On Tuesday, March 5, 2013, in a packed West Philadelphia artist/community space, three women, each an accomplished singer and a survivor of the Liberian civil wars, shared their stories and their voices. Fatu Gayflor began by introducing the song, “Kweyengeh.” In the Kpelle language, it’s traditionally sung by women whose daughters have left for the Sande Society, an association for the initiation of girls in Liberia and elsewhere in West Africa. Wondering how her child is faring, a mother shares her worries and her longing to hold her daughter once more. “For me, explained Gayflor, “it’s the same as during the war, when people didn’t know where their children were. I was separated from my two-year-old child at that time. And though I’ve been told many stories, I’ve never found out what happened to him. I found that by singing this song, especially to other mothers who experienced the same thing, I could tell them they’re not alone.” And together, she went on to say, they could tell the world that war isn’t worth it. She then sang “Kweyengeh” with such power that many in the audience -- some in chairs, some sitting on the floor, others standing, squeezed against the wall -- were moved to tears.

Singing to fellow sufferers during wartime; performing in Europe at the behest of the World Food Program to raise awareness about and seek funds to address the dire hunger situation across Africa; creating an arts troupe in a refugee camp in the Ivory Coast to both share traditional songs and dances, and to encourage a sense of community cohesion and hope; performing for soldiers as a way of asking them to put down their
arms. These are just some of the ways in which Fatu Gayflor, Zaye Tete and Tokay Tomah, all professional singers and dancers from Liberia, have harnessed the power of their arts for justice, peace and reconciliation.

Gayflor, Tete and Tomah were all members of Liberia’s National Cultural Troupe, an ensemble of dancers, singers and drummers who lived and trained together for years in Kendeja, a kind of artists’ village just outside of the capital city, Monrovia. Selected from their home villages when each was barely a teenager, they joined compatriots from all 16 of the country’s ethnic groups to form a troupe that toured nationally as well as internationally. And each of them became a popular recording artist in her own right. During and after Liberia’s 1989-2003 civil wars, these women dedicated their music to peace-building in refugee camps and in their homeland. They’ve continued to address inequities and violence through song, both in West Africa and in Philadelphia, where they all now live.

Liberia is a relatively small country that has seen a huge amount of devastation wrought by political instability and civil war. Settled in the early 1800s by free-born Blacks and formerly enslaved people from the United States who were being “returned” to Africa through the work of the American Colonization Society, the colony became the Republic of Liberia in 1824, with a capital city called Monrovia, after U.S. President James Monroe.

Although there was intermarriage between the new arrivals and the indigenous population, enormous discrimination against the local Africans was the norm. The Americo-Liberians, descendants of those early settlers, continued to rule the country for more than a century until a coup d’etat in 1980 lead by a man named Samuel Doe. Doe brought indigenous people into positions of power, yet, he soon started mistreating people from certain ethnic groups and pitting those in other
ethnic groups against one another. A full-blown civil war erupted in 1989. The fragile ceasefire that took hold in 1996 lasted only a few years. As a result of these back-to-back civil wars, most of the country's infrastructure was destroyed. Soldiers, some of whom were children, were responsible for horrific violence inflicted on the civilian population. A quarter of a million people perished, and double that number were displaced within Liberia. Even greater numbers sought safety in neighboring countries.

There, in exile in the Ivory Coast and Guinea, were Fatu Gayflor and Zaye Tete, who -- independently from one another -- found the strength to perform for fellow refugees in the midst of hopelessness and chaos as a way of making a statement against war. Meanwhile, back in Liberia, Tokay Tomah was singing to and about the internally displaced, and other devastations of war.

Peace accords were signed among the fighting factions in 2003, in no small part because of the activism of the country’s women, including Nobel Peace Prize winner Leymah Gbowee. And Liberians elected Africa’s first woman president in 2006.

Fatu Gayflor was recording an album in the Ivory Coast when war in her homeland of Liberia kept her from returning to her family. In the early 1990s, in exile, Gayflor traveled with the United Nations to refugee camps throughout West Africa, performing as a way of instilling hope in the Liberian refugee population. The World Food Program took Fatu to Milan, Italy, in 1996 to perform with artists from across Africa to publicize the continent's vast hunger crisis. Since moving to the U.S., she has continued to compose and perform. Gayflor participated in a 2012 training on peace-building through the arts run by Brandeis University’s Peacebuilding and the Arts initiative, and was honored that same year with a Leeway Foundation Transformation Award for her decades of art and social change work.
Zaye Tete was living with her fellow National Cultural Troupe artists just outside the capital of Monrovia when she decided she had to escape the escalating violence. While in a refugee camp in the Ivory Coast, she started a Liberian children's cultural troupe. Tete also traveled from refugee camp to refugee camp, and even crossed back over the border into war-torn Liberia to sing to soldiers, asking them to put down their weapons. Here in the U.S. she performs at Liberian celebrations and clubs, and continues to compose and record. Her most recent CD, entitled For the Sake of the Children, came out in 2011. She was awarded a Leeway Foundation Art and Change grant in 2009 to teach traditional songs and dances to Liberian American youth. In January, 2013, she returned from a three-week performance tour of Australia.

Tokay Tomah started working with the United Nations on disarmament and reconciliation, through music, in the mid-1990s. In addition to her peace-building work, she carried out awareness campaigns on HIV/AIDS, rape, sexual exploitation and abuse, and other issues, all through performance. She served as the executive director of a Liberian non-governmental organization, Women and Society, advocating for equity for women. She has produced seven CDs, and has been honored with awards from the Musicians' Union of Liberia, Africare Liberia, and the Liberian Ministry of Agriculture. Her 2010 album, Open the Door, shares a message about taking responsibility for one's impact on one's own community. While visiting the United States in 2007, Tomah was a featured speaker on a panel about the relationship between art and war at the University of Maryland. She moved to the United States permanently in 2011, and recorded her latest CD, What You Know About Me, in 2012.
The March 5th event (mentioned at the beginning of this essay), featuring these three women, was produced by the Philadelphia Folklore Project [http://www.folkloreproject.org/], a 26-year-old arts and social justice organization. At the Folklore Project, we work to sustain vital and diverse living cultural heritage in communities in our region. We document, support, and present Philadelphia-area folk and traditional arts and culture - including the arts of people who have been here generations and those who have just arrived. We have a long-standing relationship with the local Liberian community, which numbers more than 30,000. At this evening program Gayflor, Tete, and Tomah spoke about songs they composed or re-worked from their traditional context, and then blew the audience of more than 70 away with gorgeous voices and at times heart-wrenching, at times hopeful, memories and messages.

After Gayflor’s “Kweyengeh,” Tokay Tomah introduced her song, which she composed in the Vai language, by explaining her horror at seeing a compound of starving children. “During the war there was a place for orphaned children. They couldn’t find enough food. When people asked them what they wanted, what donations they might ask for, they said all they need is food.” She then wrote the song, incorporating the children’s pleas.

“We Need Peace” was Tete’s contribution to the program. She sang her song in English, one she composed as soon as she returned from a performance tour of Australia in January of this year. As she traveled through that country, she confronted deep divisions among the Liberian immigrants there, divisions mainly based on ethnic group rifts ignited by President Doe and fueled by the war. She said she sees the same thing in
the U.S. And that, “even though the war is over, we still need songs about peace,” to heal the discord among Liberians and build true reconciliation.

Many Liberians in the Philadelphia area experience anti-immigrant bias, violence, racism, poverty, and deportations, in addition to schisms among themselves. There are high rates of gender violence and sexual assault. People's current circumstances stem in large part from the legacies of war, loss, exile and trauma. These issues are the subjects of these women's concerns, and their art-making. These artists have lost children and stood up publicly for an end to the carnage. They have both enormous talent and incredible determination, continuing to draw on their traditions to compose and perform songs reflecting upon their personal and community histories.

Throughout 2012, Gayflor, Tete and two other Liberian artists (storyteller Gbahtuo Comgbaye and dancer Kormassa Bobo) undertook a Philadelphia Folklore Project-supported initiative, during which they conducted research within their own community. Dudley Cocke, social justice activist and artistic director of Roadside Theater in Appalachia [http://roadside.org/], served as project advisor. Talking with people about current pressing concerns, the Liberian artists came together once a month to share stories and identify emergent themes. They developed a performance combining drama, dance, song and storytelling, reflecting issues they had heard their fellow Liberians speak about. They then performed in a community hall in a neighborhood heavily populated by Liberian immigrants. As part of the evening’s program, they invited audience members to speak. What became apparent was the heavy burden on Liberian women: domestic abuse, abandonment by husbands, children with problems the mothers felt they couldn’t address, and so on.

From that year-long endeavor, and that performance, the idea for a Liberian Women’s Chorus for Change developed. Gayflor, Tete and Tomah are planning to spearhead an effort to inspire dialogue about and concrete actions against gender violence
and other ills plaguing women in their community through pop-up concerts in strategic locations – places where Liberians, or policy-makers or social service workers frequent. They want to get the issues into the open, and help people network with those with authority or resources to transform their circumstances.

The informal concert on March 5th was a way of introducing the idea of the “Chorus for Change” project, asking for advice, and seeing who might like to participate in one way or another. Taking seriously how grassroots women's peace efforts, and women's agency and roles, alter how people collectively see past, present and future, Gayflor, Tete and Tomah are looking forward to continued engagement with the public about their music and their commitment to making constructive change in the world.

**Toni Shapiro-Phim**

Toni Shapiro-Phim is a cultural anthropologist with specializations in the performing arts, migration, social justice, and Southeast Asia. She received her Ph.D. from Cornell University, writing about the relationship between war, dance and music in Cambodia, and has held research and teaching positions focused on arts and social justice at the University of California, Berkeley, Yale University and, currently, at Bryn Mawr College. Co-editor of *Dance, Human Rights and Social Justice: Dignity in Motion* (2008), her writing has also appeared in *Annihilating Difference: the Anthropology of Genocide* (2002), the *Oxford Encyclopedia of Theatre and Performance* (2001), and other books, magazines and journals, including *Dancing at the Crossroads* (forthcoming), about dance and conflict resolution. Between 2008 and 2010 she oversaw the creation of a dance archive at the Khmer Arts Theatre in Cambodia. She is Program Specialist at the Philadelphia Folklore Project where she conducts research about urban expressive culture, curates exhibitions and coordinates arts and social change initiatives.