

Envisioning Folklore Activism

Drawing on her own experiences as a public folklorist and those of others (particularly Gerald Davis and Bernice Johnson Reagon), the author argues for the importance of activist ideals for folklore research and public practice. The concepts of authenticity, authority, and local place are explored as key elements in framing grassroots and community-based folklife practices that seek to address inequalities, challenge injustice, and work for the common good.

If you see me stumble
Don't stand back and look on
Reach out now, brother
Give your hands to struggle.
—Bernice Johnson Reagon¹

GERALD L. DAVIS BEGAN HIS PLENARY speech to the American Folklore Society by humming a few bars of “Over the Rainbow” (Davis 1996:115–28).² And so, for the task of outlining an activist folklore, it seems fitting to begin with Jerry and with a song: Bernice Johnson Reagon’s “Give Your Hands to Struggle” ([1975] 1997). My points of departure are two voices embodying progressive activist folklore practice, both notable for their authenticity and authority, two particular performances in a history of activist folklore less widely known and referenced than it could be and more necessary now than ever.

I ask you to hear socially responsible artist-scholars, standing in familiar places comfortable and uncomfortable, asking important questions, doing necessary work. Hear them in the vernacular: as prophetic, more than double-voiced, speaking truth publicly and to wherever power resides. In his plenary talk, Jerry calls the discipline of folklore to account, asking what his large African American presence means in a place where, relative to race and equity, so much is both “celebrated and kept invisible, in the closet, under the rug” (Davis 1996:118). He asks what we folklorists are doing. Do we recognize that our work may lead to “deculturalization”? Are we working with communities to help them protect their own cultural legacies?

Are we activists, technicians, bleeding hearts, cultural conservationists . . . or just folk on a mission to share love and concern and caring with other folk? Is our cherished collective presentation too much a practiced artifice and no longer the naturally un-

DEBORA KODISH is the founder and longtime director of the Philadelphia Folklore Project

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even engagement of one human soul and spirit with another, each able as *equals* to balance a mutually beneficial association? Or has our practice ever been that? . . . I am alarmed and pained, as are many of you, that after 100 plus years of doing business in our fashion, we have come to this regrettable place/point/period where so few of those we have studied are with us as colleagues to police our excesses, to authoritatively warn us of our imminent transgressions across intentionally erected and maintained customary boundaries, to applaud us and slap our backs when we have made genuine “discoveries” of use to our host communities and to the field, and most importantly, to follow their own paths and journeys through their own cultural formations, sharing with us as appropriate something of what they discover about themselves and their communities, their identity sources (to the extent they are willing to be self-conscious about their own wellsprings). (Davis 1996:119)

Hear these words as questions about occupational folklore—how it is possible to imagine and do everyday practice, craft, and work—and also as questions about moral responsibility, spoken to an audience of mostly middle-class, mostly gainfully employed folklorists, an aging crowd, dedicated family and friends up front and peppered throughout, a sea of mostly white faces. More than a dozen years later, Jerry’s words still ring true and his questions remain central. What are we doing? What are the politics and ethics of our work? Skilled in analyzing and using the conventions of public performance, Jerry was certainly talking some activist talk, mixing a call to conscience with honest self-critique. He made all who were listening responsible and shared a vision of what folklore could be, performing out of an activist tradition in which vernacular forms offer essential tools for strong peripheralized people (his terms) to name and own their/our own experiences (Davis 1996:119). These are familiar ways to utter otherwise unrecognized truths, challenge authority, and call others to account (Payne 1995; Sider 2003; Westerman 1995, 1998). Jerry asked how folklorists walk the walk. And then he went on to demonstrate. Powerfully and precisely outing himself and us, he asked, and then he showed, how freedom may open doors for others.

In this essay I pull at three interwoven threads, all present in Jerry’s work: the compelling use of authenticity (to the point of coming out); the belief in a people’s authority (a radically pluralist, antisubordination stance); and fine-grained attention to critical junctures in local places, asking where we stand, here and now.

I weave the ideas of authenticity, authority, and place to anchor a consideration of folklore and activism for several reasons—first because they are so admirably recast in Jerry’s work and allow me to recall him. A second aim is to explore how progressive activist perspectives can reorient certain core notions of folklore. I am interested in the significance of vision, accountability to community, and how character works and serves as a marker. Third, authenticity, authority, and place put us squarely in the realm of values and ethics, which (acknowledged or not) shape our work and deserve more attention. Finally, these notions attempt to outline the concerns of a certain kind of work that I will characterize as public interest folklore, simply: grassroots and community-based folklife practice inspired by a vision of progressive social change, addressing inequalities, and working for the common good.³

Taking this as work, I try to characterize it. The overarching approach is a perspective from which public interest folklore is activist, responsible, and engaged prac-

tice—concerned with what is equitable, where power lies, and how people in situations of inequality make significant art and change. This necessitates blurring (indeed dismissing) the boundaries of folk and folklorists, folklore and folkloristics. It locates us as kin and allies to people working in other kinds of transformational labor. When Jerry asked to what degree we include as equals those people whose experiences and expressions we study, he was speaking as a “seasoned community activist” respecting the authority of people engaged in their own considerations of culture (Davis 1996:123). The politics I trace reflect some basic community-organizing principles: a habit of respecting and building local people’s agency and power, a commitment to supporting people in doing for themselves what only they can do, a belief that people together are stronger and wiser than any of us standing alone (Long 1991:34–5; Moses and Cobb 2001; Borgos and Douglas 1996; Kelley 2002; Payne 1995), and some experience of the joy and community created in this collective generative effort. But if we are “by conviction” scholar-activists, then, Jerry cautions, “we need to rise more compellingly than we have to the challenge of interrogating and reinventing or rediscovering ourselves” (Davis 1996:120). This requires that we examine our own roles and practices and the structures of domination, racism, and inequality shaping the most basic ways of work (Smith 1999). Activist practice is not only out there; it is always in here, too: in us.

My attention here is on “low” politics (Mills 1993:174), vernaculars, and everyday occupational practice. Examples show folklore work engaged with questions of social consequence and grounded in equitable relationships, processes through which progressive traditions and values are cultivated and supported, productive ways that folklore (and folklorists) contribute to local community-based social change efforts. Overall, I watch the tools folklore offers activists, and the tools activists offer folklorists. I am aware that similar ground has been more fully delineated in larger and more established sister disciplines (Sanday 1976; Herzfeld 2001; Sanford and Angel-Ajani 2008; Bourgois and Schonberg 2009). But folklore continues to be overlooked in that literature and has particular fine-grained responsibility and resources to contribute. This may also be seen as an effort to explore some of the back story and theory underpinning the vital presence of folklore in peoples’ freedom dreams and community struggles (Berry 1977; Bambara 1981, 1996; Klein 2007).

This direction, derived from Jerry, is about the intellectual, moral, and political underpinnings of folklore work. It aspires to certain values: a (more) satisfying egalitarian practice and a folklore practice free(r) of problematic universalizing modes, capable of fully enfranchising the insights and leadership of people engaged in culturally specific, local, particular struggles (Davis 1996:126). It requires honesty, integrity, authenticity, and feeling. (“Fight for the feeling and empathy, always,” Jerry told himself and us). It requires that we put ourselves on the line and push ourselves to compelling visions.

I owe debts. Three interactions, each at once gift and obligation. One. Teresa Jaynes and I met Jerry in a New Brunswick diner around 1995, early in planning the Philadelphia Folklore Project (PFP) exhibition on Folk Arts of Social Change (<http://www.folkloreproject.org/programs/exhibits/fasc/index.php>). I can see him coming in the door, at the table, the view out the window. Always generous, Jerry had agreed to advise us.

That day, he asked me why I was doing the project. I described an urge to bridge gaps I felt between some activists and folk and traditional artists, but my answer felt thin to me. Not exactly inauthentic, but not full-bodied either—insufficient. Sometimes we are not there yet, for reasons we know or for reasons beyond us (Bambara 1996:235). Inhabit the gaps or they will inhabit us, John Roberts (1993) and Octavia Butler (1993; see also Davis 1996:124) might say. Two. The late Beverly Robinson (a folklorist with similar radical chops) also agreed to advise us on the Folk Arts of Social Change project, and she set her terms—the condition that we weren't playing. Three. A few years later, John asked me to deliver an address (Kodish 1997). Again, I felt myself unequal to the task but, committed to shared vision, was unable to refuse. Beverly offered to listen to the talk the day before. We stopped at a bench, along the Austin Riverwalk. A few sentences in, she stopped me, took the pages out of my hands, and began to score the piece, underlining words, showing me how to make sure that I spoke so that meaning was heard. These encounters set the terms. These are ethical matters regarding what we owe and to whom we are accountable; where we spend attention, love, care, and concern; how we recognize ourselves and others and pull each other along toward a larger vision. Teachings come from those who make revolution irresistible and show a way.⁴

Authenticity

Over my head, I see freedom in the air
—Bernice Johnson Reagon⁵

Authenticity has been a discredited notion in the field of folklore for some time now. One grievance has to do with the idea that it is a problematic fiction: a means of owning or taking sides, not always honestly or in a good way. Folklore and anthropological scholarship on authenticity, especially as the concept appears in various kinds of discourse on heritage, has centered on it as a kind of imperialism: a way in which people make problematic claims on the past to justify action or status in the present (Kirshenblatt-Gimblett 1995:369–70).⁶ We always have reasons to reframe and make claims on one another; problems certainly arise from gaps between present need and past realities, from hiding the reasons, from denying or not noticing slippage, and from ignoring who benefits from these shifts. While questionable history and specious rhetoric about native origins, folk roots, and ethnic rights are used to justify ethnic cleansings, violence, and nationalism, these abhorrent practices do not render all uses of authenticity illegitimate or all discussions or claims of origins, roots, and rights meritless. The fact that reactionary, exclusionary, or exploitative politics, stated or not, may shape claims about tradition and identity does not mean that all claims of authenticity are regressive.⁷ And the fact that the term itself is loaded/charged/dangerous/ruined does not disallow the space it can open.

It is true that in relation to identity claims, authenticity is too often seen as fixed and imposed, an objectifying caricature that denies agency, historical complexities, and the fluid nature of self-making.⁸ In progressive uses of authenticity, though, people often define themselves in process and situationally, with reference to past and present frameworks (Smith 1999:73–4, 77). Furthermore, active oral traditions

on these matters—“commotion,” “hubbub,” or “low theory”—air assumptions and perspectives and offer means of moving to other places (Esteva 2002; Mills 1993:174). Lively talk here can direct us to fuller and fairer naming practices, to vernacular processes for disputing and resolving claims. And it can trace communities: people who, “sharing food, work, and ceremony,” labor together (Tsing 2005:197).

Who makes claims on the past (or about identity), how and where claims are pursued, and to what ends, of course, all matter a great deal. Charles Briggs and others have observed that abstract arguments and documentary evidence marshaled to discredit local standing around heritage claims often signal access, power, privilege, or distance (Briggs 1996; Smith 1999; Trask 2000; see also Keesing 2000a, 2000b). Privileged assertions are lacking in certain ways. An outsider rarely lives with the same risks as local people or those who are not seated at the main table. His or her perspective may offer a splendid view, but it is not the only one and not necessarily the best.⁹ Outside perspectives can make contributions to local discourse, understandings, and action in a variety of ways. Coalition work, some kinds of service, and alliances, for example, can open different possibilities and force the recognition “that all forms of subordination are interlocking and mutually reinforcing, even as they are different and incommensurable” (Matsuda 1996:64). New languages, new forms of realization, mark this history—and lives depend on it (Reagon 1983). Useful tools in these struggles are habits of valuing folklore, of recognizing how, where, why, and when people construct (multiple) authenticities.

Working in public interest folklore in the same town for twenty-four years, I come to this because I must. Questions of authenticity emerge as questions about policy and theory embedded in practice.¹⁰ At the Philadelphia Folklore Project, we have preferred notions of significance, relevance, and impact for defining our work. But authenticity seems to creep in whether we own it or not. Why do we perceive someone’s work as having the ring of truth? How do we help artists to name their own particular places in, departures from, and challenges to any tradition, to describe what is good work for them, and to define how their work ought to be fairly evaluated? What difference does depth of learning, critical analysis, self-knowledge, or community value make—and how do we fairly name where such things register or leave some mark? How do other people’s de facto assertions of and assessments of authenticity affect local artists with whom I work? And what is my obligation in the face of these judgments? (This is especially a concern in a time when so many people appropriate the veneer of diverse cultures with little regard for what may count as insult or damage or for how it may diss or undermine community cultural efforts.) What is authentic assessment of children’s learning in the Folk Arts–Cultural Treasures Charter School (FACTS) that PFP joined with Asian Americans United to found? How do I build and recognize authentic assessments of my work, capable of rendering rich and rigorous (true, fair) insights? What is authentic evaluation and feedback?

These questions cannot be ignored. So, I have to be less interested in all the ways in which authenticity is a failed concept and more attuned to the progressive ways in which neighbors and respected allies use it at particular tight moments. How can the notion of authenticity help me do trustworthy and reliable work with allies, at FACTS, and with PFP’s efforts to sustain meaningful urban folk cultural practice?

In the context of inequality (and terrible times), authenticity is not merely a rhetorical strategy or an abstraction. When you cannot recognize yourself in the way that you are treated and in the names that you are called—but when you still have a hope, a belief that you are not what they say you are—authenticity can be a name for a space where you can breathe. Examples of this deep and compelling need for recognizable acts of naming, for justice and freedom, are of course legion (Smith 1999:142–62). Authenticity is sometimes felt more keenly when it is denied.

What if we approach authenticity from times and places when the hope of authentic expression seems most compromised: from the particular perspectives of local people fighting uphill struggles for freedom and justice? When neither the stakes nor the rules are in local control, where folk arts are significant resources, and where community well-being is a central good, authenticity emerges as an important high-context measure, an indicator—observable and valued by the community—of a type of highly successful realization at very particular moments in pursuing such dreams. This space of struggle—and action there—is my concern. James Scott uses the classical Greek notion of *métis* to mark this territory, the home of mother wit: “that large space between the realm of genius, to which no formula can apply, and the realm of codified knowledge, which can be learned by rote” (Scott 1998:316). I am arguing that a particular kind of authenticity, a form of *métis*, may also emerge in times and places requiring a kind of artful improvisation on a base of cultural knowledge and need. This authenticity, a balancing act, connects present struggle with a vision of justice (Jackson 2005:12–3). In a work of philosophical anthropology centering on Crow leader Plenty Coups (Many Accomplishments), Jonathan Lear explores ethics and acts in the face of cultural devastation. He asks what happens when certain kinds of identity can no longer be sustained, when a way of life collapses. He examines the kinds of subjectivities that emerge—ways of conceiving the self in terms of ideals (Lear 2006:43); this is not only the kind of role you play but also the kind of person you are. And in the face of cultural devastation, he looks at radical hope as a form of creative practical reason. We can take this as a form of *métis* concerned with how we live our lives, a way to see authenticity as a creative and necessary act.

Reflecting on her experiences as an organizer and field secretary with the Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) and on her development as a socially conscious artist, Bernice Johnson Reagon offers two good definitions of authenticity. She writes, “Participating in that struggle for change taught me about being challenged to trust my inner voice about how I and my people were doing in the world.” Speaking of the “sweetness of struggle,” she says, “[I]n the midst of standing against opposition, even when at great risk, there is a satisfaction of knowing on the deepest level that who you are to yourself is the same essence you offer to the world in which you move” (Reagon 1990:2). Here, authenticity is about being genuine, in the context of struggle and in the service of justice (and something much larger than yourself). It is a sign of integrity and self-preservation: a way to “constantly remove any kind of camouflage or any kind of barrier that exists between me and the community that names me” (Bambara 1996:216). Challenging barriers requires activating all of one’s gifts and trainings, owning multiple traditions in pursuit

of survival, change, and many kinds of movement (Reagon 2001:1–11). Reagon is at once scholar, historian, intellectual analyst, community member, committed activist, and creative artist, and she draws on all of these perspectives in her principled offerings (and commentaries on them) (Reagon 1990:2–4).

Reagon articulates an existential and experiential authenticity.¹¹ Her concern is not centrally about reclaiming origins or identity or about who has the right to some definitive or redefined past—although both are features of the story she tells—about the task of crafting a response to inequality and justice in the present, with authenticity a sign of success in this effort. Central to pursuing this struggle are values of trust and consistency. Consider Reagon’s description of how she got the voice that she has now:

Growing up in Albany [Georgia], I learned that if you bring black people together, you bring them together with a song. To this day, I don’t understand how people think they can bring anybody together without a song.

Now, the singing tradition in Albany was congregational. There were not soloists, there were song leaders.

When you ask somebody to lead a song, you’re asking them to plant a seed. The minute you start the song, then the song is created by everybody there. It’s almost like a musical explosion that takes place. But the singing in the movement was different from the singing in the church. The singing is the kind of singing where you disappear.

The song-singing I heard in Albany I’d never heard before in my life, in spite of the fact that I was from that congregational singing culture. . . . [W]hen we did those marches and went to jail, we expanded the space we could operate in, and that was echoed in the singing. It was a bigger, more powerful singing. . . .

After this first march, we’re at Union Baptist Church, Charlie Jones [of SNCC] looks at me and said, “Bernice, sing a song.” And I started, “Over My Head I See Trouble in the Air.” By the time I got to where “trouble” was supposed to be, I didn’t see any trouble, so I put “freedom” in there. And I guess that was the first time I really understood using what I had been given in terms of songs. I’d always been a singer but I had always, more or less, been singing what other people taught me to sing. That was the first time I had the awareness that these songs were mine and I could use them for what I needed them to. . . .

The voice I have now, I got the first time I sang in a movement meeting, after I got out of jail. . . . The voice I have now, I got that night and I’d never heard it before in my life. At that meeting, they did what they usually do. They said, “Bernice, would you lead us in a song?” And I did the same first song, “Over My Head I See Freedom in the Air,” but I’d never heard that voice before. I had never been that me before. And once I became that me, I have never let that me go.

I like people to know that when they deal with the movement that there are these specific things, but there is a transformation that took place inside of the people that also needs to be quantified in the picture. And the singing is just the echo of that. If you have a people who are transformed and they create the sound that lets you know that they are new people, then certainly you’ve never heard it before. They have also never heard it before, because they’ve never been that before. (Reagon 1991:143–4)

Talking about how power and social change develop, Reagon names an authenticity that is about an individual in the context of community. She tells a transformation narrative that turns on the speaker's coming into her own voice. She witnesses and records how this power is enabled by naming a way that suits people's collective experience. She broadens the teaching: this is really about a people coming into new and enlarged voice. This is about learning to recognize, hear, and sing freedom out of what has long been named trouble. This is about acting in service of freedom.¹² The questions are always posed: "How do you know if it is freedom? Freedom for whom?" These are good questions. But framed as abstract and general—turned into universalizing discourse—they are too often used to shut down engagement or to (suspiciously) distance or exclude. Take this very particular case, in a particular time and place. In Albany, Georgia, in 1961, it must have been clear how right it was to be taking a stand, naming, demanding, and singing the long overdue freedom in the air. It was (and remains) a step for freedom for all of us. This is socially responsible art and a progressive, antiessentialist authenticity, standing against subordination (Matsuda 1996:19, 63–9).

More than a decade ago, Lois Fernandez, cofounder of what is now the thirty-five-year-old ODUNDE African American festival in Philadelphia, was told by outside experts that the Yoruba-inspired event, in the vanguard of a cultural regeneration movement, wasn't authentic, that people were "playing African." This wasn't the only charge. People within the community criticized her for being pagan. Charged with two kinds of inauthenticity, Lois rejected both critiques. "We know who we are. We were saying we are African people," Lois said, recalling what it took back then to name things correctly and to challenge restrictive norms. Jerry Davis and other folklorists helped, articulating alternatives to formulations requiring proof of particular line of descent (inappropriate given African American history) and recognizing authenticity on other grounds. These allies championed ODUNDE as an African American diasporic festive gathering welcoming the full community: in cultural garb, Muslim robes, hip-hop threads, Sunday best. What was authentic was this ingathering itself (Davis 1992b).

ODUNDE was fully traditional in welcoming and calling together the people, feeding the spirit, tending to community well-being. ODUNDE was a vision of reclaiming W. E. B. DuBois's historic neighborhood (and of experiencing again in those streets a vital African American community); even more, it was a dream of reclaiming what looked like a lost generation.

Standing against the gang wars (symptom and cause of despair), Lois and others remembered what they had seen Yoruba people doing in New York, and they went to Osugbo to see more, "their dashiki, African garbed natural selves." Those liberated women freedom fighters came home and started an Osun celebration right there on South Street and Gray's Ferry, and they have been fighting to keep it there ever since, but that is another story (Fernandez 1993).

Embraced by the community, ODUNDE had become and is an extended family gathering, drawing 500,000 people the second Sunday of every June.¹³ Jerry was there, and he recognized it as righteous, an event characterized by multiple authenticities: the right of self-determination. The right to name history, to claim African descent, and to look and move as African as you please. The right to open a door—to explore African tradi-

tions, long inaccessible, that might properly be seen as sources and as current inspiration: all were central to the moment (Davis 1992b).

Authenticity is needed to recognize, negotiate, and travel the hard road ahead. Indeed, transformation narratives in countless social change movements mark moments when people become conscious of self, story, and role in the context of larger narratives (an epic, Esteva and Prakash [1998] say, but I am getting ahead of myself) and when they rewrite their roles (Hunt 1999; Bambara 1996). You might say that transformation narratives emerge when we recognize something that had been hidden to us, that in some way oppresses, and from which some kind of deliverance is possible. A transformation narrative liberates. We find space, recognize others' experiences as our own, feel more authentically able to name who we are (Bambara 1996:201–45). Intimate local or felt knowledge of vernaculars allows us to recognize such shifts in understanding, while inspiring countless glosses and arguments over what “keeping it real” means, as it should.

The idea of authenticity can lead us to more just places. “The most radical ideas often grow out of a concrete intellectual engagement with the problems of aggrieved populations confronting systems of oppression,” writes Robin D. G. Kelley (2002:9). Visions of equity and justice shape what Kelley calls “freedom dreams” in African American thought and culture—habits of imagining liberated zones, what people want the world to look like (2002:2–4). These guiding visions have force. For one example, take Alice Walker's assertion in her “Open Letter to Barack Obama” (2008): “We knew, through all the generations, that you were with us, in us, the best of the spirit of Africa and of the Americas. Knowing this, that you would actually appear, someday, was part of our strength.” And, too, it is “a balm for the weary warriors of hope” that this brave and radical belief has indeed overcome so much.

Traditions that come out of engagement with systems of oppression can make and cultivate alternative spaces: places and times to breathe and be and collectively imagine. Consider again Reagon's description of voice in the freedom struggle. She describes herself *recognizing*—hearing the difference between people who are singing together and people who are singing with a clear vision that freedom is real—and then *reporting* what and who she saw around her, in a way that gives that self-knowledge back to the group and makes it stronger. And then *performing* when it is called for. Recognizing, reporting, repeating, and performing are speech acts, observable features of what Dell Hymes described in foundational documents of performance-based folklore study. Good practice, not only for watching authenticity and authority (*métis*) develop, but also for developing it in ourselves (Hymes 1981; Kodish 1997). *Recognizing* can be an emergent, engaged, public, and collective act. This is the kind of cultural training that Reagon describes as central to the development of socially conscious artists (Reagon 1990:3; 2001:101–5).

Call this socially responsible work. Reclaiming authenticity can be an act of solidarity, a means of naming where we fully stand: a means of quoting and reframing—as Bakhtin (1981), in other oppressive times, told us where and how to read between the lines, listen to the silences, use festival laughter and transgression. A defense of authenticity may be constructed as an acceptance of accountability for community well-being on your recently discovered (and rarely prepared for) watch.

Authority

You're not really going to leave me
 It is your path I walk
 It is your song I sing
 It is your load I take on
 It is your air I breathe
 It's the record you set that makes me go on
 It's your strength that helps me stand

—Bernice Johnson Reagon¹⁴

Reagon sings that gifts and responsibilities come to us from others: we hold ourselves accountable. It is not only that we are indebted and oriented but also that we hope to embody in our own way durable legacies in which we believe. Acting on common ethics and values, we contribute to a collective authority that develops over time out of what people accomplish together: a shared vision of how things are and ought to be. Call it community well-being, in the most inclusive sense possible. Our individual authenticities—small acts of witnessing, experiencing, remembering, imagining—coalesce into vernacular power that regenerates community (Davis 1991:27; Long 1991:35). This kind of authority differs in important ways from the top down, imposed authority of states, institutions, and experts. It has a populist, radically plural, antisubordination politics; for state-resistant autonomous peoples, such a stance may be a matter of political choice (Scott 2009). Here I note several dimensions of this brand of authority: radical collectivity, moral and ethical principles, character, vision, and power.

Collectivity is central to folklore—but some aspects are more noted than others. Robert Cantwell describes jazz as a mysterious synthesis by which people make music together that takes them somewhere they could never have gone alone (2008:xvii). Sam Schragger describes a valued time in a community, when justice was actively created by people working together: a large story about the Wobblies' reputation and how it came to be held partially by many, begging to be collectively regenerated (1998:287, 298). These examples of collective creation (folklore's old preoccupation) also describe a whole that is greater than the sum of the parts: an emergent participatory authority in which people together generate possibilities (Lear 2006).¹⁵

For a prime example of what people's *moral and ethical principles* have to do with such authority, consider how aspects of southern folk culture served as the bedrock of the freedom struggle. Charles Payne says that SNCC folks "found in southern folk culture, Black or white, a set of values more sustaining than those of bourgeois culture and a code of conduct for governing interpersonal relationships. What SNCC organizer Bob Moses said about Ella Baker could have been said about all of them: they were taking the style and substance of the rural South and elevating it to another level" (1995:101). Payne considers that "the young activists of the 1960s trying to work within the organizing tradition were bringing back to the rural Black South a refined, codified version of something that had begun there, an expression of the historical vision of ex-slaves, men and women who understood that, for them, main-

taining a deep sense of community was itself an act of resistance” (405). The values and code of conduct described here were developed by people acting with the good of the community in mind, over generational and other divides, in the light of a stunning vision of freedom and equity. So, Payne said, a new generation of young activists turned to and relied upon practices of southern folk culture cultivated and exemplified by elders in that community. They were instructed in folklore. Our futures depend on our participation: on our capacity to regenerate those virtues advancing the vision.

In our tellings, *character* becomes a way that we know and guide one another, recognizing the virtues that we bring to and need for such serious imaginative undertaking as community survival. We recognize and author ourselves with our actions and are known by them: our characters develop as features in stories in which we collectively participate. Critical long-term, purposeful, deeply collaborative process (social change, folklore practice, great art) requires that we develop trust in character. We learn to size up (ourselves and one another), to evaluate “where [we] are coming from” (Payne 1995:236–64). Payne spoke with former SNCC workers and local people active in the freedom struggle. He describes the experience:

[O]ne doesn't actually interview SNCC folk. The process is much more interactive, with them often asking more questions than they answer. Above all, they make one question one's own framework by constantly pointing out hidden assumptions and tacit theories buried in questions most people would think innocent. In their ability to look beneath the surface of things, we get a glimpse of what an intellectually refining experience SNCC must have been. “Local people” could also be very astute at picking up on a wrong-headed question—and far gentler about pointing it out. What I remember most about talking to them, though, is their predisposition to assume without evidence that I was doing something good and worthwhile, a reflection of the expansive sense of community they brought to the movement, transforming it. (1995:xiv)

SNCC people inquired deeply (shining a light on back stories). Careful examination created unity of purpose (coherent narrative), refined character and intellect, for “skills and drive without consciousness and purpose make you a danger . . . to the community” (Bambara 1981:128). We are required to take on collective wisdom, actively turning it to use.

Folklore has a long history of attending to what collectivity can mean in the face of violence and inequality. The life of a *vision* among the Crow people provides another example. Jonathan Lear describes Crow traditions of sending young people out to have dream-visions, which elders then continually reinterpret over many years. This is a cooperative imaginative activity: work done on behalf of the tribe and as a means of ensuring its future (Lear 2006:71–7). Lear writes particularly of Plenty Coups (Many Accomplishments), a great Crow leader as a young man and over the course of terrible years in Crow history:

He dreamt on behalf of the tribe, and the dream transformed these anxious concerns into narrative form. This was the beginning of a process by which Plenty Coups

became entangled in the tribe's history—and in which he took on the burden of an anxious way of life. On this occasion, as a young boy, he was able to bring back to the tribe their own anxieties; only now they had the form of a story that could be told, retold—and interpreted. The elders of the tribe were then able to take the dream-narrative and turn it into an articulate, conscious thought about the challenges that the tribe would be facing. (Lear 2006:78)

Lear sees Plenty Coups's dream as a necessary work of "radical anticipation" (78): an imaginative tool that served the Crow as its meanings were worked, used over decades of consideration about how to ensure the people's healthy survival. Here again, a vision of healthy survival, endlessly debated in its details, is collective effort; it depends on courage and hope in the face of cultural devastation (for a parallel analysis, see Davis 1991:27).

Power is reimagined by collective authority. Folklore forms and activist work depend heavily on collaborative production of knowledge: we do well to remain sharply attuned to exactly what collaboration entails. The above examples show people collaborating in creating meaningful existence—figuring out how to live lives in relation to cultural ideals, especially under pressure (Lear 2006:43–7). Authority is not a matter of position, role, text, or genre, or about who speaks for whom, but about how we together alter the frameworks within which people may live their lives: "For the issue that concerns us is not who has the power to tell the story—however important that might be; it is rather how power shapes what any true story could possibly be" (Lear 2006:31).

Close-to-the-ground struggles and highly interactive processes involving people who labor and risk together form the sources of authority in Charles Payne's view (1995) of freedom struggle. People participate in creating something that is greater than the sum of the parts: we are enlarged, transformed, in the process. This shift has the same radical implications. In the words of organizer and educator Robert Moses, the movement "was less about challenges and protests against white power than feeling our way toward our own power and possibilities—really a set of challenges by ourselves and our communities, to ourselves" (Moses and Cobb 2001:125). Collective effort is transformational: thus Payne writes about the "African American freedom struggle" rather than the "civil rights movement." Vision alters perspectives.

Note that these two examples describe fundamentally egalitarian collective and radical practices: habits of doing "with" rather than "for" or "to." The work that is described here makes openings and possibilities. Folklore studies and other disciplines have increasingly sought reciprocal, participatory, and constructed practices for sharing authority (Sheehy 1992a, 1992b; Spitzer 1992; Baron 1999; Lawless 2000; Cadaval 2000). But what are the politics of these efforts? A radical politics actively challenges inequalities. Practices of collective authority-making are tools in this effort. Activists and artists long in the trenches have greatly expanded possibilities. "Keep the focus on the action, not the institution; don't confuse the vehicle with the objective; all cocoons are temporary and will disappear" (Bambara 1981:199). For a sister discipline, models in this area are Herzfeld (2001) and Bourgois and Schonberg (2009).

I documented Eric Joselyn's eye-catching signs before I knew who made them. In 1992,

public dollars supported dozens of events celebrating the quincentenary of Christopher Columbus's (so-called) discovery of America. Philadelphia activists who objected to this wholesale repackaging of genocide and tragedy fought back with time-honored weapons of the weak: folk arts of social change. The Stop the Name Change Coalition did serious public education in the course of fighting the city's plan to rename Delaware Avenue as Christopher Columbus Boulevard. An attention-getting canoe blockade in the Delaware River provided lively counternarratives to the official docking of the tall ships *Niña*, *Pinta* and *Santa Maria* (Westerman and Kodish 1992). Native peoples walked through Philadelphia in a long march of protest during 1992 counter-quincentenary actions, stopping in Washington Square Park (once Congo Square) for a ritual. And on the trees, signs: "Columbus discovered America: NOT." As it turned out, Eric Joselyn was involved: artist and activist for twenty-plus years then, he was someone people routinely turned to for help making "good-looking plans and things" for "righteous use, towards a righteous end." An artist aiming to even the odds for social justice movements, "offering ideas for tying our art to the ceaseless drive of regular people everywhere to build a better world," Joselyn made his work visible in the street, in meaningful collective actions (Kodish 2006:18).

Much later, for his PFP *What You Got to Say* exhibition (Joselyn 2006), Eric drew on twenty-eight years as an artist, activist, and ritual specialist with a dozen political organizations, collectives, and mobilizations.¹⁶ The show surveyed collective struggles and alternative perspectives. Banners, signs, props from actions and demos, scripts, plates, t-shirts, whirligigs, and more: pulled from cellars and storage bins in at least six states, turning the PFP gallery into a reminder of (or introduction to) struggles for women's rights, Asian American rights, workers' organizing, antiwar efforts (one oil war after another: the Gulf, Iraq 1, Iraq 2) and much more, including considerable work for Asian Americans United (AAU), directed by his partner, Ellen Somekawa, the array a comment on depth and breadth of relationships as well as struggle.

Among the t-shirts Eric made were some that said "No Stadium in Chinatown." Thousands of people organized by AAU wore these t-shirts, filling the streets in demonstrations against city plans threatening the community in 2000. In 2009, the design was back—stadium crossed out, casino written in, calling attention to environmental racism, a history of development projects foisted on the city's only remaining community of color, and to that community's successful history of resistance, organized against impossible odds.¹⁷ Call it vernacular performance art, transformation enactment, with rank-and-file mass participation.¹⁸ People came out, organized and together out of long work and shared concern, powerfully united, lifted by the beat of lion dancers' drums and cymbals, insistent messages condensed on t-shirts, banners, and signs.

The kind of authority Eric and Ellen have taught me to reject and resist in myself and others is top-down, authoritarian, externally credentialed, universalizing, solo-voiced. The kind of authority in which I have participated, in their company, is authority that is collective and collaborative. And bottom-up, local, particular, and specific. Complex, discontinuous, sometimes momentary, messy. A matter of endless meetings. Aspiring to be principled. Radically pluralist and standing against subordination. Where I can expect to be challenged (and to challenge) because it is that important. Lively talk, vital interchange, generative occasions—and great losses, some irredeemable, as well as silence and

absence—signal how and where authority is deliberated significantly. Oral and witnessed credentialing trace earned and legitimate authority, trust, and respect, marking character: reputation over the long haul. Character is how we come to know one another. Informal law theory settles here. Slogans speak to character-defining acts: people are known to walk the walk.

The kind of authority I am describing has been elaborated and practiced by dozens of African American folklorists (including those cited here) who have fused community, scholarly, and activist training and responsibilities (Fry 1975; Davis 1992a). Many who work from this tradition see their role as that of organizer or cultural worker (Reagon 1986). And more than that: engaged and responsive, they are accountable (May-Machunda 2008; McCarl 1992:122). They do not connect and disappear: they do not “give voice” but enliven options (obvious shared effort). They are not indiscriminant or *agents provocateurs*: present and untrustworthy. Instead, their work is described as a matter of building power, as collective and collaborative interaction: Bernice Johnson Reagon says that a song leader’s role is to plant a seed (1991:143). Sharon King describes her work as an offering (1991:45). Artful organizers and folklorists alike create openings: “You bounce a ball,” Robert Moses said. “You stand on a street and bounce a ball. Soon all the children come around. You keep on bouncing the ball. Before long it runs under someone’s porch and then you meet the adults” (Moses and Cobb 2001:xiv). Former SNCC worker and folklorist Worth Long writes: “My role as an organizer—community and cultural—is basically to give people an option. Powerlessness is basically having no option” (1991:33). He speaks for the importance of doing cultural work so that people own the process: “You are organizing to draw from the people what they feel they need to do. . . . The key is always to leave room for people to change what you offer to make whatever they are involved in theirs” (35). People together shape the significant work at hand, and power develops out of their action: “If people can define what they can do with what you’re doing at the beginning, then they can use it better” (28). Beverly Robinson was clear that people generally know what is important and what they want to preserve (1991:39–40) in folklore research and public projects: “Somebody has got to sanction what has been identified, and it should be the people themselves” (43).

Here is evidence of a tradition of progressive folklore practice that has not been given the attention that it deserves. A tendency to marginalize and resist work with certain sources and subjects persists tracking buried discriminations of race and class. Activist work by folklorists has too often been obscured and overlooked, or seen as the discrete business of a “subfield” rather than as central to the construction of a folklore approach. Critical contributions from people working in African American folklore, Mexican American folklore, laborlore, public and applied folklore, and more have regretfully been marginalized in this way (Limón 2007; Roberts 1993, 1999a; Seward 1996:31; Spady 1989). And there are other blind spots. Folklore as a discipline has not always kept an eye on liberation—unlike a strong majority of folklorists of color, people engaged in freedom struggle, straight-out activists, people with something at risk. That matters. Values of folk culture, egalitarian practice, and mutual respect all feel different when necessarily used toward emancipatory ends (Payne 1995:257). No wonder that those engaged in activist work often describe their par-

ticular efforts as characterized by the kinds of questions asked and the ways in which those questions are addressed (Sider 2003:lxviii). Fundamental principles and assumptions need to be questioned.

We are also misguided by the common tendency to imagine and elevate certain kinds of authority at the expense of others. Where activist history is concerned, major leaders (Big Men, Heroes), big events, large marches, and loud demonstrations still tend to receive more than their fair share of attention as sources of authority, knowledge, and social change. Focus on publicly visible agents and actions obscures some of the most important grassroots processes through which change occurs. This same privileging happens in the field of folklore as well. A fuller and more complex history is pluralist, less hobbled by subordinating practices and privileged genres of disclosure.

And critiques of activist folklore work still too often caricature it (thus perpetuating the errors of earlier critiques of public and applied folklore). It is said that activist scholars inevitably allow bias to shape efforts. That the end results are known before the work is done. That advocacy suppresses or manipulates knowledge. We are said to be using the wrong tools. In taking a partisan position we are told that we see less rather than more. And of course, it is suggested that the entire business is out of order (and a job in social work might be more appropriate). Elliott Oring (2004) catalogs the complaints listed above. His position is notable in its refusal to accept evidences of the merits of an alternative (and activist) approach. He uses deceptive frames of reference—for example, hypothetical questions (Oring 2004:261) that presume bias and the suppression of truth—to challenge Carl Lindahl's work (2004) exploring the claims of Lloyd Chandler as to the history of a song's origins. Why not address what Lindahl does—which is to be scrupulously fair, to name a single scholar's place, responsibility, journey, to open wider contexts to view? This is not defining one's work by its outcomes (Oring 2004:259–60) but considering that outcomes are relevant. Oring says advocacy work fails to address “the theoretical, methodological, or even moral necessities of folklore study” (259).¹⁹ On the contrary, to classic ballad scholarship, Lindahl adds dimensions—additional documents and testimonies, folk history, folk theory, social outcomes, attention to moral precepts, attention to his own role, and a tracking of what happens to this song in multiple worlds. Rather than “undermin[ing] the potential of folklore studies to be anything at all, let alone a force for good in the world” (Oring 2004:259), Lindahl gives weight and space to a fuller story of this song, its impacts, and a wider community of opinions. In doing so, he pays attention to the disparities that sparked his own commitment (his “calling”) and raises questions about claims and accountabilities.

The argument turns on matters of definitional authority: expansive versus restrictive senses of the discipline, inclusion of domains versus narrowly restricted evidences, egalitarian rather than extractive practices, and scalpels rather than hatchets (Davis 1991; Roberts 1991; Zeitlin 2000). A more authentic evaluation would consider how effectively activist work challenges (false) claims of objectivity, analyzes contexts of power, explicitly names (and works to dismantle) structures of subordination, acknowledges the real consequences of work, and aims to develop counterideology based in the experiences and expressions of subordinated peoples (Mat-

suda 1991:1393–8). What Arundhati Roy says about the situation of writers may be said about folklorists: We “may refuse to accept any responsibility or morality that society wishes to impose. . . . Yet the best and greatest of them know that if they abuse this hard-won freedom, it can only lead to bad art. There is an intricate web of morality, rigor, and responsibility that art, that writing itself,” and that folklore impose (Roy 2004:5).

Return to my examples: what do we make of the sheer volume of freedom struggles going on (Roy 2004, 2009; Smith 1999)? Gustavo Esteva and Madhu Suri Prakash coined the term *grassroots postmodernism* to describe a range of human rights, environmental justice, cultural equity, and land-claim efforts initiated by indigenous and nonindustrialized people, “the so-called illiterate and uneducated non-modern ‘masses’” of the “two-thirds world” (Esteva and Prakash 1998:3).²⁰ Grace Lee Boggs—elder, activist, philosopher—distinguishes this grassroots postmodernism from modernity: it rejects the idea that “there is only one universally valid way of understanding social reality,” challenges both “the exclusive and general validity of Western-defined notions of human rights” and “the notion of the self-sufficient individual, as contrasted with people-in-community.”²¹ Moreover, grassroots postmodernism rejects economics as the determining feature of social life, valuing also the ethical and the social. (This is a challenge to the very terms by which dominant and universalizing systems operate.) And “whereas Global Capitalism views the ‘local’ as an inconvenience on the road to progress, grassroots post-modernism nurtures ‘the local’” (Boggs 2001:1). Boggs also observes that a different theory of change underlies this approach, whereby local actions change the larger system through countless interconnections, rather than through accumulating mass or forcing system change (the difference between quantum and Newtonian physics, she says, referencing Margaret Wheatley). This is exemplified in the work described by Payne and Lear.

Collective authority, seen as epic in its presence, persistence, and longevity, offers a critical framework of power, trajectory of struggle, and vision. Enlarged context. And a wide cast of allies to whom we are accountable.

Place

Philadelphia, Philadelphia, I choose to stay in my home. . . .
—Joaquin Rivera²²

Folklore has long been concerned with the particulars of vital and sustainable communities, on some level: how vernaculars are generated, cultivated, and developed; how culture, local knowledge, and affective expression make livable community out of place (Morgan 1980; Basso 1996; Ives 1978; Glassie 2006). Many can say, as Jerry Davis did, that “we are founded on a passionate concern to preserve, lately to conserve, the social and expressive, esthetic integrity of the diversity of American, hemispheric, and world human communities” (Davis 1996:120). But it too often seems that the field is not centrally concerned with the shifting fates of these many localities and peoples. And we are surely in a state of emergency (Bourgois and Schonberg 2009:21).

Marginalized (socially vulnerable) local and vernacular traditions go in and out of fashion in folklore. It has been a bad few decades. Over the last thirty years, many folklorists found relevance in following culture-making in changing (post-)modern contexts, studying “up” just when inequalities widened, the income gap boomed, and jobs disappeared. The terms *folk* and *folklore* are a chronic embarrassment to some folklorists (and not the terms many people would use for their activities, their resources, and themselves). Similarly, the idea of the local is critiqued while widening inequalities remain too little addressed.²³ But focus on the dangers of “spoiled” terms may divert our attention from what is going on with those who have been left behind, collateral damage from endless modernist/postmodernist universalizing schemes.

Analysis can be revived by a view that is locally grounded but globally diverse, accountable in the positions we take relative to both community experience and universalizing systems. Folk (under many names: poor and peripheralized people, diverse local communities, migrants and dispossessed, even folk and folklorist) are fighting on numerous grounds on many fronts.²⁴ The grassroots postmodernism that Esteva and Prakash call “epic” is just one way of imaginatively linking peoples’ efforts. Folklore offers the possibility of joining the closely grained detail of a particular moment with larger peoples’ movements, sensitive to forces, coercive and reparatory: the field has theory and practice that we can and must contribute to current struggles and freedom movements.

Public interest folklore is the name I use for this work, in which we are together bound. “You all are native people, too. You just forgot where you came from,” Wasco/Navajo poet Elizabeth Woody commented at an American Folklore Society meeting in Portland, Oregon, after patiently responding to questions about sustaining Native culture.²⁵ Aware of complicated history and interdependence, she invites us to consider place from a long view: as guests and migrants meeting at certain familiar and predictable crossroads. People choosing freedom (Scott 2009), with certain debts and accountabilities, uncertain futures. And certain legacies: Plenty Coups’ chickadees are relevant in our anxious time, too. Visions of the kind of world we want to live in, to be part of, can (must) orient our work.

Place is always at stake. Our challenge is to know and value vital places (real teachings, motivating visions, great folk arts) and effectively challenge that which threatens them and all of us. Back to James Scott, who makes “a case against the imperialism of high-modernist planned social order,” or more specifically “against an imperial or hegemonic planning mentality that excludes the necessary role of local knowledge and know-how” (Scott 1998:6). He observes that “Formal order . . . is always and to some considerable degree parasitic on informal processes, which the formal scheme does not recognize, without which it could not exist, and which it alone cannot create or maintain.” This blind spot is critical, he observes, because it offers “a valuable point of departure for understanding why authoritarian, high-modernist schemes are potentially so destructive. What they ignore—and often suppress—are precisely the practical skills that underwrite any complex activity” (Scott 1998:310–1). In his critique of universalizing plans and agendas, I noted that Scott identifies another alternative authorizing agent: good in highly variable situations requiring a deep well of know-

ledge drawn from personal experience or others' stories (collective authority) and an ability to size up, adapt, and improvise. The climax of Scott's book is his compelling reasoned defense of "practical skills," "know-how," "savoir-faire," "common sense," or *métis*, from the Greek: "forms of knowledge embedded in local experience" (Scott 1998:311). This is Lear's creative practical reason and what we call folklore. Scott wants to jettison the term, which he sees as overly associated with particular kinds of minorities, static or inert, inactive or regressive. I disagree, finding this a view of folklore based on a certain problematic usage. Instead, I follow progressive and generative dimensions in the notion: folklore as widely disparate forms of vital, affectively centered, community-sanctioned work. Necessary knowledge and skill, creatively adapted. Moreover, this is folklore at a critical juncture, a point when past experience may not serve but is fully relevant. And it imagines the sources of folklore as progressive active agents put it all in play. Public interest folklore sees the work of creative practice reason as central and necessary to the radical practice that overwhelming inequalities require.

This is Rosemary Cubas's view of folklore: if she had known about the job, she would have been a folklorist, she thought. She was a longtime organizer. ("The best organizer I ever met," says Mary Yee). I met Rosemary at a time when gentrification was driving people of color and working people out of newly desirable parts of town, displacing families, homogenizing city neighborhoods (see Cubas 2003). It was from Rosemary that I first heard about people losing their houses to the city's Neighborhood Transformation Initiative (NTI), a program developed by Philadelphia's Mayor John Street in 2001.

"The City of Philadelphia is making a real and lasting commitment to reclaim, restore and revitalize our neighborhoods," said Mayor Street in 2002, describing NTI as an ambitious plan to address more than fifty years of deindustrialization and depopulation (Street 2002:1). Among other things, NTI would allow the city to "acquire properties, relocate residents and prepare large parcels of land for developers" (McGovern 2006:530). Street was trying to address real needs. Factories and plants that once anchored urban neighborhoods were long gone and, with them, jobs and residents who paid taxes. Lower North Philadelphia, including Rosemary's neighborhood, lost 60 percent of its population between 1950 and 1990 (McGovern 2006:536). Abandoned and vacant houses seemed a visible mark of these changing times. But things were not always as they seemed.

Whole neighborhoods were designated "blighted." Bodine Street was one of the streets targeted—with supreme disregard for the reality on the ground where the situation was far different from what the official records told. Anyone could have helped to correct these bureaucratic errors, had they cared to; residents went to City Hall to explain that they had actually lived for decades in the so-called vacant houses that the city had acquired the power to take away. Local people stood up to defend their rights and hold on to their neighborhoods. Rosemary shared information, organized residents. The organization she led, Community Leadership Institute, played a critical role in the fight against eminent domain abuse and the takings of homes in an area of lower North Philadelphia.

I was shocked when I learned that homes were being taken from people who had lived there for generations, hanging tough through rough times, economic disinvestment, and

city disregard. I was recruited. Rosemary said that they wanted to get the word out. PFP pitched in. Video documentaries were one result.²⁶

Rosemary told me that I really knew how to listen. Embarrassed then, I hear it differently now, recognizing that when we were together, she had time to explain (some of) what needed to be said; that people tend to hear themselves more fully when telling a story out loud; that her patient explanations shone light on possibilities; that fieldwork (occupational practice) has transformative potential. Rosemary recounted what she heard: how people's homes contained history, and were irreplaceable. Mr. Gunzleman once owned her house, and she could see what he had done to care for the place in his time. People appreciated, valued, the quality of their old houses, and they detailed the hard and good work, the skill and time and care, invested. Changes made: paint, plasterwork, the holiday decorations on which Bodine Street neighbors collaborated, the way people without much money had fixed things up and made them nice. No historic buildings, endangered species, or Great Places emerged to hang this struggle on, but people knew: "These new houses are paper houses," Lisa Segarra lamented. "A bullet can go right through it."²⁷ The old houses were solid physically and had become solid metaphorically. The new houses to which residents would be relocated would offer no protection. We protect one another. Or can learn to. Driving around her neighborhood, Rosemary pointed out how people were doing sweet things with "abandoned" lots. Don Hernandez made a park, with trees and a casita. People gathered there. Now they have been dispersed. She told how people knew one another, how her own immigrant history (she was Dominican-born), that of Bosnians and Puerto Ricans, blacks and whites and Jews, intermingled. She told about the work of making neighbors of drug dealers and orphans. Through difficulties, critical junctures, and tight places, they fought and disagreed and came to care about one another. They recognized one another. And that precious currency, escaping bureaucratic calculus, was destroyed.

No good has come of these clearances. People saw them for what they were: another case of urban removal, the extractive predatory practice of wealth redistribution (in wrong-headed familiar direction). The city drew some lines on a map, called it a blighted area, and demolished: did wholesale land clearances; bulldozed blocks into rubble-filled fields, dust, and glass; destroyed homemade neighborhoods, communities. The harder work is ongoing (and talented committed people are still at it). This is a multipart fight against predatory development policy: strategies that displace or further marginalize poor and working people and communities of color in the name of "improvement" or the "public good."

It took me too long to recognize what I was seeing when I walked around the neighborhood with Rosemary. I should have seen the resemblance to the Newfoundland resettlement that I had witnessed: wholesale relocations of fishing communities.²⁸ And I had read about English clearances. Why was I shocked? This is an old story, central to folklore. Radical activist scholar Raymond Williams was especially eloquent, describing developments on the British landscape where manor houses are seen in terms of their real costs, their "disproportion of scale" marking a history of "exploitation and seizure" of land, "robbery and fraud" over generations, creating a barbarous disparity (R. Williams 1973:105-6; see also Herzfeld 2009). Arundhati Roy as eloquently describes the same

process now (2009:7). Barbarous disparities are everywhere. Anthropologist Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing's work (2005) began in simple compassion: she was angry at what was happening to local Indonesian people facing off against the capitalist interests reshaping their rainforest homes. The disastrous policies of transnational corporations encounter local interests in a kind of "conjunctive friction," she says, naming where inequalities come together without giving up full framing power to dominant global forces.

Transformation narratives happen at just such moments—when we recognize ourselves in different ways and reimagine ourselves in the contexts of larger struggles. We become someone different, Reagon reminds us. Conjunctive friction seeds transformation: Jerry Davis recalls dis-ease (inauthenticity) and insult pushing him on. Uneasy, we turn to tradition as a resource that we own and remake, called to be *métis*-makers at these junctures. Our creative acts—as folklorists and as people—take leaps, resisting oppressive structures that define us as in some way separate from others around us. Active folklore (we have long intoned, describing others more than ourselves) is a sign of a healthy community and not only a canary in a mine shaft calling out trouble—early warning signal either way (Berry 1977:3–14). Activist practice has the capacity to reorient (Roy 2004). If we see this work as a matter of cultivating our collective capacity to sustain and regenerate valued vernacular resources, then we first must aim for “[even] engagement of one human soul and spirit with another, each able as *equals* to balance a mutually beneficial association” (Davis 1996:119). An even engagement against inequality begins by naming disparities and by deciding where we stand. Collapsing the distinction between folk and folklorist requires that we consider how we imagine our work and ourselves in the midst of such disasters. Nostalgia, John Roberts told us, was history annotated with feelings: what we long for, where value resides. If we see ourselves as equally oriented by motivating freedom dreams, we keep our eye on what we value.

Community-sustainability struggles often start with visible things: what can be seen and documented, what we can name as being at risk. In North Philadelphia we found no spotted owls, no obvious tools for stopping the erosion and theft of community and home place. Watch the impacts and who is being removed. Narrow notions of worth make it possible. What might we have named: Folk arts that make us human and part of something larger. How environmental racism was linked to public health outcomes. What if we took more seriously the notion of cultural body, cultural health, and vitality? Medical metaphors (taken from other public-health struggles) serve. The loss of arm lingers: phantom limb, they call it (and we ache for what is gone). We know and see PTSD around us, the long-term cost of removals. We have witnessed cultural death too long. I wish I had realized then what the metaphors imply.

Rosemary passed on April 5, 2006. Gentrification, eminent domain abuse, and development policy overall are still major areas of struggle in our city and no doubt where you live, too. Resources—in the form of land and anything else deemed to have bankable worth—are being sucked out of our communities. We are so closeted, Jerry told us. Can we get in the same room long enough to support one another's efforts, to learn from one another? Can we recognize the crossroads at which we stand? In concern for the fates of diverse local communities (the two-thirds world) in the face of global

capitalism (the one-third world), we return to places long noted by folklorists: to the margins, borders, boundaries, crossroads, liminal times and spaces. But this time, perhaps, more explicitly animated with an insistent sense that any place can (and does) become a no-person's-land in an instant: look at Bodine Street. Recognize places from which certain people have been removed or are absent: local land, neighborhoods, meeting rooms (those of the American Folklore Society included). Toni Cade Bambara asked, in *Salt Eaters*, "Are you sure, sweetheart, that you want to be well?" (1981:1). Cultural health and vital folklore surely require resisting state-making machineries. James Scott's most recent book (2009) describes state-resisting peoples, maroon communities constituted by peoples' political choices. The public interest folklore I am imagining places us as widely dispersed members of just such communities.

And here I am again in good company at a New Jersey diner with Jerry; along the Austin Riverwalk with Beverly; on Philadelphia streets with Lois, Rosemary, Eric, and Ellen, unsure of the steps forward. I write in the hope that together we have the capacity to work past what any of us alone might accomplish. That seeking authentic and authoritative practice can be tools in this labor. Critical race scholar and lawyer Patricia Williams writes that she does not consider herself either remarkable or a troublemaker; in challenging bias, she merely shares "the insights of women, of people of color, of a certain degree of powerlessness" in places where such perspectives are rarely present (P. Williams 1995:93). Common knowledge that many people voice daily. Displaced, with the obligation and capacity to bring wider perspectives to bear. Without forgetting where we come from (even as we cannot possibly fully know), we move forward together in unfamiliar and perilous times. We bring others with us, in conversation and action. Character shows at the crossroads.

Coda

Tell me what's going on. I'll tell you what's going on.
—Marvin Gaye

In arguing for the important traditions of diverse peoples, folklorists have generally been part of what the late Archie Green, looking at the politics of cultural work, has described as secular liberalism. "Only a handful of folklorists during the past century have identified with radical theses challenging majoritarian consensus," he wrote, and he may still be right, more than twenty years later, that "most American folklorists have accepted dominant ideology: empiricism, pragmatism, individualism, parliamentary democracy, progressive reform, free market economics" (Green 1983:351). Alan Lomax and Pete Seeger have drawn attention from popular writers and scholars as presumed representatives of folklore's radical heritage.²⁹ But focus on them and their approaches obscures other and different kinds of radicalism, noted here as critical formative aspects of activist day-to-day work. The seeming conservatism of some traditional arts practice, the subtleties of local meanings, and the dispersed nature of the field can further conceal and impede progressive work. And the ideology and politics of most folklore work are rarely made explicit (but see the exemplary work of Briggs and Mantini-Briggs 2003).

Shipwright, union man, and organizer (apprenticing in craft, solidarity, and justice) before he was a folklorist and professor, Archie Green long and vociferously disagreed with the political and cultural/aesthetic tenets of Lomax and Seeger (Cantwell 2001). Archie opposed Popular Front politics, monist or doctrinaire social arrangements, and folksong revival styles, critical of their particular skewed representations of people's lives and vernacular traditions. Archie characterized his own work as anarcho-syndicalist and pluralist, valuing vernacular styles and ordinary working people's own expressive formulations (Green 2001). This longtime stance harmonizes well with the Afrocentric (or de-ethnocentricized polyvalent) folklore theory for which John W. Roberts calls (1993). And it meshes with what critical race theorist and lawyer Mari Matsuda characterizes as a politics of radical pluralism and antisubordination (1991). I have taken this as a basis for sketching a public interest folklore and some of its occupational practices.

Radical activist practice reframes internal disputes. Such public interest folklore avoids language that seems to artificially separate public folklore (seen as mediated or collaborative display or representational work) from applied folklore (focused on amelioration and justice) (Green 1992; Baron 2008). It assumes that politics, ethics, social change, and representation issues are present, acknowledged or not, in any kind of work with folklore, regardless of terrain. It requires us to address how folklore forms (and folklorists) challenge inequalities, racism, the excesses of individualism, and the exploitative assumptions of disaster capitalist economics in everyday practice. Internal and academic definitional debates can prevent us from seeing ourselves in terms of movements for human dignity and humane existence, where authentic selves and legitimate authority are abiding concerns. Those who come to this work motivated by freedom dreams are explicitly committed to realities on the ground, to equitable and transformative action with people engaged in struggles for sustainable communities, by whatever names.³⁰ This is the view of the field that Jerry Davis advanced: "Those communities that have been for the entire span of our existence the ubiquitous shadows, the voiceless plantation hands, the bastardized cousins from illicit social unions kept on anemic academic welfare, must begin to insinuate themselves, ourselves, infect us, rudely intrude to the very core of our Society" (Davis 1996:125). A radically pluralist antisubordination politics recenters our work in the midst of collective effort.

Imagine what the field might look like if we framed our work in terms of struggles that matter, in which living people (and future generations) have a stake, if we linked variously placed efforts. Coalition work, Reagan reminds, is never easy, but you do it so you won't get killed (1983). If bridge languages are needed to link revolutionaries and clairvoyants (Bambara 1981), then we may do well to consider the possibilities of discredited or maligned terms, tools, or categories that in different ways focus attention on accountabilities and shared vision. Whatever our opinions, we can no longer imagine that substantive, relevant, progressive ethical practice is beyond reach or outside ourselves or that folklore is anything but central to current struggle. This is or can (and should) be regenerative and transformational practice.

And it is our occupational folklore: What are we doing? What do we call ourselves? How are we named and known? What if we see ourselves as socially responsible work-

ers laboring equitably for community transformation: community scribes, cultural health workers, métis-makers, bridgeworkers' apprentices, artisan-critics of progress stitching patchwork in public? How do we share with others the work of cultivating radical sources and tending progressive legacies? How does it feel if we count ourselves as members of the rank and file, doing good blue-collar jobs, developing skills in women's work and shadow economy, working humbly in "humbling activity" (Smith 1999)? Working against privilege, stitching against the grain (Brodkey 1996)?

Who we are is written in our actions. Reputation and character live on the tongues of others: we are forever accountable. We read our own authority in what can be said about us by those in positions to know. In "that which we give away," Marge Piercy says, "and don't clutch" (1999:135-7). We are rendered inauthentic when we lack others who show us ourselves, our work, our worth. When we fail to see it as joint effort, collective undertaking.

"There's no place like home," Jerry Davis intoned, clicking his burgundy ropers and—"poof"—disappearing after thanking us for indulging him, and thanking Fair Jane for the invitation.³¹

The question of how we inhabit this place is folklore's core. Do we believe it or not? Do we take folklore seriously? Time to come out as folklorists.

"And the dreams that I dare to dream really do come true," Jerry reminded us. And let it be so.

Notes

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1. Reagon recorded "Give Your Hands to Struggle" in 1975. It was reissued in 1997. Listen at <http://www.bernicejohnsonreagon.com/>, where you can also find a biography, a bibliography of her scholarship, and examples of creative work and projects.

2. See Roberts (1999b) for an obituary and remembrance. A bibliography of Jerry Davis's folklore writing and a brief biography can be found at <http://www.folkloreproject.org/folkarts/resources/pubs/davis.php>.

3. This thread is indebted to public interest and critical race legal theorists and practitioners Greene (1991), Williams (1991, 1995), Matsuda (1991, 1996), and others.

4. Bambara again, as Louis Massiah describes her, walking that path himself (Bambara 1996: xi). Also see Holmes and Wall (2008).

5. Reagon ([1975] 1997). The song is "Freedom in the Air."

6. There is much literature on this topic. See also Bauman and Briggs (2003), Bendix (1997), Briggs (1996), Handler and Linnekin (1994), Hobsbawn and Ranger (1983), Linnekin (1991), Trask (2000), Whisnant (1983).

7. Two critical race theorists are helpful here. Mari Matsuda distinguishes between progressive and regressive identity politics (1996:15). And Patricia Williams writes compellingly on the problems of "verbal blockbusting": forms of rhetorical obsolescence and robbery that devalue terms with (former) purchase power (1995:27-29). I am grateful to Bill Westerman for bringing Matsuda's work to my attention. (Misreading "folklore" for her word "juridical" has greatly benefited my thinking.)

8. John L. Jackson prefers the notion of “sincerity” in *Real Black* (2005). I, too, want to privilege the active self in any discussion of “realness.” But I value authenticity over sincerity for the way that it acknowledges collective forms (genres/modes/traditions) rather than single agents. And intentionality is neither a reliable nor a sufficient indicator of character enacted in community.

9. Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing’s (2005) characterization of her own fieldwork—long-term, discontinuous, outraged, distressed—catalogues a gendered reconstruction of an activist-scholar’s labor and craft, and offers a further reminder of the ways that distanced, objective, and outside notions of expertise privilege characteristics of male performance. See Kodish (1987).

10. If this is a step from deconstructing authenticity as theory to deconstructing authenticity as practice, what other choices do we have, and where might this choice lead? And if this is a strategic essentialism (Noyes 2006), then we may acknowledge the difference between progressive and regressive essentialisms (Matsuda 1996).

11. There is much more that can be said than I can sufficiently address here. In a personal communication to me, Dorry Noyes observes that the existential tradition of authenticity opposes it to alienation; both Fanon and DuBois are relevant. She also writes: “The kind of authenticity critiqued by Regina [Bendix] et al. is already a reification/alienation of that primary authenticity—the way that national movements as they started turning into state projects froze it into origins instead of something situational” (see also Noyes 2006:31). Note that in considering authenticity, I am restricting my attention simply to one dimension of Reagon’s account, which, in her own theory and practice, she continues to fully develop.

12. Reagon embeds critical analysis of performance features in her testimony here; of course, she is both reporting on her experience and setting this event in the wider context of African American song with which her scholarship is concerned. For example, see her discussion of the history and evolution of African American sacred music (Reagon 1992:3–18), the spiritual and emotional force of the tradition, and matters of transcendence and survival (1992:3–7, 11–3). For other transformation narratives, see Reagon (2001:126, 130–1).

13. But not embraced, I might add, by funders—private or public—despite the public benefit conferred by ODUNDE annually for 35-plus years. At considerable cost. An example of the false measures and investments governing our particular urban cultural life, especially inequitable in relation to sustaining community vitality and diverse cultural ecosystems (see Graves 2005).

14. Reagon wrote “They are falling all around me” (in “Give Your Hands to Struggle,” [1975] 1997) about great singers and musicians passing; I use it here to allude to collective effort and social change legacy as well, to the responsibilities and gifts lodged in us from those who come before, and for an example of how we hold ourselves accountable to those authorizers we respect.

15. Also see Smith (1999:17). For the opposite, documenting ways in which legal and other systems make it impossible for people to speak the truths of their situations, see Westerman (1992, 1994). Communalists mistook the critical roles of individual actors but were right in observing a dimension of collective work/ownership/participation that matters.

16. See <http://www.folkloreproject.org/programs/exhibits/joselyn.php>. There were works commissioned by CISPES, Northern Sun Merchandising, the Drywallers Union (San Diego, CA), Angel Ortiz (Philadelphia City Council member), Berkeley Cop Watch, the McClintock Workers Support Committee, Black Workers for Justice, Labor for Mumia Committee, BringThemHomeNow.com, Teachers Against the War (NYC), Philadelphia IWW, Stop the Name Change Coalition, and more.

17. For coverage of the Casino struggle, see <http://www.aaunited.org> and <http://www.casinofreephila.org>.

18. That Eric’s principled and excellent work is not easily named by conventional genres, and goes largely unrecognized by galleries and funders, are other issues worth noting.

19. See McDowell and Smith (2004) for a series of essays on advocacy issues in folklore, the context in which Oring’s and Lindahl’s essays are gathered.

20. They make a useful distinction between progressive grassroots modernism and regressive modern or premodern formations to which I have alluded.

21. Readers can sign up for her weekly essays in *The Michigan Citizen*, e-mailed regularly by the Boggs Center (<http://www.boggscenter.org>). Thanks to Debbie Wei for introducing me to Boggs and her work.

22. This song was written by the late *pleñero* Joaquin Rivera, at the request of Rosemary Cubas and the Community Leadership Institute. “Philadelphia, I Choose to Stay in My Home” can be heard in the documentary *I Choose to Stay Here* (2004), codirected by Cubas et al., and at http://www.folkloreproject.org/folkarts/resources/documentaries/zPlayer/doc_iChoose.php.

23. Shuman (1993) argues that the “local” is too often a faulty and essentialized construct; as with the misuse of authenticity, this argument relates primarily to distanced/elite uses of “local” as an unmarked category. See Matsuda on progressive essentialisms (1996:18–9).

24. For example, consider an active coalition of environmental justice groups, Burmese activists, antiwar activists, indigenous groups, climate change activists, and others pursuing local struggles against corporate giant Chevron (Solnit 2008:17–8; see also Klein 2007). And see Patricia Williams on “the hard work of boundary crossing” (1991:129–30) and Matsuda on “asking the other question” (1996:64–5).

25. Woody confirmed her 1998 comment in a personal communication with me. For her work, see Woody (1994).

26. This work eventually turned into two video documentary projects: *I Choose to Stay Here* (Cubas et al. 2004) and *The Taking of Bodine: Never Forget* (Cubas et al. 2007). George McCullough (2005) tells a larger story; to this, PFP was pleased to contribute footage. For background, see Cubas (2003) and Martinez (2003).

27. Miriam Camitta (1988) discusses these issues in the context of an earlier development struggle in Philadelphia.

28. I lived in Newfoundland between 1975 and 1977, and my education in folklore was also education in displacement, failed state practices of removal. There is a large literature here. See Canadian Archival Information Network 2008, http://www.mun.ca/mha/resettlement/rs_intro.php.

29. Consider American Folklife Center symposia (2006, 2007). For contrasting views on Lomax’s work, see Davis (1996:121), Lawless (2000), and Work et al. (2005). For an early consideration of relationships between folklore and left-wing politics, see Reuss (1971). And for alternative positions addressing class and ideology, consider Paredes (1958, 1976) and his students Peña (1985) and Limón (1983).

30. I am indebted to Bill Westerman’s insistence on political belief as an important and under-recognized realm for attention (1995).

31. Jane Beck, then president of the American Folklore Society, invited Jerry to give the plenary address.

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