Singing Among Strangers:

Representations of Latvia at the Smithsonian Folklife Festival 1998

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Topics in Performing Culture: World’s Fairs

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Introduction

Latvia is a small European nation located to the east of the Baltic Sea, between Estonia and Lithuania, with Russia and Belarus to the East. Its unique history and culture and struggles with identity as a small nation make it an interesting place to study in terms of cultural representation and display. I focus on the Smithsonian Folklife Festival of 1998 in the research that I present here because of the important role that folklore, folklife, and history have played in the creation of a national consciousness in Latvia. This national consciousness led to the nation’s first period of independence between the World Wars, 1918 to 1940, and the second period of independence from 1991 to the present.

I became interested in representations of Latvia in international exhibitions partly because I am half Latvian, my father having been born there, so, the Latvian/American border is one that I carry within me. Because of this, it is interesting for me to see how this border of Latvian/American or Latvian/other, Latvian/Western is played out on an
international stage. What I found in my research was that the Smithsonian Folklife Festival 1998 was a political project, which used “objects of ethnography”\(^1\) to affirm the Baltic nations being represented and to disassociate them from communism. The Festival exhibit grew out of Latvia’s long history of self-representation in exhibitions joining with the United States’ long history of cultural displays.

I take the name for this presentation, Singing Among Strangers, from an American novel about Latvian refugees written in 1954 for young adults, at the height of the Cold War. The novel, in turn, takes its name from a Latvian folksong that contains the lines, “Sing, sing, stranger’s daughter/You are singing among strangers”\(^2\). The novel, like the Smithsonian Folklife Festival, represents Latvian “traditional culture” to an American audience in simplified form. The people represented in the novel and at the festival begin their story in Latvia and end it in the United States. Through simplification and representation, depth and sometimes truth may be lost, yet both the novel and the festival try and often succeed in conveying the vibrancy of Latvian culture to a general American audience. This culture is then used to justify a political project of nationalism and democracy by stressing an ancient tie to the land and a continuous cultural narrative to the present.

The novel and the festival both include many of the same elements of Latvian culture, which are repeatedly invoked to produce a sense of national identity. These elements include folksongs and dances, holiday traditions, a strong connection to the earth and nature, Latvian language, traditional foods, and jewelry and clothing. Also important in forming a national identity and in representing that identity to the general

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\(^1\) Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, *Destination Culture: Tourism, Museums, and Heritage*, p. 17.

American public are the tradition of Latvian Song festivals and the political history of the region which are reenacted at the Smithsonian Folklife Festival through the Singing Revolution special program. I am interested in how these symbols come to embody and encapsulate Latvian cultural identity. Kirshenblatt-Gimblett uses the term “objects of ethnography” to mean that elements of cultural heritage chosen for display are created as ethnographic objects through their detachment from their original context. They then display those who create them as ethnographic as well as those who originally made them.

![Latvians at the Smithsonian Folklife Festival 1998](image)

**The Smithsonian Folklife Festival**

The Smithsonian Folklife Festival is an annual event that began in 1967. The festival takes place on the National Mall in Washington, D C, a powerful location infused with messages of national pride and freedom, with Capital building to one side and the Washington Monument to the other. It is a site that is used for organized protests as well.

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3 Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, *Destination Culture: Tourism, Museums, and Heritage*, p. 18.
as celebrations of American democracy. It is hard to image a space that could be more potent with symbols of American government. The Smithsonian Institution’s Center for Folklife and Cultural Heritage organizes the festival with additional funds from the National Park Service and a variety of other smaller contributors, who often have a vested interest in promoting the culture that is being represented, such as local governments and businesses. Additional “major sponsors” for the Baltic Nations display in 1998 included the governments and ministries of culture of each of the three nations, as well as the Cultural Endowment of Estonia, the American Latvian Association, and the Lithuanian Foundation.  

The festival usually consists of several cultures chosen from around the world that are unrelated. In 1998, the folk cultures featured were Wisconsin, the Philippines, the Rio Grande/Rio Bravo Basin, and the Baltic Nations: Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania. It lasted for ten days and drew approximately one million visitors. There is inevitable comparison that comes with putting cultures on display next to each other. The Smithsonian Folklife festival grows out of the history of cultural representation in Europe and America. As Kirshenblatt-Gimblett describes in “Destination Culture,” this history is closely linked with the history of World’s Fairs and museums.

The Smithsonian festival describes itself as a break with its world’s fair past. For example, the 1998 program book compares the Philippine exhibit with that at the 1904 Louisiana Purchase Exposition in St. Louis. It states, “A hundred years later the voices involved in the organization of the 1998 Philippine Festival Program have been quite different…most importantly, the Festival enables artists to speak for themselves.”

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4 Smithsonian Folklife Festival 1998 program book, p. 132.  
5 Kennedy, “Rethinking the Philippine Exhibit at the 1904 St. Louis World’s Fair,” p. 44.
we know that these artists are themselves becoming objects of ethnography by virtue of being displayed. And simply by having so many varied cultures condensed into one place for a short period of time, the event proves itself to be quite similar to the ethnographic exhibits at World’s Fairs.

What the festival does to represent cultures in a more authentic manner is to try to avoid using costumes except during musical performances and to try to avoid organized folklore troupes. The Smithsonian has created its own genre of folklife presentation, which includes a casual, simple presentation style and allowing the cultures being presented to present themselves as directly as possible. Of course, sometimes, it is very difficult to differentiate between culture that is authentic and learned naturally and that which is learned in a folklore revival setting. This was certainly an issue with the Latvian exhibit in 1998. Ilgi and Rasa were two groups chosen to represent Latvian folk music. Interestingly, they are the bands of Valdis Muktupavels, who was one of the organizers. They are both proud to be folklore revival groups, which goes against the Center’s goals. It seems that the Smithsonian may have been more flexible for this exhibit because of the important role that such folk revival groups played in the Singing Revolution, which will be discussed. It can be very difficult to say what is more authentic. These groups are extremely popular in Latvia and therefore are a testament to the living folk culture of the region. The Stalts family who represent the Livonian heritage of Latvia are the last surviving family of their culture group. They learned their culture from their parents, but they also frequently present their culture to the public in festivals and exhibitions.
Latvia and the Baltic Region

A unique relationship exists between Latvia, Lithuania, and Estonia that allows them to be represented as one culture with three distinct parts at the festival. Their histories have converged and diverged throughout time, resulting in an interesting mix of mutual understanding and support, yet resting necessarily on their individuality from each other. The archeological record of the region contains evidence of humans dating back to approximately 9,000 BCE. By around 2,000 BCE there is evidence of people that lived in timber houses in villages, practiced agriculture and fishing, pottery and textile crafts, and is known as the Narva culture.⁶

One of the main cultural differences between the nations is found in language differences. Whereas the Latvian and Lithuanian languages are Indo-European (the oldest that are still spoken), Estonian is a Finno-Ugric language. Christianity arrived late to all three countries, around 1200 AD with the German Teutonic Knights who conquered the region, but paganism remained strong much longer, arguably until the present day. Lithuania became officially a Catholic country due to alliances with Poland, with which it formed a massive empire around the 15th century. Latvia and Estonia became and remain officially Lutheran and never expanded very far beyond their present borders. While having once been a vast empire is intrinsic in Lithuania’s national identity, Estonians and Latvians generally see themselves as having been continuously subjugated from the 13th up until the 20th century alternately by the Russians, Germans, and Swedes. The three nations experienced a period of independence between the World Wars, but were occupied by the Soviet Union in 1940. They recently regained their independence in

⁶ Gimbutas, The Living Goddesses, p. 197.
An important issue is the representation or lack of representation of different groups that are or were present in the region. There was a very significant Jewish population in Lithuania especially and also Latvia and to a lesser extent in Estonia. Most Jews in the region were killed in the Holocaust, while those who could escaped to other countries and continents. Today there is a growing Jewish population once again, mostly immigrants from Russia and other former Soviet Republics. Many other minority groups had significant presences in the Baltic region - Roma, Russian, Polish, Ukrainian and Swedish to name a few. Today, almost 40 percent of the population of Latvia is Russian-speaking minorities. A study done in 1999-2000 found that of the population of 2,400,000 is made up of 57% Latvian, 30% Russian, 4% Belarussian, 3% Ukrainian, 3% Polish, and 3% others.\footnote{Karatnycky, Motyl, and Piano Eds., \textit{Nations in Transition 1999-2000: Civil Society, Democracy and Markets in East Central Europe and the Newly Independent States}, p. 39.} This is because part of the Sovietization effort was to relocate people all over the Soviet Union, so that people would not be tied to their region, and every part of the union would be equally Soviet. With independence, there has been a great struggle to create equal rights for everyone, while creating a new modern Latvia with the Latvian language as the official language and a culture that is distinct. In Latvian national heritage displays, minority cultures are generally not represented. This
is a major problem with the encapsulation of a culture into one display; people who are different from the dominant group are often left out.

There are also Latvian minorities, that is to say, groups that have been in the region as long or longer than the dominant group, so they are seen as indigenous cultures, yet they are distinct from the dominant group of the state. The Livs and the Latgallians are two groups that enter into this discussion. Both groups were represented at the Smithsonian Folklife Festival 1998. The Livs are a Finno-Ugric speaking culture. There is only one family left who speaks the language at home. That is the Stalts family who were present at the festival. The family is very active in presenting and, as much as possible, preserving their culture. Latgallian, on the other hand, is spoken by approximately 150,000 people. It is an Indo-European language related to Latvian and Lithuanian. Latgale is the Southeastern region of Latvia. It is the only Catholic region of the country. It is also known as the poorest region. There is a dispute over whether to consider Latgallian a dialect of Latvian or its own language. It has had its own literary tradition for over 300 years that continues today and speakers of mainstream Latvian are not able to understand Latgallian. However, the government of Latvia would like to consider it a dialect to increase the numbers of Latvian speakers in relation to Russian. This brings us to the history of Latvian self-representation; I hope some examples will be helpful in illustrating the power of display and importance of folk culture to national identity.

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8 Nick Coleman, “Latvia: Tongues Wag at a Riga Conference.”
Latvian Self-Representation

In 1901, for the 700th anniversary of the founding of the city of Riga, a great celebration was held. It featured an exhibition of industry and crafts in order to demonstrate the industrial achievements of the city. Halls for industry, construction, machines, and gardening, several restaurants, fountains, and an open-air stage were built. Everything was brightly lit at night “to delight the visitors.” Another feature was a recreation of the Old Town as it would have been in 1612, only smaller, where a festival of historic costumes was held. Next to this was the Bird’s Meadow, which was the equivalent of the Midway at the Chicago Columbian Exposition. In the Bird’s Meadow you could ride a gondola through Venice or, at night, attend the very popular performances of Wild Wives of Dahomey, a dance troupe of 50 West African women organized by Alfred Urbach of Hamburg.  

9 Pictures, Printed Material and Manuscripts from the Collections of the Latvian Academic Library documenting this event are available online at http://www.riga800.lv/en/history/8riga700.asp
At this time, the National Awakening had been underway for over 30 years led by the Riga Latvian Society, which participated in the planning of the festivities. They were instrumental in the promulgation of the Latvian nation anthem, God Bless Latvia (Dievs Sveti Latviju) by Karlis Baumanis, the national epic, Lacplesis by Andrejs Pumpurs, and the flag. They are key elements in the “invention of tradition” as discussed by Eric Hobsbwam. At this time, Latvia was still a part of the Russian Empire and the esplanade was used for military training. However, the Russian Minister of War was so impressed with the exhibition, that he gave the space to the Latvian people. This exhibition shows that Latvia is experienced at self-representation and consciously chooses what to put forth to convey the desired message. Last year being the 800th anniversary of the city of Riga, again, great festivities were held and the city was shown off to people from around the world.

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Latvia participated in World’s Fairs during its period of independence in the interwar years. There was a Latvian pavilion at the Brussels Worlds Fair of 1935. The exhibit featured folk costumes and a mural of the skyline of the city of Riga, condensed icons to symbolize the whole of Latvian culture, its ancient traditions, ties to the land, and powerful modern city. This was very much in the style of the times and keeping with other national pavilions, which also displayed folk cultures along with symbols of progress.

Very important to issues of Latvian self-representation are the song festivals. Latvians have a special relationship with song and language. Latvian is an endangered language. There are only about 2 million speakers of Latvian in the world. In the 1920s, Krisjanis Barons collected over 200,000 folksongs, called dainas, and many more have been collected since then. Some of these date back to the twelfth and thirteenth centuries and most express aspects of traditional life. They are therefore valuable ethnographic resources and are used to study the pagan religion and practices. These folksongs have played a very important role in forming Latvian national identity.

“To the Latvian the dainas are more than a literary tradition. They are the very embodiment of his cultural heritage, left by forefathers whom history had denied other, more tangible forms of expression. These songs thus form the very core of the Latvian identity and singing becomes one of the identifying qualities of a Latvian.”

These words were written by Vaira Vike-Freiberga in the Journal of Baltic Studies in 1975. Vike-Freiberga has studied the dainas extensively and, with other

scholars, created a database to catalog them. She is now president of Latvia, which shows both the importance of the dainas and the importance of the émigré community to Latvia as she lived for many years in Canada. The current president of Lithuania also lived in North America, in Boston.

The dainas are just one type of folksong. They are a very specific archaic quatrain form consisting of two non-rhyming couplets. There are also lyrical songs that employ poetic devices typical of archaic oral poetry. And other types of folksongs include call and response singing, called apdziedasanas, which follows a prescribed form, but is improvised each time it is performed. They are often humorous and teasing.

All of these types of songs were actively collected during the National Awakening beginning around 1850. At this time, educated elites began to adapt them into modern choral arrangements. These are generally what are performed at the song festivals. Choral singing is understood to have been introduced to Latvia by German Lutheran minister-schoolmasters.

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Song festivals have been an extremely important Latvian tradition. The first one was held in Riga in 1873 and had one thousand participants. It was organized by the Latvian Society in Riga, a strong nationalist force of the time. Song festivals continued to be held every four years in Riga until the Soviet invasion of 1940. In 1953, the 80th anniversary of the first song festival in Riga, Chicago held the first Latvian song festival for the émigré community in the United States. Twenty-two choirs participated with a total of 650 people singing and an audience of 5,000. Song festivals continued to be held for émigré communities in the U. S. and Canada every four years.

In Latvia, song festivals began to be held again when the Soviet Union realized that if they could be a tool for Latvian nationalism, they could be a tool for Soviet nationalism as well. Choirs were forced to sing songs about Lenin and the Soviet Union. However state controlled the Soviet festivals were, they left some room for Latvian patriotism to survive through the use of folksongs. Folksongs were accepted by the Soviet Union to some extent because they are songs of the peasant and working classes.

By 1990 Soviet censorship had broken down sufficiently for song festivals in the each of the three Baltic States to contain prewar songs, which had previously been banned, and the national flags were flown in public for the first time. Guntis Smidchens writes that these song festivals “were ‘cultural performances,’ events in which the cultures were placed on display in concentrated form, for viewing and reviewing by both foreigners and members of the cultures alike.” These song festivals are part of the reason that the Baltic nations’ independence movement from the Soviet Union is called

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17 Ibid, p. 31
the Singing Revolution. In addition to the song festivals, the Baltic nations protested Soviet rule and asserted unity with each other in 1989 with the “Baltic Way” demonstration, where two million people joined hands to form a human chain across the three Baltic nations. Later, there were parallel incidents in each of the states where people peacefully defended institutions that were symbols of democracy - a television tower, press building, and parliament building. As Soviet tanks drew nearer, the nonviolent protesters sang and held their ground. At the most recent song festival in Riga, which was held in 2001 during the city’s 800th anniversary celebration, there were over 20,000 participants.

An example of a song that played an important role in the Singing Revolution is Put Vejini. This is a traditional song about the area called Kurzeme which is now part of Latvia. The song is thought to be originally Liv and is popular throughout the region. It is sung with the words in Latvian, Lithuanian and Estonian. The lyrics to the song call for the wind to blow the singer home to Kurzeme. It was very popular during Soviet times for those in exile and in the Baltics because it speaks to a longing for the homeland. The national anthems of the Baltic nations were banned during the Soviet period, so this is one of the songs that became an unofficial anthem.

**Blow, Wind, Push My Boat**

Blow, wind, push my boat to Kurzeme.  
A woman from Kurzeme promised to me  
Her little daughter, the milling girl.

She promised me, but did not give her,  
She told me that I was a big drunk.

She told me that I was a big drunk,

And also a pony racer.

Which bar did I empty out?
Whose pony did I race?

I drank with my own money,
I raced my own pony.

I married my own bride,
Without father and mother knowing.

Blow, wind, push my boat,
Push me home to Kurzeme.¹⁹

**Festivals Within the Festival**

The singing revolution was remembered at the Smithsonian Folklife Festival on the evening of the fourth of July. The parallel of shared celebration of freedom and democracy. A speech was given by an Estonian, Ingrid Ruutel, the president of Baltica, a pan-Baltic festival. She said, “A great empire can justify itself only with force. A small nation like the Estonians must depend on its own wisdom…We could not free ourselves with weapons. We had to find our own road to freedom.” She described how songs that had been banned reemerged during the singing revolution: “All these songs were like magical charms, repeated by thousands and thousands of Estonians.”²⁰ In this speech we see that the democracy is being celebrated and the creation of democracy is being attributed to the magical forces of song.

The singing revolution program at the Smithsonian Folklife Festival is an example of a “festival within the festival.”²¹ Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett uses this

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¹⁹ This is my own rough translation.
²⁰ Ralph Rinzler Folklife Archives and Collections, July 4, 1988, Baltic Music Stage, Tape 1, #281
term to reference to the common choice to use a festival re-creation to represent culture. Since festivals are often colorful and joyous occasions, they lend themselves to showing off a culture. However, the danger is that the everyday aspects of the culture may be overlooked.

Another example of festival-within-the-festival at the Smithsonian Folklife Festival 1998 is the St. John’s Day celebration. The most important holiday in Latvia and the rest of the Baltic region is Midsummer. This seasonal rite was recreated at the Smithsonian Folklife Festival 1998. The holiday is called Jani or Ligo in Latvian. Janis is a mythical deity said to bring fertility including green leaves on trees and green grass. The text of one of the traditional folksongs to Janis is as follows:

Janis came over the hillside,
A bundle of grass on his back.
Come, dear Janis down the hill,
Give (the grass) to my heifers;
I shall give you a chunk of cheese
For feeding my heifers.22

As a festival that is intrinsically tied to the land, it lost a lot of meaning by being taken out of context. In exchange, it gained new meanings by being performed on the national mall. Midsummer is the summer solstice, the longest day of the year, which in Latvia, because it is so far north, means that the sky never goes completely dark. To

make sure of this, an essential element of the observance is a bonfire that burns all night. The bigger the bonfire the better as its purpose is to scare evil spirits away that humans are especially vulnerable to on this magical night. Young couples and young men especially jump over the fire to show their bravery and regenerative power. A fire was built at the Smithsonian Folkife Festival, but of course, due to practical and insurance constraints, the fire could not burn all night or be jumped over by anybody. A fire truck was standing nearby and firemen put the fire out after the demonstration was over. The power was taken out of the fire. This is an example of the distortion that can happen through oversimplification to accommodate the needs of display. However, by being performed in the space of the national mall, the festival gained the symbolism of being accepted and respected by the much larger and more powerful U. S.
American – Latvian Relations

The relationship between Latvia and the United States is key to studying the festival. There are many aspects to this. Latvians have been emigrating to the United States since the 19th century. Two major waves of immigration are during the Bolshevik Revolution and during World War II. The largest populations are in the American Midwest and in Toronto, Canada. There are also Latvian American communities on the east and west coast and in other parts of Canada. These communities have preserved traditions that were endangered in Soviet Latvia and fought for international recognition of Latvia’s struggles. They have also always contributed financially to support family members and institutions in Latvia. Recently, the American Latvian Association paid for an extensive renovation of the Freedom Monument in Riga in preparation of the festivities for the city’s 800-year anniversary. The Latvian American Association contributed financially to the exhibit at the Smithsonian Folklife Festival and Latvian Americans participated in the creation of the exhibit. Inta Gale Carpenter is a Latvian-American and a folklorist at Indiana University who had been working for the Smithsonian and was instrumental in the planning of the Baltic Nations presentation. Guntis Smidchens is another Latvian-American who worked on the festival who heads the program in Baltic Studies at Washington University. When asked about their involvement, they both modestly deny doing anything much. However, when listening to the recordings of performances, you can hear that Guntis takes a very active role and is describing and explaining as well as translating to the audience.
The annual folklife festival is a celebration of democracy. It proclaims to American citizens and visiting tourists from around the world that America appreciates and accepts diversity. It is important for the United States to keep Latvia democratic and not let Russia conquer it again, which would lead to Russia regaining power. So, Latvia and the United States have a complimentary relationship in this way.

**Conclusion**

Representations of Latvia at the Smithsonian Folklife Festival 1998 are a very useful place for looking at issues of cultural identity, nationalism, and memory. The festival is a world in miniature, and in the small world of the festival, a cultural narrative is put forth, and culture is presented as a whole. However, this culture is necessarily incomplete. It leaves out narratives that are not the dominant one. Also, rather than replicating and preserving traditions and carrying them on to the future, the past and all cultural heritage are encapsulated into forms which are displaced from their original context. They are then made into something new by being displayed in a new setting, with a host of new meanings.

In this way, when Midsummer is observed on the mall, it is no longer the most important day of the year, intrinsically tied to the natural elements, the land and the sky, where you can go visiting home to home and try your neighbor’s homemade beer and cheese made just for the occasion. Instead, it is a hollow form remembered and
reproduced from the past, performed for the tourists. Yet, it is still important both as ethnographic knowledge and as a space for Latvians to relate to Americans.

Similarly, when the Singing Revolution is performed on the mall, it is no longer a natural and gradual rising up of the people against their oppressors, bursting forth in song. Instead, it is something to be displayed, an interesting piece of history. Latvia’s strong history of folklife representation has been very useful, even necessary to create a national consciousness over the past 150 years. It will be interesting to see what kind of role it will play in Latvian identity formation in the future.
Bibliography


