

CHALLENGES

An Interview with Richard Bauman

Interviewed by Gregory Hansen

I interviewed Richard Bauman on December 9, 1999 in Bloomington, Indiana. Professor Bauman developed applied folklore projects during the 1960s and was integrally involved in the development of public sector folklorè in the 1970s. Throughout his career, he was written about applied and public folklore, and he has focused much of his attention on relationships between the politics of culture and public folklore work. Known for making direct and candid comments, Bauman offers a critical perspective on issues relevant to public programming as well as a challenge for folklorists to develop new infrastructures and models for applying folklore work outside of academe.

GH: I thought we would start out with my interest with your early work with applied folklore. I'm curious about the types of work that you were doing.

RB: That was at the University of Texas in the early and middle seventies.

When I got to Texas, the politics of culture were really interesting. One of the crystallizing elements there was the development of Hemisfair. It had aspired to be a World's Fair and didn't get authorized to be one, so it became a roll-your-own knock-off of the World's Fair exposition. All the rhetoric surrounding that had to do with positioning ourselves in the hemisphere and recognizing our connections to Latin America. Meanwhile, establishing the space for Hemisfair meant bulldozing the whole very viable Chicano neighborhood. And so the symbolic and political resonances were running strong.

One of the pavilions there was the Texas Pavilion, which then became the Institute of Texan Cultures—and that was part of the planning. After Hemisfair was over, that was to remain as a showcase for Texan cultures. It was a very interesting set-up because it was an in-your-face acknowledgment of ethnic diversity. That is, you want ethnic diversity? We'll give it to you. We've got Lebanese-Texans, Czech-Texans, Polish-Texans, Swedish-Texans and all, and everybody gets the same-size showcase. You can put your pretty party clothes on, and we proclaim that

we have all this diversity and so on. Very quickly, because they had a folklife orientation, they tried to draw in some of the academic folklorists who were there. Roger Abrahams and others were willing to be involved.

But very quickly, they perceived this cynical agenda was going on. Here's a state with a very substantial Mexicano community that went back to a complex historical past. The African-American community, which has claims to a lot of attention, was being juxtaposed with the eighty Lebanese people—with all due respect—who were there. And this was being submerged in this sea of mushy liberal pluralism. That crystallized a number of issues with regard to the politics of culture and institutionalization and these types of things.

At the same time, there was also this network of resource centers around the state for the Texas Education Agency to provide materials for teachers. There was a push within that institutional framework to develop teaching materials that took account of the ethnic and linguistic diversity of the state. A number of the UT education people became involved in that and enlisted the assistance of folklorists. One of the national research and development centers, the Southwest Educational Development Laboratory, had the same function as the state one. They were developing an interest in these matters. So, all these things were happening that drew us into thinking about what folklore might contribute to pedagogy but also to public representation of cultures.

The Southwest Educational Development Laboratory got the idea that it might be good not only to think about folklore as a way of presenting and representing cultural difference but to think about folklore and the way it works in society as a potential framework for thinking about pedagogical methods. Our argument had been, "Look, you're talking about these African-American kids." This is of course the heyday of deprivationist conceptions of minority/non-mainstream kids in schools—their idea was that black kids have no language or their language is broken. We kept saying, "Wait a minute, we've spent a lot of time listening to African-American kids. The very kids that you say can't speak are out there in the schoolyard or in their backyards doing these incredibly complicated things with language and movement and poetry. There is something seriously out of whack here, and we want to be able to show what these kids know and can do with language and other systems of signification. And we think that that might illuminate the larger set of questions going on here."

So, out of that came the idea of looking at what we could discover if we really looked at children's folklore in a developmental framework. It might actually yield some interesting insights with regard to

pedagogy. I took a leave of absence from UT and did some development of the project. It got funded by the National Institute of Education, and I took a year off and enlisted a bunch of graduate students to do the research. We designed the project to look very carefully at kids in grades K-3 and to try to come up with some pretty hard developmental information about the kids' acquisition of competence to perform these various folklore forms. The project involved extended fieldwork in the classrooms, out in the playgrounds, back in the neighborhoods and households. A lot of documentation included early video, using these big half-inch portable video machines that were such a pain to haul around. When I went back to teaching, the project continued beyond that year, so I taught graduate courses in children's folklore. A fair number of now well-established folklorists were participants in that. Meg Brady was one. Beverly Stoeltje, John McDowell, and Danielle Roemer were others. McDowell's work on children's riddling came out of that project. Meg's stuff on Navajo kids was colored by that project as well. Danielle has published a number of things on children's folklore that came out of that. So, it was productive in a lot of ways. It made a difference to a lot of people—but only academically, ultimately.

The applied payoffs never happened for a number of reasons. One is that a number of us began to have second thoughts. To try to institutionalize, regiment, and rationalize the kinds of things we were finding and bring them into the school would be to grab the stuff around the neck and choke it. That is, it does its stuff out on the playground, so leave it alone. You know? We had these visions of teachers teaching children's folklore to children, and we said, "Wait a minute, that does violence to the stuff, and they are not going to do it well." The application didn't happen. I think we learned a lot about children's folklore, but the application just fizzled and dribbled away.

GH: But in a way it would be applied because multiculturalists now are picking up on some of that material and the work of Labov. That is used in teacher education.

RB: Yeah, my general position about lots of intellectual and related matters is that you have got to be in it for the long haul and be grateful for small victories. I do see people picking up on it. The publications are getting cited. Things have moved in such a direction that our work is being cited now in educational journals where it hadn't been. People are picking up on our conceptions of performance that organized that

stuff. But there is a lot of mediation in between—and a lot of years. I mean, this is twenty-five years ago.

GH: There is so much press now in folklife in education for teachers' inservices—like Paddy Bowman's work with the National Task Force on Folk Arts in Education. They are gearing toward teacher training and professional development and viewing that as a viable thing for folklorists to do. It just seems to me that your work is waiting to be rediscovered.

RB: I don't want to make claims that this stuff won't sustain. There are some more direct links. I, for example, have had a nice collegial relationship with Shirley Brice Heath who knew that stuff and who was able to accomplish in her *Ways with Words* project what we really didn't have the knowledge or the institutional stability to do. That is years of work. What came out in *Ways with Words* was the understanding of what classroom teachers do and their rootedness in a particular region. I see many of the arguments she made as ones that do relate to what we did. Such is her brilliance that it has been more persuasive.

GH: But the idea was to develop more of an applied focus early on rather than some other types of programming?

RB: That's what it was. That project, which was the most substantial one I have ever been involved in, ran over several years. Within a larger scope, we did participate in on-going discussions at the Texas Humanities Committee and the Texas Commission on the Arts. We continued discussions at the Institute for Texan Cultures, and our own students wound up there: John Minton, Jim McNutt, and people like that.

So all of us continued to have a concern with cultural presentation and representation as consultants ourselves and as mentors of people who were involved with the work just within Texas. Then, of course, Roger Abrahams and I were involved at the Smithsonian and in the establishment of the American Folklife Center.

GH: I think that is something that people don't realize a lot of times: the degree to which people like yourself and Roger Abrahams have been involved in laying the infrastructure later on for the network.

RB: And Henry Glassie and Kenny Goldstein from the beginning. Henry, I suspect, has talked to you about the establishment of an AFS Committee

on Applied Folklore. Kenny Goldstein was president of AFS at the Atlanta meeting that broke through to the point where the committee was established against “interesting” kinds of resistance. People said, “Keep my politics outside of my academic work.” And, “We shouldn’t mix the two.” Basically, that committee didn’t accomplish a whole hell of a lot—except to establish a venue for those of us who wanted to think about applied folklore. We were involved in that Point Park Conference and other sorts of sessions at the meetings. It’s not like we somehow induced AFS or lots of folklorists to get into this. But as a mechanism to coalesce some ideas and for those of us who were involved in it, we found it did do some business for us. But it is not like it was very long.

If you figure 1969 is when we were authorized to do that committee work, it begins to take shape in the early seventies. Within next to no time, all the push towards the Bicentennial was going on which diverted the attention to the institutionalization in Washington of the folklife programs. That had actually started earlier. Ralph Rinzler began, what? ’65, ’67—somewhere in there.

GH: Early sixties. [Editors’ note: The Smithsonian’s first Festival of American Folklife began in 1967, but Ralph Rinzler’s early work with folklife programming began prior to this event with folklife programs at the Newport Folk Festival.]

RB: Yeah. Another nexus was that Texas was the featured state at the Smithsonian festival. I think maybe the second one in 1968 or around in there. It had some connections with the Texas Folklife Pavilion. Things were already happening there, and the establishment of the two endowments got people thinking very early—like Senator Yarborough—about where folklife was going to be in all of this stuff. Jim Hightower was working for Ralph Yarborough, and very early on he got the idea of a third Endowment. Actually, if I recall correctly, Yarborough actually proposed some legislation to establish a third endowment in ’65 or ’66 or so. So, that was simmering out there as a set of possibilities. When the Bicentennial was getting closer, this stuff began to coalesce into more of a movement, and it got more active. AFS got more active, running up to testify at this, that, or the other hearing, attending angry meetings with Nancy Hanks at NEA, banging the table, “Why don’t you pay any attention to Folk Arts?” So, the mission and energy of the applied folklore was taken up before very

long by all of that push to get it into the Smithsonian, into the Endowments, into the Library of Congress.

GH: That's what I think of with the piece by Robert Byington, "Whatever Happened to Applied Folklore?" It got usurped by the movement of the Endowments and all that other—

RB: Yeah. You know, I was secretary/treasurer of AFS and involved in that capacity. Roger was on these various boards and committees and whatever of the Smithsonian. Henry and I served together on the Smithsonian Folklife Advisory Board. I was chair of it for awhile, getting all this going.

GH: Well, there is a lot of talk now—and some action—by public folklorists to take a more applied approach to folklore programming. I see that in the development of a whole range of things. Some folklorists think of themselves more as activists and as social workers. But do you think it is possible to do applied work within the structure that is set up now in folklore?

RB: I'm doubtful. Yeah. You know, although we have been sitting here talking about how much energy I and close colleagues expended on all of this, I regret many of the ways that is has turned out. You and I have had these discussions often, so you know how I feel about these things. But I think this folk festival model has had such a dominant influence on so-called public sector stuff—partly because of Ralph Rinzler's energy and genius, partly because of Bess Lomax Hawes's investment in that stuff fairly early on, and partly because that's where the money and the jobs and the action and the funds to do talent-scouting come from.

Those things had a long reach. It has set up a frame of reference that I think is politically problematic and functionally dubious—what Nick Spitzer characterizes as "Have a Nice Day" folklife—a mushy liberal pluralism. You know, "Your culture is nice; my culture is nice. We sing and dance; you sing and dance. We eat tasty stuff; you eat tasty stuff. If we eat each other's goodies, then we will love each other."

It's a crock of shit. And it feeds heritage politics and all sorts of dubious notions of what culture and tradition are. I regret, for instance, that Bess had such a long reach in establishing all these programs because I think it has slid in very, very problematic directions—not without

achievements, not without some victories, not without some useful stuff. But on the whole, it hasn't turned out the way some of us anticipated.

But I continue to think—call it “applied,” call it whatever—the insights that folklorists have into what it means to be a human being in society can be turned to the solution of social problems however they might come up. I think that is demonstrable, and it makes sense to me. As Richard Kurin never tires of saying, “We are all in the representation business,” and that’s true, and that will go on, and that’s fine. I would like to see some of the energy of festivals go into museums and other things, but—be that as it may—I keep coming back to the notion that folklorists have something to offer.

The old notion had an institutional frame of reference: that is medicine, law, education, etc. There is also I think a grassroots civil society element to it. Not that I am any great subscriber to all the notions of a civil society out there, but I do invest some hope in grassroots, local-level activism. And I think that is another place where folklorists have something to offer. Have you ever met Robin Zeff? Have we talked about her?

GH: No.

RB: She was one person who crystallized my thinking about it. She was a graduate student in this program—already in the program and fairly advanced when I got here in '86. And I'm not even sure what she had intended to do when she came in, but I think she worked for Bob Aten who does geological and environmental work. She became interested in grassroots organizations that were awakening to the mess that dumping hazardous waste in their neighborhood was making, and she wound up doing her dissertation on the symbolic and expressive mechanisms and activities of some of these organizations—within the larger scope of what it took for people to become involved with them. She looked at how it reoriented their thinking about the political process and their own participation in it and even larger ideological issues. People would say “I've always been a conservative, but a lot of people are calling me a radical now. And if trying to protect my children's health is radical, well then, by God I am a radical.”

You know to your old fifties and sixties lefty, that has a nice ring. Robin ultimately wound up working in Washington for the Citizens' Committee. I haven't heard from her for a while. She wrote a very nice dissertation.

GH: Well, that's really in line with what David Whisnant is writing about in his article, "Letting Loose of Liberalism." Instead of having somebody come in and intervene by putting on a display event, the folklorist works with the existing community and gets them to understand the political, economic, and social pressures that are playing on their culture. The folklorist becomes more of a catalyst for change.

RB: I think so. What has given me even more interest in this is Leslie Jarmon's stuff. Leslie was a faculty member when this department was Speech Communication. [ed. note: Richard Bauman holds a joint appointment with the Folklore Institute and the Department of Communication and Culture. This interview was held in his office at CMCL.] She is a Texan from Corpus Christi, and she did theater as an undergraduate and was an actress in New York for awhile. But, she went into the Peace Corps and did two stints—one in Bolivia and one in Costa Rica—and then she went to work for the Peace Corps headquarters in Washington. As things were gearing up towards the '88 elections, she and another Peace Corps colleague were sitting around worrying about the political state of the US and remembering the heady days when they were community organizers in Latin America trying to get potable water or electricity for their community. They were thinking about the mobilization of local communities and how important it was to make the breakthrough where somebody who felt utterly helpless in the face of the system finally got up the courage to go face the mayor or whatever and say, "We need this." And then they would come back and tell the story and make it possible for people to say "Well, if he survived, I can do this too."

The upshot of all this, is that Leslie and this guy Peter Yockel quit their jobs, bought a car, bought two good tape recorders, probed their network of Peace Corps and other Washington folks to get contacts among activists in whatever field of activity: homelessness, spouse abuse, substance abuse, labor issues, hazardous waste, Native American rights, literacy programs, you name it, in the contiguous forty-eight states. They set off on this trip of seven or eight months. They interviewed at least one person in every one of the lower forty-eight states. Recorded their stories, basically very open-ended. They said, "Tell us your story—how did you get into this?"

The idea was that this would then be a resource to mobilize other people. They wound up with almost 500 cassettes. Every week, they had an arrangement with a public radio station in D.C. I gather that they developed something of a following. They transcribed a number

of these tapes and published them independently by subscription, and they had this big collection.

A number of years ago, I got a message from Bob Ivie, who told me, "We are considering this woman for a job here. We have asked her if there is anyone else at IU she would like to meet. She mentioned she wants to meet Dick Bauman."

I had friends and colleagues in the Speech Communication Department down at UT. She went back to school to do her Ph.D. in speech communication, and she knew some of my work. So he asked if I would go to lunch with her.

"Sure, why not."

"Terrific."

So, we went to lunch, and she is one of these energizing people. She ups the RPMs of any space she comes into. We had a wonderful time at lunch, but one of the main reasons she wanted to meet with me was that there was this collection. Where in the hell were they going to put it? No one at UT was interested in it. And I said, "You know, this is something. Let's think about getting it here at IU at the Archives of Traditional Music."

Well, it's in the archives now. But at that lunch, she gave me a copy of the book that they had produced. So, I took it home; after supper I thought I would just flip through it. But at two o'clock in the morning, my eyes were wide open, and I'm utterly in the grip of this thing. Incredible stuff.

She gave a presentation at IU's School of Public and Environmental Affairs—and it was hard-bitten policy types—and there wasn't a dry eye in the house. She played some of these tapes and talked about them. It is astounding material. Anyway, she had lots of talent and energy and could have easily gotten tenure. She stayed here one year. She looked the profession of higher education—the big research university—right in the eye, and she said, "The hell with this. I'm not going to give myself to this." She quit, and she went back to Austin to be an activist. And we have continued to stay in touch. In fact I plan to make my Ways of Speaking course next time I do it, based on that collection. I think I can engage the students with this stuff.

But, thinking about that, listening to Leslie, and doing some reading within this civil society sets of issues, makes me convinced that there are some possibilities here. The vernacular base of folklore has resources in regard to what it means to act collectively at the local level. For all that, "it's a hard way to make a living" talk, it seems to

me there is a nexus here that will ultimately promise more than putting on shows. I mean—not to put too fine a point on it—(Laughs.)

GH: (Laughs.) Yeah. I think there is a place for the arts network, but it's got to be the starting point for something else. I have worked on quite a few festivals, and it is not my favorite thing to do. What I really like are the educational concerns. But the festivals have at least provided a gathering point, an entry point, and a way of raising funds so that then we can develop educational materials—which is what really interests me.

RB: (Laughs.) Whatever it takes.

GH: Public folklorists doing festivals—it's like, the money could go to somebody else. Coca-Cola could be spending it out to fund a concert of industrial music or something like that. Why not pay it for somebody that otherwise—

RB: Yup. All right, I can accept that.

It does trouble me, though, to see some of the fictions we have to tell ourselves and others to put these shows on. It really does trouble me, which you well know.

GH: Right. It is the whole issue of living in the world and trading off costs and benefits. Unfortunately, I hate thinking in economic terms, but that is the way it works.

RB: Yeah. That's the way it works. But from what I see, there is still a heavy degree of saturation of what is almost the founding structure of inequality that made the idea of folklore make sense in the first place. It is the whole idea that, "Oh yes, present cultures, but you have to have a presenter with a masters degree because these people cannot speak for themselves?" You know? It's bullshit. I'm against it. Giving voice to the voiceless? Legitimizing local traditions? No.

GH: We are just bolstering the political-economy of the machinery that sets up this structure in the first place when you do that.

RB: That's what I think. That's what I think.

GH: Yeah. Well, there is the other side of that too. There's a lot of interest in the private sector and corporate funding, and I can see people needing

to go into it as a source for funding when you're not able to get grants. But one of the things I did to take a reality check one time was to go look over the Dorothea Lang photographs of the 1930s. And I realized that there were a lot of WPA folklorists doing this type of work. Looking at those photographs and thinking what motivated them was one of the convincing things for me to come back to school.

RB: Yeah. You know, I have seen some good work done with corporate sponsorship too. Some colleagues in Latin America do great, politically interesting research that is sponsored by beer companies because it needs to yield a commercial.

GH: Well, another thing I wanted to get your comments on are some real specific concerns about public folklore in terms of graduate education. A lot of public folklorists are concerned about having a sufficient number of qualified applicants for their positions and—

RB: Really?

GH: Really. Definitely. Some even have said there is a labor shortage right now, and they can't get people who are really trained for this work.

RB: Really? Good God. I had no idea.

GH: Yeah. I was just talking to somebody down south, and they said they had a position open up and just had hardly anybody applying for it. This was a pretty nice permanent position.

RB: A permanent position? I could see why people would get tired of doing nine-month to one-year contracts.

GH: The life of a folklore migrant gets a little weary. What I was hearing at AFS this year is a concern about a breakdown in communication between professors in folklore and people who are in positions of hiring. There is a big concern about training graduate students as folklorists. I'd like your perspective. Do you think just training someone to be a good folklorist is sufficient training for them to learn the job and go into these entry level positions?

RB: Oh, I don't know. It is such a complicated thing. I know a few of the points of disjunction which raise questions. Take just the notion of

fieldwork. Here we are in the academy emphasizing and offering courses about field methodologies, ethnographic practice, and the problematics of representation. And then, there are the job requirements. “You have a week to scout us up two black ropers and a Mexican saddlemaker.”

So, what happens to all this work that we do to figure out what sense it makes to call something “folk”? Then you know somebody with a MFA who carves ducks and gets on the registry. There is this disjunction, so it would be naive to say “Oh, just get trained as a good folklorist.” There are points of disjunction—as you know. (Laughs.)

GH: It gets a bit surreal.

RB: I know from talking to students and colleagues that there is a shock when you go out there. My feeling is that being trained as a folklorist ought to prepare you for that. In terms of the way those jobs are configured, it doesn’t happen.

What’s the answer? I don’t know. I’m not going to teach people to do Rolodex fieldwork. I’m not going to do it. I am not going to teach people how to frame the rhetoric or their presentation statements—dumb it down or whatever you have to do. Not only do I not believe in it or want to invest my energy in it, I don’t think I can do it.

GH: Well, that is a lot to ask of a professor—to teach right from an academic style and suddenly learn how to do it in this “corporate-ese” way of talking.

RB: I can’t. I’m not effective at it. All I can write well is turgid, academic prose. I have had a pretty good run at it, and that’s how it is going to be.

But there are similar problems that come up in regard to other extra-academic venues for folklorists. All the debates about whether the program with museum studies tells you how to configure a diorama or whether the program says, “get passionate about some aspect of culture and I can teach you a few techniques to render it.”

I don’t know enough about those kinds of issues. I’m not surprised that there is a gap between academic folklore and these public positions, but I don’t know what would fix it.

GH: Well it’s interesting because you get as big a range in the public sector about that as you would in academe. I was talking to Brent Cantrell the other day about this, and he said what he really wants to hire is a philosopher. He wants someone who knows folklore, knows how to

do fieldwork, and knows how to think about things in interesting and creative ways. You can learn the other nuts and bolts stuff on the job.

On the other hand, I like some of the things they are doing at Western Kentucky University where they teach some of the techniques, but they also place that in relationship to the *why* and *how* and bigger implications.

RB: You have to—both with regard to the semiotics of it all, which I have always fruitlessly gone on about, but also with regard to critique. In my view, from the first invention of the notion, folklore has been about the politics of culture. It has been interventionist. To the extent that public sector or applied folklore is interventionist, it behooves a folklorist to know what has been done, what's been tried, how it has worked, how it hasn't. How the outcomes have squared with the ideology and the planning.

This is no new thing. It also behooves people to know that the same mechanisms that they conceive of as serving their liberal agenda have been used for the most appalling agendas. These agendas have hurt or potentiated the extermination of gypsies, Jews, homosexuals and anyone else.

All those wonderful epics that Parry and Lord recorded are the charter for people killing each other in the former Yugoslavia. The same Goddamn epics! Folklife festivals and these other public programs have been in the interest of Anglo-Saxon racism as much as they lend themselves to, you know, "My culture is tasty; your culture is tasty." If you don't know that, then you are disadvantaged.

I don't have to teach you to manage the bureaucrats in your state agency. You learn that on the job. But what I might contribute is this critical vantage point that it behooves you to sustain. For me personally, and for academic programs more generally, that's maybe the best thing we can offer.

GH: Studying for quals was a real eye-opener for me—when I found the degree to which the WPA work was really radical. Cultural pluralism, at that time, was basically communism.

When Dorson established the Folklore Institute, he had to deal with that in the McCarthy Era. Coming out of that, you get a rhetoric of pure versus applied science. Robert Baron writes a lot about how this established folklore as a discipline. I see an attempt to reclaim the left-wing heritage now—when it is a little bit more to your advantage to argue from that left wing position in academe.

RB: Or it is less dangerous, really—again for better or worse.

Yeah, when Dick Dorson was working so hard for the institutionalization of folklore, he had not only the thirties Popular Front to fear, but there were all these totalitarian ideologies. Throughout World War II and the Cold War, there was a succession of politically-suspect formations that tried to harness folklore to their purposes. He had proclaimed that we are talking about an academic subject and that it shouldn't be sullied by bringing it into public institutions. But he also asserted that it behooves us to know this so that we can fight the Evil Empire.

As graduate students here, we were funded on National Defense Education Act Fellowships that Dick Dorson was able to persuade the Feds to give him because he said "The commies are doing this, and we need to know what they are up to."

GH: So, Dorson's real criticism of applied folklore was its potential use for left-wing politics—or right-wing politics?

RB: Totalitarianism—of the left or right.

GH: Such as Pol Pot's.

RB: Yes. And so it behooves you to know how it can get that way. More than that, it's an instrument because the same ideological complex can cut in very opposing directions.