

• *Book Reviews* •

---

***If You Don't Laugh You'll Cry: The Occupational Humor of White Wisconsin Prison Workers.*** By Claire Schmidt. [Folklore Studies in a Multicultural World.] (Madison: The University of Wisconsin Press, 2017. Vii + 269 pp., map, acknowledgments, notes, bibliography, index.)

Raised in a family principally employed by the Wisconsin Department of Corrections ("DOC"), folklorist Claire Schmidt was surrounded by stories rooted within prison walls. Often including criminals and vulgarities, these stories are both humorous and worthy of study. In *If You Don't Laugh You'll Cry*, the newest publication in the Folklore Studies in a Multicultural World series, Schmidt examines how the occupational humor of white prison workers in Wisconsin functions "as it travels between the workplace and the home." (8) Schmidt positions her research at an intriguing theoretical intersection, focusing on how, through humorous storytelling about work, prison workers "separate themselves from their institutional context and negotiate their own subjective position." (7) One of the most compelling and engaging elements of this study of the American prison system is its engagement with family folklore.

*If You Don't Laugh You'll Cry* assembles interviews featuring nine DOC employees and their families conducted between 2003-2015. Schmidt notes that her collaborators are "individuals known to me in my everyday life because I wanted collaborators to be comfortable giving feedback and comments. I study my own people to ensure I write in a respectful way, acknowledging the authority of those I have interviewed." (12) Throughout this project, Schmidt engages in reciprocal ethnography, sharing her notes and drafts with collaborators whose feedback she incorporates. By doing this, Schmidt not only respects

her relationships with her collaborators, but produces a stronger interpretive analysis of genres and themes in which the voices of those interviewed are heard more clearly.

The book's introduction opens with a discussion of the incarceration rates in the United States and Wisconsin. Schmidt concisely lays out the demographics of Wisconsin's incarcerated population of over twenty-two thousand individuals across thirty-six adult facilities as of 2015. (3) Critically, she notes that Wisconsin "has the highest incarceration rate of black men in the United States...[and] also leads the nation in the number of incarcerated Native American men." (5) This information provides the setting within which Schmidt's collaborators make a living and tell stories.

Schmidt divides her book into three thematic parts, each comprised of three chapters. Part One focuses on the hidden dynamics of correctional officers' family and social lives. She notes that "Prisons and prison work shape families and communities, influencing the ways individuals and groups of individuals perceive and experience the world." (17) This is reflected through exoteric perceptions, i.e. lazy employees or hyper-violent correctional officers. Correctional officers negotiate these images while working a job with high turnover rates, psychological and physical strains, and constantly fluctuating employment benefits. Occupational humor provides an outlet for individuals to engage with and pass along their esoteric knowledge. These stories are "deployed and received on the *margins of work*" and "are meant to entertain and to create an elusive sense of control over a job that imposes the will of the institution on the needs and wants of the individual and family." (35; italics in original)

If working in a prison shapes one's view of themselves and their community, it certainly shapes how these employees view individuals outside their immediate group.

Chapter two discusses the reality that many employed in corrections live and work in predominantly white rural areas and that interacting with incarcerated members of minority groups may present a largely negative perception of these populations. All parties involved are highly aware of the racial disparities, and humor can be used to diffuse tension. As Schmidt details, learning to laugh at threats against one's own safety becomes an invaluable tool in the correctional officers' kit, even if the humor is offensive to outsiders. Negotiating the transition between prison and home is the focus of the third chapter which again heavily draws upon a sense of humor, particularly pranks and fool's errands, to mark the end of one's shift. This structure of analyzing humor's function at home, work, and the liminality in between, produces the most compelling and insightful part of the book as it constructs the worldview that informs the day-to-day lives of those employed in corrections as well as their families.

The second part of the book examines the valuable role humor plays as a tool among employees in maintaining institutional norms and negotiating relationships amongst coworkers within hierarchies. Schmidt notes that her "collaborators argue that humor keeps them human in the face of dehumanizing stress." (81) The fourth chapter is particularly poignant in its analysis as it examines ways in which humor is employed through inmate mimicry (which speaks to institutional power structures), gallows humor, and practical jokes. These behaviors are aimed at alleviating not just stress, but the boredom associated with a career of routine, regulation, and supervision. The idea of humor as a work-related tool utilized for initiating new staff and teaching opportunities is discussed in the fifth chapter. Creating humorous situations and telling stories of past events assist in designating group membership, fostering bonds of friendships among

employees while testing appropriate limits. Humor can also define relationships between staff and inmates, which is explored in the sixth chapter. Schmidt demonstrates how prison staff use joking behavior to bend institutional rules in order to keep staff safe by reducing tension brought about by infractions and racially driven conflicts. Relationships fostered through humor can be a tool to educate inmates, getting their cooperation, and "facilitate the success of the institution." (154)

While the second part of the book focuses on how humor reinforces social and institutional norms, the emphasis of the third part turns to humor's subversive power. Although prison employees are representatives of model behavior for inmates to "reinforce dominant social norms" (177), Schmidt demonstrates in chapter seven how employees may negotiate the discomfort associated with such authority through humor. Her collaborators note that there is often a contradictory behavior associated with policies pertaining to homosexuality and holidays, sometimes protecting behaviors that are "forbidden." (161) Chapter eight explores how "Prison workers use humorous expressive culture to defy the institutions they work for to maintain an identity that is separate from the job." (178) Whether "playing the fool" for laughs or pushing against societal norms that pertain to class, gender, or race, humor can challenge the militaristic hierarchy of prison life and "is ultimately a defensive tool in the hands of both inmates and prison workers in the constant negotiation for power over the institution itself." (200) The third part concludes by examining how prison workers are treated as society's "scapegoats," reduced to a lower social status due to their careers and the fault of the social injustices and inequalities that run rampant within the U.S. justice system. Although the text overall is

incredibly strong and insightful, this part felt the weakest as the ninth chapter more closely resembled an epilogue in scope and tone.

By drawing upon ethnographic fieldwork conducted with family members, Schmidt constructs an insightful and heartbreaking work. Through the relationships with her family she gains invaluable insight into the occupational folklore of a largely stigmatized, yet important line of work that may have been closed off to other ethnographers. Schmidt successfully negotiates her dual roles of ethnographer and kin through critical analysis of the humor which is considered necessary to navigating a difficult career working in Wisconsin's Department of Corrections.

JARED L. SCHMIDT  
*University of Wisconsin-Madison*