

# Introduction

by Paddy Bowman and Lisa Rathje

We launch Volume 3 of the *Journal of Folklore and Education* just days from the opening of the [National Museum of African American History & Culture](#) on the National Mall in Washington, DC. This museum, a hundred years in the making, emphasizes that culture is as important as history; thus we find publication of this issue, Intersections: Folklore and Museum Education, timely. Contributors encourage us not to shy from tough issues or neglect engaging with diverse communities wherever we work. We look to this new museum as inspiration, as it aims to be “a place that transcends the boundaries of race and culture that divide us, and becomes a lens into a story that unites us all.”

Folk Arts in Education (FAIE) works in the crossroads of disciplines, partnerships, and innovative processes. Folklorists doing FAIE have become adept at using the content, skill sets, and creativity of folklore and ethnography to their fullest to inform their work with K-16 educators and students and navigate changes in education policy and practice imposed by national education standards, high-stakes testing, and reduced school budgets.<sup>1</sup> Museum education includes a wide variety of organized formal learning opportunities (docent-led visit, curriculum guides, teacher training) as well as informal learning features for the casual visitor, from exhibit-based activities and techniques (hands-on, multimedia, accessibility) to programming (lectures, workshops, and other adult programs; family days; festivals; child-friendly guides; intergenerational programs; discovery carts), and other creative endeavors. In the 1960s, museum education began emerging as a distinct field situated within schools of education or museum studies programs. Many museum educators have also come from other fields, including folklore, and many folklorists have worked in museums in non-education positions (curators, administrators, archivists) or in conjunction with museums to develop exhibits and programs.

The selections in this issue reflect the diversity of work in museums and educational environments that make use of objects, special collections, ethnographic approaches, or the curatorial tools from the museum world to engage learners. As we reflect upon these pieces, we are reminded how we have told students in other contexts that a museum (like all cultural sites) can be considered an important text that deserves careful reading. Before visiting a museum, we ask students to inventory their assumptions about what they expect, even if the institution is a familiar one—to think about where it is, how it sits on the landscape, its relationship to the natural and built environments. This exercise can extend to the museum visit, where we may encourage students to analyze categories such as audience, voice, cultural representation, and aesthetic choices to scaffold close observation of various aspects of the museum experience.<sup>2</sup>

This exercise creates an opportunity for students to become ethnographers of a museum. Asking them to keep a “field journal” of their visit provides a place for them to take notes, sketch, and include other media (where allowed). This journaling exercise can create opportunities for deeper reflection and analysis to occur—sometimes in the gallery, but more often back in the classroom. Likewise, a museum educator crafting culturally appropriate and engaging lessons and activities can use ethnography to understand the institution and its outreach more fully. When learning is both content delivery and an initiative that may reach across and between potentially diverse cultural perspectives, a new, rich arena for developing appropriate and meaningful educational platforms arrives. This reminds us that the institution of the museum itself is a culture. Too often “culture” is relegated to narrow conversations about ethnic diversity. To see the work of museum education as engaging with and between different cultural perspectives provides additional sensitivity that may enhance programming and outreach.

Designing an educational experience that asks the visitor to become ethnographer employs:

**Observation and Interviews** Asking visitors to take note of the concrete facts that they can observe and then asking them to respond to these facts creates a space for learning. It also encourages visitors to begin to look at the context for an artifact or collection, ask questions about the assumptions they may have brought to the experience, and help monitor what other questions they may have.

**Dialogic Communication** Creating a space where the visitor can actively construct meaning about an artifact or display allows for a co-creation of knowledge that brings diverse viewpoints and ways of knowing into a museum. This may prove particularly helpful when creating museum education programs that touch upon controversial topics or issues that may touch upon sensitive or political issues.

**Local Knowledge** Using interviews or other narrative devices, visitors can feel empowered to call upon and share their knowledge and history, knowing that they can contribute a valuable aspect of the larger story invited by the museum exhibit.

**Cultural Awareness** Helping museum visitors see that they, too, have culture disrupts the tired dichotomy that suggests museums exist to display the cultural artifacts and heritage of an “other” or the “elite” class. Educational programs that encourage self-discovery of a visitor’s culture create an opportunity for greater reflexive understanding of what is represented through the artifacts in a gallery.

(Adapted from a chapter by Rathje and Bowman in *Folklife and Museums: 21<sup>st</sup> Century Perspectives*, eds. Charlie Seemann, Patricia Hall, and C. Kurt Dewhurst. Lanham: Rowman and Littlefield. Forthcoming 2016.)

**Intersections: Folklore and Museum Education** highlights the significance of objects as cultural texts that can, through context and dialogue, open doors to learning that promote literacy and social studies, not to mention interpersonal skills and intergenerational learning. Another intersection relevant to current issues and the times we live in is the juncture of education, museums, and social justice. Our Local Learning Focus: The Gallery of Conscience presents three perspectives on how a gallery decentered the curation process and opened its door to important social conversations. We also invited two pieces (“Dismantling Racism in Museum Education” and “The Urgency of Empathy and Social Impact in Museums”) that provide frameworks and tools for creating inclusive, brave spaces for dialogue in our institutions and classrooms. These threads can be seen in other articles, from reclaiming educational sovereignty with indigenous pedagogies to decentering authority in museum/school partnerships. The Topical Index in the Table of Contents lists other suggested “threads” that wind through this volume.

The intersection of FAIE with museum education is fluid and complementary. Best practices for both fields value critical literacy skills (including visual literacy), inquiry tools, and thinking strategies that make connections across disciplines. Throughout this volume, authors demonstrate that practices and curricula that use the tools of folklore and ethnography to connect classrooms and communities with museums, as well as with museum objects or collections, provide a rich praxis for learning.

#### Endnotes

1. See Bowman, Paddy and Lynne Hamer. 2011. *Through the Schoolhouse Door: Folklore, Community, Curriculum*. Logan: Utah State University Press.
2. Find the Museum Observation Field Journal on the [Local Learning website](#) in “Educational Resources.”

#### URLS

- <https://nmaahc.si.edu>  
[www.locallearningnetwork.org](http://www.locallearningnetwork.org)