

BOOK REVIEW: THEORY, TRADITION AND TEACHING:
THE SIGNIFICANCE OF CONCEPT WORK

Jackson, Jason Baird. 2025. *Concept Work: Constructing Frameworks for Folklore Studies*. Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press. 204 pages.

The histories of disciplines and their landmarks can be viewed in different ways. Usually, we think about pioneering scholars and their grand monographs, leading the way and sometimes laying the foundation for certain schools or trends. Often, great scholars become legends; we might know their standing in international scholarship, but we hardly think about where exactly they studied or made their professional careers. There are only a few academic centres in the world of folkloristics that stand out high above the many others and have, through the decades, guided the discipline. The Department of Folklore and Ethnomusicology at Indiana University is one such legendary environment where folklore studies have thrived and continue to thrive, with an impact that goes far beyond American folkloristics. Jason B. Jackson is one of the former folklore students at Indiana University and today is among its distinguished folklorists – the Ruth N. Halls Professor of Folklore and Anthropology and the current president of the American Folklore Society.

His new book offers insight into the state of the art and current trends in folklore scholarship at Indiana University, as well as the theoretical and methodological developments unfolding in the 2020s. As the alma mater of multiple PhD students, the monograph also sheds light on possible future trends and tradition dominants in scholarship – folklore scholarship in the making. It is a book about a set of new, incipient, and rising concepts in folkloristics, i.e. paradigms, categories and guiding ideas characterised by Jackson as “markers of professional identity” (p. 6) and epistemic tools that are “interme-

diated between broad theories and empirical and, sometimes, applied and public-facing engagements” (p. 7). The book deepens and expands the conceptual terrain mapped in the earlier manual *Eight Words for the Study of Expressive Culture* (Feintuch 2003), which covered the keywords group, art, text, genre, performance, context, tradition and identity. As Jackson notes, while he admires and values theorymaking, he shares Dorothy Noyes’s (2008) “humble theory” orientation. The outcome is a book that relies strongly on disciplinary history, draws inspiration from adjacent fields, and is both theoretical and remarkably accessible, a combination that is rare in academic writing.

The first chapter opens the topic of colonialism, which has emerged as one of the major concerns and research foci in 21st-century folkloristics. It uses the example of tale type ATU 927C* (Uther 2004) about measuring ground with an ox hide. Among Native American peoples, it has been a story about the dishonesty of white colonisers as they purchase a piece of land from the locals, to be measured with the size of an animal skin. Through trickery, the hide is cut into a long strip, and a huge area is encircled. Often, the classical international novelle tale is told as a true story to address historical injustice. Jackson analyses the tale in comparative context and engages with classical scholarship, such as the works of Jacob Grimm and James Frazer, who have shown the connection of this storyline to ancient systems of measurement. The chapter reveals differences between the etic and emic frames of interpretation. For scholars, the story is an example of diffusion, adaptability, and the persistence of narrative

plots. According to Hans-Jörg Uther (2004: 566), the oldest version of the tale is found in the ancient Indian text *Śatapatha Brāhmaṇa*, an early source about Indian mythology from around 700 BCE. For tradition carriers, the story is oral history about unfair treatment and oppression. Jackson shows how sensitive consideration of indigenous perspectives enables us to understand the meanings of colonisation.

The next chapter (coauthored with Johannes Müske and Lijun Zhang) addresses the concepts of innovation, habitus and heritage and takes the reader into large-scale processes of cultural change and transformation, offering a heuristic tool for analysis. The examples and schemes presented show the dynamism between cultural innovation, normative culture and heritage. Heritage in this chapter emerges as a central concept in metacultural discourses today and a focal point of cultural awareness during the age of modernity.

The third chapter offers an extensive and critical discussion of cultural appropriation as a current global phenomenon. Jackson approaches the concept, outlining its emergence and relationship with kindred concepts of cultural change: diffusion, acculturation and assimilation. Appropriation refers to a situation in which “the powerful group takes aspects of the culture of the subordinated group, making them its own” (p. 74). Cultural appropriation is always marked by the aggrievement of the group that is colonised or marginalised. The examples that Jackson provides concern clothing and adornment – cases “of ‘playing’ embodied identities that are not our own” (p. 82). Useful additions for understanding cultural appropriation are ideal typological schemes that illustrate modes of cultural circulation (p. 75) and of global transformations of culture and property (p. 88). The chapter offers a subtle, thoughtful and ethical manifesto to “foster more sensitive and respectful forms of intercultural contact and cultural change” (p. 91).

As I think about the history of the concept of appropriation, the discussion also illustrates how meanings shift over time and

how flexible words become as we load them with theoretical weight. Michel de Certeau, in *The Practice of Everyday Life* (1984), used ‘appropriation’ to refer to the creative tactics through which people transform, use, and sometimes subvert cultural forms produced by dominant institutions. Instead of being passive consumers, people thus become active users and creative agents. In this sense, appropriation has also become a concept in discussing local and indigenous responses to colonisation (see Dijkstra 2021: 8–10). Jackson’s chapter focuses on different cases and warning examples of cultural encounters of domination, abuse and boundary transgressions.

The fourth chapter addresses the macrosociological theory of world-systems, formulated by Immanuel Wallerstein (1930–2019), and its potential applications in folkloristics (Wallerstein 2004). On one hand, Jackson shows the usefulness of Wallerstein’s conceptual tools for folklore studies, focusing on the notions of households, semiproletarian status, national identity and colonisation (pp. 107–111). On the other hand, Jackson expands Wallerstein’s approach to disciplinary history and his formulation of historical social science as a single discipline by adding folkloristic and ethnological perspectives. The chapter is a call for crossdisciplinary dialogue and exchange, considering not only theories and methods but also institutional cooperation within the academy.

The fifth chapter provides a context for all the preceding discussions and, once again, indicates the implied audience: folklore students and fellow folklorists engaged in shaping the theoretical framework of the discipline and its range of research topics. Jackson offers an insider’s perspective on the curriculum and teaching practices of folkloristics at Indiana University. He outlines the history and contents of one of the basic classes, “Folklore Theory in Practice”, which was established (under a different title) by Richard Dorson (1916–1981), the founder of the folklore department, and later developed and transformed by Henry Glassie, Jason B.

Jackson, Ray Cashman, and others. Jackson reflects on the key topics, problems, and conceptual foci of the class, shedding light on the basic features of folkloristics at Indiana University, which has for over four decades been a flagship site of the “communication-centred, context-minded paradigm” (p. 142), which today also dominates international folkloristics. Jackson’s relationship with the history of the discipline and former scholarship is deeply engaged and intellectually generous. He offers a brief survey of the basic readers and texts in his folklore class, mainly representing US folkloristics, but he is well aware of the international scope of today’s folkloristics. *Concept Work* offers cross-disciplinary perspectives, although it can also be seen as an instrument for promoting disciplinary identities.

In the spring semester of 2026, we are using the book as the basic reader in the PhD seminar of folkloristics and ethnology at the University of Tartu. 15 young scholars participate in the seminar, and their research topics range from the formation of folklore archives to placelore, humour, folklore about technology, vernacular knowledge and death culture, from heavy metal and instrumental folk music to textile design, tattoo culture, heritage studies, and beyond. Their research addresses a variety of cultures and subcultures in Belarus, China, Estonia, Finland, India, Latvia, Lithuania, Mongolia, South Africa, Tibet and Ukraine. How easy would it be to find a common reader that fits this intradisciplinary range, inspiring students and bringing them together for reflection and discussion? Jason B. Jackson’s *Concept Work* manages this challenge very well. Even though the roots of the book are in American folkloristics – and in the academic traditions of Indiana University in particular –, it is a contribution to folkloristics and ethnology as a rapidly developing international field.

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