10 Lessons in Community Love

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10 Lessons in Community Love

This conversation engages one of folklore's foundational tasks: the recording, archiving, and sharing of the diversity of experiences and points of view that shape human experience. Modeling the practice of collaboration they advocate for the folklorist/documentarian, the authors Selina Morales and Maribel Alvarez explore through conversation a pedagogy of documentation from a critical racial justice lens. Moving across a spectrum from family stories to public folklore projects and reflecting on their deep roots in community organizing, they draw attention to the dynamics of power that impact whose stories are told and which assumptions of disciplinary knowledge are applied to theorizing documentation practices.

Keywords
AFS ETHNOGRAPHIC THESAURUS: Documentation, fieldwork ethics, public folklore, reciprocity, friendship, family narratives, social justice

HUMAN BEINGS ARE CONSUMMATE STORYTELLERS; and a great deal of us are also story-keepers. Preserving memories and caretaking of the *cuentos* and *sucesos* shared among families and communities are intrinsic to the Latinx[1] cultural experience of survival and everyday joy. As Latinx folklorists, we dig deep into these reservoirs of belonging to help inform our professional practices. In our practice of the ancient and necessary craft described by our profession as "documentation," we consider the role of the Latinx folklorist in the evolving tradition of collaborative ethnography. The *plática* below is conceptual and analytical, but its ultimate aim is activation. We learn together as we shine light on our work as public folklorists, women of color, and Latinas committed to antiracist, anti-oppression, and democratic practice. We believe that folklife methodologies include tools for liberation. The documentation work we highlight in this conversation leads us to suggest 10 working principles

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that can be helpful to both established and emergent folklorists, Latinx and others, interested in considering documentation as praxis—an embodied ethical exchange that is intentional and equitable, and seeks accountability in all phases of the process.

10 Lessons in Community Love

1. Cultural expressions are always embedded in contexts of power.
2. Accountability to one another and to communities leads our work.
3. There is always more than one story and more than one reality to be accounted for as we live our lives with others.
4. Methods and products are important but are not the end-all of our practice. Instead, commit to and prioritize emergent practices driven by collective decision-making.
5. Words are not the only means by which stories are told.
6. We have to make room for dissonant stories to co-exist in our families and communities.
7. What we do matters to real people.
8. Documentation could also be a tool to help communities and families sort out feelings or ascertain options before things get resolved.
9. Even difficult topics or points of view that are contrarian must be represented with dignity.
10. Documentation is relational; carry yourself into the process.

SELINA: Cultural documentation is the daily bread of folklorists—the reason many of us get up in the morning! There is so much joy in laboring to collect and enter the wisdom, wit, and grit of ordinary people into the annals of history. At the same time, as Latinx folklorists, we enter this professional fellowship fully aware that so many of the practices we love, and which have meant so much for our families and communities, have a checkered past. Documentation has been weaponized, used to make boundaries within and around nations, to justify and perpetuate racism and oppress communities. It has been used to identify and fortify the concept of the Other and to advance dominant narratives and variants of "truth." Many documentation efforts have been cast as noble: salvaging antiquities, recording humanity, and so on. None of these ideas motivate my work with documentation. I focus on collaborating with others to document community-based experiences that are relevant and important to them. I believe that working within one's own community to inquire about, name, record, and consider community knowledge is a way to flex muscles of self-knowledge and self-determination and to build relational power. Cultural documentation is organizing work.

MARIBEL: In other words, welcome to our world of paradox. We are folklorists, and we are Latinas, and sometimes the two identities seem like such a perfect match (we are, after all, consummate traders of stories). But at other times, upon closer review of the disciplinary conventions, it feels so incongruent to, in the famous words of Audre Lorde, work with "the master's tools" (Lorde [1984] 2007:110). There's no doubt that the disciplinary cloth of documentation, as you lay it out, is rather frayed. Some aspects of it come from a tradition that prioritized a desire for discovery, for exotic fact-finding missions. Certainly these impulses included missions of empire and

conquest. I have found the work of historian Patricia Seed in her book *Ceremonies of Possession in Europe's Conquest of the New World* useful to understanding how cultural practices emerge out of contexts of power, but also resistance (1995). She shows how each imperial power—the Dutch, Portuguese, English, French, and Spanish—used rituals, aesthetics, and ceremonies derived from their particular cultural assumptions to announce their arrivals and conquest. Some favored pageants, some made maps, and the British liked hedges and gardens as demarcations. But the story is more complicated than simply saying that culture flows from above as a tool of oppression. It does that and something else. In the colonial record, we also see present, even under harmful conditions, a subtext about humanity, about the need to beautify and embellish. This is both the anchor and the contradiction of folklore. Paraphrasing folklorist Henry Glassie, in essence, the question of early ethnographers was: Are other people, people? (Glassie 1995:575). In the early days of anthropology, you see, on the one hand, the rise of a morbid curiosity about the Other, the stranger. But at the same time, there was recognition that, maybe, just maybe, in faraway places, there were people who lived fully, but differently. And all were human. That may sound like a really low bar, nothing to be celebrated. But in the context of the times, this incipient science of human diversity made a contribution, albeit imperfect and complicit with power. Both of these impulses are part of the folklorist's genealogy. At the same time, there were forms of documentation and community acknowledgment that were already present in many aboriginal communities. These practices were often undervalued or ignored. The oral tradition, for example. And these are still questions that haunt folkloristics: Documentation for whom? By whom?

SELINA: Yes. The "for whom" question is really critical, and oh so complicated. While I want to talk about accountability, I think we must first take on the relationship between documentation and power. As a public folklorist, I've felt proud stating that my folklife methodology has been to work with communities to document themselves for themselves, assuming that the question of "for whom" could be solved by simply removing the expectation of the outsider's gaze and valuation. But systems of power cannot be subverted so easily. And sometimes this power can be harnessed for community-identified goals. During my time as the Director of the Philadelphia Folklore Project (PFP), we engaged in an initiative with the small community of Tibetans in Philadelphia. After building beautiful relationships between our staff and members of the Tibetan Association of Philadelphia, we introduced the idea of collaborating with community members to document what they called their "Tibetanness." The Tibetan Association of Philadelphia requested that we create an exhibition that would be open to the general public. At first, I pushed back, gently. Perhaps there was a misunderstanding of PFP's intentions. I reiterated that there is no required public component of this documentation effort; what is most important is that a community learns together and grows from the learning. The Tibetan Association of Philadelphia then made it clear to me that documenting folklife was a powerful act of protest against China's attempted cultural genocide. They wanted to make a public statement: we are here, and our culture matters and gives us power.

MARIBEL: Oh, so they wanted to leverage the power of the institution to bring visibility to their cause and existence. Your initial instinct was right and just, wanting to avoid

exacting a tax of visibility from them, but their response showed you that they, too, were savvy readers of power and its uses. Let's agree then, for the sake of constructing together a pedagogy of ethical documentary practice, that we will begin with this idea, principle #1: **Cultural expressions are always embedded in contexts of power.** Beauty or wit cannot be taken at face value; they are always manifestations of a social dynamic and often, of a social struggle too. Our job is not to "protect" people from power, but to help illuminate the power dynamics so that the people we work with can act upon their worlds (and in their interactions with the institutions we run) in full command of their capacities. Mapping the flow of these relationships, or practicing the due diligence of asking who is doing what, where, when, how, and why is the first lesson I would teach an emergent Latinx folklorist.

SELINA: Yes, this diligence is our responsibility.

MARIBEL: Responsibility to the community should be the North Star of everything we do as folklorists. I know this is true and universal across our profession. It is interesting, though, that in the context of Latinx life, responsibility is a concept tied to notions of love. It is not legalistic, a "rule" one must comply with only. In her foundational text, *Methodology of the Oppressed*, Chela Sandoval devotes a whole chapter to "love as a hermeneutics of social change" or what she cleverly calls "a decolonizing *movida*" (Sandoval 2000:139). In other words, by "movida," I think Sandoval means the ways people of color maneuver the terrain of being professional ethnographers/folklorists, sometimes two steps removed from our own communities of origin by virtue of our academic credentials, and also as participants of our own destinies bound up with our "gente." She tells us in that essay how Latina/Chicana theorists like Gloria Anzaldúa, Emma Perez, Cherríe Moraga, along with other key theorists of color, understand love as a "breaking through" from whatever controls, in order to find understanding (an intellectual truth) and community (the affective place where we go to recharge). But interestingly, some of us encounter these critical lessons in more private spaces before we experience them as part of our formal academic training. As Latinx women, documenting our existence and establishing a record of our community's presence on the land, on history itself, is almost a birthright. We are "responsible" in a personal, communal, but also very much a familial sense. I think that sets us up really nicely to talk about family.

SELINA: We have both made efforts to hear stories from our families and have described to one another being eager to utilize our folklorist tool kits to learn more about ourselves and our families' histories, and also to amplify the voices of our own communities and their experiences. This has been essential training, and essential living, for me. In 2000, I started documenting my grandmother's life as a healer in Puerto Rico, the Bronx, and Orlando. And when I go back to review my MiniDVs, tapes, or .wav files, I can now appreciate how her stories were always changing. When I would sit down to record her stories formally, she would tell one version of a story; that same story would change if we were sitting around the kitchen table cooking. When I was 18 years old, trying to record the "truth of our people," I found it very frustrating. As I've gotten older, I've incorporated these contextual tellings into my methodology (and, of course, can recognize that there is no absolute truth floating in the ether, but only the

truth that binds us to memory and family). I love to invite other family members to come around and listen in. That is when the stories become more animated, and the main points or the moral of a story shifts and changes, depending on her audience. When the family gathers to listen in, not only are the stories better and richer, but they also do their good job. They have helped my family—my cousins, siblings, and myself—build our own sense of power and self-knowledge. They train us to determine for ourselves who we are and what matters to us. I have observed, over decades, the impacts of those sessions on my family. Because of these long observations, I believe in the mutual impact of this work, and am committed to maintaining and fortifying the storytelling practices and documentation processes within communities.

MARIBEL: This is beautiful. The depth and texture that you have brought to this family project is pretty remarkable. I think we need to uplift more models that demonstrate how the *recording* of the story and the *thinking* about the story go hand in hand. There are precedents in feminist ethnography that teach us about listening, co-authorship, and the difficulties of reconciling truths that are painful to record, especially around family dynamics. I am thinking, for example, of that incredible essay from the early 1990s by folklorist Elaine Lawless, with the heart-wrenching title "I Was Afraid Some-one Like You . . . an Outsider . . . Would Misunderstand" (1992). She tells the story of a woman she had interviewed and formed a real bond with, a deep, well-oiled friendship. Lawless went to extremes to make sure the book published from this and other women's source materials reflected accurately what *they* had said. But as the folklorist "author" of the book, she did not extend that same care to consulting with her co-narrators on their opinions about the interpretations the folklorist reached. When her close friend read in the book one particular editorial assessment of a decision she had made relating to her marriage and family dynamic, she wrote to Lawless rebuking her forcefully for "not understanding." Lawless' radically honest account of this painful incident gave rise to an entire new focus on what she termed, and the field of folkloristics largely accepted, as "reciprocal ethnography." At the heart of it all was the realization on the part of the folklorist of how the role of the ethnographer affects and informs the work that she produces. I am curious. How did you negotiate, as the "editor" collector of stories from your grandmother, how you interpreted the reasons for her multiple versions? Where did you situate yourself as co-creator of meaning in that intimate, loving, but perhaps dissonant narrative?

SELINA: My life lived is a record of hers. *¿Cierto?* When Jon Kay invited me to include a chapter in his volume on folklore, art, and aging, he intended for me to write about my then-octogenarian *abuela*. The stories I shared were of the two of us, aging together. I have recorded her stories as a college student, while learning the family trade of making *remedios*, on the eve of my wedding, and during my pregnancies. My context so clearly influenced her tellings; while she was happy to "play along" with my academic efforts, she had her own agenda of addressing me (comforting me or attending to my life transitions) and shaping my understanding of the world. After all, having grown up at her knee, she is my caretaker and my teacher. I cannot separate her life story from mine. The dissonant narratives, as I shared earlier, were upsetting as I tried to fit my work into the academic models that I had in front of me

at the time. They were also familiar, the telling and renewed-telling of the same story is common in a family. As a student, when I encountered "reciprocal ethnography," I felt more at ease with what I already knew (and was unsure of how to honor) as "being in community" and "being accountable to that community." Let's call out this theme as principle #2 in our pedagogical road map: **Accountability to one another and to communities leads our work.** Starting my career with family by my side allowed me to develop an expectation of accountability and care in the documentation of folklife. As well, a grounding in family gave me an understanding of the multi-vocal and multi-dimensional truths for which we advocate.

MARIBEL: Oh, so rich in meaning! Thank you. In Latinx womanist work, there are certainly path-breaking methodologies like *testimonios* and *pláticas* that had to fight for recognition in the academy (Perez and Cantú 2022). Of course, in this regard, we are grateful for the anthology *Telling to Live: Latina Feminist Testimonios* (2001), edited by the Latina Feminist Group, and before that, my own learning was greatly influenced by the edited volume by Gloria Anzaldúa called *Making Face, Making Souls/Haciendo Caras: Creative and Critical Perspectives by Feminists of Color* (1990). Memoirs and women's *conversaciones* (sometimes even *chisme* or *mitote*) have taught us so much. For example, in autobiographical accounts, we can hear women editing their stories as they go along, owning fully their enunciations in a flexible creative space, never one-dimensional. This is what you did with your grandmother's stories: notice how the passage of time edits the narrative a little bit closer to how memory really works, in zig-zag mode. This modality of retelling and editing stories militates against what in a linear narrative may be called coherence. Your grandmother, in a very natural way, was reminding us of what I think becomes principle #3 of our pedagogy of documentation: **There's always more than one story and more than one reality to be accounted for as we live our lives with others.**

SELINA: I do think she would agree with this principle. Her bright, mischievous spirit reserves the right to change the narrative and thus reality. My fear in this work with her has always been writing her into coherence, turning her slippery tales into straight lines. She's taught me to ask again, listen well, and to leave room to be surprised.

MARIBEL: The commitment to narrative coherence has to be acknowledged as a mentalist, hierarchical mandate that tells us to "tidy up" and disregard what doesn't fit the needs of mastery. The instruments of storytelling do not always work in our favor to facilitate open-ended stories. The conventions of documentation we are taught tend to favor telling as accomplishment: we "got it" is a common expression among documentarians. That captured text then becomes the product that you work with, or if you have multiple texts, you lay them out to ask how one story speaks to the other. But in some cases, we find that the stories do not add up, that rather than becoming manageable "textual artifacts" that we are able to manipulate, the stories come to us more in the form of energy fields, shifting and challenging us to shift in turn. I am fond of the way in which Meredith Abarca enacts this methodological insight in her work collecting stories from her mother in the kitchen. The book is called *Voices in the Kitchen: Views of Food and the World from Working-Class Mexican and Mexican*

American Women (2006). Abarca takes the analytical bull by the horns—she declares the lived wisdom of her working-class mother, *tías*, and *comadres* as "culinary philosophies" and invokes Latina women's kitchen talk as method with sophisticated rigor, a practice she calls "*charlas culinarias*."

SELINA: We are now moving, by the natural flow of our conversation, into a new arena that I think represents principle #4: **Methods and products are important but are not the end-all of our practice. Instead, commit to and prioritize emergent practices driven by collective decision-making.** The documentarian wants or needs to see "a thing" emerge from their efforts. I know part of it is also tied to professional validation—we went, we interviewed, we listened, we wrote, we published. But you and I know that in those *charlas en la cocina*, there were important things that probably never made it into the book, right? Let me loop back to something you said: I like thinking about these textual artifacts as energy fields. My research has me considering how to document metaphysical artifacts and knowledge. Recognizing the movement in text and intent is helpful to me. *Gracias*. Can you say more about the dynamic between text and intent in your efforts to document your family stories?

MARIBEL: Certainly. I think you are bringing attention to something very important when you introduce the notion of "product" and the ways our learning as Latinx folklorists have benefitted from an engagement with a metaphysics of place and tangible things. Maybe that is the essence of principle #5: **Words are not the only means by which stories are told.** Let me share this personal note. I left Cuba when I was 7 years old and returned when I was 32. In my grandmother's house in Cuba, there were boxes that my father had left behind: boxes that no one had opened in 25 years, full of photographs, letters, telegrams, and holiday cards. I found my father's last business card, from 1969, that said "*Enrique Alvarez, Plomero*." Even in the humidity of the Caribbean, everything had survived. When I stepped out of the plane, the people greeting me only remembered me as a 7-year-old. And I remembered the place in the ways a 7-year-old remembers. There were so many conversations that followed with family members and neighbors. But for me, the depth of learning came from the material objects in the house. It was surprising how many pieces of my childhood memory were affixed to objects. Due to family circumstances, I had to make lots of interpretations about those objects without the benefit of actual family testimonials. This was tricky. I knew I was reading signs from the vantage point of a 30-something feminist educated in the United States: very different from how my mother would have made sense of things in her own time. As expected, I found good things that made me proud, such as my grandmother's political activism. There were signs of tender moments between my parents, but there were also bits and pieces that I found confusing. The objects were a gift of memory, but they were also little doorways that led to proverbial rabbit holes.

SELINA: There is something about the assumptions of what makes a "text" in performance theory that doesn't quite capture the temporal dynamics that we're exploring here. How can we record the shifting nature of these memories? Since 2006, many of us have been using smartphones (and now smart watches). Before this time, we

had to get specialized equipment to document and record. I am curious about how having access to recording technology—digital camera, video recorder, and voice recorder—all connected to a communication device, impacts any popular worry about safeguarding our cultural heritage. So much more is documented than just 10 years ago.

MARIBEL: I think you are pointing at a connection between process and product that we have yet to explore in greater depth in our field. I think everyone largely agrees that changes in technology have ushered in a new era for documentarians of all sorts—folklorists, journalists, filmmakers. But I get the sense that your comment has more to do with the implications for justice and equity. Can you say more about that?

SELINA: I gave a workshop on cultural documentation recently, opening it with a question about how a participant's community documents and communicates about itself. What are the ways that people are documenting and learning from each other? We have much to learn from communities; everyday people are experts in documentation and communications. How are we teaching documentation methodologies to upcoming folklorists? What is a "job well done" in documentation? What needs to be unlearned?

If our methodologies are not nascent from within our Latinx communities, how can our work truly be community-centered, impactful, and relevant to everyday life? We've had a discussion about taking the methods of our field to our families and sometimes being rejected or having the methods rejected: family members saying "You don't get to ask those questions" or "We don't talk about this." You and I share the experience of being at odds with what we've been trained to do (what we've committed to) and the cultural norms (especially around gender) that we've been raised with. We've had to negotiate this, coming up through families who raised a folklorist and similarly coming up through an academy that doesn't quite know how to engage with/make space for a culture-bearer as scholar.

MARIBEL: You make several critical points. I am moved and intrigued by how you and I keep coming back around to questions about the hard learning we do as Latinx folklorists even as we are often the ones doing the teaching. Maybe this co-learning is part of our co-creating with the communities we work with, but I think we need to acknowledge how this scenario of equity and inclusion, which upends the roles we play as well, carries some extra labor for the folklorist of color. Latina anthropologist Ruth Behar shared a heartfelt story many years ago about how, in the process of writing her award-winning ethnography *Translated Woman: Crossing the Border with Esperanza's Story* (1993), she had unintentionally alienated her parents by writing about them in ways they found disturbing. "I brought struggles from home into my ethnography," said Behar. But then she sought some redemption by traveling back to Mexico and gifting a copy of her book to her *comadre* Esperanza, whose life story the book told. She was pained to discover, once again, that there was no redemption to be found. Esperanza gave the book back to her (which was written in English) and told her she did not want to keep a text she would never be able to read. Paraphrasing Behar's reflections, I think we can say: sometimes folklore hurts.

SELINA: Yes, it is roses and thorns, because it is personal and intimate work. When you work with a community of which you are a member, there are boundaries and rules of engagement to consider. When we break the rules of our community, there are social consequences. Sometimes we choose to take this on; sometimes a misstep hurts our relationships. The organizing work that is at the heart of my practice also requires boundary crossing—building trust, being transparent, and working together is part of the method.

MARIBEL: I remember my very dear great aunt telling another family member that she found my questions about family history "insolent." My great aunt was a very sweet person, so her use of a word that implied a lack of respect or rudeness on my part was really hard for me. As folklorists, we know that there are consent protocols that we abide by in community. But when it came to the family, I felt like, "What do you mean I can't ask those questions?" I felt compelled to assert my right to know things. I believe many of us in the profession hold on to a basic belief that we do have a right to know because we have the right tools, or because we have received the proper training, or because we don't mean any harm. We think about our profession in a benevolent way. So the question of power in documenting stories can be troublesome because it rarely will appear as a power that aims to crush or steal, but a power that others should accept because it will do "them" some good. And sometimes this is true, but there are ways that communities use stories that are more like chatter or rumors, or social ways of "thinking out loud" without fixing any single narrative about themselves. I suppose I am now articulating the truth of principle #6 for our pedagogy: **We have to make room for dissonant stories to co-exist in our families and communities.**

SELINA: Early in my career, I was drawn to museums and curating because through curatorship, one is offered an opportunity to document a multiplicity of experiences. Some of those neat packages of narrative could be exploded and explored simultaneously in a physical space, certainly including dissonant stories. For me, exhibitions helped to communicate and investigate the sensorial experiences of community life, and I found a satisfying way to do extratextual documentation.

One of my first exhibitions was an effort to document my grandmother's *botánica*. I interpreted it by creating an ethnographic exhibition about her store. For me, the goal of the work was not to make a museum exhibition (though my grandmother was quite thrilled by the formality of it all). The goal was to dive deeply into the assemblage of memories, spirits, ancestors, and materialities to understand the sensory saturation, to borrow Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimlett's idea, that existed within our family's *botánica* (Kirshenblatt-Gimlett 1998). And the only way to document this was to re-create the overlap of "stuff": the smells, the sounds, the gaze of the statues, the juxtaposition of the colorful candles, the pictures of my family. All of that was a way to document and to more deeply understand my grandmother's use of aesthetics to heal others during a moment in her life. The most important moment of this massive exhibition project came when my *abuela* visited the show on opening night; she silently walked around the gallery, and I heard her say under her breath "That's right." In her affirmation, I heard that what I had done mattered to her. And her affirmation meant the world to me.

MARIBEL: I have always found intriguing the ways people we normally would consider outside of the proper roles of curation express their own aesthetics of what should be included, highlighted, or omitted in documentation. For example, when I ran a community gallery in San Jose, California, the space had a public face toward the downtown arts district, but it was also located at the edge of several working-class, immigrant neighborhoods. A lot of Mexican and Central American women would step into the gallery as they made their rounds around the neighborhood, often pushing strollers with babies. I always remember being educated by them about the things they considered exciting in a gallery setting. Their interpretative lens was different than that of the typical middle-class gallery visitor. Many times, the things that they found most interesting were paintings or sculptures that provided just enough leeway for them to see themselves in the story. We began to blow up photos that were taken by kids from the neighborhood, and we posted them on the outside of the gallery of the building as a way of saying to the community that that was their space. This simple act, which is so basic on one level, became an important marker of the ways in which this art space was embraced by the community. As Latinx people, we get so used to accepting that certain spaces and certain forms of acknowledgments are not forthcoming for us. These occasions are humble reminders of what I would now call principle #7: **What we do matters to real people.**

SELINA: This conversation has me thinking about meeting communities where they are and building up relationships in ways that matter, ways that are most relevant to our shared needs. Documentation is a box of *recuerdos* in the attic, the retelling of a story just heard down the street, snaps of local kids at play posted to Instagram, the interplay of colors and incense on an altar. My Latinx feminist folklore practice values these community documentation methods: ways of being and knowing, of remembering and passing on.

MARIBEL: I love how you describe this. I want to bring up another tension I have experienced in my work: between documenting painful and happy narratives. There is a tendency among storytelling enthusiasts to extol "hero" narratives that push past challenges and arrive at happy resolutions. I like happy endings, but I wonder to what degree there is another principle here we are well-advised to keep in mind: #8: **Documentation could also be a tool to help communities and families sort out feelings or ascertain options before things get resolved.** How can we see the documentation process itself—messy as it may be—as community accomplishment? I'm thinking of the benefits of story in the process of community organizing, where we are likely to capture false starts and learning by trial and error. What is our responsibility to a balanced account of community documentation that tells both sides of human dilemmas: for example, the things that we love about our neighborhood and the things that are not so good: documentation as a teaching aid?

SELINA: I'm so glad you brought this back into the conversation. Your earlier comment about making space for dissonant stories is on my mind, and I think the theme we have been pursuing in this *charla*, building from scratch, through conversation, a syllabus for a decolonized documentary practice, what we have called here "documentation

as pedagogy," is a lovely way to name the potential of our field to play a supportive role in building up community power. I think that a skilled folklorist documentarian is also a skilled facilitator, working with members from within a community to guide the documentation processes. I advocate for community documentarians to work alongside folklorists in order to build out a wider understanding of an event, history, person, or art form. Like with my own family over time, there is much to learn through documentation that has long-lasting impacts. It is naïve and harmful to think that there is one way to document a story, experience, or work of art.

MARIBEL: I hear you articulating principle #9, which I think is core: **Even difficult topics or points of view that are contrarian must be represented with dignity.** When you apply the tools of our work to certain environments where there's rapid transformation taking place, you are going to get opposing points of view. Take, for example, neighborhoods undergoing gentrification. We want to aid in the fight of those who seek liberation, but the lives of folks are rarely so clear-cut and pure; we are always likely to encounter contradictions. I admire and want to lift up here as an example the work that our colleagues at Alliance of California Traditional Arts (ACTA) did in the community of Boyle Heights in Los Angeles. Their report on the extensive asset-mapping they partnered to co-lead in that community didn't shy away from acknowledging the complexity of perspectives that co-existed, even among people who shared markers of identity and social position (ACTA 2017). As Latinx feminist folklorists, we understand better than most the need to make room in our narratives for complexity and improvisation, but at the same time, we recognize power dynamics when we see them. We can't be "neutral" storytellers when one side speaks through a bullhorn while the other side can barely be heard through whispers. In the end, this challenge becomes for the folklorist a test of truthfulness and accountability.

SELINA: Again, we come back to accountability, and integrity. There is a need to take into account, engage, and interact with the counter-narrative and include it in order to document a fuller picture within a community. I think that engagement stands to have a huge benefit; it's a really difficult role.

MARIBEL: Could you say a little bit more about how you have seen this play out in your own work in communities, especially in Philadelphia? You are one of the leaders in the folklore field who has not been afraid to direct the tools of the trade in the service of community organizing. And yet, how do you balance competing voices, all of which may be authentically of the same community?

SELINA: Absolutely. When I was working at the Philadelphia Folklore Project (PFP), we engaged in a collaborative project to document the 2009 South Philadelphia High School boycott. The boycott was preceded by ongoing in-school violence against Asian immigrant students that mounted to a day-long series of attacks against these youth. The boycotting students worked with adult and youth allies to organize and analyze their situation. They ultimately brought a case to the Department of Justice demanding that the school be held accountable for the safety of their students. In 2009, during the boycott and the court case, news teams from CNN, Fox News, National Public Radio, and other places, swooped in and told the story for the youth. The

Philadelphia Folklore Project's intention was to collaborate with Asian Americans United (AAU) to reflect upon the traditions of organizing that were passed between adult allies and student organizers during this historic moment, and to work with the organizers (youth and adults) to document the events surrounding the boycott, in their own words and through their own curatorial process. Because the boycott and organizing were grounded in a community with decades of experience organizing, so many pieces were in place to start. The youth organized across three languages (Chinese, Vietnamese, and English), and two community documentarians followed the activities, snapping photos along the way. The allies to the boycotters included long-time AAU organizers, organizers from the Chinese, Vietnamese, and Cambodian communities, members of Victim Witness Services, lawyers, educators, and a multiracial coalition of youth. The bias attacks were racialized; Black students attacked Asian students—that's what happened, yet the group developed a strategic analysis: "It is not a question of who beat whom, but who let it happen."

The exhibition was curated collaboratively between AAU leaders (Ellen Somekawa, Joan May Cordova, and Helen Gym) and PFP staff (Debora Kodish and myself) through a community-engaged process that included more than 50 youth and adult participants. We chose to focus the exhibition on what led to the boycott, and on youth-led organizing and analysis, allyship, and adult accountability to children. As Ellen, Joan, and Helen wrote, the exhibition went "beyond the headlines about a groundbreaking civil rights case to document a community's fight against biased violence at a Philadelphia High School" (Somekawa, Gym, and Cordova 2012:18). The stories shared from the 2009 incident, as well as the community organizing that addressed bias violence and catalyzed a generation of community leaders, were contextualized within the history of integration of schools in Philadelphia. The tensions explored in the exhibit were not new. Our curatorial team felt accountable to the wider story.

The curatorial process was, itself, a pedagogy of documentation. The process of reviewing the photographs, the retelling of stories, and the renewed connections were all a part of witnessing and recording experiences of this moment. Counselors were available at all of the sessions where the students were engaged in conversations about the photo documentation of the boycott and related advocacy. They gave new testimony about their experiences, which, along with excerpts from oral histories conducted by Dr. Joan May Cordova, became the exhibition text. We also invited members from the wider community who participated in any way in the boycott to look at a rough draft of the exhibit: we literally put it up on the walls on copy paper, and said: "Come take a look, here's a clipboard, edit it, make changes. Tell us what you're curious about." And we were sure to invite African American community leaders to give us feedback in this way. Like this, we invited that counter dialogue directly into the exhibition process. We considered all feedback with sincerity. Of course, once the exhibition went up, there was pushback from some individuals in our own community. As a nonprofit organization, we were accountable to our wider community; folks came through and said: "You know you're only telling one side of the story here." We committed to having a dialogue with those individuals knowing our history, knowing the context, and having real relationships with those entering

our gallery. In the section focused on school integration in Philadelphia ("We've Been Here Before"), we had a table and chairs so we could sit down and talk about what went down. We could document these experiences too. It is critical that we maintain and model accountability to our communities. I am grateful to partners Debora Kodish, Ellen Somekawa, Joan May Cordova, and Helen Gym for holding this process with me and for being my teachers.

MARIBEL: I'm so glad that I asked you to tell us more because what you just presented is an incredible case study of exactly that complexity. I think one of the things that happens with documentation is that, by nature, it is product-oriented. A lot of messy things can happen in the process. Even if you end up with no product, or with a shitty product, or with a product that is not exactly what you expected, we know that incredible learning has taken place. How do we not edit out the wrinkles to use the messiness as a learning tool about the power of stories? I conducted an oral history interview once with a very distinguished member of the academy, a famous and amazing woman anthropologist, and all throughout the interview, each time we asked a question of great consequence, she would burst out laughing and chuckling. We couldn't hardly use any part of her interview on video because she was so self-deprecating, and yet so brilliant in inserting laughter in a way that was meant to intentionally point out how pompous the discipline was, how highly we thought of our work when, in fact, 9 out of 10 times, the "great achievements" of anthropology had emerged out of fumbles and equivocations. I learned so much from that experience and from the late *maestra* Jane Hill (2008), QEPD, about when and how we should declare a storytelling process or project completed—when the chuckling stops and we wrap a bow around "the thing that happened"? As the story of our Latinx communities evolves in this country, a narrative that is equal parts reality and fantasy or imagination, how will we live up to the task of accounting for our own sense of disorientation, bewilderment, and hope, *siempre al final de todo, la esperanza de un mundo mejor*?

SELINA: We live folklife. We light candles, we make altars, we put wooden spoons into boiling pots of beans and rice like our ancestors had done before us. We live this folklife with people. The work is not separate from who we are. Here is principle #10: **Documentation is relational; carry yourself into the process.**

In 2018, I had the great honor to travel to Santiago de Cuba with the Kulu Mele African Dance Ensemble, on the occasion of their fiftieth anniversary, to study a *pataki* through dance with *Ballet Folklórico Cutumba*. I spent 10 days as the group's cultural specialist and in-house interpreter. In a publication about the company's work, I reflected:

> When I agreed to serve as interpreter, I hadn't considered the emotional and spiritual impact the work would have on me. Each day, all day, I translated: greetings, instructions, steps, stories, corrections, revisions, song lyrics, postures. [It] was exhausting: arranging babysitters, ordering food, coordinating with the bus driver and all the music/movement/songs. Yet, I was energized. Something else very important was happening for everyone, and for me and *through* me. Joy, love, grace, passion, commitment, amazement, magic (literally magic), divination, unity and liberation

> coursed through everything we did, every step taken on the dance floor, every song sung by Cutumba, in batá lessons, as we drove to the monte, as we danced in unison at Ochún's birthday party, as we put our feet in the salty ocean. (Morales 2019)

When I tried to document the experiences of our trip for publication, I was overwhelmed by the feeling that the academic tools I had at hand were inadequate. The days in Santiago included lived folklife, experiences that were multi-dimensional, literally metaphysical. My record needed to center the loving relationships that formed on the trip, between myself and company members and with the spirit guides who chaperoned our work. The documentation I produced was in the form of a love letter between the main characters in the *pataki* that we studied, the *orishas* Ogun and Ochún. In writing, I imagined: How would Ochún recount our journey, using her love language, to Ogun? I carried my homegrown epistemologies into the practice of cultural documentation. When I re-read my fieldnotes and writing from that experience, I feel a sense of liberation and gratitude that comes from the enactment of our tenth principle. There are many gradients. Can you relate to this story? What has been a shining moment for you in cultural documentation?

MARIBEL: Thanks for bringing us back to gratitude. There are many aspects of our discipline worth challenging. The work of cultural critique can be taxing and somewhat somber at times. But there are moments of shining joy when the folklorist's tools are sharp and useful. A highlight of my career was visiting the tradition bearers of the Maine Indian Basketmakers, hosted by master basket maker Theresa Secord. I was commissioned by a philanthropic organization to write a documentary essay on the Native folk knowledge and practices that had been revived and were then sustaining the passing of tradition among the Wabanaki people of the Northeast. My fieldwork was one of total immersion with the community for several days. I knew nothing about Maine baskets or the Native communities of the region. It was winter, and it had snowed heavily. Coming from Arizona, I didn't even own a coat well-suited for that kind of cold weather. I loved the assignment, and except for a few email and phone exchanges with Theresa prior to the trip, I carried no assumptions. I am not saying we can ever achieve a state of disavowal and neutrality as documentarians, some state of unblemished innocence. But what I can tell you is that I went to Maine with a radical openheartedness, with a love and gratitude for the invitation that was not cerebral, but sat like a translucent lightbulb in the middle of my chest. I can tell you (and Theresa has confirmed this many times over the years) that as I arrived, that is exactly how the elders and tradition bearers saw me, and they, too, opened their hearts to and with me. I sat for hours with them attempting very clumsily to learn how to weave a simple basket, and as the hours passed, the conversations were wondrous, magnificent. We ate together, we laughed, we cried, we shared stories. And then I came home and wrote the essay (Alvarez 2007). I shared it with my friend Theresa for fact-checking and asked that she share it with the artists and elders. She told me that the community members loved the essay and felt it was one of the very few cases they had ever experienced when someone from outside their community understood so clearly and deeply their traditional way of life. I share this story not in the least to lift

myself up. God knows I have had my share of ethnographic bloopers and mistakes. But what I can say is that no matter what degrees you earn, academic credentials you don, or good intentions you have, at the end of the day, it is love for people, genuine radical love (not tolerance, not political correctness, not woke slogans) that people will read in your eyes, gestures, tone of voice, and manner of asking questions. If there is anything we can teach from our Latinx, feminist, school-of-hard-knocks experiences, let it be, simply, love for the folks (and love will lead us to compassion when we, or they, mess things up).

SELINA: We'll do this loving work together, Maribel. We will continue to document our folklife practice for one another, to build power and to maintain records of our creativity. We will hold up our cultural documentation traditions/methods as valid and valued. We will expand the idea of pedagogy of documentation for our students and alongside the communities to whom we are accountable. We will cultivate the process. *Ashé*.

Notes

1. SELINA: I use the term *Latina* or *Latin*x to describe myself, and *Latinx* to refer to my community when speaking in English and generalizing about Spanish-speaking residents of the United States. When referencing the same population in Spanish or Spanglish, I use the term *Latine* or *Latinx* interchangeably depending on who I am speaking with and the language we use to communicate with one another.

MARIBEL: I use the term *Latinx* as a bridge to align the points I share in this conversation with the term as invoked in the call for proposals for this special issue. I understand the term as a neologism that resonates with a new generation of English-speaking scholars living in the United States whose experiences are rooted in the lineage and heritage of people of Latin American descent and/or Indigenous to the Americas, but who are also forging new alliances across a range of social identities. When describing myself, I prefer the term *Latina*.

See Mayer-García (2022) in this issue of JAF, for a discussion of the terms *Latinx* and *Latine*.

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