

Strike a Global Pose: Considerations for Working with Folk and Traditional Cultures in the 21st Century

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On an ordinary day in October 2007, I opened a file I keep near my desk containing clippings, printouts of emails received from various list serves, and loose ephemera that students and colleagues pass on from time to time. The file is one of my guilty pleasures: a bulging briefcase of quirky happenings and ideas extracted from the widely dispersed fields of culture, folklore, mass media, tradition, taste, style, and art.

Four random items caught my attention.

- ✓ First, I came upon a stapled set of newspaper clippings about recent developments in Mexican regional and traditional music. The first article, from The New York Times (July 2007), told about a Mexican immigrant named Jose F. Garcia in Idaho who had composed several *corridos* (traditional Mexican ballads) about recent events in the United States such as 9/11 and the immigration reform debates in Congress. The core idea explored in the story was the ambivalence that local traditional Mexican musicians in the Western United States feel between reminiscing about home and the old-country (Mexico) and relating, through traditional expressions such as corridos, to the realities of their new lives in their new country (the U.S.). The story also includes information about how the Western Folklife Center, a folklore organization in Nevada, had begun recording and documenting the new corridos as examples of an evolving tradition undergoing rapid change. The second article, from a local Spanish weekly in Tucson, told about how two of the most beloved and influential pop bands of regional Mexican music in the United States, Los Tigres del Norte and Montez de Durango, originate from San Jose, California and Chicago, Illinois respectively. I attached a small Post-It note to the latter story noting that the official website of Montez de Durango features a regional “banda” arrangement sung in Spanish of the 1974 U.S. hit “Seasons in the Sun.” The iconic words “Good bye Papa, please pray for me” replaced by “*Adios Papa, reza por mi.*”

- ✓ Secondly, I found a page torn off the Bangor Daily News in Old Town, Maine (February 2007) that I had quickly stuffed in my notebook on the way to the airport after a visit to the Maine Indian Basketmakers Alliance. The front-page story comments on the impact of globalization on the local artisanal furniture industry in the state. The owner of a family-owned furniture manufacturing company was laying off 130 employees and closing shop after 60 years in operation. The news story quoted him saying: *“Globalization has changed the game for any company that relies on people to build their products,”* Up to about ten years ago, consumers eagerly sought the well-made Maine furniture known for its beauty, quality, and durability. Independent furniture stores operated in almost every Maine town. But as large retail stores offered inexpensive, foreign-made furniture, sales of Maine’s pride began to decline. Finally, in early 2007, the principal suppliers of Maine wood announced that they had negotiated exclusive agreements to sell the raw materials to manufacturers in China. *“Isn’t it a shame,”* said the shop owner, *“we’ve become a colony; we are exporting raw materials and nothing value-added.”*

- ✓ The third item was a print out of the main page of a website that one of the students in my Introduction to Folklore class brought to my attention last year. The website is www.folklore.org (a URL address so directly referential to the field of folklore than one would expect it belongs to the American Folklore Society, the Library of Congress’s American Folklife Center, or any of the flagship folklore organizations in the United States). Instead, the URL belongs to an individual; it self-describes as a “collective historical storytelling” project devoted to the development of the original Macintosh. Functioning in the format of open source characteristic of Web 2.0 new technologies of participations (such as Wikis) the site claims to capture and present *“sets of related stories that describe interesting events from multiple perspectives, allowing groups of people to recount their shared history in the form of interlinked anecdotes.”* The banner at the top of this site for self-designated Mac-geeks is the word “Folklore” spelled out in the style of traditional hand stitching.

- ✓ Lastly, my file contained handwritten notes I had jotted down on a yellow pad during a recent workshop I was asked to teach in one of the small towns adjacent to the US-Mexico border line. A section of the workshop taught teachers how to conduct mapping exercises of local cultural assets. One of the teachers raised

her hand to share an anecdote. She told the group about her surprise when a few months before she had asked a group of local high school students to identify the sites they considered held more important cultural significance in their community and they unanimously named the local Wal-Mart store as their number one choice. Below my impromptu transcription of her anecdote, I scribbled: *“check out/compare with overheard stories about students in the South who cited McDonald’s as the best place to eat “traditional food” and kids in Detroit who described their Nikes as the cultural artifact they considered best represented their cultural identity.”*

The varied strands of these stories converge around a preponderant realization: *the contexts in which folk and traditional arts and cultures flourish are changing.*

At one level, one cannot help but be struck by the awareness that there’s nothing singularly earth shattering about this observation. For one, as the late anthropologist Clifford Geertz remarked, the informal logic of actual life imposes *change* as the fundamental characteristic of culture. Human beings, to paraphrase a classic postulate, are animals suspended in webs of meaning that they themselves spin. It is silly to imagine that such spinning is not affected by changing needs and social conditions as well as by those unexpected twists and turns in everyday life that Geertz called the “complex specifics.” Thus, it must not surprise too much when one day we suddenly discover that young people increasingly interpret their ideas of what is “traditional” through the prism of commodities; or that musical expressions—even in traditional genres—are infused with strange borrowings and co-mingling with pop tunes and current events; or that, as MIT media scholar Henry Jenkins has noted, we can perceive among internet savvy, social networking fans a veritable “revitalization of folk culture.”

The recognition that we are living in times of swift transformation—economic, political, technological, and environmental—is now commonplace. Even those social dynamics that not long ago suggested flirtatious (and hopeful) propositions for a radical multiculturalism defined by newly acquired tastes for sushi, pad thai, baklava, chipotle, and mojitos, have recently shown a darker side; the specters of social instability, xenophobia, warmongering, religious fundamentalism, ecological devastation, and a widening and seemingly irreversible divide between the have-mores and the have-nothings. Today, the tidiness that may have once enveloped the mystique of “folk cultures” as arenas of everyday life where folks found their bearings of unique identity and self-contained expressiveness is gone.

As the stories above indicate, finding “meaning” in the world today entails a serpentine path through the valleys and peaks of challenges that often extend far beyond any neat boundaries of “the cultural” and “the folkloric.” Some of these changes have proven to be detrimental to tradition-bearers: for example, when the giant retailer Ikea copies a traditional Wabanaki design to manufacture baskets for mass production without any consultation or compensation to the Maine basketmakers who own the intellectual property. On the other hand, sometimes the changes are welcomed and necessary: as is the case when young Wabanaki men learn traditional basketmaking (traditionally a women’s activity) and introduce new designs that sell well and consequently contribute to the increased pride and continuity of an ancient art form that a few years ago faced extinction. Many similar examples of simultaneous pros and cons brought about by global changes can be cited among traditional weavers, dancers, artisans, and other artists.

The institutionalized field of folklore—represented by the profession’s specialists and key organizations—to be sure, has not remained oblivious to these changes. In the last two decades many prominent entities and scholars have undertaken robust efforts to explore how the traditional concerns of folkloristics intersect with issues of cultural conservation, political economy, and the legal battles of tradition bearers around the world to protect their copyright of traditional knowledge. As folklorist Rory Turner recently noted, while working locally and caring for all forms of localized cultural expressions has been the “badge of honor” of the traditional arts field, there’s increasing recognition that few lives among our constituents are untouched by awareness and participation in global economic, political, population, and cultural flows and networks. In a recent essay, folklorist Bill Westerman notes that while folklorist’s fieldwork activities continue to yield findings of extraordinary traditional artists willing to go the distance to learn how to be part of the established systems of traditional-arts display and education (folklife festivals, exhibits, etc.) many are also increasingly expressing an unwillingness to pursue what they perceive to be “art projects” that do not entail adequate financial remuneration. In other words, current global economic and social structures that bring survival matters to the forefront of people’s traditional cultures may be impinging on traditional cultures to degrees that many of us would have difficulty apprehending.

It is in light of these conditions of change and disruption that The Fund for Folk Culture (FFC) has set out to take the temperature of the field of folk and traditional arts in the United States as the first decade of the 21st century comes to a close. Specifically, the FFC has identified demographic change—the fact that by the year 2050 there will be no single racial majority in the United States—as the intriguing point of convergence of two distinct, but rather complicated and intertwined strategic courses of action. More to the point: the politics of representation—the familiar and for the most part successful agenda of public policy in which

multiculturalists advocated for access, diversity, and inclusiveness—is giving way to an emerging politics of social, cultural, and economic justice. In other words, as author Jeff Chang recently noted in a compelling essay exploring the ambiguous and fragmentary legacy of the post-civil rights “aspirational idea” of multiculturalism: diversity is (and will be even more so) a fact of life in the United States that cannot be denied or devolved (“as ubiquitous as Disney,” says Chang). But on the other hand, a sheer gain in the quantity of representation need not correspond with a gain in the quality and range of those representations. Yes, the folk and traditional arts have a piece of the national arts pie in the form of NEA grants and about three dozen folk art programs at state art councils; yes, municipalities, museums, and schools invite traditional artists regularly to offer demonstrations, but how many other arenas of social life go about their business without ever having to engage the “folks” in their midst?

For folk and traditional culture and communities, the FFC is right to assert, the challenges of shifting demographics are even more daunting: for immigrant and culturally-specific traditional and tradition inspired artists such as first and second generation newcomer artists, diaspora artists, indigenous artists and historical minorities questions of “being” (identity) or “being here” (demographics) are only the beginning. Somewhere between the “informal economy” that held vernacular life together (in barrios, families, rural areas, churches, reservations, etc.) and the “creative economy” (of cultural entrepreneurs who make their own iMovies, program their choice of world music on their iPods, and “network” via text messages and FaceBook) folk and traditional artists must find ways to interact with global market and social forces in ways that are meaningful and critical to their own needs. The stated goal of the FFC effort is to bring together folk practitioners and their advocates to engage in deep reflections about these changing realities in order to (a) better understand the impacts of these changes on traditional expressive practice and (b) work as a national intermediary organization to expand and broaden the resources and material support that traditional artists and communities need to weather the storm of these structural adjustments in society and the economy.

There is no doubt that this is a worthwhile endeavor. However, I believe that despite the perceptiveness of the FFC in laying out this scenario of social transformation and calling upon the field of folk practitioners and their advocates to think deeply about its implications, nothing much could come of this effort unless some fundamental ideological premises and programmatic choices of the field of folk culture as a whole, as an institutionalized sub-sector of the arts and culture system in the United States, are also seriously examined (and in some instances, resolutely abandoned).

Without a brazen self-examination of the contexts that the field of folk and traditional culture has itself created to talk about, engage with, and publicly represent and adjudicate the

assets and needs of traditional artists, it is unlikely that any policy arrangements other than the prevailing mechanisms that have left the institutionalized art world off the hook from ever having to deal with unfamiliar artistic traditions or accommodate practices that fall outside the norm would ever be significantly altered. For too long, social, economic, political, and cultural stakeholders have been quite happy to abdicate “folk” matters to “folk” realms which in turn are expected to generate “folk” solutions. The time has come to implode the neat confines of that antiquated agreement and re-position the “local” (whatever it is about the “folk” that is worth saving in “folk culture”) as “the” business of the public sphere, not simply a small niche but in fact, in the aggregate, the largest sector of the cultural eco-system at any given time, in any given location. The inherent danger in this recommendation, of course, is that when all is said and done, the field of folk and traditional arts would seem rather unrecognizable from, say, the discourse of micro enterprise in economic development, or the principles of community design in urban planning, or the practices of self-documentation inherent to viral Web 2.0 marketing. This may or may not be a desirable outcome. Folklorists will debate this point as they have many of the other central tenets in the discipline’s history. But in the process of sorting out what policy engagements offer more or less traction to address the changing conditions of a global social order, perhaps a counter-intuitive solution can re-emerge from the folk cultures and artists that have the deepest connection to those elements of meaning in human life that matter most: the local, creative, authentic genius of ordinary citizens.

When Context was Good

More than any other group of art specialists or social activists, folklorists are especially attuned to the importance of “context.” Without understanding the contexts in which they are developed and activated, a quilt might never be regarded as anything other than an utilitarian object to provide warmth or a hula dance as anything else other than an ethnic form of entertainment to entice tourists. In the history of folklore as an academic discipline, arriving at an understanding of the importance of context transformed the study of folk cultures from antiquated superstitions to living systems of meaning, whether we are talking about the “folk cultures” formed by groups of lawyers, firefighters, Navajos, African American gospel choirs, miners, or teenagers texting the words OMG (Oh, my God!) at the mall. But just as ordinary “folks” constitute their own definitions and relative principles of interpretation, folk experts too, constitute a folk community that wields substantial authority over what counts as “folk” in the last instance. Hence, in any consideration of folk cultures and traditional practices it is fundamental to make an important distinction between those elements of expression that constitute, in self-standing ways, the attributes of folk culture and those that manifest the development of

professionally and institutionally defined concepts about the folk. My interest in this essay is in the latter; but given more time and space, I suspect that there's also an interesting story to be told about how the distinction between these two ways of naming what we care about came to be fused into one, thus generating among professionals in the field an ethics of "helping" the folks discover and rescue their own cultural assets.

So, let's begin by acknowledging the following: insofar as folk culture resides steadily and reliably in the spaces of everyday life, it is presumptuous to assume that there's anything professionals need to do to assist folks go about their vernacular, everyday businesses. Assessed from this point of view (a bit caustic, to be sure), as an asset that people already possess and mobilize on their own behalf to make sense of their surroundings, affections, and challenges, then one can comfortably declare to those who worry about "the state of folk and traditional culture" that all is well (thank you very much) with folk culture. For the great majority of people (author and readers of this essay included) folk knowledge is that part of the cultural iceberg of our lives that we'd rather not think about—consciously—all the time. How tedious it would be if each time I call my niece a term of endearment, I would have to theorize the construction of my family's indicators of status or blood lineage. How absurd it would feel to attend Thanksgiving dinner at my brother's house with the added burden of having to deconstruct the ritual elements of our seating arrangements at the table. I imagine something in the order of this phenomenon must be at play when we approach Native artists displaying rugs, katsinas, or pottery at a museum open air market to ask: what does doing this work mean to you?

A discussion about folk knowledge, expressive culture, and tradition from the point of view of public policy is an altogether different type of conversation. The nomenclatures that name "folk culture" as this or that part of the social world, are in effect also mechanisms of power. When the pie of public cultural resources gets divided (by legislative actions to fund certain programs and make cuts to others, for example) it matters what branches of the cultural family have a seat at the table. Seen in this light, as the writer Wendell Berry has observed, we are going to find the question of "context" "abounding in inconsistencies and moral discomforts," for soon we'll come to realize that it is precisely the contextual understandings that frame how folk culture gets brokered in professional arenas that has largely influenced the place assigned to it at the table that the FFC calls available "resources and support." To the extent that "folk" evokes a category of residual cultural material, thus its serving order at the distribution of resources dinner party would also continue to be residual (and possibly unsubstantial).

The case of Art is perhaps the most transparent example of this conceptual quagmire in operation. Changes in context change the meaning of what counts as artistic. A urinal was only such until Duchamp placed one in a show in Europe. A box of detergent failed to animate any

interest among cultural critics until Warhol made it his item of choice to get their attention. In the same manner, language that stakes claims to name what is important in social life carries a lot of weight in determining what is deemed valuable. In any city in the United States, those who attend the symphony represent a tiny (and increasingly declining) sector of the cultural community. In contrast, those who sing in community-based groups (at churches and karaoke bars) represent many times over the number of citizens engaged in participatory art activities. The symphony, however, receives the bulk of public funding. I am aware that there are hundreds of fine points to be debated in establishing a comparison between a symphony orchestra and a karaoke bar; I am not advocating here a facile populism that disregards the merits of rigorously-trained musicians and composers. But I am hoping to make a point about the importance of brokering specific claims to accomplish specific outcomes in the public distribution of “resources” and “support” for arts and culture. In the business of treating cultures as public goods, it matters who speaks for whom and how elastic or restrictive the categories that distinguish one sector of art-making from another are.

The field of folk and traditional culture has assisted in crafting broad understandings within public discourses about what is “folk” and “traditional.” To the extent that any discipline (noun) disciplines (verb) the general public to think about specific cultural products and producers according to discipline-originated concepts and values, then it is also fair to say that such discipline shares responsibility in the public perception of that field’s conceptual reach or of its limits. No one debates the fact that there are elements of culture that are experienced informally, collectively, in small groups, artfully, and inventively out of precedents. But as an intrinsic component of finding and making meaning in everyday life, these are not the privileged activities of only a few human beings. These characteristics are, to quote Geertz again, clues that “the universal is in the particular.” Thus understood, all arts are in fact “folk arts” to the extent that all of us are “folks” in one or another form of communal endeavor. Yet, despite years of theorizing and revisionism, the impulse towards romanticism has been hard to erase altogether from the professional brokering of folk cultures. In essence, what was “folk” and “traditional” in the 1800s (the peasantry) continues to be, for many folk advocates working today, what is “other” to mainstream culture (particularly, in opposition to the general culture’s consumerist strands in capitalism). The passion many folk culture brokers feel for the “unspoken-for” groups of tradition bearers among whom they work is firmly cemented in the idea that not everyone is a “folk” in the same organic and richly expressive ways in which some communities retain attachments to their traditional ways.

Will folk culture experts and professional advocates be ready to come to terms with the fact that they, too, have exercised a “naming” power over the realms of public culture that attend to “folk” and “traditional” arts and that certain consequences in terms of public engagement and

resource allocation have followed from holding on to that “niche” of cultural practice? Whether by tradition or disciplinary rigor, a prevailing set of common assumptions held and disseminated by folk culture brokers helps to organize what the public considers “folk” and “traditional.” Many of these key understandings were codified in the language of the American Folklife Preservation Act passed by Congress in 1976. Specifically, that legislation concurs with plenty of textbooks on folklore studies in that folk culture and folklife are practices learned orally, informally, by imitation, lacking institutional compulsion, and always embedded in the life of a group that shares common characteristics such as ethnicity, location, occupation, among others. The boundaries of this conceptual terrain have found a mirror image in the policy arrangements of the art and culture system. Folk culture, therefore, concerns itself with what is small scale, non-institutionalized, understood within localized communities, heritage-based, and largely mediated to the “out” group by means of some translational mechanism of interpretation (such as tourist guides, fieldworkers, or museum curators). As folklorists Giovanna Del Negro and Harris Berger have observed, the operational terms in which most work on folk cultures is conducted in public agencies in the United States today manifest a range of “populist” positions among field workers that strongly favor beliefs in the creative and pragmatic endeavors of “common folk” (as opposed to elites and other leading social actors). Thus when we think of “folk culture” we rarely consider anything mass manufactured; authentic folk culture is, so to speak, hand-made (very much like the embroidery of a grandmother or the ancient family recipe for a holiday dish).

Taking into account the exigencies (and joys) that close-to-the-ground, small, localized folk cultures and their advocates have carved for themselves within the crowded field of cultural policy in the United States, it is not unreasonable to suggest that folk and traditional culture have fared relatively well with regards to the self-defined aspirations and priorities of the field. Although public funding and support for arts and culture in the United States is a fragment of what it is in other countries or what art advocates would deem ideal, a quick review of patterns of private and public support for folk and traditional arts over the last 40 years conducted by The Fund for Folk Culture indicates that the field has not been all together neglected. For example, since the creation of the NEA Folk Arts Program in 1978, the agency has awarded more than \$75 million in support of the field. In a survey conducted in 2000, the FFC also identified more than 160 corporate, private, and family foundations that have regularly provided support for folk artists and practitioners. Close to 40 out of the 50 states have folk arts Master-Apprentice programs; the Library of Congress’ American Folklife Center, the National Park Service, the Smithsonian, the American Folklore Society, and myriad of other municipal entities, museums, academic institutions, historical societies, nonprofit organizations, and tribal governments consistently sponsor and advance folk culture programs and special initiatives.

Despite these well-documented sources of support, the research conducted by the FFC, however, revealed three findings that would seem, at first glance, to significantly qualify any shouts of victory. First, research pointed out that funding for the folk and traditional arts tends to be short-term and seldom renewable; secondly, most funding goes to specific select organizations, rarely to support broad field initiatives; and lastly, grants tend to be small in size. But if we examine them closer, these three findings may also be indicative of a wider phenomenon at play. Fundamentally, it is difficult to assess the extent to which—by being primarily concerned with “other” alternative practices on the periphery of the social sphere—the small universes of meaning of group identity and informal transmission as opposed to the realms of cultural practice more broadly defined—the field of folk culture itself may have inadvertently contributed to a kind of self-regulation within the larger ecosystems of cultural policy in this country. At the present moment, this can only be posed as an enquiry demanding further analysis. But, one has to wonder: is there a relationship between the small sizes of the grants for folk culture with the field’s own boundary claims to working in the “small” dimensions of everyday practices? Is there a connection between funding that is short-term with a field that has privileged de-institutionalization as its core operating protocol? Is there anything that links the lack of support for broad-based field efforts with the idea of informality and localized knowledge so intrinsic to the practice of the profession?

These questions are not posed with any intention to “blame the victim,” but rather to invite folk culture brokers and tradition bearers to reconsider how we might capitalize on the true strengths of this field—namely, the insights and inroads that folk knowledge offers to find solutions for large social issues through micro-local approaches—in order to advance a more humane and just understanding of the common good. Good policy, as cultural advocate Roberto Bedoya has stated, is always integrative. The failure of our social experiments frequently hinges on their isolation from other fields where “the real action” is taking place. Thus, Bedoya argues, we would be better cultural advocates if we understood that land use policies, economic development policies, immigration policies are fundamentally, and at the core, always cultural policies as well.

Part of the social capital of any movement that considers itself alternative, against-the-grain, and working on the margin of the overarching categories depends on a certain celebration of its outsider status. The celebration of a hidden world of rich creativity among ordinary folks has been a central force in the development of the analytical and policy world of folk culture. Substantially akin to a credo of sorts, folk culture has largely positioned itself deliberately as a sub-sector of the cultural realm; a sub-sector that requires different sensibilities, different understandings, different demands towards and from its core constituency. Not everyone, many a folklorist would say, is trained and equipped to handle the “responsibility” and “expertise” of

working with folk and traditional culture groups and individuals. The “field” has been announcing for decades its singularity, and yet, as private funding at the national level has started to decline and in some instances disappear; as a devolution of funding trends towards local emphasis increases; and as fewer large-scale or nationally visible projects connect the folk arts institutionally to other competing rising fields of interest, folklorists and their allies have begun to sense—if in some instances only instinctively—that something may be adrift in the social contract that has thus far fastened, if not an altogether “safe” place for folk culture in the cultural ecosystem, at least a predictably recognizable “field” made up of (to come full circle) “shared meanings.”

Has folk culture—through its loose institutional structures and diffused mechanisms of codification and support—reached a crossroads where some of the basic assumptions of the field’s disciplinary boundaries invite reconsideration? Is it time for a change? Is it time, perhaps, to reposition the “small” and “informal” elements of the field’s trademark in more strategic relationships with the “large” and “structural” dimensions of social policy such as demographic change, immigration, human rights, intellectual property, educational equity, participatory technologies, environmental justice, and economic development? Regardless of whether or not folk culture practitioners are able to reach a consensus around any of these polemic topics, one thing seems certain: in an increasingly contested public sphere where the rubric of “culture” is invoked as casually to sell torture tactics as it is to farm organically, it behooves folk and traditional culture advocates to sort out as expediently as possible why some specific elements of our present social condition are better understood and addressed through a “folk” lens than by any other means of representation. In other words, it is time to unfasten “folk culture” from its attachment to particularities of a sub-stratum of creative agents and get messy with the social policy languages of our time. It is time to expand the portfolio that currently encompasses the bulk of the work of folk culture in ways that hopefully engage in more creative ways the nature of the changes we have already acknowledged are drastically impacting the intentionality of our work.

When Context Got Complicated

The last ten years seem to have brought an increasing realization among art specialists and cultural brokers in the United States that many emblematic practices of folk culture that used to anchor identity, solidify group cohesion, facilitate intergenerational transmission, and enhance personal meaning are showing signs of strain. The reasons for the straining represent a menu of social ills quite familiar to the average educated person today. At a minimum, most observers agree that during the last two decades the world economy has been fundamentally

restructured. Consequently, a number of social, political, and cultural tensions are mounting at staggering rates. The traditional communities among which, or with whom, folklorists, vernacular art specialists, cultural brokers, art administrators, and activists work have not escaped the long-arm of these tectonic global transformations.

While folk and traditional communities continue to create art, celebrate traditional events, pass on stories, and fight their way through the occasional darkness of personal, familial, and collective challenges, it is equally true that deep disruptions concerning basic living wages, educational access, legal status, housing, environmental safety, and physical wellbeing impinge on the relative stability of the cultural assets many of us have always assumed were the last line of defense against the politics of oppression and “no-respect.” As a result of the neoliberal restructuring of the world’s economy in the era of globalization, there’s a growing corpus of temporary, vulnerable workers all over the world. In the current transnational stage, the poor are pressured on three levels: (1) leave home; (2) work for low wages; (3) send money home. More frequently than we can admit, these workers and their families are the “folk” that folk culture programs seek to serve. Under our watch, the idealized core constituency of our field—the folk community where small and informal culture thrives—has merged with the constituencies of displacement, hopelessness, underemployment, and poverty. Folklorists, used as we are to affirming the resistance value of identities grounded in cultural authenticity, frequently lack enough robust theorizations of social change in our training and vernacular to assimilate or explain these phenomena. Our inability to produce, ultimately, the resources that matter most to people call into question the soundness of our desire to address “folk problems” with “folk solutions” alone. Validation for folk artists, for example, is nice; cash is good; a green card is even better.

Deciding to work in the folk and traditional field today necessarily implies accepting various degrees of discomfort with the messiness of the categories at hand: community arts, refugees and immigrants, historic minorities, heritage-based development, amateur, informal and active arts, culturally-specific communities, digital technologies, creative economies, financial literacy, home town associations, market initiatives, wealth creation, human rights, job training, and so forth. The systems of support that have traditionally attended to the “folk arts” are now frequently invoked to serve these other demands of the social clamoring at the door of regional foundations, public agencies, and academic programs. Today, folk culture may be as easily found attached to or imbricated in the context of economic development, health and human services, labor organizing, and digital documentation as in discreet communities of meaning engaged in the planning of an annual ritual. In more ways than we can fathom, the politics of representation have given way to the politics of social and economic justice.

Taking into account this context, folklorists and other advocates of folk and traditional culture face a difficult situation. Considering the complications of the times, many good-intentioned cultural workers would be tempted to interpret the present political impasse as an invitation to espouse high-brow skepticism over “what is to be done.” In times of crisis, the organized cultural sectors have historically defined what is important on the basis of a reductive arithmetic: less funding means less staffing, less programs, less services in the face of more needs. Better times are therefore frequently defined as better funding opportunities. Hence, it is not uncommon under duress for national campaigns on behalf of “the arts” to frame questions in the negative: *which policy arrangements impede the democratic sharing of cultural assets?* But here’s where a broad knowledge of folk culture may actually be instructive: somewhere between optimism and pessimism—between the vagaries of the informal economy and the boosterism of the creative economy—folk and traditional artists and practitioners have long mastered a different kind of rhetorical strategy and a more nuanced, and grounded, politics of social engagement. I am referring to the poetics of can-do.

Contextualizing Hope

The “context of everything,” Wendell Berry says, “is everything else.” If we take into account the depth of the issues facing us today, it would seem logical that folklore professionals would assess the prospects for a more humane and holistic society in terms of impediments and shortcomings. However, the aggregate historical experience of folk and traditional artists and communities advises caution before reaching any foregone conclusions about what the future may hold. For many of these artists, the ground underneath the apparatus of cultural policy has been shifting for a long, long time. The current tremors, while a bit more intense in some respects, also feel utterly familiar. The fact is that, seen from the perspectives of native communities who have endured hundreds of year of colonialism and genocide and have, in spite of it all, rescued near extinct languages and art forms, the world has been striking a global pose for a long time. Often thriving *despite* the infrastructures of support, not *because* of them, folk and traditional knowledge bearers have learned to activate many inventive tactics of survival and transformation. For example, two-thirds of the folk artists who have received awards to support their work from The Fund for Folk Culture report no affiliation to any cultural organization or entity. The “independent kitchens” of folk culture have always found ways of cooking up change and possibility—even when the social conditions that contextualized their work were never of their own making.

While it cannot be denied that new globalized economic factors impinge on the productivity and transmission of folk culture in ways that may confound and disrupt, it is also

equally certain that for the great majority of folk culture practitioners, the “folk” in culture has substantially less to do with making a *living* than with making a *life*. It is precisely this texture of life-making, fraught with resourcefulness and everydayness in the micro-spheres of social life, that makes working with folk and traditional cultures distinct and that suggests an alternative positioning for this type of work in the current conjuncture. The portfolio of most folk culture brokers already includes many of the organizations, entrepreneurs, methodologies, and practices that can sustain interventions of social change where it most counts, at the level of families, small farms, cooperatives, indigenous and ethnic enclaves, unions, churches, and self-convening expressive communities of interest.

Yet, if we take seriously the severity of the changes taking place in the world today, then we also probably know that things are likely to get worse before they get better. In this situational dynamic, cultural hopefuls (and that includes most folklorists) need to ascertain which policy steps will have more traction in getting us, eventually, to that “better” distribution of social goods that we still believe is possible. Organizations like *Mujer Obrera* in El Paso, Texas, not necessarily perceiving themselves as folk culture brokers, have begun to activate the connections between folk communities’ aesthetic practices, vernacular and traditional knowledge, and practical problem-solving in terms of social and economic development. Some of these connections have illuminated dimensions of capital that had remained profoundly undertheorized under the conventional rules of engagement of folklore. For example, through models of micro-enterprises such as selling flowers, sewing, food businesses, and construction trades, for example, many traditional practitioners have demonstrated how it is possible to operate within market economies, without being primarily market-driven.

In the languages of economic development, health policy, food security, urban and rural planning, and cultural revitalization, the lesson offered by these folk entrepreneurs is counter-intuitive: the solutions we seek may already be at our doorsteps. The folk, small, community arts sector represents probably the broadest and most decentralized sector of the cultural ecology; it is also, frequently, one of the most enduring. Folk culture brokers have the deepest connections to this sector. Missing, however, from the larger conversation of the times are more instantiations of the know-how of successful initiatives; practical knowledge about what dynamics make it easier for local actors to do what they do. Missing, also, from many of folk culture’s own spheres of competence are concrete, codifiable, replicable examples of the depth of the field’s experience working at the intersection of multiple public goods and multiple policy objectives. Organizations like *SIPA* in Los Angeles (Search to Involve Pilipino Americans) blaze the path by combining, through a grounded institutional framework, health, welfare, political, and cultural empowerment. If there is an urgent call to be issued from these arguments let it be the call for documenting more initiatives where success is revealed rather than indifference.

The impetus for a re-conceptualization of folk culture's "utility" to the human community need not be attached to a revival of romanticism. Instead, it can present professional folk culture brokers with an opportunity to join policy makers in new and auspicious ways around the table of community planning, resource allocation, and social, economic, and cultural justice. The fundamental questions at the center of many of the challenges facing the cultural sectors today have little to do with discerning what policy arrangements *impede* social change under this global specter; there's plenty of grist for that mill among the pundits that populate cable television channels . What is missing is a practical sense of direction about which policy arrangements can actually *facilitate, advance, and sustain* the democratic sharing of cultural assets, including those assets that are less likely to be known outside their informal folk settings.

For most of the 20th century, the work of folk and traditional cultures proceeded, if not altogether without a certain sense of precariousness, at least relatively stable across the operational grids that had shaped the field as a self-contained sector. Today, few would dispute that the ground underneath folk cultures is shifting. Market forces, trans-generational challenges to bounded identities, intellectual awakenings, newcomer demographics: these are only a few of the new points of reference. These new realities exert new demands from the field, its professional brokers, and advocates. One of those demands is finding new ways of working at the policy level to foreground the national and transnational implications of the work at the local level that folklorists and traditional cultural practitioners had crafted and honed well before anyone could predict that "the local" would become the new site of renewal of the social imaginary. Having thus defined the agenda for this new century, now folk and traditional culture advocates need to excavate their own deposits of practical knowledge to determine at what scale and in what measures of purposefulness it is possible to attempt to intervene in the world as it unfolds, relentlessly, in its own dialectical moment of reckoning.