

Bailey Brazier  
 Dr. Kevin Brooks  
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## Negotiating Fargo

### Janteloven, *How Fargo of You*, and Lived Reality

#### Purpose

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In response to the existing perceptions of Fargo's culture, this project investigates the ways that the Scandinavian cultural influence of the Janteloven is at work in Fargo culture, how it came to be, and how it is being reshaped through cultural fluxes. In *Intercultural Communication*, Ingrid Piller posits an interesting contribution to the conversation of the importance of cultural understanding when she likens the relationship between each person's cultural positioning and their thought process to the concept of linguistic relativity (36-46). In this light, surely each person can understand themselves better by understanding the culture that shapes their thoughts.

While culture is, for many Americans, like "the air they breathe," they often take their cultural practices for granted and assume that all other cultures are either similar or should be. Bosley pens, "all cultures tend to be ethnocentric –that is, all tend to cling to the belief that their own culture is the standard by which others are to be judged" (Bosley 3). If this is true, then individuals' understanding of their own culture is essential, both to break down ethnocentricity and to relate to other cultures: "conversely, intercultural competence is characterized by the ability and desire to engage with realities other than our own." (Piller 53).

Further, if Fargo's understanding of its own culture does not extend beyond the stereotypes imposed on it, Fargoans can hardly expect others to regard them as anything more than they are stereotyped to be. By not refuting inaccurate stereotypes, Fargo has not only played into such stereotypes, but has also been shortchanged in intercultural relations: "Stereotypes underlie much intercultural communication and as participants in intercultural encounters we often approach each other through stereotypes. We need to understand stereotypes for what they are – interested generalizations – in order to engage with people from different backgrounds in meaningful way (sic). Elevating stereotypes to heuristic devices is not only useless but also damages our capacity to engage with others" (Piller 73). Concerned by the acceptance of stereotypes in Fargo's culture, I saw a need for a better representation of Fargo's culture. This study begins to answer the questions of what historical influences have shaped Fargo's culture, what Fargo's culture really is, and how it is changing.

While many definitions of "culture" exist, this study cannot hope to identify or incorporate all of the aspects of culture but rather to unearth a few layers. The definition of culture that is perhaps most appropriate for this study comes from Nancy Hoft's "Global Issues, Local Concerns,"

where she asserts that culture is simply, “the way we do things around here” (145). If culture is, in effect, the agreed-upon way of life for a particular group or area, then what that culture encompasses is extremely influential to that group, and living within a culture requires, at least to some extent, participation in that culture. Though cultures change over time, each has a historical dimension that is often open for negotiation in some way. Because culture can be both a source of identity and a ruler of how to express individuals’ identities, this is often where negotiation happens.

## National Perceptions

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For many cultures, media is one of the only planes on which the rest of the world ever comes in contact with the culture, and though they may be unintentional, national perceptions of a culture are often illustrated by fictitious, exaggerated, or dramatized deceptions fed to viewers by news reports, media, and entertainment. For Fargo, news reports of local weather and flooding, the film *Fargo*, and newly, Marc de Celle’s book *How Fargo of You* have been most responsible for portrayals of Fargo and Fargo’s culture. In some cases, cultures have even been commoditized or have become like spectacles for the tourist and merchandise industries to market (Piller 8). In Fargo’s case, the idea of “selling the unsellable” is entertaining, but dangerous in its power to reproduce potentially negative stereotypes. Interestingly, it is the very culture of Fargo that prevents its people from taking efforts to improve or redeem its reputation.

## Fargo’s Culture

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Before discussing the culture of Fargo, it is important that I specify that the culture extends beyond the city limits. Fargo is only the epicenter of what seems to be a radius of sorts, with varying degrees of the same culture extending into northern North Dakota and Minnesota, west across North Dakota, and south until it meets the more dense and diverse populations.

As seen in news reports about the floods, the film *Fargo*, and other nationally recognized sources, popular representations of Fargo’s culture seem to emphasize two features: “simplicity” and “niceness.” While it does not completely cover all of the connotations I would like to reference in describing representations of Fargo’s culture, “simplicity” here includes characteristics ranging from simple-minded to primitive. Fargo’s culture has been represented as much more concerned with practicality than creativity, and in the film *Fargo*, depictions of Fargo culture fall miserably short of accurate. While Marge’s character is certainly capable and intelligent, her husband is an example of the opposite, and though the Conan brothers do include some dignified representations of Fargoans, the overall impression of simplicity and humor seems to gloss over that. This strong comedic element in the film might be partially responsible for the stereotype of simplicity in Fargo’s culture.

Simultaneously, Fargo has been represented as being extraordinarily kind, where each resident seems more than willing to come to the aid of anyone in need without so much as a second thought. Marc de Celle’s *How Fargo of You* seems to be an attempt to set the record straight,

saying that Fargo really is genuinely nice and competent as well. Unfortunately, it seems that his good intentions were overpowered by his participation in the classic dramatization of Fargo's "niceness." In chapter nine, de Celle's content about how a cab driver recently quit his job as "the assistant manager of the largest Ford dealership in San Diego" to return to Fargo is a strong step toward a favorable representation of Fargo (126). The story illustrates the value that young, educated, well-paid adults place on their home culture, and de Celle explains how many people in Fargo are not only intelligent, but highly overqualified for their jobs. However, much of this good content is overshadowed by the form in which de Celle presents it, leaning heavily on the over exaggerations. In chapter thirteen, de Celle uses another strong example: North Dakota's financial responsibility and integrity. With intentions of producing a more helpful perception of Fargo, de Celle recounts his conversation with the Mayor of Fargo, Dennis Walaker, and their discussion of the "subprime loan mess" that North Dakota had abstained from indulging in. Again, it seems that if de Celle could move beyond the theatrics and the style of writing to entertain, his description of the bankers who kept their clients' best interests as a higher priority than any financial incentives would have been more memorable. de Celle's colorful descriptions seem to transfer the readers' focus off of the actions and events he is trying to exemplify and onto how these acts were carried out. Acknowledgement of these pieces of what it means to be from Fargo is a much needed improvement on the old depictions of comedic kindnesses, but as the stereotype of niceness seems to be de Celle's crutch, *How Fargo of You* is actually reproducing the stereotype. Ironically, this is one of the very stereotypes de Celle seems to be hoping to adjust. For example, de Celle's narrations include "big friendly smile," "smile flashing," and "flashed that grin" all within three pages of each other (32, 37, 40). As part of this culture, I find this over exaggeration bothersome, along with other descriptions that seemed downright laughable, such as "big, friendly, muscular young men were parading our worldly possessions through our garage" (30). These descriptions are not realistic, and consequently, unhelpful representations of Fargo's culture. With so many strong points, *How Fargo of You* had the potential be an excellent overturning of stereotypes, if only de Celle would not have let his "slightly euphoric daze" color the tone of the book so strongly (41). Unfortunately, as an author, de Celle's representation of Fargo is bound to his need to entertain and ultimately sell books, which might explain why his honorable intentions to reshape perceptions of Fargo are never without a layer of dramatization.

Even in arguments trying to overturn them, stereotypes in Fargo's culture persist. Why? Part of the answer is that even though they have been exaggerated and exploited for financial gain, they are, at their root, drawing on existing truths. In fact, a strong case can be made that both the "niceness" and "simplicity" stereotypes come from the same cultural root, the very root that prevents the overturning of misrepresentations of Fargo.

## **Janteloven and Fargo**

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Many people who desire to celebrate the unique culture of Fargo wonder how it came about. Many people have hypothesized that much of the kindness in the culture can be credited to North Dakotans' need to band together to survive harsh weather. Not satisfied with this explanation, I researched the strongest explanation of Fargo's cultural origins, the Scandinavian cultural inheritance called Janteloven, which is still much more potent in Norway than in Fargo today.

Janteloven, the Scandinavian social protocol, is said to have been “imported” here centuries ago with the overwhelming influx of Scandinavians settling the Upper Midwest. Originating in Scandinavia with Aksel Sandemose’s novel *A Fugitive Crosses His Tracks: A Story of a Murderer’s Childhood*’s fictitious town of Jante in Denmark, “Janteloven” means “The Laws of Jante,” (Sandemose). More simply, it is a code of behavior emphasizing “adherence to the group” (Maylath). A preview of the first three of Sandemose’s fictitious Laws of Jante provides ample demonstration of the implications of Janteloven:

1. Thou shalt not believe that thou art something.
2. Thou shalt not believe that thou art as good as us.
3. Thou shalt not believe that thou art more than us.

As the “commandments” show, uniformity and priority of the community over the individual are paramount. Just as the individual can rely on the community to follow through with these expectations, the community also expects each person to uphold the same values. When someone fails to do so, that person is reprimanded not by individuals but by the community as a whole. This becomes problematic, especially in Norway, where Janteloven’s influence is strongest, when those who stand out, even trivially, are downright bullied by the group in the name of uniformity (Maylath). Ironically, the very force that elicits the almost unanimous inclination to perform acts of kindness is the same force that allows each member of a group to rationalize bullying behavior. Because they feel that no one should think themselves superior to the group, group members often feel it is their responsibility to enforce adherence to the group, and as Dr. Bruce Maylath articulates, “they feel they have license to do so.”

Though Janteloven’s influence on Fargo is diluted in comparison to that of Norway, Janteloven certainly still orchestrates much of Fargo’s cultural interactions. Even de Celle notices, “Anyone who isn’t helpful stands out like a sore thumb” (72). Similar codes of conformity, however, are common in small towns all over, and because Fargo is surrounded by miles of low population, Janteloven is easily continuing to be of influence.

### **Janteloven and Narcissism**

Though the obligation of the community to resist differences has caused pain for those who stand out, it has served well as a protection for the Upper Midwest from narcissism. In fact, the humility, or desire to appear humble, is often difficult to distinguish from kindness. For example, every time we have cookies or treats at work, no matter how quickly they are eaten, the last treat is always left. While this could be mistaken as thoughtfulness for others, I would argue that it is simply the outcome each person’s unwillingness to appear inconsiderate, self-entitled, or rude. Similarly, at another group gathering, several friends were aghast when a person third to the end of the food line took the last three portions of the entrée, even after each person before her had taken only one, leaving the two people behind her with no entrée. The last two people in line were quick to pass judgment and could not understand how the greedy eater had figured her appetite more important than theirs, and the rest of the diners quickly agreed that she had been inconsiderate and rude. Interestingly, as it turns out, this girl was new to Fargo and was originally from Rochester, MN, just outside the radius of Janteloven’s influence.

Religious institutions also play a significant role in reinforcing the importance of community and cautioning against selfishness. Interestingly, many of the mega-churches grounded in glory-theology that preach the glorification of the self have struggled to establish themselves in the Upper Midwest, and many have even fizzled out in the Fargo area, likely resisted by the already established Janteloven code of behavior (Maylath). This correlation suggests a sort of cultural resistance to narcissism, likely resulting from the Janteloven influence. Twenge and Campbell, in their book *The Narcissism Epidemic*, seem to affirm that correlation in their explanation: “Whether these societies will become infected with narcissism depends on the natural antibodies provided by their cultures” (261). Further, Twenge and Campbell address the concept of Janteloven: “This type of social structure is a buffer against narcissism, because it does not allow people to get too carried away with their own importance” (263). Acting as an “antibody” against narcissism, Janteloven can be very helpful in the creation of a respectful, noticeably pleasant society with many of the refreshing features that *How Fargo of You* highlights.

While numerous of explanations of Janteloven exist, many are colored with either negativity or appreciation. For example, while Maylath describes Janteloven as “a way to learn how to behave in light of others’ needs,” Avant and Knutesen pen, “Janteloven denotes the tendency to conform, with overtones of envy, jealousy, and spite toward those who do not conform. Nonconformity is looked upon as a threat to the community” (Avant and Knutsen 4). As varying discussions of Janteloven suggest, there are both extraordinary advantages and painful disadvantages to the influence of Janteloven in any community, including Fargo’s.

#### **“Minnesota Nice”**

Though its mention is nearly exhausted, many Fargoans are quick to identify with Fargo’s incredible and almost unanimous willingness to help one another, which is an effect of Janteloven. As demonstrated time and time again through flood relief, Fargo’s innate sense of caring for others in time of need is nationally unmatched. More specifically, Maylath also notes that, thanks to the Janteloven, the Red Cross has identified the Upper Midwest as the source of many of its best volunteers.

A strong case can be made that Janteloven deserves partial credit for much of the feeling of safety in Fargo as well. Maylath, having spent six years in Norway before residing in Fargo, describes the value of community as a certain kind of trust of neighbor. While pressures to conform to the group may be costly, they ensure that the group or community will care for its members. This eliminates almost any kind of suspicion of neighbors and facilitates trust among strangers. Emulating Norway in this way, Fargo has become known for being a safe place, and many newcomers report safety as a strong factor in their decision to come to the area.

#### **“Minnesota Ice”**

While Fargo is incredibly helpful and concerned with the welfare of others, it is common for newcomers to “confus[e] that concern about [their] well-being with a desire to be [their] best friend” (Koski 1). In other words, many newcomers are disappointed when the same nice man who pulls them out of a snow pile does not invite them over for dinner or share plans for the weekend. Syl Jones posits that what is often interpreted as a lack of hospitality, or what some call “Minnesota/North Dakota Ice” stems from Scandinavian roots as well (“Tracing the Origins of ‘Minnesota Nice’”). Fargoans may seem oblivious to any sort of lack of hospitality because

just as they live within very tightly knit circles, they assume that everyone else does too, and in fact, almost everyone does. This explains why newcomers often feel blocked or ‘iced’ out. Maylath offers a further explanation that Norwegians, and consequently Fargoans, tend to maintain friendships from their youth and stay within their first social circles. Naturally, this makes them less receptive to new friendships than many people from other areas are, because for those already feeling fulfilled in close-knit circles, they have no immediate need for building new relationships. This is evident even at NDSU, despite efforts toward diversity and inclusion; though the University encourages everyone to host international students for Thanksgiving dinner, few people actually do. Maylath speculates that this example is only one of the many repercussions of the Scandinavian tendency to form and remain in closely knit social and family circles: “They’ve got their circle of friends and their family and they’re just assuming that you do too.”

## **Lived Reality in Fargo**

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Though my methodology was far from fulfilling of the description of a traditional interview, yet not completely cultural studies methods, I succeeded in gaining enough trust from those with whom I spoke in order to hear their opinions and experiences of Fargo’s culture. While a true cultural studies method would require a much longer time allotment for immersion in the culture and a deeper relationship with the people involved in the study, my study involved only eight weeks of research. However, I have lived in the region my whole life and in Fargo for three years, giving me a strong background and a host of observations to lean on as well. Further limitations include my unfamiliarity with the field of cultural studies and its accompanying writing style. Yet, my interest in Fargo’s culture has been a great advantage in making my study feasible.

Interested in how the influence of Janteloven is playing out in Fargo’s culture today, I initiated almost 20 conversations with a variety of people currently living in Fargo. Hoping to gather responses to represent both newcomers and long-time residents, I visited with Cassie Sanders from Jefferson Elementary, Meg Lindholm, who has done previous research on the experience of new Americans living in Fargo, and Greg Tehven, a social entrepreneur who has returned to Fargo after eight years of living in more urban communities. I also exchanged emails with several NDSU students, including one student who grew up in Fargo, two students from other towns within the Fargo culture radius, a student from Congo, a German from Russia, an Italian, a Turk, and a Korean student. In addition, along with Dr. Kevin Brooks, I visited with the owner of the Somali restaurant *Habib* in Fargo. Lastly, I went to a Somali market where I talked with a Somali woman who has lived in Fargo since 2007.

*As soon as we walked into the Habib restaurant, I began to question my desire to be there, not because of the smell or the food or the decorations, but because I was different. I was unsure if the others in the restaurant were as aware as I was of my inability to blend in, but regardless, I was uncomfortable. Again, these feelings were necessary. Why was I uncomfortable? Was it because all my life I had to some degree equated “different” with “unacceptable”? Was it because I had never been part of a minority before? Maybe it was both.*

*When I was about to ask the owner of the restaurant what he thought of Fargo's culture, my mind went blank. Here was this kind man taking time to talk to me about my research, and suddenly I felt sorry that I was visiting his restaurant for these reasons. I felt ashamed that I had not visited his restaurant before, or that to visit it was even some kind of diversity endeavor for me at all. More disturbing than my initial discomfort, this regret revealed to me even more how fragmented Fargo's culture is and how normal such fragmentation can feel. Normal. Until a Somali man is sitting in front of me telling me about his family, his restaurant, and how nice people in Fargo are.*

Most of the people I talked with offered some sort of affirmation of Fargo's culture's kind nature, but one said that Fargo's reputation for being extraordinarily kind is a myth, and some respondents mentioned feeling iced out. Interestingly, most of those who noted the cliquey or cold culture were either working closely with or part of Fargo's diverse population, though not all newcomers felt iced out. Those Fargoans without much contact with newcomers seemed unaware of any sort of coldness at all, making no mention of its existence. This bolsters the hypothesis that much of the 'icing' is unintentional or subconscious, and while 'icing' can be a result of an individual's failure to adhere to the group, it is often simply a consequence of innocent assumptions.

*Now that I had true friendship with an international student, I finally felt that I could ask the question I had been wondering to myself for years: do international students like to be asked questions? Of course, the answer is different for every person, but fear of offending anyone and the complete mystery of how an international student would be feeling had always kept me from engaging in conversation. Are we all just unsure of how to approach one another? Is that all this is? No. Even on top of the best intentions, it seems that many our lifestyles of working, driving, and rushing just do not lend themselves to meeting new people.*

To my surprise, almost half of the people I exchanged conversation with mentioned, most often with complaint, how driving seems to be part of Fargo's culture. This recurrence was most notable when conversations included complaints of drivers' inattention to pedestrians or bikers. However, Meg Lindholm added an interesting layer to the observation when she pointed out that, while almost everyone drives to almost all of their destinations, newcomers and those only a few states away are used to walking. When they do not see seas of people walking, they wonder why Fargo has no people or where all the people are. In fact, Meg's research revealed that the prevalence of driving likely contributes to the unconscious icing out of newcomers. How can anyone meet others, even their own neighbors, if everyone is always in their own vehicle? Greg Tehven shares this concern as part of his work encouraging Fargoans to walk to their destinations, not only to save gas and money, but because it would allow them to "actually see [their] neighbors" and facilitate the opening of the tight-knit family-friend groups that many Fargoans are content to live within, missing out on other great relationships.

*The impression I get from many people is that if we are happy with the way things are, we should not worry about changing them. However, I also see those same people excited by the vibrance, ingenuity, and resourcefulness of urban areas, regarding it as an attraction rather than a lifestyle. This makes me wonder if maybe we are just content without these things because I do not realize that they are possible here. They are possible, though. Walking on Broadway*

*downtown, into the new Tag store to meet Tehven, I was almost embarrassed for feeling so excited about the downtown atmosphere. I was excited by the reality that Fargo has such an area and embarrassed at the implications of my excitement –that I had doubt of Fargo’s capacity to be exciting. Analyzing my feelings, I realized that not only did they confirm that I had partaken in Janteloven’s influence, but also that acknowledging these feelings were critical to my understanding of others’ feelings of Fargo, and collectively, Fargo’s culture.*

Tehven also suggested that this tendency toward practicality and fixed social groups deprives Fargoans of the excitement of their own community. He explained that his journey to appreciate Fargo’s culture began by first moving away. After living in an urban environment near St. Paul, MN, Tehven returned to Fargo with a new perspective, no longer taking for granted his home culture. His story revealed traces of the Janteloven at work in both himself and the Fargo culture he had so easily taken for granted. Because Fargoans collectively avoid glorifying themselves, many of the praiseworthy aspects of the culture as a whole are minimized. When groups of people allow themselves and their work to be seen as less than they are, no one seems to mind that the culture as a whole is underestimated and underappreciated. In this way, even members of Fargo’s culture easily misjudge the value of the community.

This fits nicely with a native Fargoan’s perspective on the culture; she asserted that the culture will stay the way it is because those who like it will stay and those who do not like it will move away. She recalled Fargo’s many efforts to retain its young population, reasoning that they leave looking for new and different opportunities. Marc de Celle in *How Fargo of You* mentions several times throughout the book the surprising number of over-qualified young adults who return after experiencing such new and different opportunities and are willing to sacrifice their professional success in order to live in Fargo’s culture. Tehven, a prime example, expresses his hope to combine the unique existing culture of Fargo with the vibrant, mindful, creative influence that so many young people desire. He uses downtown Fargo as an example, pointing out the growing desire and interest for the environmentally conscious, creative, and exciting new blend of urban culture in traditional Fargo.

Many comments on Fargo’s culture also included mention of how isolated people think it is. In light of the Janteloven influence, this makes sense. Because Fargo has a culture within which social circles hardly intermingle, the collective culture’s tendency to mirror that behavior is not surprising. Further, in order to bring new ideas or movements into a culture, someone must be willing to stand out, and when few are willing do so, few new ideas or movements are brought into Fargo’s culture.

*Though change is slow from the inside, Fargo area’s culture is rapidly being influenced by newcomers coming in from other cultures. However, the newcomers whom I thought would bring the most change have actually changed Fargo very little. I’m surprised by the size of Fargo’s diverse population, maybe because I have subconsciously bought into the idea that we are a homogenous people or maybe because I have been too wrapped up in my own social groups to notice. Even more surprising, when I talk to Fargoans, almost everyone seems to have a response similar to mine, realizing that they have paid little attention to people outside of their own groups. Does this mean that even though Fargo is home to enough Somali people that they can run specialized businesses, markets and restaurants they may never truly feel a part of*

*Fargo as a whole? Will we all just stay in our own circles and instead of growing as a people, simply watch as new groups arrive rather than open up to them? If so, then it seems instead of growing and diversifying, Fargo will only grow more fragmented. Sadly, many people who are unwilling to compromise their culture prefer a fragmented Fargo.*

## **Culture Changes**

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Near the end of *How Fargo of You*, de Celle mentions the growing diversity resulting from the resettling of refugees in the Fargo area, but seems unsure of what to say about it: “How this very humanitarian work will eventually play out, for everyone concerned –there’s a huge gap between the demolished cultures most of these people come from and the Northern Prairie Culture and its immune system –remains to be seen” (de Celle 270). Considering the tight, almost impermeable social groups that make up Fargo, de Celle is probably right not to say that everyone will blend together perfectly. However, his quick gloss over this important topic seems to have slight problematic implications. I cannot help but wonder if de Celle is implying that the arrival of newcomers and their potential to change Fargo’s culture is a threat or a disappointment. If so, these tones and implications have found their way into the current representation of Fargo’s culture and been added to the mix of influences and perceptions that are helpful to no one.

More visible changes are happening in the western North Dakota area of culture as results of the massive influx of people coming for the oil boom. Crime rates have risen to the point where law enforcements are scrambling to make sufficient staff additions and long time residents are saying, “We want our town back” (Ellis). The culture of Williston, ND is quickly changing as outsiders with their own cultural practices are outnumbering those accustomed to living under the influence of the Janteloven. However, to avoid what has happened with exaggerations of Fargo’s current culture, great care should be taken not to distort perceptions of cultural changes as either.

## **Conclusion**

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The greater awareness a people has of the culture they live in, the more active of a role they can play in preserving, adapting, and claiming it. If Fargo’s people take an active role in their culture, they will slowly chip away at the useless, even damaging, stereotypes that prevent them from appreciating the culture around them. What such an active role might look like is interesting, because Janteloven, which is behind much of what makes Fargo extraordinary, is also what prevents Fargo from appreciating itself and being recognized for what it is – much more than “simple” and “nice.” It seems that to address these unbecoming stereotypes from others, Fargo’s culture would have to compromise the Janteloven; as long as the desire not to be or appear self-important outweighs the desire to set perceptions of Fargo right, active changing of outside perceptions may not happen. However, for Fargoans to change their perceptions of themselves, each other, and their own culture is certainly possible.

*“It’s not the city’s responsibility to be interesting; it’s the people’s.” Greg Tehven*

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