

Report on Meadowcreek IV: Cultural Sustainability/Community-Based Folklife Practice Retreat

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American Folklore Society Consultancy and Professional Development Program funds enabled a group consultancy and working retreat to take place May 2-4, 2014 at the Meadowcreek Center in Fox, Arkansas. Meadowcreek is a sustainable community retreat center founded in 1979 by brothers Wil and David W. Orr. We met to continue discussions on how we might develop guidelines and practices to work toward community sustainability and how to support our work in the times of diminishing public dollars. AFS funds received were used to assist with the cost of lodging, meals, and travel for the participants. We felt that such a discussion is critical to developing the strain within our field, which is devoted neither entirely to academic study nor to publicly-funded public displays of traditional life, but rather to the sustaining of tradition in situ as a vital part of healthy and enduring community life. Growing out of presentations on cultural sustainability, sustainable music, and community engagement at the 2009-2012 American Folklore Society meetings, we sought an extended conversation to develop what practices would be best for folklorists and other culture workers to utilize to further assist communities in the face of the forces which endanger traditional practices and disrupt traditional knowledge. In all, eighteen people gathered (including four children) for the discussions, although several additional folks had expressed an interest in attending. Included in the group were public and university-based folklorists, graduate students in folklore and heritage studies, as well as folks engaged in a variety of national, regional, and community initiatives on bioregionalism, food, agriculture, rural arts, education, and related topics. This was the strongest and most focused gathering yet and there is a strong desire to continue and expand the discussions.

Over the course of the three days, we discussed both formally and informally such topics as the changing models in folklore practice, the nature of the communities we engage with, the types of projects we pursue, the difference between a public and a community orientation, the role of the arts, and alternative funding strategies. Our opening session was a roundtable introduction of each of the participants, giving each the opportunity to discuss projects and concerns. Mike Luster led a session entitled "Communities and the Public Perspective." Rachel Luster, drawing on her recent experiences with food and craft co-operatives, led a discussion on changing models in folklore practice and other community initiatives. Folklorist Meredith Martin-Moats led a session on community interaction. Sarah Moore brought her film on poet and rural dweller John Rule, and Rule was on hand to read a number of his poems following the screening. Other participants included folklorists Jennifer Jameson, Rachel Rudi, Marie Campbell, Jess Lamar Reece Holler, and Willi Goehring; community activists Acadia Roher and Rachel Townsend, educator Maegan Mayes, graphic designer Bryan Moats.

Together, we discussed a number of big-picture issues, continuing discussions from the three previous years and expanding them into new areas. How do we work with the real community, reaching its various sectors? What are we trying to do for/with communities? Do our tools and methods have an ideology? What is the role, effectiveness of media? What can we learn from perspectives of race,

gender, and class? How do we engage the economy of communities? What stories do communities choose to tell and which ones go untold? How can folklorists (and other cultural workers) address the different spheres of our work (scholarship, our public audiences and obligations, specific communities) and lives in useful and sustainable ways? How do we sustain our own work as well as the communities and traditions we work with? What models exist both in our field and in other quarters? How might the current zeitgeist refresh and reinvigorate the field? How healthy is the public folklore paradigm? What are unintended consequences of programs like the National Heritage Fellowships? How do we use our lives, skills, and knowledge to engage with and strengthen communities? Beyond public and corporate dollars, what resources might exist to fund our work?

We discussed a number of types of communities, rural, urban, even virtual, and how the experiences of each are interconnected and interdependent. There was a special interest this year in discussions of race, gender, and class among some of newer and younger participants. We continue to explore a third way, a community-based folklore/arts practice, one which not only examines the flowers of tradition, and offers their beauty to an interested public, but one which works as well to ensure their continued growth.

Best practices in light of these and previous discussions would be:

To welcome interdisciplinary dialogue toward encouraging enduring culture through a community-based practice;

To consider the holistic health of community life including the environmental, physical, spiritual, economic, and cultural well-being in the development and implementation of community-based practice;

To recognize that community-based folklife and arts initiatives must be locally adapted to specific places;

To actively seek input from community members that have historically been excluded from decision-making processes in community life;

To emphasize the ways in which traditional knowledge and its practice can be used to join a community;

To use an inclusive definition of “community” which includes the natural and cultural landscape and all things that depend upon or are born of it including traditional knowledge;

To use our skills as cultural workers to strengthen community life and encourage enduring cultural practices;

To actively seek to participate in conversations outside of the field of folklore regarding aspects of sustainability and to offer our unique perspective in the search for local, national, and global solutions;

To take action against the homogenization of culture by highlighting, through our work, the necessity of community and cultural pluralism;

To recognize that community takes multiple forms, urban and rural, and exists in a variety of locales;

To seek to develop and adapt new systems of grassroots organization and fundraising techniques to our community-based practice;

To recognize that cultural initiatives should be planned with and based on community needs and desires and be a partnership with the community membership, human and otherwise;

To encourage the tenets of stewardship in our methodology and community-based practice;

To remain open to the possibility that our skill sets, training, and talents are owed to the communities in which we live and/or work, in part, as the responsibility of membership and that our work may be done out of avocation as well as vocation;

To reaffirm to communities through our work that all value is not monetary by highlighting community assets that have alternate values;

To highlight through our work the ways in which growth economies contribute to the dissolution of community life and to act through our work to change this;

To search for alternative funding structures to supplement or replace public or corporate dollars;

To emphasize the importance of action in a community-based practice;

To affirm that the fundamental level of culture, the inner-most nest, is the level of traditional and local knowledge and folklore is the knowledge that creates and sustains community.

To develop a handbook or series of guidelines toward third-way, community-based culture work.

To create a chapbook reprinting some of the essays that have come from or led to these discussions.