This seminar is designed to serve three specific constituencies—1] students with folklore collecting experience who wish to continue and refine their ethnographic work; 2] students interested in documenting folk culture for the Houston Arts Alliance or other public programs; and 3] future teachers interested in teaching courses that involve students in collecting folklore—as well as anyone else interested in documenting community culture. The seminar will engage students in ethnographic techniques of recording community arts, history, festivities, customs, and religious life. Each participant will undertake a semester-long documentation project. Each member will choose to study a particular community. The chosen community may be as small as a family or group of friends or it may be as large as an entire neighborhood or local ethnic enclave. Participants are encouraged to choose communities of which they are members or in which they have a strong interest; teachers interested in developing ethnography as part of their teaching strategies are encouraged to enroll.

One possible topic is folklore fieldwork in Houston with Haitian Americans; if this option is pursued, students have the further option of a research trip to Haiti in May or July 2015. Another possible) topic of the spring 2015 term is Community Festive Life and Celebrations, religious or secular. Participants may choose to focus on informal family practice (lawn shrines or home puja practice); the community activities of a single congregation (zydeco dances at Mother of Mercy Catholic Church); particular traditions of singing (e.g., hymns, gospel music), dance, or visual arts; or the various dimensions of community celebrations and observances (including Art Car Weekend, Baisakhi, birthdays, Chinese New Year/Tet, Cinco de Mayo, Easter, family reunions, Holi, Houston Livestock Show & Rodeo, Mardi Gras, Parinirvana, Passover, Purim, quinceaneras, St. Patrick’s Day, and weddings).

Participants will begin by shaping a fieldwork proposal and compiling a bibliography of works that refer to the chosen topic and community. As early as possible, they will identify the community with which they will work. Once the plan is approved and refined each student will begin making contacts in the community and create a plan for documenting the community’s traditions through audio and visual means. The course will discuss the legal and ethical dimensions of recording community culture. Participants will practice interviewing techniques work on designing and administering permission and release forms.

Fieldwork will entail performing interviews and close observation. Participants may work individually, in pairs, or in larger groups, but each will be responsible for creating a bibliography, conducting and processing a series of interviews, and documenting community activities through audio and visual media. Each final project will include a “field journal”, an annotated bibliography, at least four recorded interviews, some sort of visual documentation, and a written evaluation of the fieldwork experience. Typically, at least some of the student work will be published at term’s end. Many of the interviews and photos will become part of the online Houston Folklore Archive and perhaps also part of HAA’s Folklife and Traditional Arts Program. Copies of all documentation will also be made available to the documented communities. For questions and further information, please contact Carl Lindahl at lindahlcarl1@gmail.com.