



Carnival and the performance of heritage

History perspective: Ruth Tompsett

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The history of Notting Hill Carnival is deep and complex, it relies enormously on oral tradition, it comes with migrants from the Caribbean, it comes in their memories, it's about how you remembered what you did in Trinidad and therefore, in a sense, it's carried in the body and in the memory, and how it begins here is really as an affirmation of the self. It really is about Claudia Jones getting together a carnival dance with all the elements of carnival from back home that can in any way work within a huge dance hall, and making that work with all that memory, with all that is brought of what people recall about how they sing, how they dance, about the calypso, about the certain kind of chipping movements, and so on that go with the calypso sound, use of steel band, and certain kinds of traditional characters that are re-enacted wherever Trinidadians go.

Although Claudia initially prepared carnival within dance halls, after all it was February, true carnival time and it would have been pretty hard to do it outside, but carnival is of the streets because its history is about claiming the streets. The importance of coming onto the street was to come to that public space and say we belong here too in the face of so much conflict and racism, and then there is an affirmation in dancing your own dances, playing your own characters, in finding your own ways of speaking and being on the street, which is what carnival is about. In a sense memory is at the heart of all carnival because in the first place those who were transported forcibly from West Africa by European powers in the slave trade were carrying to Trinidad to Jamaica, parts of North America and so on, and South America, the things that were held within the body, within the heart, within the memory, so while there are possibly elements within the carnival that survive from perhaps African masquerades it's very hard to trace these accurately but what it is certainly possible to do is to look at the way the movement of carnival, the percussive traditions in music, and these are what we find in carnival from the beginning when it comes out in emancipation celebrations, and in that sense the body is the vessel of a memory, these rhythms, these percussive traditions, and these particular kinds of isolation movements, syncopations and multi-beats, multi-rhythms came out of African traditions, so the memory is, if you like, it's very much in the body as well as the heart and the mind, and it's coming right through over to the Caribbean, back over in the case of Notting Hill Carnival to Britain.

There's no doubt in carnival also that much of carnival is made up of what people remember from Trinidad, or what they have been told, or what they remember doing in carnival as very young people. All memory is subject to subjectivity and in a sense that subjectivity in carnival becomes a part of the whole mythology. Now some of those aspects, those details in the history of carnival in Notting Hill can be verified, or indeed can be corrected. One can find a detail that somebody's speaking about, a date or an event, but often times that isn't possible, and so you come to situations where people feel very strongly – this was first, or that was first – sometimes it's simply because people didn't know about each other, and what was going on. Sometimes it's about how would you define the first band? And so you get both a rich history because you get many stories. You also get conflict, people who feel upset that one person is claiming something they feel they can claim. In fact that mythology in those complex myths, which are part of the oral tradition, are part of what is essential, what carnival is made up of because it draws us back to the people who make it happen and to the fact that a lot of carnival is connected to belief, to that sense of 'this is mine, this is me'.

It's not, for example, unusual to hear somebody talking about a carnival family. A Jamaican friend of mine describing carnival was blasting to find a way of describing and eventually simply said, it's like coming home. Now, it's true in families that we tell stories and the facts come and go a bit, but the myth is about how we are, and they describe how things are made, so they are important, and if they're not factually correct they will actually be giving us an

impression of how things developed, or what things mean. Carnival is ultimately – it may be spectacular, the music is great, and so on – but ultimately carnival's existence is in the experience of it, how you feel as a Trinidadian, Jamaican, as a white British or whatever, and we need to listen to that.