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## **Imagining Public Folklore**

What folklore *isn't* public? What folklore isn't, inevitably, about more than private, individual effort? Here I explore public folklore as an occupation committed to broadly democratic cultural participation. Over the last fifty years, increasing numbers of folklorists in the United States have worked as public and applied folklorists, holding the deceptively simple and radical notion that all peoples' experiences, arts, and expressions are worthy of attention, and that we neglect such attention to our certain risk (Davis 1996; Green 2001; Baron 2008). Public folklore is frequently described in terms of job setting (outside the university) and medium (festivals, exhibitions, documentaries): external features defined by their differences from mainstream academic norms. Here, however, I want to focus on practice: what the work is, and what it allows. Among the many threads of public folklore, I distinguish a progressive public interest tradition where labor equitably dedicated towards the flourishing of people's power and capacities, traced in arts and culture, is a critical variety of liberation struggle (Reagon 1990).

Folklorists may agree on folklore's critical role in cultural life; they vary in embracing vernacular practices as means of addressing fundamental social inequalities and inequities (Stewart 2000; Graves 2005:196–220; McCarl 2006; Kirshenblatt and Kirshenblatt-Gimblett 2007; Haring 2008; Ivey 2008:ix; Scott 2009). Some have named these cultural rights issues; the inalienable human right to (and responsibility for) culture, that is to say, to dependable access to excellent and vital folk arts. The emerging field of U.S. public folklore, my focus here, has been slow to explicitly address big-picture questions, large challenges, and visions. When politics are not made explicit or are pictured as a minority concern, radical traditions in folklore are easily buried (Alvarez 2005:7–17, 89–96; Cocke 2002). But we have developed over the last fifty years—reacting against the pernicious impacts of corporate capitalism, trying to avoid well-documented pitfalls, narrowly focused, repudiating nationalist, universalizing, and regressive strains, hampered by a general absence of reference to the accomplishments of significant actors and to shared struggle, yet against the steady background of the African American freedom

movement and other liberation struggles that have changed the terrain of our lives. Amidst such forces, separately and against huge odds, straddling the economies that threaten us, great teachers have shaped the practice of public folklore. This essay is a small payment on large debts.

## **Politics and principles**

For me and many others, one of these great teachers was Archie Green, a man who had enormous impact in shaping a developing discipline nationally through work as a scholar without a long-term academic base, an organizer and public intellectual, an “anarcho-syndicalist with strong libertarian tendencies,” a person with diverse friendships (Cantwell 2001:xv–xvi). *Partisan*, *particular*, and *pluralist* were the terms he often used to characterize public folklore: the practice of folklore in public contexts, for public good (Green 2001:157). His framework reflects a preoccupation with large social concerns—notably environmental and workers’ struggles, and questions of democratic engagement and public responsibility. Robert Cantwell describes the artful reflexivity of Archie’s writing: He was “caulking the joints in the discursive hull (to use the figures of Archie’s own trade), bolting the rhetorical decking to the argumentative framework, plugging the bolt-holes and applying a protective varnish” (in Green 2001:xxii). Archie was a shipwright before he was a folklorist and his language, well-crafted and well-considered, treats public folklore as a type of everyday labor: particular skill put to necessary task (Green 2001:199). Here, in his honor and memory, I take liberties in describing *anti-subordination* and *radical pluralism* as politics that elaborate his approach (Matsuda 1996). They animate the following keywords and describe the work that I most admire and to which I aspire.

Here, a *partisan* is committed and accountable, resists draconian forces. Frankly partisan public folklore work develops from long relationships with people to whom we have become responsible. And it comes from everyday confrontation with the inequalities circumscribing our lives. My generation has painfully witnessed the costs of 30 years of neo-liberalism. We continue to be excoriated for owning up to our politics (see Oring 2004). In these contexts, being partisan is a matter of the kinds of questions we learn to ask, the forms of respect we tender, the kinds of

contributions we learn to make, and the forms of power that we build (Sheehy 1992:323–9; McCarl 2006b:23; Lindahl 2010).

Public folklorists are *particularists*: in our diverse locations; in insisting on the importance of vernacular practices; in our long obsession with high-context expression and attention to the divergent understandings shaped by people’s wide and varied experiences; in the close eye we’ve kept the dynamic and protean nature of culture-making over generations and on people’s places in these efforts. But we are also closet collectivists: in friendships and long-term engagement with others as part of the work; in attention to how community authority is inscribed in popular expression and practice; and in cultivating a capacity to see creativity and individuality where they are lodged collectively—one of Roger Abraham’s great contributions (1970). An activist mix of particularism and collectivism is close-up work. Notions of fixed identities and authenticities give way to awareness of people’s struggles for expanded subjectivities, self-determination, and self-fashioning of arts and community quality of life (Graves 2005; Lear 2006:7–10, 31, 42–52; Davis 2007; Sheehy 2007; Spitzer 2007). We recognize strategic progressive essentialisms and anti-essentialisms as choices that people make in standing against subordination (Matsuda 1996). Locating folk arts and ourselves in the context of wider struggles and freedom movements allies us with others who resist re-inscribing inequalities (Reagon 1990, 1991; N’Diaye and Bibby 1991; Payne 1995; Bambara 1996; Kelley 2002; Briggs and Mantini-Briggs 2003:324–331; Freeman 2006). These shifts are led by feeling, and marked by character and reputation. The work is *personal*. Another dimension to add to Archie’s alliterative trio. And, of course, the personal is *political*.

Few of us are as fully integrated as Archie: clear about guiding ideologies, excellent craftspeople, eloquent speakers and writers. “Write this down,” he would bark, until I learned to come prepared. I write as that apprentice. But I know apprenticeships as true lifelong endeavors in terms of the relationships they trace and the work they embrace (Peterson 1996:24–31; Hawes 2008:154). Guerrilla work, Archie called it. What is this labor? It is harder to say than it might seem. Out here in the U.S. hinterlands—Elko, Middlebury, Austin, Boise, Madison, Fresno, Philadelphia—many of us have operated for decades as sole practitioners or in relatively small shops. We remain severely under-resourced. The field is splintered and disconnected: united in

no single movement or moment. Like many of Archie's students and extended kin, I am by now deeply embedded, gratefully accountable to many local teachers—activists, artists, and people with wide ranges of experience—who, like Archie, took time and care in instructing me.

We undertake this work together with diverse others, though we lack clear common language that might allow us to articulate our agenda more precisely (Narayan 2008; Lindahl 2010). Situated peripherally within what has been called the art camp, in one local hinterland, I outline here one purpose that may bind us: how it is possible to imagine and cultivate healthy grounds for culture. Tracing features of occupational practice, I look to stories traded, visions embraced, accomplishments recounted and measured. (Learning to value what we trust and love is a lesson long in coming). We have to be as “equally at ease inside barnyards as bureaucracies,” wrote Nick Spitzer, and to “strive for eloquence” in cultural conversations (Spitzer 2007:99). He articulates the creolist awareness that we speak in complex and layered tongues and that we participate in significant dialogues about our fate and future collectively, ethically, and imaginatively. I find public folklore at its best when it answers Toni Cade Bambara's call for (and her example in shaping) a bridge language by which revolutionaries might speak with clairvoyants (1996:235).

Practitioners writing about the field and addressing themselves to the discipline have taken other tacks in describing public folklore. They offer programmatic overviews, surveys of key issues, wide perspectives on such questions as the founding of federal and state folk arts programs, pros and cons of modes and metaphors, case studies, and useful ruminations, far more than I can do justice to here. Collections and special journal issues introduce a range of important voices and perspectives (Collins 1980; Camp 1983; Feintuch 1988; Hufford 1994; Jones 1994; Baron 1999 and 2008; Shuldiner 1993–1995; MacDowell and Smith 2004; Wells 2006; Baron and Spitzer 2007; MacDowell and Kozma 2008). Essayists hint at the broad ranges of conversations in which people participated at different stages of their careers, and I recommend these writings as introductions to critical themes in U.S. public folklore. The lifelong labors of leading workers, artists, and people of color (too seldom appearing in such references) offer further examples of principled practice honed over many years into fine craft (Cannon 2000; Peterson 1999; Alliance

for California Traditional Arts website). Our kin in community arts have shaped parallel agendas (Appalshop and Community Arts Network websites). Ample ground has been laid.

### **Valuing multiple excellences**

Bill Westerman observes that the work of public and applied folklore contributed to a revolutionary expansion of what is considered art in the United States (Westerman 2006:118; Hawes 2008:128). But this fight continues, against the odds. Folk arts and those committed to them challenge mainstream (elite, universalizing, top-down, bureaucratic) notions of what counts as art, where it occurs, and how it is meaningfully embodied and supported. Here is art, after all, that is participatory, exists in the lives and hearts of common people, is recognizable in repertoire as much as in individual virtuosity. Official structures shove diverse vernacular traditions to the periphery; the commercial sector dwarfs them, although they are abundant in shadow economies, currencies based on alternative values (Ivey 2008). Folk arts struggle for equitable measures of respect. So, consider that Native and Sea Island basket-making, cowboy poetry, Irish music, blues, klezmer, and African American storytelling are just a handful of the significant folk arts said to have enjoyed “revivals” or “renaissances” over the last 50 years. What does this mean? Westerman sees a radical reconfiguration of elite notions of excellence here.

Start with Westerman’s optimistic picture, and consider how *excellence* is reckoned in diverse grassroots contexts. Carl Lindahl breaks down this process, distinguishing between interconnected elements of forestory, performance and understory (2010:257). One place to begin (both curious and obvious) for glimpsing great *performance* is with individual artists celebrated in prestigious awards. However imperfect and problematic honorific systems are, they recognize some remarkable artists. The National Endowment for the Arts Heritage Awards (the nation’s highest honor in folk arts, modeled after Japan’s living national treasures program) has since 1982 annually named keepers of significant cultural heritage. Look up the winners: Mary Jackson, Buck Ramsey, Elaine Hoffman Watts, LaVaughn Robinson, and others. Their life stories — part of Lindahl’s *forestory* — invoke hosts of others who made their way possible. Attention here has the capacity to widen cultural histories, offering particular detail and vivid context for the birth and cultivation of diverse artistic excellences; their meaning for

communities; the challenges they face (since one-time awards are no guarantee of survival); and the signs of health for these parts of our social body (National Endowment for the Arts website; Siporin 1992; Cannon 2000; Freeman 2006; Hawes 2008:155–168; Mulcahy 2010).

And then, the *understory*: what we take from all of this and hold in mind. The late and great Gerald Davis, a public folklore pioneer in his own right, noted that “we have been slow to plumb our own experiences” (Davis 1989:viii). What is excellence in public folklore practice? Davis offered benchmarks in his plenary address to the American Folklore Society (1996), and earlier, when he described his 1972 encounters with photographer and activist Roland Freeman, then contemplating work among his own people, Baltimore’s surviving arabbers (the local name for African American horse-cart vendors). Thirty years later, Freeman would be named an NEA Heritage Award winner. In these early encounters, Davis judged that Roland already had what was needed: passionate conviction, the capacity for “caring documentation,” “family history,” “active relationships,” “a love for the integrity of the tradition,” and “professional craft.” The requirements for excellent work are clear, simple, and profound: it is envisioned as a practice of guiding attention to what is essential in the human spirit (Davis 1989:viii). Freeman himself observed that the work has been “rewarding, healing and integrating” (1989:ix).

Davis’s criteria for good practice and Freeman summary of his life-changing labor are examples of authentic evaluation: trustworthy measures yielding enduring value. Excellence is articulated in terms of artfulness and fine craft; knowledge (personal and collective) on which we can build; integrity of self and work (I’ll return to this notion of *authenticity* later); ethical, purposeful labor; trust; means of cultivating a vision in which others have a genuine stake; real change. This work offers pathways to freedom (Bambara 1996:91–92; Atlas and Korza 2005:162–163). As another late great public interest folklorist, Beverly Robinson, insisted, shifting into African American vernacular: This is not playing.

For many reasons, the African American freedom movement and civil rights struggle remain underacknowledged forces in the development of, and examples of excellence in, public interest folklore. The model of a beloved community and life stories of veterans in this tradition offer many detailed descriptions of excellent engaged work for a just purpose, where people are

accountable to others and to larger and widely held freedom dreams, and where folk arts are central to stories of social change and present at critical junctures (Davis 1996; Freeman 1989; Kelley 2002; N'Diaye and Bibby 1991; Reagon 1990, 1991). It is not accidental that Charles Cobb describes African American activists (including folklorists) with a large vision: seeing themselves as part of a tradition in which people are “totally committed to ‘the redemption and vindication of the race’ —black race or human race, take your pick . . . [a] commitment [that] leads straight to culture and tradition.” Cobb refers to generations-old traditions of community organizing that sustained enslaved Africans, and still sustain movements for justice (in Freeman 2006: 44; also see Roberts 2000; Payne 1995; Shapiro et al. 1976). In the context of meaningful work for social change, such pointed evaluation is certainly debated—a public matter, reflecting collective judgments and deep ideological divisions—but it also articulates vernacular criteria of excellence. The stories people tell about one another hold meaningful folk history and analysis (Lindahl 2010). Character and life story, held and shared among a community, are an important way in which people (including public folklorists) are judged.

So consider a place where such a narrative tradition is elaborated. Consider a celebration documented in a book. In 2005 Roland Freeman organized a tribute to honor Worth Long, “a remarkable person,” civil rights activist, cultural and blues historian, interpreter of material culture, organizer of festivals around the country (Freeman 2006:5). Family and friends contributed appreciations picturing Long. Doing fieldwork, with family, engaged in the African American freedom struggle as a student activist in Arkansas, as a sit-in protester, as Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) coordinator in Selma. Who was beaten and bloodied in Selma but would not stop naming himself “Mr. Worth Long” (Charles Bonner in Freeman 2006:35). That same spirit inspired his organizing and his folklore fieldwork, each a matter of “listening” and “making yourself at home” and then as a matter of course treating it like home and paying people just the same respect you’d expect to be given. Walking the walk. Long was hard to contact, often in the field or traveling by Greyhound bus. But you could put the word out that you were looking for him and Bernice Johnson Reagon observes that “he always turned up when you needed him” (Freeman 2006:35). He was where he needed to be, “on the case” (Freeman 2006:5). Others still on the case clarify the terms.

*Accolades* describe the community's names for Worth Long. They value the man's artistry and integrity in this work. People describe *virtuosity* (great skill and accomplishment, solid research), *significant relationships* (the many artists he befriended, doors he opened to let others move dreams forward), *vision* (showing us that folk arts are as important an ingredient for freedom movement as voting rights or algebra skills [Moses and Cobb 2001]), and *seriousness of purpose* (a disinclination to mess around). Testimonies filled with love ground this work and secure its future. These are signs of excellence to value and believe in. That Davis, Freeman and Long portray great work in similar terms is not accidental.

If community development policy had an eye on serious cultural sustainability, it would track the real outcomes of such public interest folk cultural investments and actions. It would find in Worth Long's life a template for cultivating a vital social body and expanding freedom of expression. It would pay attention to significant indicators of the value of Long's work: a generation of African American folklorists, the National Black Arts Festival, the Mississippi Folklife Project, the "Will the Circle Be Unbroken?" radio history of the Civil Rights Movement, films, exhibitions, the Mississippi Blues and Heritage Festival ("the first major music festival in this country to be owned and organized by an African American organization"), the Southeastern Louisiana Zydeco Festival, the blues revival, Penn Center's Heritage Days Celebration and stewardship of Gullah culture, his influence on the Smithsonian Festival of American Folklife, Bess Lomax Hawes and the National Endowment for the Arts, Julie Dash's *Daughters of the Dust* and much more (Freeman 2006). Outcomes, and the community *celebrating* its own / telling Worth Long's true names, aptly illustrate what *excellence* means within a radical vision of folklore (Mills 2008:20). Plumbing oral tradition for what it says about character, reputation and cultural history fills in the picture with recurring vernacular definitions of power, authority, and authenticity. For example: "He helped me develop 'my voice' and understand the importance of using it" (Crosby in Freeman 2006:47).

Such community criteria can be useful means of evaluating other public folklore work as well. Consider the Smithsonian Center for Folklore and Cultural Heritage (CFCH) and its Festival, established in 1967 and now in its 43<sup>rd</sup> year. The Smithsonian Folklife Festival is perhaps the most-documented of U.S. public folklore efforts. It is the subject of six books or book-length

collections and countless other essays; many dozens of annual Festival program books, monographs and recordings; and a score of state / regional / country spin-offs. Hundreds of folklorists initiated programs, were trained, or developed aspects of their practice on a CFCH paycheck. Questions of how to historicize and analyze festivals and display events in general, and the Smithsonian's Festival in particular, have generated a disproportionate amount of scholarly ink (Bauman 1992; Cantwell 1993; Price and Price 1994; Sommers 1994; Kurin 1997; Hasan-Rokem 2007; Diamond 2008). Critics have addressed the problematics of representation and reported on gaps between idea and actualization, but their critiques often reflect distance and double standards in analysis—for example, a persistent habit of subordinating vernacular genres and grassroots voices; lack of attention to proportion, time depth and long-term outcomes; inadequate or partial contextualization; failure of sympathy (marking disbelief, bad faith, or limits of engagement).

The examples I draw from African American activist folklorists' work offer a different framework for understanding what the CFCH and the Festival have accomplished. Here is a way to evaluate excellence in public interest folklore by what actually happens on the ground, according to people who are positioned to recognize good work and feel its impact, a habit of documenting histories of exemplary work pursued over many years and with reference to meaningful community opinions. We look to where and how mission and vision are made real and aptly judged (Mills 2008:20). Where CFCH is concerned, important generative work includes the African Diaspora program that I have alluded to here, and the signal efforts of Bernice Johnson Reagon and others; work that has addressed class and abilities (i.e., occupational folklore and laborlore, family folklore and aging); the development and distribution of media and documentation efforts; the significant flourishings of music and arts with which I began this section; and the lifework of individuals. Here are places where doors have opened, offering ways forward. Which returns us to the inspiring example of Worth Long. For histories of the future, we might well measure our celebrations to see who we have become.

Cultivating diverse forms of community-significant excellence is the unfinished revolution that Bill describes. Attention to this task requires us to rethink where universalisms blind us: where top-down dominant notions squash the possibilities offered by community alternatives. In the

face of extreme inequality, a certain kind of *authenticity* is required—and not the problematic notion of authenticity in its reified or universalizing versions, critiques of which dominate the literature. The authenticity I describe reflects vernacular usage: it is often felt as the opposite of a divided/internally oppressed self, the idea of “trusting [your] inner voice,” “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—and other categorical tools for measuring quality—are placed in particular, partisan, and personal contexts (Kirshenblatt and Kirshenblatt-Gimblett 2007; Spitzer 2007:85; Welsch 2011). Vernacular forms of authenticity retain critical weight as experiential and existential processes by which we come to realize our own best excellences in company with others and in the face of draconian forces (Kodish 2011).

This is community-accountable work. The notion of community is often used loosely. By *community* I mean a beloved, self-constituted assemblage: people organized by common visions, committed to regenerating vital and sustainable place. Reid and Taylor talk about this as the conditions for life, the social basis of livability, of healthy body-place-commons (2010:10–12). Robin D. G. Kelley and Jonathan Lear describe the critical importance of freedom dreams, love, and creative practical reason to constituting such communities. *Communitas* and *solidarity* are other terms. Toni Cade Bambara describes the obligation “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).

How can we grapple with, support and defend diverse authenticities in appropriate ways? This labor might yield a robust theory of sustainable body-space-commons where multiple artistic excellences (and especially folk arts) are signs of cultural health and community vitality (Reid and Taylor 2010), and where processes and systems for their achievement are imagined and built. Supporting (with loving concern) forms of excellent action arising and celebrated at the grassroots is fundamentally a creative craft of practical reason (Lear 2006). Here we are not artist or activist wannabes; we are cultivating art and equity because we must (Welsch 2011).

### **Addressing boundaries**

But who are *we*? How we know and name ourselves remains a difficult problem. Although U.S. federal agencies have played critical roles in shaping public folklore, this is not top-down work: dispersed activities at the grassroots distinguish the field. Decentralized public folklorists are located at borders—in many senses. Bess Hawes herself, who had so much to do with so many of the people referenced above, worried that there might be better things to do than helping others fill out government forms, even if this sent sorely needed cash to the resource-starved hinterlands (Hawes 2008:139). Her comment draws attention to disparities in literacies and resources that become visible at critical junctures, to public folklore's sometimes uneasy place where inequalities are visible, and to our accountabilities there. These are shaping dimensions of the work.

Hawes pictures public folklore at borders, places where people rub up against one another (and themselves). She describes herself bridging domains of power and class: rubbing elbows with folk artists and politicians, at dinner parties and rump sessions. She champions fieldwork as an essential craft of connecting with people across widely different contexts (and exults in finding the perfect fieldworker, Dan Sheehy, who later would fill her shoes at the Endowment) (Hawes 2008:105–6). She points to troubling unarticulated class divisions and to differences in strategy that emerge as chronic schisms further separating people (resistance/assimilation, purism/creolisation). But this one-time Almanac Singer says that folklorists ought to be working where there are problems: the dilemmas faced by every American—attached to a psychic hitching post but bifurcated internally—are divisions that shape the field (Hawes 2008:118–9).

Others have described public folklore work in terms of bridgework, cultural brokering, mediating, transcontextualizing (Kurin 1997:18–25; Graves 2005:149–150; Baron and Spitzer 2007:xvi–xviii, 4; Sheehy 2007:220; Baron 2010). Discussions of appropriate roles puzzle the same gap between self and community (Shapiro et al. 1976; Reagon 1990:2–3; Long 1991; Robinson 1991; Bambara 1996; Moses and Cobb 2001:182). The peopling of the field, it has been frequently observed, marked the crossing of social barriers. Many American public folklorists (mostly white, middle-class people, and more men than women in our incomplete histories) first came to the profession through involvement in countercultural movements like the folksong revival (Cantwell 1993:244–247). Cantwell names this *ethnomimesis*, where boundaries

collapse between personal and professional, led by feeling; where transformations happen out of love and desire (Cantwell 1993:294–300). Or people find themselves bound to “a community of tradition embodied in the people and lifeways. . . [we have] known since birth but which. . . [we, like many others], began to discover only after having left it behind” (Lindahl 2010:252; also Cannon 2000; McCarl 2000). In this era where borders so often mark violence and perpetuate inequality, consider public folklore skills as humble but powerful way of working against the grain (as Linda Brodkey characterized the radical educator’s practice and vernacular sign of quality: Brodkey 1996:30–51; McCarl 2000). This is anthropology’s bricolage and métis-making: means by which we reconstruct pathways forward and back from whatever incomplete resources are at hand and in full view of the communities that constitute and charter us (Lear 2006).

This is laborlore. Archie Green, too, identified boundary-work as a core problem at the heart of folklore. He framed the problem as the human need to address internal divisions, individual and social. Archie surely transgressed (inauthentic) borders (McCarl 2006a:6–11). So did my generation of public folklorists. With various training, we walk all over the place and talk to everyone. An inclination with familiar antecedents. Jewish peddlers and itinerants like my grandfather and his brothers: poor people who live from the margins, curious young people who play hooky to observe everyday life. I recognize my own history and occupational practice in these details, thanks to the life review work of Kirshenblatt and Kirshenblatt-Gimblett (2007), an exquisite rendering reconstructing a picture of how Jewish people lived, not only how we died. (Also see Hufford, Hunt and Zeitlin 1989). Larger struggles and forces may remain murky, in the background, but they surely orient this work, placing us at borders where we make impossible choices, and if we are lucky, learn to cultivate hope.

Fieldwork is rightly celebrated as an occupational craft. Folklorists trained in the mid- to late 1970s faced an era with few academic positions, even as dream jobs emerged in the still-undefined field of public folklore. Many of us were sent into the field as survey workers, charged with uncovering and documenting what mattered to people. Questions immediately presented themselves. Always unfinished and unstable, this creative border-crossing practice remains satisfying and frequently transformational (Hawes 2008:106; Hawes 2007:67–70).

The craft deserves more attention. Great fieldworkers (folklorists and organizers) are described as really knowing how to listen, how to make themselves at home, and how to open possibilities (Moses and Cobb 2001:xiv; Payne 1995:xiv, 236–264, 405). More needs to be said. For example: that when people listen well, others have time to explain (some of) what needs to be said. That people tend to hear themselves better when telling a story out loud. That theory and practice are refined in conversation. That conversations have a way of proliferating. That shared stories shine light on alternatives and create change. (And also about the power of reporting back in responsible, ethical manner.) Long-term, intermittent, authentic (feminists recovered these dimensions early): fieldwork acknowledges the time it takes for meanings to flower; dignifies patience, diligence, and humility; embodies real relationships. It honors the importance of emerging significance. Fieldwork may certainly be an extractive and reductive process. But here, I distinguish that important radical tradition where people working together in folk arts and social change create enduring value, transformation, power, radical hope (Lear 2006). Ethical documentation is inherently collaborative and inevitably filled with gaps and divides we feel our way across. Like coalition work, it is risky, and done in view of what is at stake (Long 1991; Robinson 1991; Reagon 1990:2–3; Moses and Cobb 2001:182). Folklore is best when it is practiced with a full and loving heart addressing the problems of how we live together: perhaps our most radical vision (Welsch 2011). Consider Archie’s words:

We must touch issues of cultural pluralism at every place they erupt, every place in the polity where there’s a wound, every place where people rub each other on matters of identity, or race, or region, or occupation. Folklorists need to consider a deskilled workforce, a closed textile mill, a fire in a chicken plant, a conflict between Hasidic Jews and Blacks, a conflict on an Indian reservation over a nuclear plant. Each place of human tension, that’s where a folklorist ought to be. That’s our goal. Public folklore has to move into these areas, and it will only move if young academic folklorists are challenged by these problems. . . . By dealing with issues of cultural pluralism, national identity, rurality, occupational skill, and ethnicity we may move ahead. If folklorists are not advocates for these issues, then they have little to do. Day-to-day tasks reduce to rubble. (Green 1993:10)

You don't really defend a society that is divided internally and filled with tension, not just in economic but in non-economic areas such as religion, region, and gender without cultural workers. Academic folklorists must train students to meet the demands of the next century, of a post-Cold War era. If trained folklorists lack the skill, drive, and creativity to engage in guerrilla warfare, then it will be done by other people. And those others may not be conventional types, such as anthropologists, economists, or sociologists. In every other period in American life, when there was a crisis—over slavery, the frontier, or the Depression—people arose, whether they were called abolitionists, conservationists, or New Dealers, and responded to the challenge. . . . Will cultural work continue? . . . Of course, advocates will come to the surface. Whether or not we will part of the process, that's the big question. (Green 1993:12).

If such motivating feelings drive generative and participatory arts, then the field may be imagined as centrally concerned with community cultural health. Groundbreaking publicly engaged work in legal and medical areas addresses the cultural dimensions of disease, violence, and well-being (O'Connor 1994; Westerman 1994; Payne 1995; Briggs and Mantini-Briggs 2003; Goldstein 2004). These scholars show that beliefs and values (including our own) are generative: orienting how we behave, act, heal one another, and seek justice. Excellences of character—distinct and particular—emerge here as well, as reputations are collectively reconstituted.

Stories of change describe pivotal movement across divides. The field has collectively chronicled tales of visits and first encounters; narratives of origin, conversion, and transformation; often without adequately contextualizing them as moral at core (and requiring appropriate ethical response). Here is folklore's stock in trade, the convention of margin and crossroads where people change and where such shifts defeat the tyrannies of (unjust) divides. We know now to fill in the wider contexts (Danticat 2010:1–20). Taken seriously, this work teaches us how to get well in worrisome times, how to build power (Bambara 1996:235; Lear 2006).

Transformation narratives chart territories of struggle and pinpoint moments when people come into a new consciousness of their place in a collectivity. Recognizable, memorable, and powerful, they are indicators that something important is going on. Bernice Johnson Reagon (activist, musician, folklorist, critical theorist) tells a paradigmatic transformation narrative. Reagon came into the voice and power that she has—she came into herself, she became the *who* she is now—when she was working with other freedom movement workers in Albany, Georgia, in 1961. She describes being raised in a tradition of African American congregational singing. And in Albany, in the middle of formative movement action, people said, “Bernice, give us a song.” She began the song that goes: “Over my head, I see trouble in the air. . .” She looked around at beloved people courageously gathered in the face of certain danger, standing up for freedom, singing a familiar song together. At that moment she realized what the tradition offered: She changed the word “trouble” to “freedom,” and it was profoundly transformative for her and for the gathered company. *The assembled voices, and her own, clearly sounded different.* They sounded different because people *were* different through courageous action. Reagon’s creative political act restructured the frame within which they were all acting. Deepening ownership of this tradition, it unleashed power. Activists explain that “[h]istory demonstrates that taking responsibility for one’s own life, one’s own learning, can change a person” (Moses and Cobb 2001:188). Reagon demonstrates how people can create (and feel) power and can change the terms: of voice, song, history, and struggle; of who we feel ourselves to be (Reagon 1991). Citing Sojourner Truth, Harriet Tubman and Bessie Jones, she writes, “I come into my life and my singing as a woman who had the best models—singing mothers who were fighters, whose lives taught me another way to be in this world (Reagon 2001:141).

I hear this as a story that deserves to be retold (and reenacted). In it the generative power of people listening to one another and acting together is revolutionary. Closing the gap between appearance and reality, universalizing system and freedom, liberates. Here, folk arts are a way for people to take their own life experiences seriously, to close divides, to feel a way to develop their own power: “really a set of challenges by ourselves, and our communities, to ourselves” (Moses and Cobb 2001:125; also Beck 1997:124–125; Cantu in Peterson 1996:26). This narrative goes to the heart of public folklore practice: what it can aspire to do, and how it can work. Notions of “gatherings” (Western Folklife Center) and “visiting” in humble ways enact

this power: embracing reassemblage, celebrating regatherings of the exiled. Living, working, writing beyond ourselves.

## **Histories and contexts**

Public folklore emerged in the United States as a barely discernible current among rising waves and movements of social change and social consequence (but note the general absence of folklore and folklorists from footnotes and bibliographies of sister efforts such as public history, applied and public anthropology, and community arts: Atlas and Korza 2005; Community Arts Network, Appalshop). Nevertheless, the discipline of folklore has persistently yielded critical insights related to democratic cultural participation. It has moved demonstrably out of U.S. universities and into public life since the 1960s. It is to that trajectory that I turn now.

Folklorists writing about the field (largely to one another) regarding U.S. practice and disciplinary history have charted terrain with different names: applied folklore, public sector folklore, public folklore, folklore-in-use (Green 2007; Collins 1980). Essays debating and defending the various terms reflect intellectual lineage and internal border skirmishes, placing work with public consequence at the center of the field, finding antecedents in late 19<sup>th</sup> century ethnographic work, arguing for the significance of negotiated understandings, or for attention to impacts and social issues related to folklore (Sweterlitsch 1971; Collins 1980; Feintuch 1988; Hufford 1994; Green 2001; Baron and Spitzer 2007; Baron 2008). Many of these frameworks represent various strategies of justifying and recontextualizing—indeed, a continuing need to legitimate work outside the academy, which continued to diminish these efforts. A parallel fate has befallen the notion of folklore in general. I argue for an alternative approach to definition and naming: tracking action, keeping an eye on the liberatory power of folklore in critical junctures.

There is context to consider. I still don't know much about the chilling effect of the 1950s Communist witch hunts on folklore in the U.S., but see Price (2004) and Davis (2010) on some of the stories they never told us in graduate school about anthropologists and folklorists who were silenced. Not much has been written about the 1970s and 1980s in many American folklore graduate programs, buffeted by the “Culture Wars”—what Mary Louise Pratt describes as “a

fatal collision between two historical processes: on the one hand, the arrival on university faculties of the ‘children of the ‘60s’ and, on the other, the arrival at the White House of Ronald Reagan along with a dogmatic political right hungry for power” (Pratt 2001:30). Consider again the oral tradition. The era was characterized by racism: Jerry Davis recalls Richard Dorson telling a racist joke at a Berkeley folklore gathering, and his own vociferous rejection (Davis 1996:117, 121–123). Sexism: only one folklore faculty member was convicted of sexual assault, I believe, but it is widely known that abuse goes extravagantly underreported. And certain classism: poor people (i.e., a certain version of folk) were becoming *déclassé*, books on or by working-class academics didn’t come out until the 1990s. Many of us in graduate school earlier felt closeted from ourselves as well as others. Ambivalence about poverty and poor people was evidenced by the wholesale abandonment of attention to issues and populations of historic interest to the field, while the general academic drift to postmodernism silenced or co-opted work in laborlore and immigration rights (but see McCarl 2000, 2006). There was the reactionary legacy of Richard Dorson’s cold-war politics, his attempt to institutionalize a marginal field, and his antipathy to public folklore (and left-leaning brethren). The notion that public folklore debased the pure coin of scholarship was a considerable burden to productive work, and carried its own unexamined class assumptions and double standards: subordinating sympathy, practice, vernacular politics and poetics, and social good.

This dirty laundry (occupational folklore) is relevant here because it directs attention both to generally oppressive structures and to the liberation movements engaging so many of our peers. In folklore, radicalism seemed closeted. Entering the academy in the 1970s meant that you were expected to leave homegrown identities at the door. In subtle and obvious ways, those who come into folklore as some kind of other—people of color, people from working class backgrounds, women—continue to learn that professional identities require submersion of primary subjectivities and divide us against ourselves. This is a sure strategy to diminish worth (and self-knowledge), foster internalized oppression, and breed distrust about the legitimacy of working papers. How much does it also impede the field’s attention to inequalities or engagement with social issues? How much do these divisions lessen our capacity to treat as equals people who enter the field as subjects, sources, partners, mentors?

Conditions change as unruly subjects challenge aspects of canonical/orthodox thought. 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. Displaced and divided, we have the obligation and capacity to bring wider perspectives to bear. Remembering where we come from, we bring others with us, in conversation and action (Williams 1995:93). These are among the lessons taught by activist folklore—from Bernice Johnson Reagon, Jerry Davis, Worth Long and others.

Bess Hawes reminds us that this is both lost opportunity and blind spot: a historical accident often repeated. Recalling the complementary missions during the years of discipline-based programs at NEA, of “Expansion Arts” and “Folk Arts,” she observes that each tended to those local groups that no one else could manage to fund; one tended to focus on who did work, and the other tended to focus on what they did (Hawes 2008:143–4). This separation between agent and genre has weakened both camps. Who do we count as allies? What lineages do we follow and why? What do various forms allow and constrain? Where do we feel history as chartering vision, where as oppressive structure? How do we equitably unite disparate efforts?

Radically pluralist and anti-subordination politics animate these examples; they are distinguishing features of the stance Archie Green adopted and that I value. To further elaborate the work that others have distinguished as folklore’s public responsibility, I borrow from Mari Matsuda and Patricia Williams in critical race studies where lawyers of color have used folklore and people’s own formulations of their experience to shape legal critique and analysis.

Progressive philosophers and anthropologists have done a great deal over the last 30 years to offer politically engaged tools, sharp ethnographic lenses, and skill in limning neo-liberal disasters (Lear 2006; Alvarez 2005; Scott 2009; Reid and Taylor 2010). Historians have offered back stories and rationale (Payne 1995; Tchen 2007); so have journalists (Klein 2007). Working in the tradition of great regionalists, “provincial intellectuals” have steadfastly democratized public senses of place (Leary 1998:xv–30, 33–110; 500–502; Noyes 2008:39). Performance theory (in which many of my generation trained) deserves attention for useful tools: from Bakhtin, Prague School theorists, Russian formalists, semioticians, structuralists, sociolinguists,

pragmatists (Hymes 1988; Baron and Spitzer 2007:viii–ix). Using them as recipes for action, public folklorist practice pushes all of these skills in new directions. Dell Hymes’ radical formula is extended in vital community arts, where we are able not only to remember, report, repeat, or perform, but also to enact, transform, and regenerate. A reflexive, politically engaged (anarchist) history linking various threads of such state-resisting work would be helpful. Scott’s work on hill people of Southeast Asia provides detail and theory for such an effort (Scott 2009). More work needs to be done here, with folk arts as central concern.

Diana N’Diaye (1991) and others place this labor in international contexts with references to world gatherings of African diaspora workers which have continued to model practice, linking the efforts of cultural workers located in widely diverse contexts. Gustavo Esteva and Madhu Suri Prakash (1998) coined the term "grassroots postmodernism" to describe the whole range of human rights, environmental justice, cultural equity, and land claim efforts initiated by indigenous and non-industrialized people; the cultural dimensions remain too little understood here, as well. Grace Lee Boggs and others have observed 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. These frameworks provide a wider context for the dispersed and locally-centered work of public folklorists. Call it grassroots public interest folklore. Community cultural development.

Public interest folklore is, at its best, work in community. Older words like *communal* and *collective* have fallen, unfortunately, into disuse in folklore studies. What they offer is an angle on the formative nature of enduring vision and a long view. Collective creation is accountable to carefully tended emerging and unfinished notions of human rights and responsibilities. I sketch it as radical regenerative public health practice: matters of ethics and spirit and of tending diverse excellences and authenticities.

In her foreword to Betsy Peterson’s *Report on the Folk and Traditional Arts in the United States*, Jane Alexander quotes Wendell Berry’s description of cultural democracy: “it would begin in work and love,” he says, describing a community dance, turning towards folk arts as example. “People at work in their communities three generations old would know that their bodies

renewed, time and again, the movements of other bodies, living and dead, known and loved, remembered and loved” (1996:5). There are, of course, countless ways to frame the public interest folklore effort, equally large and compelling; this view pictures community cultural health as a main aim of folklore, and as a central feature of freedom dream and liberation struggle. It follows that cultural health and vital folklore require resisting state-making machineries, and that folk arts chronicle and advance aspects of this labor. I have noted that James Scott describes state-resisting peoples: these include maroon communities constituted by peoples’ political choices (2009). The public interest folklore I am imagining places us as widely dispersed members of just such communities, working to cultivate and detoxify the ground and soil of culture. Here, folklore is an enduring, renewable resource, a constituting mechanism, necessary to community life. Cultural diversity taken seriously. It follows that we are accountable to one another. And there is plenty of work to be done.

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