

Educative Encounters, Liminal Advantages and Culturally Inspired Storytelling: A Critical Look at the “Peru: Pachamama” program of the 2015 Smithsonian Folklife Festival

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Introduction

During the second five days (July 1-5) of the 2015 Smithsonian Folklife Festival, a team of anthropologists/educators from the University of Pittsburgh, working on behalf of the American Folklore Society's Consultancy and Professional Development Program and led by Dr. Maureen Porter, (referred to in the remainder of this document as “The Pittsburgh Team”), visited the *Peru: Pachamama* program with the charge of participant observation of the educational opportunities and potential of the Festival. Dr. Porter prepared a comprehensive report, the most salient points of which are summarized in this document. (Page references in this report are to the longer document.) These observations are pertinent not only to the future efforts of the Smithsonian Folklife Festival, but to other cultural events of various types and scope, as well as to Folklore and Education efforts in other venues (including museums, cultural centers, and classrooms). The complete report (37 pages) can be obtained by contacting Betty J. Belanus at the Smithsonian Center for Folklife and Cultural Heritage at belanusb@si.edu.

The Pittsburgh Team used the following framing questions to guide their inquiry:

What are features of educative moments at the Festival that have the potential to foster positive dispositions for folklife learning? Shifting from a restrictive and dichotomous definition of an idealized, educational Festival to an ethnographic analysis of educative moments that can inspire lasting dispositions helps to identify the kinds of meaningful encounters and authentic modes of engagement that have genuine potential to engage diverse public audiences.

How do liminal aspects of the Festival design encourage receptivity and require participants to make their own syntheses? Embracing the inherently liminal aspects of the Festival gathers under one metaphorical tent those aspects that, by their very juxtaposition, provide the contrast and provocation necessary to inspire reflection. How do the design, flow, and association of key items help visitors to make unified sense of the featured cultural groups?

When do storytelling spaces and practices inspire new appreciations of culturally inspired modes of sharing wisdom? Storytelling spaces and practices, both staged and spontaneous, offer the necessary means of choreographing mutual encounters that can become catalysts for shifting perspectives on self and other, and in response, in prompting generous exchanges between diverse presenters and audiences. (Porter, p. 3)

Educative Encounters

The Pittsburgh Team challenged the notion set forth in the seminal 1980 article, “Six Reasons Not to Do a Folklife Festival” in which Charles Camp and Timothy Lloyd dispute the educational potential of folklife festivals due to their setting (celebratory and social), the relatively short period of time spent at such events, and the relatively shallow interactions that visitors have with tradition bearers. The Team set forth a new paradigm of “educative encounters”:

“Based on our own work on site and in longer-term conversations with the hosts [Festival organizers] and presenters, [Festival participants] we believe that even though the Festival does provide a brief series of encounters, the ways in which they are presented, their intensity and potential emotional richness, and the cumulative value of Festival attendance over time have a great deal of potential. The answer is not a simplistic binary of whether it is educational or not, but rather better understanding the continua of experiences offered – and taken up – are what matter.” (Porter, p. 7)

Visitors come to the Festival as “free-choice learners” and select their own experiences during their visit, in keeping with education theorist John Dewey’s concept of “educative” encounters “as those that offer the possibility of meaningful engagement and individual meaning-making with authentic tasks in a relevant context” (Dewey 1938). As the Pittsburgh Team suggests, “learning begins with direct experience, sometimes guided by a master practitioner, but often as an individual engages with the surrounding environment, whether natural or artfully (re-)created at a festival.” (Porter, p. 6) Furthermore, if Folklife Festival visitors build upon one visit to such an event, they may follow with return visits to the same event or others like it, creating a continuum of personal meaning and cultural understanding.

Over time, the Pittsburgh Team argues, such “educative encounters” can lead, “not necessarily to mastery of a particular craft or subject matter, but to “dispositions” towards a greater respect for others’ cultures, a finer awareness and appreciation of one’s own heritage, and/or the desire to develop competence in a particular endeavor. It can also mean a more inclusive willingness to engage with others, not just to enjoy being entertained by exotic others, but by taking up or recommitting to one’s own practice of folk arts at home and in the local community. The larger take-away message is about the value of art, not as an elite or unique practice of a few exemplary geniuses, but as a democratic practice that is accessible.” (Porter, p. 7)

The Team noted several Festival examples which illustrate this concept, as well as areas that the Festival and other events like it might find room for improvement. One example was the potential educative encounter that food from the featured culture could create. At the Smithsonian Folklife Festival, culturally appropriate food is only served at concessions run by professional caterers or restaurant owners, as the dishes cooked by Festival participants in demonstration settings is not allowed to be eaten by the public. Still, the Pittsburgh Team suggested that even concession food has the potential to bring “an authentic taste” and better understanding to visitors. They saw a missed opportunity in a lack of cultural contextual explanations of the foods offered. For example, Inka Kola, a Peruvian soft drink, was on offer but its interesting story was not explained. (See

<http://knowledge.wharton.upenn.edu/article/branding-lessons-from-inca-kola-the-peruvian-soda-that-bested-coca-cola/>)

Another example noted was the special case of visitors with Peruvian heritage. One activity that the Team participated in was administering visitor surveys. A typical response of visitors with Peruvian heritage when asked what they enjoyed about the event was “the live music and dance and food because it gave them (especially their children) a wider view of what their home country is about. This sense of bridging a gap in information was an important function for those who wished for their kids to retain or to make a positive link with their heritage, however far back.” (Porter, p. 10)

The Pittsburgh Team also noted the Festival as a possible setting for indigenous peoples to meet one other and find common ground. They cited the example of visiting Navajo elders in the GALACTIC (Global Arts Local Arts Culture Technology International Citizenship) program led by Dr. Amy Horowitz from Indiana University, who met with indigenous groups from Peru. One Navajo visitor met with textile artists from Cusco, Peru and admired their traditional clothing. The Peruvian weavers explained that they wear these clothes every day to show their pride in their heritage. This prompted the Navajo visitor to become inspired to wear her own traditional clothing in the future as everyday work attire. “These experiences of feeling part of something larger than their local efforts helped them to see the role that folk arts can play in their lives and struggles.” (Porter, p. 11)

The Team also noted the role of the Festival’s Family Activities Area (called the *Wawawasi Kids Corner* in 2015) as a place where not only families with children but also many adult-without-children visitors feel free to try hands-on and movement-based activities without feeling as though they are disturbing or not showing proper respect for the folk artists demonstrating or performing in other areas of the event. “In the *Wawawasi*, freewheeling, naïve questioning and attempting something new and challenging was actively encouraged. ‘Try out asking, ‘*Imata sutiki?*’ (What is your name?) in Quechua,’ encourages the facilitator to wheelchair-bound seniors and squirrely schoolchildren alike.” (Porter p. 12)

The Pittsburgh team further noted that “educative encounters” also extended to Festival interns, temporary staff and volunteers.: “We dare to conclude that for all those working at the Festival, from the highly experienced tradition bearers communicating to new audiences to the freshest interns and volunteers looking for ways to share their emergent talents, the weeks [of working at the Festival] provide a hands-on workshop in emotional intelligence and global cultural competencies, prerequisites for effective leadership in a networked global village. When each return to their home organizations, colleges, and communities they will take these new dispositions towards public leadership with them to enrich their shared practice there.” (Porter, p. 12)

The Pittsburgh Team summarized: “These educative moments provide the impetus to build sustainable momentum, and therefore dispositions, to continue learning about folklife. The result is a cumulative audience base who arrive eager for new sensory experiences and new insights into others’ cultures as well as their own. They learn that others’ sophisticated folk practices, whether in conservation, storytelling, or agriculture, are beautiful and enticing... Because the

Festival provides a smorgasbord of new delights and a potentially confusing array of sounds and sights for the visitor, the curators must intentionally design ways for the visitor to begin to make sense of – and integrate – what they experience.” (Porter p. 13-14)

The Educative Advantages of Festival Liminality

In the next section of their report, the Pittsburgh Team drew upon the concept of “liminality” to explore how the Festival works on many levels and in many types of venues/presentations to reach visitors: “By acknowledging the synchronous aspects of the Festival, we need not castigate it for being a spectacle at the same time that it is celebratory and critical, nor need we disregard the educative aspects of play, inversion, and engagement. Indeed, the fact that a Festival on this scale is all of these at once is one of the keys to its multi-lateral success. Each person, no matter whether a seasoned and savvy folklife aficionado or a wide-eyed young summer camper, can find something there to meet them where they are.” (Porter, p. 15)

Again, using examples from their observations of and participation in the event, the Pittsburgh Team illustrated this concept. The way in which the Festival presents culture as “looking backward as well as forward” was noted as an example of liminality at work: “Liminality means the transgression of simple categorical boundaries... helping us to connect the traditional and the modern, the remote rural and the inner city. They co-occur, inform one another, play off one another, and parody simplistic ideas of nation, people, or indigeneity. This allowed even the seasoned members of the team to learn something new about Peruvian culture as they explored urban *chicha* art and noted how folk artist Elliot Tupac “seamlessly combines sayings, ancient hummingbird folklore, Peruvian national colors and flags in his street art and the mural that he created there on the Mall.” (Porter, p. 16)

The idea of “radical hospitality” (extending a warm and appreciative welcome to the stranger and possible friend) at the Festival was also noted, allowing Festival participants as well as visitors a space in which to share their stories. The Pittsburgh Team described their privileged position of staying at the same hotel as the participants, and also having the ability to communicate via Spanish and some Quechua language skills, as facilitating their own exchange. But, they also noted that the nature of the Smithsonian Folklife Festival allows visitors whose encounters are necessarily briefer and sometimes experience language barriers to feel welcome to exchange information as well: “The Festival provides a dynamic opportunity to actually come into contact with others, to engage, to serve, to share. Volunteers offer to fetch a bottle of water for a parched performer. Performers listen closely to an awkwardly worded, but sincere, question from a visitor. Visitors dare to write down a personal concern or hope for the future on a public comment board. These cumulative series of generous acts acknowledge the dignity and humanity of all who dare to make the long journey to the Mall.” (Porter, p. 17)

The Team explored the “portals” presented by the Festival, from the actual gates into the main plots on either side of the Mall space, to the ways that the best Festival presenters offer “entry points” for participation by visitors in such events as dancing with Peruvian performers in the open space called The Plaza. The Team also described how the Festival schedule and maps act as portals, directing people spatially and temporally to venues and performances that might interest them.

New to the Smithsonian Folklife Festival in 2015, as the Pittsburgh Team noted, is the prohibition in using the middle grassy plot of the Mall (newly refurbished) for tents and other built structures. Instead of seeing this restriction as a hindrance to interaction that this wide open space presents, the Team noted how it was being used by participants and visitors alike:

“Performers made grand, intentional use of the great portals and the wide avenue of grass... to slowly wind their way from one side to the other, playing enticing music and picking up a trail of eager, curious followers that grew as they traversed the space separating their home base tent from the performance stages. This ploy was so effective that people under the trees on either side could see the assemblage accumulating as the parade approached either stage, and the multiplicative draw of the eager crowd ensured that by the time the entourage reached their final destination the performers would have a considerable throng waiting eagerly for them to begin.” (Porter, p. 20)

The Team also critically examined some displays within particular tents, most notably the two textile dyeing and weaving tents organized by the Center for Traditional Textiles in Cusco. They found most of this display exemplary, although the portion of the tent on dyeing seemed to give “mixed messages” to visitors, simultaneously displaying a prominent sign that read “Do Not Touch” while a participant beckoned visitors to sift through the materials. They also suggested adding more contextual signage, including possibly duplications from an excellent book that the founder of the Center, Nilda Callañaupa Alvarez, had recently published.

Two aspects of display were more problematic, in the opinion of the Team. The first was a depiction of a traditional planting (*chacra*) that symbolically represented the terraced fields in wooden planters of different heights. “Even with the nearby, suggestive sign for the *Chacra Wachiperi* agricultural display, I believe that it would be beyond the ken of nearly all visitors to decipher the significance of the set of staggered planters. Most visitors simply struggled to maneuver their strollers around the planters, trying to avoid these impediments.” (Porter, p. 21)

The other aspect was the Smithsonian-designed “invented” icons for the twelve case studies of the “Peru: Pachamama” program as a whole. (<http://www.festival.si.edu/blog/2015/behind-the-scenes-designing-the-peru-pachamama-logo/>): “Translating complex symbolism or traditions into simple logos, color themes, maps, or container labels requires strategic and consistent choices. While the logo may have served its simple decorative purposes on posters, T-shirts, or the official program because it provided a unique, simply recognizable image, it offered little in the way of understanding original, authentic Peruvian imagery.” (Porter, p. 21)

In summary, the Team expressed the opinion that “the tangible, hands-on experience of the Festival is one of the ways that the very field of folklore is made visible on a large scale.” That is, the liminal spaces of the Festival are reflected in, and reflect, the liminality of the field of folklore in general, but in a positive rather than a negative manner: “Indeed, the capacity to span the diversity inherent in folklore, a liminal field that bridges the margins and the mainstream, is one of its epistemological virtues. Therefore, effectively moderating the accessible richness at the explicitly named Smithsonian Folklife Festival continues to enhance organizational – and disciplinary - visibility and viability.” (Porter, p. 23)

Culturally Inspired Storytelling

The last section of the report of the Pittsburgh team discusses engaged storytelling within the Smithsonian Folklife Festival: “Telling stories, and listening to others tell theirs, is one of the most powerful acts that take place regularly at the Festival. Whether programmed to occur on the hour every hour in the specific location, or encouraged to occur spontaneously in the Volunteer Tent or the *Wawawasi*, storytelling provides intimate means of transmitting cultural knowledge, both in style and in substance.” (Porter, p. 24)

While the Team felt that the Festival offered many positive venues for “courageous storytelling,” they also pointed out that engaged storytelling often needs good facilitation. They cited a number of good presenters “who were able to not only literally translate the performances for the audience but who could also interpret and contextualize the significance of the performances... in which they conveyed the artists’ passions, concerns, and respect for traditions that inspired them.” (Porter, p. 25)

The Team noted some areas where words were not needed to convey meaningful cultural exchanges, such as inside a tent where Andean women were preparing grass ropes for the amazingly intricate Q’eswachaka bridge built over the ten days of the Festival. (<http://www.festival.si.edu/2015/peru/traditional-knowledge/qeswachaka-bridge/smithsonian>) Visitors, especially children, were beckoned into the tent to sit down and learn how to weave the rope using their toes to separate it. “The women gestured and smiled, and showed kids how to loop the rope ends securely so that they could be successful. Dewey would appreciate the fact that being actively invited to try out a seemingly simple task, and then only partially succeeding, is a good lesson in appreciating the skill that artists cultivate over many decades.” (Porter, p. 25)

They also noted a number of other “open-hearted exchanges” that they observed, including discussions in the *El Hablador* narrative stage; between the local owners of a pair of alpacas which were brought to the Festival for a ceremony and the tradition bearers who performed the ceremony; and between schoolchildren from a local school who grew quinoa plants as a classroom project and the actual Andean quinoa farmers. They also were moved by the stories that the participants told after hours, to and from the hotel or over dinner or social time in the evenings, about meeting and getting to know fellow Peruvians from different portions of the country: “One of the profound statements made to us and to each another in the evening informal gatherings was that by being in DC together, representing Peru, they felt more like citizens with broadly shared experiences, perhaps even a greater stake, in their country. One of the group leaders noted, “You are helping us by getting to know one another. This doesn’t happen in Peru – but the Smithsonian brings us together ‘as one pueblo.’ ” (Porter, p. 27)

In conclusion, this section’s examinations of stories told “Peruvian to Peruvian, expert to novice, and Festival to wider public” points out that “storytelling may seem like simple entertainment, an interlude between more substantive performances. However... it is one of the most educative kinds of mutual encounters. Presenters adapt the telling and performing to effectively embrace its liminal circumstances when performed in a foreign setting, demonstrating by example how satisfying...cultural syncretism can be for all.” (Porter, p. 30)

Conclusion

The Pittsburgh Team began their report using the metaphor of the Q'eswachaka bridge, which was a center piece and the most visible icon of the Peru program. However, another traditional Andean creation, the *quipu*, is evoked in conclusion. A *quipu*, the name deriving for the Quechua word for knot, is a multi-stranded device that was used in Andean historic culture to mark important information. The devices were used for record keeping and sending messages throughout the empire, utilizing color, knot placement, and type of cord within the logical reading of the *quipu*. (Porter, J. <http://newsdesk.si.edu/snapshot/quipu>) The Team feels as though their experience, and the resulting report, is their *quipu* marking important observations of and experiences at the 2015 Festival, which they were happy to share with The Smithsonian Center for Folklife and Cultural Heritage, the American Folklore Society, and anyone else interested. They urge some area of further inquiry, including a closer examination of the mediation between Self and Other/Exotic and Familiar; a mindful examination of the marketing done for Festival sales; and ways to tie Festival themes into larger global issues, such as climate change, seen through the lens of traditional cultures — all outside the purview of this study.

The final statements of the report helps sum up this multi-faceted consultancy and its findings:

“Because the Folklife Festival experience is a dynamic, multi-sensory one that literally extends beyond the confines of an indoor showcase museum, it is educative, offering more than it demands. It evokes a sense of wonder, receptivity, and appreciation. In doing so, the Festival helps to create and affirm a shared commons, a sacred space on the National Mall that remains an audacious testament to the tenacity of culture, heritage, and community.

Yuspagarasunki. Gracias. Thank you.” (Porter, p. 34)

Selected Resources (Compiled by Maureen Porter)

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Summary Bio of Dr. Maureen Porter and Pittsburgh Team

Dr. Maureen Porter is a faculty member of the Administrative and Policy Studies department at the University of Pittsburgh's Social and Comparative Analysis of Education graduate program in the School of Education. As an anthropologist of education, Dr. Porter studies the social construction of "education" and situated learning in culturally-specific communities of practice.

She brings not only the insights of the disciplines of Education and Applied Anthropology to this research project, but also extensive experience in leading summer service learning programs to Bolivia and Peru. Two master's degree students in the program assisted with the Festival research: Jessica Rathbone Davila and Rachael English. The team was accompanied by two high school students, Daly Trimble and Sofia Porter Bacon. The multi-generational make-up of the team brought additional insight to the research.