

Ethnology at the Crossroads : Intangible cultural heritage in Ontario : Whazzat?

(slide)About a year ago, I attended the International Conference on Intangible Cultural Heritage organized by the Québec Council for Expressive Heritage in Québec City. One panel discussed how municipalities can support intangible heritage and I asked a member, Jean Fortin, mayor of Baie-St-Paul, what we could do in Toronto to introduce the idea of intangible cultural heritage to our city. His answer was simply; “Tell your mayor about it”. (slide)Rob Ford, I discovered, is also well-known in Québec and the laughter that accompanied this comment spoke volumes at many levels, some of which I will deconstruct shortly.

But first I want to address the question “Why is intangible cultural heritage unknown in my home province?” Could it have something to do with the uneasy relationship that Ontarians have with questions of identity? University of Toronto historian Robert Bothwell calls Ontario “the unknown province” and correctly suggests that “the fuzziness of Ontario’s self image is a paradox because no province has had more written about it at the local level” (Bothwell 1).

(slide)Indeed, the ubiquitous blue plaques are testimony to the determination of the Ontario Heritage Trust, an agency of the provincial government, in documenting the province’s built or tangible heritage. Scholars are examining the heritage of Ontario and promising identity studies are occurring: Ontario geographer Amy Lavender Harris, a cultural geographer at York, is researching the cityscape through its literature, and urban planners like Greg Baeker have been advocating municipal cultural planning in the province since 2005. Yet,

Ontarians, curiously, are reluctant to document themselves and, if they do produce memoirs, these become 'famous Canadians' rather than 'famous Ontarians'. (Ontarians often say "Canada" when they mean "Ontario"). Most pertinent to the current paper is that Ontario has no English language faculty of Folklore. I am a Ph.D candidate in the Faculty of Graduate Studies, enrolled in the Dance Department at York University, where I chose to carry out my research, partly because folklorist Carole Carpenter, one of the founders of the Folklore Studies Association of Canada, is a member of its faculty.

Although I have not yet met Professor Carpenter to ask about why the academy in Ontario contains a distressing lack of folklore studies, I believe she gives an answer in a 1975 article on the ethnicity factor in Anglo Canadian "folkloristics", where she writes that Anglo Canadians (and I imagine she means Ontarians) with the exception of Newfoundlanders and Nova Scotian Scots, simply fail to identify folklore with themselves and tend to consider folk materials to be the quaint, charming and decorative but ultimately unimportant possessions of the strange, foreign, or "backward" people in their midst (Carpenter 343).

She continues her argument by explaining that because of our political ties with Great Britain and economic ties to the United States, the resultant colonialism has resulted in "Anglo Canadians" searching beyond their own borders for cultural identity. Carpenter also cites the "garrison mentality" identified by Northrop Frye in his seminal "Introduction" to Carl Klinck's *Canadian Literary History* and suggests that the challenges of cultural survival in

anglo-Canadian society are compensated by displays of paternalism towards minority cultural groups and their traditions, characterized by preservation, sentimentalization and exploitation.

Another Ontario folklorist, Pauline Greenhill of the University of Manitoba at Winnipeg writes chillingly but astutely that the reification of culture, tradition and ethnicity is used by elites in Québec to accrue power; the reification of non-culture, non-tradition and non-ethnicity serves Ontario elites to the same end (Greenhill 159). In this context, is it no wonder that the academic study of folklore in English Canada outside of Nova Scotia and Newfoundland seems impossible.

There are, I am sure, many Ontario Anglophone folklorists who have voted with their feet and left for Newfoundland; the example of Dale Jarvis comes to mind. I came to dance studies because I am a folk dance practitioner, fully aware of what dance scholar Theresa Buckland calls the 'power inequities' of this term (Buckland 6); yet determined to continue the discourse I have started, supported by the generosity and open-mindedness of my dance colleagues at York and by the work of dance scholars like Joann Kealiinohomoku whose foundational article "An Anthropologist Looks at Ballet as a Form of Ethnic Dance (1970) is a constant source of inspiration as she deconstructs the historical paradigms that led to the now mythic division between high and low art, between ballet and folkdance.

Of great interest is the more recent scholarship from thinkers like Benedict Anderson (2005) whose fascinating definition of nationalism as

“imagined communities” provides a powerful paradigm for a new examination of the place of folklore in English-speaking Ontario. Anderson’s riveting argument that “members of a nation imagine their ‘nation-ness’ because they will never meet all their fellow nation-members; yet each has an image of that nation in mind” speaks to folklorists whose very job it is to document and analyse these images.

There is also reason for optimism in Ontario folklore because of the changes in provincial demographics that have occurred over the past ten years. Recent statistics (2006) show that 28.4 per cent of Ontario residents report being born outside the province and 17.1 per cent of those born outside the province have arrived within the last ten years. Studies (Hart and Cumming, 1997 and Green, 2005) have shown that the federal government’s (slide) Language Instruction for Newcomers to Canada program has insufficiently prepared newcomers for integration into Ontario society, citing a lack of cultural sensitization for learners. This would seem to indicate insufficient expertise on the part of teachers and course designers to identify exactly what constitutes Ontario culture. Here again is an opportunity for folklorists to contribute to knowledge about Ontario and its elusive nature.

Another positive development in the study of folklore in Ontario is the emergence of diaspora studies; a Centre of Excellence opened at the University of Toronto in 2005 and universities across the province offer research opportunities that can only serve to whet the appetite of any folklorist; (slide) indeed this fall’s conference at U of T’s Jackman Institute of

the Humanities on “Foodways: Diasporic Diners, Transnational Tables and Culinary Connections” promises to be of keen interest to folklorists, except that the word ‘folklore’ is not found on the website’s target subject areas. Intangible Cultural Heritage, according to the UNESCO 2003 Convention, also entails social practices, rituals and festive events, so that the Centre for Diasporic and Transnational Studies at the University of Toronto, is actually hosting a conference about intangible cultural heritage, but doesn’t seem to appreciate this fact.

It is well known that dance serves as “incorporated memory” in the sense of social anthropologist’s Paul Connerton’s idea of “bodily practice” (Connerton 72), where dance as a social activity transmits information regarding power and status. Intangible cultural heritage also includes the performing arts, and when I explain the concept to my dancer colleagues at York, their eyes light up and they say ‘I am doing intangible cultural heritage!’

Throughout Ontario, there is a multitude of folk dance practitioners. (slide) In Toronto, the Community Folk Art Council has some 100 member groups that include thousands of performers. The CFAC has, almost since its inception in 1968, been a member of Folklore Canada International, a member group of Québec’s Council for Expressive Heritage, an umbrella organization for the province’s regional history associations, fiddlers, accordion players, story tellers, festivals, theatre makers, herbologists, artisans and craftspeople, museums (including Hull’s Museum of Civilization), historical societies, and dancers. In Québec, they seem to

understand Intangible Cultural Heritage and realize the power of working together to accomplish great deeds.

In Ontario, we also have a network of regional fairs and festivals, storytellers, craft councils, fiddlers, museums, historical societies, gardeners, food historians, artisans, herbologists, accordion players, theatre makers and dancers. How to help them understand that we are all doing Intangible Cultural heritage?

At York, we have an Office of Knowledge Mobilization, and I requested a meeting with our knowledge mobilization officer, explaining about Intangible Cultural Heritage. Michael Johnny, who before he came to York worked in the province's literacy secretariat with members of Ontario's aboriginal population, immediately understood what I was talking about and set up a meeting with an official with the Ontario Ministry of Tourism, Culture and Sport (slide). From that conversation, I realized that the Ministry fully comprehends the economic value of cultural tourism so that again, we have an opportunity for folklorists to enter the fray, delivering research that could help feed that industry as we begin to properly document Ontario's Intangible Cultural Heritage. However, bureaucrats are famously adverse to change so that any new policies need to be politically implemented, I am told on good authority. (slide) My local MPP, Glen Murray, is a Montréalais by birth and, when I had the opportunity to speak to him informally about Intangible Cultural Heritage, he understood the concept but used the term 'cultural narrative', probably resulting from his time as CEO of the Canadian Urban Institute or perhaps when he was mayor of Winnipeg. En tout cas, He is on

my list of people to interview, along with other Ontarians who are practicing Intangible Cultural Heritage without realizing the intent and subsequent power of their actions.

Rob Ford, Mayor of Toronto, does realize the power of Intangible Cultural Heritage and supports his family's personal efforts to this end by enrolling his children in a Polish folk dance ensemble. His family's printing firm was responsible for the production of passports to the (slide) Toronto Caravan festivals of the 1970's and 1980's so that he is quite well aware of the carnivalesque aspect of folklore as alluded to by Pauline Greenhill (Greenhill 1994). However, for him and for many others who are active in Ontario's diverse communities, there is no question of cultural preservation, sentimentalization and exploitation in response to anglo Ontarian anxieties about cultural survival, as suggested by Carole Carpenter. On the contrary, the practice of folk dance is a valued social skill and as "incorporated memory" in the sense of Paul Connerton's idea of bodily practice (Connerton 72).

(slide) In Toronto's 2011 Cultural Plan, "Creative Capital Gains", an elite panel of advisers including Richard Florida of the Martin Prosperity Institute at the University of Toronto, Karen Kain of the National Ballet of Canada and Cameron Bailey of the Toronto International Film Festival suggested to Mayor Ford and Council that opportunities for effective action in the arts are often lost due to lack of awareness of what others are doing. The panel recommended that the city use its power of convening to promote awareness of opportunities and coordination of efforts among stakeholders.

We have seen that cultural plans are now beginning to emerge in other cities in Ontario so that an effort must be made to convene all cities and all cultural stakeholders in the province to understand the nature, importance and value of Intangible Cultural Heritage.

To this end, a website will shortly be launched and a provincial conference to set the foundations for an organization similar to the Quebec council is being planned.

The final image I want to show you this morning is of the Mississippi River Heritage Festival at McDonald's Corners, Ontario in 2009 when the Ontario Heritage Trust placed a blue plaque to commemorate the Rivers and Streams Act of 1884. At the time, a dispute between a mill owner and a logger to river rights in Lanark county resulted in political action that gave all Ontarians free access to our waterways. Now, we need political action to help give us access to our Intangible Cultural Heritage. Together, we can make this work. Ensemble, la patrimoine expressive va marcher chez nous en Ontario!

Thank you for your attention, merci beaucoup!

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