

# From the Director



I was recently asked to name the critical issues facing the field of folklore and the New York Folklore Society today. While comedian Rodney Dangerfield's "I get no respect"

complaint comes immediately to mind, a more thoughtful answer is warranted.

The problem is one of definition. Even in 1945, our then-editor Louis C. Jones lamented, "There is a current notion across the country that we haven't much folklore in New York State." Folklore certainly was and continues to be alive and well in the Empire State and has been the subject of more than sixty-five years of publishing by the New York Folklore Society. Folklore and folk arts are pervasive, but are often not recognized until someone points them out as being part of the social fabric of a community. The subject of our work as folklorists is in front of our eyes every day, yet somehow folklore continues to "fly under the radar."

I recently had a conversation with a state assemblyman, in which I mentioned that at one time the New York Folklore Society was debating whether to change its name, feeling that the word "folklore" conjured up images of a nineteenth-century notion of oral poetry. "Folklore' does not reflect everything the society does," I said. My comment evoked his impassioned response about the importance of the word "folklore" as a way to draw attention to what is truly local and unique about a community. He understood and embraced folklore's totality.

Folklore as a discipline stands today at an interesting place. In an era when the next

Big Idea is usually celebrated, folklorists are working hard to recognize communities' maintenance of cultural traditions. We have allies in new movements that are coming to the forefront in American society, such as the 100-mile diet and buy-local movement, which champion locally harvested foods and locally owned businesses as key to maintaining communities' character.

Folklorists are uniquely positioned to lend an important voice to the debates around immigration and immigration reform. As globalization brings the world together, folklore works to draw attention to that which is local, individual, and expressive. Throughout the next decade, it will be important for folklorists to continue to draw attention to the field of folklore through alliances with disciplines and organizations outside of folklore, thus providing a folkloristic perspective on contemporary life. To again quote Louis C. Jones, "We have our part in building this nation's knowledge of itself, a task which seems to us as important for a whole people as for an individual."

With this issue, the New York Folklore Society thanks Paul Mercer for his service as board president and welcomes a new president. Gabrielle Hamilton began her term as board president in March 2010; she is joined by new board members Pauline Adema of Poughkeepsie, Karyl Eaglefeathers of Bloomville, Joseph Sciorra of New York City, and Thomas van Buren of Hastings-on-Hudson. I look forward to their future contributions to the New York Folklore Society.

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## From the Editor



This issue of *Voices* offers readers a cornucopia of food for deep thoughts on New York. We experience the transcendent freedom of Vodou dancing in the city, survey the shape-shifting history of Rip van Winkle stories, and wend our way through the psychological landscape of a post-9/11 urban legend. We also encounter Afro-Colombian music in Queens and Native New York handcrafts.

In "The Vodou *Kase*: The Drum Break in New York Temples and Dance Classes," participant-observer Lois Wilcken examines *kase*, a drum pattern associated with spirit possession. She compares transcendent experiences in Brooklyn dance classes to possession during the rites of Afro-Haitian Vodou. Wilcken argues that experiences of transcendence or possession related to the *kase* vary, but they exist along a continuum, whether they occur in dance studios or in temples.

In "Saint Rip," *Voices'* Play columnist and author John Thorn offers an erudite and thought-provoking exploration of the origins and concentric reappearances of the Rip van Winkle story and its key motifs, in New York State and beyond. Gabrielle Hamilton and Naomi Sturm take us into the Queens apartment of marimba maker and player Diego Obregón for a chat with the artist about *currulao* dancing and drumming and his experiences as a craftsman, instrumentalist, and composer within this tradition.

In "The Grateful Terrorist: Folklore as Psychological Coping Mechanism," a group of psychologists and counselors—

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***"Once we recognize we can feel deeply, love deeply, can feel joy, then we will demand that all parts of our lives produce that kind of joy. And when they do not, we will ask, 'Why don't they?' And it is the asking that will lead us inevitably toward change."***

—Audre Lorde, *Black Women Writers at Work* (1983)

## From the Editor (continued)

Trisha Smith, Grafton Eliason, Jeff Samide, Adrian Tomer, and Mark Lepore—explore urban legend texts and folklore scholarship to offer their own thoughtful meditation on the psychological functions of a legend that surfaced after the events of September 11, 2001. Stories like this one depict a suspected terrorist as neither essentially evil nor good. The terrorist responds to an act of kind treatment in a grocery store, later providing his helper with a cryptic, protective warning, alluding to terrorist acts in the near future. The authors argue that this urban legend and other stories like it can simultaneously reduce anxiety and stir up fear—while sustaining belief in a just world—in the immediate aftermath of large-scale trauma.

Finally, New York Folklore Society's staff folklorist Lisa Overholser reports highlights from the September 2009 celebratory opening of North by Northeast, a monthlong ex-

hibition of basketry and beadwork by New York Akwesasne Mohawk and Tuscarora artists. The exhibition took place in Schenectady and included an opening lecture, a film screening and panel discussion, and an interactive music and dance performance by the Mohawk women's singing group, Kontiwennehá:wi : Carriers of the Words.

As always, *Voices* welcomes readers' responses to what we print, in the form of articles, photo essays, artist profiles, regular columns, and more—or share your thoughts in a letter to the editor sent to the e-mail address below. We look forward to your feedback.

Eileen Condon  
Acquisitions Editor

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## The New York Folklore Society will sponsor three gatherings for Latino artists in New York State.

Supported by a grant from the National Endowment  
for the Arts, the gatherings will take place at three  
locations on three separate dates:

**October 24, 2010, at Long Island Traditions, Port Washington**

**March 19, 2011, at Go Art!, Batavia**

**May 14, 2011, at Centro Civico, Amsterdam**

Designed for musicians, dancers, craftspeople, and others who practice a traditional art form with its origin in any of the Spanish-speaking communities of North and South America, the gatherings will assist artists in sharing resources and experiences and provide an opportunity for future collaborations and technical assistance.

For additional information, or to find out how to become a delegate to the gatherings, please contact Lisa Overholser at the New York Folklore Society: [lisa@nyfolklore.org](mailto:lisa@nyfolklore.org)

# Voices

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