

Interrelationships of Festival, Community and Power: A Case Study

Guest speaker speech delivered at the 2nd Annual International Symposium on Festival Culture (ISFC)

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This paper outlines some thoughts on festivals and the power of a local winter carnival by examining the organization of communicative and actual resources. It also examines rhetoric and beliefs about community. In particular, I examine how the locally believed notion that Winter Carnival is “good for the community” both disempowers and empowers local people. The local inhabitants, including both organisers and the general public, frame Winter Carnival as being “good for the community”; this is the most common way Winter Carnival is described. I argue that on the one hand, this framing device uses the rhetorical, emotional imperative of community for hegemonic purposes. I also argue that, on the other hand, the imperative of community is a tool through which local people enact their own ideals while reflexively thinking about and critiquing those ideals. This means

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that the festival is both a tool of empowerment and an instrument of disempowerment at the same time.

These ideas are based on twelve years of research, conducted between 1998-2010, some of which are elaborated in *Winter Carnival in a Western Town* (Gabbert 2011). Here I first offer a brief overview of the history of the Winter Carnival. I then explore the logic of community in relation to the festival by unpacking local ideas about money, volunteerism, and the social pressure that arises from this event. I conclude by illustrating how this festival is embedded in discourses of community and power.

First, to clarify, the phrase "winter carnival" does not refer to a pre-Lenten carnivalesque "Carnival" celebration with a capital "C." The festival I examine is called a carnival and is influenced by Carnival and Mardi Gras aesthetics, but these are global and commercial influences that are more recent. This particular carnival originated in the early twentieth century as a winter sports festival and is similar to the traditional Finnish pre-Lenten sledding festival called Laskiainen.

Winter Carnival is held in the village of McCall in the Rocky Mountain in the state of Idaho, the mountain west region of the United States. The village has a year-round population of about 2,500 people, is located in a remote part of the state, and traditionally receives heavy snowfall for five or six months of the year. Snow is a central facet of its culture and identity, which is as a destination resort. Today, the primary economy is summer and winter tourism. Until the early 1980s, however, the primary economy was the timber industry, while tourism was a secondary source of income.

The first Winter Carnival was held in 1924 and was a winter competition. It is possibly related to Laskiainen since the area was settled by Finns who emigrated either directly from Finland or who came from mining communities in Wyoming and other areas. This festival featured dog sled races and early forms of skiing. It is tied to the rich history of skiing in the region and the development of professional sports nationally. The festival was held on Payette Lake, which froze during the winter. People experimented with skijoring, for example, which is where one skis while being pulled behind horses. They also experimented with early forms of technology, such as being pulled along by wind power. Dog sledding races also were part of the festival's activities, and these races attracted competitors both

nationally and from Canada. There were ski jumping competitions for both children and adults. This incarnation of the Winter Carnival was held until 1939, when, for a variety of reasons, it was disbanded.

Winter Carnival was revived in 1965 by the local Chamber of Commerce, a quasi-government agency that encourages economic development and tourism. The reason for reviving the festival was to promote the newly developed local alpine ski resort, Brundage Mountain, which opened in 1961. It was thought that a Winter Carnival, held at the end of January, would attract tourists to the area during a slow time of the year. Newspaper advertisements from this period, which feature glamorous, young couples on skis, illustrate that promoting skiing was an instrumental aspect of the festival. This tied the revived festival back to its historic roots as a winter sports carnival.

Local organisers also decided to build snow sculptures and enter them into competition with each other as an additional attraction to supplement the theme of the festival as winter-oriented. The idea to build snow sculptures likely came from New Hampshire, where students at Dartmouth already had a tradition of creating winter snow sculptures. One organiser I spoke with told me that he had written to Dartmouth asking for advice about how to create sculptures, but never received a reply. Instead, people began experimenting and teaching themselves how to build them. Examples of well-known early snow sculptures from this period include a sculpture of Paul Bunyan and his Blue Ox; a winged Pegasus that was painted red; and a scene depicting King Neptune sitting on a dias surrounded by mermaids.

The construction of snow sculptures continues today, although other kinds of events have been added over the years. Additional events include a second, statewide snow sculpture competition, a children's torchlight parade; a Mardi Gras parade; casino night; and various games and competitions. Skiing itself has become a less integral part of the festival as the industry has become more industrialised and globalised. Today the festival lasts ten days and is estimated to attract 100,000 people over that period of time. I will return to these sculptures and activities as they are important: they are festive objects produced and used within discourses of community and embedded in a complicated web of social relationships, economics, aesthetics, and politics.

Festivals have long been linked to the notion of community. Émile Durkheim (1912|2001) argued for religious events as collective representations; Victor Turner (1969) developed the notion of *communitas* that can emerge in festivals as a state of undifferentiatedness; Bakhtin's (1968|1984) communal carnivalesque forms degrade official values; Richard Bauman (2001) explains that festivals are linked to community because of generic expectations; and Roger Abrahams notes that "Festivals are ultimately community affairs... in which many of the basic notions of community are put to test" (1987). These are just a few ways that scholars have viewed festivals in relation to community.

As an ethnographer, I am also interested in what locals have to say. What are the local ideas about festivals and community? As noted above, in McCall, local people link their festival to community by saying that Winter Carnival is good for the community: this is not just promulgated by organisers but also by the general public. Nevertheless, the term "community" is quite vague and abstract (cf. Creed 2006; Joseph 2002, 2007). What does it actually mean? Upon further investigation I found the term "community" meant something like "economic interdependence entailing generalised reciprocity and moral obligation." Unpacking this idea and how it operates with respect to the festival sheds light on issues of power.

First, people say the Winter Carnival is helpful for the community because it contributes to the local economy by bringing tourist dollars into the town. What they mean is that the festival is profitable for neighbourhood businesses and shopkeepers. As one business owner told me, "Winter Carnival is a boost for the local economy. A lot of merchants need that...it services them."

The value of Winter Carnival to local businesses extends beyond the business owners themselves. The local population also wants local businesses to succeed because of the way people think about money. Money is imagined as circulating locally. There is a proverb in English that says, "what goes around, comes around." This proverb suggests a circle. When applied to the community economy, it means that whatever money is spent in the community (that is, "what goes around") will benefit other parts of the community ("comes around"). I was unable to verify whether or not this was factually true. However, that is what people believe, and in many ways that is more significant because people operate on

that belief. The belief that money circulates locally stems from the fact that most businesses in McCall are small, local businesses rather than national chains or multinational corporations. Unlike corporations, these businesses don't rely on a national headquarters to support them when times are difficult; they rely only on the customers who come through their door for their survival. As one local resident told me, "the economy of this town affects everybody...Everybody who lives here is affected by the success, or failure, of local businesses because this is where we live."

If "what goes around, comes around" is believed to be true with respect to money, then according to this logic as a shopkeeper, if one's friends and neighbors are doing well financially, they will spend their money in one's own store. Similarly, if a store owner is doing well financially, presumably that profitable business benefits others—for example, by providing employment opportunities. Regular employment is very vital in this area, which in the past has had unemployment rates as high as 18%. This is an imagined communal economic relationship in which one's own financial well-being is perceived as being dependent on the financial well-being of others.

Because people presume themselves to be economically interdependent, the classic anthropological economic concept of "generalised reciprocity" also operates. Generalised reciprocity is the notion that people will do something for the general good without expectations of an immediate tangible return. That is, people contribute to society without expecting immediate concrete payback, at least in the short term.

This is essentially what happens at the Winter Carnival. Winter Carnival is run entirely by volunteers. This volunteer time and effort that people put into the festival is key to understanding how the festival operates in terms of power (cf. Olgilvie 2004). People contribute a significant amount of resources to it, and they do so without expecting immediate benefits because Winter Carnival is thought to be "good for the community" and the money it generates presumably circulates around and comes around. One local resident illustrated this point by saying, "Winter Carnival is supposed to be a community effort to bring tourists to the area. Additionally, it is good for the rest of the community regardless of whether we benefit from it or not. We will in some way, whether it's immediate or not."

Just as an example, it takes a lot of time, effort, and energy to make a snow sculpture. I volunteered on a team to build a sculpture one year and we worked every day for two weeks for eight hours a day. At any point in time, there were at least four people working, often more. It was tiring work. It also costs a lot of money just to buy water. Then of course there are many other events that require volunteer effort such as organizing parades, competitions, and so forth. People volunteer by organizing an event, donating money, making a sculpture, chairing a committee, or something else. So people contribute in ways that benefit others, because what is given out is supposed to eventually come back. There is a presumption of future returns.

The idea that Winter Carnival is "good for the community" combined with the "what goes around comes around" belief about money means that contributing to the festival is also something of a moral imperative. A moral imperative is a force, drive, or organizing principle that compels someone to act. Because the festival is considered to be good for the community and because it is believed that what is good for the community is good for the self, then there is something of a moral duty or moral obligation to support the festival. This moral imperative is evident in a statement by a local resident who said that, while the town's hardware store does not make money during the festival, the store participates in the festival because it is the "right thing to do."

Snow sculptures, which as stated earlier are festive objects caught up in a web of social relationships, economics, aesthetics, and politics, are a compelling example. They are an incredibly public and visible statement about one's relationship to the community. As a community member, one is morally obligated to contribute to Winter Carnival by (for example) making a snow sculpture so that tourists will come and spend their money so that my neighbors and myself will benefit. The sculptures are a visual representation, crystallised into snow and ice, of people's commitment to community ideals. In building a snow sculpture, one is visually "performing" these ideals. This is of course what festivals do: festivals put values on display.

Given that participation is something of a moral obligation, it is also not surprising that local people judge and critique the snow sculptures. The reality is that one's neighbors are the audience for the sculptures, not tourists; tourists are a secondary audience. People

talk about who built sculptures, who did not, which ones were good, and which ones were poor. In doing so, they evaluate others with respect to the articulated ideals of community. Businesses who do not construct snow sculptures or otherwise participate are subject to the disciplining talk that is typical of small towns, especially if that person/business is perceived as benefitting from the Winter Carnival directly. They are thought of as not contributing to the greater good. So social pressure comes into play: people are aware of their own contribution in relation to the contribution of others and they make moral judgements about the relations of others to the community vis-à-vis visible participation in the festival. And of course, people who do not contribute make their own statements as well.

So what do these dynamics tell us about festivals and power? One aspect is that the Winter Carnival is a tool of hegemony. The rhetoric that Winter Carnival is "good for the community" is accepted as true by nearly everyone, yet as is true with hegemonic ideas the reality is that only a very few businesses, such as gas stations, hotels, and restaurants immediately benefit. Not all businesses prosper: some even close down during Carnival to avoid the crowds and therefore lose money. From this perspective, the festival and associated ideals of "community good" are a tool of power that benefits the few.

On the other hand, the Winter Carnival also empowers local people and does so in two ways. First, the festival is a device that enables the actual enactment of community. Recall that community in McCall means "an economic interrelationship entailing generalised reciprocity and moral obligations." Winter Carnival is a tool for literally putting that definition of community into practice. The festival makes the abstract notion of "community" concrete by providing a framework to enact the realization of economic interdependence, generalised reciprocity, and moral obligations to a larger whole. It empowers people to act out their own ideas and definitions in ways not immediately available anywhere else.

Further, having put their own ideals about community into action, Winter Carnival then becomes a means of evaluating and reflecting on these ideas. This is what is meant when festivals are described as "reflexive." People do not just blindly follow hegemonic directives by uncritically volunteering. Local people are quite aware of who makes money and who does not. They also know

how much time and effort it is to volunteer and participate. They know the sacrifice in terms of hours of free time and donations, and they evaluate the social pressure and moral evaluations they put on themselves and on others. The main topic of conversation throughout the village was whether or not the festival was worth all the inconvenience. People asked: Why I am I doing this? Who is it for? By asking whether or not the festival was worth their time and effort, people queried and tested ideas of economic interdependence, generalised reciprocity, and moral obligation. These concepts constitute emic definitions of community. There was no escaping this debate; every year, everyone wondered whether or not the town should have the festival. Winter Carnival caused people to consciously think about community because they were putting the ideals of community into practice. By putting the ideals of the community into practice they thought about, evaluated, and critiqued the limits of the community. They also thought about what the ideals of the community were, and what they should be. Therein lies the power dynamics of this particular festival. It is both hegemonic and empowering at the same time, drawing opposing ideas together, as festivals do, within a single framework.

I conclude, then, with a plea for including these kinds of tourist or economic festivals within the umbrella of festival studies (Gabbert 2019; Fournier 2019). Winter Carnival is typical of rural, small town festivals throughout the United States, which often have some kind of agricultural or environmental theme and are produced for economic purposes, often by attracting tourists. Yet such festivals often are overlooked because they are not thought to be very significant in terms of culture. They frequently are dismissed as too ordinary or obvious in their meanings. Nevertheless, they are common, and because they are common, they are relevant. While I cannot speak for all such festivals, this one provides a useful window into how local culture, politics, economics, and aesthetics operate on the ground in people's everyday lives. Such power dynamics exist outside of the festival as well, but they become more visible and observable when played out in a frozen, festive public sphere.

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