

BOOK REVIEWS/GENERAL

Jason Baird Jackson. *Concept Work: Constructing Frameworks for Folklore Studies*. Indiana University Press, 2025. 220 pages. Hardcover, \$70.00; paperback, \$35.00; eBook, \$34.99.

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This review examines Jason Baird Jackson's *Concept Work: Constructing Frameworks for Folklore Studies*, which develops "concept work" as a practical method for refining analytical tools in folklore studies. Focusing on colonization, cultural heritage, cultural appropriation, and folklore studies in the world-system, the review shows how Jackson's idealized models help scholars organize empirical materials while also noting some limits in their broader applicability. Overall, the book is presented as a valuable contribution to contemporary folklore studies and ethnology.

Despite the lack of the broad-scope, all-encompassing "grand theories" in their discipline, folklorists are consistently in quest of analytical tools and interpretive frameworks to engage with the rich and complex variations of cultural expressions in the everyday social life (Noyes 2008). Jason Baird Jackson's *Concept Work: Constructing Frameworks for Folklore Studies* is a great example of this disciplinary endeavor. Presenting "concept work" as scholarly work on concepts of possible use to scholars (5), Jackson characterizes the grounded and iterative development of useful models and perspectives in folklore studies (1). He discusses four concepts—colonization, cultural heritage, cultural appropriation, and folklore studies in the world-system—across four chapters that examine scholars and students in folklore studies and ethnology. Based on disciplinary and interdisciplinary discussions, Jackson elaborates on these concepts systematically to develop conceptual heuristics for empirical works in folklore studies and provokes further discussions among scholars in related fields. Jackson concludes the book with a chapter on empirical reflections on teaching concepts and modeling concept work to graduate students at Indiana University. The book offers inspiring accounts of the enrichment and refining of analytical tools in contemporary folklore studies.

Chapters 1–4 were originally published in folklore studies journals. With their core arguments remaining unchanged, these four articles are reframed and recontextualized to match the broader aim of the book. While the original articles address four distinct phenomena, here Jackson integrates these into a coherent conceptual toolkit with inter-chapter resonance achieved through the congruent focus shifting from case studies to the meta-discussion of concepts in the chapters.

In chapter 1, Jackson examines the conceptualization of colonization in folklore studies by revisiting Native American folk narratives of their early interactions with colonizers. Delving into oxhide purchase stories narrated by various indigenous populations in North America, Jackson points out that these narratives are presented as history and highlights their historical contexts. As descriptions of the first contact between the colonized and the colonists, these narratives serve as epitomizing events that embody the long-term colonial experience and become an ethnohistorical reality for the colonized group. These narratives offer ground for the conceptualization of comparative folkloristics of colonial experiences and facilitate engagements with the concept and practice of decolonization in folklore studies.

Chapter 2 considers cultural heritage as a part of the temporal continuum of cultural history. Aiming to provide an alternative and complementary approach to the discussion of cultural heritage, this chapter proposes a heuristic comprising three idealized categories: innovation, habitus, and heritage. Cultural forms move into and out of categories with the passage of time. The mode of heritage in this model marks cultural forms as disappearing in daily routine but retaining high metacultural prominence. This approach highlights the activities driven by grassroots heritage carriers and endeavors.

In chapter 3, Jackson discusses other modes of cultural change, with special attention to the concept of cultural appropriation. The author first differentiates three types of cultural changes—diffusion, acculturation, and assimilation—each signifying a modality of movement of cultural forms between communities. Cultural appropriation denotes a different mode of cultural exchange, in which cultural forms, practices, and knowledge from a subordinate group are taken up and utilized by a more powerful group, arising disapproval in metacultural discourse within the source community. This concept naturally intermingles with other metacultural discourses, such as cultural property, heritage, and authenticity, making the actual instances more complicated.

In chapter 4, Jackson seeks to broaden the focus of folklore studies and ethnology from small-scale social units to a wider range of social bases by situating them in a macro-sociological and historical context and using Immanuel Wallerstein's world-systems analysis. After a brief introduction to Wallerstein's theory, Jackson lists several common topics that folklorists and ethnologists share with world-system analysts, such as household, nationalism, colonialism, and decolonization, among others. In Jackson's view, engagement with world-systems facilitates the rethinking of the status of history and historical methods in folklore studies and the resituating of the discipline's research foci in the face of the reorganization of the social sciences.

Chapter 5 concludes the book with the author's pedagogical experience of incorporating concepts and "concept work" into postgraduate education in folkloristics. Concentrating on one mandatory course taught by three

generations of scholars, Jackson traces the intellectual trajectory of the transmission of methodological, theoretical, empirical, and conceptual knowledge of folkloristics in the postgraduate program at Indiana University. The chapter offers valuable, practical insights into how the educational process is organized and directed, which may be useful to educators in other disciplines.

Jackson establishes his concepts eloquently through reflexive arguments supported by a rich academic foundation and empirical data. However, the heuristics he proposes are not flawless in terms of cross-context applicability. For example, concerning the concept of cultural appropriation, the criteria for defining the properties of cultural forms remain insufficiently argued. Not all cultural forms have clear and exclusive ownership, especially those cultural forms highly diffused among different ethnic groups. On the position of folklore studies in the world-system, instead of a clear heuristic for empirical works like in other chapters, Jackson's discussion is more similar to an initiative to other folklorists on engaging with wider social base. However, these imperfections do not influence the academic value of these concepts. As I see it, these shortcomings largely stem from Jackson's framing of these concepts as discipline-specific tools for organizing particular empirical materials in folklore studies, whereas the semantic scope of these key terms—extensively debated and variably deployed across disciplines—is too expansive to be contained within a single disciplinary framework.

After all, any compliments or criticisms of this book should be taken under the premise that, as the author states multiple times, these concepts are idealized models built on ideal types. They are framed to help other scholars grasp the subtle patterns of cultural phenomena encountered in their empirical work, not to explain the complex systems of the world. In this sense, *Concept Work* provides practical contributions to folklorists and ethnologists engaged in research relevant to the contemporary sociocultural context.

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