



Carnival and the performance of heritage

Multiculturalism perspective: Susie West

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The importance of the urban location for the carnival in Notting Hill is probably impossible to overstate. Whatever angle you explore the Notting Hill Carnival from so many of the answers come back insisting that it needs to be public, it needs to be out on the streets, and this very much reflects its historical origins as not exactly a protest performance but a reassertion by people who were otherwise supposed to be pretty much unseen and unheard that, you know, once or twice a year they were jolly well seen and they were certainly heard.

The history of Notting Hill Carnival is absolutely closely related to its sense of place. Notting Hill, for anyone who knows a little bit about the economic history of the area in London, has gone from being quite run down, a deprived area, a low rent area, post-war in the 1950's, to actually having extremely affluent and economically buoyant pockets, and that's brought a lot of community changes with it, and this is strongly reflected by interviewees in our films, who are very clear that the black presence in Notting Hill came about because it was an affordable area. When you're new to a country, you're starting, obviously you need somewhere low rent to live. That's not really the case now. Notting Hill has a mix of social housing where rents might still be affordable and yet, of course, it has some extremely polished main shopping streets, and a lot of the earlier residents may have moved out or feel that their Notting Hill doesn't really exist in the sense which they knew it several decades ago. So this means that people's sense of place is always changing and might be felt to be quite perilous, and it's probably that that makes it all the more important to hold on to it.

So we've seen that people are very resistant to the idea of relocating the carnival, particularly because they feel it's a way of tidying up something that is inherently disruptive, and it's supposed to be. Carnival anywhere in the world is a disruptive event - it's a challenging event to people in authority. If it didn't do that it wouldn't be doing its job. So where people work, where people live is where they want to celebrate. I think most of us could see that in our own lives, and it's no different for Notting Hill Carnival. What is different now is that a lot of the older residents are no longer present and the younger residents are actually finding new homes that are affordable away from Notting Hill, and yet Notting Hill has this almost iconic importance as the meeting place for a black community. It's where people feel that they still develop and insist on aspects of their identity. They have to do that out on the streets, you couldn't tidy this up to some great arena somewhere else; it wouldn't have the same effect. So the sense of place is there because it's imbued with memories of earlier generations who've used those streets, but it's also memories that people make for themselves, particularly if they feel a commitment to carnival and they need to go back and back. They're building up a stock of memories for themselves that are shaped by the urban environment that this great event takes place in, so it perhaps has this quality of a place of pilgrimage. These streets are really overlaid with so many memories of so many people. Those memories are not transportable. They are to do with street corners, they are to do with very particular places that people can assemble in, places that people can parade down. That is not something you can pick up and replicate anywhere else.