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Verbatim transcript of “Crafting Gentleness: The Political Possibilities of Gentleness in Folkloristics and Ethnology”

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Hello.

Why don't I just leave all those people alone?

Why don't I just stay at home and read?

Why don't I just let all that stuff go? I've already got too much stuff in my life; too many books, too many things; why don't I just let it all go?

Why do I have to remember everything? Why do I have to write down everything other people remember? Why do I have to even bother talking to people?

Is my desire to collect greater than my desire to respect?

Is my desire to record greater than my ability to just be present with people?

Is my desire to write greater than my desire to listen?

Is my desire for knowledge greater than my desire for wisdom?

An Irish fiddler, Paddy Cronin, was being interviewed at a summer school called the Willy Clancy Summer School a number of years ago, and he was asked what he thought about young people playing traditional music and he said something like, 'they're not playing traditional music, they're collecting tunes'.

Jean Ritchie was up for a National Heritage Award in the United States and as she was accepting the reward she was asked something to the tune of, would she like to be remembered as a singer, and she said, no, she wouldn't like to be remembered as a singer, she would like to be remembered as a person who sings.

I was working with some students this year on a folklore course and a number of them came from an Irish language speaking district of Donegal, an area that had been the focus of a lot of collecting work in the nineteenth century, and I introduced them to the philosophies of a number of the people who had been doing the collecting. I introduced them to the idea that a number of these people considered people from their own communities as 'resources for tradition' as 'raw materials for the nation' and my students got very angry. They thought that quite a number of people at that time in the nineteenth century might have got very angry if they had known that that is how these people thought about them and their lives, and about what was important to them.

I was reading an article recently by Ríonach Uí Ógáin, a folklorist based in Dublin, and she's been doing a lot of work on the field diaries of Seamus Ennis, and she recently published a book, a magnificent book, which is mainly in the Irish language, the diaries of Seamus Ennis. But she has this very nice article published in Bealoideas, the Irish folklore journal, about the relationship between Seamus Ennis and Colm Ó Caodháin, who was a person who lived in Conemara who Seamus identified as someone with whom he could work to collect songs and stories and various other things from. But there's one line in the article, and in the diaries of Seamus Ennis, which sits with me and makes me very sad. Seamus Ennis had a wonderful relationship with this man by all accounts. By the accounts of the diary he was a great friend of his. He more or less lived with him on many occasions and was invited by Colm to live with him semi-permanently at one point. But there's one point at the end of his diaries in relation to Colm where he says, 'Bhí mé réidh leis'. I

was finished with him.' He'd done all the collecting that needed to be done; it was time to move on. 'Bhí mé réidh leis'.

The ethnomusicologist Kofi Agawu has a line in the middle of an article that he wrote, where he says, 'the imperial urge dies hard'.

I was once speaking to someone, I was working as a music journalist, and I was speaking to someone about various things, and interviewing her, and in the middle of the interview we stopped talking about what we were talking about and the attention turned to myself and my own family, and I let it slip that my parents didn't sing traditional songs or play any instruments, and she goes, with a little disappointment if not disdain, 'oh. I thought you came from a traditional family.'

I was sitting beside the sociolinguist Joshua Fishman at a conference a number of years ago and it was about a year from the end of my Ph.D. and he turned to me and asked what I was working on, and I babbled my Ph.D. abstract back at him in rather large prose. In the middle of it he just put his hand up in a sign for me to stop, and said, 'Speak to me as if I'm your grandfather.'

I had two grandfathers. One grandfather was named Joe, he worked in quarries, he worked as a postman, a quiet gentle man. My other grandfather was called Johnny, a farmer, apparently a very smart man, with a sharp wit, he sang many songs, many long songs. I didn't know him very well because when I was growing up I was scared of old people and he was an old person. But I'm guessing that neither of my grandfathers and neither of my grandmothers would have much time for people who couldn't communicate with them respectfully. And part of the work that I'm trying to do at the moment is, in a sense, to honour them and to honour the relationship with my grandfathers, with my grandmothers, Kathleen Edith and Mary, with my parents, John and Teresa, and with the rest of my family who are too numerous to mention. And I think that's very, very important for me at the moment, to consider this relationship with the people in the communities where I live, the people in the community of family in which I have grown up, and the ways in which, as an academic, I have been conditioned and trained to write in ways which could often be regarded as very disrespectful if I were to be standing here speaking to them.

Why do I do the work that I do?

I don't regard myself as a folklorist, I don't regard myself as an ethnomusicologist, I don't regard myself as an anthropologist. I regard myself as a person who sings songs. I regard myself as a person who practises some of the methodologies of anthropology, ethnomusicology, and folkloristics. But one of the reasons that I do the work that I do is because I regard any academic position, any role as a professional thinker, someone who is paid to think thoughts about life and about human beings to be a very, very privileged position, and to be one which is deeply political whether we like it or not. We're the professional thinkers. We get time to think about the world. We get time to think about life. Not many people get as much time as we do. There's a lot of violence in the world. There are people getting blown up. There are people getting murdered. There are people getting raped. There are people dying all the time. People die. It happens. But I think we do have an opportunity as professional thinkers to really take that responsibility very seriously, that we do have a part to contribute to the diminishment, the lessening of dynamics of violence, coercion, fear, anger, hate, domination, and oppression in the communities in which we live.

On the other hand, historically speaking, the disciplines we work in [speaking to an audience of folklorists] and many other disciplines. In those disciplines many of the practices that have been

undertaken in the name of the things that we do have contributed to domination, to oppression, to anger, have not helped a lot, and there's a lot of damage reparation and damage control that tends to go on in the work that we do. And the silences and exclusions that have been a consequence of the work that, for example, folklorists have done, and the silences, exclusions, and blindnesses that tend to be structured into the work that we often continue to do are not accidental. They tend to be a consequence of the epistemologies that we use, and we talk about epistemology quite often, but we don't really have any open discussions about epistemology. Epistemology is sort of like pedagogy. We're teachers, but we very, very seldom talk about what pedagogy means for us and what it can mean for us. Similarly, we very, very seldom talk about what epistemology might mean. And too many times our epistemologies are still grounded in Kantian, Platonic, Hegelian, etc. etc. etc. Euro-American, 'Western', whatever you want to call them, models which are deeply fragmented at their heart, in terms of subject-object dichotomies, in terms of various ways of thinking about the world which, from our starting assumptions, often shut down the heart, shut down any sense of holistic relationship and often leave us in a position where our very starting points dessicate our work. And what I'm interested in is the way in which, in thinking about trying to honour the people I live with, work with, admire, love, in what ways have our epistemologies, in what ways have our methodologies, in what ways have our discourses made the people I admire and love not only discursively invisible but politically irrelevant?

What I've been looking at in my work are two themes; one is the theme of 'enclosure', the other is the theme of gentleness.

When I talk about enclosure, I'm talking about expansionary social dynamics that involve accelerative or intensifying commodification of everyday life, emerging from the dominance of the expectation that uncertainty can be or should be eliminated. What I'm looking at in my work is the way in which certain unhelpful dynamics of social change are driven by these tendencies we often have to eliminate uncertainty.

I work with the assumption that uncertainty is a constant and variable aspect of my experience. So to seek to eliminate uncertainty, for me, is to deeply disrespect the character of that experience. Historically, seeking to eliminate uncertainty has also often meant seeking to eliminate the aspect of emotion from our work. The idea of the 'objective scientist' is very much at the heart of this notion of the elimination of uncertainty. Often it very much involves simply eliminating people from our work, because people can be unpredictable and uncertain and keeping people and their biographies, keeping people and the richness of their lives away from the heart of our work (actually, the heartlessness of our work, sometimes) is actually a very, very interesting process for me.

But these enclosing dynamics, as I think of them, arising from the 'elimination' of uncertainty, for me they can be identified in two particular ways. One is in the dominance of discourses of resource production and management, and another is in the privileging of sight and sound in the discourses of our analysis.

In terms of discourses of resource production and management, just think of the ones that we use. 'Heritage' is a property metaphor. 'Property', that's a property metaphor too. 'Data', 'that which is given'. 'Information'. 'Knowledge'. 'Capital'. 'Resources'. Tradition as a resource. Etc. etc. etc. Most of the words that we use at the core of our work are resource metaphors.

Discourses of sight and sound tend to be privileged in what we do. We tend to talk a lot about aesthetics. We tend to privilege text, again, the privileging of sight and sound. We tend to do a lot

of surveillance work - that's what we do, we monitor people, we go, we record, we monitor. And there tends to be a lot of emphasis on spectacle, on performance.

One of the consequences of the elimination of uncertainty as an ethic, or of discourses of resource production and management, or of the privileging of sight and sound, tends to be a profound depoliticisation of what we do, and of how we think about what we do, and of how we think about the possibilities of what we do. Primarily because what we're left with, and this is what the orthodoxies of most fields are left with, is that our understandings of power are reduced to the idea of power as control, or power as intervention, but power as some form of resource production or management.

Also what tends to happen, particularly with regard to the privileging of sight and sound, is that there tends to be an emphasis on *descriptive* analysis, analysis that simply describes what's going on, without really *explaining* how a situation happens to be the way it is and not some other way, and particularly without allowing for any *participatory* analysis, in terms of how might we be *participating* in the dynamics that we analyse?, or how might we be participating in the dynamics that we seek to critique?

And I think, for me, where I've turned to in terms of the issue of gentleness is ... what I'm interested in doing is not identifying what gentleness is, or what gentleness looks like. What I'm interested in looking at is the way in which the elimination of uncertainty as an ethic can draw us away from the possibilities of relationship.

If we only think of power as control then those who seek to control have power and those who do not seek to control are powerless. Those who seek to be gentle are powerless and are in fact irrelevant to politics.

What I'm interested in is the way in which the gentle people that I've worked with, the gentle people that I've admired and loved, in line with work in eco-feminism, in line with work in certain aspects of gentle anarchism, in line with aspects of certain buddhist and quasi-buddhist approaches to thinking about politics, these people are living deeply powerful lives. These people are living lives that we can learn from. And I think we are in a deeply privileged position. We get to talk to people as a job. We get to talk to people that we can learn from about what it means to be human. And when I think about the archives that we have ... When I go to a zoo it makes me sad, but I still keep going to zoos because I keep thinking that it's a good thing to go to a zoo. But every time I go to a zoo I go with hope and aspiration and I come back feeling very sad. Archives increasingly make me quite sad, because for me they're records of missed opportunities. They're records of missed opportunities for understanding what it means to be human. We've had a chance a chance to talk to so many wise people, historically speaking as folklorists, and we have so little wisdom in the archives. We have lots of stories and songs, but in terms of what it means to be human, the emotional intelligence, the emotional wisdom, the emotional university that has been there, we don't have access to that, because we weren't listening well enough, and I think that's one of the opportunities that we have now, is to really privilege those aspects in our work and to not think of ourselves merely as archivists. I think archives are important, if we ground them in the social responsibility of reimagining the power of small emotions, reimagining that folkloristics is actually in a very privileged position. You have eco-feminism, you have activism, you have all these things, but we're the ethnographers. We're the ones who get to actually sit down and spend time to work out what do people think are helpful ways to make sense of being human. We can ground our work. We can substantiate our work. And for me that's very much at the heart of the gentleness project.

I'm just going to stop there and open it up to the conversation.

Comment/Micheál Briody: First, Seamus Ennis's comment that he was done with Colm O Caodhain. Yes, I've come across other comments like that, and there's one interesting aspect in Delargy's diaries when he's finished his East Clare collection, it's in the bag, it's done with and over, but that's partly due to the rushed nature of the collecting. When Delargy first started learning collecting he spent two years working with Sean Conaill without collecting anything, just listening to him. He wasn't ever able to do that with anyone else, just because he had his mission and he liked to collect so much. There was a much more humane approach originally before it became this sort of production stage, I would call it mass production folklore. That's one thing. You get that a lot, and in Estonia in the 50s and 60s you get a lot of folklorists talking about 'emptying' an area, sending out a team of collectors to 'empty' it, and again you get that in Delargy's report, emptying an area. It's very much there. But, yeah, I think though, Delargy, to give him credit, he often said that the only experts on the folktales were the narrators, you know, and unfortunately he didn't follow that through entirely because one thing he never got around to was sending out a questionnaire on storytelling. He intended sending out a questionnaire about storytelling but he never got around to it. There was a great deal of information collected, nonetheless, from many storytellers about the tradition and all of that, so he did ... sometimes it was just lip service, but he always sort of humbly said they were the experts. Now maybe there was pretence involved to some extent but I think myself there was a gentle nature in him. I think there wouldn't be the big collection without that, but it somehow got left aside because of the ambition of making a very large collection and then also of saving it, even if you might say emptying it, but, you know, in many cases if he hadn't emptied it, despite what you say about archives being places like museums or zoos that are not so pleasant, if we hadn't it you might be standing up here and saying, you know, why don't we have archives, and zoos, and museums, so we can't really have it both ways. But there is that absence of gentle approach, maybe.

A: Well I think what you're saying is really, really important, in that most of us, pretty much all of us are in this field because we care about people, you know? And I think Delargy and Ennis and all of these collectors were doing what they did because they cared, they really cared. Perhaps they cared too much in some ways. And I think that for me is part of the challenge, that we get drawn in because we like spending time with people, we like talking to people, we value that aspect of what we do perhaps more highly than we value anything else. We value what we learn from these people as human beings. We value spending time with them. We don't necessarily talk or write about those aspects of our work, instead we privilege the collecting aspect, but I think what we can learn from the likes of that experience that Delargy had where he goes from spending lots of time to spending very little time with people, is to become more aware and more discerning of the influence of institutional imperatives on the work that we do, and to clarify for ourselves what is actually important to us? Regardless of what the institutional imperatives are, what's important to us as human beings, each for ourselves, and as we go in and do our work how can that be reflected in the work that we actually do?

Comment/Regina Bendix: It's very nice that you're able to talk like that. I would like to suggest context as a very important component of evaluating where our predecessors were. I mean that sort of sadness or frustration that you report about your students thinking about the nationalist paradigm of the nineteenth century, I have been helped a lot in doing historical work to recognise that they were also caught in whatever political or academic forces there are, and so the sadness or frustration is not as productive as recognising where individuals are caught. I think the connection between yours and the previous paper is very powerful as a recognition of allowing ourselves, in doing research, to recognise our body, our mind, our emotions. But the link that's missing there is acknowledging that you're not just researching or spending time with people,

you're also sitting in this highly institutional, regimented professional life. You're little episode with Joshua Fishman, here you found a human who wanted you to talk 'unprofessionally', so to speak, and I think we have not done enough legwork in our own professional worlds, because our own professional worlds are the realm that is unexamined, are the realm which we slide into, and we appropriate its mores, and its pressures. And because we have not done enough of that kind of deconstruction work you feel isolated when you feel the way you do, maybe also the way Janika feels, when you dare to come out and speak that way and act that way, the pressures around you ... there are not enough of us who do this, you know? And as a result you get 'fringed' unless you participate also in the deconstruction of the professional life.

A: As I do, and that's why for me pedagogy and radical pedagogy is actually very much at the heart of trying to challenge the institutional structures and the institutional values in the places in which I work. I align myself with social ecologists across the world more than anything else, and there is a growing community of people out there, even within university structures, that are doing work like this, that are privileging the human. And I don't have to be an academic. If I get too frustrated within the university structures, I will leave and do something else. I can always do something else. I will continue writing and I will continue researching. At the moment I find the university structure in which I find myself does facilitate the work that I want to do, and I hope that continues.

Comment/Valdimar Hafstein: Thank you for your talk which I found thought-provoking in many ways. The elimination of uncertainty you spoke about as an ethic and as a social program related to such things to coercion and violence and domination. I found myself being somewhat uncomfortable with this and think perhaps you're not giving the elimination of uncertainty its due. There is another way of understanding the elimination of uncertainty, and that's to do with such things as social security and the welfare society, in fact the elimination of uncertainty as an ethic, as a political and social programme has been the programme with the most powerful movement in western societies in the 20th century. The labour movement, it's political arm, the elimination of uncertainty has been its programme to create a more decent and just society. And I think that it perhaps another aspect of the elimination of uncertainty that is underacknowledged in the way that you present it.

A: For me, looking at movements like the labour movement, for example, discourses of the elimination of uncertainty do pervade most political movements, although I think it's important to make a distinction between the provision of stability and the elimination of uncertainty. Because the elimination of uncertainty can never happen, as far as I'm concerned. It's a discursive claim, it's a claim that people make about what happens. In terms of the welfare state and those sorts of political achievements, in a sense, that's about the provision of stability, the reduction of uncertainty in often crisis situations, and the reduction of uncertainty or the provision of stability for me are quite different from the elimination of uncertainty, which is a discursive claim about the way the world is, a declaration that this is reality and what is and must be in terms of how we think about reality. So I think what you're talking about are very helpful in many respects, but I would also suggest that in those political movements, if you look where people are claiming the *elimination* of uncertainty rather than the reduction of uncertainty, you are likely to find very unhelpful dynamics around those aspects of what they do.

Comment/Kristin Kuutma: I would think there is still some hope in the human encounter with the folklorist and the people that they meet because very often there is quite a long interaction and very often the people that folklorists talk to they kind of are indoctrinated into this process of creating wisdom, so they are inside this process. This is a different kind of wisdom, but they know what the folklorists might know, or if the interaction is long enough the folklorist has

explained what he or she is looking for so the person talking to the folklorist gets a certain status from being inside this process and producing the knowledge for the folklorist, as they take it down, record it. So there is another side to it as well, whether we ask them what they personally think about things, but I'd say there is a positive side to it as well.

A: I think there's a positive side to any two people being in the same room together even if they're hating each other. In thinking about this, I am thinking from a deeply hopeful perspective, and for me hope works better when it's here, rather than when it's somewhere that you're aiming for. I think the mere recognition and acknowledgement of people's lives, particularly people who have experienced what might be described as marginalization or have felt as if they are in situations of oppression or felt like nobody listens to them any more, that nobody cares about what they care about, these people that we live with and work with, I think it's very, very important that the mere acknowledgement that they exist and that somebody wants to listen to them is a very positive thing. I don't think it's enough. I think that any status that might be accrued from that for them is a very small gift, as far as I'm concerned. I think we can be far more respectful, even in that. I do wonder ... at the moment one of my big questions is, is it more respectful for me to visit people and not record anything they say? It's a very serious question for me. I think of Delargy and his two year visit. Maybe we can be professional friendly people in a true sense, with the powerful character of friendship and relationship that we can bring with ourselves. But there are a lot of interesting things going on there.

Comment/Diarmuid Ó Giolláin: Do you think you can make distinctions between different disciplinary traditions there. It seems to me, for example, that at least the stereotypical folklorist in the last couple of generations as someone who goes in search of particular genres, say, and who perhaps in a sense scratches the surface, and on the other hand the anthropologist who tries to delve deeper, seeking social structures and so on. Often with the folklorist there's a sort of exaggerated pietas to the tradition, with the anthropologist ... there have been a couple of cases in Ireland where the anthropologist was the one that caused the most problems. I'm thinking about that highly respected book by Nancy Scheper-Hughes called *Saints, Scholars, and Schizophrenics*. I mean, can you elaborate on that perhaps?

A: I wasn't going to say, highly respected by whom? I know some people that don't highly respect it. For me it's a question of what's more important, the disciplinary boundaries, methods, narratives, or making use of the privileged positions we have to make sense of what it means to be human. For me, the second is more important. I am in a privileged position, I am a professional thinker, I get paid to teach, which is the most wonderful opportunity that anyone can have on a daily basis, and I get to research what I want to research, which is not what everybody gets to do, particularly in the current research environment. But I have a chance to try and make sense of my own experience in a way that I think can help me towards more helpful relationship, in the sense of what's going on. This for me involves both a critique of unhelpful dynamics in the world, or in my experience, and a reconstructive approach to relationship. And wherever I can find disciplinary help in terms of peopled, heartfilled, respectful ways of thinking, whether in anthropology or in social ecology or in folkloristics, wherever I can find them, I'll try and use them, and see to what extent they work or do not work depending on the epistemological grounding that they come from. But at the end of the day I do regard myself as being in a privileged, institutional position at the moment, which facilitates the kind of work that I want to do and wherever I can find it, in whatever discipline I can find helpful support for that, I'll go there and I'll look to that. I'm more interested in inviting the idea that we can think about what we do and say, okay, we've got where we are, we're in a position, we're professional thinkers, how can we act most helpfully in the world as human beings, while still doing what's important to us, while still doing things we care about?

Comment/DÓG: It's not a romantic search for community?

A: No, not at all. Because that leads us back to eliminating uncertainty through the utopian imagined community. For me community is expectational resonance, it's the sense that you can have with anyone at any time to some extent, but also conflict as expectational dissonance that's always present too to some extent. It's about being more discerning of the conflict and community opportunities that are available to us at any particular time, being aware that at all times there are the traps of romantic communalism, the traps of arrogant academicism, etc etc.