

SOME DILEMMAS OF FIELDWORK:  
A PERSONAL STATEMENT

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Initially, in addressing myself to folklore in the city, I stubbornly persisted in looking for the same phenomena I associated with the country. Even though I had conducted fieldwork in a city about two years prior to the Gary project, the additional attendant notion of folklore of the city was not yet firmly in my grasp. It was not so much a problem of redefining the term "folk" that was facing me, but the need for a re-evaluation of my attitudes toward a familiar and comfortable concept about them. When I got to Gary, Indiana, in the summer of 1976, I wanted to find that white-haired old fella with the gleam in his eye whose work-weary hands slapped his knees after a clever maneuver at checkers; or that lady in the perpetually flour-dirtied apron, standing proud, though slightly stooped from years spent leaning over a back fence and a washing tub.\* The real folk were the ones I was after: the ones with the old stories to tell; the ones carrying the wisdom of the ages; the ones who had survived by stubbornly hanging on to the old ways. These folk, to me, were the truly beautiful people. I had been conditioned by my schooling to think of "the folk" as the representatives of a unique and dying breed who were isolated from the modern world; their traditions, personalities, and very existence seemed worthy of the protective attention of the folklorist. Admittedly, I harbored a romantic image of "the folk" which, interestingly, co-existed with an equally stereotyped notion of the city as a cold, unfriendly, and threatening place--the last place on earth for the folklore fieldworker.

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\* Ed. Note: For a vigorous statement on the folklorist's dependence on "the folk," see Charles Keil, "Who Needs 'the Folk'?" and Richard M. Dorson's reply, "We All Need the Folk," Journal of the Folklore Institute 15:3 (1978).

Before and during the early phase of our "urban expedition," the Gary Gang spent hours discussing and devising field strategies. One essential concern for us all was making contacts. In Gary we used the telephone to set up appointments with preachers, politicians, public officials, local journalists, and school teachers, hoping through them to plug into some juicy leads. We scoured the Region's newspapers for publicized local events that might strike our folkloric instincts. We loitered in bars, sat in restaurants, prayed in churches, walked the street, browsed in shops, and smiled many smiles. Frequently, the Gang would meet at Headquarters (Jennie's Restaurant on Broadway) to compare notes and trade experiences. Enthusiasm is contagious, and ours spread within our little group as we eagerly matched experience for experience and informant for informant. Our mission was to seek and to find people who would tell us about life in the city, and find them we did, with amazing and rewarding results.

Within the course of the first week, I had made several contacts, participated in the video-taping of a Sunday religious service, and lined up a few promising appointments for the next week. By week two, I had moved from the Merrillville Gateway Motel into the home of a couple with five children whom I had met and collected from during an earlier weekend excursion. The Johnsons housed, fed, entertained, and advised me. I remained in that household for the next nine weeks. Needless to say, they became and are still some of the best friends that anyone could ever hope to have.

Without consciously adjusting my aspirations to find "the folk," I met people and developed friendly relationships with them. Usually any initial restraint and suspicion on their part gave way, and, as arched brows relaxed, they launched into seemingly unending monologues. City folk had plenty to say, and, to my surprise, were

as eager as any to share their experiences and points of view. My expressed interest in Gary, its black majority population and its black mayor, triggered flowing and passionate narrations on (and off) the subject. Couched in anecdotes, jokes, and, most often, personal experience stories, recurring themes unraveled through which the complexities of city life were revealed. Scandalous tales were recounted about politicians, preachers, and ordinary citizens: Reverend So-and-So chased a female worker around the grounds of U.S. Steel in his birthday suit; Such-and-Such, a well-known local lady, bought a new Cadillac every year from her earnings as a Madam; a certain black city official kept a Jewish mistress. Thus unfolded the secret life of Gary. I had, indeed, found my stories. In addition, I had found "the folk"; they were disguised as restaurant and bar owners, housewives, churchgoers, welfare recipients, mill workers, entertainment promoters, office workers, ministers, community leaders, teachers, the self-employed, the under-employed, and the un-employed. In contrast to my preconceptions of the "urban personality" as aloof and impersonal, my informants expressed themselves freely and vigorously about themselves and their neighbors, and about Gary and its local leadership. Often they shared with me their dreams and their failures. Surrounded by people with something to say and a willingness to speak, I appeared to be in an ideal situation for a folklorist. Without any doubt, the rapport fieldwork manuals place such a premium on creating had been established. But seldom in these guides for the fieldworker is attention directed to the consequences of establishing rapport. My problems were just about to begin.

Slowly, I noticed that the more I saw of my informants, the closer my relationships with them became. Of course, I anticipated this result, as close ties generally follow in situations where people spend time comfortably in each other's company talking and sharing common interests. What I don't think I could have predicted were my immediate reactions to this level of intimacy. In several instances, I had become part of the lives of my informant-friends, if only for a brief period of time. The closer I grew to them, the more detailed and

intimate their accounts became, and another, more personal dimension was added to their lives for me to see. I began to feel uncomfortable in my new, reluctantly assumed, role of confidante, mediator, and even confessor. Had I misrepresented myself? Did my informants understand and remember that I was merely on the trail of folklore? Had I become too friendly, misplacing somewhere along the line the correct and professional and scientific posture? Regardless of the answers, it seemed too late to bow out gracefully, nor did I see how I could alter my approach without superimposing an artificial persona. Besides, I had met some people I wanted to keep as friends. I wanted to maintain a few as informants only, and still others I didn't quite know how to relate to at all. Logically, I began to sense that there was some point at which I had to draw a line separating the personal me from the folklorist. But where was that point? Familiar themes and tale types were one thing; the people behind them, another.

I can recall that the woman who lived upstairs over the apartment I shared during an early weekend trip to Gary abused her child. According to my informant who was also a tenant in the building, the woman was convinced, apparently, that the girl was possessed by the devil. On the one hand, I was disgusted by what I suspected was going on, while on the other, I was overcome with an urge to interview the mother about her religious beliefs. Should I have encouraged the tenants in the building to take some action? Should I myself have acted, for after all I was staying there, too. How far did my responsibility extend?

Another time I was directed to the eighty-six year old widow of a black soldier in the Spanish-American War. She lived alone at the dead end of the unpaved part of a street on Gary's east side. She was, I had been told, remarkably coherent, active (she grew her own vegetables), and a likely source of folklore. As I drove there, I somehow envisioned a neat "cottage" with lush vegetables hanging heavily on the vines of the backyard

garden. It turned out, in fact, to be only a small, plain frame house (much like the others further down the road) whose garden she shared with an old friend who lived across town. The interview was not particularly fruitful, but my hostess begged me to return, if only to stop in and see how she was getting along. She had been robbed several times and seemed frightened of being alone so much. Mrs. B. (I'll call her that) cried when I did return. She was so glad to see me, she said. Mrs. B. pleaded with me to come more often (which I tried to do) and was clearly upset whenever I had to leave. On at least a couple of occasions, I was late for other appointments because I couldn't leave her until she had calmed down. I hated those visits and hated myself for giving in to and simultaneously resisting her human needs. There was nothing idyllic about this woman's isolation and loneliness, and added to that, she seemed to have no stories to tell and no memories that she was able to reconstruct which would satisfy my research goals. Even so, I knew she fit somewhere into the scheme of things--but where exactly?

Most of my informants, however, did satisfy my folklore interests and provided me with a wealth of material. But, more often than not, I would reach a point (somewhere between acceptance and trust) where the lore and private confidences became entangled. Though I was never sworn to secrecy, I knew when they were addressing me and not the folklorist. It became increasingly difficult to maintain a safe, scientific distance. These "folk" simply would not remain comfortably one-dimensional, pouring out their folklore and reserving their personal selves to be shared with old friends and relatives. Good collecting is not, as I believe someone has already said, like picking daisies in a field. Nor is the product of our exercise a basketful of lore, as satisfying in and of itself as it may once have been. Because, like the daisies, once removed from the fertile soil in which it thrives, its essence wanes and it becomes lifeless. The soft approach of today's folklorist invites an intimacy that aids in eliminating some of the barriers to total context and a vision of the informant as an individual, not merely a folk type.

I see now that I wanted my informants to remain true to an ideal type, to be "special" people, people whose lives were wholesome and mysteriously satisfying. I thought I had divorced myself from that romanticized, "folksy" image. But obviously traces still lingered. No wonder I felt myself becoming disillusioned and caught in a scholarly bind; the more involved I got, the more I learned; the more I learned, the less I wanted to know. Frankly, I didn't want to feel any sense of personal responsibility toward my informants and it was getting very difficult not to feel responsible. Much of the data that I amassed, either directly or indirectly, seemed so personal and confidential that I was hesitant about sharing it, especially since it wasn't always very pleasant. What right had I to expose the private lives of people, people who seemed to trust me? But the subtleties and digressions appeared crucial for a proper research perspective that would involve individuals and not "types."

Once I had the unfortunate experience of observing an informant buying what I thought to be drugs. I had suspected before that he may have used something for a occasional "high," but I became certain later on when he exchanged money for what I will forever be convinced was a hard drug, such as heroin. The reality of this incident forced me to perceive my informant in a new light. He was no less a person, but somehow the nature and tone of our encounters changed. I don't know if he actually knew or suspected what I'd seen, but after a couple more meetings I never saw him again. He just didn't come around any more. Perhaps he feared the use to which I'd put my new knowledge; I don't know that either. I do know that I felt disillusioned and disappointed in him. From what he had told me on the occasions of our first meetings, what I had since learned made him appear to be a hypocrite. Apart from my personal feelings, my discovery also added an interpretive dimension to the text and context that I couldn't disregard. How could I use that information without doing so at the expense of my informant? Unlike Poe and

Coleridge, he is still alive and, I trust, well. How successfully could I hope to mask his identity? In the name of good scholarship, what is important about him and what isn't?

An extension of that situation is illustrative of still another problem I faced in doing fieldwork. As a result of noticing the drug deal, I knew where and from whom drugs could be bought. This revelation greatly offended my personal sensibilities, and the amoral scientist-observer gave way to the irate individual. The very idea of drugs in any black community is abhorrent to me. As a black person in Gary, I identified with its black majority and its black mayor's campaign to improve the city's image as a black "City on the Move." In my heart, I cheered for Richard Hatcher and booed the Post Tribune. Campaigns against drugs, poverty, and racism in Gary were causes with which I identified without a second thought, especially when these issues involved black people, as was most often the case. Frequently the same topics were the themes of simple discussions, personal experience stories, and other kinds of narratives. I was very sympathetic to my black informants' points of view, which in innumerable instances paralleled my own. Situations of this kind led me to understand exactly how much a part of the total context a field collector can become, as well as how difficult it is to move back out again. How would my picture of Gary look? Too slowly, perhaps, I began to realize that I could no more objectify or romanticize my feelings about Gary than I could be objective about my informants and their private lives. In a discipline that claims to be both scientific and humanistic, where is the middle ground?

I doubt if many folklorists enter the field as naive about "the folk" as I did. But many, I'll wager, wrestle repeatedly with the consequences of personal interaction and identification. But so seldom do we pay more than a cursory attention to our actual field experiences, to the neglect of a significant and distinguishing aspect of the discipline. We all, by now, take for granted the physical and time-consuming demands of fieldwork and are eager to share shortcuts

as well as helpful hints about the quirks of recorders and other electronic devices. But we are less direct, open, and willing to share the total field experience, particularly in its personal and psychological ramifications. And it is these very areas that are most likely to influence the shape of the final product.

With our friendly smiles, we ease into private lives, encourage friendly relationships without always being equipped to take responsibility for the consequences. The inner lives of the folk, when revealed to us, deserve treatment, sensitive treatment, in our efforts to reconstruct their lore and their lives as realistically as possible. Much more consideration should be paid to their total environment, especially when the complexities of urban life styles are under study. Our responsibility is not just to the individual informants, but also to the total community of which they are a part. We cannot be content with focusing on them alone, isolating them from the larger political and social dynamics regulating their city lives. Whether we like it or not, our published and archived researches can influence folklorists and non-folklorists as we steadily provide alternative ways of viewing the world. Folklore studies are no longer of interest to just a closed group of scholars with little more than an ivory tower interest in "the folk." Conclusions drawn from our studies by scholars in other disciplines, particularly the traditional social sciences, should be based on our presentations of the fullest possible context.

The kinds of questions raised here have become more and more of a concern to me since I completed my fieldwork in Gary. With the help of reels of both audio and video tapes, images and impressions of some of my informants and my personal experiences have become sharper. I remember the little things: some painful, some funny, some distasteful, and some pleasant. Everything becomes a part of the total picture, but everything, obviously, cannot be told. The problem then is how to identify the lore of the folk and then reconstruct the context for



scholarly and public consumption, but with an eye on ethical and moral honesty. Clearly, the job of the folklorist is not to romanticize (as has been the habit of some), nor is it to make value judgments. But neither can we make claims to objectivity merely by recording the voices of the folk, especially when we have been admitted into their private lives.