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The late great writer and cultural activist Toni Cade Bambara has said that she was trained as a community scribe. Local people in her Harlem and Atlanta neighborhoods recruited her to compose letters, fill out forms, say on paper what needed to be said, put things on record. She describes this labor as an early stage on her path to learning how “writing could be a way to engage in struggle, [how] it could be a weapon, a real instrument for transformation politics.”

Her words name an important part of the training that we have been privileged to receive here at PFP. For 27 years, local people have been taking time to educate us: sharing important matters and giving us useful writing assignments. We have been put to work on countless forms, applications, position papers on topical issues, letters to editors, obituaries, essays, scripts, exhibition panels, and performance programs. These tasks have required translating across mediums and paying attention to particulars: constantly marking subtle and significant shifts in how we understand and imagine the world, history, our pasts, and one another. These tasks have made us accountable, sharpened our politics and principles, and opened possibilities.

In the best moments, I think that translating ideas and dreams to paper with others has pushed us to find, together, new and better frameworks, language and thinking than we might ever have found alone. Writing has become something collective. We have sometimes transformed one another in the process.

That is part of the story told in the Founders’ Day reenactment described in these pages, recounting how Asian Americans United and PFP came together to found the Folk Arts-Cultural Treasures Charter School.

PFP has used grant-writing—a problematic but practical collaborative writing practice—to disturb the status quo, to challenge funders to acknowledge bias and exclusions, and to deliver resources to under-resourced communities. The apprenticeship that is allowing Annsumane Sillá and Lela Aisha Jones to work together is one of 350+ community-based projects nurtured over the years through PFP’s technical assistance program. Overall, we have helped to raise more than $3.3 million dollars in grant funds for grassroots folk cultural activity in our region. PFP started helping local people with grant-writing because it was clear that grant dollars were not going to worthy projects developed by people and communities of color. It seemed right to apply our literacies, and to pay some dues. I am proud of the results, but frustrated by the deeply entrenched bias and inequity of existing arts and cultural funding structures.

This magazine has been a long-running attempt to put the record straight, share significant histories, and widen peoples’ notions of local art and culture. Inaugurated in 1987, Works in Progress has aimed to address the absence of folk arts and community-based artists from much mainstream public consciousness. This is the 43rd issue and the last one that I will edit. On June 7th, at PFP’s Birthday Bash, I will step down as Director of PFP. I am pleased to be leaving PFP in the capable hands of Selina Morales, who will become PFP’s next Director. I look forward to what she and Toni Shapiro-Phim, longtime PFP staff member, will do together. Their work and vision for PFP is reflected here in wonderful essays about the Liberian Women’s Chorus for Change, and the Honoring Ancestors exhibition. Both projects were conceived and produced collaboratively under their direction. Advancing work in folk arts and social change, both projects develop new ways for PFP to serve as an instrument for transforming ourselves and our communities.

The opportunity to serve in this position for 27 years has been a true privilege; it has immeasurably changed and enriched my life. I am deeply grateful and indebted to the community that has, truly, raised me. Thank you all for your gifts of time and trust.

With gratitude,

Debora Kodish

Notes

Honoring Ancestors

notes from an exhibition
Honoring Ancestors grew out of the impulse to explore and share histories of African dance and drumming in Philadelphia. The exhibition became an offering: a small way to recognize visionaries and cultural workers who opened new pathways benefitting all of us. It celebrates artists who, beginning in the 1950s, transformed the cultural life of our city. They sought out, reclaimed, preserved and innovated within traditions that continue to be vital. They saw how things could be and were undeterred by challenges. They lived for their art and the betterment of their communities, and they created community, a sense of family, and new possibilities. We all remain greatly in their debt.

Identifying with African cultural traditions and asserting dignity and strength against overwhelming odds, pioneers of African-rooted dance and drumming were in the vanguard of those struggling for cultural equity and social justice in 1960s and 1970s Philadelphia.

People actively countering racism, disenfranchisement, and violence took real risks. Dancer Ione Nash and drummer John Wilkie are among those who tell stories of police harassment for using (and even carrying) African drums. Artists who embraced cultural nationalism describe dealing with racism and retribution from outside the community (and sometimes hostility from inside). That the obstacles they faced may seem hard to imagine today is a testimony to exactly how much they accomplished.

Today, the vitality and diversity of African-centered percussion and dance in Philadelphia is powerful validation of the imaginations, visions, sacrifices, and labors of countless local people, going back sixty years. The following testimonies from people who have been witnesses to, and participants in, this cultural revolution. They represent diverse insiders’ views on a cultural movement that continues to create both great art and vital community.

Cachet Ivey: If you step on the dance floor or if you put your hand on the drum in Philadelphia then you need to definitely know who the people are who made this possible here, and how they did it.

Omomola Iyabunmi: In the 60s we began to remove things that had enslaved us. That’s when I got the name, Omomola Iyabunmi. “Omomola” means “child who knows tomorrow.” “Iyabunmi” means “God’s gift to mother.” My whole journey is about reclaiming who I am. The 60s were a wonderful time. They woke you up. “I’m black and proud.” Something was guiding me to get more than that.

You have to get a connection. You have to live it. The sekere became part of that. I met Baba Ishangi. I found out he was teaching at Ile Ife and I studied sekere with him. Our music is sacred because it’s a part of who we are. Our movements mean something. Our dances tell a story. The music goes with it. It talks about society. It’s not just music and dance; it’s how you live. I no longer felt ashamed of being from Africa. That’s what was about for me. Then you began to gravitate toward your other family, brothers and sisters, because we didn’t love each other the way we should. So this was the time to reach out and be proud and go back and get your stuff.

Leonard “Doc” Gibbs: The drum was a big part of the Movement because when you heard the drum you thought, “Africa.” I graduated from high school in 1966. I remember a lot of the civil rights events being on T.V. When [Babatunde] Olatunji went out to perform he had to have African Americans with him. They were the early pioneers, wearing dashikis. African Americans were taking it a step further: Not only do I want the respect due me as a man, but I also want to know more about my culture. It’s one thing to be in the Movement, and it’s another to also want to know about one’s culture.

It’s an unwritten rule as a hand drummer that you gotta know about your culture. Some of these people that I studied with—Baba Crowder, Minye Gay, Bernard Henderson, Peache Jarman—if they showed me something on the drum, there was other information that was given, too. These were all African Americans who lived in Philadelphia, who I sat with. That sparked an interest to go a little deeper and find things.”

The thing that worked for me was that I studied tradition and culture while I was doing the commercial stuff. It’s about skin on skin, and if you ain’t doing that and if you don’t have no understanding of the drum you can’t tell nobody nothing.

In a minute we ain’t going to be here. We’re at a critical point. Other people are doing our culture and presenting our culture. If we’re not careful, we will all have passed on and they won’t be telling our story. They’ll be telling their story. We don’t have a lot of time. It’s important.

Corbitt D. Banks (Ademola Olugbelola): All of my work over the past 40 years has been around culture, justice, freedom, and connected to being African—and that’s connected to the drum and the

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dance. Culture is political because our being in America has always been political: the 300-pound gorilla in the room is [the need for] justice, freedom and equality for everyone in America. That's been a stain on America. The First Black Power conference (in modern time) was held here in Philadelphia at the Church of the Advocate in 1968. Whenever you had these kinds of gatherings, the entertainment was always around the arts, including African drum and dance. I don’t think there would have been political change without the art, without the culture…

Who were the gods before the gods we now have? And that was connected to the drum and the dance because that’s how you exist with the orishas…

Politics, culture, religion were all ways of looking for an alternative to what had enslave us. If what was was not meant for us, we went on the search.

Baba Joseph Bryant Bey: I came out of the Civil Rights movement, the Black Empowerment movement. I was born in Philadelphia. The old 50s, 60s thing of Black idealism, or African idealism, affected me like everyone else. I went from being colored, Negro, to being African American. Coming up as a young man and being able to see the change from colored water fountains to anybody-can-drink-at-them water fountains.

In 1965 I met Baba Robert Crowder and Baba Robert Kenyatta. They turned me on to drumming. I started noticing all these crazy dances. I took a dance class from Alex Makapungai who was teaching over at the University of Pennsylvania. This guy was doing something different, sort of African. I thought, “I could do that.” This was in the early 60s. I was asked to try drumming, around 1969-70. Charles Minye Gay had a lot of faith in me. He saw something in me that I didn’t really see in myself. Then we met Mongo [Santamaria] and all them. They wouldn’t teach you unless you had the potential. You had to produce back then.

Betty Aldridge: At one point, I discovered that Arthur [Hall]’s company was not only Philadelphia-based, but also four blocks from me. I took a walk, heard drumming from an old factory. Looked in. Wondered who’s in charge. I saw the photos and said, “That’s the company I saw when I was in high school.”

Even though I was a new mother, I took my 2-month-old to classes and performances. That was one of the beautiful things about Arthur—a family unit thing. Especially during Sunday rehearsals. The ladies would go upstairs and put on big pots of food and others would grab the kids and keep the rehearsal going. Arthur ended up being the babysitter, changing diapers and feeding babies backstage because he wanted us to be on stage. Half of the company members had children. When the kids got big enough to move, we put them into dance class.

Doing the procession during the first and second ODUNDE celebrations in South Philadelphia, we were carrying Oshun on the litter, which was decorated with offerings. People were saying we were ‘devil worshipers’ or ‘voodoo worshippers.’ If they knew anything, they’d realize they actually didn’t know anything.

Even our own family members. Even in our own neighborhoods. People said to me, “Why don’t you put some clothes on? Now you’re all nappy and ratty-tatty. We ain’t Africans, we’re Americans.” Even down to, “You’re going to hell.” I’d say, “I’m learning our culture.” But it was like talking to a wall. This is a choice you made to see where you can go as a person, to know who you are as a person. People were so angry at us. Some actually followed us along the way. Then accused us of polluting the water. “We’re not throwing garbage; we’re placing offerings.” We were giving nature back to nature.

Hideous things were happening in my own neighborhood of 10th and Dauphin. That’s what Arthur [Hall] tried to put a stop to. Arthur reached

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for the teenagers: “You don’t have to be following those footsteps to nowhere.” People felt threatened by his alternatives. They fill the hole in their lives with all the wrong things. Like puzzle pieces that don’t fit. Arthur would open possibilities of what they could fill that hole with.

Company members went on to college, or to open a business or into politics. I have to say “thank you” to him. It’s a big legacy.

I was quiet for a long time; now I won’t stop talking. We’re missing out on some good elements of society if we don’t get our act together.

**Nana Korantema Ayeboafo:** When I first saw the African drummer John Eshun playing the drum in Arthur [Hall]’s studio, I was mesmerized. It looked as if it was magical—there was some aura of light around him that I will never forget, and I think that’s what drew me in. When I had the opportunity to drum with Farel Johnson, and Bobby Artis, and Bob Franklin, I was working out disappointment, I was working through misunderstandings. The drum always afforded me the opportunity of therapy. The drum was my therapy. Whenever I wasn’t feeling great I could play the drum and transform into joy.

When I joined the dance company and started drumming for the dancers, it became my responsibility to use it to transform lives, and to heal others. I can reach people without ever saying anything to them. I can reach them in a positive way and I can share my experience through making music with a drum. So, it’s a very important thing for me to be able to drum. When I was performing, it meant a lot to me as a performer. Now it means much more because of the healing aspect of the drum, and the ability that it has to bring people together.

The underlying element that is alive for the drumming and dancing today is absolutely a call for people to come together, for an opportunity to share love where there was hate, and division, and separation. Through the dance and through the African drumming we can become whole. We can heal ourselves and the differences in the world. When we come to that realization, everyone becomes much more valuable to the future than they may even realize.

**Ira Bond:** When you have a teacher it’s a lifetime commitment. The idea isn’t about trying to get something and run, it’s about a family and establishing and respecting who we are as human beings, and everything else comes second. I see a lot of people who want to grab it and then run and think they got it. That was not the case—that’s not how it is in Africa.

I think the biggest thing is understanding the levels of existence of a human being: child, adolescent, adult, and ancestor. When you understand the transitions you understand why in West Africa you always acknowledge and speak to people. Or why one gives respect to elders, and, ultimately, to God. That is what the masquerade is. It represents the ancestors, and God: when you see the masquerade you don’t see the person who is dancing inside. You see the transition or incarnation of a spirit. It is to be respected. When you see the masquerade, you have to look past who you think is in there.

The mask society is a secret one.
Thousands of Liberian families, of many generations, live in Philadelphia. Surveys and studies tell us that within those families, women bear many burdens. Liberian women know this by experience. After interviewing members of their community to discover their concerns, four local Liberian women singers, with PFP support, founded the Liberian Women’s Chorus for Change with the goals to both start dialogues within families and the broader community about how to address violence against women among Liberian immigrants, and to connect social service providers to Liberians in need of support. We’re in a planning phase, experimenting with giving performances of traditional and new songs, composed and adapted by these women specifically to bring hidden issues into the open, shared in locations where Liberians come together. Fatu Gayflor, Liberian Women’s Chorus for Change artistic coordinator, says that “Our aim is to connect with our Liberian sisters, through our music, encouraging them to value themselves and to recognize abuse. They need to break their silence and reach out for help. I’m honored that three other accomplished Liberian singers of various ethnic backgrounds have joined me in this. Liberians continue to need to work on ethnic reconciliation, and we model this by working together.”

Most Liberians living in and around Philadelphia have arrived since 1989, when the first of back-to-back civil wars broke out in their homeland. African immigrant organizations’ estimates of the number of Liberians here range from 10,000 to as many as 20,000 or more, making our region home to one of the largest Liberian communities in the U.S.

A relatively small West African country, Liberia has seen a huge amount of devastation wrought by political instability and war. Settled in the early 1800s by free-born Blacks and former enslaved Africans from the United States “returned” to Africa through the American Colonization Society, the independent Republic of Liberia came into being in 1847. Its capital city was called Monrovia, after U.S. President James Monroe.

The Americo-Liberians, descendants of those early settlers, ruled the country for more than a century until 1980, when a military coup d’etat brought indigenous people into positions of power. Diverse ethnic groups had previously co-existed peacefully, but warring factions soon were pitted against one another. A full-blown civil war erupted in 1989. In 1996, a fragile ceasefire took hold, lasting only a few years, with violence flaring again between 1999 and 2003. As a result of these horrific conflicts, most of the country’s infrastructure was destroyed. People fled en masse, leaving whole villages deserted. Soldiers, some of them children, were responsible for inflicting gruesome violence on the civilian population. Sharon Abromowitz and Mary Moran write that, “From 1990 to 2003 the Liberian and Sierra Leonian wars attracted international attention for their shocking displays of state collapse, violence against civilians, and sexual abuse.” They cite “a survey of more than sixteen hundred women conducted in 2005 [that] found that over 90 percent reported being subjected to some form of sexual abuse during the conflict,” and notes that, while the post-conflict situation on the ground in Liberia is fluid and justice concerns are being addressed in a number of ways, the “long duration of the war, and its resulting trauma, have contributed to a normalization of violence in many social and political domains.”

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Close to a quarter of a million people perished during the civil wars. More than double that number were displaced within Liberia, with many eventually seeking safety in nearby West African countries. Peace accords were signed among the fighting factions in 2003, in no small part because of the activism of the country’s women. Liberians elected Africa’s first woman president, Ellen Johnson Sirleaf, in 2006. Sirleaf and Leymah Gbowee, the head of the women’s peace movement, were awarded the Nobel Peace Prize in 2011.

In Liberia, before the war years, Fatu Gayflor was known as “Princess Fatu Gayflor, the Golden Voice of Liberia.” During the wars, exiled in refugee camps in West Africa, she was hired by the United Nations to travel from one Liberian refugee camp to another, to sing to her compatriots, as a way to help counter their fright and depression. She composed songs that reflected her own loss—of home, of a child—as a way to speak out against war. At one point, the World Food Program brought her to Europe to participate in a concert calling attention to the hunger crisis across Africa.

In 1990, when the civil war reached the capital, Zaye Tete made her way across the border to the Ivory Coast. At that time, she escaped to Ghana, where she lived in yet another camp. While in the Ivory Coast, she started a Liberian children’s cultural troupe, recruiting kids from the refugee schools. With the help of an international non-governmental organization, she set up a practice hall, found other musicians and dancers to help with the training, and produced, sang and danced in performances in the camp, for the birth of a child, for arrivals of friends or relatives, and so on.

Marie Nyenabo chose to stay in Liberia throughout the years of war. During that time, she devoted herself to disarmament work, through music and dance. Since the end of the civil conflict, a decade ago, Marie has traveled across the country, facilitating dialogues about reconciliation, corruption, the evils of human trafficking and other justice issues by first attracting attention through performance. Alongside artists from other ethnic groups, she modeled unity to a population still gripped by memories of recent inter-ethnic strife.
In the mid-1990s Tokay Tomah started her work with the United Nations on disarmament and reconciliation. She continued singing for peace, and asking, through song, that combatants lay down their arms, for more than a decade. In addition to her peace-building work, she carried out awareness campaigns on HIV/AIDS, rape, sexual exploitation and abuse, and other issues, all through performance. Tokay served as the executive director of a Liberian non-governmental organization, Women’s Aid Society, advocating at a grassroots level for economic equity for women.

Liberians in the U.S., whether survivors of war and displacement (internally and to neighboring countries as refugees), or born here, live with legacies of loss and violence. Their recent history is one of families being torn apart by politics and geography; of physical and emotional trauma; and of relocation to sometimes unwelcoming communities where safety is a concern. Here, Liberians have experienced anti-immigrant bias, high levels of violent crime and less-than-adequate schools. Artists, in particular the singers at the heart of the Liberian Women’s Chorus for Change, find themselves exceptionally situated to offer beauty, entertainment, and connections to disrupted and valued cultural practices. They also offer a platform for the discussion of current troubles, and possible alternative future paths.

Tokay Tomah says, “I live in Upper Darby, in the heart of a Liberian neighborhood. Who I am—a well-known Liberian singer and songwriter and activist, and a recent immigrant to the U.S.—has an impact on my relationship to the Chorus audiences. Through participation in the Liberian Refugee Relief Organization, and just general life at certain shopping centers, community events, etc., I have a good sense of what’s going on in the community. And I’m recognized, by name and by voice. I had three successful albums, including many hits on Liberian radio, throughout the 1990s and the first decade of this century. Because of that fame, which all of the Chorus members have, we’re trusted. We can attract a crowd and engage them as performers and fellow Liberian immigrants. What might be surprising to people who aren’t Liberian is that our youth still love traditional music. They might love rap, but they also love what their parents play in CD players or on YouTube at home. When any of us performs at Liberian weddings, graduation ceremonies or nightclubs, young people come to dance alongside us, and sing the choruses.”

The focus of the Liberian Women’s Chorus for Change is on addressing violence against women, mainly in the home. Domestic violence is a complex phenomenon, and a dangerous one. It occurs among people of all ages, genders and backgrounds, and can take many forms, including physical, sexual, psychological, and economic abuse. Domestic violence is all-too-common, across the globe and right here in our neighborhoods.

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Music can turn your heart around

by Ruth M. Stone
**The Music of the Liberian Women’s Chorus for Change**

**Fatou Gayflor** sings as the soloist in “Kweyenge.” The text begins: "Kweyenge," as a mother calls her child’s name twice and the chorus echoes her cry with “Oh ay oh ya.” She follows with “Nee fe mi” (I have no mother), “Nang fe mi” (I have no father). “They took my child from me, he’s cutting trees, what will I do?” The other singers respond to each of her plaintive cries of loss, with, “Oh, a yea, oh” after each phrase. The third phrase to which they respond is much longer than the first two short phrases. Thus the chorus members listen for their cues to know when Fatou is about to end her phrase. They listen to the content of what she’s singing, to the decreasing density of her text, to the slight slowing of the music, as well as to the lowering pitch. Fatou improvises and extemporizes as she declaims the text, telling her story.

The chorus affirms her exclamation and ends by singing different pitches at the same time, at an interval, as they punctuate the cycle with a kind of harmony. This closes the musical and textual thought and the short pithy story. Fatou Gayflor explained to me, the text as she brought it to Philadelphia from Liberia tells the story of a mother whose child has gone into the secret society and is now separated from the mother. This absence might extend for several years and the mother in the song is wailing with loss of her child. The child is without a mother and without a father as well. She concludes, “What am I going to do?” in a kind of rhetorical question. The singer knows she can’t question the absence. The child was seized by the spirit of the bush, ngamu, and disappeared into the enclosure where she will remain until the Sande session ends.

As the Liberian Women’s Chorus for Change—Fatu, Zaye Tete, Marie Nyenabo and Tokay Tomah—sing for change and try to address issues that are troubling Liberian households in the United States, this lament can mean many things. It is a multivalent metaphor for loss, pain, and suffering to which the audience members can connect and with which they can empathize. Fatou has chosen it for sharing with the audience. And her fellow singers, even though they don’t speak Kpelle, have learned to sing and express the sentiment in a language that is deeply Liberian. At other turns they sing in the language of one of the other lead singers, for each of the singers in this group is capable of leading the group and they take turns doing so.

“Kweyenge,” then, is created in a call and response structure. This kind of form is a familiar and ubiquitous one for Liberians. It’s a very well...

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known form in African as well as African American music. One part should ideally begin as the call and be balanced by another as the response. A person is always part of a larger whole. And each part of that whole expresses membership in the whole. The parts interlock; the singers don’t all sing simultaneously. They weave in and out of one another’s part as they build the song. As such the sonic and structural patterns are quintessentially Kpelle and also Liberian.

The melody of Fatu’s song is a familiar one that is often sung by singers in the Sande Society, a means through which girls receive secret and important instruction about appropriate moral, sexual, and cultural conduct. The recognizable melody communicates a deep matter that the audience members relate to on a variety of levels. (I have recorded a similar melody with a soloist singing of a matter relating to the Sande Society.) While the melodic style signals a Sande-related song, the vocal tone color provides an additional clue that this is Sande as well. Fatu’s voice is deliberately penetrating and forceful. (While some singers of Sande songs may also muffle their vocal tone in particular ways, Fatu does not do that here.) But knowledgeable audience members recognize the cues that this is a Sande-related song.

The music that ties these women together has its roots in the Sande Society where several of them spent time. Indeed, initiation into the Sande is a prerequisite for adulthood and therefore critical to any further movement within the life cycle. In their formative years, these women entered the Sande Society, the generic name for this women’s group that is considered fundamental and central to the identity of the Kpelle, Dan/Gio, Vai and other groups in Liberia and neighboring countries. The Sande exists in tension and counterpart with the Poro, or men’s society.

Within the Kpelle region, in those towns that are sites of Sande or Poro training, people from the surrounding region enter the enclosures that are especially constructed outside of town where the children live for a period of time separated from their families. During the three years that the Sande is in session, the women of the region are considered to be in ascendency and the Poro may not be in session. The number three is sacred and significant. Four, on the other hand, is the number associated with the Poro and the number of years it will be in session.

Young girls (like these singers when they went to Sande) are considered to be reborn to a new life when they leave the Sande session. Upon graduation, they would have sat in a building at the edge of town for three days and displayed faces covered in white chalk to show their liminal status. They would have presented themselves in new clothes with a new name, and displayed special dances they had learned in the sacred enclosure. The exceptionally talented girls, as these surely were, received particular instruction from the master dancers and singers while they were in the secret society. This might also include lessons in playing the gourd rattle or sasa, as Fatu has described was part of her experience.

When, as young women, Fatu, Zaye, and Tokay converged at Kendeja, the performers’ village that was home to the Liberian National Cultural Troupe to which they had all been recruited, they were asked by Peter Ballah and other Kendeja instructors for some of [Continued on next page >]
the songs they had learned. They might have been spotted singing to themselves and asked to share what they knew with the group. These performances from their Sande days were then adapted and honed by the directors. Performers who didn’t know some of the other Liberian languages were taught the words, melodies and other parts by the oral/aural tradition. Parts were added, and dance steps were expanded to fit the Cultural Troupe’s context. Most importantly, to adapt to the Western stage, performers adjusted their spacing and orientation from a circle where everyone faced inward to an arrangement of lines where performers faced out to the audience.

The Liberian Women’s Chorus for Change has composed a song in English. “Women Today” directly addresses their mission and serves as a theme song. Fatu told me that the group had collectively composed this song, aiming for it to have social impact as its goal. They begin with the chorus:

“Women today, 
Women tomorrow, 
Women yesterday. 
You are special people.”

The verses follow, punctuated by the chorus after each one:

“No matter you who are, 
No matter where you live, 
No matter where you come from, 
You are special women. 
We are special people, 
Designed by God, 
To bring up our children. 
So we are special women, we know. 
In this world today, 
We have to train our children the right way.”

Each singer takes her turn singing a verse. And these are occasions for some improvisation. One verse that Fatu sings is only two lines long, for example. She then launches into a kind of call and response that takes place by picking elements of the song apart and varying the structure. Fatu sings a section in which she improvises single lines and the chorus responds, “We are special people,” after each line. So the structure combines verse and chorus with call and response in an interesting hybrid that points both to Africa and to the West in its building blocks. The singing tone color also points to West Africa and Liberia with its taught, clear, penetrating sound.

The singers favor the parallel fourths and fifths of singing together, which sonically reminds the listener of West Africa and Liberia. The language may be English, but there are plenty of clues that this performance draws on Liberian aesthetics.

The journey for the Liberian Women’s Chorus for Change is intriguing. These women sing for deep and urgent reasons. They draw on things they learned as young girls in the Sande, melding them with their training in Kendeja as members of the Liberian National Cultural Troupe, where they grew into adults as they were perfecting their performing skills. These skills were tempered by the situations they have since experienced in war scenes and refugee camps in neighboring West African countries. All of that rich mix of life’s extremes is now seasoned with the events of daily life in which they find themselves in the Philadelphia area. At each turn, performance has been for pleasure and beauty. But it is also for survival, for moving through loss, and for bonding together for strength

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Friday, March 7, 2014. Folk Arts-Cultural Treasures Charter School (FACTS), Chinatown North, Philadelphia. The entire school, 486 K-8 students and 50 adults—faculty, staff, and founders—wear red FACTS t-shirts, crowding in an echoing multi-purpose room on the 3rd floor of our building, once a textile factory, one of many former industrial buildings in the neighborhood.

This year, our ninth anniversary, includes a lively reenactment of how FACTS was founded on March 9, 2005. Students and teachers are the re-enactors, carrying big cardboard props. A narrator announces: “Today is Founders Day—the day we tell the story of FACTS. It’s a day for stories from the past but it’s also a day for stories about the future—stories that haven’t been fully written, stories about how we all take what we learn here and go on to become founders ourselves. Founders are people who start something. Founders come together to make something bigger than themselves. Founding a school is not just about taking care of yourself. It’s figuring out what people need and coming together to work with others.”

Signs prompt students and they chorus lines from the school pledge: “We learn to help ourselves and to help our communities.” Teachers hold up a giant cardboard ear and spectacles, as they tell how Asian Americans United (AAU) and the Philadelphia Folklore Project (PFP) looked around and listened to people. (Students chime in with another line from the pledge: “We care for one another and learn together.”)

Now, re-enactors take turns representing community members—parents who came forward to testify on behalf of the school. They are drawing elements from actual testimonies presented in 2005 before the School
District’s governing board (who would decide whether or not to approve our school). Re-enactors catalogue the needs out of which the school was shaped: immigrant parents’ hopes for a school where their children would be loved rather than mistreated, for an end to violence and the discriminatory policies that put us here, for a place where everyone’s experiences and arts are reflected in the curriculum, for a first public investment in a neglected neighborhood. Organized by AAU, peoples’ testimonies share community knowledge, widely voiced, about just how bad it is, about the price that we have paid, and about the distance we have traveled from seeing ourselves as collaterally damaged to seeing ourselves as mending the world.

Re-enactors hold up cardboard busses, parading them in front of the group, recalling how hundreds of community members came to the School District to show their support on that day nine years ago. Huge binders are brandished to show the planning that went into the school. Setbacks are described. (The opposition presents its case, but we minimized that in this condensed version.) Finally, a cardboard Commission votes: four cardboard hands flip up to grant our charter. Huge cheers go up in the room, as they did back at the District in 2005. The younger children, seated in front, are delighted throughout, wiggling and wrapt. By the end, the “cool” older ones in the back rows are participating as the assembly ends with a song: “Something Inside So Strong.” Later, founders will go back to individual classrooms and share our own stories or guide the classes in reflection. Some years, we also gather for lunch. Some teachers prepared lovely follow-ups. In thank you notes, children reflected on what the day meant to them. One year, eighth graders wrote epics (as Founder’s Day coincided with the study of Ancient Greece) about FACTS’ founding.

I use this example to illustrate our critical folk arts education practice. Grace Lee Boggs, one of the activists and thinkers whose political and educational vision informs our school, writes that the destruction of community is the worst cost of capitalist systems. She and many others point to folk arts as tools for rebuilding community. But what does that mean? What do we need to know and be able to do in folk arts? What essential questions should guide our inquiry and practice? To figure this out, we turn to critical pedagogy—the work of scholars and teachers committed to education for liberation. Here is analysis of draconian structures and techniques of persistently “asking the other question.” Here is the practice of valuing everyday experience, using class, race, and awareness of persistent inequalities to decolonize our imaginations and practice. Here is resistance to comfortable accounts where who “we” are (and where we stand) goes unquestioned.

And we turn to folklore. Folklorists working in folk arts education have compiled a huge number of resources introducing students to ethnography, local culture, and the folk traditions of their own community. At FACTS, we aim to build on this work by cultivating transformative practices: developing traditions (and knowledge of traditions that create self-knowledge, power and collective action.)

Founder’s Day is part of the ritual calendar at FACTS: how we move through the year, celebrate, and mark our time together. We teach folk arts by framing Founder’s Day as a ritual which actively builds our community and reflects our values. We aim to make our pledge real: something all can believe and act on. We ask: What is your place in this story? What can we do on this day to carry its meaning forward, to build our connections to one another and to the school’s founding vision? What does this pledge mean to you?

We familiarize students with other folklore genres: origin narratives, foundation stories, and events that that mark beginnings and name peoples’ connections to place and to one another. We ask: Who is celebrated in these other holidays and our own celebration? How does our holiday challenge a narrow view of the history of our communities? How does it build power and justice? How does our own origin narrative recall what happened and keep it present? What stories do we know and remember that connect us to efforts to take a stand for justice and self-determination?

We use (and call attention to) elements of traditional folk cultural festivity and ritual: creating a break in the everyday round where people can reflect on, feel, [Continued on p. 26 >]
In January 2014, the Pennsylvania Council on the Arts announced that nine “master/apprentice” pairs from the Philadelphia area would receive funding through their recently restored “Folk and Traditional Arts Apprenticeships” grant program.* These grants support partnerships in which highly-accomplished folk and traditional artists teach others who will continue, develop, and share these arts. This contributes to sustaining Pennsylvania’s rich and varied cultural heritage; it also enhances visibility and depth of understanding of these traditions within the very communities that cherish them.

Anssumane Sillá, a dancer/drummer from Guinea-Bissau, and his student, dancer and scholar Lela Aisha Jones are among those funded.

An accomplished dancer and drummer, Anssumane Sillá began performing at the age of 11 in his native Guinea-Bissau. He danced professionally for over 18 years with the National Ballet of Guinea-Bissau. Anssumane was also a member of the contemporary dance troupe, Africa Estraha, with whom he performed pieces addressing strife and suffering (including abuse of power and inequitable access to clean water and other vital resources) in Guinea-Bissau, which has been torn apart by coups and political violence for decades. Since arriving in Philadelphia in 2008, Anssumane has performed and choreographed with groups including Voices of Africa and Kulu Mele African Dance Ensemble. He teaches traditional (Bijagos, Balanta, Fula, and Manjaco) and contemporary dance styles from Guinea-Bissau, and other West African dance styles in studios and schools around Philadelphia.

Lela Aisha Jones describes herself as “a dancer, researcher, writer, artistic conceptualist, and creative catalyst.” In 2009 she founded FlyGround, a movement performance company that “artistically archives and rethinks the intersecting lineages of the African/Afro/Black Diaspora and U.S. Black lived experiences.” With Deneae Richburg, she co-founded The Requisite Movers in 2010, to present dialogue-provoking artistic projects by women choreographers of African descent. A Florida native, now living in Philadelphia, Lela has studied at the Jose Limon Dance Institute, Dagara Institute of Dance and Music in Ghana, L’Ecole des Sables in Senegal, and with Dance Brazil.

What follows are excerpts from a conversation with them.

Anssumane: I came to the U.S. in 2008, and met Lela. You know, we got together because of our art. I saw what she’d been doing in the city, in the community. I saw Lela’s power—We say vontade [will or volition] in Portuguese. So I saw that, and I said, “Okay, this is the person I can work with intensively, and she can get anything I’m giving to her.”

Lela: I’m always looking for teachers. I’m always looking for people who have information that I don’t have, because I feel that if you’re going to be a teacher, you should know what you’re doing as deeply as you can. And as a performance artist, I feel your performances are better when you know you have references for what you’re doing. Anssumane cares a lot about his culture and where he comes from. I feel like that’s also important. I feel like he teaches because he really loves what he’s learned. It has a certain kind of value in his life as something he’ll continue even without people like me. He will continue to do his work. It’s what he loves.

Anssumane: I’m very proud of her. And there’s more. I’m not doing this for myself. I’m trying to promote culture from my country, Guinea-
Bissau. In the United States, nobody teaches Guinea-Bissau styles. I see dances from Mali, Senegal, Guinea. So I said [to myself], “Okay, I am not going to sit down here and cross my legs. I have to show people what I know.”

There are a lot of things from Guinea-Bissau I’m afraid to do, or I’m afraid to show Lela, because I don’t have permission for it. When I go back home I will see if I have permission. I can’t show [her] because it depends what ethnic group you’re from. I’m not just going to bring something I don’t really know, or something I know, but don’t have permission to do, and do it. I don’t want anything to happen to me, so I have to, you know, protect these kinds of things.

There are two worlds that I’ve had a chance to live in. In general, I’ve either been learning in the States, in a formal class where it’s organized to a “T,” or outside the U.S. where things are less rigid. When I go to other countries and I learn stuff, I may be in a setting that’s similar. I would say it’s a more Western way of teaching. But, most of the time when I have my choice, when I go to Africa, or to South America, it’s a kind of “go with the flow” of how things are happening. Sometimes they might say there’s a class that’s two hours and they won’t start until an hour into that two hours. It is organized in its own way. If we stop for a minute and we end up talking about the dance for the rest of the hour, that’s still learning. Some people might see that as going off the schedule. But I see that as a period of time I’m learning about the culture. I’m learning about the dance. I’m learning something about how to function in the context of where this movement comes from.

The way that Anssumane and I organize [this apprenticeship] is this: Anssumane comes in, and he’s like, “Well, let’s work on it until we’re worn out.” Or, “Let’s work on it until you get the transitions,” or, “until you have all the steps.” It’s been really helpful to go through that process here, as a one-on-one student, because I want to just go deeper with the work that I’ve been doing. And I want to know more, and to be able to off the top of my head say this and that about a dance. Or, have it in my body so that I know how to break it down. I know how to do it full out. I can maneuver through it very easily, whether I’m teaching it or I’m performing it. I’m also really interested in the nuances.

Anssumane: I’m teaching Lela Fulani dances, and ethnic Manjaco dances, which are similar to [dances of] the Baga—my mom’s ethnic group from Guinea. They’re similar because of the rhythms they play. They don’t use the djembe or the dundun [drums]. They use a large drum for their ceremonies. But, even among Manjacos there are differences depending on what village you’re from—in the South or the North. I chose [to start with] Fulani dances because it’s what I’ve been doing since I started dancing. In the year 2000 the Minister of Culture organized a seminar for us, bringing people from villages from all over Guinea-Bissau to teach us. That’s how we got the depth of all the Fulani stories and dances.

Lela: There are two worlds that I’ve had a chance to live in. In general, I’ve either been learning in the States, in a formal class where it’s organized to a “T,” or outside the U.S. where things are less rigid. When I go to other countries and I learn stuff, I may be in a setting that’s similar. I would say it’s a more Western way of teaching. But, most of the time when I have my choice, when I go to Africa, or to South America, it’s a kind of “go with the flow” of how things are happening. Sometimes they might say there’s a class that’s two hours and

* Workshops

PFP offers workshops about PCA Apprenticeship grants. For more information, visit www.folkloreproject.org.
IN THE SPRING OF 2007, I invited a small group of Bangladeshi high school students to participate in “South Asians in the U.S.”, a community-based seminar I was teaching at the University of Pennsylvania. The students were all recent immigrants to Philadelphia; one had arrived just a few months earlier. They were all seniors at a local public school within walking distance of the University. From a distant country, these students were attempting to make sense of their place in an urban environment and struggling to navigate an impoverished school system in a language not their own. Since then, I have had opportunities to work with more Bangladeshi youth, both through an after-school tutoring program and through a Folk Art and Social Change residency at the Philadelphia Folklore Project. In the residency, I supported the students in documenting and exploring their own culture and community. I was overwhelmed by the purity of their desires for success and the tenacity of their spirits in the face of significant odds. Despite the difficulties of migration and the pressures to balance the past with their present, these Bangladeshi American youth continue to employ memories of their homeland as they navigate their multiple overlapping communities. This essay describes how the youth negotiate social change through constructing their own identities by combining their migration narratives and memories with their parent’s memories of Bangladesh and the realities of their lives in the city of Philadelphia. Above all, they yearn to be seen—to be recognized for their heritage and for their promise as Bangladeshi Americans.

In collaboration with PFP, I worked with a group of six Bangladeshi American youth who explored the history, traditional practices, and future goals of their community. They studied food customs, clothing traditions, religious observances, games, music, and dance. Over the period of several months, the students recorded various aspects of their life and interviewed friends and family members. Each was eager to find vehicles through which their multiple identities and the identities of their community could be articulated. The students enthusiastically turned to Bangladeshi games, dress, food, and migration stories. One stated, “It is important for us to show our actions in America.” They want to show how Bangladeshis are different from other South Asians since people often assume that the students are from India. The students
stated their hope “to represent our country with this project.” Not only do they hope to inform their peers of what “Bangladeshi” means, they also want the Philadelphia School District to see their work and learn about their identity. Scholar Kibria notes, “The global national image of Bangladesh is such as to invoke not just non-recognition in the United States but also an image of poverty, political instability, and corruption.” The students’ desire to document their community is fueled by a two-fold urgency: to preserve what it means to be Bangladeshi for their families, and to do so as underrepresented minorities in an urban environment.

Bangladeshi Americans are recent additions to the American landscape. The 1965 Immigration and Nationality Act diversified the racial and ethnic composition of the United States, replacing a quota system which severely restricted Asian immigration. When Bangladesh gained independence from West Pakistan in 1971, labor migration increased, but Bangladeshis did not migrate to the United States in large numbers until the introduction of the Diversity Visa Lottery system in 1990. For people from “underrepresented countries,” this Lottery offered access to U.S. entry visas and permanent residence status for applicants along with spouses and dependents. Currently, the Diversity Visa Lottery is not open for Bangladesh since the country is no longer “underrepresented.” Over 50,000 Bangladeshis have entered the U.S. for each of the past five years.

Bangladeshi Americans have lived in West Philadelphia for approximately 40 years. Close-knit and centrally positioned around four neighborhood blocks, the community is growing in numbers, strength, and diversity. People experience many challenges of first-generation immigrant life including the difficulties of developing English language skills, maintaining economic stability, practicing religion, and raising children in a foreign environment. Many who came as a result of the Diversity Visa Lottery program first arrived in New York and then eventually moved here. Through their personal networks, new immigrants learned that Philadelphia offered increased employment opportunities, a lower cost of living, and better schools. Many families in Philadelphia are linked to one another through years of chain migration.

For most families, including those of the six students whose work I followed, migration to the United States and to Philadelphia was, and still remains, an arduous journey. All of their families decided to emigrate in order to improve opportunities for financial gains and for educational advancements. But leaving Bangladesh has disrupted lives in multiple ways. Mahmuda stated, “Everything is different than my country.” She related difficulties adjusting to the school system and coping with studies in English and literature. Others interviewed friends and family who spoke of struggles with employment opportunities. Each know many people who work long hours as taxi cab drivers, in meat packing plants, or in small local businesses. Most members of the community carry serious financial burdens, supporting their families in Philadelphia and sending remittances back to Bangladesh. For Farzana’s mother, physically taxing work at a meat plant created severe health concerns. Many in the community dream of finishing their education in the U.S., but economic constraints have forced them to relinquish these aspirations.

Memories of Bangladesh and of family left behind are constantly evoked for the students. Scholars Partha Chatterjee and Nazli Kibria note that Bengali culture and language served as a counterpoint first to British colonial rule and later to rule by West Pakistan. In the face of oppression, people embraced Bengali identity as a unifying force and a means of refashioning a deteriorating self-image. Kibria asserts: “For Bangladeshis abroad, Bengali nationalism may be an important strategy of affirmation, self-consciously deployed to resist the stings of stigma and alienation experienced in the receiving society.” Memory of Bangladesh and of an authentic self contradicts “the current global misunderstanding of Bangladesh as poor, illiterate, corrupt and overrun by floods and famine.” Moreover, Sharmila Rudrappa argues that immigrants are forced to re-create themselves in response to their minoritization in the larger American society. This re-creation extends into a quest for the authenticity of their native identity and culture in order to challenge alienation and invisibility within the larger dominant society.

All the students agree that quality of life was better in Bangladesh. That life offered friendships and the sense of comfort gained from being surrounded by the Bengali language. Nasrin spoke of a friend’s mother who lost her daughter-in-law during childbirth and is now here, raising her grandchild herself. “The mother sits by the window all day,” she said. Family and community isolation create a sense of disconnection both from the local Philadelphia environment and from the larger family network in Bangladesh. Long work hours further decrease time that individuals have to socialize or connect within the community. The isolation and heightened longing for Bangladesh intensifies the desire to maintain religious practice through dress and food, for example, and motivates the celebration of Bangladesh Independence Day.

In the students’ lives, Bangladeshi identity extends from home to school and is based on an amalgamation of their own memories with the memories of their parents’ experiences living in Bangladesh. Young women habitually wear traditional long kurtas or shirts with jeans. They speak to each other in Bengali and eat Bengali food almost exclusively. Mahmuda, one of the students, stated, “I like my culture, food, and dress and also poetry and all the educational culture but my main point is cultural dress. At first I was confused what kind of dress I would wear but now I feel free to wear my cultural dress (it is called three piece) when I did my summer job. By this way I can represent my Bangaliana.” Arman, another student disclosed, “I was born in Bangladesh and moved here in 2010 along with my family. Even though I am not so artistic, I like to perform art with respect of our own culture. Sports in Bangladesh is most popular and pervasive. The most popular sport in our country is cricket. I am currently playing cricket in Philadelphia. My team consists of Bengali young players. I was a champion in a sport called ‘Cockfight.’” Farzana spoke of her love of dance: “Growing up in my country, I was exposed to dance daily. I saw it on TV; I saw it during school functions and of course at weddings. I loved watching dancers have control of their bodies. I wanted to learn so I asked my mom to teach me. She had me dance with my

[Continued on next page >]
cousins and after several attempts, I became a great dancer. I learned to control my body and express emotions through body movements. Then I started teaching my friends how to dance and together we would hold school functions for the community where we would share our talent with parents and students. Now, in America I don’t have the courage to dance in front of audiences but I often watch others and try to learn their steps from cultural functions known as melas. Maybe one day, I will be able to overcome my shyness.” Nasrin stated, “I came to America a year ago with my mother and two brothers. I love cooking in various ways. I have been taught how to cook from my mother. I love spending time in the kitchen because it motivates me to cook and challenges me to extend my learning in cooking. Knowing how to cook allows me to invite people over and give others food in my community.”

Both the struggles of being an immigrant here and memories of Bangladesh shape a community of people who continuously negotiate the tensions of current everyday working class life while preserving a rich sense of cultural life. One woman who was interviewed by Mohammed expressed her frustration that she had perceived America as “dreamland” prior to emigrating. She missed her family intensely and for the first few months thought she could hear their voices calling to her. As a result she said, “I literally spent $1,150 on telephone bills on my first month here.” In juxtaposition to life in America, memories of Bangladesh fuel determination to hold fast to religious and cultural practices. The students have to navigate the tensions of migration and manage their own memories of homeland, but they have to negotiate parental expectations as well. The demands of both their present life and their memory influence their participation in the documentation project. As well, each student possesses a strong desire for social change in their community and in their own lives. Social change for them manifests in two specific ways. One is their passionate desire for visibility. When I asked them about their hopes for the Bangladeshi American Folklife Project, Rabbi was quick to say, “Our aim should be telling others we exist.” All of the students want their local neighborhood and their schools to learn about their history and their cultural heritage. The students feel exasperation at constantly explaining that they are not from India. They want to be seen, to shatter an invisibility caused by lack of knowledge about Bangladesh, a struggle against economic hardships, and an urban environment with failing schools.

Unfortunately, many of the local middle schools in their neighborhood closed recently, forcing Bangladeshi students to go to school in more distant areas. Although parents demand academic success, they are concerned about safety since many children have long walks to school. The students are also quick to point out parental concern regarding their friendships with non-Bangladeshis. Rabbi claimed, “When I was in middle school, my parents said ‘Don’t hang out with them’ [non-Bangladeshi friends].” The students know that their parents believe they will lose their cultural identities if they befriend “foreigners.” Rashid further explained that this warning from their parents is, “to protect us from being lost in the wild.” Yet despite being aware of their parents’ concerns, all of the students have non-Bangladeshi friends and make efforts to talk with their families about them. Many of the students bring friends home and share meals with them. All of these actions facilitate the articulation of the students’ identities as Bangladeshi Americans with their friends and within their families. The other social change centers on their pursuit of educational success. Currently, the Philadelphia School District, where all of the Bangladeshi students attend school, is in a state of chaos. Schools have been closed, the District has implemented severe budget cuts, classrooms are overcrowded, and teachers are overwhelmed with little support. Nevertheless, education remains a high priority for Bangladeshi parents and for students. Arman does not hide the fact that “parents force their kids to study a lot.”

In response to the crisis in the School District and to the limited resources, the students have been forced to find alternative ways to learn. Some students have started tutoring programs at local community centers, while others have formed study groups to help each other with their coursework. Despite the challenges, the students remain committed to their education and are determined to succeed. They want to be seen as capable and intelligent individuals, and they are willing to work hard to achieve their goals.
taught us African dance, did choreography, and we performed all over Philadelphia. Well one more thing. Saka was one of those teachers that put feeling into his dance. What we now call “soul” he put it into his dance. That’s really what turned me on. Because I don’t care whether I’m doing praise dancing or African dance or social dance—I put a lot of feeling into what I’m doing.

**Nana Korantema Ayeboafo:** Saka [Acquaye] first said to Arthur, “There are so many African Americans here and so few traces of Africa—so what are you going to do about it?” Arthur was in his group; Bobby Crowder, and Mama Liz Roberts (who sewed for the dance company) were among his first students committed to learning African culture in order to bring it to the African American community. Saka taught it all: the dances, the drumming, the songs, the history. Eventually, Arthur started his own group—the Arthur Hall Afro American Dance Ensemble. Over the next 50 years, Arthur did a lot about it! Arthur infused African dance, drumming, culture and art into the fabric of American life.

**Daryl “Kwasi” Burgee:** During those days there was more of a drumming community, so if you were a drummer, you had to go through the ranks of knowing who those drummers were—those who were famous for maintaining the culture, and these forms of drumming. Bobby Crowder, founder of Kulu Mele, and John Wilkie. There was also Skip Burton, and there was Gregory Jarman, better known as Peache. These individuals in the city were some of the most proficient drummers, therefore, if you were really interested in developing, you had to seek these guys out. Learn from them, then seek their approval. “Approval” meaning that you have developed to the point where you could play in the same environment with these individuals, holding the rhythms, knowing the rhythms, knowing what to play when.

Protocol is very important in drum culture and dance culture. “Protocol” means the basic aspects of culture are being exercised, within a community that has tiers of respect for those who have come before you. What your social position is within that, and how you apply that protocol [reflects] your ability to show respect. In a drum community there are often times different styles, and many different techniques. And certain individuals are key holders to those styles and techniques. [If you are serious, then] you’re not just somebody that shows up at a location, gets information, and leaves.

The drum culture in Philadelphia was very close. So you couldn’t just show up and be at a class, expect to get something from somebody that has spent their entire life learning and developing what they do. There was more of a social aspect to that: you had to break bread with these individuals. You had to show the effort of humbleness, for them to be willing to unveil their secrets to being able to play the drum to you. And you had to be a part of the family, in order to do that. Because a lot of drummers were bitter about people who had the approach of coming to pick their pocket.

Today, because an individual pays for a class, there’s the assumption that the teacher is supposed to take a lifetime of learning and dump it into the hands of someone they know nothing about. So when we talk about drum community and drum culture, it was very different. You had to socialize in that community in order to be recognized.

**John Wilkie:** Cumbay was the dance ensemble started by William Powell and Enriqué Admiral from Cuba. It was through them that the Afro Cuban stuff started here. We’re carrying the lantern, the light, so other people can see. It’s like a stone that hits the water and circles and circles. I hope somebody carries on after I leave or retire.

**Dorothy Wilkie:** Baba Crowder was studying batá drumming and then Peache Jarman came in and Enriqué came and took us to another level. I learned Cuban dance that goes with batá. We incorporated Afro Cuban dances into Kulu Mele after Cumbay came done.

**Clement “Chuckie” Joseph:** Farel [Johnson], Bob Franklin, Bob Thompson, Bobby Artis, Baba Crowder—from each one I learned a different mindset. Farel—the consummate showman, all the lovely flashy stuff. Farel floated across the top of things. Neayi was the jackhammer. He’d crack the earth open with the way he drummed. Baba Crowder: I called him the melody man. He heard every note. Bob Thompson taught me the road: “Don’t start too fast; you have to feel it.”

**Nana Korantema Ayeboafo:** I honor Bobby Artis who was the lead drummer of Arthur [Hall]’s company and the person who actually sat down with me and said to me, “If you wanna be a drummer, you have to be a good drummer. That means you don’t just bang on instruments, like you’re doing now. You have to be serious and you have to practice every day. You have to know what a 2/4 rhythm is, a 6/8 rhythm. You can’t rely on anybody. It’s not about being a man or woman. Either you’re a good musician or you’re not.” There’s no space for mediocrity. One day he comes in and says, “Oh, you’ve been practicing!”

**Robert Kenyatta:** When I learned the different rhythms that we were playing and they locked, or harmonized, I began to see the influence the drum had over the members dancing and singing. Most of the ceremonies were performed for healing purposes. This demonstrates the power the drum possesses! Even an observer would get a spiritual feeling, and some would even possess. A Loa, or spiritual force of nature, would come into them. We drummers from Philadelphia had a unique
bond between us. The Sanctuary’s drummers consisted of Weaver, Ahmed—we called him Obeng. His Haitian name was Don Tambou, which means “inside the drum”—and his son, Ahmed Junior. The culture in which we were born was different from that of the native Haitians. We had that Philadelphia soulful feeling that made us a tight unit. My spiritual grandfather in Haiti said that we were not playing rhythms identical to theirs. He said, however, when we played people possessed, and you knew that they felt our drums! The Haitian drummers loved the way we played their Haitian drums, and their rhythms.

Kariamu Welsh: I studied the Katherine Dunham technique for seven intense years as a young dancer in my twenties. I fell in love with it. One of the things my teacher, a second generation Dunham dancer, Pearl Reynolds said, may her soul rest in peace, was, “You have to know more than how to dance the dance.” We were all about doing the dance but knew next to nothing about it origins. She was the one who pointed out to me that it matters what the dance means and where it is from. The Dunham technique has many beautiful African dance qualities to it.

I worked with Pearl Primus. Again, when you’re young, you can’t see everything. She was older and wiser than me. She said to me, “Everything happens in its own time” and that stayed with me because she was kind of chastising me, and I took it because I realized I was being a little bit too hasty, too quick, too eager to be something that I wasn’t ready for. Her thing was, you still need to study and learn. Yes, you may be good, but there’s a great deal more that you need to know. I have learned to be patient, to wait.

I lived in Zimbabwe, right after the seven-year war following the country’s independence. It really is very moving to me that the dancers taught me much more than they will ever know. I have to thank African dance for all the life lessons I’ve learned, for my own graciousness and humility. Some of my best teachers have been villagers who would come up to me and just correct a foot movement or rhythm, not by saying, “That’s wrong.” They would just do the movement next to me, until finally I would get it right. Then when I’d get it right, they’d indicate it and walk away. That’s so beautiful.

Carol Butcher: I can remember doing shows with Arthur Hall’s company where the majority of the audience was white because our own people would not come to see us. I remember this one time I heard this man say, “They aren’t real Africans.” We weren’t trying to be “real” Africans. We were just trying to be ourselves. It was a part of our fabric, our being, to embrace the culture. That’s the only way I can put it. It was a part of us to do that. But our own people couldn’t understand. To them it was like going backwards, I guess. I’d wear African clothes and my father would make me walk in the back door. And some African Americans feel the same way today. For me, it’s very painful that our own people are looking down on us. It’s like they don’t love themselves, they don’t love who they are. This is just a very, very, sensitive topic with me. Because I’ve felt it since the 60s and I’m still feeling it.

I’m arguing with my teenaged grandsons every day: pull your pants up. All I can do is continue to talk to them. They are members of Omo Kulu Mele [Kulu Mele African Dance Ensemble’s children’s troupe]. They play drums. And I think the drumming may be a help to them. All I can do is help them see they don’t have to follow the idiots. We have a culture. Let’s lean on our culture. Stick together as a family. I think this is something they can carry on for their children. Just being around the culture. Just being aware of who you are. Knowing where you came from is going to help you know where you’re going. You’re not going to be floating in the air without roots. You must be culturally grounded. I pray I’ve given, and continue to give, my grandchildren and great-grands cultural roots to be passed on to their children.

Clement “Chuckie” Joseph: Arthur [Hall] really was a genius. Not too many people come along like him. The amount of a contribution he gave to this thing, to pull off the productions we did in those times, was unheard of. Arthur ran you to the point it was first nature, not second nature. Art was IT in Philadelphia, when you think about it. As a contributor to the history of this place. That was not a path that most brown folk was looking at. The thought of “I’m going to start a dance company for people that look like me.” NOT back then! And we were just getting to a point to think that being Black was nice! You were getting more crap from your own people than you were from anybody else.

From staying at four-star hotels [on tours overseas with the Arthur Hall Company], being treated like royalty, back to 25th and Diamond or 6th and Pike—drug addicts sitting on your porch. There was no guidance for the transition. Figure it out as you go. I grew up in a time and a place—the height of crack. The height of complete and utter disregard for anything other than money. We went from guys selling weed or something so hard it would scare most people. Folks didn’t know what crack was. All of a sudden you had corner millionaires and all the problems that come with that. I don’t think anybody didn’t want to be part of the life you think you saw. Fancy cars, couple hundred dollars’ worth of chains around their necks, girls falling all over them.

Without [African dance and drumming], I hardly doubt I’d be here and if I was here I’d be in jail for the rest of my days. It took me out all the time, at the right time. I was

[Continued on next page >]
hanging with these guys and watching this madness. Then [with the troupe] we’d go off to wherever and it would remind me, “I can’t mess this up.” It was like the 200-pound gorilla in the room. I had to respect these people [in Arthur’s company]. They weren’t just talking, they were walking it all the time. I don’t know what magical words he used. Arthur took a bunch of serious corner boys and drug dealers and put them on a stage. No matter how glitzy and glam the other stuff looked, I knew that a drum could keep me from dying, keep me from sitting in prison the rest of my days. To be pulled off the street and be given snippets of what you could be, what you could do. The basic culture, the way of life has been a blessing. I will always be grateful.

Joan Huckstep: There was, of course, Pearl Primus’ “Fanga” dance. Everybody in the Black Power movement that danced knew “Fanga.” They did it at the rallies to open them up. I was always politically active. Always interested in politics and history. I married the two together in my head and my life. I was in the student wing of the League of Revolutionary Black Workers. They talked with me unmercifully about the 

**Honoring Ancestors** was co-curated by a core group of community members and PFP staff. It was produced in partnership with the Community Education Center as a PFP Folk Arts and Social Change residency: a program through which PFP supports communities in researching and representing their own cultural traditions and histories. *Honoring Ancestors* was intended to complement *DanceAfrica Philly! 2013*, a project of CEC and Baba Chuck Davis.

**Curators**

Nana Korantema Ayeboafo (Asona Aberade Shrine), Ira Bond (Kulu Mele African Dance and Drum Ensemble), Joan Huckstep, Jeannine Osayande (Dunya Performing Arts), Terri Shockley (Community Education Center), Angela Watson (Camara Arts), and Toni Shapiro-Phim and Selina Morales (Philadelphia Folklore Project).

**Acknowledgements**


**Funders**


**Note**

Quotes are excerpted from interviews by *Honoring Ancestors* curators (listed above) as well as by Jos Duncan, and Venise Battle/Kulu Mele Oral History Project; recordings are preserved in the PFP Archive.

and solidarity, for education, and for critical change. Fatu, Marie, Zaye, and Tokay each create a life in her diaspora home that responds both to images of women in the United States, and also honors the Sande values that have long held people in Liberia together and that have also been the basis for moral conflict.

These women have endured multiple displacements. Three of them were taken from their home cultures at a very young age and moved to Kendeja, the site of the national troupe headquarters along the beach outside of Liberia’s capital city of Monrovia, in Montserado County. There they lived with other young children, all from different parts of Liberia. They grew up together under the supervision of a house mother in the dorms and under the direction of Peter Ballah, who served as artistic director of the National Cultural Troupe. Then, when the war broke out, they were displaced from their everyday lives. All eventually left their country.

Throughout all of the upheaval or displacement and disruption, each of these women has turned to music and dance to create beauty, to flourish through difficult circumstances, and to bring people together in community. In a short video about the Liberian Women’s Chorus, Marie Nyenabo says, “Music is something that can turn someone’s heart around.” Performance has been a kind of glue that has allowed these women to stick together and to laugh and sing even through painful loss. The women echo that when they sing, “Women today, women tomorrow, women yesterday, are special people. No matter where you live. . .”

Making music that is more than mere beauty or simple pleasure, they sing in the way that music and dance have long been conceived in Liberia. Music is vital to life and deeply intertwined with life’s profound issues; never separate nor frill. And that is how this Women’s Chorus for Change seeks to build their performances. As Zaye Tete has noted, “We are using the music to be able to send our message out there. We speak for the masses through song.”

The Liberian Women’s Chorus for Change works in this way because they firmly believe that music has considerable power. The sound, rhythm, movement and feeling that develops with the audience makes many things possible. While their face-to-face audiences live in Philadelphia, as the group posts its performances on the Internet, as they reach back to Liberia as well to other places where Liberians live today, to touch them with their nuggets of sound and solidarity.

Ruth M. Stone is the Laura Boulton Professor of Ethnomusicology and Associate Vice Provost of Research at Indiana University. Her research for more than 30 years has focused on musical performances among the Kpelle of Liberia, where she grew up. She has numerous books and articles to her credit. She has advised PFP on projects with Liberian musicians since 2007.

notes from FACTS / continued from p. 17

imagine and work for community well-being. We ask: How can our rituals help us reflect (and model) what we value? How can symbols and practices open new ways of being? How can we transform ourselves, our school, and our world through moments that rehearse the world in which we want to live?

Shaping critical folk arts education practice requires us to critically investigate the structures that create injustice and inequality, and to become actors in transforming our worlds into a place where justice is possible. We frame festival as a way to collectively name and share our own history and values, build community, and teach about folk arts and social change. We reclaim the right to name (and to celebrate) what we value. We purposefully shape celebrations that grapple with inequality and injustice, that imagine just and fair schools and communities.

We use Founders Day to tell and share the story of the founding of FACTS because we want students to know that we, as a community, can come together to fight for justice. Depicting the struggle that it took to make FACTS happen, we encourage students to consider other ways that people (at FACTS and beyond) actively work to challenge inequities and we introduce (or remind them about) the problems that face our world. These are ways that we hope to share the idea that ordinary people do extraordinary things by working together, that we can make (and tell) our own histories, and share them through different mediums, including our own folk traditions.

FACTS was started by two small
Anssumane: My teacher used to say to me, “Get the step first, then you create your body movement, in pattern with the drum beat.” You have to get the characteristics of a dance. “If people are down, and you are up, you’ve broken the choreography,” that’s what my teacher said to me. Some people are here and you’re there. Everybody should be here. If you move here, but one of your arms doesn’t [follow], that’s bad. Everything has to be the same. You know, in some of the villages, even though the choreography seems simple because it stays in a circle—with people going into the middle of the circle and then back—people are still dancing the same steps, with the same characteristics. [At the National Ballet] we’d take those steps and make the choreography beautiful for the stage.

Lela: If you see them dancing in a circle, they look the same. Even though they have their little things that are their own thing, the general feeling is that they look the same: they’re all the same level, they’re all moving one part of their body the same way.

Anssumane: That’s what people have to be very careful about in African dance. Very careful. I can say I got beat up for that! Yeah, teachers back home, they don’t joke. When they give you the step, try to get the step first, and they’ll look for bad movement, and for your balance with the drum beats. Some of the movements in African dance explain activities and ideas. Like in one of the Manjaco dances. It’s a partner dance. [In the piece] there’s a bantaba [a kind of celebratory dance and drumming “throwdown” in which everyone can participate] and I’m trying to show off to my love. So that movement is actually talking, saying something. If you don’t know anything about it, and you just take a movement and use it, people who understand the dance will ask, “What are you doing? What’s this movement for?” They’ll say, “Oh, you’re not a dancer.”

When I’m teaching, I give somebody a product. When she’s taken that product for a while, I think some people are going to be asking her, “Who’s your teacher?” or “Who taught you this?” I don’t want them to be saying, “Anssumane, oh he’s wrong” [when they see the product.] When people say, instead, “Anssumane, it’s good,” that makes me feel good.

I’m accepting this role with Lela because she’s a hard worker. She really wants to know. So, if you cross paths with this kind of person, you have to open your heart, and give her whatever you’ve got. And Lela, she gets everything. For example, when I say, “Okay, we repeat this part,” or “We need to do it like this,” she’s right there, inside the program. I was singing the songs, and I never thought she was going to sing. It’s very, very hard. The first time I was teaching this song to Lela, it took us like, two, three weeks. You know, there’re more songs beside this song which are very hard for Lela, so I’d say, “Okay, we’re going to put this in the suitcase” [both start laughing] and bring it out later on.

Some students don’t want to open their minds, don’t want to pay attention. They just want to come, get whatever they want, and then just go. But you’ve got to feel, you know—lie down, sit down, think about it and watch what you’re doing, you know. So, this is really important about working with Lela.

Lela: I feel like we live in a commodity-driven society and that’s challenging because we want it to be our living, but I think in both our cases we don’t want to abuse it and make it this thing to sell. I’m more loyal to the idea of learning the culture than I am to seeing that movement in my work. So, I feel that if it comes out in some improvisation, it won’t look like the traditional piece because I spent the time and

[Continued on p. 29 >]
The statistics for Philadelphia alone are sobering. According to Women Against Abuse (WAA), a local advocacy organization, 2,000 visits to Philadelphia emergency rooms each year are made by women who were likely assaulted by a spouse, ex-spouse, boyfriend or ex-boyfriend. Domestic violence victims fill 37% of the family shelter beds in general homeless shelters. 107,093 domestic violence reports were filed by the Philadelphia Police Department in 2012, and 5,568 arrests for domestic violence were made that same year. In 2013, 8,910 requests by women for safety in WAA’s safe haven shelter were denied because of lack of space. 3

When domestic abuse overlaps with isolation because of a lack of fluency in English or of knowledge of resources, or with poverty, cultural norms that discourage air of “dirty laundry,” job instability, and legacies of (or ongoing) trauma, escape can seem impossible. This is the case for many immigrants, including Liberians.

Marie Nyenabo reflects: “Just as we’re doing here with the Chorus, some of us tried to bring awareness to deep problems in society in Liberia through music. I’m [ethnic] Krahn, and, after the war, I traveled miles and miles and miles to Krahn villages, way out in the countryside, to perform. I went there because of trafficking of young girls from the countryside to the city. Parents are fooled—they believe the people who tell them that their daughters will have a good life with a good job and good money in the capital city. And they let them go. But we all know what really happens. The girls are trafficked. They become sex workers. When I went to those villages, I brought some drummers and dancers with me. We’d set up outside, with generators and lights we brought with us, and perform, on the ground. Because we were singing in a language they knew, and using traditional Krahn rhythms and melodies, the villagers loved it. They’d all gather around, and clap, or call out [approval] or even dance where they were standing. I changed some lines in the traditional songs and wrote new songs about daughters and families. It was indirect. We didn’t tell people what to do. We wanted to get them thinking, and then we asked people to make comments. I know they have hard choices to make. Their lives aren’t easy. I wanted to get people thinking and talking, so they could start to make changes. We’re trying to do the same thing here in Philadelphia with the Chorus.”

Throughout this planning year, the Chorus is performing in a series of “pop-up” concerts—performances of varying lengths in unexpected or unusual places. One, for example, was at an inaugural celebration for new officers of the Liberian Association of Pennsylvania; another was in the basement of a church with a largely Liberian congregation, after Sunday services. At each place, the Chorus presents songs and a short drama to focus the audience’s attention on the issue of violence against women, acknowledging the trying circumstances of many Liberian families here. The songs, sung in several languages, include both traditional, well-known pieces, as well as new compositions grounded in traditional aesthetics. In each case the songs are contextualized through an introduction and discussion related to the concern at hand—violence against women, in the home.

The Chorus initiative capitalizes on the interactive/call-and-response nature of much public performance in Liberian cultural contexts. While singing or answering questions or offering space for audience members to share stories at each concert, Chorus members are listening and responding to fellow Liberian women’s engagement with their art and messages.

Almost 400 people, the majority of whom are Liberian, have attended concerts as of this writing (early March 2014). Sometimes, at the conclusion of the performance, women stand and speak about their personal experiences overcoming hardships, including domestic violence. After one event, Liberian women reached their arms toward Chorus members, saying, “Thank you. Thank you. Thank you.” At another recent concert, a police officer told us, “I enforce the law, but they [the Chorus] are helping me behind-the-scenes, trying to prevent this kind of violence, this kind of crime.” A social worker, also Liberian, asked, “What can I do to help [the Chorus]’ project?” “These women [singers] can talk about violence against women in ways that I can’t, even as a member of the clergy,” a pastor shared.

“People hear their message.” Along with performing songs and dramas, and facilitating audience members’ testimonies or stories, the artists distribute cards that include their contact information (the Chorus has its own Facebook page: www.facebook.com/chorusforchange) and the number of a local domestic violence telephone hotline. They also alert people to other relevant local resources. One woman who had been in the audience called Fatu Gayflor as soon as she got home. “We knew you as singers,” she told Fatu. “We didn’t know you could help bring awareness to this kind of violence. Please don’t stop.”

The singers model their approach a bit on the “palaver hut,” a somewhat informal traditional way of finding solutions to domestic and other local clashes in Liberia. While prioritizing the creation of a safe space for women to speak and listen, they honor the holistic nature of domestic conflict and the need for awareness and questioning by everyone in a community, and in a family. The Chorus members are educating themselves about the dynamics of domestic violence, surrounding structural causes of chaos for local Liberians, and the fact that gender roles have been
and remain in flux. The aim is never to preach; it is to set the stage for first steps toward discussion about current realities—recognizing that today’s experiences are rooted in specific, complex histories and specific cultural contexts. And then, to guide people to relevant resources for support. Invariably, audience members inspired to speak at Chorus concerts reference details about the war years, and life in refugee camps. Even some young people place their stories in such a context. One young woman, brought to the U.S. as a child, with no memory of living in Liberia, has set a light bulb aflame in her mind: Maybe that’s what happened to her. She could be pressures: no money; no time to spend together because they are off homes. For example, some married couples are not at peace. There can be serious misunderstandings among them and their children. This can end up with situations of abuse. I’m very concerned about this. I sing in the song about how war does us no good. I feel the same about violence in the home. Imagine what it does to everyone in the family, including the children. We need peace there, too, for the sake of all.

Notes
1 Fatu Gayflor is a member of the Loma ethnic group, from Lofa County. Marie Nyenabo is from Grand Gedeh County, and of ethnic Krahn heritage. From Nimba County, both Zaye Tete and Tokay Tomah are Dan (Gio).
3 All data is from the Women Against Abuse website: www.womenagainstabuse.org/index.php/learn-about-abuse/domestic-violence-in-philadelphia
4 Esteria Woods, a Liberian gender-based violence expert, conducted an educational retreat for Chorus members in September 2013. Philadelphia-based social service providers share their knowledge and feedback with the Chorus as part of an advisory committee, and are working to make their resources more visible and accessible within the local Liberian community.

anssumane & lela / continued from p. 27

I’m using it and going into another place where it’s about how Lela moves. I don’t want it to be seen as Lela puts these African steps in this dance and now we can say she does “that.” I don’t want to be in that kind of pocket. I’m not making my living that way. I learn these dances because they’re important to me and to my history and I create art because I want to archive my experiences through movement. Although I am not and may never be clear on my exact lineage—as the transatlantic slave trade made sure of that for many—I can connect with Africa and its cultures in the best way I know how. [I can] try to gather the intricacies of specific people and places on the continent. I am blessed to be able to work with people like Anssumane Sillá to do just that. To go deeply into the work of knowing from his perspective. Not just as a complete outsider.

Anssumane: This apprenticeship program is a big opportunity for me. I called back home [when I got the grant]; I called the Minister of Culture, I called the Director of Culture. I’m doing something in Guinea-Bissau’s name, not in my name. What surprises me is that I have a person close to me doing this—studying dances of my country. It’s very important for me. There’s a saying in Guinea-Bissau: “If you want to know, you have to lie down and let people step on you.” When you stand up, everybody will see you—who you are. When you stand up, everybody’s going to say, “Oh, that’s Lela!” It’s like the proverb, “If a snake wants to be bigger, it has to hide.” If you don’t want to be bigger, just step out. People are going to walk on you; a car is going to crush you. If you want to get bigger, hide. I’m sure she’s hiding, and one day she’s going to POP! All the city, all the United States is going to say, “Lela!”

Lela: I guess for me I hope we can continue to work together. I just hope that I represent Guinea-Bissau okay. And that when I teach [these dances] and he looks at my students, he’s like, “Okay, good. You’re doing a good job.”
organizations, long-time allies with a big dream. Located in Philadelphia’s Chinatown north neighborhood, our school is the first (and only) public institution serving the neighborhood, the last community of color in the city’s center. More than a quarter of the small community has been destroyed since the 1960s by “public” construction projects: an expressway, shopping mall, Convention Center, prison/detention center, and by gentrification. Various “Save Chinatown” movements fought every one of these projects and gained some givebacks. AAU has been organizing around these and other efforts in Chinatown, and with the City’s Asian American communities since 1985. Since its founding, AAU has worked tirelessly in Philadelphia’s Asian American communities and in broader multiracial coalitions around quality education, youth leadership, anti-Asian violence, immigrant rights, and folk arts and cultural maintenance. More recently, AAU organized coalitions of Chinatown residents and allies to stop a baseball stadium and a casino—for the first time, successfully blocking predatory development in the community. With FACTS, the organizing philosophy guiding these efforts entered a new phase: an effort to build the kind of place-based and vital community we value and need. This is the kind of revolution that Grace Lee Boggs describes in her wonderful book on sustainable activism: a revolution grounded in nurturing caring communities, place-based but not place-bound. Folk arts are necessary acts that help us reimagine and remake such beloved community. The process is changing us. The process of asking ourselves what we expect students to know and be able to do in folk arts by the time they leave FACTS has become a question we now ask about all of our work. The question pushes us to keep a firm hold on what folk arts and cultural treasures mean, on what a better world looks like, and on the values and vision that guide our practice. We follow the lead of folk artists who speak compellingly about the kind of people they have become through their practice: valuing patience, caring, respect and interdependence. These folk arts values anchor their work, and ours. Tracing, teaching and learning the legacies (and wisdom) of song, dance, festival, and story, and embodying them here and now, we learn together to remake the world we want to inhabit.

Notes
1 The reenactment of the March 9, 2005 vote of the School Reform Commission, the governing body of the Philadelphia School District, was scripted and directed by Eric Joselyn, art teacher at FACTS and folk arts coordinator there, as well as a long-time activist with street theater experience.
2 Boggs (2011): 157
3 Materials shared with teachers (timelines, testimonies, histories, discussion prompts) give students (indeed, all of us) tools for learning more about how the school happened, and why: for remembering that we are a community caring about one another; and for seeing our own paths to standing up for what we believe in.
4 As critical race studies activist-scholar Mari Matsuda puts it. Also see Brodkey, about the practice of reading against the grain (1996) and Lee et al (2008).
5 See Bowman and Hamer (2011) and the Local Learning Network website.
6 Founder’s Day illustrates our efforts to resist celebrations where we are consumers of a pleasant and uncritical “diversity.” Instead, we model (and encourage) active participation, examination of historical injustice and community mobilization, and affirmation of shared values. See Lee, et al (2008).
7 When Asian immigrant students from South Philadelphia High School organized to fight persistent anti-Asian bias and violence in their school in 2009, and to hold the School District accountable, they boycotted school and came to FACTS to meet with AAU and other activist groups. More on this at www.aaunited.org/
language ability of many Bangladeshi Americans in Philadelphia, one Bangladeshi American family started an after-school program in the basement of their home. Today, the center of the community is built around this educational center. As a newly married couple, Ali and Najneen often saw school-aged children at home or with their parents during the day. Some children played in the streets of their neighborhood until late in the evenings. When Ali asked the children about homework they often said they did not have any. Deeply committed to education and improving the quality of life for his fellow Bangladeshi Americans, Ali recognized a crisis. If he could help it, the community’s children would not fall through the cracks. He and Najneen began helping children with homework after school and supporting parents with teacher conferences. Today, many of the children gather here for assistance. Within the same space, parents are able to find support and guidance.

The students in the Bangladeshi American Folklife Project were all very conscious of the significance of education in their lives. They knew that in America, education could offer them a chance at financial security and freedom. Even though students acknowledge intense pressure from their parents about going to a “good college,” they also understand education to be an intrinsic part of Bangladeshi identity. Their determination to be successful and their acceptance of hardship is astounding. Arman related that he had only been in the U.S. for three years and had arrived with little English fluency. He was often bullied and mocked but eventually mastered English; he graduated and was accepted to Penn State this year.

This determination also affected the students’ home lives as well. All of the students believe that most people in their parents’ generation do not feel competent in English. A lack of English fluency prevents Bangladeshi Americans from leaving their homes and interacting within their neighborhood community. In particular, most women—the students’ own mothers and others who they interviewed—were not fluent, which restricts their shopping, working, and use of public transportation. The students all appeal to their parents to learn English and several have taught their parents English phrases or helped them with pronunciation. These young people are cognizant of the hurdles in front of their parents and continue to remain committed to their goals.

Despite their growing numbers in the United States, little is known about Bangladeshi American peoples’ lives or the issues faced by this particular community. The Bangladeshi American Folklife Project allows immigrant students the space and time to contemplate the rich cultural heritage of Bangladesh. The group hopes to continue exploring their own community’s history, through ongoing documentation of migration narratives, stories, and material culture.

Regardless of the diverse histories of individual families, the migration and settlement experience has solidified a core identity for this community and for their children. Multiple obstacles of language, education, and finances have created an unspoken urgency in the community for recognition, and for opportunities to be heard and seen. In addition, parents remain steadfastly committed to Bangladeshi traditions, language, and culture. Due to limited financial means, their children experience Bangladesh not through their own travel, but through the memories of their parents. As a result, youth in high school feel a dual sense of urgency for the future. They are eager for opportunities to share their everyday lives—full of the culture, tradition, and color of Bangladesh—and they want to be successful Americans. Many feel strongly about the lack of awareness that other students and the School District have about Bangladesh and are enthusiastic about wanting to define what it means to be Bangladeshi American in the heart of Philadelphia. These youths are committed to making a difference in their own lives as well by accessing all educational opportunities. Their bright hope as immigrant youth informs this paper as migration, memory, and visibility are negotiated within the space of four neighborhood blocks.

Notes
4Kibria, p. 16.

Dr. Fariha Khan is the Associate Director of the Asian American Studies program at the University of Pennsylvania where she also teaches courses on South Asians in the U.S., Asian American Communities, as well as Muslim Identity in America. She received a Master’s degree in Arabic and Islamic Studies from Yale University and a Ph.D. in Folklore and Folklife from the University of Pennsylvania. Her current research focuses on South Asian American Muslims and the Bangladeshi American community. She is a PFP board member.
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 27-year-old independent public interest folklife agency that documents, supports and presents local folk arts and culture. We offer exhibitions, 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

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Thanks to new and renewing members!
Please join us today!