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Annual Conference Roundup

BY LISA OVERHOLSER

The New York Folklore Society's annual conference, held each fall, is a long-established tradition. Focused on particular themes, the conferences typically feature guest speakers, such as master artists or scholars, who lend their knowledge and expertise on the theme. More recent conferences have included "field trips," with a designated host site and a stronger emphasis on experiencing the local folklife.

The New York Folklore Society decided to blend these traditions at the 2010 conference with a new element: student presenters. In collaboration with New York University's Latino studies and Latin American studies programs, we invited graduate students to present their work on the theme of Latino Folk Culture and Expressive Traditions on Saturday, November 20, at NYU. This new format came from a desire to address current needs in the field. With slashed funding, evolving disciplinary configurations, and a shifting statewide infrastructure for the arts, the field of folklore in New York State is—simply put—threatened. As an organization designed to fulfill the needs of the field, we want to foster and encourage young scholars coming into the field by allowing their work to be heard and shared in the intimate format of the annual conferences.

Encouraging a student presence at the annual conference is not a new concept—far from it. Back in 1950, New York

Folklore Society members attending the annual meeting in Rochester suggested a student contest for the best paper on New York State folklore. Then-president Moritz Jagendorf recalled the proposed prize: "The winner will receive fifty dollars, and his or her paper will be read before the members."

While our 2010 conference did not offer a monetary prize for the student presenters, several graduate students delivered papers on the conference theme. After putting out a call for proposals from graduate students early in the fall, we

formed two separate panels: a morning panel, Latino Music and the Negotiation of Identities, and an afternoon panel, Representations and Depictions. The Latino Music panel included papers by Guesnerth Josue Perea (AfroColombia NY), "Currulao Neoyorquino: Unearthing Afro-Colombian Musical Traditions in New York City"; Naomi Sturm (Columbia University), "Lo Haces Un Poco Así y Switch . . ."; and Jaime Bofill (University of Arizona), "Entre Peruanos: An Ethnographic Film on the Peruvian Community of Tucson."



Latino folk culture researchers (left to right) Jaime Bofill, Guesnerth Josue Perea, Naomi Sturm, and Berta Jottar find common ground at their November 20 presentations. All photos: Eileen Condon



Life-size Day of the Dead paper sculpture by Aurelia Fernandez oversees the conference proceedings.

The Representations panel featured papers by Eric Cesar Morales (Indiana University), “Do We Need Sombreros to be Chicanos? The Representation of Chicanismo in Television Sitcoms”; Beatriz Albuquerque (Columbia University), “Pagan Reminiscence in Christian Commemoration and Its Influences in Two Contemporary Performance Artists”; and Rachel Valentina Gonzalez (Indiana University), “You only turn fifteen once’: Imagining an American Quinceañera.” We were happy to have students come to the conference from as far away as Arizona and Portugal. Students who made

the trip had the opportunity to share their work with established scholars and artists in a highly engaging setting.

In keeping with previous New York Folklore Society conferences, artists and scholars participated in and rounded out the day’s activities. Student presentations were moderated by individuals closely involved with Latino expressive traditions in their professional lives. Berta Jottar, video artist and independent scholar, moderated the Latino Music panel, and Marie Sarita Gaytan, visiting associate professor of sociology and anthropology at Bowdoin College, moderated the Representations

panel. These scholars provided detailed feedback and commentary for the student presenters, highlighting important issues connecting the presentations, raising questions for consideration, and sharing their own skilled perspectives.

New York–based community scholars had the spotlight in a late-afternoon Community Scholars’ Forum for Latino artists and those working with Latino artists. Invited participants included Ladan Alomar, executive director of Centro Civico in Amsterdam; Carlos Osorio, choreographer, dancer, and founder of Cumbia Spirit School of Dance in Woodstock; L. Ivan Dominguez, director of El Conjunto Folklorico in New York City; and Aurelia Fernandez, a Yonkers-based Mexican paper artist, and her daughter Zafiro. The Community Scholars’ Forum refocused the conference on New York State as a locus of Latino expressive traditions. The panelists discussed issues relating to their unique experiences as artists and leaders within New York State’s Latino communities, and many forum participants were stimulated by the mix of scholarly perspective and artistic reality. As Carlos Osorio remarked, “This was a unique opportunity for me to see how some of the things I do in my daily life are treated elsewhere. As a choreographer of traditional dance, I was especially interested in the discussions of traditional expressions in a modern setting. It was very inspiring.”

The conference culminated with a critical keynote speech by Juan Flores, professor of social and cultural analysis at NYU and chair of the Latino studies program. Attendees also enjoyed a few artistic treats throughout the day. Aurelia and Zafiro, two of the invited community scholars, brought several of their items to display and sell at the conference, including “Lupita,” a revolutionary figure used in the celebration of Mexican Independence Day, and several figures for the Mexican Day of the Dead. Raquel Z. Rivera and her band, Ojos de Sofia, treated conference-goers to a lively performance of new hymns to



Mexican paper artist Aurelia Fernandez at her colorful display table.



New York City rumberos performed a rousing set during a break between papers and panel discussions.

Mary Magdalen during the closing catered reception. Lunchtime was enlivened with a screening of Berta Jottar's experimental ethnographic film, *Conflicto Rumba: The Persistence of Memory*. The beautifully made film documents efforts to suppress community-based rumba performances in Central Park during the late 1980s. Some of the rumba musicians documented in the film (Jesús "Tito" Sandoval, Alfredo "Pescao" Diaz, Felix Brito, and Juango) gave an impromptu performance following the film screening.

What a pleasure it was to see so many members and new faces at the conference! It is truly a testament to the value and richness of the field. In addition to our student presenters, more than sixty-five artists, students, scholars, advocates, and funders joined us. We hope you'll join us next year, but if you missed the meeting,



Berta Jottar introduces the screening of her film.

you can view the photos on our web site and look for some of the student papers in future issues of *Voices*. The conference would not have been possible without the dedicated efforts of our board members, Juan Flores and the NYU staff, and financial supporters including the New York State Council on the Arts, New York University, and National Grid (sponsor of the Community Scholars' Forum). ▼

Lisa Overholser is staff folklorist at the New York Folklore Society, where she manages the mentoring and professional development program and contributes to many other projects and initiatives. She holds a Ph.D. in folklore and ethnomusicology from the University of Indiana.

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