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129 Jay Street
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Folklore's Four Sisters: Scholarship, Fieldwork, Activism, and Artistry

BY STEVE ZEITLIN

A few years ago, a reporter from the *Los Angeles Times* interviewed me about my work as a folklorist. When I started talking about my new book, *The Poetry of Everyday Life*,¹ he listened, then said, “I guess what you’re saying is that a folklorist is a scientist of human expression—and that our creative expression stands as evidence for the soul,” then paused for a moment and laughed. “I think we’ve had a metaphysical breakthrough.”

Folklorists are often asked to define what folklore is. If we’re in a hurry or think that the person isn’t interested in hearing a complex definition, we may say something like “traditions handed down by word of mouth,” or perhaps a broader definition, “an expressive body of culture shared by a particular group of people,” or we quote the definition given by folklorist Dan Ben-Amos:² “artistic communication in small groups.” I usually try to steer away from defining this charged and all-encompassing term and suggest that a better question is to ask what folklorists *do*. Folklorists work to document, interpret, present, and advocate for forms of cultural expression that society may view as marginalized or insignificant, but which are often at the core of a community’s identity and culture. We support undervalued and underacknowledged forms, traditions, and artists in order to bring them recognition, appreciation, and remuneration. This explanation suggests that folklorists will always be needed, because we are not studying things that are “dying out,” but forms and traditions that are sidelined by the large society—there will always be opportunities for folklorists to pursue the values of cultural equity.

My friend Sam Lee once suggested that folklorists should wear a collar, that we are somehow akin to priests. Possibly, we think in some similar ways. In that vein, perhaps, it’s even possible to go a bit further, drawing on the metaphors of the body, mind, heart, and soul—for the field of folklore draws on all four.

The *body* might be thought of as the body of work, the documentation—the stories, oral histories, and materials collected in the field. The *mind* is the scholarship or the interpretation of the documentation. The *heart* of the field is activism and empathy, central to the work of folklorists who collaborate with communities and individuals to amplify their voices and provide them with venues, resources, and ways to supplement their livelihoods. Perhaps, the *soul* of the field is the creative artistry embodied by the talented people with whom we work and collaborate—as well as our own artistic sensibility we bring to the task.

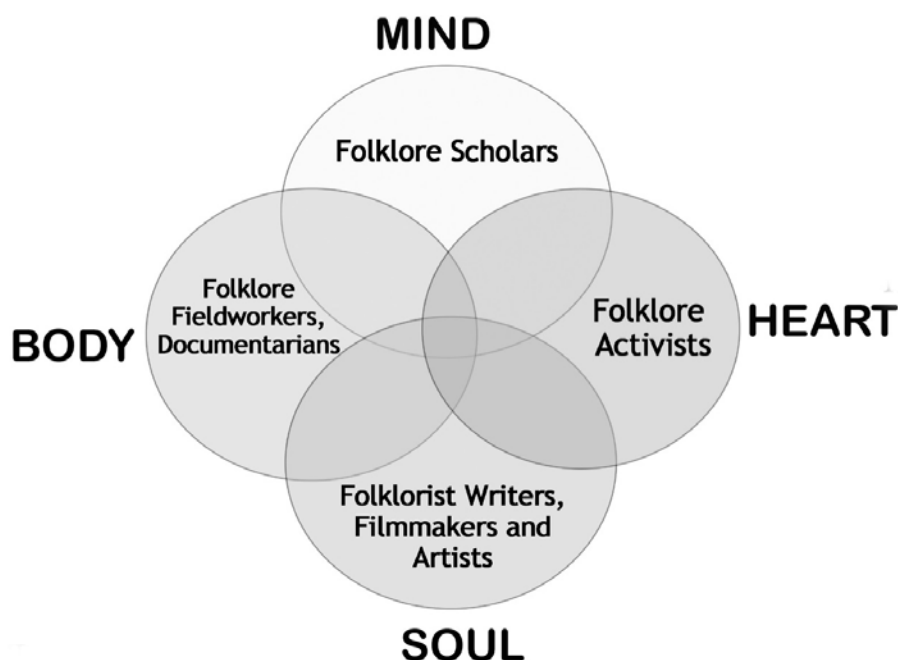
A lifetime in folklore has led me to believe that there are (at least) four distinctive sides or approaches to folklore—fieldwork (body), scholarship (mind), activism (heart), and artistry (soul). I also believe that some of the field’s most interesting work happens in the spaces where they intersect (see figure below).

The discipline of folklore is replete with individuals who work at the intersections of these approaches. A scholar such as Jim Leary from the University of Wisconsin is a passionate labor activist. Folklorist Amy Shuman from Ohio State University is a tireless

advocate for disability rights. Chicana post-modernist writer Norma Elia Cantú is a professor at Trinity University. Betty Belanus, a public folklorist from the Smithsonian Institution, is also a novelist.

Although fieldwork, interpretation, and activism in public sector work are widely recognized, as is the artistry of the individuals we present, the artistry of the folklorist is often underacknowledged. I admire work that brings the four sisters together, with the folklorist–artist or the folklorist–writer playing a special collaborative role in bringing a project to life and rendering it compelling for both for the public, as well as for the featured artists, many of whom choose to work with us year after year and who discover new, meaningful, and exciting perspectives or approaches to their own work in the course of the presentation.

Here are some of the initiatives I so admire. Marjorie Hunt, who worked with Paul Wagner to create the documentary *The Stone Carvers*,³ uses all four approaches, and the artistry brought to the project was acknowledged by an Academy Award for Best Documentary Short in 1985. The film was also the



subject of Marjorie Hunt's dissertation and was based on fieldwork she conducted for the Smithsonian Folklife Festival. It served as an advocacy project at a time when stone quarries were closed and carvers had little work, but it is also a carefully crafted work of art.

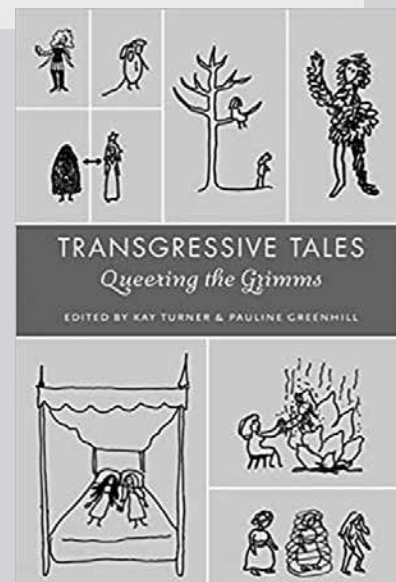
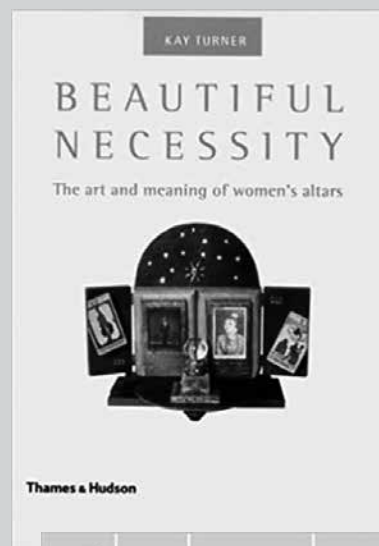
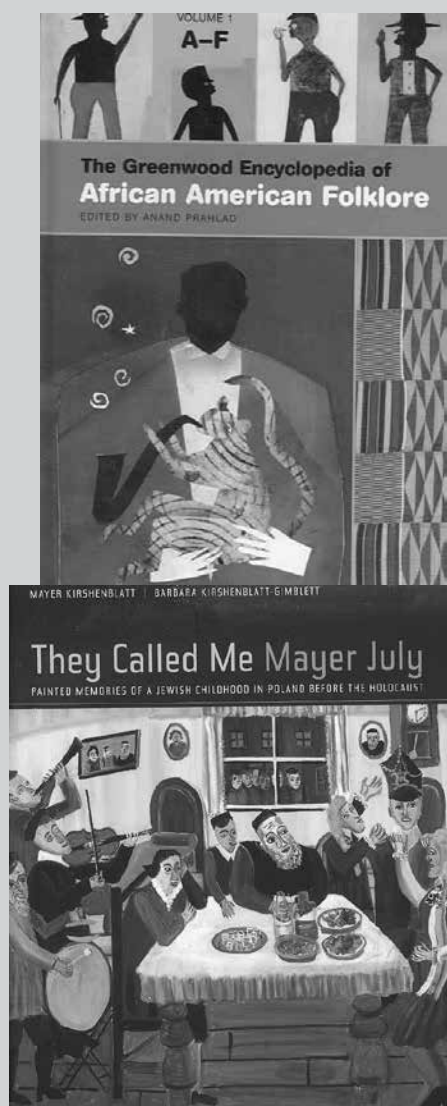
Much of the work by folklorist filmmakers is accessible on Folkstreams.net, where free streaming gives the public access to more than 325 significant and hard-to-find films, along with contextual information. The films of Pete Seeger, Alan Lomax, Bess Lomax Hawes, Woody Guthrie, Gerald Davis, Bill Wiggins, Archie Green, and Bill Ferris—all of whom saw themselves as scholars, fieldworkers, and activists, as well as writers, filmmakers, and songwriters—are among those whose work lives on Folkstreams. "One of the ways we made Folkstreams appealing," writes the site's founder and curator, Tom Davenport, "was to treat the filmmaker as an artist, an 'auteur.' The films we selected for Folkstreams are not clips of performances ... but documentaries that have a story, and in the best of them, give something of the catharsis that art conveys. The goal of many filmmakers on Folkstreams," Tom says, "is not to make money, but simply to touch another person's heart."

Some folklorists have separate but integrated careers as artists and performers. Karen "Queen Nur" Abdul-Malik is a nationally known storyteller, who also works as a public folklorist for the Perkins Center for the Arts in Moorestown, New Jersey, and has emceed the National Heritage Fellowships awards ceremony. Based at the University of Missouri, Anand Prahlad brings together scholarship, creative writing, and public folklore. He is the editor of the three-volume *Encyclopedia of African American Folklore*,⁴ as well as a poet, creative nonfiction writer, editor, scholar, songwriter, and musician. In the Columbia, Missouri, community, he founded "Poets-in-the-Schools," a program that arranges for poets to teach poetry to elementary students. He also works with the New Media Network project, which helps disadvantaged teenagers learn photography and videography and to display their works in local galleries.

Dr. Kay Turner created and toured with the lesbian rock band Girls in the Nose. She brought her artistic sensibility and approach to bear on her imaginatively written and edited books—*Beautiful Necessity: The Art and Meaning of Women's Altars*⁵ and *Transgressive Tales: Queering the Grimms*⁶—as well as to her public programs at the Brooklyn Arts Council. For instance, she turned the 100th anniversary of the Williamsburg Bridge into a public folklore project, and invented a "Croning" ritual at the meetings of the American Folklore Society, during which women of a certain age are hilariously inducted into a "secret society" of female folklorists over age 50.

The 2007 book, *They Called Me Mayer July: Painted Memories of a Jewish Childhood in Poland before the Holocaust*,⁷ a collaboration between folklorist Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett and her father Mayer Kirshenblatt, is a stellar example of a folklorist working at the

intersections of scholarship, fieldwork, activism, and artistry, while incorporating personal history. Mayer ran a paint shop in Toronto in the 1960s, when Barbara was growing up. Barbara and her husband, the painter Max Gimblett, were convinced that Mayer was capable of painting his memories of his childhood in the village of Apt in Poland, which he so often spoke about. But it wasn't until 1990, at age 73, that he painted his first work, depicting the kitchen in his childhood home. For the next 15 years, he continued to paint details of his daily life. Bringing together scholarship, ethnography, and activism to recall the often neglected robust life in *shtetls* and towns of Eastern Europe before the Holocaust, *They Called Me Mayer July* integrates the artistry in Mayer's paintings with Barbara's carefully selected taped interviews, resulting in a compelling, beautiful book, itself a work of art. Its purpose in part: to assure that future

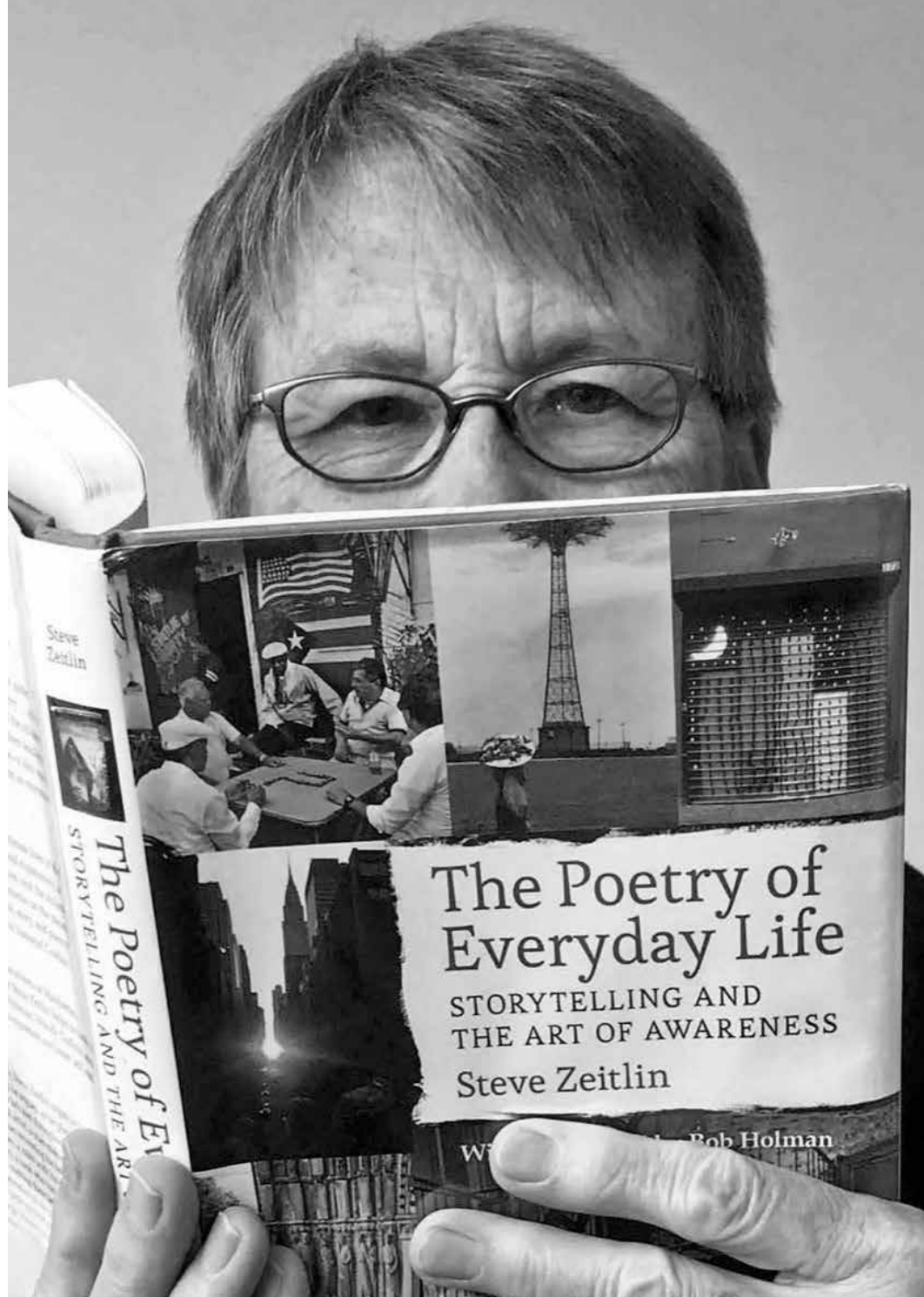


generations might remember more about how Jews lived than how they died.

Throughout the field, curatorial creativity plays a major role in the collaboration between folklorists and traditional artists who seek to shift the paradigm, reframe, and in some cases, reimagine traditional arts for new audiences. In other artistic disciplines, the role of presenter is often to simply introduce a performance and let the art speak for itself. When folklorists present, we often need to contextualize the performance and make it relevant to a new audience, a process that requires an in-depth collaboration with the artist. At City Lore, we describe ourselves as tradition-inspired, not tradition-bound.

Emphasizing the artistry brought by folklorists to the profession may help us to answer some of the toughest questions put to us as folklorists. Are we part of an “extraction culture”? Do we need to decolonize folklore? Yes, we need to rethink some of our approaches, but I have never been one to suggest that I am in the field solely to change the world. If that had been my goal, I could have chosen politics or social work. I cherish the role of creative collaborator, partnering with folk and community-based artists who choose to work with us in the service of beauty. I am in the field because I serve in all the roles in the diagram—scholar, documentarian, activist, and artist/writer—and because I love to do this work.

The closer we come to bringing together these four sisters—scholarship, fieldwork, activism, and artistry—the mind, body, heart, and soul of our work, the more folklore can do justice to the people and communities with whom we collaborate. ▼



Naima reading *The Poetry of Everyday Life*. Photo courtesy of Naima Rauam.

Notes

1. Zeitlin, Steven J. 2016. *The Poetry of Everyday Life: Storytelling and the Art of Awareness*. Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press.
2. Ben-Amos, Dan. 1971. “Toward a Definition of Folklore in Context.” *Journal of American Folklore* 84 (331): 3–15.
3. Wagner, Paul and Marjorie Hunt. 1984. *The Stone Carvers*. Distributed by Direct Cinema.
4. Prahlad, Anand, ed. 2006. *The Greenwood Encyclopedia of African American Folklore*. Westport, CT: Greenwood Press.
5. Turner, Kay. 1999. 1999. *Beautiful Necessity: The Art and Meaning of Women's Altars*. New York: Thames and Hudson.
6. Turner, Kay, and Pauline Greenhill. 2012. *Transgressive Tales: Queering the Grimms*. Detroit: Wayne State University Press.
7. Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, Barbara, and Mayer Kirshenblatt. *They Called Me Mayer July: Painted Memories of a Jewish Childhood in Poland before the Holocaust*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

Steve Zeitlin is the founding director of City Lore in New York City and the author of *The Poetry of Everyday Life: Storytelling and the Art of Awareness*. Photo by Tom Pich.



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