

Education or Exotification? A Reexamination of the Smithsonian Folklife Festival

Kelly J Schultz*, Dr. Amy Shuman
Department of Anthropology, Folklore

As a central cultural event and meeting grounds for the diverse cultures of the United States, the Smithsonian Folklife Festival has a significant influence on the cultural education and intergroup understanding. The Festival has been a central case study in some of the central debates of Folklore: exotification, authenticity, traditionalism, presentation, and representation. In this study, I examine some of the key publications involved in the debate and reconsider their arguments in terms first person experience as an intern at the 2010 Festival, textual data, and ethnographic interview with Festival staff, curators, and participants. I conclude that these issues not yet resolved, pose some degree of risk to public good, and require further attention from Festival developers.

Introduction

The Smithsonian Folklife Festival (previously Festival of American Folklife) is a stage upon which we play out a great drama; the key players, people of nearly every ethnicity, class, region, country, and culture come together to interact and symbolically define our country's intergroup relationships. As an intern for the 2010 Festival's Asian Pacific Americans Program, I was able to observe the delicate and subtle communication between individuals and groups that is central to our mutual understanding and ability to exist synchronically. With this experience, I seek to take part in the greater debate of exoticism, othering, authenticity, and cultural representation.

Here I examine the major arguments surrounding the Festival, with primary focus on the issue of othering as a source of intergroup conflict and causes of exoticism, the conceptualization of other groups as exotic, in the Festival. I suggest a multilayered causal relationship: a number of influences as a cause of exoticism/othering, exoticism as a cause of intergroup conflict, and conflict as negatively correlated with public good.

Methodology

In order to develop a comprehensive look at the current issues surrounding the Festival, I considered a number of the most relevant and well known publications on the topic. Textual analysis, personal experience, and ethnographic interview were the primary modes of investigation.

Findings and Discussion

Cultural Representation

Festivals are, above all, meeting grounds for the public. They are the places

in which peoples who do not normally come together may experience each other and where people are able to see their neighbors in an entirely new context (Kidd, 2010). Just as the presentation of the self chosen by individuals when first meeting will define the relationship, so too do the cultural representations shape the form of relationships within our society. Thus “any mature representation, and any attempt to communicate such representation, is inescapably ‘a moral act’” (Livingstone, 6) and a powerful one. Dr. Lucy Long, folklorist and a senior research fellow with the Smithsonian, notes that “there is a real sense of obligation and responsibility” (Long, 2010) among the Festival staff on the subject of representation. Despite the Festival’s stated goal to create true to life cultural presentations, the resulting productions are nonetheless representations and are subject to the degree of fabrication and fictionality implied by the term. “To understand this it is only necessary to consider for a moment what the Festival would be like if participants were fully represented in their own home circumstances, complete with such signifiers of disadvantage as a diurnal diet of fast food and daytime television, or worse” (Cantwell, 161). Thus some degree of fictionalization and romanticization are required in the production of a Festival representation.

Representation, in itself, is a complex and problematic issue with many unforeseen consequences. Perfect representation is not representation at all, but rather observation of the actual circumstance; representation is better considered, through analogy, as a map with corresponds with reality through symbols (Livingstone, 18). Thus it is the nature of representation to be other than, and symbol for, that which it represents. The question becomes one of symbolic communication, which, like any other form of communication, varies from culture to culture. Representations are thus read, interpreted, by both the observer and the represented in light of the meaning of these symbols within their own worldview and are thus subjective and open to interpretation. As with any other form of communication, skill levels of interpretation and representation will vary from individual to individual; thus a talented and knowledgeable chef may become a representation of his culture as unfriendly and uneducated because his culture prizes silence during the cooking process.

Representation demands self-consciousness. In the very act of asking someone to demonstrate the things that they do normally, we are asking them to change the nature of these things from natural and unconscious to self-conscious and represented. This phenomena is described by Hufford:

Traditional ways of doing things are often deemed unremarkable by their practitioners, until cast into relief by abrupt change, confrontation with alternative

ways of doing things, or the fresh perspective of an outsider (such as a folklorist). The diversity of American cultures has been catalytic in this regard, prompting people to recognize and reflect upon their own cultural distinctiveness. Once grasped as distinctive, ways of doing things may become emblems of participation (Hufford, 1991).

The act of representing a traditional cultural form alters the significance of that form for the tradition holders by turning it in to a symbol. It becomes a symbol of identity, of inclusion within a certain group. However, by increasing awareness of inclusion in one group, it necessarily signifies exclusion from another group. The act of demonstrating the preparation of a specific dish at the Festival forces the cook to become aware of that dish as a symbol of his ethnicity, and while this symbol may have inclusive qualities, binding him to others of his ethnicity, it also makes him more aware of inter-ethnicity differences. The audience, too, is aware of the significance of the presentation as a symbol and marker of difference. In this way, the act of representation brings differences into sharper relief and creates symbols of these differences.

In live performance, the people are the representations, and thus “become signs of themselves” through the process of self-representation (Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, 5). By removing a person from his natural state and placing him as the object of observation, one creates an environment in which the natural becomes self-conscious and representative, for “the palpable substance and intrinsic forms of representation both shape what is represented and the awareness to which it is represented” (Cantwell, 154). The representation thus comes to represent the very act of representation as well as the culture itself. The act of representation either essentializes (through presentation of the quintessence) or totalizes (showing the whole through the part), both of which ultimately result in a fragmented presentation through which the audience must infer the nature of the whole (Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, 5). That which is represented is inevitably taken to carry some significance that will ultimately reveal the nature of the culture, and thus representations are imbued with authority that shapes intercultural relationships. The contemporary intellectual environment further compounds the issue by adding the postmodernist concept that everything is representation and thus value judgments on the accuracy or authenticity of the message are thus futile (Livingstone, 15).

It would then be quite impossible to create a model of representation that would allow it to serve as a perfect communication tool. To Richard Kurin, “representations of peoples, cultures, and institutions do not just happen. They

are mediated, negotiated, and yes, brokered through often complex processes” (Kurin, 13). The Festival’s response is cultural democracy, to create a space for the participants “where they could tell their story in their own words, in their own terms” (Kurin, 13). Kidd describes the Festival’s hand in the representation process as such:

we, for the most part, leave it up to the participants to decide how they’re comfortable presenting themselves. We hope that when they come to the National Mall, they take control of their space and make it what they want it to be... Our job is to provide a place where the participants can present themselves the way they want to be presented. (Kidd, 2010)

The Festival, thus, usually only steps in when an outside force, such as a program partner, is pushing participants to represent themselves in a manner with which the participants are not comfortable (Kidd, 2010). This method of allowing individuals to self-represent implies a great respect for the participants and thus increases the perceived obligation to create an “authentic” presentation. While self-representation is the most effective way to ensure minimal outside influence of the representations, it is not without its complex consequences.

As with any performance, the act of self-representation is an, often unconscious, dialog between the performer and their audience. Performance relies on a complex interplay between the audience, or the perceived audience, the Festival staff, scholars, and the performer. We all, inevitably, “bring with us to the Festival... a great many vague notions” (Cantwell, 273) which shape how we approach and understand the performer. When asked what they wanted to convey to the audience, several performers told me that their main goal was to “make a good impression” to those watching. For some, this meant adjusting their cultural forms to be more appealing to the audience (as one South Korean cook said, Americans don’t want to see the smelly stuff), for others, this meant catering to the audience’s desire for “authenticity” by making a dish “as my grandmother used to make it.”

However, not all performers are well-versed in the intricacies of the meaning of their actions in terms of the major symbols of various worldviews of the audience members. Even in circumstances where audience and performers speak the same language, there can often be a communication gap which can lead to awkwardness in the relationship between the performer and the audience members. As a foodways presenter, Long strategically brings the dishes out into the audience, where visitors feel more comfortable asking questions of her which they perceive would be

offensive to the performer (Long, 2010). In some ways, the presenter acts as a “translator” of these more subtle forms of communication, using culturally appropriate symbols and analogies to connect the demonstration with actions done in the lives of audience members. When presenters are experts in both cultures and are skilled in these strategies of communication, they are able to bridge the divide between the stage and the audience.

As a dialog between the performer and the audience, the success of the representation does not rely on the performer alone. Audience members enter the space with their own conceptions, beliefs, and experiences that shape their own interpretations of the representation. The Festival itself also shapes the way that both parties approach each other. The environment of the Festival is unique; it is most analogous to a cultural tourism vacation and we thus approach it in a similar way. For Kirshenblatt-Gimblett:

to know a society only in its festival mode, filtered through the touristic lens of spectacle, is to raise another set of problems- illusion of cultural transparency in the face of undeciphered complexity and the image of a society always on holiday. To festivalize culture is to make every day a holiday (Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, 62).

While there could be worse conceptions of a culture than to conceive of it on perpetual holiday, these “tourist gazes” (Urry, 2002), which “constitute imperfect barometric records of the diverse ways which tourists adjust their personal experiences to the requirements of the social expectation,” do not serve the Festival goals of creating intercultural communication and understanding. Rather, by viewing a culture in this way, one makes it more exotic, romanticizes it, and thus strengthens the preexistent delineation between self and other. This type of representation removes a culture from its socio-political history, it indulges in the ethnographic sensational, an aesthetic of strangeness and wonder, so that the world ‘appears bigger and stranger than ever’ (Fischer, 216). The spectacle of festival works through “clear separation of observer and actor, primacy of visual mode, and aggrandizing ethos,” instilling in the festival goers a sense of awe, of wonder which is necessarily incompatible with analysis of the intellectual and moral ambiguity of such representation (Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, 72).

For the presenter new to self-representation, this freedom can be intimidating and challenging. These performers are encouraged to “do what they usually do,” often resulting in some degree of genuineness. It is the highly experienced performers who run a greater risk of creating a representation to which they feel no connection or analogy to their own lives. As cultural tourism and the marketability of heritage

become more prominent in our country and in the world, cultural forms are increasingly being changed to fill a market niche. Cultural and community groups that exist primarily for the continuation of tradition risk becoming alienated from it; “with repeated exposure, cultural performances can become routinized and trivialized. The result may be events that have no clear analogue within the community from which they purportedly derive” (Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, 64). As performers continue to perform, they become aware of audience receptivity and thus cultural forms tend to freeze in the form most well-received (Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, 64).

The focus then shifts from the holders of the cultural heritage to the audience, and the cultural form ceases to represent the culture from which it came and begins to represent the tastes and desires of the culture to which it is presented. The danger of commoditization, including self-commoditization, is very real. Robert Cantwell asserts that a development in the “Festival of American Folklife, particularly in the context of cultural conservation, is the unstated assumption that the Festival has in effect become the cultural marketplace itself” (Cantwell, 159). Measures to prevent this include the framing and presentation techniques which move the Festival away from spectacle, the incorporation of the mundane and everyday, and the emphasis on intercultural dialog and education. In spite of this, the very nature is the presentation of people as the keepers of intangible cultural heritage serves to objectify them to some degree.

Definition also plays a major role in representation. Both the audience’s interpretation and the participant’s performance are shaped by the categorization and definition of the performer as belonging to a specific group, culture, or geographic entity. While it is generally understood that there is variety in all human groups, there is some degree of homogenization implied when “tangible geographically bounded communities are being presented and also created” (Long, 2010). Kurin describes this as “synthetic attempts to understand and present larger wholes” (Kurin, 18). Participants are generally grouped by nationality and regionality, a phenomena not unique to the Festival by any means. The rationality behind these grouping lies partly in the “Boas-Benedict legacy of plural, separate, distinct, historically homogeneous cultures [which] is both scientifically misleading and educationally irrelevant” (Wax, 108). Groupings become arbitrary and political and diminish the great diversity within. This grouping system further discounts the great many people who lead “multicultural lives” (Kurin) and tends to shy attention away from the areas where “isolated cultures” overlap, the culture contact zones, where there is a proliferation of new and adapted cultural forms. This ideology diminishes our understanding

of the immensity of cultural diversity and encourages stereotyping and overgeneralization, as well as encouraging conceptualizing political units as equitable to cultural units. In this, the act of representation has political ramifications:

“the ideological work of representation is often to translate social and cultural heterogeneity into homogenous unity and to emphasize boundaries which map zones of inclusion and exclusion. Thus, certain conceptions, values, and visions are prioritized in the cultural processes of representation, reproducing patterns of inequality and power” (Hallam & Street, 7).

While the Festival encourages self-representation, the CFCH create the space in which this representation will take place, thus presenting the tradition-bearers through specific frames.

The Festival’s aim of allowing people to present themselves in a form true to life helps to diminish the spectacular nature of these kinds of events. Director Stephen Kidd spoke to me on this subject:

there are inevitably differences and that’s one of things that brings visitors down to the festival: to learn about things they wouldn’t ordinarily be able to learn about. I think the main way that we...try to make the unusual familiar is by asking the participants to come at it from the direction they’re used to coming at it from. To do things that are part of their daily life in ways that they would normally do it. We don’t ask them to wear any costumes they wouldn’t normally wear, and we ask them to talk about it in the broader context of their life and their community. And we hope, through doing that in their own voice, they are doing it in a way that’s not exoticizing... and that one person can relate to another person because they’re just talking about their own lives in their own voices (Kidd, 2010).

This self-representation method helps to minimize the chances of misleading representation via a third-party. Yet, “self-representation is representation nonetheless” (Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, 55) the agenda and representational skills of the performers result in a wide variety of demonstrations.

The act of cultural representation varies, of course, according to the medium through which the culture is being represented. Dance, art, music, and song are frequently-used medium of cultural representation; these are forms that lean toward theatrics and are thus vulnerable to the misrepresentation, exoticism, and objectification. By including nontraditional forms of representation the Festival

helps to create a truer-to-life demonstration. Discussion stages, such as the Asian Pacific Americans program Talkstory stage, serve as a ground for dialog. At the Talkstory stage, for example, Asian Pacific Americans were brought together for forty-five minute sessions, during which they would address topics relating to their own lives. By creating a space for free, unscripted dialog between a number of participants, and in part, the audience, the Program helped to create an opportunity for natural presentation with minimal representation. While any act of social interaction necessitates self-representation on the part of the individuals involved, the extemporaneous nature of these presentations helped to minimize representation to a more natural level. This candidness often came across to audiences, and allowed them audience to better understand and feel a connection with the participants.

Another type of demonstration which allowed a more clear dialog and connection between audience and participants was the foodways stage. As Foodways presenter Dr. Lucy Long put it, “not everyone cooks, but everyone eats” (Long, 2010). Director Kidd agrees that “foodways is a great way to make connections between people, because everyone has some experience with food” (Kidd, 2010). Food is a highly symbolic aspect of every individual’s life, imbued with meaning that relates directly to culture, interpersonal relations, and self-definition. By presenting a culture not only through its food, but through individual’s relationships to that food, we are implying basic connections between the peoples via their common connections (social, celebratory, or mundane) to food. Presenters such as Long aim to reach audiences by teaching them about the ways in which foods are significant to everyone, for when they “start seeing where their emotions get attached to the food... then they can find the connections better” (Long, 2010). Stories of learning to cook a certain dish from one’s mother, for example, is an easily translatable episode that carries meaning for many and can help to connect them through common experience.

Presentation

While the Festival takes a rather hands-off approach to cultural representation, it still plays an important role in presentation. It has employed performance models focusing primarily on “face-to-face interaction and the performance, framing, and recontextualizing of folk tradition while maintaining the canons in terms of content” (Sommers, 228). This is achieved through the use of staging and framing techniques, the presenters and informational materials, and ambient elements (Cantwell, 154). The subtle impact of design, stage height, image placement, and physical location of the participants can be significant (Cantwell, 158). The

effects of aesthetics as well as the physical placements of objects and people alter the way that we approach them. Is the participant on the ground, a six-inch stage, a three-foot stage? Is there a physical barrier between the audience and the participant? A threshold? Are they surrounded by finery, wearing delicate costumes? Are their voices booming through the microphones, or are they speaking naturally to a small crowd around them? For example, “the higher off the ground you are, the more passive your audience” (Cantwell, 190). These elements are essential in the formulation of a relationship between the audience and the performer and ultimately decide the humanity of the performer; they inform us, through the use of symbols, whether this performer is celebrity or person, one of us or other.

The Festival is a total sensory experience, a sort of chaos which requires “selective disattention, or highly disciplined attention, in an environment of sensory riot” (Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, 57-8). Bold colors, a variety of aromas, alternating cacophony and euphony, the tastes of Festival foods, and feel of summer heat- these arouse and confuse the senses, placing the audience members in a state of disconnect and wonder. Any festival performance is thus inevitably framed by both the exterior and the interior environment, the interior being the audience member’s sensory experience and his own mental processing of events in light of this experience.

Presentations are further framed by symbolism, in part of the select location and time for the Festival. The monumental and highly symbolic architecture of the National Mall, as well as the emotionally and symbolically loaded time of the year leading up to the 4th of July, inevitably changes how both the presenter and the audience approach each other. For, “the mall makes visitors and patriots of us all, and in passing over it one experiences the self-consciousness of exposure to the view of the great princes, the Capitol and the Monument, whose silent protocol one must observe in every step” (Cantwell, 191). Shay, however, describes this phenomenon differently, stating that the festival “...placed native tents and other exotic structures on the National Mall surrounded by architectural representations of the Capitol and other official buildings, representing the greatest military and economic power on earth standing in stark contrast.” The framing symbolism thus changing depending on who is invited to perform; Americans, even marginalized ones, may view this frame as a symbolic invitation to the forefront of the national heritage, an act of recognition and acceptance. Others, however, may question the political implications of this locale. Further, the space is not merely imbued with American symbolism, however, but is a symbol of the Smithsonian Institution itself. One may be struck with the authority and official nature instilled in the event by the physical proximity to the institution’s buildings. However,

“the reframing of folk culture by an elite cultural institution can, for the participant, at least, be deeply confusing” (Cantwell, 259).

I have previously alluded to the Festival’s competency in minimizing the “spectacle” of the performances by adopting what Kirshenblatt-Gimblett calls an ascetic aesthetic. Theatrical elements, such as dramatic costumes and concertized performance styles, are discouraged in “an attempt to achieve the quality of pure presence, of a slice of life” (Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, 77). What’s more, the Festival encourages performances of everyday activities, such as cooking, craft, and narrative, focusing on creating an environment as close to life as possible and an atmosphere of information sharing and education. By limiting the spectacle in favor of a more “realistic” staging, the Festival minimalizes the potential for casual exoticism. It cannot, however, eliminate it, for “anytime anyone is put on stage or framed in some way as ‘look at this person’ there is that danger of othering them” (Long, 2010) and “the very act of bracketing them for public presentation makes them ‘performances’ of a very special kind” (Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, 77).

The relationship between the audience and the performer is thus a complex one. On one hand, the educational and “real life” components can help produce understanding the audience and allow them to draw analogies to their own lives. On the other, the elevated mood of the Festival and the symbolic placement of performers in brackets can have powerful effects on how the audience approaches the performers. The social hierarchy becomes somewhat unclear; performers are insulated, bracketed, often elevated, honored. Yet they were invited to perform by the Smithsonian Institution, which by its nature belongs largely to the hegemony of this country. To Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett,

In festivals of cultural performances, respectability and decorum, values of the dominant cultural institutions that stage the event, tend to diffuse the oppositional potential so essential to festivals. For this and other reasons, these festivals have a tendency to reinforce the status quo even as enlightened organizers and performers struggle to use them to voice oppositional values (Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, 77).

The power struggle between performer and audience is apparent; less apparent, however, is the dominant victor. To some, the entire purpose of the Festival is the elevation of the participant; to others, such as Robert Cantwell, “however admired they may be, moreover, however well remunerated, the artists are in a position of apparent

internment, even servility, and visitors often speak of them, and observe them, as if separated from them by a one-way mirror” (Cantwell, 155). Are the participants in a position of servility via performance, or are they in an elevated place of honor? The inherent problem is not the necessity to answer this quandary, but the simple fact that there exist these two contradictory views of the event. Either position further delineates the border between the stage and the crowd and both positions speak to a larger cultural and political conflict in society at-large.

Each of these framing mechanisms, these methods of presentation, is the result of careful planning and consideration. However, there is inevitably a gap between the planning and the event which cannot be fully bridged; the changing thematic nature of the festival, the dynamic socio-political environment in which it takes place, and the variety of peoples represented means that no amount of planning can encompass every facet of this dynamic production. For Cantwell, “the process of fine-tuning these factors in intimate consultations in the various sancta of festival production is itself deeply intuitive, imaginative, and mystical, and aims at ultimate effects that are separated from the planning process itself by a gap that neither theory nor practice can bridge” (Cantwell, 158). In the end, the deciding factors are what Richard Kurin calls “emergent, non-predictable cultural creation.” In spite of the ambiguous nature of the work, the Festival has long served as a testing ground upon which presentational theories can be tested (Kurin, 18).

The Mall, during these ten days, serves as a symbolic microcosm for the Nation. Here, on the Mall, members from nearly every American ethnic group can interact, recognizing and celebrating internal and international diversity through the performances. Internationals invited to the program face the microcosm in a way much similar to the many immigrants, but “suddenly the secret to survival in a strange land has become simply to be what you are: to show them our dances” (Cantwell, 192). Marginalized groups are now “no longer diffused on the margins of the social center [and] the folk-cultural universe, bounded now by the National Mall and differentiated into several realms each distinguished by a specific culture or cultural theme, is collapsed into a center whose margin is the social-scientific gaze” (Cantwell, 158). This exhibitory nature has led to the Festival being likened to a “living museum” or a cultural zoo.

By approaching the Festival with the museum mindset, one risks objectifying the participants, for “not only inanimate objects but also humans are detachable, fragmentable, and replicable in a variety of materials” (Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, 34). Kirshenblatt-Gimblett and Price & Price alarmingly draw analogies to 16th century exhibitions of Native Americans as cultural rarities as examples of how putting

humans on display can quickly transcend the boundaries of human rights. Unlike a cultural zoo, in which humans are placed in models of their natural “habitats” and put on display, the Festival today serves more functions than simply entertainment and voyeurism. Today, “the presenters’ contextualization... keep[s] it from becoming a situation where people are on display...Presenters are there to create context and facilitate communication” (Price & Price, 23). Rather than an exercise in objectification, Richard Kurin views the Festival as a marked movement away from the fetishization of material objects held in museums through the creation of dialog with the objects maker, as well as an opportunity for historically under-represented groups to display their cultural achievements (Kurin, 121). Both arguments have validity when considering the effects of the festival at the individual level.

Othering

“It is not stretching the point to regard ethnic differentiation- the social construction of ‘us’ and ‘them’, marked in cultural terms- as a ubiquitous feature of sociability, and hence of all human societies” (Jenkins, 1997). As a social species, the delineation of “us” and “them” is a natural phenomenon through which we bind together the social groups which serve, primarily, as a mechanism for survival. The concept of othering carries no implicit value, either negative or positive, for it is capable of creating both conflict and social cohesion. Without the risk of conflict with proximal other through a clear concept of “us,” a society is not truly bonded and the individuals within remain at risk. In the defining of “us,” qualifiers must be made that distinguish “us” from “other,” and since every “us” is the penultimate example of humanity, “other” must be defined with characterizes that, in part, remove some of their humanity. “There is no self knowledge without other, and no knowledge of other without metaphor” (Cantwell, 184). Conflict, travesty, and the oppression of human rights are born from this most basic division, as are families, communities, loyalty, and patriotism.

American identity is similarly dependent upon this method of self-definition; “a sense of American identity is established, not only through internal imaginary unity, but in relation to external differences that get circulated within” (Bloom, 22). The other process is by no means limited to the divisions between political and geographical entities, but works on the individual level of society, creating divides between groups in a multicultural society. The concept of multiculturalism as an institutional practice and a future-oriented vision feeds into the act of othering through

the construction and commodification of the cultural other; mystified process of reification and museumification; the decontextualized appreciation of non-mainstream cultures and cultural forms; the fetishisation of a cultural difference centered on and mediated by the gendered/ethnicised body (Huggan, 153),

elements which we see in all institutions adhering to an ideology of multiculturalism and the celebration of ethnic difference. As an ideology, multiculturalism accentuates the differences between ethnic groups, effectively “othering” them, and through that very process removing the element of humanity forged when individuals and groups recognize basic similarities between themselves. In our country, the resulting form is a hegemonic white majority in a centered position working under the conception of ethnicity as something that belongs to the “other” alone” (Bloom, 23).

Exoticism, as a central component of conflict and group delineation, is necessarily a subject with political ramifications. As Huggan tells us:

the exoticist production of otherness is dialectical and contingent; at various times and in different places, it may serve conflicting ideological interests, providing the rationale for projects of rapprochement and reconciliation, but legitimizing just as easily the need for plunder and violent conquest (Huggan, 13).

In some cases, exoticism of a group occurs primarily for political reasons, such as the presence of a valuable resource or area of strategic colonial importance which may only be accessible through conflict. In other cases, political conflicts arise via the clash of proximal conflicting ideologies which threaten the reasoning and belief system of each group. Within a multicultural society, exoticism may serve to define “inferior” ethnic groups and justify the current political hierarchy or violation of civil and human rights, or may simply serve as an effort to segregate and enclave minority groups whose ideology is threatening to the hegemony. Regardless of the reason or purpose of the exoticification, the result is a removal of the exotified group from a status of “fully human” and thus a great potential for harm to members of those groups.

As an institution which celebrates cultural differences and generally omits the majority group as honored holders of cultural tradition, the Festival plays a significant role in this larger social context; “like the idea of ‘folklife’ itself, the Festival of American Folklife stands at the cultural frontier between self and other, particularly where self directs its gaze socially outward or downward” (Cantwell, 1). As a

celebration of cultural diversity and an educational program, the festival “automatically deals with both differences and similarities” (Long, 2010). To combat the othering naturally created by this type of activity and the threat of exoticism that comes with placing marginalized groups in brackets and on stages, the Festival seeks to emphasize the similarities between groups through strong educational and intercultural communication components. These elements combat the natural othering, as “knowledge is incompatible with exoticism” (Tudorov, 1993). As visitors learn the socio-historical component to a performance, craft, or dish, the element of exoticism fades; when described in terms of the foundational elements of human life, such as family, friends, basic human needs, celebration, mourning, birth, marriage, old age, and death, they become increasingly difficult to define as foreign or nonsensical.

Beyond translating the exotic into more familiar terms, the Festival has had to deal with presenting cultural groups that were *too* similar to the American majority, and thus fall under the umbrella of groups “without culture” or ethnicity. In such circumstances, audiences grow bored with the familiarity which they perceive as an automatic lack of “culture,” or at the very least, “culture” of interest. Long described to me her experience with the Wales program:

Wales has kind of a different position in our consciousness than the Asian Pacific Americans. It's automatically not seen as being as exotic. I think that what surprised the audience was a lot of the stuff that was exotic... It was almost like we had to find something that would exoticize the Welsh so that people would move past the cooking techniques....we're not here for cooking classes (Long, 2010).

That the Wales program required some degree of exoticization to meet the expectations and needs of the audience speaks a great deal about the nature of the Festival. A delicate balance of the exotic and the familiar is required to make a successful Festival program; the exoticizing agents capture the attention of festival goers but also allow them to move into an analytical mindset through which they can begin to examine the culture intellectually, while the familiarizing agents help to bridge the gap between “self” and “other” and thus return to other some of their basic humanity.

Self-Othering

The process of othering is not always victimization, but can rather be an act of appropriation and self-definition by the othered group. Just as we define ourselves in relation to

the other, the other define themselves in relation to us; thus where distinction from the majority (or any other group) becomes desirable, groups and individuals will accentuate their differences, thus self-exoticizing. The presence of self-othering within a society can be reflective of the society's human, civil, and cultural rights laws, or may be the result of a significant cultural (often ideological) conflict in which the self-othering group expects to be a contender. Self-othering may also occur as the result of a circumstance in which the act of othering is more beneficial than harmful, such as circumstances in which the marketability of cultural heritage leads to ease of financial burden, thus improving standards of living more than potential prejudice and conflict would decrease them. While the process of othering necessarily has political connotations, self-othering can occur when the primary motivation is not political. Perhaps most problematic, and most likely to be seen at the Festival, is the self-exoticism for the purposes of cultural commoditization and marketing.

With the rising popularity of cultural tourism, indigenous cultures are increasingly “transforming features of their cultures into alienable products for consumption” (Bunten, 381). In a study of the heritage industry of Native Americans (Tlingit), Bunten examines the processes of self-commoditization, which she finds to be both an economic response to changing demands in the global market as well as a political response to the need for expressed identity. The creation of a commoditized persona allows the performer to both present a product that is pleasing to potential customers and to protect oneself from the destructive forces of the tourist gaze (Bunten, 389). In the adaptation of culture as a product, the performer must be flexible in forming his commoditized persona in response to the needs and wants of the audience; it also required the simplification of cultural forms “that conforms to Western concepts of the Other popularized in” media and thus meets customers expectations (Bunten, 386). Performers commoditize their personas not only through conformation to expected stereotypes but also by evoking concepts of a “hyperreal past,” which conjure thoughts of a halcyon era and “authenticity,” and by accentuating differences between Western and Tlingit culture, conjuring thoughts of the exotic (Bunten). Performers, then, are must maintain and develop the commoditized persona while, “at the same time strive to adhere to their own cultural norms of representation and concepts of the self” (Bunten, 389).

The keepers of cultural heritage worldwide are presented with the opportunity to self-commoditize in order to fill the cultural tourism niche in the global market, and festivals present a domestic version of the heritage industry, in which repeat performers are at the greatest risk of self-commoditization. While valuable to those struggling

financially, the industry often toes the line of cultural injustice for those who may not have another viable source of income and are forced into the industry. The result of self-commoditization is removal or distortion of the cultural forms and adaptations by which a people have learned to survive. As these forms become disconnected from their purpose, the needs they were intended to meet are no longer filled. The culture deteriorates at a rate much faster than normal cultural adaptation, and individuals are often victims of psychological trauma caused by this disconnect. The experience has little true value to the tourist, as well, who is provided with a spectacle and entertainment value, but leaves the experience with a false understanding of the people represented and no closer to understanding culture or their fellow humans. Beyond these inherent problems with the cultural tourism industry, the Festival is faced with the issue of self-othering as a contradiction to its goals. Where performers create cultural personas, the shallowness of these personas is often conveyed in the performance; the audience thus has a more difficult time connecting to the humanity of a creation that is essentially non-human. In these circumstances, the performance neither serves to conserve cultural heritage (but rather destroys it) nor to connect members of the Festival community.

A similar problem, one which is particular relevant to the 2010 Asian Pacific American Program, is the issue of reorientalization. This too is a process of commercializing an ethnic persona which plays of traditional Western stereotypes of South/East Asia in an exoticization process; it is a phenomenon belonging primarily to diasporic Asians (Lau, 589), who may not have the cultural connections or knowledge to accurately represent the culture of their heritage. Reorientalization differs, however, in that it is not necessarily done for financial purposes, but is often an attempt to “simultaneously claim insider knowledge (and status),

while somehow distancing themselves enough to claim the position of knowledgeable representative or emissary” (Lau, 585). Those place in a position of cultural authority and presumed expertise at the Festival are at great risk of falling victim to this process; when faced with Smithsonian standards of authenticity, these performers may try to overcompensate for their disconnect from their country of origin by over-orientalizing and thus presenting a fabricated reality of themselves. As a presenter, Lucy Long had to remind participants that they were not expected to be experts in their countries of origin, nor representations of those countries, but rather to display themselves as an individual with his own personal culture. By shifting a participant’s position from an expert on a specific, “authentic” culture to an expert on their own lives, the probability of fabrication, false education, and miscommunication are reduced, and the participants and audience are given the opportunity to connect.

Conclusion

In a world in which intergroup interaction is progressively more frequent and vital, we must consider the causes of conflict and attempt to resolve them at their roots. The basic delineation of self and other is one such root, one that is aggravated by exoticism. There is a clear relationship between exoticism and conflict, conflict and public good. Thus, in order to ensure the best possible circumstances for the public, we must fight exoticism and othering through education and communication. Such a delicate issue requires an equally delicate response. By developing an awareness and understanding of issues of presentation, representation, othering, and self-othering, we can begin to resolve and prevent the exotification of others and deflate the potential for intergroup conflict.

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