Folk Culture: A Vessel for Equity in Education

by Selina Morales

> *Folklife, because it is passed between people, has an embedded, culturally relevant pedagogy. In addition to holding the DNA of community creativity, these art forms hold critical pedagogical tools for teaching long-valued lessons about beauty, joy, epistemology, ethics, survival skills, leadership styles, community building, visioning the future, and so much more.*

Folklore and folklife[1] are ways that everyday people, in the present, maintain relationships to their past. So much community "DNA" resides in folklife—in community embedded stories, dress, dance, foodways, song, and other cultural expressions. The lessons and flourishes embedded within teach us time-tested ways to be with one another, in community. Folklife can also be visionary, future facing, in that these arts and customs can often depict, foretell, and aspire toward the worlds we want to live in. Staying connected to our community traditions can give us confidence to move into the unknown, and courage to create an equitable future for ourselves and our communities.

I've often been invited as a guest to the annual new teacher orientation at the Folk Arts-Culture Treasures Charter School (FACTS), where I am Chair of the Board of Directors and a parent of two students. I attended these orientation sessions as Director (2015-2019) of one of the school's founding organizations, the Philadelphia Folklore Project (PFP). During orientation, the founding organizations are tasked with telling the origin story of our school. The Directors of Asian Americans United and PFP retell our story by having the new teachers enact the FACTS Founders Day play, a skit written by FACTS teacher Eric Joselyn. At orientation, it is a fun and whimsical way to hold this origin story as a frame for new teachers.

As a school envisioned and founded by activists and folklorists, ritual is an essential part of building the FACTS school community. For example, every year, on or near March 9, our school community celebrates the day when FACTS won our charter. During that event, students sing together our anthem, "Something Inside So Strong." It's our tradition, too, to retell the heroic story of the founding of our school. Using cardboard props and a script steeped in our own mythology, teachers act out the dreaming up of our school and the mobilization of our communities who, in 2005, marched into the Philadelphia School Reform Commission hearing, and, in a moment the kids love to recount, the Commissioners raised their hands and all said yes, yes, yes, the school could open! We all yell, "Hurray, Hurray for Founders Day!" The play is also a future-looking tool, a chance to foster inclusion in the foundational narrative of our school and to ask students, teachers, and staff: How will you steward these dreams? But, I digress.[2]

At that orientation, I've often told teachers this: I grew up observing and participating in my own communities' traditional life and cultural practices. I can attest to the value of these art forms and customs in building my sense of community, inclusion, wellness, leadership, value of my ancestry,

and sense of responsibility to the future. I was raised in New York City among Caribbean immigrants and my culture was all around me: in my home, on my block, in my neighborhood, and in my family's business (we owned a botánica[3]). My grandmother is an *espiritista*[4] healer and spirits were an important part of our family's daily conversation and community. Yet, when my parents drove me to school from the Bronx to the Upper West Side of Manhattan every morning, I knew the spirits, my dreams, and my worldview (my favorite world-making tools) had to stay at home. I was not able to bring my whole self to the classroom. To be honest, I didn't really notice the deficit in my education until much later in life.

As a parent, I want my children to be able to engage their whole selves daily because I know that our home culture has much to offer in building their sense of identity, integrity, and justice. Much of this is my own responsibility. I buy coconuts from the store so they can see me grate them, squeeze milk from their flesh, and tell stories about their supernatural power. I light seven-day candles for peace, clarity, and care, and I ask for their help when I do it. I parent with my culture as a guide. I send my kids to this school because it is a school that respects our home culture and invites our community knowledge into the classroom as a resource. I hope my testimony encouraged our new teachers to view our cultures as resources, treasures, and sources of wisdom.

Folklife, because it is passed between people, has an embedded, culturally relevant pedagogy. In addition to holding the DNA of community creativity, traditional art forms hold critical pedagogical tools for teaching long-valued lessons about beauty, joy, epistemology, ethics, survival skills, leadership styles, community building, visioning the future, and so much more. The tools of listening, observation, and making meaning from context are core to folklife practice and pedagogy.[5]

How does folklife help us teach equity and teach equitably? There are many organizations devoted to supporting your journey in teaching for equity, and I invite you to start and continue dialogues with them.[6] These introductory thoughts consider the practice and teaching of folklife as they relate and advance principles of equity. Within, I also offer questions about practice that can serve as frames for reading the articles in this special journal issue, Teaching for Equity: The Role of Folklore in a Time of Crisis and Opportunity.

As I have worked with the articles that authors from around the nation shared about their practices and intentions for Teaching Equity, I was reminded of the significant statement on equity published by the national research and action institute PolicyLink in 2015. Written as "The Equity Manifesto," it offers the following seven points to define and activate the meaning of "equity," two of which I emphasize below and will examine further:

The Equity Manifesto

- **It begins by joining together, believing in the potency of inclusion, and building from a common bond.**
- It embraces complexity as cause for collaboration, accepting that our fates are inextricable.

- **It recognizes local leaders as national leaders, nurturing the wisdom and creativity within every community as essential to solving the nation's problems.**
- It demands honesty and forthrightness, calling out racism and oppression, both overt and systemic.
- It strives for the power to realize our goals while summoning the grace to sustain them.
- It requires that we understand the past, without being trapped in it; embrace the present, without being constrained by it; and look to the future, guided by the hopes and courage of those who have fought before and beside us.
- This is equity: just and fair inclusion into a society in which all can participate, prosper, and reach their full potential. Unlocking the promise of the nation by unleashing the promise in us all.

While this entire Equity Manifesto merits inquiry, action, and evaluation in any of our daily encounters with others, I want to focus on the two highlighted points as we consider folklife and community-based culture and our learning spaces for all ages. As we walk through these equity practices named by PolicyLink, I invite readers to hold on to this question: How does the culture of my learning space measure up to the processes named in the Equity Manifesto?

Community and Inclusion

- *[Equity] begins by joining together, believing in the potency of inclusion, and building from a common bond.*

Folklife comes out of and reinforces common bonds between and among community members. Engaging folklife as a teaching resource in our classrooms brings the lived experiences and brilliance of community knowledge to the front. It is also a way of teaching and reminding students of the value of the beautiful, meaningful things we do together in community. Activating traditional culture through K-elder curriculum reinforces this critical equity-building action.

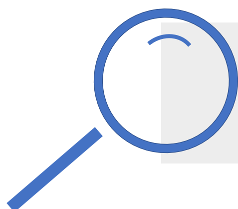
Consider, as one example, call-and-response techniques of traditional storytellers around the world. *"Ago?" Are you listening? "Ame." I am here and listening. "Krik?" Are you listening? "Krak." I am here and listening*. These traditional story frames transform people into community, into tellers and listeners, they join people together for a purpose and are inclusive. What call-and-response frames are used in your education spaces? What call-and-response frames do your students use in their classrooms, in their homes, on their blocks, in their community spaces (playgrounds, religious organizations, after-school programs, and others)?

- Might you use this or other folklife forms to establish your learning community?
- Might you plan a lesson in which students explore the everyday acts of inclusion in their communities and the role of these folklife activities in building healthy communities?[7]

Consider, too, that school classrooms, community centers, and museums have their own culture. These learning spaces are important parts of communities.

- What characterizes your classroom culture?
- What ways do you actively build community in your classroom?
- How might your students' home-based cultural practices be honored and shared as part of building and fortifying an equity-centered classroom culture?

Like building equity, building community is an active process. Reinforce this equity-centered principle by creating a learning space where students practice building community and the powers of home communities are valued.



Not sure where to start? Read the articles in this volume and consider: What ways does this author (do these authors) engage with folklife to join together, include, and bond to advance equity in learning spaces?

Learning from Local Leaders

- *[Equity] recognizes local leaders as national leaders, nurturing the wisdom and creativity within every community as essential to solving the nation's problems.*

The wisdom and creativity in community offer another way of defining folk cultural knowledge. For all time, including now, leaders have used local creativity to address societies' issues.

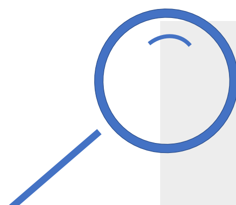
This is an invitation to study community leadership, community-identified leaders like parents and grandparents, block captains, bodega owners, clergy, storytellers, musicians, dancers, teachers, makers, as well as local politicians, to see what wisdom and creativity they nurture. Why do they tend this knowledge, what wisdom does it hold for all of us? How can we consider what we value in our community as lessons for addressing national problems such as racism?

Local Leader Ira Bond
Below, learn from Ira about his teaching practice from a recent conversation with Selina Morales.
About the photo: Self-portrait by Ira Bond.

The website CultureTools.org, created by Asian Americans United, the Philadelphia Folklore Project, and FACTS, explores how local leaders use community folklife and traditions to combat systemic oppression. Geared toward K-8 teachers, the site links the importance of knowing one's elders, and honoring their work, with the development of leadership skills. Click here for folklife-

centered prompts for developing K-elder worksheets and lessons focused on naming and recognizing the work of local leaders.

Whether you're restructuring leadership at a large museum or creating a lesson plan for your 1st-grade classroom, an equity-centered practice engages with community creativity and wisdom and uplifts the ways that local leaders bring equity forward into their leadership. The practice centers and values local learning, shifting harmful, hierarchical, white supremacist power structures that overlook the potential of local people and the value of their cultural expressions.



Not sure where to start? Read the articles in this volume and consider:
How do local leaders nurture community wisdom and creativity in these examples?
How do these examples of leadership and folklife practice offer manners of uprooting systemic oppression such as racism, sexism, and other forms of oppression?

I've watched the FACTS Founders Day play for ten years, often wondering how this pedagogy centered on social justice and equity actually affects the students. In mid-November 2016, I was feeling afraid and unmoored by the elections. I remember that I decided to light a candle to try to ground myself. Because my Kindergartener was in the room, I asked him to join me. I told him I was lighting a candle because I was looking for peace in my community and in myself. I asked him, "What do you need?" Without missing a beat he said, "I need a fair and peaceful world." I immediately recognized this as a line from the FACTS pledge: "We work to build a fair and peaceful world." We lit the candle. I was choking back tears. Here is how these teaching moments are actually affecting the world.

How will we measure equity? We won't. We must work toward it diligently and come back to processes like those named by PolicyLink or others and develop for ourselves questions that help us deepen our practice. We must commit, in the world-building profession of teaching, to the hard and essential work of centering equity in our practice. Folklife is all around us, and it is one powerful, dynamic and multidimensional tool we can use to teach toward equity.

Interview with a Local Leader: Ira L. Bond

When Philadelphia-based musician and teaching artist Ira Bond pours libation at the opening of an African dance and drum performance or in a school, he recalls the ancestors who came before him and brings their teachings into the future. This act of local leadership teaches how to honor your ancestors and the importance of the past in our lives. It also re-forges a cultural connection and heritage that was interrupted by the transatlantic slave trade. Let's learn from Ira about his teaching practice.

Selina Morales: Would you introduce yourself?

Ira Bond: I'm Ira Bond and foremost I'm an educator. There are two areas where I consider myself an educational leader. The first is in schools, where I work with youth and educators to develop leadership skills and knowledge of their selves. I also lead through my involvement with community arts education practice, currently through my organization Malidelphia and as a lead percussionist with Kulu Mele African Dance and Drum Ensemble.

Selina: Ira, thanks for agreeing to talk with me about your work as an educator and a leader in Philadelphia. From knowing and working alongside you for a decade, I know you are passionate about working toward equity in your classrooms and that you see folklore as an important way to teach equity. Can you tell me about what grounds your practice?

Ira: Sankofa, learning from the past to build your future, is at the center of my artistic and teaching practice. Traditional arts, folklore, and, for me, music, are ways to unify people. The idea is that through tradition and folklore (which in my opinion is an image of tradition, a way we enact it) we can learn about who we are. The idea of Sankofa is to learn from the past and use the knowledge to empower your now and your future. This idea comes to me from Ghana, West Africa. It is a large concept, and it is what fuels my arts and community education practice.

Sankofa

The concept of Sankofa is aligned directly with the sixth point of the Equity Manifesto above: *[Equity] requires that we understand the past, without being trapped in it; embrace the present, without being constrained by it; and look to the future, guided by the hopes and courage of those who have fought before and beside us*.

How can we apply this powerful concept from teaching traditions in our learning spaces?

Selina: Can you describe for me a way that you show up as a leader that draws on community knowledge and creativity?

Ira: I talked about Sankofa, I want to talk about libation as a way that we can learn about today from yesterday. If we isolate ourselves without knowledge of the past, we risk living without a real understanding of what is unfolding around us. One main purpose of performing libation is that it reminds us to acknowledge our past. Consider a monument, these public statues depict a story from our past and keep it visible/audible our present, whether true or false.

When I pour libation, I ask permission of the elders, they are the wisest, according to African traditions, because they have been on the earth the longest. Next, I acknowledge the source of life, the Creator. I then talk about *Maafa* (introduced by Marimba Ani's 1988 book *Let the Circle Be Unbroken: The Implications of African Spirituality in the Diaspora),* which is also named as the African Holocaust, Holocaust of Enslavement, or Black Holocaust to describe the history and ongoing effects of atrocities inflicted on African people. In the *Maafa*, I talk about the attempted destruction of people of color and people who aided in the saving of people of color, so it is not just learning about the work of enslavers but learning the story of people who fought for freedom. I talk about civil rights leaders and emancipators who fought and died for civil liberties, humanity, human rights. If I were to be at a school doing a libation, I'd call on our collective academic

understanding of who these people are and consider how their scholarship might fuel our own competencies. If I'm in a community setting, I might talk about how these energies might help guide our steps to freedom, justice or healing. Marcus Garvey, Malcolm X, Ida B. Wells, Frederick Douglass, Maya Angelou: We can talk about hundreds of folks. You have to do your research to find out who these people are and what was their contribution to liberation for your own internalization.

From that point in the libation, I pour libation to your family. I pose the questions: Who are the people in your family that if it weren't for them you would not be here today? Whose contributions to your life helped to dictate, shape, or contribute to your identity? On whose shoulders do you stand? Some of my students don't know who their grandparents are nor their great aunts and uncles. I teach them to ask about their people. I also teach them to learn about the people who are around them. I tell young people, "Maybe you find out things you don't like. You can think about what you don't want to embody. You can be a best version of you."

From there we think about an affirmation for the people who are living and who are around us, people in our churches, on our block, in our lives. Together we think about our future, pour affirmation to our children's children. Our hopes are that our future is better than our present and past.

By going through this libation protocol you follow the track of Sankofa.

Selina: You work in school settings and in community settings, you mentioned drawing on academic or spiritual connection in each context. Are there other differences in your community and school practices?

Ira: When I talk about libation and spirituality in school, I have to be careful to honor and respect that people have different belief systems. Libation is a nonreligious ritual that can be made religious if you are in a community context. For example, I have seen libation poured in church in conjunction with prayers. If you are pouring libation, the protocol is that you ask permission from the elders to begin, then pour water into a plant and call on the Creator. That can be problematic in a public school because some people don't believe in a creator. In a school setting we might say "source of life," whereas in the community we can talk about Olodumare or Jesus or just be more open about putting our own beliefs out there.

Selina: How does this example of pouring libation at the start of a ritual, a performance, or a school day connect to larger issues in our country, like systemic racism or others?

Ira: We fight by remembering. We learn truth and dismantle lies that teach us how to move today. This concept is about how you use these practices to make good decisions about who you are now. Apart from the fact that folklife is beautiful, it also builds character, strength, and resiliency. That is what makes it a good tool for education. This is all a part of the idea about learning who you are. For me, as an African American educator, I have seen that many of my African American students believe our historical context begins with enslavement. This makes an indentation in their self-esteem. This is major work that I do as a leader for liberation, using folklife to lift them up by helping them know where they've been and where they are going. Folklife and ritual help build

communities and the fight for justice now. It is my hope that someone will continue the tradition and pour libation for me one day, and that our communities will be stronger because of it.

Selina Morales *is a Philadelphia-based public folklorist who consults nationally with a focus on urban folklore, particularly the intersection of community aesthetics and social justice. She is the Board Chair of the Folk Arts-Cultural Treasures Charter School and a mom. She has an MA in Folklore from Indiana University, Bloomington.*
Ira L. Bond *(Ibrahim Diabate) is a master teaching artist and African Masquerade professional. He has been a cultural enrichment specialist for 30 years. He has a principal certification and an MEd in Multicultural Education from Eastern University. He has an honorary degree in Malian Cultural Arts from Antioch University and the National Dance and Drum Ensemble of Mali. Currently he is the lead percussionist for Kulu Mele African Dance Company, a member of Dunya Performing Arts, and the founder of Malidelphia Performing Arts.*

URLs
https://www.policylink.org
http://www.culturetools.org
http://www.culturetools.org/people/dorothy_wilkie.html

Endnotes
1. Folklife is defined by the American Folklife Center at the Library of Congress as "the everyday and intimate creativity that all of us share and pass on to the next generation" https://www.loc.gov/folklife/edresources/ed-gettingstarted.html.
2. See http://www.folkloreproject.org/sites/default/files/issues/summer14.pdf, pages 16-17 for an article about the Founders Day Celebration at FACTS.
3. Botánicas are stores that sell ritual merchandise necessary for practicing a variety of traditional Latin American healing and belief systems. From love potions, lucky pennies, and statues of Catholic saints to fresh herbs and spiritual consultations, a botánica offers an alternative health resource to its community.
4. *Espiritismo*, as a belief system with doctrine and rules, has been defined in books. However, in my lifetime of participating in communities of "practitioners" and my 18 years of formally interviewing individuals about their practices, I have yet to meet a person who relies on a formal definition or doctrine when describing what this belief system entails. Here is what my grandmother explains: *Espiritistas*, or people who practice *espiritismo*, share the belief that metaphysical spirits influence people's lives. The human body is a vehicle or vessel for these spirits or souls. When a person dies, their spirit is released back into the spirit realm and, likely, reborn. My grandmother says, "We are souls more than anything," and uses Catholicism's guardian angels to exemplify the place that spirits have in the world.
5. For a discussion of ways of bringing folklife in school settings see https://www.locallearningnetwork.org/wp-content/uploads/Deafenbaugh.pdf.
6. https://www.locallearningnetwork.org, https://embracingequity.org/mission-and-vision, https://www.tolerance.org
7. For example, threshold traditions offer a concrete form for exploring how rites of passage help practitioners make a transition between two states, such as secular to sacred, outside to inside, child to adult, and so on. (Learn more with Rangoli: Traditions of the Threshold, by Amanda Dargan.)