

## Editors' Introduction

A pivotal scene in Joel and Ethan Coen's 2000 film *O Brother, Where Art Thou?*<sup>2</sup> finds four Depression-era southerners—three white escaped convicts and an African American blues guitarist straight from the crossroads—barging through the door of WEZY, a crumbling radio station resting on a nondescript southern farm road. They have money in mind, and they have heard WEZY will pay cash to musicians willing to commit their songs to wax. The ruckus of their entry brings forth the station manager, a blind man who assures them that the rumors of payment were true. “You boys do nigger songs?” he barks. Flustered, but undeterred, the convicts lie, “Well, sir, we are Negroes, all except for the fellow that plays the guitar.” “Well, I don’t record nigger songs,” the manager retorts, “I’m looking for old-timey material. Folks can’t seem to get enough of it.” In an abrupt turn, the convicts reply that they can deliver the goods: “We ain’t really Negroes, all except for our accompanist.” They sing their song and get paid.

Rife with stereotypes of southern working-class culture, the scene from *O Brother* nevertheless offers a useful parable of the relationship between the bearers of folk culture and those that collect, study, and sell it. It traces in microcosm the recent history of the academic love affair with vernacular culture. Historians have been fascinated with folk culture at least since the rise of the New Social History in the sixties and seventies. Collections of folklore, folk song, traditional dance, and material culture offered historians windows into the culture and consciousness of those who left few written records. They opened up new ways of unearthing the past, new subjects of study, and new ways to talk about power and politics. Many scholars diligently mined folklore collections to enable yesterday’s subaltern to speak to us today. To paraphrase the WEZY manager, folks couldn’t seem to get enough of vernacular culture.<sup>1</sup> Slowly, new scholars began to challenge the veracity of folklore

*Radical History Review*

Issue 84 (fall 2002): 1–5

Copyright 2002 by MARHO: The Radical Historians’ Organization, Inc.

## 2 *Radical History Review*

collections by examining the collection process itself. Collectors often went to the field with their own desires and a priori assumptions about the folk, visions that inevitably complicated and compromised what they collected. Thanks to a still growing body of work critiquing the politics of folkloric and anthropological fieldwork, scholars have become increasingly sophisticated and self-reflexive in their approach to folklore material.<sup>2</sup> The blind station manager—a collector who knows what he wants even though he cannot see what is in front of him—is receiving important, if overdue, attention in recent scholarship.

Yet the parable from *O Brother* also presses beyond academic self-reflexivity to portray “the folk” as conscious, rational ‘courtiers’ of collectors’ attention, power, and capital. Aware of their musical traditions, the characters use them to great advantage, twisting their culture to fit the station manager’s desires, to gain media access, and to put money in their pockets. Such conscious and often contrived use of vernacular culture by informants is vital to understanding the history and politics of everyday culture, the long-term effects of cultural commodification, and the ongoing challenges of writing cultural history. Yet artists’ savvy, uneven deployment of folk culture during encounters with outside authorities (be they corporate, academic, or governmental) has often fallen through the cracks between those studies claiming the privileged place of tradition and those declaring that collectors got it wrong.

This special issue of *Radical History Review* presents work that attempts to live up to *O Brother*’s challenge by exploring ways in which those identified as bearers of vernacular culture used this designation as a source of cultural and political power. Interested in maintaining traditions that helped define alternative or oppositional identities, many folk artists nevertheless understood the traditional arts as important sources of cultural capital that could be saved, invested, or spent according to their changing social needs and desires. These “uses of the folk” went far beyond campaigns to save cultural traditions from the onslaught of modernity. The value twentieth-century nation-states, scholars, and public institutions placed on folk traditions as sources and evidence of national identity also provided folk informants important leverage within political and economic debates. Communities used authorities’ requests for folklore to assert their own identities and get their voices heard within national and international debates.

Two featured articles explore the attempts of federal governments in Haiti and postrevolutionary Nicaragua to develop and control exhibitions of national folk dance. In each case, the state promoted regional dance traditions as evidence of intrastate solidarity as well as a national heritage born outside of United States political and cultural influence. Kate Ramsey examines a prescient moment in the reformation of the Haitian nation-state following the withdrawal of U.S. troops in 1934. Traditional indigenous dance, deeply intertwined with “voodoo” religious practices, became both a state-sanctioned representation of Haiti’s unique cultural heritage and an anathema

to government and Catholic officials interested in dispelling stereotypes of Haitian primitivism. Ramsey traces the political struggle over the meaning and visibility of sacred dances within Haiti, while never losing sight of the actions and interests of the indigenous population. As state forces attempted to strip official folk dance performances of even “one ritual note,” indigenous dancers repeatedly accommodated the changing letter of the law while continually finding ways to salvage spiritual meaning from the dances. Katherine Borland examines a similar revival of folk dance in Nicaragua during the 1980s Sandinista government. The marimba, a folkloric dance historically associated with the Masaya region, became central to the national revival, and various groups purportedly reproduced the authentic dance of the region. As Borland aptly demonstrates, these developments forced Masaya residents into a troubling conundrum: while they claimed that their local troupes better represented Nicaraguan traditions than did urban art-house influenced troupes, they found that these appeals to authenticity limited their creative freedom to change and develop the traditions on which they drew. Borland situates the folk dance revival within a complex network of demands and influences, charting how Masaya dancers tried to reconcile their need to maintain a distinct regional identity with their desires to be full participants in the national dance community.

Jordanna Bailkin’s “Radical Conservations: The Problem with the London Museum” and Adina Back and Sally Charnow’s interview with Steve Zeitlin, executive director of City Lore, both consider questions of authenticity and the folk in an urban context at either end of the twentieth century. Bailkin’s account of the opening of the London Museum in 1912 narrates a set of public debates about a new kind of folk museum, one that collected the material of urban domestic life and welcomed ordinary citizens into its halls. The London Museum created a public institution where “every visitor was also a potential donor.” Given the museum’s emphasis on the artifacts of domesticity, however, debates about its collections and audience inevitably raised questions about the role of women in civic culture. In an era when suffragettes brought their unruly activism into museum galleries, the London Museum reflected complex debates over gender and citizenship in a changing society. In addition to questioning the role of women at the London Museum, commentators also disputed which artifacts did, and did not, belong in a museum dedicated to the history and culture of London. In contrast, Zeitlin and his colleagues at City Lore take an expansive approach to defining New York folk life and steer clear of judgments about the “authenticity,” or lack thereof, of particular cultural practices. As a self-described “cultural activist,” Zeitlin seeks to preserve and present the stories people tell about themselves and the ways they tell them. Founded in 1986 and grounded in the disciplines of folklore, public history, and oral history, City Lore’s efforts to document the expressive cultures of New Yorkers past and present have included exhibits on “city play,” annual “People’s Hall of Fame” awards—an ongoing

#### 4 *Radical History Review*

program to identify and preserve endangered neighborhood places—and, most recently, an exhibit documenting the public memorials that sprang up on the streets of New York in the days after September 11, 2001.

In “Reflections” we asked three scholars from different disciplines to consider the ways in which folk sources have been approached in their particular fields and in their own work. The open format elicited varied responses, yet together the essays suggest the vital need for further interdisciplinary conversation. We must strive for scholarship that is both sensitive to the subtle ways folklore is enacted in people’s lives and critical of the legacy of silences that has resulted from scholars’ historical disinterest in venturing outside of their departmental enclaves. Folklorist Regina Bendix insists that scholars in her discipline have been at the forefront of interdisciplinary cultural studies. Many professional folklorists have worked both as researchers and as organizers of folk exhibits, festivals, and other public presentations. This double duty forced them to grapple with questions of mediation, ethnographic fieldwork, and public history well before scholars within more institutionalized fields caught interdisciplinary fever. Conversely, musicologist Ronald Radano finds that writing a history of the concept of “Black Music” entails not only going back to the primary sources, but overcoming the entrenched narratives of racial and musical difference that we have inherited from earlier generations of scholars. Even as methodologies have improved, the archive has preserved yesterday’s theoretical shortcomings, many having blossomed into widely distributed “common sense.” Historian Daniel Walkowitz discusses the necessity of charting an interdisciplinary common ground in his work with folklorists on English country dancing. Caught off guard by his collaborators’ apparent disinterest in the ways dance revivals have changed over time, Walkowitz also revels in the ways his partners find meaning in body movements, social gatherings, and a host of gestures and events that had not caught his eye. His reflection on the art of collaboration points to the exciting scholarship possible when scholars with different strengths find common cause in the uses of folk culture.

Our regular sections round out this issue of *Radical History Review*. In “Teaching Radical History,” Georgina Hickey and Peggy G. Hargis describe the “generation gap” they faced in their attempts to teach about structural inequality and social movements in the United States to students born and raised in the free-market optimism of the Reagan era. Honoring the activist impulses that drew them to teaching, Hickey and Hargis emphasize discussion over lecture and use a variety of materials to encourage students to question their assumptions, think critically, and perhaps even become social activists themselves. Gerald Shenk and David Takacs also seek to use their course on the social and environmental history of California to foster community responsibility and activism among students. Employing a Freirian “praxis pedagogy” based on self-reflection, study and discussion, and purposeful action, they require students to undertake challenging “Historically

Informed Political Projects” as a key element of the course. In our “(Re)Views,” authors consider the post–World War II rise of conservative political movements in the United States, notions of children and family in the nineteenth- and twentieth-century United States, recent works of popular history on the early U.S. republic, and a range of recent print and film explorations of Congo in the colonial and post-colonial eras. Of course, no issue would be complete without the incisive commentary of R. J. Lambrose in “The Abusable Past.”

—Karl Hagstrom Miller and Ellen Noonan

### Notes

1. This trend perhaps is best exemplified by Lawrence Levine’s use of folklore collections in *Black Culture and Black Consciousness: Afro-American Folk Thought from Slavery to Freedom* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977).
2. In anthropology, self-reflexive critiques of the discipline flourished in the 1980s. See, for example, James Clifford and George E. Marus, eds., *Writing Culture: The Poetics and Politics of Ethnography* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1986); Clifford, *The Predicament of Culture: Twentieth-Century Ethnography, Literature, and Art* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1988); Renato Rasaldo, *Culture and Truth: The Remaking of Social Analysis* (Boston: Beacon, 1989); and Johannes Fabian, *Time and the Other: How Anthropology Makes Its Object* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1983). A number of scholars made similar critical evaluations of the discipline of folklore, including, to name a few, Roger D. Abrahams, “Phantoms of Romantic Nationalism in Folkloristics,” *Journal of American Folklore* 106 (1993): 3–37; Regina Bendix, *The Search for Authenticity: The Formation of Folklore Studies* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1997); and Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, *Destination Culture: Tourism, Museums, and Heritage* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998).

