A New Paradigm, Moving on from Bakhtin

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This was an engaged, workshop-styled session, with presentations by Jarula M.I. Wegner and Kim Johnson, who addressed the theme ‘A New Paradigm: Moving on from Bakhtin’. Along with several points and questions taken from the wider group, and discussion between the presenters, the session became a lively debate about matters of methodology and theoretical approaches to the study of Trinidad carnival, and of carnival in a more global sense.

Dr Wegner, setting out a survey of perspectives on Bakhtin, gave a concise look at the appropriateness of this celebrated thinker to better understand Trinidad carnival. He also reflected on the extent ethnographic research on carnivals elsewhere in the world. Narrating his personal experience of Trinidad carnival since 2009, focusing heavily on ethnographic research on carnivals elsewhere in the world, he also presented his views of the ‘mas man’ (carnival band leader) Peter Minshall. He claimed that Dr Wegner urged us to continue to wrest with this complex thinker, so that both the history and the future of Trinidad carnival research remain fruitful.

If Dr Wegner had called for scholars to account for the aesthetic and political dimensions of carnival in a more dialectical way, Dr Johnson’s presentation proved to be a fully contingent and fitting response. Less concerned with characterising the surrounding scholarship on Trinidad carnival than in tracing the genealogy of carnival itself, Dr Johnson gave vivid introductions to diverse aspects of the festival, moving lightly across the longue durée of two centuries, from the cultural crucible of plantation slavery, into the present day. His was a fluent and expansive account of how carnival can itself be ‘theory generating’; he advocated for the telling of carnival histories in a mode of discovery, recovery and affirmation. As such, the starting point for Dr Johnson’s presentation was not a seminal text such as that of Bakhtin, nor any other founding treatise, but was centred rather on discrete instances of carnival practice, which this speaker carefully drew together through an overarching explanation.

Dr Johnson explained the ‘evolution’ of carnival as a means to meet the existing scholarship on common ground. He signalled clearly that general scholarly interest in carnival’s ability to offer a means of ‘resistance’ has held the unfortunate result of misrecognising (even to the extent of downplaying) the role that power holds in carnival. As Dr Johnson debated, given that power has myriad aspects, our interest in resistance needs to be nested within more complex, ‘problem-based’ approaches to the study of carnival. Thus, a great many further and related historiographic problems present themselves, ranging roughly from the diachronic to the synchronic — an approach that repeats Bakhtin’s own commitment to historical materialism and the philosophy of language. Certainly, diachronic questions issue from a key problem of trying to understand the drivers for the evolution of carnival. Yet they can barely help to explain why the festival has so many faces, quite so many intersecting elements, and so diversifying a character. For this, a synchronic method— albeit mindful of historical change— can offer a direct look at the material components of carnival as they interact in any given situation. Dr Johnson allighed on the suggestion points of critique that Bakhtin has been subject to. They are points that speak to the general and the particular: Bakhtin has little grasp of how carnival anywhere can be much political, while Bakhtinian accounts of Trinidadian carnival seem incapable of capturing its local idiosyncrasies. If both would make Bakhtin perform irrelevant to carnival research, Dr Wegner asked that we think again. The tide of criticism against Bakhtinianism is prone to mischaracterisation, wherein his writings on the ‘carnivalesque’ are divorced from their own fraught political beginnings. Far more is offered by Bakhtin than this: fascination for carnival’s salient qualities of escape and entertainment, for instance. There is scope still for a grounded political economy, capable of understanding where carnival may help to deliver historical and social change. When Dr Wegner suggested that scholars ought to ‘move with Bakhtin’, he urged us to continue to wrest with this complex thinker, so that both the history and the future of Trinidad carnival research remain fruitful.

Being mindful of each tendency, Dr Wegner has looked to bring together these diverged parts in a fresh and dynamic fashion. He briefly illustrated what such a ‘dialectical’ theorisation may resemble, with reference to the ‘mas man’ (carnival band leader) Peter Minshall. He claimed that Minshall’s recent address to ideological fields — such as the emergence of Trumpism or the global climate crisis — is intrinsically reliant for its effectiveness upon the opportunity granted through carnival for public participation and creative spectacle.

Dr Wegner assumed of his audience a firm, prior awareness of Bakhtin’s writings on carnival, which enabled him to explore the often-expressed

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2 Jeff Henry, Under the Mas: Resistance and Rebellion in the Trinidad Masquerade (San Juan: Lawton Trinidad Ltd. 2008).

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that carnival is itself a ‘trinity’, or ‘three body problem’, comprising of mas (masquerader, pan (group musical compositions played on the steel drum), as well as kaiso and calypso (sung, highly lyrical and improvisational performances). These unfold further, he showed, through a proliferation of components that include costume, oral arts (song and speech), dance, drumming, and weaponry (namely sticks and whips). Almost any instance of carnival will see a combination of these, which morph into one another through interaction and exchange.

Against this background of explanation, Dr Johnson was able to probe the core issue of what has encouraged the individualistic responses of the many participants in carnival, and a concomitant issue of what such responses may enable for those individuals and their national community. For this, we return to a concern with ideas of the collective and practices of identification and identity, in a way that tries to make sense of carnival’s changing and multiple manifestations as a register of power. Although here, in a surprising move away from part-versus-whole/individual-versus-structure explanations, Dr Johnson briefly theorised why it may be that the temporality of carnival could provide the key to understanding its deeper significance. He argued that there has been an over-reliance on the Roman Catholic calendar in trying to explain carnival, i.e. as a pre-Lenten indulgence of the flesh that anticipates a season of abnegation and fasting. In place of that explanation, carnival has to be seen more complexly and in contrast not with Lent but with Christmas: marking a contrast between carnival’s public show of individual self-realisation on the one hand and, on the other, the family-based, domesticised time of celebration that Christmas has largely become. Since the latter has nothing of the liberatory complexion of carnival, this play of stark differences has as much to do with the optics of celebration—aesthetics in the broadest sense—as with the place of those actions and their desired critical effects.

Perhaps more importantly for the symposium as a whole, both Dr Wegner and Dr Johnson argued powerfully that the resulting analytic uses begin and end with the place of those actions and their desired critical effects.

This might all be rather wishful thinking and fanciful reasoning in the area of project design, however, as I will briefly try to explain. What both of the papers by Dr Johnson and Dr Wegner revealed is that there are barriers in the way of any sort of thoroughgoing evaluation of the appropriate theoretical frameworks for understanding Trinidad carnival. That is not to say that carnival is without a tradition of intellectual reflection and theoretical claims. I do not see the Caribbean as having succumbed to a self-impoverished utilitarianism in the way of a rejection of ‘theory’ or anything along those lines. Rather, I would highlight the general discourse of ‘exceptionalism’ that continues to operate in the English-speaking Caribbean. This is so widespread as to have the effect of making it harder to recognise how a theoretical approach which originates outside the region can have any or much purchase at all. The same attitude may be extended to the identity and location of those who are doing the research, it has not helped the path of academic research on the Caribbean in general, in my view. A commonly made claim is that Trinidadian culture stands apart and that it is opaque to academic study. However, the terms of that difference only tends to return us to already


quite familiar academic categories and concepts (freedom, democracy, individualism, nation, community, difference, change/continuity, etc.). These are long-debated in both academia and in the mainstream of humanistic thought, as well as in foundational models of postcolonial criticism.

As I see it, the main imperative for carnival researchers within and without the region is to remain in dialogue. They must retain all the opportunities presented to the academy through connection and comparison. Part of the assumption of Trinidadian and Caribbean ‘exceptionalism’ is a reluctance to undertake theoretical work per se – an intellectual conservatism that tries not only to leave theory aside in local representations but to disenable if not disempower the effects of theoretical work. Any talk of an innovative ‘experiential’ post-Bakhtinian phenomenology of carnival is likely to be ruled out by that attitude. There is a paradox here, given the ample evidence that Trinidad carnival can be ‘theory generating’, as our speakers have clearly shown. As such, we need a compassionate and explanatory look at this context, with the acceptance that knowledge about carnival can take a variety of forms and that ‘ownership’ of that knowledge deserves to be contested.

This returns us to the central objective to consider a ‘new paradigm’ in this panel, where I see a danger of us being in a muddle about how this all sits within a research field. Effusive first-person reflections, historical or otherwise, and enthusiasm for carnival in Trinidad expressed on a nationalistic register (‘we culture’ etc.) are hardly a research method. Those emotions and knowledge are actually more like data, and so need to be allotted a different (and probably much better place?) in this field.