Carnival and the performance of heritage
Notting Hill Carnival: artistic traditions

The third film and accompanying discussions look at some of the meanings created by the performances associated with carnival. Performance is a key area of interest in heritage studies. We can think about a whole series of types of performance associated with heritage:

- the performance of actors in historic dress at a historic house

- the performance of identity which is associated with heritage activities – wearing national dress, eating particular types of food and carrying out local customs during national holidays here.

A less obvious form of performance related to heritage involves the performance of an audience – the museum visitor behaves in particular ways in the context of their visit to a museum which are different to the way in which they behave in a shopping mall or at the bus stop, for example.

All of these are forms of performative behaviours which structure our relationship to heritage objects, places and practices in the world.

The film and the two audio perspectives provide ideas and information relating to the Notting Hill Carnival as:

- a series of performances created by the different bands

- a performance, in which all participants, bands and audiences alike, are performers

- creating shared understandings between performers and their audience.

If you haven't already done so, watch the film 'Notting Hill Carnival: artistic traditions' and listen to the two academic perspectives now.

You might also find it useful to read this extract from Chapter 8 of *Understanding heritage in Practice* (Susie West, (ed.), Manchester University Press, 2010).

Two hundred years of carnival in Trinidad

Carnival in Trinidad had a complex birth, as the island (and the island of Tobago) was colonised successively by Spanish, French and finally British traders, growing sugar cane with the use of enslaved Africans. Fragmentary documentary records suggest that the key components of Trinidad Carnival existed before the abolition of slavery (1838), and that African music, dance and stick-fighting performance formed the repertoire of an annual permitted carnival, understood by Europeans as a masquerade (in reference to European carnival practices) (Liverpool, 1998). Trinidad has evolved a carnival tradition over more than 200 years. As such, the performances continue to change, notably the choice of characters and costumes and the switch to new music forms, currently Soca (emerging as heavily amplified bass beats, an evolving fusion from calypso).

Contemporary Trinidad Carnival is integrated into postcolonial government funding and is overseen by the National Carnival Commission (NCC), the state-sanctioned governing body for carnival. The NCC has been supporting research and parallel carnival activities since 1998 in an attempt to understand, foster and promote carnival traditions that are being abandoned in favour of new forms. One critic has argued that this state investment in 'old-time carnival'

research ignores the majority activities of the carnival performers, which are not categorised as traditional (Scher, 2002, p. 455).

A national strategy for carnival

The NCC has an agenda for carnival. The carnival is a significant contributor to Trinidad's tourist economy, with international tourists of returning Trinidadians and foreigners buying flights and hotel beds, as well as spending directly at carnival locations. As such a prominent national event, Scher asserts that the government 'sees an increasingly professionalized Carnival as a strategy towards catering to a demanding and competitive tourist consumer', and the qualities of the old-time carnival are seen to be of most value for this strategy. The NCC is developing this strategy by considering the old-time carnival components as a form of cultural intellectual property, able to be protected by international frameworks or even copyright laws (UNESCO-World Intellectual Property Organization fact-finding mission to Trinidad in 1999; WIPO 2000, cited in Scher, 2002).

The officially sanctioned components of carnival are being delivered by the Carnival Institute of Trinidad and Tobago, established in 1999 to combine carnival research and craft skills. It aspires to become an accrediting body for the carnivals around the world that have been created by emigrée Trinidadians and thus contain Trinidadian Carnival elements. So the process of defining official heritage for carnival allows the possibility of protection as cultural heritage, and subsequently the possibility of protection as national products (exports).

Philip Scher makes the important point that much of the academic and official discussion of the value of culture and its relationship to its owning community tends to construct culture as being akin to a set of objects 'or at least, to some degree, as independent from the people who perform them' (Scher, 2002, p. 459). Here, the intangible performance practices of carnival have been narrowed down to officially defined artistic (tangible) products. Scher believes that the decision by the NCC to concentrate on the waning practices of old-time carnival has created an official discourse of what Trinidad Carnival is, and that this 'works to exclude a significant portion of the population in part through acts of preservation' (Scher, 2002, p. 461). Set against this problem of exclusion we should also acknowledge, as Scher goes on to do, that postcolonial nations are concerned to establish their own cultural identities and assert their control over their culture which may be seen as still open to exploitation by outsiders. There are powerful nation-building arguments to consider including the need to maintain the uniqueness of Trinidadian culture and national identity. However, the official language behind documenting the components of carnival also creates a set of definitions that are not inclusive of the majority of carnival performers' behaviours now.

This brings up the concept of authenticity in performance and the official concerns to define and preserve an authentic Trinidadian Carnival. Scher goes on to argue that the NCC's selections of what makes up a carnival, focusing on the traditional characters played out in masquerades, is in fact a series of selections from the early twentieth-century favourites. The most disruptive characters (including a character draped in rags stained with menstrual blood) have been dropped and other shifts in fashion during the nineteenth century, which saw the arrival of indentured Indian workers and associated ethnic tensions, have also been sidelined (Scher, 2002, p. 472). An officially defined old-time carnival is therefore a new construct, formed from the 1990s, that does not answer the plea for the rich cultural history of the nation to be fully recognised.

New traditions

The modern carnival that is not seen as authentic by the NCC emerged from the 1950s to the 1980s, with the rise of Soca music and the increased disappearance of steel drum bands. Women moved from being minority revellers to a majority (80 per cent) by the 1980s, and the class composition became steadily middle class, as the streets became safer and women gained greater economic independence generally and were more able to afford the expenses of costumes and fees. Now the different carnival groups (bands) have memberships in thousands, mostly women in revealing, bikini-based costumes. Groups on this scale develop their own internal distinctions using social attributes like attractiveness, connections and employers (Scher, 2002, pp. 72–9). One of the newer functions of carnival, then, seems to be

the networking possibilities for younger women. These performative behaviours are not recognised by official definitions of character-based bands (the historic form), indeed they seem to generate similar responses to those of the disapproving nineteenth-century elites. Arguably this is a sign that Trinidadian Carnival is in good health.

Whose carnival?

Historically carnival has always changed because performers have invented and selected what they wish to represent, and the constituency of the performance has also evolved to include Indian and Chinese male labourers before female Trinidadians in the later twentieth century. The major intervention in carnival came in the last decade of the twentieth century with the formalisation of state interest in the content of carnival, both as a positive attempt to enhance the national reputation and economy, and as a reaction against a perceived erosion of the 'product'. But what is the product? Carnival is not played out from a script; there is no ur-text to consult to verify authenticity. How can folk art, without a named creator, be patented?

The uneasy relationship between culture and commerce is perhaps more likely to be won by culture, for a change. How authentic would a carnival of truly mass participation be if only performances approved from a pre-1950 repertoire were allowed? Carnival has always been the performance of an inversion of power relations, and the successful state intervention would remove that quality. This is not to argue against historical research and the fostering of craft skills for creating historic carnival artefacts; the curation of the past allows new generations to make informed choices about their future. However, carnival survives as two days of hard partying by millions of citizens. This performance is successfully resisting official definitions of heritage by continuing to act out current social shifts, one of which is the reshaping of gender roles. As Scher argues, contemporary carnival is as deserving of investigation as the pre-1950 manifestations, and it is a certainty that carnival of 2030 will be different again.

Reflecting on the case study

The case study has argued that carnival, as a performative behaviour, is not fixed. As a Trinidadian export, new carnivals take on new identities in different contexts. As Trinidadian heritage, it is a living tradition in a society that has experienced considerable change in its colonial and now postcolonial existence. Its transgressive purpose is emphasised here to show an inverted set of power relations, initially between white slave owners and their enslaved African workers. However, as a set of performances that need to be comprehensible to their audience, carnival operates within its own norms: stick fights do not kill, blood is fake, the carnival king is still a worker.

Our discussion of the components of performative behaviours has suggested that it is a total experience, drawing in sensory reactions and non-verbal communication. If you have been to a carnival, as a viewer you inevitably become a participant, sharing your response to the spectacle with the party goers and the official bands. In fact, if you do not make a noise and move about, inhale the street-food smells, accept the press of the crowd, it would hardly be a carnival. You adopt norms for the performance of being a visitor here that you would not adopt for the hush of an art gallery. Equally, as Butler pointed out, norms shift and erode as a result of being part of the repeated performances, as we saw for the Trinidad Carnival. Practices that live as performance are the most difficult, if not impossible, to contain because they are profoundly bound up with identity. They make startling propositions for a day, such as that black residents could assert their presence in white London, or that Trinidadian women could take over their streets from the men. Back to daily life after the party, tiny shifts start to accumulate.

References
Liverpool, H. (1998) 'Origins of rituals and customs in the Trinidad carnival: African or European?', *The Drama Review*, vol. 42, no. 3, pp. 24–37.

Scher, P.W. (2002) 'Copyright heritage: preservation, carnival and the state in Trinidad', *Anthropological Quarterly*, vol. 75, no. 3, pp. 453–84.

So what do you think about the following questions?

- To what extent do you think the Notting Hill Carnival is a series of performances created by the different bands and how much is the carnival itself a performance, in which all participants, bands and audiences alike, are performers?

- How do you think a character-based carnival performance works with the assumption of shared understandings with the audience?

- How are messages transferred to the audience as part of such a performance?

Feedback

Carnival is a community performance that is usually understood as unofficial heritage, although the Government of Trinidad and Tobago is supporting official heritage practices for its carnival traditions. The Notting Hill Carnival is unofficial heritage and relatively young, as it was initiated in the 1950s. It draws on the older heritage of carnival in the Caribbean. Performances by individual bands continue to represent aspects of the history of slavery in colonial Caribbean nations. The participants' freedom to perform these narratives can be taken as a measure of their power in society, visible for a day in ways that may prompt reflection on their daily experience of the relations of power. The historic carnival characters and stories satirise or invert some of the historic social relations between coloniser and enslaved, or they may select aspects of the historic cosmology of enslaved Africans and the new forms that emerged from encounters with Christianity. Some of the commentators on the Notting Hill Carnival expressed concern that these historic meanings were not widely understood by younger carnival performers. However, the process of creating the performance is itself a way of transmitting the stories to new generations. Carnival is not a didactic tool although its origins and messages have educational uses. Performance theory suggests that many messages are received by the interactive qualities of performance between performer and spectator. The example of the creation of the Tiananmen Square puppet as a commentary on current political oppression in 1989 is an example of how heritage forms can receive and express new meanings, which keeps them alive.