

AAD 521: Synthetic Essay #2

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This term we are facing questions about the future of folklorists in arts and cultural organizations. Coupled with the mildly panicked search for a summer internship (for the Arts Management students, at least), our readings and class discussions have propelled me into thinking about the skills I have, the ones I want, and the types of job positions that I might be interested in (or forced to accept) in the future. Hours of researching internships and jobs in the museum world and other program-heavy arts and culture organizations has served to further confuse my future employment aspirations. My interests are varied and expansive and that leads to difficulty in pinning down an exact career goal. In the effort to utilize my dual pursuit of Masters degrees in Arts Management and Folklore, I decided to take a real (although slightly unusual) staff title, enrich it into a unique position, and posit it in a fabricated museum that blends folk arts and cultural history with a community-emphasis and ethnographic bend. This job position is one that I hope, one day, to be qualified for.

### **Job Announcement**

The Museum of Living Culture (MLC) in Supercool City is seeking a Curator of Public Programs to manage our diverse calendar of programming, encourage audience outreach and participation, and work with community leaders and our collections department to design contemporary exhibitions that reflect the values and interests of our museum. This is a full-time (1.0 FTE) staff position.

## **Responsibilities**

The Curator of Public Programs reports to the Executive Director and will be responsible for:

- ❖ Managing the Museum of Living Culture's programming schedule.
- ❖ Overseeing the Project Coordinator, Special Events Team, Program Assistant, Museum Educator, and the occasional Student Intern.
- ❖ Working closely with MLC's Collections Department to design and implement programming and exhibitions that connect to our permanent and visiting collections.
- ❖ Working with MLC's Education Department to develop programming and workshops for youth, school, and teacher audiences.
- ❖ Working with MLC's Curatorial Department to design and implement programming that supports MLC exhibitions and brings in relevant speakers and lecturers.
- ❖ Working with MLC's Communications Department to establish effective outreach.
- ❖ Build and maintain relations with community leaders and cultural groups.
- ❖ Research and apply for grants and funding to enrich programming efforts.
- ❖ Imbed front-end, formative, and summative program evaluation to assist MLC in remaining relevant, community-focused, and successful.
- ❖ Conduct ethnographic fieldwork with MLC's constituents to help develop relevant and valuable programming that incorporates multiple voices and reflects living cultures.
- ❖ Perform other related duties as required.

## **A Little About You**

Our ideal candidate for the Curator of Public Programs position is dynamic and adaptable, a team-player who can work with a variety of people, and has a demonstrated interest in folk art, folklore, and museum programming. You are creative, positive, diplomatic, a self-motivator, work well under pressure, and like to laugh. In addition to these sparkling qualities, you:

- ❖ Have 3-5 years of relevant experience with programming, preferably in the museum world.
- ❖ Have 1-3 years of relevant experience with exhibitions (design, planning, implementation, or similar)—this won't be your first rodeo.
- ❖ Have a Masters degree or PhD in Arts Management, Museum Studies, Folklore, Anthropology, or related field.
- ❖ Have Ethnographic experience.
- ❖ Possess exquisite attention to detail.
- ❖ Have solid computer skills (Microsoft Word, Excel, PowerPoint, Windows Operating System knowledge).
- ❖ Have strong leadership, management, and supervisory skills bolstered by volunteer or staff management experience.
- ❖ Have the ability to represent the MLC with professionalism, integrity, and a collaborative spirit that reflects the mission of our institution.
- ❖ Have strong interpersonal, time-management, problem solving, and analytical skills.

## **Compensation**

Salary commensurate with experience. \$40,000-60,000 range. Full benefits package available.

## **How to Apply**

Interested applicants should send a cover letter, current resume, and three letters of reference to Executive Director Del Longstream at [wearesocool@mlc.org](mailto:wearesocool@mlc.org).

## **Job Description**

The position “Curator of Public Programs” is an amalgamation of three usually separate museum positions while simultaneously not being any one of them. Similar (but not equal) positions include: Director of Public Programs, Curator (whether chief curator or assistant curator), and Director of Education. The idea for a position titled “Curator of Public Programs” stemmed from my professional experience, our class readings, and research ideas of crafting a museum that focuses on living cultures and the integration of folkloric ethnography with an institutionalized third place. As requested, I will look at how this created position interacts with values, ethics, skills, and approaches that we have discussed in class.

## **Values**

The somewhat prickly concept of value goes hand-in-hand with relevance. People value what is relevant to them, and relevancy implies cultural, social, personal, and ascribed definitions and considerations of value. The Curator of Public Programs is a position that double-checks value with the Museum of Living Culture’s constituencies and community. It is paramount, then, that whoever holds the position be able to work with community leaders, conduct fieldwork to assist with relevant exhibition and program design, and understand the values of the museum’s constituencies. The most effective way to make sure that a museum is producing programming that is relevant to the institution is to check the

mission statement. Janice Rutherford mentions it time and again in “Museums,” her chapter in *Arts and Cultural Programming*. Museums provide mission-driven programming first and foremost and every museum program should reflect the mission (Rutherford, 2008, p. 193). In order for this fabricated position to be both necessary and relevant, the mission of the Museum of Living Culture needs to reflect values of folklore, ethnography, community input, and shared authority.

The mission is not, of course, the only guideline to consider when developing programming. The Curator of Public Programs would need to understand the values of the museum’s constituencies, and—whenever possible—include community members in prototyping and creating relevant programming. My desire for integrating a folkloric training and background into preferred qualities for the position stems from the necessity of effective community engagement and outreach. As mentioned in the book *Museum Administration*, “regardless of its mission, size, or emphasis, a museum will be known to its audiences through its public programs (Genoways and Ireland, 2003, p. 287). This indicates the importance of thoughtful and relevant programming, and it is my belief that training in folklore provides a key ingredient to community connectivity. Often museum staff members work behind the scenes, rarely interacting with the public who regularly visit their museums. Providing a spokesperson position, like that of the Curator of Public Programming, ensures that there is always someone on staff who can speak knowledgeably to (and of) the museum visitor base.

Although the experience of John Lair and Sarah Gertrude Knott is more related to arts and cultural programming via festivals and radio, their experiences still teach arts programmers a valuable lesson about, well, value. As Michael Ann Williams, the author of

*Staging Tradition*, tells us, “ultimately both models failed [Knott and Lair] because they fell out of favor with the public” (Williams, 2006, p. 180). Knott and Lair’s organizations seem to have suffered from a little bit of “Founders Fever”, where the organization exists and runs happily while the founders are there lending their passion and long hours to it, but once the founders move on from the organization it dwindles and, sometimes even dies. As a cultural programmer, you do not want to be the only person driving the programs you design and implement. For a while, passion and dedication served Lair and Knott in creating successful programming, but without a continuous double-check with their constituencies the National Folk Festival and Renfro Valley ceased to remain relevant and therefore lost value to their audiences. Concerning programming, value must exist for the institution/ organization (mission-driven for museums especially), the visitors, and the community. As Weil gently reminds us in his book *Making Museums Matter*, “a museum must be able to articulate the logical connection between its primary program activities and the positive difference it believes those activities are likely to make to its community” (Weil, 2002, p. 107). The Curator of Public Programs is a position that needs to reflect value, both for the Museum of Living Culture and the public it serves.

## **Ethics**

When I consider the ethics of cultural programming, what pops into my mind is not as much related to the readings for this class as it is to my more generally accumulated knowledge about museum responsibility, authority, and the problem of aesthetics. When considering the Curator of Public Programs position, ethics is an intrinsic part of representation and shared authority. The Museum of Living Culture, although a fictitious institution, is dedicated to maintaining community and audience relevancy and does this

through continued partnerships and not the institutional practice of deciding what is aesthetically valuable for other people. I believe that folklore has a lot to offer institutional ethics, especially as concerns shared authority and why it is important. In her chapter “‘Shared Authority’: Collaboration, Curatorial Voice, and Exhibition Design in Canberra, Australia,” Hutchison explains that “Frisch’s ‘shared authority,’ based on the intimate interaction between oral history interviewer and narrator, offers a space that have not been colonized by ‘community engagement,’ which can resemble a marketing strategy more than a democratized process” (Hutchison, 2012, p. 160). The Curator of Public Programs has a responsibility to the museum’s constituencies and serves as someone with a vested interest in the museum visitor.

### **Skills**

The Curator of Public Programs requires some specialized skills and experience, especially as pertains to folklore. Often the organizational structure of a museum resembles a line rather than a pyramid. There are a couple of people “at the top,” as it were, but many of the departments in a museum work separately from one another, gathering together mainly for larger projects. A Curator of Public Programs would have to act as a broker, facilitate inter-departmental communication, and try to reinforce the folk group of the Museum of Living Culture. As Baron mentions in his article “Sins of Objectification? Agency, Mediation, and Community Cultural Self-Determination in Public Folklore and Cultural Tourism Programming,” the folklorist has many valuable skills. He reaffirms the role of the folklorist as facilitator, saying “as cultural brokers, folklorists mediate among multiple parties—cultural institutions, artists, academic disciplines, traditional communities, and audiences” (Baron, 2010, p.67). It is this type of versatility that a Curator



of Public Programs (with a folklore background) can bring to museums. This feeling is reaffirmed by an earlier article in *Putting Folklore to Use*, where Farb Hernandez's chapter "Folklore in Museums" informs us that "an active and aggressive folklore program can ultimately accrue positive results to almost any museum if it is handled wisely and professionally" (Farb Hernandez, 1994, p. 73).

Similarly, Weil predicts this same type of versatility in the future of museum work. He says that "at the level of institutional leadership, the most important new skill will be the ability to envision how the community's ongoing and/or emerging needs in all their dimensions—physical, psychological, economic, and social—might be served by the museum's particular competencies" (Weil, 2006, p. 48). I believe that the skills of a folklorist are capable of doing just that.

## **Approaches**

There has also recently been a popular culture claim on the word "curator." Being your own curator exists across multiple platforms, like Pinterest (curate collections of your interests!), Twitter (curate who you follow and what updates you see!), and many museums are pioneering online databases of collections that museum visitors can curate and interact with in a digital space. I chose the title "Curator of Public Programs" deliberately, to suggest a collaborative interface but also to reflect the important idea of choice. It emphasizes the value of working with community leaders and members to develop programs that are curated for the community. In her chapter within *Museums and Communities: Curators, Collections and Collaboration* Golding asserts that "museum curators today can work collaboratively and creatively with collections, not only to promote an understanding of cultural diversity and the often shameful histories of museums, but also to forge a

contemporary connection with the lived experiences of present-day audiences” (Golding, 2012, p. 14). This collaborative interface is the approach I envisioned when creating the Curator of Public Programs position. While programming should always reflect the institutional mission, it should also be in conversation with the museum’s collections. A Curator of Public Programs can ensure that this happens and promote intrapersonal collaboration within the museum itself.

Community consultation is also key to the Curator of Public Programs’ approach. This relates, of course, back to relevancy but also to the importance of looping in community leaders and constituents to the planning process. People are far more likely to find a stake to hold when they have been part of the creative process. Fouseki and Smith, in their article “Community Consultation in the Museum: The 2007 Bicentenary of Britain’s Abolition of the Slave Trade,” illustrate this point well by saying that “a failure by museum staff to understand how exhibitions feed into the wider political and emotional needs and aspirations of communities underlines the failures and frustrations of community consultation” (Fouseki and Smith, 2012, p. 242). This statement highlights the potential of a Curator of Public Programs, to pull community members and leaders into the planning process to develop innovative and relevant museum programming with an emphasis on living cultures.

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