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COLLEGE OF ARTS AND
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**DEPARTMENT OF FOLKLORE
AND ETHNOMUSICOLOGY**

Material Culture and Heritage Studies Laboratory

Fire in the Plaça: Catalan Festival Politics After Franco

By Dorothy Noyes. 2003. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press. 336 pages. ISBN: 0-8122-3729-3 (hard cover), 0-8122-1849-3 (soft cover).

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Fire in the Plaça is a masterpiece, brimming with virtues. The book's multifaceted excellence has been justly recognized with the 2005 Fellows of the American Folklore Society Book Prize, but reviews of it have been slow to appear. This later fact is a collective failure that suggests the need for folklore studies in the English-speaking world to rediscover the importance of the book review genre as both a critical measure of disciplinary health and a crucial means of promoting our work to wider audiences including, not insignificantly, the scholarly publishers on whom we rely. (*JFRR* represents a healthy experiment directed toward such ends.) Thankfully, as we consider new ways of speaking up on behalf of folklore studies, Dorothy Noyes has given us a sophisticated work of ethnography and history that we might point to as embodying our best disciplinary virtues and as reflective of what a revitalized and sophisticated twenty-first century folkloristics can accomplish. The book deserves not only to be reviewed widely, but also to be promoted informally in our discussions with colleagues in other fields. Among folklorists, I hope that it will provide one point of departure for invigorating discussions about where our field might be heading.

While Noyes, in varying degrees, considers most genres of folkloristic concern, her book is built around the study of the Patum, a distinctive Corpus Christi festival performed in Berga, a provincial town in Catalonia. Noyes offers both a synchronic ethnography of Berga and the Patum (ca.1989–1992) and a social history of the festival as an institution in the region's life during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. In both of these frames, she gives the Patum its due as a complex and interesting phenomena in its own right, but she also considers the festival (as the people of Berga do) as a key window through which to glimpse the entirety of local culture and history, particularly the ongoing disagreements at the center of social life. Of special interest in all of this are Catalonia's quest for national self-determination and the complex legacies of Francisco Franco, Spain's long ruling and authoritarian leader.

Of obvious relevance to those concerned with Europe, the book has many commendable qualities of general relevance. In engaging prose, the book illustrates Noyes' sophisticated command of social theory, past and present, including folklore's place within this domain. Generations of folklore graduate students have wondered why they were asked to grips with the luminaries of "classic social theory," particularly figures such as Emile Durkheim, Sigmund Freud and Karl Marx. Noyes provides an innovative answer, not by simply adopting or even modifying the theories of these earlier scholars, but by entering into a cross-generational dialogue with them on shared concerns, particularly the (contradictory) nature of society under conditions of European modernity.

This aspect of the book is particularly compelling because Noyes shows how the historic and contemporary perspectives of the people of Berga, as reflected in, among other things, the Patum, not only resonate with those of these early scholars, but that the roots of both European social theory (as a scholarly project) and European (or at least Catalan) "folk" (or "ethno-") social theories share a common contextual history. Rather than articulating a single right (or wrong) answer, both the scholarly and folk traditions of theorizing represent manifestations of an ongoing debate over the fundamental nature of social life and are an outgrowth of Europe's unfolding social history within a broader world context. Sharing common roots, European social theory's two registers thus intertwine over time, reciprocally influencing one another. While this is obvious in the case of Marx vis-à-vis the history of communist and socialist politics in Catalonia, the same dynamics are shown to characterize the ideas of Durkheim (paralleled, for instance, in "social body" discourses on the Patum) and Freud (evidenced, for instance, in the Patum's "sexual body" language). While I cannot do justice to Noyes' remarkable analysis, it is important to note in this context that she not only takes ethnography very seriously, but also goes to considerable effort to privilege the sophisticated thinking of her remarkably diverse Berguedan interlocutors.

Such innovative analysis is not limited to an engagement with classic social theory, but extends to what some would argue are more contemporary concerns. Noyes has important things to say about, among other issues, the politics of heritage, the legacies of authoritarianism, transitions to democracy, the nature of representational practices, the workings of social networks, the realities of class, the lives of immigrants, the effects of deindustrialization, and the ramifications of globalization. She especially contributes in innovative ways to theorizing the nature of the provincial, an important task that she shows to be especially well suited to folklorists, given the kinds of communities and topics emphasized in our work. She suggests persuasively that lessons learned from the experiences of those living in historically provincial places, such as Berga, are increasingly relevant to all peoples and places as globalization makes provincials of all of us and prompts a search for, as her dust jacket blurb condenses the problem, "a third way between tourism and terrorism."

For those who might be daunted by my breathless catalog of heady issues, I offer assurances that the book is not only accessible, but is rich in careful, poetically described, ethnographic detail. It does outstanding work integrating several approaches to the ethnography of festival and is marked by engaging, reflexive storytelling. One gains a clear sense of what it is like to experience the sensory overload that both the Patum and any intensive fieldwork experience offer. Beyond enriching the study of festival and ritual per se, the book is also an important contribution to so-called bodylore studies on several levels, from confronting the physical experience of Patum, where one's body is subjected to a shocking regimen of extraordinary experiences, to the multiple and complexly laminated (and contested) ideologies of the social body that are evoked in discussions and representations of the Patum, and of Catalan society more generally. The book also includes first-rate explorations of everyday sociality, foodways, clothing, and the remarkable material culture and performance practices associated with the giant dancing effigies (including a crowned eagle, giants, dwarves, knights, devils, and flaming "mule-dragons") that are central to the Patum's enactment.

The search for the means by which studies of the interaction order of face-to-face social encounters (in our idiom think "artistic communication in small groups") can be articulated meaningfully with a macro-sociology of global social forces and large-scale historical processes has represented a

kind of eternal quest for the human sciences. As with social theory more broadly, I do not hold out for the discovery of a single all-purpose solution to the “linkage” problem. In *Fire in the Praça* though, Noyes shows how the tools of folklore studies, particularly smart, careful ethnography in a very particular place, when combined with a commitment to skillfully contextualizing that place in its own history and in its social connections to the larger world, can lead to a remarkably helpful and persuasive general understanding of how people live, struggling both as neighbors and as global actors.