Response to Interviews with Bill Ivey and William Ferris

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In his interview, William Ivey presents his vision for the Arts Endowment as one in which a new sense of "artistic endeavor" will emerge consciously through the philosophy and supporting activities of the National Endowment. Central to that sense of artistic endeavor, he argues, is an increased valuation of or commitment to living cultural heritage and "creativity." He says nothing more about what exactly constitutes "living cultural heritage" or how the Endowment might support it, but clearly this was not the focus of the interview. Instead he turns to the question of creativity. However, since he mentions cultural heritage as an equally important part of his vision, it does raise some questions: what process will be used in identifying the cultural heritage that will be supported? And what will be "done" with that heritage once it is identified? For example, will individual performers or artists be singled out as "national treasures"? Will the Endowment create an inventory of people who carry our cultural heritage—as the Traditional Arts Indiana project is currently doing? Has the Endowment explored the effects of either of these actions (or others) in nations other than the United States?

I raise these questions because in effect they come up again as Ivey addresses the special focus of the interview—creativity. I do think Ivey has taken the Endowment in a significant new direction by including the concept of creativity along with the more usual talk of cultural heritage. While the term "heritage" has all sorts of positive overtones, it is after all a very static concept. It implies preservation but not innovative performance—the focus of most folklore research today. Folklorists are well aware that both tradition and innovation, heritage and creativity—the "twin laws" as Barre Toelken calls them—are necessary for any cultural performance. Ivey, as a folklorist, finds it natural to include both in his description of the aims of the Endowment, and he admirably credits the field for giving him that important perspective. However, he doesn't, in my opinion, go far enough in exploiting the riches of the concept of creativity in this politically charged arena of the National Endowment for the Arts.

Toward the close of the interview, Ivey reflects on the tendency of folklorists to be "uncomfortable with modernity," actually with the trappings of modernity, and the resulting tendency for folklorists to "hold back." He offers some very helpful insights about how useful his own training in folklore has been in running such organizations as the Country Music Foundation or the NEA. Still, given his comments on how useful his understanding of a folklorist's perspective has been to him personally, and how adamant he is about incorporating an appreciation for creativity into the vision of the NEA, it seems surprising that he has not pushed the process of creativity itself into the limelight and found a way to let it serve his mission. I guess I would say he is holding back.

An exciting undertow I heard throughout this interview was Ivey's own solid understanding of the process of creativity and the role his training in folklore has played in making him aware of that process. When he says that folklore needs to be more central—that the field needs to reassert itself—he is underlining his appreciation for the success the field of folklore has had in studying the creative process, not simply in identifying and promoting the products of that process. No offense intended, but the fields of journalism or marketing can promote the products of the folkloric process. The field of folklore loves the products but studies the process as well, and Bill Ivey has said as much himself. My question would be why he has not chosen to find a way to support the process of creativity directly rather than only indirectly through the display of the products of creative process.

This brings us back to his statements early in the interview that tie culture and democracy together in his aims for the NEA. It is clear that an organization like the NEA has to worry about some of the political ramifications of "cultural exchange." People often find it hard to appreciate other people's culture. One of the great contributions that folklore and anthropology make as academic fields is in their efforts to teach appreciation, and folklore in particular does that by highlighting the process of creativity that leads to such a variety of cultural products. One of the effects of that in the classroom is each student's own "aha!" experience of seeing his or her own culture as a creative process. A truly democratic incorporation of the concept of creativity will do that for all American citizens as well. In other words, the NEA needs to find a way to make it clear to everyone that what we are celebrating—what we are nurturing, as Ivey says with good reason—is *not* differences but rather a shared process, one that leads to glorious and innovative differences but one in which every individual can and does participate.

How can the NEA put a fire into the hearts of the American people? Probably the same way we teachers of folklore can so often put a fire into the hearts of our students—by letting them see that they themselves participate in that same process—that they and their grandfathers who whittle and their little sisters who make up new jump-rope rhymes are all engaged in a creative process that can be fostered—nurtured—by our national endowment. How can that come about? I think Bill Ivey's sense of the centrality of folklore to his enterprise in Washington is absolutely on target. He needs to find a way to make the creative process itself and an appreciation for what happens before the "product" arrives on the stage or in the gallery the focus of his support. As a start, maybe we could ask the people who produce NPR programs "How is what you do to produce your program similar to what Willie Nelson does to create a song or what my grandmother does to create a quilt? And how can the NEA most effectively nurture that creativity?" My guess is that it will involve some new mechanism—some new dimension of the NEA— that supports and features the process itself directly.

In the Ferris interview, the interviewers give him free reign on the topic of creativity and its role in the National Endowment for the Humanities. Ferris, however, chooses to tie the notion of creativity directly to the idea of regionalism in the United States. Given Ferris's success in bringing together a great variety of genres and perspectives in the *Encyclopedia of Southern Culture* (Wilson and Ferris, 1989), it is not surprising that he views the potential link between creativity and a sense of place or region as one in need of academic and public advancement.

Ferris offers what he calls a three-legged stool of creativity. One leg is tradition; one leg is change; and one leg is a sense of place. Typically, folklorists talk about conservatism and dynamism or tradition and change as *two* parts to creativity. They do definitely involve location or a sense of place in their analysis, but Ferris makes a much stronger case for including this dimension as a fundamental part of the creative process. Some folklorists, such as Henry Glassie, have done this clearly in practice, tying the history and geography of a place to the process of creativity as it develops there. But Ferris is arguing a more direct and equal recognition for the role of "place" in creativity generally.

The problem here is that he is probably preaching to the choir. It is not folklorists but rather other representatives of "the humanities" that need to be convinced that "place" is an important part of creativity. Actually folklorists would include a number of other categories of individual and group identity as influences on the creative process—religion, education, gender, age, social class, etc. But for people in "the humanities" these elements are analytical properties that need to be taken into account but are not central to the definition of the "stuff" of the humanities. What Ferris actually wants to do is justify his designation of ten "regions" of the United

States as the focus of his work with the NEH during his tenure. I think the emphasis on regions is an excellent one, but it seems just a bit contorted to try making the process of creativity the "reason" for emphasizing regions.

One of the problems that Ferris will have to face given the way he has divided up the nation into ten regions is exactly the arbitrariness of those "regions." Regionalism has long been an issue in American Studies, and years ago Richard Dorson and Suzi Jones argued the case for and against certain features being used as the basis for synthetic categories or the recognition of more home-grown senses of place (see Dorson 1964; Jones 1976). One answer to the problem that has been suggested recently by someone who clearly wants to accommodate the concerns of more general "humanities" scholars appears in Kent Ryden's book *Mapping the Invisible Landscape*. Ryden takes the bold step of calling the sense of place a "genre"—a genre of folklore to be sure, but an analyzable entity. The sense of place itself is certainly viable as a subject of academic research within the humanities. The "creativity" involved here is in taking a "genre" as known within the culture—in this case, how people define to themselves a sense of place—and applying it, using it to create their own "performances" of the genre.

Ferris has intuitively seen the connection between place and the production of "things" normally identified as part of the humanities. Creativity is the process through which people come to have a "sense of place," and the NEH will be making a significant contribution in supporting the examination of that process. But the connection needs to be clarified. Otherwise, I fear, the creativity that is used in nurturing a sense of place will be ignored. That the "regions" Ferris has identified will be exposed as "arbitrary" is not the issue; rather, the role of the actual "senses of place" created by the many communities and small "regions" within each of the ten areas can indeed be recognized and used as a theme in the exploration of all of the humanities found in each location. If the theory is correct, there should clearly be creative influences directly traceable to the sense of place in every branch of the humanities that is seen as representative of a given region, however or whoever so designates it. Much of the creativity will occur in the changes to research agendas as scholars try to accommodate the genre of a sense of place. Foremost will be their investigation of the emic or local sense of place as a genre and their ensuing focus on how each "place" selects the "stuff" it presents as its face to the world.

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Response

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I have long taught classes in the impact of human culture on the Earth's environment. I have looked at the results of overgrazing on terrestrial ecosystems. I study the changes to streams and lakes wrought by anthrogenic pollution. I consider this work challenging and important. But it has not been until more recently that I have come to believe that art and narrative can be critical to understanding human interactions with the environment.

More than a decade ago, I learned the value of thinking about folklore the hard way. I started teaching an interdisciplinary class in sustainable development—with a folklorist. Suzanne Lundquist is a specialist in Native American studies at BYU. She is also an expert in personal narrative and literature.

As we began teaching our course together, I was constantly pushed—or dragged—into new places. Suzanne sees the world as a collection of texts and narratives, all available for reading and interpretation by thoughtful people. As a biologist, I have always been interested in the natural world, but Suzanne opened my thinking. I began to be interested not only in the interactions of humans in ecosystems, but in the narratives associated with those interactions. And I began to realize the interpretation of human interactions with natural places creates the way in which thoseinteractions occur. Worldview structures actions structures worldview.

A new way of looking at the world opened to me as Suzanne and I took students to Latin America repeatedly during summer terms to interact with local peoples. During the day we worked side by side with Tarahumara