



# Research Practices:

## How We Learned about the Traditions of D.C. Folk

by Marianna Blagburn and Brett Williams

Our research team for *Washington, D.C.: It's Our Home* was composed of D.C. community residents and local university students interested in urban folklife. As coordinators of this group, we brought to the project a great love for Washington nurtured by growing up, marrying, raising children, sustaining families, supporting churches, schools, and sports, working, organizing, and conducting public anthropology projects over many years here. While we knew that we knew the city, we wanted many eyes and voices involved in research, for Washington's complexity ensures that no person can know it all. The research effort was funded by the D.C. Commission on the Arts and Humanities and the Humanities Council of Washington, D.C., in collaboration.

Our goal was to document urban practices and living traditions performed by the residents of Washington, D.C. The methodology required thousands of hours spent deeply involved in D.C. communities in conversation with D.C. residents, and active participation and observation in a wide cross-section of neighborhoods and communities. Our challenge was twofold: to seek out the D.C. residents whose photos and living practices are rarely seen, and to ask them to collaborate with us in documenting their traditions. Our knowledge and connections to the city, the energies and skills of the researchers, and careful attention to this collaborative process allowed us to capture the tenor and quality of the voices, expressions,

and indefatigable spirit of the citizens who live in this place we call home.

Seasoned anthropologists, longtime D.C. residents, senior citizens, young athletes, environmentalists, musicians, immigrants, and students from George Washington, Howard, and American universities fanned out across the city. Over a nine-month period, the 45-member research team visited playgrounds, schools, churches, community gardens, and nightclubs; attended civic meetings, picnics, concerts, and games; and participated in river clean-ups, parades, political gatherings, and Senior Wellness Day. They listened to hundreds of D.C. natives and newcomers share stories and watched their artful expressions of making and doing within their own communities.

*Washington, D.C.: It's Our Home* is a program rich with the memories and flourishing traditional practices of the city's fishermen, taxi and bus drivers, lawyers, dancers, activists, retirees, seamstresses, craftspeople, musicians, choirs, quartets, gardeners, poets, cooks, quilters, and rappers, from east of the Anacostia River to west of Rock Creek Park. Often people drew on times gone by to interpret the current conditions of the city. Washington, D.C., is a city of refuge and advocacy for the marginalized peoples of our nation and the world, and people helped us see the social, cultural, and political context for their folklife practices.

The perspectives of anthropology and folklore have also helped us provide context for these practices. For example, we talked to people who



Glover Archbold Community Garden, in the Glover Park neighborhood of Northwest D.C., is one of nine community gardens under the authority of Rock Creek Park and one of the oldest. Photo by Carla Borden

fish about the techniques of skilled fishing. Some anglers draw on traditional arts to craft their own rods and lures. People often fish with kin and friends, share their catch with neighbors, and gather for fish fries or spicy fish stews. Fishing offers a window to building community in the city. Sometimes fishing practices affirm connections to other places. When anglers dip for herring to preserve in salt and fry up for breakfast, they echo the Atlantic practices of the West African communities where some of their ancestors lived. New immigrants often catch different fish and prepare them using the seasonings and techniques of Southeast Asia or Central America. Finally, many people concerned about

how pollution harms fishing come together in community clean-ups to act on their concern for Washington's rivers.

Soccer games offer other windows to connections and community. New immigrants to Washington often search for soccer teams from home. Each week Washington's parks host a small contest between nations, from Trinidad to Korea and Ethiopia. Spectators cook and share traditional foods, play music, and dance, transforming these games into celebrations. Long-time Washingtonians have grown to love soccer as well, and the city has nurtured its own legendary players and coaches, clinics and camps, styles, language, and new generations of players.

We found that Washington, D.C., residents are enthusiastic participants in and spectators of numerous parades and processions throughout the year. Caribbean Carnival, Gay Pride, Chinese New Year, Unifest, Halloween, the Cherry Blossom, and inaugural parades and Good Friday processions are examples of lively celebratory events which take place on our city streets. Participants spend countless hours in detailed planning and preparation to create the delicate balance between artistic style and performance. Spectators interact with performers as this unpredictable form of dynamic street theater pulsates through city neighborhoods.

This program honors community life and civic action, including the memories of the neighborhoods that people built as safe spaces from discrimination, and others that people lost through urban renewal and relocation. Participants also describe the city's long tradition of human rights activism, and they share the songs, arts, stories, icons, rituals, and memorabilia that have enlivened this tradition. Go-go, Washington's indigenous music, may be the quintessential urban music, all percussion and beat, pulsing from garbage can lids, plastic buckets, homemade drums, cowbells, bass guitar, and saxophone, drawing audiences into passionate call-and-response as they identify the neighborhoods





Left: Pride in neighborhood is a feeling shared by many D.C. residents.

Photo by Elizabeth Sheehan

Right: The Chinese Dragon Dance marks the new year in Chinatown. Chinese first settled in D.C. in 1851.

Photo by Richard Strauss, courtesy Smithsonian Institution

where they live. As musicians, deejays, dancers, stylists, instrument builders, and fans make this music, they also communicate its deep and complex roots in African-American musical styles, the history of live musical gatherings in the city, and the pride of place expressed in a musical tradition that begins with meager material resources.

*Washington, D.C.: It's Our Home* began with this research: developed and guided by the residents of Washington who have built extraordinary traditions from the ordinary fabric of everyday life.

### Suggested Reading

- Abbott, Carl. 1999. *Political Terrain*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press.
- Cadaval, Olivia. 1998. *Creating a Latino Identity in the Nation's Capital*. New York: Garland Publishing.
- Cary, Francine Curro. 1996. *Urban Odyssey*. Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution Press.
- Federal Writers Project. 1942, 1983. *The WPA Guide to Washington*. New York: Pantheon Books.
- Gutheim, Frederick. 1977. *Worthy of the Nation*. Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution Press.
- Hutchinson, Louise. 1977. *The Anacostia Story: 1608-1930*. Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution Press.
- Landis, Kenesaw. 1948. *Segregation in Washington*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Melder, Keith, and Melinda Stuart. 1997. *City of Magnificent Intentions*. Intac, Inc.

Orbach, Barbara, and Nicholas Natanson. 1992.

"The Mirror Image: Black Washington in World War II-Era Federal Photography," *Washington History* (September 5-93).

Smith, Catherine Schneider. 1980. *A History of the District of Columbia*. Washington, D.C.: Associates for Renewal in Education.

\_\_\_\_\_. 1988. *Washington at Home*. Northridge, California: Windsor Publications.

Terrell, Mary Church. 1966. *A Colored Woman in a White World*. New York: G.K. Hall and Co.

Weissman, Barr, and Glen Leiner. 1991. *Home: The Langston Terrace Dwellings. A Study Guide for Viewers*. Humanities Council of Washington, D.C.

*Marianna Blagburn is a D.C.-based anthropologist interested in urban folklife practices and life stories among the African-American community in Washington, D.C. She grew up in Anacostia, attended D.C. schools, married a native Washingtonian, and is raising her family here. She currently teaches a course on interpreting American culture at American University.*

*Brett Williams is Professor and Chair of the Department of Anthropology at American University. She has written four books, including Upscaling Downtown, and many articles about neighborhood life, integration, displacement, homelessness, poverty, and the history and cultural life of Washington.*



