



Carnival and the performance of heritage

History perspective: Susie West

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Notting Hill Carnival shows us how something perhaps seemingly spontaneous and very low key in origin actually draws with it some very deep-rooted historical attachments to what people expect to do at a carnival, how they expect to behave, what they want to see. The black community from the Caribbean have carried its origins with them and although they reproduced it in this low key indoor form, it very quickly reasserted its original nature and moved out onto the street, and that's a great example for us of showing how heritage travels, is reshaped and then re-emerges in different contexts. People were self conscious that they needed to do this thing outside in the streets but equally, of course, their self consciousness came from the opposition that was made apparent to them every day of their lives in London that their presence was remarkable, and I mean that in the literal sense of constantly being remarked on, and as we hear it was counter to so much hostility, hostility expressed on the streets and the carnival is, you know, the ultimate peace response actually and it's proved to be a very effective one.

Multi-culturalism is now an important component of thinking about heritage because we're thinking about heritage for the cultural work that people ask aspects of their heritage to do for them. We can think about Notting Hill Carnival as a case study for new meanings that it has been able to absorb in the decades that it's been running. So it's kept its identity very clearly as Caribbean in origin and it's still very widely supported by people who identify with Caribbean origins, and yet it's also used in modern London as a multi-cultural event and it does this, I think, because of its slightly anarchic, slightly baggy structure in that it's very absorbent, so although I think it's clear in the films that it retains its awareness of the historical origins of carnival in the Caribbean with the historic carnival characters that have emerged, but also it's become a great venue as a welcome to all comers, but particularly to people who understand the need to embrace multi-culturalism in modern Britain.

One of the critical concepts that we use throughout the course is to ask students and ourselves to reflect on tangible and intangible heritage, and I think Notting Hill Carnival, although it's, you know, it's quite easy to define it as an example of intangible heritage because it's performance, but also I think it's important to think about the intangible qualities of its social importance – the unspoken, the non-verbal communication that makes the carnival what it is and makes it become a successful totality of otherwise potentially quite fragmented events. So I think the intangible qualities the carnival has are really key to understanding this as a great piece of heritage, but also reminding students that actually unpacking an event like this for its intangible qualities reveals it to be extremely complex.

I was really lucky that because I was involved in making some of these films that I got a chance to tag along and see what happens really from the very early morning in Notting Hill right to twilight when everybody's tired and straggling home, and it was an incredible experience. It almost felt like stepping out of my normal time, my normal routine, into this very created, artificial but fantastical world, just for this very particular period of time. So I could see the transformation really from people turning up in their casual clothes, to people who emerged dressed up as men made of fire, or as individuals in a cane field, or fantastical, almost Gothic creations and this transformation increased once they were on the street and they were assembled as a band, and part of the transformation came about from an audience response as well, that's what made it work.

You stop looking at the 19th century streets and townhouses behind you, or the shop fronts, and you suddenly start concentrating on demons that are three metres tall, or fireflies that are fluttering down the street, or that it's perfectly natural that there is a band performing on a lorry that's moving at two miles an hour down one of the busiest, otherwise busiest shopping

streets in this area of town. But also I think it's important that Notting Hill that there is an underlying, perhaps slightly grittier realism as well, people may be aware that the carnival represents something much older and something much darker if they're interested in the history of carnival, or if they begin to wonder why some of the carnival characters are quite as disturbing, you know, what is going on there, they're not all pretty, fluttering creations, they're not all girls in bikinis, so you can see that something else is going on and equally the sense that people may know that Notting Hill Carnival has obviously had a troubled history, and many people bring a lot of these layers with them when they come to carnival, either in the bands or because they're committed to being a spectator on the streets, and I think that's what makes this carnival have its particular level of energy.