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A New Paradigm, Moving on from Bakhtin

Report: Workshop session conducted during the 2nd Annual International Symposium on Festival Culture (ISFC)

This was an engaging, 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 extant ethnographic research on carnivals elsewhere in the world. Narrating his personal experience of Trinidad carnival since 2009, focusing heavily on notable strands of intellectual debate on the festival, he made a strong case for taking a new direction in this field. Dr Wegner recommended that research on Trinidad carnival should seek to reconcile existing attitudes to inquiry, and aim for the 'mutual empowerment' of scholars who appear otherwise methodologically divided. On the one hand, assumptions have been made about Trinidad carnival being simply another site of Bakhtinian poetics, without due and proper attention to context.¹ On the other, carnival—when framed as an ethnographic phenomenon—has been subject to an excessive and deadening degree of contextualisation. Reductively explained away for its social function, or else claimed by a paternalistic effort to 'salvage' a tradition thought to be in decline, the cultural sovereignty and creative potential of carnival have been utterly traduced by ethnography.²

Being mindful of each tendency, Dr Wegner has looked to bring together these divorced 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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¹ Max Farrar, 'The Caribbean Carnival: Yearning for Freedom', *Caribbean Quarterly*, 65: 4 (2019), 553-574.

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

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.³ If both would make Bakhtin perforce 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 'carnavalesque' are divorced from their own fraught political beginnings.⁴ 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.⁵ When Dr Wegner suggested that scholars ought to 'move with Bakhtin, beyond 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.

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.⁶ 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 on public freedom, democracy or creative expression, 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.⁷ 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 interchanging 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 alighted on the suggestion

³ Mikhail M. Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, translated by Hélène Iswolsky (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1968), p.8.

⁴ Graham Pechey, 'Bakhtin and the Postcolonial Condition', in *Critical Essays on Mikhail Bakhtin*, ed. by Caryl Emerson (New York: G. K. & Co., 1999), pp. 347-354.

⁵ Samuel Kinser, *Rabelais's Carnival: Text, Context, Metatext* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990), p. 11 (fn. 1).

⁶ For a history of Trinidad Carnival, see: John Cowley, *Carnival, Canboulay and Calypso: Traditions in the Making* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996); Errol Hill, *Trinidad Carnival: Mandate for a National Theatre* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1972); and Hollis 'Chalkdust' Liverpool, *Rituals of Power and Rebellion: The Carnival Tradition in Trinidad and Tobago—1763-1962* (Chicago: Frontline Distribution, 2001).

that carnival is itself a 'trinity', or 'three body problem', comprising of 'mas' (masquerade), pan (group musical compositions played on the steel drum), as well as kaiso and calypso (sung, highly lyrical and improvisational performances).⁸ 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.⁹ 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 deriving from the Trinidad context may be generalised out of its Caribbean context, without forsaking the radically particular structure of its origins. In discussion, that prompted various questions including the following:

- To what degree does the current scholarship on carnival continue to address issues of political economy and aesthetics as if they were separate matters of concern? What lines of thinking or intellectual work have led to this point?
- What are the benefits as well as the limitations of this separation; where do its analytical uses begin and end?
- To what degree is such thinking generated from the experience of carnival? Which carnival or carnivals, and why?
- Does commentary on carnival and its histories in Trinidad intersect with a wider discourse of Caribbean exceptionalism? What particular challenges does this present for scholarship?

⁷ Valentin N. Volosinov, *Marxism and the Philosophy of Language*, trans. by Ladislav Matejka and Irwin R. Titunik (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1986).

⁸ Peter van Koningsbruggen, *Trinidad Carnival: A Quest for National Identity* (London: Macmillan Education Ltd., 1997), p. 37.

⁹ Samuel Kinser, *Carnival, American Style: Mardi Gras at New Orleans and Mobile* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press 1990), p. 21.

- What is the relationship between academic discourse on carnival and carnival practices themselves? What scope is there for two-way traffic between them?

Chair's discussion

An abiding debate here is about how to recognise carnival as an effective form of popular resistance, and to query whether this may be taken for granted as a reading of it. Carnival here has been forcefully sanctioned by the nation state ever since Trinidad and Tobago's political independence. It was colonised even during the high point of the British Empire, such as through commercialisation and direct sponsorship, which brought a system of competition and anti-democratic gestures such as title- and prize-giving for individual performers and carnival bands. Rather than remain caught within this preoccupying dilemma, however, these two speakers had worked to unpack and complicate concepts such as resistance.

My own understanding of Bakhtin's and all such linguistic-based approaches is that they have to be undergirded by attention to perception – what Réa de Matas in her doctoral and published work has called 'sensory embodied experience'. That could mean 'bracketing' Bakhtin in the manner of the phenomenological epoché, which involves taking a completely different methodological approach that starts with listening to the participants of carnival and trying to understand the specificity of their experiences. Inquiry could then move on to considering how to enfold those participants' personally-held explanations and narratives, as well as the meanings for carnival derived through auto-ethnography, etc. Let us be clear, however, that would involve contending with the materiality and emotionality of carnival, areas that Bakhtin does not cover. Clearly the 'new materialism' and historical materialism are not interchangeable approaches.

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-impooverished utilitarianism in the way of a rejection of 'theory' or anything along those lines. Rather, I would highlight the general discourse of 'exceptionalism' that circulates within 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 mainstay of mainstream 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.

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