ETHNOCULTURAL SPECTACLES AS
Stages for Ethnic Self-Representation

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FOR THE PURPOSES OF THIS PAPER, AN "ETHNIC CULTURAL SPECTACLE" MAY BE DEFINED AS AN ORGANIZED EVENT IN WHICH A GROUP REPRESENTS ITSELF BOTH TO ITS OWN MEMBERS AND TO NON-MEMBERS. SUCH EVENTS ARE SPECTACLES TO THE EXTENT THAT THEY ARE HIGHLY DRAMATIC, ENTERTAINING AND, IN A LITERAL SENSE, EXTRAORDINARY; THAT IS, THESE ARE SPECIAL OCCASIONS OR PERIODS IN WHICH AUDIENCE MEMBERS ARE EXPECTED TO BE ENGROSSED AND OFTEN ENTERTAINED BY A DEMONSTRATION OF SOME ASPECT OF A COMMUNITY. SOME OF THE BEST EXAMPLES OF CANADIAN SPECTACLES ARE THE ETHNOCULTURAL FESTIVALS HELD IN MANY CITIES ACROSS THE COUNTRY.

ROLE ONE: ALTERNATIVE ECONOMY OF STATUS

In order to demonstrate the way in which cultural spectacles might represent alternative economies of status, let me briefly describe the spectacle with which I am most familiar: Winnipeg's Folklorama. In this two-week summer festival (the largest and longest-running ethnocultural festival in the world[1]), approximately forty of the city's ethnic groups organize "pavilions" in which they represent their culture to themselves and to outsiders. In Folklorama pavilions, these representations take the form of cultural displays, food and beverages and a forty-five minute show featuring distinctive folk songs, dances or dramatizations. These pavilions are located in public and private spaces throughout the city and collectively attract a total of approximately 450,000 visitors each year.

Folklorama pavilions are labour intensive operations that are almost entirely dependent on large numbers of volunteers. Within these contexts, not only is solidarity generated, but so too is a kind of alternative social structure which may be quite distinct from that in which participants are involved during the rest of the year. Cultural spectacles thus become their own microcosms in which individuals, who might occupy relatively low-status social positions during the rest of the year, can temporarily assume positions of considerable status.

For a brief period of each year, ordinary people become – or at least are sometimes treated as – minor celebrities. For those who seek an elevation of social position, the pavilion might represent an economy of status (Bramadat 2001) in which a valued social good (status) is distributed or generated according to an alternative method. Even though this alternative economy only operates for a short period each year, it might be a crucial ingredient of one's sense of overall well-being. One could surmise that one's attachment to a Canadian identity (or the Canadian dimension of one's more complex identity) might be augmented by the awareness that Canadian society (government and public) accepts and, in some cases, celebrates a variety of ethnicities through these festivals.

ROLE TWO: SITES OF DIALOGICAL SELF-DEFINITION

The second way in which cultural spectacles influence the construction and maintenance of ethnic identity is that they represent backdrops against which individuals and groups can participate in the so-called politics of identity. So, an ethnic cultural spectacle may represent a symbolic site in which they articulate a particular account (or

"story") of themselves (as Sikh-Canadians, Croatian-Canadians, etc.). When Folklorama pavilion organizers create a cultural display and decide what forms of entertainment they will use to represent their group, this decision obviously forces group members to clarify for themselves the ways they want to understand themselves and be understood by outsiders. Such stories may sometimes amount to transnational fictions or efforts to preserve the identity-generating links between Canada and some other (even "imagined") homeland (Anderson 1983; Bramadat 2001).

In short, spectacles may facilitate the presentation of dramatic performances of identity directed not only by, but also *at themselves* in order to tell a certain kind of story about what it might mean for individuals and groups to combine within themselves various identities. Since more and more generations of children born in Canada lack an unmediated personal memory or experience of another (i.e., neither French nor English) language, religion or non-Canadian place, regular performances of identity are crucial means of perpetuating or recreating a particular identity in many communities. By encouraging ethnic communities to re-enact and re-experience concentrated versions of a particular ethnic identity in a public manner, spectacles such as Folklorama exemplify the form of Canadian multiculturalism that encourages conversational partners to speak from (but not necessarily to limit themselves to) specific discursive locations. Scholars may argue that the identities celebrated in such festivals are often reified, whereas identity is also (or, according to some, only) dynamic, constructed and "processual" (Baumann 1999). However, we should not overlook the reasons (different in each case) that communities choose to depict themselves in one way and not another.

ROLE THREE: PUBLIC EDUCATION ABOUT ETHNIC IDENTITY

a) Fighting General Prejudice

The public performances of indigenous cultures described by Cruikshank, the Folklorama pavilions described by Thoroski and Bramadat, the Giglio Feast described by Primeggia and Varacalli, the Cultural Festival of India described by Shukla and the various festivals described by Halter are all means by which group members can convey or construct a picture of themselves for a public which not only seeks an authentic or sanctioned depiction of identity, but might also harbour certain stereotypes about these groups. These festivals are thus sites of contestation in which individuals and groups shape or, more to the point, reshape the ways others perceive them by effectively, if temporarily, seizing control of the arena of cultural representation. In short, if identity emerges dialogically, cultural spectacles may be one way to provide minority groups with opportunities to engage the assumptions held by their discursive partners and, in so doing, to influence their own and their partners' identities.

b) Reducing Religious Illiteracy

Many Canadians assume that religion and ethnicity are neatly separated modalities of identification. A related and equally popular notion is that those for whom this is not the case must be older, first generation Canadians. However, in my own research on Folklorama, and religion and ethnicity in general, I have found that in many, if not all, ethnic groups, it is unwise to assume either that a clear separation exists between ethnicity and religion or that a lack of a simple distinction between these two dimensions is characteristic only of recent or older immigrants.

The intimate relationship that often exists between ethnic identity and religious identity is evidenced in cultural spectacles such as Folklorama, Caravan and the Giglio Feast in New York, as well as in national and international news. However, because of the general ignorance about world religions in contemporary North America, many people may be uncomfortable asking direct questions about another person's religious (or perhaps one should say religio-ethnic) identity. However, cultural spectacles such as Folklorama provide individuals with a safe context within which to learn about the religious elements of a group's ethnic background. Through such spectacles and in the conversations that arise after the "show" is over, ethnic groups are able to represent their multi-dimensional identities more fully to other Canadians and to answer questions outsiders might have about their deepest individual and shared convictions.

ROLE FOUR: SPECTACLES AS ETHNIC SHOW BUSINESS

Ours is a society permeated by highly commercialized and highly Americanized cultural spectacles such as the Academy Awards, the Superbowl, motion picture releases, political scandals and reality television shows. In a society so marked by large-scale corporate entertainment events, ethnocultural spectacles such as Folklorama, Mosaic and Caravan might be understood as local renditions of global (though, in truth, mainly American) patterns or, to put it another way, as "ethnic show business."

Many writers (e.g., Baumann 1999; Bissoondath 1994; Thoroski 1997) see in this pervasive American style the harbinger of cultural homogenization. However, the commercialized style of ethnocultural spectacles simply reflects the common and dominant consumerist ethos in which the majority of people in the developed or developing world lives. In fact, this style allows for more reinterpretation of and resistance to commercial hegemony. An expression of ethnic identity couched in the aesthetic and cultural language of the American ethos of spectac-ular consumption could demonstrate to a particular group that it is possible to be Indian (or Croatian, Italian, or West Indian) in a distinctly Canadian way. So, even though one cannot extricate oneself from the discourses of consumerism or American popular culture, we should recall that virtually everything in the arena of individual and communal identity is, if not controllable, at least negotiable.

OUTSTANDING ISSUES AND DIRECTIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

Ethnocultural spectacles are severely under-studied by scholars and policy makers. This neglect – its history, its discursive strategies and its proponents –

should be examined, especially since it seems likely that it reveals a form of high culture elitism. Regrettably, many academics dismiss these spectacles as yet another form of shallow entertainment that simply reproduces problematic stereotypes (of the lusty Greek, of the meditative Indian, etc.). This disdain and its neglect of the fact that, even within these events, these stereotypes are often critiqued, represents the greatest challenge we face in trying to shed some light on the role of these spectacles in Canadian society.

There was a great deal of discussion in the Halifax workshop about how little we know about the kinds of debates that occur within ethnic communities over ethnic self-representation. This is, of course, partly the result of the neglect I described above. Since these events take place across the country and throughout the year, we are missing an opportunity to understand a large and popular arena within which both ethnic identity and, more broadly, Canadian identity are, as Mary-Lee Mulholland commented in her summary of the session, "reproduced, reinterpreted, and transgressed." One interesting phenomenon to explore would be the place of people of mixed racial or mixed ethnic background in these spectacles; in a complex, multi-ethnic and perhaps "post-modern" society, how do individuals who belong to two or more groups understand their involvement in these events? Studies of these events – especially studies that underline the negotiated and dynamic nature of identity formation – are important if we hope to chart the major ways Canadians are making and resisting certain kinds of identities.

In addition to examining the kinds of discussions that undergird these acts of ethnic representation, we also need to explore the way these definitions are received or employed by outsiders. Research on the responses of audience members to the images with which they are presented would help us to evaluate the effect of these events on public perceptions of ethnic minorities. The results of the research into the audience reception of these spectacles could significantly inform future policy decisions.

A longitudinal study of one or more of these events could provide a vivid account of the actual effects of the multicultural policy in Canadian society since 1971. We might ask what kinds of changes have occurred in these spectacles over time and to what extent, if at all, are these changes related to the ascendancy of a particular political party or ideology. We could also compare and contrast partially-funded multicultural festivals, such as Caravan and Folklorama, with entirely state-funded events, such as Canada Day, ethno-specific festivals such as St. Jean Baptiste Day / La Fete National and carnivals and parades such as the Gay Pride festivals across the country. This kind of research should also outline the extent to which these events influence and reflect more general cultural shifts toward or away from progressive or inclusive forms of multiculturalism.

As well, research into the relationship between these events and various levels of government (especially in the form of government symbols, state funding and policies such as multiculturalism) would help to clarify the effectiveness of state involvement in cultural production. It would be especially interesting to explore the reasons that the organization, attendance and government involvement at these events range so significantly in different regions. Moreover, situating these Canadian events within the broader international scene should also help us to understand, not only the cultural spectacles of other countries, but also the power of Canadian spectacles to reflect our relatively progressive form of multiculturalism. It seems likely that studies will evidence that, in most cases, government financial support for cultural spectacles does help stimulate Canadian cultural creativity and a unique sense of multicultural solidarity. However, it would be useful to be able to substantiate this claim with empirical evidence.

CONCLUSION

According to Baeker (2000), the definition and practice of contemporary Canadian multiculturalism is (or should be) less focused on welcoming new ethnic "others" to Canada (specifically, white, eurocentric, bilingual Canada) and more focused on a celebration of the emergence of a broad, cosmopolitan, relatively post-European and decreasingly white civic culture. Ethnic cultural spectacles, while certainly historically rooted in the former approach to multiculturalism, can also promote the presently emerging form. While some critics worry that these spectacles sometimes risk ossifying ethnic identity, I for one do not share this concern. Rather, I agree with an observation articulated by Dhooleka Raj during our workshop at the Halifax Identity Seminar: Even when these spectacles appear to bring visitors an unmediated vision of the (other, or putatively authentic) homeland, in the end these events reveal a great deal more about the dynamic values and self-understandings of people within distinctly Canadian ethnic communities.

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[1] This description is found on the festival's website. See www.folklorama.ca.