

Cassie Mancer
2006

Giving Voice: Issues in the Exhibition of Oral Narratives

Introduction

I did ethnographic fieldwork in Southern Maryland for my senior thesis project as an undergraduate student, studying how the role of the waterman's wife had changed in the past thirty years with the rise of women's liberation, the increased numbers of women working outside the home, and the decreasing crab and oyster yields of the Chesapeake Bay. I struggled with the problem of how best to portray these women and their stories. From the ethnographic literature I read, I knew I wanted to make my presence as "transparent" as possible. I didn't want my "voice" to overshadow the voices of the women I had interviewed. So I made an audio presentation featuring the interviews, formed to a script not unlike the presentations on National Public Radio. My mentors, with their own folklore projects, had their own style and ethics when it came to interviews and presentation—I thought that their insertion of narration, sound effects, and catchy instrumental music bordered on the unethical.

When it came time for the departmental presentations, I was pretty proud of myself; mine was the only project that actually featured the real voices of the people I interviewed sharing their real opinions, and they were not buried in the depths of some over-theoretical forty-page paper. When the discussion portion rolled around I was ready for anything—defending this, citing that, showing how I wanted to keep the results of my research accessible to the community I had studied—and I thought things were going really well. And then the departmental wunderkind asked if, with the editing and all, the presentation could really be considered "authentic". I had deleted background noise and sounds, rearranged words, and even transposed bits of conversation in order to get my final product. My confidence shattered—I realized he had a point. Although it did feature a recording of the actual performance of the interview, in the end the way I had presented my ethnography was really no different from anybody else [Mancer 2004:1].

The story of the presentation (or exhibition) of my "Saint Mary's Project" helps to illuminate some of the problems that museum curators must consider when proposing the exhibition of oral narratives: how to address the issue of "authenticity", the ethics of representation, and the mode of presentation. There is another issue in the exhibition of oral narrative in museums that is not so easily illustrated in my narrative, yet plays a very important role: the issue of power in the interview (and exhibition) context. I will address these issues in this paper; as a field report I will focus on the Smithsonian Institution's annual Folklife Festival. Although not a stone-and-steel "museum", for two weeks every year, the National Mall in Washington, DC is turned into an open-air exhibition of traditional cultures and living people. Exhibiting the traditional skills and

oral narratives of the “participants” in the Festival raises the same questions as if the exhibition were taking place within any of the Smithsonian’s other exhibition venues.

Authenticity

The exhibition has been theorized as a highly contested “cultural artifact” in which “the producer of the exhibition, the content [and the objects themselves], and the audience” all play a role [Gurian 1991:178]. The public view of objects in museums remains confident in the object’s “veracity”, since “...a tangible relic seems *ipso facto* real” [Loewenthal 1985 in Crew and Sims 1991:162]. However, the “authentic” object [Crew and Sims 1991:159-160] has “multiple authentic voices” that are open to multiple interpretations. This has proved problematic for museums, since authenticity is, as Crew and Sims [1991:162] put it “about authority.” The scholars who produce the exhibition are invested with authority created by an expectation the audience has of a “social contract between the audience and the museum, a socially agreed-upon reality” where the museum interprets the multiple voices faithfully [Crew and Sims 1991:163].

Recent trends in historical scholarship indicate a movement toward using oral narratives/histories as historical evidence [Henson and Schorzman 1991; Crew and Sims 1991:163-164; Chew 2002]. Oral narratives have gained greater respect in historical research because of an increasing emphasis on “social history” [Henson and Schorzman 1991; Crew and Sims 1991]. Scholars have become interested in the stories of everyday people; people who, until recently, were left out of history texts [Crew and Sims 1991:163-164]. Because of the lack of traditional textual sources addressing these individuals, scholars began to utilize new techniques of study, becoming increasingly interested in primary sources such as probate documents, diaries, and material culture

[Crew and Sims 1991:164]. These new horizons also included an increased interest in oral narratives. The move toward social history and the use of oral narrative, which is in itself an attempt to create a more “authentic” picture of history, has been reflected in exhibitions based on this scholarship [Jones 1994; Chew 2002].

What is the relationship between “authenticity” and an oral narrative? The traditional measure of the “authenticity” of an oral narrative has been the “reliability and validity” of its source. “Reliability” is defined as “the internal consistency of the testimony of the interviewee,” while “validity” is defined as “the consistency of the testimony with other types of evidence,” relying on “documents, other interviews, or contemporary accounts” [Henson and Schorzman 1991:625]. However, the concept of authenticity is beginning to be considered as an arena for the negotiation of power and cultural identity—the traditional interpretation reinforces the culturally institutionalized power of the scholar [Briggs 1993; Muana 1998]. Influenced by a similar debate taking place in the anthropological field [Henson and Schorzman 1991:622], historians have begun to adopt a more reflexive perspective in their consideration of “authenticity.”

There has been much scholarly interest in the negotiation of power between the scholar and the performer that takes place within an interview or performance context. Numerous factors support the view that the scholar is placed in a powerful position—his support by various cultural institutions, the discourse of scholarship, and his recognized status as “scholar” [Kirshenblatt-Gimblett 1998:143]. The scholar may also “[establish] hegemony over...discourse by choosing and assembling what in his or her estimation constitutes his/her arbitrary methodological mandate” [Muana 1998:51]. Vocabulary in use within the discipline, such as “participant-observer” [a euphemism for the

scholar/interviewer], is an effort to minimize the appearance of power the scholar has “to objectify, represent, and interpret the discourse of a ‘foreign’ community” [Muana 1998:51]. The most powerful tool the scholar holds is his ability to represent interviewees and performers. He holds the power of “contextualization”, the ability to define “interviewees and the texts they produce as exemplars...of a tradition, genre, community, or social group” [Briggs 1993:408].

Context, Performance Theory, and Identity

Discussions of performance theory have favored a context-based approach that takes a holistic view of the act of performance. “Performance is situated in a context” [Hymes 1975:13]—factors creating that context include the physical setting and environment and the audience/participants in that performance. It is from this “three-dimensional context” [Dorson 1972:45] that the performance emerges. There has been much discussion of the “emergent quality” [Bauman 1975:302; Hymes 1975] of performance. This quality “resides in the interplay between communicative resources, individual competence, and the goals of the participants, within the context of particular situations” [Bauman 1975:302].

Performers and interviewees maintain a degree of agency, even when their performances are recontextualized into scholarly discourse; performance is made up of “ongoing negotiations” of identity [Muana 1998:42]. Although “scholars may shape not only how these voices will speak...but also what they will say” [Briggs 1993:419], the performer chooses what to share. A number of factors influence the performer’s choice, including a “perceived responsibility” to the audience and any prior knowledge the performer might

have of “[the scholar’s] research interests, [and] recognition of the linguistic, social, and cultural limits to [the researcher’s] interpretive abilities” [Briggs 1993:406].

Mode of Presentation

Scholars within the museum have yet another choice to make, when we are deciding what technology will be used as the mode of collection and presentation of the oral narrative in the museum context. Will textual transcription suffice, or should we incorporate audio or video recordings into the exhibit design? Since the transmission of oral narrative “has historically been defined over and against communication technologies as *oral*—it is said to precede and to be something other than—print or sound recording” [Kirshenblatt-Gimblett 1995:70], we should recognize that text and even audio recordings will not give the same impression or experience to the audience. The nature of oral transmission is the performance, which at the very least should be presented in a video format to give a better impression of the context in which the oral narrative was performed.

Levin [in Lord 1960:xiii] explains that many Western cultures have had a traditional preference for text, privileging that which we call “literature.” However, even in the late 1950s and early 1960s, Levin recognized that performances “as spoken or sung, together with a visual image of the speaker or singer, [had] meanwhile been regaining [their] hold through electrical engineering.” He urged scholars “to take a fresh look at tradition...as an organic habit of re-creating what has been received and is handed on” [in Lord 1960:xiii].

Kirshenblatt-Gimblett [1995:71] considers the effect that “electrical engineering” feats such as the tape or video recorder have had on folklore and history scholarship, exploring the “advent of schizophonia, R. Murray Schafer’s term for the separation of sounds from their sources.” Sound recording has allowed scholars “to capture a performance and listen to it many times for the purposes of detailed analysis not possible otherwise.” Separation of the

performance from the time and space in which it was first performed creates a static “phonic artifact” [Kirshenblatt-Gimblett1995:71]. What we deal with in museums is the “phonic artifact,” the recorded interview containing oral narrative that has been removed from its “original point in space... [and] time” to be recontextualized within the exhibition.

Problems in Representation: Decontextualization

Objects in museums are decontextualized; they have been removed from their original contexts. Some performances are similarly “amenable to ethnographic excision and to presentation as autonomous units, though not in the same way as artifacts” [Kirshenblatt-Gimblett 1991:420], since “[o]ne can...not detach performances from performers.” “[P]erformance is all process” and only becomes like an artifact when it has been photographed, recorded, or canonized through repeated stage performances [Kirshenblatt-Gimblett 1991:420]. In the process of study, “[s]uch fragments become ethnographic objects by virtue of the manner in which they have been detached” [Kirshenblatt-Gimblett 1998:2].

Bauman and Briggs [1990, in Briggs 1993:406] argue that recontextualization “can [be] realized in quite different ways and for quite different effects.” Performers are usually aware of the potential for contextualization of the interview in different settings, and Performers are usually aware of the potential for contextualization of the interview in different settings, and, similar to the scholar, attempt to make “explicit intertextual links” [Briggs 1993:407] between the performance and other sources of authority [Briggs 1993:407]. Both participants in the interview collaborate and feed off of each other’s interaction, recasting it for their own purposes and gaining their own meaning both during and after the performance. Social identities are constructed, and “the formal

patterning of discourse reflects the negotiation and transformation of social structure” [Muana 1998:42].

Recontextualization is an inherent part of the production of museum exhibitions. By skillful entextualization, the objectification of or “the process of making discourse extractable [...the scholar may ease the] transposition of entextualized discourse into other discourse forms” [Muana 1998:44].

“Good” interviewers are particularly skilled in creating discourse that is maximally prefigured for recontextualization in scholarly texts. While the formal and content-based parameters of scholarly discourse are thus written into the discourse obtained in interviews, explicit intertextuality is generally kept to a minimum, particularly as interview data are recontextualized in academic publications [Briggs 1993:408].

The same applies to the utilization of oral narratives in an exhibition context. Control of folkloric performances such as oral narrative, dance, and song allows a community to make “[claims] to the past [that] lay the foundation for present and future claims” of authority [Kirshenblatt-Gimblett 1998:65]. When performers and scholars invoke the amorphous concept of “traditional ways of the past”, both actors participate in “constructing notions of *tradition, authenticity, community, nation, and the like*” [Briggs 1993:407-408]. These “notions” are important references for presenting a “distinctive national identity” when performing activities of cultural heritage [Kirshenblatt-Gimblett 1998:65].

Field Example

Why the Folklife Festival?

In the course of this paper I have been trying to consider how best to address the issues that arise in the presentation of oral narratives within an exhibition context. Just because the public presentation of oral narratives is problematic does not mean that it should not be attempted. Perhaps the best way to present oral narratives is to include the original

speaker in your exhibit, acknowledging the performance aspect of oral narrative attempting to remedy the problem of decontextualization by having the oral narrative directly performed. Other than having those whose oral histories you wish to exhibit take up residence within your museum (which has been done in the past in the presentation of traditional cultures [Kirshenblatt-Gimblett 1998]), how best can this be accomplished? At the outset of this research I thought that one of the best examples of attempting to address the problems of authenticity, representation, and power dynamics can be seen in the Smithsonian's annual Folklife Festival, but in the course of study I found that the Festival has problems of its own.

Many factors led to my choice of the Folklife Festival as my field example. I wanted to look at a type of venue we had not talked about before; in class, we seemed to focus almost all our attention on art and history museums, but there are many other ways, such as traveling exhibitions or festivals, in which information and cultures may be exhibited to the public in a museum or "museum-like" setting. In talking with the people involved in the production of the Festival, I have come to believe that the process of developing an exhibit/program for the Festival is very similar, if not identical, to the development of a museum exhibit. Each exhibit is based on years of ethnographic fieldwork that involves an extensive interview process and research into the community to be exhibited. Collaboration between the Festival curators and members of the community is intensive, with the community members advising on much of the content of the program, who would be the best example of a particular tradition or performance genre (according to community standards), and what materials would be needed in the construction of exhibitions of these traditions. I also chose the Festival to consider because of the strong

body of scholarship about folklife festivals in general and the Smithsonian's Folklife Festival in particular as an outstanding exemplar of this genre, being a "model for productions in many other locales" [Bauman, et al. 1992:4]. And finally, I chose to examine the Folklife Festival because it is billed by the Center for Folklife and Cultural Heritage as "a living museum without walls" [2006] and should therefore be subjected to the same sort of scrutiny customary for traditional museum exhibitions.

The programs for 2004's Folklife Festival, which ran from June 23 through 27 and June 30 through July 4th, were **Haiti: Freedom and Creativity from the Mountains to the Sea; Water Ways: Mid-Atlantic Maritime Communities;** and *Nuestra Música: Music in Latin American Culture*. The usual breakdown of the Festival includes various stages within the larger program venue; these include tented stages for Musical and Dance Performances, Occupational Folklife (Work Skills), Crafts Demonstrations, Foodways, and a "Talk" or Storytelling stage. The "Talk" stage features "moderated discussions of the various skills on display and cultural foundations of the various groups in which they are rooted" [Bauman et al.1987: 5].

Based on the work I did at the Festival as a volunteer audio documentation aide, I decided to focus on the talk stage of the Maritime program, entitled "Bayhouse Stories," because of the time I spent there recording and logging the various presentations of the Festival participants. On the "Bayhouse Stories" stage, participants got a chance to talk about the skill they are there to display and to compare with other participants. Most presentations were in a panel format, featuring three or four different practitioners of a particular tradition, such as crabbers or net fishermen, who would compare and contrast their different approaches to a similar profession. The participants would be given a

general topic given in advance, such as “Fishing: Then and Now” or the effect of environmental problems on their professions, but the content of the talk itself is improvised, with scheduled participants involved changing at the last minute. Each of these talks is moderated by “presenter”, who is usually a folklorist or some other scholar who has worked with the community. They introduce and contextualize the people and topic for the audience, giving information to people who constantly wander in and out from the other exhibits on the Mall.

Performance, Recontextualization, and Representation

The “Bayhouse Stories” stage is devoted to the presentation of oral narratives in a panel form, with individual Festival participants periodically taking the stage for a solo presentation. While this allows the Festival’s visitors to see, listen to, and engage in conversation with the participants, the problem of representation that comes up in the museum exhibition of oral narratives still remains. The recontextualization of people and their narratives takes place in the context of the festival just as much as it takes place in a museum setting. The activities that the participants practice in their everyday lives are put on display, recontextualized as performances by being turned into demonstrations. We talk about the importance of how an object or a performance is framed; there are four different methods of “framing” or contextualizing an activity that takes place at the festival [Bauman et al. 1992:28-31]:

- Performance (“accountability to an audience for an authoritative display of communicative competence”)

- Demonstration (a “representational frame in which a “task-like” activity is done out of its usual context to allow someone a close picture of the doing of the activity”)
- Instruction (teaches the observer how the task is accomplished)
- Exhibition (displays products/objects)

It is through these frames that people’s normal skills are “invested with new matrices of expectations and social relationships” [Muana 1998:44].

Another of the problems inherent in the Folklife Festival is that the people included as participants are represented in “their most traditionalist form” [Hall 1981 in Kirshenblatt-Gimblett 1998:76]. Although Folklife festivals succeed in publicizing “traditions that otherwise would not be exposed, it is also the case that those who perform tend to be represented exclusively in traditional terms” [Kirshenblatt-Gimblett 1998:76].

Participants

...did not always agree with or appreciate the identities they felt were being ascribed to them. While carrying out their duties responsibly on-stage, backstage they found various ways (often creative and humorous) to re-negotiate identity, offer resistance, or simply to survive the two weeks” [Bauman et al. 1992:40].

While I did not get a chance to talk with any of the participants backstage, in their presentations they seemed to skillfully negotiate the balance of being “traditional”, while not appearing as “folksy”. “Traditional”—one of the chief criteria for a participant’s invitation to the Festival—implies that the participant is “continuing a family occupation, talent, or practice, or...learning one that is personally significant” [Bauman 1992:46]. To view the participants as “folksy”, on the other hand, as “unsophisticated, untravelled, uneducated people without political views or agendas” [Bauman 1992:46] would be uninformed and, in a scholarly way, careless. The people I saw participating in the

festival are certainly skilled in their particular traditions, with all the connoisseurship that skill entails, and many are professionals engaged with their local museums or even their own preservation foundations to preserve the heritage of these traditions. They are engaged in the modern community, participate in business ventures, and lobby state and federal governments for more recognition. Although they were presenting traditional arts and skills, these people are far from what we would call “folksy.” When presented in a festival setting, however, with the focus of “Bayhouse Stories” being panel discussion, the attempt at “the discourse of pluralism, of unity in diversity” runs the risk of “the neutralizing effect of rendering difference (and conflict) inconsequential” [Kirshenblatt-Gimblett 1998:77].

Power and Political Issues

As with traditional museum exhibits, scholars still remain the ones in power—they “frame” the performance and the discussions of the participants with the explanatory text panels and presenters’ introduction of the scheduled talks. Although visitor “participation” is encouraged at the Folklife Festival, clear boundaries are established between the visitor and the performer—the performer’s knowledge is privileged by his having learned it “in a traditional manner...by insiders from insiders” [Kirshenblatt-Gimblett 1998:75].

Also, although there is some community involvement in the selection of performers/participants, the curators retain the final say in who is to be featured at the Festival, may reject someone as too modern or “revivalist” [Bauman 1992], and discourage the use of electronic instruments, non-traditional performance styles, and “other overtly theatrical concessions” [Kirshenblatt-Gimblett 1998:74].

But, this does not mean the participants remain completely passive in the creation of and their representation within the Folklife Festival. Curators collaborate with the participants from the beginning, even basing who they select to perform/present based on who is recognized as outstanding by the community, in the community, by that community's standards [Belanus 2004]. The individual participants also choose display items, photographs, etc. in conjunction with the curator and a researcher "intermediary" assigned to them through the Center for Folklife and Cultural Heritage.

I have found that, at least in the case of the Smithsonian's Folklife Festival, I do not completely agree with the criticism that exhibition in the festival setting is too focused on the celebratory. The Maritime exhibitions seemed to focus more on the precarious situation that most of the communities are in. In the discussions I sat in on, I witnessed the debate of such topics as: the declining yields of fish and other harvestable resources in various waterways; the influx of people from cities, which is threatening the small-town culture of most of the communities represented in the Festival; and the disinterest of the youth in the traditions of their parents and ancestors. In the visitor experience, one can go to the festival and choose to just see the "pretty stuff & music", or one can look deeper, actually read the text panels and talk to the participants and read the program book, and find out that, at least in this case the curators and participants tried to get a "deeper message across" [Belanus 2004].

It is this "deeper message" that many participants may hope to capitalize on; besides being the "honor of a lifetime" and perhaps good publicity for one's business [Bauman 1992:18-19], participation in the Festival may be used as a publicity platform. The truth of participating in the Folklife Festival is that many of the participants hold their own

agendas and look at the Festival as a way for getting more interest in threatened traditions and as a tool to increase funding, interest, and political clout in their communities [Bauman 1992; Kurin 1991:320].

Conclusion

Oral narratives are gaining wide acceptance within the museum community as a legitimate part of exhibition. More than just explaining the object on display, oral narratives themselves are becoming an integral part, and sometimes the subject, of exhibition. But exhibition itself remains problematic;

...one may ask whether the format and aesthetics of that form are appropriate to that which is represented. If folk art [and oral narrative] is to be distinguished from elite and commercial art [and written narratives that have traditionally been the sources for history] in its unification of object and context, pleasure and utility, meaning and audience in familiar contexts, does it make sense to have exhibitions that generically present the objects of folk art [and performances of oral narrative] as if they were paintings in the National Gallery or concert performances in the Kennedy Center? In short, folk arts and folklife...suggest aesthetic and organizational notions that are at odds with generic museum exhibitions. It makes sense for our presentational formats to be consistent with the features of those arts and cultural activities we seek to represent [Kurin 1991:326].

At the outset of research for this paper I thought to address the problem of oral narratives in exhibitions by taking a closer look at the Smithsonian's annual Folklife Festival, focusing on the "Bayhouse Stories" stage, which features oral narrative as the main exhibitional focus. However, I found out that presenting oral narratives within a festival format has problems of its own, which echo the issues faced in traditional museum exhibitions. Oral narratives featured in festivals as opposed to oral narratives that have been recorded and are featured in traditional museum exhibitions still face the problems of authenticity, representation, and power. What both modes of presentation require is a more reflexive approach to be taken by the scholars to create them. If we realize that both the scholar and the creator of the oral narrative are "co-creators of social meaning"

[Crew & Sims 1991:174] we will make great progress to the realization that “exhibitions, whether of objects or people [or oral narratives], are ...exhibits of those who make them”

[Kirshenblatt-Gimblett 1998:78].

Works Cited

- Bauman, Richard. 1975. Verbal Art as Performance. *American Anthropologist* 77 (2):290-311.
- Bauman, Richard, Patricia Sawin and Inta Gale Carpenter. 1992. *Reflections on the Folklife Festival: An Ethnography of Participant Experience*. Special Publications of the Folklore Institute. Bloomington. Indiana University Press.
- Belanus, Betty. 2004. Re: Folklife Festival Questions. Personal Communication. December 2, 2004.
- Briggs, Charles L. 1993. Metadiscursive Practices and Scholarly Authority in Folkloristics. *The Journal of American Folklore* 106 (422): 387-434.
- Chew, Ron. 2002. Collected Stories: The Rise of Oral History in Museum Exhibitions. *Museum News*. November/December 2002: 31-37.
- Crew, Spencer R. and James E. Sims. 1991. Locating Authenticity: Fragments of a Dialogue. In *Exhibiting Cultures: The Poetics and Politics of Museum Display*, pp. 159-175. Washington. Smithsonian Institution Press.
- Dorson, Richard, ed. 1972. Introduction: Concepts of Folklore and Folklife Studies. In *Folklore and Folklife: An Introduction*, pp. 1-51. Chicago. The University of Chicago Press.
- Gurian, Elaine Heumann. 1991. Noodling Around with Exhibition Opportunities. In *Exhibiting Cultures: The Poetics and Politics of Museum Display*, pp. 176-190. Washington. Smithsonian Institution Press.
- Henson, Pamela M. and Terri A Schorzman. 1991. Videohistory: Focusing on the American Past. *The Journal of American History* 78 (2): 618-627.
- Hymes, Dell. 1975. Breakthrough into Performance. In *Folklore: Performance and Communication*, eds. Dan Ben-Amos and Kenneth Goldstein, pp. 11-74. The Hague. Mouton.
- Jones, Gordon L. 1994. Research for Interpretive Exhibits: A Practical Study. *History News*. November/December 1994:14-18.
- Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, Barbara. 1991. Objects of Ethnography. In *Exhibiting Cultures: The Poetics and Politics of Museum Display*, eds. Ivan Karp and Steven D. Levine, pp. 386-443. Washington. Smithsonian Institution Press
- 1995. From the Paperwork Empire to the Paperless Office: Testing the Limits of the 'Science of Tradition'. In *Folklore Interpreted: Essays in Honor of Alan Dundes*, eds. Regina Bendix and Rosemary Levi Zumwalt. New York. Garland.
- 1998. *Destination Culture*. Berkeley. University of California Press.
- Kurin, Richard. 1991. Cultural Conservation through Representation: Festival of India Folklife Exhibitions at the Smithsonian Institution. In *Exhibiting Cultures: The Poetics and Politics of Museum Display*, eds. Ivan Karp and Steven D. Levine, pp. 315-343. Washington. Smithsonian Institution Press.
- Lord, Alfred. 1960. *The Singer of Tales*. Cambridge. Harvard University Press.
- Mancer, Cassie. 2004. Forging Authentic: The Problem of "Authenticity" in Folklore Scholarship.
- McLuhan, Eric and Frank Zingrone, eds. 1995. *Essential McLuhan*. New York. BasicBooks.

Muana, Patrick Kagbeni. 1998. Beyond Frontiers: A Review of Analytical Paradigms in Folklore Studies. *Journal of African Cultural Studies* 11 (1):39-58.

No Author. 2006. Smithsonian Folklife Festival. <http://www.folklife.si.edu/center/festival.html> [Accessed March 29, 2006]