



Carnival and the performance of heritage

Challenges perspective: Susie West

Susie West, lecturer in heritage studies

The Open University

One of our concerns across this course is to explore how a definition of official heritage perhaps as being heritage that is defined by formal frameworks and administered by public sector professionals intersects with, or stands apart from, unofficial heritage. And we're calling unofficial heritage the sort of thing that's really personal. It might belong to communities who otherwise would not see what they do as coming under official heritage categories, it's not something like a listed building that you can point at and is something very sort of massive and concrete. So unofficial heritage, you know, we've been talking about in terms of things that people create, whether it's cloth that they weave, songs that they sing, performances that they enact to each other, and Notting Hill Carnival, I think, has a really interesting tension between both official and unofficial sides of heritage. Official because as a major event in a world city it has a lot of administration to support it, it needs the goodwill of politicians and the police, two very major institutions, very official in their own way, and yet it works because it has the voluntary energy and activity of all of the different carnival bands that come together and they are very unofficial in their approach, and there is no way at the moment in Britain of saying oh we must do the equivalent of listing the carnival performances. We have no status for carnival performances here as official heritage, and yet it's become such an institution that you might think of it as official heritage now.

The problem of organisation for something that we think of as heritage I think comes back to whether the heritage event is perceived primarily as an official or an unofficial event. If it's something that's primarily official in that perhaps a government or a public sector institution has taken charge of it then organisation really takes on that quality of bureaucracy that we might associate with any event that has the hand of government in it, whether that's something that's actually a lot of fun – it might be, you know, the Lord Mayor's Parade in London – but that still stands for an institution, the City of London in all its magnificence, but that's very official, and it's very controlled, it's not really there as an open event, it's a spectacle for people to come and look at, but not necessarily feel that they own, or that they could shape, whereas the Notting Hill Carnival as a large scale event is still something that is really controlled through a process that is perhaps quite democratic in that band members have their place on the board, and it's felt really to still have its roots in its originating community, and so although it has to have a clear structure of organisation to guarantee its success each time, nonetheless it's got to manage that tension between being a success and yet not being over-managed and losing that sense of accountability back to the bands who are the grass roots groups who make this happen.

I think the importance of the bands is that they are really the glue that holds the carnival together, and so that's the place in which individuals join the collective really, it's all mediated through the bands, and I suppose that's how carnival breaks itself down into manageable pieces, and yet also glues itself together through seeing the bands as almost if you could use the metaphor of, you know, a string of pearls, the necklace is the whole and yet each band is an individual pearl. When I visited the carnival I came away thinking that this might be a really good example of something that is anarchic and I use that word quite carefully because it does have a formal meaning. We tend to use it colloquially now, I think, meaning it's chaotic, but actually anarchy is really touching on the unspoken, informal agreements between groups that nonetheless managed to create a coherent whole, and sometimes an example of anarchy is cited as the way that international postal services manage to work, you know if I post a letter in the UK it will get delivered to Australia but that's actually through a very agreeable process of anarchy between the different postal services involved.

So I thought that might be a good way of thinking about carnival because although we have talked about the formal structure of carnival, it is controlled by a board, we know that there are a number of members of the board who are representative of the performing bands, and yet there seems to me a quite a loose connection between what goes on at board level and what you observe on the street, and it's this glorious coming together of the many different bands, their agreement that they're all going to show up on time, they all file in to their place on the carnival route, everybody performs, has a good time, they finish the route, and they exit. All of this happens through actually a lot of non-verbal communication. There was something in the air that said the time is right, we're going to group together, we're going to move off, we're going to hit the route, and it was fascinating how all of this was communicated 'cos I couldn't see it happening but I could feel it. There's not a whole range of marshals telling people what to do when, how to behave, how to leave, so I think there is this glorious quality of anarchy perhaps borne out of, you know, years of experience about this, but also making it afresh each time it happens.