

Stand Up and Be Heard: Robert Force and the Instigating of Tradition

Robert Nichols

In some forms, anthropology can be considered a complicated version of writing a collection of narratives. Instead of just giving the story and where it all links together, anthropology wants to give the how and why of a story, explaining why a certain story has occurred or how this story's occurrence can show a deeper understanding of the why. This desire to comprehensively examine all aspects is bound, due to the vagaries of human nature, to time. The second an anthropologist puts pen to paper, that anthropologist becomes a chronometer of sorts, a chronometric analyzer, if you will, of everything seen and experienced, by themselves and others at the focus of his pen. In no case is this more prevalent than in the field of ethnography, as it is at the same time a distillation and a gathering of the human condition. Ethnographic accounts seek to document times of place in the human experience, but *as* humans experience them, not as presented by historical review. This leads to the possibility of being considered as merely writing an account, not an objective discourse; a problem in procedure, as Thomas sees it, because issues of theoretical consequence are subsumed in the ethnographic process, and any resulting revelations are contained within the ethnography (Thomas 1991); this “hiding” of results, whether intentional or not, risks being overlooked if not somehow brought to the surface, with the larger problem being the mechanism one uses to do so. Reflexive writing carries the baggage of both writer and subject, and therefore is not as clear in exposition as many anthropologists would hope it to be, especially if one desires a more nuanced formulation that keeps the writer at arms length, rather than what seems to be a more intimate involvement in contemporary writings.

With that in mind, how do you write, especially focused primarily on one individual? Can you focus on something other than just the story of that person? My desire is to present some insights to an individual who is at the same time *within* and *without* his community. His is an experience that contains many of these types of dialectical situations, being both known and unknown to his own society.

Robert Force is a man at the turn; the turn in life where looking back you have accrued enough traveled distance to be able to look around and see more of the totality of your travels, rather than just the path itself. At opposite ends, it can lend itself to critical discourse, if you desire, adding up the swerves, stops, and starts it took to get *here*, or it can be bland sentimentality of 'what was' *there*. Most people end up somewhere in the middle, at times criticizing themselves over a turn not taken, other times reflecting on a certain period that was particularly enjoyable for them. Force, as player, answers questions with the realization that he is known for something *within* his life that is, paradoxically, *outside* the realm of

Stand Up and Be Heard: Robert Force and the Instigating of Tradition

Robert Nichols

knowledge of most of his society at large. This does not make it less important to him, only less recognized *outwardly* for his musical *conceits*; it is this lack of recognition in the larger society that needs to be redressed.

The course of action taken to get insights into his process of realization was a series of interviews done over the internet through the medium of audiovisual video conferencing, and emails. This was necessary as it would not have been possible to arrange a face to face series of interviews due to the distance between the parties' locales. These interviews took place sporadically as time permitted, and as could be arranged between the involved parties. As both a backup and means of clarification, if necessary, a recording was made separate from the internet recordings by a digital recorder in the room with Robert Force, the digital file sent to me afterward for downloading. Aside from initial setup parameters that would be necessary in any videoconferencing situation and a couple of stops and starts due to internet activity interfering with streaming of the video, no real problems were encountered that were not overcome. The email portions were specific questions, usually of a more technical nature, that could be easily answered through writing. Some may question the use of such technology, assuming it may get in the way or somehow does not constitute 'real fieldwork' simply because you are not 'there', wherever 'there' is, but it is at least one way of the future in information gathering, and, by proxy, fieldwork when appropriate. Sunderland's embrace of the phone as fieldwork medium notwithstanding (Sunderland 1999), the videoconferencing medium does allow a certain avenue into the field, though not physically present, that the phone itself does not, as it allows one to still interact in a face-to-face manner with your subject. Not absolutely directly, of course, but the fact that you can engage the person and get nonverbal cues as well as verbal language does a great deal to represent what fieldwork aims to entail; a complete picture in which to partake. I do feel it adds a great deal more than just phone work, or impersonal email, but rather it should be considered as part of the bag of tricks of modern anthropologists to gather data, especially when it could facilitate easier funding of projects that are of a certain focus, such as this individual ethnography.

Analyzing data strictly from interviews of one person involves the tricky step of remembering your place in that activity. It is up to the interviewer to shape the broad outline of the talk, leaving the interviewee to fill in the spaces, remembering the whole time that answers given are usually framed in the context of your asking; therefore you run the risk of biasing information immediately if not careful in crafting the direction. Other risks of interviewing deal with the phenomenon of "canned answers," where the interviewee is used to giving interviews, and has stock answers ready to pull out. The intent may not be seen as malevolent, but if care is not taken to continue past those answers the anthropologist or

Stand Up and Be Heard: Robert Force and the Instigating of Tradition

Robert Nichols

ethnographer will end up with information worth not much more than a magazine interview.

Shifting to direct analysis of Robert Force's interviews, the information given by Force can be seen to exhibit threads of related terms that coincide with his overall narrative. I have ordered them under two main topics of relationships and experience. These are the two biggest orders of magnitude that have shaped Robert Force as original player and innovative American musician.

<u>Relationships</u>	<u>Experience</u>
Individual:Community	Education: Societal/Self
Friends:Strangers	Age: Societal/Self
Men:Women	Songs: Societal/Self

For clarity, the following definitions are used as a basis of my coding strategy:

Relationships- those connections or involvements between two parties

Individual- a distinct indivisible entity

Community- a group sharing common characteristics or interests, usually perceived as distinct from the larger society they are a part of.

Friend- a person attached to another by feelings of personal regard

Stranger- a person with whom one has no personal acquaintance, someone not a member of a group

Men- male humans

Women- female humans

Experience- Knowledge or practical wisdom gained from what one has observed, encountered, or undergone

Societal Education- The result of acquiring specific knowledge or skills in accordance with what a particular community deems necessary and appropriate; usually in some sort of formal framework

Self Education- The result of acquiring specific knowledge or skills through one's own efforts and abilities, often outside a formal framework

Societal Age- The level of development, applications, and works achieved by a group, especially that of a community; often paired with a period of generational time

Self Age- The length of time an individual has existed; often paired with periods of life with which one relates to other individuals in the same stage of life

Societal Song- A metrical composition, sung or not, which a community has deemed at a level of acceptance that it is protected or codified in some way

Self Song- A metrical composition, sung or not, arrived at or created by an individual through their own means

Stand Up and Be Heard: Robert Force and the Instigating of Tradition

Robert Nichols

Robert Force's journey began with listening to *songs*; in particular songs of society, folk songs, of the eastern United States. The first introduction of these songs that really grabbed his attention were by Richard Fariña; himself a *stranger* to the traditional *community* associated with these songs, yet able to find meaning enough to play them to great accord with a measure of *experience* brought on by *self education* of these *societal songs*, and enough presence and ability to affect a newer, unattached *community*. At first blush this seems simple enough, but the stronger realization is that Robert Force would also affect a *community* with which he had no *relationship*, but through the means not of *self education* of *societal songs* but *self education* of *self songs*, songs brought on by experience, *songs* not created yet. The presence of *self* caused Robert Force to choose a different path from the one he initially was observant of, that of another individual's *self* interpreting *society* through that *society's songs*. This working of society's songs had and has no real importance for Robert Force's music, and is what is fundamentally different from his introduction to, and ongoing *relationship* with, the Appalachian dulcimer; what is important in his reality is the reliance on *self*, not *society*, to create *song*, and through songs, meaning.

The societal environment, here referred to through coding as *societal age*, was key to his musical path. The society of the 1960's and 1970's was one of experimentation and thinking seen as outside the mainstream of society, a result of the younger generation seeking its own way forward. This *societal age* was enthralled by *societal song* not of their own world; though American, their experience was not initially with these folk songs, *societal songs* of meaning from areas far removed from the urban environs most found themselves in. Here then, was where Robert Force found *self*; young in *self age* in a *societal age* young (in experience and accomplishments) as well. The urge to create, and to create freely, was naturally arrived at in this environment.

This *societal age* created a sense of *community* different from that of mainstream America for Force; the *individual* was accorded the latitude to convey both *self education* and *societal education* as they saw fit for constructing meaning, not as society at large saw fit. Robert's initial experiences with the Appalachian dulcimer led him to create a new paradigm for the instrument almost immediately; unattached as he was with the instrument's traditional *community*, and lacking any other *experience* to tell him otherwise, he subsequently fell to his own process of *self education* to realize the instrument as he felt it best, rearranging the style of playing the instrument as well as a different tuning.

Returning again to his initial introduction to the Appalachian dulcimer in Fariña's recordings, one can extrapolate

Stand Up and Be Heard: Robert Force and the Instigating of Tradition

Robert Nichols

the strong determination society plays in defining its conveyances of meaning; in particular, folk traditions, though dynamic, have strong identifiers that the related society will either allow or not allow according to *experience* (tradition). Richard Fariña, recipient of societal knowledge of the instrument, while innovative to a degree, was still bound by the *societal education* given for the instrument as he learned it; Robert Force, having no boundaries of *societal education* to fence him in, re-imagined the dulcimer in a way that, still today, is pure innovation, and especially notable as that brought by *self education*.

As Force's influence grew, this notion of community affected not necessarily him, but others around him, as the dulcimer community grew in adherents. One has to remember his style of playing is *individual*, on an instrument played individually, yes, but traditionally the instrument is played with a strong sense of communal correctness in form and style; his form is not of the *community*, yet he is still creating *song* (as a concept and coded) to be played *individually* in *community*; *song* that speaks as much to the tradition of folk music as anything one can find in the hills of Appalachia, where his instrument had its beginnings.

The importance of community also points to acceptance of the individual in this case; Robert Force, though innovative, *self educated*, and without *community*, was embraced by others of his *societal* and *self age*, creating *community* through new *relationship*. This new *community relationship* in turn led to a merging of traditional *community* acceptance with the new *community* created through *friends* and *strangers* Robert met and educated while playing and traveling.

To further the understanding, the *individual* Robert Force was primary to the creation of a new coalesced *community* of traditional *community* and new *individuals*, brought on by the new paradigm created by and through *self education* and *self song*.

The *song* form is to be particularly noted, as the impact of Force's influence is felt here as well. In any community there exist songs or works of art that become important of themselves, creating an acceptance that allows the community a focus point for creation of folklore; in this instance it is better to think of the concept of folklore mentioned here as explained by Rowe and Schelling, "...as 'a kind of bank where "authenticity" is safely stored'..." (Mendoza 1998 p166). This authenticity, then, only occurs with acceptance of the *song* by *community*, it is only when accepted by *community* that *song* can transform from *self song* to *societal song*. This has occurred with a *self song* of Robert Force, namely "Wellyn." This *self song*, helped along by his *friend* and playing partner Albert d'Ossche, (who was the recipient of *societal education*

Stand Up and Be Heard: Robert Force and the Instigating of Tradition

Robert Nichols

in dulcimer playing, having been taught by Force) has gained *societal song* status within the dulcimer player *community*. This song has great importance as *self song* for Force as well, as it was the first song he and *friend* d'Ossche created *community* on through a meshing of individual styles of the two by *societal education* of d'Ossche by Force. To underscore this transformation one we can craft this sentence: The *self song* “Wellyn,” played as *community* endeavor by *individual friends* has transformed to *societal song*, now to be played by *community* as *individual song*. Quite a transformation from someone who started with no *community*, no *societal song*, and no *societal education* of this musical *community*.

This community acceptance also occurred for another reason; Robert Force never stayed as an outright *stranger*. Even when first meeting another player, Robert would freely share information on playing, transforming his *self education* to *societal education* within the dulcimer *community*. This process was not uncommon to those of his *self age* and *societal age* for reasons already given, and had the result of a generation of like-minded players, but the fact that he would share it with those outside his *age* meant that *friends* and *strangers* alike benefited from his *individual* presence in any *community*, traditional or new, where he would find himself. Even while hitchhiking Force would end up playing *self song* for the person who gave him a ride, often playing at the kitchen table while they made dinner (Force 2010). The effect was cumulative, and had the result that over time Robert became accepted by the *community* for the *individual* he was. The *individual* holding *self education* became societal educator within the *community*, yet retaining *self education* of a different form not keeping with *community* style or *societal education*. The *stranger* identifier lost meaning in the community, yet acceptance was not predicated on gaining or demonstrating *community* knowledge as one might think; here the *community* accepted a lack of *community* knowledge in exchange for specific *self education* knowledge that could affect *societal song* through new information in *self song*.

The dulcimer *community* is open and egalitarian in practice, with few, if any, boundaries to keep men or women from participation. This openness has served the newer dulcimer *community* especially well, and in turn the traditional dulcimer *community*, as many newer *individual* players of both genders have contributed much to the *societal education* of the coalesced dulcimer *community*. Robert Force, as a prime innovator, contributes more in *self song* than many of either gender, but women have never been sidelined or otherwise excluded. Women players, especially those of Force's *societal age*, show themselves to seek out more breadth of *societal song*, adding to the repertoire of the instrument that way rather than through *self song*, and none as of yet choose to follow Force's *individual* style of playing innovation of standing up, or

Stand Up and Be Heard: Robert Force and the Instigating of Tradition

Robert Nichols

even modifying their basic position, choosing instead to play the dulcimer as *community* traditionally has done. Force was fortunate to meet Jean Ritchie, a *woman* of great traditional dulcimer *community* stature very early in his playing- the result of this openness of community that knows no gender hierarchy. The equal stature of *man* and *woman* in the *community* of dulcimer players leaves out a lot of political and power struggle that often happens with *women* competing or existing on the same stage as *men*; Force is a recipient of this egalitarian freedom, positioned as he is to both accept and give *self song* and *societal education* where desired, free of issues of gender/power, and in turn gives freely to either gender such knowledge. This in turn allows more freedom of *societal education* for *men* and *women* in the dulcimer *community*, leading to more *individual* and *community song* and *education experience*. It can be said that the egalitarian nature present in *community* leads to *individual* progressive musical movement by this *experience*, fomenting further *community* musical dynamic, allowing for more *societal education*; this, in turn, teaches *societal song* gained through *community* acceptance which ultimately leads to *self song* in such a dynamic environment, by allowing the *individual* to make contributions without fear of upsetting *community* within and due to the presence of this open environment.

All this talk of *community* is good, but where does that leave Force? Much as he is considered part of the coalesced dulcimer *community*, he himself still reacts to the *individual* within. How do you account for a musician who is more concerned with the creation and creative realm of music, more than the means used to create it, in a *community* that defines itself primarily by artifact, the instrument, how the music is created? If you write this off as someone who is an “artist,” and purely creative, how then, do you account for Force's ability to reexamine the instrument in many ways, at times reconstructing the dulcimer physically different from what is considered traditional but decidedly saving one of its most identifying, yet at the same time constraining realities, it's diatonic fretboard? In the interest of creativity why limit the means with which you produce your creations? What becomes of your reference point to creation if that very base identifier is changed? Robert Force ends up giving an insight to that question, through the mechanism of a newer kind of dulcimer, one with a chromatic fretboard. He had occasion to behold one while at a festival in early 2010, the first one he has had a chance to touch and actually play on, and described a scene of intimate experience as a result.

What is seen is a creator, at the crux of what led to his present reality, being presented that fulcrum again, both familiar yet anew. The *individual* Robert Force shows a true orientation of self and place, he creates a song.

The fact that a song has been produced on a musical instrument is not necessarily something unexpected,

Stand Up and Be Heard: Robert Force and the Instigating of Tradition

Robert Nichols

obviously, but is notable in it is exactly what occurred when he was first introduced to the traditional dulcimer many years ago; Robert speaks of playing and creating three songs in the first 24 hours he had the first instrument, and here again, the creative process, the folk condition of songs of time and place, occurs. Only this time it is on a similar, yet reinvented instrument, one that, in his song, is revealed in his words as the natural progression of time and purpose. Shall Force reinvent himself again, to expand on his *experience* with this newer form? He intimates rather that he understands the reason for the transformation of the dulcimer, but sounds as someone who, though individual and purposeful to that end, recognizes the truth of song as form, rather than the instrument itself. He is comfortable in his *self song* as he knows it, on an instrument that, rather than being defined by a few extra frets, is instead defined by the *individual* who holds it in their hand, able to convey meaning through *self song* to *community*. That, to Robert Force, is the crux of what is created and why; that is true tradition.

REFERENCE

Force, Robert. Internet Videoconference Interview by Robert Nichols. 11 Apr 2010.

Force, Robert. Internet Videoconference Interview by Robert Nichols. 12 Apr 2010.

Force, Robert. Internet Videoconference Interview by Robert Nichols. 15 Apr 2010.

Goodman, Jane E. "Writing Empire, Underwriting Nation: Discursive Histories of Kabyle Berber Oral Texts" *American Ethnologist* 29. 1 (2002), 86-122, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3095022>. (accessed May 10, 2010).

Mendoza, Zoila S. "Defining Folklore: Mestizo and Indigenous Identities on the Move" *Bulletin of Latin American Research* 17. 2 (1998), 165-183, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3339227>. (accessed May 10, 2010).

Moffatt, Michael. "Ethnographic Writing About American Culture" *Annual Review of Anthropology* 21. (1992), 205-229, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/2155986>. (accessed May 10, 2010).

Sunderland, P L. "Fieldwork and the Phone" *Anthropological Quarterly* 72. 3 (1999), 105-117, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3317425>. (accessed May 10, 2010).

Stand Up and Be Heard: Robert Force and the Instigating of Tradition

Robert Nichols

Thomas, Nicholas. "Against Ethnography" *Cultural Anthropology* 6. 3 (1991), 306-322,
<http://www.jstor.org/stable/656438>. (accessed May 10, 2010).