A Working Guide to the Landscape of Arts for Change

A collection of writings depicting the wide range of ways the arts make community, civic, and social change.

Hugo Arroyo of Los Cenzontles engages young people in a Son Jarocho music and dance class.

Folk and Traditional Arts and Social Change

By Betsy Peterson

Folk arts include a constellation of artistic activities and cultural expressions in community life that are informal, often popular in orientation, amateur, voluntary, and occurring in myriad social contexts. As expressions of deep cultural knowledge, creative expression, activism, cultural durability, and community values, folk and traditional arts can be tools for community empowerment and social change.

In this paper, author Betsy Peterson captures a range of cultural activity beyond familiar forms such as protest songs that use cultural tradition to explicitly address or mobilize public opinion on political or social issues. She characterizes subtle but potent ways that cultural workers, activists, and others intentionally draw upon folk and traditional arts and culture to name and interpret their own experience, to test their own boundaries, and to affirm a cultural continuity in the face of social concerns. Preservation in the form of cultural engagement and participation can be a form of place based advocacy; it can also be an act of naming, resistance, and critical affirmation for communities whose cultural values, languages, and art forms find little support or recognition mainstream systems. Increasingly, individuals and organizations are employing ethnographic field methods of listening and observation and the tools of documentation in community development and planning processes, for cultural and creative capacity building, and in arenas of education, social justice, and mental health and healing. Folk and traditional arts can also create space for dialogue that enables full and authentic engagement with others. Examples highlight how folk arts organizations and their programs, through dialogue, foster intergenerational connection and understanding; broker conversation, opportunity, and access to resources; and link history to contemporary issues toward deeper understanding.

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Animating Democracy
A Program of Americans for the Arts

Folk arts and traditional cultural expression—an authentic search for meaning and voice in the collective experience, cloaked in the habitual rhythms of everyday life.

On the Sunday after September 11, far from New York City, I attended a candlelight vigil on the plaza in Santa Fe, New Mexico. Throughout the evening people came and went, some milling about restlessly, some frozen in place, while others wept and comforted each other. Local Protestant ministers led prayer, Catholics recited the rosary. Disparate groups sang: "Give Peace a Chance," "God Bless America," "De Colores," or "Amazing Grace"—often overlapping. A man from a nearby pueblo beat a drum throughout the entire event. At that moment, this polyglot cluster of folks felt the need to come together in a public space to share grief and create meaning, to reach across boundaries and assert a common humanity. Swedish anthropologist Ulf Hannerz uses a wonderful phrase—"diversity in motion"—that aptly describes the moment. (Hannerz, 1996, p. 73).[1] Bau Graves, Arlene Goldbard, and others might call it an example of cultural democracy. Still others might say it serves as an example of cultural citizenship—something anthropologist Renato Rosaldo has described as the right to express difference without compromising one's right to belong.[2] As for me, I think of it simply as everybody getting the chance to speak and be heard—in this case all at the same time. I guess it all pretty much refers to the same thing.

Can we look at the practice of folk arts and cultural activity as fundamental civic engagement leading to social change?

I believe we can.

When I was initially asked to write this article about folk arts and social change, I kept thinking about the image of that evening. It captures some of the tensions and the potency I prize in folk arts and traditional cultural expression—an authentic search for meaning and voice in the collective experience, cloaked in the habitual rhythms of everyday life. Thinking through, making do, always attempting to connect. Using and adapting what is at hand to voice personal yet fundamental collective desires. Radically local, specific, and often intimate. In truth, thinking about folk arts within the context of social change requires arts policymakers and funders to rethink many implicit assumptions about civic dialogue, cultural citizenship, and the ways in which they are practiced. Whose art and whose democracy is being expressed or served? Is artistic engagement in the civic realm always or only accomplished through capital-D dialogue with capital-P politics with capital-A artists? Is there only one conversation with one monolithic community to be had? Or can we look at the practice of folk arts and cultural activity as fundamental civic engagement leading to social change? I believe we can.

THE F WORD

Over the past decade, a burgeoning cultural policy literature has helped to broaden definitions of artistic practice and participation in the arts. Working under a broad umbrella of terms such as cultural participation, cultural democracy, and cultural development, a growing number of practitioners, artists, and scholars are describing a constellation of artistic activities and cultural expression in community life that are informal, often folk or popular in orientation, amateur, voluntary, often involving direct community participation, and occurring in myriad social contexts beyond the boundaries of the museum, the concert hall, and the traditionally defined nonprofit arts universe.

The descriptors for this work constitute a jargon-laden soup, with each term highlighting a different aspect of cultural participation. The phrase "informal arts," used by Alaka Wali in 2002 to describe community-based artistic and cultural practices in Chicago, emphasizes the social or non-arts settings and contexts for the activity and has been embraced by several individuals. Some use the term "amateur," highlighting the avocational quality or the absence of credentialed, professional arts training, or some say "vernacular" to underscore the sense of "second-natureness" or embedding in everyday life. Still others favor the term "participatory arts" to note the element of direct, hands-on individual and community engagement that is central to much of this cultural expression. In its most neutral and broadest usage, cultural participation simply denotes the "wide array of ways in which people engage in arts, culture, and creative expression."[3]

Terms like folk arts, heritage, traditional arts, or vernacular arts provide that shout-out to ideas of cultural community, continuity, and historical context.

In this discussion, people often dance around the terms "folk arts" or "folk culture," acknowledging frustration with the conceptual baggage associated with words that suggest artistic work of lesser value and quality to some, or implicate dimensions of class and socioeconomic status (associations that people in the arts seem especially loath to discuss). After all, the term folklore emerged in nineteenth-century Great Britain and Europe, during a time of colonization and rising romantic nationalism, to describe the pure cultural expressions of a peasant class. Both Maribel Alvarez and Alaka Wali describe these conundrums and language puzzles at length and with great skill.[4]

But I digress. Such terminology debates will always be with us. I have to confess that I tire of them more and more. My own preferences gravitate toward terms like folk arts, heritage, traditional arts, or vernacular arts, and I often use them interchangeably. They provide that shout-out to ideas of cultural community, continuity, and historical context that advocates for DIY or "professional–amateur" participation rarely acknowledge or simply forget.[5] I know in my bones that these terms describe real aesthetic expression and potent lived experience in daily life. I know they refer to a

rich symbolic reservoir of story, song, belief, ritual, and thought, or to, as Bill Ivey describes in *Arts Inc.*, "a kind of cultural stock portfolio that connects us with history, shared values, and community, giving us the strength that comes from a sense of belonging and place."[6] Thomas Freidman puts it more dramatically in *The Lexus and the Olive Tree*: "Few things are more enraging to people than to have their identity or their sense of home stripped away. They will die for it, kill for it, sing for it, write poetry for it, and novelize about it. Because without a sense of home and belonging, life becomes barren and rootless."[7] Cultural durability, it seems, is critical to cultural vitality, creativity, and well-being. Folk arts and traditional culture live in that intersection where past and present, individual and collective yearnings—both real and imagined—co-mingle and sometimes collide.

FOLK ARTS AND SOCIAL CHANGE: COMMON THREADS IN CURRENT PRACTICE

When I mention folk arts and social change in the same breath, people generally react in a couple of different ways. A few, thinking folk arts to be old, irrelevant, or inconsequential fluff, consider it to be deeply apolitical, without the gravitas of real art or real-world issues. But most people will think of protest songs sung by Woody Guthrie, Pete Seeger, Bob Dylan, Odetta, and on and on—the 60's folk revival, songs of the civil rights and labor movements. In other words, didactic usage of cultural tradition to explicitly address or mobilize public opinion on issues of political or social concern—the capital-D dialogue with capital-P politics with capital-A artists that I mentioned earlier. A worthy but, I feel, a narrow lens through which to view folk arts and social change. And a topic I will return to.

> *A growing number of community-based organizations, folk arts programs, and cultural activists intentionally draw upon folk and traditional arts and culture to affirm cultural continuity in the face of a growing privatization and a consolidated marketplace.*

In other subtle yet powerful ways, a growing number of community-based organizations, folk arts programs, cultural activists, and other cultural institutions large and small intentionally draw upon folk and traditional arts and culture as everyday community resources to name and interpret their own experience, to test their own boundaries, and to affirm a cultural continuity in the face of a growing privatization and a consolidated marketplace. Many of these activities remain hidden, in part, because the field of folk arts

and culture practice in community life is fairly dispersed and decentralized, occurring in informal or community settings. Many of these activities are also anchored in place, locally focused, and locally generated, addressing the needs and interests of particular communities or publics. There is no one center to this field or one national service organization serving a well-defined membership or directing this work. In fact, there are relatively few self-identified folk arts organizations (compared with most other arts fields). In reality, it is more accurate to look at it as a vast sea of diverse, overlapping networks. Some of them actively connect and collaborate, even as others do not recognize similar communities as fellow travelers or see themselves as part of a larger sphere of activity. Some do not necessarily label their work as “social change,” even though concepts of social and cultural capital are at the core of folk arts and traditional culture.

Still, within this messy mix, there are patterns worth noting that exemplify key values and processes of folk-arts work grounded in social change:

- a commitment to viewing artistic expression within a broader holistic view of culture, privileging vernacular arts’ and humanities’ voices, perspectives, and interpretation;
- an appreciation of documentation and ethnographic skills as tools for self- and community awareness; and
- a belief in conversation, dialogue, and personal narrative as tools for community empowerment and social change.

Preservation and Reconstitution

Over the years, in the course of writing grant proposals and talking with funders, I learned it was best to use the word “preservation” sparingly. I suppose it conjures up images of frozen objects or back-room storage where items and mementos are kept out of view for no one to see or touch. It’s a shame, because when I talk with artists and community-based cultural organizers in diverse communities, I hear a range of meanings: I hear a term that resonates with vibrancy, passion, and immediacy; I hear a term that is used both casually and with great solemnity; and a word that is part of everyday speech and everyday life. For communities whose cultural values, languages, and art forms find little support or recognition in mainstream cultural institutions, or in an institutionalized educational system, preservation can be deadly serious—a creative act of naming, resistance, and critical affirmation, as if to say, “We are here. We demand respect.” The preservation I refer to here, however, occurs through proliferation and adaptation, through cultural engagement and participation in community-supported teaching and performance, in peer-to-peer or intergenerational contexts. Activities of cultural preservation become a means for reconstituting community in daily practice.

At their most dramatic and basic, preservation efforts literally concern naming and language revival, and they illustrate the intertwining of art, culture, and vernacular

Preservation can be deadly serious—a creative act of naming, resistance, and critical affirmation …a means for reconstituting community in daily practice.

interpretation. In the United States such projects are most visible among immigrant and indigenous populations, where war, migration, colonization, violent change, or institutionalized racism can contribute to the fragility or erasure of cultural traditions and ways of life. Throughout the country on any given weekend, for instance, there are scores of Saturday schools focusing on language and culture in community centers or churches. Many of them, established after World War II by European immigrants and refugees, are still strong in urban areas throughout the country. The Ukrainian School of Chicago, founded in 1950, has over 200 students enrolled this year. Japanese, Chinese, Armenian, and Iranian Saturday schools, to name a few, convene weekly throughout Los Angeles. Newer waves of immigrants from southeast Asia and elsewhere have developed their own efforts to reconstitute their culture and community, establishing regular weekend events focusing on dance, craft, ritual, and language. In these moments, students are getting schooled in the meanings and responsibilities of cultural and civic citizenship in a modern, increasingly interconnected world.[8]

In many Native American communities, where many languages are critically endangered, similar efforts at linguistic and cultural preservation and rebirth are occurring. The native Hawaiian community, through the development of preschool "nests" and K–12 language immersion schools, strong state support, and assistance from a growing number of active native Hawaiian cultural organizations, has developed model programs that link native Hawaiian language, artistic tradition, history, and language to daily contemporary life. The number of young native Hawaiian speakers is on the rise, at least tripling over the past two decades. Many native cultural organizations and tribes are striving for similar goals with the establishment of language immersion programs.[9] For example, native basketmaking organizations—including the California Indian Basketweavers Association, the Maine Indian Basketmakers Alliance, and the Northwest Indian Basketweavers—have done much to increase visibility and recognition for native basketmakers and have encouraged a new generation of basketmakers to value the craft. But their work is about much more than technique. The organizations have spent equal amounts of time building a community of practice, mentoring younger basketmakers in the deep cultural knowledge surrounding their craft, and working with federal and tribal government to ensure the viability of natural resources. Deep cultural knowledge, creative expression, activism, and community values—these actions and aspirations are inseparable.

Efforts of preservation and reclamation are also about enlivening and recognizing grassroots memory and creativity, contesting and correcting the record of what is worthy of preservation, and presenting the layered meanings of our physical surroundings.

Nor are efforts of preservation or reclamation restricted to issues of cultural or ethnic identity. In New York, City Lore and the Municipal Art Society jointly sponsored Place Matters, a project begun in 1997 that conducts an ongoing citywide survey called the Census of Places that Matter to discover places that offer associations with history, memory, and tradition for all New Yorkers.[10] In doing so, they validate the vernacular memory and the multiple narratives that comprise a community's history and sense of itself. The project, based on fieldwork throughout the city and an open nomination process, identifies places of community and cultural significance and seeks to explore how and why "place" is meaningful to people. Amounting to a grassroots knowledge bank, their online census database, print and virtual maps, and place marker map projects provide information on hundreds of places nominated by New Yorkers. Their Place Matters tool kit provides information for place-based cultural advocacy. Several collaborative projects with neighborhood organizations document the evolving histories and contexts of diverse cultural and art-making communities throughout New York, including the Lower East Side, the Latino South Bronx, and the neighborhood clubs, gathering places, and streetscapes that have nurtured jazz, hip-hop, the labor movement, and much more, some of these places gone and some in continually evolving daily use. In another project Place Matters collaborated with the tenant-activist organization Good Old Lower East Side, the Pratt Center for Community Development, and a coalition of nonprofits on the Lower East Side to help New Yorkers—especially residents and stakeholders on the Lower East Side—in a community-based conversational process to envision development and land usage for an underused swath of land associated with a particularly troubled episode of 1950s-60s urban renewal.

Although the work shares similarities and common cause with much historic preservation work, it is also about enlivening and recognizing grassroots memory and creativity, contesting and correcting the record of what is worthy of preservation, and presenting the layered meanings of our physical surroundings. Again, memory and creativity in service of cultural citizenship.

Ethnography and Fieldwork as Tools for Discovery and Community Engagement

As the above examples suggest, the stories we tell give voice to our dreams, aspirations, hopes, and fears for ourselves, the communities we live in, and the futures we envision for our children. For some artists, such as Anna Deavere Smith, the stories provide actual text that is shaped and adapted to the context of theatrical performance—"enacted oral history," as one theater critic described it. In many community arts projects, artists often work with community members to identify

> *[In] "enacted oral history," personal narratives, oral history, cultural traditions, and ritual often provide the raw material or basis for other related artistic projects and products.*

issues of concern and tell stories that are then developed into diverse artistic projects in a community-based collaborative, dialogic process. Dudley Cocke, Artistic Director of Roadside Theater, describes one component of the process: "The community's own stories and songs become a natural resource for creating drama. Nascent and experienced local playwrights, producers, directors, actors, and designers use this material to make plays. We fill in the gaps in inexperience." [11] The Thousand Kites Project, a national dialogue project about the criminal justice system, developed by Appalshop, is one of the most fully realized examples of this approach. The project draws upon the stories, letters, rants, and poems of prisoners and uses film, theater, radio, and the Internet to explore the criminal justice system and bridge racial, cultural, and geographic divides between stakeholder communities. In essence, personal narratives, oral history, cultural traditions, and ritual often provide the raw material or basis for other related artistic projects and products—a theater or dance performance, a multimedia installation, a radio series—daily life experience remade and reframed as art or performance.

This, I feel, is a critical difference between community arts and folk arts as they are generally practiced, but I think it is one worth noting. While the goals or intent of folk arts and community arts projects are sometimes the same—the presentation or exploration of multiple community narratives—the work is often achieved through different methods and processes. It is truly unfortunate that the two fields rarely collaborate or engage in critical dialogue. It is not simply an illustration of real life or truth being stranger, more real, or more creative than fiction. It may be about larger (and largely artificial) dividing lines of arts and humanities, funder priorities, and the different stances of documentation, creation/fabrication, and interpretation.

Through employing field and ethnographic methods of listening and observation, creating the possibility for multiple narratives and interpretations to be heard and shared is enough.

Another route to engage with communities and individuals is through listening and observation, employing field and ethnographic methods established in folklore, anthropology, and oral history. Some jokingly refer to the techniques as basic "hanging out," but ethnographic methods require sharpened skills of listening, interviewing, and observation. In practice, fieldwork is sometimes characterized as "engaged awareness" and is grounded in the premise that artistic traditions are best understood in context and from the perspectives of artists, cultural practitioners, and community members. In many folk arts projects spearheaded by folklorists or other cultural and media specialists, or conducted by traditional artists and community members, the dialogic or creative discovery process *is* the documentation process. The narratives embedded in daily life—whether casually or artfully uttered—and the people telling them *are* the point. Creating the space or the possibility for

multiple narratives and interpretations to be heard and shared is enough. Acts of creativity and inquiry can be and often are one and the same.

Increasingly, a growing number of individuals and organizations are employing ethnographic methods and the tools of documentation for a range of purposes: in community development and planning processes, for cultural and creative capacity building, and in arenas of education, social justice, and mental health and healing, to name a few.

The Surviving Katrina and Rita Project in Houston (SKRH)—a peer-to-peer documentation project—is the first project in which the survivors of a major disaster have taken the lead in documenting it, focusing on storytelling for personal and public healing. Based at the University of Houston and co-directed by folklorists Carl Lindahl and Pat Jasper, SKRH enabled survivors displaced to Houston receive training and pay to record fellow survivors' storm stories, memories of lost neighborhoods, and ongoing struggles to build new communities in exile.[12]

Surviving Katrina and Rita Project in Houston trainee Natasha Morgan Parker (right) with interviewee Kym McClelland and her daughter Remerica. Photo: Dallas McNamara, 2007

From 2005 to 2009, SKRH held six field-documentation training schools, and survivors conducted over 400 interviews (in four languages), now housed at the University of Houston and the American Folklife Center. The interviews became the foundation for a radio series of short-program features; four exhibitions scripted, recorded, and photographed by survivors; and a special section of the Katrina issue of prestigious African diaspora literary journal *Callaloo*. Six public programs mounted in the Houston area featured live presentations by hurricane survivors. Several project participants co-presented with the coordinators at several regional and national conferences, and Lindahl co-authored articles on narrative and trauma recovery that were published by the American Bar Association and the Department of Health and Human Services, among other venues. The paychecks earned by survivors helped fill an obvious need; their training and documentary experience enhanced their skills and prospects for building new careers in the aftermath of the hurricanes. But the heart of the project is stories: stories told by survivors, to survivors, on the survivors' own terms. While media often portrayed Katrina and Rita survivors as criminals or victims, SKRH enabled both the interviewers and storytellers to tell and shape their own stories. This process had a notably positive effect on survivors' resilience in the face of disaster, a fact that led the United Way of the Texas Gulf Coast to fund SKRH as a behavioral/mental health project.

The Artist Leadership program and Indigenous Geography program, both based at the National Museum of the American Indian, provide similar opportunities for individual artists and community members to conduct their own research and shape their own stories and analytic capacity. Their Artist Leadership program provides support for native artists to work with the museum's collections, visit art galleries, and receive professional development assistance. The program also supports dialogue and presentation opportunities for artists to share knowledge when they return to their homes with community documentation and individual research.[13] The Indigenous Geography program provides support to selected native communities in North and South America for web-based bilingual projects that enable community teams to conduct original video, audio, and photographic documentation of the environmental, geographic, spiritual, and cultural origins and dimensions of their communities from their perspectives and in their terms.

Dialogue and Cultural Capacity: Four Examples

"Traditions that come out of engagement with systems of oppression can make and cultivate alternative spaces: places and times to breathe and be and collectively imagine."[14] Debora Kodish, Executive Director, Philadelphia Folklore Project

Capacity building—you know it when you see it, right? For years, there has been a standard menu of capacity-building strategies in the arts: conducting professional development workshops and providing consultants to assist organizations in the operational capacities of their work, whether it be board and leadership development, strategic planning, or fiscal management. We may not normally consider dialogue and conversation as capacity building, but they are essential building blocks for cultural capacity building, the kind that builds a sense of confidence, the kind that enables the individual to recognize him- or herself in the collective struggles of others, the kind that can ground true social change. In many instances, however, the strengthening and fortification of base resources is a critical step in working toward social change, creating the capacity to fully and authentically engage with others and our surroundings. A diverse range of examples stressing dialogue, understanding, and sharpened critical skills follow.

Dialogue and conversation are essential building blocks for cultural capacity building, the kind that can ground true social change.

The Folk Arts Cultural Treasures Charter School. In 2005, Asian Arts United (AAU) and the Philadelphia Folklore Project (PFP) drew on decades of education, social-justice activism education, and a shared commitment to cultural equity to found the Folk Arts–Cultural Treasures Charter School (FACTS) in Chinatown North, a tuition-free public K–8 charter school that now serves over 450 students from a cross section of Philadelphia neighborhoods. While the school offers a core curriculum of English/language arts, math, science, and arts, the folk arts are central to the curriculum, as the name suggests. The

school sees cultural citizenship and dialogue as lifelong practice and process and strives to produce students who "will have confidence and respect for themselves as well as their neighbors and be ready to participate in our democracy as engaged and responsible people." For the founders and current staff, folk arts (whether performing, visual, or narrative arts) is a logical vehicle for this vision. As their mission statement acknowledges, "We focus on folk arts because they represent collective action and shared values. The use of folk arts embeds into the life and culture of the school the very ideals which are most meaningful to the communities themselves. Just as children need to be physically healthy, they also need to be culturally healthy." Folk arts serve as vehicles to bridge children to elders, school to community, and school community members to each other. The school employs team teaching and learning, and students regularly engage with a range of traditional artists throughout the year.

Losang Samten, former Tibetan monk and National Heritage Award winner, dismantles a sand mandala with FACTS students. Photo: Kathy Shimizu/ Philadelphia Folklore Project, 2007

For AAU and PFP, FACTS represents a commitment to place-based activism, an effort to change the fundamental realities of young peoples' lives by creating a school and school culture that models (and builds) a caring and healthy community. As PFP Executive Director Debora Kodish remarked, "We nurture compassion, commitment and social consciousness by giving young people meaningful opportunities to practice and participate in both folk arts and in addressing the needs of our communities. We do this in the face of predatory development and anti-Asian and anti-immigrant violence." The only public institution in Philadelphia's Chinatown, FACTS is a place where students learn together how to take action.

ACTA Cultural Equity Dialogues and Roundtable Series. The Alliance for California Traditional Arts (ACTA), like the Philadelphia Folklore Project, increasingly see themselves as facilitating and brokering conversation, opportunity, and access to resources between and among traditional artists, cultural communities, funders, and other resource providers. Founded in 1997 in Fresno, California (with satellite offices in San Francisco and, in 2011, Los Angeles), they offer a menu of programs commonly found in state folk arts programs—project grants, apprenticeship programs, and professional development

support. Beginning in 2008, however, they have also begun coordinating a series of peer-to-peer round-table conversations in San Francisco for traditional artists and cultural activists, in collaboration with local organizations, creating intimate salon-like settings (in addition to skills-based workshops) for creative and intellectual exchange. For artists and organizations who often work in isolation within their own cultural communities and under the radar of mainstream funders, the informal gatherings provide space for collective sharing and intercultural recognition, and the focus is determined by the artists themselves. Conversation topics over the past few years have included the political nature of folk arts, immigration, ethnic and mainstream media, and faith-based traditions, in addition to the nuts-and-bolts topics of fundraising, portfolio development, and other issues.

A more recent Los Angeles event, the Cultural Equity Dialogues, also brought together traditional artists, cultural activists, arts funders, and community leaders to explore and define dimensions of cultural equity such as artistic marginalization, sustainability, creating “first voice” space in mainstream media, and leadership. An interactive online series of conversation excerpts and written articles based on the dialogues have followed on ACTA’s website, providing an opportunity for more inclusive commentary beyond the actual event.

Immigration Sites of Conscience is a regional network of the International Coalition of Sites of Conscience, involving 27 museums serving immigrant communities and/or presenting immigrant history across the United States and Europe; it includes organizations such as the Japanese American National Museum, the Lower East Side Tenement Museum, the Jane Addams–Hull House Museum, and the Arab American National Museum.[15] Established in 2008, the network is committed to engaging the public in a new conversation about immigration, and many network members have been recognized nationally for their innovative work in engaging multiple communities and in addressing contemporary issues of social change. Network members combine historical materials, oral history documentation, and public conversations with traditional and contemporary arts exhibits and programs to focus on relevant community immigration issues. Ethnographic and oral-history documentation methods are common tools for engagement, and the arts are fully incorporated as part of a broader cultural rendering of community life. Two of the members—the Levine Museum of the New South in Charlotte, North Carolina, and the Wing Luke Museum in Seattle—are recipients of the National Museum Service Award presented by the Institute of Museum and Library Services.

While most of the network members are museums, one member—**The Chicago Cultural Alliance**—is a consortium of Chicago's ethnic museums, cultural centers, and historical societies, whose mission is to effect social change and public understanding of cultural diversity through first-voice perspectives. Founded in 2007 with collaborative assistance from the Field Museum, the 27-member alliance is developing its collective voice and

presence in establishing relationships of parity and equity with larger cultural institutions, universities, schools, businesses, and government agencies in Chicago, a city that is often called a city of neighborhoods. In 2009 the members approved a Civic Engagement model to guide their programs, a model that stresses dialogue sessions and public panel sessions with member communities, focusing on issues of contemporary significance such as immigration, health care, and environmental sustainability. The alliance offers a full range of capacity-building services for member organizations, including an emphasis on conservation and collections to ensure that members' collections, which tell the multiple stories of Chicago, remain viable and accessible to the public.

CONCLUSION: LITTLE THINGS WRIT LARGE

Nearly a decade ago, I attended a Neighborhood Funders Group (NFG) conference that was exhilarating and frustrating. For someone like me, who works and thinks about the relationship of arts and culture to community life in a second-nature kind of way, it was exhilarating to be around nonprofits and funders who understood the social and political complexities of communities, yet frustrating to realize that arts and culture were not seriously considered as integral dimensions of their work. Sure, they were well-versed in strategies confronting institutionalized racism and discrimination of all kinds, but artistic expression was reserved for guest speakers and special presentations—parenthetical pauses, off to the side. In the course of talking with one community organizer about the arts and culture of immigrant communities where he worked, he enthusiastically described the presentation of ethnic dance groups at special civic events and board meetings where staff and board members joined in singing songs from Pete Seeger, Bob Dylan, Joan Baez, and others. Nostalgia at best, condescending gestures of marginalization at worst. Like others, he missed the point. In 2011, the theme of NFG's conference will be "Advancing Community Power through Culture, Equity, and Justice." Some things *do* change.

> The folk arts remind us that it is the little things, the cultural particulars, the specificity of adaptive response, that can enable a fully realized sense of cultural citizenship.

We come full circle, thinking about that "capital-D dialogue with capital-P politics with capital-A artists." While songs like "We Shall Overcome" and many others may seem like protest songs writ large—artifacts from another time that have achieved a hallowed status for some—their undeniable power in propelling and igniting the 1960s civil rights movement stems in part from their commonplace existence and everyday connection to the black church, black gospel music, and black cultural experience, forming a deep reservoir of traditional artistic response and cultural strategies for people to draw upon, adapt, remix,

and make anew to address current circumstances. In fact, “We Shall Overcome” was itself adapted and “re-visioned” to address new situations. The folk arts simply remind us that these moments of collective transcendence often draw their power from these reservoirs of lived artistic response. The folk arts remind us that it is the little things, the cultural particulars, the specificity of adaptive response, that can enable a fully realized sense of cultural citizenship. As anthropologist Clifford Geertz once wrote, “The universal is in the particular.”[16]

We see this same spirit today embodied in Eugene Rodriguez, executive director of Los Cenzontles Mexican Arts Center in Richmond, California, and the work of the Center’s performing group Los Cenzontles. Last spring, in response to the passage of Arizona’s anti-immigrant law, Rodriguez and Los Cenzontles recorded a *corrido*, the “Ballad of Arizona: Estado de Verguenza” (“State of Shame”) in the time-honored tradition of *corridos* (ballads) in Mexican and Mexican American culture as contemporary social and political commentary. Within weeks of the law’s passage, the group had recorded the song and made a video directed by filmmakers Les Blank and Maureen Gosling for YouTube. We see the same spirit in the revolutions in Tunisia and Egypt, where social media, rap music, traditional chanting, and improvisational music in Tahrir Square influenced and informed public discourse, helping to propel a nation to revolutionary action. Little things writ very, very large.

For a field as diverse and decentralized as the folk and traditional arts, the strategies employed in service of social-change activity are varied. They emanate from many quarters, from professionally run organizations to grassroots ad hoc situational efforts, as it should be. Concentric, sometimes overlapping, circles of activity. Some of the projects cited in this essay, particularly involving immigration, approach change through a social, or perhaps more accurately, a cultural justice lens—one that focuses on education and intergenerational learning. In other instances, we have seen a focus on health, well-being, and trauma, as in the case of the Surviving Katrina and Rita project. In all of them, however, there is an emphasis on cultural capacity building—building and validating cultural awareness and knowledge, connecting individuals to communities and communities to each other in dialogue, enabling them to voice their own concerns and to see their concerns expressed more broadly. It’s hard work but a change is gonna come. I know it in my bones.

Betsy Peterson is an independent consultant with over two decades of experience, specializing in program planning, design, and evaluation; cultural research; nonprofit fundraising and grantmaking; and organizational development. Prior to establishing an independent consulting practice, Peterson served as executive director and program director for the Fund for Folk Culture from 1998 to 2009. Among other previously held positions, Peterson was a co-founder of and program coordinator for Texas Folklife Resources and director of the Traditional Arts Program at the New England Foundation for the Arts. Her past clients include The Wallace Foundation, the Southern Arts Federation, the Mid Atlantic Arts Foundation, Carnegie Hall, The Ford Foundation, and the National Endowment for the Arts, for whom she wrote, edited, and compiled *The Changing Faces of Tradition: A Report on the Folk and Traditional Arts in the United States*, published in 1996. Peterson has consulted with numerous public and private philanthropic organizations on the development of grantmaking programs for the folk and traditional arts, and she has developed a wide range of programs and services, with an emphasis on traditional performing arts and artists. Peterson holds a BA in English from the University of Redlands and a Ph.D. in folklore from Indiana University.

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Organizations Mentioned or Cited

Alliance for California Traditional Arts, Fresno and San Francisco, California (www.actaonline.org)
Asian Americans United, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania (www.aau.org)
California Indian Basketweavers Association, Woodland, California (www.ciba.org)
Chicago Cultural Alliance, Chicago, Illinois (www.chicagoculturalalliance.org)
City Lore, New York City, New York (www.citylore.org)
Folk Arts–Cultural Treasures Charter School, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania (www.factschool.org)
Immigration Sites of Conscience Network (www.sitesofconscience.org).
Levine Museum of the New South (http://www.museumofthenewsouth.org/)
Los Cenzontles Mexican Arts Center, Richmond, California (www.loscenzontles.com)
Maine Indian Basketmakers Alliance, Old Town, Maine (www.maineindianbasketmakers.org)
National Museum of the American Indian , Outreach and Community Programs, Washington, DC (http://www.nmai.si.edu/subpage.cfm?subpage=collaboration&second=landing)
Northwest Native American Basketweavers Association, Covington, Washington (www.nnaba.org)
Philadelphia Folklore Project, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania (www.folkloreproject.org)
Place Matters, New York City, New York (www.placematters.net)
Surviving Katrina and Rita in Houston (A Survivor-Centered Storytelling and Documentation Project), Houston, Texas (http://www.katrinaandrita.org/)
Wing Luke Museum of the Asian Pacific American Experience, Seattle, Washington http://www.wingluke.org/home.htm

Endnotes

[1] Hannerz, Ulf. *Transnational Connections*. Routledge, 1996.
[2] Rosaldo, Renato. 1994. "Cultural Citizenship and Educational Democracy." *Cultural Anthropology, 9(3):* 402–411.
[3] See Wali, Alaka, Rebecca Severson and Mario Longoni. *Informal Arts: Finding Cohesion, Capacity and Other Cultural Benefits in Unexpected Places.* Chicago: Center for Arts Policy and Columbia College, 2002; and Jackson, Maria-Rosario, Florence Kabwasa and Joaquin Herranz. *Cultural Vitality in Communities: Interpretation and Indicators*. Urban Institute, 2006. Commissioned by the Rockefeller Foundation.
[4] Alvarez, Maribel. *There's Nothing Informal about It: Participatory Arts within the Cultural Ecology*. San Jose, CA: Cultural Initiatives Silicon Valley, 2005. Also, Wali, *The Informal Arts*.
[5] See Leadbeater, Charles and Paul Miller. *The Pro-Am Revolution*. London: Demos, 2004. Many others have noted this phenomena but this is one of the first and most fully articulated discussions.
[6] Ivey, Bill. 2008. *Arts Inc.: How Greed and Neglect Have Destroyed Our Cultural Rights*. Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press. p. 23.
[7] Friedman, Thomas. 1999. *The Lexus and the Olive Tree*. p. 27.
[8] One recent article that talks about the opportunities for funders interested in supporting cultural infrastructure in immigrant communities is Stern, Mark J., Susan Seifert, and Domenic Vitiello, "Migrants, Communities, and Culture." Philadelphia: Social Impact of the Arts Project, University of Pennsylvania and The Reinvestment Fund, 2008. 12 pp. Commissioned by The Rockefeller Fund. Also check out "The Art of Community," a publication of the Institute for Cultural Partnerships (ICP) and "Grantmakers Concerned with Immigrants and Refugees (GCIR)." Harrisburg: ICP, 2006. 32 pp. The monograph contains a wealth of information and recommendations for ways in which funding partners can engage with immigrant communities. The monograph was a part of the ongoing work of ICP (which no longer exists—RIP) and part of a larger GCIR project Building Cultural Bridges).
[9] Pease-Pretty on Top, Janine. *Native American Language Immersion: Innovative Native Education for Children and Families*. American Indian College Fund. Supported by the Kellogg Foundation. n.d. pp. 62–77.
[10] See www.placematters.net for more information about the organization's programs and services. Several other initiatives employ the term as well: whereplacematters.org and placematters.org.
[11] Cocke, Dudley. "Class and the Performing Arts." http://www.roadside.org/ClassAndPerformingArts.html Posted October 11, 2008. Accessed April 20, 2011.
[12] Comparing the SKRH project and "Uprooted: The Katrina Project" would provide a great opportunity to compare and contrast processes and methodologies of engagement in folk arts and community arts.
[13] During my time as executive director at the Fund for Folk Culture, the FFC's Artist Support Program offered small project-oriented grants to individual artists from 2005–08, provided similar opportunities for many traditional artists to conduct their own research, interviews, and documentation with other

artists or at libraries and museums to enhance their own cultural knowledge and understanding of their work, traditions, and communities. A few of the artists who pursued such projects included California-based Roma dancer and cultural activist Sani Rafati; Bay Area resident and Liberian native Naomi Diouf, dancer and artistic director of the Diamano Coura; and Makah basketweaver Melissa Peterson (Neah Bay, Washington).
[14] Kodish, Debora. “Envisioning Folklore Activism.” *Journal of American Folklore* 124 (2011): p 39. I also want to thank Debora Kodish for her comments to earlier drafts of this paper, and for her good thinking and pioneering work with the Philadelphia Folklore Project.
[15] For a full list of organizations participating in the Immigration Sites of Conscience network, go to http://www.sitesofconscience.org/resources/networks/immigration/en/.
[16] Geertz, Clifford. *The Interpretation of Cultures*. Basic Books, 1973.