

GEORGE MASON UNIVERSITY
UNIVERSITY LIBRARIES

Publications of the American Folklore Society

New Series

General Editor, Marta Weigle

Volume 8

WOMEN'S
FOLKLORE,
WOMEN'S
CULTURE

Edited by

ROSAN A. JORDAN · SUSAN J. KALČIK

UPP

University of Pennsylvania Press · Philadelphia

FENWICK LIBRARY
GEORGE MASON UNIVERSITY
FAIRFAX, VIRGINIA

821e

The quotation on page 137 from the poem by Anne Sexton entitled "Cinderella" is from *Transformations* by Anne Sexton. Copyright © 1971 by Anne Sexton. Reprinted by permission of Houghton Mifflin Company.

The photographs in chapter 5 are by Geraldine N. Johnson and the photographs in chapter 9 by Karen Baldwin.

Copyright © 1985 by the University of Pennsylvania Press
All rights reserved

Library of Congress Cataloging in Publication Data

Main entry under title:

Women's folklore, women's culture.

Bibliography: p.
Includes index.

1. Women—Folklore—Addresses, essays, lectures.
2. Women—United States—Folklore—Addresses, essays, lectures. I. Jordan, R. A. (Rosan A.) II. Kalčík, Susan J.

GR470.W66 1985 398'.088042 84-12019
ISBN 0-8122-1206-1

Printed in the United States of America

GR

To Linda Dégh, Bess Hawes, and Ellen Stekert

GR
470
.W66
1985
c.3

stage, the animal has a voracious appetite. . . . The axolotl form is so different in appearance from the adult animal that it is usually given another name, that of 'water dog.' "

3. This story has been noted elsewhere, usually with the added motif that the snake pacified the hungry infant with the tip of its tail while stealing the milk. Rosenberg (1946:91) reports the existence of this legend in Argentina (and also the belief in snakes impregnating women); he does not identify the sex of his informants. In J. Frank Dobie's folklore novel *Tongues of the Monte* (1935:90-91), an old Mexican woman tells a version of The Singing Bone in which the first incident concerns a snake (here identified as an *alicántara*, which Dobie notes is a coachwhip, also called a prairie racer) which has been stealing milk from the hero's mother's breasts. I also know of at least two unpublished Louisiana versions, both of which were told by women. See also Cardozo-Freeman 1978.

4. My thanks to Lysander Kemp of the University of Texas Press for calling this work to my attention. Arreola also credits Sahagún with reporting on the legendary origin of axolotls as a result of an important lady's douching in a lagoon named Axolotla after having been raped while having her period by a gentleman from another town (1964:33).

5. Two additional Negro-American texts heard in Chicago and in Missouri and collected by a female student at Fisk University were sent to me by Sandra Keyes.

6. Horney believed that such anxieties had a physiological basis in the vaginal organ sensations of even young, inexperienced girls and in the young girl's subsequent dread "that if her wishes were fulfilled, she herself or her genital would be destroyed" (1967:154). Horney further explains that fantasies, dreams, and anxieties betraying *instinctive* knowledge of sexual processes may assume various guises, including that of "animals that creep, fly or run inside some place (e.g., snakes, mice, moths)" (1967:142).

7. I collected this text of "Charlotte the Harlot" (at a party in Baton Rouge, Louisiana, in 1972) from Tom Sprott, Jr., of Winnsboro, South Carolina.

8. Kinsey, on the other hand, believed that accounts of women having sex with animals represent a projection of the male desire for a variety of sexual activities, especially in view of "the male capacity to be aroused erotically by a variety of psychosexual stimuli." One wonders, however, about his assumption that the creative expressions he refers to (from "ancient archives of folklore and mythology" to modern literature and art) reflect utterly and entirely male fantasies. He even states: "Females, because of their lesser dependence on psychologic stimulation, are less inclined to be interested in activities which lie beyond the immediately available techniques, and rarely, either in their conversation, in their written literature, or in their art, deal with fantastic or impossible sorts of sexual activity. Human males, and not the females themselves, are the ones who imagine that females are frequently involved in sexual contacts with animals of other species" (Kinsey et al. 1965:502).

9. Texts of this form of the legend are found in Miller (1973:99) and in Dorson (1964:438). The latter is reprinted from Perez (1951:73-74, 76). The text in Dorson is a memorate of a personal encounter with La Llorona; the text in Miller is merely explanatory or descriptive. Also see Toor (1947:531-532).

10. Others who mention this practice are Mendoza and Mendoza (1952:477) and Bourke (1894:140). Both sources note that Mexican women administer the drug to their lovers in potions; Mendoza and Mendoza say that it is the seed of the plant which produces confusion and that the potion is supposed to ensure that a woman's lover will never forget her.

WOMAN TO WOMAN: FIELDWORK AND THE PRIVATE SPHERE

Margaret R. Yocom

EVER SINCE I have been old enough to remember, my sense of family has grown out of the stories told by Grandmother Bertha Davidheiser Yocom, my father's mother, and Grandfather Elmer Christman Keck, my mother's father, both in their different ways fine tellers of personal experience and family narratives (Fig. 1). Bertha's stories about ice-skating with her brothers on the Schuylkill Canal near Douglassville, Pennsylvania, about leaving the countryside to work in Philadelphia, and about managing a farm family with her husband, Isaac, lived on in my imagination long after the telling. The people, places, and events in Elmer's stories also echoed in my mind: the men in his father's slaughterhouse who, wielding great knives, stuck belligerent hogs in the neck; the bright-eyed boy-men who sweated through freshman hazing at Pennsylvania State University; T. DeWitt Kyler's boundless farm near Whitehorse, Pennsylvania, where Elmer worked one college summer; and the explosion in the Emporium, Pennsylvania's World War I smokeless powder plant, where he stood helplessly by, watching brains bubble inside the charred heads of his fellow workers.

When I returned home to Pottstown, Pennsylvania, in the summer of 1975, I heard the stories once again, but this time as a fieldworker

as well as a granddaughter. What surprised me was not the stories—I knew them so well I could tell parts of them myself—but the difference between the private and public settings where Bertha and Elmer told their stories and the contrasting ways that they, as storytellers within these settings, approached their listeners.

Elmer's stories, usually about himself or his relatives, provide the spice for many a family meal. Either before or during a meal, or lingering over a dessert, his tales ring out to everyone within earshot. "That's nothing," he said, laughing, after my father, Norman Yocom, mentioned that Great Uncle Rufus Keck as a wedding-day joke smeared Limburger cheese on the manifold and exhaust pipe of Uncle Donald Keck's car. "You should have seen what Wilmer Keck did when Bessie Keck married Wayne Kline," Elmer continued:

Wilmer knew that they were getting married at the parsonage out at Reverend Kline's. So they had a cab there to take them wherever they wanted to go. Whether it was up to Reading to Wayne's place or whether it was to a railroad station, I don't know what it was. But anyhow, what Wilmer does was: he goes up, tips the cab driver, asks how much he was owed. So he paid him off and told him to get going. And he has the calf wagon from the abattoir that we hauled calves in . . . all decorated up and had it pulled up in front of Reverend Kline's. When they came out, they lowered them in the calf wagon and hauled them around town.¹

If someone says, "Today's a cold day," Elmer will say that the coldest was that one day in 1911, when as a freshman at Penn State he found frozen water in his water basin. If someone mentions a friend of theirs, he knows that fellow's grandfather who used to live just down the block from him and who worked for years in the Arcade building where the parking lot is now. Garrulous and outspoken, he is the one whom all the family members seek out for information about his and his wife's relatives. Addresses, birthdays, anniversaries, and death dates—he knows them all, or he has them in his updated address book or among his chronologically arranged stack of funeral cards. At family reunions, it is he who recites the names of those who have come—and those who have not. And going to Grace Lutheran Church with Elmer is a combination of reverence, worship, and fun. As he walks inside the church and sees his friends milling about, he reaches for their hands. "Elmer, good morning," they say. "How're

you doing today?" "Terrible, terrible," he says with a grin. One Sunday morning when Elmer saw Wellington Smith, he stood right in front of Smitty, smiled, and started brushing his own hair back on his forehead. "You better comb that hair out of your eyes," Elmer teased him. Smitty ran a fake comb across his bald head and laughed to those standing around him: "That's Elmer. It wouldn't be Elmer if he didn't give somebody a bad time."

His humor and his stories, told in front of his relatives and friends, are those of a man in the public sphere who revels in the attention of many listeners, who shows his friendship by giving people a "bad time," and who enjoys following someone else's story with one of his own that will top, he claims, the one that went before. Once, after an evening of talk on his son-in-law's back porch, he leaned back in his chair and after a moment of silence remarked more to himself than to anyone else, "You know, I suppose I have done some pretty interesting things. I should have written a book." A fieldworker could not ask for a more willing informant.

Bertha Yocom, like Elmer, was born to Pennsylvania German Lutheran farmers near Pottstown in the 1890s. She lived on Keck property when for a few years her father rented Elmer's father's farm. After high school both left home for a time. Bertha studied bookkeeping and traveled to Philadelphia, where she worked until her marriage in 1920 brought her back to farming. Elmer learned animal husbandry at Penn State, worked in a World War I powder plant, and brought his bride, Louisa, from the hills of northwestern Pennsylvania home to Pottstown in 1919 when he returned to his father's slaughterhouse.

But here the resemblances end, for to see Bertha at a family gathering is to see a woman carefully dressed in purples and blues who listens attentively, smiles constantly, and talks rarely—unless someone speaks to her. When she does talk in front of others, she rarely speaks about herself. The day I suggested that I might like to write down some of the things that happened to her, she cried out, "Oh, no, no."

A fieldworker who met both Bertha and Elmer in public might well think Bertha an overly shy and untalkative woman who would not make a rewarding informant. How wrong that fieldworker would be, for she does indeed talk about herself and her relatives: everyone in the family knows bits and pieces of her life story. And some of those

bits, like her several-mile walk over the cornfields to the train that would take her to Pottstown and school, are famous.

The difference between the way Bertha appears, as a storyteller, and the way she is lies with the setting where she performs. Like most of the women in the Yocom-Keck family, she tells her personal experience narratives not in public, like Elmer, but very much in private. And the fieldworker who would like to work successfully with Bertha and the others must be prepared (as with many other women informants) to investigate and interview within the private sphere.

In the private sphere, with its atmosphere of intimacy, Bertha and her women relatives thrive (Fig. 4). When they feel close and comfortable with one another, when they perceive that everyone will listen and talk, their storytelling begins. This sphere of theirs may be indoors or outdoors, in any room or on any lawn; the location does not matter to their storytelling as much as the privacy that those locations afford.

Their privacy may come from natural isolation: they may be the only two people in the room. Or it may come from created isolation: amid a flock of relatives, several women turn and face one another, their bodies forming a circle as their arms reach toward one another; or they relax on a swing or a bench with only enough room for the two of them (Figs. 3,4).

The private sphere of women's storytelling has shared not only confidences and privacy but also work. No matter what the activity—whether slicing the ends off just-pulled scallions, searching in the spring grass for dandelions deserving enough to become a dinner vegetable, cutting parsley for a noonday meal, sewing a torn seam, recording the death of a relative in the family Bible, or packing her belongings after she sells her home to move in with her daughter (Figs. 5-8)—for the talk to flow a woman needs only another who will help, listen, and talk in turn.

Women's private storytelling sphere includes all those areas that feel not merely a woman's touch but also her dominant influence and control. In kitchens and dining rooms especially, women are the mistresses of many details that a careless or uncaring eye might overlook. Here, where they place several forks and spoons of varying sizes by each chair, where they arrange plates by paralleling the design and the lines of the table, and where they make their way between spatulas, potato mashers, dippers, and tea strainers, they

work and talk together as other relatives and occasional guests go about chores or visit in the living room until the call to dinner comes (Figs. 9,10).

Many of the products of these labors are ephemeral. Paradoxically, they last for a brief period of time, but they are constantly re-created: dinner table decorations of multicolored flowers, dishes of roast beef garnished with onions and carrots. Yet these items as well as those that last longer live on in the women's storytelling sphere as women comment on their displays of table and food, of sewing and ceramics (Fig. 11). And after their work is done, the private sphere shifts to favorite sitting places, large overstuffed chairs and rockers within view of family photographs and strategically positioned so that the occupants can see out of several windows and onto the street beyond (Fig. 12).

There is no denying the very comfortable feeling that a female fieldworker experiences as she steps into this private sphere of women's storytelling. How many times has she been led in and out of rooms and been shown embroidery and photographs, quilts and books, dishes and special gifts? How many times has she come from a long journey to a woman's house, worried about how this stranger might respond to her, and heard her informant begin by complaining herself about the heat and the distance that the fieldworker has had to travel, and then watched this woman settle easily, cold non-alcoholic drink in hand, into a discussion of her latest illnesses. It feels like home.

And well it should, for women, when they meet, know that they have many common bonds, especially in the work they do to maintain both their homes and their bodies. They cook and trade recipes, bear children and raise them, worry about their relatives, clean and decorate, sew and make gifts, welcome guests, and share information about sicknesses, cures, and doctors.

What they do not or cannot do also bonds women together. Although they might keep the records in the family Bible up-to-date, for example, they will not inherit the book itself. Because women cannot pass on to their children the name they themselves received at birth, they often do not inherit family documents, furniture, or land. Women are what other families inherit: "Well, she was a Smith," a woman will hear about herself after her marriage, "but now she's a Jones." Because women have no voice in many decisions, they do not repre-

sent jobs, power, or money to one another. What a woman informant sees in a female fieldworker is largely a person who will face many of the same joys, sorrows, and challenges she herself did.

Women's personal narratives within the private storytelling sphere reflect these bonds, for the narratives have little competitive edge to them; few women talking in the private sphere begin their stories with, "That's nothing." Neither do their narratives exist primarily to entertain. Exemplum-like and liberally sprinkled with the marker "Now, not to brag or anything but . . .," women's personal narratives provide support as they teach other women what is possible for them.

One rainy afternoon, for example, as Bertha Yocom and I sat in her bedroom, we spoke of one of our friends, a woman who had never been out of her hometown, and rarely out of her house, until she moved several hundred miles away with her husband. We spoke of her inability to adapt, of her unhappiness. "She wasn't like me, poor thing," Bertha observed:

For twelve years I worked in the city [Philadelphia]. I was a book-keeper, not a stenographer. Why, do you know how I became a bookkeeper? I didn't even know what "bookkeeper" meant. I thought it was someone that took care of books, kept them, you know, something like a librarian. Then a friend of mine, a schoolteacher, told me that teachers made only forty-eight dollars a month and had only seven months' work and that bookkeepers made more, worked all year, and got two weeks' paid vacation. Well, I thought that was pretty good.

Bertha talked over an hour about business college, paying her father back, riding the train to Philadelphia, working in a necktie and clothing firm, teaching Sunday school, and saving money to help pay for the farm. "It's good," she remarked as she finished. "You never heard much about my past."

Similarly, on Mother's Day 1976, when the Kecks gathered to visit an ailing Grandmother Louisa, Great Aunt Martha and I sat on the back porch swing and talked about my fieldwork, Elmer Keck (her brother), and how Elmer was in college while Martha was growing up:

Martha: Yes, well, I went away to college in 1925. [*She was looking at the pictures I took of Elmer.*] Do you know when they sold the farm?

Peggy: I think it was around 1927.

Martha: That's when my father died.

Peggy: I'll have to check.

Martha: Yes, I went off to college knowing that my Dad had cancer. That wasn't easy. And in my dorm you couldn't get any phone calls except emergencies after eight. If the phone rang after eight, I'd be terrified. I couldn't study. . . . But I learned to overcome this fear gradually. This experience always stayed with me in many other situations. You can't let fear cripple you.

Although Bertha and Martha offered their experiences as good ones worthy of praise, they did not seek to praise themselves at their listener's or anyone else's expense. Bertha's closing remark ("It's good. You never heard much about my past.") links her to her audience. She does not present herself as one person who has done something much grander than her listeners could ever hope to accomplish. Likewise, through her conclusion ("You can't let fear cripple you"), Martha also bonds herself with her audience; she shows listeners how to interpret and use that story for themselves.

In contrast, when Elmer talks about himself in the public sphere, he entertains, informs, and competes, good-naturedly, with his audience. "That's nothing," he often begins. Once, for example, when I mentioned getting a work permit for my first job when I was sixteen, he laughed, "Work permit? Why I went to work when I was five, doing newspapers with Alan [Elmer's older brother]. I had my own route from the time I was six, mind you, till high school."

If told to children, this part of Elmer's life history might by its example lend support to their quest for a job, but the information itself, told as it was without narrative comments that bond, does not link narrator and listeners together in a common struggle. Instead, it points out the strengths of the narrator and challenges the listeners to put forth their own.

Although women rarely carry their personal experience narratives outside this private sphere with its emphasis on bonding, women certainly do not restrict their storytelling to that one sphere. Some women blossom before a public audience with tales about relatives, children, and friends (Fig. 13). Yet because women usually stay within the private sphere and because they are often in the company of other women when they share these narratives, it might be tempting to describe such storytelling as sexually exclusive.

Labeling such storytelling as sexually exclusive would also be

aided by research that often applies the principle of exclusivity to women's traditions in general and to women's bawdy materials in particular.² Yet women exclude men when the material is far from bawdy, and women perform bawdy traditions in front of men (see Kalčík 1975; Johnson 1973; Green 1977). At issue in any discussion of women, fieldwork, and exclusivity must be not only the type of material being performed or the sexual composition of the group, but also the kind of atmosphere the participants want: public, with its attention and competition, or private, with its intimacy and bonding.

Women telling their personal experience narratives in the private sphere do not automatically exclude men; even the most public male storytellers can find a place in the private sphere (Figs. 14,15). A woman who feels a close bond, especially a family bond, with a man will share private information with him. "I never said this to anybody," explained Mrs. Carmel Iannone to her grandson who was collecting her life history. "I say it because you're her [Mrs. Iannone's daughter's] son" (Princiotta n.d.).

Women narrators, however, do exclude men and women who are unwilling or unable to adapt to the intimacy of their private sphere. They may also exclude people they do not know well enough; they would not want to invite those who might disrupt the privacy they desire.

The private sphere of women's personal experience narratives therefore does not depend on physical location, sexual exclusivity, type of material, or the number of participants. It is a mode of social interaction, a space where none need fear ridicule or embarrassment, where handwork often accompanies talk, where participants feel that they all share several bonds, where narratives emphasize those bonds, and where each participant is seen as equally capable of and willing to contribute personal information. Fieldworkers who would enter this sphere successfully need to be able to give of themselves, to share their own stories with others, and to participate in the thoughts, struggles, sorrows, and joys of women of all ages (Fig. 16).³

NOTES

1. These remarks are from a field journal entry for May 30, 1979, and from an interview of June 23, 1979. Subsequent comments of informants quoted are taken from field journal entries from 1975 and 1976.

2. Goldstein (1964:83) notes: "I was informed several times of obscene-story and song sessions which would take place during women's tea parties at a specific place and time; unfortunately, my sex eliminated me as a potential participant or onlooker . . . and I was forced to obtain my data about such sessions during interviews with one or more of its participants with whom I was on especially good terms."

3. All photographs except that of the author and Susan Supplee (which is the work of G. M. Vaught), were taken by Margaret Yocom. The author thanks her entire family for their help and support, especially the women of her family: Bertha Davidheiser Yocom, Louisa Zwald Keck (1898-1977), Martha Keck Fry, Betty Keck Yocom, Gladys Yocom Metka, Edie Yocom Boyer, Marie Rebecca Yocom, Jean Keck, Fern Keck, Janet Yocom Keck, Diane Yocom Supplee, and Nancy Mortensen Yocom; and her grandfather, Elmer Christman Keck (1893-1982).