



Carnival and the performance of heritage

Notting Hill Carnival: multiculturalism

Chris Mullard

former carnival chair

Chris Mullard:

There is a tendency I think for us all to begin to look at culture and to look at heritage in a way that is defined by one specific interest group. You know, and it tends to be white, it tends to be male, and it tends to be upper class.

Ansel Wong:

former carnival chair

Ansel Wong: Carnival is a street event, to be contained within a park, to be contained within an O2 stadium, to be contained anywhere else in a small geographical area will kill the elements of Carnival.

Claire Holder

former carnival chair

Claire Holder: Notting Hill has become a lot more gentrified, and there are very few ethnic minorities around here now. Simply because we cannot afford to live in Notting Hill.

Some of Notting Hill's current residents are keen to re-route carnival's procession.

Chris Mullard:

Ah there is the tension also between those who want to keep it on the streets, and those who say no, it should be sanitised, put into the park, corralled, made nice and neat, something for people to look at, you know but not be part of basically.

Concern about Carnival's location came to a head under Mayor Ken Livingstone.

Chris Mullard:

During the seven years I was chair of Notting Hill Carnival, I spent all those years fighting that very thing and so it was not going to be a Carnival in the Park, you know, and off the streets of Notting Hill. You know we had to take, in those days, Ken Livingstone to task.

For many people, carnival's location has symbolic importance.

Darcus Howe

former carnival chair

Darcus Howe:

We call it affectionately "The Grove". Not "Ladbroke Grove", Ladbroke Grove is a road. The Grove is a mood, an historical moment, carved in people's minds and I think that was why with the race riots, it did not happen in Finsbury Park, or Brixton. Somewhere there this is this spiritual aura that produces all these things, of revolt, of relaxing when you take the power, of not compromising, and that is of the race riots, that is the ethos that set off the carnival for ever.

The streets have framed important moments in British black history.

Chris Mullard: I first came to Notting Hill in 1957. Whenever you walked out you were greeted with taunts at the best, and words of aggression and blasphemy at the worst really, so there was an ugliness, there was rampant racism on the streets of Notting Hill and I can remember, you know, looking for bedsitters in this area and picking up the Evening News as it was in those days, and saying "no coloureds need apply" and this was in every single advertisement.

Darcus Howe:

Where I am sitting now in Notting Hill, there were Notting Hill race riots, so you didn't go many places, you didn't want to be seen alone. The police had a thing about black men.

Chris Mullard: Now that's one side. There was another side of Notting Hill, and the other side was of course the social side, that we clubbed together, you know, so there was a sense of comradeship, there was a sense of struggle, there was a sense of well, we're putting up with this, we're going to get, fight through this, and that was the other spirit that was in the area. Carnival, too, was a way in which it gave us sanity, we belonged to bands. There was a natural feeling of belonging that came and a natural feeling of identity and a natural positive feeling of projecting an image of ourselves, as we see ourselves.

Darcus Howe:

The creativity emerges where you find your own thing to do. You couldn't go in pubs, so we formed shabeens with music from Jamaica which came from every boat, with a calypso from Trinidad, and with the clothing from the south of the United States. You need the most vicious totalitarianism to destroy the spirit. So with the racism, this was a kind of way of dodging it. Not confronting it, yet, dodging it, and dance, dodging it with a dance.

Chris Mullard: And the seeds of the protest movement in the UK that all sprang out of this, of being part of Notting Hill. Mainly the Caribbean peoples who came from the Caribbean, right, settled here in Notting Hill, and so there is that connection. So you go to a Caribbean family now, or a black family more perhaps accurately, and you talk and you will hear oh no, my granddad was in Notting Hill. Notting Hill is still important.

Claire Holder: I came to Notting Hill actually in the sixties and I remember when the motorway was being built, that M40 motorway through Notting Hill. And I remember my church, the local Notting Hill Methodist Church, being very much involved in protesting about the motorway, and we all went and laid down at the entrance to the motorway on the day of its opening as a mark of protest because we saw the motorway as totally decimating the community, because where the motorway was built was like the heart of the ghetto of Notting Hill, it was those slums and people had lived in those slums because as black people we could not get anywhere else to rent, and then when they decided to build a motorway, suddenly everybody's home was either compulsorily purchased, or they were simply shifted out of the area, and so the coming of the motorway broke up the community.

Carnival reunites that community once a year to celebrate its heritage.

Chris Mullard: What we've got to be saying to the heritage bodies is not that we are marginal but we are part of that heritage. So you see Carnival on Carnival's terms. As you would see a stately home on the terms of the aristocrats that owned those stately homes: as places, as industries, as local communities or local businesses or whatever, the way they see it and how they lived etcetera etcetera. Well Carnival lives in the same way, so you've got to see Carnival in this way. You don't need to sanitise Carnival to make it therefore cultural and therefore part of the heritage.

Steve Pascal

current carnival chair

Steve Pascal: London Notting Hill itself, as an area, was not always looking the way it looks now. The fact is that in terms of assisting the development or the gentrification of the Notting Hill area has been the London Notting Hill Carnival. Fundamentally, a number of the Bohemian set were attracted to the area because of its uniqueness, because it had this massive festival on their doorstep.

Claire Holder: I like the sort of vibrant culture that is uniquely Notting Hill. I like the role that Carnival plays in Notting Hill, two days a year, you know the residents have to be tolerant of each other and Carnival brings life to the streets of Notting Hill, and it's a statement that we are here, we haven't completely gone yet, and that gives Notting Hill its very unique feel.

Chris Mullard: Even with the gentrification of Notting Hill, there are new communities that exist here. It's important for them to realise, the new white communities that exist here, the multiculturalism of London the multiculturalism of Britain and Notting Hill has its place in the history of the making of that multiculturalism.