

Adventures in Ethnicity Consuming Performances of Cultural Identity in Winnipeg's Folklorama

Cynthia Thoroski

Volume 19, Number 2, 1997

Amalgam
Amalgam

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1087683ar>
DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7202/1087683ar>

[See table of contents](#)

Publisher(s)

Association Canadienne d'Ethnologie et de Folklore

ISSN

1481-5974 (print)
1708-0401 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

Cite this article

Thoroski, C. (1997). Adventures in Ethnicity: Consuming Performances of Cultural Identity in Winnipeg's Folklorama. *Ethnologies*, 19(2), 105–112. <https://doi.org/10.7202/1087683ar>

Article abstract

The representation of ethnicity within mainstream multicultural festivals tends to commodify ethnic identity within homogenized and simplified frameworks which ease consumption by mass audiences. "Adventures in Ethnicity" examines some of the cultural politics implicit in this brand of "fast food multiculturalism" and the ways in which large-scale multicultural festivals decontextualize, neutralize and remobilize representations of "ethnic authenticity" to market cultural identities as symbolic products. A secondary focus of discussion examines Winnipeg's Folklorama as a case study in possibly resistant and deferential strategies within mainstream multicultural festivals' appropriation of ethnic identities. A special emphasis is placed on the implicit cross-coding of public performance and displays of material culture to create a potentially subversive critique of large-scale multicultural festivals, their products and their consumers.

ADVENTURES IN ETHNICITY

Consuming Performances of Cultural Identity in Winnipeg's Folklorama

Cynthia THOROSKI

University of Western Ontario

My Folklorama Adventure

All three kids at camp and the honeymoon starts,
It's travel the world we say with our hearts.
The bank book is opened and clearly refuses,
We could go to Korea my husband amuses!
So the search has begun for a night full of fun.
It's into the car for a trip to Ukraine,
What have they there, that will entertain?
The mandolin orchestra's really outstanding,
And the dancers jumping just barely landing.
We haven't had dinner so let's go to eat,
Roti, vrenykas, or egg rolls with meat.
No, I feel like pizza and Gelati ice cream,
So it's off to Italy just like a dream.
The singing is great and the people all smiles,
Our stomach's content and we've travelled miles.
This city of ours is truly amazing,
Cultures galore, the colours just blazing.
Canadians first but our roots run deep,
Tradition galore that we all try to keep.
Folklorama provides us all with the chance,
To hear in the songs and feel in their dance.
The pride of our people settled now here,
Living in freedom and not in fear.
So people all over, get out tonight.
You don't need to phone or book your flight.
The pavilions are waiting to greet each of you,
To show you their ways exciting and new.
It costs so little it's almost free,
So much to learn, to taste, and to see,
Folklorama is here in Winnipeg city.
It's great and to miss it would just be a pity! (Casiro 1996)

The preceding poem, written by Winnipegger Malca Casiro, was the winning entry in the *My Folklorama Adventure* contest of 1996, sponsored by the Winnipeg Free Press, The Manitoba Arts Council, and Air Canada. In this account of her particular experience at that annual multicultural event's Ukrainian and Italian pavilions, Casiro also provides a telling display of the fast-food-like presentation of multicultural identity which is promoted in the festival's marketing. Casiro's poem captures the essence of the Folklorama experience for many. Promising an authentic experience of cultures and

traditions “galore,” this annual celebration of multiculturalism continues to attract large numbers of eager visitors with its exciting, affordable ethnic smorgasbord. If you are a dedicated Folklorama-goer, you can consume up to three cultures — and dinners — a night and visit the world without leaving the city limits.

Simplifying the complex intersections of cultural identity into about an hour’s worth of dinner, drinks, and dancing, Folklorama’s visitors exit pavilions with the soothing satisfaction of having experienced the world as a politically neutral, easily understandable, smaller place. Like living museums, Disney’s Epcot Centre (as discussed by Grimes 1995), or the fast-food services of McDonald’s, this homogenized brand of multiculturalism provides visitors with the illusion of a cross-cultural close encounter along with the security of imagining the “other” from a safe distance.

My discussion of Folklorama’s marketing of multiculturalism through the use of discreet, homogenized ethnic identities has much in common with Lisa Hagen-Smith’s discussion of Pride politics and the rainbow flag. There are similarities between the ways the two events synthesize or streamline symbols of polysemous identities for the purposes of identification with and consumption by a large mainstream audience. In my discussion of the homogenization and commodification of ethnicity within Folklorama as a mass-marketed, mainstream multicultural festival, I will also draw attention to sites within the otherwise synthetic construction of identity which put into question the construction of a simplified whole. In particular, I will look to individual pavilions within the superstructure of Folklorama whose syndetic performances resist the easy objectification of ethnicity which comes with mass marketing for mainstream audiences and, instead, open up new spaces in previously closed discourses and definitions of identity. Such sites of resistance challenge what is to be defined as authentic, not in order to simply create new definitions or common-sense syntheses of authenticity but, rather, to overlap and overwrite dominant definitions and categories of identity in surprising dynamic critical turns.

Folklorama has been delighting Manitobans and tourists alike since 1970, when it was first presented in celebration of the province’s 100th birthday. Now in its 28th year, the festival has become a much-beloved institution symbolizing the multicultural heritage of Manitobans and Canadians in general. However, as this 1996 Winnipeg Free Press excerpt exemplifies, it is also a celebration of the consumption of very literally commodified ethnicities:

This year there are more than 36 multicultural pavilions participating. Visitors will see about 1,500 stage performances with over 3,000 performers. Some 600,000 meals will be served and visitors will wash them down with about a million beverages (Jager 1996b).

In 1995, Folklorama delivered representations of ethnicity to an audience exceeding 400,000 (Jager 1996a).

Until I attended Folklorama in the summer of 1996, it had been many years since I had visited the pavilions of Winnipeg's multicultural festival. My childhood memories of this two-week celebration revolved around the hasty consumption of new and interesting foods and the equally hurried ingestion of ethnic performances and displays. Last year, my re-examining of Folklorama as a performance of ethnic identity caused many of these same memories to resurface. But after that experience of Folklorama's rapid-fire delivery of "authentic" ethnic performances, I was left wondering what sort of aftertaste the event leaves with other festival-goers. Its performance of ethnicity seems to be a product which is intentionally neutral, streamlined and entertaining. Yet as theorist Trinh T. Minh-ha has asserted in her discussion of postcolonial negotiations of self, representations of identity and claims of authenticity are often strategic rather than neutral manoeuvres (1991: 157).

The strategy backing Folklorama's commodification of carefully neutral claims to "authentic" ethnicity seems to support a concern for a mass consumption of cultural diversity or the fast-food-like production of ethnicity which anthropologist Pauline Greenhill has playfully termed *McMulticulturalism* (1996). Through the neutralized images of ethnicity which are performed at each pavilion, visitors receive the impression of having vicariously participated in and internalized the culture of various ethnic "others". It seems as if these cultures are literally consumed by pavilion goers as they sample displays, dinners, and stage shows meant to represent the values and traditions of easily identifiable cultures. But to whom is this strategic representation of otherness directed? Is resistance to this commodification possible within the constructs of Folklorama as a mass-marketed tourist enterprise? Or, to pose postcolonial theorist Guyatri Spivak's question, is it possible for subaltern ethnic identities to speak (or be heard) across the discourses of cultural consumerism found within Folklorama?

Growing numbers of tourists and casual visitors, especially from the United States, are becoming a large factor in the mass marketing of Folklorama. The festival apparently depends on the attendance of the non-committal, nomadic visitor who spends two to three nights exploring Manitoba's multicultural heritage rather than on die-hard festival goers who are able to maintain their attendance throughout Folklorama's entire two weeks and visit more than a few pavilions. The emphasis in marketing seems to have shifted from the sustained attraction of the event as a whole to the number served. Last year's elimination of the festival passport, which provided reduced admission to all pavilions for frequent visitors, reflected this change in the expected demographic (Kives 1996: 17-18). Another notable feature in the construction of pavilions was special privileged seating in the front rows to accommodate a growing number of bus tours. These groups, consisting largely of seniors from the United States, were often officially recognized and thanked alongside official

pavilion sponsors in the opening remarks made by pavilion representatives or adult and youth cultural ambassadors.

To entertain and attract audiences of the magnitude that Folklorama is increasingly seeking, a common agenda for each pavilion is to offer visitors clear expectations of what they will find in their carefully pre-packaged "experience" of each new culture. A common script becomes evident, underlying this streamlined performance. Prior to each 45-minute show, a waiting line of eager pavilion visitors is ushered in for a quick half hour of cultural displays and more line-ups for the ethnic food and beverages (largely alcoholic) of their choice. Visitors are encouraged to visit a waiting material cultural display, usually graced by an essentially politically "neutral" presentation of historical artifacts (predominantly of the airport souvenir variety) representing the culture in question as if it were frozen in a nostalgic ethnographic present manufactured of various historic folk-art products. The show which follows usually consists of "traditional" clothing and dances meant to represent various periods and regions of a country. With few exceptions (to be discussed below), contemporary performances are rarely a part of this representation. Following this nostalgic, neutral performance of identity, festival goers are briskly ushered out to continue their world travels through other pavilions across the city of Winnipeg. Last year, a handy complimentary guidebook provided visitors with a map of Folklorama's temporary Disney-like global village, accompanied by quick summaries of pavilion attractions and brief messages of endorsement from all levels of government.

Of the twelve pavilions I visited during my own Folklorama adventures, one of the first to give me experiences in the negotiation of ethnic identity was the Hungarian Pavilion. This exchange indexed my understanding of the expected Folklorama demographic. A woman, part of a U.S. seniors' bus tour, walked up to my companion (my partner's mother) and whispered over her shoulder while indicating the goulash she was eating: "What do *you people* call this?" My companion was a bit nonplussed, having been misrecognized as a member of the Hungarian community, but nonetheless responded to the query by pointing to the Folklorama guidebook which explained the food and entertainment to be found at this pavilion.

This brief encounter left me slightly disturbed. It drew attention to the easy way in which Folklorama seemed to sum up the complexities of ethnic identities into conveniently accessible packages. All the messiness that comes with the negotiation of gender, sexuality, politics, and ethnic diversity was neatly packaged into a pre-arranged format so that any good consumer could come away with an uncomplicated understanding of what "*those people*" are all about. Within the space of approximately an hour, you eat the food, take in the dances, and ingest the displays of the culture of your choice as presented to you by the heterosexual pairs of adult and youth ambassadors. You essentially consume a culture in exchange for your entertainment dollar. The strategy

behind Folklorama's authoritative representation of the "cultural mosaic" found in Winnipeg's multicultural community seems to forego the complexities and displacements so often associated with the negotiation of a cultural identity in favour of a facile commodification of ethnicity.

Instead of the many conflicts characterizing the lived experience of ethnic identities, Folklorama tends to homogenize cultural representations so as to make them easily palatable and commodifiable. A clearly defined cultural product must be evident by the finale of each pavilion's performance. Yet, despite the best efforts of marketing and promotion, cracks *do* appear in the veneer of the polished cultural performance that Folklorama, as an event, constructs around its pavilions. Within the individual pavilions, counter-discourses, contradictions, and complexities are also evident. There is room, even within the confines of Folklorama, for what cultural theorist Homi Bhabha has described as a "third space", an interstitial discourse that remobilizes the dominant signs and symbols to create new hybridized meanings and send resistant messages (1994: 38-39).

The rest of my discussion will look at two notable examples of Folklorama pavilions which resist the representation of cultures as Epcot-Centre-like "living museums." I will focus particularly upon the Ireland-Irish Pavilion and the Africa/Caribbean pavilion, and their particular complicities and resistant tactics within Folklorama's strategic brand of ethnic identity.

More than some of the 34 other pavilions at Folklorama last year, the Ireland/Irish pavilion had the potential to present a politically complex negotiation of identity. Unavoidably, the devastation caused by conflicts in Northern Ireland *was* acknowledged within the context of a cultural poster display which maintained a delicately neutral stance in asserting that peace is the only desired outcome for all involved parties. But throughout the carefully neutral performance of traditional Irish identity, my companion (my partner) was repeatedly annoyed by the fact that the performers lacked "authentic" Irish accents and continually sang English drinking songs and songs of doubtful Irish descent.

I intend no offense to my beloved, but his irritation symbolized to me, in part, his consumption of the Folklorama ideal of presenting ethnicity as a static, uncomplicated product. He was expecting to see what Folklorama's traditional discourse prepared him to receive: Irish accents (even if they needed to be faked) and traditional reels such as those he'd heard as a child from bards like the ever-popular Irish Rovers. The hybridization of identity found in the choice to forego what might be considered more typical Irish songs seemed an un-Folklorama-like complication of ethnic identity. While it did not seem to be a consciously strategic manoeuvre to complicate the negotiation of "tradition", this slight suggestion of an "impure" or hybridized tradition seemed an act of uncommon resistance on the part of the Irish pavilion. This was something I did not expect to see in a festival meant to provide easy access to

and consumption of ethnicity, especially in a more mainstream pavilion representing the often invisible markers of Euro-American ethnic identity made visible previously in Nathalie Cohen's discussion of questionable whiteness and in Elizabeth Carlyle's exposé of the power of Gary Filmon's invisible whiteness.

I observed a second and perhaps more explicit example of this resistance to such easily commodified identity during another pavilion visit. One of the most popular pavilions, the Africa/Caribbean is noted for wonderful spicy food and for its dramatic and energetic stage shows, featuring dancing and drumming displays and Jamaican limbo dancer/fire-eater, Neville Johnson. In this case, however, resistance to the easy commodification and packaging of culture was evident in the cultural display rather than in the more popularly received performances.

The cultural display at this pavilion mirrored the souvenir-style tourism of all the other pavilions I had visited. Dubious and/or touristic cultural artifacts such as fabric banners or woven mats with the names of countries or regions printed on them, shell necklaces, t-shirts, and more traditional clothing such as that worn by pavilion ambassadors (available for purchase) were on display. Other items included an assortment of books and informational pamphlets on Africa, Jamaica, and tourism in the Caribbean. Much of the merchandise on sale and display seemed of the types that con artists sell on beaches to naive tourists. I wondered if pavilion ambassadors and members of the local Afro-Caribbean community keep such artifacts in their own homes.

Among the plentiful items representing African/Caribbean history and society was a literature display of pamphlets and books. Perusing these largely ignored materials, some subversive messages emerged for me rather unexpectedly. My niece and I felt incredibly conspicuous when reading a book on how to make money selling souvenirs to tourists. On the cover of this exposé was a white man in full rasta attire, selling the same sorts of objects which were visible in the cultural display for the Africa/Caribbean pavilion. Was this a veiled satirical comment on pavilion visitors?

In another informational pamphlet, typical American male and female tourists, the Barbie doll and the football hero, were caricatured in opposition to the preferred, though perhaps equally stereotypical, representation of the local Jamaican man and woman. The description of the American Barbie doll displays a line drawing of a woman with a long blonde hair and a stunning smile wearing a bathing suit. Arrows pointing to these and other features emphasize her obsession with bodily perfection and aesthetics. The football hero, is similarly noted for his emphasis on bodily appearance as well as his attempt to appropriate culture through the buying of souvenirs (T-shirts, hats, necklaces, etc.), such as those available for purchase in the pavilion's own cultural display. I quickly glanced around to see if any of the smiling cultural ambassadors were snickering in their sleeves, thinking we were Barbie Doll

tourists rather than the cosmopolitan celebrants of multiculturalism that Folklorama-goers are *made out* to be. This resistant use of the traditionally neutral cultural display displaced me as a typical Folklorama consumer to pose questions regarding my own commodification of “otherness” and ethnicity through the folklorizing of souvenirs.

Despite the relatively low-key status which the cultural display takes on within the context of the pavilion (especially a popular one such as the Africa/ Caribbean), there is room for implicitly coded and not-so-coded messages of resistance to make themselves evident. The popularity of Folklorama’s entertaining floor shows may overshadow the much-touted learning experience that the event’s publicity praises it for providing, but the cultural displays can also provide interesting sites for the negotiation of ethnic identity. In the case of the Africa/ Caribbean pavilion, the less popular cultural display can also provide a safe, low-key venue for a critique of the type of commodification that Folklorama otherwise exemplifies in its very structure.

McDonald’s and Disneyland are not typically places where one would expect to find resistant messages or hybridized representations of cultural identity. Similarly, the fast-food, global village which Folklorama constructs for its pavilion visitors is not a place where I expected to find a subversive, interdiscursive “third space.” However, reading between the lines of the festival’s scripted “McMulticulturalism” opened up new and resistant spaces for the negotiation of identity. Folklorama seemed *not* such a small world after all. Further research into the actual construction and organization of individual pavilions may reveal an even greater degree of agency on the part of pavilion organizers and performers within the structure imposed by Folklorama.

Culture, no matter the venue, is ultimately a staged, negotiated performance, a strategic claim to identity and to power. The idea of pre-packaged ethnic identity, ready for consumption as in Casiro’s poem, is convenient for the marketing of large-scale festivals such as Folklorama but has little bearing on the lived experience of identity negotiations. Cracks in Folklorama’s superstructure, as pointed out in my discussion of the subversion evident in specific pavilions, belie the easy way in which cultures are marketed for mass consumption. The strategies which lie behind otherwise simple representations of culture may reveal messages which require more complicated digestion than even Folklorama’s typical, often spicy fare.

References Cited

- Bhabha, Homi. 1994. *The Location of Culture*. London: Routledge.
- Casiro, Malca. 1996. Poem extols fun event/'so much to learn, to taste and to see' at City's Folklorama. *The Winnipeg Free Press* (My Folklorama Adventure Contest entry), Saturday, August 10: A5.
- Greenhill, Pauline. 1996. The Researcher and the Festivals: Privileged Ethnographic Voyeurism and Its Discontents. Presented at the Society for Ethnomusicology meetings, Toronto.
- Grimes, Ronald L. 1995. Ritual Criticisms of Field Excavations and Museum Displays. In *Readings in Ritual Criticism*. New York: MacMillan.
- Jager, Manfred. 1996a. Rain or Shine, Folklorama a big draw. *The Winnipeg Free Press*, Tuesday, August 6: A5.
- . 1996b. Polish commitment really shows/Korean pavilion's martial arts display impressive. *The Winnipeg Free Press*, Friday, August 9: D8.
- Kives, Bartley. 1996. Culture Clubbing: Go around the world in 14 days with Folklorama. *The Winnipeg Sun*, Sunday, August 4: 16-17.
- Spivak, Gayatri Chakravorty. 1988. Can the Subaltern Speak?. In *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture*: 271-313. Chicago: University of Illinois Press.
- Trinh T. Minh-ha. 1991. *Framer Framed*. New York: Routledge.