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PUBLIC FOLKLORE, NATION-BUILDING, AND REGIONAL OTHERS: COMPARING APPALACHIAN USA AND NORTH-EAST INDIA

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All human communities maintain themselves with the formally instituted learning that constitutes the sociocultural system; but the ethnonotic plenum maintains itself, well below the level of formal learning, by the unconscious mimesis by which every member of the community, from infancy on, reperforms and incorporates it, from unconscious communications lodged in physical behavior and language itself to all the techniques of material facture, social interaction, and expressive arts....

Technologically extended, as by literacy, the ethnonotic plenum loses its immediacy, takes on the character of the extension, and forms the basis of social systems such as education, designed to shape consciousness to the medium in which all mimetic culture has been technologized. Fundamentally, however, all authentic human communities generate a noetic body undifferentiated by the complex rational forms, social, political, and technological, that extend, elaborate, and ultimately reflex it. (Cantwell 1993: 83)

Introduction

Why does public folklore matter in the 21st century? In the 20th century, in many places, folklore contributed to the creation of democratic public space because of its efforts to bring stigmatised, marginalised or threatened culture ways into public recognition, to include them in the repositories of national heritage, to nurture social transmission of threatened cultural forms, or, failing that, to preserve some record of vanishing cultural forms and to make them integral to national memory.

For instance, central to the mission of public folklore in the USA has been the effort to bring ‘folk’ cultures into the sphere of the national public, in an effort to empower the cultural voice of the structurally disempowered and to strengthen the fabric of national democracy by stewarding pluralism and civic empathy across class, racial, ethnic, regional divides. The organisational vehicles for achieving this mission have primarily been the archive, the museum and the festival. These goals and strategies continue to be important. However, this article joins others (Kurin 2002; Muthukumaraswamy 2002) in pondering new possibilities, venues and organisational vehicles for public folklore in the 21st century —
to build on the important achievements of the past while rising to emerging challenges. It is important for public folklore to continue to try to expand the national public sphere to include more diverse identities, voices and memories. However, the very fabric of public life is so threatened by current global forces that a more urgent mission is the reconstruction and reclamation of public life itself. I argue that public folklore has a unique role in this larger project.

This article attempts to look critically at the vehicles, venues and activities that folklore uses to achieve these goals. What are the emerging roles for new forms of participatory culture-making? How will they interrelate with the forms that have been so central in the past — the 'festival,' the 'archive' and the 'museum'? It goes behind the scene of the national public, to examine the political economic macrostructures from which this public sphere emerges. Crucial to this is the analysis of the shifting scalar relationships among the local, regional, national and global in the context of economic globalisation, and the effect of these scalar reorganisations on the prospects for the goals of 'cultural democracy,' which Kurin (2002) suggests should be central to public folklore in the 21st century. The utopian dream of the democratic nation-state is that it is founded in a public that is like a great open courtyard, accessible to all citizens. This is an enabling, but false dream, of course. The vitality and natural habitat of folk cultures are in local publics. Many layers of social, political and cultural barriers and gatekeeping separate these local publics from national publics. This paper attempts to articulate an analytic framework for understanding the 'public' in public folklore as a many layered, many chambered reality — with different challenges and tasks at different levels. It argues that regional publics are particularly powerful sites of intervention for public folklore in the articulation of local into national publics.

This paper grapples with these questions by comparing two regions - Appalachia in the United States and the eastern Himalayas in India — focusing on the state of Arunachal Pradesh.2 Both are areas that are stereotyped in their national mainstream as Other — 'backward,' 'violent,' 'underdeveloped,' 'tribal' in the worst sense. But, in the curious symbolic polarisation that constructs Others, both regions have also been seen as a kind of folkloric ideal — 'tribal' in the best sense, close to nature, isolated from the enervations of modernity, embodying the communal and uncommodified, carrying in local artistic traditions a non-reflective but powerful creativity that expresses some essential, primitive, timeless humanity. It argues that to reweave the civic and cultural fabric that integrates these regions into the national symbolic, one must look very closely at the scalar relationships and contradictions between local, regional and national publics. This might entail a different vision of the project of cultural conservation from that of socio-democratic ideologies of nation-building.

In the past, much of the resources and energy of public folklore came from nation building projects based on a social democratic vision — which used the power of the nation-state to redistribute monies from the central government out into the peripheries as a way to remediate inequality. For instance, in the United States, public folklore received crucial momentum from the New Deal federal programmes under the presidency of Franklin D. Roosevelt in the 1930s and 1940s, which combated economic depression and civil strife with huge outlays of central government money to increase employment, construct infrastructure and to build civic unity through public arts, photography and folklore.

The place of folklore in the constitution of the Indian national public is complex — reflecting the enormous cultural complexity and diverse historical roots of India’s nation-building project. I approach the Indian context with hesitation, because of my lack of qualification for these large realities. In this paper, I can only make a humble contribution by considering contemporary effects in Arunachal Pradesh of competing legacies of nation-building — especially the contradictions between the Gandhian, Nehruvian and neoliberal visions. For all his remarkable symbolic presence in international and national publics, Gandhi’s hope was resolutely focused on the nurturing of local publics with the goal of embedding culture and politics in locally sustaining economies — a sort of post-modern reclaiming of the unities of pre-modern, ‘folk’ culture. Nehru attempted to implement these cultural ideals through a centrally administered bureaucratic structure that had the contradictory effect of performing a sort of symbolic mumification of the Gandhian vision. These tensions were embodied in the colourful and contradictory person of the anthropologist, Verrier Elwin, who as Advisor for Tribal Affairs in Assam, was influential in the training and philosophy of the elite Indian Frontier Administrative Service for the North-East Frontier Agency (Elwin 1959).3 NEFA remained under central administrative control until it became the state of Arunachal Pradesh in 1987. Elwin’s 1957 book, Philosophy for NEFA, lays out a detailed vision for weaving folk cultural forms into many aspects of administration, education, economic development, social services, etc., and seems to continue to have some influence within the state.

Theoretical background

Public folklore has much to contribute, not just to the expansion of the public sphere, but to a regrounding of public creativity in the enabling conditions from which public culture springs, and on which it depends. Muthukumaraswamy says that the “true task of the folklorist...is to restore
his specialised idiom to communal, collective structures, which underlie speech, language and artistic expression" (2002: 3). These formative structures, which are before 'speech, language and artistic expression', constitute what Cantwell calls the 'marrow of culture' (1993) — that shared life-world that provides the creative powers from which the architectonic structures and metanarratives of public culture emerge — as bone arises from, and protects, marrow.

In a recent work, Herbert Reid and I locate this 'marrow of culture' at the nexus of body, place and commons (2000, In press). We argue that our ability to imagine ourselves as selves within collective structures, polities, cultural identities and non-human ecologies is fundamentally intertwined with the rhythms of everyday bodily engagement with particular places that, from childhood on, lay down habits of habitation — ways of orienting oneself within, and sustaining oneself from, a commons which enables and exceeds individual awareness. This is the realm of what Cantwell (1993) calls 'ethnomimesis' — the constant, restless mirroring in human sensation and thought of immediate, embodied engagement with human and non-human others that is a largely pre-symbolic medium out of which semiosis emerges. These semiotic/bodily processes sedent over time into what Cantwell calls the 'ethnonoetic plenum' — a dense, partially conscious accumulation of images, meanings and sensations of the particularities of direct engagements with human and non-human Others in particular places within the cycles of bodily and ecological time. I agree with Cantwell that this is 'the real stronghold of culture'. In my work, I would summarise it as the bodily enculturation of a 'sense of place' — the sedimentation of embodied experiences of self, things, others, out of the tangled metonymic linkages of intertwined stories in a shared medium of expression through local knowledge of local places and local events.

In its semiotic dimension, this process of habitation is largely a process of putting things in and out of context. Whether something is identified as food or toxin, home or threat, 'us' or 'them', depends on whether it can be understood as subsisting in a common matrix, of co-inhering in a common context. This semiotic process, I have elsewhere described as 'cosmogenesis' — the symbolic creation of the architectonic of meaning that turns the flatness of 'universe' into the proportionalities of 'cosmos', that allows things to nestle within each other, to co-inhabit, to be a matrix for each other, to make a 'place' out of neutral 'space', or to be cast out as anti-matrixial (Taylor In press b). In exploring this body/place/commons nexus over the last several years, Herbert Reid and I suggest that it is time to move beyond the 'linguistic turn' of the last several decades of social theory. The 'linguistic turn' locates the formative forces of culture in structures of language. Our work is part of what some have called a 'bodily' turn — rooting the formative powers of culture in kinesthetic, multi-sensory, intersubjective, existential structures of habitual engagements that are prior to, but secured of, and entangled in, linguistic structures. I argue that both theoretical trends can be fruitfully brought together in a turn to habitation and cosmogenesis as the foundational processes of culture (Taylor In press b).

In this theoretical framework, the crises of 'postmodernity' are more than a collapse of metanarratives. The very idea of metanarrative suggests that formative structures are primarily in external structures that uphold collective order — seeing only the articulated form of skeletons rather than the hidden, dynamic interdependence of living bone and living marrow in live bodies. We argue elsewhere that the crisis of public life under postmodernity is better understood as an assault on that 'marrow of culture' which carries the capacity for cosmogenesis. Economic globalisation can be understood as a massive assault of space upon place, a blighting of cosmogenetic capacities that creates what William Leach, in Country of Exiles (1999), calls a "vast landscape of the temporary".

In response, new kinds of social movements are emerging, which some have called 'globalisation from below'. The last two decades, in many parts of the world, has seen a burgeoning of grass-roots activisms focused on protecting local quality of life in local communities — often linking multiple issues of environmental and social justice metonymically into a holistic defence of place and local community. It is possible that, in their anti-globalisation efforts, these local militancies are 'scaling up' to form something of a global convergence of disparate movements into a broad social movement in defence of place. Grace Lee Boggs, long-time activist in African-American civil rights and Black Power movements, says that "place based civic activism" has "become so important to movement building in this period" because it is "unique in the way that it links issues" as it "provides opportunities to struggle around race, gender and class issues inside struggles around place" (Boggs 2000).

The place of folklore in the recovery of public space

Folklore has much to offer to efforts to reweave the fabric of public space. No other scholarly or applied profession has developed more skills in attending to the luminous particularities of the nexus of body/place/commons. If we put aside reified notions of folk culture as 'traditional', 'small-scale' or 'pre-modern', we can see it as the representation in dynamic local expressive traditions of embodied encounters with human and non-human others, through material livelihoods as they embed in the diurnal and annual round of ecological life. Even in situations where people are the most insulated by technology or class privilege from these embedding
bodily and ecological realities, they never wholly escape from being ‘folk’. For instance, the primate cycles of birth, death, generativity and the inevitable mimesis of living bodies facing, interpreting, smelling, fearing, touching each other still carry what Cantwell calls ‘irreducible cells’ of folk life even in the most mediated and dis-placed lifeways. In addition, many cultures that are labelled ‘folk’ and seen by the mainstream to be passively carrying on ‘traditions’ are cultures which have actively and flexibly nurtured local cultural creativity and agency as a way of manoeuvring through a disempowering political economic landscape – a kind of hyper-development of local cosmogenetic practices as survival tools in a chronically exilic existence. If there is a crisis of ‘place’ at the heart of post-modern culture, folklore brings a close knowledge of its vicissitudes.

How can folklore find the resources to take on these larger tasks of reclaiming public culture? Kunitz points to the fiscal and institutional difficulties of public folklore. In a study he did for UNESCO, he found that little public folklore was being done globally. In the USA, he finds academic programmes decline in numbers and public funding for culture is at very low levels (2002). This article compares two global regions to assess what undeveloped niches, roles, needs, funding sources might open up sturdier material and organisational bases for public folklore to engage these huge tasks in the recovery of place, commons and public space.

Civic audits of cultural capacity: A comparative analytic model

At the University of Kentucky’s Appalachian Center, we are struggling to develop analytic models to assess quality of life in the Appalachian region at many levels – including civic, cultural, ecological, economic, etc. The goal is to develop tools for community-based assessment of regional well-being in order to draw in the perspectives and needs of those who have been marginalised by chronic inequalities in this peripheralised region. Through our Common Knowledge Network, we are building partnerships with communities and NGOs for such participatory research within the Appalachian region. Parallel to this, we are beginning to develop a new programme of Global Regional Studies, with the goal of building international partnerships for comparative research on best practices for democratic regional planning – in the context of economic globalisation.5

The following gives an overview of a possible analytic framework for a comparative ‘regional civic audit’ of cultural capacity. Given the space limitations here, the following comparison of Arunachal Pradesh and Appalachia is very broad-brush. In the interests of presenting the broad outlines of such an analytic approach, it moves too rapidly over complex issues. I present it as a suggestive, rather than definitive example, of the sorts of comparisons that might be made in future, more systematic, comparative research. Such research would require interdisciplinary, international collaboration, because of the complexity of causal synergism among multiple political-economic, cultural and civic factors. Folklore needs to play a key scholarly role in such projects.

Appalachia

What are the resources and constraints affecting cultural creativity in the Appalachian region? If we examine the historical and macrostructural contexts to the contemporary situation, three factors stand out as particularly important.

First, the region has a remarkable heritage of creativity in folk arts and folklife from which to draw. Musical genres that are now seen as American national treasures have important roots in Appalachia – ‘bluegrass’, ‘American folk’, ‘country’, ‘southern rock’, ‘rockabilly’ (from ‘rock & roll’ and ‘hillbilly’ musical genres), ‘gospel’, ‘protest music’. Rich and distinctive regional traditions of music, story-telling, ecological knowledge, spiritual practices, deep genealogical and historical memory combine in an ‘ethno-poetic plenum’ strong in local cultural creativity and resilience.

Second, the macrostructural position of ‘Appalachia’ in the national political economy has made it a sort of ‘internal colony’ – where there are areas of high inequality that are exploited and impoverished by external capital investment, with local government weakened by sharp class divides, inadequate social services, lack of civic participation among the disempowered, and local elites who have tendencies to maintain control with clientalistic patronage and political corruption, intimidation, and violence.

Third, the region has been deeply affected by external circumstances, which have made it a symbolic icon in the American mainstream of a national Other – simultaneously despised and romanticised. In the national media, there have been waves of highly distorted and stigmatising images of ‘Appalachia’ – as ‘hillbillies’, ‘rednecks’, ‘white trash’, etc. Above all, it is stereotyped as an area of biologically degenerate white people (ignoring African-American, Native American, and other non-white populations in the region).6 ‘America’ has projected its repressed shadow onto a false image of ‘Appalachia’, which is seen as in-bred, carrying genetic deficiencies, ‘backward’, violent, stupid – all of which is seen as opposed to the optimistic, ambitious, technologically adept and innovative ‘American’ national ideal.

1) Appalachian folk culture? Geographically, ‘Appalachia’ is the ancient mountain range (perhaps the oldest in the world) that runs roughly parallel, and several hundred miles inland, to the eastern Atlantic seacoast.
Livelihoods were strongly dependent on the vast Appalachian forests. People in more mountainous and less populated areas, away from the fertile valley bottomlands, practised a kind of shifting cultivation — opening up "new ground" in the forest until its fertility wore out and then letting it return to forest. The forests were used as a commons for hunting, livestock and for foraging nuts, berries, food plants and medicinal herbs and roots (Hufford 1997, 2000).

These socio-economic macrostructures created fertile grounds for a decentralised cultural creativity with the capacity both for conserving traditional cultural forms and for innovating and diversifying new cultural forms. The skilled practitioners of music, dance, story-telling, crafts, and spiritual music and ritual mostly practised their arts as part of, or as supplementary to, farming or artisanal livelihoods. The venues for performance came largely from local community life — Saturday night dance parties, local establishments where locally produced alcohol was served, evenings sitting on the front porch with neighbours or kin, special church "revivals" or "brush arbors" (outdoor spiritual events that could last several days and which drew many people from a wide area) and regular weekly church services. The religious centres were small Christian "churches", some of which were independent congregations, some belonged to "denominations" (institutionalised sects with differing theological beliefs), some of which were nationally institutionalised (such as the Methodists or Presbyterians) but many of which were small, predominately regional denominations or sects (such as the Free Will Baptists, "Jesus Only", Missionary Baptist, "Hard Shell" Baptist, etc.). Church practices varied greatly among the smaller sects, but most de-emphasised Christian rituals of the Eucharist and of the liturgical year, and emphasised the ritual of Baptism, personal encounters with God through the inspiration of prayer, spoken "preaching" from a lay minister, "testifying" by lay members under the influence of the "Spirit", music, and locally, various rituals such as healing through "laying on of hands", "anointing with oil", and ecstatic trance practices such as "speaking in tongues", and, in a few areas, "snake-handling".

The lack of institutionalisation or professionalisation of arts and crafts and the decentralisation of performance venues meant that abilities to perform and appreciate expressive arts and crafts were widely diffused — with many people having some skill, and those with particular skill able to find venues for expression in local communities without needing outside resources. The transmission of cultural knowledge was along the same kin/ neigbour social networks that provided the social glue for the economy and the maintenance of social order. People learned by imitation and observation, not formal education. The grandparent/grandchild relationship seems to have been particularly important for many great performers — as
old and young are brought together in relative leisure for artistic sharing – thus creating a pathway of transmission for older art forms. This kin/ neighbour complex was a powerful social circuitry for maintaining traditions as well as for rapid diffusion of innovation over wide areas without needing special resources or outside inputs.

There is much scholarly contestation over how much of ‘Appalachian culture’ derives from cultural preservation of traditional forms from Europe, Africa and Native America, how much comes from syncretism among these traditions, and how much comes from innovation.

On one hand, the Appalachian region seems to have been particularly effective in transmitting traditional cultural forms. The still practised folk dancing called “clogging” clearly has roots in the Celtic dancing of the outer British Isles, as do some of the traditional storytelling genres such as the “Jack Tales”. On the other hand, recent scholarship is demonstrating how much syncretism there was. For instance, the diverse ‘Appalachian’ traditions for playing the guitar and the banjo clearly draw in very complicated ways on African, Celtic, and Spanish traditions, as well as English balladry that was widespread in 18th and 19th century England and elite “high” culture in eastern USA – which were originally disseminated as much by commercial publications as by folk transmission (Cantwell 1992).

The decentralised agrarian subsistence economies of Appalachia provided a dynamic and durable civic infrastructure for cultural transmission and innovation. A fascinating aspect of Appalachian history is the way in which this civic infrastructure was appropriated and redeployed as very different political economies swept through the region. As extractive industry and agrarian overpopulation displaced many Appalachian people into the lowest and most unstable rungs of the industrial national economy, people shifted into a pattern of migrancy – moving between the mountains and cities, between coal camps and timber camps, between part-time work and farms. Like African-Americans moving from the rural south, Appalachians moved, by the hundreds of thousands, to northern and eastern cities in several waves between the 1930s and 1970s – often keeping close emotional and social ties to the hills. It is also the case that many migrants from the mountains to the industrial cities moved into the middle and upper classes. This upwardly mobile migration has been far less studied.

Traditional farming practices emphasised flexible and changing use of diversified crops, foraging and hunting and a flexible social network for sharing and mutual help in crises. These ‘traditional’ skills for orchestrating multiple livelihoods and manoeuvring flexibly through widespread, informal kin/ neighbour networks of reciprocity were redeployed under industrialisation by people forced into unstable economic niches. In the face of crisis, able-bodied adults could move children, disabled people and older people in need between different members of extended families that stretched between the mountains and the poorer parts of cities. Despite the trauma of these various displacements, core social and cultural practices were mobilised and reinvented. In a way very parallel to the southern African-American rural/ urban experience, Appalachians (both white and black) grappled with these displacements by reinventing traditional music and story-telling genres to construct and steward meaning and value out of “hard times”. This remarkable outburst of folk cultural creativity has deeply affected American popular music. It was the extra- and post-industrial exile experience of being displaced from Appalachian roots into the cities and off of the farms, that powered musically original and emotionally powerful forms of music, which were carried by the small new recording companies and radio stations that were springing up to serve new audiences of working-class Americans, striving to make sense of the rapid changes in their lives.

2) Appalachia as an ‘internal colony’: By the 1870s and 1880s, railroads were reaching into the heart of the magnificent hardwood forests of central Appalachia, where massive seams of high quality coal had been discovered. The opening up of this much wealth so close to the booming industries and ports of the eastern USA led to a massive land grab that is still remembered with bitterness, and remarkable detail, in oral traditions in central Appalachia. Lawyers and land scouts representing investors in American cities such as Philadelphia, Baltimore as well as international capital (especially British) procured huge tracts of land from Appalachian, largely uneducated landholders, often through illegal or coercive means. Company-owned towns for mining (“coal camps”) and timbering sprang up across the Appalachian portions of Virginia, West Virginia, Ohio, Kentucky – drawing in thousands of displaced or landless Appalachians, African-Americans from the south, Eastern and Southern European immigrants.

From 1900 through the early 1950s, central Appalachia was dominated by extractive industry – primarily coal and timber, becoming an ‘internal colony’ of the USA. Much of the region is still locked into a position of macrostructural dependency, with all the usual sociocultural consequences. Conspiring with local elites, outside extractive industries and capital investors dominated local governments in the coalfields, leading to chronic problems of political corruption, repression, violence and massive ecological damage. These assaults on quality of life are compounded by bad schools and inadequate social services because of the ability of large, outside corporations to avoid taxes. All these factors tended against economic
diversification, tending to produce a two-class society in the coalfields—with many poor people, a small and culturally and psychologically defensive elite, and an inability to produce or attract a middle-class. Land inequality continues high, with outside corporations tending to own between from 60% to over 90% in coal producing counties.

We lack systematic empirical data across time and space to be able to definitively link these macrostructural conditions with the micro-politics of cultural agency, in terms of how local, regional, state and national processes articulate into each other. However, these historical structural problems seem to continue to have deep impacts on civil society across central Appalachia (Certeau and Guthrie 1999; Epstein 1999; Reid 1999; Welch 2001). For instance, in community meetings which our Common Knowledge Network conducted in eastern Kentucky coal mining counties over the past two years, a strong picture was painted by working-class and middle-class community leaders of a local elite that increasingly drew its power from its ability to control central and state government money flowing into the community. As jobs in mining and industries disappear with hyper mechanisation and globalisation, jobs in government schools, libraries, offices, agencies, etc. are often the only stable, well paying jobs. Local elites control these jobs through wide webs of patronage, often based in the county School Board. Before people consider any form of activism or expression of interest contrary to the local elites, they are aware that it could negatively affect the ability of their extended family to get jobs long into the future. Corruption is pervasive in many counties, and is particularly focused on construction—especially roads. Vote buying and violence by local police are also factors. All of these anti-democratic tendencies have been exacerbated in the last few decades by increased inflow of hard drugs. Urban, middle-class Americans often express shock when they hear of the severity of these problems in the contemporary Appalachian coalfields.

Highly rural, non-coal producing areas show continuing high rates of economic distress. However, western North Carolina is moving on a different path of sub-regional development, for reasons that have much to do with different historical patterns and investment in cultural infrastructure. This area is one of the few parts of central Appalachia that is growing economically and has in-migration. In part, this has to do with different choices made by local elites in the early 19th century. Reacting to environmental damage from massive clearcutting of forests in the late 19th and early 20th century, a local network of powerful businessmen and other civic leaders catalysed the movement to establish major national forests and parks that are now considered national treasures. These are now magnets for a large tourism industry and diversified in-migration of people and businesses seeking a high quality of life. The city of Asheville, where much of this elite clustered, also nurtured an unusual density and coherence of architectural beauty. The natural beauty of the Appalachian Mountains is augmented in many parts of the rural landscape of western North Carolina by the aesthetic care given to landscape in areas that have had hill resorts since the late 19th century.

Ironically, certain missionary efforts oriented to helping the mountain poor, have become part of the synergistic mix in western North Carolina that has produced ‘cultural amenities’ which attract the affluent and create middle- and elite-class affluence. For instance, the crafts and job development efforts of the Christian mission, Penland, have evolved into an internationally renowned centre for very high value arts and crafts. Western North Carolina has attracted a number of intentional communities—where primarily urban people come to create a utopian experiment in simple living close to the land.

The Celo Community, which developed in the 1930s in the South Toe Valley, with communal ownership of land, was influenced by Quaker spirituality. The ecological preservation and the cultural resources of this valley have, in turn, attracted a high number of artists and crafters, wealthy retirees and others. All of this has synergistically worked together to create a civic infrastructure that encourages non-extractive development. In the last two decades, the area has become one of the national centres for alternative spiritualities—many of them influenced by non-Western spiritual ecological philosophies, as well as arts and crafts. However, working class, rural people, in many places are being displaced by increasing land values and wealthier in-migration.

In the past three decades, other regional cultural networks have emerged that can contribute needed infrastructure for cultural recovery, conservation and democracy. The Appalachian Studies Association emerged out of 1960s and 1970s social movements, and continues a strong commitment to bring together and to support academics, activists, cultural workers, educators and students. The Appalachian region has produced an unusual number of fiction writers and poets, although there have been few regional institutionalised supports for them, such as artist colonies, fellowships, conferences, publishing venues, etc. However, this is changing, with recent efforts such as the mutual support networks associated with the nationally acclaimed “Appalachian Poets” (building both Appalachian and African-American identities) and the Appalachian Writers networks. The media company, Appalachian, in eastern Kentucky has been a regional powerhouse through its film production, community-based theatre and festivals.

3) ‘Appalachia’ as the stigmatised Other to ‘America’: Regional cultural agency has been deeply affected by external processes of cultural
stereotyping that do not represent the realities of the region. From the middle to the late 19th century, industrialisation was producing a new urban, middle-class in America that was forming its own cultural identity in the midst of rapid political economic change. This was a complex process with many internal contradictions. However, what is important here is the extent to which this new cultural identity came to define the national ideal by contrasting it to a stigmatised Shadow self, which was seen as what this ideal 'American' self was leaving behind or advancing beyond. This was a deeply racialised image, in which educated, urban, white people were seen as gaining vital energies from a pre-modern, kinship-based, agrarian past, but derived their virtue from what was seen as a special aptitude for Progress. The American versions of the general Western imperialist 'myth of Progress' laid out a unilinear history of constant improvement as science, technology, entrepreneurship and individual ambition triumphed over Nature. This was metaphorised in the 'myth of the Frontier', with images of white men wresting a new and pure civilisation out of the wilderness and all that was associated with it. This imagery was deeply gendered and racialised - with an idealised white masculinity seen as the engine of Progress always pushing itself away from the deadening constraints of Nature, Woman and pre-modern, non-white peoples. The stereotypes of 'Appalachia' that started to emerge in the late 19th century were deeply threatening to this emerging middle-class, urban identity. White people who were seen as refusing 'progress', to be 'close to Nature', became too much like white 'savages' and the pre-modern rural past from which the mainstream was trying to escape symbolically.

This imagery of 'Appalachia' was first consolidated in the 1870s in a genre of fiction and travel writing called "local colour" - which portrayed mountain people as exotic, colourful and 'savage' for a newly prosperous urban, middle-class looking for vicarious adventure and Others to symbolically consume. Many health and recreational resorts were being developed in the cool and beautiful Carolina and Virginia mountains for affluent city dwellers to escape the heat of lowland cities. With the exotising imagery of local colour writing ready to hand, these urban travellers observed local life from an unempathic distance, confirming stereotypes and their own sense of superiority. In the 1890s and 1890s, the colonising complex of mining, timber and railroad industries was able to use this recently developed regional symbolism to discredit and justify their appropriation of land and political dominance. This pattern continued through much of the 20th century, but was particularly strong in the very violent battles to unionise the coalfields in the 1920s and 1930s when images of violent and lazy "hillbillies" were used to discredit the struggling United Mine Workers of America and other unions.

However, the defensive oppositions that create symbolic Others, always flip-flop between positive and negative, as has been repeatedly demonstrated in scholarship on the imperialist imagination. National imagery of 'Appalachia' oscillated between stigmatisation and romanticisation of 'Appalachia' as a folkloric ideal. The region has periodically been 'rediscovered' by 'America' and often is given a special aura because of its 'victim' status. From the left political spectrum, there are tendencies to romanticise working-class heroes and the 'oppressed'. The Appalachian coal miner has repeatedly appeared as a national icon - perhaps most notably in the 1930s and 1960s. But, the region has also gone through various waves in which it is seen as a sort of isolated, living museum where 'traditional' folkways had been preserved in pure and unchanging form from pre-modern British culture. Which 'pure' culture was imputed to 'Appalachia' varied from one decade to the next, but it tended to be the most 'tribal' fringes of Great Britain - variously Highland Scot, pre-Anglo Saxon, undifferentiated Celtic, Scotch-Irish, or archaic 'Elizabethan'.

Perceived as a 'backward' area, the region has attracted unusually high levels of missionary activities, with contradictory results. On one hand, in their efforts to attract charity, the missionaries helped create 'Appalachia' as a symbolic object of pity, need and cultural deficits. On the other hand, in many ways the settlement schools emphasised holistic social development. The efforts to create 'folk schools' were linked with the international movements in the early part of the century that sought to resist the alienation of capitalist industrialisation with artisanal and locally self-reliant economic development - networks from which Gandhi drew some of his inspiration. The arts and crafts development efforts in Appalachia, then, can be seen as parallel kin to the Gandhian policies that shaped Nehru and Elwin resulting in the Panchsheel policy for tribal development of the 1950s.

Cultural politics and the macrostructural (dis)articulation of public spheres

What does all this mean for public folklore? The above detailed description of the macrostructural position of Appalachia should make clear that regional history and political economy create many zones of public life, and that the boundaries between local, regional and national public spheres are complex and politicalised. Fear, desire and anxiety stalk any human boundaries. But boundary anxieties can be expected to intensify in the 21st century because the essence of post-modernity is chronic dislocation in scalar relationships.

Scalar boundaries within the nation-state are key points, both in the distribution of goods and resources, but also in the social and political
capital and prestige that individuals accrue if they can demonstrate their power to control these scalar switch points. And, scalar boundaries within nation-states are increasingly the sites where extra-national forces prowl. The direction and pace of economic globalisation is driven by the profit margin. As neo-liberalism breaks down buffers at the national level, regional and local boundaries are increasingly zones of transactability. Local communities increasingly have to plan their futures against the extreme and unpredictable weather of global economies. Some in Appalachian Studies call this the ‘Appalachianization’ of America – since this pattern of unbuffered articulation into profit systems is similar to the ‘underdevelopment’ associated with extractive economies.

What are the points of (dis)articulation between ‘Appalachia’ and ‘America’ in the constitution of public life? What kinds of challenges and opportunities do these patterns of public life create for public folklore? First, to a remarkable extent, the sturdy and self-reliant cultural creativity of the earlier rural working class life has been reinvented to create resilient local publics to weather the uncertainties of post- or extra-industrial life – whether in precarious small-scale farming lifeways struggling against increasing global competition, in the ecologically shattered and low employment coalfields, or, cities with a thinning manufacturing base. This is a highly personalistic public, constituted out of stories and direct personal exchange among kin and neighbours. However, these webs can lay down potent social circuitry for carrying news, social solidarity and aesthetic cultural forms, fast and wide. This public is very much a ‘folk’ creation – ad hoc, improvisational, flexible, durable, centred in households, talk and the reproductive labour of women. The waves of grassroots activism in Appalachia have been carried by these networks – in remarkable, high-risk struggles against strip-mining, labour injustice, corruption, clearcutting forestry, etc. (Epstein 1999; Fisher 1993). However, except in the heyday of unionisation, this kind of public space tends to resist institutionalisation – flaring up suddenly in outbursts of collective action that tend not to leave behind durable institutions of social reproduction – fading like guerrillas back behind the façade of everyday life.

This rather elusive and emergent type of public space is extraordinarily rich in its power for cosmogenesis. Within this public, at the heart of the ethnnoetic plenum is a weaving together of body/place/communs through ‘landscape’. Cantwell says that the ethnnoetic plenum “...maintains itself, well below the level of formal learning...from unconscious communications lodged in physical behaviour and language itself to all the techniques of material facture, social interaction, and expressive arts...”. This semiosis is scarcely conscious because it is scarcely concretised in sensory signifiers. As the ethnnoetic plenum concretises into representational signifiers, it, as it were, needs to cool and solidify to become the foundations of a public sphere: These foundational structures are persuasive insofar as they can entangle affective motivations with the foundational ontological principles that authorise which discourses and roles are legitimate and authoritative and which are not.

In rural, working class Appalachian communities, one of the primary ways in which this cosmogenesis is represented and semiotically concretised is through ‘landscape’. The local publics emerging out of the kin labour complex are constituted out of stories – thickly sedimented, highly entangled narratives from everyday life – that bind people together out of past and possible generalised reciprocity, common dramas and daily labours. The architecture that holds this narratival ‘stuff’ together, in many ways, is ‘place’ – that is particular sites that are metonyms of the engagement of people, things, material needs and events over time. This shared narratival public binds people’s very identities and the ownness of their sense of individual and collective being into the landscape which becomes drenched with feeling and meaning. In other work, Hufford and I describe how this metonymic entanglement into ‘place’ is primarily carried by bodily engagement through material production and reproduction – as foraging in the forest commons is intertwined with talk, sharing between generations, and a remarkable ‘folk’ ecological knowledge (Taylor 1992, In press; Hufford 1997, 2000). And, of course, it is this tradition of cosmoensis that generates passions and sensibilities behind the haunting beauty of Appalachian music and its derivatives. This creates a kind of ‘civic environmentalism’ very different from the urban, middle-class, North American environmentalism justly criticised by Ramachandra Guha (2000).

It is one of the tragedies of peripheralised regions that their cosmogenic richnsses tend to be pathologically disarticulated from what Jerrold Hirsch calls the ‘local-national continuum’ (1990). The primary reason for this is the precarious position of local elites who carry much of the burden of brokering with the non-local. This elite faces the full brunt of national stereotyping, as they try to broker resources and status from the elites in their state or elsewhere, or as they send their children outside the region for ‘better’ schools where they have to run a gauntlet of demeaning stereotypes. These experiences leave psychic wounds. One reaction is repression of cultural characteristics – such as dialect – that might signify Appalachianness, or, to attempt to ‘pass’ by taking on the cultural trappings of national or other regional elites. But the other is to engage in an identity politics in which elites cultivate an ‘us’/them’ distinction which projects all regional problems outward onto a victimising outsider, thereby consolidating their own power (insofar as they can claim ‘nativeness’), and giving easy symbolic leverage against dissent by attributing it to demonised, outside colonising forces.
The result of this is a thinning of the civic fabric at the regional level. The regional public becomes something like a civic bottleneck. It chokes off outward communication from the richly creative complexities of local publics. It tends to block, or distort, democratic civic forces coming from outside the region, while speeding up globalising extractive powers.13

The very strength of local publics becomes a weakness at the translocal level. The personalistic, metonymic, narrativ nature of semiosis in local publics only barely emergent from the body/place/common sense does not extend or articulate easily into the rationalised, metaphoric, metanarrative foundations of American national civic life. First, where political, economic and cultural resources are brokered by local elites, without other alternatives, the personalistic bonds of local publics easily congeal into personalistic webs of patronage — encouraging corruption and clienteleism (Billings and Blee 2000; Duncan 1999; Epstein 1999; Weise 2001). This can lead to a curious change in political sensibility, which feels something like a loss of civic oxygen. As people fear negative repercussions on their personalised role in the patronage system, there is a fear of civic experimentation or expression — leading to a claustrophobic feeling as people do not venture into the open (in an Arendtian sense of the ‘public’ and the ‘political’). Everything becomes politicised, even small gestures and off-hand comments, but, politics, in a classic sense, disappears.

Second, when activisms arise in these sorts of local publics, it becomes hard to articulate them with the civic mainstream elsewhere. Civil society organisations with clout and translocal capacities tend to be dominated by an urban, middle-class cultural style of voluntary association focused on ‘causes’, with highly rationalised modes of meeting and membership — that tend to marginalise and disvalue the metonymic, narratival and place-based civic practices of local mountain publics.

**Arunachal Pradesh**

Fascinating similarities and differences emerge if we compare these two economically peripheralised, but culturally rich, mountainous regions.14 Arunachal Pradesh has an extraordinary diverse and rich heritage of cultural creativity, with over 30 major ethnicities (with 47 subgroups) and as many as 42 different languages (Dutta and Ahmad 1995). While changing rapidly, many forms of folk arts, music, dance and crafts are still vibrant, resilient and adaptive to contemporary realities. But, like Appalachia, it is a challenge to build the civic infrastructure to strengthen a ‘local-national continuum’ of cultural conservatism and creativity. This is an enormously complicated challenge, which I can only inadequately address here.15

The macrostructural conditions in both regions put enormous pressures at the point of articulation in public space between the local and trans-local. Political contexts are very different. Through the Indian Administrative Service, the Indian central government has far more administrative authority over local and state development, planning and implementation than the American federal government. Relative to the United States, Indian national policy has, from the beginning, woven together a far more developed, sophisticated and complex vision of cultural democracy and cultural self-confidence as integral to economic and political development. The Nehru/Elwin policies are remarkable in weaving into bureaucratic planning a cosmogenetic mission. A cosmogenetically infected plan is one in which the plan is evaluated and understood, at least in part, from the point of view of a real actor, oriented within their own action, from within the world as they inhabit over time and in daily and annual habits. However much the Philosophy for NEFA and the Panchsheel policy failed in implementation because of bureaucratic entropy, it seems to have helped create a philosophic space within the social world of the Arunachal guiding elites, which legitimated cultural and personal identity to a remarkable extent.16 As many have remarked, there is a sense of pride, agency and ease in tribal identity in the educated Arunachalese that is remarkable and can lay a most positive basis for future building of civic mediating structures to create a ‘local-national continuum’ for cultural conservation and creativity. (And, in some ways, is missing in Appalachian elite political culture).

The federalist government administration of the United States, means that far more power for development activities is in the hands of state governments — many of which have a very strong crony capitalist relationship with the mountain elites involved in extractive industries. As we have seen, this political economic complex has consistently generated some of the lowest levels of public and government support for cultural stewardship to be found anywhere in the United States (which, in any event, has seen unusually weak commitments to public institutions because of recurrent waves of ‘neo-liberalism’). In addition, the Appalachian Regional Commission, the federal agency mandated to serve Appalachia, has been almost entirely driven by a narrowly urban and industrial model of extreme economic developmentalism — focusing on road construction, infrastructure access and urban ‘growth centres’, with only a fraction of its funds going towards education, social and civic infrastructure, rural economic self-sufficiency and cultural pride, and cultural or environmental stewardship. The ARC vision, in many ways, is the antithesis of the Panchsheel policy.

Tragically, both areas have structural tendencies towards political corruption. Too often, the direction of development planning is set by forms of ‘fast money’ that tends not to be ‘sticky’ civically — it flows through, without sticking to local socio-economic activities in a way to build up...
'multipliers' and diversifications of economic production and social reproduction. There is a sharp gap between local, largely subsistent economies, and the huge profits of timber, coal and, now increasingly in Appalachia, drugs which flow out. The in-flows of central government development monies tend to travel along the same crony networks that the 'fast money' flows out on. In our grassroots focus groups in the Appalachian coalfields, it has been suggested (only partly facetiously) that the best statistical indicator of political corruption would be to track the flow of gravel (used in road construction) with GIS digital mapping. In both areas, this tendency to exploitative economies enabled by corrupt siphoning off of public monies, is counteracted by a deep love of place and land that often is a contradictory part of the psyche of the very elites who are facilitating assaults on land and place.

Looking to the future

There is much that is hopeful in the prospects for developing a civic infrastructure in both regions that can build a local-national continuum which interdigitates local, state, regional and national public spheres into a harmonious collective capacity for planning that respects local cultural perspectives. However, to achieve this, public folklore must maintain a constant, critical awareness that different expressive forms and semiotic mediums operate differently, and have different political effects when they are moved between contexts. One must first carefully assess what are the particular needs at different scalar levels. This article tries to use comparative macrostructural analysis to make the point that the scalar level, where local meets regional publics, is the most fraught with danger (and opportunity) for cultural democracy.

In both Arunachal and Appalachia, there are structural forces which act on this level and function to create a sort of civic bottleneck - tending to create a pathological social membrane which can let through the least democratic cultural forces and block those that would bring out the best in people and communities. Using the SEED-SCALE model for scaling up community participation, Future Generations (Arunachal) and the Appalachian Center are attempting to work with other NGOs and academic institutions to create civic pathways around the civic bottlenecks. The key components of this are community research centres CRC (participatory research institutes run by local citizens and NGOs, but partnered for long-term support with advanced academic support), peer-learning networks among CRCs, panels of 'local experts' which can serve as brokers between local publics and state and national government and experts, regular community-driven assessments of community well being. For instance, in our work in Appalachia, the community-based planning has tended to give top priority to conducting place-based 'cultural inventories' of cultural assets - i.e., gathering oral histories, photos and other documents and records of the historical and cultural landscape, traditional systems for foraging in the forest commons, heritage seeds and plants, traditional gardening and other crafts and artisanship, folk music, stories about special places. Using GIS digital archiving, we are trying to create a collective digital atlas, which can be accessed by schools, NGOs, communities, officials, and researchers. Local people feel that this can help give them more democratic control over economic planning, while seeming non-threatening because 'culture' seems non-threatening.

Out of our process of critical and theoretical engagement in action projects, we hope that policy implications can emerge, so that it will be possible to create a praxisically grounded policy for public culture work in the 21st century that has been well tested to address and solve real needs at all scalar levels. Certain key themes have begun to emerge:

- The central mission of public folklore in the past was the stewarding of cultural products, performances and skills (mostly through the venues of the museum, archives and festivals). While these continue to be important - especially on the national and local levels, we join others (Kurin 2002; Muthukumaraswamy 2002) who argue that this needs to be supplemented with a mission to strengthen civic capacity and civic networks that become the generative grounds for democratically solving pressing public problems - environmental, economic, political, etc.

- In close intellectual collaboration, Mary Hewford, Herbert Reid and I have been developing an argument that the central mission for 'civic professionals' such as public folklorists needs to be the mission to tend the ecological and civic commons. (Hufford 2002; Reid and Taylor 2000, In press).

- New informational technologies like GIS can serve (if critically used) as media for linking the place-based local knowledges about local landscape, history, ecology, and culture with the space-based, rationalised media, which in bureaucratic, rationalised mass society provide the knowledge infrastructure for communicating across distance.

- The focus in public culture work on representation has perhaps gone too far. While such venues as the festival, archive and museum for publicly representing 'folk cultures' in non-local contexts has value (especially in urban areas, accustomed to the polyvocal disjunctions of what Cantwell calls 'cyclonic' multimedia presentation (Cantwell 1992)), they can have problematic effects.
at the most politicised boundaries where non-democratic
gatekeeping takes place. For instance, in Arunachal, many
traditional cultural expressive forms since the 1950s have been
reinvented for use by new kinds of political and economic elites
who have used traditional cultural forms as sites for spectacular
display to consolidate political power. For instance, many of
the traditional tribal religious festivals have been assimilated into
something like a civic religion – where they are primarily performed
as rites of political display. The violent, separatist movements of
the North-East use similar dis-placing semiotic mechanisms for
turning public representation of cultural difference into the occasion
for uncritically collecting people (especially dis-placed, young men)
to demagogic leaders. In Appalachia, many of the festivals and
other public performances of ‘traditional’ folklore have become
key media for ‘marketing’ highly metaphorised, reified and dis-
placed icons of faux-places – making local culture a ‘landscape of
consumption’ of romanticised Others by affluent and mobile elites.
Our work seeks to ground public representation of cultural
difference in alternative and democratically thick civic networks
that empower local leadership and link local culture workers to
local culture workers elsewhere – rather than constituting culture
and cultural workers as a display that is represented to dis-placed
consumers accountable to the needs and politics of local publics.

Notes

1. I am indebted to colleagues of Arunachal University for rich conversations in
my visits to Arunachal Pradesh between 1995 and 1998 that laid the basis for
the comparisons developed here. During that time, several very helpful colloquia were organised
by the Departments of Tribal Studies and Political Science which included regional comparisons of civil society, in which
Herbert Reid (Professor, Political Science, University of Kentucky) and I
presented papers that began to develop comparisons between Appalachia and Arunachal.

2. My discussion of Appalachia condenses a sizeable and growing scholarly
literature in Appalachian Studies that emerged in the mid-1970s as an area
studies with its own professional association and over a dozen academic
centers. (For more information on the Appalachian Studies Association, see
www.appalachianstudies.org). In this discussion, I try to cite the most synoptic
publications, so that readers unfamiliar with this literature have the most
reliable and comprehensive entrée into the field. I also draw on over 20 years of
ethnographic fieldwork in central Appalachia, and four years of participatory
action research and grassroots programme development.

My knowledge of Arunachal comes primarily from direct immersion in action
projects while I was working with an NGO, Future Generations
(www.future.org) from 1995 to 1998. As Senior Social Scientist for Future
Generations, I was responsible for opening up negotiations with Arunachal

3. Ramachandra Guha’s biography of Elwin is a nuanced dissection of this complex
personality in the context of a powerful ideological analysis of the
macrostructural contradictions of colonialism and nation-building through
which Elwin moved on his journey from British nationality to Gandhi
freedom fighter, to advocate for tribal identity, to Indian citizenship and public
sector service as anthropologist/administrator. See Guha (1999).

4. For a discussion of the confrontation between place-based “globalisation from below” with space-based “globalisation from above”, please see Reid and Taylor (2000).

5. Herbert Reid and I initiated these efforts at the University of Kentucky
Appalachian Center in 2000 under the rubric of the Project for the Civic and
Environmental Commons. Believing that experts’ and technocrat ideologies
are large part of the problem, this project included both “outreach” to partner
with community-based and participatory development projects, as well as
“inreach” to academia to reflect on what transformations are needed in academic
institutions to better enable them to pursue research that serves the public
good — what we call “civic professionalism”.

6. There is an emerging and important literature on the experience of non-white
Appalachian communities. For more details, please see bibliography on
Appalachian Studies Association website (www.appalachianstudies.org) as
well as the Center for the Study of Gender and Ethnicity in Appalachia,
Marshall University (www.marshall.edu/cseg).

7. The following summarises literature from the last two decades of Appalachian
Studies. For doorways to this literature, see the following overviews: for history,
see Pudup et al. 1995; for the neighbour/kin complex, see Halperin 1990,
Taylor In press a.
8. For more on these complex, sub-regional differences, see our forthcoming report on civil society in Appalachia (Taylor and Rice in press).

9. For more detail on this complex contemporary and rapidly changing cultural scene, please see the Appalachian Center report on civil society (Taylor and Rice in press).


11. There are obvious parallels to the British symbolic construction of the colonial Other in imperial India, but I do not know of any scholarship that has made this comparison.

12. The summer 2002 issue of Journal of Appalachian Studies focuses on the class politics of a depoliticised use of Appalachian cultural identity, with a lead article by Herbert Reid and myself and commentary from other scholars on Appalachia or globalisation.

13. A culturally insecure local regional elite tends to be susceptible to the lure of sheer money and conspicuous consumption as it tries to overcome a sense of inferiority, and peripheral regions tend to be economically well positioned for the ‘fast money’ of quick extraction, drugs and corruption. Above all, local and regional elites are not in a lifeworld that encourages impulses to reinvest in their native commons or to steward pluralism. For instance, a survey by the Appalachian Regional Commission found that Appalachia has the lowest levels of public philanthropy or philanthropic foundations in the country. Long-term deficits in regional taxes as well as long-term poverty have resulted in a relative lack of public institutions with the mandate for social and cultural reproduction. There are no top-level universities in Central Appalachia, only a few top-notch private colleges, and museums and art institutions are chronically under-resourced (Taylor and Cook 2000).

14. Some of the most fascinating parallels are in the details. I do not have space to discuss these here, but am currently developing them in a manuscript that applies the analytic framework used here to a comparison of contemporary community development efforts in the two areas.


16. On my immersion into Arunachal, I was struck by the number of officials, leaders and scholars, who made positive reference to Philosophy for NEFA. However, beyond such anecdotal impressions, more systematic research on the construction of identity, and social and political imaginaries among the regional leadership of Arunachal (and Appalachia) is very much needed.

17. The SEED-SCALE model is thoroughly described in Daniel Taylor-Ide and Carl Taylor, Just and Lasting Change: When Communities Own Their Futures (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press, 2002) and on the Future Generations website www.future.org. More on the SEED-SCALE model and methods will be also on the UK Appalachian Center website (www.appalachiancenter.org) by early winter 2002.

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