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Ordinary Life, Festival Days: Aesthetics in the Midwestern County Fair. By Leslie Prosterman. (Washington: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1995. Pp. xi + 220)

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Ordinary Life, Festival Days: Aesthetics in the Midwestern County Fair. By Leslie Prosterman. (Washington: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1995. Pp. xi + 220)

I have mixed feelings about this book. On the one hand, I'm pleased that the inadequate theoretical and descriptive attention paid to festivals within the United States is being remedied. On the other hand, I'm disappointed because *Ordinary Life, Festival Days* doesn't do as much as I think it could to advance research and analysis in this relatively neglected field of folkloristics.

Yet this is a very solid piece of scholarship, a respectable and respectful look at county fairs in the midwestern United States. Its focus upon aesthetics, given the manifest and primary concern of county fairs and their boards with the judging of local products, seems reasonable and valuable. I applaud Prosterman's decision to conduct an ethnography based upon people "who declare themselves interested or involved in the fair" (p. 7)–board members, judges, exhibitors, and so on. This is an ethnography of enthusiasts, and they are the participants most concerned with aesthetic issues.

Despite this strong and well-delineated focus, however, Prosterman lost me in her introduction when she commented: "As far as I could establish in an anecdotal way, issues of gender did not seem to be dominant in understanding the functioning of the fair. There was consciousness that gender roles were changing, but those role changes or role differences did not seem fundamentally to influence people's attitudes toward the fair or the symbolic dimensions of the fair" (pp. 7-8). I wanted to know in whose understanding issues of gender were not dominant, and who were the "people" whose attitudes were uninfluenced by gender? In midwestern U.S. fairs, as in the ones I know about in Ontario and Manitoba, there is a pretty strict division of labour and competition between women and men. A brief section of *Ordinary Life* (pp. 100-101) looks at "gender distinctions," in

which Prosterman comments that: "No stated rules stop either gender from entering categories unspecified by sex...Still, custom, not law, precludes one sex or another from entering any of these nongender-specified sections. Women enter men's categories with less problem...In the departments and divisions in which women commonly have held sway, men...require enticement with special subdivisions like the one on the plants and flowers section in one fair: 'The Masculine Touch. Arranged and exhibited by a Man'...There are no special Ladies' or Women's categories in any of the fairs (pp. 100-101)." Such an arrangement seems a pretty significant aspect of "the functioning of the fair" and of how folks "participated in the culture of the fair." Its primarily understood-but-unstated format makes it all the more so. Perhaps in suggesting that gender does not influence "attitudes" and "symbolic dimensions," Prosterman means that the aesthetic dimensions of fair judgement that she discusses, such as balance and uniformity, are equally salient in women's and men's domains. But her meaning is unclear.

I even began to wonder just how Prosterman conceived the idea of a gendered fair, particularly when she commented: "What more obviously did seem to affect participation were race and religion; with a few exceptions, the local and transient participants were all white Anglo-Saxon Protestants or Catholics" (p. 8). Perhaps she thinks that a gendered analysis of midwestern U.S. county fairs would only be possible if one sex or another were excluded from participation by custom or practice, as are people of colour and non-Christians. Yet Prosterman also fails analytically to engage the whiteness and Christianity of the fairs. For example, she does not make the links of these aspects of practice with her analysis of family and community (e.g. p. 66).

Of course, there is nothing wrong with Prosterman deciding not to look at gender, race, or religion in her analysis. But she should not justify this choice by arguing that they are unimportant when her own work shows they are, as she does with gender, nor say they are important and then ignore them, as she does with race and religion.

Prosterman sees midwestern U.S. county fairs as "a statement of what life could be—a kind of cultural icon" (p. 12). She notes, but does not explore beyond insider's views, their "oppositions," or contradictions. Her descriptions of fairs and of their history and administration, premium book categories, judging, and aesthetic criteria with their working relationship to everyday life, are exhaustively detailed. Yet her comments seem almost exclusively based upon emic categories and ideas, and never approach "thick" description. Prosterman never seems to distance herself sufficiently from the events she looks at to make generalisations other than those fair insiders themselves would make.

As such, there is very little that I as a folklorist could take from this book into my own analysis of festivals, or of the culture and society of the midwestern

United States. More attention to work on culturally and socially related events–for example, Beverly Stoeltje's on rodeo–might have helped Prosterman in this regard. I do think, however, that *Ordinary Life* would be extremely useful to folks becoming more deeply involved in midwestern fairs–new judges or new board members, for example–because Prosterman has done such an excellent job of outlining fair workings and aesthetics from insider perspectives. Given the frequent (and in my opinion generally justified) criticism of folkloristic writing becoming irrelevant to our subjects of study, this is an important contribution.

Nevertheless, Prosterman's book epitomises a particular way of writing about traditional culture which I personally find somewhat problematic–what I'd like to call "the ethnography of niceness." Though at points her sweet veneer cracks slightly and we get a glimpse or two of the non-ideal (exhibitors who cheat, bad judges, and so on), the one central signifier of discord she discusses at some length in the book–the midway–is in the final, most analytical and theoretical chapter, mentioned only in passing.

Linked to this ethos, Prosterman's oblique remarks about the National Endowment for the Arts and the culture wars of the 1980s and 1990s trouble me. She refers to "one notion of value" to which she alleges "politicians and administrators tend to allot money, performance and exhibit space, art education, and political attention" (p. 186). Her implication is that folk arts and aesthetics, as seen in county fairs, have been slighted by the NEA. Yet they have for some time been included under its purview. What right-wing politicians and administrators are trying to suppress at the NEA is not folk art, but the arts of marginalised groups and individuals who challenge the very structures of racism, sexism, heterosexism, and uniformity epitomised in the county fair as Prosterman describes it. Folk arts projects are trotted out by folklorists and NEA officials alike as examples of the benign arts NEA funds, and are contrasted with the nastiness of the more intellectually and politically challenging work of artists like Tim Miller. (Perhaps Prosterman would agree with this view, and her obliqueness is a result of fear of repercussions for her publisher, another organisation directly funded by the U.S. government, and, thus, clearly not immune to political and material censorship.)

Despite my obvious misgivings, however, *Ordinary Life, Festival Days* is an important contribution filling a lacuna in folkloristic studies. Its contents, both explicit and implicit, raise questions that I hope will be debated in the field for some time.

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