

# Journal of Folklore and Education

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**Intersections: Folklore and Museum Education**

2016: Volume 3

**About the Cover Photo:** *The current exhibition in the Gallery of Conscience at the Museum of International Folk Art in Santa Fe, NM, is tentatively titled Under Pressure: Choices Folk Artists Make in Today's Global Marketplace, April 2016-January 2018. The first iteration for prototyping started with photos, quotes, and questions on butcher block paper along the walls.* Photo courtesy of Suzanne Serif.

## Journal of Folklore and Education

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## 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)

# Like a Jazz Song: Designing for Community Engagement in Museums



by Suzanne Seriff

The current exhibition in the Gallery of Conscience at the Museum of International Folk Art in Santa Fe, NM, is tentatively titled *Under Pressure: Choices Folk Artists Make in Today's Global Marketplace*, April 2016-January 2018. The first iteration for prototyping started with photos, quotes, and questions on butcher paper along the walls. Photo courtesy of the author.

Improvisation in jazz begins with a melodic phrase, invites a response, and builds on a theme. Sometimes melodic, sometimes cacophonous, the result is rooted in the magic of call and response, history in action. In 2012, the Museum of International Folk Art in Santa Fe, New Mexico, incubated an improvisatory approach to exhibit development in its newly created Gallery of Conscience (GoC). Led by a team of folklorists, folk art educators, and design innovators, the results have been hailed “a model of museum practice for the 21<sup>st</sup> century.”<sup>1</sup>

Improvisation fits both the mission and the method of the GoC, which draws on the words and works of living traditional artists to catalyze dialogue, connect with communities, share stories across generations, and promote personal reflection, communication, and action around pressing issues of conscience important to us all. Like a jazz song, the exhibit development process begins with a single

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For an expanded version of this article, see two forthcoming book chapters from which this article was largely excerpted: “Immigration, Empathy, and Engagement: Incubating a New Approach to Immigration in the Museum of International Folk Art’s Gallery of Conscience,” in *Interpreting Immigration; Connecting Past and Present at Museums*, ed. Sarah Pharaon. Forthcoming 2017. Nashville: AASLH Press. And “Like a Jazz Song: A New Model for Social Justice Work in a Museum Setting: The Case of the Gallery of Conscience at the Museum of International Folk Art,” by Suzanne Seriff and Marsha Bol 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.



The Gallery of Conscience at the Museum of International Folk Art is specifically designed to:

~**Catalyze dialogue**

~**Attract new and previously underserved audiences**

~**Meet the needs of a changing, transnational population of artists**

~**Respond more directly to human rights and social justice issues through the words and works of folk artists at home and abroad**

For these reasons, both the process and the products explored in this space are fundamentally participatory, responsive, and interactive.



*Menina con Gallo/ Young Girl with Rooster, by Cenia Gutiérrez Alfonso. Cienfuegos, Cuba, 2014.*

Photo by Blair Clark.  
Courtesy of Museum of International Folk Art, museum purchase with funds from the Barbara Lidral Bequest, A.2013.61.2.

idea, explored through a limited set of artworks, like a melodic line in music. The first year of this new improvisatory approach in the gallery, the idea was HIV/AIDS and the ways folk artists use their art for education, advocacy, and awareness. On World AIDS Day 2012, a dozen or so works of art began the conversation in the gallery about folk artists' responses to HIV/AIDS: a tower of 600 beaded dolls represented the children orphaned by AIDS in one South African village; an AIDS Memorial Quilt block commemorated eight New Mexicans who died at the height of the pandemic in the U.S; a carved wooden sculpture of an AIDS protest march in Mozambique's capital challenged visitors to remain active against a pandemic that still affects more than 30 million men, women, and children worldwide.

Responding to the call over the coming days and months, community members, visitors, schoolchildren, families, and museum patrons added miniature protest signs, memorials to loved ones lost, radio pieces weaving artist stories with personal life stories, slogans to educate and enjoin, and squares sewn into a community quilt. Their improvisatory responses spoke of grief, resilience, activism, and hope. They created an opening, an invitation to reflect upon, add their voices to, and discuss a topic too often hidden by silence, stigma, and misinformation. The result was sometimes beautiful, sometimes challenging, but always rooted in the community's call to respond.

Folk art proved to be a compelling catalyst for this kind of honest conversation about a global health pandemic spanning generations, cultures, geographies, and histories. As folklorists, we know the value of traditional, familiar, hence readily understandable forms of storytelling to reach people, and how these stories effectively transcend the barriers of language, taboo, religion, or race. Meaningful, heartfelt, and sometimes controversial conversations were effectively sparked by the artworks themselves, the words and passions of their creators, and the participatory environment we created in the space.

The second exhibition in the newly refocused GoC centered on the topic of immigration and the overarching issues of living between two worlds and struggling to belong in a place that is not always welcoming. The exhibit opened in the winter of 2014, when national

news headlines featured stories of tens of thousands of women and children—most seeking asylum from conditions of life-threatening violence in their home countries—who had crossed the border into the U.S. and were being held in newly opened, privately run detention centers in New Mexico and Texas. Several of the artworks uncannily mirrored the very current events in the national news, even though they had been created years before.



*Refugiados/Refugees*, by Camurdino Mustafa Jetha. Santo Domasio, Mozambique, 2014.

Photo by Blair Clark.

Courtesy of Museum of International Folk Art, museum purchase with funds from the Barbara Lidral Bequest, A.2013.61.2.

Two of the most evocative artworks included a painting by Cuban artist Cenia Gutiérrez Alfonso depicting an unaccompanied young girl crossing the Atlantic Ocean on her journey to a new land, and a three-part sculpture by Peruvian American *retablo* maker Nicario Jiménez (provocatively titled *Immigration: The American Dream*), which illustrates the differential receptions of three groups of undocumented Latino families

arriving on our nation's shores—Cubans, Haitians, and Mexicans—by refugee assistance agencies, detention centers, and border police, respectively. Also, putting the immigration crisis in global perspective, a painted wood sculpture by Mozambican folk artist Camurdino Mustafa Jetha depicted a group of *refugiados*—refugees from the decades-long civil war in his country—marching single file toward asylum with their barest necessities balanced on their heads.

Artworks addressed four main themes, based on input from community members and advisors: Deciding to Leave, Dangerous Journeys, Who Belongs?, and Where Is My Home? Each was highlighted by a first-person quote from community members taped on the gallery walls:<sup>2</sup>

*There's the home that you have made and there's the home you come from—that's always your instinctive home—where you understand it without words.*

*What is the story of those who don't make it?*

*You need to distinguish between feeling unwelcome and being unwelcome.*

*When I die, throw my ashes in the Rio Grande. The ashes will decide where I belong: Mexico or the United States.*

And the participatory exercises set up throughout the gallery intentionally encouraged visitors—especially young visitors—to put themselves in newcomers' shoes:

*If you had to leave your home and could only bring what you could carry, what would it be?*

*Describe a time when you felt that you didn't belong. Use the Post-its or tweet your response at @galleryofconscience.*

Even the exhibition title, *Between Two Worlds: Folk Artists Reflect on the Immigrant Experience*, was the result of a crowd-sourced contest to pick the title that best reflected the questions “Who Belongs?” and “Who Can Be an American?” These are the questions that have always been at the heart of the immigration debate in our nation—and are with us in the national and international news today.

### **What Is Prototyping in Museums?**

Prototyping is an incremental, inquiry-based mode of exhibition design that allows for an institution to experiment with new ideas—keeping those that work and tossing out or modifying those that don’t—in a way that is relatively low risk, low cost, and low maintenance. As internationally recognized exhibit design innovator, Kathleen McLean writes, a prototype, drawn from the Greek word meaning “original form,” is “a mock-up or a quick and dirty version of an idea; something flexible and changeable; a tool for learning something about the effects of an idea or object on the end-user (and in the case of museums, the relevance of an exhibit or experience on a museum visitor).”

For the GoC, prototyping involves an ongoing series of conversations—with each other, with our visitors, with our artists, and our community partners. Through those conversations, we discover what works and what needs tweaking or refiguring for greater impact in a subsequent exhibition iteration. We also fold these conversations back into the exhibition itself by continuously adding new pieces of art, new community projects, new quotes on the wall, and new responses to our participatory exercises. Once you get the hang of it, as McLean teaches, prototyping “is not just about the object or the exhibit or the experience itself—it is actually a way of working, a philosophy and set of values, a process of inquiry.”

See “[Museum Exhibit Prototyping as a Method of Community Conversation and Participation](#),” by Kathleen McLean.

### **Community Engagement and the Museum Exhibition Design Process**

For the Gallery of Conscience, the motivation to incubate an entirely new design process was to create a “medium” that fundamentally mirrored the “message.” Like social justice work itself, we wanted a process that was responsive, responsible, collaborative, engaged, equitable, impactful, and ethically motivated. From our first exhibition in 2012, to the third exhibition prototyped in the GoC in the spring of 2016, this museum space builds and expands on our commitment to exploring social justice themes and issues through the lens of folk art.

For such a conceptual overhaul to be successful and embraced, we knew the audience and local communities needed to gain a sense of ownership through active involvement, not passive lectures. Everyone has something to offer. If we wanted to tap that collaborative vein, we had to clean our own house by shaking up the conventional museum decision-making structure. So we began by throwing out the curator/ designer/educator model of exhibit expertise in favor of a team approach that was fundamentally collaborative, improvisational, and flexible. Focusing on audience engagement rather than specialized knowledge, this team-based approach represented, for us, a more innovative structure designed for visitors to learn through doing. Rather than dividing ourselves into distinct roles within the team, we all worked together within the gallery to design the spaces, engage the visitors, create the interactives, write the labels, conduct visitor evaluations, and change and adjust the prototyped space for increased clarity and depth of response, after each iteration. Our goal was to be as nimble and responsive with each other as we hoped to be with our visitor and community input.

While our core team of folklorists and museum professionals was experienced in community-based collaborations, we had little collective experience in a truly bottom-up, participatory and dialogic model of exhibit development. This is where Kathy McLean’s experience and expertise came in as our resident



“prototyping guru.” McLean explains her idea of prototyping—drawn from the Greek word meaning “first impressions”—as “a mock-up or a quick and dirty version of an idea; something flexible and changeable; a tool for learning something about the effects of an idea or object on the end-user...and in the case of museums, the relevance of an exhibit or experience on the museum visitor.”<sup>3</sup>

The result has been both exhilarating and exasperating.

Challenges have arisen in defining exactly what we mean by community involvement and what we mean by “art”; managing workflow expectations and responsibilities; communicating the value of work-in-progress to patrons, who expect finished products; ceding the conventional authority of curator and designer; and redefining success in new terms—based more on reaching new audiences than on pleasing old patrons, and on starting conversations, rather than on creating polished exhibits.

While initially skeptical of such an improvisatory, inclusive model of museum engagement, we are all beginning to recognize the revolutionary potential of this kind of “crowd-sourcing” approach to engaging local and global audiences in the co-creation of their learning, sharing, marketing, and advocating experiences around issues of real relevance, yet distinct differences, in each of their communities and lives. And responses from visitors, community participants, and participating artists reinforce our enthusiasm:

*~I saw myself here for the first time. Thank you for that...*  
*~I love that the gallery is always changing, and is changed by the people who have responded....*  
*~This is a brave thing to do....*  
*~This is a beautiful exhibit—accessible in ways museums haven’t felt before.*  
*~There should be a place in every museum where you have to commit your own opinions. More museums should get a hold of people emotionally, not just intellectually.*  
*~This is an excellent and timely exhibit. It brings awareness and helps people empathize by putting them in others’ shoes.*

Together, museums and communities have the potential to create an entirely new and replicable model for civic engagement that finds its way back to what community-based artists and storytellers have known all along. In the words of master bead worker Lulama Sihlabeni of South Africa, “Folk art must speak to people—that is part of what puts the ‘folk’ in folk arts!”

**Suzanne Seriff** received her PhD in Folklore and Ethnomusicology at the University of Texas at Austin, where she currently teaches courses on folk arts and community engagement, museum innovation, cultural heritage production, and immigration in the Department of Anthropology. She also has worked, since 2010, as curator and more recently, Director of the Gallery of Conscience at the Museum of International Folk Art in Santa Fe.

## Endnotes

1. Gretchen Jennings. 2015. “Critique of Between Two Worlds.” Exhibition Critique Section of AAM’s *Exhibitionist Journal*, Spring: 71.
2. Quotes in order of their presentation (left to right, top to bottom) by: Helga Ancona, Brazilian, KSFR radio program host, Santa Fe; National Dialogues on Immigration participant; Kamajou Tadfor, Cameroonian, artistic director, Afreeka Santa Fe and producer, Fiesta Fela; Catalina Delgado Trunk, *papel picado* artist, Albuquerque.
3. McLean, Katheen. “Museum Exhibit Prototyping as a Method of Community Conversation and Participation.” Professional Development Report of the American Folklore Society. [www.afsnet.org/?page=ConsProfDev](http://www.afsnet.org/?page=ConsProfDev).

URL [http://c.ymcdn.com/sites/www.afsnet.org/resource/resmgr/Best\\_Practices\\_Reports/McLean\\_and\\_Seriff\\_Museum\\_Exh.pdf](http://c.ymcdn.com/sites/www.afsnet.org/resource/resmgr/Best_Practices_Reports/McLean_and_Seriff_Museum_Exh.pdf)



## Between Two Worlds: A Collaborative Curriculum Addressing Immigration through Folk Art, Media Literacy, and Digital Storytelling

by Laura Marcus Green with  
Katy Gross and Tara Trudell

*Traveler, there is no path. The path is made in walking.*

—Antonio Machado, 20<sup>th</sup>-century Spanish poet

### Building Community through Collaboration

At the heart of all Gallery of Conscience (GoC) exhibitions are community-based collaborations that take place within and beyond museum walls. Through its community engagement process, the GoC develops ongoing partnerships that grow organically from exhibition themes. GoC collaborations vary in scope and nature, ranging from journals and story cloths created by English language (ESL) students, to a spoken word poetry residency with at-risk youth, a dialogue and moderated panel focused on transgender issues, and a peace quilt created by Palestinian, Jewish Israeli, and American young women with instruction from a Nigerian/Yoruba indigo resist-dye master. During the life of an exhibition, multiple partnerships take place concurrently, always drawing from and often contributing back to exhibit content and programming. In this article, as a folklorist and former GoC Community Engagement Coordinator, I present one such collaboration, based on the exhibition *Between Two Worlds: Folk Artists Reflect on the Immigrant Experience* (2014-16).

While in progress, this collaboration often seemed like a braid. The three “strands” of the braid included the Museum of International Folk Art’s Gallery of Conscience, Youth Media Project (YMP), and ¡YouthWorks!—three local community-based organizations with kindred missions and programs. The first partner was the GoC itself. Founded in 1953, the Museum of International Folk Art (MOIFA) seeks “to enrich the human spirit by connecting people with the arts, traditions and cultures of the world.” In 2010, former MOIFA Director Marsha Bol established the GoC, explaining, “As the largest folk art museum in the world, there is a responsibility to create a forum to discuss current issues that folk artists are facing around the world.” Folklorist Suzanne Seriff curated the first two exhibitions in the GoC, which focused on social justice issues related to women’s empowerment

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About the photo: Gallery of Conscience, Museum of International Folk Art exhibition *Between Two Worlds: Folk Artists Reflect on the Immigrant Experience*, 2014.

Photo by Blair Clark. Courtesy of the Museum of International Folk Art.

and natural disasters, respectively. In the third year, she conducted a strategic plan to research models for creating a more participatory, community-driven approach to exhibition design and process, which resulted in the prototyping model described in her article above. The newly formulated GoC team consisted of three MOIFA staff—a curator, preparator, and museum educator—and three outside members, including the director, prototyping consultant Kathy McLean, and myself as Community Engagement Coordinator.

Youth Media Project was the second critical player in the *Between Two Worlds* partnership. This Santa Fe-based organization teaches “the craft of digital storytelling and the art of listening for a socially responsible world.” YMP develops projects through collaborative relationships with community partners such as schools and youth-focused organizations, which provide access to participants. Over the years, YMP has developed a framework for engaging with young people, establishing their trust, and equipping them with tools to explore contemporary issues through the lens of media literacy and digital storytelling. Many of their collaborations result in public listening events and radio broadcasts that are subsequently posted on YMP’s website, as well as the national Public Radio Exchange, [www.prx.org](http://www.prx.org).<sup>1</sup>

As the GoC embarked on its more participatory process, YMP emerged as a natural community partner. Folklorists and journalists are professional listeners by trade, using recorded interviews, writing, and photography to document and interpret their subjects. Differences in how folklorists and journalists conduct their work emerged as the project evolved—more on that below. In developing the *Between Two Worlds* collaboration, I worked closely with YMP’s Education Director Katy Gross and Media Arts Intern and poet Tara Trudell. Suzanne Seriff and former YMP Director Mi’Jan Celie Tho-Biaz provided ongoing input and oversight.

The *Between Two Worlds* project was the second partnership between the GoC and YMP. During our pilot collaboration, based on the GoC’s previous exhibition *Let’s Talk About This: Folk Artists Respond to HIV/AIDS*, we established criteria for selecting a third community partner. The key ingredients for a third community partner include the capacity to provide consistent access to youth participants and the resonance of an organization’s mission with YMP’s programmatic focus and with the GoC’s exhibition theme at the time of collaboration. Both the GoC and YMP seek to cultivate enduring collaborative relationships through their work, so a prior track record with an organization is also a factor in choosing the third community partner.

Another project component established during the pilot collaboration was the understanding that the workshop’s thematic focus would generate content for the GoC’s exhibition and public programs. Having a “readymade” theme for students to explore represented a shift from YMP’s usual way of doing things. Generally YMP workshops give students more agency in determining the topic for a given workshop. Nonetheless, within the theme of immigration, workshop participants found ways to personalize the topic and their experience with it.

The third partner in the *Between Two Worlds* project was ¡YouthWorks!, a nonprofit organization that creates opportunities for disconnected youth and families in Northern New Mexico to become engaged and valued members of their communities. Through their programs, job training and placement, life skills counseling, and education and leadership development, they inspire youth to realize their full potential. ¡YouthWorks! recruits a new cohort of approximately 30 students each fall. Students apply based on their interest and their determination to forge a path toward a productive and satisfying life. ¡YouthWorks! students spend two days a week in the classroom and two on a jobsite where they develop vocational and professional skills. Students typically graduate in the summer. For *Between Two Worlds*, GoC and YMP staff worked closely with ¡YouthWorks!

### **The Audio Project—Listen here!**

The pilot Gallery of Conscience-Youth Media Project collaboration focused on the exhibition *Let's Talk About This: Folk Artists Respond to HIV/AIDS*. YMP intern and poet Tara Trudell wove together South African bead artist and HIV/AIDS activist [Lulama Sihlabeni's story](#) with her own narrative to create an audio segment that served as a template for workshop participants to emulate.



South African beadworker and HIV/AIDS activist Lulama Sihlabeni and beaded skeletons in the GoC, during the exhibition, *Let's Talk About This: Folk Artists Respond to HIV/AIDS*, 2013. The skeletons were made by members of eKhaya eKasi (Home in the Hood) as a tool for HIV/AIDS awareness. Photo by Bob Smith.

### **Listen to the Audio Revolution broadcasts here:**

*Let's Talk About This*

<http://www.youthmediaproject.org/2013/12/lets-talk-about-this>

Sample an individual segment from *Let's Talk About This* here

<http://www.youthmediaproject.org/2014/02/retablos-a-message-of-hope>

*Between Two Worlds*

<http://www.youthmediaproject.org/2015/05/audio-revolution-between-two-worlds>

leadership and classroom instructors to ensure that the project meshed with participants' schedules, activities, and goals.

Growing from the work and missions of the three partner organizations, the collaboration unfolded symbiotically. GoC and YMP staff crafted a curriculum focusing on immigration, filtered through the lens of the *Between Two Worlds* exhibition. The exhibition featured textiles, woodcarvings, beadwork, *papel picado* (cut paper), paintings, and poetry by Cuban, Mozambican, Hmong, Mexican, New Mexican, Brazilian, Lakota, Polish, Nigerian, Tibetan, Navajo, and Peruvian artists. These artists drew upon their art forms to express their experiences and feelings about immigration from the perspectives of those leaving home, those left behind, and those receiving newcomers into their midst. In tandem with the artworks on display, interactive components invited visitors to respond, and thereby contribute to, the exhibition. The exhibit's thematic focus was developed through a series of dialogues with local immigrant artists and community members. Thus, the interrelated ideas of home and belonging, displacement, and living between worlds informed the selection of artworks as well as the development of collaborations and public programs throughout the life of the exhibit.

Through the prototyping process, GoC exhibitions evolve over time, based on visitor input and community engagement. In the case of *Between Two Worlds*, as in all GoC exhibitions, prototyping drew upon and responded to community-based dialogues, visitor feedback, and collaborative projects with community partners, as well as with local, national, and international folk artists. Over the exhibition's two-year run, there were at least four iterations, as some artworks were removed and others added, interactives were tweaked, and thematic sections were reconfigured. By its final iteration, the exhibition encompassed a significant number of pieces that came in through the GoC's community engagement process, including a listening station where visitors could hear the audio pieces created through the GoC-YMP-;YouthWorks! collaboration and a related chapbook of student poetry.





Immigration is a topic that can divide community members of diverse cultures or those who view the issues from different perspectives. This collaboration, however, built community at various levels. The *Between Two Worlds* curriculum encouraged workshop participants to interpret their immediate communities and the world beyond through the twin lenses of media literacy and folk art, using the tools of journalism and ethnography. Reflecting the community where they live, YouthWorks! cohorts are composed of Hispanic, Latino, Native American, and Euro-American students.<sup>2</sup> Endemic to this social landscape and its complex history is a tension that can arise among members of these cultural communities. During planning meetings, YouthWorks! staff related that students often come into a new cohort with preexisting biases toward classmates from other cultural communities, a microcosm of the larger social context. Often, however, they quickly develop a sense of solidarity, recognizing that their shared experiences and goals are more compelling than their differences. The thematic focus of the *Between Two Worlds* workshop helped students navigate their sense of identity and develop empathy for those who differ from them. Further, although not all participants were immigrants, as “disconnected youth,” they readily related to the themes of belonging, home, displacement, and living between worlds.

Ultimately, the collaboration benefited all three partners. The project generated content and public programming for the *Between Two Worlds* exhibition. It resulted in an edition of the YMP program *Audio Revolution!*, which airs on local public and community radio stations. The partnership also supported YouthWorks! goals by providing students opportunities for academic and professional development, while helping to integrate the young people and their families more solidly and productively into the social fabric of northern New Mexico.

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Photos from top: 1) Mexican *papel picado* artist Catalina Delgado Trunk, left, welcomes YouthWorks! students in her Albuquerque studio. From left: Philip Talachy, Dacien Villa, and Sean Martinez. 2) YouthWorks! student Dacien Villa, left, interviews Tibetan *Thangka* painter Lama Gyurme. 3) YouthWorks! students work on their writing

All photos by Laura Marcus Green. Courtesy of the Museum of International Folk Art.

## **The Curriculum Framework**

Following is an overview of the *Between Two Worlds* collaboration, provided as a roadmap for replicating the project in museums, classrooms, or other settings. This section includes goals, a step-by-step outline of the project, project outcomes, challenges and lessons learned, and a few tips. A lesson plan for the first workshop session provides a taste of the curriculum. The complete curriculum is currently under development and will be available on the Museum of International Folk Art's website upon its completion.

The *Between Two Worlds* themes—home, the struggle to belong, and living between worlds—were originally conceived as an approach to the topic of immigration. However, these themes are broadly applicable, providing an effective framework for exploring a host of other issues. For example, GoC staff drew upon the exhibition as a catalyst for a community-based dialogue and a moderated panel about transgender issues. Beyond immigration, any number of topics can be addressed through this project model.

## **Curriculum GOALS**

~ Participants explore their connection to the topic of immigration through the lens of traditional arts, media literacy, and digital storytelling, specifically relating to the themes of *living between worlds* and *the struggle to belong*.

~ In a safe and supportive environment, students develop academic and professional skills such as listening, writing, interviewing, use of recording equipment, audio production, interpretation and analysis, and public speaking.

~ Students develop tools for self-reflection and self-expression toward an understanding of their lives and cultures, and those of others, through creativity and listening to stories of peers and community members. Awareness of their surroundings and of local and global issues is developed through the tools of ethnography and media literacy.

~ The project builds community by bringing together students, master traditional artists, and other community members to address issues of common concern. Further, sharing the products of their work with friends, family, and the general public expands the project's reach.

~ The project generates content that may be used in exhibition installations, dialogues, radio broadcasts, public programs, and other educational contexts.

~ Often underrepresented community members share their voices and experiences with the general public, putting a personal face on contemporary issues. The project provides an opportunity for participants and the public to learn about an issue from multiple perspectives, with the possible outcome of fostering empathy and understanding.

## ***Between Two Worlds* Curriculum Project Steps**

**Step 1** Develop staffing for collaborative work on folk arts and cultural heritage and media literacy and production. Staff may include a folklorist, art educator, media specialist, or other appropriate personnel with this content area expertise.

**Step 2** Identify and recruit project partners. Identify and recruit refugee and/or immigrant traditional artists, or traditional artists who address immigration through their work. Create a timeline that works for all participants.

**Step 3** Lay the groundwork with students, including an understanding of the project goals, activities, and timeline; introduce basic concepts in media literacy and traditional arts as a lens for exploring immigration and *Between Two Worlds* themes.

**Step 4** Establish and maintain the workshop as a safe space for exploration and learning. Engage students in activities to develop skills and analytical tools for exploring immigration and project themes through media literacy and traditional arts. Activities include listening exercises, discussion, creative writing, and story development exercises, as well as interacting with traditional arts either through a visit to a local museum or another space where immigration-themed folk arts are accessible. In-class use of images or artifacts is an alternative to a fieldtrip. Throughout these sessions, students develop a body of writing in response to artwork, prompts, and exercises. The writing becomes a building block for students' media pieces.

**Step 5** Elicit and develop effective questions for interviews with local traditional artists. Train students in the use of audio recording equipment. This includes having students interview one another to gain experience with the recording equipment and build confidence conducting interviews in teams. Students select an artist to interview. Where possible, students research "their" artist and/or their art form in a library or online.

**Step 6** Concurrent with Steps 4 and 5, schedule student interviews with local folk artists. Interviews may be held in artists' homes or a space arranged by participant organizations. A partnering media-focused organization may have access to a recording studio, as was the case with YMP.

**Step 7** Students conduct interviews with local folk artists. For each interview, one student conducts the interview while another engineers/manages recording equipment. At least one project staff accompanies students to each interview.

**Step 8** Students log and edit recordings while mining their writing for content to weave together with excerpts from artist interviews. Students connect their writing and artist interviews by seeking common themes and kindred or parallel experiences. For example, one student in the *Between Two Worlds* project found similarities between his uncle, an artist who spent time in prison, and a Tibetan *thankga* painter who lived for years in a monastery during his painting apprenticeship. Students produce short (three- to eight-minute) audio pieces that can stand alone or be combined to create a longer audio piece, such as a radio broadcast. In the latter case, students develop a hosting script to record and stitch together their individual segments. NOTE: Depending on students' age, skill level, available time, and engagement, the activities in Step 8 may be done predominantly by project staff, in consultation with students. In the case of the *Between Two Worlds* project, students created a roadmap for their pieces and project staff did the final editing.

**Step 9** Project staff develop and implement ways for students to share their pieces with the public through listening events, online or radio distribution, and/or listening stations. The media pieces can also become curricular tools, used for generating discussions about current issues.

In keeping with YMP's format, the *Between Two Worlds* workshop culminated in a public listening event where participants shared their work with a public audience. At listening events, project participants introduce and debut their pieces. Following the listening segment, a Q&A allows the audience to engage with participants and participants to reflect on their work and their workshop experience. The *Between Two Worlds* listening event took place in the GoC, powerfully connecting the audio pieces and the exhibition. Listening event audiences are typically composed of students'



families and friends, participating folk artists and their families, constituents of the participating organizations, and the general public. A circular seating arrangement creates an intimate space and gives a sense of sitting around a fire sharing stories. YMP embraces the tradition of “listening lights”—strings of lights festooning the event space. This practice is highly recommended!

#### **Listen Here:**

These individual audio segments by ¡YouthWorks! students were created during the *Between Two Worlds* workshop. These individual pieces are encompassed in the 55-minute broadcast found in the audio section above. The pieces are woven from students’ creative writing and their interviews with *Between Two Worlds* exhibit artists. The GoC installation consisted of an iPad “jukebox” with a touch screen. Visitors selected an audio piece by touching an image of artwork by the artist who was interviewed.



[Dacien Villa interviews Navajo weaver Steiner Cody.](#)

[Gabriel Martinez interviews young Mexican American poet Mildred Rodriguez.](#)

[Sean Martinez interviews Mexican papel picado artist, Catalina Delgado Trunk.](#)

[Philip Talachy interviews New Mexico Hispanic woodcarver, Luis Tapia.](#)

[Kelvin Lopez interviews Tibetan Thangka painter, Lama Gyurme.](#)

[Jacob Tafoya and Nigerian/Yoruba Indigo dye artist, Gasali Adeyemo.](#)

About the photo: *Between Two Worlds* Listening Event in the GoC. Katy Gross of YMP is at far left, Tara Trudell of YMP at far right.

Photo by Laura Marcus Green. Courtesy of the Museum of International Folk Art.

#### **Project Outcomes**

At the *Between Two Worlds* listening event, the sense of accomplishment among participants, their families, and ¡YouthWorks! staff was palpable. The opportunity to hear students’ brave and candid voices was among the project’s most rewarding outcomes. At the culminating listening event, there was a sense of wonder, as all the pieces came together. Beyond this crowning moment, the collaboration yielded a number of other positive outcomes.

~ The project resulted in new materials for the *Between Two Worlds* exhibition, augmenting its community-generated components. The listening station installed in the GoC added an aural dimension to the exhibition, allowing visitors to hear the artists’ voices and deepen their experience of the artwork. Further, the audio pieces contributed perspectives from local youth on the themes of belonging and living between worlds.

~ The workshop and listening event brought first-time visitors to MOIFA, broadening and diversifying the museum’s audience.

~ The project generated content for YMP’s *Audio Revolution!* program, as well as individual audio pieces that can be used for advocacy and awareness of immigration issues and as a springboard for discussion.

~ The public listening event brought together diverse community members to honor students' accomplishments and hear their audio pieces before they aired on the radio. ¡YouthWorks! staff reported learning new things about their students through hearing their audio pieces and presentations.

~ Youth acquired hands-on skills such as designing and conducting interviews, library research techniques, and the use of audio recording and editing equipment. They also bolstered their experience and confidence in writing and public speaking. The project provided a unique avenue for exploring complex emotions through creative self-expression. Further, by turning an ethnographic lens on their own lives, they sharpened their analytical skills, often finding new insight into their culture and community and their relationships with others. The development of these skills and participants' exposure to new experiences fulfilled the ¡YouthWorks! mission to "inspire youth to realize their full potential."

~ The project provided GoC staff opportunities for deepening engagement with local exhibit artists and strengthening relationships with community partners. The artists enjoyed interacting with students and contributing to their projects. In most cases, students visited artists in their homes, which was often a new cultural experience. For ¡YouthWorks! students, many of whom are overcoming adverse situations or life choices, the experience of being welcomed and respected in the artists' homes boosted confidence.

~ The collaboration resulted in a replicable project model and curriculum through which museum and media professionals, folklorists, educators, students, artists, and others can channel the power of folk and traditional arts and the media to illuminate contemporary issues, offer a platform for conversations about difficult topics, and provide a tool for outreach and advocacy around immigration and a host of other issues.

### **Challenges and Lessons Learned**

It is satisfying to look back on a successful collaboration and recognize positive outcomes. However, the journey often includes some unexpected twists and turns that must be navigated. The GoC-YMP-¡YouthWorks! collaboration was no exception. This is the nature of collaborative, community-based work, where partners' differing needs and agendas can sometimes collide.

#### *Timing: Making It Work*

In the *Between Two Worlds* collaboration, timing became one of the project's primary issues and challenges. Disjuncture between the ¡YouthWorks! annual cycle, YMP's funding period, and GoC's programming and installation schedule led to a modification in the project design. Invariably, this project model and curriculum need to be tailored to every situation to some extent; however, this particular version became especially labor intensive and time consuming.

Ultimately, rather than hold two full three-month workshops as initially planned, project staff transformed the second session into a four-week spoken word poetry residency with Albuquerque's inaugural Poet Laureate, Hakim Bellamy. Bellamy customized the workshop to *Between Two Worlds* themes, including a session held in the GoC. There, students wrote ekphrastic poetry based on an artwork or interactive of their choice.<sup>3</sup> This spontaneously designed workshop was possible in large part because of the trust and ease developed with ¡YouthWorks! staff and students during the first phase of collaboration. Some students who had declined to participate in the first workshop, motivated by classmates' experience, eagerly took part in the poetry residency.

The poetry workshop resulted in a second *Audio Revolution!* radio broadcast, *Between Two Worlds Through Poetry*, as well as a chapbook that came into the GoC exhibition. Students and their instructor—who took the workshop as well—performed their poetry in a community arts showcase, satisfying the need for a public program. In preparation for the event, Bellamy devoted one residency session to performance boot camp, strengthening students’ competency in spoken word poetry, an art form in which some were already engaged. The performance offered another opportunity for students’ voices to ring out in the halls of a state museum, for new audiences to come to Santa Fe’s Museum Hill, and for traditional arts to engage audiences around a contemporary issue relevant to all.

Beyond these outcomes, there was a ripple effect. The relationships built through this impromptu “deviation” from the project design resulted in Bellamy’s invitation to be keynote speaker at ¡YouthWorks! graduation ceremony that year. New collaborations developed between Bellamy and the GoC, between the GoC and YMP, and between YMP and ¡YouthWorks!

### *Staying Nimble, Finding the Sweet Spot*

In general, the prototyping approach to exhibit design diverges from a state museum’s typical operations. Organic, nimble community engagement can go head to head with predetermined deadlines and schedules and anticipated outcomes. The very thing that makes this approach so exciting and rewarding—its emergent, unpredictable nature—can also make for challenging moments. Working with community partners in general, and at-risk youth in particular, entails a certain amount of readiness to field unexpected situations. In the *Between Two Worlds* collaboration, student attendance sometimes presented a challenge. Even as engaged as they were with the workshop, students understandably had other commitments competing for time and attention, including work and educational responsibilities, family obligations, and various life issues.

Further, although ¡YouthWorks! staff provided transportation between their home base and the workshop site, students did not always have the means to travel to ¡YouthWorks! from their homes, some of which were in rural areas outside Santa Fe. Students’ occasionally inconsistent attendance inevitably led to delays. Relying on student-generated content for deadline-driven exhibition installations and audio production sometimes stretched project timelines and staff.

Another challenge was that some participants’ audio pieces were longer than anticipated. The audio segments were interwoven from students’ creative writing and their interviews with local *Between Two Worlds* exhibit artists. Each individual piece was painstakingly edited by participants and project staff. These pieces were anticipated for installation in a listening station in the GoC, as part of the *Between Two Worlds* exhibition. They were also destined to be stitched together with a hosting script developed by participants to comprise a 55-minute edition of the YMP radio program *Audio Revolution!*

As it became clear during the editing phase of production that some pieces erred on the long side, project staff decided to prioritize the integrity of students’ self-expression over prearranged formats. For YMP staff, this meant shortening the hosting script to accommodate the required program format. In the GoC, the listening station consisted of an iPad with a touch screen that had icons of exhibition artwork for each corresponding audio segment. Thus, visitors could sample as many audio pieces as they desired. With the benefit of comfortable chairs and headphones, visitors seemed to take time to listen to the audio pieces, the longest of which ran eight minutes. When such issues arise, a “make-it-work” attitude among all project staff helps resolve these situations. In the end, invoking flexibility and mutual understanding toward finding workable solutions is well worth the effort.

*Ethnography Meets Journalism: The Synergy of Compromise*

From the outset of the pilot GoC-YMP collaboration, there seemed to be a natural fit between the two partners. Both channel the shared methodologies of working with recorded interviews, photography, and interpretive, creative writing as a springboard for programs that address difficult topics, with a goal of positive social change.

Yet during the pilot collaboration, the length of students' interviews created some tension rooted in professional differences. Working from an ethnographic model and trying to reap the maximum benefit from the student-artist encounters, I considered an interview that lasted an hour or so to be "normal." This timeframe allowed for students to find their stride and the interview to "go deep." Grounded in journalism and the need to produce a radio program, YMP staff balked at interviews longer than 20 or 30 minutes. The longer interviews that I facilitated prolonged the process of logging sound files for students and project staff. These longer interviews also made for more editing and decision making, as first-time interviewers waded through their audio logs. For the second collaboration, we reached an agreement that interviews would be limited to 30 minutes or less. This timeframe proved adequate for students to get a taste of the interview process and obtain material for their media pieces, while upholding the project's integrity.

Each challenge provided opportunities for self-assessment, growth, improving the project model, and strengthening partner relationships. The project's success was clear in the level of participants' engagement with the workshop themes, with each other, with the artists and their work, and with the process, despite its challenges. The training in media literacy and folkloristic inquiry gave participants new lenses through which to interpret their lives, cultures, and communities, along with a multifaceted perspective on issues close to home.

The curriculum was designed to empower participants, as they selected the art pieces and artists on which to focus, crafted interview questions, and conducted interviews. Participants were clearly nervous going into their interviews with the artists, but during the process relaxed and focused on the task at hand. One participant following his interview said, "I feel . . . accomplished." Participants' excitement and sense of achievement fueled their commitment to the hard work of logging and editing the audio recordings, editing their writing, and weaving together the content for their audio pieces. Ultimately, all project participants, including students and staff, would agree that the journey and the final outcome were well worth the sweat and tears.

¡YouthWorks!  
student Gabriel  
Martinez engineers  
for an interview with  
Tibetan *Thangka*  
painter Lama  
Gyurme and explores  
Lama Gyurme's  
meditation room,  
including his  
paintings and altar.  
Following this visit,  
students reported  
feeling "peaceful."



Photos by Laura Marcus Green. Courtesy of the Museum of International Folk Art.

## Acknowledgements

Support for the *Let's Talk About This: Folk Artists Respond to HIV/AIDS* and *Between Two Worlds* project was provided by the National Endowment for the Arts, Mark Naylor and Dale Gunn, the International Folk Art Alliance, the International Folk Art Foundation, the Museum of New Mexico Foundation, and the International Coalition of Sites of Conscience.

During the *Between Two Worlds* project, the GoC team consisted of three MOIFA staff, including Outreach Educator Patricia Sigala, Exhibition Preparator Brian Johnson-French, and Curator of Textiles and Dress Carrie Hertz. Outside team members included Director Suzanne Seriff, Prototyping Consultant Kathy McLean, and Community Engagement Coordinator Laura Marcus Green. MOIFA Librarian and Archivist Caroline Dechert helped youth participants research their topics. YMP staff were steadfast allies, including Katy Gross, Tara Trudell, Mi'Jan Celie Tho-Biaz, Luke Carr, and interns Nick Beckman, Austin Ross, Ash Haywood, and Yesenia Ramos. Big thanks go to YMP founder and former Director Judy Goldberg for helping forge the pilot GoC-YMP collaboration. YouthWorks! staff included Melynn Schuyler, Michael Santillanes, José Smith, and Jay Hennicke; student participants were Sean Martinez, Dacien Villa, Kelvin Lopez, Gabriel Martinez, Philip Talachy, and Jacob Tafoya.

The artists engaged with the exhibition *Between Two Worlds: Folk Artists Reflect on the Immigrant Experience* generously shared their time and stories and welcomed participants into their homes. Thanks to Gasali Adeyemo, Steiner Cody, Catalina Delgado-Trunk, Lama Gyurme, Mildred Rodriguez, and Luis Tapia. Hakim Bellamy fostered an inspiring and safe haven for youth poets to grow and shine.

Use of the Xhosa (Ngqika) folk song, "Inkulu into ezakwenzeka" ("Something Big Is Going to Happen") for Tara Trudell's audio piece featuring Lulama Sihlabeni was provided by the International Library of African Music at Rhodes University, Grahamstown, South Africa. Thanks to Director Diane Thram for her assistance. Also featured on that audio segment are the eKasi Singers of South Africa, performing the second rendition of the South African National Anthem.

**Laura Marcus Green, PhD** is *Folklife and Traditional Arts Program Director at the University of South Carolina's McKissick Museum and at the South Carolina Arts Commission. Previous positions include Community Engagement Coordinator for the Museum of International Folk Art's Gallery of Conscience and contract fieldworker, writer, and consultant for the Louisiana Division of the Arts Folklife Program, the Iowa Arts Council, and the Idaho Commission on the Arts. With Amy E. Skillman, she is co-founder and co-director of Building Cultural Bridges, a national interdisciplinary project merging the arts and social services in support of refugee and immigrant heritage.*

**Katy Gross** is a photographer, educator, and multimedia producer. She currently works with Littlelobe as director of its fellowship program and as a team member. Born and raised in Santa Fe, she is happy to be living and working in her native community. She holds an MA in arts education from NYU and a BA from Brown University in International Development Studies. Her passion is documentary storytelling, and she has honed her skills at the Salt Institute for Documentary Studies and the former College of Santa Fe.

**Tara Evonne Trudell** studied film, audio, and photography at New Mexico Highlands University. She graduated with her BFA in Media Arts. As a poet and artist raising four children, it has become her purpose to represent humanity, compassion, and action in all her work. Incorporating poetry with visuals, she addresses the many troubling issues that are ongoing in society and hopes that her work will create an emotional impact that inspires others to act.

## Endnotes

1. See the 2015 issue of the *Journal of Folklore and Education* (v. 2) for an article by YMP founder, Judy Goldberg. [[www.locallearningnetwork.org](http://www.locallearningnetwork.org)] Since the time of the 2013-2015 collaborations between YMP and the GoC, YMP has merged with another Santa Fe-based community arts organization, Littlelobe.

2 For the purposes of this article, "Hispanic" is the term most commonly preferred and used by descendants of Spanish colonists who settled in northern New Mexico and southern Colorado's San Luis Valley beginning in the late 16<sup>th</sup> century. The culture that has developed over generations is unique to this area. In contrast, "Latino" refers to first-generation immigrants and their descendants from Mexico, El Salvador, Guatemala, and other countries, who have more recently made northern New Mexico their home.

3. Ekphrastic poetry is composed in response to visual imagery, most commonly, art.



## Learning Application: Tips for Adapting a Collaborative Curriculum in Classrooms or Museums

### Project Resources

Forge partnerships among organizations that collectively provide access to the following key project resources:

#### **Project staff** with

- ~ Expertise in folklore and heritage documentation, interpretation, and production
- ~ Connections to local traditional artists, especially those who are immigrants or refugees
- ~ Expertise in digital storytelling, media literacy, and audio production

#### **Community partner organization** that can

- ~ Provide consistent access to 6 to 15 youth
- ~ Be a liaison and means of communication with participants outside the workshop

#### **Also:**

- ~ Meeting or classroom space
- ~ Transportation
- ~ Computers and audio editing software
- ~ Recording equipment and studio
- ~ Public venue for listening event, if applicable
- ~ Relationship with local public or community radio stations, if applicable

Most states have a state folklorist and/or arts council staff who can help connect you with appropriate traditional artists in your area. If you are not familiar with the folklorist in your state, here is a place to start: [www.afsnet.org/?page=USPubFolklore](http://www.afsnet.org/?page=USPubFolklore) .

And snacks or meals are highly recommended to fuel youth participants!

### Logistics

- ~ Ideally, project participants meet twice weekly to maintain students' engagement and fluency with the project, especially at the beginning phases.
- ~ Customize the curriculum to the participants, available resources, capacity of project participants, as well as the community context.
- ~ Consider piloting the project model as a way of customizing the curriculum to the resources at hand in your community, as a baseline for developing future workshops.
- ~ Be sure from the outset that all participants (including staff, students, artists, and any other project personnel) are clear about their roles, the project timeline, and outcomes.
- ~ Build trust with and among participants by establishing mutually agreed-upon ground rules at one of the first sessions (see Sample Agreements document in online curriculum). Incorporate trust-building exercises into session icebreakers and closing activities.
- ~ Model and take part in exercises with students, for example, during icebreakers, check-ins, or reflections. This builds trust and elicits more thoughtful work from students.

**And don't forget...** Maintain flexibility, patience, and a sense of humor, as the unexpected inevitably arises! In collaborations among multiple partners, there needs to be give and take to accommodate each organization's mission, goals, operations, and timeline. As in any collaboration, be prepared to work outside your "normal" way of doing things, or even your comfort zone. Creativity and openness to new ways of working can forge strong relationships and exciting new directions.

## Learning Application: Collaborative Curriculum Introductory Lesson Plan

### WEEK 1 Introduction—Laying the Groundwork

**SNAPSHOT** Students get an overview of the project, including the types of activities in which they will engage and project outcomes; students become familiar with participant organizations and project staff. This session may be used as a “pitch” to engage or recruit students, as well as an intro to the project.

**OBJECTIVES / INTENDED LEARNING OUTCOMES** Students will ...

- Practice telling their own stories
- Practice and reflect on the art of listening and telling the story of another
- Begin to explore audio and radio as a medium for digital storytelling

#### ESSENTIAL QUESTIONS

- How do I tell my own story? How does it feel to share my story with someone else?
- What makes for effective listening? How do I tell someone else’s story?
- What are the ingredients of an effective audio story? What details bring a story to life?

#### TIMEFRAME

1.5 hours (includes a 10-minute break between the Two-Minute Life Story & Listening Exercises)

#### PREPARATION-MATERIALS

1. Laptop or other device and speakers for playing audio
2. Timer for story-sharing exercises

#### Between Two Worlds Resources

1. “Fatherhood” by Andrew Mata: <https://beta.prx.org/stories/92007>
2. “Stand My Ground” by Tara Trudell: <https://beta.prx.org/stories/103786>

#### Vocabulary

1. Folk & traditional arts
2. Digital storytelling
3. The art of listening

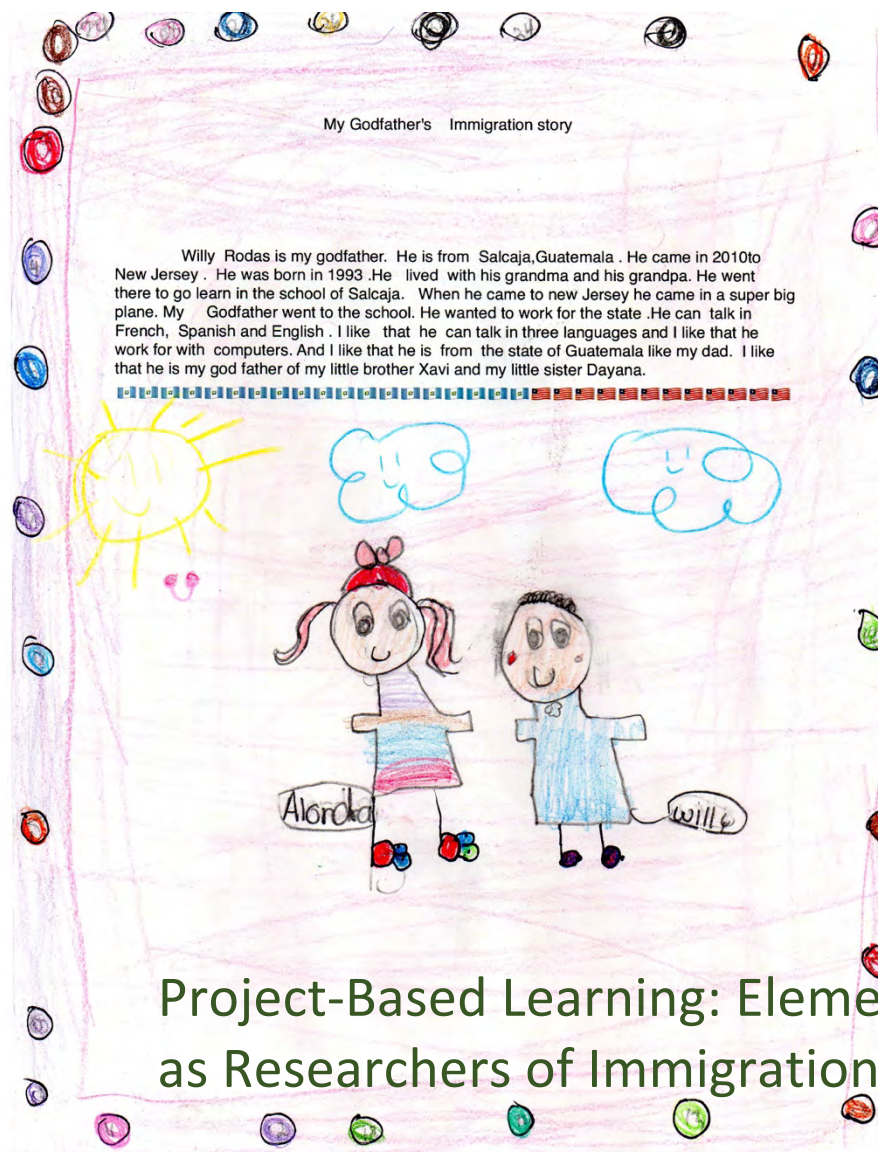
#### INTRODUCTION & ICE BREAKER

- Facilitators share a brief anecdote about how they got into their line of work (10 minutes)
- Introduction to participating organizations; this can include film, PowerPoint, etc. (20 minutes)
- Two-Minute Life Story Exercise: see instructions below.

#### INSTRUCTIONAL ACTIVITIES

1. **Two-Minute Life Story** (5 minutes) In pairs, students give life story to one another in two minutes; the listener takes no notes, asks no questions during the partner’s life story. Instruct the speaker: tell who you are. The story can be presented any way the teller wants—whole life, particular incident or event, all the places you’ve been, etc. This exercise offers practice in the art of listening. What goes into listening? What’s important to do while you’re listening? Elicit responses; can include: eye contact, focus, actively listening to another. Switch roles and repeat after two minutes.
2. After students have shared their stories, they reconvene back into the whole group. Each student has one minute to share his/her partner’s story with the whole group.
3. **Debrief on Two-Minute Life-Story Exercise** (10 minutes) facilitators ask group: how did that feel? What was hard or challenging about this exercise? How did it feel to have someone else tell your story? How did it feel to listen without taking notes or asking questions? What was easy? What was hard or easy to remember about the other person’s story? (details, dates, places . . . make it interesting.) Have students explain their answers to these questions. This *Between Two Worlds* program is a chance to help you tell your story.
4. **Listening Exercises** (20 minutes) As a group, students listen to “Fatherhood” audio piece (7 minutes) and “Stand My Ground” (2:25 minutes). After listening to each piece, facilitate separate discussions about each piece: What did you think about this piece? What stood out to you? Discuss radio or audio as a medium to relate visual details, imagery, as elements of a good story. How can you create imagery through audio? (Create pictures with words.)
5. **Looking ahead** (5 minutes) What we’ll be doing in the coming weeks. Visiting a museum or looking at folk art. Creative writing. Learning to use recording equipment. Interviewing folk artists and creating our own audio pieces, which will be included in a radio broadcast.
6. **Questions** (10 minutes) Invite questions about the program from students.





## Project-Based Learning: Elementary Students as Researchers of Immigration Narratives

by Natasha Agrawal

Seeing the *Between Two Worlds* exhibit in Santa Fe at the Museum of International Folk Art inspired me to think about my New Jersey students' journeys to the U.S. As an English as a Second Language (ESL) Teacher at Carroll Robbins Elementary School in Trenton, New Jersey, I wanted to design a curriculum that would inspire my students and meet learning goals for the classroom.

Many young people have traveled through deserts and across oceans to come to Trenton. As an ESL teacher at Robbins School, I am curious about and thankful for each child who walks through my classroom door. What are their experiences like? How do they feel about being immersed in a new culture? What strengths do immigrant children bring and how can teachers empower them to use those strengths?

*The more young people who get the opportunity to travel the world, live in other cultures and learn new languages, the more they will begin to understand our shared ideals and the shared opportunities to keep moving this world forward.*

~ Michelle Obama<sup>1</sup>

With these questions in mind, I began an immigration project with my grade 3 and 4 after-school ESL students. I realized that the children were eager to talk about their experiences and their home countries. To facilitate interaction and collaboration, we began our project with conversations about our home countries and the languages we speak. Speaking and listening are integral domains of language learning. Additionally, the Common Core Anchor Standard 1 for Speaking and Listening defines that students should *prepare for and participate effectively in a range of conversations and collaborations with diverse partners, building on others' ideas and expressing their own clearly and persuasively*.

Our immigration project concluded with presentations of written narratives as well as oral interviews recorded with iPads. I partnered the students so they could work together to interview each other and create a narrative about each other's immigration experiences. Here are the steps of our project:

### **Step 1: Brainstorming questions for an interview**

What would you like to know about your partner? For ESL students, using the right sentence structure for questions is often difficult. So we began with some easy questions. Where did you come from? Who was with you when you traveled? How did you feel? The children added many more to this list. What colors do you like? What games do you play? Were you afraid? Was your family rich or poor?

### **Step 2: Using technology**

Common Core Speaking and Listening Standard 4 outlines that students should be able to *make strategic use of digital media and visual displays of data to express information and enhance understanding of presentations*. We used iPads to record interviews so our information was oral and visual. It was also easily accessible when the students needed to listen to the interview to clarify information to put into their written narratives.

### **Step 3: Integrating community**

To involve the parents, we invited them to the classroom, asking if they would like to be interviewed by the children. It was a matter of great pride for the students to bring their parents in and have their immigration narratives recorded. The most interesting part was when the parent revealed certain details about their lives and travels, which their own child did not know. For instance, one little girl learned that her mother was a weaver and can speak Quechua. She glowed with pride when other students commented on how smart her mother was to be able to create such beautiful fabric and speak such a difficult language!

### **Step 4: Involving the school staff**

Interestingly, many of our staff members also have fascinating immigration stories to tell. The students interviewed our principal who is from Dominican Republic, our custodian who is from Gambia, and a teacher from India. Between them, they spoke and demonstrated a variety of

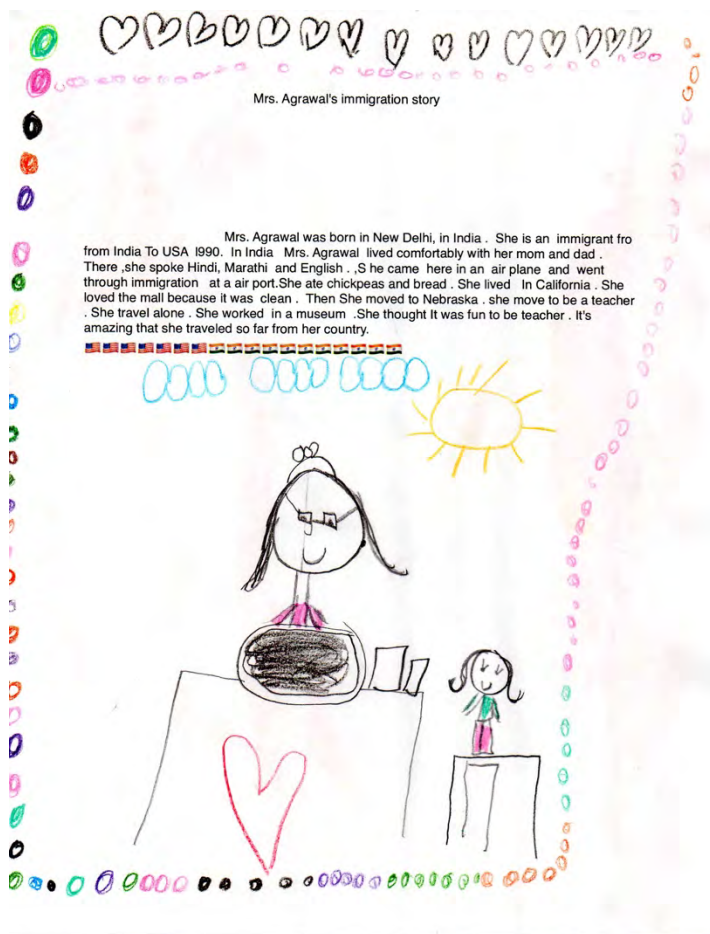
languages. Through the interviews, students learned the names of several different languages, enhancing their understanding of the peoples and tongues all around the world.

### Step 5: Written narratives

After all the information had been collected, each student picked one person to write about. According to Common Core Speaking and Listening Standard 3 students should be able to *evaluate a speaker's point of view, reasoning, and use of evidence and rhetoric*. My students returned to the recorded interviews to glean information and type a narrative about a staff member, a parent, or their partner. Giving students a choice to select the immigrant narrative they want to write about enhances decision-making skills and creates accountability.

### Step 6: Presentation

Once the narratives were printed out and the illustrations were complete, it was time to present! I instructed students to bring one artifact from their home cultures to add to their presentation. First, the children read aloud their writing about a new culture that they learned about, and then they presented an artifact from their own homes. There was undeniable pride in the students' writing and presentation of their artifacts. From Ecuador, we got a big flag, from Haiti, a book in French. The Guatemalan girls brought handwoven *huipils*, and another little girl wore special shirt with a picture of Our Lady of Guadalupe.



Our immigration project created meaningful dialogue and deepened relationships between students, parents, and staff. Together we learned about traditions, food, and languages from different parts of the globe. It is by investing in similar projects that students will discover “shared ideals and shared opportunities to keep the world moving forward” that Michelle Obama espouses.

*Natasha Agrawal has been an ESL teacher in Trenton Public Schools for eight years. She enjoys teaching and learning from children who come to her classroom from all around the world.*

1. Quote from CNN iReport Interview with First Lady Michelle Obama on the value of study abroad experiences. See <http://www.cnn.com/2014/03/25/politics/michelle-obama-study-abroad-interview>

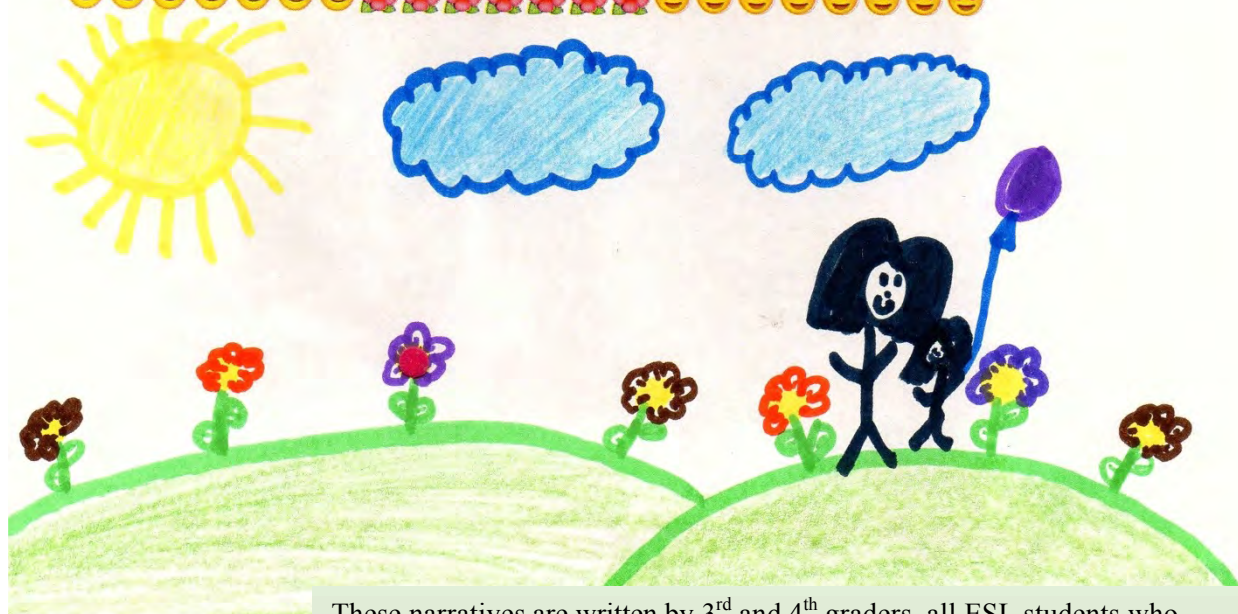


## The Best Principal In The World: Bienvenida Gardinet

Beeeeeeeeep! The lunch bell is ringing Mrs. Gardinet stays in her office to do some work and then she rushes to the lunch room. Mrs. Gardinet is my school principal she is nice and kind. Mrs. Gardinet is the best principal in the Carroll Robbins Elementary School.

Mrs. Gardinet came to the United States from the Dominican Republic when she was 15 years old. She was afraid of the plane. Mrs. Gardinet misses the warm weather of Dominican Republic and her family. Mrs. Gardinet came to the United States in August 26, 1988. She was very sad when she left her country and her family but happy to see her dad. Mrs. Gardinet's father was in New York City. Mrs. Gardinet was sad because she was going to leave her friends behind. Mrs. Gardinet was 15 years old when she left her friends behind.

Mrs. Gardinet came to be a principal because she was bilingual. She is a great principal because she is always prepared to do important work. She also respects the other teachers in the school. Mrs. Gardinet treats the students like this are her own kids. She is the best!



These narratives are written by 3<sup>rd</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup> graders, all ESL students who are level 2 and 3 (level 6 being native-like fluency).

# Dismantling Racism in Museum Education

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by Marit Dewhurst and Keonna Hendrick

Last summer, after a late-night phone conversation about how museum educators were—or more often, were not—finding ways to address racial injustice directly in their everyday work, we decided to invite colleagues to an intensive, multi-part workshop focused on addressing racism in museums. Within two days of announcing the workshop on social media networks, over 40 people signed up. Clearly, they had struck a nerve.

Drawing from our recent experiences working in museum education and similar arts organizations—Keonna at the Brooklyn Museum, The Museum of Modern Art, and ArtsConnection and Marit at The Museum of Modern Art and City College of New York—we hoped to create an opportunity for museum educators to think critically about how to dismantle racist practices in their professional lives. Through a series of both open-ended and structured group discussions, colleagues from many New York City cultural institutions shared how racism affected their work and their personal experiences in museums. At times challenging and at times joyful, these conversations ushered an important dialogue about the large and small ways in which White supremacist thinking permeates the museum field.

Since that first facilitated gathering, we have led conversations for museum practitioners and professional associations from across the country. Much like museum education, the field of folklore shares similar commitments to the concepts of multiple narratives and the importance of listening. One of the things we've noticed in leading workshops is how important it is for people to tell and to listen to each other's stories. Just as folklore educators value the importance of oral narratives as sources of crucial social, cultural, historical, and personal knowledge, we've found that reflecting on these personal narratives can help people analyze how their racial identities shape their work in museums and in education.

As museum educators learn to listen to how other narratives align, contradict, or crisscross their own, they gain a greater understanding of the ways in which multiple narratives can be at play simultaneously. In terms of conversations about race, this ability to hold multiple truths together in the same moment is incredibly powerful in disrupting the idea that a single, often White-dominated and constructed narrative, is the only truth. The lessons learned and stories we have heard about how racism has been acknowledged, ignored, perpetuated, and dismantled in museum education suggest that the field has much work to do. In between workshops, we took time to reflect on what we have learned through leading and supporting colleagues in anti-racist museum education.

## **Definitions**

To understand anti-racist and anti-oppressive museum education, it's important to define racist and oppressive museum education. Racist museum education normalizes the cultures, histories, experiences, ideas, bodies, work, and objects of White people, thereby reinforcing White supremacist ideology. As a result, it diminishes and (in some cases) erases the beliefs, cultures, and bodies of people of color. Racist museum education can take on many forms—from educators policing Black and Latino students in the galleries, to avoiding teaching from objects created by or for people of

color, to inviting students to replicate Native American design without permission from indigenous peoples in the art studio— but it is always oppressive because it reinforces institutionalized power to Whites.

### Want to Learn More?

Here are some of the texts on our shelves and websites that provide resources and thoughtful critique on topics of inclusion and anti-oppressive education:

Leonardo, Zeus. 2013. *Race Frameworks: A Multidimensional Theory of Racism and Education*. New York: Teachers College Press.

Incluseum <https://incluseum.com>.

*Museums and Society Journal*  
<http://www2.le.ac.uk/departments/museumstudies/museumsociety>.

Sandell, Richard, ed. 2002. *Museums, Society, Inequality*. New York: Routledge.

Tatum, Beverly Daniel. 1997. *Why Are All the Black Kids Sitting Together in the Cafeteria?" And Other Conversations about Race*. New York: Basic Books.

Pollock, Mica. 2008. *Everyday Antiracism: Getting Real about Race in School*. New York: The New Press.

Delpit, Lisa. 1988. "The Silenced Dialogue: Power and Pedagogy in Educating Other People's Children." *Harvard Educational Review* 58.3: 280-98.

American Alliance of Museums, Alliance Lab Diversity and Inclusion Blog  
<http://labs.aam-us.org/blog/open-forum-diversity-inclusion>

Anti-racist museum education is a form of anti-oppressive museum education that focuses on dismantling ways racism or White supremacy manifest for learners in and with museums. Anti-racist and, similarly, anti-oppressive museum education has at its heart the goal of creating societies that are just and equitable for all. As sites of collective memory and public engagement, museums have a responsibility to consider how they can contribute to dismantling inequality in our communities. This must happen on multiple levels—it cannot be left to the education departments alone.

In calling for anti-oppressive museum education, we urge educators to help museums recognize how they are built upon historical foundations rooted in White supremacist thinking in terms of how they collect, exhibit, and teach about objects in their collections. This attention to White supremacist thinking—although that language can be initially jarring for some White educators—is intentional. By calling out the ways that White people have dominated the narratives in museums to align with their own thinking, we hope to call attention to the many large and small ways in which racism (and binary, heteronormative thinking) manifests in our daily practices. It is imperative that those of us who work in museums understand that our beloved museums have been used to tell a single narrative about power, beauty, history, and value that has been shaped by White (heterosexual and largely patriarchal) ideals and stories.

In identifying the ways in which racism has colored the entire enterprise of museums, we can begin to search out specific strategies to acknowledge this history and create new ways of working that allow learners to experience multiple narratives, expanded definitions of expertise, shared authority, and self-affirmation.

### Questions to Consider

In the past year, we've facilitated multiple conversations with colleagues in the field about how to shift our work explicitly toward racial justice and equity. Often, we've found that a few key reminders and questions can be quite useful in turning our collective efforts toward dismantling racist practices in museum education.



The first area we suggest educators start with is terminology. All too often we have found that confusion about language has prevented colleagues from even beginning to talk about how power and privilege intersect with our racial, cultural, and gender identities. Caring colleagues and young audiences alike confide in us that they just don't know what to say and that they are afraid of being called racist, so they don't say anything at all. We encourage educators to seek out definitions of commonly used words such as prejudice, discrimination, race, racism (including internalized racism, structural racism, interpersonal racism, and institutional racism), gender, transgender, ally, power, privilege, sexual orientation, and intersectionality. For example, we often start by pointing out that discrimination is prejudice in action, and can be experienced by anyone, while racism is race prejudice in action and is tied up in historical legacies of power that means it moves from those in power to those without power. In these conversations about how we use language, we have found that many educators gain confidence in their ability to talk about race more productively.

Once educators have a clearer understanding of the current vocabulary about race, racism, and identity, we ask them to discuss how to use that language to facilitate brave conversations. Drawing from several colleagues' calls to move toward "brave not safe spaces" for dialogue about identity (Arao and Clemens 2013; Sensoy and DiAngelo 2014), we encourage educators to engage in some of the same practices we demand of our students. Just as we always tell our audiences to lean into the discomfort of learning—to embrace what is challenging, new, or different—we also ask educators to follow their own advice. Knowing that we do our greatest learning in moments that nudge us out of our comfort zones, be it looking at a work of complex abstract art, analyzing a dance performance from another culture, or simply listening to the narrative of someone who looks different from us, we offer guidelines to help educators challenge themselves. Among these guidelines, we urge educators to speak from their own experience; listen to hear, not to

### **Using Familiar Tools**

As every museum educator knows, our greatest tool in helping audiences connect to artworks and artifacts is the question, "What do you see that makes you say that?" This inquiry tool is fundamental to our goals of helping audiences construct meaning in the objects they encounter in our collections. We use this question to guide inquiry-based discussions that layer personal connections, visual evidence, and contextual information into a co-constructed understanding of an object. At the root of this question is a belief in the value of multiple perspectives and listening as a radical act of learning.

In many of the recent workshops we've facilitated on racism in museum education, we have noticed that some colleagues are quickly overwhelmed by the seemingly daunting nature of dismantling the racism that surrounds them. In these moments we encourage colleagues to tap into the core beliefs of museum education as a way of thinking about anti-racist teaching. For example, we tell our students to seek out multiple interpretations of objects to gain a more nuanced understanding. We ask audiences to share their personal connections to works of art in an effort to make the object relevant and meaningful for each visitor. We use contextual information to deepen our understandings of the ways in which objects fit into our current lives and the roles they played in history. We talk endlessly about how critical thinking enables us to expand the stories we've become accustomed to as we create new ways of analyzing, challenging, and re-creating the world around us. Each of these values resonates clearly with anti-racist education strategies. In many ways, we need only turn our own teaching tools to the work of examining race to begin the conversation.



respond; accept that there are multiple truths; focus on language that expands rather than denies (replace “but” with “and”); acknowledge when something hurts and when something you’ve said is hurtful, apologize; and support each other in being uncomfortable together.

In a museum setting, we are lucky to work with artworks and artifacts. These objects can serve as excellent sites for discussions about who we are and why that matters. Once educators have built a foundation to talk about race, class, gender, religion, and other identity factors, we urge museum educators to turn to the objects with which we teach. If we revise our view of objects as sites for multiple narratives, personal connections, and historical/social interrogations, they become lively opportunities to talk about power and privilege in our society. For example, in encouraging audiences to make personal connections with objects (and even with the institution) we are able to challenge the idea that there is a single and White-centered narrative. Suddenly, the expert stance of the institution can come into question, allowing for audiences to share their own perspectives. As these previously unquestioned descriptions of objects are critiqued, we urge educators to think about how to use contextual information about each artwork or artifact to access conversations about racism and oppression. For example, we might delve into information about how an object was collected or categorized to talk about historical and contemporary forms of racism and colonialism. Or we might talk about the racial landscape of the object (craftsmanship and production, use and value, artist’s background, historical context, why it was selected to be on view, etc.) to connect to current issues about racism in our society. Despite the rich racial history embedded within each object, we find that many educators avoid talking about race in relation to the objects they work in, thereby risking cultural and historical erasure. In other words, the decision not to discuss the racial context of an object is an act of silence that maintains the status quo.

Another approach that we highlight in our own work is the importance of holding ourselves and each other accountable for racial justice and anti-oppressive work. While we are often invited to facilitate special conversations about racism in museums, we know that nothing can be solved in a three-hour workshop. Engaging in racial justice and anti-oppressive education takes daily work. As such, we encourage educators to develop strategies to hold themselves and each other accountable on a routine basis. Examples can include forming reading groups, setting time aside in each staff meeting to talk about racial justice work, requiring educators to reflect on how race (and/or gender, religion, class, citizenship, etc.) shapes each tour they give or program they run, forming peer accountability partnerships or teams that set regular goals for racial justice education with colleagues. As educators learn to identify their blind spots they can support each other as they seek out more information about how power, privilege, and identity shape our experiences. To do so, we’ve found it can be helpful for educators to reflect on questions such as the following:

- Whose story is missing in this institution, program, object label? Whose is prioritized?
- When do I talk about race (gender, class, citizenship, etc.) and when do I leave it out?
- How has my racial identity provided me privilege?
- What assumptions and expectations do I hold for those whose racial identity differs from mine? How did I develop these assumptions and expectations? How do they manifest in my interactions with learners, colleagues, and objects?
- In what ways do I privilege ways of communicating and teaching that are rooted in my life experiences and biases?
- How might I change my views of what good teaching looks like to expand opportunities for multiple cultural approaches to learning and teaching?

As educators navigate these questions, both individually and with colleagues, we encourage them to remember that who you were, who you are, and who you will be are not necessarily the same. To

embrace a more racially just approach to museum education, we must allow ourselves, our colleagues, and our institutions to evolve.

### **Museum Policies Influence Practice**

Although we spend a lot of time working with individual colleagues on how they can change their own daily behaviors, practices, and attitudes, we also believe strongly that change must come from all levels. Placing the burden of change solely on individuals only serves to alleviate institutions of their own accountability. We believe that for real changes to happen in how museums work to dismantle oppressive practices, the institutions themselves must make a commitment to racial, gender, and social justice. This may mean rewriting mission statements or offering new policies for racial, gender, and/or social justice across all domains: from HR to collections management to education.

An example that came up in a recent workshop was the idea of writing a policy of racial equity that would provide guidelines for educators leading school groups through a museum's collection. Such a policy might explicitly state that the museum will highlight art created by multiple racial identity groups on every school group visit or public program. A policy of this nature would serve multiple purposes: it would require educators to include artworks by artists from multiple racial identities; it would give visiting audiences a clear sense of what to expect on their tours; it would make public the institution's commitment to racial diversity; it would introduce the concept of racial identity into the conversation for all stakeholders; and it would protect educators from complaints about programs that promote racial diversity. Additionally, such a policy would require that the museum display works created by artists of different racial identities, thereby hopefully influencing exhibition and acquisition decisions.

### **Sample Scenario**

One activity that we have found to be very productive is our scenario protocol. In this activity, we ask colleagues to share a scenario of racial injustice that they have experienced or witnessed. (Often we share several of our own to get started.) We then guide educators through a simple protocol to help them reflect on, analyze, and problem-solve the scenario. Using the questions below in the order listed, we have found that this simple protocol has led to in-depth conversations about how racism is made manifest in our work, the emotional implications of that for different identity groups, and the potential short- and long-term strategies to dismantle racist thinking in our work.

#### *Scenario Protocol Questions*

1. What is your initial emotional reaction (not what you would do, but what you think/feel immediately)?
2. What is really going on here? Where is the racism?
3. What actions could we take to dismantle the racism here? In the moment? Long term?

In addition, Keonna and another colleague, Melissa Crum, have been working to develop a framework for reflection and accountability, called Multicultural Critical Reflective Practice (MCRP), to help educators talk about their own life stories and how they shape our work in museums. We've found that MCRP not only enables educators in expanding their cultural perceptions but also can be used to help learners think critically about objects and content and build inclusive learning spaces. MCRP practitioners engage in critical self-reflection to interrogate their identities, critical reflection with peers to gain different perspectives, critical reflection in teaching to be responsive and accountable with learners, and critical reflection on teaching to consider lessons learned and alternatives for the future. For more information on this, we encourage you to check out their recent

chapter “Multicultural Critical Reflective Practice and Contemporary Art,” in *Multiculturalism in Art Museums Today* (Hendrick and Crum 2014).

### Conclusion

We’ve been thinking about the work—anthropological and literary—of Zora Neale Hurston quite a bit lately and its relevance to resistance, revelation, and resilience for communities of people of color amid the social acceptance of racism. While the U.S. has never been void of racism, there seems to be a growing social acceptance of interpersonal and institutional racism and a tendency toward cultural exclusion. Certainly, the contemporary political landscape is reinforcing ideas of cultural and racial hierarchies. In Hurston’s *Dust Tracks on a Road* (1984), we learn that while the tools for exercising racism and oppression may have changed, the premise of racist practices replicate themselves in many ways. In her attention to honoring the stories of people who have long been excluded, Hurston, like many folklorists, shines light on the important ways in which communities have developed tools to survive and thrive in the face of tremendous violence and racism.

Silence, in the face of racism and injustice, is complicity. While some may want to believe that museums are neutral spaces, they are far from that. It is our responsibility—as educators committed to creating more just and equitable societies—to understand how our daily practices might actually enable White supremacist (and heteronormative, patriarchal) thinking. And while the work that must be done can feel overwhelming at times, we just cannot be afraid to start.

**Marit Dewhurst** is the Director of Art Education and Assistant Professor of Art and Museum Education at The City College of New York. She has worked as an arts educator and program coordinator in multiple arts contexts including community centers, museums, juvenile detention centers, and international development projects. Her research and teaching interests include social justice education, community-based art, youth empowerment, and the role of the arts in community development. Her book, *Social Justice Art: A Framework for Activist Art Pedagogy* was recently published by Harvard Education Press.

**Keonna Hendrick** is a cultural strategist whose teaching, writing, and strategic planning development promote critical thinking, expand cultural perceptions, and support self-actualization. She is the co-founder of SHIFT, a collective of cultural workers engaging anti-oppressive feminist professional and personal development. She is also co-creator of multicultural critical reflective practice, a professional development model. Keonna continues to provide professional development to educators in museums and classrooms nationally, including ArtsConnection, Brooklyn Museum, The Museum of Modern Art, New York City Museum Educator Roundtable, and The Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum.

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## Heritage Repatriation and Educational Sovereignty at an Ojibwe Public School



by B. Marcus Cederström, Thomas A. DuBois, Tim Frandy, and Colin Gioia Connors

In the Western Great Lakes region, late summer is the time to harvest *manoomin*, wild rice, a sacred food central to the prophecy that led Ojibwe to make their home in the place where “food grows on water” (Loew 2013, 60). Growing in the shallows of lakes and rivers, *manoomin* (“the good seed”) is harvested in canoes poled or paddled through a thicket of tall grass-like rice stalks that emerge above the surface of the water toward the end of summer. After the rice is “knocked” into the canoes, it must be dried, parched, hulled, winnowed, and finished—a process that can span another month or more of work.

The wild rice harvest is a community event that maintains long-enduring relationships between Ojibwe people, their environment, and their foodways. In recent years, the PK-8 Lac du Flambeau Public School has included wild rice harvesting in its curriculum, bringing Native middle-school students out onto the rice beds, along with teachers, elders, and—most recently—University of Wisconsin-Madison (UW) folklorists. By bringing the harvest tradition into the school, educators seed a colonial western institution with indigenous cultural practice. Students are shown that the harvesting of wild rice is an important element of their Ojibwe identity, worthy of inclusion in their schooling.

With this article and the accompanying short film (*Birchbark Canoes and Wild Rice*) we examine the Lac du Flambeau wild rice harvest within the context of educational sovereignty and as a decolonizing educational initiative. As Luis Moll asserts:

Educational sovereignty requires that communities with assistance, with affiliations, create their own infrastructures for development including mechanisms for the education of

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About the photo: Wayne Valliere and a student from Lac du Flambeau Public School paddle the birchbark canoe during the ceremonial launch in Lac du Flambeau, June 2014. Photo by T. DuBois.

children that capitalize on rather than devalue cultural resources. It will then be their initiative to invite others, including those in the academic community (2002, np).

His points are matched by those of Jamila Lyiscott (2016), who warns against top-down or outsider-to-insider curricula or programming that unintentionally replicate colonial messages of dependency and lack. As she writes, “The idea of ‘giving’ students voice, especially when it refers to students of color, only serves to reify the dynamic of paternalism that renders Black and Brown students voiceless until some salvific external force gifts them with the privilege to speak” (2016, np).

In this article we explore some productive ways in which folklorists can support or enhance educational sovereignty occurring in communities. We detail the role of UW folklorists at Lac du Flambeau Public School—our work in grant writing, project implementation, and ethnographic documentation, and in the broader process of establishing a culturally responsive curriculum. Embracing the principles of educational sovereignty, community-initiated and community-directed projects, participatory action research (Kemmis and McTaggart 2000, Westfall et al. 2006, Stringer 2013), indigenous-centered research (Tuhiwai Smith 1999), and the work of folklorists who have striven to make a place for local culture in school, museum, and community education settings (Simons 1990, Bowman 2004, Gay 2010, Bowman and Hamer 2011), we believe that folklorists have important roles to play in supporting such curricular innovations.

Our team of UW-Madison folklorists first began extended collaboration with the [Lac du Flambeau Band of Lake Superior Chippewa \(Ojibwe\) Indians](#) through an effort to revitalize competitive wintertime games and sports, called [Ojibweg Bibooni-Ataadiwin](#) [The Ojibwe Winter Games]. This annual program, initiated and carried out by Ojibwe artist and educator Mino-Giizhig (Wayne Valliere), repatriates traditional competitions that were actively discouraged or prohibited during the missionary era and thus lost to the Lac du Flambeau community for over a century. We began documenting the community-driven work at the Reservation and pulled on our boots and gloves to lend a hand in the efforts. Our support included grant writing and fundraising, aiding on-the-ground project work, organizing related events at Lac du Flambeau and in Madison, shaping materials to share with media outlets, creating a web presence through [social media](#), helping harvest natural materials, and assisting in construction of equipment. We have documented and helped curate



Middle-school students from Lac du Flambeau Public School participate in the hoop and spear game at the 2016 Ojibwe Winter Games. Photo by Marcus Cederström.

programs for both students and general audiences that clarify and explain the importance of decolonization. And we have contributed to longstanding discussions in the community about how cultural revitalization works and to what ends it may lead. Multi-year collaboration with the Lac du Flambeau community on the winter games repatriation has let us test and appreciate the efficacy of cultural responsiveness in education, the subtle processes by which effective revitalization movements take shape, and the sometimes challenging steps needed to transform theoretical principles of decolonization into concrete practice.



### Documentation and Media

Throughout the residency, the team of folklorists worked to document the building process in photos, interviews, and film. To generate publicity and keep students and the Lac du Flambeau community updated on the progress of the canoe, the folklorists created a [blog](#) and [Facebook page](#) that made immediate use of the film footage and photos and included regular discussions of the techniques that Valliere was using to transform harvested birchbark, cedar planks, spruce roots, and pine pitch into a sleek and durable canoe. Finally, to ensure that the project was digitally documented for posterity, the team created a [permanent website](#) and a short open-access film, *Birchbark Canoes and Wild Rice*.



In the fall semester of 2013, building on these previous successes, our team arranged for Wayne Valliere to visit the UW campus as artist in residence in the woodshop of the university's Art Department to construct a birchbark canoe. We were fortunate to work with the department's chair, Tom Loeser, who was enthusiastic about exposing his students to Ojibwe arts and helped with fundraising and day-to-day coordination of the residency. Our project, "*Wiigwaasi-Jiimaan: These Canoes Carry Culture*," afforded Valliere a venue for calling attention to the nuanced and demanding art of birchbark canoe building—a tradition currently practiced in Wisconsin by only three Native artists, all over age 50. Crucial to the project was the involvement of middle-school students from Lac du Flambeau, who harvested natural materials on the Reservation and in the ceded territories of northern Wisconsin and traveled over 200 miles south to the UW campus to assist in the canoe's construction. Their visits not only helped demonstrate the value of Native cultures to university professionals and the wider university community, but also suggested to the visiting students that they can attend a university and maintain their Ojibwe identity. Through further fundraising, the team was instrumental in purchasing the resulting canoe for permanent exhibition and use at the university. The canoe is now displayed in the dining hall of [Dejope Residence Hall](#), a dormitory designed to celebrate the Native American heritage of Wisconsin. In the spring of 2014, the UW team brought the canoe back to the Reservation to be honored and launched in front of the entire student body of the school and community members of Lac du Flambeau.

As a direct result of the publicity and enthusiasm generated by this canoe project, administrators at Lac du Flambeau Public School invited Valliere to build another canoe, this time at the school. That project, which unfolded over the academic year 2014-15, helped expand support among school officials to make Ojibwe culture and knowledge traditions (epistemologies) a central element of the curriculum for all its students, some 98 percent of whom are Native American. Together the films, blog, social media pages, websites, and the current article illustrate the kinds of materials that folklorists can produce to further support other professionals committed to decolonizing education in academia, museums, and PK-12 schools.



### The Rice Harvest of 2015

With the above-mentioned events as background, we turn now to the school rice harvest of 2015. One sunny morning in September, some 40 students, educators, and folklorists converged at a Wisconsin lake to harvest wild rice. On that shore, students put on life jackets and helped unload 16 school-owned canoes from trailers. The two birchbark canoes described above stood ready for the harvest as well. Central to our combined efforts has been the production *and use* of such canoes, not simply as pieces of art to be conserved and admired, but also as useful elements of daily life. The decision to employ the canoes in ricing also underscored the traditional use of such boats as vehicles for gathering and harvesting food, a notion quietly suggested to UW students by displaying the canoe in a dining hall instead of in the UW boathouse or art museum.



Standing on the shore, Valliere gestured toward the water, explaining:



A lot of you know what *manoominikewin* [wild rice harvesting] is, know what a *manoominikaang* is, a rice bed.... You guys have been exposed to this, a lot of you, through your families. Those of you that haven't—that's why we're out here, we're out here for you that haven't. *Manoomin*, wild rice, is the single most important reason why the Anishinaabe are here where we're at (2015).



As both a teacher and a cultural leader, Valliere underscored the Ojibwe understanding of plants and animals as “older brothers,” teachers, and allies. One by one, the adults helped students into canoes and launched them into the rice bed, while Wayne and his son Wayne, Jr., an aspiring educator, piloted the two birchbark canoes.

It should be noted that heritage repatriation and educational sovereignty efforts at Lac du Flambeau did not begin with this partnership. In fact, the school has long supported students' participation

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Photos from top: 1) Wild rice after the 2015 harvest. 2) The birchbark canoe displayed in DeJope Hall on the University of Wisconsin-Madison campus, Spring 2014. 3) Wayne Valliere teaching students the importance of wild rice in Ojibwe culture, September 2015. 4) Students from Lac du Flambeau Public School launch canoes into lake for the 2015 wild rice harvest.

Photos by T. DuBois and Marcus Cederström.

in traditional cultural activities. Even as pressure to standardize education and “teach to the test” have increased nationally, Lac du Flambeau Public School has remained committed to, and in fact intensified its investment in, culturally responsive education. After the day of ricing, in a community room at the school where elders and students can interact, Lac du Flambeau elder and teacher Carol Amour explained:

If you see your culture in your school, if you see your culture in your curriculum, if you see your culture valued, if you see your culture around you, it says to you, “My culture is important.” And it says, then, to you, “I have value. I am of worth” (2015).

By all accounts, the school’s culturally responsive curriculum has paid great dividends. Amour notes improved confidence and poise among students at the school, a markedly higher high school graduation rate, and an impressive increase in the number of students going on to college. As Amour puts it:

I think particularly for Native students, you’re dealing with that whole history of colonization and cultural genocide, and historical trauma. It’s there. To consciously and intentionally say, “No, that was not a good thing, there were many very negative things that happened, but we’re going to say that we’re taking charge. And we’re doing it in a Native way” (2015).

The film accompanying this article conveys some of the excitement and satisfaction that the harvest engendered among its participants, students and educators, young and old alike. Drafts of the film were shared with our Lac du Flambeau partners during production, and their input and ultimate endorsement of the final product were essential to our collaboration and eventual presentation of the film.



### **Folklore, Presenting Culture, and Educational Institutions**

The view inside the birchbark canoe after bending the ribs.

Photo by Colin Connors.

The longstanding engagement of American folklorists and other ethnographers with Native American communities has taken many turns. At the founding of the American Folklore Society in 1888, and under the energetic leadership of Franz Boas, folklorists working in communities reeling from the devastating effects of settler colonialism acquired, catalogued, and archived narrative traditions, detailed descriptions of ways of living, items of material culture—both sacred and profane—and even human bodies. Museums became repositories of items alienated from their original contexts, employed often to buttress racist narratives regarding the primitiveness and exoticism of “vanishing” Native American cultures (Macdonald and Fyfe 1996, Pilcher and Vermeylen 2008, Macdonald 2006, Toelken 2003, Gradén 2013). Museums as well as zoos displayed indigenous



people as *exotica* (Huhndorf 2001, Baglo 2011, Lehtola 2013), using indigenous people as spectacles to facilitate white self-reflection and reinforce social values about the roles of racial, indigenous, and ethnic minorities in relation to a dominant settler society. The Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act of 1990 provided a legal framework for restoring to Native communities some of the goods and human remains that American museums had taken (Ridington and Hastings 1997, Toelken 2003, Welsch 2012). More recent efforts have worked to use museums and educational museum programming as tools to decolonize representations of indigenous people (Vermeulen and Pilcher 2009). Archived and published accounts of practices, as well as artifacts stored in museums, can become catalysts for decolonization when returned to Native communities in ways that facilitate their reappraisal, re-adoption, and revitalization.

While folklorists of the 19th century engaged in what they regarded as salvage ethnography, Native children of the same era were funneled into residential boarding schools of the type planned and promoted by Richard Henry Pratt to “kill the Indian to save the man.” Often with the ignorance, complicity, or even urging of academic ethnographers (as detailed by Ridington and Hastings 1997), boarding schools sought to separate Native children from their languages, cultures, and worldviews, “reprogramming” them to become diligent domestics and manual laborers to fill the workforce void created by African American emancipation. Pratt’s infamous Carlisle Indian Industrial School was replicated throughout the United States, and boarding schools remained a norm of education for reservation children from the 1870s until the 1970s, when at last the Indian Self-Determination and Education Assistance Act of 1975 provided a framework for dismantling the system and restoring some measure of local control to Native communities (Child 1998). Despite the closure of such schools, the legacy of schooling as assimilatory and colonial has continued. Tribal members are often subjected to curricular materials that extol Columbus, rationalize settler enterprise, promote simplistic stereotypes of Native Americans, and sidestep unsavory details of relations between the U.S. and sovereign Native nations. Many Native parents rightfully worry that schools will undermine their children’s Native identity and lead them away from their community’s traditional lifeways.

Educators like Carter G. Woodson have long pointed out that American schooling has often worked to serve the goals of assimilation, social control, and deculturation (Bowman and Hamer 2011, 7), goals stated or implicit in the writings of early luminaries of public education such as John Dewey (1916). Through curricular choices, some culturally specific forms of knowledge and knowledge traditions, pedagogical methods, and worldviews find reinforcement while others are marginalized or rejected. Ojibwe forms have decidedly *not* been among those privileged. When no effort is made to “challenge the legacy of control and impositions” (Moll 2002, np) that actively work against indigenous communities, schools continue to serve as vehicles for imposed cultural assimilation. Heritage repatriation, the revitalization and strengthening of knowledge traditions and cultural worldview, and educational self-determination work in tandem to create sovereignty in indigenous schools.

As scholars like Geneva Gay (2002), Paddy Bowman (2004), and Elizabeth Simons (1990) have shown, culturally responsive education can help communities challenge and defeat imposed marginalization of local traditions and identities. Many studies have linked culturally responsive curricula to successful educational outcomes, particularly in Native American and other ethnic minority populations (Crooks et al. 2015; Neblett, Rivas-Drake, and Umaña-Taylor 2012; Phinney 1993; the Office of Head Start 2012). Such is not to suggest that the development of culturally responsive curricula is always easy or popular. Some programs rooted in vernacular cultures prove effective while others flounder. Teachers, however enthusiastic in principle, may lack the cultural knowledge or training needed to present materials or ideas from knowledge traditions radically different from their own. They may fear to ask what they do not know or remain uncomfortably silent,



A student from Lac du Flambeau Public School assists Wayne Valliere with the 2013 building of a birchbark canoe on the University of Wisconsin-Madison campus.

Photo by Marcus Cederström.

### **Folklore, Museums, and Educational Sovereignty**

We suggest that folklorists' and other educators' engagement with educational sovereignty efforts should include the following four factors:

- Programs should be community-initiated and community-driven.
- Educators should be encouraged and empowered to “teach culturally,” rather than simply “teach culture.”
- Collaborating folklorists should respect the leadership and decision-making authority of their indigenous partners.
- Collaborations should be long term and flexible, negotiating the evolving needs of the community, of folklorists, and of funders to ensure ongoing viability.

stances that do no favors for their students. Consciously or unconsciously, teachers and the curricula they present may reinforce attitudes that Native ways are outdated, inferior, or unwelcome in the classroom.

### **Moving Forward in a Good Way**

In reflecting on the Lac du Flambeau-UW collaboration in relation to educational sovereignty, we point to four specific factors that we believe contributed to its success. Our first observation underscores the importance of local leadership and innovation in ensuring the initial, as well as the sustained, success of programs. The programs discussed here were designed by Lac du Flambeau educators to make their community stronger and healthier. There are noteworthy parallels on other reservations and in other tribal contexts in Wisconsin: for example, a hundred miles to the west, the [Lac Courte Oreilles Band of Lake Superior Chippewa Indians](#) have included Ojibwe traditions in their elementary school curriculum as well as at the Lac Courte Oreilles Ojibwa Community College (McGrath 1995, Anon. 2008). Lac Courte Oreilles's community college is paralleled by that of the [College of Menominee Nation](#), some hundred miles to the southeast of Lac du Flambeau on the Menominee Reservation. While such programs can serve as inspirations, crucial for the success of the Lac du Flambeau curriculum has been the active engagement and leadership of Lac du Flambeau educators as they highlight, celebrate, and sustain Ojibwe traditions. Year upon year, these programs demonstrate their effectiveness to community members, underscoring the need to continue, improve, and expand them in the future. Their momentum derives from the community that initiates and enacts them.

We suggest that this type of community engagement is essential. In a context in which Native communities have been subjected to the dictates of outside managers for centuries, a project initiated by outsiders without local leadership is destined to be viewed with suspicion, if not also resentment. As Amour put it, “It isn’t someone non-Native coming in and telling us how to do it, or we should do this or we should do that. It is *us*—this Cultural Connections team—and it’s almost all Native now. That’s powerful” (2015). As a direct result of this local approach, elders, teachers, school



administrators—and most importantly parents and students—have been supportive of and enthusiastic about experiential learning opportunities.

Secondly, we suggest that cultural projects are more effective when educators embrace Native pedagogies that *enact* rather than *describe* culture. According to Valliere (2015), “There is a difference between teaching the culture, and teaching culturally. The latter is what I try to do.” It requires or empowers educators to embrace Native knowledge traditions and to be prepared to challenge or augment western approaches to education. Embodied and experiential learning has proven effective in situations where “traditional schooling” is ineffective (Gee 2004). This enactment is essential in building a successful culturally responsive program. “It’s not enough to know your culture,” Valliere points out, “You have to live it.” Amour, reflecting on the students’ harvesting *manoomin* with their teachers and elders, says:

That was phenomenal this morning to see the [non-Native] teachers go out with the kids, which says, without saying a word, of course...“We think this is important. And, we’re all teachers and we’re all learners. Today we’re learning from you. Going out [ricing], we’re learning from you” (2015).

Thirdly, as is evident in Amour’s words above, we suggest that outside organizations and individuals must support and respect the decisions of local leadership, or, as Luis Moll says, embrace “the need to challenge the arbitrary authority of the power structure to determine the essence of the educational experience” (2002, np). In the view of educators like Valliere and Amour, frameworks that replicate—however well meaning—outside institutional control and evaluation carry with them powerful and corrosive underlying messages of dependency, backwardness, and ignorance. To counter this potential, and acknowledge the leadership as well as the cooperation essential in our collaboration, the UW and Lac du Flambeau partners have worked to make explicit their understandings of mutual interests: in other words, folklorists and community members have stated clearly their professional goals and worked to enact procedures that serve to meet the needs of all parties.

A shared understanding of explicitly stated goals allowed partners to assist each other’s efforts effectively. Understanding that Lac du Flambeau educators valued the opportunity for their students to see the UW campus and form positive impressions of potential life and study there, UW folklorists made sure to show visiting students dorm rooms, art facilities, classrooms, and other parts of campus. Understanding the UW folklorists’ interest in sharing Ojibwe culture with a broad university community, Valliere participated actively in a wide array of educational events and classes across campus, making a point as well of talking with every visitor who came to the university woodshop to see his work. Where visitors may have expected to find an artist in residence working in isolation—a modern-day equivalent of the kind of museum and zoo displays of indigenous people of the past—they found instead an outgoing artist, interested in the fields they represented, eager to make new allies who could help realize his educational vision for his community, and encouraging of others to lend a hand in the hard work of the canoe’s construction and his community’s decolonization.

Finally, we note that funding frameworks tend to favor short-term projects that result in easily quantifiable products and measurable results, but within the framework of a school, a project that occurs only once and is not repeated may frustrate or disappoint participating teachers, students, and families. Decolonization efforts demand continued reinvestment and crosspollination across traditional lifeways to help ensure viability and lasting outcomes. Our collaboration benefits greatly from a multi-year approach and includes various, separately funded stages that all center around key personnel—specifically, local educators—and shared goals of decolonization and educational

sovereignty. Our aim was to build a responsive and adaptable partnership that allows educators to replicate an existing program, encourages artists to move on to new challenges, presents funders with exciting new projects within the framework of the partnership, and—most importantly—grows community capacity to take full ownership over any work that folklorists helped catalyze. We feel that it is counter to the very notion of educational sovereignty and decolonization to mandate the involvement of outsiders in every future cultural project in Lac du Flambeau and that building cultural sustainability and educational sovereignty necessarily means our relationships to the community as public folklorists must change.

The four points outlined above helped advance the educational sovereignty and decolonization efforts in Lac du Flambeau. Over the course of several years, we have come to see firsthand the obvious benefits that such a program has for a community and a school. The value of incorporating programs of the kind described here into school and museum curricula and the role of folklorists in support of this work cannot be underestimated. Successful projects must acknowledge that the past shapes the present as well as the future and that educators, in collaboration with communities, can and must recontextualize traditional knowledge for the benefit of students. In Native communities, young people have often endured the strains and uncertainty of negotiating two separate structures of authority: that of local elders and cultural leaders and that of western educational representatives. Native people are often forced to choose which authority they might respect or invoke in any given moment. By providing situated programs through the public school, with the logistical support and cultural endorsement of UW folklorists, the projects gained legitimacy and promoted an overarching Ojibwe-centered educational approach. Instead of competing against each other, the two systems of knowledge authority worked in tandem. Together we are shaping a curricular context in which traditional knowledge can be used, helping it thrive in the community *and* in the school. As Valliere puts it in describing the value of these projects to students:

By them having identity and knowing who they are, there's an old, old motif for their people: it's like this, "By knowing where you've been, you'll have a greater understanding on where you're going." So, it's going to add strength, that solid foundation of their identity is going to [make them say], "Yes, I can go to college. I can obtain that education. But I don't have to lose my Native value to understand Western society and be part of it. I can be the best of both worlds" (2014).

Carol Amour echoes those sentiments: "To me, it's so obvious that it's good for kids. And that this way of teaching is good for our kids in this community" (2015).

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Photo by Tim Frandy.

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- <http://www.menominee.edu>
- Find the film at <https://vimeo.com/170565548>





## The Urgency of Empathy and Social Impact in Museums

by Mike Murawski

*"We are in more urgent need of empathy than ever before."*<sup>1</sup>

This quote has repeatedly been on my mind over the past weeks, months, and sadly, years—as senseless acts of violence and hatred hit the headlines at a numbing pace of regularity. I began writing this article at the end of the first week of July 2016, when the country was reeling from the deaths of Alton Sterling, Philando Castile, and five police officers in Dallas—Lorne Ahrens, Michael Krol, Michael J. Smith, Brent Thompson, and Patrick Zamarripa. So many of us were still processing the horrific attack at the Pulse nightclub in Orlando less than a month earlier, while simultaneously witnessing an alarming spike in hate crimes and xenophobia in the U.K. immediately following the Brexit vote. This all corresponded in unsettling ways to the divisive rhetoric and acrimonious tone of the presidential campaign here in the U.S.

In moments like these it is important for museums—and the people who work for them—to pause and reflect on the roles that we serve within our communities. Yes, museums are institutions that hold collections. But they can also serve a powerful role with our communities as active spaces for

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About the photo: Recent refugees from Burma/Myanmar, Paw Saw and Kue Mah Wah clasp hands as they tell their story. Object Stories, Portland Art Museum. Photo by Cody Maxwell.

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connection and coming together, for conversation and dialogue, for listening and sharing. Museums can be spaces for individual stories and community voices. They can be a space for acknowledging and reflecting on differences, and for bridging divides. They can be spaces for growth, struggle, love, and hope.

The words I open with come from Roman Krznaric, author of *Empathy: Why It Matters, and How to Get It* (2014a) and founder of the Empathy Library. Krznaric is among a growing chorus of voices who see an urgent need for empathy and human understanding in an era too often marked by violence, hatred, resentment, self-interest, and toxic political and social debates. In his 2014 TEDx Talk “How to Start an Empathy Revolution,” he defines empathy as “the art of stepping into the shoes of another person and looking at the world from their perspective. It’s about understanding the thoughts, the feelings, the ideas and experiences that make up their view of the world” (Krznaric 2014b).

In September 2015, Krznaric put these ideas into practice in the realm of museums with the development of the Empathy Museum, dedicated to helping visitors develop the skill of putting themselves in others’ shoes. Its first exhibit, *A Mile in My Shoes*, did quite literally that, setting up in a shoe shop where visitors are fitted with the shoes of another person, invited to walk a mile along the riverside while being immersed in an audio narrative of this stranger’s life, and then write a short story about it. With contributions ranging from a sewer worker to a sex worker, the stories covered different aspects of life, from loss and grief to hope and love.

Developing empathy has the potential to create radical social change, “a revolution of human relationships,” Krznaric states (2014c). So how can we spark this empathy revolution in museums?

### **Museums Are Us, Not It**

I want to start by making an important foundational point about how we talk about museums. When we talk about them only as brick-and-mortar institutions or as “it,” it becomes easier to distance ourselves from the human-centered work that we do. So it’s absolutely essential to remember that **museums are made of people**: from directors, board members, patrons, and curators to educators, guest services staff, registrars, conservators, security guards, volunteers, maintenance and facilities workers, members, and visitors. I am reminded of this by the Director of Learning at the Tate Museum, Anna Cutler, whose memorable 2013 Tate Paper discussed institutional critique and cultural learning in museums. In it, she quotes artist Andrea Fraser: “Every time we speak of the ‘institution’ as other than ‘us’ we disavow our role in the creation and perpetuation of its conditions” (Cutler 2013).

This is an important basis for any discussion of empathy and museums, since it defines the vision, mission, and work of a museum as the vision, mission, and work of *the people* who belong to that museum. So if we, myself included, say “museums must be more connected to their communities,” we’re really talking about what the people who make up the museum need to focus on—being more connected to our communities. We are inseparable from the institution, in other words. Any critique of museums is a critique of us; and any change needing to happen in museums is, therefore, a change that needs to start with us.

### **The Growing Role of Empathy in Museum Practice**

Krznaric’s work with the Empathy Museum is but one small example of the types of civically engaged, human-centered practices that have been instituted in an effort to expand the role that museums serve in building empathy and human connection in our communities. Staff working for museums across the globe are launching new efforts to bring people together, facilitate open dialogue, and elevate the voices and stories of marginalized groups to promote greater understanding.

At my own institution, the Portland Art Museum, the Object Stories initiative<sup>3</sup> since 2010 has embraced storytelling and community voices in Portland. A recent exhibition on view from February through May 2016 featured powerful stories and personal objects from local refugee communities. The exhibition was co-created with Portland Meet Portland, a local nonprofit focused on welcoming immigrants and refugees arriving in our city by creating mutually beneficial mentoring opportunities that promote cross cultural learning, enhance work skills, and build trust.<sup>4</sup>

The work of Portland Meet Portland and this Object Stories exhibition helped to highlight the important contributions that immigrants and refugees bring to their new homes here in Oregon, and also offered this area's longer-term residents an opportunity to learn from these newcomers—their stories, resilience, and unique cultures. Visitors to the gallery (around 60,000 people) had the opportunity to listen to participants' stories, leave a welcome message for these storytellers, and learn more about advocacy efforts and local nonprofits working with immigrant and refugees in Portland (which ranks 11th among U.S. cities resettling international refugees).



View of the Object Stories gallery at Portland Art Museum during exhibition *Objects and the Making of a New Life*.

Photo by Cody Maxwell.

For example, I continue to be amazed and inspired by the Multaqa Project developed in 2015 by Berlin's state museums, which brings in a group of refugees from Iraq and Syria to serve as Arabic-speaking guides.<sup>2</sup> The project title, Multaqa, means "meeting point" in Arabic. The tours are designed to give refugees and newcomers access to the city's museums and facilitate the interchange of diverse cultural and historical experiences. The tours have been so popular, according to a recent report, that the organizers are looking to expand the program to include "intercultural workshops, which the Berlin public can also participate in" (Neo 2016).

The Canadian Museum for Human Rights, an inspiring institution in so many ways, currently houses six different exhibits that explore the tragic story and legacy of the Indian Residential School System, one of Canada's most pressing human rights concerns. As a national museum and hub of human rights education, the Museum has an important role to play in efforts toward reconciliation between indigenous and non-indigenous people in Canada. As is stated in the summary report of Canada's Truth and Reconciliation Commission: "Through their exhibits, education outreach, and research programs, all museums are well positioned to contribute to education for reconciliation" (2015). The team at the Canadian Museum of Human Rights is also working to keep the conversation alive and involve the voices of its communities, especially through its Share Your Story Project that allows anyone to record their own story about human rights or listen to the individual experiences of others.

In their book *Cities, Museums, and Soft Power*, Gail Dexter Lord and Ngaire Blankenship discuss the human social behaviors of *bridging* and *bonding* that museums have the distinct potential to promote and amplify, especially through public programs, education, and exhibitions. Their final essay offers a comprehensive set of strategies for how museums can be of greater value to their cities and communities:

"Museums and cities have a strong role to play together in bridging and bonding. They bring

people together at similar life stages ... or with identity in common ... where they can share their experiences. Museums also bridge among identities, offering a public place to bring different groups together around similar interests" (222).

Also featured in this issue of the *Journal of Folklore and Education*, the International Museum of Folk Art's Gallery of Conscience, inaugurated in 2010, serves as truly unique and visionary example of how museums are experimenting in this area. The Gallery's goal is to be an agent of positive social change by engaging history, dialogue, and personal reflection around issues of social justice and human rights. Since inception, exhibitions have explored how traditional artists come together in the face of change or disaster to provide comfort, counsel, prayer, and hope through their art. This focus has earned the space membership in the International Coalition of the Sites of Conscience. (See pages 3-34, this issue.)

### **Building a Broader Culture of Advocacy**

The type of museum practice I've highlighted is certainly not new. Many of us read about this work in museum blogs (such as Inluseum, Thinking About Museums, Visitors of Color, Queering the Museum, Brown Girls Museum Blog, etc.) and emails from the Center for the Future of Museums. Many of us work on programs like these ourselves. But what concerns me is that across much of this practice, I find a lack of a broader institutional culture of support. Too many community-based projects like those above end up being relegated to education staff, isolated from the core mission of an institution, or left entirely invisible. And this lack of supports extends beyond the walls of the museum. When journalists, scholars, and critics write about museums and exhibitions, they frequently ignore or denigrate the spaces that invite visitor engagement and community participation. There are even individuals in my own field of museum education who refer to empathy-building practices and affective learning strategies as too "touchy feely."

We museum people need to work together to build a stronger, collective culture of support and advocacy for museum practice based in empathy, inclusion, and social impact. This is some of the most meaningful, relevant work in museums right now. People across our institutions—not just educators but directors, curators, marketing staff, board members, donors, etc.—need to be publicly and visibly proud of the programs, exhibitions, and projects that actively embrace individual stories, dialogue about provocative questions, and the diverse and rich lived experiences of those living in our communities. More comprehensive support for this work can lead to an expanded focus on social impact and community engagement in a museum's strategic goals and mission, in its exhibition and program planning process, and in its allocation of resources.

So let's **all** be prouder of the work we're doing in museums to bring people together and learn more about ourselves and each other—from tiny one-off gatherings and events to much larger sustained initiatives.

### **Time for an Empathy Revolution in Museums**

How do we start an empathy revolution in museums? How do we more fiercely recognize and support the meaningful work that museum professionals are already leading to support open dialogues around the challenging, relevant issues of our time? And how do we radically expand this work to build a stronger culture of empathy within museums—one that measures future success through our capacity to bring people together, respond to local realities, foster conversations, and contribute to strong and resilient communities?

In 2013, the Museums Association of the U.K. launched its Museums Change Lives campaign, establishing a set of principles based on research, conferences sessions, online forums, open public workshops, and discussions with charities and social enterprises.<sup>5</sup> The core principles they developed

from their vision for the social impact of museums are worth sharing to move this discussion forward and enact change:

- Every museum is different, but all can find ways of maximizing their social impact.
  - Everyone has the right to meaningful participation in the life and work of museums.
  - Audiences are creators as well as consumers of knowledge; their insights and expertise enrich and transform the museum experience for others.
  - Active public participation changes museums for the better.
  - Museums foster questioning, debate, and critical thinking.
  - Good museums offer excellent experiences that meet public needs.
  - Effective museums engage with contemporary issues.
  - Social justice is at the heart of the impact of museums.
  - Museums are not neutral spaces.
  - Museums are rooted in places and contribute to local distinctiveness.
- (Museums Association 2013, 4)

These principles, as with much of their vision, are inspiring—but too often we stop there, feeling inspired but lacking action. The Museums Association report continues, “It’s time for your museum to respond to hard times by making a bigger difference. It’s time for you to play your part in helping museums change people’s lives” (13). The report concludes with a set of ten actions that will help your museum improve its social impact. Here is a slightly abbreviated, edited list:

1. Make a clear commitment to improve your museum’s social impact (i.e. having strategic goals).
2. Reflect on your current impacts; listen to users and non-users; research local needs.
3. Research what other museums are doing.
4. Seek out and connect with suitable partners.
5. Work with your partners as equals.
6. Allocate resources.
7. Innovate and be willing to take risks.
8. Reflect on and celebrate your work. Learn from and with partners and participants.
9. Find ways for partners and participants to have a deep impact on your museum. Bring more voices into interpretation and devolve power.
10. Strive for long-term sustained change based on lasting relationships with partners and long-term engagement with participants.

Print these out, put them on your office wall, bring them to staff meetings, share these with your visitors and audiences, and have some open conversations about the “so what” of museums. Take these principles and action steps seriously. Build a broader team to advocate for the work you’re already doing at your institution; rethink existing programs; and bravely propose new projects and partnerships that better serve your community. See how a human-centered focus on empathy and social impact might change your own practice, your museum, and your community.

The best museums are now striving to realise their full potential for society and are far more than just buildings and collections. They have two-way relationships with communities.... They are becoming increasingly outward looking, building more relationships with partners. They are welcoming more people as active participants. (Museums Association 2013, 5)

Let’s be a part of making this happen!



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### Endnotes

1. Roman Krznaric quoted by Brigid Delaney in "Philosopher Roman Krznaric: 'We Are in More Urgent Need of Empathy Than Ever Before.'" *The Guardian*, February 18, 2016, <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2016/feb/19/empathy-expert-roman-krznaric-on-shifting-away-from-20th-century-individualism>.
2. For more information see "Multaq: Museum as Meeting Point–Refugees as Guides in Berlin Museums," <http://www.smb.museum/en/museums-institutions/museum-fuer-islamische-kunst/collection-research/research-coopeation/multaka.html>.
3. For more information see <http://portlandartmuseum.org/objectstories>.
4. See <http://www.portlandmeetportland.org>.
5. See <http://www.museumsassociation.org/museums-change-lives>.

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# Learning Application: Have Conversations Here

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*Talking in museums is one of the things that makes them matter.*  
~Adam Gopnik

## Why Dialogue?

Dialogue is a powerful mode of conversation that genuinely seeks mutual understanding. It can occur between friends, students, co-workers, family members, and even among strangers. And it can certainly occur between people who do not share the same experiences, perspectives, or ideas. Learning to listen carefully and disagree respectfully are essential skills in today's world.

- Share your views.
- Ask questions.
- Listen with care.

## What can museums do to encourage dialogue?

The Portland Art Museum starts with an invitation:

*You are welcome to talk and have conversations here at the museum. We encourage you to use the galleries throughout the museum as spaces for dialogue, while always remaining respectful of all visitors. Explore together, look closely, and find a place within the museum to sit and talk about what you see and experience.*

The museum identifies specific galleries for people to visit that have the potential for rich dialogue. It asks visitors to consider visiting artworks on view that more directly explore some of the politically- and socially-charged issues seen in the news today, including policing, racial violence, stereotypes, and social justice activism.

After the participant takes some time to experience these artworks, think about their responses, and have a conversation with someone else in which perspectives are shared and heard, the Portland Art Museum asks visitors to consider these questions:

- *How have events related to these issues affected you personally?*
- *What life experiences of your own might connect with the work by these artists?*
- *How are these artists challenging you?*

## Reflection

Use this guide to spark conversations with others—whether during or after a visit to the museum. Encourage your students and visitors to think about any insights you've gained and how you might extend this experience.

- *Have you noticed anything new about yourself and how you view the world?*
- *How might these conversations help you better understand someone else's perspective?*
- *How might you create more opportunities for reflection and dialogue?*

## Talking and Listening Strategies for Families and Younger Students

Talking about issues of social justice and violence with kids can be challenging. Children are curious and constantly ask questions about the world around them. In one breath, they might ask about a range of topics — from the weather to something they heard on the news. Whether at home, in the classroom, or at the museum, it can be difficult to know how respond when difficult questions arise.

To help support these types of conversations at a museum for all ages, here are a few flexible suggestions. These strategies might help a classroom or family talk together about some of the socially- or politically-charged artworks one might encounter during a visit to the museum.

*Start by finding out what your child knows.*

When a difficult issue comes up, ask an open-ended question like "What have you heard about it?" This encourages your child to let you know what they are thinking.

*Ask a follow up question.*

Depending on your child's comments, ask another question to get them thinking, such as "Why do you think that happened?" or "What do you think people should do to help?"

*Explain simply.*

Give children the information they need to know in a way that makes sense to them. At times, a few sentences are enough.

*Listen and acknowledge.*

If a child sees or hears something that might worry and upset them, recognize their feelings and comfort them. This acknowledges your child's feelings, helps them feel secure, and encourages them to tell you more.

### **To Learn More...**

Learn how the Portland Art Museum is encouraging more dialog about art and its larger social and cultural context at <https://artmuseumteaching.com/2016/08/31/have-conversations-here>.

### **Acknowledgements**

Guide adapted from Portland Art Museum's *Have Conversations Here*.

<http://portlandartmuseum.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/07/PAM-Have-Conversations-Here.pdf>

"Talking and Listening Strategies for Families and Younger Students" adapted from "Talking with Kids about the News," a resource for parents available online at

<http://pbs.org/parents/talkingwithkids/news>

### **ADDITIONAL RESOURCES**

This guide draws from the following projects and resources to develop these strategies to promote active, productive dialogue and reflection. Learn more by visiting the websites listed here:

PBS – *Talking with Kids* <http://pbs.org/parents/talkingwithkids>

*Ask Big Questions* <http://askbigquestions.org>

*Teaching Tolerance* <http://tolerance.org>

*The Public Conversation Project* <http://publicconversations.org>

*Teaching for Change* <http://teachingforchange.org>



Flyer design by Ariel Mack. Courtesy Native Eyes Film Showcase.

Based in Tucson, Arizona, the Arizona State Museum's collections, research, and exhibits focus on the Native peoples of the greater Southwest. The museum sits on the ancestral lands of the Tohono O'odham Nation. The other prominent tribe in the area is the Pascua Yaqui Tribe. The Native Eyes Film Showcase, started in 2004, is produced collaboratively by Arizona State Museum (ASM), Tohono O'odham Nation Cultural Center and Museum (TONCCM), Pascua Yaqui Computer Clubhouse (PYCC), and Indigenous Strategies (IS). PYCC teaches media skills to their young community members, and IS works with educational institutions to promote Native-specific education. TONCCM's purpose is their community—to promote, preserve, and protect the history and the land of the Tohono O'odham; to perpetuate the culture. For an anthropology museum, like ASM, it is important to work with and show that these Native communities still exist and to further cultural understanding among the museum's audiences. Native Eyes is one program that serves these objectives for both museums and our educational partners.

by Lisa Falk and Jennifer Juan

Mainstream media do not present Native stories from the point of view of Indians, which is exactly what the Native Eyes Film Showcase strives to do. This collaborative program presents films by and about indigenous peoples for diverse audiences: intergenerational, multicultural, and tribal. We screen narrative stories that explore Native American family relations, documentaries about leadership, activism, cultural traditions, land, and water from an Indian perspective, and imaginative shorts from indigenous filmmakers in the U.S., Canada, New Zealand, and Australia as well as select films featuring Native stories by non-Native filmmakers. Screenings are augmented with discussions presented by Native specialists who can address the



content and perspectives presented in the films. Each member of our collaborative programming committee brings different perspectives, resources, community needs, and audiences to the mix. Our combined views along with our willingness to invite other community partners to join us in planning and implementation makes programming more relevant and meaningful.

Our programs give Native youth<sup>1</sup> opportunities to see Native films and make connections to things of importance in their own communities. When youth view films by Indian filmmakers, they have an impact; and meeting Native filmmakers serves as an inspiration. These experiences provoke a realization that they can have a voice in telling their own stories and that these stories are worth telling from their perspective. They can challenge Hollywood's representations of Native peoples and what is documented by non-Native filmmakers. One participant in a program we did for Tohono O'odham elders agrees that film programs have the potential to go beyond a screening, "I think it is important that the youth be involved to watch the movie and participate in discussion and go out and educate the community."<sup>2</sup> An adult participant who came to a related youth program said it made her "even more committed to working with Native youth in my community—to inspire them to understand that they can make a difference, that they are not powerless."<sup>3</sup>

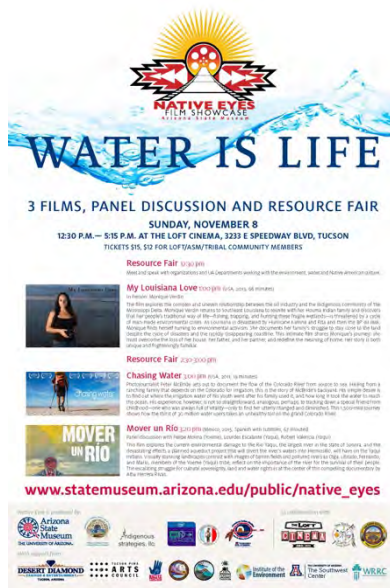


Jerry Carlyle holds a newspaper article about the Arizona Water Settlement Act.

Photo by Gilbert Valenzuela, Pascua Yaqui Computer Clubhouse.

Each year the Native Eyes team meets to review films and reflect on how the screening programs can have deeper impact. Our goals include breaking stereotypes; furthering understanding of Native American and indigenous culture, history, and contemporary issues; and providing skill-based workshops that encourage media making and storytelling from a Native perspective. These workshops have included storyboarding, acting, filmmaking, camera and editing skills, and using tools at hand such as cellphones and stop-motion materials to create videos. In addition, to help hone youth's understanding, self-assurance, and efficacy, workshops have also had a call-to-action orientation. They have included examples of social justice efforts and strong Native leadership models.

Sometimes program ideas are sparked from a conversation one of our partners may have with a community member. Two years ago, with the anniversary of the Arizona Water Settlement Act, Jerry Carlyle, vice chairman of the San Xavier District in the Tohono O'odham Nation, was speaking with Melodie Lopez (IS) about the role of his mother in passing this historic water rights act that restored water to the tribe. She queried, "Do your youth know this history?" Upon realizing that most probably did not, they discussed a program to share the history and meaning of water to the O'odham people. As it happened, many films the Native Eyes team was reviewing brought up issues regarding water and leadership. A partnership was sprung.



Flyer designs by Ariel Mack.  
Courtesy Native Eyes Film Showcase

Conceived of as a one-time event, this resulted in two years of programming. We offered a series of public screenings, panel discussions, resource fairs, a walk for water and daylong workshops for Native elders and youth to learn about and reflect on the meaning of water in their community with the hope of inspiring involvement and action around these pressing contemporary and cultural issues. The programs also shared Native perspectives on this shared resource with the broader Tucson community. These programs, titled *Water Is Life*, encompassed many aspects related to water—including foodways, traditional prayers, gardening, farming, art expressions, science, and community history and lifeways. Without planning it, the program also created an opportunity for cross cultural sharing and collaboration among tribes. In fact, a participant who brought a youth group to the *Water Is Life Walk* cited her primary reason for their attendance was “to encourage a youth group to attend and partner with other entities and to encourage learning about other’s culture and common theme of water, and to know others.”<sup>4</sup>

One inspiring moment during the first year’s fall youth program was when we went to the Wa:k Hikdan, a sacred riparian area<sup>5</sup> made possible by the flow of water gained via the Arizona Settlement Water Act. Upon arrival Vice Chairman Carlyle led everyone in a traditional O’odham prayer in O’odham during which each reflected inwardly about the morning’s presentations about water. A few feet away, Felipe Molina, a Yaqui elder, shared a traditional Yaqui song in Yoeme in honor of water and our coming together. It is unusual to have this cross cultural sharing of prayer traditions happening in unison with participation by all in attendance. This opened the door for a feeling of connection between the two tribes, which modeled respect of each other’s traditions and allowed us to talk about common values and concerns.

The day ended with youth and adults working in small groups to discuss issues in their communities, what was important to them about water, and actions they could take related to this topic. In reflection, one student realized “that even being an urban Native there are roles I can still fulfill to help with water rights.”<sup>6</sup> High on the groups’ action item lists were listening to elders, teaching others, gardening, and a walk to raise awareness of the many roles and sacredness of water. This gave the Native Eyes team our marching orders to continue working with the community for a spring program.

In March, Native students, families, elders, and political leaders came together for the *Water Is Life Walk*. This walk was designed by students and elders working with us, and tribal administration

choosing and clearing the path. Members of the broader Tucson community joined with members of the Tohono O’odham and Pascua Yaqui tribes at dawn to walk eight miles along the Central Arizona Project (CAP) waterline, ending at the Wa:k Hikdan. Along the way, students presented about political issues affecting traditional Yaqui lifeways due to the lack of clean water access for their brethren in Mexico and about the use of water to support O’odham farming and ceremonial practices. Elders from San Xavier joined us near an old abandoned water tank. They told stories about how in the past, when water was plentiful, this land supported cattle ranching, which is no longer possible in a dry desert. A shared meal of traditional foods grown on the San Xavier Coop Farm (sustained by CAP water) along with more stories and prayers closed the walk. Learning about our shared concerns and similarities in traditions linked to water taught us how important it is to listen to each other’s stories and that we can work together to ensure our future.



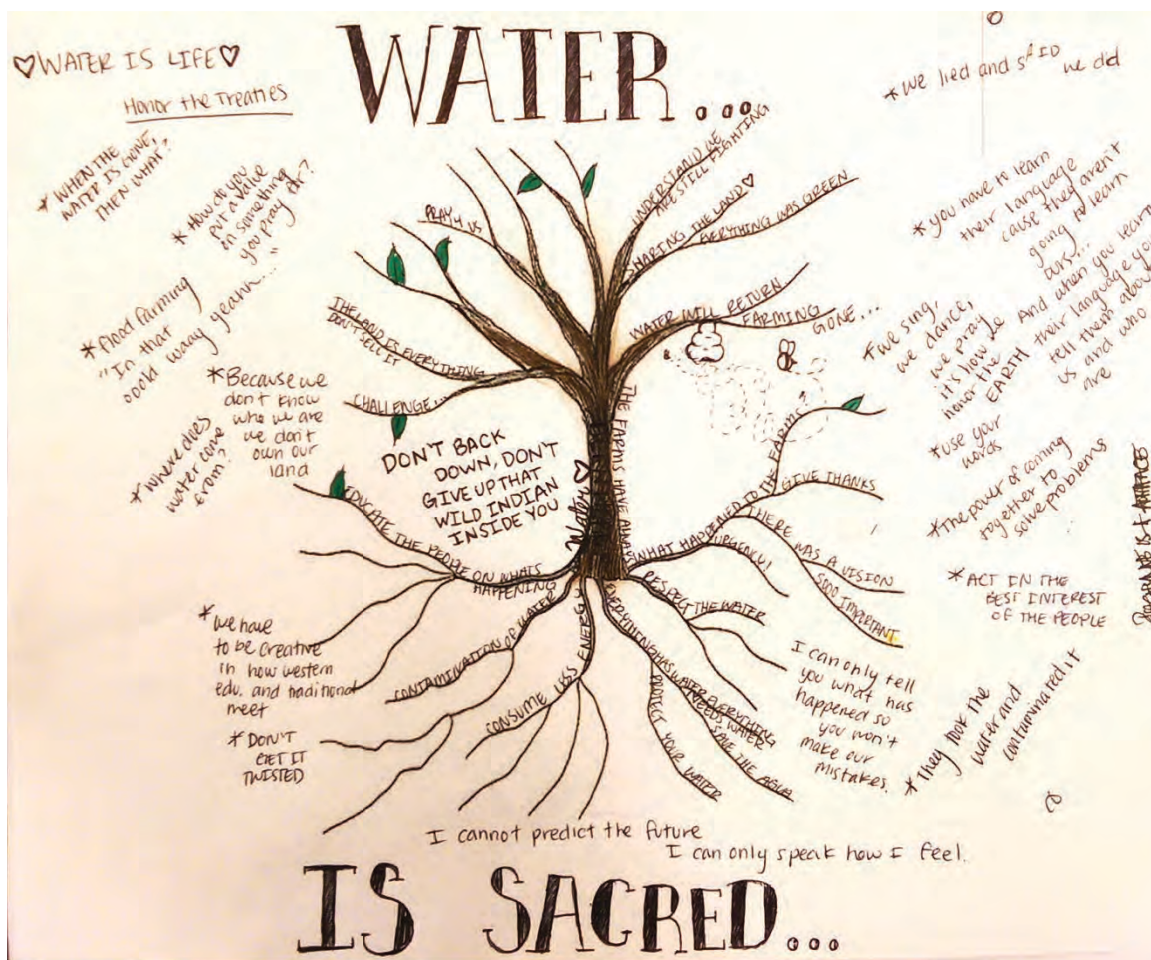
Photo by Lisa Falk, Arizona State Museum.

Overall, Native students who attended the youth workshop and Native and non-Native attendees at the walk found it satisfied a different style of learning and connection than more science-based discussions of water. The program helped them understand a deeper, cultural base to water issues and inspired them to get involved with their community and issues that affect culture and shared natural resources. One student stated, “It made me want to be more involved in my tribe and culture, it totally changed my view on water. It was amazing and eye opening.” The programs opened their eyes to different ways of thinking about contemporary problems and how they affect distinct groups. The value of this orientation was expressed by attendees: “I was uplifted by the communal, spiritual response to water as our source of life vs. the more mainstream scientific intellectual approach to water only.” “I am passionate about seeing through the eyes of Native youth leaders and elders given the urgency of our water crisis and the fact that spiritual, communal values must define our response to the crisis.” One university student stated that as a result she now conducts “scientific research and presentations organized in a way that is rooted in indigenous views of water: cultural and traditional uses.”<sup>7</sup>

Others who already work on water issues found new connections that would help in their work. They appreciated the access to different cultural and generational views of water. “I’ve been intensely active with water for a long while, but the walk made me hungry to participate more with Native youth water leaders. It also led to community members discussing the need for a youth-led water conference.” “I was inspired by the speakers, and the connections I made during the walk have led to numerous shared projects between the organization I work for and the communities in the San Xavier District.”<sup>8</sup>

We found that everyone who came to these programs, whether or not they were the primary intended audience, found personal meanings and connections that inspired them. The value of multigenerational programming was emphasized: “Bridging the youth with elders and adults is necessary for empowerment and knowledge.” “[I realized] that perhaps I can gain strength and lend strength to others, that this is trans-generational work.” This is an important lesson to museum and





Tree Notes by Pachynne Ignacio, Baboquivari High School, Tohono O'odham Nation.

other cultural programmers from outside communities. Too often our programs are only intended for one age group.

We also discovered that meaningful programs have a life of their own. If they truly resonate, the community may want to continue them, but it might not be for the same reasons or in the original format that the museum intended. And this is okay, in fact it means you went beyond “surface” programming. It opens the door for true community partnerships.

We thought we were done with *Water Is Life* after the walk. A call from the San Xavier Farm Coop initiated our second year of programming. They liked what had been done and wanted to explore another program. At the meeting of our now very diverse and plentiful partners, *Water Is Life* evolved to include a specific day for elders to share memories related to water; a second youth daylong workshop that incorporated hands-on art making, cooking, and farming activities into the program; another public screening of new films with a panel discussion and resource fair. Without realizing it, this second year would cement a relationship with members of the Cherokee community in Oklahoma.

At the elder program, held at San Xavier, we started by screening a powerful film, *Cherokee Word for Water*, that exemplified using community values to solve problems, and held a discussion with Charlie Soap, whose work with Wilma Mankiller was memorialized in the film. After a lunch of



traditional foods prepared by the San Xavier Farm Coop, placards on the tables promoted further discussion. These had historic photographs from the TONCCM's archives matched with culturally relevant questions related to water. The elders shared their memories, each building on the comments of the other: "Youth should know water is important for everyday living—for animals, plants and human beings." "Plants and animals that come when it rains: wild wheat, rabbits, javalinas, rattlesnakes. All of these are significant to the O'odham." "We drank (everybody drank) *šu:daḡi* from the *ha'a*. It tasted fresh and cold. We had one inside our house and under our shade *wa'tho*." "I learned from my grandparents that you take a new child in its first rain, naked, and bathe them, blessing them."<sup>9</sup> At each table college students, Farm Coop workers, and Native Eyes team members jotted down the memories of the elders, which were taped to a River of Memory on the wall—our version of a community timeline. These thoughts would flow into the youth workshop held a month later.

At the first year's youth workshop we had speakers from four Native nations: Tohono O'odham, Pascua Yaqui, Navajo, and Hopi. They each brought different cultural and knowledge perspectives to the table: elders, political leaders, water specialists, and young activists. We also heard from national leaders LaDonna Harris (Comanche), Charlie Soap (Cherokee), and filmmaker Juliana Brennan (Comanche) about becoming involved and taking action. Because the second year was being offered at the initiative of San Xavier Farm Coop, there was more emphasis on O'odham, but everyone also wanted to include their Yaqui neighbors. Native Eyes team members made an effort to encourage attendance by outside tribes and pan-Native students. Students came from the Pascua Yaqui community in Tucson and Guadalupe (an hour away), from the Ak-Chin Reservation (also an hour away), various communities on the large O'odham Nation, including from the Tohono O'odham Community College (TOCC), and pan-Native students from the University of Arizona and Tucson high schools. While aimed at youth, adult community members and elders from across the Tohono O'odham Nation asked to join us and participated in the discussions following each speaker. They felt it was important both to talk to and listen to the youth.



Drawing by Shamie Encinas, San Xavier Farm Coop.  
Photo by Lisa Falk, Arizona State Museum.



## Elder Questions

At the elders program we paired questions with historic photographs on table tents. These were placed on the lunch tables and talk turned to these after the meal. Here is a sample of our questions:

### RAIN

- The smell of rain, *şegai*, reminds me of...
- What memories come when it rains?
- When it rains, I think of...
- When it rained, I remember my family used to...
- My parents/grandparents told me the rain meant/was...
- As a child, what did you do when it rained?
- Which plants and animals only come when the rains come? Do any of these hold special significance to the O'odham?

### WATER

- My parents/grandparents told me water meant/was...
- Where did your grandparents get their water? Your parents? Your children/grandchildren now?
- What changes have you seen in water in your community?
- Did/does your family have a special water-related tradition/ritual?
- Can you remember the taste of water from the *şu:daǵı ha'a*? Describe it. What are the memories you have about/around *the şu:daǵı ha'a*?



Held on Tohono O'odham land, one of the most emotional experiences was when Felipe Molina and his brother played and sang Yaqui ceremonial songs about butterflies and water in Yoeme. They invited those who wanted to come forward to be blessed with the water from their water drum that had been embodied with the spirit of the songs. Everyone came forward.

Again we shared a meal of foods nurtured by CAP water and grown at the San Xavier Coop Farm. Afterward we went to the Farm and put thoughts to action. Lead by Clifford Pablo, an elder and teacher at the TOCC, students dug in the earth to create a rainwater catchment garden area for fruit trees. Working with the Farm Coop's chef they participated in a cook-off using traditional ingredients, judged by Vice Chairman Carlyle and Charlie Soap. They interviewed elders about their memories of how water was a part of their lives. They learned introductory basketmaking from Terrol Dew Johnson, an award-winning O'odham basketmaker. They made beaded bracelets with clay beads embossed with Native water symbols and discussed cultural symbols with Andrew Vigil-Emerson, a young Navajo artist, and worked on a graffiti wall, spray painting messages about water. They also read, discussed, and added to the River of Time water memories. A popular activity was screening t-shirts with members of the 1519 Rebellion, a Yaqui artist collective, that said Water Is Life, *şu:daǵı 'o Wud T- duakud* (O'odham), *Va'am Yee Hiapsitua* (Yaqui) that would remind participants of the day's ideas.

Reflecting on the day's activities, a student wrote, "Art does play an important role to communities because it provides visual healing, spiritual boost and harmony and cultural connection." Another stated, "Art is a wonderful medium of expression which

can be used as an outlet for internal and external struggles. Art can be used to express community issues without words; a silent message.”<sup>10</sup>

In our evaluation, we found that 60 percent of participants at the first youth workshop and walk felt as a result of attending these programs they became more involved with their community and strove to learn about their community’s history, cultural traditions, or issues surrounding water and were more inclined to take on leadership roles or social action projects. Traditions and cultural beliefs will only be maintained if the young value them. These programs were a start at connecting the youth to their elders and to the stories of their communities. The shared memories, songs, and traditions also connected youth to language as they heard O’odham and Yaqui words sprinkled through the talks and activities, such as *ṣu:daḡi* (water in O’odham). Those from other Native Nations went home hungry to learn their traditions and related words. For us, we know that future Native Eyes programs need intergenerational connections bringing youth, elders, and the broader community together.

Cultural programs that derive from the wellspring of the heart take us in amazing directions of sharing and understanding. At our first year’s *Water Is Life* programming, Charlie Soap from the Cherokee Nation of Oklahoma emphasized communities working together to overcome problems creatively. He called on the spirit of his wife Wilma Mankiller and the Cherokee tradition of *gandugi*, people coming together to solve a problem. This was powerful and probably inspired the *Walk for Water*. The second year, Charlie returned to join us at an elder’s program that so inspired him a month later he returned with a crew of Cherokee to participate in the youth program. Their experience inspired the beginning of community and family gardens back on the Cherokee Reservation in Oklahoma. Closer to us, the San Xavier Farm Coop is exploring a young farmers program.



#### PLANTS

- Did your family ever gather wild plants? What plants did you harvest? What did you have to do to get them? What time of year did you gather them?
- What did your grandparents grow? How did they garden?

#### BASKETS

- Who was the first person you saw make baskets? Where did they gather their materials? Are these still available today?
- Did your family ever have to travel a long distance to get materials for baskets?

Photos on pp 56-57 by Bernard Siquieros, Tohono O’odham Nation Cultural Center and Museum.



Let's back up. Why did the museums work with the community to create these rich programs? We were invited. And then we took the backseat. We let the community partners tell us what was important to them. They identified topics and helped secure speakers who could address these from a Native perspective. They had ideas of activities relevant to where they live and work. We helped keep the discussion focused and brought additional human and financial resources to the table. We took care of project logistics that required materials and resources from the outside, while our community partners stepped up to take responsibility for the site-based logistics. We were able to make broader connections by linking the films into the programs. The partnership deepened the discussions at the public screenings because the community members and youth came to town to join us. They were able to express that while concern for water is universal, there are specific community and culturally based stories, uses, and concerns. This expanded the conversations and understanding by all participating in the screening programs.

What made it work? Native Eyes did not ask for anything from our community partners. The intent was solely to work together, creating a true partnership. What followed was because of the relationships and respect for each other that were forged.

Unexpected results included adding oral history interviews to the San Xavier Community Archives and the TONCCM collections, as well as metadata on the photographs used at the elders program. For the community and museums alike, the information shared by the participants also points to possible new programs such as making pottery water jugs and traditional foods tasting, cooking, and gardening programs that will also add to our knowledge of these practices and can be linked to museum collection objects, photographs, and documents. It opens the doors for folklife documentation projects taken on by the community members and can give direction to filmmaking workshops. The community might turn to us to partner with them, or perhaps they will want to do them on their own. But if called upon, we are eager to work and learn alongside them.

Museums can be a catalyst for communities to come together to design something authentic. The invitation to continue *Water Is Life* gave this Native Eyes program legitimization from the community, and for us outsiders made us realize that museum programming can be meaningful and go deep. If museums want to have real connections with their community, they have to embrace equal partnerships. Museums need to step back, provide resources, help with organizational planning of programs, but let the partners shape the intent and content of programs. Museums need to acknowledge the expertise of their community partners. All partners need to practice respect for what each brings to the table. This should be the norm as the result can be powerful, meaningful programs that honor cultural knowledge and link unique communities together.

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#### **Endnotes**

1. For our programs we consider young people from 6<sup>th</sup> grade through university PhD students to be youth.
2. Native Eyes Elder Program, San Xavier District, Tohono O'odham Nation, 11/5/2015.
3. Native Eyes Evaluation Survey for Water Is Life Youth Summit and Walk, 9/2015.
4. Native Eyes Evaluation Survey for Water Is Life Youth Summit and Walk, 9/2015



5. Riparian refers to land usually along a flowing river bank. In Arizona it is used to refer to lands that are fed water, whether naturally or piped in to create the same environment.
6. Native Eyes Evaluation Survey for Water Is Life Youth Summit and Walk, 9/2015.
7. Native Eyes Evaluation Survey for Water Is Life Youth Summit and Walk, 9/2015.
8. Native Eyes Evaluation Survey for Water Is Life Youth Summit and Walk, 9/2015.
9. Elder comments from River of Memory activity, San Xavier, 11/5/2015.
10. Native Eyes Water is Life Youth Summit Evaluation, 12/5/2015.

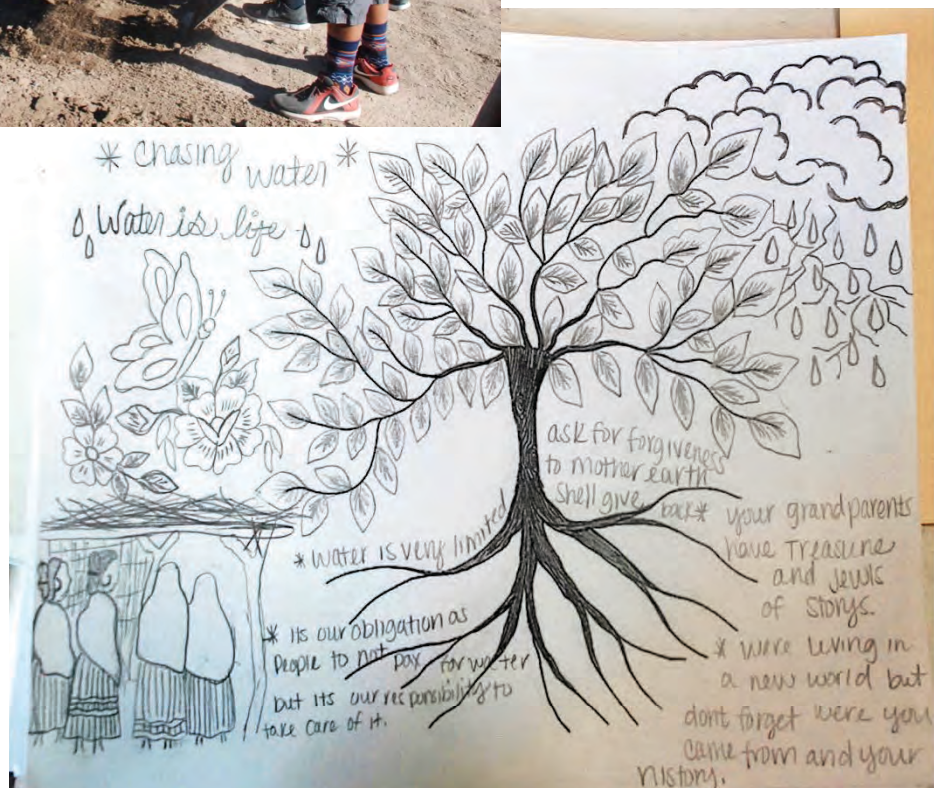
**URLS**

Native Eyes Film Showcase [http://www.statemuseum.arizona.edu/public/native\\_eyes](http://www.statemuseum.arizona.edu/public/native_eyes)  
 Year 1 Water Is Life 2014 [http://www.statemuseum.arizona.edu/public/native\\_eyes/native-eyes-2014.shtml](http://www.statemuseum.arizona.edu/public/native_eyes/native-eyes-2014.shtml)  
 Year 2 Water Is Life 2015 [http://www.statemuseum.arizona.edu/public/native\\_eyes/native-eyes-2015.shtml](http://www.statemuseum.arizona.edu/public/native_eyes/native-eyes-2015.shtml)  
 San Xavier Farm Coop <http://www.sanxaviercoop.org>  
 San Xavier Farm Facebook page <https://www.facebook.com/San-Xavier-Co-Op-Farm-194464287256029>



Tree Notes by student, Hiaki High School, Pascua Yaqui Tribe.

Photo by Lisa Falk, Arizona State Museum.



# Writing as Alchemy: Turning Objects into Stories, Stories into Objects

by Rossina Zamora Liu and Bonnie Stone Sunstein

*The thing about a story is that you dream it as you tell it, hoping that others might then dream along with you, and in this way memory and imagination and language combine to make spirits in the head.*

~Tim O'Brien, *The Things They Carried*



## I. Lawn Chair as Trope

When Long moves into his next home, he will take only the things that matter most: his television, a Sony analog box that he and his wife purchased when they were married; his stereo, two giant Sony boomboxes, or blasters, from the '80s; and his television couch, which actually is a plastic lawn chair that he resized by sawing off half the legs to fit his height. These are the items that fill his living space, wherever he settles. Together and separately they carry with them memories—*stories*—invisible to the human eye, although perhaps not to the human heart.

Artifacts collect and tell stories. This, folklorists have long known. One broken *Sancai* Chinese vase, for example, from the Tang Dynasty at the Smithsonian's Arthur M. Sackler Gallery in Washington, DC, speaks the cultural aesthetics of the time, as well as the availability of material and resources with which the piece was crafted. From there, we reimagine the interior of a Chinese aristocrat's home. We see the nobleman admiring the ceramic. He is inspired by the three-color pottery—yellow, green, and white—before his eyes, and in this moment of elation, he tells his wife that when he dies, he would like the vase in his tomb—along with her and their servants.

And why wouldn't he?

In earlier times pottery of this sort was commonly used for burial. The vase offers us a sneak glimpse of religious beliefs, of social class constructions, and of ways in which ancient Chinese aristocrats legitimized their power (Bronner 1986; Prown 1982; Sims and Stephens 2005; Toelken 1996). Folk objects can “remind us of who we are and where we have been” (Bronner 1986, 214) and, for that matter, where we are going—as individuals, as a culture. What are cultural artifacts, after all, but the objectification of human ideas and values (Bronner 1986; Kouwenhoven 1964, 1999; Prown 1982; Schlereth 1985)? Of our mortality, our significance, our *stories*? And these stories, *our* stories, are shape-fluid and because they are, they possess infinite possibilities of forms aside from the initial artifact: forms that become visible in other ways with the help of the beholder who composes them, writes them, in fact, *transforms* them.

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About the photo: The woodcarving is by “Clark,” a participant in the workshop sessions of the Community Stories Writing Workshop at Shelter House, Iowa City.

Photo by Rossina Zamora Liu.

Each time Long sits on his plastic lawn chair, puts on his Bose headphones, and turns on a Vietnamese music video, for instance, he also feels the heaviness of that big Sony television box resting on his five-foot frame. He recalls the time when he and his wife forced it up the stairway of the apartment complex. The Macy's Thanksgiving Day Parade was the next day, after all, and what could be more American than to watch it close up via Japanese technology? As snapshots of the parade flash before him, he hears the drumbeats from high school bands marching down 38<sup>th</sup> Street and Herald Square in New York City. The band's percussions blur with a woman's high-pitched voice stretching out a Vietnamese ballad from the music video. He feels the vibrations of his lips humming or, perhaps, of his left foot tapping, *dancing*, along to the syncretic sounds. In these moments, he experiences the chair not just as a piece of furniture, but also as a material object that is physically, metaphorically, and sentimentally re-crafted into memories about a time that once was, when he and his family tried to live up to American conventions. In these moments, his heart aches. His mind races. He exhales. Then he puts pen to paper, and he writes.

Like all fine arts, writing gives form to things seen and unseen, transforming them into strings of words that, when woven together, materialize into possibilities not yet conceived, or at the least, not previously acknowledged or remembered. Writing, thus, gives shape to stories that the artifacts carry and in so doing reshapes the artifacts themselves. In "shifting the shape" of each artifact, thereby layering meaning to it, writing also changes the dynamics and exchanges between the writer and the object. Where we once experienced a story through its artifact, for instance, we later experience it as a poem, a song, or both. A plastic lawn chair, thus, is no longer a plastic lawn chair, but a plastic-lawn-chair-poem montage *about a life*.

Indeed, writing has the power to turn objects into stories and stories into objects. Writing is a double act of alchemy. Writing is a double act of magic.

## II. Magic in the Drafts

*Writing is a craft before it is an art; writing may appear magic, but it is our responsibility to take our students backstage to watch the pigeons being tucked under the magician's sleeve.*

~Donald M. Murray, *A Writer Teaches Writing*

So how does the magic work? How does a writer turn an object into a written story? How does that story reshape the object? The answers are less mysterious than the questions themselves. The short of it is: craft by way of drafts—lots of them. The longer discussion, of course, is much more involved, but one that demystifies the alchemy nonetheless and makes accessible the *magical* art of writing.

Pulitzer Prize winner and writing teacher Donald Murray tells us that so much of writing seems magical because we only witness the end product. We don't see the many drafts that writers must revise, or as he refers above, "the *pigeons*." We don't see the different strategies that writers consider during their processes. We don't see the honing and persisting and experimenting during their revisions. We don't see the *craft*. And particularly for writers who are not necessarily comfortable on the page, writing can seem dauntingly impossible with limited choices: the blank sheet of paper and the ink-filled pen, or the computer monitor and the perpetually blinking cursor. These writers don't see outside their options. They don't see the infinite shapes of the artifact.

As writing teachers whose teaching careers are influenced strongly by folklore, we see our roles as enabling writers to look carefully and to write about what they see (Geertz 2003 and 1988; Sunstein and Chiseri-Strater 2012). One way we do that is to invite them to engage with personal, material

objects. Artifacts, as we have discussed, can serve as entry points into composition, giving writers the reflective distance they need, and the opportunity to be expert on something while enhancing their own thinking. Rather than writing about a generalized feeling and/or other abstract ideas, for example, artifacts can stimulate writers' memories to do the reflecting; the reflecting can inspire writers to do the inferring; the inferring can connect writers to do the reshaping—of object, of story, of meaning. Artifacts can, thus, offer writers the details to do the *showing*.

“What do you see when you look at this artifact?” we ask writers. “A ‘big glob’ doesn’t tell readers enough. What’s big and globby to one person isn’t to another. What about color? Size? Shape? Movements? Measurements?”

“What do you smell when you take a whiff of it into your nose? Where else have you smelled something similar or something different? What do you recall when you smell this scent? ‘Yucky,’ for instance, doesn’t offer enough details. Does the smell take you to the memory of a place? A scene? Food? Drink? Something in the natural world?”

“What about sound? What do you hear? ‘A noise’ that makes you think of what?”

“What do you taste? Or perhaps what taste do you recall, do you imagine, do you think of? ‘Delicious?’ Like what?”

“And what about touch? Touch it. Work your fingers through it. What does it feel like physically? What does it feel like emotionally?”

Of course, inviting writers to use their five senses to engage with material objects is not new. It is one tool that allows writers to draw on their own experiences and knowledge to tell the story from their points of view. After all, everything has already been written but not necessarily in the way that each writer would, or *could*, write it. The five senses enable writers to narrow more easily in to the specifics—*their* specifics—to portray and translate “big” abstracts into vivid, tangible illustrations.

Mark Twain once said, “Don’t say the old lady screamed. Bring her on and let her scream.” What he means by this most fervent plea, of course, is the old writing cliché, “show, don’t tell.” It is the elixir of all magical writing—for every writer, for every storyteller, for every folklorist. We depend upon this wisdom to help breathe life into stories. We say, “Don’t *tell* people: ‘The fireworks were awesome.’ *Show* them: ‘Each boom exploded silvery greens, blues, reds into the dark, warm night; sulfured smoke seeped over the ocean.’” For writing that *shows* is writing that *performs* and thus invites the reader—the *audience*—to participate. When readers participate, they are talking to, and with, that performance. They are making meaning of it, relating to it, claiming parts of it, and importantly, they, too, are performing the magic (Abrahams 1992; Bauman 1984, 1992; Briggs 1988; Turner and Schechner 1988).

It may be helpful, too, to remind writers that the “writing” is already inscribed inside these objects; hence, when we are taking pen to paper, we are in essence interpreting it, *translating* it onto another medium. The stories have been collected and thus already live inside Long’s lawn chair and television set and boomboxes, for example. To tell those stories, he must bring life to them in a way that allows others to witness them also and, possibly, *participate* with him in making sense of them.

Granted, not every writer will compose with equal facility, at least not with pen and paper, keyboard and monitor. Many will prefer to be oral historians of their material artifacts. Some stories are best conveyed and performed orally (Bauman 1992; Lord 2000); some stories do not *want* to be in written



form. But for those that do, the process to transport and thus *transform* them from object to written medium can, and will—and should—vary with every writer. As writing teachers, we must work to understand such variability so that we may help writers uncover the hidden layers that are not so obvious, enabling them to write about their own histories, the very histories they sometimes do not readily see. Varying the gateways for writers' entries into composition is not only useful, but often necessary.

The truth is, whether they are in a museum, a graduate program, a public school classroom, or a community program, there are many writers who do not easily warm up to the idea of writing at the onset—writers like Clark, a U.S. Army veteran in his mid-50s, who had not picked up the pen since 10<sup>th</sup> grade until he discovered wood spirits inside a writing workshop at a homeless shelter; like Anna, a high-performing doctoral student who could not see beyond the academic jargon of English literary critique until she rediscovered (and researched) a version of *Snow White and Rose Red* in her grandmother's garage; or, like Nikki, an English Language Learner student at an urban high school who did not see the purpose of writing or math, let alone writing *in* a math class, until she discovered the ratio of fat to meat in pepperoni. Although Clark, Anna, and Nikki are three different writers from three different generations in three different contexts with three different writing processes, they are writers who also share resistances to writing stemmed from an unchanged writing culture of red-ink-pen explosions and narrative "I" taboos. Our approaches to working with them have entailed many process-oriented strategies, but one of the most successful is indeed the object biography.

In the following section we offer portraits of these writers: Clark, Anna, and Nikki. Although neither of us worked one-on-one with all three writers (as Clark worked with Rossina through a writing workshop at a homeless shelter while Anna and Nikki worked with Bonnie in a graduate writing class and a high school math class, respectively), we collaborated and consulted with each other regularly on using objects to facilitate their writing processes. The rest of this essay is our collective reflection on how artifacts gave the writers entry points into their stories, as well as how writing enabled them to reshape the artifacts themselves. For the very things that shaped their writing indeed became the very things that were shaped by them. We conclude with our favorite writing exercises.

### III. Three Portraits

*...at the end of the day, we're part of a long-running story. We just try to get our paragraph right.*

~Barack Obama to David Remnick, *The New Yorker*

#### **One Veteran Composes the Things He Carries: Magic inside a Homeless Shelter**

We begin with a portrait of "Clark" because his resistance to writing is one of the more common kinds that we see as teachers. Like many members who participated in the Community Stories Writing Workshop at the local homeless shelter in Iowa City, a writing group that Rossina founded in fall 2010 with, and for, the community, Clark did not consider himself a writer and preferred instead to be called a *storyteller*, deeming the designation more accessible because it did not, for him, carry the weighted judgments of grammar. "If you ask a guy to tell stories, he can just recall it and tell it the way he talks," he said. "But if you ask him to write a story, he has to think about spelling and punctuation and all that stuff that you get graded for, and he's like crap. How do I do that? I'm a storyteller because no teacher can tell me that I'm not."

And indeed a good storyteller he was. Clark could tell a story about *anything*—the different kinds of wood in the Midwest, the different things you could do with morel mushrooms, the different kinds of pens you could get for free (mostly from banks)—and capture full audience attention. There was a



Woodcarvings by Clark.  
Photos by Rossina Zamora Liu.

rhythm in his delivery, an intention in his pauses, a naturalness in his timing. There was an awareness of voice, of persona, of audience—there was a *performance* (Bauman 1992; Lord 2000). Still there was also hesitation, if not avoidance, when it came to writing, the activity for which the group was intended and named.

Until joining the workshop, Clark said he hadn't "picked up the pen since the 10<sup>th</sup> grade—except to endorse a check, which is never, or write a check to pay bills, which is more often than ideal." Ranked 452 out of 453 in high school, writing, for Clark, was a practice that happened only in school, in the same way that *writer* was a term that teachers granted only to students without red marks on their papers. He, like many writers with whom we've worked, did not initially see writing as a *way of being* that belonged to him. And yet, what we want to underscore about him is that he was also the same person who, after discovering his voice on the page, would drive out to his storage unit at two o'clock every morning, set up a battery-run lamp atop a few boxes, and compose short stories and essays into dawn. As a client of the homeless shelter at the time, writing, he said, was his "only escape and salvation."

Of course, Clark's discovery of self as writer did not happen overnight. For the first several sessions he would respond to the writing invitations, or *prompts*, only by way of talk. Regardless of the prompt, Clark would return to the walking sticks he carried and tell the writing group about his carvings. The essay below about wood spirits, for example, was the first he narrated orally, and one that he continued to retell for several sessions.

*Some people see this face and think it's Santa Claus, but it's not. It's a wood spirit and according to German folklore, they are protectors—guardians—of the Black Forest. They watch over the woods and protect it from fire destruction. They also represent good luck and such. I wear one on my neck, too, but usually I carve them onto walking sticks...*

*It used to take me a whole day to carve a face like this, but then I met Jim. Jim had this huge shop and that's all he did—make and sell walking sticks....he showed me how to do it more efficiently. The guy could carve these things in 20 to 30 minutes. I'm a little slower, although what used to take me a whole day, now only takes me about 45 minutes. Before Jim, my mushrooms also used to be all the same, just a bunch of patterns in a row. But now, they have shape and I have people asking if I attached some plastic*

*mushroom to the stick. They just can't believe that the morels are part of the stick—it's wood. I've carved these things over a hundred times, and you know what? None of them are alike.*

*I'm not sure why I'm telling this story other than to say carving represents an important part of who I am and what I've worked hard for.... The act gives me time to think through things. It's also soothing.... I don't want to have to mass produce these things. I don't want to not care about the details. I don't want it to not be therapeutic. I guess you can say, it's really about the time and the craft. I've done it for eight years so far.*

*This reminds me of that story about Pablo Picasso. He was sitting at a bar one day and some guy came up and asked him if he would draw something for him on a piece of napkin—sort of like an autograph. So Picasso drew something. I don't know what it was, but anyway, when he was done he handed the napkin to the guy, and the guy was all happy. "Hey thanks! That's pretty cool," he said. Then Picasso said, "Hey wait. I want \$10,000 for that."*

*"What? Why?" asked the guy. "It only took you 5 to 10 minutes to draw that," to which, Picasso said, "No. It took me 40 years."*

*That's the best way I can explain it—the craft of woodcarving. It's like that.*



It was evident that Clark was extremely proud of his craftsmanship. Woodcarving was what he knew best and it was a topic about which he was most comfortable talking. What's noteworthy during these deliveries was that, as he narrated the story, he would run his fingers along the indents of the carved faces, and sometimes embrace the sticks, bringing them closer to his side—*reading* and reflecting on the sticks as he went along by way of touch and sight.

As writing teachers we recognize that these are opportunities for deeper narrative exploration. Posing sensory questions could help writers potentially uncover the other layers of meaning behind the objects and, importantly, their stories. For Clark the questions included:

*"What did the first wood spirit look like when you carved it?"*

*"If you closed your eyes and opened your ears, what do you hear when you think about these wood spirits?"*

*"Of all the sticks you've carved, which was your favorite and why?"*

Each time Clark answered various renditions of these questions, he offered seemingly different answers but those embodied similar themes. For example, to the question "What did the first wood spirit look like?" Clark's answers ranged as follows:

*"It wasn't the first one I made, but it was one of the first. The stick was ugly and was very rough, but I was proud of it."*

“It wasn’t of a wood spirit. It was a mushroom. You couldn’t tell though because it looked like a hot dog. I made it for my daughter and it was one of the few things we did together.”

“It was on a short walking stick because my daughter was very young at the time. I don’t think she cared that it didn’t look like a mushroom.”

Each of these answers suggested a kind of nostalgia and sentimental relationship that weren’t evident in the story he told orally about the wood spirits. There were layers yet to be uncovered and with each conversation, or what writing teachers call “writing conference,” Clark went a little more in depth about his relationship with his daughter.

To facilitate his writing processes, the sessions of Clark talking about the wood spirits and reflecting on the sensory questions were audio-recorded (by Rossina). After multiple sessions, when it seemed as though he had exhausted what he could orally compose about the sticks, he was invited to listen to the recordings and transcribe the parts that he felt were important to convey in writing.

What was interesting, or *magical*, about Clark’s process—the movement between orality and written form—was the narrative shifts that occurred through the act of transcribing. That is, in writing it, he started revising his story, connecting different memories and sentimental details to it, shaping it into something other than about wood spirits, morel mushrooms, and Picasso. Eventually, he composed a written draft about the first stick he carved for his, then, five-year-old daughter. The story centered around a father-daughter walk through the woods, but the emotional layer was about his regret for not having spent more time with her.

Of course this process entailed many drafts through writing prompts and exploratory questions about artifacts—about the carvings on the sticks, about the various written drafts, about all of them. It also entailed a lot of encouragement because, again, initially he did not see the compositional potential in his orally articulated story and was rather resistant to putting his thoughts onto the page. As suggested, part of his hesitation stemmed from a history with teachers who overlooked strengths, be it because of standardized testing, expectations of correctness, strict attention to rigid models, or simply lack of knowledge about writing; we don’t have to go far to understand why red pens are sold in bulk.

And part of it, too, is that writing is often overlooked—*forgotten*—as a folk practice in our culture, even though early writings happened on walls of buildings, on textiles of clothing, and on surfaces of objects (such as those displayed in homes and museums, for instance). As a consequence, writing has become inaccessible; the very art and craft that once belonged to the *folk* has, in many ways, become “gentrified.” And so as teachers our role is to remind writers of the *folklore-writing* connection and thus, their familiarity—and right—to writing.

Not only did Clark’s story about wood spirits reveal his knowledge of woodcarving and folklore; it begged questions that he knew answers to: “Why woodcarving?” “Why do you carry these sticks with you?” “What is their significance to you and your life?” “What was the first stick you carved, that you were most proud of?” “And why?” These questions were opportunities—*invitations*—for him to draw from his own knowledge and to build on it. They offered him a way to explore narrative possibilities behind the objects and his carvings.





Clark's bag full of pens.  
Photos by Rossina Zamora Liu.



Anna Williams' own book.  
Photo by Anna Williams.

Clark would eventually go on to write many stories: an essay about local heroism, loss of his father, memories of his first horse. These stories were therapeutic for him to tell, as they were transformative for him write. Over time, he also collected and carried additional artifacts, those reflective of his newly found storyteller-writer identity, such as black and white composition notebooks because he assumed, "the kids still use them in language arts class." Or those free pens he collected from various venues, mainly local banks and job fairs. One time, he came into the workshop and threw a camouflage fanny bag full of pens onto the table. "Don't get all excited, everybody," he said. "You can have these for the same price I paid for them." And then after he distributed the pens to each member, he turned to the facilitator (Rossina) and said, "I figure I'd help you out a little. You always seem to run out of pens. Now, you know it's because I've been stealing them from you."

It is hard to believe, sometimes, that this was the same person who once said he would never again pick up a pen other than to endorse a winning lottery ticket. Because here is a gifted storyteller: someone full of wit, humor, and presence; someone who, when invited to reflect on artifacts, observed sensory details and composed meaningful narratives about his own history. Here is a craftsman, who, from woodcarvings on walking sticks made visible the stories living inside them, and they, these *stories*, in turn, made visible the writer living inside *him*—by way of the composition notebooks, by way of the bag of pens, by way of the things he carried. Here is a storyteller who, indeed, is very much a writer, an alchemist, a writer-alchemist in his own right.

**One Graduate Student Composes an Object Biography: Magic inside Pandora's Box**

We move now to another writer-alchemist. Anna, a soft-spoken graduate student in English, is a young woman in her mid-20s who came to her PhD from a successful college career in the American South. She is a lifelong reader, happy to have the privilege of choosing literature as a specialty. But she had lost her way in the thick forest of academic jargon in English literary critique until she rediscovered and researched a version of *Snow White and Rose Red* in her grandmother's garage. Other than textbooks and articles about literary critiques, Anna didn't need to carry much with her into the classroom, at least nothing that could be seen with the naked eye.

But in our seminar, Family Stories, Oral Histories, Portraits, and Object Biographies, she studied this one book, a

beloved artifact of her past and an homage to her grandmother. As a student of literary theory, Anna had never taken a writing course, nor did she know much about ethnographic research or folklore as a discipline. She was fearful and admitted it to her classmates. The assignment to write one carefully researched essay—and work on it all semester in short preparatory writing—was terrifying to her.

She'd never written "personal stuff" before, she said. At first she was resistant and quiet, ready to read whatever we assigned, but afraid to write. After several exercises in class, she found herself stuck on one strong memory about a dusty book on an empty bookcase in her grandmother's garage: "a beautifully illustrated version of the Grimms' version of the fairytale about two sisters, one fair like the snow and the other 'dark and beautiful as the red roses.' Granny would read this book to my cousin Abby and me, always sure to point out that we, too, were fair and dark just like the sisters....I flipped through the frayed pages with reverence, wondering how on earth such a fragile thing could have ended up out here..."

Anna's research led her in many directions, including her French-German heritage and her hometown in Tennessee. Her final essay contained three German subheadings (*Die Steigende*—the rise/climb, *Der Tod*—the demise, *Das Ewige Leben*—the life), a metaphor for the story she was telling as well as her own position as a student.

She collected data from multiple sources: telephone and live interviews with relatives, her now deceased grandmother's written memoir, an inventory of her southern family homestead and its town's historical society. She pored through other similar tales (Greek, biblical, and American), histories of 19<sup>th</sup>-century American bookselling and distribution, her own family's longtime business's loss to a big-box store. The course paper had 15 scholarly references from folklore and history and, of course, her memory. "Granny's own stories were not unlike fairytales," Anna wrote, "they often included pirates and ghosts and antebellum princesses in plantation castles" (Williams, 7). "For Granny, history was just an opportunity to tell a good story—to create an easier, brighter somewhere else as if by magic" (Williams, 7).

It was her engagement with the actual object that brought her research to life. In her description of the book's first page, Anna writes, "Against the backdrop of a quaint hearth with glowing fireplace, Rose-Red, the dark-haired, pluckier sister, stands in the foreground of the page, unlocking the cottage door and pulling it open with dainty pinkies extended. On tiptoes in her Bohemian clogs and aproned dress, she smiles in anticipation of the friendly face she expects to meet as snow and wind rush through the cracked door. Her sister cowers on a stool behind her, reaching out to their mother who is just standing up from her chair. The mother, also dark like Rose-Red, is illustrated with her thumb, index, and middle finger pointed upward, indicating she is mid-speech. 'Go and see who is there,' she says, 'It may be a traveler who is cold and hungry'" (Williams, 2). Anna explains the trope of the disguised stranger at the door, recognizing familiar variants in the Bible, Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, and other folk traditions, referring to Walter Benjamin's concept of "cross-fertilization" in time and space. It stands as a metanarrative Anna reminds us in her essay, which influences our environment through the artifacts that we find and the stories we tell about them.... When we think about it at all.

Then the essay returns to Anna's book. "At the precise moment of the visitor's anticipated entrance, the girls' mother has just been reading to them.....a book flutters to the ground, suspended in mid-air where it has just slipped from the startled mother's hand. It is a metanarrative moment in which the story, in effect, calls attention to itself as a story" (Williams, 10). Anna continues to summarize the book's story, its variants in other historical contexts, the universal message about trusting strangers, and the rewards of good deeds. "So in the end," Anna concludes, "maybe it doesn't matter if Granny's

stories were as much fairytales as the jewel-colored book in her garage.... Maybe we're not supposed to believe in them at all, but only what they stand for...."

Anna's love for learning and scholarship is clear and passionate in her essay, but it is the personal connection to her grandmother, to her roots, to that dusty "jewel-colored book" she recovered in the garage after all those years, that makes her account sing to a reader: of history, economics, traditional folk motifs, religious and cultural heritage of both the southern U.S. and Germany. Anna's linking of intellectual passion and personal past to her scholarship contributes to her growth as a writer.

We know that artifacts serve important functions for examining details in cultural stories, and many recent initiatives in the cultural history of objects show scholarly recognition of that (Halton 2011, Kurin and Clough 2013, MacGregor 2011, Sunstein and Chiseri-Strater 2012). Even TV programs like *History Detectives*, *Antiques Roadshow*, and *American Pickers* offer eloquent personal peeks into entire cultural histories—of both owners and appraisers/analysts, offering inventories of human ingenuity, historical insight, and even a kind of hope.

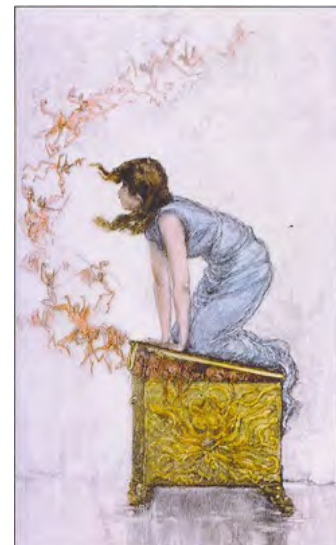
### Creating an Object-Centered Writing Classroom

The course recognizes that objects and living interviews are not only metaphors but also primary sources, often the best way to unwrap the stories hiding inside. Over time, we know graduate students' writing, like Anna's, will stiffen and clutter because of pressure to sound "right." Authenticity and voice disappear under years of academic obedience. We wanted students to see that with authentic but no less rigorous writing, academic research makes for enjoyable and engaging writing—and reading.

The course website posted objects whose cultural history and value were not traditionally academic but were packed with meaning and history and, yes, academic possibilities. A search about an object might yield new knowledge, and the information might come from unlikely sources.

We begin this research/writing seminar with this note:

*Creating portraits—of others, of things, for others—despite (and because of) ourselves, is an ancient human endeavor. Pandora's Box reminds us: woman, crafted from water and earth, embellished with clothes from Athena, beauty from Aphrodite, and speech from Hermes, got herself into big, big trouble by opening THE FORBIDDEN BOX...out of which spews a blizzard of bad, bad things...BUT THEN, lo and behold, after the churn, lying at the bottom of the box was HOPE. We'll enrich our curiosity together in search of the hope that lies at the bottom of every small box or big blizzard we encounter.*





And—a great sample of an artifact that represents oral history, family stories, and cultural heritage awareness—here are a few examples of clay Pueblo storyteller dolls, which you might think an ancient American folk tradition. Nope! The first one was made in 1964 by Helen Cordero to honor her grandfather who was a tribal/family storyteller. Male or female, each storyteller doll has an open mouth, as does her/his audience. A great example of "intangible cultural heritage," artistic traditions carried on, and perhaps co-opted or commodified, yet these are pretty new. Here are the four small clay storytellers who reside in my office.

Photo by Bonnie Stone Sunstein.

We posted an example from the National Public Radio (NPR) series *Planet Money Makes a T-Shirt*, which itself evolved from a sourcebook, Pietra Rivoli's *The Travels of a T-Shirt in a Global Economy: An Economist Examines the Market, Power, and Politics of World Trade*. Two reporters, Jacob Goldstein and Alex Blumberg, along with the Planet Money team, created a five-part radio documentary on the political, economic, social, and ethical complexities involved in a contemporary enterprise when NPR commissioned a T-shirt. The nuances are astonishing.



There are movies, too, about artifacts; we're sure everyone has a favorite.

*The Red Violin* (1999) is a good example that a good object "study" is really about an idea. In the last two paragraphs of Roger Ebert's eloquent four-star review, he explains it's an homage to an idea ABOUT an object. First, he outlines the main vignettes of the narrative. But then he writes, "A brief outline doesn't begin to suggest the intelligence and appeal of the film. The story hook has been used before. *Tales of Manhattan* followed an evening coat from person to person, and *The Yellow Rolls-Royce* followed a car....Such structures take advantage of two contradictory qualities of film: It is literal, so that we tend to believe what we see, and it is fluid, not tied down to times and places....*The Red Violin* follows not a person or a coat, but an idea: the idea that humans in all times and places are powerfully moved, or threatened, by the possibility that with our hands and minds we can create something that is perfect."

*Paper Clips* (2003) is a very different example. Middle-school students in Tennessee learned that paper clips had been developed in Norway during WWII as a symbol of solidarity against the Nazis. They wondered what a collection would look like, one paper clip to honor each victim, and where they might house this collection. The film tracks their project, online, in the media, and by word of mouth, as it crosses the world and results in a riveting memorial museum on the school grounds: 11 million paper clips housed in a donated authentic German railroad car. In the film, we meet survivors, journalists, educators, and the students themselves as the project about a paper clip becomes a visual essay about diversity and intolerance.

Since this was a graduate course, we indulged in a lot of nonfiction reading. We each found and chose one published essay to share, but everyone read Jamaica Kinkaid's personal meditation about colonization through objects, "On Seeing England for the First Time"; Pico Iyer's take on the English in India, "A Far-Off Affair"; Lars Eighner's "Dumpster Diving"; and Garrison Keillor's "Ball Jars." We explored books about artifacts, some in detail, some by review: *Agnes's Jacket: A Psychologist's Search for the Meanings of Madness*; *The Coat Route: Craft, Luxury, and Obsession on the Trail of a \$50,000*



*Coat; Stuff Matters: Exploring the Marvelous Materials that Shape Our Man-Made World; A British History of the World in 100 Objects; the Smithsonian's version, A History of America in 101 Objects; as well as Bonnie's book, FieldWorking: Reading and Writing Research.*

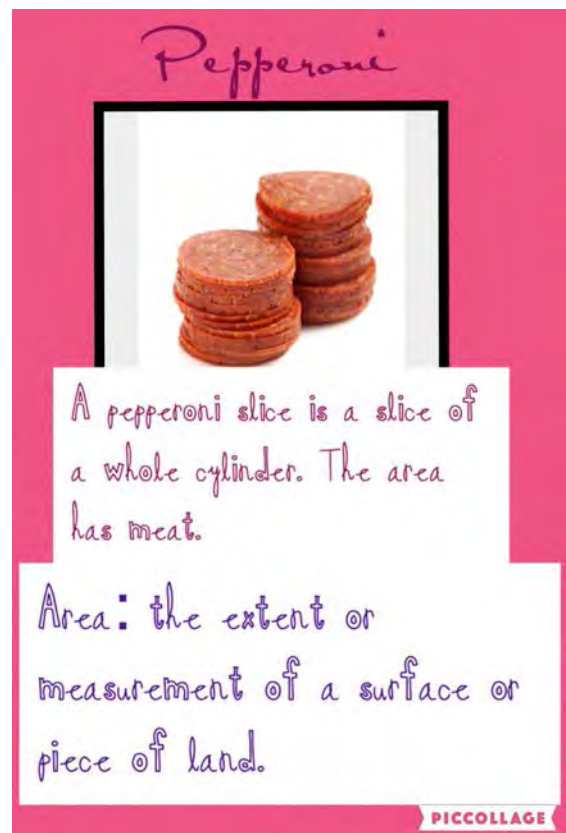
The real proof of the value of “object biography” was in the students’ work. Their 17 essays ranged from a regional history of a recipe book passed to four generations in one student’s family, to a full analysis of Twitter’s thematic threads, to an audio essay about personal descriptions of “love.” The seminar offered an education of a different sort to a long tableful of conventionally educated students.

### **One High School Student Composes Ratios with Pepperoni**

Finally, and with contrast, we introduce you to Nikki, a bouncy sophomore in an urban high school. She wears her school ID sticker on her thigh, just above her carefully slit jeans. Although she is a typical American high schooler, her school attaches multiple labels to her that belie her personality: “underperforming,” “ELL,” “low achiever.” An immigrant from Central America, she’s a second language English speaker with a home life both peppered by gang shootings and nourished by loving family. In class, she primps her long hair, sits too close to her best friend Margretta, checks her petite frame regularly, but enacts bold leadership abilities. She is a natural collaborator, and her math teacher allows her to solve problems in concert with her classmates. She approaches tasks in geometry with a smirk, an eye-roll, and distracted attention. But she completes them with a creative spin. Although she’s had low test scores, she’s an engaged learner.

On a day we observed, her assignment was about circles. The students were learning to use iPads, a funded school program that offered one per student. They knew how to use the iPads to take standardized tests and use online tools to solve geometry problems. But their teacher wanted them to learn the power of research and was interested in “object biographies” in his class. “Where do you find circles? And what do they tell us?” His assignment was simple: “Create a slide, write a sentence.” Other students chose artifacts like wheelchair wheels, the peace symbol, a bathtub sponge, airplane tires, basketball hoops. Everyone chose a cultural artifact.

Nikki smirked at the assignment and observed loudly that pepperoni is both a cylinder and a circle. It was a joke at first, meant for her seatmate who was researching spiral clocks. But within an 80-minute double class period, she eventually created her image (seen on the right). During the process of her research, Nikki articulated the differences between a cylinder (the whole pepperoni) and a circle (one slice), and the ratio between muscle (meat) and fat. She discovered that the price of pepperoni depends on that ratio; it goes up when there’s more meat and less fat. Her revised slide illustrates all that thinking and writing.



Six months later, during another research visit, we saw that Nikki had spent time documenting artifacts that appear in math problems, and she was more adept with the computer. She confronted a problem about trolls and barrels of honey. Using a “mind map” program, Nikki designed nine separate but connected stations on her mind map, writing about her solution process over 20 minutes. “I tried to figure out what is hidden in the problem that could give off the answer.... I started to play around and then decided to draw trolls....I switched the half barrels and the empty ones...with Margretta’s help I figured it out...then I ended up getting it right so I was *amped* because I actually got the answer.”

Nikki articulated her thinking processes as she engaged with artifacts. Whether it was pepperoni or trolls looking for honey in a barrel, she was able to see the value of persistent inquiry, collaborative help, and her growing expertise on the Internet. No wonder she was “amped.” Was it magic? Alchemy? We think it was the persistence, response, and revision that come from being more comfortable with writing. As we’ve already observed, we saw Nikki reshape the artifacts themselves: the very thing that shaped her writing thus became the very thing she re-shaped from her own perspective.

#### **IV. The Closing Act: Exercises for Magic in the Classroom**

As our portraits of Nikki, Anna, and Clark illustrate, we think that no matter what type of class you’re teaching, or where it’s held, writing about relevant artifacts can enhance any curriculum. But more important, it is a way for learners to reflect on their own perspectives as they learn the content of the course, whatever the discipline. It stretches students’ research, reading, writing, revising, and collaborating skills, not to mention their self-knowledge and identity. We hope you agree. The pages that follow provide examples of exercises we’ve developed for doing just that.

#### **V. The Magic Is Rigor, Response, and Revision**

We like to think that the good writing teacher finds the alchemist in each of her students and then, like Murray’s magician, teaches them how to hide the messy processes behind the final draft. And, on the other hand, for those of us who teach writing, there’s much more about that world than we sometimes notice. There are the things we carry, whether they are woodcarvings, stilted ideas about academia, or pepperoni. When we write about an artifact, we don’t lose the object in the writing; we add and create and describe an object until it is a double of itself. When we examine its old meaning, we make new meaning. We like to think that writing enhances the cultural significance of what some would call “reading” artifacts.

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## Learning Application: Three Class Exercises for Writing with Artifacts

### I. Working through an Idea

What makes you curious?

As you study geometry (and other content-based ideas), what do you wonder about?

Can you summarize your interest in one word? Ordinary words like "angle," "symmetry," "curve," "related," "parallel" (in a geometry class) can represent extraordinary ideas.

Your word:

Look for evidence around you. Where in your daily environment do you see examples of this word?

Look for evidence in art. Where in books, music, or movies do you see examples of this word?

Look for clues. How many different ways do people use this word? (Try Googling the word and see where your search leads.)

Fact-find. Where can you look to find information about your word? List three ideas you can find on the Internet, and be sure to note the website where you found them.

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.

Illustrate. What places on the Internet might you find a few pictures to illustrate your word?

- 1.
- 2.

Design. Make a slide to present your word in a class slideshow. Include at least one image (illustration), a definition, an example of where we find the word in life (or in art). Tell your partner (audience) something they might not know about how the word relates to a concept in your course.



## II. Collaborative Artifact Exchange

(Adapted from Sunstein and Chiseri-Strater, *Fieldworking: Reading and Writing Research*, 4<sup>th</sup> ed., 2012, Box 20.)

To investigate the story behind an object from another person's point of view, choose partners and act as both interviewer and informant. Select an interesting artifact that the partner is wearing or carrying (keychain, piece of jewelry, clothing item) or have the partner select. These background strategies echo the entire research process:

**1. Observation Notes** Take quiet time to inspect, describe, measure, draw, and take notes on the artifact your informant has given you. Pay attention to its form and speculate about its function. Where do you think it comes from? What is it used for?

**2. Personal Notes** What does it remind you of? What do you already know about things similar to it? How does it connect to your own experiences? What are your hunches about the artifact? In other words, what assumptions do you have about it? (For example, you may be taking notes on someone's ring and find yourself speculating about how much it costs and whether the owner is wealthy). It is important here to identify your assumptions and not mask them.

*And then, with your partner/research participant.*

**3. Interview the research participant** Ask questions and take notes on the story behind the artifact. What people are involved in it? Why is it important to him or her? How does the owner use it? Value it? What's its cultural background? After recording your partner's responses, read your observational notes to each other to verify or clarify the information.

*After the interview, begin to analyze and write up research on the "other's" chosen artifact.*

**4. Theorize** Think of a metaphor that describes the object. How does the artifact reflect something you know about the participant? Could you find background material about the artifact? Where would you go on the Internet? In your partner's community? Where would you look? How does the artifact relate to a larger history or culture?

**5. Write** In several paragraphs about the observations, the interview, and your theories, create a written account of the artifact and its relationship to your informant. Give a draft to your partner for his or her response.

**6. Exchange** Write a response to your interviewer's written account, detailing what was interesting and surprising. At this point, the participant can point out what the interviewer didn't notice, say, or ask that might be important to a further understanding of the artifact. You will want to exchange your responses again, the interviewer explaining what she learned from the first exchange.

**7. Reflect** Write about what you learned about yourself as an interviewer. What are your strengths? Your weaknesses? What assumptions or preconceptions did you find that you had which interfered with your interviewing skills? How might you change this?

### III. Write a Review of Writing that Highlights an Artifact

It's fun and instructive to read others' writing about artifacts, and the writing can vary as much as the topic. But always it's about how the reader/narrator (you) engaged with what and how it "speaks" to you. For this assignment, find an essay (or a website, film, or book excerpt) that talks about an artifact and its history. Read the essay, notice the written and imaged portions, ask some questions, and take some notes. As you read, you'll want to "read as a writer"; that is, notice how the writer creates an image with description, information, and history. You might ask such questions as:

1. Does it blur boundaries, or sit squarely inside a style or genre (website, article/essay, collection, script). Why did the author choose this style to present the artifact this way?
2. What kinds of information gathering does the presentation show, and how does the writer mask it to create a smooth read? How many sources did the author need to consult? What kinds of sources? What surprises you about the way the author organizes the presentation?
3. Does it offer you any new opportunities as a reader? How does it mix words, sounds, and images? Or does it offer a full description in words alone?
4. What knowledge do you already need to have to be a reader of this presentation?
5. What's the story it tells? How does that story expand itself to a larger theme about a culture?
6. How (and what) does the writer use as a "toolkit" (focus, voice, point of view, narrative arc, rhythm and pacing, metaphor, simile, analogy)?
7. Where, and in what form, was this presentation first published? Why do you suppose the writer chose that publication method?
8. For whom is this written? Does the writer identify the audience?
9. What sentences/images really grab you? Write out a few.
10. What would you revise about how this presentation highlights an artifact and its history?
11. What made you choose this presentation to review?

Write a one- or two-page review of the essay, not necessarily a sales pitch, but perhaps a pitch for your abilities to recommend (or not) this presentation to other writers. Be funny or cynical or intellectual, snobbish or self-effacing, pushy or demure. Just review it so we know a lot about this presentation, its writer, the artifact it's meant to highlight, and its effect on your expert readership.

# Spotlight: Local Learning @ Vermilionville

by Paddy Bowman

Even in a region renowned for Cajun and Creole traditions, French language, folk arts from music to weaving, and unique celebrations, most students do not study regional culture or encounter folk artists in their formal schooling. A four-year partnership between Local Learning and the Vermilionville Living History Museum and Folklife Park in Lafayette, Louisiana, has sought to remedy this by providing professional development for teachers; resources for integrating folklife across subject areas, including French immersion; arts-integrated residencies that put both folk artists and teaching artists in classrooms; and connecting educators with local cultural organizations and culture bearers.

Education of young people and the general public is a keystone of the museum's mission. Inspired by a similar Local Learning partnership with the Acadiana Center for the Arts and Lafayette Parish Schools, the Vermilionville Board and museum education staff reached out to brainstorm about deepening the museum's relationship with the local school system and improving offerings for the thousands of students from around the state who tour the historic village annually. The result is rewarding.

Each year a folklife theme has informed residencies, resources, and training, which includes a summer institute and workshops during the school year. Examples include sense of place, games and play, the seasonal round, and traditional music. University of Louisiana at Lafayette professors in the College of Education assign pre-service students to develop [standards-based lesson plans](#) to test at Vermilionville and polish for publication on the museum's website. Lessons, worksheets, and rubrics from [Louisiana Voices](#) are also invaluable. In addition, local scholars, musicians, poets, and media producers contribute to endowing teachers and students with inspiring and practical support.

Because Vermilionville focuses on Acadian, Creole, and Native American history and culture 1765-1890, the folklife education initiative grounds students in their own living traditions, helping them to see themselves in history and as creators of culture. Students interview Vermilionville folk artists and family and community members and create projects, artwork, and a documentary, [Made by Hand, Built on Tradition](#), made this year by Lafayette High French students with help from the Center for Louisiana Studies and AOC Community Media.



Lafayette High French teacher Mario Charest's Year 3 students producing the video. It will introduce students around the state to Vermilionville and prepare them for fieldtrips.

## URLS

Vermilionville film clip: <https://youtu.be/bP1yndger8s>  
<http://www.vermilionville.org/vermilionville/educate/lesson-plans>  
[www.louisianavoices.org](http://www.louisianavoices.org)

# Museum Cultural Ambassadors: Parent Engagement through Museum and School Partnerships



by Dawn Brooks-Decosta, Francis Estrada, and Erin K. Hylton

In the summer of 2014, education staff from the [Museum of Modern Art](#) (MoMA) and [The Studio Museum in Harlem](#) in New York City discussed the possibility of creating a collaborative program for a school where both institutions had ongoing educational partnerships: [Thurgood Marshall Academy Lower School](#) in Harlem. The school, which serves over 200 kindergarten to 5<sup>th</sup>-grade students, values parent partnerships and collaborative efforts with various community-based organizations within and outside the Harlem community. Both MoMA and The Studio Museum have been working with the school's teachers and students for several years, providing guided school tours and hosting family days when educators led intergenerational family tours, but we wanted to deepen parent involvement. The goals of both museums included increasing visual arts literacy for the entire family and providing parents opportunities to gain an understanding of what their children learn and experience through arts-based conversations and activities. Using skills essential to museum-based educators, the staff modeled their practices for engaging in conversations around works of art, which provided an opportunity for parents to take more initiative to engage in the arts and feel confident visiting art and cultural institutions independently.

With support from the school's principal, Dawn Brooks-Decosta (a co-author of this article), and Thurgood Marshall parent leaders, the Cultural Ambassadors Program launched with a workshop at The Studio Museum in October 2014 with more than 15 families. We led an inquiry-based gallery conversation around artworks by Charles Gaines ([Gridwork 1974-1989](#)) for 20 parents and family members. We discussed his artistic process and imagined what narratives can be drawn from the



### Sample Journal Prompts for Parent/Child Gallery Visits...

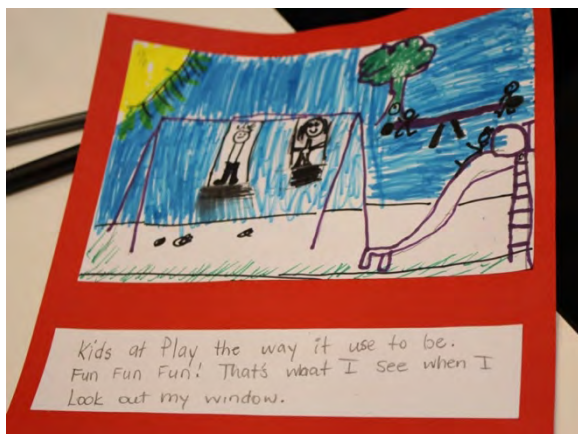
~Start by exploring the galleries together to find a work of art that has your child's favorite colors, shapes, or objects.

~Discuss what materials the art is made from and come up with a descriptive word for the materials such as colorful, shiny, smooth, or rough.

images he chose to present. The group conversation flowed smoothly, and parents expressed appreciation for casual exchanges with the educator. Following the gallery experience, we shared our goals and gave participants tasks to complete before our next workshop in April. We asked them to visit a museum with their children before April. We also gave them journals that included simple prompts to help start observational conversations about works of art (see inset).

The second workshop, conducted at MoMA in April 2015, centered on works from Jacob Lawrence's *Migration Series*, with a focus on narratives. Sixteen parents and 20 students participated. Our goal was to foster oral communication of intergenerational experiences by children and adults in their community inspired by Lawrence's art and process. In the months leading up to this workshop, students visited the museum with their classes and during guided tours investigated how Lawrence's works depicted environments, people, and conditions throughout the Great Migration.

During the workshop, parents were led through an activity-based tour of [One Way Ticket](#) while their children remained in a classroom to work on a drawing activity. Before seeing the *Migration Series*, we provided parents captions that Lawrence used as titles, and then we asked them to draw an image based on the text they received. Upon seeing the associated paintings, we asked them to compare and contrast their drawings with Lawrence's paintings, considering the artist's choices, text and image comparisons, and overall reactions to his works. Connections to their own family histories and the current Harlem community sprang from conversations about the artwork on display. Parents responded to the artwork by telling their family narratives of migration from the South and immigration from the Caribbean. As each parent shared, others supported the conversation by adding smiles and nods in agreement. Some chimed in, "My family too!" or "I remember that place!" When it was time to rejoin the children in the workshop, parents continued sharing with each other as we headed to the elevator and down the stairs. They were brimming with excitement as they joined their children.



In the classroom, taking inspiration from Jacob Lawrence's narrative process, we asked each child to draw a recent memory from their neighborhood. When parents returned from the galleries, we asked the children to describe their drawing/memory in detail to their parents. Noting Lawrence's use of captions, we asked parents to write captions for the drawings. The room was full of energy as family members recounted their memories, noting details about their individual experiences that related to the drawings. The children were eager to share their newly captioned drawings and memories with the large group. We noticed that parents shared what they experienced in the galleries with their children,

and children shared their experiences from their fieldtrip. Conversations about coming back to visit our institutions and doing art at home filled the classroom. Families expressed enthusiasm about the opportunity to engage in art education beyond the school year, create projects at home, and share their family stories.

At the end of the workshop, we asked parents to complete an electronic survey about their experiences looking at art with their children. The group recorded a high level of comfort engaging in the arts with their children. Given that Thurgood Marshall is a school very focused on the arts in interdisciplinary ways, it is perhaps not surprising that parents show such a high interest in the arts. Ninety-four percent said they were either “comfortable” or “very comfortable” taking their children to an art museum. If parents are open to the arts, their children tend to be more receptive as well. Below are a few parents’ responses when asked if they noticed any changes in their children based on their experience visiting MoMA:

*My children are able to discuss art pieces with ease and intelligence. The best thing is that my daughter is a lot less critical of her own artwork.*

*[My child] is open to discussion and [it's] great to see my child's perspective.*

*Loved the experience. She wants to take the whole family.*

We decided to continue the Cultural Ambassadors Program through the 2015-2016 school year because of the success reaching our goals in the previous year and the school’s invitation to return. New families joined the dialogue and experience, as the program was recommended to them by the administrators and former parent participants.

Similar to the previous year, parents and children were split in two separate groups. Parents engaged in inquiry about the works of art as a springboard for conversations about the changing Harlem community. As parents identified places they recognized from the photos, they reminisced about whom they spent most of their time with, the things they did, and what different places in Harlem meant to them. Many places in the photographs no longer exist. Parents noted, “I used to go there with my cousins” or “I remember passing there all the time on my way to 125th Street.” Chimes of agreement and personal stories rang through the gallery as the parents moved among the and should photographs. Stories of past and present intertwined as the base of a discussion about what art could represent for a community.

Our theme was “Art Is...” with a focus on the school community. Beginning at The Studio Museum in Harlem in October with 18 families, we viewed [Lorraine O’Grady: Art Is](#), which centered on a performance by the artist and 15 collaborators during the African American Day Parade in Harlem in



1983. O'Grady entered her float with an enormous, ornate gilded frame displayed on top, and the words "Art Is..." emblazoned on the float's decorative skirt. At various points along the route, O'Grady and her collaborators jumped off the float and held up empty, gilded picture frames, inviting people to pose in them. The joyful responses turned parade onlookers into participants, affirmed the readiness of Harlem's residents to see themselves as works of art, and created an irreplaceable record of the people and places of Harlem some 30 years ago.

While parents were in the galleries, children created their artistic interpretations of what "art is" using markers and worksheets to draw freely and color their interpretation of the phrase. Later, with their parents, they completed the phrase "art is..." in connection to the exhibition and discussed where they could continue to engage in art with their families. Parents offered valuable insight into what "art is..." and pondered questions such as "What is art? Who defines what art is? How might you become a piece of art? Where might you create work? How do you use creative expression?" The classroom was abuzz as parents and children talked about what "art is..." and happily transcribed and shared their thoughts with each other.

When the Thurgood Marshall families returned to MoMA six months later, parents had a guided tour of the exhibition [From the Collection: 1960-1969](#) while the children remained in the classroom for a guided activity. Continuing with the theme "art in the community," the focus was on artists' use of familiar objects. At first, parents were apprehensive about discussing abstraction, but they began to open up when discussing materials and processes. Discussions in the galleries became lively as parents reflected on what art is, how art could be found in their immediate vicinities, what the artworks represented, and how materials and objects found around their communities were transformed. Interpersonal stories, memories, and shared experiences had parents laughing and connecting with one another as artwork

**Art is...**

Feeling, relaxation, expression, music, movement, singing, creativity, cooking, freedom, power, design.

Passion, feelings, colors, inspiring.

Trains, books, school, galleries, libraries, sculptures, stores.

Self-expression!

Someone's garbage that you put together.

Something special and unique to someone.

Everywhere--on walls, tattoos, buildings, books, bags.

A moment in life.

History and fashion.

Forming ideas that no one else can interpret the way you can.





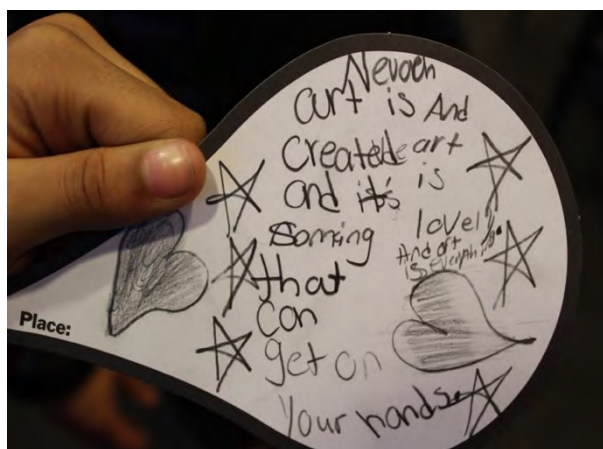
and design objects from the time period evoked memories of their community, family, and Harlem. Parents shared memories of which works resonated with them, of which times in their lives the artwork reminded them, and the role art has had in their lives.

While parents were in the galleries, we asked the children to speak with each other and think of places in their communities (home or school) where they see art. Their responses varied from architecture to public art, tattoos, and activities. When the parents returned, they commented on how artists such as John Chamberlain and Lee Bontecou “transformed everyday objects into works of art.” The children talked about where and what types of art they see in their communities, and the responses from the families evoke sentiments ranging from the everyday to the profound.

Next year, in addition to organizing their scheduled guided school tours, we plan to provide students with guided activities in the galleries on the days when their parents visit so that both parties will have gallery experiences when they are in the museum.

We asked Dawn Brooks-Decosta, principal of Thurgood Marshall Academy Lower School, to share her thoughts on the program:

*The Cultural Ambassadors Program at Thurgood Marshall Academy Lower School through a unique partnership between MoMA and The Studio Museum in Harlem has provided a special opportunity at our school in building the school-family partnership. The design of the project has provided leadership opportunities for our parents and grandparents to participate directly in the arts integration that exists in our curriculum in a hands-on way. The families have been exposed to works of arts at two major cultural institutions and have received the type of workshop training that is typically used for teachers. This has afforded our parents and grandparents an opportunity they would have otherwise on experienced. The parent and grandparent participants are now leaders in our school throughout this Cultural Ambassadors Program and open to utilizing the museums as places for learning for their families. It is a unique opportunity for which we are eternally grateful.*



Starting out as a pilot program to get more parent involvement from our partnership school, the Cultural Ambassadors Program ultimately allowed parents and their children to communicate orally and visually about their experiences and memories of their communities. Looking at art and having conversations about artists’ processes allowed participants to make connections between art and community, and also created opportunities for deeper engagement and learning for the school and museum partners.

All photos by Francis Estrada.



**Dawn Brooks-Decosta** has an MEd in Educational Leadership from Teachers College, Columbia University; an MS in Fine Art Education from Queens College; and a BS in Education from St. John's University. She has worked for the New York Department of Education for 17 years and has received numerous awards. Recognition includes the Heroes of Education Award 2002 for her work with students involving the 9/11 tragedy, highlighted on CNN's "Through a Child's Eyes." Her Museum Ambassadors Program involving parent/grandparent workshops and student exhibits has been highlighted in numerous publications. She also designed the Faith Ringgold Museum Ambassadors Program, which focuses on literacy and artists of the African diaspora.

**Francis Estrada** is the Assistant Educator for School Visits Programs at MoMA. He has taught diverse audiences in a variety of studio, classroom, and museum settings. He is an artist and collaborates with various nonprofit organizations about the amalgamation of art and culture through objects. He exhibits his work nationally, including online publications, and focuses on culture, history, and perception. Samples of his work may be seen at [francisestrada.com](http://francisestrada.com).

**Erin K. Hylton** is a Jamaican American cultural organizer, social justice advocate, mentor, and artist from the Bronx, New York. She is School Programs Coordinator at The Studio Museum in Harlem. Her academic focus is on the importance of the arts to students, especially those with special needs. She is completing her Masters in Special Education with a concentration in Deaf and Hard of Hearing Studies. She writes the blog [artedgenyc.com](http://artedgenyc.com), and collaborates with other cultural organizers in New York City and abroad creating events, articles, and conference presentations.

#### URLS

MoMA <http://www.moma.org>

The Studio Museum in Harlem <http://www.studiomuseum.org>

Thurgood Marshall Academy <http://www.tmals.org>

Charles Gaines, The Studio Museum <http://www.studiomuseum.org/exhibition/charles-gaines-gridwork-1974-1989>

One Way Ticket, Jacob Lawrence, MoMA <http://www.moma.org/interactives/exhibitions/2015/onewayticket>

Lorraine O'Grady, The Studio Museum <http://www.studiomuseum.org/exhibition/lorraine-ogrady-art>

From the Collection: 1960-1969 <http://www.moma.org/collection/works/groups/1960s>

# Student Curators Demonstrate Learning by Transforming Schools into Museums

by Peg Koetsch



Click to see video of students describing their artifacts from Laos.

*"This is how I learn."*

~5<sup>th</sup> grader, after completing the MIP *Around the World in One Day*

## Introducing "Museuming"<sup>1</sup>

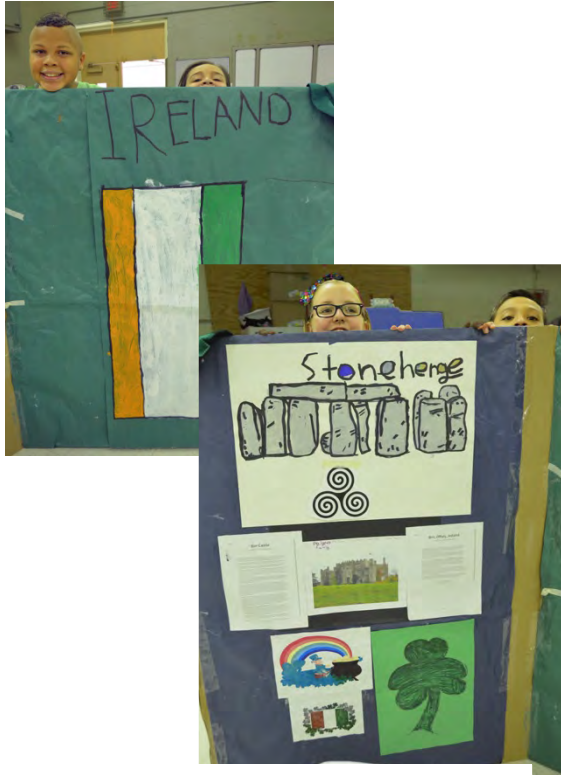
Clueless about what they're getting into when the Museum-in-Progress (MIP) project begins, students brace themselves merely to carry out another assignment. The start is deceptively simple for the students but for teachers and me, as the MIP project coordinator, the intent is to collect data on the students' previous museum experiences by asking, "How many of you have been to a museum? What did you see? Do?" The usual suspects of history, art, and science museums are mentioned. Rarely do students consider aquariums, zoos, and living history sites—such as Williamsburg—to be museums. After referencing these types as museums, the students are already increasing their museum vocabulary. And this is just the warm up.

After students list reasons museums exist, we compare those reasons with the goals for their classroom. Pretty soon students realize that museums and schools share the same overarching goals: to educate and to research, preserve, and interpret culture and history. But if this is the case, then how are they different, and why is that difference important to know? Pose the first question to students and they're usually stumped. With prompting, they recognize that museums contain original or primary source artifacts vs. schools having reproductions or secondary source materials. To answer the second question, we hit them with MIP's goal: students will become curators of primary sources, to turn their school into an interactive museum, filled with artifacts they collect and create—additional primary sources.

## Museum-in-Progress

After shifting from being a classroom art teacher to a museum educator, I realized that schools and museums have common goals for learners. Both use artifacts to illustrate facts and ideas. Yet these institutions differ in their education strategies and the assessment methods they use to reach their goals. To see if teaching and learning the school curriculum could benefit from integrating strategies that museums use to design exhibitions, I created the program Museum-in-Progress. The name deliberately includes the word "progress." Students are motivated to engage actively in learning by participating in the dynamics and strategies of creating an environment where they can teach others.

The basic components of an MIP project consist of a title, an object, supporting details, and an activity. The title is a clue to *what information* students want visitors to know as a result of touring their school museum. The object becomes a focal point that makes the *information tangible*. It could be created or



5<sup>th</sup> grade Student Curators created a backdrop for Ireland and England.

Since 1978, students around the country have created nearly 250 MIPs on multiple disciplines. For this article, examples from the two latest MIPs were referenced. At Gregory Elementary School, in Rockford, IL, 4<sup>th</sup> graders' MIP focused on people who played significant roles in the Civil War, including those who lived in Illinois. The 5<sup>th</sup> graders' MIP explored the cultures, beliefs, customs, economies, and politics of 12 countries.

Among the 60 students in the two 5<sup>th</sup>-grade classes, many had recently arrived from their native countries in Asia, the Middle East, Europe, Scandinavia, and Africa. Three girls came from different countries in Africa. When one arrived this school year, she didn't speak English. Some students had never worn shoes, others marveled at the drinking fountains. A Laotian student was non-English speaking when he entered the school. A boy from Kosovo started in 1<sup>st</sup> grade four years ago and at that point spoke limited English.

collected to be displayed on a bulletin board or grouped on a table. The supporting details *place the information in context* and could be graphs, maps, illustrations, quotes, descriptions, a life-size installation, a performance, or a demonstration. The activity *engages visitors with the information*. It's based upon *how* students want the targeted audience for the school museum *to learn*. An activity could be a game, an examination of an artifact through a microscope, a creative endeavor, or a challenge for the visitor to solve.

All these components are installed in a school space where the student curators have room to give tours and visitors can engage in the activities. MIPs have been as small as displays on desks in a classroom, stretched the length of a hallway, wound through a library, or displayed in a gym.

After the installation is complete, students rehearse giving tours to each other. Nerves and excitement build leading up to the moment when the MIP opens. Students transform into curators, encouraging other grade levels, families, friends, and school administrators to participate in the activities. The act of asking and answering questions strengthens both student curators' and visitors' knowledge. MIP student curators become teachers for the school community.

The time needed to do an MIP project depends upon a number of factors. For example, teachers need to ask questions. How long will it take students to learn the museum content? What kind of help do students need to create or collect artifacts and to complete the installation? How long is the school space available for the installation? Generally, elementary students have completed the project in a semester and middle and high school students have completed an MIP in a week.

### **What Skills Are Developed?**

At the beginning of an MIP, it's almost a guarantee that no student can describe or comprehend what a museum curator does. MIP trains students in the roles and responsibilities of being a museum curator, as teachers educate students on the curricula content and concepts. Students are filled with curiosity, yet are unaware that they're about to embark on a journey that will put them in charge.



4<sup>th</sup> graders present Harriet Tubman.

### From the Classroom

*I barely knew about the past. I didn't know about Jefferson Davis and weapons. But when I researched I was blown away!*

*I thought it was awesome to act out a character who was so amazing, brave, and such a courageous person.*

*It helped us learn more about the people from the Civil War. It also helped me with my writing!*

*It helped because it was like we were reliving our person's life.*

*The museum was a great idea. I learned that people in the war were very important.*

~4<sup>th</sup>-Grade Students



4<sup>th</sup> graders paint a backdrop for the Harriet Tubman exhibit.

The skills that a curator uses to create an exhibit are the skills that teachers want students to have gained when they graduate, including a knowledge of all the disciplines, along with creativity, flexibility, and the ability to work independently as well as in a team. Yet, the first curatorial step doesn't help students realize how much they'll be empowered. When students find out that they'll be divided into teams—not necessarily working with friends—and will have to do research to learn facts about a particular topic, the reaction is a limp buy-in.

Students earn the title “curator” by researching, collecting, creating, categorizing, exhibiting, and interpreting primary and secondary resources about events and cultures. When the curriculum requires students to learn about American history, or the history of their cultures or other countries, they make use of Folklore in Education practices. Students exchange information with family members and friends who have studied that time period or experienced the culture firsthand. The process of integrating museum, school, and folklore strategies culminates with students demonstrating their knowledge by creating a museum filled with interactive exhibits in their school.

Student curators host an exhibit opening and conduct tours for the community. In addition to celebrating proof of students' achievements, an opening serves multiple purposes. During tours, as the student curators ask and respond to visitors' questions, they exercise their listening and communication skills. As these curators give tours of their exhibits, they make the curriculum come alive and help others understand how the curriculum is relevant. As a result, student curators realize how much they've grown in their learning.

Let's return to that seemingly basic first step of researching a topic. Research, usually a familiar (and boring) task, becomes an exciting challenge when students find out they'll present the facts to a live audience, with a twist, as when Gregory Elementary School's 4<sup>th</sup> graders assumed the



personas of people who had critical roles during the U.S. Civil War, turning their MIP into a theatrical wax museum.

Interest in that challenge intensifies when facts can be found outside school, giving significance to non-conventional sources. For example, 32 percent of the 5<sup>th</sup> graders collected artifacts from their countries of origin. Those who had relatives with experiences connected to the country they were studying interviewed and collected artifacts from them. One girl, adopted from Guatemala, remembered when her mother came to get her and then years later visiting Guatemala and bringing back authentic artifacts.

Motivated to master their topic, the teams write down the pertinent facts that they want visitors to learn as a result of touring their exhibits. Now they're inspired to learn, but they're still trying to figure out how to work as a team. Partly because they're in the midst of defining what their exhibit will consist of, the students lack self-confidence in their ability to pull this off. How to coach students so they can move forward? Teachers balance familiar tasks with new MIP skills, thus encouraging students to take risks and experiment.

### Who Are the Experts?

For an MIP, classroom teachers determine the curriculum content to be emphasized, based upon required standards. The art, drama, and museum specialists build upon the foundation established by the classroom teachers. These teachers form a team that functions collectively as a museum director. They facilitate students' exploration of academic content by posing and answering questions, then coach students on how to generate fact-related questions. This inquiry-based approach values research and problem-solving skills as much as it does an understanding of the academic content.

Just as teachers generate experiences that provoke students' curiosity, MIP students develop confidence in modeling this approach. As MIP advances, students learn to plan a sequence of questioning that engages visitors and encourages them to think. Questions to ask visitors are integrated into their scripts and then turned into essential exhibit props. A prop can be as simple as a folded paper with a question written on the top flap. Once the question is asked, student curators give visitors time to respond before revealing the answer on the inside flap.



5<sup>th</sup> graders install Laos backdrop.



5<sup>th</sup> graders researching facts about Ireland.

*During the tours, I was pleased to see that students were giving visitors time to respond. That they provided wait time for visitors to think through their answers.*

~Art Teacher



Video: 5<sup>th</sup> grade Student Curators present Ireland.

The art specialist adjusted her curriculum to have students in both grade levels develop their artistic skills by crafting props to illustrate facts in their scripts and by painting backdrops to define each team's exhibit area. The drafting and construction of a backdrop produces a learning environment—a stage—that places a student's famous person in historical context, or immerses visitors in that country's traditions, languages, arts, and customs.

A drama consultant coached students on how to write, rehearse, stage, and perform scripts that highlighted their researched facts. I coached the teacher and students through two key phases of the project: introduction of the roles and responsibilities of a museum curator and brainstorming how to engage visitors in learning facts about the content. The combination of social, intellectual, and physical experiences stimulated students' different learning styles and provided team-bonding opportunities.

Student curators begin to realize that listening to visitors' responses provides clues to visitors' prior knowledge and guidance on *what* and *how* to teach visitors next. This is one example of the many "habits of mind" MIP curators develop.<sup>2</sup> As students take ownership of their learning, a desire to be lifelong learners is fostered. This authentic, investigative approach aids students in drawing connections between academic content and their own lives. Students apply their learning and become experts.

### **Connecting/Collaborating**

Figuring out how to solve problems as they arise helps students gel as a team. Even if there's a clear leader in the group, by brainstorming multiple solutions, others discover the strengths they can contribute. For example, when one team member was very hesitant to speak, his teammates compelled him to practice and assisted him in memorizing his script. Unexpectedly, during one planning session, the Laotian student burst out singing his national anthem. Astonished by his new-found voice, his peers encouraged him to sing in his exhibit. Buoyed by their reactions, he twisted a green pipe cleaner around his ear and pointed it at his mouth, to replicate a microphone.



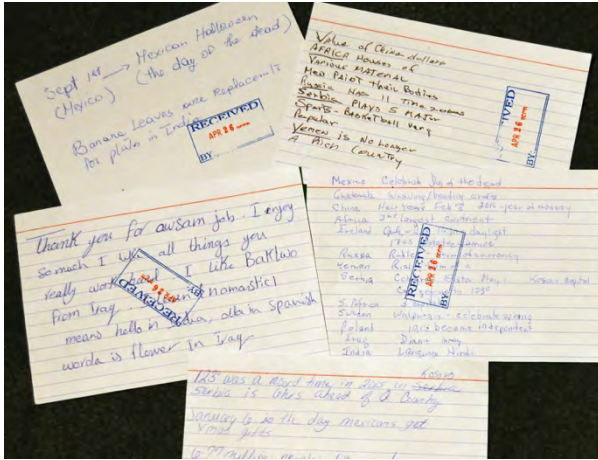
Video: A Laotian 5<sup>th</sup> grade Student Curator sings.

Students also learned that a plan needs to be flexible, especially for those unpredictable moments. On the morning of the 5<sup>th</sup>-grade MIP opening, a student in the Africa group expected to change into a two-piece outfit. But upon unwrapping it, the pants dropped into the toilet! Another student in her group had brought two dresses and offered her one to wear.

### **Assessing and Expanding the Learning Environment**

A student-created MIP is a form of assessment. It represents the best knowledge to date that student curators have of a subject. And the more an MIP can make the learning process visible, the more ways students, teachers, and the school community have to measure student growth.

Yet one complaint shared by students was not all the talking or presenting, but how tiring it was to stand and give tours for 90 minutes. Comparing that timeframe with how long teachers stand in the classroom didn't awaken any empathy. When asked if they would change anything, one 5<sup>th</sup> grader said, "To include more breaks. My thigh fell asleep while standing."



Exit “passports” documenting what visitors learned from the 5<sup>th</sup>-grade MIP.

*If you talk about assessment in any other form other than standardized testing, teachers aren't quite sure what to do. I'm very happy to see that assessment could be done in different ways. For example, in my classes I'm going to incorporate time for more self-critiques, and for students to walk around and see what others are doing.*  
~Art Teacher

*Brought out confidence in students, especially in the English as Second Language Learners students. They were very proud to present their knowledge.*  
~5<sup>th</sup>-Grade Teacher

*With the MIP project, students are demonstrating the highest level of acquisition of learning, that is, being able to teach others what they have learned.*  
~Art Teacher

*After the MIPs were de-installed, students were willing to admit that they got a lot out of doing the project that in the beginning, they didn't know they would get out of it.*  
~4<sup>th</sup>-Grade Teacher

*For parents to see their children teaching—they think: I get what's happening in this setting.*  
~5<sup>th</sup>-Grade Teacher

To discover the impact of their exhibits, students collected data on the community's prior knowledge. On opening day, before family members and friends entered the 5<sup>th</sup>-grade MIP, they faced a wall with names of countries written on it. Visitors were asked to write a fact that they knew about any country.

Then visitors were handed an index card that simulated a passport to fill out with facts that they learned as they progressed through the museum. When visitors dropped the cards off upon exiting, the cards documented where visitors had traveled and provided evidence of what they had learned.

But the learning and assessment goes both ways. As family members toured the MIP, they witnessed the skills and knowledge their child had acquired. One student's grandfather served in World War II. Visiting the exhibit on Russia brought back memories of being in the war.

Like the students' initial reactions, at first teachers can't quite grasp the potential and logistics of an MIP project and how it will influence their teaching. Once they start implementing the strategies, teachers perceive the value of students participating in authentic, open-ended discussions. They see that a free exchange of ideas enables students to explore different understandings and to clarify and assess their findings. With the diverse entry points that MIP offers, even students with low levels of achievement and social skills become active participants and apply what they have learned.

Both teachers and students gain understandings that they couldn't have foreseen at the beginning of an MIP. Students feel comfortable telling someone's story. They embody different points of view. They develop respect for diverse cultural heritages. They're capable of changing abstract curriculum content and 21<sup>st</sup>- Century skills into tangible, interactive, learning environments that make thinking capable of being assessed. Students learn to make meaning in the world around them and are inspired to enlighten others.

*"All we ever do in class is read and write. I have something to share. I need to teach others what I have learned!"* ~4<sup>th</sup> grader, after completing an MIP on famous figures from the Civil War



The museum project impacted my teaching in a few ways. Creating a school museum can reinforce skills, concepts, and learning strategies to fit the needs of all of my students. The museum project encouraged my students to use multiple intelligences and critical-thinking skills. It truly allowed the learning to come alive!

~5<sup>th</sup>-Grade Teacher

Seeing my students taking initiative and teaching others outside of their classroom has really redirected my teaching styles. My lessons involve more collaboration between students and peers teaching arts integrated activities. With this idea gained from the museum I am able to reach all levels of learners in my class.

~5<sup>th</sup>-Grade Teacher

The students loved being able to share their knowledge in such a creative and interesting way. They spent a lot of time getting to know all the different aspects about the Civil War in order to create a realistic experience for their viewers. They were passionate about gaining information, which carried throughout the rest of the year. The students gained knowledge not only about the topic, but also about different aspects that go into creating an interactive museum. It was definitely a highlight for students and teachers.

~4<sup>th</sup>-Grade Teacher

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All photos and videos by Peg Koetsch.

#### Endnotes

1. Coined by Richard Kurin, Acting Provost and Under Secretary for Museums and Research, Smithsonian Institution.
2. See *Learning and Leading with Habits of Mind* (2008) edited by Arthur L. Costa and Bena Kallick for more on the characteristics of intelligent behaviors for enhancing how a student produces knowledge, not just reproduces it.

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# Inspired Learning: The Smithsonian Folklife Festival and Art Museum Education Strategies

by Betty J. Belanus and Charmaine Branch

*Education is not the filling of a pail, but the lighting of a fire.*

~W. B. Yeats

## **Introduction**

Inspired learning can happen anywhere—at school, in a museum exhibition, at a public program, even in your own kitchen or backyard. In this article, we examine two

learning venues, the annual Smithsonian Folklife Festival and art museums, and four learning strategies used in both settings in different ways. Employing specific examples of the Big Draw, Visual Thinking Strategies, the use of the humble Post-it note, and social media platforms such as Instagram, we explore types of interactions that create inspired learning experiences. We also offer an activity that combines some of the strategies.

The four learning strategies examined in this article involve active engagement of art and folklore. They also offer different combinations of the other markers of “inspired learning,” helping learners in these settings with meaning making, deepening of skills, knowledge, understanding, values, feelings, attitudes, and reflection on what is encountered. While these strategies represent only a small subset of learning strategies that folklorists and art museum staff use and there are challenges to their use that we discuss below, we feel strongly that these strategies are useful models for inspired learning in many settings.

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About the photo: Section of artwork created by visitors to the 2009 Smithsonian Folklife Festival’s Wales Smithsonian Cymru Program, directed by artist Mary Lloyd Jones.

Photo by Betty J. Belanus.

### Why “inspired learning?”

While doing research on learning, engagement, and art we discovered the “Inspiring Learning for All Framework” (ILfA) developed by cultural institution educators in the United Kingdom. As opposed to the term “museum education,” which seems somewhat passive, the ILfA definition for “inspired learning” fits the work of folklorists working in education and progressive museum educators alike:

“Learning is a process of active engagement with experience. It is what people do when they want to make sense of the world. It may involve increase in or deepening of skills, knowledge, understanding, values, feelings, attitudes and the capacity to reflect. Effective learning leads to change, development and the desire to learn more.”<sup>1</sup>

Our examples will make more sense as springboards for inspired learning if we first describe and compare the venues and their typical audiences. Since Betty has the most experience with the Festival and Charmaine with art museums, we combined our knowledge of these two venues and alternate sections using personal examples and research.

### Setting the Stage: The Festival, Art Museums, and Their Audiences

In late June in Washington, DC, the weather turns hot and humid, alternating between burning hazy sun and scathing thunderstorms, now and then with a perfect day of clear skies and comfortable temperatures. This is the setting for the [Smithsonian Folklife Festival](#), which takes place out of doors under tents, in temporary built structures, and beneath trees on the National Mall. Despite the sometimes unpredictable weather, the event attracts hundreds of thousands of general public visitors per year, tourists and locals alike, including families, summer day campers, artists and educators.

The Festival differs from a bricks-and-mortar museum in several ways. First and most apparently is its relatively short duration—compared with even temporary museum exhibitions that are usually in place for months, not to mention permanent exhibitions in many art museums that may not change for years. It can perhaps be seen as one of the world’s largest and most complex [Pop Up Museums](#), composed of temporary displays easily put together and taken apart. Second, as an open-air event without an obvious/singular/apparent main entrance and copious eye- and ear-catching venues, visitors enter the Festival more freely than they would through conventionally imposing museum doors. They choose their pathways more voluntarily than is possible in most museum gallery spaces.

The third difference, and the one most closely linked to the mission of the Festival<sup>2</sup> and its parent organization, the Smithsonian Center for Folklife and Cultural Heritage (CFCH), is that people—not objects—are the heart of the event: the Festival “participants” or “culture bearers” who come from various parts of the United States or the world to demonstrate, perform, and talk about their cultural skills. Unlike most museum exhibitions, which may briefly employ live demonstrators, performers, or lecturers, the “people behind the objects” are the focus of the Festival throughout the event. Visitors are free to interact with them, ideally creating a dialogue (or, in Festival lingo, “a cultural conversation”).<sup>3</sup>

At first glance, an art museum may seem to be the epitome of a “passive” museum experience, and a polar opposite to the Festival. At a minimum, art museum visitors are asked to view inanimate objects such as paintings and sculptures as they walk through the galleries. Some people may not think of this viewing experience as active because the interaction between viewer and object is not as obvious as a conversation between two people. However, recent developments among educators in art museums attempt to involve visitors in a variety of active roles during their visit. Along with active observing that invokes critical thought, art museums are offering visitors the opportunity to take part

in conversational tours, educational programming, and more. These methods offer some interesting ideas that could also lead to new levels of visitor engagement cultural events such as the Festival.

How relevant is the difference between visitors to the Smithsonian Folklife Festival and art museums to their learning experience? According to a 2010 study of 40,000 museum-going households by the organization Museum Audience Insight, art museums had generally older visitor bases, with 65 percent of respondents over age 50. Generally, respondents were less ethnically diverse than the overall sample of museum goers, with 92 percent identifying as white, and only 16 percent identifying as a minority. According to the 2015 Smithsonian Folklife Festival visitor survey, Festival visitors skewed somewhat younger (34 percent were over age 55) and more ethnically diverse with 59 percent white, 16 percent Latino, 11 percent African American, and 7 percent Asian (*Who's Coming to Your Museum?* 2010).

Broad demographic statistics don't take into account the variation of art museums within the U.S. or in audience makeup of the Festival. For example, art museums with more specific missions, such as those that focus on an ethnic group, might have a more diverse audience. Festival programs featuring Latino or Asian cultures generally bring out a larger affinity audience. Beyond demographics, the bigger common sense difference between the two venues may be the anticipated experience of most visitors. Art museum goers do not usually expect to encounter music, join in a dance, or converse with an artist in person, although all these things could potentially take place within art museum walls. Festival goers find it harder just to read available signage and gaze at the art and craft on display, with the makers actively demonstrating their skills and other compelling programming beckoning nearby, although if they really wanted to have a totally passive experience, they certainly are free to do so.

Given the differences in venue, audience makeup, and expectations of the Festival and art museums, we were struck with the strong potential for using the four strategies we outline here in these very different settings and beyond. We believe that the strategies discussed below offer visitors to the Festival, art museums, and other venues (including the classroom) ideas for "lighting the fire" of inspired learning in different ways. Some strategies have been used in various forms for a number of years at the Festival. Most of the art museum examples are from the past 15 years, and many represent a radical shift in the way these museums approach visitor learning experiences. Outside the scope of this article are similar strategies that might have been part of the learning experience repertoire of other types of museums (for instance, children's museums, living history museums, science centers, or zoos).

### **Participation and Connection: The Big Draw (Betty)**

In the Fall of 2007, I was conducting research in Wales for what would become the 2009 Wales Smithsonian Cymru Program of the Smithsonian Folklife Festival, when I encountered a [Big Draw](#) event at the art gallery of the Welsh Folk Museum at St. Fagan's. I knew nothing about the Big Draw, but I liked the concept: a facilitator invited visitors, myself included, to contribute to a paper mural inspired by the art of Mary Lloyd Jones, whose work was displayed nearby on the gallery walls. Jones happened to be an artist being considered for inclusion at the Festival, since her art connects to Welsh identity and language.



Facilitator at the Welsh Folk Museum directing a Big Draw project inspired by the artwork of Mary Lloyd Jones (an example can be seen on the wall in the background).

Photo by Betty J. Belanus.

I discovered that the Big Draw (formally The Campaign for Drawing) was founded in 2000 in the U.K. to “promote visual literacy and the universal language of drawing as a tool for learning, expression and invention.” The idea quickly took off and grew from a one-day event to a month-long international celebration with a new theme each year. Big Draw events are further explained as “participatory and inclusive, [using] drawing to engage people of all ages with museum and gallery collections, heritage sites, or each other, in new and creative ways. Participants are encouraged to expand the boundaries of drawing and experiment with paint, charcoal, sand, clay, digital imagery and much more.”

The philosophy behind the Big Draw is simple: to draw something, one needs to observe it closely and then use imagination and creativity to reinterpret the item. An informed facilitator—ideally the artist him/herself—helps guide the activity. When I attended the Big Draw at the Welsh Folk Museum, the visiting artist pointed out the nearby exhibition of Mary Lloyd Jones’s work and talked briefly about its symbolism, then invited visitors to use the paints on hand to add to the growing mural with their own artwork. At the 2009 Festival, we were fortunate to have Mary Lloyd Jones as a participant. Festival visitors were invited to add their artwork to a canvas inspired by her work (on display around the site), under her tutelage.

Participatory art projects similar to Big Draw activities have been included at many other Smithsonian Folklife Festival programs as well, either in a family activities area or alongside a folk artist’s demonstration tent. These activities (in theory at least) relate to the work of folk artists at the Festival. Group creative tasks (to use the Big Draw term) have involved drawing or painting—adding to a mural on a wall or a large piece of craft paper during the 2015 Peru program, for instance. Activities inspired by the artwork of Festival participants are also common; at the 2014 China Traditions and the Art of Living Program, visitors to the family activities tent created and decorated



kites made from bamboo skewers and paper, inspired by the work of a master kite maker working in another part of the program.

If the activity takes place in a separate family activity area, the physical distance between that space and where the artist is working may make it difficult for visitors (usually children) to connect the work of the artist and their own simpler rendition. They may be having fun and being creative, in other words, but they may not be learning what the Festival staff hoped they would about the history, complexity, mastery, and symbolism behind traditional cultural products. In the case of the kite-making activity, signage explaining what seasonal festival kites are made for in China was posted on worktables, and examples of the kite maker's artwork were placed on a nearby table to attempt to make the cultural connections more evident.

Even when the folk artist is close to the art participants, there may not be a truly "intentional" connection made, usually because of a language barrier and the large crowds at the event. For instance, during the 2014 Festival, a separate table was set up next to the Chinese paper cutters, with materials (paper, scissors) for trying the craft. This seemed like a fine idea, but in my observation, this proved to be more of a strategy to get visitors to leave the craftspeople to their own skilled work than to making a meaningful connection with these particular Chinese folk artists. The visitors doing their own paper cuttings seemed to be mostly ignoring the folk artists, intent on their own activity.

In contrast, an English-speaking master Chinese American paper cutter who demonstrated in the family area mesmerized visitors, although she was not involving the audience in a hands-on activity. She made an intricate paper cutting while telling Chinese folk tales, revealing her cutting at the end of the session. This emphasizes that many different types of learning are going on at the Festival (and at art museums), and connection/engagement may not always be most effective through hands-on participation.

A Big Draw style event presents an amazing learning opportunity for visitors to connect to the work of artists and to get involved by trying their hand at some art themselves. But, without the proper connections being made, as with these examples from the Smithsonian Folklife Festival, the opportunity may be missed. When planning such a project in any learning setting, organizers should attempt to make these connections through mindful facilitation, intentional questions, and meaningful displays of authentic art, ideally involving the actual demonstration of a master artist. (For a Big Draw inspired activity, see *Learning Application: The Story Behind a Folk Craft*, in this issue, page 103.)

### **Look Closely, Ask Questions, Discuss: Visual Thinking Strategies (Charmaine)**

Many people think of an art museum tour in which a guide lectures at a silent audience as the usual form of visitor participation in a museum environment. That is no longer the case in all art museums, with countless types of tours, many encouraging discussion and conversation surrounding the object being observed. As a student docent with the Frances Lehman Loeb Art Center at Vassar College, I was introduced to one strategy, Visual Thinking Strategies (VTS), as an important tool to communicate with our visitors.

Multiple museums have designed methods with missions similar to VTS. The Art of Seeing Art at the Toledo Museums of Art encourages slow looking and discussion through a series of steps: Look, Observe, See, Describe, Analyze, and Interpret. With these steps, visitors of all ages are guided through interacting with works of art and understanding them on a deeper level.

### **Visual Thinking Strategies**

Abigail Housen and Philip Yenawine developed VTS as a teaching method and educational curriculum focused on enhancing critical-thinking skills and developing dialogue among museum visitors. The method is most successful in a group environment in which a museum educator facilitates a discussion surrounding a visual object such as a painting, sculpture, or video. The educator asks the group a series of questions beginning with a variation of three general questions:

*What's going on in this picture?*

*What do you see that makes you say that?*

*What more can we find?*

These open-ended questions and those that build on the group's observations are integral to this method to increase student engagement and performance (Visual Thinking Strategies). VTS values all the visitor voices shared in a way that encourages understanding of the viewer's perspective as well as that of the artist.

Note: Other frameworks to guide student observation and analysis of visual (and cultural) objects and expressions include [Harvard Project Zero's Thinking Strategies](#).

According to Housen and Yenawine, by learning with the VTS method visitors, especially children, are able to develop aesthetic, observational, language, and critical-thinking skills (*Visual Thinking Strategies*). Although VTS was originally developed for the art museum setting, it can be implemented in many learning environments, from the classroom to the Smithsonian Folklife Festival. The flexibility of VTS works well within the Festival's free choice learning environment. Visitors are encouraged to connect what they see, taste, and feel at the Festival with experiences in their own lives, creating cross cultural conversations. VTS, however, focuses on creating dialogue around an inanimate object, while the Festival provides visitors the opportunity to engage with participants skilled in their craft.

How might the conversation shift among visitors from discussing a basket on display in a museum to discussing a basket with a basket weaver at the Festival? The personal experience of the weaver as well as the historical context of the weaving technique would be more readily available in the Festival example. The open-ended questions provided by the facilitator could take on a more comparative role, asking visitors to discuss the use of baskets in their own culture in relation to the weaver's presentation. Perhaps the facilitator would ask: "Do you use baskets in your daily life? What do you use that functions as a basket? What is the importance of making a basket beautiful as well as functional?"

VTS at the Festival may also offer a means of delving deeper and thinking more critically about what a visitor sees, furthering the "cultural conversation" by a closer observation of a craft item to ask more meaningful questions. Take, for example, the case of the paper cutters from China at the 2014 Festival. If a visitor took the time to examine the finished paper cuttings on display as well as works in progress, questions might go beyond the usual "How long does this take to make?" to include "What kind of bird is this in the paper cutting? Why are most of the cuttings red? Who taught you to make the paper cuttings?" Although the participants within a conversation might shift from art museum to festival, the critical questions encouraged by VTS remain relevant across learning environments.

### **Leaving Your Mark: Post-it Notes (Betty)**

What is the potential power of the ordinary yellow sticky note for visitors to museums and cultural events? During the One World, Many Voices: Endangered Languages Program of the 2013 Festival, a large laminated map of the world became a fascinating interactive space. Visitors were invited to leave their own "language stories" on sticky notes, and many people had comical or poignant stories



Visitors post their language stories at the One World, Many Voices Program of the 2013 Smithsonian Folklife Festival.

Photo from Festival Blog

<http://www.festival.si.edu/blog/2013/visitors-put-their-languages-on-the-map>.

to tell. Visitors could be seen not only leaving notes but also avidly reading the accumulated stories. Curator Marjorie Hunt tasked her interns during the Festival with writing a blog encouraging visitors to participate, which included the prompts and some of the stories. After the Festival, interns compiled the stories to share at a Festival evaluation meeting. In the end, over 800 posts were compiled.

Indeed, the humble sticky note can become one of the most useful interactive tools in museums and at the Festival, employed to make portions of exhibits and Festival programs instantly interactive, adding stories and inspiring commentary in multiple voices. The idea of visitors leaving comments about an art exhibition via various means, including comment cards or books, is well established. These are usually relegated to a corner of the exhibition. The idea of applying Post-its directly to the walls of a museum, sometimes even adjacent to the artwork, to solicit more immediate visitor reactions and opinions is relatively new in most art museums and may be shocking to some visitors who might consider sticky notes a “tacky” addition to the aesthetic of an art museum.

One powerful example of the Post-it concept is from the 2013 *30 Americans* exhibition at the Milwaukee Art Museum. Museum staff invited visitors to leave comments about and reactions to the exhibit via Post-it notes. Starting with a small, designated area for the notes, staff soon realized that many more people than anticipated wished to leave comments and dialogues were being created between notes. The museum’s school and teacher program manager, Laci Coppins, commented:

I was excited to see so many people having a desire to share their voice through a small yellow note, dare I say be empowered to do so. As the exhibition continued, the Post-it notes really became a reflection of the community who viewed the art in the space and in some ways became a work of art in itself. Personally, I was most moved by the conversations that took place between notes, the different languages listed, and the overarching reminder of forgiveness, love, and the importance of teaching the next generation. (*30 Americans blog*)

Unlike high-tech versions of commenting on and sharing impressions of an exhibition or Festival program (which Charmaine discusses in the next section), the simple sticky note is immediate and inclusive. In some museums, comments displayed on the exhibition walls have shaped whole exhibitions, such as in the [Gallery of Conscience](#) at the Museum of International Folk Art in Santa Fe, New Mexico. (See pages 3-34, this issue.)

After the positive experience with visitors leaving messages in 2013, our education team working on the Wawawasi Kids Corner at the 2015 Peru program decided to leave three prompts for visitors on a board outside the activity tent. The result was over 400 comments, ranging from many variations of “I love Peru” to short travelogues (“My trip to Peru was filled with adventure. A baby was born on my train to Cusco from Macchu Pichu”) to a full-blown multi-Post-it story written July 5 by visitor Talia Nascimento [punctuation original to note]:

In 1979, after my 1st semester at Stanford I wasn't sure what I wanted to study, so...I took my backpack and traveled across Mexico to see friends. That trip led to 3 years traveling throughout South America. As I zig-zagged up & down the continent one country kept calling me back...Peru...the Andes, the sea, the Amazon, mostly the people. It was the place I kept returning to like a bird returns to its favorite flower. I made friends that I still return to see - who visit me in California. This festival has been amazing and reminds me why I still return to Peru every 3-4 years. (Post-it note comment, Peru: Pachamama Program of 2015 Smithsonian Folklife Festival)

While most Post-it note boards are not going to yield too many complete stories such as this one, even short messages can be powerful tools. First, as already noted, they make visitors feel included in a dialogue with the exhibition/event. Second, many other visitors read the comments, creating an engaging display in its own right. Third, if saved, compiled, and analyzed, these notes can become a strong evaluation tool, offering clues to how people related to the exhibition/program, what they liked/disliked, and why they felt compelled to visit in the first place.

Post-it boards or walls are, in conclusion, a low-cost, high-yield inclusion to both Festival programs and museum exhibitions. Even if they are not saved for posterity or evaluation, they are still useful in providing visitors a means of offering feedback and adding their voice. Putting some time and effort into compiling the comments, writing a blog about the results, and perhaps even coding them for clues to visitor behavior would maximize the impact of the interaction. Visitors took the time to leave their comments; educators should take the time to use them to their fullest potential after their lifetime on the wall.

### **Technology Is Not the Enemy (Charmaine)**

Technology-enhanced learning activities are myriad these days both at the Festival and museums. Much has been written about the advantages of using a smartphone to convey additional web-based information, thus bringing the museum to “virtual visitors” unable or unwilling to visit the building. Those visitors able to experience the museum in person can carry information out of the building with them in one of the many forms of social media. Through Instagram, Facebook, Tumblr, etc., they share their personalized museum adventure with their friends and followers. Social media becomes an extension of museum learning with the potential for promoting critical thought.

The Renwick Gallery, home to the Smithsonian American Art Museum's collection of contemporary craft and decorative art, has incorporated Instagram and live media sharing into a museum visit from beginning to end and afterward. The inaugural exhibition [\*Wonder\*](#) for the reopening of the Renwick in 2015 included a number of monumental artworks that people could meander through and around in casual exploration. My sister and I thoroughly enjoyed *Wonder* when we visited in March 2016. As frequent museum goers we weren't expecting the enthusiastic signs throughout the galleries encouraging people to take photographs. I usually look for signs letting me know where I cannot take photographs, which can unfortunately result in a puzzle of yes/no/yes/no depending on my location. The reaction was a plethora of selfies, pensive poses, and silly faces among the visitors. When we



uploaded our photos onto Instagram with the hashtag #RenwickGallery, we could view them on media screens throughout the galleries. This additional layer of interaction felt especially geared toward members of the Millennial generation like ourselves, and made the visit truly memorable.



(Left) Charmaine Branch standing inside *Shindig* (2015) by Patrick Dougherty at the Renwick Gallery, Washington, DC. (Right) Sarah Branch standing next to *Plexus A1* (2015) by Gabriel Dawe at the Renwick Gallery, Washington, DC.

Photos courtesy Charmaine Branch.

At the Festival, technological learning experiences have been embraced by some staff members and approached skeptically by others. While everyone agrees that the Festival website can enhance the event through posting additional information (up-to-date schedules, blogs, video, streaming content), many on staff would like to see people put away their phones and focus on interacting with participants. Other staff members are asking, “How can social media via Smartphones enhance the Festival experience while not detracting from person-to-person cultural conversations?”

CFCH is present on a number of popular social media apps including Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, Flickr, and YouTube. Some accounts are more general, referring to ongoing projects, including Smithsonian Folkways Recordings. Others are specific to the Festival such as Instagram photo contests, hashtags including #2016Folklife, and an invitation for visitors to share their favorite photo with #FolklifeCapture. The majority of the social media engagement derives from visitors’ use of Twitter and Instagram as they share their exploration live via the Internet. These social media experiences are not central to the Festival, but act as supplemental engagement opportunities for a community of technologically savvy visitors. Additionally, the Festival’s social media presence supports CFCH’s mission to represent traditional folk art and cultural practices as dynamic and in the present rather than frozen in the past.

Along with easy access to social media, the Smartphone has many uses in the museum environment. In the 2015 New Medium Consortium (NMC) Horizon Report, a group of researchers analyzed the

impact of technology in the museum over the next five years. They discussed the ongoing trend of BYOD (Bring Your Own Device) happening in museums today, finding that:

More museums are seeing the value of enabling visitors to capture and share their experience of art with their personal devices for educational purposes, and for promoting the institution to a broader audience through social media (2015, 37).

In art museums, location-specific Smartphone apps have replaced bulkier audio guide devices of past decades. Visitors can download an app specific to the museum with extended descriptions of the exhibitions, videos, and more. The Metropolitan Museum of Art's iPhone/iPad/iPod touch app provides accessible information about the museum and gives people the ability to explore current exhibitions. They can access the information during their visit or afterward from whichever location they choose. Variations of similar apps exist in museums all over the country, from the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art to the Minneapolis Institute of Art.<sup>4</sup>

A general information app was developed for the Festival in 2013, but it was scrapped in favor of maximizing the existing Festival website for mobile devices. Might the Festival think about a value-added app in the future, in line with new uses of cellphones in art museums? At first glance, the difference between the environment of the Festival and the art museum may seem prohibitive to an audio tour-like app: too much distracting ambient noise, but also the unique presence of the participants to speak to in person. But, what if audio content enhanced the Festival visitor experience in innovative ways?

The Festival takes participants out of the "natural contexts" of their workshops, homes, gardens, city sidewalks, or farms. What if contextualized audio soundscapes of a participant's home or work setting could be recorded and delivered via a Smartphone app? Could such additional information help set the stage for a more meaningful exchange and deeper understanding of the folk artists' natural milieu? Perhaps it is worth the experiment. In any case, new uses for social media and mobile technology will surely be incorporated into future Festivals, hopefully enhancing visitor experience instead of detracting from it.

## **Conclusion**

As the learning strategies above suggest, visitors can become active learners if provided the tools to do so. But we must acknowledge that visitors to all cultural institutions and events bring their individual styles of and preferences for receiving and processing information in cultural institutions and events that may have little to do with the venue they are visiting. Nina Simon, innovative director of the Santa Cruz Museum of History and Art and author of *The Participatory Museum*, notes that there will always be visitors who enjoy the "static exhibition conferring authoritative knowledge" typical of many art museums, just as "there will always be visitors who enjoy interactive programs that allow them to test that knowledge for themselves," which is more typical of the Festival. And, as Simon continues, "there will increasingly be visitors—perhaps new ones—who enjoy the opportunity to add their own voices to ongoing discussions about the knowledge presented," which as we have seen above, opens new opportunities to Festival goers, art museum visitors, and learners in many other contexts (Simon 2010, 4).

As the Smithsonian Folklife Festival approaches its 50th year in 2017, it continues to evolve, reflecting changes in society, research methods, technology, and many other factors. The Festival continues to develop new learning strategies and activities and improve those already serving visitors with the opportunity for "inspired learning." Similarly, art museums in the U.S. and around the world continue to develop new strategies for visitor engagement and "inspired learning." While

the Festival presents different opportunities as well as drawbacks to bricks-and-mortar museums, learning within the context of both Festival and museum can inform one another. In the future, it would behoove organizers of folk arts and folklife events such as the Festival to pay more attention to the ways visitor learning is changing and evolving in art and other museums and focus not only on the differences between the two, but also on the ways they can both provide visitors with meaningful learning experiences.

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### Endnotes

1. The ILfA Framework <http://www.artscouncil.org.uk/advice-and-guidance-library/toolkits> created “to develop rich learning environments for the visitor, and to evaluate the actual learning experience gained by the visitor” is a tool for museum educators and has potential for folklorists working in education as well, but further applications are the stuff of another article. Incidentally, “Inspiring Learning for All” has echoes in the in-house education “brand” that the Smithsonian launched recently with the aid of public relations firm Woolf Olins: “Exciting the Learning in Everyone,” <http://www.wolffolins.com/work/42/smithsonian>.
2. CFCH Mission can be found at <http://www.folklife.si.edu/mission-and-history/cfch-strategic-plan/smithsonian>.
3. The term “cultural conversation” has been used in many references to the Festival. See Richard Kurin (2014) and Cadaval, Olivia, Diana Baird N’Diaye, and Sojin Kim (2016).
4. For more information see <http://www.metmuseum.org/press/news/2014/metropolitan-museum-launches-flagship-mobile-app> and [http://www.nytimes.com/2010/03/18/arts/artsspecial/18SMART.html?\\_r=1](http://www.nytimes.com/2010/03/18/arts/artsspecial/18SMART.html?_r=1).

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Harvard Project Zero Thinking Strategies [http://www.visiblethinkingpz.org/VisibleThinking\\_html\\_files/VisibleThinking1.html](http://www.visiblethinkingpz.org/VisibleThinking_html_files/VisibleThinking1.html)

Festival blog on Post-it notes <http://www.festival.si.edu/blog/2013/visitors-put-their-languages-on-the-map>

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Renwick Gallery *Wonder* Exhibition <http://renwick.americanart.si.edu/wonder>



## Learning Application: The Story Behind a Folk Craft

(Adapted from the *Big Draw on the Move Sourcebook*.)

### Can a folk craft tell a story? How can you find out?

Assemble some handmade folk crafts into a “mini-museum” in your classroom, museum, or cultural event. Baskets, pottery, wood carvings, paper cuttings, kites, a quilt square—whatever is readily available and not too fragile or valuable to prevent handling. (If you are at a cultural event such as a craft or folklife festival, collect items from the makers if possible.)

Invite participants to touch, feel, even smell the artifacts, and ask each to pick the one that interests them the most.

Pass out art materials (paper, pencils, markers, crayons) and invite each participant to draw the item they are most interested in.

If you are in a setting where the makers of the crafts are present, have the participants take their drawings with them and find the maker of that type of item. (Basketmaker, quilter, paper cutter, etc.) They should conduct a short interview with the maker, asking some of the following questions or making up their own:

Who taught you how to make this craft?  
How old were you when you made the first one?  
Why did you choose these materials, colors, shapes?  
What do you like best about making this craft?

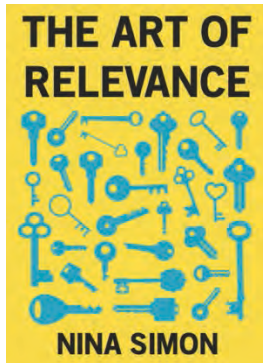
If you are not in a setting with makers present, prepare some sheets of information on each craft (and its maker, if known), which the participants can use to discover more information.

Ask participants to use the information from the interview or information sheets to write a story about the craft in their drawings. Have them share the stories with the other participants.

Put the drawings and the stories on display on a bulletin board.

**EXTENSION:** Invite other visitors to vote on their favorite drawing/story pair, to leave a Post-It note comment near their favorite, or to share their favorite on a social media platform.

## Journal of Folklore and Education Book Reviews



*The Art of Relevance*, by Nina Simon. Santa Cruz: Museum 2.0, 2016, 196 pp.

**Sarah M. Hatcher**

*Sarah M. Hatcher is Head of Programs and Education at The Mathers Museum of World Cultures at Indiana University.*

Nina Simon's newest work, *The Art of Relevance*, provides an approachable and accessible look at the topic of relevance and its importance to the work and livelihood of nonprofits. Although best known for her work in museums, Simon uses her latest book to consider relevance not only in museums but also in the wide variety of nonprofits whose efforts can be affected by relevance or the lack thereof.

Simon defines a relevant experience or organization as one that "gives you new information, it adds meaning to your life, it makes a difference to you" (29). This simple and compelling definition is used in conjunction with a "though-the-door" analogy to guide the book: You must get people to your door, but you must also get them into the room to truly engage with your nonprofit. And getting people through the door and into the room is just the beginning; the thing happening in that room has to be "brilliant" (55) and relevant to compel the user/visitor/patron to come back and partake again. Being relevant isn't a marketing campaign alone, it is about making honest and true connections to your constituents, colleagues, and community; it is about meeting them where they are and providing what *they* need and want, not what *you think* they need or want.

Relevance is an oft-discussed topic by those who create and conduct programs or lead

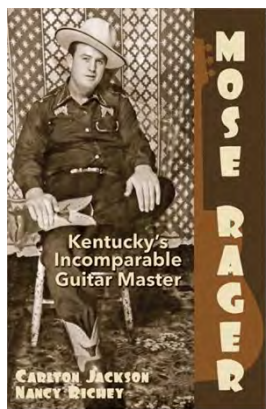
nonprofits, and this book is a welcome addition to that conversation. It encourages the reader to articulate the needs and wants of both the organization and those being served to ensure they are in alignment.

One of the book's strengths is the ease with which the reader can approach it—it doesn't take hours to get through a single chapter because the writing is clear and concise. The chapters are broken into many subsections—each clearly labeled—that address the topic at hand and illustrate the point using anecdotes directly from the nonprofit world.

While also being a strength of the book, the nonacademic nature may be frustrating for some readers. Simon briefly mentions the work of Deirdre Wilson and Dan Sperber to help guide her definition of relevance, but she doesn't specify which of their pieces influenced her definition. A quick Internet search reveals such information, but the lack of citations in the book could be considered detrimental by those looking for academic information on the topic of relevance. There were opportunities throughout to insert academic research to enrich the text further and make it a greater resource for students and academics in the nonprofit world. Simon is a strong, no-nonsense writer and her style would have kept it approachable and functional even with these additions.

Taken as a whole, this book is useful for those who work in the nonprofit world. The examples and anecdotes encourage the reader to stop and

ask the questions that really need to be asked but might be otherwise glossed over in the rush to do the things that need to be done.



***Mose Rager: Kentucky's Incomparable Guitar Master***, by Carlton Jackson and Nancy Richey. Morley: Acclaim Press, 2016, Cloth, 157 pp., illus.

**Greg Reish**

*Greg Reish is Director of the Center for Popular Music at Middle Tennessee State University as well as a record producer, author, and performer.*

One of the most distinctive, celebrated, and influential country guitar styles of the 20th century is the so-called “thumbpicking” that emerged from Muhlenberg and its neighboring counties of western Kentucky. A regional style rooted in the ragtime fingerpicking of early 20<sup>th</sup>-century African American guitarists and genteel parlor styles of the Victorian era, Western Kentucky thumbpicking offers a lively and virtuosic approach that intertwines syncopated melody and a steady, driving bass line played with the right thumb. The style became an essential part of mid-century commercial country in the hands of such superstars as Merle Travis and Chet Atkins and continues to flourish today. It is also frequently cited as an important, if indirect, influence in other popular styles, particularly through the Everly Brothers’ father Ike Everly and bluesman Arnold Shultz, one of the formative influences on the father of bluegrass, Bill Monroe. But despite their widely acknowledged importance, relatively little is known about seminal thumbpickers like Everly, Shultz, and Muhlenberg County pioneers Kennedy Jones and Mose Rager.

The late Carlton Jackson, Distinguished Professor at Western Kentucky University, collaborated with one of his former students, Nancy Richey, now also a faculty member at

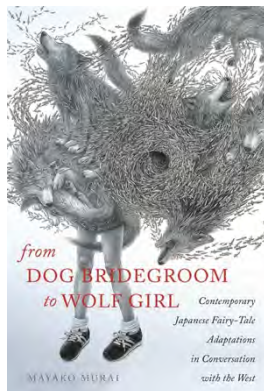
WKU, to offer a corrective in *Mose Rager: Kentucky's Incomparable Guitar Master*. A slim and easily readable book, it offers a mere 74 pages of text in its main body, organized chronologically into ten chapters, plus a foreword by contemporary thumbpicking master Eddie Pennington, a generous helping of wonderful photographs (some never before published), a bibliography, endnotes, and an index.

In this short biographical portrait, Jackson and Richey paint a compelling picture of Rager as an extraordinarily talented musician who struggled with the darker side of life as a professional musician, which he ultimately chose to renounce in favor of community, church, and family. A native and lifetime resident of Drakesboro, Kentucky, in Muhlenberg County, Rager is presented as a working man and active local musician, balancing his job in the coal mines with a willingness to play “where anyone would listen, most of the time with a borrowed guitar” (40). The authors enhance our knowledge of Rager’s musical associates, the other pioneers of thumbpicking that influenced him and with whom he played, like Shultz, Everly, and Jones. The discussion in the first half of the book constitutes an illuminating case study of the

fluid boundaries between folk and popular music, between amateurism and professionalism, in the mid-South during the Great Depression. From 1943 to 1948 Rager played to national audiences from the stage of the Grand Ole Opry in Nashville and on the road, touring with distinguished country artists Grandpa Jones, Ernest Tubb, and Curly Fox and Texas Ruby.

In the 1950s, however, Rager made the decision to give up this career to return home to his family and to avoid the temptations of drinking. It was a life-changing religious reawakening that Jackson and Richey take pains to explain and justify. In the process, the authors do at times cross over into their own evangelism, as when they provide a series of quotations from contemporary Christian authors without any hard evidence that Rager had read them (99), and when theological principles are presented as essential truths with no supporting citations (103). A similar religiosity seems to frame the book's subsequent section, which describes Rager's rediscovery by Archie Green and other luminaries of the folk revival as the "miracle" of Rager "resurrected" (104–105).

Despite its shortcomings and overall brevity, *Mose Rager: Kentucky's Incomparable Guitar Master* will prove valuable to anyone interested in the history of vernacular guitar styles or the celebrated music of Western Kentucky. As a biography co-written by a historian and a librarian, it includes practically no substantive discussion of the music itself; those looking for analytical explanation of the workings of Rager's complex style will have to continue to rely on published instructional materials by Eddie Pennington, Tommy Flint, and others. Jackson and Richey have, however, provided a much-needed portrait of this little-known but influential musician. Moreover, they have done a fine job of placing Rager within his communal context, giving that part of his life story as much attention as his professional years. The book could prove useful in a classroom or other pedagogical situation thanks to its accessibility and its compelling description of a talented man caught between the potentially destructive forces of the country music industry and the stability of family and home.



***From Dog Bridegroom to Wolf Girl: Contemporary Japanese Fairy-Tale Adaptations in Conversation with the West***, by Mayako Murai. Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2015, 192 pp., illus.

**Katharine Schramm**

*Katharine Schramm is a PhD Candidate in the Department of Folklore and Ethnomusicology, Indiana University.*

For those of us struggling to investigate issues of locally specific readings of cross cultural media and how they reflect and respond to multicultural influences, Mayako Murai's monograph on contemporary fairy tale

adaptations provides a model as well as a compelling exploration of four major Japanese contemporary artists—Tawada Yōko, Ogawa Yōko, Yanagi Miwa, and Kōnoike Tomo—whose works range from the literary to the multimedia.



All her analysis draws on intertextual readings of Japanese and Western genre conventions, multiple forms of Japanese and Western literary analysis, and reader reception.

Part of Murai's goal is to employ post-structuralist and feminist fairy tale criticism to deal with some of the most influential figures in Japanese fairy tale scholarship, in particular the Japanese psychologist Kawai Hayao. Murai works to de-essentialize his generalizations of East and West as well as those of gender, referring back to popular psychoanalytic and depth approaches to move beyond them to see additional interpretive possibilities.

Indeed, one of the really valuable aspects of Murai's work is its insight into contemporary folkloristic, literary, and gender theorization occurring in contemporary Japan, which is very much in dialogue with Western fairy tale scholarship. However, not only do the theorists converse with one another—some retellings are explicitly in dialogue with theoretical interpretive frameworks.

In brief summary of the literary artists introduced, Murai explores the work of author Tawada Yōko, whose novella *The Bridegroom Was a Dog* upends genre expectations both for Western animal bridegroom tales as well as Japanese animal bridegroom tales. Next, Murai discusses Ogawa Yōko, whose story "The Ring Finger" and novel *Hotel Iris* become a reinterpretation of the Bluebeard tale type, where the "forbidden chamber" results in the heroines' liberation, even transforming one of them into Bluebeard herself.

In the chapters on photographic and multimedia visual art, Murai begins with Yanagi Miwa, whose *My Grandmothers and Fairy Tale* photo series contrast old and young women in ways that demonstrate that the gender-typed fairy tale categories of old and young, good and evil, and beautiful and ugly, are not so easily separated. Murai finishes her exploration of visual art with Kōnoike Tomoko, whose multimedia pieces incorporate the motif of wolves and girls in many different forms, exploring and challenging the assumptions buried in the overly familiar Red Riding Hood fairy tale, as well as forcing viewers to leave the gallery and go into the forest to "imagine and feel what lies beyond the anthropocentric understanding of the world" (139).

*From Dog Bridegroom to Wolf Girl* demonstrates how to read various forms of media in cross cultural environments, especially where one culture is unequally influenced by the other, creating an ever-more-dense network of interpretive possibilities that adds to the work rather than takes away from it. This slender, attractive book would be an excellent addition to a classroom, graduate or advanced undergraduate, where the discussion of culture and cross cultural interpretation comes to the fore. The introductory chapter alone on the historical background and influences on various forms of fairy tale scholarship and the many retellings within Japan is worth inclusion in any regional studies class looking at folk or fairy tales, related literature, or folkloristics. An essential for any class on literary folklore genres, this book would also be of interest to gender and women's studies, contemporary and comparative literature, and contemporary art criticism and art history.

**Note from the Editors:** *In this issue we introduce a review section where readers from different fields can find interdisciplinary resources of interest. We welcome Thomas Grant Richardson as Review Editor. Thomas is an independent folklorist and ethnomusicologist based in Santa Fe, New Mexico. Most recently he was the Curator of Education and Outreach at the Birthplace of Country Music Museum in Bristol, TN/VA. To submit publications, media products, and web-based materials for possible review, contact him at [tgrantrichardson@gmail.com](mailto:tgrantrichardson@gmail.com).*



Lisa L. Higgins, Special Section Editor

With this *Journal of Folklore and Education* special issue on the intersections between folklore and museum education, a cadre of professional folklorists came together to provide insight into their unique programs and roles directing state folk arts and folklife programs within or in partnership with university-based museums. As demonstrated with the establishment of the Folklore and Museums Section of the American Folklore Society in 2014, folklorists quite often work in—or in tandem with—the nonprofit, government, and university museum sectors. In the following case studies, readers will learn about the history of five public folklore-university museum partnerships, some three decades old and others just a few years old. Lead folklorists at each institution also outline projects framed by museum education and address the challenges and opportunities that arise as we position and reposition ourselves and programs in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.



## Traditional Arts Indiana at Indiana University's Mathers Museum

by Jon Kay

A partnership between Indiana University Bloomington (IUB) and the [Indiana Arts Commission \(IAC\)](#), [Traditional Arts Indiana \(TAI\)](#) is Indiana's statewide, public folklore agency focused specifically on the folk arts and everyday culture in Indiana. A well-established site for the training of folklore graduate students for successful careers in public folklore and related fields, TAI works to identify, document, and present Indiana's traditional arts through collaborations with Indiana artists and cultural organizations.

Founded in 1998 as a research and outreach unit within IUB's [Department of Folklore and Ethnomusicology](#), TAI has traveled the state researching the expressive lives of Hoosiers and forging partnerships with state agencies, nonprofits, community leaders, and artists. In 2007, the Indiana General Assembly recognized TAI as the official statewide folk and traditional arts service organization, helping to secure TAI's long-term relationship with the state.<sup>1</sup> This honor encouraged TAI to continue to work with underserved communities in Indiana through strategic documentation of traditional arts, innovative public programming, and exemplary interpretation of the state's folklife and traditional arts resources. Governor Mike Pence recognized the unique contributions made by TAI in 2013 when TAI received a biannual Governor's Arts Award.<sup>2</sup>

Also in 2013, folklorist Jason Baird Jackson took over as Director of the [Mathers Museum of World Cultures \(MMWC\)](#), helping infuse a folkloristic perspective into this already vibrant museum on the IUB campus.<sup>3</sup> Two years later, aiming to strengthen TAI and to ensure its continued support within the university, TAI was moved under the auspices of the MMWC.<sup>4</sup> Combined, these two successful programs have complemented both organizations' missions and activities. When TAI joined the MMWC, it helped the museum broaden its statewide reach, expand its traveling exhibit program, and increase its access to external funds. In addition, TAI benefited from the museum's strong infrastructure, professional staff, and institutional stability. Since combining forces, the TAI arm of the museum has hosted gatherings of traditional artists, presented public programs at the museum, and become a stronger partner with both the community and the IUB campus.

### Key Projects and Intersections with Museum Education

TAI has long toured traveling exhibitions into non-museum settings. Using Indiana's interlibrary loan program, TAI loans exhibition panels to public libraries around the state through its Rotating Exhibit Network.<sup>5</sup> Since 2005, this unique program has worked to share the stories of Indiana's traditional arts and artists with new audiences. From hoop-net makers and quilters to mariachi ensembles and bluegrass bands, the Rotating Exhibit Network has profiled the cultural traditions of our state and each year more than 300,000 Hoosiers are served by this free community resource.

While the Rotating Exhibit Network exhibitions reached large numbers, their format and venues were inappropriate for larger exhibitions. Becoming a unit within the MMWC created an opportunity for TAI director Jon Kay to curate two large exhibitions at the museum. *Willow Work: Viki Graber, Willow Basketmaker* explored the creative work of a fourth-generation basketmaker working in Indiana today and *Working Wood: Indiana's Oak-Rod Basket Tradition* traced the evolution and end



### **Small Traveling Banner Exhibits and the Museum Exhibition: A Comparison**

Both *Willow Work* and *Working Wood* exhibits had had a small traveling version that toured to libraries through the TAI Rotating Exhibit Network, but presenting these traditional arts at a university-based museum allowed TAI to tell more in-depth stories about these two traditions. These were not better than their traveling counterparts, but rather both iterations worked in two different ways. Exhibitions in the Rotating Exhibit Network had to be small, quickly digestible, and easy to travel. The exhibits at the MMWC allowed us to present objects rather than just images and provide more detailed information and complex storylines. The traveling exhibit helped us reach an audience around the state, but the exhibitions at the MMWC helped us connect our work more directly with the university. Both *Willow Work* and *Working Wood* raised the visibility and perceived value of the traditional arts, by placing baskets in a gallery setting. One added bonus for artists is that museums acquire objects for their collection; in fact, the museum purchased several baskets from Viki Graber for their permanent collection, helping to strengthen the museum's collection of Indiana traditional arts. This also bolsters the relationship between artists and the museum

of a distinctive basketmaking tradition in southern Indiana. These two exhibition projects built on long-term TAI research and connected with global basketry research and exhibition projects also underway at the museum. Also, in the spring of 2016, TAI staff, along with Jon Kay's Laboratory in Public Folklore graduate class, researched and curated a large exhibition based on TAI's years of field research. The exhibition *Indiana Folk Arts: 200 Years of Tradition and Innovation* was endorsed by the Indiana Bicentennial Commission and featured the work of more than 45 traditional artists from throughout Indiana. The introductory panel describes the exhibit's focus this way:

*For more than 200 years, Indiana has been home to a wide variety of folk arts. Through telling the stories of specific artists, this bicentennial exhibit highlights the important work of individuals in the continuation of traditional arts in our state. While some create art based on skills they learned from their family or in their community, others have reinvented established forms, taking them in new directions. From beadwork and blacksmithing to rug weaving and limestone carving, the artisans featured here represent a few of the many threads within the creative fabric of Indiana.*

The exhibition opened in April 2016 to a large audience, and the festival-like opening, which included narrative stages, musical performances, hands-on demonstrations, and free root beer floats, served by the museum staff. Graduate students planned and presented the opening. The exhibition also had a 76-page, free companion catalogue.<sup>6</sup> In addition to excerpts from the exhibition, the catalogue included essays about artists, portraits of the artists, as well as images of their artwork.

In February 2016, shortly after relocating TAI offices to the museum, TAI held our first major gathering of traditional artists. For years, we had hosted artist meet-ups, webinars, and workshops, but the 2016 Folk Art Summit was different. Seventeen artists from around the state attended the gathering, for which TAI paid them a stipend. At the gathering, each artist participated in workshops to improve their demonstrations and presentations, professional photographers created portraits for each of the artists, and museum staff assisted with photographing artwork and leading collection tours. Liaisons from the Indiana Arts Commission and Indiana State Parks led workshops on potential grants and upcoming projects.<sup>7</sup> In addition, students from the Public Folklore Laboratory interviewed artists and created biographies for each. These materials were featured in the exhibition catalogue *Indiana Folk Arts*. Yet, perhaps the most important facet of the day's activities was the networking between artists that took place. This program, exhibition, and publication would not have



been possible if it had not been for TAI's new institutional home. Combining a statewide folk arts program with a campus-based museum proved to be a positive context for engaging with artists, training of graduate folklore students, and producing this bicentennial project.

At the museum, TAI hosts a steady stream of traditional artists on IUB's campus, creating a context where artists engage with both undergraduate and graduate classes, which is helping recruit and train the next generation of public folklorists. In the fall of 2015, Jon Kay taught a special course called *Work as Art: Occupational Folklife in the United States*. The course was offered as part of a campuswide program called *Themester*, which aims to encourage courses around specific interdisciplinary topics. From programs with gravestone carvers to class visits with first-responders the course blended undergraduate education with public folklore programming in a museum setting.<sup>8</sup> Students also learned basic documentation, research, and presentational methods and gained a greater understanding of the work of a public folklore.



### **Rethinking the Role of Folklore and Museum Education**

The synergy of combining a campus museum with a statewide public folklore agency is proving to be a robust catalyst for the research and presentation of the folk and traditional arts as well as for the support of undergraduate and graduate education. As arts and humanities programs are threatened by the massive restructuring that universities are facing in the U.S, public folklore and related outward facing arts and humanities programs are playing an important role in making our work relevant in the years following the Great Recession. Programs like TAI and the Mathers, as well as the other organizations featured in this essay series, help expose students to the work of folklorists and museum professionals and offer alternative career paths beyond the academy. Public folklore is not a secondary choice for many of today's folklore graduates, and our graduate training needs adapt to support applied and public work in the humanities.

So, what should students expect from a graduate program if they are going into public folklore? First, a grounding in the theories, history, and methods of our field—this should never be compromised. Second, students should receive relevant experience in public and applied work. Just as teaching assistantships help prepare students for a career as a professor, working with arts organizations and museums can prepare them for work in the public sector. Work experience can be gained in a variety of ways. At TAI, we often work with students through practicum courses, where they shepherd a project to completion, help plan and produce a public event, do fieldwork and develop an exhibition panel for the Rotating Exhibit Network, or some other relevant work. We also hire several students each year to work at TAI, assisting with day-to-day operations and public programs. TAI has also hired advanced students to do contract fieldwork. Recently, two students conducted fieldwork for TAI on the circus arts and traditions in Peru, Indiana. This research was the first leg in what we hope will be a component of a future Smithsonian Folklife Festival. In addition to graduate coursework, working helps students grapple with ideas and concepts through real-world situations. It is easy to

joust with straw men sitting in a seminar class but harder when scholars labor alongside individuals on community projects.

Students should also expect to compile, whether through a course or on their own, a portfolio that demonstrates their professional skills and experiences. This dossier should include fieldwork materials (sample fieldnotes, recordings, and photographs); examples of promotional materials for public events or exhibitions; or other resources relevant to the student's career trajectory). Like an academic curriculum vita, a thoughtful resume and portfolio help translate graduate experiences into a legible set of professional skills.



The merger of statewide folklore agencies based in university museums offers a proven training ground for public folklorists and museum professionals. While in some regards this emerged as a new model, folklorists have worked in museums for over a hundred years, and this recent turn may mark a rekindling of interest in public folklore and museum work.<sup>9</sup> The professional skills and methods needed in both public folklore and museum practice should be foregrounded in our academic training. At IU, we offer hands-on courses through the Department of Folklore and Ethnomusicology in both public folklore and museums to provide professional skills along with a grounding in the theories and methods of our discipline.

*Jon Kay is Director of Traditional Arts Indiana, Curator of Folklife and Cultural Heritage at Mathers Museum of World Cultures, and Professor of Practice at Indiana University's Department of Folklore and Ethnomusicology.*

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<http://www.mathers.indiana.edu>



## The Kentucky Folklife Program and the Kentucky Museum at Western Kentucky University

by Brent Björkman and Virginia Siegel

The [Kentucky Folklife Program](#) (KFP) was founded in 1989 as an interagency partnership between the [Kentucky Arts Council](#) and [Kentucky Historical Society](#). Since that time, KFP has been dedicated to the mission of identifying, documenting, and presenting the diverse traditional and cultural resources of the Commonwealth of Kentucky. Among the organization's many achievements are countless oral history projects, traveling exhibits, and a hugely popular Kentucky Folklife Festival, which ran in Frankfort from 1997 to 2007. In 2012, KFP had the opportunity to transition to a new home within the [Department of Folk Studies and Anthropology](#) at Western Kentucky University (WKU) in Bowling Green, ushering in a new era in the life of the organization. This new home brought with it many new partnerships with other entities on campus and the community, but perhaps most critically provided hands-on experience for Folk Studies graduate students, while the students in turn could bring innovative ideas to KFP.

A recent example of this reciprocal collaboration includes a [traveling exhibit](#) on South central Kentucky's white oak basketmaking tradition, produced by KFP in 2014 and funded by the National Endowment for the Arts (NEA). Using years of research by KFP staff, students in the Museum Preservation Procedures and Techniques class curated and designed panel content in collaborative small teams. Students also assist KFP in producing public events and projects ranging from narrative stages at regional community festivals to oral history projects for KFP's [Folklife Archives](#), housed in WKU's Library Special Collections.

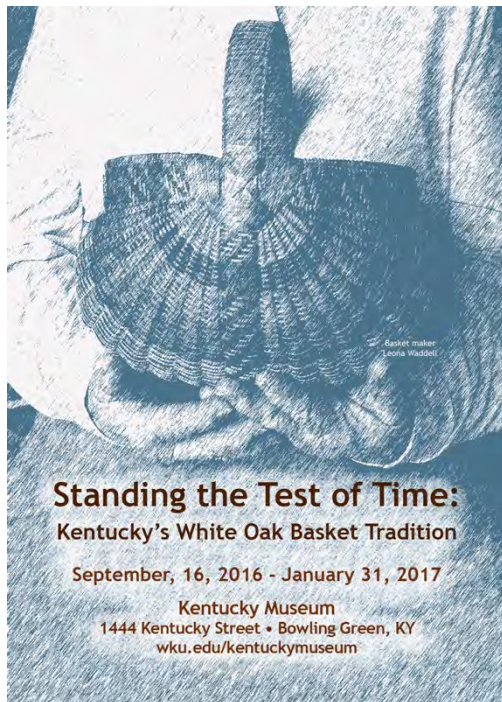
In addition to partnerships with the Folk Studies Program and WKU's Library Special Collections, KFP has built a wonderful working relationship with the [Kentucky Museum](#), WKU's university museum with which KFP has planned several forthcoming exhibits and programming. The mission of the Kentucky Museum supports the academic and cultural goals of the University and "provides a quality educational experience for the campus community and the community at large by collecting, interpreting, preserving culture, history and art, and exploring their relevance in a global society." In 2015, Brent Björkman, KFP Director, also became Director of the Kentucky Museum, bringing with him an increasingly strong link between the institutions. KFP's work expands the ways the Kentucky Museum exhibits and highlights culture, with a shift from strictly historical approaches to the documentation and presentation of living communities. Two examples of programming in the works as KFP builds its intimate partnership with the Kentucky Museum are highlighted below.

### Two Key Project Intersections with Museum Education

#### *White Oak Basket Exhibition and Programs*

In September 2016, the Kentucky Museum and KFP will showcase a collaborative indepth look at the state's well-recognized basketmaking traditions. The exhibition [Standing the Test of Time: Kentucky White Oak Basket Tradition](#) culminates over 25 years of KFP and folklorist-driven field documentation of and with central Kentucky basketmakers. Over the years, KFP has featured examples of this art form and developed enduring relationships with the tradition's practicing artists through programming at festivals and in local schools, as well as through the production of the [traveling exhibit](#) currently making its rounds to rural libraries. Interactions with basketmaking artists remains strong as KFP continues to document the annual [Kentucky Split Oak Basket Contest](#) each year at the Hart County Fair.





Exhibition poster, designed by Lynne Ferguson.

In the fall of 2016, the Museum and KFP will draw together KFP's historic documentation with exhibit planning assistance by the museum's curatorial, registrar, and preparatory team. Showcasing a contemporary and retrospective look at the history of the tradition, makers' techniques, and the nuanced basketmaking process itself, the exhibit boasts local buy-in of collectors who have agreed to loan baskets to help share this story with the public. These baskets will accompany those in the Kentucky Museum's archive, including the institution's collection of white oak baskets. Programming throughout the four-month exhibition will include a gathering of artists who will demonstrate during the opening weekend. The museum will also feature monthly talks by makers and scholars, and a hands-on "touch table" will allow visitors look closely at the baskets and their joinery.

Recently NEA announced that [Leona Waddell](#), one of our region's most venerated white oak basketmakers, is a 2016 recipient of the National Heritage Fellowship. Plans are under way to celebrate Waddell's accomplishments further as a nationally recognized traditional artist and to incorporate her award into the programming and the exhibition.

### *The Bosnia Oral History Project*

One of KFP and the Kentucky Museum's more ambitious and timely projects, given local and national conversations on refugees, is an ongoing oral history project established with Bowling Green's substantial Bosnian population. From the mid- to late-1990s, Bowling Green was one of many relocation sites for refugees of the war in Bosnia and Herzegovina that resulted from the breakup of the former Yugoslavia. Aided by the International Center of Kentucky in Bowling Green, some of the earliest families arrived in the mid-1990s. Those early families became critical in welcoming incoming families in the following years, many of them Bosniak, the predominately Muslim population of Bosnia. Many came with just a handful of possessions. Some lost everything, including loved ones. Today, roughly 10 percent of Bowling Green's population, approximately 6,000 individuals, is Bosnian American. Members of the Bosnian community include business owners, restaurateurs, prominent community leaders, and WKU students and alumni.

In the fall of 2015, shortly after his appointment as Director of the Kentucky Museum, Brent Björkman and KFP's Folklife Specialist Virginia Siegel convened a working group to plan a project that would center on the Bosnian community of Bowling Green. The year 2015 marked the 20th anniversary of the Srebrenica genocide, in which many of our community lost family and friends, as well as the 20th anniversary of the Dayton Peace Agreement that, although considered problematic in its implementation by many, ended the violence of the war in Bosnia. In addition to these two anniversaries, [WKU's Office of International Programs](#) announced that the academic year 2017-2018 would be the [International Year of Bosnia and Herzegovina](#). WKU, the institutional home of the KFP, celebrates a different country each academic year, with exhibits, speakers, films, and other events open to the campus community and the general public. Concurrent with these momentous anniversaries, KFP began the Bosnia Oral History Project (the Bosnia Project). Initiated as a working group supported by the WKU Institute for Citizenship and Social Responsibility, it has evolved into





Brent Björkman conducting an interview with Azmir Husić.

Photo by Dzeldina Dzelil.



Nermin Peimanović shares a Bosnian-made fez purchased for his young son. The fez is worn with traditional clothing for musical performances and special events within the community.

Photo by Virginia Siegel.

an ongoing planning committee. From its inception, the committee has included members of the Bosnian American community along with KFP staff and faculty of the Department of Folk Studies and Anthropology.

Capitalizing on the Kentucky Museum's prominence and visibility within the larger Bowling Green community and KFP's expertise, the working group has developed short- and long-term goals. In all its efforts, the project aims to document the experiences and traditions of the Bosnian community. KFP's growing work with the Bosnian community, as well as recent statewide and national political rhetoric, reveal a broad lack of awareness of the traditions of our rich and vibrant immigrant and refugee populations in Kentucky. In response to such a need, the working group plans to establish an oral history project that will live for years to come.

In the short term, KFP will use its growing body of documentation to design and produce an exhibit on the cultural heritage and traditional art of the Bosnian community in Bowling Green. KFP will curate the exhibition at the Kentucky Museum for September 2017-January 2018 to coincide with WKU's International Year of Bosnia and Herzegovina, and the exhibit will be mounted in the museum's feature gallery space. While the fieldwork is overseen primarily by KFP, the interpretation and design of the exhibit will be carried out in collaboration with the museum and Bosnia Project committee members. An overarching theme of the exhibit, determined through our collaborative working group, is the need to banish misconceptions of the Bosnian community, specifically misconceptions of Islam and the traditional practices of the Muslim faith. The art and material culture of the Bosnian community will be showcased; key works of art will include *sevdah* singing, dancing, clothing, crocheting, food traditions, and expressions of faith.

The exhibit will also contextualize the political upheavals and genocide that brought many Bosnians to our community and the importance of the survival of aesthetic traditions. It will examine the many similarities between the food, music, and landscape of Bosnia and Kentucky, which our Bosnian colleagues credit for making Bowling Green a desired destination for Bosnian refugees throughout the U.S..



### Focus on Bosnian Foodways and Making Coffee

Senida Husić shares the process of making Bosnian coffee, which is brewed in a process similar to (yet distinct from) Turkish coffee. **Click on the image** (or visit the KFP [YouTube channel](#)) to hear her describe the importance of coffee to Bosnian daily life.



The Husić Family's dinner table, dishes including *kupas* (cabbage stew) and *riza/pirijan* (chicken and rice). Foodways (including coffee making) will be featured as part of the exhibit and in demonstrations accompanying the exhibit.

Photos by Virginia Siegel.

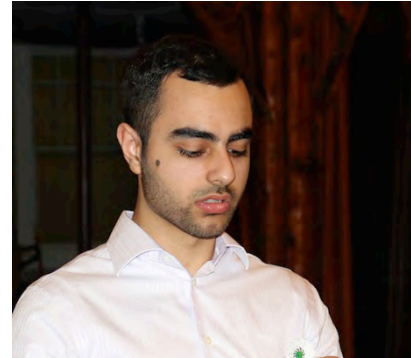
With the support of grant funds, KFP hopes to complement the exhibit with live performances and demonstrations of Bosnian music, dancing, and food preparation, tentatively planned as a regularly scheduled monthly event throughout the exhibit's run. The artists and art forms presented will be determined by KFP and the Bosnia Project committee members based on the findings of their ethnographic fieldwork in the community. This will ensure that the artists and art forms presented are characteristic of and esteemed by the Bosnian community in the region.

While this exhibit will be important to our community, perhaps most important to our Bosnian colleagues and community is the long-term goal to establish and build an oral history collection. KFP aims to establish a permanent Bosnian archive in WKU's Library Special Collections, housed in the same building as the Kentucky Museum. The 2017 exhibit will ideally be a first project in a long working relationship between the Bosnian community, KFP, and the Kentucky Museum. Such an approach, even early in our research, reinforces the roles that both KFP and the museum want to serve in the community (and for KFP, throughout the state). Since its beginning, KFP has helped citizens realize that, whether a community has existed in Kentucky for 100 years or 10, each is an important, dynamic part of Kentucky's evolving cultural story. It is the hope that a partnership with the Kentucky Museum brings this kind of living vitality to the museum's programming as well.

In regard to long-term goals for the project, oral history collection is central. In the 1990s, certain factions in Bosnia sought to erase the existence and very memory of their neighbors. Projects like the Bosnia Project in Bowling Green, or [the Bosnia Memory Project](#) in St. Louis, based out of Fontbonne University (which has guided some of our practices), actively work in reverse—to document and digitally preserve the voices of those who survived. KFP’s approach is very much place-based. Our exhibit will not seek to tell the story of all Bosnians, or what it means to be Bosnian American throughout the U. S. Our exhibit shares the story of the Bosnian American people of Bowling Green and how this particular place has become home for a small portion of the Bosnian diaspora. There is a scholarly advantage to this strategy as well. By focusing on our community, we are not burdened with representing the entire diaspora and the diversity in religion, ethnicity, experiences, and opinions that entails. Because it is place-based, we can focus on local stories and experience. That is not to say we will work in isolation. In addition to Fontbonne University’s Bosnia Memory Project, we have sought the advice and opinions of scholars and members of the Bosnian community near and far and have found support from Bosnian leaders and organizations on the national level. While the focus of the exhibit will be local, the “good work” produced by the exhibit will stretch further, and through portable components of the exhibit, perhaps live on after the mounted exhibit has been taken down at the Kentucky Museum.

### **Engagement of Graduate Students in Public Folklore**

To make the above highlighted programs and projects viable, KFP owes a great deal to the wonderful home WKU’s Department of Folk Studies and Anthropology has made for us at the university. KFP relies on the department and the graduate students. One of the most advantageous reasons for KFP’s move from its alignment as part of state government (as part of both the Kentucky Arts Council and Kentucky Historical Society) was to bring practical, real-world projects to the program so that graduate students could get public folklore experience while benefiting the small staff at KFP. Depending on the project, KFP relies on Folk Studies graduate students as frequent volunteers and collaborators to expand and sustain its programming. Projects not only provide hands-on experience but also serve as models that students can use as cultural programming templates to build and improve upon as they venture into their own professional careers.



Denis Hodzic shares a small crocheted flower, a sign of remembrance for the genocide that took place in Srebrenica, Bosnia, in 1995. The color and shape of the flower are significant. The number of petals represents the day the genocide began, July 11<sup>th</sup>. The colors symbolize both innocence and hope, while also representing women mourning in white as they surround a casket draped in green.

Photos by Brent Bjorkman.



WKU Folk Studies students help document Kentucky’s traditions through their classwork and by volunteering for the Kentucky Folklife Program.

Photo by Amanda Hardeman.





The Kentucky Folklife Program is fortunate to have a graduate assistantship position through the WKU Folk Studies Program. Graduate assistants are critical to KFP's operations. Lilli Tichinin, pictured here, was KFP's first graduate assistant after its move to WKU.

Photo by Brent Björkman.

Like our museum-based colleagues who have contributed to this series, the Kentucky Museum and KFP, along with our partner colleagues within the Department of Folk Studies and Anthropology, continue to be burdened with the financial woes and increasing budget cuts common to many universities. We are all asked to “do more with less” and producing collaborative projects that can be seen as both “sharing resources,” as well as strengthening folkloristic practice as it is realized in the context of dedicated museum exhibit production, is a great growing strength of our relationship. With WKU's tagline “A Leading American University with International Reach” as an increasing focus of the university, the exhibits highlighted above have been created with this goal in mind as well. In the case of the white oak basketmaking exhibit, we present the story of this traditional art form as both locally created but nationally and internationally known within the greater basketmaking and collecting community. The Bosnia Project, in a similar though perhaps inverted way, presents the traditional culture of a more newly arrived folk group to Kentucky that, though rooted in another country and part of a larger international diaspora, now calls Kentucky home.

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***Virginia Siegel** is a Folklife Specialist with the Kentucky Folklife Program. She received her MA in Folk Studies from Western Kentucky University and her BFA in Historic Preservation from Savannah College of Art and Design.*

#### URLS

<https://kentuckyfolklife.org>

<http://artscouncil.ky.gov>

<http://history.ky.gov>

<http://wku.edu/fsa>

<https://kentuckyfolklife.org/resources-2/traveling-exhibit-panels>

<https://wku.edu/library/dlsc/manuscripts>

<http://www.wku.edu/kentuckymuseum>

[http://www.wku.edu/kentuckymuseum/white\\_oak\\_basket\\_tradition.php](http://www.wku.edu/kentuckymuseum/white_oak_basket_tradition.php)

<http://www.mammothcavebasketmakers.com/WOBC2015/2016contest.html>

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oF5ceW9t9W4>

<https://www.wku.edu/oip>

<https://www.wku.edu/iyo>

[https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCux10F1F6wMiKE\\_wX30GTZg](https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCux10F1F6wMiKE_wX30GTZg)

<https://www.fontbonne.edu/academics/departments/english-and-communication-department/bosnia-memory-project>





## **Michigan Traditional Arts Program at Michigan State University Museum and the Michigan Council for Arts and Cultural Affairs**

**by Marsha MacDowell and C. Kurt Dewhurst**

The Michigan Traditional Arts Program (MTAP) is a partnership of the Michigan State University Museum and the Michigan Council for the Arts and Cultural Affairs (MCACA) with a mission of developing and implementing programs "to advance cross-cultural understanding in a diverse society through the identification, documentation, preservation, and presentation of the traditional arts and cultural heritage of the state of Michigan."<sup>1</sup> This partnership is a symbiotic relationship benefitting from the structures, missions, and resources of the museum and the state arts council.

Focused research, education, exhibition and collection development activities related to traditional arts began in 1975 when Marsha MacDowell and C. Kurt Dewhurst approached the museum about serving as the institutional home of a project to survey historical folk arts in Michigan with the aim of developing an exhibition as part of the nation's Bicentennial celebration. These two researchers were keenly aware of several factors when approaching Michigan State University (MSU) and the museum as a home for this project: a) the university, as a land-grant educational institution, had a mission to address educational and research needs of the state's citizenry; b) the university's extension service was a network of professionals situated both on campus and in every county with strong connections to local individuals and institutions; and c) the museum had strong historical collections related to rural Midwest living and worldwide traditional cultural practices and a dedication to object-based and field research.

With support from a grant from the newly established Folk and Traditional Arts Program at the National Endowment for the Arts (NEA) as well as supplemental support from Michigan 4-H Youth Programs, the two researchers traveled the state for a year. They met with county extension personnel, folk arts collectors, and staff at local arts agencies, historical societies and museums throughout the state. These contacts led almost immediately to the discovery of rich, varied, and sometimes uniquely place-based historical arts, but more importantly this survey uncovered leads to scores of contemporary practitioners of traditional arts. Hence the exhibition of historical folk art mounted at MSU was quickly followed by another project to document contemporary Michigan folk artists with the goal of presenting an exhibition about them and their work. By the time the second exhibition was mounted, again with support from NEA, the university offered each of the team members a position to continue their work and the MSU Museum agreed to be the home for them and their work.

### **FOLKPATTERNS: Folklife and 4-H**

In 1977, the museum joined with MSU Extension Service (MSUE) and 4-H Youth Development to create FOLKPATTERNS (a statewide cultural heritage education program for youth). Funded at the outset by the National Endowment for the Humanities (NEH) and subsequently by MSU 4-H Youth Programs (a division MSUE), the FOLKPATTERNS program reflected NEH's desire to facilitate humanities-based programming in previously "unlikely" settings, the desire of 4-H to expand their arts and culture offerings beyond performing arts and global education, and the museum's desire to create and deliver statewide educational programs that would focus on the traditions of families and communities.<sup>2</sup>

Both FOLKPATTERNS and a folklife extension position secured in the early 1980's endured, with support from MSUE and NEA, until the early 2010s when the State of Michigan faced economic downturn and the MSUE both lost substantial funding and was reorganized.<sup>3</sup> Nonetheless, FOLKPATTERNS curriculum materials are still used in 4-H, museums, and school programs not only in Michigan but also in other states that adapted the program. It is also noteworthy that in Michigan youth are still able to enter and win awards for projects in FOLKPATTERNS categories at county fairs.<sup>4</sup>

(See a lesson plan adapted from FOLKPATTERNS for *Show-Me Traditions* on page 135 of this section.)



From its earliest years, the folklife programs at the MSU Museum also received project-specific grants from MCACA. Because other states were adding folklore positions to their council operations and expanding support for folklife programs, the folklife team at the museum approached MCACA with a proposal for the museum team to serve as the council's state folk arts program as a partner with MCACA and, rather than project-to-project funding, the MSU Museum be considered for operational program support for this specific activity. In 1986 the Michigan Traditional Arts Program (MTAP) partnership was launched and the folklife team of the MSU Museum and MCACA staff began to engage in many activities that have endured. Through this partnership the capacity for each institution to carry out its mission has been strengthened and, simultaneously, traditional artists and arts communities in Michigan have benefited from this collaboration.

In the early 1980s folklorists at the museum began what was to become the first of many joint research, festival, and exhibition projects with colleagues at the Smithsonian Institution's Center for Folklife and Cultural Heritage and later with the Smithsonian's National Museum of the American Indian (NMAI). In 2001, the museum became the first in the state to receive Smithsonian Affiliate status from the Smithsonian Institution in Washington, DC, the world's largest museum and research complex, thereby giving the MSU Museum broader access to Smithsonian's cultural and scientific resources to use in scholarly engaged work. The application for this designation was based, in large part, on the shared interests of the Smithsonian and the museum in folklife and cultural heritage work.

In 2006 the museum was administratively realigned from the MSU Office of the Vice President for Research and Graduate Studies to the MSU University Outreach and Engagement, a unit of the Office of the Provost. This change reflected the recognition that the museum's role in not only furthering the teaching and research activities of campus-based faculty and students but also in using its resources to foster unique scholarly based collaborations with communities outside the university. Consistent with the core principles of University Outreach and Engagement, the MSU Museum staff

“seeks to become more embedded in the communities with which we work, to stress asset-based solutions, to strive to build long-term community capacity, and to create and strengthen collaborative networks.”<sup>5</sup> Today the museum reaches broad and diverse audiences through strong, varied, and accessible collections, field- and collections-based research, public service and education programs, traveling exhibits, and innovative partnerships that respond to needs and issues not only of campus faculty, staff, and students but also of communities around the world. The museum-based team of individuals whose work as researchers, curators, and educators is centered in the investigation, collection, and presentation of tangible and intangible cultural heritage has been core to this body of activities. MCACA yearly support for the MTAP has been key to sustaining activities that focus on Michigan and connecting these activities with work being done nationally and globally.<sup>6</sup>

### **Key Project Intersections with Museum Education**

Either directly or indirectly, the basic partnership of the MSU Museum and the MCACA has provided a foundation for the creation of many other partnerships in which a traditional arts focus has been core. Some have been temporary or short-term and some have lasted for years. We would like to speak here about two that illustrate different types of partnerships that have had intersections in different ways between the Museum and MCACA.

## QUILT INDEX

*Example ONE:* [The Quilt Index](#) is a digital humanities research and education project of the MSU Museum and Matrix: The Center for Digital Humanities and Social Sciences and is headquartered at the museum.

The first survey of historical folk art done in 1974 by researchers in the nascent folklife program at the museum identified quilt history as a potential research endeavor. A Michigan Quilt Project, begun in 1983 and directed by a folklorist at the museum, followed a model used in one research project on focused on folk pottery in Michigan but also was being deployed by documentation projects in other states that were focusing on quilts. Typically led by quilt or folklife specialists, the quilt documentation projects usually involved engaging citizen scholars who volunteered to staff documentation days at local partner agencies such as community centers, museums, libraries, or churches. Local citizens brought in quilts they made or owned to be measured, photographed, and described on standard forms and, where possible, the stories of the makers and/or the quilt were recorded. In many states, including Michigan, the documentation and often the eventual fabrication of an exhibition and production of an accompanying publication was assisted by grants from NEA and state arts agencies. As of 2016, this ongoing project in Michigan has documented over 10,000 quilts and the accumulated documentation (oral histories, photographs, and the inventory forms) are housed at the MSU Museum and have served as the focal point for exhibitions, festival programs, applications to the Michigan Traditional Arts Apprenticeship Program (TAAP), publications, and more in-depth research on certain heretofore under-researched aspects of quilt history in the state, most notably quilting within Native American, African American, and Upper Peninsula communities.

By the 1990s, those massive grassroots research efforts had already generated tens of thousands of documentation records about quilts and quilt artists in the United States. In the mid-1990s a group affiliated with these projects began to discuss the need to preserve records that had no institutional home and to make accessible all the records for education and research. The idea of a digital resource was hatched and MSU (through the museum and Matrix: The Center for Digital Humanities and Social Sciences), in affiliation with what was at that time called the Alliance for American Quilts, secured

grants from NEH and the Institute for Museum and Library Services that underwrote the research and implementation of a digital repository. The records of the Michigan Quilt Project and the MSU Museum's collection of quilts were key to beta testing all aspects of this major digital humanities research and education project.

By 2010, Quilt Index activities had expanded to include all documentation projects whether conducted by region or topic or focused on one aspect of quilt data, such as stories. Today, the Quilt Index is an open-access, digital repository of thousands of images, stories, and information about quilts and their makers drawn from hundreds of public and private collections around the world. Museum-based folklorists and arts agencies, including MCACA, have been instrumental in these activities that have focused not only on documenting and preserving knowledge about this aspect of traditional arts, but also on making this accumulated data accessible and facilitating engagement with the data for research and education. This work has also paved the way for the creation of other projects focused on thematic material culture that engage grassroots citizen scholarship and result in digital repositories of data that fosters more research and education.<sup>7</sup>



*Example TWO:* [The Great Lakes Folk Festival](#)

One of the most significant partnership projects that evolved from the collaboration of MSU Museum and MCACA is an annual folklife festival. In 1983, the museum produced its first series of outdoor showcase of Michigan's folk traditions at the annual 4-H Exploration Days in East Lansing followed two years later by the Michigan Whosestory? Festival that featured over 75 musicians, storytellers, and crafts demonstrators. Then, as part of Michigan's 1987 sesquicentennial celebration of statehood, the museum's folklife staff worked closely with state cultural agencies and the Smithsonian Institution to document and present Michigan's cultural traditions at the Festival of American Folklife in June of that year. Over 1,000,000 festival visitors were exposed to the state's diverse regional, ethnic, and occupational heritage and the media coverage, both nationally and within the state, brought the contributions of these artists to audiences of unprecedented sizes and scope. With financial support from MCACA and the Kellogg Foundation and tremendous in-kind support from the university, museum-based folklorists restaged the festival program, renamed the Festival of Michigan Folklife, in August on the MSU campus in East Lansing. It became an annual event and, over its 12-year history, provided a platform for presentation of over 1,400 Michigan traditional artists—the vast majority of whom had never been presented by any other arts organization in the state. The presentation of artists followed the “museum without walls” model initiated by the Smithsonian in that it combined community-based research and planning with traditional theater presentation and exhibition techniques in an outdoor setting with the important element of first-person presentation of stories, music, food, dance, and art.

In 1999, the museum began a new three-year partnership, this time with the City of East Lansing and the National Council for Traditional Arts (NCTA) to produce the National Folk Festival. NCTA took primary responsibility for coordinating music programming, East Lansing provided infrastructure and marketing support, and the museum was responsible for researching and presenting all the non-music traditional arts programming. In 2002, when the National Folk Festival moved to a new venue, the museum and the City of East Lansing continued to produce a festival, now renamed the Great Lakes Folk Festival. This event, which has benefitted from nearly annual grants from NEA and MCACA, continues to be the museum's (and the university's) largest annual cultural heritage research, exhibition, and education project and draws on the expertise of curators, special events



managers, collection managers, educators, communication managers, and administrative staff of the museum as well as a strong roster of research associates and community volunteers.

In a 2010 study of the educational impact of the festival, researchers found that “The event creates a strong bridge between the campus and the city, has been instrumental in fostering and sustaining ties between on-campus units and programs and off-campus constituencies, and represents complex and collaborative efforts of state, local, and national arts and cultural organizations working with civic, religious, social, educational, media, and business partners. The festival is viewed by the East Lansing as a critical ingredient in stabilizing and building an economically viable downtown that serves not only a university student and faculty clientele but is also equally attractive to a multi- interest, multi-aged and multi-ethnic community. The festival is valued as symbolic of the commitment of East Lansing to foster a quality of life that attracts and retains a diverse workforce and citizenry.”<sup>8</sup>

As of 2016, this event continues to be an anchor MTAP activity. It remains a major showcase for Michiganders whose skills and knowledge have contributed to the richness of the state’s cultural heritage but whose contributions are rarely showcased outside their local or immediate settings or communities. Reflecting best international practices of the role of museums in society, the festival creatively helps sustain and foster understanding of cultural heritage and supports lifelong learning and community engagement.

### **Rethinking the Role of Folklore and Museum Education**

The addition of staff whose focus has been on traditional tangible and intangible cultural heritage has had significant and lasting impacts on the museum. Coincidentally, this same period has been one of tremendous changes in the international museum profession. Museums are no longer viewed as simply repositories of collections, they are understood to be educational centers and expected to be more responsive to the multiple audiences they seek to serve. The historical notion of authoritative curatorial voices has been contested and museums are now expected to facilitate multiple voices in the creation and interpretation of



MSU Quilt Exhibition program.

Photo by Pearl Yee Wong.

collections; in the formation, execution, and evaluation of programs and exhibitions; and in the myriad ways in which museums can use their collections, facilities, and staff expertise to address local, state, national, and global issues. Museum practice has been shaped by a broader, increasing societal expectation that cultural and educational institutions share their authority and use their power and resources for the common good. Principles such as reciprocity, mutuality, transparency, and representation have become central to the assessment of a successful community-engaged museum.<sup>9</sup>

The sustained, deep work of folklorists at the museum within and with communities that historically had not been connected with the museum has substantially broadened the diversity and engagement

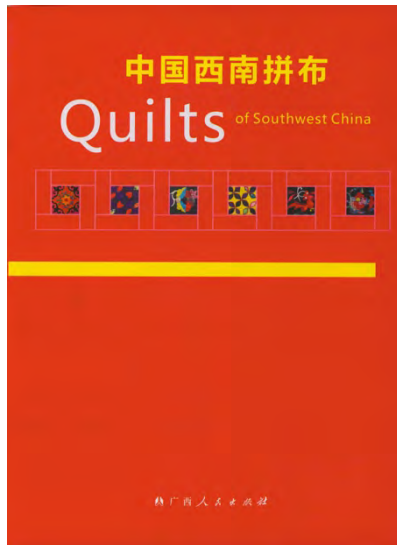
Here is a sample of a few projects over the last 30 years of our partnership between folklorists MSU:

- [\*Michigan Native American Arts Initiative\*](#) was a MCACA-sponsored, two-year survey of the needs of Native American artists in the state. The survey and report mapped out a series of strategic actions that would help individual artists and strengthen particular arts.
- [\*Our Daily Work/Our Daily Lives\*](#) focuses on the cultural traditions of workers, workplaces as contexts for the expression of workers' culture, and the diversity of historical and artistic presentations of workers' lives. Led by a folklorist and a labor historian/educator, the program explores and presents worker experience culture through exhibitions, lectures, performances, discussions, demonstrations, and other activities. It has also developed a solid and growing collection of workers' art.
- [\*Quilts from Southwest China\*](#) partners the museum with museums in China and the U.S. on staff exchanges, fieldwork, exhibition, and training projects; these activities were an outgrowth of work by the Chinese Folklore Society and the American Folklore Society (AFS) to increase bi-national interaction around shared interests. One recent outcome is the *Quilts from Southwest China*, a bilingual traveling exhibition and accompanying publication.
- [\*Folk Arts in Education: A Resource Handbook II\*](#) was produced by two museum-based folklorists who collaborated with individuals across the U.S. who were working with place-based and folklore education programs to compile an extensive resource book, funded by NEA, that provides sample lesson plans and descriptions of a variety of folklife in education projects conducted in many formal and informal learning environments.
- The museum's Michigan Traditional Arts Research Collections, built through the museum's folklife activities since 1974, is a treasure-trove of materials that chronicle the state's cultural traditions. One way the museum is making these materials more widely accessible is through the [\*National Folklife Archive Initiative\*](#) supported by funding from NEH to AFS. Through the initiative, users will not only be able to more readily access the Michigan materials but they also will be able to compare and contrast them with documentation from other states.

of individuals in what the museum collected, how materials were collected, the exhibitions and programs that have been developed, the audiences who have participated in museum activities, and the communities that have supported the activities through volunteerism and donations of funds and collections. It is not insignificant that the museum now has major collections and endowments for Latino, African American, and LGBTQ activities given by members of those communities.

Programmatic activities (some short-term, others enduring) created by folklorists affiliated with MTAP bear testimony to the impacts the individuals and the activities have had on the museum and on the state arts agency. MTAP initiatives have regularly engaged in work that targets communities whose traditions and histories were under-researched, were under-represented in general by museums, and had historically been disconnected from state arts agency-led programs. Traditional arts projects have helped to build connections among and between artists, communities, the museum, and MCACA. They resulted in digital and physical collections (of objects and documentation), exhibitions, publications, festival programs, educational events, curriculum materials, and new and revised arts-policies. They also led to the creation of new partnerships with other organizations inside and outside Michigan whose missions were focused, partially or wholly, on traditional arts. It is also not insignificant that groups historically disconnected to mainstream museums are now seeking partnerships with the museum.

Survey and exploratory research done for one project or activity has often paved the way for deeper, expanded work on traditions pertaining to particular cultures, communities, genres, or regions



as well as collaborations with new partners. As but one example, the initial folk arts survey in 1974 identified quilting as warranting further investigation, including the inventorying of quilts and quilt stories through the Michigan Quilt Project. Subsequent studies have focused on fundraising quilts, quilting in the Upper Peninsula, Hmong American story cloths and *paj ntaub*, quilts and human rights, quilts and health, and African American quilting in the state. These studies resulted in exhibitions, publications, and festival programs but they also laid the groundwork for connecting in-state research with additional research in other states and countries. Research on Native American quilting in Michigan led to a partnership with the NMAI to investigate quilting in Native communities across the U.S. and resulted in *To Honor and Comfort: Native Quilting Traditions*, an exhibition that opened in NYC then traveled across the U.S. accompanied by a publication and educational materials.<sup>10</sup> The museum developed what is now the world's largest collection of quilts by indigenous artists and subsequently developed a version of the exhibition that travelled to tribal museums.

In summary, MTAP has fostered connectivity with individuals and organizations within Michigan, colleagues within the university and other state folk arts programs, and individuals and organizations. The net result has been a sustained program of robust activities that have had many outcomes and benefits for many.

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MSU Quilt Exhibition.

Photo by Pearl Yee Wong.

## URLS

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[www.greatlakesfolkfest.net](http://www.greatlakesfolkfest.net)

<http://minativearts.net>

<http://museum.msu.edu/s-program/mtap/Programs&Services/dailylives.html>

<http://museum.msu.edu/index.php?q=node/1399>

[www.folkartsineducation.org](http://www.folkartsineducation.org)

[www.afsnet.org/search/all.asp?bst=National+Folklife+Archives+Initiative](http://www.afsnet.org/search/all.asp?bst=National+Folklife+Archives+Initiative)

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Missouri Folk Arts Program

## Missouri Folk Arts Program at the University of Missouri's Museum of Art and Archaeology in Partnership with the Missouri Arts Council

by Lisa L. Higgins

### A Brief Missouri Folk Arts Program History

In 1981, the University of Missouri's flagship campus in Columbia established Missouri's robust Cultural Heritage Center with initial leadership from a steering committee and, starting in 1982, headed by folklorist Howard Wight Marshall, a professor in the Department of Art History and Archaeology. Over the years, Center staff included notable folklorists like Barry Bergey, C. Ray Brassieur, Amy Skillman, and Dana Everts-Boehm. Marshall and staff moved into the Center's permanent home at the University's Conley House, an historic property originally owned by a University founding family, in 1986. Center staff and affiliated faculty approached Missouri's rich culture and heritage across academic disciplines with projects in rural sociology, vernacular architecture, cultural geography, historic preservation, archaeology, and folklore, among others. The Center sought "to encourage and foster research in Missouri's cultural heritage with outreach activities and public programs such as exhibits, performances, published materials, and oral history" around the state. Traveling exhibits, based in extensive field research, documented Missouri's occupational folklife, family farms, cultural symbols, and immigrant experiences. Within the Conley House, the Center produced occasional public performances and mounted smaller exhibitions, as well as built a lending library and extensive [collection of fieldwork materials](#). Sadly, in 1993, the Center was decommissioned due to budget cuts following an economic downturn.

Leaders at the University's [Museum of Art and Archaeology](#) (Museum), in partnership with the state arts council, lobbied to sustain two of the Center's public folk arts projects: the Traditional Arts Apprenticeship Program (TAAP) founded in 1985 and a touring program with an active artist roster, performance fee subsidies, and marketing and promotion assistance. Retaining two dedicated staff members, Dana Everts-Boehm and Julie Youmans, the Museum adopted the newly named [Missouri Folk Arts Program](#) (MFAP) under the auspices of the Museum. Many Center objects, assets, and some documentation were dispersed to appropriate repositories and stewards, as the Museum largely assumed an administrative role. The [Missouri Arts Council](#) (MAC) provided operating support via grants, and MFAP staff continued to seek and receive funding from the National Endowment for the Arts (NEA) for the apprenticeship program. MAC then invested in a Folk Arts Project Grant pilot project, co-managed with MFAP staff and successfully instituted within five years alongside fine arts, festival, and media disciplines, and the performing traditions program was phased out. With the advent of the NEA's Folk and Traditional Arts Infrastructure Initiative in 1997, MAC designated MFAP as its affiliated program to fulfill the state arts agency's goals and objectives within the unique discipline and constituency.

After nearly a decade's work to found and sustain MFAP through its transition, staff moved on to new opportunities, and Lisa L. Higgins and Deborah A. Bailey, Director and Folk Arts Specialist, respectively, joined MFAP staff in fiscal year 2000. Higgins credits her previous work with MFAP as a graduate student, and her work with a regional arts organization, as foundational training. Bailey brought years of expertise as an ethnographer, contract folklorist, and qualitative researcher. Both are currently in their 17th years, still coordinating TAAP, the state arts council's folk arts grants, and now a community scholars project. The Museum staff has supported the folk arts program steadfastly



## An Evening of Ozark Storytelling with Marideth Sisco



*Noted for her folksy, relaxed, over the garden fence stage presence, the fourth-generation Ozarks native is host of the popular public radio series, "These Ozarks Hills," as well as the lead singer in "Blackberry Winter Band," the group featured in the Oscar-nominated film "Winter's Bone."*



MFAP invited master storyteller Marideth Sisco to perform in conjunction with the Museum's special exhibition *14 Rural Absurdities*, a collection of woodcuts depicting hyperbolic local legends by Missouri artist Tom Huck.

Courtesy Museum of Art and Archaeology.

In this image from *Work is Art and Art is Work*, master luthier Bernard Allen of Naylor, Missouri smooths his handmade violin.

Photo by Rita A. Reed.



since 1993—through three permanent directors, two interim directors, and three fiscal managers. The current director and fiscal manager have proved to be particularly supportive of MFAP and its sustainability in the public sector.

As we approach 25 years, the partnership has proven a good fit, although still, MFAP neither collects nor exhibits objects within the walls of the Museum. As an entity of the Museum, the MFAP bridges more than "town/gown" engagement. MFAP staff and its projects provide measurable outreach beyond the Museum's galleries, university campus, City of Columbia, and central Missouri. Periodically, MFAP has supported Museum programming with ancillary public performances and gallery talks from traditional artists and folklorists whose work aligns with a special exhibition or project.

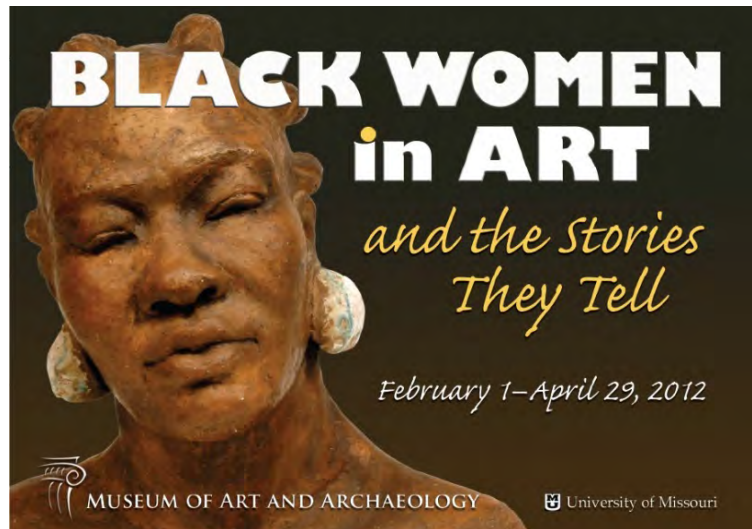
Likewise, MFAP has benefited from Museum staff expertise when curating traveling exhibitions, like [Work is Art and Art is Work](#), which toured to nine Missouri communities featuring the work of six traditional luthiers. MFAP contracted with professionals at ExhibitsUSA to design, build, and tour *Work is Art*. Still, Museum staff, particularly preparators, shared invaluable guidance and expertise throughout the process.

Recent events have aligned MFAP and the Museum programming more closely. In the fall of 2013, the University relocated the Museum out of historic Pickard Hall and into a vacant campus property two miles north of campus. In this "new" space, MFAP staff offices are mere seconds, rather than minutes, away from Museum colleagues, storage, preparators' shop, and the galleries themselves. With closer proximity, Museum and MFAP staffs find ourselves collaborating more often, especially with Museum education staff. In 2014 and 2015, for instance, MFAP

participated alongside the Museum and other cultural entities for *Smithsonian Magazine's* annual Museum Day Live! Folk Arts Specialist Deborah Bailey coordinated traditional artist demonstrations and hands-on activities with a rug weaver one year and an Ioway regalia bead and ribbon worker the next, both previous TAAP participants. MFAP and Museum staff continue to expand collaborative programming, including regular performances in the Museum galleries.

### A Project's Intersections with Museum Education

In 2011-2012, the planets and stars aligned to create the first project fully co-coordinated by the Museum and MFAP. In the middle stages of planning an upcoming exhibition for Black History month, then European and American Art Curator Mary Pixley and Fiscal Manager Carol Geisler discovered a strong connection between the exhibition's focus—Black women and narrative art—and MFAP programming. As fiscal manager, Geisler processes all payments and contracts for the Museum, including those for TAAP. She communicates often with master artists about contracts, travel vouchers, and payments. Those artists know Geisler almost as well as they do MFAP staff. Thus, Geisler was very familiar with master storyteller Gladys Caines Coggsell of Frankford, Missouri (near Hannibal). Geisler even visited Hannibal to attend a Coggsell performance in her role as artist in residence at the Mark Twain Boyhood Home and Museum. While Pixley considered works for the exhibition, eventually titled *Black Women and the Stories They Tell*, Geisler approached MFAP staff to consider booking Coggsell in support of the exhibition. Geisler recognized that Coggsell embodied the exhibition's theme and goals. With the agreement of all parties, and enthusiastic approval of Museum Director Alex W. Barker, we planned the project's components: the exhibition, a public performance, and a school residency.



The Museum's graphic designer featured the painted terracotta bust *Maudelle* in the exhibition's marketing materials.

Courtesy Museum of Art and Archaeology.

For the exhibition, each work linked to the theme of storytelling and its tradition within families and communities, from one generation to the next, foregrounding the experiences of Black women. In the fall, Pixley winnowed the exhibit down to 15 works by internationally acclaimed artists like Romare Bearden, Carrie Mae Weems, Elizabeth Catlett, and Faith Ringgold as well as Columbia artists Byron Smith and Wilma King, a University of Missouri custodian and professor, respectively. As Pixley wrote in the docent guide:

The stories can be quite complicated, especially when artists explore the complexity of the black identity as it relates to white American culture, black American culture, and the African legacies found in the United States. Some images are racially charged as the artist confronts stereotypes and prejudices that resulted in the placement of black women at the very bottom of the hierarchy of race, class, and gender (Internal document, 2012).



Works included lithographs, photographs, charcoal, linocut, oil paintings, watercolor, and painted terracotta. Pixley chose to break from curatorial convention with text labels, expanding them to convey the women and their stories as fully as possible. For instance, the label for Beulah Ecton Woodard's *Maudelle* examined the life not only of the African American female clay artist—the first to show in the Los Angeles County Museum—but also the life of the subject, accomplished dancer and model Maudelle Bass Weston.



Curate an exhibit using family folklore with the *Show-Me Traditions* lesson plan excerpt at the end of this article.

As Mary Pixley selected the exhibition's works and researched their overt and embedded stories, MFAP Director Lisa Higgins consulted Museum Educator Cathy Callaway to map out an arts education grant proposal to MAC to support a school residency with Gladys Coggsell. MFAP has produced educational projects for schoolchildren for decades, and in 2004, with an NEA Infrastructure grant, MFAP introduced a pilot [Folk Arts School Residency Project](#) to train traditional artists for school residencies. MFAP then consulted with Folk Arts in Education Specialist Susan Eleuterio and residency artists to develop a curriculum guide specific to Missouri, its traditions, traditional artists, and the integration of local knowledge into the curriculum. Three traditional arts residency artists, including Coggsell, field tested the guide in three rural Missouri schools. Coggsell continued to participate in the residency project when MFAP received an arts education grant from the Dana Foundation to train ten more teaching artists. Also, the MFAP published a curriculum, [Show-Me Traditions: An Educator's Guide to Teaching Folk Arts and Folk Life in Missouri Schools](#) that won the AFS Dorothy Howard Prize. Coggsell was well-prepared to lead school residencies in Columbia to accompany *Black Women in Art and the Stories They Tell*. MAC awarded the Museum a mid-year arts education grant to support the residencies, which was matched by MFAP, the Museum, and the College of Arts and Science.

Like Geisler, Mary Pixley was enamored with Gladys Coggsell and her performances. When Coggsell accepted our offer to develop programming in conjunction with the exhibition, she insisted that she meet with the curator to become familiar with the works and the stories they told. Pixley and Coggsell spent substantive time together in Museum storage, where they both relished in the works. Ultimately, three works resonated with Coggsell: *Tillie*, a 1932 oil on panel painting by Ste. Genevieve Colony artist Aimee Schweig; Harlem-raised Faith Ringgold's 1996 lithograph *The Sunflower Quilting Bee at Arles*; and *Sharecropper*, a linocut made by Modernist Elizabeth Catlett in 1958. Furnished with research, Coggsell returned to her home in Frankford to study the works and their social and historical contexts and craft oral stories that animated the figures illustrated in these three works.



Simultaneously, project staff coordinated the artist-in-residence component to bring Coggswell and her apprentice Angela J. Williams to West Boulevard Elementary and Lee Expressive Arts Elementary, both in central Columbia, where they spent three hours a day at each school for one week. MFAP provided copies of *Show Me Traditions* to lead teachers Ann Mehr at Lee and Jonette Ford at West, and they pre-taught sections on folk tales and oral traditions. Identifying which schools to participate had been both obvious and unexpected. The Museum and Lee, at that time mere blocks apart, have long been paired through the City of Columbia's Partners in Education project. Lee promotes learning across the curriculum through the arts. "Junior Docents" regularly crafted narratives for designated works in the galleries. During the residency, Coggswell worked with three grades, and at the culmination of her residency, she performed during an all-school assembly.



Gladys Coggswell performs a story about sharecropping based on an Elizabeth Catlett linocut at Pickard Hall.

Photo by Alex W. Barker.



[Click on the photo](#) to see Coggswell tell a family story passed down from her Uncle Pete in response to Elizabeth Catlett's *Sharecropper*.

Video courtesy Boden Lyon.

By happenstance, Lisa Higgins met West 5<sup>th</sup>-grade teacher Jonette Ford. Higgins learned that every spring Ford taught her students via a "mini-museum" in which they selected topics, then researched, created, wrote, and produced works in their own galleries in the school's hallway. For instance, one of the first mini-museums focused on women's history, illustrated through hand-stitched quilts. Ford and Denise Parker, also a 5<sup>th</sup>-grade teacher, were invited to participate in the residency to connect the West "mini-museum" with the Museum. The residency also connected curricula in social studies, writing, reading, and language (communication arts) to Black Culture Month, of significant importance to educators, students, and parents at this high-minority school. At the culmination of Coggswell's one-week residency, West 5<sup>th</sup>-graders presented stories and poetry that they had crafted.

That same week, Coggswell opened the exhibition with a special performance in Pickard Hall. There, to a diverse crowd in the packed lecture hall, she shared three narratives, inspired by her selected works of art and grounded in oral tradition and social history. The entire audience responded with a standing ovation.



Lee Elementary student Dinesh Baldwin shares a tall tale at the Junior Storyteller event in Pickard Hall.

Photo by Alex W. Barker.

Two weeks later, Coggswell’s “junior storytellers” from Lee Elementary and West performed in the same auditorium, to another full house with a slightly different and equally diverse audience who also responded with standing ovations.

Like all best laid proposals, small details in the residency morphed as the project was implemented, but the overall quality, outcomes, and participation were better than expected. Everyone at the Museum and MFAP pitched in: the Museum’s fiscal officer delivered exhibit and performance posters to the J. W. Blind Boone Community Center and Second Baptist Church advertising public events; the Museum fabricators built Coggswell a box to elevate her height at the podium; teachers in nonparticipating classes at both schools pitched in with logistics and helping hands; City of Columbia Parks and Recreation provided a handicap accessible bus to shuttle audience members from Second Baptist Church to the Museum for the exhibit opening; and the University’s Educational Technology Specialist video recorded performances.

However, it was the West and Lee students who shone. West 5<sup>th</sup>-grade teachers integrated the exhibit, the residency, and the topic into the very fiber of their curriculum and onto the walls of their school. All students created narrative poetry and short stories based on research about the subjects of the three exhibit works also selected by Coggswell. The target group performed these stories during the residency’s school assembly and then onstage at the Junior Storytellers event.

As this amazing, intensive project concluded, teachers from Lee and West used the [Louisiana Voices Oral Presentation Rubric](#) to assess learning. Additionally, students from both schools self-assessed their performances at assemblies or the Junior Storytellers event. Both resulted in above averages scores in three categories: awareness of audience, strength of material, and delivery. However, notable outcomes from the project must also include that the children were energized by new things over the course of the residency. Lee students could, and regularly did, walk to the Museum, just blocks from their school, but West students on the whole had never visited. Alex Barker, Museum Director, found funds to shuttle every West student (not just 5<sup>th</sup> grade) to Pickard Hall for docent-led tours of the exhibition. Other notable firsts included performing in front of an audience and meeting “probably the best storyteller [I’ve] ever seen,” as one West student noted as Coggswell departed on the last day of the residency.



In its “mini-museum,” West’s 5<sup>th</sup>-grade class wrote narratives about each member of Faith Ringgold’s *The Sunflower Quilting Bee at Arles*.

Photos by Lisa L. Higgins.

### Rethinking the Role of Folklore and Museum Education

The AFS [Working Group on Folklore and Museums Policy](#) notes that folklorists help engender “community engagement” in museum programs. In addition to increasing engagement in communities across the state through partnership and outreach, opportunities for MFAP staff to engage new audiences at the Museum continue to increase. When Gladys Cogswell and her junior storytellers performed, many children and local citizens entered Pickard Hall for the first time, not only to enjoy public performances but also to connect them with the special exhibition in the galleries. Now at Mizzou North, MFAP can coordinate performances, demonstrations, and workshops in the galleries, shared classroom space, and shaded gazebos on the grounds. In 2016 alone, MFAP coordinated an African American gospel concert, a “Little Dixie” region fiddle concert, and an educational program on luthiery with current apprenticeship teams from Columbia, St. Louis, and rural Monroe County. Each event brought new visitors to the Museum and introduced Museum stalwarts to Missouri’s folk and traditional arts. Museum and MFAP staff coordinates these events, from booking artists, providing cultural interpretation, and paying artists to marketing the event, setting up chairs, and providing security in the galleries.

In addition to fulltime Museum and MFAP staff, these programs also rely on the assistance of new professionals in Folklore—our graduate interns and assistants who work for course credit and stipends. Since 1993, MFAP has hosted 16 graduate student interns, 15 from the Department of English, home to the Folklore, Oral Tradition, and Culture Studies Program (Mizzou Folklore). With leadership from professors Elaine J. Lawless and Sw. Anand Prahlad, the [internship](#) has added a layer of education to folklore studies that bridges the academic and public folklore sectors, a result that more realistically reflects the multivalence of positions in the field. MFAP’s second graduate intern Lisa Higgins became MFAP’s second director, a testament perhaps to the strength of both the academic program and the public sector opportunity.

Our colleagues in the AFS Folklore and Museums section enumerated four “intersections between museum practice and folklore studies that occurred in the 20<sup>th</sup> century” (2015: 8). “[L]inking folklore

and museum graduate training” was the first on the list. While the University of Missouri’s graduate training in Folklore through the MFAP internship is not a course in Museum Studies, some training in the latter field transfers to graduate students through assigned readings and hands-on programming that intersects with museum practices of representation, programming for the public, and creating content that engages learners of all ages. Entering MFAP interns are assigned a range of readings in public folklore’s history, practice, and evolution. Students are encouraged to read, for instance, Patricia Hall and Charlie Seemann’s *Folklife and Museums: Selected Readings*.<sup>1</sup> Since 2010, MFAP has also been able to offer a graduate assistantship to students who have completed the internship thanks to the support of, first, the College of Arts and Science and now the Museum.

In the last 16 years of graduate education, students have assisted MFAP staff with two traveling exhibitions, as well as the residencies for *Black Women and the Stories They Tell*. Two graduate interns initiated archival research and curated an online digital exhibit, [Master Artists; Master Teachers](#), on our website, in honor of our most prolific TAAP master artists. In that exhibit, artist profiles include biographies, quotations, images, and audio clips. Most recently, graduate assistant Jackson Medel developed a portable exhibition on freestanding, full-color banners to share the TAAP story with text and images. Medel was recently quoted in [College Magazine’s Guide to the Folklore Major](#): “One of the most important experiences I’ve had...has been my internship and subsequent assistantship with the Missouri Folk Arts Program.”

As a state folk arts program based in a museum on a university campus, however, we, too, have challenges to address in the 21<sup>st</sup> century academy as it shifts and alters. At the University, for instance, the retirement or death of senior faculty members has unsettled the Folklore, Oral Tradition, and Culture Studies Program in the Department of English, where major Folklore scholars have been on staff since 1895. MFAP stands ready, as always, to adapt to change, the constant we know as folklorists. We envision partnering with Digital Storytelling and Museum Studies professors to identify student interns and assistants. We also intend to research funding for paid internships for students in Folklore and Culture Studies programs outside Missouri, especially as we contemplate long-range plans to collect and exhibit works by folk and traditional artists on campus and beyond.

*Lisa L. Higgins is Director of the Missouri Folk Arts Program, Folk Arts Grant Specialist for the Missouri Arts Council, and Instructor of the University of Missouri’s Department of English Folk Arts Internship.*

#### **URLS**

<http://shsmo.org/manuscripts/columbia/4053.pdf>

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<http://mofolkarts.missouri.edu/docs/showme.pdf>

Gladys Coggs well performance video, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Is7yXEX3A14>

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#### **Endnote**

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## Learning Application: Show-Me Traditions: A Family Folklore Lesson Plan

### Lesson Plan #1: Family Folklore Checklist and Display

#### Necessary Materials

Pencils, family folklore checklist, paper

#### Time Needed

Three class sessions (45 minutes each)

One class period (1/2 to explain directions, 1/2 to write story): one class period to read stories; one class period to display exhibits

#### Directions

**Step 1:** Hand out Family Folklore Checklist and review with students to make sure they understand categories. You might bring in a few samples from your own family (photographs, keepsakes, etc.)

**Step 2:** Students should complete the checklist at home, select one object, and interview a family member about it.

**Step 3:** In class (or as homework), ask students to write a story about the object from the Family Folklore Checklist. Writing Prompt: This object is important or special to my family because ...

**Step 4:** Consider hosting an exhibit of objects and photographs from student's homes. Their stories can be displayed alongside objects and photographs, students may revise and shorten the stories into exhibit labels, or students may give oral presentations of their objects and stories to an audience of peers or families.

#### Objectives:

- To introduce students to specific examples of folk culture in everyday life
- To help students identify examples of folk culture from their own lives
- To use folk culture to develop a story and written report

#### Outcomes:

- Students will research examples of folk culture from home using the Family Folklore Checklist
- Students will create a story or an exhibit about one example of family folk culture
- Students will present their story/exhibit to the class

#### SHOW-ME STANDARDS CONNECTIONS

##### Show-Me Standards Social Studies Goals 5, 6, and 7

- the major elements of geographical study and analysis (such as location, place, movement, regions) and their relationships to changes in society and environment
- relationships of the individual and groups to institutions and cultural traditions
- the use of tools of social science inquiry (such as surveys, statistics, maps, documents)

##### Show-Me Standards Communication Arts Goals 1,4, and 7

- writing formally (such as reports, narratives, essays) and informally (such as outlines, notes)
- identifying and evaluating relationships between language and culture

##### Show-Me Standards Fine Arts Goals 4,5

- interrelationships of visual and performing arts and the relationships of the arts to other disciplines
- visual and performing arts in historical and cultural contexts

# Family Folklore Checklist

Adapted from 4-H FOLKPATTERNS  
Michigan State University Extension, Michigan State University Museum

## Directions

Use this list at home for clues to your family folklore. Ask your family to help you locate some of these objects. How many can you find? Put a check beside each one you find. Ask for the story behind one of these objects. Then write a short story about the object you found. Ask if you can bring the object to school. If you can't, draw a picture of it or take a photograph of it and bring that with your story.

- |   |   |
|---|---|
| <input type="checkbox"/> Awards and trophies  | <input type="checkbox"/> Home movies                  |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Baby clothes         | <input type="checkbox"/> Keepsakes                    |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Books or toys        | <input type="checkbox"/> Newspaper clippings          |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Collections          | <input type="checkbox"/> Occupational tools           |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Costumes or clothing | <input type="checkbox"/> Quilts, knitting, embroidery |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Family photographs   | <input type="checkbox"/> Religious books/objects      |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Family recipes       | <input type="checkbox"/> School mementos              |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Family stories       | <input type="checkbox"/> Scrapbooks                   |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Games                | <input type="checkbox"/> Songs, music, instruments    |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Greeting cards       | <input type="checkbox"/> Souvenirs                    |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Handmade objects     | <input type="checkbox"/> Wedding announcements        |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Holiday objects      |   |



**University of South  
Carolina's McKissick  
Museum, the Folklife  
Resource Center, and the  
South Carolina Arts  
Commission—A Partnership**

**by Saddler Taylor**

## **McKissick** Museum

### **UNIVERSITY OF SOUTH CAROLINA**

Since its creation in 1976, [McKissick Museum](#) has been a champion of the folklife and traditional arts of the South. Originally charged with housing varied collections related to the University of South Carolina, early museum staff members like George Terry realized the traditional arts were an important part of the regional story that should be showcased.

In 1982, Terry became the second director of McKissick Museum. He initially joined the staff as curator of history just after the museum opened, while still completing his doctorate in Southern history. Terry believed in the power of objects to convey historical concepts and events in a way that all people could understand. During his 15 years at McKissick, Terry was responsible for guiding the museum in its mission to collect, preserve, exhibit, and celebrate the traditional arts of South Carolina and the South. He established the museum's folklife program, secured notable objects for the collections, produced important exhibitions, and through constant advocacy, encouraged traditional artists and art forms to flourish. He successfully built McKissick into one of the largest university museums in the Southeast—one with an international reputation for excellence in scholarship and education.

Established in 1985, the [Folklife Resource Center](#) (FRC) at McKissick Museum focuses on documenting the traditional culture of the South. The preservation and dissemination of this material are key aspects of the FRC mission. Over the past 30 years, through the support of state and federal grants from South Carolina Humanities, the South Carolina Arts Commission (SCAC), the National Endowment for the Arts (NEA), the National Endowment for the Humanities, and the Institute of Museum and Library Services, the FRC completed several important documentation projects, including sweetgrass and split-oak basketry, alkaline-glaze stoneware, quilting, African American celebrations, and a variety of foodways traditions.

McKissick Museum has enjoyed remarkable stability in its leadership. The museum has only seen two directors since Terry, and while they both consider the museum's solid foundation a springboard for continued work in the field, they share different perspectives and approaches to the subject of folklife in museums. Lynn Robertson (director 1991-2010) remembers the idea of establishing a university museum was proposed to President William Patterson in 1976 by a committee put together to consider what should go into the McKissick building, which had been recently vacated by the university library. Patterson felt USC needed a place where the public could freely come to learn

about the university and its contributions to the community—a sort of public “window” into the history of and community value of the school. Because of building limitations and the desire to display the extensive collections, the only places for changing exhibitions were half the history gallery (second floor south) and the art gallery (first floor south). As curator of the history area, George Terry had an academic interest in public history and material culture studies, and Roberston had an interest in 20<sup>th</sup>-century craft. Those two interests, coupled with the fact that Roberston had the only exhibition experience on staff, brought the two together to plan and install the first exhibitions based on the collections.

Many objects that came to the museum in the historical collections were uncatalogued and unresearched. The pottery created conversations between the curatorial staff about to how to display them. Terry knew a little of their historical importance, and he initiated detailed research. With his dissertation on the Lowcountry, he also knew the plantation history of sweetgrass baskets. Robertson thought they made good-looking exhibitions and could connect with more contemporary craft trends. There was a lot of funding available for undergraduate assistantships, and Terry hired four or five students to go through probate records to document the mention of baskets and pottery. The early staff soon realized that folk art collecting and exhibitions told an important historical story that was missing in the region. A real turning point came when McKissick put together the project *Southern Make*, which included a survey of traditional arts in the South. While a broad sampling with fairly basic interpretation, it really was the spark that ignited growth in the program. McKissick soon began to form relationships with private collectors and other regional museums.

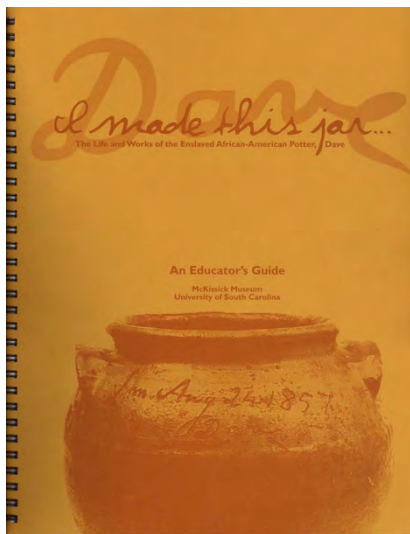
One of McKissick’s first grant proposals to NEA involved sweetgrass basket research and exhibition development. Securing that grant, which allowed staff to work with fieldworker and scholar Dale Rosengarten, pushed the staff toward a more comprehensive view of the field—one of folklife, not just folk art. In addition, McKissick had support from people throughout the state who had similar interests, scholars like historian Charles Joyner and anthropologist Leland Ferguson.

In 2003, the FRC initiated a project to digitize all the materials housed in the archive, a process that would involve the digital transfer of thousands of prints, slides, manuscripts, video, and audio recordings. A few years into the project, the museum launched [Digital Traditions](#), the web portal providing online access to some of the material housed in the FRC archive. In addition to digitally transferring decades-worth of materials, this project provided an important learning environment for dozens of undergraduate and graduate students from a wide variety of disciplines.

With each exhibition idea, the staff had to think through their intellectual and philosophical points of view. By the time Terry became director, the museum had established that major efforts would go toward an exploration of regional folklife. By the time the NEA Folk and Traditional Arts Program approached McKissick with a proposal to house the state folk arts program, McKissick had developed a successful process of original research, academic

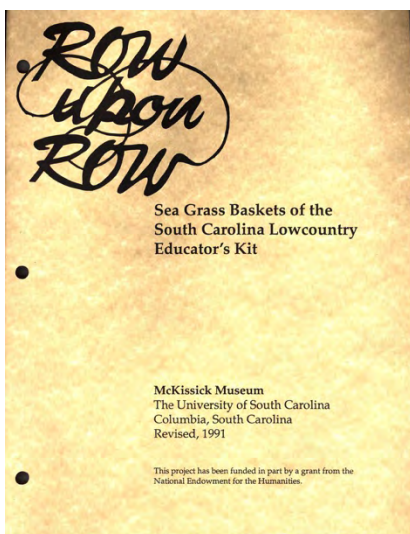






collaboration, curatorial expertise, and fieldwork. Gary Stanton came on board as the first professional folklorist and made the staff more critical of what and how they worked. He also introduced professional fieldwork standards.

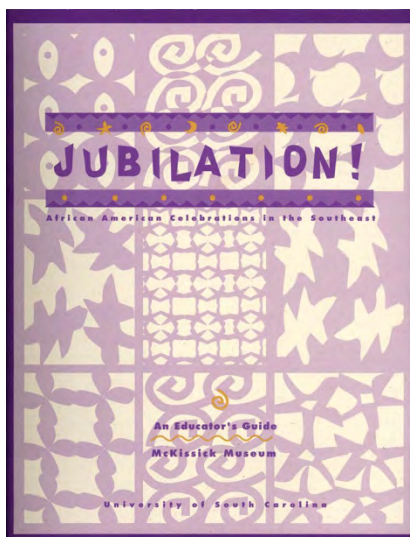
Some of the groundbreaking programs completed in the first decade included *Carolina Folk: The Cradle of a Southern Tradition*, *Row Upon Row: Sea Grass Baskets of the South Carolina Lowcountry*, the *Quilt History Project*, *Stout Hearts: Traditional Oak Basketmakers of the South Carolina Upcountry*, the *Sweetgrass Basket Conference*, *Crossroads of Clay: The Southern Alkaline-Glazed Tradition*, *Jubilation! African American Celebrations in the Southeast*, and the establishment of the Jean Laney Harris Folk Heritage Award. Many of these projects, like *Row Upon Row*, *Jubilation!* and *Crossroads of Clay* were on topics with which most people were only vaguely aware. They were well researched and “academic” yet still had an ability to instill appreciation for the state’s diverse traditions.



Many of these groundbreaking projects also included an ambitious effort to reach the K-12 demographic. Working closely with education specialists, McKissick created several educator kits that packaged the exhibition material in a way that was relevant to K-12 educators and students throughout the state. *Row Upon Row*, *Stout Hearts*, and *Jubilation* were three projects that specifically targeted elementary students through this medium. Combining images, artifacts, audio, video, and excellent guides, the goal was to present these traditional art forms and expressive traditions to students in an engaging and relatable way.

### **A Project’s Intersections with Museum Education**

A cathartic change occurred while Bess Lomax Hawes was head of the NEA Folk and Traditional Arts Program. In the mid-1990s, Congress ruled that the NEA needed to retain more control over programmatic content and that all funding for programs that used government dollars could only be passed to the respective state’s arts organization. The NEA could no longer directly fund the program at McKissick Museum, even as a state university. Hawes came down to visit with Robertson to discuss the news. However, Robertson and Hawes met with senior staff at the SCAC. The foundation for what has become a long-term partnership was established. While the state folklorist position moved to the Arts Commission, McKissick Museum maintained a folklife position and would remain the physical location of the folklife archive.



McKissick Museum and the SCAC have since collaborated on several key projects that build on the overall public programming efforts at both institutions. Since 1987, [the Jean Laney Harris Folk Heritage Award](#) has been administered jointly and in partnership with the South Carolina General Assembly. The Folk Heritage

Award recognizes and celebrates lifetime achievement in traditional arts and advocacy. As the state's highest award for traditional artists, the program is an example of arts organizations working closely with state government to facilitate programs highlighting community-based traditions.

The [Traditional Arts Apprenticeship Initiative](#) (TAAI) was developed in the mid-1990s and has been a major program component at both institutions. Pairing a master artist with a willing apprentice, the program has seen a variety of traditional artists come through the program, from blues musicians to split-oak basketmakers. All the fieldwork generated during programs like the Folk Heritage Award and TAAI is housed in the FRC at McKissick Museum.

### **Rethinking the Role of Folklore and Museum Education**

Jane Przybysz (director 2011-present) also has a deep and appreciative perspective on McKissick's journey. She applauds McKissick's early leadership for undertaking pioneering studies of forms of expressive culture that—until the last quarter of the 20<sup>th</sup> century—had not been deemed of sufficient significance to warrant serious academic study. McKissick undertook seminal research, exhibitions, and publications on a variety of key topics and this is the work for which McKissick is best known, and which served as the basis for building its material culture and the FRC's archival collections.



While folklore as an academic discipline has moved beyond romanticizing the mostly rural cultural practices perceived as disappearing, shifting its focus to the study of how community life and values are expressed through a wide variety of living traditions, the field continues to focus largely on the living traditions of peoples who often have been marginalized by seismic technological, economic, social, cultural, and political changes. What responsibility do museums have for not only documenting and celebrating the persistence of particular folklife activities in their communities but also for probing and intervening in the changing contexts that make such activities increasingly irrelevant or relevant to the lives and health of the people and communities they seek to serve? In the case of McKissick, which historically has aimed to “tell the story of southern life...community, culture and the environment,” Przybysz wonders if there a case to be made for McKissick working to *shape* that story or tell – not just the *story* – but competing *stories* about how we got to where we are as southerners and where we want to go next?

Louis Armstrong once said, “All music is folk music. I ain’t never heard a horse sing a song.” In doing so, he raised the larger question of how and why some people’s music gets called “folk” and other people’s music gets called “popular” or “classical.” What assumptions underpin these categorizations and to what effect? How much of what we now call folk music was the popular music before the advent of radio? How much of what we now call classical music was once the folk music of European elites? Over the past two decades, Przybysz has observed a resurgence of interest in materials-based forms of knowledge typically associated with folk and traditional arts among contemporary artists. Artists seeking to draw public attention to the natural world in urban environments learned to knit to “bomb” (wrap hand-knitted fabrics around) tree trunks and limbs in urban spaces. Then, there was Susan Phillips who won the prestigious Turner Prize for contemporary art in 2010 with a sound installation featuring herself singing different versions of a traditional sea shanty, “Lowlands Away.” And Theaster Gates, a Chicago-based, African American artist trained as a traditional Japanese potter

and urban designer who in 2012 created ceramic “soul wares” to re-ritualize the sharing of meals in a historically Black neighborhood.

These contemporary artists and many others like them have re-engaged so-called “traditional” art forms to reconceive and reconstitute community experiences in public spaces. Are they so different from the folk artists and advocates McKissick Museum and the SCAC collaborate to recognize as recipients of the Folk Heritage Award? Or do they simply operate in different art world contexts on a different scale? Przybysz is emphatic that for folklife research, collections, exhibitions, and publications to be meaningful to 21<sup>st</sup>-century audiences, especially the undergraduate population that is McKissick’s primary target audience, we must reframe folklife and traditional arts in a way that resonates with people beyond the niche groups of scholars, curators, and collectors who have been the museum’s main stakeholders. The two frameworks she finds most compelling at this historical juncture are those associated with the still emerging notions of social entrepreneurship and art as social practice. The idea that a business can generate earned revenue *and* do good in the community strikes her as an especially salient way of thinking about both the future of museums in an era of declining public and private support, as well as the economic role that many so-called folk art practices played and continue to play in the lives of individuals and communities. Similarly, the idea that there is growing demand for art forms whose meaning and significance is located as much in *processes* of community engagement as it is in any final *product*, seems particularly relevant to understanding the role culture might play in constituting and re-constituting societies and civil life.

While fully acknowledging the importance of the foundation built by the dedicated and talented museum staff over the past 30 years, the folklife program at McKissick is firmly focused on the future. In 2012, McKissick dedicated a major gallery space to folklife and traditional arts programming. The *Diverse Voices* gallery is the first such dedicated space at McKissick and provides an excellent venue to showcase the traditional arts of the South. In 2013, McKissick strengthened its relationship with the SCAC with the establishment of a grant-funded joint position, essentially becoming the home of the state folklorist once again. This increased staffing provides the capacity to plan and implement comprehensive and relevant public programming, as well as expand established joint programs like the TAAI and the Folk Heritage Award. Through digital technology, the FRC will continue to explore web-based resources like *Digital Traditions* and social media in efforts to engage as wide an audience as possible. Collaborations will continue to be important—with academic departments across the USC system, off-campus organizations like South Carolina Educational Television, and other community-based groups.

As a teaching institution, the museum provides educational opportunities for students in the classroom and practical experience through independent studies, internships, and graduate assistantships. Many programs, exhibitions, and collections-based projects generated by the FRC are the direct result of student involvement. Through this work, McKissick Museum will continue to foster dialogue about the traditional arts of the region, their role, and the importance they play in communities throughout the South.

**Saddler Taylor** is Chief Curator of Folklife and Fieldwork at McKissick Museum, Manager of the Folklife Resource Center, and Instructor in the University of South Carolina’s Honors College. He received his MA in Folk Studies from Western Kentucky University.

**URLS** <http://artsandsciences.sc.edu/mckissickmuseum/mckissick-museum>  
<http://artsandsciences.sc.edu/mckissickmuseum/folklife-resource-center>  
[www.digitaltraditions.net](http://www.digitaltraditions.net)  
<http://www.southcarolinaarts.com/folkheritage>  
<http://www.southcarolinaarts.com/grants/artists/folklifeapprentice.shtml>

The *Journal of Folklore and Education* is a publication of  
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## **Newcomers and Belonging**

### ***Journal of Folklore and Education* Volume 4 (2017)**

The theme for the 2017 *Journal of Folklore and Education* issue is dedicated to exploring how the field of Folklore offers tools, strategies, and resources to help educators understand how culture influences ways of learning, creates and strengthens communities, and expresses itself in neighborhoods and schools. Research-based writing that evaluates or assesses programs that use Folk Arts in Education tools and practice are also welcome. These research articles may intersect with the theme of “Newcomers,” but all submissions will be considered for publication if they have a research component.

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### **2016 Local Learning Advisory Board for Folklore and Museum Education**

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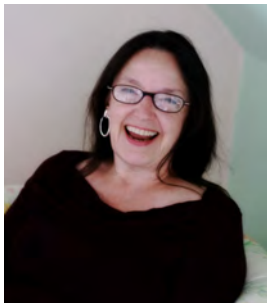
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