

*The Land of Weddings and Rain: Nation and Modernity in Post-Socialist Lithuania.* By Gediminas Lankauskas. Toronto: University of Toronto Press. 2015. 317 pp. Notes. Bibliography. Photographs. Index.

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Weddings and their accompanying finery are so visible in Lithuanian cities that even tourist guides direct visitors not to miss the colorful string of wedding parties entering and exiting the city halls in a “conveyor-belt routine of civil ceremony” (157). Getting married in Lithuania is part spectacle, part private affair, part echo from the Soviet past, and part embodiment of that which is seen as newly modern. This makes research about it an exploration of archaic, Soviet, and modern “public dramas” enacted in specific times and places (136). Written to fill a perplexing “paucity of rigorous ritual study in post-socialism” (31), Gediminas Lankauskas focuses not only on the lives of his participants, but also on the social life of rituals. By looking at wedding traditions and identity formation, Lankauskas counters arguments that traditions wane in times of upheaval, as Lithuanian weddings *use* ritual to navigate transition. Through rich ethnographic detail, Lankauskas reveals fluid and sometimes contested performances of tradition and modernity that connect capitalism, westernization, and Lithuanianess.

At the heart of the book is the question of “how Lithuania is and is not becoming modern, Western, and European” (7). This question emerged as Lankauskas’ fieldwork revealed modernity to be a “pervasive preoccupation” (9) for those in his study. To understand what modernity meant to them, he focused on weddings, which emerge as a metonym for Lithuania’s pursuit of western belonging in the same way a bride searches for her groom. If weddings are about building a sense of family that augurs the birth of a new addition, in Lithuania they are also about internalizing and performing a sense of belonging that resonates with the hope of a new future.

The theoretical foundations of this work are discussed in detail, using important concepts that move what could be a book limited in scope to deeper discussions about the way individuals embody complexity, understand space and time, and shape culture. Each chapter breaks down different elements of wedding culture. In Chapter 1, Lankauskas provides a history of how the Soviet Union appropriated and dictated the nature of weddings to insert the state into previously private rituals. Within this insertion was the promotion of practices that imbricated fidelity to the state as well as to the new partner. In Chapter 2, Lankauskas discusses and defines markers of Lithuanian identity. Many common traditions and discourses in weddings focus on the way “others” insert themselves into “authentic” Lithuanian practices (and thus identity), from newly adopted western traditions, such as gifting the couple television sets made abroad, to the way social “others” (such as Jews, Gypsies, and Russians) encroach on cultural norms. Gender is also introduced, as traditional stereotypes are entrenched through presentations of the “unassailable” character of the female and the ultimate failings of the male, although this is not a lens used consistently throughout the book.

In Chapter 3, Lankauskas discusses the inclusion of Catholic ceremonies into wedding traditions. Religious identity is complicated for many because the historical influence of Soviet atheism led them to abandon formal religion. Some couples accidentally performed Church rituals “wrongly,” moving them away from the authenticity they seek because they were enacting rituals they identified as being their own, but they had little experience with them in actuality. In Chapter

4, Lankauskas most centrally embarks on his argument that weddings in Lithuania are “ambulant time-space rituals” (135) connecting national pasts with personal (often imagined) ones through concrete spaces. He introduces the cityscape as part of the wedding, noting that certain places, such as Soviet-era wedding palaces and city halls, are an essential touchstone of Lithuanianness, while others are intentionally omitted. The result is to highlight the normative power of nuptials that romanticize what was, what is, and what could be in idealized performances of identity.

In Chapter 5, Lankauskas takes on “key consumables” (189), edible items without which no wedding is complete. Food is a key focus in Lithuania, with baskets of sausages, cucumbers, meat pies, cakes, and other homemade items proffered as gifts more valuable than anything similarly made in a store. Lithuanian homemade liquor was also a common, though illegal, gift. Food speaks to both poverty and modernity, as a culture of Soviet shortages made such offerings a luxury that now sit in contrast with the ability to buy anything from the west. Yet not everything western was desirable, as Lithuanians who had a little *too* much were seen as dubious in terms of economic honor and thus inauthentic. As with other wedding traditions, consumption serves as a form of “othering” to define oneself in terms of a “new” modern identity.

The ostentatious nature of weddings is visible everywhere, leaving the reader hungry for more context on how the practice of conspicuous consumption reads in comparison. Additionally, the significance of drinking *and* culture in Lithuania is considerable, leaving room for more background on the subject of food/drink as social identity. Opportunities for further analysis also begin to present themselves through the focus on middle class, urban brides and grooms because gender, age, class, and location influence sensibilities of the “modern.” Naturally, the focus on “nation” also means *ethnically* defined Lithuanianness, and thus leaves out conversations about the same ritual across non-ethnic Lithuanian communities in terms of citizenship and proximity. Still, the book has rich insights to offer about a subject and country that are rarely highlighted, and it is an interesting and important contribution to anthropological explorations of ritual.

The complex and ongoing processes of identity formation in this part of this world make this book of likely interest to anthropologists, social scientists, and researchers of/in states of transformation (especially those focusing on post-socialist spheres). It is also a book that should have a place in political science and international affairs conversations as a way of highlighting the many intangible, but society-defining cultural outcomes that come from economics, policy, and politics (areas that often take culture as a “lightweight” subject). Overall, the detailed telling of individual particularities provides an academic and socially relevant text that illuminates the power of ritual on a theoretical level, as well as in the lived realities of those involved.