

**Folklorists in the South Retreat\***  
**April 7-9, 2017**

This year the biennial Folklorists in the South (FITS) Retreat centered on the theme of “the Power of Our Stories” and explored story as both a medium for communication and an approach to folklore practice. Held at the Gray Center neighboring historic Canton, Mississippi, presentations, workshops and discussions ranged from highlighting projects and artists that illuminate story forms, to leveraging our stories for advocacy, to publishing our findings, to considering the application of narrative approaches in the field. The retreat kicked off with presentations from federal folklore and arts partners representing the National Endowment for the Arts (Bill Mansfield) and the Library of Congress’s American Folklife Center (Nancy Groce). Despite budget uncertainties and the continuing resolution that prevents NEA staff from recommending new grant applications for funding, Mansfield encouraged retreat participants to continue to send Heritage Fellow nominations and apply for NEA grant opportunities. Groce noted that budget uncertainties do not affect AFC activities (funded through Legislative Branch appropriations) and likewise encouraged participants to utilize AFC resources (e.g., RSS feeds and guest blog opportunities to highlight state and regional programs), as well as research funding opportunities, such as Kluge Center scholar-in-residence positions (e.g., Alan Lomax post-doctoral fellowships) and Archie Green fellowships, among others. Both Mansfield and Groce invited participants to reach out to officials at the NEA and AFC to for advice and guidance related to funding opportunities, and encouraged folks to take advantage of free publications available in quantities from the NEA and AFC upon request. Along these lines, AFC recently updated their *Folklife & Fieldwork* guide to cultural documentation. While Mansfield and Groce could not comment or advise on advocacy efforts in support of their agencies, several retreat participants raised the idea of distributing publications such as *NEA Arts* to members of Congress during our visits to Capitol Hill as a way to showcase NEA programming.

Two workshop sessions challenged participants to consider storytelling as a tool for conflict resolution, community development and social change efforts (Kiran Singh Sirah, International Storytelling Center), as well as a best practice for advocacy work (Sue Eleuterio, independent folklorist). These explorations of how narrative approaches can be applied in (and in support of) the arts and folklore provided a timely forum for addressing a recurring concern that surfaced in both formal and informal discussions – that of threatened cuts to funding for the NEA and NEH. Sirah noted that the arts teach people to tell their stories and express themselves. He highlighted art and stories as a site for meaning-making and understanding, with story-sharing as a means to provoke debate and dialogue that can potentially lead to understanding and new relationships. Through guided reflection, Sirah invited participants to consider how we might develop and share our own stories as well as the stories of others in ways that empower and build connections, as well as promote listening and empathetic understanding. This frame set the stage for Eleuterio’s workshop on the following day, where she further explored how to practice advocacy that resonates with policymakers. Eleuterio introduced the AFS’s *Folklore Advocacy Toolkit* (<http://www.afsnet.org/default.asp?page=AdvocacyToolkit>) as well as best practices for working to influence decision-makers. Namely, she invited participants to frame their conversations with legislators as an “elevator story.” In other words, how can you tell a

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\* Due to travel delays related to severe weather, the following invited speakers were unable to attend: Jorge Mateus (Association for Cultural Equity), Alison Fast and Chandler Griffin (Barefoot Workshops).

story that's quick and to the point, but captures your listener's interest enough to help them become a fellow advocate? (I.e., What do you do and why does it matter?) She also engaged participants in exploring ways in which these stories can be framed to resonate with both one's constituent base and policymakers. Participants practiced developing a story-and-action approach to advocacy, articulating their diverse missions and goals, and identifying points of intersection and access. Eleuterio encouraged participants to "Retell, Refine and Remember" and be passionate in advocating for our work/field. Spirited discussions ranged from defining our role, to inspiring support (or managing disagreements), to conflict of interest, to how to best represent our constituency – i.e., providing a platform rather than "giving voice". In all, the workshop provided an important opportunity to raise and share concerns as well as demystify advocacy.

A panel session on "Publishing the Stories we Collect" included representatives from regional digital and print publishers (University Press of Mississippi, LSU Press, Southern Foodways Alliance/*Gravy* and *Mississippi Folklife*) who described their areas of focus as well as their process for sourcing articles. Panelists also offered guidance around pitching concepts for publication and encouraged authors to be involved in promoting their books. Of note, *Mississippi Folklife* is going through a change in editorial leadership, but continues to publish during the transition. A final panel session on "Putting Stories to Work" featured projects and approaches that leverage community stories. Mark Brown (Kentucky Arts Council) shared highlights from a farmer/artist collaborative farmers market that features community stories in a community- and economic-development context. Heather Gerhart (independent folklorist) introduced the Collaborative Digital Storytelling Hub and discussed opportunities for amplifying community voice by bringing a co-creative, digital storytelling approach to our research process.

A highlight of the retreat was the group's visit to Canton's St. James Missionary Baptist Church, where Scott Barretta and Nancy Groce presented and screened fieldwork footage of worship services filmed at St. James in 1978. Reverend Clyde Tate led the evening with an abbreviated service prior to the screening and retreat participants were invited to share in the worship through prayer and song. Following the service, Barretta and Groce introduced the unedited footage that Alan Lomax, Worth Long and John Bishop recorded as part of fieldwork they conducted in Canton and Madison County, Mississippi. As we would all discover – folklorists and congregants alike – a couple of the hymns and praise songs we witnessed that evening had been part of the repertoire recorded in 1978. Indeed, as the film was shown, members of the congregation hummed and whispered along, celebrating along with their church family nearly 40 years distant. Congregants featured in the film, as well as family members, were in attendance for the screening and a brief discussion followed. There was good-natured ribbing and laughter shared, as well as expressions of gratitude from congregants who recognized community members who had since passed away. Many congregants recalled that old church space where wooden floors allowed for foot-tapping accompaniment, and summer heat and splintered pews kept congregants from shifting too enthusiastically in their seats as they sang. The new St. James church is a modern house of worship, featuring carpet, air-conditioning and padded pews. The juxtaposition underscores how people and song – rather than the church's physical architecture – establish continuity and define this sacred space. Groce encouraged the congregation to reach out to AFC to assist in identifying community members from the film and to share stories and perspectives that would enhance our understanding of the footage. Reverend Tate invited FITS participants to return for a proper Sunday service if their travel schedules allowed.

**Future of American Folkloristics  
May 18-20, 2017**

*"Do great work and call yourself a folklorist" -Diane Goldstein*

The Future of American Folkloristics (FOAF) conference was held on the Indiana University campus in Bloomington. Organized by graduate students and recent graduates of the University's Department of Folklore and Ethnomusicology, the conference was conceived as an opportunity to gather academic and public-sector folklorists and charge these scholars and practitioners with envisioning possible futures for the field. The majority of participants also presented in the concurrent workshops or plenary sessions, and all attendees were encouraged to engage in the highly participatory format that favored dialogue and working sessions over formal presentations. Each day concluded with a plenary session addressing key issues concerning the field.

Several key challenges emerged from conference discussions. Namely our field is struggling:

- To define our discipline as a unified field;
- To demonstrate folklore's relevance;
- To communicate using accessible language that resonates with non-folklorist audiences; and
- To diversify – both in terms of the folklorist demographic, as well as via cross-pollination in dialogue with other disciplines.

In several sessions, participants considered whether we folklorists might not be complicit in our own undoing, as we talk mainly among ourselves using specialized jargon that other disciplines and the general public find inaccessible. Social media forums likewise tend toward insular discussions, and participants further cautioned that we should not mistake social media "buzz" for action. In various sessions, participants proposed campaign slogans, including "Call a Folklorist" and – recognizing the need to educate non-folklorists – "Why do you need a Folklorist?" Participants also suggested outreach strategies, such as organizing traveling exhibits to raise the profile of folklore's contributions and broader impacts. In terms of raising the profile of our discipline on a national scale, there was also talk of organizing a petition around claiming the Smithsonian's Arts and Industries building for folklore: *Make America Great Again – support traditional industries!*

Conversations ranged from academic to applied folklore and back again. Related to folklore applications beyond the academy, participants wondered: Is our folklore education and training preparing us for the work we will do? What creativity is involved in translating these (highly transferable) academic skills into applied practice? In other words, how do we translate this work into *work*? At the same time, there was a lively debate over whether getting folklore graduates jobs is the goal. On the one hand, our discipline depends on it; on the other hand, some believe our objective is to work ourselves out of a job – ultimately, folklore is about the stories of the people we advocate for...not the folklorist.

Along these lines, open discussion in a session entitled *Putting Folkloristics to Work* challenged participants to consider our role as advocates for the communities we work with. For instance, are there opportunities to push back against terminology (e.g., "underprivileged" or "at risk") that tends to perpetuate the "savior complex" trope? In what ways might folklorists work to return authority to those who own their experiences? Discussion turned to our academic value

system and whether tenure decisions appreciate and recognize social engagement. What is the impact of policy work beyond the academy (e.g., numbers of books sold as compared to numbers of people impacted by policy-making)? The *Folklore Advocacy Toolkit* (<http://www.afsnet.org/default.asp?page=AdvocacyToolkit>) was also cited as a resource for making the case to academic administrators. Another session, *Putting Folklore Studies to Work in the Public Sector*, extended these discussions by framing communities we work with as *constituencies*. Panelists facilitated discussion around negotiating power (e.g., determining who gets funded), mediating relationships between boards, funders and constituents, and collaborating with communities (e.g., asking, “is this how you want to be represented?”) In other words, identifying strategic opportunities to leverage our privilege, cultural capital and obligations as folklorists to promote equity and access for our constituents. In her plenary session, Debra Lattanzi Shutika argued for the need for folklorists to be engaged academic citizens through leadership skills development. Shutika’s charge to participants to *do what you love* generated robust discussion around advocating for our discipline, as well as changing higher education from within. What are our values as folklorists? How are these demonstrated? Do opportunities at our institutions and organizations mirror our values and ethics?

The need to be educators surfaced repeatedly in discussions. A dynamic session entitled *Folklore Cheerleaders and Academic A\$\$holes: Getting Others to Take Folklore Seriously while Remaining a Serious Folklorist* stood out as a session that addressed this theme head-on. Lynne McNeill (Utah State Univ.) shared stories of her own missed opportunities to engage lay audiences and offered ideas for improving our communication and outreach strategies. She argued that others are speaking for us and we need to take back opportunities to represent our field by making folklore apprehendable to non-folklorists. McNeill’s co-panelist, Trevor Blank (SUNY Postdam), called on participants to work to foster intellectual curiosity at the margins of our discipline – a theme taken up by the third panelist, Andrea Kitta (East Carolina University), who pointed to opportunities to cite fellow folklorists, seek out existing audiences with overlapping interests, and publish in the journals of other disciplines.

In addition to educating those outside our discipline, presentations and working groups considered opportunities for applying our folklore skills in an educational context. In her session on *Relevance and Resilience in Folklore in Education*, independent folklorist and newly appointed Executive Director of Local Learning, Lisa Rathje, challenged participants to bring their skills for fostering respect, curiosity and appreciation for difference to the classroom. A panel on *Social Justice in the Folklore Classroom: Strategies for Facilitating Effective Student Discussions* took up this theme and facilitated sharing among participants around strategies for teaching for transformation – i.e., in ways that interrupt assumptions and engage minds and hearts in seeing, comparing and reflecting. Rounding out these discussions, Diane Goldstein noted that, while folklorists are educators, we are also constant learners who are accountable to the communities we study. Applied folklore draws attention to new questions for investigation and lends itself to problem-solving. Indeed, Goldstein reminded us, it is a political act to do nothing in response to what we learn, and she challenged the audience to be alert to instances when our disciplinary values compete with those of communities.

Importantly, FOAF made space for considering how folkloristics intersects with and informs a wide range of disciplines. For example, a session on *Encountering Environmental Folklife: Trans-Methods & Forms for the Intersectional Anthropocene* pushed participants to consider

allied fields such as environmental humanities and questions of sustainability. Who defines what it means to be *sustainable*? And whose cultural forms might be lost in the pursuit of sustainability? Panelists also suggested that folklorists bring approaches that help overcome the overwhelming scale of environmental issues (e.g., climate change) by engaging through personal stories that resonate. Another session – *Folklore and Science Roundtable* – likewise brought a scientific lens to FOAF discussions. Panelists highlighted the ways in which science is not only a knowledge-making enterprise, but also reflective of cultural values, creating a space where folklorists can bring insightful expertise – especially where scientific knowledge claims inform areas such as research design, health disparities and policy-making, among others. In both of these sessions, participants agreed that there is both a need and an opportunity to characterize our skills in ways that define a space for folkloristics in approaching this work.

Wrapping up the conference, a session on *Keeping Folklore Relevant: A Dialogue on Cultural Sustainability and the Future of Public Practice* challenged participants to bring our folkloristics lens to bear as we consider how to sustain our discipline. Why do we do folklore? When did we realize we were folklorists? What inspires us? In other words, what are the patterns of support and frustration that might inform how we can work together to advocate for, celebrate and envision a future for our discipline? As Kay Turner reminded participants as she closed the conference, putting the past to use in the present requires folklore to actualize the power of the past and to assert lost values. The FOAF conference serves as a reminder to reach back to our personal and collective origin stories for inspiration as we work collectively to enrich the field of folklore.