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Performing Nordic Heritage: Everyday Practices and Institutional Culture by Ed. Peter Aronsson and Lizette Gradén (review)

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### Author

Tangherlini, Timothy R

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Aronsson, Peter, and Lizette Gradén, eds. 2013. *Performing Nordic Heritage: Everyday Practices and Institutional Culture*. The Nordic Experience 1. Surrey and Burlington: Ashgate Publishing. xvii, 348pp. Index.

This recent collection of essays exploring aspects of cultural heritage, its display and, as the editors frame it, its “performance”, provides an interesting series of case studies, all interrogating the idea of *Norden* and examining how different institutions, groups, and individuals across the region have engaged this idea, either explicitly or implicitly, as part of their representational activities. The introduction to the volume attempts to clearly demarcate the area of *Norden*, at the same time as it struggles with the contingent and shifting notions of *Norden* and the differential investment in the concept across the Nordic region. Ultimately, the editors and their contributors, recognize that *Norden*, as a concept, is riven with dissension, contradiction, and outright rejection.

The stated goal of the volume, to “investigate how images of *Norden* (as the five Nordic countries are referred to in Denmark, Finland, Iceland, Norway and Sweden) as a supranational identity have provided, and continue to provide, arenas for negotiating cultural understandings of community in specific public contexts,” is an interesting one, yet one that never quite comes to fruition over the course of the ten case studies that comprise the main contents of the collection (1). Rather, what becomes apparent is that *Norden* is not a universally functional category and that, rather than acting as a central conceptual cultural category that organizes the region, the concept of *Norden* is deployed rhetorically as part of specific ideological projects. Even “belonging” in or to *Norden*, as the chapters that include considerations of the Baltic countries make clear, is subject to debate. The case studies, each written by scholars from across the region and from a broad range of disciplines, do an excellent job of exploring the particularities of a series of these ideological projects, highlighting along the way the importance of nation (as opposed to region) as an organizing trope, even when these projects ostensibly gesture at region and eschew nation.

The case studies are interesting each in their own right, but do not always cohere as a group; indeed, the organizational principles of the volume suggest that the editors and the contributors had difficulty devising a general organizing principle for the volume and settled on “performance” as a means for bridging the two projects, “Nordic Spaces in the North and North America” and “National History—Nordic Culture: Negotiating Identity in the Museum”, that are the basis for these essays. That aside, the chapters are fascinating explorations of how cultural heritage is constructed and displayed, both in *Norden* and outside of *Norden* (particularly North America) and the inherent contradictions or deliberate lacuna that emerge from these projects.

In the first chapter, Susanne Österlund-Pötsch, provides a history of the emergence of the relatively obscure sport of “Nordic Walking”, linking its emergence to an interesting discussion of the concept of *allemansrätten*. Subsequently, she is able to tie it into the history of folklore collection in the Nordic region. Folklore collection, as she accurately points out, relied on intensive walking tours, a physical engagement with the space of the emerging nation. She uses these practices to open up the concept of the environment and the varying types of engagement with the environment that characterize the Nordic countries. While the peon to Nordic walking that comprises part of the chapter is slightly odd, Österlund-Pötsch moves on to a thought-provoking discussion of the

recent popularity of “pilgrimage.” What I found missing was a discussion of the popular sport of orienteering, as that would have made a clear bridge between pole-walking and pilgrimage.

In the next chapter, by Katla Kjartansdóttir and Kristinn Schramm, the focus shifts to Icelanders “abroad” and how they negotiate their positionality as slightly exotic outsiders even in other Nordic countries such as Denmark. The discussions of food and the practice of navigation in the urban/suburban environment are intriguing—even amusing—highlighting the differential understanding of the Nordic among people from different countries and cultural backgrounds in *Norden*.

The folklorist Hanne Pico Larsen turns our attention to heritage museums and the reconstruction of Viking age buildings in North America in the next chapter. Her discussion of received notions of Denmark and Danishness, and the cultural indexicality of both Vikings and windmills is fascinating, recapitulating some of the issues she raised in her excellent dissertation about Solvang. Of particular interest is the discussion of Dybbøl Mølle, a discussion that resonates well with a later chapter (chapter 7) by Olav Christensen. In his chapter, Christensen focuses on the historically fraught border region of Southern Denmark.

The ensuing chapter on commemorations by Torbjörn Eng and Ingemar Linderäng engages the notion of the public performance of identity well—but as with many of the chapters, it highlights more the disunity of Norden as opposed to its alleged unity, particularly as the majority of the commemorations examined deliberately focus on national cultural icons or historical events. Indeed, most interesting in this chapter is the discussion of the hard feelings that can be generated between nations in the commemoration of historical events that resulted in asymmetrical power relations (102-104). This discussion intersects with a discussion in a later chapter by Rindzevičiūtė concerning the Baltic museums, where she notes that in these museums, “When they are used, the categories ‘Baltic,’ ‘Nordic,’ ‘the North’ and ‘European’ are carefully shaped to strengthen the national distinction. Broader regional spaces are typically articulated through bilateral relations with other contemporary nation-states” (240).

Stuart Burch’s chapter on “Banal Nordism” is perhaps the most contentious of the essays in the collection, relying on an entertaining reading of the Carl Gustav recoilless rifle (bazooka) as a means for interrogating the representation of the Nordic as peaceful, anchored in nature, and an inherent protector of human rights. He emphasizes that “Norden” has “long been a projection screen for fantasies” (135), implying that “Norden”—or at least Sweden hiding behind the notion of “banal Nordism”—could just as easily be read as an industrial, manipulative war machine.

The remaining articles in the collection are more focused on museums and museum practices. Each of these chapters provides helpful background to the particular forms that largely historical collections of cultural artifacts have taken throughout the region, while proposing various theoretical frameworks, from Mauss’s concept of “The Gift” to interrogations of “vernacular culture” as a means for exploring these institutions. My only quibble with this section is that Aronsson’s chapter on “Performing the Nordic in Museums” could have come earlier, as he proposes four useful categories for understanding the category of *Norden* functional in Nordic museums: “(1) Explicit Nordic political utopias... (2) Dominant national narrative but pro-Nordic content and images... (3) Silent or banal pro-Scandinavianism... (4) Explicit anti-Nordic rhetoric”

(293-294). The very brief concluding chapter unfortunately does little for the volume, and could have been excised.

The editors have made some unusual decisions that contribute to the slightly fragmented nature of the volume. Rather than provide a concatenated bibliography, each chapter includes its own bibliographic apparatus, resulting in duplications of references throughout the volume. Although this may be a decision that rests on a need for electronic access to individual chapters, it inadvertently bolsters the sense that each one of the case studies is an independent chapter and not part of a larger, integrated project. The inclusion of a volume-wide index is excellent and should allow one to find shared concepts across the disparate chapters. Nevertheless, many of the entries in the index are a bit of a tease, and lead to simple mentions of words, as opposed to actual conceptual engagements. Most striking of these are references to the welfare state (8 mentions) that accurately lead to mentions of the “welfare state” but offer neither substantive discussions of the welfare state, nor why it matters in the context of the discussions at hand. Finally, the citation model used is cumbersome, and leads to long footnotes that often only include bibliographic references; using the standard social sciences citation style would have saved paper, and readers’ eyesight.

These very minor quibbles aside, Aronsson and Gradén have managed to assemble an intriguing set of essays. While one will not come away with a better understanding of the “performance of cultural heritage” in *Norden*, or of *Norden* as a unified region, one does come away with an appreciation of the fraught nature of this concept, and how it is functional (or not) in various institutions. The emphasis on museums and other forms of display brings to the fore the ideological nature of projects that aim to encapsulate aspects of largely national cultural heritage. Ultimately, the attempt to “scrutinize the creation of Nordic heritage as a performative action” (4) largely falls short of the mark, largely because the theoretical framework of “performativity” is probably the wrong one. Indeed, the few engagements with performance theory that are scattered throughout the volume are essentially broad references to Richard Schechner, Erving Goffman, and Richard Bauman, and do little to advance our understanding of “performative action” as a theoretical construct. Strangely, “performativity” does not appear in the index. Instead, the ideas of “inclusiveness” and “exclusiveness” to which the editors allude (1) would have been a more productive avenue of inquiry, still anchored in *Norden*, and more attuned to the current political climate in the Nordic countries. That said, the interdisciplinarity of the overall volume does allow for a rich intersection of intellectual currents, and results in a worthwhile volume. Beyond the obvious target audience of scholars of Scandinavian and Nordic studies, the anthology will be of interest to students of museum studies, cultural heritage, cultural anthropology and folklore in general, as well as geography, political science and sociology.

Timothy R. Tangherlini  
UCLA  
1618 words