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Reflections & Vision:

A Conversation with the Outgoing and Incoming New York Folklore Society Board Presidents



Gabrielle M. Hamilton is the Director of Education and Public Programs at Flushing Town Hall. Photo: *Inside Out, A global art project by JR.*

To Everything—Turn, Turn, Turn

By Gabrielle M. Hamilton, NYFS President 2010–14

While a conversation on an organization's infrastructure is not exactly a page-turner, it is important to briefly reflect on the past as the New York Folklore Society moves forward. Here, you will read a full explanation of the history of NYFS, its role throughout the state, and Tom van Buren's vision for the society for the next two years. In March 2015, Tom van Buren began his term as NYFS' new president, and we are pleased to have him serve. As the past president, I have been asked to reflect on the last few years, having served as the society's president from 2010 and having been a board member since 2008.

When one hears the phrase “the Great Recession,” we think of Wall Street, the subprime mortgage crisis, and unemployment—hardly the lexicon of the folklorist. And yet, the national financial crisis had very real, often profound, implications for the New York Folklore Society, especially from 2008 to 2014. With government shutdowns, our usual generous funders at the New York State Council on the Arts and the National Endowment of the Arts were not able to release funding on time, thus hampering day-to-day operations at the society and creating a cash-flow crisis. This crisis triggered internal questions on how to best to manage resources, how to maintain existing programs and staffing, and how to simply keep the lights on.

Our first step as a board was to work closely with Ellen McHale, NYFS' executive director and the staff to find ways to limit our expenses. In doing so, the staff fearlessly took on more tasks in order to avoid costly external contractors. When funding continued to be delayed, the NYFS Board and Ellen McHale worked with the Community Loan Fund and the Fund of the City of New York to secure bridge loans in order to maintain operations. Although the society ended each year in the black, NYFS could not weather the cash-flow crisis without an influx of funds to provide a buffer while waiting for major funders. Larger institutions often rely on boards with “deep pockets” or extensive endowments to ensure adequate resources in times of crises. For smaller institutions, the members of the board of directors need to roll up their sleeves. I challenged the board to provide resources for the society through a board-giving program. While the NYFS Board had historically provided outstand-

ing programmatic governance, we were less inclined to regulate giving (call it a “cultural construct”). As a folklorist and educator in the field myself, I knew exactly what kind of financial test I was presenting. I'm grateful that over time—and with the support of the New York Council on Nonprofits, Ellen McHale, and Jessica Schein, NYFS' Board Treasurer—the board found ways to increase giving and helped to ensure our financial stability. The board was not alone in their giving. NYFS is deeply grateful to our many members who increased their donations during that time. We appreciated our members' patience during the delays of materials and their regular copy of *Voices*. We knew our members had their own financial issues to contend with, but the angels among them helped NYFS tremendously.

To further increase our membership base, I developed the Graduate Student Conference, which encouraged young professionals in the field to gather, present their research, and find support from senior colleagues—and ultimately join the society. We kicked off our program in November 2010 with a conference in New York entitled, “Latino Folk Culture and Expressive Traditions.” NYFS partnered with New York University's Latino Studies department for this one-day conference. Student panelists came from local universities, such as NYU and Columbia University, as well as Indiana University and the University of Arizona. In addition, we created a structure where community scholars could share their rich experiences with attendees. The Community Scholars' Panel included Carols Osorio of Cumbia Spirit School of Dance; Ladan Alomar of Centro Civico of Amsterdam; Aurelia Fernandez, Mexican paper artist; and Ivan Dominguez of El Conjunto

Folklorico. We also included performing artists and the percussionists from the film *Conflicto Rumba*. I am pleased to report that five years later, one of our student scholars, Naomi Sturm, is now a member of the NYFS' Board of Directors. NYFS followed a similar format and presented this conference throughout the state, alternating between downstate and upstate, providing educational offerings with wide appeal.

In 2011, NYFS also took on the organization of the New York State Folk Arts Roundtable. Each year, close to 50 folklorists from around the state gather for three days of training and dialogue about experiences in the field, folk arts programming, and collaborative projects for consideration. A special thanks to the NYFS staff for taking on the logistical tasks to make Roundtable as successful as it continues to be.

Other structural changes included the introduction of Regional Representatives throughout the state. There will be two Regional Representatives serving downstate and upstate. NYFS was pleased to hire Eileen Condon, PhD, as the downstate representative. Eileen helps to manage the society's Mentoring and Professional Development Program, initiate local socials, and invites NYFS members, folklorists, and people interested in folklore to gather for downstate events. NYFS is currently seeking an upstate Regional Representative.

Over the last few years, significant sacrifices were made by the NYFS staff themselves—Ellen McHale, Lisa Overholser, Laurie Longfield, and Patti Mason all endured furloughs, not an easy task in a field known for modest salaries and few work opportunities. I am immensely grateful to Ellen McHale's leadership and the willingness of Lisa, Laurie, and Patti to weather the storm while providing a continuity of programs.

Finally, a note of appreciation to Jessica Schein, our past treasurer: a top-notch accountant, Jessica tolerated hours of financial questions from me as we rode the Metro North to meetings throughout the state, phone calls at random hours about

tax filings, and endless emails. She definitely knows the time to gain and the time to lose.

Now our purpose turns to all things positive for NYFS. Here's a bright future for the New York Folklore Society!



Tom van Buren is the Director of the Folk Arts Program for ArtsWestchester, the arts council of Westchester County, New York.

Moving Ahead with the New York Folklore Society

By Tom van Buren, NYFS President 2015–2017

In March 2015, I accepted the nomination to serve as President of the Board of Directors for the New York Folklore Society. I have been a member of the society since the mid-1990s and have served on the board since 2009. When I came onto the board, the society was reeling from the impact of the financial crisis of 2008–09. However, under the careful leadership of Executive Director Ellen McHale and then Board President Gabrielle Hamilton, we were able to weather that period and emerge even stronger. As I take on the leadership of the board, along with Board Vice President Chris Mulé, I am thinking about the state of folklore and traditional culture throughout New York State and the role of folklorists the New York Folklore Society in supporting it.

Since its founding in 1944, the New York Folklore Society has been a source of information and inspiration to scholars, folk artists, and public sector folklorists on many levels. My own experience has been in the public sector, as I have worked since 1994, in various capacities in the New York City area, both for independent folk arts organizations and in my current capacity of managing the folk arts program for the Westchester Arts Council. From this background, I have a great appreciation for the work that folklorists do, the importance of folk artists in maintaining cultural identity and pride in their respective communities, as well as the vital role of a vibrant and sophisticated audience for the celebration of root cultures throughout the state. I believe that the New York Folklore Society should serve all of these groups and help to forge an alliance that achieves its mission to foster “the study, promotion, and continuation of folklore and folklife of New York's diverse cultures through education, advocacy, support, and outreach.”

We have a lot to be thankful for in New York, but we also face big challenges ahead. New York State is blessed with, first and foremost, a diverse and dynamic cultural landscape, as well as a vibrant network of folklorists and supporters of traditional culture. In no small part, this is due to two major factors: the rich and varied experience of upstate rural culture and its advocates, and the state's prime place for immigration to the US, fueling a vast reserve of cultural knowledge that new Americans have always brought with them from around the globe.

In the early 1980s after a long campaign of advocacy, the New York State Council on the Arts was expanded to include a dedicated Folk Arts Program of funding that has made possible an array of vital projects and programs across the state and engaged dedicated folklorists, ethnomusicologists, and other cultural workers interested in this work. These folks are at the core of the mission of the New York Folklore Society, and I look to them and their work for inspiration about what we can be and will do in the coming years. But just as importantly,

the society needs to build upon its history as a cultural resource-based membership organization.

When it began, the society was founded in a spirit of populism to celebrate the roots of local culture throughout the state. As the discipline of folklore developed in academic settings, the Society adopted a more educational focus that was aligned with a movement to include local history and folk culture in the New York State social studies curriculum, and for a period, every fourth-grade teacher across the state was a member of the society. Since the 1960s, folk arts and folk culture became a national movement, headed by projects like the Smithsonian Folklife Festival held each summer on the National Mall in Washington, DC, and the National Council of Traditional Arts' traveling National Folk Festival produced in partnership with communities around the country. Likewise, the establishment of state folklorist positions throughout the US contributed to a growing appreciation for traditional arts and culture within the growing diversity of the US population, since the Immigration and Nationality Act of 1965 struck down discriminatory immigration quotas.

During the tenure of Executive Director Ellen McHale, the work of the New York Folklore Society has expanded to include regional research, education, archival, and advocacy projects, most often funded through dedicated grants. Recent projects include a statewide Latino dance initiative and current work in the Muslim communities of upstate New York. The society now also serves as the convener of the annual

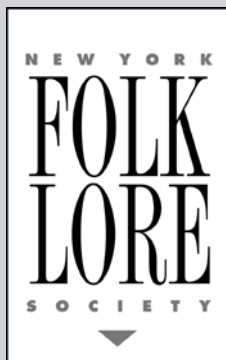
New York State Council on the Arts Folk Arts Roundtable, a professional development meeting for folklorists and leadership of organizations receiving state-funded grant support.

For the general membership, we have also tried to maintain the tradition of an annual conference focused on a theme or region of New York State. Under the previous Board President Gabrielle Hamilton's guidance, the conference was realigned to promote graduate student research and presentation in folklore and related fields. On April 2, 2016, we are planning for a conference on vernacular architecture and placemaking in folk culture at the Cooper Union. We will feature graduate student research, but also invite significant public sector participation from those involved in related subjects of field research and public programs.

Despite all of these developments and important work, in recent times we have seen a number of developments that challenge the model of a membership-based cultural services and advocacy organization. Where the society once filled a niche with very little competition, many mainstream institutions now regularly feature folk and international culture in their programming, and the rise of the digital age has opened a vast array of resources that compete for audience attention and membership among our former key constituencies. Since the 1990s, the society's regular membership has shrunk, and aside from the information-packed website that is open to all, the primary benefit for members has been the biannual *Voices* magazine, which provides excellent articles on folk culture and insightful commentary

from the field. The society is challenged to keep producing a print publication, but many of us feel that it is important to keep this going at least until a subscriber-based digital version is viable. For now, *Voices* is delivered to many libraries and organizations and serves as an important record of the work of both folk arts practitioners and folklorists in New York State.

During my term as president, I will seek to strengthen the financial base of the organization, and will do all I can to encourage dialogue and programs that maintain the identity of the society as just this: A membership society that is open to all who share an interest in folk and traditional culture; and that provides timely and complete information on events, activities, projects, and opportunities for folk artists of all stripes and the cultural specialists who work tirelessly to promote the idea that New York is made stronger and more interesting by the diversity of its communities and the talent and hard work of its artisans, culture bearers, and the people who promote them. I invite you to stay active as members of the society, keep informed through our website and mailings, attend the events of the society and its affiliates, and join the conversation about how to promote folklore and folklife throughout the region. I appeal especially to the artists and tradition-bearers whose work is the vital link of folklore, as well as to up-and-coming folklorists and other cultural workers interested in the field, to join us. There is a vast resource of cultural knowledge and experience among the members and contacts of the society. We can help you connect with it, if we work together. Feel the lore! ▼



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