REVIEW


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*Heritage and Festivals in Europe: Performing Identities* is an edited volume of thirteen chapters and an afterword. Cultural expressions have been reckoned as social and political resources since the heritage boom of the 1980s, and this book explores the creation, maintenance, transformation, and contestation of tradition in various European contexts. A recurrent common objective is to grasp the elusive idea of “Europeanness” through the identities displayed at festival squares across the continent.

Chapter 1, by Ullrich Kockel, Máiréad Nic Craith, Cristina Clopot, and Baiba Tjarve, is a theoretical overview of the book’s main foci. It emphasizes the fluid nature of heritage as both innovation and conservatism, a processual approach to identity, and whether and how the notion of a common European heritage can be defined. The concept of heritage as sense-making and self-exploration is part of the constructivist anthropological understanding of identity, while tensions between the local and the European may emerge. Chapter 2, by Simon McKerrell and Kerstin Pfeiffer, explores the theoretical grounds of performance, how our ideas of performance shape our understanding of heritage, and whether performance goes beyond its immediate effect for self-reflection and understanding. Chapter 3, by Rūta Muktupāvela and Anda Lake, features the Song and Dance Celebration of the Baltic countries Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania. This is a salient example of how tradition is worked upon by strategy experts to turn it into a national or regional brand. The questions remain as to who gets to do the branding, and how to keep it as a “sustainable endogenous brand” (p. 37). Chapter 4, by Cristina Clopot and Catherine McCullagh, focuses on two festivals: Romania’s Proetnica festival, in which members of officially recognized minorities gather to celebrate multiculturalism, and Shetland’s *Up-Helly-Aa* festivals, a fire festival of sensory immersion. The chapter concludes that along with positive messages like “together we can,” tensions and Othering along ethnic, gender, and majority/minority lines may prevail, and the challenge is that onstage respect translates into offstage solidarity. Chapter 5, by Babak Taheri, Martin Joseph Gannon, and Hossein Olya, explores the Cappadox festival in Turkey, where nostalgia and identity stimulate feelings of engagement among consumers. Through three festivals (the Solsona carnival in Catalonia, the Masopust “mumming” traditions of Bohemia, and the deer-man pantomime of the central Apennines), chapter 6, by Alessandro Testa, reviews the major dynamics that push festivals toward wanting to become heritage. Situating heritage processes within a complex web of “actions” (p. 48) such as heritagization, institutionalization, commercialization, and taxonomic polarization (tradition vs. modernity, etc.), the chapter concludes that the function of festivals remains integrative in spite of tensions.

Chapter 7, by Laurent Sébastien Fournier, illustrates a shift from “organic” to “organized” tradition through the Processional Giants and Dragons of Belgium, and the Fest-Noz collective dances of
Brittany. For the former, impetus came from the outside as a top-down process when actors had to simply "accept" the heritage title, while the latter was bottom-up in the sense that actors came together to decide what elements to keep. In chapter 8, by Andreas Pantazatos and Helaine Silverman, the Durham Miners' Gala comes alive after its predicted death along with the pits and the coal-mining industry. The authors identify three factors behind successful revitalization: politicization, community instead of place-centeredness, and the heritagization of mining culture as proper to the identity of pit villages. Chapter 9, by Simon McKerrell, focuses on the European folk festival orchestra La Banda Europa and draws from the premise that sound structures metaphorically relate to social structures. The chapter warns against essentialist categorizations that lie behind labels like “European music;” rather, La Banda Europa created a “social semiotics” that allowed us to “hear” the complex social structures of Europeanness (p. 134). Chapter 10, by Mairi McFadyen and Máiréad Nic Craith, discusses the Scots language as a form of inclusive civic nationalism. The authors trace the Scottish “egalitarian myth” and democratic proclivities through literature, philosophy, and Enlightenment thought, pinpointing that this ethos was expressed in Scots and culminated in such distinctions as “metaphysical” Scotland and “utilitarian” England (p. 146).

Chapter 11, by Cristina Clopot and Katerina Strani, studies the discursive construction of Europeanness in three cities that became European Capitals of Culture (Valletta, Plovdiv, and Galway) in 2018, 2019, and 2020 respectively. The authors identify tensions between the topoi of history, heritage, unity, and Europeanness, concluding that cities find the notion of “Europeanness” as vague as academics do. Chapter 12, by Kerstin Pfeiffer and Magdalena Weighhofer, looks at how storytelling and theater have brought people together in divided Northern Ireland and the German-Czech borderlands. The Theater of Witness Project (NI) put in contact former Irish Republican Army fighters with the relatives of victims, and German and Czech youth met in order to confront the traumatic past of their communities. By “meeting the alienated ‘Other’” (p. 175) through storytelling and theater, people were able to access their common traumatic past and challenge preconceived notions of identity that had prevented exchange. Finally, chapter 13, by Ullrich Kockel, describes how the vanished homeland is revived for German expellees, whose associations engage in unification efforts to reclaim their “right to homeland” on their annual Tag der Heimat, “homeland day.” Valdimar Tr. Hafstein's afterword summarizes contemporary politics of European culture as festivals being heritagized and heritage being festivalized.

The great strength of the book lies in the diversity of its festival case studies, its broad conceptual apparatus, its identification of tensions and incongruities, and its up-to-dateness, minus (understandably) the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on public sociality. The richness of the volume's themes and contexts also creates a weakness, however. There could have been, perhaps, greater effort at weaving a few governing principles through the chapters. While identity, heritage, and festival are discussed in their myriad forms, they remain a little disconnected, as the initial promise of conclusions about “Europeanness” was abandoned. Organizing the chapters by theme might have also resulted in a greater coherence across the book.

Nevertheless, exciting problematics emerge here for anthropology, ethnology, folklore, and heritage studies. What are the contradictory impacts of heritage regimes on local engagement
and authenticity (chap. 7)? How to make sure that festivals are not just well-rehearsed “heritage performances” but rather, have lasting impact and create flesh-and-blood “heritage communities” (chap. 8)? And finally, there is that “absolutely irrevocable ontological challenge” (p. 26) for the writer: How to communicate the embodied knowledge so that we understand how performance feels (chap. 2)? The words of the dancer Isadora Duncan remind us of the ultimate failure of language and the necessity of performance to take over: “If I could tell you what it meant, there would be no point in dancing it.” This book shows that, even if we struggle to verbalize our Europeanness, there may be many ways to perform it.
AUTHOR BIO

Mariann Vaczi (University of Nevada, Reno) is a cultural anthropologist who works on cultural performance genres and sporting cultures in Spain. Her main work has focused on the social, cultural, and political dimensions of Basque soccer and Catalan human towers (castells). She has published Soccer, Culture and Society in Spain: An Ethnography of Basque Fandom (Routledge, 2015) and Sport and Secessionism (coedited with Alan Bairner, Routledge, 2020). Her work explores the interfaces of sport and popular culture with themes such as national identity, nationalism, the politics of the body, sensory performance, and the anthropology of affect.

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