I am what is called (in America) a folklorist. When I say that, people tell me, “You must know a lot of great stories.” They assume I must be a performer, which I am not; what I am is a recovering folksinger. I know about a lot of stories; what I do is translate them, analyze them, and try to keep them embedded in their sociocultural settings or causes. I’m not much interested in curing or nourishing the sick or starved souls of modern human beings though bringing them into contact with ancient myth. Rather, I conduct research in expressive culture, those activities in people’s lives which have an aesthetic component. One place where I have worked extensively is the Southwest Indian Ocean. The islands lying east of Africa—Madagascar, Mauritius, Réunion, Seychelles, and the Comoros—are not much known to Americans, who if they’re interested in sea, sun, and sand can more cheaply visit the Caribbean. Because the intangible cultural heritage, or folklore, of these islands, which are creole, or mixed, societies, has not been known to the English-speaking or English-reading world, I have become a translator. I have learned that the field of folklore and the field of translation studies are sibling disciplines.

To begin with, there’s this problem of terminology, which is a translation problem: The words folklore and folklorist have quite different meanings for American scholars from the meanings they have in Europe. French speakers, for example, are accustomed to thinking of le folklore as something charming but irrelevant, a set of survivals from earlier stages of culture—for example songs, dances, or legends which are picturesque but of no importance or significance in an enlightened society. The study of such things, if ever it’s taken seriously, is included in the concept of ethnologie. In Germany, the words Volkskunde, for peasant culture, and Völkerkunde, for so-called primitive culture, acquired a corrupted meaning during the era of National Socialism. It’s been a heroically creative effort of German scholars like Hermann Bausinger to get out from under that shadow and produce some of the most
substantial cultural criticism of the twentieth century. In Spain, ‘folklore’ means popular traditions, beliefs, and costume. And in Africa and Latin America, ‘folklore’ is something that was researched by colonial officers treating local people as primitives. There, the person who allows herself to be called a ‘folklorist’ must be an antiquarian, who has turned away from the realities of contemporary life to devote herself to materials that by definition are obsolete or obsolescent. In the United States, the word is different. Especially over the last fifty years, the study of folklore has broadened into a kind of descriptive ethnography, focusing on the communications of people in the present. Consequently, the folklorist has become a microscopic cultural critic, examining not merely the traditions of enclaved groups like American Indians or non-English speakers, but the communications of people of all classes. What we in US now call the study of folklore, or folkloristics, has new contours, which situate it in a pluridisciplinary location by virtue of the dispersal into different academic departments of practitioners who yet claim affiliation with a single disciplinary title, folklore. But like any ethnographer, the folklorist is a translator too. “The ethnographer,” says Haun Saussy, “brings back information from remote peoples, dissolving the boundaries that separate them from others by translation as much as by overcoming the hardships and dangers of travel, and also leaves something of himself with the people investigated” (Saussy 2006, 27–28). This is one of a thousand such statements showing the common ground of translation and folklore studies.

Studies of folklore arise from difference. Hence all folklore studies are translations. In philosophy, we are told, “the articulation of an adequate concept of difference, and as well a proper sense of how to valorize it, is the overriding problem that occupies recent French thought” (May 1997, 1–2). In folkloristics and translation studies difference is essential. As the poet Charles Bernstein says, seeing differences “is the source of our social power to intervene, to agitate, to provoke, to rethink, to take sides--using all the formal and cultural rhetorics at our command” (Bernstein 1992:97). What we do with, or about the differences in one discourse is translation, in another it’s folklore. In both discourses it’s assumed that cultural expressions are the vehicle and effectuator of values. In folkloristics what we study is the transmission of cultural values. Translation is one of the techniques of that transmission, as it is of anthropology: the distinguished anthropologist Michael M. J. Fischer writes in a recent book, “The
challenge of cultural analysis is to develop translation and mediation tools for helping make visible differences of interests, access, power, needs, desires, and philosophical perspective” (Fischer 2009:1).

There’s also a status problem. The materials of folklore--legends, proverbs, family recipes, vernacular housing--in America have a lower status than short stories by John Updike and Joyce Carol Oates, sayings attributed to Benjamin Franklin, books and television programs by Julia Child and Emeril Lagasse, and buildings by Frank Gehry. Legends are stigmatized as lies, which require correction in writing. Many books calling themselves folklore operate outside copyright law, under the assumption that legends, proverbs, and folk costume are nobody’s property, whereas intellectual property receives reverent protection from well financed authorities. In the university world, the study of folklore is depreciated by the academy. One of the most successful American graduate programs in folklore was terminated a couple of years ago by the administration of the University of Pennsylvania. (That didn’t totally put me out of a job, but I did sometimes teach in that program. Some of what I say today was developed there, in collaboration with a former colleague, Regina Bendix, who is now the Professor of European Ethnology in the University at Göttingen.) Another successful graduate program in folklore and mythology, at UCLA, was rendered invisible by being merged into a department of “world arts and cultures.” Dance at UCLA disappeared into the wings that same day. I need not tell you how difficult it is to find translation studies in the departmental structure of most universities.

In folklore studies we frequently have the experience of observing material examples of the subtle highflown insights of critics and philosophers. Here is one: we live in a world of differences and translations between cultures, a world that was uncannily foreseen in the 1980s by the literary critic Frank Lentricchia. He saw that instead of isolated literary texts, there is “a potentially infinite and indefinite, all-inclusive series of networks of interrelation.” That’s an elegant description of the current state of folktale study, for example, which grew out of conceptualizing the recurrent plots of tales around the world as “tale types.” Now that so many tales have been inventoried, the concept of tale type has been seriously weakened. Every tale appears to be, in Claude Lévi-Strauss’s phrase, a “bundle of distinctive features,” existing in networks of cultural flow. Lentricchia’s networks, taken outside the world of literature into the wider world, are the same networks of cultural flow which Arjun Appadurai, also in the
1980s, classically identified. As you may remember, Appadurai proposed “five dimensions of global cultural flows that can be termed (a) ethnoscapes, (b) mediascapes, (c) technoscapes, (d) financescapes, and (c) ideoscapes” (Appadurai 1996, 33). Ethnoscapes refer to moving peoples, such as immigrants, refugees, tourists, guest workers, and exiles, the displaced persons who “constitute the shifting world in which we live.” Mediascapes refer to the circulation of images and information. Technoscapes refer to the distribution of technology. Financescapes refer to the global movement of capital. And ideoscapes are the distribution of political ideas and values. All five flows constitute the matrix for the renegotiation of culture; all five are plainly visible on the ground in the Southwest Indian Ocean islands.

To come back to Frank Lentricchia’s unwitting portrayal of folklore: These networks of interrelation, he wrote, “are not securable[,] because they are ruled by never-ending movements of linguistic energy,” and these movements of energy don’t recognize the rights of private ownership (Lentricchia 1980, 189). That’s a fair picture of folklore as I understand it, especially in creole societies, where (as the editors of a forthcoming book write) “native cultural entities combine, recombine and reemerge, creating creole expressions which defy external analytical categories . . .” (Baron and Cara, forthcoming). Rights of private ownership lie at the heart of the unresolvable debate in UNESCO over communities and their role in the preservation of intangible cultural heritage, or folklore. There’s a fine book Intangible Heritage, edited by Laurajane Smith and Natsuko Akagawa, which brings together essays that critique the history and concepts of UNESCO’s 2003 Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage (Smith and Akagawa 2009). The study of folklore is swept with linguistic and cultural energy ceaselessly moving inward and outward. It draws--I cite current examples--upon history (St. George 1998), psychoanalysis (Dundes, A. 1987), anthropology (Blackburn 1988), linguistics (Hymes 2003), musicology (Feld 1982), and literary criticism (Toelken 1995), while reciprocally contributing to all these fields. Translation studies continually wrestle with the rights of private ownership. Susan Bassnett has pointed out that a poet, or a translator, or a reader may all conceive a poem as his or her property (Bassnett 2002, 72, 82).

In the early days of folkloristics, the German romantics were as enthusiastic about translation as they were about folklore. For Johann Gottfried von Herder, a return to “sources” was concomitant with an
openness to English literature and classical antiquity. He called for Erweiterung, expansion, the acquisition of culture, and the Treue, fidelity. Treue for folkloristics means the Authentic, a requirement that led the Grimms to proclaim their fidelity to the words of their informants. As Antoine Berman has shown, the time of Lessing and Herder opened the essential questions for a historical theory of translation: why translate? how to translate? what should be translated (Berman 1992, 41)? Both translation and folklore were necessary agents of Bildung (culture, formation), which in turn is “the experience of the alterity of the world . . . .” The self experiences; the self becomes the Other; so it discovers that the Other is itself. So Novalis was able to convince himself that “the German Shakespeare today is better than the English” (trs (Berman 1992, 105).

Certainly translation was a necessary agent of the Bildung of folklore studies. If there is such a thing as the ‘folk’, transmission of lore amongst the folk always depended on translation. Multiple existence in variant forms, a defining element for folklore, presupposes translation. It was the big surprise to the Brothers Grimm that the German tales they set out to put before the German public were not of German origin, but were international in their distribution. Contemporaries held also the opposite idea, that because all cultures began in savagery and developed through barbarism to civilization (represented by the British Museum), they all knew certain myths. Even if this idea were true, it would have to acknowledge the Babel of human languages and therefore admit that there have been an enormous number of translations since history began. The discovery in ninth-century China of the most ancient text of the Cinderella story rather hints that, well, translating it began a long time ago (Dundes, A. 1988, 71–97). It is now known that what modern Europe learned to call the folktale or fairy tale existed in antiquity (Hansen 2002). (Of course, still thinking of antiquity, the classical European tradition depended on that looser sense of translation in which Vergil is ‘translating’ Homer.) Emanuel Cosquin’s discovery in 1862 of a Grimm tale told in Lorraine opened before him the whole problem of international transmission and gave impetus to folkloristics in France (Dorson 1968, vii).

Moving from folklore texts to folklore studies, every folklorist knows how many of the canonical or innovative texts of his or her discipline are the result of translations. These have often been hidden; a notorious example of translator’s invisibility is the anonymous translation of Claude Lévi-Strauss’s The
Savage Mind. A foundational text of narratology, the Morphology of the Folktale by V. Propp, lay in Russian obscurity for thirty years after Propp published it, evidently because of the cloud hanging over formalism just then (Pirkava-Jakobson 1968, xxi). The reliance on Propp’s Morphology by scholars and critics from the 1960s on would make you think it had always been an accessible classic (Bremond 1973; Prince 1982; Rimmon-Kenan 2002; Paulme 1972), but it wasn’t. The most relentless structuralist analysis of myth, after Claude Lévi-Strauss, the structuralism of A. J. Greimas, is rooted in Propp (Greimas, A. J. 1971). Folkloristics and translation are ineluctably intertwined.

I discovered the intertwining when I went to produce an English translation of a long folktale text from Madagascar, called “Ibonia.”¹ Since part of my audience would be the textual community of folklorists, it was necessary to annotate the text so as to show them the tale’s use of motifs or other plot elements found also in other narratives, both those known to Malagasy performers and those found in East Africa and Indonesia. This story is an oddity, because it is so much longer than Malagasy folktales, or anybody else’s folktales, ordinarily are. Its general outline is a plot so familiar and widespread that a certain kind of reader might think it is inborn to the human race. We meet a hero of royal parentage; his mother is barren until she consults a diviner, who brings about the hero’s conception. His story continues through an unusual birth, the hero’s precocious strength, his quest for his betrothed, tests of his worth, supernatural aid, and a struggle with her abductor. Final victory and marriage complete the story. As is well known, tales following this outline are found all over Europe, Africa, and Asia. Around this outline there is additional material, which lengthens the piece. Some segments looked like digressions, to the British missionaries who studied native culture in the latter half of the nineteenth century. Ibonia’s combats with a crocodile and other adversaries, for example, retell the worldwide combat myth. Also, in two “donor sequences,” the hero’s mother and later he himself are tested. When each responds appropriately, she or he is provided with a magic object. These donor sequences link “Ibonia” with European folktales. Thus part of my job as a translator was to show these links as a commentator.

In the Malagasy genre system, the tale is rather an angano, a tale, story or fable, than a tantara, true history. I singled it out for separate publication because it belongs to another genre, namely epic. There had been a great deal of stormy controversy in the 1970s and ‘80s over whether Africa actually
possesses the epic genre. The controversy had pretty much died down by the time I started to work on “Ibonia,” because enough African examples had been collected to define the genre. In Isidore Okpewho’s words, it is “fundamentally a tale about the fantastic deeds of a man or men endowed with something more than human might and operating in something larger than the normal human context and it is of significance in portraying some stage of the cultural or political development of a people” (Okpewho 1979, 34). By that definition, “Ibonia” is an epic, and I wanted to add Madagascar to the accumulating pyramid of African epic translations.²

Whatever its previous history, “Ibonia” is still alive in oral tradition: versions have been collected as recently as 1992. When I came upon it, the text had been in print for over 125 years. It acquired canonical status almost upon publication. The long “Ibonia” stands at the head of the section labeled “Tales and Legends” (Angano na arira) in the large collection of tales, poems, riddles, song lyrics, and other Malagasy folklore, made in 1872-76 by a Norwegian missionary (Dahle 1877). Subsequently that text was re-edited more than once, annotated, and translated into French. Hence I incorporated, in my notes on the translation, the ethnographic and historical annotations of the French translator, as well as notes by other commentators; I also indexed the motifs in the story, from that indispensable tool of the folktale scholar, Stith Thompson’s Motif-Index of Folk Literature. The translation would have been useless, incomprehensible, and unpublishable without the folkloristic commentary, and without the translation, no one would have read the commentary either.

As a folklorist translating one text from Madagascar, I shared one peculiarity with my American colleagues, namely a certain aversion to grand theory. For American folklorists, there is no Grand Theory in folkloristics, for three reasons: a dislike for abstract rhetoric, a loyalty to their received methods, and a refusal of authoritarian stance (that is, the study of folklore has tended to pay attention to dominated or enclaved subcultures, which often resist authority). One textbook conceptualizes folklore in several different working models: as a historical artifact, as a describable and transmissible entity, as “culture,” or as behavior (Georges and Jones 1995, 22); but there is no Grand Theory. The methods received from Franz Boas and Stith Thompson retain the antitheoretical bias of those progenitors of the field. American folkloristics has been remarkably innocent of the culture wars of the 80s and the Beautiful Theories
Elizabeth Bruss wrote about in her beautiful book. Instead of translating models or concepts developed by Jacques Derrida, Michel Foucault, or Jacques Lacan, and applying them to their data, folklorists focus—to cite some recent examples—on the actualities of people’s interactions with each other—on a live performance in Afghanistan of an ancient tale from the Arabian Nights (Mills 2007), on stories that provoke people to say “Small world, isn’t it?” (Shuman 2005), on the role of nostalgia in the mental life of a town in Northern Ireland (Cashman 2006), or on the inseparability of poetics and politics in Catalonia (Noyes 2003). I need not point to the recent burgeoning of theory in translation studies.

Despite an entrenched resistance to foreign influence, however, a modified kind of structuralism underlies some of the most distinguished work in folklore studies. To modify structuralism is to translate it deeply. One way of doing that is to bury the theory so effectually in the practice, and to surround it with so many rebarbative linguistic or other technicalities, that no French or German reader will detect the theoretical advances, and even an American or English reader will be put off. I am thinking of the influential translations-with-commentary of Native American texts by the anthropological linguist Dell Hymes. Folklore, he says, “is able to start from community definitions of situation, activity, purpose, genre, and to discover validly the ways in which communicative means are organized in terms of them” (Hymes 1975, 350). An inspiring statement of a method, which gave rise to a reorientation of folklore studies away from isolatable texts towards the whole of a communicative event. This is called the “performance approach” to folklore. There were other pioneers than Hymes: Erving Goffman, Ray Birdwhistell, Kenneth Burke. But it was Hymes who focused on problems of translation. One of the advocates of the performance approach, Dorothy Noyes, calls it “humble theory.” She says it’s an alternative to Grand Theory, a “defense of engagement with surfaces as opposed to deep structures, whether cognitive, Freudian, Marxist, or whatever” (Dorothy Noyes, personal communication (Noyes 2007). Dell Hymes once illustrated Humble Theory nicely by saying, “I have never done anything I would myself describe as theoretical or ethnographic,” while producing some of the most precise and empathic ethnography of the twentieth century. But in fact Hymes’s kind of translation-with-commentary takes you from the surface into deep structures. This bottom-up direction translates method into theory.
Incidentally, the movement from insight to method to theory recurs in many disciplines, sometimes dangerously. Take linguistics: Saussure’s insight that “signs in language were matters of convention,” which is now recognized as less than original with him (Matthews 2001, 117), turned into a method of understanding the relation between a signifier and a signified. Then that relation was inflated: the linguistic became the general principle for the social sciences (Dosse 1997, 369). In other disciplines, the notion of paradigm, which Thomas Kuhn set forth in The Structure of Scientific Revolutions (Kuhn 1962), was taken up and inflated into “some sort of overall theory or concept or notion” (Wilber 2000, 283), which would then govern the conduct of research. In anthropology, Claude Lévi-Strauss resisted the movement; he once refuted the writings of some wannabe followers by saying, “Structuralism is not a philosophical doctrine, it is a method” (Dosse 1997, 83). But moving from insight to method to theory is one way of creating an orthodoxy. I wonder whether anything of the kind has occurred in translation studies. What follows, for instance, from admitting that translators are usually kept invisible? For Lawrence Venuti, it’s a “call to action.” Most of what Lawrence Venuti advocates is not theory; rather he advocates new methods, for example ‘foreignizing’ translation, which would include “archaism, slang, literary allusion and convention” (Venuti 1995, 310). The theory of foreignizing translation would have to be sought elsewhere, in the concept of cultural creolization. But I digress.

Dell Hymes’s translation of structuralism divided it into two varieties. One is what we see in the kinship or mythology studies of Claude Lévi-Strauss, or in the work of Roland Barthes in his structuralist period (Barthes 1966). The other variety looks backward into the history of linguistics, advocating “the elementary task of discovering the relevant features and relationships of a language and its texts,” as carried out by Kenneth Pike or Eugene Nida (Pike 1967; Nida 1946). Hymes labels his “task of discovering the relevant features and relationships of a language and its texts” as “practical structuralism.” Yet in his practice as a translator, Hymes only seems to be turning away from the major intellectual current of his generation. In his translations from Native American texts, he has developed and enlarged the scope of the structuralism of Claude Lévi-Strauss. At the same time, he honors tradition in two dimensions. One is that his translations bring across traditional content and style in tale performances by Native American narrators. The other dimension honors the entextualizations of those
performances bequeathed by his predecessors in the anthropological study of Native culture. In two major books, Dell Hymes, to realize “full accessibility to original texts” (Hymes 2003, 47), returns to the transcriptions by Franz Boas, Edward Sapir, Melville Jacobs, and even himself, to correct them and discover new features of style. The method necessitates three steps: "retranscription, retranslation, realignment."

Retranscription has to do with decisions as to how the words and phrases are to be spelled. Retranslation involves reconsideration of the English equivalents for the Indian words and phrases. Realignment is a name for discovery of the ways in which words and phrases are actually organized in relation to each other (Hymes 2003, 206).

Superior linguistic knowledge provides a base for all three steps. With realignment comes the demonstration of Hymes’s first principle, that “oral narratives consist of spoken lines.” It may be difficult to remember how novel this proposition was, and how antistructuralist it was, when Hymes, Dennis Tedlock, Jerome Rothenberg, and other ethnopoeticists first broadcast it in the 1970s. Retranslation reveals that “equivalence”--the key term in Roman Jakobson's famous formula of 1960--is to be sought and found in orally spoken syllables, alliteration, and larger units of the narrative, which are disseminated by a performer and apprehended by an audience. That is the second principle. The structuralist revelation comes in the third principle: “there is an architecture ... [of] verses, stanzas, scenes, and, sometimes, acts” (Hymes 2003, 234–235). So Hymes turns the structuralism of Claude Lévi-Strauss upside down without discarding it. Where Lévi-Strauss focused on the unconscious structure of narratives, Hymes’s structuralism focuses on conscious storytelling behavior (as does the performance approach to folklore), through a search for regularities, rhythms, and repetitions. Examining case after case within the still-emerging corpus, patiently scrutinizing verbal detail for what it reveals about capacities and performances, establishing a narrator’s definite verbal meaning, Dell Hymes is always answering the structuralist question, “What are the conventions that make literature possible?” What he calls “practical structuralism,” applied to the retranslation of Boas’s and Sapir’s texts, is an augmentation of Claude
Lévi-Strauss’s methods, to include examining linguistic features that are literarily active and part of an artist’s armamentarium.

Dell Hymes’s linguistic analyses have been faulted for being “ingrown and tedious”; a reviewer rightly pointed out that linguistic details were going to limit the audience for such retranslations (Mishler 1983, 482). Hymes’s justification for the linguistically based analyses of his texts goes right to the heart of translation studies: “Linguistics and linguistic-like analyses are necessary means to the joy and understanding, because words were the means used by the authors of the texts.” His theory is implied in the statement, “The joy, the understanding, the language are all of a piece” (Hymes 1981, 5). That is, there is to be no separation between linguistics, aesthetics, literary criticism, and sociocultural commentary. The new folklorist-translator-commentator “has to take seriously the exact detail of what was said” (Hymes 2003, 312)—which is hardly different from the well-known teaching of Reuben Brower at Harvard, which Paul de Man so revered: “Students . . . were not to say anything that was not derived from the text they were considering. They were not to make any statements that they could not support by a specific use of language that actually occurred in the text” (de Man 1986, 23).

When Marjorie Garber cites this retrospect of de Man’s, she devises teaching “Shakespeare in Slow Motion” (Garber 2010). I learned a lot about Shakespeare in slow motion through appearing as an actor in seven or eight of the plays: there’s no close reading that can match rehearsing the Bard’s words over and over. (I’ll spare you the demonstration.) When I cite de Man’s look back at Reuben Brower, it’s to teach a course called “Folklore and Translation.” One of the assignments in that course asked students, already knowing that variant forms are a defining feature of folklore, to imagine that versions of the same folktale in different languages or circumstances are translations of a lost original. Much time in that course was given to issues in translation studies, in an effort to do away with Walter Benjamin’s mystified conception of transparency in translation. You remember that Benjamin wrote, “A real translation is transparent,” mystifying a process he understood better in other parts of his famous essay. Transparency, in turn, has often been considered, even by Benjamin, to be a quality residing within a given work (Benjamin 1968, 71). As a folklorist interested in reconstructing performances of the past, I (like Michael Silverstein and others) would like texts to be transparent, so that I can discern the strategies
of long-silent informants. But as they aren’t, the texts left behind by Boas, Edward Sapir, and Melville Jacobs require restudy and retranslation by a Dell Hymes, to bring out, he said, “what they are really like.” The climactic assignment in that course asked students who had command of another language to choose a folktale, myth, or legend, or a collection of proverbs or riddles, and translate it into English, presenting the text in the original language and their translation and discussing any translation problems. That assignment made it necessary to take seriously the exact detail of what was said, through uniting translation with folkloristic analysis. I have never seen a better set of undergraduate papers.

My experience with “Ibonia” and Hymes’s monumental work on North American Indian texts convinces me that folkloristics and translation studies are sibling disciplines. What did the founder of structuralism say? Claude Lévi-Strauss, for his part, writing in *L'Homme*, drew a boundary between his structuralism, in particular his approach as a comparative anthropologist, and Hymes’s philological approach. He asserts that the two approaches are complementary, but confesses that Hymes’s terminological technicalities were too much for him: “Quand ils parlent théorie, nos collègues américains versent dans un langage si idiomatique que je craindrais de le trahir en traduisant ...” (Lévi-Strauss 1987, 118). Although Claude Lévi-Strauss admits that Hymes is conducting a structuralist analysis, he argues that comparative study is also necessary, if one is to evaluate justly the extent and limits of a performer’s freedom (Lévi-Strauss 1987, 131–132). Hymes would not argue against comparative study, except to say that attention to individual narrators has to precede speaking of ‘tradition’ (Hymes 2003, 366). That American bottom-up approach again.

The most sophisticated elaboration of structuralist analysis of narrative is the work of A. J. Greimas (Schleifer 1987). His approach to segmentation (which as Liberman remarked is the key to all the rest), modeled on Prague structuralism, is not less thorough or ambitious than Hymes’s. When he studies Lithuanian mythology, he synthesizes the structural semantics with historical study to create “an archaeology of culture” (Greimas, A. J. 1992, ix). Perhaps someone will apply Greimas’s ten methods of segmentation, which he applies to a story by Maupassant, to some orally collected texts (Greimas, A. J. 1976), thus further connecting disciplines.
The two fields of translation studies and folklore studies have grown and matured in recent years, in tandem in fact. They share so much. Lawrence Venuti’s three scandals of translation--cultural, economic, and political (Scandals 1)--are all painfully known to the discipline of folkloristics. The folklorist’s invisibility is equal to the translator’s invisibility. The two disciplines have a similar history, which reaches back to the time when ruling classes within crumbling empires harnessed questions of linguistic diversity and language history towards the goal of creating nation-states that would be legitimated by national cultures. France is the supreme example: the Decree of October 29th, 1793 and Guizot’s law of 1833 mandated correct French language for all--Bretons, Basques, Flamands, Alsaciens along with Parisians. The resistance to oral literature, which promotes ignorance among literary folk, has concealed from comparative literature scholars, and from Europe-oriented authorities like Pascale Casanova, what is obvious in Mauritius, that it’s the creole poets and storytellers of the world who are, in her words, “the great innovators from the margins”; that it’s multilingual oral performers who (again in her words) “make use of the whole of the heretical transnational heritage that has been accumulated” (Casanova 2004, 327). Objects of the folklorist’s study continue to be created; texts requiring translation continue to be written, whatever the fate of either discipline in American universities. Both are marginal to the departmental structures of universities; both offer solutions to problems all departments are experiencing, the enlargement of the canon for example. Both translation studies and folklore are engaged in restoring to the surface some repressed realities of intellectual history.

If folklore and translation studies are perceived as weak academic disciplines, they both have risen in achievement and merit, which should bring more respect for them in universities than it does. They share the cliché about being neglected: as translation is neglected or ignored in the study of literature, so folklore’s generous provision of materials and styles to literature, art, and music are most often neglected in those fields. Yet in both, the theoretical advances position the two disciplines “to contribute to ongoing dialogues about the creative and social dimensions of culture” (Roberts 2008, 53).

Translation studies and folkloristics might think together about how knowledge gets produced. For example, after accumulating the enormous inheritance of literary translations, translation studies have now, through the audacious theorizing of recent years, emerged into enough visibility as a discipline to
occupy the major share of the 2009 program of the annual meeting of the Modern Language Association. Shall folkloristics follow suit and seek visibility in the halls of its more illustrious neighbor disciplines? Will folklorists continue to concentrate on building empirical research and cultivating new audiences for traditional artists, or shall they turn their efforts to constructing a Grand Theory, against the advice of concerned colleagues (Roberts 2008, 52)? The American conception of folkloristics is inherently interdisciplinary. It takes in anthropology, literary studies, psychology, and other fields, although the conception seldom demands that the folklorist display much mastery of them. Such interdisciplinarity requires, however, that concepts and methods of folkloristics be continually translated for our colleagues. Two final questions, perhaps for a collaborative forum: what is known now about the nature of authorship? What is a folkloric author, and is the translator an author? And the final, ethnographic question from Regina Bendix: What sort of cultural practice has translation been through history, and what is it today? Folklore through its history and theories offers many such usable approaches to the variant forms of translation. These two threatened, marginal fields can make common cause both strategically and intellectually.

Bibliography


Notes

1. Portions of this discussion are drawn from my introduction to the translation (Haring 1994).