

Finding a Place for Research at the Winnipeg Folk Festival

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When George Lyon asked if I would review this year's Winnipeg Folk Festival, my first thought was that anything I might say as a folklorist and audience member would indicate more about my musical tastes than about the Festival itself. I could say, for example, "The WFF should have more of X type of music, and less of Y type of music." That I would put Waterson-Carthy in the first category, and the Nields in the second, indicates that I'm over 40 and a traditional folkie. As it happens, my research assistant Janet Macaulay, under 30 and into alternative music, would reverse the two. So what?

So I asked George if it would be OK if instead I took this as an opportunity to reflect on the WFF from the perspective of someone who's currently studying festivals,¹ one of which happens to be the WFF itself.² And since the research team also includes three extremely competent assistants, with independent viewpoints, I thought this would be a chance for all of us to take stock on our research so far. And George (who is an agreeable type) acquiesced. *[Agreeable? Some would debate that, but I hope I can recognize a good idea when it's presented to me.—GWL]*

Of course, what we write about the WFF here also probably tells more about us than it does about the Festival. As feminist researchers, we recognise the partiality—in the senses of both incompleteness and bias—of the information we gather, and of how we present it. And in calling our contribution "Finding a Place at the Winnipeg Folk Festival,"³ we're calling attention to the locations from which we speak: mine as a research grantee; Lisa's as an audience member; Danielle's as a long term Festival volunteer; and Janet's as an aficionada of Festival Camping. We take our topics from our experiences.

This direction also fits well with the research program, called "Cultural Politics and Identity Politics in Festival Construction and Performance." In it, we look at terms like multiculturalism, culture, ethnicity, pluralism, folklore, tradition, and identity. A variety of groups—government agencies, entertainment and tourist service providers, media, and individuals, and, of course, festivals—use these terms, often to communicate rather different messages. Specifically, we want to find out how these ideas are used to encourage or discourage interaction between groups or individuals with ideological differences, or similar relationships, with respect to power, politics, gender, sexuality, race, ethnicity, and the state. Whose agendas are foregrounded and whose are backgrounded, and under what circumstances?

"Cultural politics" and "identity politics" are sometimes referred to disparagingly. Cultural politics can be seen as the cynical betrayal of a group's distinctiveness by addressing superficial aspects of their outward expression while ignoring the deeper meanings; identity politics as the label which reduces all of a person's salient qualities to one category such as sex, gender, race, class, sexual orientation and so on.

However I use them here instead to draw attention to the strategic uses of creating culture and identity.

Lisa, Danielle, and Janet's contributions speak most clearly to issues of their personal locations, but also each has implications for cultural and identity politics. Lisa considers how the literal finding of places and people can happen on the crowded site. But she also politicises her position as an audience member, recognising how her interests in music and community influence where she goes, and with whom, at the WFF. Danielle looks at the sometimes uncomfortable admixture of work and play that is the volunteer's lot. She recognises her own volunteer identity as contingent and changing, alternately linking or disengaging with her position in her family, community, and age group during the over 15 years of her involvement with the WFF. Finally, Janet speaks of her musical tastes and feminist concerns as influences on her experience in Festival Camping. The apotheosis she finds there is nevertheless both troublesome and fleeting. Each writer, in her own way, addresses the kind of community she would like to see created at the WFF.

Each also considers, implicitly or explicitly, the WFF's creation of a sweet and inherently uncriticisable culture which I, as an outsider to this province, also see as quintessential to the construction of Manitoba's self-image. Each researcher has told me that she feels guilty about what could be interpreted as negative commentary on the Festival. But I wonder who else but a Manitoban would feel contrite about pointing out that a performer seems to be a misogynistic, homophobic jerk; that people get grumpy about being restricted in the amount of food they're provided; or that it's not exactly *nice* to pillage somebody else's campsite? But these researchers' concerns with public representation are also linked with festival experiences.

Whereas in everyday life controversy over social and cultural differences may be hidden or subdued, in festivals they can be publicly performed. At the WFF, for example, mainly middle class white audiences can watch African or Latino performers or ones who share their own background; lesbian singers can advance radical viewpoints while Loudon Wainwright III can stage heterosexism. One problem, which I'll discuss below, is the extent to which the most progressive manifestations are both superficial and temporary. Too, festivals often comprise significant behaviours and activities that their organisers—and sometimes legal authorities—do not condone (as discussed by Janet Macaulay in this issue). Sometimes organisers and authorities assert levels of control that may seem undue (as discussed by Lisa Hagen-Smith in this issue).

An example of such control—beginning beyond the WFF⁴—is the fact that in finding a place for my research at the WFF, I first had to obtain permission. I did, from Executive Director Pierre Guérin, way back in the fall of 1994, when I

was writing up my grant proposal. I provided him with a copy as soon as I found out that the funding would be forthcoming, and we had a brief discussion of the work I would be doing with the research assistants, in which Pierre gave several helpful suggestions.

But having permission from Pierre proved insufficient for some of our purposes. When Communications Manager Linda Cubbidge found we intended to tape on site, she informed us that we needed media accreditation. The Festival has explicit (in the Programme Book) rules that no audio or videotaping is allowed on the site. Here, the place we wanted at the Festival, and the place Festival organisers thought researchers would have, came into direct conflict. All my discussions with Linda and with Media Co-ordinator Tanis Treneman suggested that they thought we wanted to tape performers. In fact, though obviously the WFF would not happen without performers, their particular agendas were very low on our priority list in this year, and we certainly did not (and do not) intend to record their performances. The staff agenda prevailed, so this year we took photographs and made written notes instead of using tape recorders.

One of my places in the research this year was attending the opening media ceremony which, by the way, I was permitted to tape. As an opportunity for the WFF to publicly display itself to those who would interpret it to the public, it included a preview of one of the hot new bands that would be playing the Festival (Papo Ross and Orquesta Pambiche) but also a series of thank yous by the Board Chair, Michael Handler, to the over 900 volunteers, the staff, corporate sponsors, and all three levels of government.

Federal, provincial, and city representatives' comments give some indication of their agendas as WFF supporters. Ron Duhamel, representing the Feds, spoke bilingually of the "sudden burst of energy and creativity and internationalism which is the Folk Festival" and of the organisers who "go out and find the very best talent in the world and bring it here so that we can in fact experience it." Frank Couture, representing Manitoba, spoke at much greater length about

an important summer tradition, one that adds to Manitoba's reputation as a place offering a wealth of music-making possibilities... an immersion experience... [with] music [that] offers all kinds of possibilities for gaining a better understanding of our neighbours, and a larger and more inclusive sense of community....Over the weekend Bird's Hill Park becomes a global village with music as a medium of expression and world harmony as a seemingly reachable goal.

Finally Winnipeg Mayor Susan Thompson congratulated the organisers for "put[ting] Winnipeg and Manitoba on the map," and welcomed the entertainers to "the heart of the North American continent." The last speaker, Executive Director Pierre Guérin, concluded

We're about to bring you one of the best events in this province, in this country, and I believe in North America. Why do we do it? Well there's a thousand of us [staff and volunteers]; there must be a million

reasons, but I believe there's one that we have in common. Because when we go up there, we create a community. We have an opportunity to make a difference. We take a small part of the world and for a short period of time, we make it better.

Their concept of the festival as an example of (musical) pluralism was common, but their perspectives on it were clearly variable.

The Festival's move to foreground international connections began with the "Festival Countdown," held at the Mondetta World Cafe "featuring West African and Latin dishes" (*Uptown*, June 29-July 5, 17), with music by Papa Wemba, Papo Ross and Orquesta Pambiche, and Prince Diabate and Amara Sanon. Displaying these performers is consistent, in addition, with Pierre's reported policy to "[shy] away from hiring big name, big money acts.... The overriding philosophy is that the event should lead fans to the artist, rather than the artists leading people to the event" (John Kendle, *Winnipeg Sun*, June 2, 1995, 21). These comments were cited during a brief media flurry over the Edmonton Folk Festival's announcing its lineup of big name acts. *Winnipeg Free Press* columnist Morley Walker characterised the WFF as a "banjo-and-beard event" (June 2, 1995, C1), making a gender and music exclusive statement not apparently shared by WFF organisers or funders. He also snidely suggested that his experience of WFF lineups was that "most of the names [were] either overly familiar or completely unknown" (*ibid.*). While suggesting that the WFF is "about the mellow atmosphere, enjoying the outdoors, and discovering some excellent music you've never heard before," he also asserted that the WFF "is already too large to achieve the intimacy you'd want in a folk festival" (*ibid.*). His rhetoric of discovery uncomfortably echoes that of colonial discourse, particularly given the WFF's espoused internationalism.

Some reportage on the Festival also echoed organisers' and government funders' concerns for pluralism and multiculturalism. Suggesting that an Eastern European workshop was "more representative of the Winnipeg Folk Festival" than the one with Ani DiFranco and Susan Crowe, *Winnipeg Sun* writer Bartley Kives quoted audience members' comments about WFF "diversity," including the analogy that the tarp run was "like the running of the bulls in Spain." I interpreted this as a plug for "real" folk music—"traditional," and clearly the possession of the ethnocultural "other"—over recently-composed, Euro-North-American stuff. On the same page, John Kendle talked about the "multiplicity of musical styles," and "the mood of discovery" (July 8, 1995, 2).

But what kind of multiculturalism can be expressed by the WFF, and understood by its audiences? The term "Benetton multiculturalism," refers to the purveying of subaltern cultures as "a profitable means of commodification" (David Theo Goldberg, "Introduction: Multicultural Conditions," in *Multiculturalism: A Critical Reader*, edited by Goldberg, Blackwell, 1994, 8). Commercials which "fabricate a history of the goods' presence, of their present tense ... evade (if not erase) the goods' conditions of creation" (*ibid.*:15). While such ideas do clearly create some kind of space in a colonial

political economy for the subaltern (as pointed out by Michelle Wallace's "The Search for the 'Good Enough' Mammy: Multiculturalism, Popular Culture, and Psychoanalysis" [in Goldberg, *Multiculturalism*]), it is not usually a particularly powerful one. Duhamel's federal statement echoes the discourse of "discovery" in the media; we bring performers from around the world to Winnipeg for our enjoyment, but there is no indication that they have any impact, critical or otherwise, upon us.

The provincial and civic representatives give more indication of an effect not only on Winnipeg, but also on the performers who come here (perhaps the Feds can only envision Winnipeg as a place to visit on the way to somewhere else!). But Pierre's statements invoking community, difference, and improving the world (*n.b.*, not just Winnipeg!) suggest that the WFF is aiming (admirably) much higher than its funders.

And there is some indication that this notion is effective. A *Winnipeg Free Press* (July 6, 1995, People 8) article on local Chilean-Canadian musician Hugo Torres, who appeared at the WFF, refers to linkages between music and revolution activity in Chile, and to their connections to Winnipeg itself.⁵ The discussion of Torres's personal history and life suggests that perhaps the WFF's improvement of the world, contra Pierre, need not be confined only to the short period of the Festival. In keeping with current investigations of cultural politics, I hope next year to extend the research and investigation into exactly what possibilities for profound change might be immanent in a festival, particularly one like the WFF which seems to cater primarily to the affluent white middle class. The use of the term "community," so evident in media discussions but also in audience comments about the festival, may be a focus, as it is in the papers which follow.