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PFP doings
“You all are native people, too. You just forgot where you came from,” Wasco/Navajo poet Elizabeth Woody once commented to a gathering of folklorists, patiently responding to questions about sustaining native culture. Her words remain a gift: reframing complicated history and our interdependence, inviting us to consider place from a long view, naming us all as guests and migrants with responsibilities to one another and the homes we share. She reminds us that we are in this together, over generations and distance. It is no accident that similar messages—call it folk wisdom—emerge so often in the articles in this issue of *Works in Progress*.

Folk arts can have a kind of protective coloration: they hide in plain sight. We can use these traditions without always thinking deeply or reflectively about what we are doing, or what these arts mean. But when folk arts come into our consciousness—when we tend them and actively shape them with others—they are formidable tools for social change. They connect and change us; they hold (and build) power. Master gardener Blanche Epps, honored at a PFP gathering this year, calls this “undormacizing” knowledge.

This issue is filled with examples of such work, each opening new possibilities in difficult times. Over the last year, PFP has used our “Making Home Place” project to ask: How do local people use folk arts to address various kinds of displacement? Read these pages as brief reports from the kind of revolution that Grace Lee Boggs describes in her wonderful new book on sustainable activism: a revolution grounded in nurturing caring communities, place-based but not place-bound. “Community is the most important thing that has been destroyed by the dominant culture,” she writes. Folk arts help us reimage and remake community. We learn: To listen closely and with empathy to the experiences of others. To find ways forward together. To reclaim the right to define cultural traditions. To push against narrow histories and insist on fuller visions of what healthy communities can and must be. To look back—beyond incomplete evidence, believing in the power of communities to endure. To value caring, hope, and joy. Tracing the legacies (and wisdom) of song, dance, festival, and story, and embodying them here and now, people in these pages show how we find ways to remake the world we want to inhabit.

Read on. Germaine Ingram reflects on how her collaboration with Bobby Zankel and John Dowell drew on rich African American expressive traditions, inhabiting the spaces between what is known and what can be imagined. Their art grapples with our relationship to the fact of slavery and to the experiences of enslaved Africans forced to labor in the President’s House. Irma Gardner-Hammond and Gbahuto Comgbaye reflect on what they hear in the stories others tell, and how becoming a “story-hearer” has opened their vision. Irma says, “The longer you live, the more stories become clear to you. We’re writing stories with our lives.” Asunción Sandoval and others describe the sense of freedom created in the annual San Mateo Carnaval: “This is the one day we don’t feel illegal or persecuted or frightened. This is the only day we feel at home with our family and with our friends. The truth is, that day it doesn’t matter where we are. The only thing that’s important is to feel alive, to feel Mexican and to feel our culture.” Madhusmita Bora describes how the devotional intent of sattriya dance can be sustained, and the barriers she has crossed in making this possible. A Liberian folk tale from an elder, recorded by Gbahuto, describes orphaned children who survive in an inhospitable home through cleverness and wit (and magically helpful neighbors).

The idea of displacement seems foreign only if we close our eyes to the experiences of those around (or before) us: to foreclosed homes, to the costs of predatory development, to what it means to lose home, family, and beloved community, all at once or by degrees. Forced by need, war, and violence to leave native homes, migrant people actively regenerate culture and community here. They ground themselves in time as well as space, and with others. Art, empathy, imagination, research, and collective effort—these are among the forces people mobilize in the face of such traumas.

Losang Samten has considerable wisdom to share on this matter. Born in Tibet before the Chinese crackdown, Losang and his family were forced to flee their home in 1959. He speaks with sorrow of the current destruction of Tibet’s culture and landscape, and shares stories about his own painful experiences. People respond differently to violence. We reason, resist, endure, and explode in returning violence. But anger, ignorance and attachment are poisons. Losang teaches. A former Buddhist monk, Losang was an artist-in-residence at PFP this spring, where he shaped an exquisite mandala, made equally of sand and patience, peace and loving-kindness. The art is part of Buddhist meditative practice, its intricate patterns representing spiritual truths. The beauty is impermanent and profound. We may be surprised to find that we can carry it inside us: this exiled art makes momentary sacred space in unimaginable distant places (like our hearts). Losang reminds us that wisdom is carried in multiple traditions. That we can know and value vital places (in space and time, in art and life): that tending such places is sure way to challenge the poisons around us.

Certain words and stories haunt us, Edwidge Danticat says. Memories break unbidden, suddenly transforming our understandings of who we are, and who we are to one another. May the words in these pages move you in just such ways.

—Debora Kodish

**Readings**


Gbadou and Menduawor Comgbaye, 2009.
Photo: Harvey Finkle
“Our stories are for survival”:
Gbahtuo Comgbaye, Liberian Storyteller

Gbahtuo Comgbaye was born and raised in Nyor-diaplay, Lower Nimba County, Liberia, where he was a teacher of math and Liberian culture. He has listened to storytelling for more than five decades, respecting the ability of oral traditions to share community knowledge and values in engaging ways.

His hometown was close to the border with the Ivory Coast and the residence of an elder, a storyteller named Kergongor, who periodically crossed into Liberia with his singers, traveling from village to village and telling musical fables in the Dan language. Gbahtuo recalls how villagers from miles around gathered by the light of lanterns and bamboo torches to listen to Kergongor and his entourage spin their musical tales. This man has been Gbahtuo’s artistic role model from the time I was a youngster until today. The stories used to be so exciting. He had his people wear costumes made out of raffia. They dressed beautifully and their voices and the stories were also very beautiful. In fact, the people would stay in the circle—the rain would fall and people would not move until he finished with the story. So, being a child at that time, I used to imitate him. I started to look for my own raffia, to fix my raffia, and that is how I started liking the storytelling.

Kergongor stopped visiting Nyor-diaplay, but Gbahtuo’s interest in storytelling continued. His father told stories about the tribal wars that took place in Liberia in the early 1800s, including stories of his heroic grandfather, who fought in those wars. His father’s wives also told him stories. Gbahtuo learned by imitation: I imitated, I listened, and I tried to make it a part of me.

Gbahtuo’s repertoire now includes spider stories (what other people sometimes call Anansi stories), the call and response stories known as dangbe, among people of the Dan ethnic group, and kweze (legends). Most of all, he likes to tell kweze because, he says, they are a way of bringing the past to the present. A story is not just a story: there is an important idea that will be the message of the story. There is substance in the culture that makes the storytelling interesting, because the stories in the culture, in the Dan tradition—they talk about peace, about reconciliation, and love. They never praise violence. The values that they teach are good values: about how to get along with others, how not to be greedy, and how to be a good person. This is important for our children. Once the kids have the fundamental idea of this and start to grow up with it, they will stay out of violence too. It is like the proverb: ‘One ambassador for peace for the younger generation means ten thousand ambassadors out there.’

What I have learned from the culture is what has taken me to where I am today. There are qualities that I got from the culture, from what I was taught. . . .

I always speak to everybody in my neighborhood. When I got here first, I used to speak and people didn’t answer. But they got used to me as someone who is speaking to them. So every time they see me now, to get me off their back, they have got to speak to me! So that’s how I’ve been, you know. And I’m different in the community. You get into my neighborhood right now and ask for me, people will say, ‘OK, that African man that lives over there.’ They will call my name and say, ‘Oh, you mean the guy who always sweeps there.’ And they think that I am crazy, but I sweep from my front porch right out to the street, and I have come to notice that other people are following my routine now. So when I’m not there, or sleeping, or at work, and the sidewalk is dirty, other people have got to sweep! That is like another proverb: ‘At least one episode of love that you exhibit out there means a whole lot to thousands of people!’

It is an undeniable fact that we have got violence in our society. In fact, it’s growing exponentially. The Liberian kids were being bullied in the schools here, and there are certain times they started grouping together to go and fight. You know, this is a big thing that we have been dealing with forever. So these are things that I have practically seen. And they are things that I feel a responsibility to do something about.

When I first moved here, the kids used to go and stone my door. Everything I’m telling you right now, if you ask about them in my community, they will tell you the same thing. Those kids used to stone my building. They would stone my door. Pow! And I was so lucky that the glass door didn’t bust.

But every time they would throw a rock at my door, I would get outside and say, ‘Who is doing this? Who is doing this? I’m going to call the cops!’ And when I would say that, they would go away—the kids would go away.

They did this over and over and over until the kids saw me at Patterson School, when I was there to do storytelling. And then, the kids start telling their parents, ‘Oh, he is a great man! He came—he

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Sattriya is a living art and it has an unbroken tradition.
inutes before we dock at Majuli, a fluvial island on the Brahmaputra River in Northeast India, I make my way to the bow of the boat. The sun is just disappearing into the horizon, and its remaining glow projects a halo around the land. The approaching darkness has already begun to swallow life on the island known for its monasteries, spirituality and idyllic beauty.

For a moment, I forget the cacophony and chaos that cluttered my journey. An hour before, on the other side of the river, my parents, my son and I boarded the rickety wooden boat with trepidation and a silent prayer. A state dignitary’s visit to the island had thrown off the ferry schedules. After much haggling and pondering, we rented a private boat to take us across: a fisherman’s vessel without life jackets, or safety rails. The mighty Brahmaputra is known to be moody, and its deep undercurrents claim hundreds of lives each year. We huddled in the belly of the boat in a cabin with blown-out windows and unkempt plastic chairs and tables while our van rested at eye level on two wooden planks. Four melon-sized boulders kept it from diving into the river.

Now I bathe in the twilight, rejuvenated. I am returning to Majuli after a six-year absence, with a grant from the Philadelphia-based Leeway Foundation to study Sattriya. Majuli is Sattriya paradise. This classical dance form gets its name from the satras, or monasteries, where Vaishnavite monks have preserved and practiced it as part of their daily rituals for the past 600 years. It emerged out of the Bhakti movement, which griped medieval India as an alternative to the caste system, polytheism, Brahmanic rituals and idol worship. In Assam, Mahapurux Srimonto Sankadev—the saint, scholar, and religious and social reformer who created Sattriya—preached a monotheistic philosophy called Ek Xoron Naam Dharma, which was based on devotion to Krishna. To spread the word, he wrote one-act plays called Ankiya Naat. Sattriya emerged as an accompaniment to these plays. It drew from tenets of the Natyashashtra, Abhinaya Darpan and Sri Hastamuktawali, the bibles of Indian classical dance. As time went by, Sattriya established an independent identity as a dance form. But political censorship spearheaded by Brahmins and intolerant rulers would imprison the dance within the walls of the monasteries until the 1960s, when a few monks ventured outside with it. Despite its deep roots in drama, the underlying abhinaya or expression guiding the dance became one of Dasya, “devotion or servitude to God.” It is a living art, and, unlike major classical forms such as Bharat Natyam and Odissi, it has an unbroken tradition.

Since most monasteries are situated in remote areas, geography was a hurdle for all prospective students, but there was a further challenge for women. For the longest time, Sattriya remained off limits to us. Some say this was because many of the monasteries followed the path of celibacy; others say the Mahapurux wanted it that way because women abandon their own religion and embrace that of their husbands when they marry. That policy changed dramatically in 2000, when the Indian government recognized Sattriya as a classical dance, and more women were welcomed to its fold. Sattriya schools have mushroomed in the cities, and quite a few dancers make the pilgrimage to Majuli and satras elsewhere to make up for lost time. I am one of them.

I step out of the boat and drink in the serenity around me. Not much has changed in Majuli since my last visit. Roads and electricity are still nonexistent on most of the island. Incomplete embankments pretend to guard the land against the notorious floods that ravage and erode the island every year. After a brief stop at the government circuit house,
I prepare myself for the meeting with the satradhikar or head monk of Uttar Kamalabari Sattra, a monastery that is deemed a leader in protecting, teaching and propagating traditional Sattriya repertoire. As I wait outside his living quarters, I feel both excited and nervous. Being a woman and not a member of the sattra, I had little access in my previous visit. The prayer hall (naamgar) had been off limits. So was the interior of the monastery, along with access to the dance teachers. My heart flutters and my mind wanders.

A few weeks before my trip to Majuli, I danced at the Barpeta Sattra in Lower Assam at Doul Utsav, an event celebrating Holi, the festival of colors. Performing just a few yards away from the prayer hall, where the carvings on the walls were illuminated with the soft rays of hundreds of clay lamps, I felt inspired. After the performance, I hurried toward the entrance to soak in the divinity of the prayer hall, only to be greeted by a locked door and the sign, “No entry for women.” I left disappointed, but not surprised. My dance odyssey has never been easy.

My foray into Sattriya has been both natural and challenging. Madhabgaon, where I spent the better part of my early childhood, was steeped in sattra culture. The dawn of each new day and the end of the old one were marked by the sound of the doba drums in the naamghar. Borgeets, the great hymns of the Mahapurux, were part of the lullaby repertoire of my grandparents and aunts. The rhythms possessed my soul, and I was initiated into the movements watching my cousins, aunts, neighbors and uncles performing at the naamghar. My first performance was at age four at Raax, an autumn festival stemming from the holy scriptures that celebrate Lord Krishna’s life and his followers’ ultimate devotion to him. The annual event is the most eagerly awaited one in the village, but that year celebrations were laced with tensions. We were in the middle of the Assam Agitation—a student-led uprising that called for identifying and expelling foreigners from the state. My father belongs to the Congress Party—an organization that was deemed sympathetic toward the foreigners—and my family was inadvertently stuck on the other side.

Giddy at being chosen to play little Krishna, I was oblivious to the hostility. Then, minutes before I was to go on stage, a crowd barricaded my entry. They wouldn’t allow the daughter of a congressman on stage. I would be able to dance two nights later, thanks to the intervention of deo, the naamghar’s spiritual leader. But that event marked the beginning of my Sattriya exile. Assassination attempts against my brother and me and growing violence forced my family to send me to Delhi. Sattriya eluded me and I drifted into Kathak, a North Indian classical dance with strong ties to Vaishnav lore. Along the way, I pursued journalism and moved to the U.S., where I continued to study Kathak under New York–based Guru Janaki Patrik. But Sattriya continued to pull at my heartstrings.

In one of my trips to India, I became a disciple of Guru Ram Krishna Talukdar, one of the most celebrated teachers of Sattriya. Sattriya was so ingrained in my kinesthetic memory that despite a gap of decades, I was able to pick up the repertoire where I had left off. Very little had changed in the art form in those intervening years. Costumes were snazzier, expressions and movements more defined, but the spirit and purity remained intact. Determined to make this my life’s journey, I launched Sattriya Dance Company along with my sister-in-law Prerona. In 2009 we embarked on a mission to promote Sattriya in North America. We performed at the Library of Performing Arts at Lincoln Center, NYC, the Wilmington Public Library in Delaware, the Indian Dance Educators Association’s festival in Arlington, Virginia, and PFP, among other venues. Wherever we went, Sattriya elicited strong curiosity and enthusiasm among...
the audience, which included cultural experts and dancers of other Indian classical forms. I wanted to carry that enthusiasm to Majuli, and return to the U.S. better equipped for my mission to popularize Sattriya here. I felt that my journey would be more fruitful with the blessings of the sattra. When the Leeway Grant came along, I came closer to realizing that dream.

As I wait for the satradhikar of Uttar Kamalbari on my first night back in Majuli, I am determined to relinquish my outsider status. Walking through the hallways, I feel a marked difference since my reception six years ago. I am not talking to the monks through the windows, while confined to the verandah.

Now prabhu ishwar, as the satradhikar is universally addressed, and I sit in the same space and talk about the monks’ concerns as they witness Sattriya becoming more mainstream. After centuries of silently enduring hardships for the sake of preserving the art form, they feel that Sattriya is being hijacked by professional dancers. They are wary about outsiders jumping on the Sattriya bandwagon, now that it has become a hot classical form.

Part of the Sattriya challenge is its ritualistic, living identity. This identity is challenged when it appears on the performance stage, shorn of its ritual functions. The outside world is embracing the art form—but also influencing it. Bhakti or devotion is no longer the only form of expression. Dancers and teachers in the city are challenging choreographic boundaries as they champion the Sattriya cause before modern and secular audiences. The aesthetics are undergoing transformations, some of which displease the preservers of the art form. This comes at a time when the monasteries are facing off other challenges as well. For centuries these institutions have relied on the generosity of devotees to sustain themselves and their lineage. Until a few decades ago, struggling parents would offer a son to the monasteries to give him a better life. The sattras were self-sufficient, with their own schools and agricultural lands. But with changing economic times both land and people are dwindling. Sattriya could be a new opportunity to sustain the monastery and the teachings, and sattras such as Uttar Kamalabari have sent monks to teach and perform in major cities like Guwahati and Delhi, and even abroad. They are desperately trying to hold on to their ebbing influence over the art, and are distraught over changes that might compromise the purity of the form.

I spend hours that night in discourse about the dance, its history and its future. When I leave with an invitation to return early the next day, I was still feeling like an interloper.

Dawn in Majuli stirs the silent, sleeping island with the music of birds, the distant hymns of the monastery and the sounds of slow-moving vendors setting out to earn their day’s sustenance. I arrive at the monastery and sit outside the prayer hall, where an old monk is singing the scriptures to the rhythm of giant cymbals called bor taal as two other monks clap to the beat. Inside, prabhu ishwar sits and listens, often hanging his head thoughtfully. The sounds evoke childhood memories associated with the village naamghar. I finally feel at home, and in the serenity and happiness that envelop me, I fail to notice prabhu ishwar motioning me to step inside. A young monk ushers me in and says that a teacher has already been chosen for my lessons. They are now going to give me xoron, “shelter,” inducting me into the sattra as a disciple.

At first I think I am imagining that first step into the sanctum. But as one of the monks directs me to kneel and surrender myself in front of the altar, my heart weeps in happiness.

I am no longer an outsider.
“We’re going to continue walking”:

South Philadelphia’s Carnaval de Puebla

Carnaval participant dressed as a French soldier.

Photo: Leticia Roa Nixon

(Ahdanah)
San Mateo Ozolco is a small town on the outskirts of the city of Cholula, in the state of Puebla, Mexico. Over the past decade immigrants from San Mateo have settled in South Philadelphia. Today over 12,000 live here—more than one-third of San Mateo’s population. Like many other immigrants, they maintain active connections to their former homes, working and living here while investing in housing, schools, roads and community life back in San Mateo, where family members remain. Money, food, music, legal documents, and gifts are transported weekly between the two communities.

Since 2007, bearded masks, beaded capes, goatskin headdresses, and other costume accessories are among the goods that travel to Philadelphia from Puebla. These artifacts are used in an annual celebration called Carnaval, which commemorates the 1862 Battle of Puebla (an event more widely known as Cinco de Mayo), at which Mexican soldiers defeated the occupying French forces. A festive celebration of the victory has been held since 1869 in many towns in Puebla, most notably Huejotzingo.1 An important part of community life, it goes on for a month. This April marks the fifth year that people from San Mateo have recreated the event in Philadelphia.

Carnaval participants dress as historical characters from the battle and reenact folk dramas from Puebla. Several battalions, each with its own costumes, dance steps, and general personality, parade down South Philly streets to live music performed by Mexican musicians. While much of the costuming comes from family closets and artisan workshops in Puebla hometowns, some outfits are constructed from materials close at hand to honor traditions in new living situations. Oversized dresses, Mardi Gras masks, and sneakers decorated with confetti bows, masks, hats, capes, and detailed accessories—all are assembled into caricatures of French, Turkish and Mexican officers, soldiers, and sappers (infantrymen who perform engineering duties), which also serve to disguise participants’ identities.

The San Mateo Carnavaleros are men from San Mateo Ozolco, and other parts of Mexico, who are dedicated to bringing this centuries-old tradition from their region to the streets of Philadelphia. Last year, PFP organized a Community Folklife Documentation Workshop (CFDW) to train local people to document folk life in their own communities, with a particular focus on how folk arts are used to address displacement. Participant Leticia Roa Nixon (Ahdanah) interviewed the Carnavaleros to learn more about how this community festival helps participants create a home for themselves in Philadelphia. She offers her thoughts about her fieldwork, followed by excerpts from her interviews. —Selina Morales

In the beginning my Community Folklife Documentation Workshop [CFDW] project was about the Carnaval of Puebla, but it was from an outsider’s perspective. At first I saw my countrymen as “displaced”—the topic we were all exploring. But working on this project and talking with people made me look at my own displacement too.

Many things are left unsaid. This project doesn’t really reflect people’s daily struggles—especially those of the undocumented workers. They have a cultural barrier and a legal barrier. Also employment is something that is kept quiet. There is so much they have to overcome each day. I didn’t get a lot “on the record” about how people crossed the border—which is something horrible. Or about how San Mateo Ozolco is a ghost town populated by elders and very young people because most of the population is here. And without proper migration laws and reform they cannot go back, and this breaks their hearts. Some people want to go back to see their parents alive, but without good migration laws they cannot move freely across the border. When the tape recorder was off—that’s when some people could say these things.

Why do people from San Mateo Ozolco come here? That has to do with NAFTA and globalization and all the interests of the big heads of these countries. And then when you get here, how do you survive? We are in the midst of a polarizing conflict. Immigration reform is needed, but it is at the bottom of the list. What is Obama going to do? It is important to put this first documentary effort in context. Why do I record these stories? There is racial discrimination against Mexicans in South Philadelphia. They are beaten up. They are robbed. They are maimed. Women are raped. And nobody says anything, because of course they are afraid. As other [CFDW] participants saw, when we went to take pictures at the Carnaval, people were hiding and moving out of focus. Arizona had just passed their law. Fear and phobia about immigrants is permeating everybody.

Being visible and invisible at the same time is a struggle. You want to be invisible, to disappear when you feel a stare or sense that somebody is looking at you for more than 30 seconds. And then you have this urge of participating in the Carnaval—the urge to say: “Here we are. This is who we are. We want to be visible, even if just for one day.” And the San Mateo Carnavaleros started the Carnaval in spite of all adversities. This is the second the Battle of Puebla, which was won again. In what follows, I have chosen (and translated) just some samples of people’s own words about what the Carnaval means. I included these and other excerpts in a multimedia piece created from CFDW field recordings

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“Vamos a seguir caminando”: Carnaval del Sur de Filadelfia al Estilo de Huejotzingo

Portrait of Asunción Sandoval, Carnaval organizer. “I’ve always said from the beginning, this is the one day that we don’t feel illegal or persecuted or frightened. This is the only day we feel at home with our family and with our friends.” — Asunción Sandoval

Photo: Leticia Rae Nixon (Alamedal)
San Mateo Ozolco es un pequeño pueblo en las afueras de la ciudad de Cholula, en el estado de Puebla, México. En la pasada década, los inmigrantes de esta comunidad se asentaron en el Sur de Filadelfia. Hay 12,000 personas viven en esa zona—más de un tercio de la población de San Mateo Ozolco. Como muchos otros inmigrantes, ellas son participes activos tanto en su actual comunidad, como con su comunidad de origen: trabajando y viviendo aquí mientras invierten en vivienda, escuelas, caminatas y otros aspectos de la vida comunitaria en San Mateo donde permanecen familiares. Dinero y artículos con frecuencia viajan entre estos dos lugares, tales como comida, música, documentos legales y regalos.

Desde el 2007, caretas con barbas, gáznés, penachos de zalea de borrego y otros artículos de los trajes tradicionales son algunos de los objetos que han viajado desde Puebla hasta Filadelfia. Estos artículos se utilizan en la celebración anual del Carnaval, el cual conmemora la Batalla de Puebla de 1862 (mejor conocida como la celebración del Cinco de Mayo, en la cual los soldados mexicanos derritaron a las fuerzas francesas que ocupaban el país. Desde 1869 muchas comunidades en Puebla organizan celebraciones donde se conmemora la Batalla, pero la más reconocida es la de Huejotzingo.1 Las celebraciones, las cuales son una parte importante de la comunidad, duran como un mes.

Este próximo abril (2011) será el quinto año que la gente de San Mateo ha recreado el Carnaval aquí en Filadelfia. Los participantes del Carnaval se visten como los personajes históricos de la famosa batalla y representan dramas folklóricos de Puebla. Varias batallas, cada una con sus trajes, bailes y características particulares, desfilan por las calles del Sur de Filadelfia con música en vivo interpretada por las bandas que traen de México o bandas locales. Aunque la mayoría de los trajes provienen de los armarrios de las familias y de los talleres artesanales de Huejotzingo, alguna gente usa los materiales que tienen disponibles, honrando la tradición, pero reflejando su nueva realidad socio-cultural. Por ejemplo, se pueden observar trajes de talla grande, máscaras de otros carnavales (tal como mascaras de Mardi Gras) y tenis decorados con moños de confeti junto con las mascaras, los penachos, los gúnzé y los otros componentes de decoración que caricaturizan a los soldados franceses, turcos y mexicanos, a la vez que oculta las identidades de los participantes.

San Mateo Carnavaleros esta compuesta por un grupo de hombres de San Mateo Ozolco y de otros partes de México que se han dedicado a traer esta tradición centenaria a las calles del Sur de Filadelfia. El Proyecto de Folklore de Filadelfia (PPF) organizó un Taller de Documentación de Vida Folklórica Comunitaria (CFDW, por sus siglas en Ingles), donde se entrenó a ciudadanos para que documenten el folklore en sus propias comunidades, con un enfoque particular en cómo las artes folklóricas son utilizadas para lidiar con el desplazamiento. La participante Leticia Roa Nixon (Ahdanah) entrevistó a los organizadores de San Mateo Carnavaleros para aprender más sobre cómo este festival ayuda a los participantes a crear un sentimiento de hogar y comunidad aquí en Filadelfia. A continuación presentamos algunas de las observaciones de Leticia Roa Nixon acerca de su experiencia investigando en esta comunidad, y algunos fragmentos de entrevistas con los Carnavaleros. —Selina Morales

Al principio mi proyecto para el Taller de Documentación de Vida Folklórica Comunitaria [CFDW] era acerca del Carnaval de Puebla, pero desde un punto de vista de una persona de fuera. Al principio veía a mis paisanos como desplazados—el tema que todos estábamos explorando. Pero al trabajar en este proyecto y hablar con la gente me hizo ver mi propio desplazamiento.

Hay muchas cosas que quedan sin decir. Este proyecto realmente no refleja las luchas diarias de las personas indocumentadas. Tienen la barrera cultural y la legal. También el empleo es algo que se queda callado. Hay tantas barreras que tienen que superar por un solo día. No grabé muchas cosas acerca de cómo la gente cruza la frontera—que es algo horrible. O como San Mateo es ahora un pueblo fantasma habitado solamente por ancianos y gente muy joven porque la mayoría de la población está aquí. Y sin una reforma migratoria no pueden regresar a México y esto parte su corazón. Y hay gente que quiere regresar a ver a sus padres vivos, pero sin una reforma migratoria no pueden cruzar libremente la frontera. Cuando la grabadora estaba apagada es cuando las personas me platicaban acerca de algunas de estas cosas.

¿Por qué viene aquí la gente de San Mateo Ozolco? Eso tiene que ver con el Tratado de Libre Comercio y la globalización y los intereses de las cabezas de esos países. Y luego cuando uno llega aquí, ¿cómo vamos a sobrevivir? Estamos en medio de un conflicto. Es una polarización. Se necesita la Reforma Migratoria. Pero está al final de la lista. ¿Qué va a hacer Obama?

Así que es muy importante poner este primer esfuerzo de documentación en un contexto. ¿Por qué grabamos estas historias? Hay una discriminación racional en

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Como otros participantes del taller vieron cuando fuimos a tomar fotos del Carnaval, la gente se estaba escondiendo. La gente se apartaba de la cámara. Arizona acaba de pasar su ley. Hay mucho miedo y fobia acerca de los inmigrantes y el miedo esta invadiendo a todos.

Ser visible e invisible al mismo tiempo también es una lucha. Uno quiere ser invisible, achicarse cuando alguien lo mira fijamente por más de treinta segundos. Y luego uno tiene este deseo irrefrenable de hacer el Carnaval y decir: “Aquí estamos. Esto es lo que somos. Queremos ser visibles aunque sea por un día.”

Y los organizadores de San Mateo Carnavalero comenzaron a organizar el Carnaval a pesar de todas las adversidades. Esa es la Batalla de Puebla que se ganó de nuevo.

Cogí y traduje algunas muestras, en las propias palabras de los entrevistados, de lo que significa el Carnaval. Estos son fragmentos que incluí en la presentación de multimedia creada durante el Taller de Documentación de la Vida Folklórica Comunitaria tanto de grabaciones como de fotografías.—Leticia Roa Nixon (Ahdanah)

**Asunción Sandoval:** Esta historia se inicia en Huejotzingo, Puebla y queremos de todo corazón darles nuestros respetos a nombre del grupo San Mateo Carnavalero. Ellos [la gente de Huejotzingo] son los que saben más de esta historia, ellos son los creadores; de ellos aprendimos nosotros. Y si en algún momento de alguna forma los ofendemos yo solo quiero que sepan que nosotros los representamos. Nosotros nunca hemos dicho que esta historia es nuestra, o esta creación fue nuestra, ni es de San Mateo. San Mateo aprendió de Huejotzingo y los vamos a respetar siempre, porque el Carnaval original, y el Carnaval que todo mundo quiere hacer, se hace en Huejotzingo. Entonces nosotros representamos a ellos. Estamos orgullosos de ellos y si los ofendemos nos disculpamos.2 Nos hemos enfocado en lo que nosotros sabemos, pero hay más cosas que no sabemos y quisiéramos aprender bienvenidos si alguien nos puede enseñar más. Pero este Carnaval es representado por San Mateo, pero obviamente aprendido de Huejotzingo, Puebla. Nad a más mis respetos y gracias a toda la gente que ha hecho posible todas estas tradiciones. Gracias.

**David Piña:** Nuestros padres, y también otros amigos de nuestros padres, que iniciaron el Carnaval ahí [San Mateo Ozolco] y nosotros desde que tenemos uso de razón pues andamos ahí atrás de ellos bailando. Antes lamentablemente no teníamos ni para comprarnos un traje ¡no! y aunque nuestros padres nomás compraban una caretita y órale pónela y a bailar. Si no nos veíamos ahí bailando, la verdad nos poníamos a llorar, era una tristeza muy grande. Es algo muy difícil de describir, pero se trae en el corazón y en la sangre.

**Gerardo Chico:** Mi papá también fue parte de esto que le llamamos San Mateo Carnavalero, ¡no! Allá en mi pueblo yo también participaba en el Carnaval y entonces es parte esencial de mi vida, ¡no! Cuando vine a Filadelfia casi todos mis primos traían el traje de Zapador. Entonces como que para mí el de Zapador representaba la juventud, algo nuevo, y como estaba yo en este país nuevo, me entusiasmó optar por empezar a salir de Zapador.

**Francisco Piña:** Yo represento el Batallón de los Zacapoaxtla el original de los soldados que salieron en defensa de Puebla en lo que llamamos allá el Cinco de Mayo. Cuando llegamos aquí pues tratamos de hacer una imitación más o menos porque no se puede hacer aquí todo. Por ejemplo tronar, traer pólvora
and photographs.—Leticia Roa Nixon (Ahdanah)

Asunción Sandoval: This history begins in Huejotzingo, Puebla, and on behalf of the San Mateo Carnavalero group we want wholeheartedly to convey our respect. They [the Huejotzingo people] know more about this history. They are the creators of it. We learned it from them, and if at any moment or in any way we offended them, I just want them to know that we represent them. We have never said that “this is our history” or “that is our creation,” nor that of San Mateo. San Mateo learned from Huejotzingo. And we are always going to respect them because the original Carnaval, the Carnaval that everybody wants to do—it is done in Huejotzingo. Therefore, we represent them. We are proud of them and we apologize if we have offended them and if we have misinformed anyone about the costume, the clothing, about the event—again we apologize.2 We have focused on what we know, but there are more things that we don’t know and we would like to know. We welcome anyone who can teach us more. But this Carnaval is represented by San Mateo, obviously having learned from Huejotzingo, Puebla. I convey my respects and thanks to everyone who has made these traditions possible. Thank you.

David Piña: Our fathers as well as our parents’ friends started the Carnaval in our hometown [San Mateo Ozolco]. And since we can remember, we danced behind our fathers. Unfortunately, before we didn’t have enough money to buy a costume, right? Even so, our parents would buy us a little mask and say, “Come on, put it on and dance.” If we didn’t dance during the Carnaval, to tell you the truth we would start crying, and it was such a great sorrow. It’s very difficult to describe, but you carry it in your heart and in the blood.

Gerardo Chico: My Dad was also part of what we call the San Mateo Carnaval, right? Back in the town I also participated in the Carnaval, so it’s almost an essential part of my life, right? But when I came here [Philadelphia], well, almost all of my cousins had the Sapper costume. So I considered the Sapper costume as representative of youth, of something new, and since it was a new country for me, then I opted also to start wearing the Sapper.

Francisco Piña: I represent the Battalion of Zacapoaxtlas—the soldiers who fought in defense of Puebla on what we call the Cinco de Mayo. When we arrived here we tried to make kind of an imitation, more or less, because there are things we can’t do here. Like, bring gunpowder and blast it—and that’s the prettiest thing [at the Carnaval].

Claudio: For me it means a lot because we left roots and history back home. For instance, I have a son. Everybody has a child. And I feel that we’re leaving them a legacy, a history that they also can keep so it never gets lost: the history of the Battle of Puebla.

Gabino Mateo: I’m also part of the Carnaval organizing group. It’s something we liked when we were back in the town [of San Mateo], and we carry it with us. We arrived here without knowing if we could do it here. We have been organizing it for four years, and we are doing the best we can to improve our Carnaval.

Asunción Sandoval: We have knocked at many doors. Many people have closed their doors, but many others have opened doors for us. Open doors signify a triumph. It means a piece of the heart of San Mateo that we bring here to South Philadelphia. It means everything. It’s something that can’t be described in a few words. I would need the whole day to tell you what the Carnaval means to me. We have always said that without them [the small business owners] we might not be able to have this Carnaval. Their monetary donation is something that comes from their hearts. And

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I grew up in a small town on the Eastern Shore of Maryland. And if you are a little bit older, you might remember Mayberry R.F.D with Andy Griffith. It was one of those laid back, lazy kinds of towns. The only difference was that on Andy Griffith’s show you saw all white people. In my town it was segregated. So we saw the other side.

My community was made up of family and friends. It felt very safe. My teachers went to my same church. The corner store was really in the neighborhood. Everybody knew everybody. And most were related. So there was a real sense of family, a down home kind of thing. Good eatin’. Not too much diversity. Everybody was Methodist or Baptist. I always heard funny stories. My father enjoyed making people laugh. He always had a story to tell or he had a poem to give out. And he’s 88 now. If I call him, I’ll say, “Dad, how are you doing?” He’ll say, “You know, just like a sewing machine. I’m so-so. So-so.” And then he makes up these little rap things. And I would grow up listening when my aunts and uncles and cousins of my father and mother’s age, they came to visit. And they’d say, “Children should be seen and not heard.” But we would hear a lot. Because they would always have a good time when they got together. And they would tell stories about their growing up and funny things that happened to them. And there were things that they would tease one another about. And I was always one to eavesdrop and remember the stories.

I think I love the stories that I heard from them that helped me to know another side of my relatives. For example, I had an Aunt Elsie. By the time I knew her, she was already an old lady and she had a reputation for being stingy. She always saved her money and she was always in the church. “Y’all children come to church. Now, you know, I’m having family day and you’ve got to come to my church.” She was a nurse and she lived in New York. And she came back to Easton and she helped people a lot. And she worked very hard in her church. Well, I went to visit one of my relatives who lived in New York. He was her younger brother. And we got to looking at old pictures and I said, “Well, Uncle Sun, who is that?” “That’s your Aunt Elsie when she was young.” She had on a two-piece bathing suit. Sitting on the beach. I said, “That’s Aunt Elsie?” “Yeah, your Aunt Elsie ain’t always been like she is. She was really hot stuff. She and Anna Staton…” And that was my first grade teacher. And when I knew her, her name was Mrs. Gibson. And they used to go out and do the Charleston and dance and everything. And the pictures were beautiful, you know. I said, “That was my Aunt Elsie!” And of course I wanted to know: “What else did they do? How did Aunt Elsie get with Uncle Jack? How did Mrs. Gibson get to be a teacher?” So I always wanted to know why and how come. And I guess that’s why today I tell stories.

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that are pourquoi stories. Pourquoi meaning “why.” I tell why the hippo has no hair and lives in the water. Why the lion is not a pet in the house. I always put these endings on why something happens.

So we grew up knowing these stories. And they were stories that we could learn lessons from.

And some of the things my grandparents would say, I know now that they aren’t true. But I really, really, believed them. I didn’t drink coffee for a long while because of a story I was told when I was little. My Grandpop Ernest was a really, really, dark skinned man. And he used to always drink coffee. And sometimes he would pour his coffee out of his cup and into the saucer. And he would let me sip some of it and let me taste what coffee was like. But sometimes he would drink coffee that was not for children. He might have put a little bit of his medicine in it or bourbon or something like that. And we used to say, “Pop-pop can’t we have some of your coffee?” “No, no, child! You know, coffee will make you Black.” And I thought that that’s why Black people were Black—because we drank coffee. And that white people were white because they were always drinking milk. And I didn’t like milk when I was little. Although we grew up on a farm, had cows and all that, I didn’t like milk. And when I was a really small child I thought that Black people drank coffee and white people drank milk and that’s why they were like that.

I was in drama. In our church, my grandmom always made us learn poems for different holidays. In those days, our church was a good social setting. We had afternoon teas on Sunday where people would dress up and you’d sit down and eat formally and you’d have a program. People would recite their poetry. And your aunts and your people in the church would work with you to get you to learn those poems. And you would learn Langston Hughes. You would learn Paul Laurence Dunbar. You would learn all of these things and you would learn classical music. And you would have to perform in front of one another, right at the church. Looking back, I realize we did that because we weren’t welcome in “mainstream” facilities. But I didn’t know that then.

So that carried over into school. I think my community in those times really valued our young people. Because they knew that the young people, just like today, are our future. But they knew to invest in young people. Back then they didn’t have any choice but to invest in young people.

My world was safe. And my world was surrounded by loving relatives, family, friends—people who protected me. At age 14 that’s when everything changed, because that’s when the Freedom Rides started and northern agitators, as they were called, would come down and do Freedom Rides. And it was a great awakening. In my political science class we learned about what was going on. And everything started to make sense to me. In the summertime I had to take a job at Fletcher Hank’s Clam Factory. And I was an academic student who has A’s. And I was in the Honor Society. And I wondered why my white counterparts were getting jobs at telephone companies. Or clean jobs. None of the Black girls had clean jobs. We worked in the corn factory. We worked in the clam factory. We did domestic work. Things like that. And so it made sense to me why change was happening.

All along I thought that it was good that I was going to my school, which was Moten High, an all-Black school. And then there was Easton High, an all-white school. They were separate, but they weren’t equal. Not at all as far as materials and things like that and equipment. We didn’t have what they had.

And this is when I started noticing things. I noticed that some of the women in my church who I really respected had jobs working as domestics and had jobs working in the big hotel down there. You know—jobs that were honest jobs. My aunt worked at the chicken factory for many years. And when you would see these very dignified women on Sunday morning in church, they were Aunt Sarah. They were Ms. Carrie. They were Sister T. They were Mother Annie. They were dignified people. But they weren’t given the same dignity by the people that they worked for as domestics, as factory workers, you know. They were sometimes called ‘Girl.’ I began to pick up on these things and notice them.

And then there were men who were big and strong and did things and I really looked up to them. And they couldn’t get promoted in their jobs. We had one Black police officer. We had barbers and beauticians. People that had little restaurant businesses. They were respected by their own community, but in the white community there was very little respect because they were farm workers. They were domestics. They were fishermen.

But that’s when things changed—when I started becoming aware and started becoming more political. And the news was starting to be made public. You could see the dogs and the hoses and on the television. So it became more real. It was right in your living room.

I’ve always worked in mental health. Geriatrics and things like that. And I worked at Jefferson, which is a teaching hospital. And you always have students of some kind under you. And I had this one student. And she asked me to come down one day. She said, “Could you listen to my story? I joined this group and I’m practicing my story.” And she told this story and it was just fascinating. And I
was just sitting there in awe. I said, “Wow, that’s wonderful. You had me pulled into your story and your voice and everything.” And she said, “Well, I belong to this group, Keepers of the Culture. You should come. You could probably tell some stories. You probably would like it.”

And so she invited me to one of their meetings at a friend’s house and I met these storytellers. One guy told this story that had a game in it. And I said, “I like games. I could do that. I could do that.” And I had never spent an afternoon like that with people that I didn’t know, telling these wonderful stories, one after another. And I just thought, “Oh, this is wonderful.” I learned these stories and I kept hanging out with them, going to their meetings. And I would come home and retell their stories to my children. I just loved them. And I was reading some of the books that they were reading.

I was at the library up here on 52nd Street and Market Street. They used to meet there. And this brother said, “Today’s your day. You’ve got to tell a story. You’ve got to share at sharing time.” I said, “I can’t tell no stories with all these famous storytellers up in here.” There were professional storytellers there. Linda Goss was there. Charlotte Blake Alston was there. Thelma Shelton Robinson was there. Isaac Maefield. All these people that I had been in awe about. And he said, “You’re telling a story today.” And I said, “No, I ain’t telling no story.” And then they got to that part of the meeting, and Isaac got up and announced me. He said, “Well, we have a young lady who’s been hanging out with us and she loves storytelling and she’s going to tell you a story today.” And I got up and told this story called “The Man Who Grew a Tree on His Head.” I told that story and once I got up there to tell it, I wasn’t as nervous. It just came right on out. And when I got finished, everybody applauded. And Thelma Shelton Robinson said, “Girl, where you been? You’re a natural storyteller. You’ve got to tell stories.” And so, after that I was encouraged to tell stories.

I do a couple of reenactment characters now. I do a character named Dinah from the 1700s who was a slave for the Logans at Stenton House up in Germantown. And in doing her all these years, I gave her life. I gave her personality. And I show why she’s important in history. Had it not been for her, many of the important papers and a lot of the history of the Stenton House would have been gone. But it’s standing today because of this smart Black woman.

As a storyteller we can give these people life and make them human and tell their story. I do a character called Emeline Chapman who came to the Johnson House. She escaped slavery and made it by herself all the way to Philadelphia. And the things that she experienced! I studied her and put it together to see what she must have gone through. She had to leave two children behind. She didn’t have shoes that day and she had to wrap her feet. And the paddy-rollers were after her. Dogs were after her. Sometimes she only had muddy water to drink. Or she only had berries or stuff that she could eat. Freedom meant so much to her that she even changed her name to Susan Bell. And so when I do that character, I feel that character. And I make that character come to life. Because people have to know that these are real people. And these were people that are connected to real people who live today like myself. How do I know that I wasn’t related to that person? Or that you weren’t related to that person?

I do believe that everybody has a story to tell and the longer you live, the more stories become clear to you. Through storytelling you can experience history and life in different ways. We’re writing stories with our lives and each chapter is important. And it’s a wonderful thing.

I think everybody should be a storyteller because it taught me not to be afraid any more.

Notes
1 Keepers of the Culture, the region’s Afrocentric storytelling group, meets at PFP the first Thursday of every month. For more information, visit http://www.kotc.org/
2 There is a mural in Germantown of Dinah; Irma served as a model for her portrait.
Lessons on the way to the President’s House

by Germaine Ingram

This article, written in May 2010, is one weigh station in an ongoing journey of discovery. In the year since this was written, my perspectives have broadened and deepened—and sometimes been reshaped—by further research, events and experiences, and by the searching process of making dances and music. The President’s House Memorial, which opened to the public on December 15, 2010, has become my ever-changing observation post on how people respond to difficult revelations about our national history. Among the influences of the past year, that of dancer/choreographer/director Dianne McIntyre merits special note. Her guidance, encouragement, and caring challenges have lifted and propelled my collaborators and me as we move steadily toward our goal of completing an evening-length work for a winter 2011/2012 premiere.

It started with a phone call—a brief one—about a hole in the ground, about a place at 6th and Market Streets where President George Washington and Martha Washington held enslaved Africans, about recent photographs of the underground evidence of where the house stood, of where the slaves worked and slept, and of how close it all was to current monuments to our nation’s founding principles.

It was August 2008, just months away from a national election that would test whether America was ready to move beyond race… or move inside and come to grips with its fixation on race… or move parallel to race (as if, with a candidate so well-educated, so refined, so well-spoken, the common stereotypes don’t hold). Candidate Barack had delivered his masterful speech on race. He chose the National Constitution Center (just a block from 6th and Market Streets) as the venue—placing himself outside/inside/next to the racial views of his pastor, mentor, friend, goad, and sometimes nemesis, Reverend Jeremiah Wright.

The invitation was so provocative and intriguing: to make music, dances and images that would do/say/ask WHAT? about this “place,” represented by a hole in the ground, in connection with the practice and legacy of slavery. What to say about that place in connection with today—when some are hopeful or naive or detached from reality enough to employ the term “post-racial,” and to suggest that the pain and embarrassment of slavery has faded from our national consciousness. Not a period piece. Not a polemic. Not another screed on slavery’s indignities and brutalities. But what?

Two years have passed. My collaborators—composer/saxophonist Bobby Zankel and visual artist John Dowell—and I are still asking, “What?” even though we’ve spent many, many hours reading, talking, consulting with historians, anthropologists, archaeologists, and ethnomusicologists, and creating art. Each new idea comes wrapped in a bundle of questions that takes time to unravel and explore. And ideas double back on themselves and peck away at intentions that I thought had begun to solidify. This past May, dancer/choreographer/director Dianne McIntyre (who will serve in the role of...
coach/dramaturge for the project over the next year) asked each of us to write out what we want to say in the final performance piece. My reply to Dianne said, in part:

The unique context represented by the President’s House—the practice of slavery in the first executive quarters of the new nation founded on principles of freedom and democracy; the fragmented but riveting stories of Hercules and Oney Judge and the enigma of being owned by the most revered man in America; the rubbing of elbows between slavery and freedom, and between the enslaved Nine and the free blacks of Philadelphia—offers an ample canvas for exploration of the cultural tools—as reflected in music, dance, language, attire, performance—that have helped African Americans to subvert denigrating stereotypes in order to define themselves, to sustain hope and energy to resist and persist against discrimination and oppression, and to brand their distinctive aesthetic influence into America’s art and culture.

I know that I could not have mustered this level of intention two years ago, or even a year, or six months ago; and I expect this statement to evolve over the next year as we prepare to mount a finished performance piece in winter 2011/2012.

Just as my sense of intention has evolved, so has my appreciation of the lessons that this project is eager to teach me. Here are some thoughts on a few of the lessons that I have been learning on the way to a performance piece on the practice of slavery in the President’s House.

On Enfabled History

In one book of the many that I’ve read in the course of this project, there was a jewel of a quote that broke open new ground for me: “History is fable agreed to.” Here was an answer to my anxiety about making a piece related to historical events and characters, and about finding a tenable and responsible stance between feeling cabined by historical facts and being historically profligate. Seeing history as “fable” made me comfortable with my inclination to do aggressive research, but also to imagine events, thoughts and intentions to fill the large gaps in information and analysis; it freed me to use this amalgam of fact, theory, and fiction to shape the context for understanding the enslaved Nine and their relationship to the Washingtons. It disposed me to embrace John Dowell’s idea of using the theatrical conceit of a “slave dinner party” at the President’s House—a time of merrymaking, signifying, and storytelling, perhaps with leftovers supplied by Hercules, Washington’s accomplished cook, from the master’s own table, while the Washingtons were absent. There are historical

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accounts of slave parties, often held surreptitiously, but sometimes organized with the master’s permission and enjoyed as exotic entertainment by slaveholders and their guests. However likely it might have been for the enslaved Africans (maybe joined by the indentured white servants) of the President’s House to stage a party on the premises, it is fair to imagine that, given the opportunity, they would have used this means to relieve the stress of their condition, share news and gossip, and revel in their own cultural touchstones.

Ironically, a discovery in 2009 demonstrates how much fable the accepted “history” about the Nine is wrapped in. The conventional account states that Hercules, George Washington’s slave chef, escaped from the President’s House on the day that the Washingtons were leaving Philadelphia to return to Mount Vernon at the end of Washington’s tenure as president. There was a report of a Hercules sighting in New York in late 1801 (after Washington’s death), but he was otherwise unheard of after his escape. However, in 2009 chief Mount Vernon historian Mary V. Thompson interpreted recently discovered historical records as establishing that Washington, fearful of another escape following Oney Judge’s flight from the President’s House in May 1796, left Hercules in Virginia when he returned to Philadelphia in the fall of that year, and that Hercules escaped from Mount Vernon—not Philadelphia—on Washington’s 65th birthday, February 22, 1797. This revelation stokes curiosity and imagination. If Hercules was going to risk escape, why didn’t he run from Philadelphia? It would have been so much easier for him to abscond during one of his customary evening promenades and to hide out among the free blacks of Philadelphia, as Oney Judge did when she escaped (or so historians tell us). Since Hercules, at least once, was allowed to stay continuously in Pennsylvania for more than six months, why didn’t he claim his freedom under Pennsylvania’s Gradual Emancipation Act? Did he return to Mount Vernon for the sake of his children? Or to protect his vaunted position in the Washingtons’ household? Did he return out of loyalty to Washington? If so, what changed his mind?

New interpretations of the historical records suggest that in late 1796 Washington stripped Hercules of his chef’s status and reduced him to a common laborer, making bricks and pounding stones into sand outdoors in the damp, chilly Virginia winter. Historians now surmise that Hercules took flight because he could not endure the physical conditions and the insult to his pride, that he made his way on foot, by night and over rough terrain, to Alexandria, Virginia, where he boarded a vessel heading north, that he ultimately made his way to Canada or Europe, where he could exercise his highly developed culinary skills. And so as new bits of historical evidence emerge, enabling and evolves. That’s the license that historians have—or take. And I will claim license to imagine thoughts, feelings, motivations and intentions that describe the Nine’s humanity in ways that historians, constrained by the documentary and archaeological evidence, cannot.

On Hidden Significance
Once I envisioned the Nine in the President’s House as channels for the cultural tools that have sustained African Americans in their quest for self-definition and survival, all kinds of connections and relationships began to emerge. One such connection developed between Hercules’ reported affinity for fine attire and the tradition of “black dandyism,” as theorized in Monica L. Miller’s provocative study Slaves to Fashion.

Historical accounts tell us that Washington so valued Hercules’ culinary skills that he acceded to an arrangement whereby Hercules could sell the surplus, or “slops,” from the executive table and keep the proceeds for himself. Hercules purportedly used his earnings to outfit himself in finely tailored clothing and accessories—including a velvet-collared coat and a long watch fob—which he would wear on evening strolls around the part of Philadelphia that we now refer to as “Old City”. Initially, I took this information as evidence of Hercules’ excellence at his craft, of his entrepreneurial aptitude, and his uncommon sartorial taste. Then I happened on a copy of Miller’s book tracing the history of “black male dandyism” from the arrival of the first Africans on North American shores to today’s style-setters. Read her description of the significance of the “black dandy” as a cultural marker:

Though called by many other names, black performance styles have become grouped under the general rubric of signifyin’—an intra- and intercultural aesthetic that has come to define the culture of the African diaspora. To ‘signify is to repeat, revise, reverse, or transform what has come before, continually raising the stakes in a kind of expressive poker’; signifyin’ is thus a signature of all black expressive forms, whether music, dance, oral and written narrative, and even dress. Black dandyism is often seen as being imitative of Western dress and as a sign of one’s aspirations to enter the mainstream, but when interpreted as a signifying practice, it becomes instead a dialogic process that exists in relation to white dandyism at the same time that it expresses, through its own internal logic, black culture (Miller 2009:14).

Viewed in this context, Hercules’ closet was as profound as the ring shout and call and response as a representation of the complexity and persistence of African American culture. How shocked would George have been

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Miller’s treatise also casts a different light on Hercules’ evening strolls. She observes how, during the Harlem Renaissance, favorite pastimes of African Americans included “strolling and parading”—not just stepping out for a walk, but engaging in a cultural practice born out of exigency that was as much an emblem of African American claims to urban space as a celebration of creativity and freedom.... [T]he stroll and the parade had origins in the early African American festival and flourished in the nineteenth century when many poverty-stricken free blacks were forced to spend their leisure time in the streets—it was the way in which they transformed this necessity into an advantage. As threatening as comic to white onlookers, well-dressed blacks sauntering down shared city streets in their Sunday best or Saturday night special represented an actual and symbolic contest for territory (Miller 2009:198–99).

Framed in this context, Hercules’ dandied-up strolls were a precursor to a ritualistic emblem of African American presence and cosmopolitanism. His excursions were not simply an hour or so of refuge from the hot kitchen and the crowded slave quarters of the President’s House; they were as bold a claim for freedom and personal space—short of escape—as he was capable of making.

**On Art Engaging with the Public**

From the beginning, John, Bobby and I set a goal for ourselves of learning how our work could contribute to the quality and texture of public conversation about the President’s House and its present-day significance. Planning for the architectural memorial at the former site of the President’s House had become a complex gumbo of public interest and debate. Were it not for strong public protest by a racially diverse contingent, but especially by African Americans, the National Park Service would have erected a memorial that contained no reference to the fact that slavery was practiced there—practiced well after Pennsylvania became the first state to adopt legislation to abolish slavery. Debates swirled around the second design for the memorial—a design that was adopted after modifications. Meanwhile, the archaeological dig that preceded the groundbreaking for the new memorial drew hundreds of thousands of visitors who engaged with the archaeological team and with one another about the significance of the site and the ironies of its association with slavery. Chief archaeologist Jed Levin would climb up from the hole to talk with visitors; he “could see in their eyes” the moment that those ironies crystallized. Debate continues over the contextual displays planned for the monument.

Bobby, John, and I had no appetite for entering into the sometimes loud and highly publicized controversies over the memorial’s design and content. However, we wanted to get a better understanding of what people found significant about the President’s House, and what they felt about the contradictions between professed American values and the practice of slavery in the first executive mansion. Moreover, we thought that our work might provide an alternative space and contrasting tone for public conversations about who and what deserves to be honored by a memorial on the site. Our principal vehicles thus far for exploring that possibility have been two events—one in December 2009 and the other in April 2010—where we showed and discussed some of the musical, choreographic and visual ideas we were developing, and invited audience members to share with us and one another comments about the subject matter and the work-in-progress. Between these two events, approximately 200 people—artists, scholars, students, teachers, activists, members of the official advisory committee for the memorial, and others—joined in the viewing and discussion.

At about noon on the day of the first showing, I got a call about a threat to picket the venue—the African American Museum of Philadelphia—in protest of our event. It wasn’t clear what it was that the potential protesters found objectionable; there was reportedly mention of “artists capitalizing” on the issues around the President’s House. If that was the concern, it suggested that the would-be protesters did not appreciate the meager economics of art-making. It also suggested valid questions about whether artists had anything meaningful to say about issues and debates that some activists had triggered and followed for a decade. It was fair to question whether we were using the visibility of the President’s House memorial as a pretext for creating some self-absorbed arts production that failed to address the political and emotional weight that the memorial’s purpose, design, and content has assumed in the Philadelphia community, especially the African American community.

No protest occurred. I assume that those who were considering joining a picket line chose instead to join our audience, and recognized the earnestness of our effort to make art that converses with the thoughts and feelings of people other than the artists themselves. At the December 2009 gathering, and again in April 2010, audience members said profound things—about the danger of disremembering painful episodes in national history, about the capacity of art to stimulate feelings people long to touch in themselves, about the importance of naming, acknowledging and honoring. We also heard cautionary comments: to be attentive to the specifics and accuracy of the cultural traditions we would represent, and to provide background information...
was the storyteller to the school!” And parents in the neighborhood came to me and said, ‘Oh, did you do storytelling at the school?’

And I said, ‘Yes.’ ‘Oh, my kid said that it was nice.’ And about ten or fifteen people told me the same thing. And from that time, the children stopped stoning my door. So, these are the kinds of things that stories can do. The children know now, ‘He has a message.’

Gbahtuo moved to Philadelphia in 2001, one of thousands of Liberians who settled in West and Southwest Philadelphia since the 1980s and the outbreak of civil wars in their homeland. The first Liberian Civil War began in 1989. Because he was a government employee in Liberia’s capital, Monrovia, Gbahtuo was pursued by rebels who were trying to oust Samuel Doe and his government. It was a devastating time. Gbahtuo survived being tortured by the rebels. Living in a refugee camp in Ivory Coast, he and his wife, Zaye (a former member of the Liberian National Cultural Troupe), turned to storytelling, singing, and dance to help reconstruct their community. Gbahtuo recounts:

I was working with the government. The rebels said they came to get me out because of corruption, but I think their corruption was far worse than the government that they ousted. We escaped very narrowly from the country. In fact, I had to assume a different name before I could get out. I threw my identification card away. I got separated from my family completely. I went by way of Guinea. In Liberia I was tortured, and then was cared for in Guinea by Medecins Sans Frontieres (Doctors Without Borders) until from there I came to Ivory Coast. In Ivory Coast I was reunited with my family. In the Ivory Coast we literally had nothing. It was terrible when we were there, actually terrible, until the international community became aware of our situation.

In the camp there was a need for education. The Adventist Development and Relief Agency (ADRA) took over a school, and I was employed as one of the teachers. My wife and I decided to establish a cultural troupe inside the school. Once we started that, the people in our little village in Ivory Coast were looking at me as the father of culture because I organized the children together. I was everything. I would go to the parents’ homes and tell them of the importance of what we were doing; to spread messages of peace and to give peace to the minds of the people that still had arms. I said ‘We can’t do this alone, your children must help us do this.’ I was going from house to house. Eventually the parents started to buy into it. Once Zaye started performing with the children, and once we began to make money, we would share all of it with the children.

Once we went to the Liberian side of the border, with heavy security. We crossed into Liberia to perform so that we could get a message to the people. It was fearful. They had Liberian fighters there who could kill anybody at any time. We were all afraid. I said [to my wife], ‘Zaye, this is the work we need to do. Since we are doing it with our whole heart, if we will die, let us die.’ We did the performance.

We did a performance with thousands of people watching. It was so good. I did two stories there; one was about Lion and Tricky Jack. It is about where anger can leave you—how it can carry you but cannot lead you back. I chose that story because of the audience. Even up to today, when people were in that refugee camp see me, they call me ‘Father of Stories.’ We did our part…

In 2009 Gbahtuo participated in the FOLKlorE Project’s Community Folklife Documentation Workshop (CFDW), a training program to teach local people how to document cultural traditions in their own communities; focusing on issues of displacement. Gbahtuo decided to seek out Liberians who were storytellers—not “professional” performers, but people who grew up with the heritage of folktales that had long been knit into everyday life. He says, I have been an amateur storyteller, but through this project, I have become a story-hearer. Each moment I point my microphone in the direction of my countrypeople, I always assume there are many uncertainties in their minds. I know the question I pose, but I do not know the response I might get in return. Because of this, I open my ears and eyes, for their answers do not only come in words, but also in body language.

The people I am interviewing have never had the opportunity to face the microphone. For this reason, I feel that we are making history. The stories and proverbs shared with me were their much-selected best and therefore require our attention. People are not detached from these stories and proverbs they share. These are folks who, in the event of problems, be it from their past or present, may speak inadvertently—through proverbs and stories—rather than directly exposing the wrongdoings. Years back, our stories and proverbs were for survival. This is still the case.

I am not separate from the people with whom I am speaking. I have a responsibility now. There is wisdom all around us. For example, one proverb says: ‘When all the animals are told to get on their knees, turtle is not worried because turtle is already there.’ This says that turtle is already on the ground, so you can’t tell turtle to kneel further. This has to do with all of us: we have been through so much, and have truly been brought so low. We have nowhere to go but up, and I believe that our proverbs and stories can help us to remember what we know and who we are. They can give us guidance for the future. As another storyteller told me: ‘You have awakened the question and it is about to be answered.’ …

While taking the time to listen to the wit and wisdom of Liberian elders, Gbahtuo also came to see the multiple ways in which displacement affects the people, culture, and landscape. And many questions are raised, such as: ‘Where are you from? Where was your family from?’ ‘Your family used to live in a nice place. What was it like? What did you have to leave?’ ‘What was the landscape like?’ ‘What kind of stories did you have? What kind of proverbs did you have?’

Continued on next page >
Liberian community in Philadelphia. Concern for the health, well-being, and cultural vitality of the elder generation motivated him to become a host of a radio program on WPEB. “Our Heritage and Us.” He hopes it will bring familiar sounds, stories, music, and issues of concern to the community into Liberian homes.

Gbahtuo’s “river of life,” as he calls it, has taken him to many places. Some of the stories he tells, and has recorded, can take us there, too. Three (of many) stories are shared here, from Robert Deemie, Samuel Mahn, and Gbahtuo and Fredrick George. Listen to the tales on PFP’s website.

**How Turtle Lost His Wings**

The proverb I give is: “Due to the greediness of Turtle, Aabi (the supreme spirit) stripped him of his wings.” This is a proverb, but it originates from a story.

Long ago, Aabi set all the animals on earth on an equal basis so they could all enjoy the fruits he had made for them. Aabi gave power also to Turtle. Back then, Turtle could fly, and he had more powerful wings than most of the other birds. He was also blessed to live longer than many of the birds.

One day, all the birds went to Aabi and asked him to give them a tree with edible seeds that they could all enjoy. In response, Aabi gave them a tree called Wa. This tree indeed bore nice edible seeds that all birds enjoyed and all the birds were happy. They planted the tree and were not surprised by how rich the tree became. The tree was so rich that seeds which dropped down from the tree also fed other land-dwelling animals. And everything was great.

But then Turtle had double power—power to walk on the ground and power to fly—and he began to monopolize the tree. Each time Turtle saw another bird resting on a branch of the tree, Turtle would go on the attack and knock the bird off. These actions got so unbearable for the birds that they all decided to take their complaints about Turtle back to Aabi.

So the birds went and explained their nightmares to Aabi. Aabi then cited Turtle for a hearing. In response to the allegations, Turtle denied all wrongdoing and vowed to adhere to the advice from Father Aabi to share and share alike.

But to the amazement of the birds, Turtle extended his aggression—this time to land-dwelling animals too. Turtle would not allow any deer, groundhogs, squirrels or any animals, as well as birds, to feed. The extent of the abuse forced the animals to go back to Aabi with a second complaint.

Aabi again sent for Turtle to hear his side of the story.

Turtle did not deny the allegations but told Aabi that there is a certain instinct in him that made him behave this way—but this time for real he promised to change. Aabi gave him another chance like he does to everyone and urged him to surely change, or else he’d face the consequences.

For the third time, Turtle became more aggressive than before. The birds again went with another complaint to Aabi. When Aabi saw the extent to which the animals had lost weight, Aabi called Turtle and told him: “You are a stubborn animal I’ve created. You will still maintain your ability to live longer than other animals, but I’ll strip you of your strength and your feathers.” Today, the marks on Turtle’s shell are the spaces where the feathers once stood.

This is how the proverb came into being: “Due to the greediness of Turtle, Aabi stripped him of his wings.”—Robert Deemie, recorded in Dan and translated by Gbahtuo Comgbaye, December 12, 2009

The Children and the Monster

Once upon a time, there lived a family of four—the man, his wife and their children, a boy and a girl. One day the man and his wife died, leaving only the boy and his sister. For fear of predators, the boy took his sister up on a high mountain—almost as high as Mount Nimba in Yekepa.

The boy’s name was Paye and his sister’s name was Sou. Paye was a hunter. Being that they were residing on a high mountain, the boy provided a long chain that Sou would throw down each day when her brother returned from hunting to enable him to climb back up. Paye instructed his sister not to throw down the chain for anyone other than him.

Each time he returned from hunting, he would sing the song that was their password to enable the girl to know that indeed it was her brother. The song was “N’ zaa yor wro day way” (meaning, “My sister the chain thrower, come and throw the chain to allow me to climb”). Day in and day out, this was the pattern of their livelihood.

What they did not know was that a certain monster called Gleeko had been listening to the boy each time Paye requested the chain be let down, and he had actually seen him climbing with the chain.

One day the monster said, “I’ll try and capture this girl from the brother and use her as my slave.” When Paye was off on one of his hunting trips, the monster went and sang the password song, but the girl replied, “That voice does not belong to my brother.” The monster left, not knowing what to do to get to the girl at the top of the mountain. Minutes after, Paye returned and

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to make the work accessible to the full range of audiences.

These gatherings convinced us that there is ample room for art to contribute to the quality and content of public conversation around the President’s House. And based on the response to our early work-in-progress, we are encouraged to believe that we can both serve the civic conversation and do our own work by hewing to our artistic purpose and vision. Perhaps the best way for us to balance these intentions is to strive for the standard implied by James Baldwin’s pronouncement that “the purpose of art is to lay bare the questions that have been hidden by the answers.”

Postscript
This project continues, as we aim to have a finished performance piece for presentation in winter 2011/2012. We are excited by the opportunity to work with Dianne McIntyre, whose long experience in choreographing on historical themes and the African American journey, and in collaborating with such noted composer/musicians as Max Roach, Cecil Taylor and Olu Dara, makes her the perfect adviser for our next phase of project development. We are grateful to the Pew Center for Arts and Heritage through Dance Advance for its generous support. And many thanks to the Philadelphia Folklore Project for its valued encouragement and technical support, and for providing a piece of the platform for undertaking this work.

References

sang the password song. His sister immediately recognized his voice and let down the chain. Sou explained to her brother what went on between her and a person with a coarse voice. Paye again reminded her that the mountaintop on which they were dwelling may have once been occupied by the monster and he urged her not to let anyone with such a voice come up.

After three unsuccessful attempts, the monster decided to go to a sand-cutter (a soothsayer, what Dan people call Deh) for help. The monster told Deh that he wanted his voice to sound like a normal male so that he could gain entry to Paye and his younger sister’s compound up on the mountain. Deh then took him to his steel-bending shop where he made tools. Deh heated an iron marble and told the monster to swallow it. The monster opened his mouth, and Deh threw the hot marble straight down into his throat. Minutes after, Deh told the monster to try his voice. His voice had taken the shape of a normal human male voice.

The next day when Paye went hunting, the monster returned. This time, he sang the password song exactly like Paye. Sou thought her brother had forgotten something and returned for it. She let down the chain. The monster seized the opportunity to climb the mountain, and he got to the girl. When the girl saw that it was not her brother, she would do nothing else. The monster began to say, “I tricked you and I’ve now got you.” The monster ordered the girl to draw the chain up to the top of the mountain so that neither Paye nor anyone else could climb up. He also ordered the girl to find all the lice and ticks in his hair, and to take them out. When the girl cried, he forced her to eat all of the fat lice and ticks she gathered from his skin. The next evening Paye came—oblivious to what had happened. He began to sing the usual password song but strangely found out that his sister was not responding. The monster was threatening the girl that she faced death if she answered her brother. Paye was deeply worried. He went to the same Deh and begged him to do something so that he could go and see who was in their home with his sister. Meanwhile, Sou was rapidly losing weight because each day the monster would ask her to cook their food and give it to him. He ordered her not to put a single grain in her mouth.

The sand-cutter told Paye to take the original route he had taken a long time ago toward the mountain top. At first he was afraid, but he yielded to the advice of the sand-cutter. The sand-cutter also told him that each evening the monster climbed down the mountain in search of cool air. Paye did as ordered. He succeeded in climbing without the chain, and he got to the top of the mountain to his sister. By the time he arrived, the monster was busy giving orders to the girl to cook the food and feed him, and at the same time to find the lice and ticks on his body. The girl scratched the monster’s lice until he fell asleep. This gave an edge to Paye. Paye took a spear and killed the monster, setting them free.—Lor Sammy Mahn, recorded in Dan and translated by Gbahtuo Comgabaye, December 25, 2009
I have to mention also our parents and our siblings who are in Puebla or in Mexico, because they provide us with the products we need, such as the costumes, and even with food. They also give us the moral support to have the strength to continue in Philadelphia.

Francisco: I participated three years ago when the Carnaval began here [in South Philadelphia]. We were few—about 50 people. It was at Mifflin and 5th that the Carnaval started. Some [people from] San Mateo Ozolco did it. The majority of us who participated [in Mexico] are relatives, cousins, nephews, uncles, all of us, yes. So here it’s the same. When I participate in the Carnaval, I feel free. I’m there dancing. Really, most of all, I feel free.

Asunción Sandoval: I’ve always said from the beginning, this is the one day we don’t feel illegal or persecuted or frightened. This is the only day we feel at home with our family and with our friends. The truth is, that day it doesn’t matter where we are. The only thing that’s important is to feel alive, to feel Mexican and to feel our culture. And above all, to show it off everywhere because, to us, we have a beautiful culture.

Maximino Sandoval: We’re going to continue walking. If we could come from Mexico and cross [the border] to get here to make a dream come true, likewise we’re going to make the Carnaval happen. That’s everybody’s goal.

Notes


2 Asunción Sandoval adds: We have an internet web page (http://www.sanmateocarnavalero.com). We welcome corrections and new information. We are here to learn, and we continue learning. Our fifth Carnaval takes place on April 24, 2011, and we welcome you!

Notas

Gracias a Mintzi Martinez Rivera por su ayuda editorial.


The story of Lion and Tricky Jack

All right, the proverb is: "Anger may carry you, but may not bring you back." And a second proverb pertaining to anger is: "If anger makes you take a weapon, shame will make you throw it and hurt someone."

So, Lion’s girlfriend was Rabbit at that time. And so, Rabbit respected Lion, because Rabbit knew that Lion was the king of the beasts. So one day, Jackal saw Rabbit and said, "I like you." And Rabbit—Rabbit was stunned. Rabbit said, "Aren’t you afraid? I’m the wife of Lion, the king of the beasts. And now you see me coming around, telling you want to be friends with me? Come on now!” And Jackal said, "Look, you don’t know how things really are, Rabbit. In the forest, I always ride on the back of Lion. I always ride on Lion’s back like I ride my horse.”

And Rabbit was like, "What? The Lion that I know? Lion kills Elephant. The biggest animal in the forest. So you’re saying you ride on his back?”

Jackal said, "Trust me." He said, "Tell Lion: ‘Jackal says that he always rides on your back just like you would ride a horse.’"

So, Rabbit could not wait for the conversation to get finished, because she wanted to run and tell Lion the whole story. So Jackal said, "Well, think about it, OK? Think about my request. But, if you like, go and tell Lion what I just said, because I know for sure that that’s what happened. Most of the animals in the bush know this.”

When Lion was on her way to tell Lion, she saw Black Deer. She told Black Deer. Then she saw Leopard. She told Leopard. She saw Elephant. She saw Bush-Goat too. She told Bush-Goat. She told all the animals, and they were all stunned.

And all of them said, "Wait a minute, this is our first time hearing this. Can Jackal really ride on the back of Lion? This is the first time that we are hearing that. We want to see it happening.”

OK, and Rabbit went and saw Lion, and she told Lion, "My god, there is something I heard today.” He said, "From who?” And she said, "From Tricky Jack. Tricky Jack says he always rides your back in the bush.” Oh my god! And Lion was so furious. He was so angry! All the hair on his neck stood up. His eyes were all red. And he started roaring, you know. And scratching everything in his sight, saying, "Hey, I am going right now to get Tricky Jack, and bring him right here. I’m going to bring him either dead or alive.”

And Rabbit said, "If you bring him dead, how am I going to know whether what he said was true or not?”

Lion said, "Well, then I’m going to try and bring him at all costs. I’m going to try and bring him right now.” He was so angry.

(Now, that was anger right there. You guys see the anger, right? OK. Someone can get angry beyond understanding, right? Whether our mother, our father, our friends. And we’ll get angry without limit. And say, you know what? I’ve got to do it back to him. No stopping. Nothing is going to stop me. That’s what happened to Lion.)

So, Lion started going to find Tricky Jack. He was looking for Tricky Jack all over the place. Luckily he found Tricky Jack laying down. But Tricky Jack knew that Lion would be out hunting for him. So, he was laying down like he was very sick and dying.

So Lion said, "Why are you laying down? Get up. You told Rabbit something about me. Get up right now. Let’s go. Let’s go right now, so you can testify. So you can tell the audience that you do not ride me. Who are you to ride me, by the way? I kill Elephant, I kill Leopard, I kill anything that I want to kill—and you say you can ride my back?”

So Tricky Jack lay down there and said, "Look, Your Majesty.” He said, "Who am I? Who am I to tell you that I can ride you? What do I come from? What do I look like? Come on now. But I am sick. Right now, I am dying. I been sick for almost one week, and I can’t get up. So that’s the only thing. If I could get up right now, I could go with you. But you are nice, even today. If you wanted to eat me, you would have eaten me a long time ago. Because I must tell you, Rabbit is just lying about me. Rabbit just wants you to destroy me. But give me another day, because I am sick. I just can’t go with you today.”

Lion really wanted to prove himself right. He wanted all the animals to know that Tricky Jack’s claim was untrue. So Lion said, "How can I help you so we can go back to tell everyone?”

Tricky Jack said, "Well, I don’t know.” Lion had no way to carry Tricky Jack. He couldn’t carry Tricky Jack in that big jaw, because he would kill him. And Lion had no hands, like human hands, to carry him—no way! So then Lion said, "Well, can you get on my back?”

Tricky Jack: "No, you’re too big. I can’t be on your back. You are—you are my chief. Why would I get on your back?”

Lion: "Come, come. I just want this thing to be proven today, because I was almost getting ready to eat all the animals that were carrying this news around.”

Tricky Jack: "When I get better I will go. I beg you.”

Lion: "No, no, no, no. Come, get on my back!”

Tricky Jack: "I beg you.”

Lion: "We’ve got to do it right now. We’ve got to do it right now.”

Tricky Jack: "Do you want to do something to me? I beg you.”

Lion: "I don’t want to do anything. I want to prove it. I want it to be proven.”

Tricky Jack: "OK. If we go on the road, and I die, then I got trouble.”

Lion: "No, you will not die by falling off my back. You will not die. But you will get on my back. We’ll go. We’ve got to go.”

[Continued on next page >]
Tricky Jack: "You're too big for me to be on your back."
Lion: "Please, please, please."
Tricky Jack: "OK. OK. If you say I am good, I will do it."
Lion: "Good."
So Lion went down and said, "Come on, get on my back."
So Tricky Jack went and got on Lion's back. And he said, "But there's no saddle. You know that little saddle that they put on the back that makes it easier to ride—to make the back comfortable?"
He said, "Your back is slippery. If I sit there, I may slip and fall. And guess what, I am sick. So you know, how can I do this?"
Lion: "I will look for a saddle. What will you do now?"
Tricky Jack: "I told you, I'm sick, don't carry me, I'm poisoned."
Lion: "Can we find a saddle? You can put one on my back and we can go. It doesn't mean anything."
Tricky Jack: "If that's what you want to do, we can do it. But I am afraid of you."
Lion: "Don't be afraid. That's what we are going to prove."
Tricky Jack: "OK."
OK, they put a saddle on the back of Lion, and decided to go.
And Tricky Jack said, "Wait, wait, wait. I'm almost falling back. That little—what do you call it? Reins, OK. I need reins to be placed in your mouth, and I can hold them so I can have balance."
Lion: "Oh, yes, OK, let's go for it. I just want us to go and prove this thing right now."
Tricky Jack: "Your teeth are too sharp. They will break the reins."
Lion: "No, I will not spoil them. I will try and handle it right there, and we'll go."
Tricky Jack: "I am afraid your teeth will cut it."
Lion: "No, my teeth are not going to cut it. I will place it right between my teeth."
Tricky Jack: "Say you want to do that, then I agree."
Lion: "OK."
Tricky Jack: "I'm afraid."

Lion: "No, no, don't be afraid."
Tricky Jack: "Thank you."
Lion: "OK."
So, the saddle is on Lion's back. The reins are in his mouth. And then they needed to find a bit to put between Lion's teeth, so they brought a piece of stick and put it there so the reins would be secure and the Lion's mouth would be open wide.
But then Tricky Jack said, "But, I need a little whip because I got flies eating my ears. I got some soil in my ears and the flies are bothering it. I need a little whip. Can I get a whip?"
Tricky Jack: "When I hold the whip, it looks like I am beating you."
Lion: "No, no, no, you are not beating me. You say you are going to drive away your flies."
Tricky Jack: "OK."
So now, Tricky Jack is in a beautiful position. He has a beautiful saddle on Lion's back, reins in Lion's mouth, Lion's mouth open wide, and he's got a little whip, and everything.
Tricky Jack said, "I need to hold on to the reins better." So they looked for some white gloves and they put them on—beautiful white gloves.
Tricky Jack had them on his hands: "So your paws would not hurt me, OK?" So there goes the gloves, and he is on the back of Lion.
By that time all of the animals have gathered to see Lion bringing Tricky Jack in, dead or alive. They all have lined up, they all are waiting, like on Woodland Avenue, like they are going to watch a parade, but when Lion and Tricky Jack were getting there—everybody, all of the animals, were stunned. And they were like, "Oh my god, this is true, Tricky Jack is riding on the back of Lion!"
And then he had a whip and started whipping him.
So when they got closer, he really started whipping the lion. After Lion saw the astonishment in the faces of the animals, he knew that he had been tricked. He knew his anger had taken him too far. The anger had brought him to a dead end where he lost track of what was going on!
So he threw Tricky Jack down, jumped away into the forest, ran because of his shame, and vowed to eat Tricky Jack from that point onwards.
So this is why every time that Lion sees Tricky Jack, whether he has a beautiful meal in front of him or not, he will leave it and chase Tricky Jack and eat Tricky Jack before he comes back to his regular meal. OK? So now, the anger. When you are so angry and you can't control yourself, or you can't manage your anger, it always leads to a problem. So that is the end of that story.—Performed by Gbahtuo Comgbaye and Fredrick George at PFP, November 16, 2010

Notes
2 His radio program is currently broadcast on WPEB 88.1 FM on Saturdays, 4–6 PM. See http://sites.google.com/site/wpeb881/news
3 Gbahtuo comments, “What I like about this story is that the boy played a role as a parent. He took responsibility for his sibling. You know, the mother and father were not living. Because their primary protectors were not there, he took responsibility and protected his sister.”
4 Gbahtuo began this performance, but Fredrick George chimed in, and the two told it together. By the time the story built to the conversation between Tricky Jack and Lion, the two men were taking turns speaking each character’s role. Listen to the performance on PFP’s website.
Our “Making Home Place” exhibition and programs investigate how local people have used folk arts to address many kinds of displacement. The exhibition in our gallery was shaped both by PFP staff and by community members who participated in last year’s Community Folklife Documentation Workshop. The show features interviews and images by Gbahtuo Comgbaye with Liberian storytellers and by Leticia Roa Nixon (Ahdanah) with the makers of the San Mateo Carnaval (see articles in this issue). Jeannine Osayande interviewed members of Swarthmore’s historically Black community, and Suzanne Povse documented the experiences of women in non-traditional trades. Other artists featured in the show include Frito Bastien, Eric Joselyn, Eang Mao, Thomas B. Morton, and Pang Xiong Sirirathasuk Sikoun. Stop by to make your own miniature home place to add to the display or to listen to media from these and other Philadelphians reflecting on how we make and sustain livable communities.

* Artist Betty Leacraft installed “Gifts from Mother Earth” at PFP this past fall. The show featured her quilts and photographs as well as displays of herbs and plants. A special gathering honored Blanche Epps, master gardener and former PFP board member, for her wisdom and long-time efforts at ”undormacizing” cultural and agricultural knowledge.

* Remembering Dr. Kathryn L. Morgan, former students, colleagues and friends gathered at a special program at PFP this spring. Artists from Keepers of the Culture, the region’s Afrocentric storytelling group, shared stories— antidotes to racism, Morgan called them— from Morgan’s ground-breaking book, Children of Strangers. KOTC artists performing included Irma Gardner-Hammond, Caroleise Frink-Reed, Queen Nur, and Momma Sandi. Wonderful stories were shared by people who knew Morgan, or were inspired by her. The first African American woman to get a Ph.D. in folklore from the University of Pennsylvania, Morgan opened the fields of family folklore, African American studies, women’s studies and more through her work. Look for recordings and transcripts from materials gathered in a forthcoming issue of this magazine. More on Morgan is at our website— including video clips and bibliography: http://www.folkloreproject.org/folkarts/artists/morgan_k/index.php.

(KOTC meets monthly at PFP, on first Thursdays. Visit their website for more information: http://www.kotc.org/)

* Eatala: A Life in Klezmer is the latest PFP documentary. A loving portrait of Elaine Hoffman Watts (her Yiddish name is “Eatala”), the documentary profiles a feisty and determined musician who has broken barriers—as a musician, a working mother, and in her persistent devotion to her family’s klezmer music. Drawing on performance footage, family movies and photographs, and interviews, Eatala shows how the klezmer tradition has been sustained over four generations in a single family, with a good dose of humor and joy. In other parts of the country, klezmer (Eastern European Jewish folk
(music) seemed to disappear and then was revived. But in Philadelphia, the Hoffman family never stopped playing this music. Purchase the DVD for $15 on our website or with a check to our office.

* Folk Arts Education: More than 450 young people study folk and traditional arts at the Folk Arts-Cultural Treasures Charter School (FACTS) which PFP co-founded in collaboration with Asian Americans United. Check out the Culture Tools website (www.culturetools.org) to see work by artists, students, and activists. Culture Tools was developed by AAU, PFP and FACTS as part of a Scribe Video Center initiative.

* Losang Samten returned to PFP for his annual residency in March. The Tibetan Buddhist tradition of mandala-making creates a temporary sacred space, a spiritual home place, intended to uplift and benefit those who see it. Over the course of a week, Losang created and dismantled a kalachakra mandala, a mandala of peace, out of thousands of grains of colored sand. An intricate diagram of the cosmos in sacred terms, a sand mandala is shaped of many elements, with each detail holding symbolic meaning. Losang explains that "First and foremost these mandalas are a form of communication through art. They tell stories that have meaning for Tibetans and other Buddhists, and for humanity in general. The witnessing of patience in the creative process helps observers find patience and perseverance within themselves. They also see how each tiny piece matters in the interconnectedness of life. These are important lessons for the next generation, whether Tibetan or not." Photos are on our Facebook site: befriend us and see this year’s mandala being made. Or visit http://www.folktreasure.org/folkarts/artists/samten_l/index.php to see last year’s mandala in time-lapse photos.

* New PFP writing: Why do we do what we do? Recent writing by PFP director Debora Kodish considers what activists offer folklore, and what folklorists offer activists, paying tribute to some of those who have guided and inspired our work. "Envisioning Folklore Activism" appeared in the Journal of American Folklore Society 124:491 (2011) 31-60. Copies are available from our office.

* PFP’s website (www.folktreasure.org) also features more media and documentation of the work of local traditional artists, lots to read, hear and watch, and plenty of resources for people working (or interested) in folk and traditional arts.

* For information about current programs, visit our website www.folktreasure.org or give us a call: 215.726.1106. To join and support these efforts, use the form on the back.
about the philadelphia folklore project

Folklore means something different to everyone—as it should, since it is one of the chief means we have to represent our own realities in the face of powerful institutions. Here at the Philadelphia Folklore Project, we are committed to paying attention to the experiences and traditions of “ordinary” people. We’re a 24-year-old independent public interest folklife agency that documents, supports and presents local folk arts and culture. We offer exhibits, concerts, workshops and assistance to artists and communities. We conduct ongoing field research, organize around issues of concern, maintain an archive, and issue publications and resources. This work comes out of our mission: we affirm the human right to meaningful cultural and artistic expression, and work to protect the rights of people to know and practice traditional and community-based arts. We work with people and communities to build critical folk cultural knowledge, respect the complex folk and traditional arts of our region, and challenge processes and practices that diminish these local grassroots arts and humanities. We urge you to join—or to call us for more information. (215.726.1106)

about the philadelphia folklore project

membership form

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