

Putting a Mirror to People's Lives

Cultural Brokerage, Folklore, and Multiculturalism

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In the United States, folklorists are entering the public sector. With the advent of multicultural programs in education and cultural politics, so-called public folklorists are increasingly assuming a new role in cultural brokerage, mediating the relationship between immigrant cultures and the wider public. This paper contends that rather than reflecting cultures "as in a mirror", public folklore entails representational practices that invent cultural otherness.

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Today, immigration is making postindustrial Western societies more culturally diverse than ever. Big cities are emerging as culturally vibrant, but socially polarized catalysts of globalization. In global cities,¹ immigrant cultures and the immigration experience itself have become topics of cultural politics and commodities in cultural markets. In New York City, for instance, a plethora of cultural institutions function as showcases for the folk cultures of ethnic minorities who have made this city their new home. Since the mid-eighties, there has been a marked increase in the number of not-for-profit organizations in New York City who support the cultural practices of immigrants. They attempt to bring immigrants' cultural creativity to public attention, and try to preserve cultural establishments and landmarks of immigrant cultures. They do so by creating exhibits, by organizing performances and concerts, by working closely with masters of traditional arts, by creating archives and documentations, videos and radio broadcasts, festivals and parades.

Many of the experts working in these institutions have received academic training as folklorists. They call themselves public sector folklorists, in order to contrast their endeavours with those of academic folklore. In the political framework of multiculturalism,

American folklorists succeed in carving out professional roles for themselves. They are making foreign cultural expressions accessible to American audiences and, in urban cultural politics, are closing the cultural gap between newcomers and those residents of the city who have been here a while. In cooperation with anthropologists, ethnomusicologists and social historians also working in this field, folklorists act as cultural brokers mediating the relationship between immigrant cultures and a wider cultural market.

In 1992 und 1993, I conducted fieldwork among public sector folklorists – "public folklorists" for short – in New York City. My ethnography of ethnographers focussed on projects and programs that represent the cultures of immigrants as well as the culture of immigration.² In New York, the institutional landscape of promoting cultural diversity ranges from large institutions of national importance like the *Ellis Island Immigration Museum* to small localized establishments like the *Lower East Side Tenement Museum*. On Ellis Island, a former government facility for the processing of immigrants has been transformed into a multimillion dollar exhibition, located in the original rooms where the new arrivals were subjected to scrutiny by immigration officers. The *Lower East Side Tene-*

ment Museum is rebuilding a turn-of-the-century immigrants' dwelling, aiming to fill it with museum pieces as well as with trained actors who will replicate the everyday life of past immigrant populations. Other institutions, such as the *World Music Institute* or the *Ethnic Folk Arts Center*, have specialized in featuring immigrant music and dance. A prominent institution called *City Lore* – The New York Center for Urban Folk Culture – is committed to presenting and preserving the "living heritage" and the diversity of New York neighborhood and community life: "Just as this city is one of the so-called 'high culture' centers of the world, so it is one of the richest and most diverse centers of traditional folk culture – New York City may well boast the most diverse aggregate of ethnic groups in the world. This diversity is a source of both cultural wealth and cultural conflict; *City Lore* draws on the folk culture of the city to tap this wealth and to help ease the conflicts that so often develop out of cultural ignorance" (Pearson 1992, 1). *City Lore* is pursuing this goal by various activities in the fields of presentation – festivals, exhibitions, radio broadcasts –, interpretation – films and art projects –, documentation, and education. Products of *City Lore*'s work range from a book on children's games on city streets to an exhibition of ethnic social clubs in New York, immigrant voluntary associations that often meet in disused stores on street level for lack of other meeting places.

Most of these projects and institutions probably would not exist without public grants from the *Folk Arts Program* of the *New York State Council on the Arts*. The *Council on the Arts*, New York State's agency for funding the arts and cultural programs all over the state, has folk arts as a special funding category side by side with more established categories as classical music and ballet. This is a result of folklorists' lobbying political support for the preservation of traditional, folk and minority cultures. It also speaks to the growing attention and financial support for cultural conservation on the national level in the United States, such as evidenced in the creation of a Folk Arts Program in the National Endowment for the Arts in 1974. All of these devel-

opments – the growth of public institutions that showcase folk cultural expressions, the inclusion of folk arts in the state funding for cultural programs, and the increasing professionalization of folklorists who work outside the traditional fields of academic folklore – reflect the emergence of public folklore as an autonomous branch of folklore practice that is considered equal to the university-based folklore scholarship. In the eighties and nineties, folklore in the public sector is superseding the antagonism of pure versus applied folklore by taking up again where New Deal folklore programs and the Federal Writers' Project had left off (Hirsch 1988).

American public folklore in many ways does not differ much from its European counterparts, both contemporary and historical. Not only as an applied science, but just the same within the academy, folklore has always been a discipline of an essentially applied character, acting as a mediator of "tensions between national identity and state building" (Kirshenblatt-Gimblett 1988:143). Specific to public folklore in America, however, is its emphasis on cultural pluralism. Public folklore is committed to maintaining cultural diversity, defending it against homogenizing influences of any kind. Roger Abrahams has pointed out that at the inception of folklore as a discipline in the United States, "the relation between indigenous vernacular language and lore, on the one hand, and the nation-state, on the other, was far from fully established" (Abrahams 1992:250), contrary to the situation in Europe. In this tradition,³ public folklore today perceives as its obligation the facilitation of cultural dialogues between recent arrivals in American society and the more established segments of the population. It aims to make visible the traditions of immigrants and ethnic minorities and to create appreciation and understanding for cultural differences within American society. It is of course no coincidence that public folklore comes to prominence at a time when multiculturalism is being promoted in American society. Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett critically noted in her presidential address at the 1992 American Folklore Society meeting that folklorists are in the business of

producing multiculturalism.⁴ Folklorists do not merely profit from the new political support for multicultural programs, but are actively involved in constructing and inventing cultural otherness.

When I asked one of the practitioners in New York's "multiculturalism business" about her interpretation of the role of public folklorists in society, she said, "Putting a mirror to people's lives, and saying: what you are doing is important, is of cultural value". Her response was fairly typical; I encountered similar descriptions of folklorists' practice in many of my interviews with museums curators, ethnographers, grant makers, exhibit designers, photographers, and artists involved in the folklorist enterprise. What public sector folklorists do – according to their self-image – is that they validate other people's everyday lives as valuable cultural expressions. By "mirroring", folklorists transform the patterns and rhythms of these lives into something that can be looked at and listened to in the much larger arenas of education and entertainment – that is, in a concert hall, in a museum, on the movie screen or on television.

"Putting a mirror to people's lives" is a widespread, but highly questionable conceptualization of the kind of representational work that folklorists are doing when they create exhibitions, write monographs, present folk musicians on stage, or assemble archival documentations. The metaphor of "mirroring" hides several problematic issues in folklorists's practice. These I intend to make visible by asking – and answering – a series of questions.

First: Who is holding the mirror? Usually the folklorist is. The separation between who is mirrored and who has the privilege of holding the mirror is increasingly surmounted by minority scholars and artists who themselves take charge of cultural productions. In most cases, however, it is still a matter of advocacy rather than of self-representation of cultural groups, that is, of operating from a position outside rather than inside the cultural context that is being represented. Folklorists in the public sector often claim to occupy a unique in-between-position, belonging neither to the cultural groups they present nor to the audi-

ence, but imagining themselves to be a link, a bridge between the two.

Second: How does the mirror image come about? The notion of representation that employs the metaphor of the mirror is more than just simplistic. It is wrong. Folklore does not function as a mirror that merely replicates and never distorts. Even though the folklorist stays invisible behind the mirror, he or she nevertheless takes an active role in constructing the images of cultural otherness it presents. Images resulting from representational work are never unmediated. Also one has to take into consideration that whenever public folklorists showcase cultural traditions, they do so by operating within the confines of specific genres of representing culture, such as museum exhibits, on-stage performance presentations, documentary films, or guided tours. As recent work in critical anthropology and ethnographic writing has shown, power and history work through such cultural productions in ways their authors or producers cannot fully control (Clifford 1986:7).

Third: What does the mirror show? Obviously, the mirror does not show everything. It is always angled as to reflect certain things and to deflect others. What the folkloric mirror shows the spectator's gaze is the "traditional", the "authentic", and the culturally "pure". Conventional paradigms of folk culture, community, and ethnicity prevail in public folklore practice. Among public folklorists, the term *community*, infusing that bounded cultural grouping with notions of belongingness and identity, largely is taken as a given not requiring explanation or inquiry. The funding guidelines of folk arts grant makers speak of a sharedness of the way of life that produces traditional cultural expressions maintained and passed on by a group – whose boundedness and homogeneity remains largely unquestioned. Contemporary findings of critical folklore and anthropology that point to a heterogeneity of cultural experience within groups claim that cultural identities are processual rather than stable, emergent rather than fixed. These do not find recognition in public folklore. The notion of the sharedness of culture remains a guiding principle for much

of the cultural work representing immigrant culture, and public folklorists remain to be most concerned with salvaging “authentic” expressions of immigrant or minority cultures while ignoring what they consider “inauthentic”. As a consequence, many immigrant artists criticize Public Folklore’s disregard of the ongoing processuality of culture in their communities. One immigrant musician I encountered in the course of my fieldwork plays a traditional instrument and sings in his native language. His productions, however, are neither traditional enough for public folklore funding nor commercial enough for market-oriented recording companies and promoters. He angrily attacked what he felt is a “colonial attitude” that tries to hold his group’s culture in a position of fixedness in time and space, denying development and change. This brings us to our final question.

Fourth: Why are public folklorists today putting their disciplinary “mirrors” to immigrants’ lives? The majority of public folklore projects and programs in New York are engaged in sophisticated folklorizations of immigrants’ cultural practices. The expressions they select for preservation and presentation are usually aesthetically pleasing, academically challenging, and also sufficiently foreign to provide an exotic thrill. Music and dance are selected for their vibrancy and expressiveness; bits and pieces of everyday lives are shown for their apparent modesty, simplicity, and authenticity, contrasting nicely with the everyday lives of average Americans in the 1990s.

The work of many public folklorists indeed seems driven by a feeling that recent transformations of American society are threatening people’s well-being. One of the folklorists interviewed in the course of my research claimed that “what we do as public folklorists is a reaction against postmodernity”. He and his colleagues perceive that recent processes of social change are cutting people from their roots, fragmenting their lives, and severing their connections to stable contexts such as communities. Nevertheless, “people still want to feel rooted and connected and interpersonal”. And this is where the cultural productions of public folklore come in to tell people

that rootedness is still possible, even though endangered, and that certain segments of society, especially immigrant groups, are pockets of rootedness, connectedness, and intact interpersonal relations. One impetus for preserving and presenting immigrant and ethnic cultures, then, seems to be the desire of mainstream America for regaining authenticity and immediacy in its social relations, a desire that is fueled by and gains in urgency along with the postmodern transformations of society.

By emphasizing what is colorful, vibrant and refreshingly simple about immigrant cultures, public folklore is feeding into what anthropologist Fred Myers⁶ recently has called “the difference machine”, the process of commodifying the exotic, the culturally other for consumption. Obviously, a deep ambivalence arises out of trying to stem the tide of postmodernity by holding on to the very modern paradigm of cultural loss and folkloric rescue. By attempting to stave off postmodernity, public folklore is becoming a functional and functioning element of the postmodern process, a handmaiden to its very commodification of culture and to the appropriation and colonization of the vernacular that is so characteristic of the contemporary politics of culture.

In conclusion, however, I would predict that public folklore will find it increasingly difficult to project its notions of culture, tradition, and identity onto the everyday life practices and discourses of minorities in a city like New York. For one, traditionality seems to acquire a different meaning under conditions of postmodernity that even those who operate with older paradigms cannot fully escape. Today, traditionality’s referent is no longer continuity, but instead, rupture and discontinuity. The people who are represented as “folk” are not among the last to acknowledge that. *Casitas* – “little houses” – are a type of Puerto Rican hand-made vernacular architecture constructed on empty lots in New York City’s *latino* neighborhoods. Usually, a group of men will get together to form a casita club, to build a small wooden house and to lay out a small garden. The casita serves as a meeting place after work and on weekends; “traditional” music and “traditional” food are foci of sociability.

Casitas are a good example for the process in which marginal urban populations actively use traditionality as a competitive resource. As the president of one casita club in New York's South Bronx explained to me in an interview, his casita club's efforts at upholding "tradition" in the Bronx are primarily a response to the living conditions in their drug-infested low income neighborhood of the South Bronx. Their decision to build a casita some years ago was a strategic choice that has more to do with where and how they live in New York than with continuing a tradition they imported from Puerto Rico. City government and political elites are generally supportive of groups that uphold traditional values like "family" and "community"; the casita club attempts to bank on that support. With the casita people, "tradition" is but one possible trope of cultural strategizing. Under different conditions, they may have opted for "modernization" instead. The identity this type of cultural strategizing generates is optional: It is not even for everyone who is Puerto Rican and lives in the South Bronx. The identity of being a casita club member is also provisional: there is no telling for how long it will offer stability, both to the group and to the individual. Tradition is no longer a place that any of these men who have built a casita together can go back to. But not merely because in Puerto Rico, casita building is a thing of the past. Rather, as James Clifford is claiming, "there is no going back, no essence to redeem" (Clifford 1988:4).

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Notes

1. The term "global city" was coined by economists and sociologists to denote major cities that take a leading role in global economic and social transformations (see Sassen 1991). Ulf Hannerz has introduced the term "world city" into anthropological discourse, applying it to cities that function as catalysts in global cultural processes (see Hannerz 1993).
2. From October 1992 to March 1993, I was affiliated as a visiting scholar to the Department of Performance Studies, New York University, New York. My research was funded by the American Council of Learned Societies in its American Studies Fellowship Program.
3. Among historians of folklore scholarship, there is an ongoing dispute about whether public folklore shares the same romanticist roots as nationalism – suggested by folklorists' endorsement of such motifs as "discovering the common experience of becoming an American" – or whether, to the contrary, public folklore's promoting an awareness of diversity within American society may stem nationalist impulses (Hirsch 1988; Abrahams 1992).
4. Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett's Keynote Address at the 1992 American Folklore Society's Annual Meeting in Jacksonville, Florida, was titled "Bones of Contention, Bodies of Knowledge: Folklore's Crisis".
5. In a lecture in Prof. Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett's seminar "Tourist Productions", Department for Performance Studies, New York University, on February 25, 1993.