

Report on Cultural Sustainability/Community-Based Folklife Practice Retreat

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American Folklore Society Best Practice funds enabled a group consultancy and working retreat to take place May 20-22, 2011 at the Meadowcreek Center, Fox, Arkansas. Meadowcreek is a sustainable community retreat center founded in 1979 by David W. Orr. We met to discuss how we might develop guidelines and practices to work toward community sustainability and how to support our work in the times of diminishing public dollars. AFS funds received were used to assist with the cost of lodging, meals, and travel for the participants. We felt that such a discussion is critical to developing the strain within our field, which is devoted neither entirely to academic study nor to publicly-funded public displays of traditional life, but rather to the sustaining of tradition in situ as a vital part of healthy and enduring community life. Growing out of presentations at the 2009 and 2010 American Folklore Society meetings on cultural sustainability, sustainable music, and community engagement, we sought an extended conversation to develop what practices would be best for folklorists to utilize to further assist communities in the face of destructive forces which endanger traditional practices and disrupt traditional knowledge. In all, sixteen people gathered (including four children) for the discussions. Another had to cancel at the last minute and two were prevented from attending by the powerful storms. Included in the group were public and university-based folklorists, graduate students in folklore and heritage studies, as well as folks engaged with radio, print design, web and print publishing, and variety of national, regional, and community initiatives on food, agriculture, rural arts, historic preservation, sustainable tourism, and related topics.

Over the course of the three days, we discussed both formally and informally such topics as the nature and usefulness of the term “sustainability,” the nature of the communities we engage with, the types of projects we pursue, the difference between a public and a community orientation, and alternative funding strategies. Lucy Long, Director of the Center for Food and Culture, spoke of their mission to promote an understanding of the power of food to connect individuals to past, place, and other people, and about her interest in sustainable tourism. Historic preservationist Caroline Millar stressed the importance of local voices and perspectives in meaningful preservation projects. Karen Miller, trained in both historic preservation and folklore, joined her in talking about the strengths of the Main Street Programs, the importance of public spaces, and the strong ties between the specifics of place and of culture. Molly Bolick draws on her experiences and studies involving women’s justice, labor activism, immigrant populations, and community engagement and looks to develop materials for her own town to teach new arrivals about their community. Jennifer Jameson, while yet a student, is looking for ways to combine her interests in food, music, outsider art and how they work together in a community setting. Rachel Reynolds Luster combines her own interests in food, music, and community in a number of ways including school garden, community food and artisan co-ops, the creation of community spaces, community engagement, and repositioning our work as folklorists. Mike Luster emphasizes the need for folklorists and other cultural workers to evaluate our efforts in how they strengthen communities and

their traditions in addition to audience and research considerations and to examine the implications of a public as opposed to a community orientation. Meredith Martin Moats spoke of her growing engagement with political activism and the inspiration she received from examining the legacy of the Civil Rights Movement, and how her work now in her own community and beyond engages with the language and perspective of social justice and intergenerational learning. Janice Crane draws on her studies in anthropology, religious studies, and historic preservation as well as her current folklore studies in her current work on vernacular architecture. Matthew Fluharty, in turn, draws on his experiences of loss of place in connection with the farm crisis, his work in Ireland, and his skills as a poet and writer to examine how the arts serve to assist with cultural reclamation, using, among other tools his blog *The Art of the Rural*.

Together, we discussed a number of big-picture issues. How can folklorists (and other cultural workers) address the different spheres of our work (scholarship, our public audiences and obligations, specific communities) and lives in useful and sustainable ways? How do we sustain our own work as well as the communities and traditions we work with? What models exist both in our field and in other quarters? How might the current zeitgeist refresh and reinvigorate the field? How healthy is the public folklore paradigm? What are unintended consequences of programs like the National Heritage Fellowships? How do we use our lives, skills, and knowledge to engage with and strengthen communities? Beyond public and corporate dollars, what resources might exist to fund our work? The latter point initiated a lively discussion on alternative funding models including such web-based tools as the threshold pledge systems KickStarter, Crowdfunding, PledgeBank, and PledgeMusic. We discussed models based on Community Supported Agriculture, as well as traditional community-based fundraising techniques. We discussed continuing the conversation through future gatherings and perhaps drafting a white paper for the Society.

In many ways, the conversations felt vital. We discussed how the cultural moment – across an array of fields and interest groups—provides an opportunity for folklorists in much the way that the period between the Civil Rights Movement and the US Bicentennial saw the field expand beyond the academy to include the public sphere. We discussed a number of types of communities, rural, urban, even virtual, and how the experiences of each are interconnected and interdependent. Perhaps the time is now to explore a third way, a community-based folklore practice, one which not only examines the flowers of tradition, and offers their beauty to an interested public, but one which works as well to ensure their continued growth.

Best practices in light of these discussions would be:

To welcome interdisciplinary dialogue toward encouraging enduring culture through a community-based practice;

To consider the holistic health of community life including the environmental, physical, spiritual, economic, and cultural well-being in the development and implementation of community-based practice;

To recognize that community-based folklife initiatives must be locally adapted to specific places;

To actively seek input from community members that have historically been excluded from decision-making processes in community life;

To emphasize the ways in which traditional knowledge and its practice can be used to join a community;

To use an inclusive definition of “community” which includes the natural and cultural landscape and all things that depend upon or are born of it including traditional knowledge;

To use our skills as folklorists to strengthen community life and encourage enduring cultural practices;

To actively seek to participate in conversations outside of the field of folklore regarding aspects of sustainability and to offer our unique perspective in the search for local, national, and global solutions;

To take action against the homogenization of culture by highlighting, through our work, the necessity of community and cultural pluralism;

To recognize that community takes multiple forms, urban and rural, and exists in a variety of locales;

To seek to develop and adapt new systems of grassroots organization and fundraising techniques to our community-based practice;

To recognize that cultural initiatives should be planned with and based on community needs and desires and be a partnership with the community membership, human and otherwise;

To encourage the tenets of stewardship in our methodology and community-based practice;

To remain open to the possibility that our skill sets, training, and talents are owed to the communities in which we live and/or work, in part, as the responsibility of membership and that our work may be done out of avocation as well as vocation;

To reaffirm to communities through our work that all value is not monetary by highlighting community assets that have alternate values;

To highlight through our work the ways in which growth economies contribute to the dissolution of community life and to act through our work to change this;

To search for alternative funding structures to supplement or replace public or corporate dollars;

To emphasize the importance of action in a community-based practice;

To affirm that the fundamental level of culture, the inner-most nest, is the level of traditional and local knowledge and folklore is the knowledge that creates and sustains community.