Salons 1: Mutual Engagement, Co-creation, and Yielding Authority for Representation: Strategies and Practices

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Public folklore practice increasingly emphasizes enabling communities to shape and determine the direction of a project from inception through implementation. The "Mutual Engagement, Co-creation, and Yielding Authority for Representation: Strategies and Practices" salons, organized by the Fellows of the American Folklore Society, explored how folklorists are sharing and yielding authority with community members, with an overarching objective of decentralizing power structures. They stressed the importance of recognizing that communities are not monolithic, containing differential perspectives, conflicting agendas, and internal hierarchies. Participants called for equity in planning and payment for project partners. They spoke about the role that folklorists can play in establishing networks among various stakeholders. Discussions embodied realistic understanding of the constraints of the institutions where folklorists work, while considering strategies for productively overcoming these limitations.

ON MARCH 10, 2021, DURING THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC, the Fellows of the American Folklore Society (AFS) held a virtual webinar in which six speakers spoke from various vantage points about folklore, heritage, and the public sphere (Hafstein 2024; Kirshenblatt-Gimblett 2024; Long 2024; N'Diaye 2024; Ronström 2024; Titon 2024). The webinar was followed by salons, a series of small group virtual discussions held on April 9, 2021, in which participants engaged with topics and issues inspired by the six presentations. Participants, mainly based in North America, also included

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international participants joining the salons from Europe and Asia. They joined morning and afternoon discussion groups ("salons") of their choice focused on topics related to the webinar themes. The topics were "Mutual Engagement, Co-creation, and Yielding Authority for Representation: Strategies and Practices," "Public Folklore, Heritage, and Social Justice," "Tourism through Folklore: Challenges and Opportunities," "Sustainabilities," and "Anticipatory Heritage." The Special Issue editors, who also coordinated the webinar and salons, designed the salon topics to facilitate discourse among colleagues in folklore, heritage, and cognate disciplines. The editors offered discussion prompts that shaped the conversations.

This special issue includes the written versions of the six presentations followed by five summary pieces of the salons, each of which is focused on one of the topics of the small group discussions. Two groups focused on "Mutual Engagement, Co-creation, and Yielding Authority for Representation: Strategies and Practices," Salon I in the morning and Salon II in the afternoon. The summaries of each are below and are intended to preserve the multivocality of the conversations that occurred in the sessions. The Guest Editors invited two to three registrants from each salon to serve as facilitators. One participant served as the reporter who provided the written notes that the editors used to construct the summaries in further consultation with all of the participants listed for each salon. The summaries are organized around central themes that emerged in the discussion. Honoring the requests of some of the participants for anonymity, the Guest Editors have presented the "Mutual Engagement" summaries as currents of discourse without attribution to particular individuals.

Discussion Prompt: This salon explores strategies and practices for mutual engagement of folklorists with communities that entail co-creation of programs and the yielding of authority to community members to represent their communities on their own terms, incorporating their experiential knowledge and expertise. It also considers issues of representation, including the question of who speaks for and represents a community.

Salon I Summary

Participants:

Olivia Cadaval, Smithsonian Institution Center for Folklife and Cultural Heritage (Facilitator)
John Fenn, American Folklife Center, Library of Congress
Simon Gall, Elphinstone Institute, University of Aberdeen (Scotland)
Jillian Gould, Memorial University of Newfoundland
Maggie Holtzberg, Folk Arts and Heritage Program, Massachusetts Cultural Council (Reporter)
Edward Millar, Castellani Art Museum, Niagara University (Facilitator)
Iveta Pirgova, Down Jersey Folklife Center at Wheaton Arts
Naomi Sturm-Wijesinghe, Philadelphia Folklore Project (Facilitator)

Institutional Constraints on Community Engagement

Representing various types of institutions, salon participants discussed how institutional contexts affect their work. Working with communities depends in large part

upon the structure and infrastructure of the cultural organizations that we represent. Folklorists are sometimes constrained by the prescriptive criteria and priorities of funding agencies and foundations, which can limit social justice and equity objectives.

Typically, there is only one folklorist working in an organization, and they have to pick and choose what they can do. The timelines of organizations do not necessarily line up with the interests of a community. They may only support short-term projects or individual communities rather than multiple communities in a region. Working in a folklore nonprofit can be freeing compared to other organizations because they can have fewer layers of structure and bureaucracy motivating deliverables. Nevertheless, nonprofits are still subject to the guidelines of public and private funders.

Within organizations devoted to folklore and social change, there are always questions about who is served, what the community wants to do, what its issues are, what its stake is in the outcomes, and what the plan of work is. Questions include the kind of product to be produced, and how tradition can be harnessed to solve problems to achieve new ways of understanding and empowering communities.

Federal institutions operate within a much larger scale. They can shift opportunities from these bureaucratic entities to communities, providing opportunities for representation while also providing the infrastructure for preservation. This approach is consonant with our interest in encouraging collaborative curation around knowledge and wisdom, folk art and practice, and heritage and tradition.

Dialogism and Community Impact

We need to recognize what we can do and the impact we can have within the limits of our institutions as well as the structures communities operate in. Asset mapping can identify both existing and needed resources.

Ultimately, our goal is to carry out work according to a community's vision. Our work with communities is always dialogic, and what we do is never exactly what was previously planned or exactly what was proposed to a funder. We can include community members in advisory committees. The project design needs to be discussed collaboratively, which is where our mission and the desire of the community are combined. If a community wants to feature a specific aspect of their culture, we should accept that it isn't a choice of one rather than another. Dialogues of difference are needed to find commonalities as well as differences. We have our own biases, and we may live our lives differently from those with whom we engage. We need to meet people where they are, recognizing that we won't always agree with people about their political views. Finding common ground is one of the most important things we can do in this day and age. Although heritage can build bridges, the social power of folklore can be also used for malevolent ends, such as the manipulation of folklore by fascist regimes. Our programs can also provide an interface: people can see their lives differently as a result of our interactions with them. Getting dialogue going is a beginning.

Asymmetries of Authority and Differential Perspectives

While emphasizing dialogic approaches, we also reflected upon our authority in projects and the differences in experience, expertise, and perspectives between folklorists

and community members. Folklorists and community members have different skill sets and ways of carrying out our work; indeed, "community scholar" may not be a productive term. Our social power in framing representations can be harnessed for the interests of a community, as a kind of counter-hegemony. Folklorists can present perspectives informed by a community's vision while also speaking for an organization within a public space.

There are fundamental differences between community-generated projects and those initiated by folklorists. We need to acknowledge the authority we have as folklorists in framing and shaping projects. To yield authority more effectively in framing and shaping projects, we should consult with participants on decisions about how a cultural group is represented. While we may claim that we are yielding authority, we may be making decisions on matters such as whether costumes are worn in performance, and, if they are worn, what kind of costumes they should be. In assembling grant review panels, folklorists face the dilemma of needing to have panelists with expertise in multiple traditions. Does this preclude having panelists with expertise in one particular tradition?

Defining Community and Recognizing Diversities

Participants agreed that how community is defined is at the heart of self-representation and self-determination. Guiding definitions by funding agencies can be tested by the communities themselves. Subgroups might define themselves differently, affiliating with, for example, the region within a country of origin, a wave of immigration, or a particular generation. They might have sharply different political ideologies, and sometimes members of one political faction won't talk to another, making dialogue impossible. Gatekeepers in a community often steer us to people who represent their ideology. While sustainability of a tradition means engaging young people, this may engender tension with elders. There are often divisions within communities between those who favor "high art" and those engaged with folk culture. Within communities, there are also different conceptions of what heritage is. And we need to recognize that culturally based communities may not define themselves by regions and borders.

Participatory Research and Co-Curation

The question of who can be considered a folklorist needs to be interrogated. Should they just be trained folklorists? Can they be undergraduate students? Community researchers? This question relates to the issue of yielding authority. We need to ask: Who's telling the stories? Who's making the decisions? How can we avoid being extractive with our work?

Ethnic communities should not be pigeonholed as only capable of carrying out research and programming within their own communities, in contrast to folklife organizations that are seen as having license to study any community. We need to counter expectations that communities of color should only document and present their own communities, which reflects a colonial mentality. Documentation, which had been largely the domain of academically trained cultural specialists, is now carried out ubiquitously through smartphones.

Teaching folklore or ethnographic research methods to community members can be liberatory, giving people tools for inquiry and reflection, documentation, or generating and exchanging cultural knowledge. Enabling cultural reflexivity, field research attends to process, not just the end goals. Documentation by community members can be powerful. Community-based documentation of resistance can become overtly activist, enabling communities to reflect on what worked and what didn't work, and then to put this knowledge into practice.

Co-curation reminds us that materials gathered *in* communities or *about* communities are different from those gathered *from* communities. While there was agreement about the value of community members carrying out fieldwork, several participants felt that the distinctive expertise and training of folklorists need to be recognized. Community members often don't have the same skill sets as trained folklorists, or the same ways of doing work. There can be important differences between how practitioners and ethnographers see culture. Further, differences of race, gender, ability, class, skill, opportunity, and other factors influence what we see and how we see it.

Autoethnography and the Politics of Participation in a Tradition

Views about pathways to transmission need to be questioned. There are people who want to share the cultural practices of another community if that is accepted by members of that community, such as in apprenticeships. Who we are to say that people are to retreat to their culturally specific corners and not practice a tradition associated with another culture? This is a colonial attitude. However, some things are sacred and are not to be shared or consumed outside of the source community.

Knowing and studying one's own community should be a prerequisite to studying another community. Autoethnography is a pathway to understanding one's own community, in preparation for researching other communities as well as teaching ethnography. It is eye-opening for undergraduate students to study their own culture. Teaching them fieldwork and folklore teaches them how to see the world differently.

What are the politics of participation in a tradition, and how is this defined?

Salon II Summary

Participants:

Violet Baron, Public Radio Producer
Kristen Catherwood, Living Heritage at Heritage Saskatchewan
Stephen Hatcher, Idaho Commission on the Arts
Maria Kaliambou, Hellenic Studies Program, Yale University
Elinor Levy, Arts Mid-Hudson
Ellen McHale, New York Folklore
Edward Millar, Castellani Art Museum of Niagara University (Facilitator)
Karen Miller, University of Maine, Orono (Reporter)
Christopher Mulé, Artist Employment Program for Creatives Rebuild New York (Facilitator)
Diana N'Diaye, Smithsonian Institution Center for Folklife and Cultural Heritage
Linda Shopes, Pennsylvania Historical and Museum Commission

Amy Shuman, Ohio State University (Reporter)
Suzy Thompson, Berkeley Old Time Music Convention
Marilyn White, Kean University, New Jersey

Co-Creation Challenges

This salon stressed the importance of yielding authority and decentralizing power structures. Participants have a wide range of extensive experiences collaborating with artists and community members. They reviewed some of the major challenges they face, including (1) hierarchies of power and a lack of transparency in the administrative processes of both organizations and granting agencies; (2) networking challenges, community expectations, and sustainability; (3) ownership, storage, and appropriation of knowledge and collections; (4) the dynamics of homeland and diaspora relationships; and (5) conflicting agendas among different organizational partners, with regard to both homelands and the diaspora. The group also discussed resources and ideas for solving these problems, especially establishing reciprocal, collaboratively created programs in which folklorists and others yield authority by developing new community-based networks that are not necessarily connected to traditional arts organizations.

Yielding Authority and Addressing Power Dynamics

Successful collaborations require attention to hierarchical structures and strategies for yielding authority. This discussion began with the possibilities for creating and sustaining partnerships in the context of unequal power structures. Yielding authority requires more than considering who speaks for whom on a public stage. It has implications for funding (especially donor-centered versus community-centered) and the role of stakeholders in conceptualizing, funding, and producing programs.

One participant asked, "How do we operationalize decentralization of power in all aspects of what we do?" When should the folklorist, who might be the only paid person on the project, take a back seat? If others are volunteers, and the folklorist writes the grant and is in charge of the budget, how do we bring in artists from the beginning? Some artists request an honorarium to compensate for their participation from the beginning. When power differentials persist in the allocation of funding, folklorists can begin by being transparent about how the process works. They can tell participants that they are writing the grant and would like them to be part of the grant writing process. Explaining that they don't have the money yet, they can then ask how the community would like to be involved not only as participants but also in shaping the program. Folklorists need to advocate for greater equity in grant writing and project implementation. Working for equity also involves considering how power dynamics are shaped by things like computer and language proficiency.

Networking Challenges

Networking requires attention to issues that produce vulnerability in the community, including who owns knowledge, conflicting agendas, and complex, multiple

affiliations. Community members have complex obligations to each other, and the folklorist's obligations to a community are part of those dynamics.

Participants discussed the challenges of developing and maintaining relationships with community members and strategies for networking and establishing connections, including the practical difficulties with contacting individuals. Folklorists can't assume that community members will prioritize invitations to participate.

Although some communities want to retain ownership of knowledge by doing their own fieldwork, these practices are sometimes in conflict with a funder or with a cultural organization's policies. For example, the position of the Smithsonian Institution in the past was that communities can't do their own fieldwork. One strategy to address this discrepancy was to inform people about how the Smithsonian and other institutions work, so that the community and the institution could identify ways to engage in reciprocal fieldwork.

Participants advocated for transparency but also recognized that some community organizations operate with little or no transparency. In some cases, individuals with power in a community may abuse their authority by publicly stating an accepted goal but making different decisions behind closed doors. Public programs might have adverse consequences for some participants. Community research projects can have potentially conflicting agendas. After noting examples from their work about how agendas respond to, or fail to respond to, community needs, we discussed models for prioritizing community needs, including Saul Alinsky's work, which emphasizes that a community's interests do not necessarily align with those of the community organizer (Alinsky 1971).

Storing Information, Archives, and Ownership of Knowledge

Who should hold the information collected and the records in their physical form? Should the community have access when these communities don't have facilities to store materials "properly?" Objecting to what participants described as the colonial mentality of archives and collections, the group discussed the possibilities for shared archives (co-curated with the community) made possible by digitization. Participants gave specific examples of the problems and strategies for storing and sharing documents and records.

The audiences for community groups can extend beyond the local; for example, a community can suggest that it represents an entire country. We can't presume to know the contours of a community, but need to explore the question of how an individual culture bearer might represent a local community as well as a national identity. These questions have consequences for considering how cultural documentation is archived and made public. Some communities don't want their documents to be public; they want to restrict access to their community members. In contrast, some communities want the documentation to be public, as a means of generating greater understanding of who they are. What works in one community or country is not necessarily beneficial or desired for others. Specific groups in a home country and in the diaspora may have different agendas regarding their public profile represented in archives and on websites.

Some communities express concern about sharing their knowledge with powerful arts organizations. One participant described participatory research programs designed to respond to African American community scholars who asked: "Why does the Smithsonian want this information about us—what's the hidden agenda?"

The Dynamics of Home and Diaspora

In some cases, what's good for one immigrant group might not be good for other, smaller communities. For example, large national commemorative celebrations can have different agendas in a home country than celebrations in the diaspora. Participants discussed how representations of a particular community group are sometimes used to represent a whole country. However, as one participant pointed out, how one understands the dynamics and politics of the concepts of home country and diaspora are complex. For example, big commemorative celebrations can have different purposes in different times and places and might have different agendas in the home country and in the diaspora. Furthermore, a community in the diaspora is not necessarily limited by a connection to a homeland. Immigrant groups sometimes establish relationships amongst themselves that do not correspond to having a shared "homeland." Points of connection among immigrants can include having a "back home," sometimes connected to sending remittances to relatives "back home." New cultural practices in the diaspora may not correspond to those in the homeland, as in the recovery or reinvention of homeland practices that weren't part of one's personal heritage, the decision to share only some aspects of cultural heritage, or the experience of being bicultural. These differences should be considered in understanding the dynamics of "home" and "diaspora."

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