity of the ancient tradition and its gradual infiltration into popular belief can be proved. On the other hand, the belief in witches and the elaboration of the ideas underlying the trials of witches require for their understanding not only the traditional transmission of belief but also the current beliefs in witchcraft" (Boas 1938b, 621). What was significant to Boas, and the "school" of American anthropology he inspired, remained not so much in the transmission of belief as it did in the society which the belief reflects.

The kind of societies to which Boasian anthropologists were attracted were those that were "traditional" and therefore the products of that society were traditional. Especially in the United States, the Boasian anthropologists appeared preoccupied with recording endangered American Indian tribes and isolated African-American settlements. The use of folklore as it emerged from oral literature studies became increasingly attached, however, to traditional products in nontraditional societies. Crediting the study of folklore, especially the "oral tradition" work of Milman Parry for her inspiration, Ruth Finnegan in 1991 called for the reintegration of tradition into anthropology by emphasizing that changing practices function as tradition. Distancing herself from the "colonializing" view of primitive cultures held by early anthropology, she suggested attention to "traditional" societies as part of an updated strategy for anthropology. As she described them, such societies rely on face-to-face and oral communication and have collective norms, and their traditions can be observed to be functioning within the society. She stopped short, however, of views of tradition within what she called "modern"—"urban living within Western industrial civilization"—although other "urban" anthropologists had gone that route (Finnegan 1991, 107; Dundes 1980d).
She ultimately advocated "looking at tradition and traditional forms not as distinctive things nor as age-old products of the past but as researchable in living practice, and of taking a critical and searching—as well as comparatively oriented—approach to investigating the manifestations and uses of that intriguing and appealing and sometimes treacherous concept 'tradition'" (Finnegan 1991, 121).

A view owing to anthropology that went further in recognizing workings of tradition within America's industrial society was the "folklife" movement that had begun in the late nineteenth century and gained momentum in America after World War II. Even in the literary orientation of folklore, a social orientation toward living practice has been evident for some time. The continuous, variable quality of folklore as observable, authentic evidence of tradition's adaptation and change came through especially in 1968 in the title Our Living Traditions: An Introduction to American Folklore edited by Tristram Potter Coffin. With specific reference to the commercial culture with which American folk traditions often vie, the essays were gathered together, the editor wrote, to distinguish "moral, maudlin nonsense" packaged for the mass market and "genuine oral traditions through which ethnic, occupational, and regional groups maintain their individual cultures" (Coffin 1968, vii). Coffin thus identified the cultural link of folklore with a sense of authenticity deriving from a living connection to the traditions of specific social groups.

Surveys of folklore studies after the 1980s showed even more than they did during the 1940s a consensus about the emphasis on tradition. Dan Ben-Amos (1984, 124) declared: "Tradition has survived criticism and remained a symbol of and for folklore." Michael Owen Jones (1989, 263) concluded that "what appeals to folklorists is the study of traditions—something in which all people of every time and place engage." Richard Bauman (1992, 30) observed: "There is no single idea more central to conceptions of folklore than tradition." In a special issue of the Journal of American Folklore in 1995 on keywords used by folklorists, tradition appeared first in a list with art, text, group, performance, genre, and context. Tradition, Henry Glassie reflected in his lead essay for the issue, may have been relegated to folklore, but as a "continuous process of creating the future out of the past," it belongs widely in association with history and culture.

In fact, studies of history and culture took up the problem of tradition with new vigor after the 1980s. Attracted to the association of tradition to the continuous past that is understood in the present, Michael Kammen in Mystic Chords of Memory: The Transformation of Tradition in American Culture (1991) masterfully periodized trends in the ways that tradition as a collective memory has been invoked in American history. It included the Colonial Revival obsession of the early twentieth century with building a national culture based on the lessons of the founding fathers and the mid-century rediscovery of regional and ethnic folk and their integration into cultural democracy. Getting away from the historical task of reconstructing what happened in the past as an objective enterprise,
Kammen urged a realization of historical reconstructions as selective cultural and political acts. Once thought too soft to build an objective inventory of the past, tradition as a concept could be embraced to explore the social and intellectual creation of the present out of the past. Historian David Glassberg, for instance, incisively analyzed the ritualization of American history into patriotic pageants during the early twentieth century, and subtitled his study “The Uses of Tradition” (Glassberg 1990).

The problem of tradition in American history brought into focus the unsettled issue of locating America’s cultural continuity with a past, some past, a contested past, not revealed easily by recording of events and biographies. Oscar Handlin had dramatically set out the problem in the mid-twentieth century by suggesting that the social history of immigration rather than the diplomatic facts of America’s founding explained the history of American nationhood. But such a social history required an inquiry not only of the events of immigration, but an exploration of cultural baggage brought into, or discarded in, America. Handlin touched off a debate still raging about the character of immigrants and the influence of “ethnic” tradition in American culture. Immigrants were described prominently in terms of “tradition” because they represented a social movement, with connections to folk cultural legacies. Although noticeably evident in changes occurring to America, they were not well represented in the documentary record. Much of their story was in fact derived from their stories. Handlin presupposed a predominant “tradition” common to immigrants of European descent, a presumption for which he was taken to task by later historians of the ethnic experience (Bodnar 1985; Daniels 1990). He explained the stability of America in the adjustment necessary for traditions of the Old World to change for the New. He viewed immigration as an alienating experience encouraging envelopment within an altered American tradition. Tradition therefore lost its authority in the New World. He raised hackles as well as garnered awards for writing: “In this world then, as in the Old Country, the safest way was to look back to tradition as a guide. Lacking confidence in the individual’s capacity for independent inquiry, the peasants preferred to rely upon the tested knowledge of the past. It was difficult of course to apply village experience to life in America, to stretch the ancient aphorisms so they would fit new conditions” (Handlin 1951, 109).

The frequent characterization in historical studies of tradition as a collective memory links historical and folk tradition, but distinctions frequently arise. In keeping with a concern for past events and figures causing change, historical tradition often implies the inherited narrative of what happened previously, what acted as a cause toward a present effect. Kammen, for instance, gives ample space to discussion of the “myth of the West,” with reference to Frederick Jackson Turner’s thesis of the movable frontier as a spur to democracy and individualism. Folk traditions typically refer less to causal events or movements and more to socially significant practices and lives. Folk tradition when it is used commonly
refers to the process or result of oral transmission or imitation characteristic of the persistence of legends, tales, songs, and so on. Thus *American Folklore: An Encyclopedia* (1996), edited by Jan Harold Brunvand, does not have an entry for the frontier or Frederick Jackson Turner’s frontier thesis. But the volume includes long entries for cowboys, rodeos, loggers, and Mormon folklore. Another example of the folkloristic usage of tradition as forms of expressive culture by social groups and localized contexts is Cecilia Conway's book on African-American influence in banjo performances in Appalachia plainly subtitled “A Study of Folk Traditions” (Conway 1995). And an exhibition of the early crafts within the round of life in the Susquehanna Valley of New York is baldly entitled *The Folk Tradition* (Barons 1982).

“Folk tradition” as a constructed category gives special attention to an “informal” transmission process through time and a social context that encourages group exchanges and identities. Kammen’s historical, or popular, tradition could be conveyed through various media including schools, television, and newspapers, and does not necessarily require a basis in the social group. To underscore this distinction between folk and popular tradition, Jan Brunvand in his three editions of the popular textbook *The Study of American Folklore* (1968, 1978, 1986) drew a contrast between the formal records of a heritage or history of a people and the social inheritance of folklore. He wrote: “Folklore comprises the unrecorded traditions of a people; it includes both the form and content of these traditions and their style or technique of communication from person to person. The study of folklore (or ‘folkloristics’) attempts to analyze these traditions (both content and process) so as to reveal the common life of the human mind apart from what is contained in the formal records of culture that compose the heritage of a people” (Brunvand 1986b, 1).

Brunvand speaks for many folklorists in applying tradition as evidence of practice which reveals mind. He is ambiguous about the element of time required or the extent of social participation necessary for constituting tradition. The appeal of tradition is apparently its location in the everyday, outside of “history.” There is continuity of this view with the earliest proponents of attention to America’s “traditions.” From his base in Philadelphia, John Fanning Watson from the 1820s to the 1850s promoted the collection of “traditionary lore,” composed of legends, artifacts, beliefs, and sayings from aged informants to recover an unwritten record of everyday “olden life” (Watson [1830] 1857). He imagined that rapid changes in American life had threatened to obliterate appreciation for traditional ways of doing things, and histories of the time were preoccupied with biographies of the nation’s leading figures. Washington Irving, a renowned novelist creating an American fiction out of this kind of tradition, credited Watson with “multiplying the local association of ideas, and the strong but invisible ties of the mind and of the heart which bind the native to the paternal soil” (Watson 1857, vi–vii). Expressing a positivist tone permeating much of later folklore research, Watson honored the
motto, “If any man were to form a book, of what he had seen or heard himself; it must, in whatever hands, prove a most useful and interesting one,” and added, “I am of the same opinion from numerous facts known to me in my researches among the aged for reminiscences and traditions” (Watson 1857, 12). More than imitating Sir Walter Scott or the Grimm brothers, Watson differentiated American research of traditions because of America’s future orientation, its progressivism. He wrote: “A single life in this rapidly growing country witnesses such changes in the progress of society, and in the embellishments of the arts, as would require a term of centuries to witness in full grown Europe” (Watson 1857, 2).

Thoms’s coinage of “folklore” won out over Watson’s lengthier “traditionary lore,” but references to tradition and folk tradition remained. If folk refers to the process of tradition, is “folk tradition” redundant? Not necessarily. “Folk tradition” usually connotes local, expressive knowledge especially among members of a bounded group identified as ethnic, religious, regional, occupational, or familial, which lends a certain “authenticity” to the cultural product (see D. Evans-Pritchard 1987; Hansen 1996). It may even be as small as two friends who create lore to identify themselves or perhaps a relationship between a person and pet, although these examples are typically seen as stretching the perception of authenticity (see Oring 1984a; Mechling 1989a). A recent trend has been to call forms of local knowledge “cultural tradition,” perhaps to stress the functionality and universality of tradition. “Cultural tradition” indicates a changing attitude toward the understanding of tradition in cultural theory. Robert Winthrop, citing tradition as a concept worthy of discussion in cultural anthropology, noted the break away from an earlier view of tradition as inflexible and irrational. “More recent culture theory,” he wrote, “recognizes tradition to be relatively fluid, capable of being invoked to justify or guide innovation, while conferring a sense of continuity with the past” (Winthrop 1991, 302). This view allows less reliance on the assumption of objectivity toward an exotic other who presumably has stable tradition as opposed to the modern researcher who is progressive and somehow culture-free. In this revision of culture theory, traditions describe all classes and situations, but are still associated with social interaction, most notably within small groups (see Jain 1977).

Tradition in such new clothing answers a vigorous scholarly concern for the basis of cultural production—the small group—rather than the bounded nation-state or boundless civilization. It can be argued, then, that “tradition studies” did not separately arise earlier because of the precedence of culture, literature, and history in American intellectual trends. Yet there has been a steady recognition that the materials of tradition called “folklore” constituted the interstices, sometimes the foundations, of culture, literature, and history. “Folklore” as a study moved, in the nineteenth century, from various antiquarian and linguistic concerns increasingly toward claiming tradition as its polestar. That did not mean, however, that “tradition” threatened to crowd out “folklore” as a name for a field of inquiry. Folklore, as I will show later, remained on the masthead partly out of historical
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accident, partly out of the appeal of “folk” as a cultural category, and partly because it had an attraction by objectifying tradition, hardening it, into classifiable units that could be materialized, manipulated, classified—indeed rationalized.

Folk and Tradition in Popular Discourse

Since the nineteenth century, use of tradition as a keyword in popular discourse and in several disciplines has surged at moments of perceived rapid change, often thought of as modernization. The growth of folklore studies, in fact, reflects this historical trend. The Grimm brothers in Germany and Thoms in England commented on the disappearance of folklore or what they perceived as agrarian expressive traditions in the wake of European industrialization. Similarly, from the 1880s to the end of the century, the groundbreaking work of William Wells Newell, first editor of the Journal of American Folklore, was bolstered by his conviction that “to save precious traditions from perishing ... appeals to the support of the American public” (Newell 1889, 2). He defined folklore as “the study of popular traditions” and insisted on its importance to show continuities between the rapidly changing present and the distant past. Although he opined that popular traditions were often vulgar, rude, and backward, they were invaluable in explaining the rise of an industrial civilization. Speaking to “modern men and women of science,” he justified attention to tradition by offering the “recognized principle, that higher forms can only be comprehended by the help of the lower forms, out [of] which they grew” (Newell 1889, 1). He associated tradition with “ancient stock” and he hoped to allay the fears of the public that the world was created anew by showing in the pages of the journal that modern industrialization, invention, transportation, and urbanization evolved naturally out of the traditions of primitive culture.

When the journal shifted to the editorship of anthropologist Franz Boas in 1908, the contents featured less of Newell’s evolutionary tone, but they still used “traditions” to respond to issues of modernity. Particularly after World War I, authors moved folklore closer to the American present. In 1923, Martha Warren Beckwith published a startling account for the time of superstitions held by supposedly modern college students to show that they rely on folk beliefs for unpredictable human issues that concern them: courtship, marriage, future prosperity. In 1920, Emelyn Gardner published a collection of play-party games in Michigan that revealed adaptation and creativity rather than blind repetition of past musical forms. Her materials were hardly from the exotic folk of anthropological usage; they were from ordinary residents of Michigan. Toward the end of the turbulent 1920s, Boas prepared a guide to the layman called Anthropology and Modern Life (1928). From his research on folklore, he referred to the lessons of traditions for the present day: “Notwithstanding the rapid changes in many aspects of our modern life we may observe in other respects a marked stability. Characteristics of our civilization are
conflicts between the inertia of conservative tradition and the radicalism which has not respect for the past but attempts to reconstruct the future on the basis of rational considerations intended to further its ideals” (Boas [1928] 1986, 136–37). He assured readers that even in a rapidly changing society such as the United States, “the old and the new live side by side” (Boas [1928] 1986, 137). In folklore, tradition could be a source to invigorate modern culture, and even became celebrated in many folk festivals, such as the National, White Top, and Pennsylvania, which drew big crowds and media interest during the 1930s. The kinds of tradition especially at issue in the push toward modernization and nationalism were those from the multiple European immigrant groups that had come in a huge wave between 1880 and 1920; from descendants of slaves in the South, some of whom had migrated to northern cities; and from persistent regional folk cultures in Appalachia, Pennsylvania, the Ozarks, and elsewhere.

The post-World War II period through the 1970s is often described as a special period of interest in folk tradition. The simultaneous dominance of mass culture and individualism, which was associated with modernism in America’s prosperous industrial nation-state, led to many references in the press and other forms of public discourse to “folk revivals,” “rediscovery of folklife,” and “getting back to tradition” (Cantwell 1988). At the same time, a counterculture movement was accused of breaking popular traditions in a form of youth rebellion. The perception of increased interest in traditional cultures at the same time as countermovements looked to new cultural formulas is not necessarily a contradiction. Both movements drew ideas from so-called folk cultural traits of plain living and social harmony (see Shi 1985). They both sought restoration of a spiritual quality to life that had been lost or had been allowed to suffer in the postwar consumer society. Folklore again offered a sense of authenticity associated with the traditions of ethnic and regional communities.

The revealing moment in this folk revival discovery of tradition was the 1963 Newport Folk Festival. The Newport festival was not the earliest folk festival in what has been called the folk revival of the 1960s; but it was the best known, and it came to symbolize boom years of national publicity for traditional music and performers (Jackson 1993). The festival, featuring folk songs of struggling workers, repressed blacks, and forgotten heroes, attracted scores of thousands to the New England city known for its wealth and elite prestige, and this contrast became the keynote for press coverage across the country (see Brauner 1983). Appearances in Newport of aging black blues singers from the poor South, who were described as newly “discovered,” became in the words of blues historian Jeff Todd Titon, “media events” (Titon 1993, 225). In addition to this sign that the media noticed racial integration in a setting engineered by northern youth, the introduction of Appalachian singers, Cajun musicians, and Ozark balladeers suggested redefinition of American views of modernization. It had been assumed that postwar America held a future-orientation that gave little account to its rustic roots. While the importance of
Newport to popular acceptance of regional-ethnic musical traditions still implied a northeastern commercial establishment, it also signaled an alternative to the mass-marketed blandness of the recording industry.

Many of the new stars put on record during the 1960s, such as Joan Baez, Bob Dylan, Judy Collins, and Tom Paxton, forced a reconsideration of labels such as folk and traditional in public usage. These artists were called folk singers even though they had little connection to oral transmission of songs in America’s familiar folk cultures. They brandished acoustic instruments and occasionally sang songs taken from American oral tradition. They were identified with nonrustic locales such as Ivy League schools and Washington Square Park in New York City. They sometimes attracted derisive labels such as “folkies,” “folkniks,” or “urban folk.” The singers from Appalachia and the Ozarks meanwhile were designated “traditional” to make the separation between an air of historical or ethnic authenticity around them and the construed folky manner of the commercial youth artists. Reflecting on the Newport festivals during the 1960s, one prominent participant gave this accounting of the urban-traditional split: “In 1963, there were around twice as many urban as traditional and ethnic performers; in 1967 and 1968, it was just the other way around” (Jackson 1993, 77). Reviewing “Folk Music” on October 9, 1964, *Time* anchored the list with Bob Dylan and the New Christy Minstrels while noting “Traditional Songs and Ballads” from seventeenth and eighteenth century Scotland performed by Ewan MacColl. While folklorists such as Richard Dorson disparaged the folk revival movement and this kind of juxtaposition for tainting the understanding of folk as an oral transmission process within a bounded group, the movement’s rhetoric significantly brought the concept of tradition in a modernizing country into a public forum. The meaning of tradition as a visceral, hazy category of authenticity came to the fore.

The organizers of the Newport festival brought together “traditional” performers—many from ethnic and disenfranchised groups—and “folky” artists connected to a dominant commercial culture in a celebration of a new integrated social vision. In 1964, the crowd at Newport mushroomed to an impressive seventy thousand and witnessed, in the words of critic Stacey Williams who covered the event, “all this wonderful variety adding up to a feeling of one brotherhood, as hard to define as it is easy to sense” (S. Williams 1965; see also R. Cohen 1995). This integrative idealism bred use of tradition to express sympathy for neglected or abused groups, but the media had a field day reporting the intolerance of the crowd for Bob Dylan’s 1965 appearance with electric guitar and an accompanying rock band. By 1969 media attention had shifted to the stinging electricity, and alienation, of Woodstock. Folk festivals with powerless old-timers on homemade instruments were characterized as corny and passive compared to the charged atmosphere of youth rebellion at Woodstock. A participant in the folk revival recalled, “The romantic idealism so much a part of the folk festivals was, I think, inappropriate in the climate of continually escalating violence. For many individuals who had
formed a large part of the festival audiences, singing about social and political problems was no longer adequate" (Jackson 1993, 78). Nonetheless, many festivals, often recast as folk arts or folklife programming with professional folklorists as watchdogs for the authenticity of tradition continued or reemerged. While Newport became history, as the same participant commented, "The nice thing about the folksong revival is how much of it survived and became part of the general culture, how much of it is still accessible. I doubt that rock music would have developed the way it has were it not for the folksong revival. More folk festivals go on now than ever went on during the 1950s and 1960s, and many of them reflect real sensitivity and sophistication in programming. Many are directed by graduates of folklore Ph.D. programs—men and women who themselves had often been in the audiences of the folk festivals of the 1960s" (Jackson 1993, 79–80).

During the early and mid 1960s, the Newport festivals were central to the folk song revival. Many who could not be at the festivals could listen in on the events through popular recordings put out on the commercial label of Vanguard, or re-create the atmosphere in a host of festivals and tours based on Newport's success. The 1964 Newport Folk Festival alone spawned seven anthology albums putting together big-name stars and "traditional" ethnic and regional performers. Fans could even see some of the folk stars on a prime-time television show with the folky title of "Hootenanny." Robert Cantwell described the special significance of the 1963 festival this way:

While "thousands of fans milled in the darkened streets outside, listening to the music drift over the stone walls of the arena," Pete Seeger, Bob Dylan, Joan Baez, and Peter, Paul and Mary linked arms with the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee's Freedom singers to sing the festival's closing songs of freedom, peace, and hope. It was a moment in which, like a celestial syzygy, many independent forces of tradition and culture, some of them in historical deep space and others only transient displays in the contemporary cultural atmosphere, briefly converged to reveal, though inscrutably, the truth of our national life. (Cantwell 1988, 190)

That truth was one of tension between the disturbing undercurrents of racial prejudice, social class conflict, and "sheer money working to carry the influences of the northeastern cultural establishment into broad circulation in the wider republic" and an idealistic hope for a tolerant, plural society where a rigid nation had stood (Cantwell 1988, 190). Tradition offered more than a sense of a stable past to give identity to a baby-boom generation entering a disposable, plastic world. It marked the recovery of group life and everyday expression in modern society. With tradition, the rhetoric suggested, the man in the grey flannel suit got a face and was able to express his inner self.

This intensity of experience was attainable not only through discovery of folk songs emphasizing communal participation, but also by dirtying one's hands with traditional crafts and practices. The tremendous popularity of The Foxfire
Book (1972) and its many sequels (nine between 1973 and 1993), edited by Eliot Wigginton and published by the commercial house of Doubleday, is attributable to the appeal of a rural southern connection with authentic historical tradition. Plain and earthy in its design, it bucked the marketing formula of glitzy appearance to become a huge commercial success. The book sold over three million copies, more than any book in the company’s publishing history (Wigginton 1989, 285). It began in 1967 as journalistic work by high school students in an English class who collected descriptions of rural crafts, skills, narratives, and beliefs from old-timers in Rabun County, Georgia. It turned, in Wigginton’s words, into “an investment that linked the public school curriculum and the area’s traditions and culture together in powerful and magical ways” (Wigginton 1989, 285). In the first volume in the series, Eliot Wigginton bemoaned the loss of folk wisdom because of the advent of electronic civilization. He especially thought that ethnic and regional contributions to American culture would suffer. Originally intended as a teaching tool, Foxfire, as it became a mass culture phenomenon in a Broadway stage play and movie, expressed the emotional vitality of life in tradition. The books became manuals for lost skills and practices of a simpler, and apparently wiser, day. By encouraging his students to collect the stories and crafts from older people who lived this way, Wigginton offered that they “gain an invaluable, unique knowledge about their own roots, heritage, and culture. Suddenly they discover their families—previously people to be ignored in the face of the seventies—as pre-television, pre-automobile, pre-flight individuals who endured and survived the incredible task of total self-sufficiency, and came out of it all with a perspective on ourselves as a country that we are not likely to see again. They have something to tell us about self-reliance, human interdependence, and the human spirit that we would do well to listen to” (Wigginton 1972, 13). Foxfire became a national movement and spawned numerous local imitations such as Salt in Maine and Bittersweet in Missouri (see Clements 1996). It became a symbol for the association of tradition with old, rural living.

There were other “moments” that exemplify the reorientation of tradition during the 1960s and 1970s. One such moment often labeled a “phenomenon” was the publication of Alex Haley’s Roots in 1976 and its production as a television miniseries (Kammen 1991, 641–45). Roots appeared as a twelve-hour adaptation in January 1977, and besides breaking television audience records for a miniseries, it won nine Emmy awards and spawned a fourteen-hour sequel, Roots: The Next Generations, in 1978. Nielsen estimated that an incredible 130 million Americans—representing eighty-five percent of all the television-equipped homes—watched at least part of the original twelve-hour miniseries. The final episode riveted the attention of a staggering 80 million viewers (H. Waters 1977). In fact, seven of the ten most-watched television shows in United States history were episodes of Roots (D. Moore 1994, 6). The book sold over a million copies within a year of its publication.
and was quickly adopted as a text in over 250 college courses. It held the top spot of the New York Times nonfiction best-seller list for an amazing run of five months beginning in November 1976. Its success landed Alex Haley on the cover of Time (February 14, 1977) and brought him coverage in a host of mass-market magazines. In Newsweek (February 14, 1977), columnist Meg Greenfield reflected that the last publishing event in America comparable to the phenomenon of Roots was the publication of Uncle Tom’s Cabin in 1852.

Like Uncle Tom’s Cabin, Roots was a narrative of slavery, but its distinguishing features were its sources and the mass appeal of an African-American writer. Haley recovered his family’s saga from Africa to the New World through oral tradition. He wrote that much of it came from elder family members who related “snatches and patches of what later I’d learn was the long, cumulative narrative that had been passed down across generations” (Haley 1976, 566). He added to this material oral chronicles regarding his ancestors he received from an African griot in Juffure. Calling his work a “novelized amalgam” woven from family tradition, Haley challenged conventional categories of fact and fiction (Gerber 1977; Mills 1981). At first Haley defended his work as “carefully preserved oral history, much of which I have been able conventionally to corroborate with documents” (Haley 1976, 584). Faced with caustic questions about the historical accuracy of his account, Haley increasingly used the rhetoric of saga and symbol (McFadden 1977; Gerber 1977; Courlander 1986; Puschmann-Nalenz 1987; D. Moore 1994). He admitted, in fact, that he had lifted sections of folklorist Harold Courlander’s The African (1967) for his narrative (A. Johnson 1984, 467–69). Although promoted as a history by the publisher, Roots was given a special category award by the National Book Awards committee. Coming to the defense of the use of tradition in Roots, columnist Meg Greenfield offered the impact of its “emotional truth.” She wrote: “‘Roots’ is romantic and melodramatic, its characters are in many ways unconvincing and unreal. But none of that disturbs its larger human truth.... Overnight, it has become part of the national folklore, this saga with its enormous power to move, and we all seem mystified by that” (Greenfield 1977).

While Greenfield observed that the popularity of Roots was “an unexpected and unaccountable wildfire thing,” Haley and others gave explanations revolving around the search for a sense of tradition and group belonging at a time when those associations, especially to rooted family and immigrant bonds appeared to be dissolving. Few argued for its impact on the basis of artistic merit, especially of the television series (“Why ‘Roots’” 1977; Gerber 1977; Fiedler 1979, 71–85). Many reviews that appeared when the series was aired related the phenomenon to a new, benign period of race relations which created new sympathy and interest in a black saga (“Why ‘Roots’” 1977; H. Waters 1977). Nancy Reagan, for one, disagreed, and was widely quoted in her criticism of the show as racially inflammatory (D. Moore 1994, 6–7). Haley dodged the issue of race and told interviewers that the appeal of Roots was based on the lure of an antimodernist theme at a time of mass cultural
alienation. Haley generalized that he had tapped into "the average American's longing for a sense of heritage" (Marmon 1977). Blaming television for alienating youth from its elders and cutting off the tradition of storytelling, Haley said: "In this country, we are young, brash and technologically oriented. We are all trying to build machines so that we can push a button and get things done a millisecond faster. But as a consequence, we are drawing away from one of the most priceless things we have—where we came from and how we got to be where we are. The young are drawing away from older people" (Marmon 1977, 72). In a commencement address at Xavier University, he elaborated further on family tradition as a source of identity for Americans: "every family on earth has some ancestry and goes back into some native land and that, fundamentally is what Roots dealt with" (Haley 1982, 70).

In the years that followed the publication of Roots, family sagas drawn from oral tradition, guides to collecting ethnic oral history and folklore, and advisers on genealogies came out in record numbers (Hijiya 1978). The Roots phenomenon turned from a reference to race to ethnicity and family. Often remembered in the Roots story is the protagonist's (Kunta Kinte) insistence on maintaining ethnic African identity in the face of adversity (Courlander 1986; Haley 1982). Coincident with the appearance of Roots, Irving Howe's World of Our Fathers (1976) climbed the New York Times best-seller list and won a National Book Award. A social and cultural history of East European Jews who came to America, its narrative tone and attention to family and community as social cynosures drew popular notice. Its hefty sales meant that many non-Jews were reading it for its message of ethnic cultural connection to the American experience, much as many nonblacks were consuming Roots for its narrative of identity search.

To encourage ordinary Americans further in the pursuit of heritage, popular advisers such as Jeane E. Westin's Finding Your Roots (1977) hit the market in abundant supply. On Independence Day, 1977, Newsweek devoted its cover story to "Everybody's Search for Roots." To feel the authenticity of tradition, which was presumably emotional and positive, the magazine suggested, meant attaching to a group, especially ethnic or familial. This challenged a cherished American notion of individualism built around a myth of separation from Europe ("the fresh start") and self-reliance ("the self-made man"). As James Hijiya reported with a tone of surprise in 1978, "To an unaccustomed degree, Americans are conceiving themselves as products of groups" (Hijiya 1978, 549). Since Haley's work had been based on the story of his family as he had heard it from "tradition," public discourse associated interviewing older family members with finding social centeredness in an overly mobile, overly faceless society. Tradition, especially family and ethnic tradition, it could be argued, provided one a sense of roots. To quantify America's growing sense of ethnic belonging, the United States Census in 1980 added an ethnic ancestry question for the first time that requested ethnic self-identification from Americans. It reported an impressive ninety percent response rate to the
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question. The 1990 count repeated the question and census publicity drew attention to this kind of question with the message: "Our families, our communities, our culture—these are the things we cherish" (see Bronner 1996b).

While the census carried national significance, folkloristic activity tapped into the Roots phenomenon, especially at the community level. I took notice in 1981, for example, of a newspaper article on a folklore professor I had at the State University of New York. His community activities had been cited as a new kind of cultural "fieldwork" during my stay at Binghamton in the early 1970s. Still at it in 1981, his work was recast then in a headline, "SUNY Prof. Helps Others Explore 'Roots'" (Mittelstadt 1981). Calling a folk-artists-in-education program "Roots and Wings," folklorist Roger Abrahams argued that the benefits of this roots awareness can be tremendous, "not only in keeping traditions alive and putting students in touch with the past, but also in fostering a sense of local pride" (Abrahams 1987, 80). Nationally and locally, cultural or folk tradition in public discourse at the time especially described the attachment to subnational and small social groups.

With so much emphasis in "cultural" and "folk" tradition on local and ethnic placements of culture, it is easy to overlook the concomitant movement to describe a common national tradition around World War II. During and after the war that had urged the nation intellectually to stand together against fascism, a number of popular works such as B. A. Botkin's bestselling Treasury of American Folklore (1944) touted national folk heroes representing the spirit of democracy. He especially spread the fame of the legendary Paul Bunyan, portrayed as a gigantic, yet kindly workingman, as a sign of a vibrant national folklore. Bunyan entered, or was promoted, in popular culture in film, literature, and music as a typically boisterous American folk hero, along with the likes of Johnny Appleseed and Pecos Bill ("King of the Cowboys"). A television series playing on the legends of Davy Crockett (dubbed the "King of the Wild Frontier") during the mid-1950s became a sensation and spurred sales of coonskin hats and other frontier garb. "The Ballad of Davy Crockett," a song from the show, became a number-one hit in the nation for thirteen weeks in 1954. The post office issued a series of stamps featuring "national" folk heroes such as Crockett, Johnny Appleseed, and Pecos Bill and called it the "American Folklore Series." Thousands of newspapers and magazines carried notice of national folk heroes of mythological proportions and recovered or invented tall tales about them. Remarking on the popularity of Paul Bunyan in particular, Richard Dorson offered that "professors and critics and composers swallowed the myth as eagerly as the man in the street. The explanation for this phenomenon lies largely in the staple reading fare of the country and the century, the newspaper, whose reporters had found a lusty, 100 percent American symbol in Paul Bunyan" (Dorson [1956] 1976c, 336). Brandishing one of the first degrees ever offered in "American civilization," Dorson observed after the war that "the
maturing of American society and the crystallization of American nationalism have generated the desire for a New World Thor or Hercules or Gargantua, with no taint of foreign genesis” (Dorson [1956] 1976c, 336).

Some commentators after the war noticed a connection of the new cultural nationalism to more than American victory of democracy over Nazism and competition with communism. They frequently pointed fingers at the boom of commercial mass culture or celebration of industrial progress (D. Hoffman 1952). Richard Hofstadter voiced distress at the public’s “ravenous appetite for Americana” in his landmark book *The American Political Tradition* (1948). In his work he recognized the cultural impact of inherited narratives about American political heroes such as Jefferson and Lincoln. He attributed the nostalgic search for national traditions, what he called “the most common vision of national life, in its fondness for the panoramic backward gaze,” to a keen feeling of insecurity. It was a response, he thought, to a profoundly shaken confidence caused by the Great Depression and war. Sounding a note of realism, he wrote, “If the future seems dark, the past by contrast looks rosier than ever; but it is used far less to locate and guide the present than to give reassurance” (Hofstadter [1948] 1989, xxxiv).

Hofstadter differed with Dorson as to the root of the Americana craze, since Dorson considered it a sign of postwar bravado that “in the era of world eminence, Americans should proudly unfurl their folk heritage” (Dorson 1959a, 3). Coming from the same generation, indeed both born in 1916, Dorson and Hofstadter gained prominence for reevaluating national traditions after the war, and they trumpeted similar calls for a rationalism rather than nostalgia in this quest. Equally concerned for the authenticity of national heroes in oral tradition and a valued role for intellectuals in public life, they agreed that the popular, commercial notice of national folk themes after the war was a remarkable “phenomenon.”

The postwar “phenomenon” was a climax to an effort coming out of a certain cultural inferiority complex. Americans turned the characterizations of their lack of refinement into a virtue and their ordinariness into civic art. A canon of American literary treasures from Hawthorne, Cooper, Irving, and Twain that owed to folk traditions became identified. Some intellectuals looking to the cachet of Europe were skeptical. Even though American arts were supposedly “coming of age” in the early decades of the twentieth century, Van Wyck Brooks’s plaint that “old American things are old as nothing else anywhere in the world is old, old without majesty, old without mellowness, old without pathos, just shabby and bloodless and worn out” laid doubt about the cultural results (Brooks [1918] 1958, 94). The charge was that America had age, but lacked tradition. The impediments to the dream of a “national culture,” he wrote, were individualism without creativity and the industrial worship of size, mass, quantity, and numbers that fostered a commercial shallowness (Brooks [1918] 1958, 101–2). In answer to his attack that American society lacked “the indwelling spirit of continuity,” many proponents of a national culture worthy of scholarly interpretation constructed
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an artistic legacy that built on a distinctive American vernacular as the ennobling stuff of native tradition. With impetus from new programs at Yale and Harvard, an intellectual movement took shape by the 1930s, making claims for the rise of a new glorious civilization, an American civilization. It distinguished a national culture that would change the way hallmarks of Old World civilizations were viewed, and indeed esteemed.

The movement to rationalize American civilization especially gathered steam during the post-World War II period. Much of its purpose seemed to lie in identifying historical and folk traditions that could broadly define a national character (T. McDowell 1948; Dorson 1976a; Gleason 1984). In the absence of an ancient stock or geographical unity, some analysts in the movement wondered whether an equivalent could be found to the mythologies that bind other nation-states (see H. Smith 1950). Admitting that America lacked the culturally shared sacred narratives conceptualized by folklorists as myths, postwar Americanists nonetheless located a national tradition that they attributed to beliefs—interpreted as having “mythic” qualities—arising from perceptions and experiences of settlers in the new nation (see Tate 1973). The national tradition usually described involved special historical events or movements affecting all Americans. Louis Hacker in 1947 produced a commonly used textbook called *The Shaping of the American Tradition* (1947) in which he identified historical patterns unique to the American experience that led to formation of an American tradition. The patterns he offered were the conquest of a movable wilderness frontier, freedom from church authority, weakness of the state, strength of the middle class, promise of opportunity, installation of democratic institutions, and a system of parties and pressure groups. He presented the traditional American “as a type,” as an individualist, a democrat, an equalitarian, and a utilitarian.

To Hacker and many other intellectuals of the period, the American type and its traditions fulfilled the promise of building a new, great contemporary civilization in America that would take its place alongside the classical Greeks and Romans. As they had their heroes, gods, and myths that united and characterized a proud civilization, so America could make its claim to such traditions. Henry Nash Smith in *Virgin Land* (1950) offered the backwoodsman and frontiersman as national heroes that exemplified the distinctive American “myth of the garden.” By this he meant not so much a narrative, but an idea imaginatively expressed in literature, arts, and institutions that America was a place of abundance whose resources could be cultivated by pioneers willing to develop the land. Other myths and heroes followed. Richard Dorson located Davy Crockett and Mike Fink in the “pantheon of American folk heroes” as epitomes of American boastfulness and optimism (Dorson 1959a, 1973a). R. W. B. Lewis examined the archetype of the American Adam who established the tradition of the country as the place of the fresh start, a locale to shed the European past and start anew (R. Lewis 1955). These traditions, then, were popular ideas rather than cultural expressions as they were described for small folk societies.
Potential conflicts between the rise of national and plural visions of American tradition culminated in the bicentennial celebration of American independence in 1976. It was a national celebration, but many localities used the occasion to celebrate what they associated with the nation's admirable past—its sense of plural community. Many local celebrations in their sponsorship of "vernacular themes" were markedly different from the centennial celebration of 1876 with its strong promotion of sweeping nationalism and industrial progressivism (Bodnar 1992, 238–43). In 1976, Chicago organizations sponsored demonstrations of local pioneer spinning, weaving, and cooking; Jasper, Alabama, had a log cabin reconstructed; Ellettsville, Indiana, restored a one-room schoolhouse; some hearty residents of Galesburg, Illinois, retraced the route the earliest settlers of the town took from New York State; and Lock Haven, Pennsylvania, floated a lumbering raft down the hazardous West Branch of the Susquehanna River. The Illinois State Museum's bicentennial exhibition showcased folk arts and artifacts of everyday life. The catalogue explained: "There has been an attempt to go beyond amply recorded political history, well-known personalities, and events in order to focus on the geographical and folk history of Illinois. Hopefully, the activities of hundreds of unsung individuals who made the true 'history' of the state will be brought to light" (Madden 1974, xii). It was a sign of alienation in the post-Vietnam and post-Civil-Rights years from the politics of national leadership, and a reaffirmation of community within the superficiality of a growing mass culture.

The widespread use of local traditions and folk arts to bring out America's plural communities during the bicentennial was offset by several splashy attempts to show the unity of the nation's traditions. The New York State Historical Association installed "Outward Signs of Inner Beliefs: Symbols of American Patriotism" to highlight a tradition of shared pride in the nation. Director emeritus Louis C. Jones hoped that the message coming from displays of historic patriotic objects made and used by everyday people showed a continuity, indeed a love of country, from the beginnings of the country to the troubled 1970s torn by racial, gender, and age conflicts. Reflecting on the spirit of the folk objects, he wrote of his wish that "some of the ebullience, some of the confidence in the future, some of the belief in ourselves can be a useful elixir in today's dark and threatened world" (L. Jones 1975, 9). Philip Morris Incorporated sponsored an even larger show using "folk art" at the Whitney Museum of American Art and several other prominent locations. Called The Flowering of American Folk Art, 1776–1876 and curated by American art historians Jean Lipman and Alice Winchester, the show made reference to the Declaration of Independence as the beginning of the seeds of a "native folk tradition" (Lipman and Winchester 1974). The show's nationalized folk art in the form of weather vanes, decoys, needlework, portraits, and wall decorations diminished the ethnic diversity of the country and emphasized the mostly middle-class character of America's New England roots. The curators used the timing of
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the bicentennial to highlight the spirit of democracy in the nation’s founding. The “unconventional side of the American tradition in the fine arts,” the folk arts to the curators “have always been an integral part of American life” (Winchester 1974, 14). Introducing the massive summer-long Festival of American Folklife on the Mall in Washington, D.C., during the bicentennial, the director of the National Park Service tried to steer a middle course between the use of vernacular themes of tradition for promoting the nation and its divided communities. He wrote: “The Festival of American Folklife is an expression of these beliefs that we are different in many ways, but we are still one nation, one people whose individual differences helped shape a great nation” (Everhardt 1976).

The popular moment that probably more than any other put the keyword of tradition on the lips of Americans was the staging and later filming of Fiddler on the Roof. It may seem to be an odd choice for influencing American culture. Indeed, the producers of the show worried before its 1964 premier that the play’s depiction of Jewish shtetl life in Russia was too esoteric for American mass cultural tastes. Its backdrop of frustrating poverty, painful prejudice, and violent pogroms hardly seemed the stuff of musical comedy. It turned out to be a theatrical wonder, breaking records for the longest-running show on Broadway, garnering nine Tony awards including one for best musical, and enjoying huge sales of soundtracks, books, and sheet music. It was among the most popular shows for repertory companies and community theaters across the country to produce, even in podunks without a Jewish presence. Playbills for subsequent productions of the play carried the tag “World’s Most Acclaimed Musical.” Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer produced in 1971 a film version, faithful to the Broadway production, that earned eight Academy Award nominations and won three Oscars. The movie earned 25 million dollars, ranking it among the top grossing musicals of all time. In fact, more people saw the movie that year than any other, except for another memorable film with ethnic-family tradition as a strong theme, The Godfather. Fiddler on the Roof reached more audiences in 1994 with the release of the film on home video. The most prominent word and binding concept in the movie is tradition.

The song “Tradition” opens the play, and in the script the word “tradition” appears thirty times in ten pages (Stein 1966). Audiences hear from the beginning of the play that tradition provides stability in people’s lives. “And, how do we keep our balance?” the main character, the patriarchal Tevye, asks. He answers his own question, “That I can tell you in a word—tradition!” If that exclamation wasn’t enough to convince the audience, villagers enter the stage and sing,

Tradition, tradition—Tradition.
Tradition, tradition—Tradition.

“Tradition,” Tevye reflects. “Without our traditions, our lives would be as shaky—as a fiddler on the roof!” He explains that traditions provide identity to people in
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this world. “Because of our traditions,” he says, “everyone knows who he is and what God expects him to do.”

In the prologue, Tevye defines traditions as both time-honored guides to behavior and expressions of them. He relates to the audience: “Because of our traditions, we’ve kept our balance for many, many years. Here in Anatevka we have traditions for everything—how to eat, how to sleep, how to wear clothes. For instance, we always keep our heads covered and always wear a little prayer shawl. This shows our constant devotion to God.” To hear Tevye talk, tradition in this community seems to be a given of life, an unanalyzable faith: “You may ask, how did this tradition start? I’ll tell you—I don’t know!”

After the prologue, Tevye’s cherished traditions are subject to challenge and change. Listening to the radical teacher of his children, he hears “strange ideas about turning the world upside down.” “Times are changing,” his daughter Motel tells her father. “The world is changing,” Chava, another daughter, tells him. “Where does it stop?” he sighs. Going against the custom of arranging marriages through a “matchmaker,” Hodel makes her own decision about who she will marry and a reprise of “Tradition” can be heard. Tevye sings:

Tradition!
They’re not even asking permission
From the papa.
What’s happening to the tradition?
One little time I pulled out a thread
And where has it led?

Tevye eventually draws the line when Chava wants to marry outside their faith and community. “Can I deny everything I believe in?” Tevye ponders, as the refrain “Tradition, tradition—Tradition” wafts in the background. Whereas the Broadway play with mass appeal allows the interfaith couple to remain united and hints at eventual reconciliation with Tevye, the earlier Yiddish-language dramatic movie Tevye (1939), which aimed at Jewish audiences, would have none of that. The distraught Chava, abused by her husband’s gentile family, abandons the unhappy union and begs forgiveness from her father. For American audiences of the 1960s watching the Broadway play, the struggles of the couple for acceptance implied the need for integration and tolerance as a break with traditional social divisions of the past. The American translation of tradition on the stage was to be faithful to one’s ethnic identity while joining in a diverse, progressive society. The play much more than the Yiddish movie offered that tradition could indeed be chosen and adapted rather than religiously followed.

Another difference between the Broadway play absorbed into American culture and the Yiddish work on which it was originally based is the explanation for Tevye’s removal from his home. In the Yiddish movie, the gentile town council invidiously orders him out. In the Broadway play, the culprit is the state, represented by the
police loyal to the czar. The anti-authoritarian theme must have appeared easier to swallow for Americans than representation of inherent vindictiveness of Christian neighbors. In the work on which the play was based, writer Sholem Aleichem made reference to a senseless persecution causing the endless wandering of the Jews waiting for a Messiah. That is their tradition. In the story, Tevye resignedly says,

For since they taught me the lesson—Lech-lecho, Get thee out—I have been wandering about constantly. I have never been able to say to myself, "Here, Tevye, you shall remain." Tevye asks no questions. When he is told to go, he goes. Today you [speaking to the writer Sholem Aleichem] and I meet here on this train, tomorrow we might see each other in Yehupetz, next year I might be swept along to Odessa or to Warsaw or maybe even to America. Unless the Almighty, the Ancient God of Israel, should look about him suddenly and say to us, "Do you know what, my children? I shall send the Messiah down to you." (Aleichem 1973, 103)

In the Yiddish-language movie and the earlier Yiddish theater play named Tevye der Milkhiker (1919), Tevye makes a choice. Rather than wait for the Messiah, he takes the initiative to go to the Holy Land so that he can live a traditional life basic to his beliefs (Wolitz 1988). But in the Broadway play, and later in the popular English-language movie, his destination is America, and what he will face there is uncertain and worrisome. It is an omen of further pressures on tradition he might expect that his wife berates the children: "Stop that! Behave yourself! We're not in America yet!" In the last line, Tevye turns to the younger generation and quietly commands, "Come, children. Let's go."

Through its long run on Broadway (3,242 performances), Fiddler instigated public discourse about the raw nerve in America that the play's theme of tradition touched. The strongest character, indeed the central character of the play, is Tevye boisterously played originally by a rabbi's son and veteran Broadway actor Zero Mostel (born Samuel Joel Mostel) with connections to East European traditions. Newsweek put Mostel in his role as Tevye on its cover on October 19, 1964. After noting the portrayal of Tevye's fatherly role in defense of tradition, the author made the comment, "The sentiment is one which a great many Americans in need of replenishment are coming to understand" ("Hail" 1964, 98). From the first notice of the play's run in Detroit on August 8, 1964, to the two months after its Broadway opening on September 22, no less than eight articles in the New York Times reported the show's tremendous resonance with audiences. Howard Taubman in his column of October 4 asked: "Who would have guessed that the stories of Sholem Aleichem would be suitable for the musical stage? Who could have predicted that such a work could play fair with the mood, color and characters of these tender and comic tales of poor Jews in Russia's villages in the early years of the century? Who would have thought that a yarn describing poverty, anti-Semitic brutality and the Diaspora could be transformed into a sunny and heartfelt musical?" (sec. 2, 1). Implying a parallel to black struggles for civil rights,
he interpreted the appeal in the pathos of those forced to live uneasily amidst prejudice, antagonism, and the peril of violence.

Prominent Yiddish novelist Isaac Bashevis Singer pointed out to readers of the Times that the adaptation of Sholem Aleichem's nineteenth-century Russian stories offered two themes that were timely during the American 1960s (Singer 1964). One was the continuity of everyday folklife, even while great, potentially cataclysmic events of the day raged on. But when traditions change, he argued, that is the really great change in life, and many audiences, whether or not they were Jewish, realized that. Related to this stabilizing factor of everyday tradition is the other theme of impending revolution caused by new ideas and old prejudices. The comfort of following tradition and feeling complacent in one's home and society is weighed against action forced by the injustices of the nation and the inevitability of social change.

Multiple interpretations of the play could be heard from reference to the Holocaust to ethnic disintegration, but it was difficult to get away from the keynote of tradition presented in the production. Modern life "without traditions," the play warned, was as "shaky as a fiddler on the roof." And at the same time, traditions had to change to be effective in modern life. The closing of the play leaves the question unanswered of the integration of tradition and modernity. As the curtain falls, the fiddler follows Tevye and his family to America but he stops playing his music.

When the show was revived on Broadway in 1977, critic Jack Kroll in Newsweek jumped on the connection of tradition as a haven from mass and urban culture. He wrote: "The very first number, 'Tradition,' may be pure showbiz, but it immediately invokes a social and even spiritual quality that's in short supply in the mean streets of our cities." And he added, "We don't have folk art any more—not in the plastic, big-deal urbanized popular arts of our mass culture. But we have, on very rare occasions, a Fiddler on the Roof" (Kroll 1977). Tevye comes closer to modern American sensibility in Fiddler by moving from Sholem Aleichem's original countryside to the play's town or shtetl. Audiences saw community bonds dissolving, yet providing a source of ethnic strength.

In the transition from the ethnic Tevye to the American Fiddler, an American rhetoric of rights entered into the dialogue, replacing the class conflicts of Sholem Aleichem's Yiddish. Explaining her revolutionary lover Perchik to Tevye, Hodel says, "He cares nothing for himself. Everything he does is for humanity." In the play, however, Perchik's most radical gesture was to observe gender relations: "Our ways are changing all over but here. Here men and women must keep apart. Men study. Women in the kitchen. Boys and girls must not touch, should not even look at each other." When Perchik tells of "our ways" as a collective statement of tradition, he is not so much the Bolshevik revolutionary as the American moralist calling for adaptability to modern conditions. Seth Wolitz incisively commented on this kind of dialogue: "A gigantic substitution occurred in the musical. American
ideals of individual rights, progress, and freedom of association are assimilated into the Judaic tradition which is presented as a cultural tradition parallel to the American. The class conflicts, which riddled the shtetl and which Sholem Aleichem considered destructive of Jewish communal interests, are sidestepped in the musical” (Wolitz 1988, 527).

If *Fiddler* gave new life to use of tradition in public discourse, it did not necessarily clarify its meaning. It lent recognition to tradition as a fragile and threatened, yet indispensable part of modern life. It pointed to the rituals and marks of tradition in folklife that distinguish ethnic groups. In the chant of “Tradition, tradition—Tradition,” it suggested tradition as a key concept, even a haunting one, for modern audiences. It implied the peculiar condition of America as the symbol of the fresh start, the progressive future hostile to tradition. And in the questioning climate of the 1960s it seemed to pose a challenge for reintegration of tradition—ethnic, family, regional—into contemporary life.

In another major production playing on the separation of tradition and modernity, the movie *Witness* (1985) offered the Amish as an American anomaly of a tradition-oriented, communal society in the midst of modernism. It made 28 million dollars and generated millions more for the tourist industry of Lancaster County, Pennsylvania, “the Amish Country,” where the film was shot. The movie was the first by Australian director Peter Weir to be filmed in America. He had previously drawn on the theme of tradition and modernity with a film called *The Last Wave* about rural Aborigines practicing their rites in an Australian city. The Amish, like the Aborigines, may be romanticized from a distance but close up might be scorned for their stubborn, unreasonable hold onto tradition.

The story in *Witness* concerns a tough city detective coldly called “Book” who finds refuge among the cozily named “Lapps” in the nearby serene environs of rural Pennsylvania. Book has been forced to flee because he knows too much about corruption, violence, and drugs within the city police department. Capable of brutality, he honestly “goes by the book,” as his name implies, and his life is therefore in danger. In contrast to Book’s background in the dark, noisy city with its pressure-cooker stress, vice, and filth, the Amish rural way of life is pictured with unforced peacefulness and clean morality. Wounded in the city, Book recuperates in the country among the Amish, and he finds value in unselfish traditions of plain dress and communal activity. He rediscovers long-neglected craft skills, emphasizing construction rather than destruction, and he begins to mesh with the communal Amish way of life. But his difference is revealed when he cannot hold his temper in response to mean-spirited taunting in town by non-Amish for the group’s plain, passive ways. Word of the hostile incident attracts the notice of the corrupted cops from the city who come to the country to hunt him down. Gunfire erupts on the bucolic Amish farm, and Book is on the defensive without his gun. There are symbolic overtures such as Book’s triumph over one bulky gunman by drowning him in harvest grain. In a powerful scene showing the moral power of
community, the last surviving gunman finally surrenders his weapon in front of hundreds of unarmed Amishmen who look incredulously at the violent scene unfolding before them. Book has learned an ethical lesson, but he cannot stay. Surrounded in an epilogue by the imposing lights and machinery of police cars, Book signals his identity with a puff of a cigarette. He is seen driving toward the city, while a young Amishman walks on foot toward the farm, wheat gently, peacefully waving in the background.

Even before Witness came out, Lancaster County, Pennsylvania, laid claim to being among America’s favorite tourist destinations. The movie added to the popular image of the region as home to Amish tradition, and compounded views of the Amish as a conservative folk culture. In reality, Lancaster County does not boast America’s largest Amish population. Holmes County, Ohio, holds that distinction. It is not the area with the most conservative Amish communities either. Mifflin County, Pennsylvania, may hold that designation. The perception of Lancaster as home to Amish tradition is related to the idea of its being among the oldest Amish settlements, having been established in the eighteenth century. But more significant is its seemingly defiant location near urban centers. Within easy reach of major metropolitan areas of New York, Philadelphia, and Baltimore, Lancaster County had been promoted as a therapeutic escape from modernity, even though tourists rarely encountered authentic Amish community members or stayed in rural surroundings. The immense popularity of tourist attractions such as the Amish country in Pennsylvania is based on the recreational lure of a pastoral group life associated with tradition. Other such promoted draws exist in America—Ozark mountaineers in Arkansas, Cajuns in Louisiana, Navajo in the Southwest, for example—but arguably the Amish, maybe because of their close proximity to America’s most bustling, cosmopolitan cities, most often epitomize American tradition. Asked to name a folk group, students I have surveyed consistently put the Amish at the top of their lists.

The prominence of the Amish in public notice is not a position they have sought, and the success of the tourist industry in Lancaster County has in fact diminished the pastoral landscape with which their “folk tradition” has been associated (Black 1992, 1993). Yet it is also among the factors encouraging Amish population growth and economic prosperity (Kraybill and Nolt 1995). The Wall Street Journal took notice, for example, of the entrance of Amish women into entrepreneurial businesses and the New York Times noticed the financial security of Amish farm families at a time when considerable press was being given to the failure of American family farms (Aeppel 1996; Schneider 1986). Responding to the image of traditional rural groups as impoverished and hard-hit by government social program cuts, the Journal reported the addition of 160 new industries and the operation of communal self-help traditions among the Old Order Amish that had made them impervious to cuts in government benefits (Ingersoll 1995).
The Washington Post appeared particularly surprised by the opening of commercial Amish markets in six mid-Atlantic locations, including some in malls within the cities of Philadelphia and Annapolis (Argetsinger 1997). Once almost exclusively agricultural, the Amish are no longer restricted to farm labor and have been mostly successful in the move to small businesses (W. Roberts 1995; Veigle 1990). Even in agriculture, change is apparent. Many Amish communities have allowed more tractors and mechanical assistance than in the past (“Some Amish” 1995). The popular press often delights in reporting such changes, especially when they appear inconsistent. Examples are reports in USA Today on the use of stereo “boom boxes” in Amish buggies, and in the New York Times on the use of trendy in-line skates while old bicycles are prohibited (S. Marshall 1996; Chen 1996). The Chicago Tribune highlighted the consumer consciousness of an Amish carriage shop that offered options of steel wheels, solid rubber tires, vinyl roofs, canvas tops, tinted windshields, and slide-across doors (T. Jones 1997).

While such anomalies make news, the dominant image in tourist literature is the unchanging serenity of Amish tradition. The same Tribune gave the headlines that touring Amish country was taking “A Step Back in Time,” with a glimpse of “The Simple Life” (P. Moore 1995; Ammerman 1989). The Detroit News touted in its travel section the way that the Amish “still value life’s simple ways” and the Houston Chronicle praised the way the “Amish Community Takes Visitors Back” (“Modern-Day” 1991; Racine 1995). “Old-time” values placed on family coherence, reliance on the land, and simplicity are highlighted in reports such as “Family is First for Devout ‘Plain People’” and “In Amish Country, the Scenery and Food are Good and Plenty” (Grossman 1992; R. Cutting 1992). Lancaster’s Amish attract national, indeed international, press for their hold on the past amidst supposedly future-oriented America.

Despite dire warnings by cultural critics and several notable folklorists of the demise of the Amish because of modernity and tourism, the population of the Old Order Amish in Lancaster County has more than doubled to over 16,000 from 1970 to 1990, a figure fifteen times greater than it was in 1910 (Glassie 1968, 4; Bronner 1996b, 33–34). Nonetheless, in keeping with the image of a communal folk, the Amish are misleadingly portrayed in countless brochures as an inscrutable, monolithic sect, soberly noncommercial, and generally noncommunicative. The apparent riddle of Amish culture thriving on rural tradition within a modern urban setting has turned them into a symbolic text in which everything they do—craft, dress, and eat—becomes anachronistically traditional and ethnically unique, so as to force reflection on mass cultural traits of individualism, technology, and progress. Tourism, however, tends to direct visitors away from Amish life into commercial zones with attractions based on symbolic narratives of Amish traditionality (Buck 1978; Brandt 1993–1994). The narratives appear especially distorted when one realizes that the major attraction of Amish country in the last decade has been factory outlet malls with romantic names invoking Pennsylvania-German tradition where Amish farms once stood.
There is also scholarship, supposedly the voice of reason, that has contributed to the notoriety of the Amish. Some of it could be faulted just as well for presenting the Amish as an endangered species that desperately needed to be protected from their non-Amish neighbors. This tendency in early scholarship on the Amish reveals an association of folk tradition with passivity and isolation as well as stability. It suggests that traditional societies cannot hold power in a modern state and need cultural brokers, often in the guise of outsiders "close" to the group, who will look out for their interests. To be sure, the Amish exhibit, as one aptly titled book called it, "A Struggle with Modernity" (Kraybill and Olshan 1994). But there are also signs that the Amish are in fact thriving and have been more vocal in recent decades in managing their affairs with the non-Amish "English" as well as the state (Kraybill 1993). In Lancaster, the Amish successfully blocked a highway expansion project through their farmlands, lobbied for maintenance of their midwife birth tradition, and exerted considerable pressure on local zoning boards for protective regulations (Levin 1996).

In light of a legacy of preservationist scholarship and popular uses of Amish tradition to spur consumerism and recreational therapy, many modern scholars of Amish tradition insist that social change and individual creativity, albeit cautious, are part of the cultural dynamics of Amish life (Kraybill 1989; see also Kraybill and Olshan 1994; Hostetler 1963). There is a reassessment of the assumption that a traditional society cannot thrive within a modernizing mass culture. Consider the centrality of tradition as described by a young Amish minister:

The Amish outlook on tradition is somewhat different than other churches. We consider tradition as being spiritually helpful. Tradition can blind you if you adhere only to tradition and not the meanings of the tradition, but we really maintain a tradition. I've heard one of our members say that if you start changing some things, it won't stop at some things, it will keep on changing and there won't be an end to it. We have some traditions, that some people question and I sometimes myself question, that are being maintained just because they are a tradition. This can be adverse, but it can also be a benefit. Tradition always looks bad if you're comparing one month to the next or one year to the next, but when you are talking fifty years or more, tradition looks more favorable. Don't get me wrong, I don't feel that everybody who is traditional is okay. But there still is a lot of value in tradition and we realize that. (Kraybill 1989, 41–42)

From the Amish minister's perspective, tradition as the precedent of the past does not have to be separable from the present. The Amish value tradition for the social stability and coherence it provides; they maintain it more than their neighbors. Yet that does not mean that tradition is unchanging or consistent.

While tourism has been blistered for fantasizing the Amish, even racializing them apart from the Pennsylvania-German heritage of which they are a part, it has prodded several efforts for studied self-presentation of the varied regional-ethnic traditions of Southcentral Pennsylvania. In the heart of Amish country, the non-Amish Landis brothers—George and Henry—notably began during the 1940s what they
called a “folk museum” to record the craft and agricultural traditions of the region. Its folk label was as much a reference to the modest general-store background of the Landis brothers as it was to the record they amassed of small-town everyday life made into relics by industrialization. But they drew scholarly interest as an early example of presenting material culture in a regional environment. It was an effort repeated in many outdoor museums emerging after World War II such as the Farmer’s Museum in Cooperstown, New York, Old Sturbridge Village in Sturbridge, Massachusetts, and Old Salem in Winston-Salem, North Carolina. Old was the operative word. Captured as a moment in time, the buildings and artifacts of the Landis Valley Museum (later the State Farm Museum when it was taken over by the state) were celebrated as prime antiques, old things to be experienced amidst the modern environment of novelty. This was never more evident than at the Shelburne Museum in Shelburne, Vermont, where Electra Havemeyer Webb, a wealthy New York heiress, located her antique Americana collections in Colonial buildings that served as galleries. As histories of the museum note, it was a visiting experience that strangely had viewers give a materialistic eye toward overstocked cabinets of glorious objects in a demonstration of a supposedly simple past.

Museums such as the Landis Valley Museum engaged in education programs to insist on the relevance of relic collections for living viewers. The programs frequently showed the continuity of activities such as gardening and children’s play in present-day communities. The Lancaster Heritage Center emphasized craft activities in education programs as the common traditions of the old city that transcended ethnic and religious divisions. Such traditions presented as old activities nonetheless appeared distant, separated in the past from the present. At a time when the loss of community was bemoaned because of apparently inevitable modernization, a noticeable rise was evident in presentations—in tourism, education, and art—of traditions as reminders of a sense of social connection that might still be recovered. What the efforts of the Landis brothers, Electra Havemeyer Webb, and others to declare local tradition not tied to religious separation reveal is a tendency to turn tradition into a form of history, a distant past remembered for its dislocation from the present.

**Tradition in Scholarly Discourse**

Seen as a common human inheritance, tradition especially in American scholarly interpretations did not need the homogeneity of a group or an ancient reference to qualify it as part of culture. The most frequently cited definition of this type is Alan Dundes’s explanation of the term “folk” during the 1960s. To apply tradition in the modern, and especially plural American contexts, he reconfigured “folk” to refer to “any group of people whatsoever who share at least one common factor.” Folklore, the logical, functional outcome of such a common grouping, becomes a popular, necessary commodity instead of a rare find or survival. Apparently fundamental to
social life, folklore according to this definition persists for its significant purpose of expressing the cultural reality of a group.

Dundes expounded on tradition emerging from social interaction: “It does not matter what the linking factor is—it could be a common occupation, language, or religion—but what is important is that a group, formed for whatever reason, has some expressive traditions which it calls its own. In theory a group must consist of at least two persons, but generally most groups consist of many individuals. A member of the group may not know all other members, but he will probably know the common core of traditions belonging to the group, traditions which help the group have a sense of group identity” (Dundes 1965, 2). A person can simultaneously be a member of multiple groups and share many different kinds of traditions as a result. In this view, the repetition and variation of that shared knowledge, such as jokes, nicknames, and sayings, designate the material as traditions. The traditions have functions that are rationally interpreted—they lend an identity to the group.

Dundes replaced the conventional association of culture with locality, growing organically from roots in a place, with a modernistic connotation of social interaction and situational context giving rise to expression of traditions. Following this line of thinking, one can theoretically have traditions introduced and “invented” in a group as small as two people or as large as a nation. One can, generally speaking, experience traditions that emerge from any social encounter. The implication is that even educated “folk” such as professors or doctors have cultural traditions; use of traditions is not relegated to a level of society. Traditions do not have to be transmitted orally through generations either but can owe their multiple existence to short-lived social, typically unofficial, uses of photocopiers, faxes, videos, and the Internet (see Dundes and Pagter 1978; Tucker 1992; M. Preston 1994; Bronner 1995, 232–46). An identifying “folk” can be temporary, such as a group of friends, rather than being rooted in a region. The key in Dundes’s definition was that people needed to express, indeed vary (often updating and customizing), traditions recordable as folklore in their formation of a group. Folklore as a basis of identity-formation and social existence gained a rationale and a living, even dynamic quality in its image of continually responding and adapting to shifting social encounters in contexts of different times and places.

Considering the close connection of folklore to tradition in scholarly as well as public discourse, one would expect more exploration of tradition than there has been in folklore studies. The *Standard Dictionary of Folklore, Mythology, and Legend* lacks an entry for tradition. The 100-year index to the *Journal of American Folklore* contains only one citation to “tradition”; references to “folk” cover hundreds of citations extending over four pages. Highly regarded reference works such as *Encyclopedia Britannica, International Encyclopedia of the Social Sciences, Encyclopedia of Philosophy,* and *Dictionary of the History of Ideas* have no entries on “tradition.” Tradition, as Dan Ben-Amos has aptly pointed out, has been a term to
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think with, not to think about (Ben-Amos 1984, 1). It is often treated as a given of discourse, a term whose meaning is taken for granted probably because it seems so fundamental to the human condition. Within scholarship, it becomes a “problem” mostly within humanities and social sciences when evaluation of it is forced in relation to controversial keywords in scholarly discourse such as modernity, innovation, and creativity (see Acton 1953; Popper 1965; Zaretzke 1982; Kristeller 1983; Mieder 1987; Gustavsson 1989; Oliver 1989; Rapoport 1989; Tuan 1989; Bruns 1991; Hammer 1992).

One can find abundant entries on specific traditions rather than to the idea of tradition. In one of the few books philosophically exploring the meaning of tradition generally, Edward Shils observed: “There are books about tradition in Islamic theology and law; there are books about tradition in Judaism; books about tradition in Roman Catholic and Protestant Christianity. There are books about particular traditions in literature and art and law. There is however no book about tradition which tries to see the common ground and elements of tradition and which analyzes what difference tradition makes in human life” (Shils 1981, vii).

Shils’s extensive effort to describe tradition emphasized the social aspect of tradition as a universal trait. Tradition, he argued, is basic to the ways that societies function. He viewed tradition emerging from the need to direct action with things, works, words, and modes of conduct created in the past. Reflecting on the tendencies of social sciences, he blamed the progressive thinking of the Enlightenment for minimizing the evaluation of traditions in assessments of the present and future. He explained: “A mistake of great historical significance has been made in modern times in the construction of a doctrine which treated traditions as the detritus of the forward movement of society” (Shils 1981, 330).

An implication of revising this Enlightenment doctrine is a challenge to assumptions that Western civilization is more creative or progressive whereas non-Western or nonindustrialized societies are primarily “traditional.” Toward the social scientific goal of predicting and suggesting social patterns, Shils treated traditions positively as “constituents of a worthwhile life.” Yet in emphasizing the basic social function of tradition, he sought a universal model for a process of tradition rather than grounding it in specific histories and cultures and evaluation of expressive traditions as many folklorists and ethnic scholars had done (see Gailey 1989; Bronner 1992b; M. Roth 1995, 177–85). Shils’s concern was not so much with evaluating traditions as it was with integrating them into the functionalism of society (Shils 1971). He was joined in this concern by S. N. Eisenstadt, who offered the idea of a “dynamics” of tradition. In this view, the stronghold of tradition as a human need for rootedness explained the use of the past to control, but not impede, social change (Eisenstadt 1969).

Although Shils and Eisenstadt were faulted for not adequately particularizing traditions within groups in the context of time and place, they had an important role during a period of shift in cultural theory toward relativizing assumptions of
progress and modernity. The separation of “literature” from “narrative,” “art” from “craft,” “civilization” from “culture,” all came under closer scrutiny for fallacies of elitist thinking. Questioning the “genius” of Western art, Shils in fact pointed out the ways that innovations are dependent on traditions in any cultural setting. Dundes’s “dynamic” definition of a folk group and its use of traditions that may indeed be “new” is an example of relativizing culture. In 1972, S. N. Eisenstadt argued that intellectuals noted for their individuality and supposedly wedded to innovation are not above “tradition.” Intellectuals in a society, he surmised, are influenced by, and themselves influence, the construction of traditions. Tradition, he agreed, is a framework for creativity. Intellectuals may indeed through their critical stance toward tradition, serve “in modernity … to create some new tradition” (Eisenstadt 1972, 3). Countering the progressive criticism of tradition, Eisenstadt shared with Shils a perspective on tradition “as the reservoir of the most central social and cultural experiences prevalent in a society, as the most enduring element in the collective social and cultural construction of reality” (Eisenstadt 1972, 3). Basic to this intellectual turn from the progressivist perspective is the reconfiguration of tradition and its oppositional pairing with “creativity.”

If tradition and creativity are thought of working interdependently, “dynamically,” since any present action takes into account the past, as well as individual preference and social influence, then tradition appears as an active rather than relic force in people’s lives. Folklore as the expression of this dynamic adapts readily to different situations and needs. Folklore becomes manipulated knowledge; it is expressed as a blend of personal and social influence. The linking of creativity and tradition suggests the modern philosophy that “the ability to create is not limited to artists or writers but extends to many more, and perhaps to all, areas of human activity and endeavor” (Kristeller 1983, 106). This ideal succeeds the romantic notion of art as the sole domain of exceptional cultivated minds as existing free of tradition, as an expression of originality or genius that can create something where nothing existed previously. A celebrated artist such as T. S. Eliot in 1919 complained indeed that “in English writing we seldom speak of tradition, though we occasionally apply its name in deploring its absence. We cannot refer to ‘the tradition’ or to ‘a tradition’; at most we employ the adjective in saying that the poetry of So-and-so is ‘traditional’ or even ‘too traditional.’ Seldom, perhaps, does the word appear except in a phrase of censure” (Eliot 1960, 3). Eliot’s protest was that the so-called fine arts had overemphasized the individual to the detriment of his or her art.

By 1983 when philosopher Paul Oskar Kristeller surveyed uses of creativity and tradition, a change in thinking was apparent. Kristeller observed: “Perhaps the concept of genius has been less widely used in recent decades since it is definitely an ‘elitist’ notion, whereas in an egalitarian age such as ours it is claimed and believed that everybody, not only some gifted and talented artists, is original and creative” (Kristeller 1983, 108). Although thought of as a post-1960s phenomenon,
the concept of the interdependence of creativity and tradition in folklore studies has been in formation at least since the 1910s, when Franz Boas, for one, questioned a West European tendency in folklore studies of viewing folktales as intact, uniform units and tellers as passive repeaters of texts (Boas 1940, 403). In fieldwork among Native Americans, Boas found varying levels of originality in the performance of folklore and he explained differences with reference to personality and social context. He underscored his view by referring to tale tellers as “individual artists” (Boas 1940, 451–90). Later Daniel Crowley addressed the problem in folklore of reconciling anthropological attention to dynamics and literary concern for stability in “Tradition and Creativity,” the introduction to *I Could Talk Old-Story Good* (1966; reprinted 1983). In this study of Bahamian folk narratives, he observed that “no tale, no matter how sacred or traditional, can be told twice in exactly the same way without improbable feats of memory,” and therefore, “variation both intentional and accidental confuses the problem of studying diffusion patterns, and threatens the validity of anticipated results” (Crowley 1966, 1). Narrators are not merely receptacles for tradition, he concluded, but rather are choosers, arrangers, and performers. He added a relativistic swipe: “The pattern of creative activity within the forms of one’s own society is valid not only in such folk arts as pottery or storytelling, but equally in the most extreme forms of personal self-expression in modern European painting” (Crowley 1966, 136).

The prevalence in folkloristic inquiry of tradition with creativity and innovation is demonstrated by the appearance of thirty-seven entries between 1981 and 1996 in the Modern Language Association’s (MLA) bibliographic database, a standard reference of the humanities. Almost seventy-five percent of the titles belonged to authors engaged in folklore research. The combination of folklore and creativity brought up about as many titles as a search for tradition and creativity. These terms showed up rarely in combination before the 1970s. The association of “tradition” with “innovation” was more common in literary study (193 hits), while folklore and innovation showed up rarely. Innovation rhetorically implied more of a break with tradition, whereas creativity suggested a process involving tradition (see Bronner 1992b). One could find reference to integration in titles such as “The Creativity of Tradition” (Peacock 1986; C. Briggs 1988), “Folklore Function in the Development of Creativity” (Voigt 1983), and “Folklore as a Special Form of Creativity” (Jakobson and Bogatyrev 1980).

The ideas expressed during the 1980s about the linkage of tradition and creativity speak to the modern redefinition of the arts and to the emphasis on change and variation in contemporary societies. Creativity, a term gaining currency in the twentieth century, has a rhetorical significance over the older use of “creation” or bringing something into being where nothing had been before. The latter view applied to art, which has occupied a dominant position in Western history, makes reference to the idea of Biblical creation as a new stroke of genius or miraculousness (J. Mason 1988). “Creation” implies unity, stability, order, and harmony; it is the work of a “creator.”
"Creativity," linked in form to the physics of "relativity," implies less of a superhuman model. It exists more at the level of an artisan's work; in myths, it is the tool of tricksters and smiths rather than deities. Thus creativity implies multiplicity, change, conflict, and physicality. Creativity emerges from everyday struggles and actions of people considering the tensions between old and new, individual and society.

Use of the MLA database, which especially represents works on language and literature, not only reveals a growth of a linkage in scholarly discourse between tradition and creativity, it also shows striking interrelationships between tradition and keywords of culture and society such as folk and modern. Searching keywords in titles of works indexed for the period 1981 to 1996, one finds that folk is among the most frequently found terms in the database with 31,080 appearances; added to the number of hits for "folklore," the figure climbs to 40,591. "Modern," as I have pointed out, shows a parallelism with folk. It shows up in the database 48,172 times; modern and folk appear together, however, only 526 times. "Culture" (15,756) and "society" (10,261) are major terms in the database, although they appear less often than folk and modern. Probably the most numerically significant pairing of folk is with tradition or traditional (1,442) and culture (5,726). Comparing the results of the MLA search with another database such as UnCover, which represents a wide range of scholarly journals beyond language and literature, I found comparable results. A keyword search for the first six months of 1996 revealed 4,800 appearances of "tradition" and 8,207 hits of "traditional" for a combined total of 13,007, which is comparable to the 15,562 appearances of "modern." "Folk" and "modern" appeared in combination only 22 times, while "tradition" and "modern" appeared 180 times. There were no hits of "tradition," "modern," and "folk" together, while "folk" and "tradition" accounted for 47 titles.

It is difficult to determine from this statistical evidence, however, whether the uses of "tradition" or "folk" are consistent in the works that appear. In fact, the meanings probably vary, although recent culture theory has emphasized the relativistic idea of the "dynamics" of tradition (see Eisenstadt 1969; Toelken 1979; Wagner 1981; Thompson, Ellis, and Wildavsky 1990). Reflecting on this shift, Dan Ben-Amos summarized seven strands of tradition used in American folklore studies from an early view of "tradition as lore" to "tradition as performance." In between he offers "tradition as [cultural] canon" (especially the valued texts in a folk society), "tradition as process" (especially oral transmission), "tradition as [transmitted] mass" (or a "load" carried by exceptional tradition bearers), "tradition as culture" (from the anthropological view of tradition as a defining and identifying aspect of social life), and "tradition as langue" (from the linguistic distinction between the language system of langue that guides the expression of a parole or "word") (Ben-Amos 1984).

One can fit, from the previous discussion, Herskovits's construction of tradition as custom or culture or Dundes's view of the folk group in "tradition as culture." There are rhetorical clues within scholarly discourse to some of these categories.
The use of “folk culture” signals tradition as culture, “oral tradition” suggests tradition as a process, “folk literature” (and sometimes “folk traditions”) implies tradition as a canon, “verbal art” stands for tradition as performance, and “folk expressions” or “expressive folklore” for tradition as langue. Sometimes the distinctions are not so neat. While Thompson in The Standard Dictionary of Folklore emphasized the transmission of folklore by oral means from generation to generation, he also wanted to identify a literary canon for folk society in his formulation of a global tale-type index (see also Pentikäinen 1978). Ben-Amos also suggested that while in theory Herskovits epitomized anthropologists who construe tradition as synonymous with culture, in practice he actually conceived of tradition as a canon of folk society because of his method of identifying traditions within a society that gain acceptance or get rejected.

Unlike Shils, Ben-Amos as a folklorist was especially concerned with the expressive dimension to traditions. He referred to the “literary” folklorists who wanted to establish a historical canon comparable to those identified as “classical,” “great,” “popular,” or “Western.” The ethnographic-linguistic concern for the guiding structures of langue and dramaturgical metaphor of performance may both involve tradition as an abstract system of rules that generates the enactment of folklore. Ben-Amos cited Kay Cothran’s performance-oriented proposal to redefine folklore as “tradition—not antiquity and orality, but ‘our ways, our means, our categories, our system’” (Cothran 1979, 445). Furthermore, the idea that tradition is a process of transmission and hence of learning and action is central to perspectives on tradition as a situated performance. Ben-Amos, who in 1972 fashioned a definition of folklore without reference to historic tradition as “artistic communication in small groups,” favored a perspective of tradition as performance and its attention to communication in dynamic situations (Ben-Amos 1972; see also Ben-Amos 1977, 1993). Yet he pointed out an often overlooked difference in “dynamic” views of tradition. Someone like Roger Abrahams, he felt, epitomized the approach that langue, like folklore, represents the stable, preexisting system of rules and symbols that produces parole or performed expressions (Abrahams 1977). Someone like Barre Toelken in his popular textbook The Dynamics of Folklore implied that tradition is performance itself:

... we might characterize or describe the materials of folklore as “tradition-based communicative units informally exchanged in dynamic variation through space and time.” Tradition is here understood to mean not some static, immutable force from the past, but those pre-existing culture-specific materials and options that bear upon the performer more heavily than do his or her own personal tastes and talents. We recognize in the use of tradition that such matters as content and style have been for the most part passed on but not invented by the performer. Dynamic recognizes, on the other hand, that in the processing of these contents and styles in performance, the artist’s own unique talents of inventiveness within the tradition are highly valued and are expected to operate strongly. (Toelken 1979, 32)
If “dynamic processes” characterize both tradition and performance, rather than being a related contrastive pair, tradition and performance appear integrated.

In summary, most evident in folkloristic scholarship from the nineteenth century through the twentieth are ideas of tradition as (1) an everyday past, often ancient, represented as stable and immutable, (2) learning as a kind of custom or process usually described as being outside formal institutions and involving older generations passing on “lore” to younger ones, (3) tradition as a shared body of knowledge and belief, a conventional wisdom, existing outside of formal records, (4) a repeated, variable expression or performance emerging from social interaction, and (5) a symbol or mode of thought characteristic of a group’s identity. These orientations have emerged in parallel development with concepts of modernity, nationality, and creativity describing human progress and identity. The combination of social and historical influences in the meaning of tradition implies a configuration of some basic human relations: among individual, group, society, and nation; between thought or idea and action or expression; between the contexts of time and space; and between perceptions of self and other. Largely defining the problem of tradition, with its suggestion of identity and existence, folklorists may well have provided the lasting lesson that meaning resides in the ways people express themselves through shared, local knowledge.

Tradition in the Press

One test of the relation of scholarly constructions of tradition to the public discourse is to examine uses of tradition communicated through the popular press. If scholarship has evaluated traditions as memories of the past, processes of informal learning, and types of collective wisdom, popular media has reflected, and contributed, public notions of the significance of tradition in the events of daily life. The news that is reported and discussed daily constitutes a clue to the visibility of tradition in society. News, as many critics have pointed out, more than reporting facts, reveals forms of public consensus (Fowler 1991, 46–65). Headlines assume that readers have a sense of the normative state of affairs, for headlines often draw attention by blaring “breaking” stories that often involve change, action, disaster, novelty. With common uses of slang and puns to engage readers in many daily headlines, there can be a feeling of clever conversation, as if a lively story was being narrated to a listening audience. Since newspaper space is normally at a premium, headline writers select words carefully, and the frequent appearance of tradition with various modifiers in headlines attests to forms of its public meaning.

Press databases such as Newspaper Abstracts and Periodical Abstracts showed that “tradition” turned up in headlines 2,173 and 2,613 times, respectively, in one six-month period of 1994. Scanning the list of titles, one can detect strong associations in the popular press between tradition and family, sport, ethnic, and local (often appearing as “small-town” or “neighborhood”) activities. The phrase
"American tradition" appeared surprisingly rarely. In national newspapers, it occurred only twenty-two times. "Japan-bashing," "bilking consumers," "baseball," "victory at the Olympics," "splashy marketing," "abuse between fans and athletes," "Greek Revival style," were the kind of patterns branded as national in city dailies. Periodical Abstracts revealed more references to national traditions, presumably because magazines such as *Time* and *Newsweek* in the database appealed to a mass market. Another reason is that they had many more book reviews with headlines often making reference to national literary and artistic trends. Yet I still expected more than the 312 citations I found. A scan of the list revealed that "American tradition" was mostly used in magazines to discuss ethnic, local, and family contexts.

To get a closer look at the public use of "tradition" in the press, I collected examples of headlines using "tradition" in one city daily over a period of two years (1994–1996). Monitoring the *Harrisburg Patriot-News*, which claims the largest circulation in central Pennsylvania, I counted fifty-five occurrences of "tradition" or "traditional" used in headlines. All but two of the headlines counted had "tradition" as its keyword. Many more articles concerned tradition in the texts of articles, but I was mainly following examples of the newspaper using tradition as a rhetoric of public engagement in its headline placement. The simplest headline was a one-word banner "Tradition." Below appeared a picture and caption describing a ranger at Independence National Historical Park reading a draft of the Declaration of Independence in Philadelphia. "Congress approved the document on July 4, 1776, and the first draft was read in public four days later, beginning a tradition that has been followed ever since," the paper explained (July 9, 1994). Headlines tend to be short and snappy, but some referring to traditions, such as the following front-page news stories, extended over two lines: "Midstaters Join in Holiday Tradition: All Forms of Transit Jammed on Busiest Travel Day" (December 23, 1995) or "To Keep Tradition, Hunters Return for Annual Rite of Fall" (November 28, 1995).

On two occasions, the newspaper used "tradition" in three headlines in a single issue (June 24, 1994, and November 25, 1994). The first was divided between coverage of Jubilee Day, a community festival in Mechanicsburg, Pennsylvania, and a sports story. The second drew attention to local Thanksgiving traditions including a charitable custom of giving free meals on the holiday, and playing of a high school alumni football game. Uses of tradition in headlines tended to cluster around holidays, especially the winter season stretching from Thanksgiving to New Year’s Day. In a busy, mobile society, the paper suggested holidays were rare occasions for togetherness and sharing associated with tradition. Many stories that involved localities also included a quotation about the loss of community and the added significance of traditions in the present as a reminder of social connection and historical continuity. On thirteen occasions, "tradition" was prominent on the front page of the newspaper, usually to refer to a repeated local event such as Jubilee Day (Patch Town Day in the coal region was another event referencing tradition) or
local ritual connected with the start of hunting season. Indeed, the newspaper’s headlines frequently linked “tradition” with community events. “Tradition” was prominent thirteen times on the front page of the State/Local section of the newspaper. Counting the references to local events in the top World/Nation section, local connections to tradition accounted for most of the headlines with tradition, forty-four percent of the total.

When a “local” story appeared in reference to “tradition,” it tended to celebrate a repeated community gathering or a dislodging of community and its bonds of familiarity. It did not have to be old to be “tradition” in this context. For example, a report on an annual community dinner in Fairview Township announced, “32 Year Old Tradition Continues” (December 7, 1994). Explaining why Jubilee Day had significance, the newspaper brandished the headline, “Celebrating a Tradition.” It quoted a participant who said of the sixty-six-year-old festival, “It’s just a tradition. I came back to see the people I know.” Elaborating on the comment, the reporter observed that there’s “something deeper and more meaningful” than lemonade and funnel cakes. “Yesterday, on the streets of Mechanicsburg, a community came together. People who grew up together, then drifted apart, met once again under the hot sun” (June 24, 1994). It was news, then, when “Tradition Ends on 50th Anniversary” of a Lawnton community dinner (December 26, 1995) or “Another TraditionCanceled: ‘Living Creche’ Has No Director” (December 13, 1995). One headline about community was unusual because it crammed innovation and tradition as a contrastive pair into a single headline: “Halifax to Mark 200 Years in Traditional, Original Style” (July 14, 1994). The traditional part of the bicentennial celebration, the paper reported, was a community barbecue, parade, fireworks, and carnival. It also had an “original” musical, a pony express ride, and an antique car show. The organizers hoped the celebration would be an annual event “bringing people together.” In another reference to a community’s presentation of traditions as a demonstration of its social self, the newspaper (with overdone alliteration) emphasized the intention of the town in its banner headline, “Dillsburg Marches Out Traditional Festivities to Fete Farmers’ Fare” (October 21, 1995).

I found few references to national traditions, but the rare instance stands out. In the middle of the crisis in former Yugoslavia, the paper editorialized about “Clinton’s Gamble.” Specifically it was that he was banking on “American Tradition for Support of Bosnia Peacekeeping Role” (November 29, 1995). It suggested a popular outlook consistent through history that is shared nationally. Reviewing his speech to the nation, the paper reported that the president “sought to appeal to the traditional American repugnance toward bullies who take their wrath out on the innocent and defenseless.” The paper credited the president with appealing to this “tradition” to win acceptance for what would likely be an otherwise unpopular decision to send troops. It implied that tradition was based on belief and emotion rather than rationality. The other reference to national tradition was also political.
Reporting the unconventional approach of Steve Forbes during the early presidential primary campaign, the paper blurted on its front page, “Millionaire Undermines a Tradition” (February 12, 1996). Referring to the “mythology of presidential politics,” the paper noted Forbes’s use of saturation media advertising over the “traditional” personal contact tour. The “tradition” not only had the ring of convention, but it also carried an association with the backwater reputation of Iowa and New Hampshire. The paper stated, for example, “Some experts claim the Forbes strategy is spoiling the quaintly bucolic political traditions of both states.” The implication is that politics, often resisted in humanistic scholarship as too formal and hegemonic to be expressive, has a cultural dimension and therefore can be described in terms of traditions (see Thompson, Ellis, Wildavsky 1990).

A survey of the newspaper shows a strong association of tradition, in fact, with humanistic pursuits. The second largest category of headlines using “tradition” appeared in sections covering Arts and Leisure, Living, and Food (issued only on Wednesdays by the newspaper). Each of these sections accounted for five headlines. If I count in the single appearances of tradition in Religion (issued only on Saturday), Environment, Real Estate, and special sections (weddings, Christmas), the total for art and daily living references to tradition comes to thirty-six percent of the total. Many of the references concerned holiday customs. On April 3, 1996, the headline “Holiday Food Traditions Preserved by Families” referred to Polish Easter practices. The front of the Food section for December 7, 1994, offered “Here Are Recipes for New Tradition.” In this case, tradition was meant to be something that would be annually repeated rather than something necessarily old. The article suggested that “family favorites” for holiday cookies such as baked truffle treasures and lemon pecan stars sent in by area residents could be taken up by readers. Another article entitled “Retiring of Some Traditions Sought” (December 18, 1994) discussed choices made by couples for the rituals used in their weddings. It also implied that traditions in a modern context could be managed rather than followed slavishly.

When “tradition” appeared in combination with another word, it was likely to be “holiday,” “local,” or “family.” “Folk” did not appear with “tradition” in the newspaper, and “folk” occurred much less than “tradition.” When “folk” appeared, it referred to one of many “folk festivals” in the region, to “folk art” on display in museums or for sale at auctions, to contemporary “folk musicians” performing on the stage, or to “folk heroes” (especially used in stories on General Colin Powell after the Gulf War). Unlike the scholarly practice of linking “folk” or “cultural” with tradition in popular discourse, if the newspaper is an indication, the main rhetoric is one of custom, community, and especially family. A report on strawberry picking season had the headline “Pick-Your-Own-Patches, A Sweet Family Tradition” (June 18, 1996). Commenting on the rise of tree farms engaging in Christmas trade, the newspaper reported, “Family Traditions Helpful to Tree Farms” (November 27, 1995), and explaining American card exchange, the headline
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playfully read, “Family Traditions Are in the Cards” (December 22, 1994). Recounting the accomplishments of an outgoing college president, the paper carried the banner “Retiring President Kept Family Tradition at Messiah College” (June 27, 1994). The repeated use of “family” with “tradition” suggested an intimacy and stability of one’s most immediate social group. Even more than following tradition, the coverage of family sharing in the newspaper suggested that families more than other groups traditionalize their activities (see Kotkin and Zeitlin 1983).

Ethnic connections were also apparent in headlines using “tradition” in the arts and living sections. The paper referred to “Traditional Symbols” in Native American art and characterized it as “Art Strongly Rooted in Past.” Another essay on Native Americans on the techniques used by the Carlisle Indian School was accompanied by a photograph of boys and girls with fresh haircuts and uniforms in front of the school. It carried the caption “Shorn of Their Hair and Traditions.” Found in the Perspective section, it was a retrospective on the experiment to “civilize” Native Americans by breaking their cultural traditions of dress and appearance (February 12, 1995). In addition to this historical example, references to tradition as a political issue also appeared in the editorials or Nation/World section of the newspaper. During this period, the paper noted court battles about gender equality at military colleges that culminated in the headline “Citadel Ends Its Long Males-Only Tradition” (June 25, 1996). This headline made tradition sound like a historical custom that had taken on the authority of a rule before it became rightly challenged. The newspaper also editorialized about eliminating the “tradition” of the Hegins Pigeon Shoot because the “blood sport” was not surviving in the face of animal rights protests (September 7, 1994).

Sports in general was a special area for mention of tradition in the newspaper. I found this consequential because folkloristic scholarship has tended to neglect sports as too formally organized for evaluation of cultural tradition (see, however, Peterson 1983; G. Fine 1987b). In the public discourse of the press, sports teams were the most recognizable location of groupness in modern life. If one specially goes to “see the Amish” for tradition, one understands teams as organized groups that foster traditions. Moreover, there is a kind of functional assumption that players fit roles on teams, or players are supposed to sacrifice their individualities for the sake of the team. Many articles in reference to Celtic tradition, or even Berwick High School tradition, suggest that players come and go, but the traditions of the team continue.

In sports coverage, teams tend to formalize links to locality. Rivalries, often touted as traditions, pit comparably sized schools or towns in the same region against each other. “Tradition, Rivalries Fuel Women’s Event,” the paper trumpeted on March 16, 1995. Because Tennessee had repeatedly been in the NCAA tournament, the paper ran the headline, “Tradition Spurs Lady Vols Ahead.” On a local level, because Lebanon Catholic High School had played in the state finals before, whereas their rival had not, the paper announced that Lebanon Catholic had tradition on
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its side (March 26, 1995). Tradition in sports can also be interpreted in public discourse as an attitude or fate—grittiness, luck, winning, losing. Announcing “New Coach is Part of Flyers’ Tradition,” the Patriot remarked on the “essence” of team tradition, “hard work, dedication and defense” (June 24, 1994). Surprised by the success of the Cleveland Indians during the 1994 baseball season, the paper carried the headline, “Indians Break Losing Tradition.” The story connected the rise of the perennial doormats to the league with the renaissance of the reputedly dowdy city as an attraction. Tradition was used as custom suggesting a role in relation to other teams or communities.

Occasionally, reports referred to specific “traditions” in sport as expressive customs. Because sport is commonly construed as “play” in America, it is often given to ritual references in the press. It is reported that teams and their coaches have routes they superstitiously follow to big games, they insist on routines for game preparations, and they break tension with outrageous practical jokes. Implying this playfulness to sport, the Patriot included the headline in its Sports section for October 27, 1995, “A Tradition with Meaning.” As the paper explained, “Since Hershey High grad Vince Pantalone became a member of the Lower Dauphin coaching staff in the mid-1980s, either he or Hershey head coach Bob ‘Gump’ May has been the recipient of a cigar depending on which team won their annual game. It is not the midstate’s best-known tradition—possibly because the exchange of a tobacco product among high school coaches defies the current swell of political correctness—but it has meaning. It was started by Pantalone’s father, Emil, and has been carried on by both coaches since Emil died in 1987.” If the previous example brought out the theme of modern sensitivity to a tradition from the past, another article tried to bring the clash of old and young generations in baseball, and by extension, in society. On July 15, 1994, the paper carried a long story about the argument of “tradition-abiding keeper of the game” (“or an old fogey at 38,” the paper stated) manager Buck Showalter of the Seattle Mariners with his star player Ken Griffey, Jr., over a hat. To Showalter’s chagrin, Griffey was following the “new” tradition among youth of wearing the baseball cap backwards. As these reports indicate, coverage of sports tends to bring out family linkage, community spirit, historical precedent, and ritualized activity as the stuff of tradition.

Going back to the 1980s, American sports coverage can be credited for creating a dramatic moment of defining American tradition. Ostensibly a contest for a basketball championship, the playoff series between the Boston Celtics and Los Angeles Lakers became translated in the press as a tussle for the national character. The Celtics and Lakers battled for the National Basketball Association championship three out of four years between 1984 and 1987. To heat up the rivalry, the press portrayed the Celtics as the team of old, playing in the antiquated, dark and dingy Boston Garden in the traditional setting of old New England. It harped on the social virtues of the Celtics’ teamwork, work ethic, and naturally a winning tradition. The dowdy digs of the Boston Garden and the plebeian reputation of
Following Tradition

Boston fans roused feelings of heartiness and pride in old-fashioned values. The Lakers, on the other hand, “Never ... anybody's blue-collar baby,” as *Sports Illustrated* observed, attracted a strikingly modern image (McCallum 1987b, 15). The team was located in the glitz of booming Los Angeles, and came to represent the “well-lighted” future of easy street and consumer culture. It had individual superstars on its team and Hollywood stars in its audience. The press featured the “showtime” of the Lakers, given to egotistical theatrics and stylish futuristic garb and cool sunglasses of the fun, if shallow, life. “Legend has it that the Lakers are into style,” a *New York Times* columnist sneered, and “a five-game victory in the Garden ... would be so much more stylish for them than having to go back home and work on the weekend” (Vecsey 1987). In contrast, a *Newsweek* report beamed, “The Celtics are a strikingly old-fashioned team, from their unselfish playing style right down to their dark green high-top sneakers” (Leehren 1984). The dapper coach of the Lakers, Pat Riley, announced “concern that his team’s reputation was wasting away in Celebrityville.” He protested the press’s portrayals of his team, in his words, as “a bunch of glitter-group, superficial laid-backs.” “This is the hardest-working team I’ve ever had,” Coach Riley declared, “but regardless of what we do we’re minimized ... we’re empty people ... and most of us aren’t even from California” (Kirpatrick 1987, 24-25). George Vecsey, the renowned sports columnist for the *New York Times*, distinguished the slickness of Los Angeles fans from the homely old Boston loyalists, where most people “look like they ought to have a nickname. Spike. Lefty. Knuckles” (1987).

The protests of the players and coaches that the championship was not a culture war, but a game among players with much in common, did not lessen the tone of the press’s puffed-up narrative of a street fight over American tradition. “Laker Talent, Celtic Team,” a headline from *Time* blared in 1984 (June 25), indicating an American identity crisis. “When East Meets West,” “The Toast of Both Coasts,” and “Playing It Tough in the East,” were typical headlines contrasting the working-class ethic of the old industrial Northeast and the laid-back lifestyle in the California Dream (Simpson 1984: Newman 1984b; McCallum 1987a). To read the papers was to believe that much more was at stake than a trophy, and the unfolding plot of the rivalry attracted many new adherents to the sport as basketball fever rose in America. The narrative plot of cultural confrontation of old and new America peaked with public anticipation of the climactic 1987 series. The television broadcast of the decisive sixth game was the highest-rated basketball game ever shown on television. The introduction of that game on television built up the “mystique of Celtic tradition,” in “ancient Boston Garden” against the “jubilant Laker Express” and “bright lights of Los Angeles.” At a time of rapid mobility when economic shift from manufacturing to service and information translated into an image of decline for the East and boom for the West, the press found a story other than the outcome of the games.

In its typical location on the back page, American sports coverage raises signs of social significance. Running stories on the reverse side of the usually political slant
of the front page, sports coverage has allowed readers to imagine dramas involving defense of fragile traditions. Commenting frequently on the development and disappearance of "traditions" naturally arising from communal activity, the press was often inclined to make team accomplishment a test of social virtues. Reporting individual achievement in relation to the needs of the group, fan loyalty at a time of loss, and community support for the team as public representative, the press kept watch over sports as a barometer of American conditions.

In other news behind the front page, especially of community events and human features, tradition is a frequently encountered prompt to readers and listeners. It reminds them of the malleable social values in everyday life that are seemingly in flux. It comes out as a keyword to measure the stability of an American sense of community, especially at moments when the cultural landscape is shifting. In coverage of national holidays and community festivals, in the "human features" of locality, family, religion, and ethnicity, the American press creates texts of tradition to follow.

**The Politics of Tradition**

To read the entry on "tradition" in the erudite *Companion to American Thought* (1995) is to see the term through a political lens. Look through it and it appears that conservatism holds claims on the merits of tradition while liberalism eschews them. Uses of tradition are attached, after all, to household names of the resurgent conservative politics of the 1980s and 1990s such as Ronald Reagan, George Bush, Dan Quayle, Pat Robertson, and William Bennett. The author of the entry, Russell L. Hanson, connects "tradition" with a sense of the past toward solutions for the future. The past is the source for selected social virtues known best in the 1990s as "traditional values." Waving tradition as the banner of a national culture, a sensible mode of thinking, and a moral way of acting, several figures gained prominence by tainting liberalism with being against tradition in political campaigns of the 1980s and 1990s.

Meanwhile liberals regarded the conservatives as being stuck on tradition to the point of wearing blinders to modern-day social realities. Or they assailed the conservatives for misleadingly offering one kind of tradition as the only worthy kind, rather than allowing for many different traditions of separate communities, all legitimately American. Different sides argued over who would be the proper guardian of a reemerging American tradition, variously defined of course. And as I will discuss, folklore has been right there in the fray.

In 1996, slogans collided as presidential hopeful Robert Dole promised to use the traditional values of the past as a bridge to the present, and Clinton answered by offering the present as a bridge to the future. Dole played out the platform of what Hanson refers to as "the party of the past," often called conservative, or the voice of the "right." On the other side of this scenario is the party of the future,
given to labels of liberal, leftist, and progressive. In this head-to-head matchup, the party of the past warns of a breakdown of a sense of order and a loss of decency in society. It seeks a return to "traditional values" that have presumably sustained the greatness of assimilating America—among them, the nuclear family, community, and religion. There is a nationalistic, or nativist, connection because of the frequent assumption that the assimilation is to a version of values held by white Christian America at the nation's founding. It implies a social good in seeking national unity based on this "mainstream," encouraging free enterprise, and maintaining beneficial hierarchies of leadership (Sigler 1969; Kirk 1982; Aughey, Jones, and Riches 1992; Sobnosky 1993; Dunn and Woodard 1996). In education, a major battleground in the square off between the parties of the past and future, the concern from the party of the past is that "students who have not absorbed traditional lessons will not become a part of America, nor will they conduct themselves in ways that continue its greatness in years to come" (Hanson 1995, 681). Extolling individual rights, the party of the past often seeks less government intervention in managing social problems and more efforts to strengthen social institutions of family, church, and school that build moral character and social responsibility.

The party of the future looks forward to breaks with the institutionalization of conservative social views it associates with racism and sexism. It often accuses an elite of wealth and power of controlling society and discourages groups marginalized because of difference of color, gender, and class from participation in the polity. At worst, it may accuse the elite of repressing dissent and encouraging discrimination. It seeks to build tolerance through establishment of new traditions recognizing the integrity of plural groups, many with alternative values, within the polity, and through special consideration for those at a disadvantage in a racially divided society (Abbott and Levy 1985; McElvaine 1987; Garry 1992; Tomasky 1996). It "condemns the self-aggrandizing tendencies of the so-called dominant tradition or cultural mainstream," and will commonly offer critical narratives of the past to warrant new directions for building a more benevolent future (Hanson 1995, 681). It will encourage multiple perspectives for social solutions, insisting on participation of, and models drawn from, traditions of marginalized groups. Or it will expound on the need to avoid value judgment in education, family planning, immigration policy, and public welfare, and, in keeping with an unfulfilled American tradition of egalitarianism, will call for wider social inclusion in a renewed cultural democracy. In the spirit of tolerance, it would allow citizens to make decisions for themselves about their social and moral identity and use government to manage this diversity.

Hanson realized the danger of a facile split between the party of the past and future, typically seen as a polar opposition of the right and left. The separation of vision is misleading if it suggests that one side wants to do away with tradition, while the other wants to hang onto it. The party of the future, Hanson pointed out, has always been careful to maintain its affiliation with the past, and the party of
the past typically makes efforts to make its stands sound progressive (Hanson 1995, 681). A hero of the party of the past like Ronald Reagan, for example, harped on America’s future-orientation, in his words its “tradition of progress,” in his second inaugural address (1985). He explained his position this way:

When I took this oath four years ago, I did so in a time of economic stress. Voices were raised saying we had to look to our past for the greatness and glory. But we, the present-day Americans, are not given to looking backward. In this blessed land, there is always a better tomorrow. Four years ago, I spoke to you of a new beginning and we have accomplished that. But in another sense, our new beginning is a continuation of that beginning created two centuries ago when, for the first time in history, government, the people said, was not our master, it is our servant: its only power that which we the people allow it to have. (emphasis added)

Bill Clinton in his first inaugural address also referred to the ideals of the nation’s past, its noble traditions, in calling for “a spring reborn in the world’s oldest democracy, that brings forth the vision and courage to reinvent America” (1993). He built his position on the tradition that “when our founders boldly declared America’s independence to the world and our purposes to the Almighty, they knew that America, to endure, would have to change.”

Differences in the inaugural addresses over the intentions of the nation’s founders probably excited Americans less than the furor ignited by Vice President Dan Quayle over “traditional values” in 1992. It was a phrase that had floated around political circles through the 1980s, but it erupted on the national scene after Quayle used it as a crusade for the 1990s (see Lasch 1986; Sobnobsky 1993; Smith 1995). Quayle’s opening salvo came shortly after rioting exploded in Los Angeles. The disturbing riot scenes after a police beating of an African American, Rodney King, were very much on the minds of Americans as television beamed across the nation dramatic live footage of random violence. Speaking to the Commonwealth Club of California in San Francisco on May 19, Quayle blamed the kind of “lawless social anarchy” in the riots on “the breakdown of family structure, personal responsibility and social order in too many areas of our society.” As an example of this breakdown, he cited displeasure at the choice of the professional woman on the television show Murphy Brown to raise a child out of wedlock. His comments about the television show made national news, and raised a hail of points and counterpoints around the country (J. Smith 1992; Greenfield 1992; Canada 1992). In fact, the issue of the riots, racism, and police brutality seem to drift away as the press mainly picked up Quayle’s family choice issue. The response aired as the opening segment of Murphy Brown in the new fall season on September 21 attracted an incredible forty-one percent of all viewers or 70 million Americans. Despite being portrayed in many media outlets as a dolt, Quayle had successfully set the tone for the Republican campaign of 1992, and the theme kept being hammered by others through the next election (Harwood 1992a; D. Williams
While hot-button issues of prayer in the schools, prohibition of flag burning, censorship of obscenity, and gun control had inspired headlines of "culture wars," Quayle effectively turned the discourse of the campaigns toward the sanctity provided by tradition for the nuclear, heterosexual family (Steven Roberts 1990, 1994; Herbert 1996). His rallying cry for the family was a tip to policies restricting gay rights, abortion rights, and welfare assistance to single mothers (Quayle 1994).

In the 1992 and 1996 elections, Democrats Bill Clinton and Al Gore refused to be set up opposing "traditional values." Although they may have differed with Bush and Quayle on the policies necessary to preserve "traditional values," they insisted that the matter was at the heart of their platform. Thus the Wall Street Journal blared the headline in 1992, "Clinton and Bush Stress Initiatives to Foster Traditional Family Values" (Harwood 1992b). Clinton tied the demise in family not to moral decay fostered by the party of the future, as Bush and Quayle insinuated, but to inaction by the party of the past that caused economic crisis. Clinton and Gore went on the offensive for "traditional values," trying to replace the Republican emphasis on family with a Democratic keynote of "community." At the first campaign rally as running mates, they appeared at the county courthouse in Carthage, Tennessee, and extolled the traditional virtues of small-town life as the essence of plural America (Suro 1992). After the election, Clinton proposed new taxes on the social elite to pay for tax breaks for low-income families. Thus would the poor preserve their families and the middle-class have less stress on theirs, he offered. The move inspired the somewhat scoffing headline in the Los Angeles Times replacing "family" with "Democratic," "Traditional Democratic Values Having a Rebirth" (Lauter 1993). Both Clinton and Bush avoided being tagged as organizational men, however. Even if party differences arose between them, they were equally enthusiastic about speaking for the values of the common people as the basis of American tradition. Bush especially tried to lose his patrician background, and Clinton played up his childhood struggles. It just did not pay to appear elite in America, rhetorically speaking, and invoking tradition lent a hearty populist ring to political stumping.

The use of traditional values became more complicated when religion was thrown into the mix of American tradition. The subject of religion was extremely sensitive, especially in a political system that held to separation of church and state, and a society given to extensive denominationalism. Perhaps in response to the headway that Clinton had made with the criticisms of economic policies that disrupted families, Bush and Quayle observed that religious faith kept families together through time, and government should respect this need in allowing policies such as prayer in the schools. Countering liberal criticism of a hegemonic social elite, Quayle revived the charge that an irreligious "cultural elite" primarily in the media and academe conspired to spread a radical liberalism, and contributed to the dissolution of basic American moral guides (see Medved 1992; C.
Smith 1995; F. McDonald 1994). He addressed conventions for Southern Baptists and the National Right to Life Committee in the weeks following the California address, and picked up his advocacy for a “commitment to Judeo-Christian values.” He cited one example of a cultural elitist organization undermining traditional values in the case of Time-Warner’s production of rap singer Ice-T, known for antipolice lyrics. He added to his criticism of the relativism and multiculturalism of public schools, which he connected to a loss of “moral bearing” (Quayle 1992, 1995).

New associations such as the Coalition for Traditional Values, Toward Tradition, and Concerned Citizens for Traditional Values took on the “traditional values” label to represent conservative religious groups in lobbying for prayer and religious programming in the schools, public support for parochial institutions, and school voucher programs (Yoachum 1993). Although sounding secular and broad-based, “traditional” in the organizational titles came to stand for an orthodox morality upholding the centrality of religion in public life. It invoked the merit of “traditional” describing “values” proven worthy by time and by popular usage. In 1997, the Christian Coalition announced that there would be no issue higher on the organization’s agenda than passing a proposal by Rep. Ernest Istook (R-Oklahoma) for a constitutional amendment to insure “the right to pray or acknowledge religious belief, heritage or tradition on public property, including public schools” (emphasis added; “Stoll Report” 1997). Taking exception to the Coalition’s conservative representation of Christians in this campaign, a less publicized religious left countered with keywords of community and “dignity of the individual.”

In answer to the insistence that traditional values of white Christian America carried the nation to its greatness, or at least gave it a clear moral basis, many writers answered that the harmonious, religious “way we were” was really the troubled “way we never were” (Gordon 1972; Miller and Nowak 1977; Cowan 1983; Coontz 1992). The past as a basis for American tradition became disputed territory especially when academics, led by distinguished historian Gary Nash at UCLA, drafted national standards for history that outraged many stalwarts of “traditional values” (Nash 1995a, 1995b). The critics assaulted the turn away from the conventional narrative of America’s progress and national heroes. Lynne Cheney, director of the National Endowment for the Humanities in the Bush Administration, barked that American history had been shamelessly twisted and blasted the report for the nonsensical extremes to which it went to represent minorities over the contributions of America’s great leaders (see Cheney 1990, 1995). The report gave culture more due in attention to the experience of ordinary Native Americans, African Americans, and Hispanic Americans, with little reference to an overarching
Christian religious influence and some defiance of chronicles of the great figures, mostly white, and events of American history.

Alarmed at what she thought was an ignorance of the unified narrative of America's past, Cheney sought to restore a proper sense of a publicly shared tradition oriented toward the rebuilding of national culture with extensive “American Memory” projects (Cheney 1987). She set up battle lines of underdog critics speaking in common-sense terms to protect an unsuspecting national public against “tyrannical” academics on a mission to fragment and thereby undermine the nation. The historians put on the defensive answered that they hoped to widen history by making it more socially inclusive. In an answer to the plaint that America's shared memory was quickly fading, they gave the decentering rejoinder that “every American is, indeed, his or her own historian” (Rosenzweig 1997).

The sides in the American memory debates both tended to view social disarray in the present, but they disagreed on the narratives appropriate for redeeming contemporary society and culture. The facts on the social realignment of family, community, and nation were these for the 1990s: the marriage rate in 1993 was the lowest in thirty years; after reaching a peak around 1980, the divorce rate declined to 4.7 divorces per 1,000 between 1988 and 1993 (National Center for Health Statistics). Still, it stood among the highest in the world. In 1994, nearly one out of three births were to unmarried women, and the percentage of single-parent households had more than doubled since 1970 (NCHS). Nonetheless, Americans reported preferring stronger traditional family ties and stepping back from sexual freedom (“Faith” 1989). Although church and synagogue membership was the lowest ever recorded going into the 1990s, Americans also told pollsters that organized religion remained their most trusted institution (“Faith” 1989; Wattenberg 1995, 129). Opinion polls gauged that Americans most feared the scourge of crime and drugs, had declining confidence in their schools, and were concerned about a deterioration in public civility. They appeared less optimistic in the early 1990s about the economy, and they often voiced the opinion that life had become overly complex and treacherous (Wattenberg 1995, 117-24).

At least one scholarly sociological survey reported the finding that Americans when closely questioned were really not as politically polarized as the venomous discourse frequently aired indicated. Regardless, public spokespersons widely held the perception that America was in the midst of a “culture war” with battles on several fronts of education, censorship, affirmative action, and social policy (DiMaggio, Evans, and Bryson 1996; Hunter 1991; Scott 1997). While the culture wars originally were declared by defenders of traditional values to rally troops to the cause, the term was also picked up by sentries for multiculturalism, who announced that they were really the embattled ones. In the construction of culture war rhetoric, it was an advantage to proclaim you were losing. Another strategy was to make the “public” the voice of tradition and the artificial institutions of education, media, and government the organs of transformation. Set up in this
way, the contest invited crowning a winner, even though the wars were part of a longstanding struggle in the definition of American culture. During a lull in news of culture-war standoffs in 1997, a year without national elections to galvanize opinion, the New York Times offered the consensus that the “conservatives” won the hearts of the public in the battle of ideas, and “liberals” triumphed in the “battle of institutions,” especially in academia (Scott 1997). Although anxious to have an end to the story, such press accounts of an Appomattox in the culture wars typically missed the historical significance of the battles over American “tradition” and the uncertain alliances they represented.

Although a narrative emerged in the culture wars pitting right against left, the rhetoric drew attention to issues that did not easily fall into diametrically opposed camps. Debates over abortion, censorship, and affirmative action, for example, often crossed party lines. With the double-figure percentage results for Ross Perot in the 1992 election, more speculation turned toward the potential emergence of a major third party. In 1995, for the first time, more Americans identified themselves as independent than Democratic or Republican (Wattenberg 1995, 118). Special interest organizations such as the Christian Coalition wielded power in both parties. The emerging Communitarian movement expressed dissatisfaction with the conservative-liberal split in America, and in a pitch to the moderate majority of Americans proposed a blend of tradition and modernity, individual autonomy, and social order. Backed by the academic prestige of Amitai Etzioni, former president of the American Sociological Association, the Communitarian platform insisted that “the American moral and legal tradition has always acknowledged the need to balance individual rights with the need to protect the safety and health of the public” (Communitarian Network Home Page; Etzioni 1996). It sought to strengthen normative institutions, what it called “foundations of civil society”—families, schools, and neighborhoods. From another angle, the Institute for Cultural Conservatism sought ways to instill “a government that recognizes traditional culture’s vital role” (Lind and Marshner 1987). Its advertisement boasted that its agenda was hailed by conservatives and liberals alike. Taking notice of such trends, U.S. News and World Report in 1994 proclaimed in a special report that “politicians of all stripes are painting themselves as guardians of old-fashioned values as Americans seek a way out of a cultural recession” (Steven Roberts 1994).

A major theme connecting many of the fronts of the culture war was “multiculturalism” and its implications for American tradition. Even Quayle admitted that “it sounded nice,” and Nathan Glazer quipped that in the political atmosphere of the 1990s, inescapably, “we are all multiculturalists” (Quayle 1995; Glazer 1997). Open to many interpretations, multiculturalism became at least in part equated with tolerance of difference from the mainstream, especially in matters of race and ethnicity. Women, as a large, but arguably “historically underrepresented” group, became prominent in the multicultural picture (see Banfield 1979; Nieto 1996; Glazer 1997). In the wake of tumultuous political protests for civil rights during
the 1960s and 1970s, multiculturalism promised to quiet the shouting by more inclusive racial and gender representation in the institutions, such as schools, responsible for setting American society's norms. As African-American writer Clarence Page observed, "Multiculturalism' need not be a dirty word. It can simply be a better way to keep our ethnic mulligan stew from boiling over" (C. Page 1997). Jesse Jackson as a presidential candidate similarly sounded a multicultural call for an inclusive "Rainbow Coalition" brilliantly forming a peaceable unity from many colors and recognizing the integrity of each hue. As calming as these images were, however, they did not halt the shrills. In multiethnic New York City, the proposal for "A Curriculum of Inclusion" drew flak for sounding antiwhite in its effort to build black self-esteem. It made what many considered dubious claims of African primacy in various fields, and railed angrily against prejudicial legacies of white America. Many avowed liberals who had supported the movement for curriculum reform signed a public statement skewering the report (Glazer 1997, 24-25). Hardly reactionaries, the critics took aim at the way the report "viewed division into racial groups as the basic analytical framework for an understanding of American history." Although supporting "diversity," the protest reasserted that "we are after all a nation—as Walt Whitman said, 'a teeming nation of nations'" (Glazer 1997, 24).

The New York City case was only one of many skirmishes that sought to question the primacy of race in multicultural reorientations, at a time when Americans generally believed that racial attitudes had improved and race needed to be deinstitutionalized (Wattenberg 1995, 130–31, 210–13). The most rancorous response was probably to the pronouncement in 1996 by the Oakland School Board that Ebonics, a reference to speech of its inner city black youth, derived from West African languages and would be recognized as a separate language. The school board understandably suffered a great deal of public ridicule for its faddish claims. Unfortunately escaping notice was the sore of educating culturally isolated "minorities" who had become an economically depressed majority in many inner cities (Katz-Fishman and Scott 1994). That sore continued to fester. In recasting America's integration of ethnic heritage into a racial divide, several forms of multiculturalism drew resistance for increasing social tensions rather than alleviating them, as had been their original promise. Nathan Glazer sagely observed that "multiculturalism is the price America is paying for its inability or unwillingness to incorporate into its society African Americans, in the same way and to the same degree it has incorporated so many groups" and hoped to moderate some extreme reactions to multiculturalism that altogether rejected the pluralist mission (Glazer 1997, 147; see also Spencer 1994).

The debates over multicultural curricula at the center of the culture wars came at a time when views of America balanced losses of ethnic expression in the wake of an enveloping mass culture against the introduction of ethnic folkways brought by a new wave of immigrants. The search was on again for metaphors to
replace the melting pot—salad, stew, mosaic, to name a few—and it revealed the ambiguity inherent in modern American identity at a time of global migration. A record high of 19.8 million foreign-born residents lived in the United States in 1990, and they were more likely to be from Asia and Latin America than ever before in American history. Although many of the new metaphors emphasized ethnic multiplicity, a case emerged for a prevailing black and white split. Spike Lee’s movie *Do the Right Thing*, a surprise hit of 1989, climaxed in disturbing scenes of a race riot and prompted audiences and reviewers to talk about lingering sources of racial hostility. Mass-scale reporting of the Los Angeles riots and O. J. Simpson trials through the 1990s featured a host of opinions on the roles of race in American justice.

Contributing to the social and political confusion between race and ethnicity, claims for America often fluctuated between the polar extremes of multiculturalist fragmentation or melting-pot unity. Despite frequently heard boasts such as “There is no other place in the world as diverse as ours,” on a widely cited international scale of ethnic composition called “the homogeneity index,” the United States is divided between homogeneity and diversity factors at a square fifty percent (Dresser 1996, 95; Kurian 1984, 43–44). It ranks in the lower middle of the world’s nations. Ethnic diversity is actually most marked in Africa, where many nation-states inherited arbitrary colonial boundaries and tribal loyalties. Of the thirty-one nation-states ranking lowest in homogeneity, all but seven are African. Canada, often cited as the source of the multiculturalist movement, is among those seven. Two others that are there, to the delight of multicultural critics who point out the dangers of cultural fragmentation, are the former Soviet Union and Yugoslavia. But except for Belgium, European countries carry more weight of homogeneity than the United States, thus setting up a scenario of America distancing itself from the traditions of Europe and in light of immigration and social changes opening its perspectives to those of the Third World.

The simultaneous tendencies toward diversity and union in the discourse of the 1990s do not represent a new struggle in America, which has redefined its nationhood several times in relation to social changes within its leaky borders, and proclaimed its unity, in various degrees of looseness, out of its plurality (Kammen 1991; Barone 1994; Glazer 1997). Although there has been a prevailing belief that the new nation was culturally homogeneous at its inception, comparison of foreign-born populations and racial composition feeds an argument that diversity was greater two hundred years ago than it is now (Parillo 1994). That notwithstanding, several explanations can be posited for the tension felt today over America’s fragmentation. First of all, the number, if not the percentage, of foreign-born is at an all-time high in America. Second, the increased array of nationalities and ethnicities present in America, especially with new Third World immigration thrown in, appears staggering. That by itself may not present an immediate problem, but coupled with the perception that the new groups are not
assimilating, indeed do not need to, in multicultural America, questions arise about the management of this diversity. In some widely noticed cities—Los Angeles, New York City, and Miami—new immigration has contributed to the rise of foreign-language communities, seemingly self-contained, within metropolitan areas. That, too, adds to the sense of diversity today. A final consideration is the publicity for predictions that the percentage of racial minorities will likely increase into the new century, which adds to a sense of social upheaval (Wattenberg 1995, 209; Sam Roberts 1995, 71; M. Spencer 1994).

With the promotion of ethnic, sexual, and racial consciousness in multiculturalism, it is worth contemplating whether other forms of identity have been displaced. The most striking contrast between American cultural studies of the 1950s, for example, and the present is the diminishing presentation of region as an American cultural priority. The Journal of American Folklore featured five articles indexed under regionalism in the postwar decade, and not another one for twenty-seven years. In contrast, sixteen were indexed under “ethnicity” or “ethnic identity” during that gap, while only one article appeared during the 1950s (Jackson, Taft, and Axlerod 1988). There is indeed evidence for an American vagueness about the “homeplace” as a social root. The U.S. Census estimated in 1990 that about one in six Americans, more than 40 million people, moved from one residence to another in a single year, and one in six of those moved to another state. Most moved to suburban areas that had a tenuous hold on community tradition between the firm historical and literary realms of city and country. Americans lived increasingly at the edge of communities, figuratively and literally. In fact, in 1990 for the first time, half the nation’s population lived in the orbit of thirty-nine metropolises of 1 million or more persons (Sam Roberts 1995, 122). With major population shifts occurring during the 1980s toward the West and South, more than half the residents of eight states were born in other states. Nevada claimed an extraordinary seventy-five percent of its population born elsewhere. As one census expert acknowledged, “this degree of mobility is unique in the developed world” (Sam Roberts 1995, 144).

Since Tocqueville made his classic observations of American society in the early nineteenth century, Americans’ loose grip on place has been an often-sounded theme. For his part, Tocqueville wrote that Americans “broke the ties of attachment to their native soil long ago, and have not formed new ones since” (Sam Roberts 1995, 147). Nonetheless, regional loyalties, particularly in the South and New England, remained lodged in the literary imagination through American history, and the mythology of America’s small towns as its backbone raises its head every political campaign. And one function of folklore scholarship has been to recognize locations, such as Appalachia or the Ozarks, where place matters. In the burst of regional romanticism in the early to mid-twentieth century, town and region provided a desirable folk sensibility of a social identity below the nation (see Allen 1996; Allen and Schlereth 1990). More socially intimate than the political
nation, the region was itself a model for *E Pluribus Unum*. The region apparently tolerated, and integrated, myriad ethnic, religious, and occupational traditions into a sense of place and gave America a lasting image of diversity (see Dorson 1964a; Jones 1976). As I have shown, the press and political institutions especially exploited connections between locality and tradition. A search for, as well as a sense of, place did not go away, and yet they gave way in the culture wars to other combatants for American social priorities. What became crucial for views expressed during the 1990s was that cultural critics and educators promoted ethnicity and race as the most mobile, and symbolic, marker of identity for citizens on the move. Set against the background of unstable institutions of family, company, church, and community, Americans increasingly turned to ethnicity and race as ways for individuals to be counted in mass culture.

America's divided legacy of union and diversity prompted Robert Wiebe (1975) to quip in *The Segmented Society* that Americans were held together by their capacity for living apart, and Michael Kammen to astutely discern Americans as *A People of Paradox* (1972). The view of the ethnic cup as half full, or multicultural, or half empty, or integrating, depends largely on how diversity is gauged—as percentages or total population, as matters of a few races or an array of ethnicities, or as cultural observations or changes in consciousness. To be sure, since the 1970s it has been apparent that thinking has shifted from an outlook of cultural pluralism formed from groups that move toward consensus to a multicultural politics of identity that stands for group solidarity and separation. The cultural pluralism of much of the twentieth century hailed a polity drawn from the social inheritance of many countries through European immigration and assuredly predicted integration within American society. It often was guilty, however, of leaving out blacks, Asians, and Native Americans from the mix. Compensating for such omissions, multicultural politics could be more inclusive but has also been interpreted to bring out racial victimization or ethnocentrism. In its well-meaning intention to increase tolerance, many of its forms have risked instilling division. Recounting the furious battles over multicultural curricula in the 1990s that showed a deep racial divide, Nathan Glazer finally had to ask, "Can We Be Brought Together?" Sounding a hope that many felt had become elusive, he thought Americans could, calling upon the tradition, "the common American way, of respect for identity in the context of a common culture.

Whether or not the rush to multiculturalism had peaked by the end of the 1990s, as Glazer thought, its key feature of representing Americans by various social identities appears to be here to stay (see Scott 1997). "It is certainly true that in much of the culture, the image of America seems permanently changed," the *New York Times* affirmed for the world to hear. "It will never again be monochromatic. P.C. [Politically Correct] or not, the accepted standards for representing gender, race, ethnicity, sexual orientation, disability have irreversibly shifted" (Scott 1997). What still remains to be worked out in the discourse is the mapping
of those identities and the locating of their bridges and boundaries. Especially urgent is explaining their uses—personal, social, cultural, political—in the post-modern, post-ethnic, post-whatever society.

I have not mentioned many folklorists, or anthropologists, or sociologists in the discussion of multiculturalism because they increasingly felt banished to the sidelines during this politicized discourse. Although the fields represented by these authorities had long dealt with models of ethnic-religious-racial identity, they scrambled to be consulted in the growing curricular debates (see Stern 1991; Roseberry 1992; Mechling 1993; T. Turner 1993; Fuchs 1994). The identity politics of the 1990s largely relied upon a dialogue between educators, politicians, and community leaders. To be sure, folklorists had increasingly begun using “multicultural” in their presentations to draw attention to their experience in ethnic cultural issues. Speaking to the California Folklore Society for its prestigious Archer Taylor Memorial Lecture in 1994, Norine Dresser wryly dubbed her talk “The ‘M’ Word.” That special, or dirty, word of course was multiculturalism. Citing precedents for multiculturalism in the first issues of the Journal of American Folklore of the late nineteenth century, she recognized that “in those days we didn’t use the term multicultural to describe our diverse society. Nonetheless, even then we concerned ourselves with the folklore of what appeared to be groups of ‘others’ among us. Depending on the decade, we gave them different names—‘immigrants,’ ‘folk groups,’ ‘ethnic groups’” (Dresser 1996, 96). Folklorists in public agencies such as arts and humanities councils often justified their purpose as serving multicultural needs of the society and its public institutions. Private non-profit organizations run and staffed by folklorists also offered multicultural resources and services (see M. Jones 1994). They signaled a direction for folklorists and anthropologists involved in diversity training and multicultural awareness programs. Many folklore Ph.D.’s came into university employment in multicultural programming rather than academic folklore instruction. Often vocal that educators invoking cultural theories were out of their league, many folklorists and anthropologists through the 1990s sported claims to multiculturalism (Sharrow 1992; T. Turner 1993; Fuchs 1994).

The rhetoric of folklore had a significant role to play in the politics of tradition during the 1990s. It can be understood at “ground zero” in the culture wars. That spot is where precious children dwell, for it is there that the public believes the morality of the future is determined. And folklore, long hailed as an educational repository for moral lessons conveyed to generations of American children, came under the multicultural magnifying glass. The underlying question in the new scrutiny given to childhood texts was, as stated by U.S. News and World Report, “How to raise decent kids when traditional ties to church, school and community are badly frayed”? (Herbert 1996). The battleground of the schools reopened during the 1990s because of the dependence of American society, even expanded, on them to shape the values of impressionable American children. The lessons gained
came into dispute when they altered the inherited narratives of the past and in the process challenged the values of many parents.

It had been widely accepted in American education that reading of folk and fairy tales provided engaging education and moral lessons in the early grades and at home. This transmission of folklore was not only elementary in the schools, but fundamental to the growth of cultural literacy in children. In *The Dictionary of Cultural Literacy* (1988) Edward D. Hirsch, Joseph F. Kett, and James Trefil placed folklore first before art, history, and philosophy in recognition of its place at the foundation of culture (see also Hirsch 1987, 1989). Classic mythology and European folktales are there—familiar figures such as Zeus, Snow White, and Cinderella. They are the hallmarks of civilization, and for America's part, one used to find that every schoolchild knew textbook legends of Davy Crockett, Johnny Appleseed, and John Henry.

Things began to change in the 1980s with the rise of sensitivity to ethnic and religious representation, a kind of relativism that would encourage tolerance of alternative lifestyles, and a multiculturalism that would enhance wide social inclusion (La Belle and Ward 1994; Glazer 1997). Multiculturalists encouraged teachers to avoid authoritatively drumming the legacy of Western civilization into children's heads. In keeping with a relativistic perspective, teachers opened awareness to an array of moral codes and cultural identities from a number of legitimate alternatives—Eastern civilization, African societies, and possibly even "new age" philosophies. Often accompanying this self-determination of identity is a cultural criticism of Western "isms"—racism, sexism, classism. Many of the tales of the Brothers Grimm were scornfully reevaluated as presenting female roles in a bad light, or being too violent, or irreligious, or privileging European ancestry (Katz 1991). A nationally carried wire story in 1993 about the banning of Snow White in Jacksonville, Florida, led to the realization in many localities of formerly revered folktales that had now been condemned. Customs and stories of Halloween came increasingly under attack from religious groups for encouraging Satanism, and many schools forbade traditional decorations of ghosts and goblins as well as trick-or-treating (Marlow 1994). At least one folklorist stood up to publicly question, "Can't We Pass on Fairy Tales without Being Accused of Satanism?" (Bulger 1992).

Many of the new children's books of the 1990s recast folk and fairy tales to serve multicultural purposes. A report coming out of the 1993 American Library Association made the observation that using folktales of Native Americans, African Americans, Hispanic Americans, and Asian Americans to represent multiculturalism was the key to new books that were appealing to libraries and schools (Webb 1993; see also McCarthy 1993). And why not? Many of the groups underrepresented in history and literature textbooks were known more for their oral traditions than documentary records. The richness of folklore was a way to show the dignity of their cultures. With its association of providing roots, folklore could
lend legitimacy and authenticity to claims for cultural continuity. Better assertive role models were also sought for women, and a spate of books appeared that boosted female heroines (San Souci 1993). Others used folktales to emphasize progressive values of social justice and international peace (Brody 1992). To be able to comment on this outpouring of new children’s books using folklore, the Children’s Folklore Section of the American Folklore Society initiated an annual competition for the Aesop Prize to recognize excellence in folklore presentations for children. It gave its prize in 1995 to one of the progressive titles, *Fair is Fair: World Folktales of Justice* (1994) by Sharon Creeden.

Most of these books drew praise for giving children of various backgrounds more topics they could relate to and increasing cultural awareness. But when Home Box Office in 1995 announced it was adapting some of the best-known European-American folktales to a multicultural message for television, it created another skirmish in the culture wars. Produced as colorful cartoons, HBO’s *Fairy Tales* took the basic plots of classic European folktales and adapted them for non-European ethnic and racial groups. It also changed the roles of the female characters to be aggressive and independent. While some reviewers appreciated the “kick of diversity” and “multicultural twist” to the old tales, others protested that the result was “anti-white washes” that encouraged racial animosity among children (Heffley 1995; Koch 1995; Fumento 1995). In reference to the reversal of roles in a classic like Cinderella, the *Detroit News* warned, “Time’s Up for Wimpy Cinderellas” (Bondi 1995). Shortly after this media brouhaha, another multicultural adaptation of fairy tales drew the publicized ire of a Michigan lawmaker when he learned that a state arts agency had given money to a group to create “rap” versions of fairy tales for presentation to inner-city black youth (Hornbeck 1996).

Conservative advocates of “traditional values” answered the rush to mine folktales for multicultural ore with adaptations of their own. Spreading the message that schools and libraries had been stormed by irreligious multicultural agendas, some writers reached out to parents to use folktales to teach moral lessons at home. Christine Allison published a “parent’s guide” she called *Teach Your Children Well* (1993). It included fables and tales meant to “instill traditional values” and bolster a “moral imagination” (see Guroian 1996). The biggest surprise in the publishing world may have been the success of William Bennett’s *Book of Virtues*, also released in 1993. The unwieldy 832-page anthology of re-tread material appeared to many literary pundits an unlikely choice for a pivotal book of fin-de-siècle America, but it enjoyed a spectacular run at the top of the *New York Times* best-seller list. An audio version, children’s edition, wall calendar—and a host of parodies—followed. The original book was a compilation of stories, including many European-American folktales meant to teach moral virtues of compassion, responsibility, self-discipline, courage, honesty, friendship, and faith. Bennett bemoaned the erosion of traditional values of family and faith, and called for renewing a tradition of storytelling drawn from the moral lessons of Western civilization. He culled stories from classic
folklore collections of the Grimm brothers, Andrew Lang, and Joseph Jacobs, and gave his own brief ethical commentaries. The huge success of the book spawned a television series, *Adventures from the Book of Virtues* on the Public Broadcasting System (PBS). The choice of PBS for a conservative answer to the controversial HBO multicultural series had its ironies, since the beleaguered system supported with public funds had been accused by some lawmakers in budget hearings of being too liberal in its programming.

One need go no further than look at the furor over popular uses of folktales to find political divisions over the character of American tradition. Sides in the culture wars found it essential to locate a folklore that would legitimize a claim to an authentic tradition at the heart of an American culture. It would provide a foundation of the past for the constructed edifice of the future. Whether right or left, conservative or liberal, party of the past or future, folklore had been shaped to goals of an imagined society.

**The Character of Tradition**

Scholarly and public discourses of tradition vary in their content, but noticeable among intellectuals is the special concern for the *emergence* of tradition and its relation to creativity. With this emergence the basis of identity, culture, and performance is often rhetorically prominent. Public discourse, as scholarly discourse in many instances, tends to question the *continuity* of tradition as a category for community, locality, and religion. At issue in both discourses, especially in America associated historically with rapid progress and future-orientation, is the effect of change (see Dundes 1969b). Various forms of change lay in the background of the discourse of tradition—physical displacement, social fragmentation, and historical modernization. Change in various rhetorical guises—progress, modernity, movement, fashion, invention—appears as the assumed constant of a normal life. Tradition is often seen as a balancing concept in America, often applied to a constructed social other, and more recently applied to a personal self in search of identity and community.

Tradition can be invoked to lend support to public causes as well as scholarly interpretations. With its connotations of respect and duty it has been used to suggest the urgency of retaining a path of action. The perception of tradition as a matter of a continuous past and collective social relations means that it can invoke a persistent force driving the future. In the United States, tradition has especially been a publicly contested term for viewing different priorities of building national unity and multicultural community. "Tradition" rarely stands alone. Modifiers to tradition such as "national," "ethnic," "religious," "folk," "cultural," "family," and "local" have implied a need to place a feeling of social connectedness, a collective memory, in an identifiable niche within mass society. The association of tradition with folk especially brings out the perception of tradition's strength in locality, in
small (often marginal) groups, in everyday life. The social conflicts between ideas of a technological mass culture of convenience and uniformity exist against that of a spiritual folk society with its bonds of intimacy and identity. The scholarship and the rhetoric of tradition points to values held and the selective valuation of history and culture. At a basic level, the problem of tradition in the last few decades has posed challenges to individuals about finding the meaning of their cultural inheritance and the choices they make in their lives.

The problem of tradition in America brings into question the assumptions of national individualism and progressivism. Tradition and its expression in folklore bring out group associations and feelings of belonging to past patterns. The “freedom of choice” that Americans have prided themselves on is based on the idea that the separation that individuals make from their background groups—ancestral, regional, national—leads them to progress. There have been cultural “riddles” raised, however, about societies such as the Amish or American Indians emphasizing tradition as a basis of society within the supposedly progressive American context. And there have been politicized questions about whether some social structures for blacks, homosexuals, or women foster traditions because of repression rather than free will (see Fry 1975; Goodwin 1989; Davis 1996; Hollis, Pershing, Young 1993). One can understand the cultural and political influence of the “dynamics” of tradition on modern everyday life, for ordinary people, as a reflection on the meaning of tradition in a future-oriented society. If modernization has brought an idea of free association through extended communication, transportation, and commerce, then identities and their social bases may as a result tend to expand and fragment. Yet the authenticity of these bases may appear doubtful and in need of reinforcement through the power of ritual, custom, narrative—folklore. That reinforcement suggests one kind of future where tradition is not assumed to devolve, as many Victorians thought, but may be selectively revitalized and invented. Transnational movements, often charismatic, of fundamentalism, orthodoxy, and religious revival, for example, bring into focus the interpretation of tradition as a stabilizing, spiritual, and moral force. In such cases, tradition may be perceived as a mode, an order, to be in as well as an observable item to do. Constructed rituals adapted for new conditions such as the “mid-life crisis” at turning forty, African-American initiation into adulthood, or same-sex marriages indicate a self-consciousness about invoking the power of tradition to urge continuation and legitimate community (Brandes 1985; Nelson 1992). Rituals and objects designed for holidays and celebrations can also be spread by consumerism and tourism to “traditionalize” mass-mediated events, blurring the lines of authenticity and artifice, popular and folk culture (see Jones 1980b; Handler and Linnekin 1984; Mechling 1989b; Dégh 1994; Santino 1996).

In addition to the conditions of industrialization seen as the cynosure for modern society during the nineteenth century, twentieth century self-awareness of anomie, disaster, genocide, incorporation, and computerization have led to consideration of
continuous tradition in a post-modern state of discontinuity. Many post-modern critics have argued further the problem of tradition set against the future by examining the expansion of choices and performances (Dorst 1988; Workman 1989; Dobruskin 1990; Warshaver 1991; Anttonen 1993). Accounting of human “performances” rather than “lives” or “societies” suggests post-modern views of the heterogeneity and simultaneity, indeed discontinuity, of an existence that, on one hand, appears to have infinite, often uneasy choices available without the guidance of tradition, and then on the other, seems to have restrictions created by cybernetic, artificial dependence. To be sure, there are apparently post-modern definitions of action that make little or no reference to tradition and emphasize any moment of communication as potentially a cultural event (see Ben-Amos 1972). Yet overall, tradition has grown in significance as a concept to think more about, to derive the meaning of the present as well as past, to apply to historical and social artifacts, to interpret as a process of thought and behavior. It has been appealing particularly for its suggestion of removing absolutes of a supposedly objective history. It has helped contextualize perceptions of reality as relative viewpoints influenced by social associations and historical precedents.

Folklore as a study of tradition has contributed to making the cultural challenges before societies and individuals more explicit. It has especially examined the social landscape growing out of the past and the need for social expression of the ways that people relate to one another. Set against the background of change, tradition’s role in the way that people live and view the world commands renewed attention as new forms of communication arise. As industrialization and urbanization of the late nineteenth century in America brought folklore prominently into view as the new century approached, trends of computerization and reorganization in the late twentieth century have raised thorny questions about the future of tradition. Observing the startling changes to life brought by the “electronic revolution” in 1989, Alan Gailey philosophized: “A future for tradition seems assured. So long as people need rules and categories by which to live, and they cannot on the spur of the moment develop them for themselves in a manner acceptable to their fellows, they will adhere to traditions, to past ways of doing and thinking about things, which they have inherited as useful, tried responses to the vagaries of their existence” (159). Commenting on the ramifications of the videotape boom on the creative storytelling of children, tomorrow’s adults, Libby Tucker thought in 1992 that “if the mouth can hold its own while ideas continue to proliferate, oral tales should continue to thrive well into the twenty-first century” (Tucker 1992, 31). Seen as a process fundamental to social existence, tradition is guaranteed a future, but viewed as a formulation of the past, as a type of knowledge or memory, doubts set in, and it opens the door for calls of preservation, memorialization, manipulation, and invention.

The essays that follow discuss the problem of tradition as a critical point of controversy about the character of American culture or cultures. As this controversy
has been greatly informed by the work of folklorists, I select several key figures, significant texts, and pivotal moments from the tangled narrative of tradition. I discuss the ways that folklorists became authorities for tradition and how their contributions have been interpreted in scholarly, public, and commercial realms. I record the ways they spoke as moderns who became followers—that is, preservers, critics, and adaptors—of tradition. I also explore the ways they became concerned with those who follow or live with tradition to advise moderns and assist traditional (or marginal) societies in the context of social and political change. I am interested in how they have identified who has followed tradition in society and attempted to answer what follows tradition for the future. I find their intellectual wrestling with the concept of tradition significant for its balance against public perceptions of the present human condition. And I particularly record their dialogue on, and in, American culture as telling for interpretations of intellectual constructions of America.