

Joan Newlon RADNER, ed., *Feminist Messages: Coding in Women's Folk Culture* (Urbana and Chicago, University of Illinois Press, 1993, ISBN 0-252-01957-1 (hardcover), 0-252-06267-1 (paperback), xv + 309 p.)

Pauline Greenhill

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This is a breakthrough book. It links those old home truths of folklore study, taught to so many of us in graduate school: that everyday life is significant and worthy of analysis; that we should work collaboratively with and esteem the people we study; and that our "readings" of their expressive culture, though they may differ from those of our informants, have truth value or authenticity. To weave these ideas analytically is itself an original contribution to scholarship. But what is equally innovative in this work — even revolutionary for folklore studies — is that it critically links folklorists' practice — ethnography as well as analysis — with the politics of culture, with feminist theories, and with the contexts of oppression in which many of us work. And it argues equally well to Women's Studies and feminist perspectives that they should examine folklorists' work and its implications.

Folklorists should already be familiar with the concept of coding from editor Radner and Susan N. Lanser's article on the subject in the "Folklore and Feminism" issue of the *Journal of American Folklore*, published in 1987. Their ideas are greatly clarified and extended in this book. What they call "acts of coding" are "covert expressions of disturbing or subversive ideas" which

are a common phenomenon in the lives of women, who have so often been dominated, silenced, and marginalized by men. The... 'texts' of women's folklore — the texts of their oral performances, of their material creations, and of the routines of their daily lives — may communicate a variety of messages to different segments of their audiences. Some of the coding that enables this selective communication may be deliberate and conscious; some is unconscious. The essential ambiguity of coded acts protects women from potentially dangerous responses from those who might find their statements disturbing (p. vii-viii).

As Radner and Lanser's opening chapter to this volume points out, coding is not limited to folklore; feminists and others have recognised, and variously termed, that practice and others similar to it. And those of us who have ever (for example) composed a letter to a newspaper — or to a University administrator — know how essential the usually inchoate knowledge of coding practice is to the everyday lives of women; we are skilled practitioners ourselves of the techniques of appropriation, juxtaposition, distraction, indirection, trivialization, and incompetence. I won't detail the book's discussions of coding; read them yourself! However, I will point out that Radner and Lanser squarely face the thorny problem of strategic analytical readings of communication, particularly the

“you’re reading something into this text that isn’t there/wasn’t intended by its creator” issue. The act of de-coding is central to the majority of folkloristic analysis; hence *Feminist Messages*’ foregrounding such practice makes the book profoundly useful.

Thus, this book is as worthwhile as it is ground-breaking. It not only presents a programmatic theoretical statement of truly exemplary lucidity in the opening chapter; it also follows up with a series of essays which critically extend its insights and suggestions. Eleven case studies locate the activity of coding within several contexts which are obviously vital for many women’s experiences: the patriarchal household; women’s own groups; and the larger community. Finally, turning upon the pivotal point of folklorists’ relationships to the work they do, the final section comprises two storytellers’ folkloristic analysis of their own storytelling praxis.

But even those who are not as convinced as I that feminist and Women’s Studies perspectives in folklore are the wave of the future (see for example bell hooks’ analyses of the cultural construction of space, of quilting, and of the work of Zora Neale Hurston in *Yearning: Race, Gender, and Cultural Politics* [Toronto: Between the Lines, 1990]) ought to take a good look at this book. In the case studies, it contains very compelling readings of a variety of genres: folktale (Lanser, Gordon, Stone), ballad (Stewart), talk (Langlois, Mulcahy), poetry (Bourke), and the material culture forms of quilting (Pershing) and dolls (Yocum, Babcock). Urban African American, Alaskan native, rural Irish, and Pueblo, as well as white American rural and urban middle-class ethnocultural groups are considered.

Theory and practice are tellingly linked in this work, but reading each essay also reminded me that the joys of analytical discovery may be mitigated in concerns for the folks whose lives and expressions we examine. The opening essay only indirectly addresses the possibly negative, broadly political implications of the privileged location of folklorists; that de-coding’s truth-telling can be a form of “outing” which may endanger people we work with. Several of the individual essays, however, address such implications; for example, Linda Pershing is particularly careful strategically to distance her own reading from the explicit intentions of the quilters she worked with. Parenthetically, I can’t help being concerned that doing the analytical work of feminist de-coding may equally be a practice of “coming out” which can endanger feminist folklorists as fieldworkers, academics, and so on.

*Feminist Messages* should stimulate more research, more analysis, and more theory. It is essential reading for *all* folklorists.

Pauline GREENHILL  
University of Winnipeg  
Winnipeg, Manitoba