

“In the Public Interest”: Folklorists and Consumer Activists as Partners in Cultural Conservation

Hayden Roberts, Tennessee Arts Commission

In 1994, I began working as an assistant to Ralph Nader, the famed consumer advocate. For over two and a half years, I worked beside Nader conducting mini-research projects, answering phones, setting up interviews, harassing corporate and political figures, and occasionally traveling across the country with Nader to his various rallies and speaking engagements.

From this experience, I became more aware of the way moneyed interests influence the social-economic framework of the United States. I saw how the interests of individuals and small communities often take a back seat to the wants of the industrial complex. I also became aware of the successes of small, well-organized activist cells that have made measurable differences in counteracting the misdeeds of politicians and corporations. Nader inspired me to make a difference and to promote change that will better the overall quality of life for Americans. When I began considering graduate studies, I looked for programs and training that could help me to achieve this goal. I also looked for areas where I could integrate my interest in art and culture with my consumer activism. I found this type of integration and activism in the field of folklore.

At first glance, one might not see a clear connection between folklore work and Nader’s consumer rights movement. But as one begins to consider the work of public sector folklorists within the past twenty years, the connection becomes clearer. Public sector folklorists have had to work as cultural activists. Through activism in applied folklore work, folklorists have assisted groups and communities that have been threatened by commercial, industrial, and political interests. Such work includes the documentation of cultural traditions as well as political intervention.

When folklorists work to preserve communities, they work to conserve the community as a network of artists, manufacturers, and other creators of cultural expressions. But as contemporary society moves into the twenty-first century, folklorists need to further their cultural conservation by considering ways to research, preserve, and support communities as groups of consumers. The economic exchange of folklore is one aspect of folk studies that too often receives little attention. In a post-industrial society such as the United States, communities cannot simply be understood through their cultural production. Communities produce and also consume cultural expressions. As consumers, they take in goods and services not only on a local level but also from commercial entities that originate outside of the community.

If folklorists would also consider the impact of consumption on a community, then they could better understand various under-theorized dynamics of folk groups. Nader and his small army of activists have spent a generation lobbying for the rights of consumers. Folklorists could stand to learn from this wealth of experience. By teaming up with regional and local consumer organizations, folklorists can better assess the impact of outside commercial interests and develop interventionist strategies to address threats to the well-being of community life.

Three Ideas for the Future of Folklore

Cathy Brigham, Indiana University

My dream for public folklore in the twenty-first century stems from my current position as both a graduate student and a public folklorist. Looking at folklore from both of these perspectives, I offer three visions for the future of the field.

First, relying on open communication and stronger networks, public folklore could become better equipped to train people entering the field. When I began my work in public folklore, I was frustrated by the amount of time I spent reinventing a wheel simply because I was ill informed about the work of public folklorists. Public folklorists need to develop and continually update the tools that allow newcomers and outsiders to identify resources. These tools could include a stronger network of contacts and a resource database—such as a Web site—that describes areas of public sector work, outlines successful models in each area, and lists resources to turn to for ideas and partnerships.

My second vision for the field is more difficult to implement: a system of mentorships. When I enrolled in graduate school, I entertained grandiose and exciting daydreams of one-on-one mentoring with my professors. I expected to work closely with a professor, participate in his or her field research, interpret the data as part of a team, and assist in any final written analyses. While I am deeply shaped by my graduate school training and by the input my peers and professors have given me, this version of mentoring was not part of my schooling—nor of the schooling of any folklorist I know. This kind of hands-on, attentive training would be invaluable in preparing folklorists for whatever career path they choose in folklore.

Third, I envision a future folklore world in which the profession is not split into a binary division of “public” or “academic.” Instead, folklorists would share a respect for the different interests within the profession, and this respect would be reflected not only in the way folklorists are trained but also in the way they interact with their peers. Too often, the current divisiveness within the profession is sanctioned by both the “academic” and “public sector” sides. As someone with a foot in each world, I repeatedly