

Theorizing Public Folklore: Folklore Work as Systemic Cultural Intervention

Gregory Hansen

Whether or not the researching and presentation of folklore for public programming has contributed new theoretical perspectives in folklore scholarship is a topic of lively debate. One position is that those engaged in the staging of folklife festivals, curating of exhibits, production of documentary videos and films, and coordination of folklife in education programs are using academic theories developed by theorists rather than making new contributions to ways of theorizing the discipline (Ben-Amos 1998:267). Another perspective is that folklorists working in these projects as fieldworkers, coordinators, and administrators are constantly developing new ways of doing the work of folklorists, and that these new approaches entail new ways of conceptualizing and theorizing the materials of folklore (Jones 1994:13). Within the generally unspoken—and occasionally vituperatively open—debate on the tension between academic theory and public practice (Kurin 1997:135), a major problem emerges. Namely, public sector folklorists seem to lack a clearly stated theory that unifies public folklore practice. Although articulating any one theory for unifying practice is a challenge, there is a need for public folklorists to develop means for connecting their work to wider issues within academic discourse. As a few examples of public programming illustrate, folklorists working outside of academe are involved in a wide array of programming practices. Their use of theory is often as tacit as it is eclectic. No good public folklorist would cite scholarly articles and books verbatim during folklife festival presentations, and footnoting one's comments about folklore will fail to persuade corporate funders to support folklife presentations. As a result, some folklorists regard public folklife programming as a non-theoretical endeavor (Ben-Amos 1998:267).

Is this assertion accurate? Rather than facetiously labeling public sector work “low theory” or even “no theory,” consider what it would mean to argue that public sector folklore is non-theoretical or a “purely applied” process of working. A strong case can be made for the argument that all

folklore research involves theory. Henry Glassie's (1975) assertion that folklorists who believe they work with no theory are actually working with bad theory reveals his position that all work is informed by theoretical lenses that focus research and representation (9). Theory can be the tacit framing of issues that provide a unifying theme to an event, and some good theories may be an implicit, and perhaps unconscious, mode of operation for public programmers. But it is bad theorizing to disbelieve the fact that theory informs practice. Glassie makes an important call for all folklorists to consider ways to articulate the theoretical assumptions through which they work. If a folklorist is unable to clearly explain theoretical constructs that are put into practice in a folklore program, then Glassie is questioning whether or not the folklorist has thought through important implications of conducting research and developing projects. Good theory provides an important resource for creating good projects, and denigrating "theory" while privileging "practice" is an anti-intellectual position that can have negative consequences for folklorists working within a community (Jones 1994:10). If one accepts Glassie's argument that theory can not be divorced from practice, then it becomes clear that folklorists in the public sector work from theoretical bases. Their theoretical positioning generally is established by their academic training in graduate schools, and public sector folklorists share a core repertory of exposure to the array of theories developed and employed by academic folklorists. Public sector folklore is theoretical.

But is there a unified theory of public sector folklore? It is my position that public folklorists have a unified theory that provides an umbrella for subsuming goals in developing and coordinating public presentations of folklife. It is a theoretical position first articulated by the folklorist David E. Whisnant in *All That Is Native and Fine* as "systemic cultural intervention" (1983:13). Whisnant offers an extended definition of cultural intervention by asserting that intervention begins when an individual or an institution consciously and programmatically acts within a social setting with the intent of bringing about cultural change. The intervenor regards that change as desirable, and he or she can take action in a relatively passive manner or in an active manner (14). Whisnant argues that the more passive forms of systemic cultural intervention could consist of activities such as developing an archive or collection, and that more active forms of cultural intervention entail programming designed for cultural revitalization. A form of cultural intervention can be positive in that the goal may be to expand possibilities for folk musicians to perform within a greater number of venues or to establish educational projects to teach students about cultural diversity. A specific cultural intervention can also be negative in that prohibitions against speaking

languages or practicing specific cultural traditions are also derived from programs for cultural intervention. Whisnant concludes his definition of systemic cultural intervention by reminding his reader that negative effects can follow from positive intentions and vice versa (14). Much of his work is an exploration of negative implications that result from well-intended goals of outside interventionists.

In his study of ways in which wealthy northerners worked in the Appalachian region to develop programs designed to address social problems through the use of folk cultural resources, Whisnant provides case studies for ways in which theoretical assumptions and constructs will influence practice. Extending what he found about the goals and objectives of outside interventionists in the early part of the twentieth century to contemporary folklife programming, Whisnant considers all public folklore work as forms of cultural intervention. He writes that "the question is not whether we shall intervene, but how and with what effects" (Whisnant 1988:233). These interventions are systemic because they involve the interplay between the official systems of the agencies that sponsor the programming offered by folklorists as well as the systems of cultural creation and expression used as a resource by members of the particular communities within which folklorists work. As numerous examples of the types of programming offered by folklorists reveal, the projects created by folklorists can have major consequences that affect life within communities and can even provide perspectives useful for deliberations over official governmental policy. I offer a series of success stories to show the range of types of cultural interventionist programs and to provide fodder for considering how public folklore work is intertwined with larger issues of theory and practice.

The Michigan Folklife Festival is one of America's stellar public sector presentations of folklore. Over the past decade, the staff of Michigan State University's Museum has produced some of the most innovative and exciting ideas in festival programming. The festival directors, C. Kurt Dewhurst and Marsha McDowell, and their staff have developed effective presentations of a range of traditional activities practiced in Michigan. Old-time crafts such as Chippewa basket making, Polish *pysanky*, and duck decoy carving have all been demonstrated on the university grounds that are transformed into a festival site. Emergent traditions such as dancing the Macarena, decorating homecoming parade floats, and performing African-American sorority step dances have also been presented to enthusiastic audiences at the festival. The 1996 Michigan Folklife Festival also featured a display of a section of the AIDS quilt, and members of the state's gay communities were especially

pleased to be invited to demonstrate quilt making and discuss how the quilt served as a memorial for friends and lovers (Sommers 1996:8).

As are most folklife festivals, this event is planned months, even years, in advance. The staff members work in a pattern characteristic of many public folklorists in that they collaborate with members of various communities to develop ways for assisting folk artists and musicians with presenting their cultural traditions. In this way, the distinction between the folklorist as the outsider who is the intervenor and the folk artist who is the insider intervened upon rapidly falls apart. Countless survey and assessment materials reveal that the majority of festival participants feel that they are the ones who present themselves at the events (Kurin 1997:134). The staff members do not regard themselves as outside interventionists who manipulate the strings of their folk artists. Rather staff members and participants work to establish a form of co-ownership in the event, and coordinating the festival is seen as a co-operation.

In the low country near South Carolina's coast, Dale Rosengarten has worked tirelessly and conscientiously with members of the community's sweetgrass basket makers (1994:152). This tradition of making an array of baskets from sweetgrass, pine needles, and palmetto is one of the oldest African-American folk arts and is unique to the region between northern Florida and South Carolina. For over 350 years, members of black families have worked to gather natural materials and sew them into works of art. The craft is most often marketed locally and independently by women who sell their craft from small stands along US Highway 17 near Charleston.

This area is also under siege from developers who are intent upon turning small communities such as Mount Pleasant into a sprawling zone of strip malls, convenience stores, franchised hotels, expensive apartments, and trendy eateries. Staff members of the University of South Carolina's McKissick Museum became concerned with what they could do to assist the artists with gaining resources to protect their artistic tradition against threats of over development. As parking lots are paved over wetlands, it becomes difficult to gather sufficient sweetgrass and palmetto for making the baskets. Furthermore, as conservationists establish environmental protection policies through the state and national park systems, their environmental conservation policy results in making the harvest of sweetgrass and palmetto illegal and thereby contributes to the destruction of a firmly-established cultural tradition.

Rosengarten was hired to work with the McKissick Museum to develop the exhibit and catalog *Row Upon Row: Sea Grass Baskets of the South Carolina Low Country*. Her work contributed to the establishment of an advocacy group for the basket makers, the Mt. Pleasant Sweetgrass Basketmakers' Association. Through organizing, basket makers such as

Henrietta Snipe were able to lobby the government and official policies have helped to ensure the basket makers' access to the natural materials used in their art. Currently the basket makers are still engaged in organized action to protect their right to sell baskets along the highway, and it remains to be seen whether or not basket makers can continue to work in an area whose landscape is exceeding its carrying capacity of Wal-Mart's, McDonald's, and Pic-n-Saves. In this case, the cultural interventionist assists communities with organizing and lobbying, and she serves as a broker for challenging governmental practice and policy that threatens artistic communities.

In 1984, Elaine Eff created her own position as the first city folklorist in the nation (1988:95). Working to research and present folklife from throughout Baltimore, Eff administered and coordinated a range of projects. One of her most memorable works is the gorgeous documentary film and video *The Screen Painters*. Eff became fascinated with the artistry of Baltimore residents who brightened their oftentimes drab row houses with vibrantly painted window and door screens. Interviewing talented and eloquent artists throughout the city's working class neighborhoods, Eff documented a vital urban folk art that had previously been ignored within the academic literature. The film beautifully shows how the screens are made, and Eff allows the artists to articulate the various meanings that they express through their artistry.

Since the production of *The Screen Painters*, this folk art has become a source of pride and identity for residents of the city of Baltimore. Eff's work shows that the idea of community is not merely a reified abstraction created by folklorists but an essential dynamic that is strengthened and nurtured by the power of art. Her film helped to foster a renaissance of screen painting in the city, and the creation of folk arts to personalize urban environments has proven to be a vital force for urban renewal. The "broken window" theory of urban decline argues that one unfixed broken window begets other unfixed broken windows and that these broken windows contribute to an overall pattern of urban blight. Eff shows that perhaps a "painted screen" theory can have the opposite interventionist effect. Her work demonstrates that the folklorist has skills and resources for making cultural interventions that directly influence city planning and policies.

Dewey Balfa was the most influential Cajun musician of the 20th century. A favorite at countless folklife festivals for over thirty years, Balfa expanded his programming into playing for venues within Louisiana's public schools. With the assistance of folklorists who helped him procure grant support from the National Endowment for the Arts, Balfa helped to revitalize and preserve Cajun traditions in South Louisiana. In interviews with Ralph Rinzler and Frank Proschan, Balfa explains how the intervention program

developed between folklorists and folk saved Cajun music from becoming a threatened or even extinct tradition (Wilson and Udall 1982:163). Rinzler asked Balfa how young people in Louisiana in the late 1970s regarded Cajun folk music:

Balfa: Well, I must tell you that it's not the music that they prefer listening to, but I can see a great change in the last ten years. From the time that we went to the first festival, people thought it was more or less an occasion to bring the Cajuns up to be laughed at.

Rinzler: People at home did?

Balfa: Yes, I'm really telling the truth. I can remember people saying, "Why are those boys going up there [to the Smithsonian Institution's Festival of American Folklife]? Nobody wants to listen to that *chenka-chenk* music." I've had friends tell me that a lot of musicians from other groups down there just couldn't understand me. They said, "Dewey is a good musician, and we can't understand why he goes and plays with a triangle." They thought that it's so backwards, so old, that it shouldn't be done.

And I was so moved, performing for an audience of about 17,000 people that year, and almost getting a standing ovation. It gives you a different feeling. I wanted to do something about it.

Reinvigorated by the experience of finding an outside audience that appreciated the richness and depth of Cajun music, Balfa explained that he was not ashamed of playing his music, and he wanted to provide his fellow Cajuns with an opportunity to reclaim an important aspect of their French heritage. He explained that when he returned to the South after performing at festivals in the North, he looked for more venues for sharing his love of the music, history, and cultural traditions of Cajuns:

Balfa: I did work with the Southern Folk Culture Revival Project with a whole bunch of people who had been working through a grant from the National Endowment for the Arts. They were very moved by the way I felt, the way I tried to explain the existing of the Acadians here in Louisiana, and that I was afraid that the music and the culture were eventually just going to fade away. I said I would very much liked to have been able to bring the music and the story of the Acadiana to the young people in school.

Balfa was awarded a grant to perform in the state's schools. He comments on the folklife in education programs' effectiveness:

Balfa: I must say it was very well-spent time and money. It was just amazing to see the student and faculty response. You would just be surprised at some of the letters [from students and faculty]. (Wilson and Udall 1982:163-67)

Dewey Balfa worked with Ralph Rinzler and other folklorists, folk musicians, and folk artists to develop presentations of traditional Cajun folk music in Louisiana's schools. They were able to change the status of Cajun culture through their work in schools and communities. Balfa grew up at a time when schoolchildren in Louisiana were slapped for speaking French on school grounds. Today, there are numerous centers for the study of Cajun culture, and many Louisiana schoolchildren are now taught to speak French in their classrooms. In some communities, traditional Cajun dance tunes are now the music of choice amongst young people. Dewey Balfa and public folklorists worked together as interventionists to challenge the hegemonic structures that emphasize the homogenization of cultural traditions in American educational systems.

These projects are all part of the success stories of public sector folklorists. Although not every project attains the same measure of success, these examples of cultural intervention characterize much of the work of public sector folklorists. Furthermore there are countless other projects that show the creativity of folklorists in developing interventionist projects in health care professions, criminal justice systems, social service agencies, and within the corporate world (Baron and Spitzer 1992; Feintuch 1988; Hufford 1994; and Jones 1994). All of these selected case studies of exemplary work demonstrate that a theory of systemic cultural intervention undergirds public sector work. As Whisnant avers, folklorists' work will affect the communities within which they work (1988).

Whisnant, like scores of folklorists in both the public sector and academe, provide caveats that the interventions of folklorists are not without the potential for deleterious effects. Writers have been compelled to critically examine the potential for well-meaning plans by folklorists to backfire and cause more harm than good to artists, audiences, and the nation at large. The literature on the cultural critique of public folklorists' interventionist programming is complex, thought-provoking, and frequently contentious (Bauman, Carpenter, and Sawin 1992; Handler 1988; Kirshenblatt-Gimblett 1988; and Kurin 1997). Numerous case studies and much theoretical pondering have asked all folklorists to consider the consequences of common practices such as including living people within museum exhibits, placing what is regarded as private culture into the public sphere, legitimizing capitalistic and nationalist political structures in display events, and placing what artists might regard as apolitical art into highly-charged political arenas (Karp and Lavine 1991).

The literature problematizes a range of issues, and many of the writers offer few solutions to what they regard as agonizingly-difficult concerns. Public folklorists have heeded various criticisms to develop other ways of administrating and coordinating programs (Kurin 1997:136). But many public folklorists choose to focus more on what they have accomplished rather than on all of the things that can go awry in programming that entails cultural intervention. In evaluating not only what folklorists have accomplished but also where their programming has failed, a larger question emerges: have public sector folklorists contributed anything new to ways of theorizing folklore?

Few public folklorists theorize their projects in academic articles and books. It is thus tempting to argue that there are few, if any, new contributions to theory from public sector folklorists. But I would argue that public sector folklorists have made theoretical contributions. Their projects place a host of issues into the scene of intellectual discourse and debate as public sector work places into motion the oftentimes unspoken cultural dynamics that are overlooked in everyday life and in scholarly study. In the playlets of humanity that are acted out in folklife festivals, exhibit galleries, and schools, public sector folklorists constantly evoke and disturb the ordinary categories of everyday life (Cantwell 1993:156). Public folklorists shift what is often in the private realm into the public sphere. They rename what some consider to be "non-art" as "Art." They challenge boundaries between the folklorist as an outsider who works as a cultural interpreter and the folk as a subject whose arts are interpreted. They question distinctions between the audience member as an observer and the event participants as performers. They rework themselves from being academics to public folklorists and challenge academic folklorists to think about their role in the public sector that encompasses college and university classrooms. In placing these issues and a host of other concerns into the scholarly arena, public sector folklorists make a theoretical contribution that challenges the distinction between theory and practice. The work of public folklorists demonstrates that every folklorist is involved in cultural intervention and engages with theoretical constructs. Folklorists simply cannot operate without theoretical lenses that focus and refocus key issues in the study and presentation of folklore whether or not these representations are manifested upon a festival ground, exhibit space, videotape, classroom, or the printed page.

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