

Knowing our place / going on 20

The Folklore Project turns 20 this year. One thing we know for sure is that we are just beginners in this work. This issue of *Works in Progress* features writing by and about people who have been engaged for much longer than two decades in the cultivation of folklore and local knowledge. These are people devoted to community, deeply responsible to the times and places where they find themselves. These are people who know particulars—details of ordinary experience and exacting craft—that escape the notice of many. Another thing that we know: this matters a lot.

In one of my favorite books, *Wisdom Sits in Places*, ethnographer Keith Basso writes of riding the Arizona landscape with Apache friends who instruct him about local place-names. Handed-down and “handsomely-crafted,” these names (rarely found on maps) are fine story prompts. Telling what happened here, making claims and judgments about the history of a place, stories do a great deal of useful work. Some stories tell about people’s experience, about foolishness and wisdom. Others provide guidelines for how to behave, for how to live a good life. And taken together, these stories give people intimate connections to the places where they dwell.

Place-names (and stories about them) are disarmingly simple forms of folklore that do powerful work. They keep us responsible to other people and other times. Intensely local knowledge, folklore anchors us to community and reminds us what is at stake. These pages share examples of people using folklore to name where they stand, to pay attention, to work for balance, beauty, equity and justice.

In the 1910s and 1920s, under the leadership of Ben Fletcher, an African American dockworker and a union organizer for the International Workers of the World (Wobblies), the

Philadelphia docks were unusual in being racially integrated. In his essay on Wobbly songlore in this issue, eminent folklorist Archie Green shows what might be known of such radical working people as Fletcher through the record of the songs they may have sung. What did workers have to say in these songs? Why did they sing? In what languages? For what causes? Archie’s writing, to be published as the preface to the forthcoming *Big Red Songbook* roots PFP in time and place as well, for his lifelong work has paved the way for a public interest folklore agency like ours.

Artist Eric Joselyn’s handy reworking of a common street sign (What rules do we really want to require? What priorities should the state really follow?) and his clip-and-use fortune-teller are 20th anniversary gifts to readers: examples of the kind of playful seriousness with which this artist engages the world. A retrospective exhibition of Eric’s work, “What you got to say?” is in PFP’s gallery through February. Adapting folk traditions and popular culture, Eric has found his place supporting local struggles, and the show is a sampling of what a range of people have had to say, often at some risk, over the past 25 years here. In March we will open a second retrospective exhibition. This one documents a different slice of more than 28 years of cultural work here, featuring paj ntaub textiles from the workshop of Upper Darby artist Pang Xiong Sirirathasuk Sikoun, who has over the decades organized dozens of other Hmong women and kin in stitching versions of Hmong peoples’ experiences. Their changing needleworks tell stories of a remembered homeland, war and loss, and resettlement. Just as important: the needlework has served as an ongoing and reliable resource for negotiating these challenges.

One of three immigrant artists featured in this issue, exiled Tibetan sand mandala-maker Losang Samten carries his sense

of place with him— by turning any space at all, wherever he finds himself, into a sacred space through his art, bringing us with him. Shaping mandalas, Losang teaches patience, perseverance and a sense of the interconnectedness of all things. (He will be in residence at the Folk Arts Cultural Treasures Charter School this winter—the school that PFP founded with Asian Americans United.) Vera Nakonechny’s commitment to reconstructing specific ethnic Ukrainian weaving traditions—beginning with the traditions of the Hutsul region where her mother was born— has carried her across three continents, and distinguishes her activities here in Philadelphia. She is literally helping people re-knit their connections to home places with her needlework. The ethnic and tribal patterns were forbidden, and dangerous to make, under Soviet rule, and much has been forgotten. Her work counters this loss.

These artists remind us: there is no lack of important work to be done. We register in these pages concerns with diminishing freedom of expression, literacies, patience, local knowledge: all core folklore issues here and now, requiring attention. Every day in Philadelphia, folk arts — mandalas, paj ntaub, songs, weavings, slogans, demonstrations and more— are among the resources people use to enact responsibility to one another and to this place, now home.

No less than Apache ranching families long in a single place, all of these people are experts in a kind of local knowledge: they know where they stand, and in revealing the details and complexity of this knowledge, they help us to know where we, too, need to stand.

— Debora Kodish