

Consultancy Report: Cultural Migrations

New York Folklore Society

September 8-9, 2017

On September 8 and 9, 2017, the New York Folklore Society held a convening of humanities scholars, artists, folklorists, and human service and health workers to explore issues of immigration and re-settlement in the context of Western New York. The convening took place at the Castellani Art Museum of Niagara University and included formal presentations, roundtable discussions, art making, and activities in the nearby communities of Niagara Falls and Lewiston.

The themes for the proposed September convening explored how migration across national borders reflects the conditions of an ever-changing world. The impacts of migration included the communication and sharing of cultural knowledge across geography and across ethnic and community boundaries. As contemporary folklore sits at the intersection of arts, humanities, and social justice, our goal was to examine some of the dynamics at play within the Buffalo/Niagara Region as regarding migration. Participants were invited to explore these issues from diverse perspectives through a New York State lens. The New York Folklore Society engaged in a lengthy planning process to plan the format, themes, and participants to be included. A planning committee comprised of members of the New York Folklore Society Board (Tom van Buren, Wilfredo Morel, and Julie Tay) along with folklore scholars from Western New York (Karen Canning, Ed Millar, and Christine Zinni) met frequently by telephone to plan the convening. In order to receive input from community members, NYFS received a planning grant from NY Humanities to discuss the program with members of Buffalo's newcomer communities as well as with potential partners. This meeting proved important in shaping both the artists' technical assistance workshop that took place on Friday, September 8th, and the artists' presentations that were embedded in community locations.

A goal of the convening was to involve community members, community scholars, tradition bearers, and folk artists on equal footing with academic scholars and public sector folklorists. While the committee had originally been focused specifically on contemporary migrations with newcomer communities arriving in the Niagara region, upon discussion it was determined that the convening should be expanded to include a Native American presence. The Tuscarora Nation has an important presence in the region, and the Tuscarora people were survivors of a forced migration in the nineteenth century. This inclusion of a Native American perspective was an important shift as it expanded the convening and provided a wider focus.

Topics/themes explored in the convening included:

- Micro-enterprise: focusing on area organizations and initiatives that work with newcomer and marginalized communities in the area of micro-enterprise and job training. Panelists included Dawne Hoeg of Stitch Buffalo, a non-profit focused upon providing opportunities for refugee communities to come together through textile arts; Ma Theint of Moon Lady Arts and Crafts (an entrepreneur and female business owner from Myanmar); Michelle Holler from WEDI/West Side Bazaar that serves as an incubator for micro-enterprise for recently resettled refugees; and Mirza Tihic, Professor of Entrepreneurship at Syracuse University who is himself a former refugee from Bosnia.
- Two panels on placemaking focused on changing neighborhood identities, rooted in the waves and influxes of immigration to the region. Place-making included both physical manifestations of place-making as well as place-making through the mechanisms of food and language. There were two placemaking panels. "Changing Neighborhood and Regional Identities" included Pat Standish of Community Action for Wyoming County; Thaw Yee and Danel Leong of the Karen Society of Buffalo; Amelia Blake of the Explore and More Children's Museum of Buffalo; and Bryan Printup of the Tuscarora Nation. The second panel had foodways and language as its focus and included Elizabeth Bloom, Professor of

Education at Hartwick College; journalist Ramin Ganeshram; Julie Tay of the Mencius Society for the Arts; restaurateur and Mexican culture worker Leonel Rosario; and foodways scholar Chandra Maracle.

- “Health services: Challenges and Initiatives” related to community and public health in newcomer communities, including access to culturally appropriate health care. Health issues were addressed in a panel comprised of Gamileh Jamil, the Executive Director of ACCESS WNY, a human service agency that works with the Yemeni population; Michael Martin of Native American Community Services, Wilfredo Morel of Hudson River Health Care, and Laura Trolino of the NYS Department of Health.

The New York Folklore Society’s goals for the convening were:

1. To examine whether this cross-disciplinary, community based approach is replicable or scaleable for application in other communities across New York State
2. To engage in preliminary community and network building in the Buffalo/Niagara region to build a stronger infrastructure for folk arts and folk cultural activities

To meet these goals, key programmatic activities were added to expand the program beyond seated panel discussions. These included;

1. An artist development workshop focused upon marketing and promotion that was specifically for traditional artists from the Buffalo/Niagara region, in collaboration with Arts Services Alliance of Buffalo.
2. A Thanksgiving Address by Bryan Printup (Tuscarora Nation)
3. A plenary address by Christina Pope of Welcoming America
4. Artists’ performances/presentations in community locations, including a demonstration of Turkish Ebru at the Castellani Art Museum and a tour of Goat Island in the Niagara River by Tuscarora scholar, Alan Jamiesen.

We positioned the meeting in Niagara to connect the symposium to work within Newcomer communities being undertaken by folklorists in Western New York. There are large communities of individuals from Somalia, Yemen, Iraq, Burma, Nepal, and other refugee populations reflecting the African diaspora. We also planned that this symposium will help with outreach to community groups prior to the AFS meeting in Buffalo. The planning committee viewed this conference/convening as a prelude to the AFS meeting in Buffalo and as a vehicle to raise awareness of the field of folklore and to identify potential participants for the 2018 AFS meeting.

The audience was diverse and numbered about 85. Included in the audience were members of community based organizations, students, professors from several different fields, public officials, and participants and family members of participants. While evaluations from participants were generally favorable, one criticism was that with such a diverse audience with diverse motivations, we were not able to fulfill the needs of any one sector. While NYFS had purposefully not styled this convening as an academic conference it was also not truly a community event and therefore was neither. While several audience members stated that this was a refreshing format, others were confused and unsure of the structure. As we look towards AFS in 2018, the issues around multiple audiences will be instructive as we aim to achieve robust local and community member participation.

The artist demonstration of Ebru and the tour by Alan Jamiesen were successful and well-received. The artists' workshop was not as well attended as hoped; this may stem from communication problems across wide distances as the workshop was organized by a Buffalo area organization. Again, NYFS learned important lessons about touring and community collaborations that will prove important for the AFS meeting in Buffalo.

Positive results of the convening include the importance of including the region's Native American population and the importance of including artists as true participants (not just as performers). We gained some valuable insights about how to reach

students. Importantly, we met future collaborators and participants in New York Folklore Society events and programs.