

9-5-2019

## Editors' Preface: Thinking with Stories

Cristina Bacchilega

Anne E. Duggan

---

### Recommended Citation

Bacchilega, Cristina and Duggan, Anne E.. "Editors' Preface: Thinking with Stories." *Marvels & Tales* 33.1 (2019). Web.  
<<https://digitalcommons.wayne.edu/marvels/vol33/iss1/2>>.

## EDITORS' PREFACE: THINKING WITH STORIES

"Thinking with Stories in Times of Conflict: A Conference in Fairy-Tale Studies" was held at Wayne State University, Detroit, August 2–5, 2017.<sup>1</sup> The call for papers read,

Conflict can give rise to violence but also to creativity. In the 1690s, French fairy-tale writers imagined through their fairy tales ideal resolutions to political conflict (Louis XIV's absolutism), as well as to conflict in conceptions of gender and marriage practices. The German tale tradition was transformed by the migration of French Huguenots to Germanic territories after the Revocation of the Edict of Nantes in 1685, which prohibited the practice of Protestantism in France. The German Grimm Brothers drew from the tale tradition to create a cohesive notion of Germanic traditions and to contest French domination in the nineteenth century. Postcolonial writers such as Salman Rushdie, Patrick Chamoiseau, Nalo Hopkinson, and Sofia Samatar draw from wonder tale traditions in ways that disrupt Western narrative traditions. And multimedia storytelling that dips both into history and the fantastic has advanced decolonial and social justice projects. These are only a few examples of the ways in which authors think with stories in times of conflict.

With this conference we brought fairy-tale scholars together to reflect upon the genre in relation to questions that include but are not limited to migrants and migration in different geographical locations and historical periods; political and social upheaval; and transformations with an eye to alternative futures. One of our goals was to encourage a dialogue between creative and scholarly thinking *with* wonder tales in times of conflict. The conference gathered over fifty scholars and artists together from North America, Asia,

Australia, and Africa, and in its aftermath we were fortunate enough to forge a collaboration among the journal we coedit *Marvels & Tales*, the *Journal of American Folklore* (JAF), and *Narrative Culture* (NC) to publish essays that, in concert, promise to have a wide-ranging and international reach with scholars in multiple disciplines, including fairy-tale, folklore, and folk-narrative studies.

Drawing together the pieces included in these special issues are three factors, all of which are interwoven within the seemingly simple and yet provocative statement “The truth about stories is that that’s all we are” (King 2). These essays focus on stories that, while from different historical periods, cultures, and media, are all grounded in tradition—that is, extraindividual storytelling practices; work not so much at interpreting these stories, but at thinking through their affordances; and meditate on these stories as specifically situated cultural productions that intervene in material, ideological, political, and emotional conflicts.<sup>2</sup>

Methodologically, these essays are quite disparate. Some are written by scholars who identify as folklorists, but many are not. Some essays by nonfolklorists employ the tools of folkloristics, whereas others bring literary, media, gender, and indigenous studies, as well as creative strategies, to bear on our understanding of folktales, myths, and fairy tales, as well as indigenous genres from the Pacific such as *mo’olelo* and *fāgogo*. Each contribution recognizes the significant social functions that folk narratives hold across time and space, and collectively they speak to how no single methodology suffices to *think with stories* in different contexts. This is especially significant when the focus is not on the folktale and fairy tale as a shape-shifting narrative and cultural text per se, but on other wonder genres as well as on creative adaptations that mix genres.

To think with stories rests in part on the understanding that the storyteller or artist is “always one step ahead of the scholar” (Nicolaisen 12), and on learning *how*—even more than *what*—stories tell about human interactions in the world and with one another; how we tell stories in different genres and cultures to overcome powerlessness, maintain privilege, or question accepted hierarchies. We focus on power and hierarchies because thinking with stories, as Jack Zipes comments in his JAF essay, occurs inevitably rather than exceptionally in times of conflict. Why in our call for papers did we emphasize thinking *with* rather than about stories? Just as current cognitive narrative theorists are focusing on the kinds of “thinking” afforded by stories, folklorists (see Noyes) as well as Indigenous and postcolonial scholars (McDougall, Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o, Justice) have looked to story and storytelling as theory. If theory is a framework for structuring and comprehending the world, traditional Western and non-Western narratives are often dismissed as outmoded or

---

inadequate tools for thinking, or, in the case of the fairy tale, these narratives are held up as one frozen-in-time picture of what the outcome of our desires—a happy ending—should be. The essays included in the three special issues look to stories, on the one hand, as resources that people creatively deploy to frame (Goffman) and script the world at given times and in specific places and, on the other hand, as resources that are vital to transform specific groups' place and future in the world (King; Turner and Greenhill).

Thus, "thinking with stories" and their scripted and generative affordances is not an intellectual or disembodied exercise. It "includes emotion, imagination, kinesic response, and (not least) interaction with other humans and the world at large" (Cave 155), and it builds on understanding how, with stories, we "seek to alter each other's cognitive environment, to make some difference, however small, to the way [we] perceive and conceive the world" (5).<sup>3</sup> Stories, across genres, cultures, and media, tell how we think of the world and place ourselves in it but also project alternative worlds and encourage us to feel and think differently.

How we think with stories that we belong to and with stories we know from afar necessarily depends on our positionality and not only on our desire to embrace, deride, or aestheticize their world making. This attention to the specificity of the stories in their sociocultural context, as well as to their collection, editing, translating, adapting, retelling, pertains to all contributions but works differently in relation to the positionality of each scholar as meta-storyteller. This positionality includes not only how close to or distant from a particular narrative tradition one is, but which communities are projected as having the highest stakes in this rethinking and why. These communities are discipline specific but are also communities of practice in face-to-face as well as virtual interactions and are even potentially new communities.

Together these three special issues we coedited address thinking with stories in times of conflict from interdisciplinary and multidisciplinary perspectives, drawing from the disciplines of folkloristics and fairy-tale, literary, cultural, and media studies, among others. Essays reflect on the ways in which conflicts and possible resolutions to conflicts get inflected by questions of gender, race, class, ethnicity, and sexuality within and among different tale traditions. Cultural appropriations of different tales and traditions can take the form of resistance to or feed into neoliberal agendas; tales can both contest and affirm hegemonic power structures; and fairy-tale utopias can be liberatory or reactionary and often a bit of both.

The essays in *Journal of American Folklore* think with stories in relation to history in order to substantiate the persistence of and insistence on counterhegemonic and decolonial values or beliefs as well as to recognize the import of contemporary storytelling and scholarship in calling into question past and

---

present uses of stories that diminish certain groups' humanity and perpetuate social prejudice. *Narrative Culture's* contributors think with stories across media—film, television, the Internet, print, and performance—to substantiate cultural resistance, remythologizing, re-creation, and expropriation. Essays in *Marvels & Tales* think with fairy tales by spelling out the affordances of the genre to address historical conflicts in France, Germany, and Louisiana as well as to play out its possibilities in Australian adaptations, the contemporary US classroom, and a cross-cultural webcomic. Notably, these essays also speak to one another across publication venues and foci as well, encouraging further conversation across disciplines and also fertile juxtapositions of critical and creative modes.

Specifically, like this issue of *Marvels & Tales*, the special issue of *Narrative Culture* features discussions of decolonial and anticolonial interventions in the Pacific and North America as well as of transcultural and transmedial resistance to and contestation of the media industry. And the essays in the *JAF* special issue respectively focus on marginalized nineteenth-century folklorists, trace present-day poetic deployment of Samoan war-goddess stories, discuss Aladdin's presence on the Internet as an outcome of cultural appropriation, reimagine a traditional Appalachian folktale in a politicized performance, and focus on Jewish-American repurposing of fairy tales that have been put to anti-semitic uses. Thus, we urge readers of *Marvels & Tales* to read the other special issues for further discussions of and meditations on how historical and contemporary uses of fairy tales and folklore intervene in situated conflicts and why this matters.

Cristina Bacchilega and Anne E. Duggan

### Notes

1. We are grateful to our conference's sponsors: Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada Partnership Development Grant (890-2013-17 Fairy Tale Cultures and Media Today); Wayne State University's Office of the Vice President for Research, Academy of Scholars, Department of Classical and Modern Languages, Literatures, and Cultures, College of Liberal Arts and Sciences, Department of English, and Humanities Center; and Wayne State University Press.
2. We acknowledge that a substantial part of this preface also introduces the other two special issues as a way to underscore their interrelatedness and to encourage reading across kin disciplines and journals. We thus thank the general editors of *JAF* and *NC* for agreeing to publish this preface with issue-specific variations.
3. We thank Marina Warner for suggesting the "thinking with stories" part of the conference's title and pointing us to Cave's volume.

**Works Cited**

- Cave, Terence. *Thinking with Literature: Towards a Cognitive Criticism*. Oxford UP, 2016.
- Goffman, Erving. *Frame Analysis: An Essay on the Organization of Experience*. Harper & Row, 1974.
- Justice, Daniel Heath. *Why Indigenous Literatures Matter*. Wilfrid Laurier UP, 2018.
- King, Thomas. *The Truth about Stories*. U of Minnesota P, 2003. Indigenous Studies.
- McDougall, Brandy Nālani. "Ola (i) Nā Mo'olelo: Living Moolelo." TEDx Mānoa, 2012. [www.youtube.com/watch?v=K69\\_kuqBiX8](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=K69_kuqBiX8).
- Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o. *Globalectics: Theory and the Politics of Knowing*. Columbia UP, 2012. The Wellek Library Lectures.
- Nicolaisen, W. F. H. "The Past as Place: Names, Stories, and the Remembered Self." *Folklore*, vol. 102, no. 1, 1991, pp. 3–15.
- Noyes, Dorothy. *Humble Theory: Folklore's Grasp on Social Life*. Indiana UP, 2016.
- Turner, Kay, and Pauline Greenhill, editors. *Transgressive Tales: Queering the Grimms*. Wayne State UP, 2012.