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Note

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Cultural Sustainability: A Framework for Relationships, Understanding, and Action

In recent years, the term “cultural sustainability” has appeared widely in folkloristics and related disciplines. This essay frames its key intellectual inspirations and provides a provisional definition of the term as an area of practice. It also adumbrates a set of principles for evaluating cultural sustainability efforts and a pathway for enacting them.

Keywords

AFS ETHNOGRAPHIC THESAURUS: Cultural sustainability, social change, theory, cultural conservation

RECENT YEARS HAVE WITNESSED AN EXPLOSION in the use of words related to sustainability. Issues of interrelatedness and interdependence, the centrality of diversity to most healthy biological systems, and the expansion of detailed scientific thinking about conservation have all contributed to the increase in the use of ecological metaphors in a wide range of fields. Those of us laboring in the realms of culture have found useful language and compelling metaphors, including “cultural sustainability.” When conservation biology began to popularize the idea of sustainability in their efforts to sustain biodiversity, Jeff Todd Titon began to explicitly advocate for an ecological approach to musical sustainability in 2006.¹ He first published about the idea in 2009, when he suggested that folklorists and ethnomusicologists ought to focus on creatively deploying four major principles from conservation biology: diversity, limits to growth, interconnectedness, and stewardship (Titon 2009). In 2010, Goucher College launched its Master of Arts in Cultural Sustainability program, which continues today,² and, in 2012, Rory Turner gave a keynote on the subject at the annual meeting of the American Folklore Society.³ The Smithsonian Center for Folklife and Cultural Heritage identified cultural sustainability as a priority initiative

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in its 2014 strategic plan and has subsequently built a new program around this work.⁴ In 2018, the University of California, Santa Barbara, hosted an interdisciplinary mini-conference on “Cultural Sustainabilities.”⁵ Within a long-standing discourse related to “conservation” and “preservation,” this new term has taken hold in the discipline of folklore and thus merits critical attention.

Cultural sustainability is a concept that names a field of inquiry and action that flows from the demands of ethical scholarship and activism and takes seriously both the challenges of cultural work and its necessity in a changing and uncertain world. Neither culture nor sustainability is a transparent or simple concept. They are keywords (Williams 1976), contested ideas whose meanings shift as they are deployed and enacted in acts of cultural production and performance, whether by scholars or tradition bearers. Bringing them together sparks dialogue and action and has the potential to invite participation in a community of inquiry and practice that spans disciplines and agendas. We argue here that this diversity can hold together coherently around an existential imperative—the aspiration of human beings to live connected and meaningful lives in ethical balance with broader ecosystems and other people. Achieving this aspiration obliges a framework that honors and sources the agency of individuals and communities to shape and control their own cultural practices and representations.

The work of cultural sustainability entails concern for tradition, for those enduring modes of being, thought, and practice that have been “equipment for living” over time and space, to cite Kenneth Burke’s eloquent formulation (1973). As the world changes—often through violence or domination, or through development and economic growth—technologies and values shift, and traditions are constantly and dynamically transformed. Those interested in the project of cultural sustainability would be foolish to try to arrest these changes and transformations, but they have every reason to hope they can influence their arc in positive ways through projects that cultivate the capacity for and realization of self-determined cultural representation and production. As Robert Baron has pointed out, the goals of cultural sustainability efforts and self-(re)presentation result from complex processes of negotiation between diverse actors, including community members, NGOs, and government officials (2016). “While recognising that heritage interventions inevitably involve power asymmetries, public folklore seeks to mitigate and diminish these imbalances as it develops approaches to enable communities to present their culture on their own terms” (Baron 2016:588). Despite the many advantages of modern political and economic structures and the benefits of technology, the health of individuals, communities, environments, and even the planet is vulnerable. In such a world, there is a place to consider the conjunction of culture and sustainability as both a call to practice and a field, and we seek here to frame some of its antecedents and inspirations, indications and exemplars, and possibilities moving forward. Folklore and folklife have a central place in such an endeavor, as folklorists have developed a deep commitment to active engagement with communities based in ethical partnerships and consideration of cultural processes. Many vernacular practices of communities hold promise for alternatives to unsustainable and unsustaining social and economic lifeways.

Antecedents and Inspirations

The intellectual endeavors associated with folkloristics have continuously held as one of their fundamental preoccupations the dynamic tension between cultural continuity and change. In 1888, the first issue of this esteemed journal described its mission as “the collection of the fast-vanishing remains of Folk-Lore in America” (“On the Field and Work of a Journal of American Folk-Lore” 1888). The earliest members of the society had particular interests in those cultural areas where they saw shifts transpiring most rapidly: the loss of English ballads and other traditions, the folklore of African American and Native peoples, and the regional cultural forms of French Canadian and Mexican immigrants to the United States. Almost a century later, Dell Hymes famously asked how we might carry tradition forward in a world that has changed (1975). Soon thereafter, Barre Toelken instructed students about the selective process through which traditions “demonstrate their viability or change so that they can [demonstrate their viability], or die off” (1979:39). With time, the discipline’s concern shifted somewhat away from documentation of individual items of folklore and toward questions of cultural preservation. A variety of intellectual currents among folklorists, ethnomusicologists, and other culture workers have flowed together to nurture and inform the discourse of cultural sustainability, and below we adumbrate its major sources of inspiration.

Not surprisingly, the question arises of what differentiates cultural sustainability from previous concepts related to cultural preservation. After the National Historic Preservation Act of 1966 was passed, scholars working on traditional cultural expressions spoke more consistently of preservation, but by the 1980s and 1990s, the language of “cultural conservation” dominated the discourse. Ormond Loomis’ *Cultural Conservation: The Protection of Cultural Heritage in the United States* (1983) responded to a congressional request to the American Folklife Center for a report on protecting intangible aspects of American heritage with a detailed portrait of government policy and practical needs. Burt Feintuch edited a volume that both historicized these efforts and focused on the challenges of making informed and appropriate interventions (1988). In fact, David Whisnant had already defined cultural intervention in *All That Is Native and Fine* (1983): An “intervention begins when an individual or an institution consciously and programmatically acts within a social setting with the intent of bringing about cultural change” (quoted in Hansen 1999:36).⁶ The “intervenor” regards that change as positive and can take action in more passive or active ways (Hansen 1999:36; glossing Whisnant). Building on Whisnant, Hansen insisted on the centrality and universality of these interventions as mechanisms to enrich the theoretical dialogue within folkloristics: “The work of public folklorists demonstrates that every folklorist is involved in cultural intervention and engages with theoretical constructs. Folklorists simply cannot operate without theoretical lenses that focus and refocus key issues in the study and presentation of folklore” (1999:42). Robert Baron and Nick Spitzer’s important edited volume *Public Folklore* sought to (re)establish the intellectual origins of this work, make explicit its theoretical assumptions, and open critical vistas on its operation (1992). Mary Hufford’s edited collection critiqued some of the key issues as they were articulated at the time, especially the

tactical but ultimately misleading categories of natural, built, and intangible heritage (1994). Since the 1980s, public folklorists have theorized their interventions in their practices, professional dialogues, and writing, grappling with questions of agency, voice, representation, and the ethics of cultural ownership and appropriation (Baron 2010). Thus, cultural conservation focused on the range of interventions that were directly related to creating cultural change. As public folklorists increasingly realized that their missions were best served through cultural partnerships (Hufford 1994), a re-envisioned orientation to methods, ethics, and subjects emerged.

As early as the 1970s, some public institutions were gathering around a new formulation focused on the discourse of “cultural heritage.” After UNESCO’s extensive efforts to preserve important cultural sites were established in the late 1960s and early 1970s, the international organization turned to the immaterial aspects of culture. The 2003 UNESCO Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage (ICH)⁷ emerged from a recognition that physical heritage sites garner a great deal of attention; yet ICH similarly takes an item-centered approach, inventorying and recognizing specific cultural expressions or genres of cultural expression. In its least imaginative expressions, this approach has resulted in endless list-making, as governments try to generate inventories of their ICH (see Titon 2009). That governments remain primary actors in this work opens up a rich critique around political interests: Who is selecting what will be safeguarded and why? How is that safeguarding operationalized? Which of the many forms of safeguarding recognized by the Convention is most appropriate or effective in a particular community and at a specific time? These are not new questions (for rich case studies, see Foster and Gilman 2015), but they point to the need for a shift: cultural sustainability is less focused on the production of something that might be labeled “heritage” and more engaged in developing the relationships between cultural producers, the communities they support, and cultural workers from within and beyond those communities. Rather than focusing on the existence of the past in the present, cultural sustainability foregrounds the goals of local actors and the ways in which they wish “to use their cultural art forms as tools to seek their own best interests and their cultural values to chart their course through the present and into the future” (Mason 2014). Thus, cultural sustainability, to our minds, can include, but goes far beyond, the technical applications of specific cultural strategies or pattern designs to new contexts.⁸

Applied ethnomusicology and its ongoing conversation with folkloristics initiated this dialogue that uses the term “sustainability” and its implications to inform cultural interventions. While various authors have also suggested that cultural or social interventions could play an important, even constructive role in public folklore (Jones 1994; Proschan 1992), Daniel Sheehy’s four strategies of applied ethnomusicology have inspired much of what has followed since his germinal 1992 article: “(1) developing new ‘frames’ for musical performance, (2) ‘feeding back’ musical models to the communities that created them, (3) providing community members access to strategic models and conservation techniques, and (4) developing broad, structural solutions to broad problems” (Sheehy 1992:330–1). These principles point toward the systems in which music-making takes place (335), with the explicit goal of improving the lives of the people with whom we work (324). It is important to note that, from

his earliest writing on sustainability, Titon explicitly invites us to make, in collaboration with music community insiders, interventions that will benefit the musical cultures themselves (Titon 2009). Huib Schippers and Catherine Grant—together with their research collaborators—took these ideas to new levels of detail, identifying five domains of analysis and some 40 “forces” that work on the sustainability of particular music practices (2016:333–50).⁹ Titon’s understanding of the pitfalls of recontextualization in transforming the existential power of music is particularly valuable in shaping the methodological sensibility of cultural sustainability interventions. Taking his cues from his Old Regular Baptist Church partners, and aware of the intimate subtleties of the cultural and spiritual work of their practices, he reminds us to consider the experiential dimensions of cultural participation, so hard to access without deep ethnographic engagement.¹⁰

In parallel, another group of scholars has been developing increasingly subtle notions of reciprocal research, much of which has developed within museums.¹¹ Elaine Lawless explored the idea of reciprocal ethnography as a “collaborative process for gaining and sharing knowledge” (1991:56), where people being represented have direct input into how they are represented. Taking on new urgency in interaction with indigenous communities, this work has attempted most directly to address the fundamental power imbalances that so often typify the research efforts of people outside of communities as well as the institutions that hold collections related to these communities (Ames 1992).¹² Museums have formulated key responses to these challenges, and “collaborative museum research is grounded in the belief that originating communities should have a major voice in shaping research questions and should benefit from the new knowledge that is produced” (Rowley 2013:23). While these efforts build upon previous research on representations of communities in museums (Karp, Kreamer, and Levine 1992) and folklife festivals (captured in Cadaval, Kim, and N’Diaye 2016), the effort here is to transform the ecology in which research questions are formulated and their answers pursued; process and dialogue play a key role, as does the surrender of a certain level of control (Rowley 2013). The question of what counts as a valuable research output also comes to the fore. As humanities scholarship has grappled with this issue within academia, scholars like Linda Tuhiwai Smith (1999) have articulated clearly that both research methods and outputs change when developed in collaboration with communities. All of this work moves beyond celebration and other forms of valorization of specific artistic expressions or even groups. Instead, it centers upon collaboration and partnership with tradition bearers and cultural activists to change the landscape of research processes and outputs. This transformed landscape, then, promises contributions to our understanding, control exercised by local custodians of culture, and, ultimately, increased well-being for the communities in question.¹³

Directly linked to these reflections on the power dynamics between scholars of culture and the social bases that generate that culture (Noyes 2016c), authors have long developed a cultural practice of social justice folklore. A great many practitioners in the fields of folklore, applied ethnomusicology, and intangible cultural heritage espouse a philosophy that construes engagement with social groups that foster and sustain folklore with a sense of advocacy for those same groups. Cultural

documentation and representation sometimes generate opportunities to address social inequality (Murphy 2015), and, as Debora Kodish has written in her critically important “Cultivating Folk Arts and Social Change,” “working at the intersection of folk arts and social change, sometimes we come at it from the art side, surfacing the social change dimensions. Sometimes we come at it from the social change side, surfacing the expressive dimensions” (2013:443). As with reciprocal research, social justice folklore explores issues of authority, but it also examines authenticity, place, and locally-informed modes of imagining and building toward a better shared future (Kodish 2011, 2013). Kodish stresses the “close work” of field research as “one of the great foundational practices of folklore: a habit of paying attention to people’s lived experiences and learning from and taking to heart what matters” (2013:436). This language echoes that employed by Goucher College’s Master of Arts in Cultural Sustainability program, where an integrated activism promises students the ability “to effect positive, community-driven change in the cultures you care about most.”¹⁴ Like cultural sustainability, social justice folklore clearly identifies itself as both an analytical tool kit and a practice of social engagement—a way to understand and act upon social life.

Performance theory provides another rich set of intellectual references that inform the work of cultural sustainability. With its emphasis on human agency and the interests of specific actors, performance theory opened the door to thinking in detailed and nuanced ways about how people do things with culture (Austin [1962] 1975). Questions of process, practice, and intentionality come to the fore. Cultural analysts have moved from the study of ritual to ritualizations (Bell 1992) and from context to contextualizations; with this linguistic and intellectual shifting, we stress the centrality of human activity and strategies in social life. Performance theory draws our critical attention to the work of communicating with people; it provides us with edifying tools to explore context-specific meanings, the intentions of the actors involved, and the impact of their communicative acts. It reminds us that culture and its performance are “equipment for living,” providing tools for the situations that people encounter. In the context of shared symbolic resources, people make choices, emphasize certain histories, and downplay certain relationships, and in so doing they performatively enact and seek to reframe their worlds (Bauman and Briggs 1990:60). Performance approaches empower us to explore the existential aspects of social and cultural life, to ask how individuals and communities shape relationships situationally and inter-subjectively, and how they inhabit those relationships across time and space (Jackson 2017:101).

From the world of cultural policy beyond ICH, other voices have enriched the dialogue on cultural sustainability. Jon Hawkes’ *The Fourth Pillar of Sustainability* (2001) argues that the policy dialogue around sustainability in urban settings requires an understanding of culture beyond its narrow formulations in arts policy, laying a foundation for a broader consideration of partnership and reciprocity with grassroots cultures in urban planning practices. Graves’ *Cultural Democracy* poses the question: “What does a community need to keep its culture vital and meaningful?” (2005:1). The Urban Institute’s watershed research report titled “Cultural Vitality in Communities: Interpretation and Indicators” explores a wide range of cultural activities as a basis

for community development (Jackson, Kabwasa-Green, and Herranz 2006); departing from many previous attempts to explore cultural vitality, this report built upon community definitions of what mattered to explore cultural assets and activities that communities were mobilizing in their own interests. Similarly, Bill Ivey argues that technology has broadened and vitalized cultural participation, inviting new ways that researchers can work with new forms of expressive life (2008). Creative placemaking represents another area of practice that brings together community engagement, arts, local institutions, and cultural creativity to shape the physical and social character of a particular location.¹⁵ This kind of community development intervention is meant to benefit a wide range of local agendas, including community-based artists and extant cultural organizations. In 2011, the Alliance for California Traditional Arts (ACTA) released its research on the health impacts on individuals who participate in community arts activities, demonstrating a relationship between arts participation and well-being.¹⁶ Arts activist Arlene Goldbard suggests that a new relationship with the arts can help us imagine a new, more sustainable world: “In this new world, beauty and meaning occupy their rightful place as the force that drives civil society, and culture is the laboratory in which we discover how to improvise a livable future” (2013:11). Thus, seeing the arts—including “folk and traditional” arts—as a generative space that may develop new solutions to environmental, economic, and cultural challenges has emerged as a major thrust in cultural policy.

Economic sustainability connects with the reflective practices in the realm of sustainable development to provide another rich set of commentaries and perspectives. In the early 1990s, the use of the term “creative industries” became widespread, and these included informal artistic expressions (Moore 2014). Within folkloristics, Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett articulates the interpenetration of cultural tourism and museums in the generation of heritage as an item of consumption (1998). As a pioneer exploring the intersection of culture and economics, David Throsby introduced the possibility of “culturally sustainable development,” and he explicitly suggests employing an ecological model that looks at the whole system wherein economics and culture interact (1995:200). With the wide adoption of the United Nations Millennium Development Goals in 2000, many cultural actors recognized an important opportunity. While the Goals did not mention culture explicitly, culturally sustainable development became a significant strategy to reach two of the goals: to eradicate extreme poverty and ensure environmental sustainability.¹⁷ These efforts dovetailed with the already thriving Fair Trade Network, which, since the 1980s, has engaged in the exchange of cultural products to provide an equitable livelihood for people in poverty (Dragusanu, Giovannucci, and Nunn 2014). Soon thereafter, a wide range of sustainable cultural tourism efforts emerged to assist communities in their efforts for both economic development and cultural conservation. The European COST (Cooperation in Science and Technology) Association explored culture in relationship to sustainable development in their Investigating Cultural Sustainability Research Network, finding that a transdisciplinary, flexible approach to culture helped integrate economic, social, and environmental aspects of sustainability and needed to be considered in development policy (Dessein et al. 2015). Perhaps most intriguingly, Throsby develops the concept of cultural capital, which he defines as “an asset which

embodies, stores, or provides cultural value in addition to whatever economic value it may possess” (2011:143). Managing cultural capital effectively and assuring that its benefits are equitably distributed become key issues in a series of principles by which to judge “culturally sustainable development,” principles that seem to express values shared with public folklorists and their interventions (see Throsby 2011:145).

Defining Cultural Sustainability and Its Principles

Ideas from public folklore, applied ethnomusicology, reciprocal research, social justice folklore, performance theory, cultural policy, and sustainable development have all nourished the discourse around cultural sustainability. These frameworks overlap around key notions about the value of cultural expression, its role in the vitality of communities and individuals, the challenges and importance of interventions, and the principles that undergird these actions. Having navigated these various currents of thinking that have carried us to this perspective, we now risk a definition: Cultural sustainability is a generative, reciprocal research practice that fosters relationships, engenders knowledge about the sociocultural ecology, and guides diverse, ethical interventions that enhance the vitality and well-being of specific communities and cherished aspects of their expressive lives.¹⁸ While cultural sustainability plays a central and critical role in contemporary approaches to public folklore and applied ethnomusicology, it overflows these disciplinary efforts to include a wide range of other interventions. This fact recognizes the irreducible interrelatedness of social, economic, environmental, and cultural sustainability (Soini and Birkeland 2014). We have seen cultural sustainability efforts generate language revitalization projects, the renovation of specific cultural forms, and simple skills transfers. Similarly, we have also witnessed environmental remediation, economic changes, and large-scale educational initiatives emerge. Thus, cultural sustainability encompasses the social processes that engender knowledge on which locally-motivated actors and their collaborators base interventions that lead to intentional cultural change.

To our minds, cultural sustainability, with its diverse intellectual antecedents and rich inspirations, is substantively different from previous schemas of cultural preservation or conservation, though it may be a difference of degree rather than of kind. First, cultural sustainability more ably engages the lived reality of cultural life as ever-changing; dynamism in cultural expression and community life require evolving responses. Rather than trying to “preserve” a specific traditional expression at the item level, cultural sustainability engages the whole social and cultural ecosystem and its current actors to chart a course for self-conscious cultural change; it analyzes a vast web of interconnected factors and may make change in unexpected places. In this way, it is centered on the current needs of contemporary actors and how they imagine their futures. These distinctions also manifest themselves in different methodologies. While cultural conservation extensively utilized folklife surveys, and while the UNESCO ICH convention spawned committees to prepare “files” for specific expressive forms, cultural sustainability builds on long-term fieldwork and extends social relationships over time. While it is possible to imagine cultural sustainability

resulting in large-scale policy interventions, these would always be rooted in more contextually specific local activities.¹⁹

While we offer this tentative definition as an attempt to fuel discussion, it is unlikely that any single sentence or two can suffice to delimit or describe the work of cultural sustainability. We see cultural sustainability as a concept that recursively embraces all interested parties as practitioners, and thus a practice that itself is in a process of knowledge generation. Our definition seeks to provoke conversation and dialogue. Still fertile soil for conceptualization and contestation, cultural sustainability invites contribution in the discursive field it opens. Our definition points to an organizing framework that emphasizes the potential it holds for intentional research and practice. For us, folklore and the other fields we have identified offer key insights into method and guide the consideration of some fundamental principles that hold promise for orienting action. Here, we foreground some of the principles we suggest are critical to ethical and successful practice. Levin and Cooper (2010) articulate key principles for collaborations aimed at cross-cultural connectivity, and their insights complement the sustainability principles espoused by Titon (2009) and Throsby (2011:145). Based on their valuable insights, we propose a preliminary set of principles to guide the planning and practice of cultural sustainability efforts:

- *Depth of relationships*: Cultural sustainability requires close collaborations based in strong multi-dimensional working relationships. How strong are the collaborative relationships built through this work? How does the relationship-building include culturally appropriate approaches? To what extent are relationships built through face-to-face encounters, cultural participation, and direct collaboration? Are the relationships forged through intersubjective dialogue and engagement? How are they related to previous engagements? How do they result in future efforts? How are partnerships formed? How are interventions imagined, planned, and implemented? How frequently do partners share information? How do they generate a consensus about specific tactics? How are new technologies used to promote connectivity in culturally appropriate ways?
- *Knowledge generation and exchange*: Cultural sustainability work requires nuanced understanding and accurate information. How knowledgeable about the social and cultural context are the people engaged in the work? What models do they bring to the work to guide their thinking and the development of new knowledge? Who is involved in generating new knowledge? What methods are used to share knowledge, and how successful were they?
- *Diversity/Interdependence*: Culture remains a useful concept to name the ontological differences of people's understanding and experience of their own lives and realities. What needs to guide cultural sustainability work is the realization that these existential worlds may unfold and be valued in very different ways by those who live in them and by the institutions and individuals who engage them. How does the cultural sustainability initiative in question take into account the cultural diversity of the community? How does it impact the vitality of cultural forms from other communities? Key to the ecological model is the recognition that cultural expressions are based in social relationships, environmental locations, and economic realities. How well does the work in question document these interrelationships and account for them? How is this interdependence leveraged to increase the benefits for individuals, communities, and the environments in which they live? The model of ecosystems of music developed by Schippers and Grant

(2016) provides a particularly rich, research-based approach to exploring interdependence.

- *Material and non-material well-being:* Levin and Cooper note that “culture should be viewed as a unique form of social currency that serves as a positive force in building community” (2010:5). What tangible and intangible benefits does the work generate for individuals and communities? What cultural resources are used, and what cultural goods and services are generated? How do people manage cultural diversity processes and sustain communities, traditions, relationships, and cultural capital to benefit as many in the community as possible? What new forms of cultural ownership are explored to challenge traditional forms?
- *Equity:* Since cultural sustainability seeks ethical interventions, the results must reduce inequality. How fairly are the benefits distributed across generations? How will the work impact future generations? To what extent are the cultural practices in question being reproduced and passed on to future generations? How are the benefits shared across the current generation? How are they spread across class, race, gender, age-grade, location, and/or other relevant markers of difference? How does the work of cultural sustainability analyze and address power within social systems and settings and contribute to the agency of marginalized groups to shape livable and self-determined futures?

Throsby also urges us to consider a precautionary principle: What irreversible impacts might be generated by the work? What will be lost in doing this particular work? Throsby argues that “decisions that *may* lead to irreversible change should be approached with extreme caution” (2011:145; emphasis added), but most cultural sustainability work emerges in situations where cultural change has already been precipitated by some outside force. In this same vein, it is important to note that cultural sustainability efforts must address intangible cultural heritage that “is compatible with existing international human rights instruments, as well as with the requirements of mutual respect among communities, groups and individuals, and of sustainable development.”²⁰ This ethical stance has major implications on what kinds of cultural expressions and which communities can benefit from cultural sustainability. Finally, it is important to note that these principles can also be used to evaluate the success of a cultural sustainability project during its implantation or upon its conclusion.

Framework for Action

The work of cultural sustainability requires an inductive process with specific individuals, rather than abstract groups. Invited to reflect on the culture that they cherish, most communities engage in some level of reflexivity. They recount their histories, often complex and contradictory. They pose new questions about where they see their communities and their expressive cultural forms in the future. They usually discuss or question their motives, often in groups, thus generating a local and culturally meaningful response. Any planned interventions, then, can be considered a cultural production that results from a specific historical moment. At its best, cultural sustainability work becomes truly generative, opening new opportunities for understanding, connection, and possibilities. As a practitioner, whether a professional or a community member, this work gets under your skin and engages your intellect and emotion.

Many of us pursue this work because of long-standing relationships with artists and teachers, and many of us are deeply invested in the outcomes of these efforts.

Based on our work at Goucher College's Master of Arts in Cultural Sustainability, Maryland Traditions, and the Smithsonian Center for Folklife and Cultural Heritage, we have synthesized the following framework for the development of a cultural sustainability project. While the order and duration of each "step" can vary widely depending on the amount of time available, financial resources, and personal or institutional interest, we do consider each of these steps essential. It is worth noting that in some ways they echo and elaborate the process outlined in Hymes (1981) and Kodish (2013): recognize, report, repeat, and perform. It also echoes the activist road map of raising awareness, changing attitudes, and inspiring action. Titon notes that the idea for a shared project does not emerge until after a relationship has developed; from awareness, insight, or shared experience emerges a shared sense that common action might address some issue (2009:130).²¹

The beginning of a cultural sustainability project usually sparks some level of introspection. The literature is full of examples of well-meaning interventions that did not produce their desired goals. Each of us needs to explore honestly what motivates us, what we hope to contribute, and what we hope to gain from the process. We need to look at our skills so we can have confidence about what we can offer and admit when we need to bring others to the table to provide needed expertise. We need to know something of our weaknesses so that we can design strategies to compensate for them. Tools that enhance self-awareness, from business and psychology, can provide useful objective feedback, as can traditional forms like a Quaker clearness committee. For those working on teams, it is important to make certain that the team has a shared set of values and a team charter that delineates roles and responsibilities. Here, again, it is important for the team to have the key expertise needed to undertake this kind of project. The team-building methods from leadership and management theory can provide useful tools to deepen relationships on a team and establish best practices.²² A key aspect of this introspection is an ongoing awareness and assessment of our own assumptions and the cultivation of our capacity to move beyond them to find avenues of participation that enable us to consider the world more fully from the perspective of those with whom we hope to work. Through participation, we can cultivate appreciation and empathy, which are necessary for nuanced work with the form, function, and meanings of cultural production and performance, and for the trust and reciprocity that is the ethical core of this work.

Preliminary research and consultation usually follow. Solid academic research on the community where the cultural sustainability project will take place provides important baseline information about the specific issues it is facing, as well as the ways in which previous researchers have framed and understood the community. Networking with other scholars, cultural workers, and tradition bearers in the community can provide another important avenue to test ideas and build relationships. Similarly, engaging philanthropists, foundations, government partners, and other partners helps create and support the relationships key to funding a cultural sustainability project. Obviously, the style, frequency, and content of this networking must be culturally appropriate, as in some cases these are the beginnings of long-term collaborations.

At some point, it is usually a good idea to select a significant, representative group of cultural leaders, potential funders, and other stakeholders to discuss together the possibilities of a project. If well-conceived and facilitated, this convening can lead to new possibilities and energize the community around the work in question. The body of information and ideas generated through this process allows for an informed assessment of the situation, but the political work of consultation also builds an important foundation for future success.

Having developed a shared vision of what matters in a particular time and place to the community in question, field research deepens everyone's understanding of the social and cultural dynamics at play on the ground, and can lead to clarifications of the challenges and needs faced by community members. Some communities also respond well to cultural asset mapping, and ACTA has shown the value of this work "to identify and mobilize diverse community cultural assets to create a shared vision of community well-being."²³ Others have experimented with UNESCO-inspired community-driven inventories of intangible cultural heritage, often including an ad hoc exhibition or performances to show the community the diversity of its own cultural riches.²⁴ The attempt to evoke the "stories about things that matter" (as Kiran Singh Sirah eloquently expresses it) mediates between the private and public realms,²⁵ and these performances usually have a political dynamic to them, as people try to make themselves heard, recast their situations, and find ways to act upon the worlds into which they have been cast (Jackson 2013). Field research often tests the ideas formulated in the consultation, and it may refine or reframe them in significant ways.

At this point, it is usually possible to plan specific interventions that respond to the dynamic concerns within the community. Obviously, different challenges require different responses, and here the ecological model put forth in Grant (2016) provides a useful framework to describe and analyze the many factors at play; Grant also presents a host of historical examples of interventions in the realm of music. An artisan community may need design and marketing support in the form of trainings. A music tradition may benefit from increased access to the music industry so the musicians can find new audiences. A disparate group of local festivals may wish to create an association to share best practices and administrative staff. It is important to note that the first round of interventions also often involves the creation of new, unforeseen opportunities, resulting in changes or additions to the original plan. Having introduced the cultural sustainability project into the ecosystem, new challenges and insights often result in responses, and flexibility and responsiveness play a key role in the success of this work.²⁶

Any interventions undertaken need to have clearly defined outcomes, and a well-planned project should include ongoing monitoring and evaluation of those outcomes.²⁷ Given cultural sustainability's commitment to deep collaboration with our friends, colleagues, and interlocutors in the communities where we work, it is vitally important to identify culturally appropriate tactics for including community members in the evaluation. At this point, the collaborators may wish to refine and repeat. There may be a call for a revised approach to addressing the issues in question. Completely new interventions may be suggested, or perhaps the same strategies can be used again with some modifications. The process of intervention may end, or it may continue for

decades, as it has with master-apprentice programs in state folklife programs across the United States.

Future Questions

Having outlined the antecedents and inspirations of cultural sustainability, we have provided a tentative definition to further the dialogue on this urgent work. We have also articulated a series of principles by which to judge specific efforts in cultural sustainability and have provided an overview of the process for a typical cultural sustainability project while avoiding the details of specific examples that require extensive ethnographic description.²⁸ However, these reflections raise major questions that we have yet to address, and we imagine that these issues will drive future research in this area. The question of the interpretation or culturally relevant definition of “sustainability” will produce interesting conversations. Even without the larger national and international discourses around culture and heritage, different languages will provide different nuances for the idea of sustainability, and these will likely reveal interesting variations across cultures. Similarly, within specific cultures, sustainabilities are often contested (for an early example, see Brady 1994).

Our approach centers on the well-being of individuals and communities, rather than on the vitality of a particular expressive form. We have intentionally focused on the human dimension, as we consider it to be of greater importance than any specific cultural form. Still, there is an increasing body of evidence that strong cultural practices within a community benefit the health of the community, including its overall physical, mental, and social well-being (Stuckey and Nobel 2010, quoted on ACTA’s website;²⁹ see also Oster et al. 2014). In fact, Whalen, Moss, and Baldwin have made a convincing case that indigenous language use results in diverse positive physical health benefits (2016). Following the Native American medicine wheel, their work conceives of Native health across four domains: spiritual, mental, emotional, and physical. They show the correlation between the use of indigenous language and each domain; some of the most significant data attest to a relationship between language and physical health:

Data exist on palliative effects of use of a Native language and/or cultural practices on smoking (Henderson, Jacobsen, and Beals 2005), suicide rates (Hallett, Chandler, and Lalonde 2007), and alcohol (Torres Stone et al. 2006; Whitbeck et al. 2004) and substance abuse (First Peoples’ Heritage Language and Culture Council 2010:213). (Whalen, Moss, and Baldwin 2016:4)

This kind of research holds such interesting promise that, in 2017, the Fifth International Conference on Language Documentation and Conservation at the University of Hawai‘i had as its focus “Vital Voices: Linking Language and Well-Being.” Certainly, our focus on the well-being of individuals and communities contrasts sharply with the cultural safeguarding regimes associated with most heritage discourses, which generally focus on the preservation of the individual cultural manifestation, be it a heritage site, landscape, or practice. Still, additional research into the comparative advantages of these approaches will reveal their relative strengths and weaknesses.³⁰

How does cultural sustainability relate to cultures of sustainability? A number of scholars have already posed questions in this area, including Jackson (2011) and Noyes (2016a). However, as we continue to move quickly along the ecological collision course with the limits of growth, a transdisciplinary concern has fostered dialogue around the implications of the Anthropocene (Latour 2014). Questions of how to take traditional knowledge and cultural practice as a basis for new ways of living in community and in balance with the natural world are likely to become ever more important. Can we locate, describe, and transplant, from one cultural context to another, cultural practices that model a relationship to the environment that is different from the one endlessly reproduced by consumer capitalism? Engaged thinkers like Erik Assadourian at the Worldwatch Institute have made clear that consumer culture will need to be transformed if the human species is to find a new way forward, and we will need to embrace a culture of sustainability (Assadourian 2010). What kind of culture will sustain our communities? How can cultural sustainability efforts lead to a cultural transformation that values cultural diversity, social equity, and beauty?

The impact of research on communities and their cultural production is another area of potential exploration. For several decades, we have known that fixing a cultural form through documentation often leads to heightened reflexivity or even self-consciousness within the community that produces it. Sharon Sherman's "That's How the Seder Looks" (1986) recounts the impact of filming the preparation of one's own family's seder and the ways in which family members began to use the film as a benchmark for future performances. Despite this understanding, the UNESCO Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage focused much of its work on documentation, and Foster and Gilman (2015) have gathered a rich set of essays that explore the challenges of working within UNESCO frameworks, especially the negotiations between the local and cosmopolitan discourses around cultural production. Similarly, Noyes has written about the impact of UNESCO recognition on the Patum de Berga in Catalonia, detailing the ways in which it has changed restoration practices for festival effigies, managed commercialization, altered the selection of participants, and made explicit meanings that formerly remained unspoken (2016b). Certainly, cultural sustainability projects—series of planned interventions—will merit the same investigation in the fullness of time, and questions about the long-term impacts of these efforts will need to be posed and answered.

When one consciously intervenes, the stakes are often higher, the margin of error is often larger, and the ramifications and responsibilities are often bigger. Moreover, the potential for damage is much greater, even as the potential for doing good is much greater as well. This points to one of the biggest challenges we all want to get right, but sometimes struggle to meet: codes for ethical conduct in research and representation must protect human rights and dignity while respecting moral and legal obligations. (Dirksen 2012)

Notes

1. Jeff Todd Titon, Sustainability Is Environmental, Economic, and Cultural, *Sustainable Music: A Research Blog on the Subject of Sustainability, Sound and Music*, January 17, 2018, <https://sustainablemusic.blogspot.com/2018/01/sustainability-is-environmental.html> (accessed February 18, 2018).

2. See Goucher College, MA in Cultural Sustainability, <http://www.goucher.edu/learn/graduate-programs/ma-in-cultural-sustainability/> (accessed February 24, 2018).
3. The program book of the American Folklore Society meeting lists the title as “Digging in the Dirt of the Landscape of Cultural Sustainability.” See https://cdn.ymaws.com/www.afsnet.org/resource/resmgr/am13/2013_annual_meeting_program.pdf (accessed May 24, 2019).
4. The strategic plan is available at https://folklife-media.si.edu/docs/folklife/Strategic_Plan.pdf (accessed May 24, 2019).
5. This conference focused on the link between cultural and environmental sustainability. For a short description, see <https://music.ucsb.edu/news/event/1567> (accessed May 24, 2019).
6. As seen below, our notion of interventions remains quite true to this definition.
7. A brief history of the UNESCO Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage can be found at <https://ich.unesco.org/en/working-towards-a-convention-00004> (accessed February 19, 2018). The English-language text of the Convention can be found at UNESCO (United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization), Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage, 2003, <https://ich.unesco.org/en/convention> (accessed May 24, 2019). See also Aikawa (2004).
8. For an interesting example of transplanting a cultural form, see Donia Zhang’s deployment of traditional Chinese architecture as a window into cultural sustainability (2013).
9. In fact, Grant’s research had been inspired by the efforts in language maintenance (2014), and there is no doubt that the burgeoning research in language documentation, revitalization, and maintenance in recent years has also done much to detail the processes that lead to the viability of endangered languages—processes that have informed the thinking of some practitioners of cultural sustainability.
10. Titon has addressed this issue repeatedly, but this post titled “Sound Sacralizes Space” on his blog *Sustainable Music* does so in a very immediate way: <https://sustainablemusic.blogspot.com/2011/04/sound-sacralizes-space.html> (accessed May 24, 2019).
11. It is worth noting that Sheehy mentions reciprocity with communities in which we have worked as a major factor in applied ethnomusicology (1992:323).
12. In 1979, the American Folklife Center at the Library of Congress began its Federal Cylinder Project, which sought to arrange, catalog, and transfer to preservation tape its vast collection; in addition, the project made cassette tape copies of the recordings to return to the tribes of origin, who had been accessing this material for their own cultural ends. In 2015, the Library digitized many of these collections, including the Passamaquoddy materials recorded by Smithsonian anthropologist Jesse Fewkes. Marcus Cederström, Tim Frandy, and Colin Connors have found creative ways to collaborate with Ojibwe communities in Wisconsin. See Cederström, Frandy, and Connors (2018).
13. The Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act of 1990 set in motion the review of vast institutional holdings of Indigenous materials and a painstaking process of their return. While this public policy has its own scholarship, it is worth noting that it also recognizes that the communities that created cultural heritage should generally be its custodians.
14. Goucher College, <https://www.goucher.edu/learn/graduate-programs/ma-in-cultural-sustainability/> (accessed June 21, 2019).
15. Ann Markusen and Anne Gadwa, Creative Placemaking, The Mayors’ Institute on City Design, 2010, <https://www.arts.gov/sites/default/files/CreativePlacemaking-Paper.pdf> (accessed May 24, 2019).
16. See ACTA [Alliance for California Traditional Arts], Weaving Traditional Arts into the Fabric of Community Health: A Briefing from the Alliance for California Traditional Arts, 2011, <http://www.actaonline.org/content/briefing> (accessed May 24, 2019).
17. Learn more about the Millennium Development Goals at <http://www.unfoundation.org/what-we-do/issues/mdgs.html> (accessed February 19, 2018).
18. The kinds of knowledge generated through cultural sustainability efforts are quite diverse; often, individuals become more aware of the creativity and diversity of their own communities, and, at the same time, these projects can generate more academic forms of knowledge as well. It is also worth noting that our definition potentially reflects all seven “story lines” of cultural sustainability documented by Soini and Birkeland’s analysis of the term (2014).
19. We would like to thank the reviewers of the last draft of this note, especially Reviewer B, who rightly synthesized these differences and urged us to make them explicit. Thanks, too, go to James Deutsch for a careful and thoughtful review and edit before the first submission.

20. UNESCO's 2003 Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage, <https://ich.unesco.org/en/convention> (accessed May 24, 2019).

21. Special thanks to Thomas Wide, Smithsonian Institution, for a productive and critical reading of an earlier version of this essay. His insights helped us improve the text in important ways.

22. For a leading example, see William Dyer's *Team Building* (2013).

23. See Alliance for California Traditional Arts, Building Healthy Communities: Cultural Treasures, <https://www.actaonline.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/06/Healthy-Study.pdf>.

24. For example, when Cuban officials worked with UNESCO's Regional Office in Havana on an inventory of ICH in the town of Perico in Matanzas Province, the team put up a temporary exhibition and held small performances in the local House of Culture (Fernando Brugman, personal communication, August 17, 2016).

25. Kiran Singh Sirah, quoted in Angelica Aboulhosn, Lessons in Storytelling: Bridging Cultures and Communities [Profile of Kiran Singh Sirah], *Smithsonian Folklife Festival* [blog], June 16, 2017, <https://festival.si.edu/blog/lessons-in-storytelling-bridging-cultures-and-communities> (accessed February 24, 2018).

26. The relevance of this fact was also noted by Thomas Wide in a comment he drafted on this essay.

27. Here, a logic model that predominates in both education and international development can be helpful as a way to clearly articulate desired impacts and strategies for testing them. The American NGO Animating Democracy has published a useful "continuum of impact" to support arts agencies in their efforts to articulate impact to potential funders and identify possible documentation of those impacts (see Animating Democracy 2017).

28. As Foster and Gilman (2015) demonstrate, the specific case studies of intervention provide fertile ground for new research in public folklore, and we urge our colleagues to continue to document their efforts and report on the impacts.

29. ACTA [Alliance for California Traditional Arts], Weaving Traditional Arts into the Fabric of Community Health: A Briefing from the Alliance for California Traditional Arts, 2011, <http://www.actaonline.org/content/briefing> (accessed May 24, 2019).

30. It is worth noting that cultural sustainability projects at the Smithsonian Center for Folklife and Cultural Heritage explicitly seek outcomes related to both the vitality of specific cultural forms and the well-being of individuals in the communities where we work.

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