Public Performances: Studies in the Carnivalesque and Ritualesque


Reviewed by Michael Dylan Foster, University of California, Davis

[Review length: 1109 words • Review posted on August 23, 2018]

Public Performances is the fourth volume in the Ritual, Festival, and Celebration series edited by Jack Santino and published by Utah State University Press. Santino himself is editor of the current volume, which is a welcome addition to the series and to ongoing folkloristic discourses on the dynamics of festival, ritual, and what Santino broadly calls “public performances.” As explained in the introduction, the essays assembled in this book emerged from the annual Conference on Holidays, Ritual, Festival, Celebration, and Public Display first convened in 1997.

Holidays, ritual, festival, celebration, public display, public performance: these are complex topics. Anybody who has ever tried to write about a festival, for example, knows how difficult it is to articulate even a single meaning or voice of such a polysemic, multivocal event. Certainly, one pleasure of reading these chapters is that we experience a variety of approaches to the challenge of writing about such complicated affairs. Indeed, perhaps the word "multivocal" is fitting for the volume itself, with its fourteen chapters covering events in locations as disparate as Trinidad, Ireland, New York, Malawi, Italy, Indonesia, France, England, and Detroit. The types of performances vary as well, including conflict displays in the Black Atlantic, brass bands in Cork, religious processions in Bali, the Puerto Rican Day Parade in New York City, a choral concert at Carnegie Hall, and a guerilla theater protest in Stratford-upon-Avon.

For the student of public performance (broadly defined), there is a great deal to think about here. A posthumously published chapter by Roger D. Abrahams, for example, provides a whirlwind tour of carnival and related performances. Beverly J. Stoeltje’s contribution addresses the importance of scale in ritual performance; Elena Martínez’s chapter on the multivalence of Puerto Rican Flags exemplifies such largescale symbolism in practice. Several chapters, such as Pamela Moro’s on choral singing groups and “awareness raising,” and Scott Magelssen’s discussion of “eco-protest,” deal explicitly with activist-oriented performances. Others evince deep historical research (chapters by Samuel Kinser and John Borgonovo) or long-term ethnographic engagement (chapters by David Harnish, Lisa Gilman, and Dorothy L. Zinn). Two chapters analyze material culture, specifically roadside memorials (Barbara Graham) and largescale “outsider art” (Daniel Wojcik), as forms of public performance. And finally, several contributions, particularly those by Laurent Sébastien Fournier, Stoeltje, and Santino himself, offer broader theoretical insights.

I have only touched on the range of the collection in terms of geographic focus, genre, historical context, and disciplinary approach, but this variety proves both the strength and the weakness of the volume as a whole. Each chapter has individual merit--all are immersive, deeply considered, and of value to anybody interested in the region or genre covered--but I wish there was a greater sense of continuity between them, or at least some scaffolding to better elucidate the implicit connections. How do we discursively link such difficult terms as “festival,” “ritual,” “parade,” “procession,” or “assemblage” (to say nothing of “performance”)? How do these connect to “activism,” “theater,” “spectacle,” or “demonstration”? What ties together anti-nuclear protests in Italy with padlocks placed by lovers on a bridge over the Seine? How is carnival in renaissance Nuremburg similar to the “Eco Porn” of the Fuck the Forest activist group?
To be sure, there are certainly connections to be made, and Santino’s notion of the “ritualesque” (most clearly fleshed out in his 2011 article in the *Journal of American Folklore*) provides a key here. In the opening chapter of the current volume, Santino explains that “carnival refers to celebrations of great abandon, social inversion, public excess, sensuality and the temporary establishment of an alternate society” whereas “ritual actions are thought to have real power; ritual is instrumental, not expressive” (4). The carnivalesque quality of an event, therefore, stresses temporary transformation in contrast to the “ritualesque,” which has effects that extend beyond the event itself. Santino further points out that “most events will have elements of the ritualesque along with the carnivalesque, and the latter does not negate the former” (5); even an event that is ludic and festive and temporary can also be symbolic and instrumental with serious, transformative intent. “Ritualesque actions,” he explains, “are those that are intended to have a permanent effect on society” (6).

Most of the chapters implicitly demonstrate this notion of the ritualesque at work in specific contexts, but very few of them explore it in depth or develop it theoretically--and this seems an opportunity missed, because we can in fact find critical similarities between the essays. For example, almost every one: 1) considers the political ramifications of performance; 2) explores largescale group/mass participation; and 3) shows how symbolic action can lead to real world transformation. The final chapter, by Daniel Wojcik, on Tyree Guyton’s Heidelberg Project assemblage in Detroit, demonstrates how vernacular art is simultaneously festive, symbolic, political, transformative, and in a word (which he does indeed clearly invoke) *ritualesque*. But Wojcik’s essay stands out because it highlights these points overtly in conjunction with the broader framework of the volume, and in this way serves as a sort of capstone that helps bring earlier chapters into focus around the theme. I wish, however, that these earlier essays had also been more explicit in addressing (or questioning) the concept of the ritualesque, or perhaps that the editor had included sectional introductions to provide more connections and continuity for the reader. That is, even though we can find threads linking these chapters, they still read as if they are disparate essays.

My criticism here is by no means meant to devalue the chapters themselves, each one of which should be sought by scholars interested in its respective subject. I simply note that as a contribution to broader discourses on festival, ritual, public performance, activism, and demonstration, the book leaves the work of connecting its component parts to the reader. And perhaps, ultimately, this is as it should be--because it will inspire folklorists and scholars in affiliated disciplines to push these issues further, probing more deeply into the political dimensions of the ritualesque and the ritualesque dimensions of the political. Such intellectual labor has always been important, but feels even more urgent in the current moment, characterized as it is by shifting forms of sociopolitical discourse that run the gamut from fervent largescale protests to pithy cryptic tweets. Indeed, I write this review in the wake of mass anti-gun rallies led by teenagers, and more recently, the inter-Korean summit in Panmunjom during which the world witnessed a profoundly symbolic drama with potentially massive consequences. The current volume inspires us to observe such “public performances” closely, to find critical connections between them, and to take them very seriously.