



John Michael Vlach

June 21, 1948 - October 30, 2022

John Michael Vlach was born at the Kapiolani Hospital in Honolulu, Hawaii, to Billie Katherine Kauio'kamo'onohu Wond and Richard Reed Vlach on June 21, 1948, the summer solstice, which Billie Katherine was fond of reminding John was the longest day of the year. John moved with his family to Alaska when he was a young boy and to various locations in California where his father worked as a structural engineer on maritime bridges and piers, until the family settled in Berkeley, California. John attended the School of the Madeleine and served as an altar boy. He made frequent visits to his Tutu (grandmother) and cousins in Hawai'i and to his Czech family's renowned farmland in Stanislaus Valley, California.

In the late 1960s while an undergraduate at the University of California at Davis, John was inspired by the cultural transformation taking place around him and seized the opportunity to study abroad in Ghana. He served as a research assistant to his anthropology professor Daniel J. Crowley, who had been paralyzed by polio and needed a strong companion to push his wheelchair through Togo, Senegal, Mali, Liberia, Haute-Volta (now Burkina Faso), République du Dahomey (now Benin), Niger, Cote d'Ivoire, and The Gambia. Valuing athletics throughout his life, John was a wide-receiver for the UC Davis football team as a walk-on. After obtaining his BA in 1970, he moved on to Indiana University to focus on folklife studies with mentors Warren Roberts and Henry Glassie.

John received his PhD from Indiana University in 1975, where he was part of the Folklore Institute and where he mentored and cajoled classmates to complete their dissertations. His own was on the West African roots of the shotgun house, a uniquely African American architectural form, whose transmission he traced from West Africa, through Haiti, into New Orleans, and up the Mississippi River, where its simple construction made it the housing style of choice for workers of limited means. He mobilized others to draw attention to African folklore with a volume he edited for Folklore Forum titled *Studies in Yoruba Folklore* (1973), to which he contributed "The Functions of Proverbs in Yoruba Folktales." Indicating a future path in American Studies as well, he also produced a groundbreaking study of the newly identified American genre of "anti-legends" in an article for *Indiana Folklore*. As a graduate student, he won with co-author and classmate Howard Marshall the American Folklore Society's award for best article by a student for the publication of "Toward a Folklife Approach to American Dialects" in *American Speech*. (1973).

Early in his career, John was elected a Fellow of the American Folklore Society, a group that recognizes the field's leading scholars. His folklore scholarship alerted academics across the social sciences and humanities to the power of cultural expression in our lives. He was especially effective in the areas of art and architecture, helping scholars and the public appreciate the significance of America's folklife. Many of his published studies continue to be required reading for university courses. John's professorships took him to the University of Iowa, the University of Maryland, and the University of Texas at Austin, before he settled at George Washington University for 32 years, for which he served as director of its Folklife Program, chair of the American Studies Department, Director of Graduate Studies, and Professor of American Studies and Anthropology. Clad in his trademark blazer, blue jeans, and

cowboy boots, he taught students of American studies, folklore, anthropology, and museum studies, including some who went on to become founding curators at the Smithsonian Museum of African American History and Culture or worked at other institutions across the country.

Throughout his career, John insisted on the merit of studying the cultural contributions of people who came to America in slavery and on recognizing the artistry and agency they exhibited in the landscape and everyday objects they created, from agricultural field patterns and dwelling styles, to basketry and quilt making, to blacksmithing and creative yet functional pottery known as “face jugs.” John wrote books and curated exhibitions on the folk material culture of the African diasporas including *The Afro-American Tradition in Decorative Arts* (1978); *Charleston Blacksmith: The Work of Philip Simmons* (1981); *Back of the Big House: The Architecture of Plantation Slavery* (1993); *By the Work of Their Hands: Studies in Afro-American Folklife* (1991), and *The Planter's Prospect: Privilege and Slavery in Plantation Paintings* (2002). He received the Fred Kniffen Prize for Best Book on North American Material Culture for his final book: *Barns* (2003), a regional survey of barn types in the United States, analyzing images throughout the collections of the Library of Congress. He gained renown for his broad-based work on folk art and architecture, including the sweeping volumes *Plain Painters: Making Sense of American Folk Art* (1988) and with Simon J. Bronner *Folk Art and Art Worlds* (1986, 1992), and with Dell Upton *Common Places: Readings in American Vernacular Architecture*. In these volumes, he emphasized the importance of community context and the concept of tradition. He also authored or contributed to numerous books, articles, and anthologies on African-American folk arts and crafts, folklore, and cultural history

John was a leading expert on folklife, American material culture, vernacular architecture, and historic preservation. In addition to his regional areas of focus in the Southern U.S., Caribbean, and West Africa, he developed a late-

in-career interest in the history of Capitol Hill, where he lived for 40 years. He enjoyed giving tours of the alley dwellings on the Hill and served on the District of Columbia's Historic Preservation Review Board. He also participated in the Capitol Hill Village Overbeck Oral History Project and served as an adviser to the National Council for the Traditional Arts. He was in great demand as a speaker and museum consultant throughout the country but limited his travels so that he could participate in family life.

At home, John was a dutiful husband and father who showed his love through acts of service, whether that was spending a Sunday watching the Washington football team while ironing his daughters' school uniform shirts for the week or serving as the driver on call for their cross-town commutes for the school carpool, ballet classes, or basketball practice. To his wife's delight as a fellow historian, and to his daughters' dismay, he was known for detouring on road trips through the South to photograph old barns or to explore ruins of slave dwellings and freed Black towns. John was an avid runner, completing the Marine Corps Marathon in his 50s and continuing his tradition of running or taking miles-long walks even during his initial struggle with young-onset Alzheimer's. And ask anyone who saw him at his daughters' weddings in recent years: He could dance!

John retired in 2013 when his disease made it impossible for him to continue teaching. George Washington University established the Horton-Vlach Fund to honor John and his colleague James Horton for "their extraordinary research and teaching legacies." The Office of Alumni Relations organized a celebration of John's career on February 28, 2013, with 50 of John's former students and colleagues honoring him. The Vernacular Architecture Forum bestowed upon him later that year its Henry Glassie Award for lifetime scholarly achievement in vernacular architecture studies.

He was cared for at home with love and commitment for many years by his

wife Beverly and with the assistance of caregivers, primary among them his caregiver for eight years, Pamela Drakes-Shepherd, who jollied him along and kept him active well beyond anyone's expectations, and Bilikisu Badmus who provided weekend coverage. John spent the final six months of his life receiving memory care at the Residences at Thomas Circle, where nurses and care professionals provided dedicated round-the-clock assistance and where John's family and companion dog Chesley made regular visits. John was surrounded by family in his final days and hours.

John is survived by his wife Beverly Brannan and daughters Kate Vlach (Jon Ettinger) and Molly Vlach (Kory Cosenza), all of Washington, DC; brother Stephen Vlach and nephew RJ Vlach of Yosemite, California; and a host of cousins, in-laws, friends, and former students. John was predeceased by his parents, toddler brother Paul, and sister-in-law Laurie Vlach. A celebration of John's life is planned for June 2023, when John would have turned 75. Memorial contributions may be made to the Fisher Center for Alzheimer's Research Foundation (https://www.alzinfo.org/donate/donation_form/). Please also share your reflections on John's life.

Tribute Wall

MC

“ *I'm so sorry for your loss. Know that you and your whole family are in my thoughts and prayers. Margaret Damm Carter*

Margaret Carter - November 08, 2022 at 08:02 PM



“ *John and Chesley, 2017.*



K - November 08, 2022 at 03:43 PM



“ *3 files added to the album Photos*



M - November 08, 2022 at 02:06 PM