Carnival in Leeds and London, UK:
Making New Black British Subjectivities

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Participating in carnival undermines the possibility of writing an objective account. This extraordinary experience, at once creative, transgressive and intensely pleasurable, melts the cool detachment of the traditional academic. Both the authors of this chapter, one formed at the center, as the British defined it, of an Empire, the other at its margin, made their way to carnival from quite different positions, but we find ourselves united in our love of the whirlwind of art, passion and struggle that carnival unleashes every year. We recognise that there are almost as many ways of analysing carnival as there are cities that host this marvellous spectacle, but in this chapter we articulate a common perspective, which though infused with our own subjectivity, nevertheless makes a serious effort to interpret the two largest Caribbean Carnivals in the UK.

The carnivals in Leeds and London, celebrated over the Bank Holiday weekends at the end of August every year since 1967, symbolize the creative, surreptitiously political, energies of men and women formed in the English-speaking Caribbean in the 1930s, 1940s and 1950s. Seeking a new life either in London, the cosmopolitan capital city of a recently-abandoned Empire, or in Leeds, a northern city at the end of its life as an industrial machine for that Empire, these men and women were inspired by their recent memories of the massive Trinidad Carnival, or the smaller, but equally vibrant carnival in St Kitts-Nevis. For many, carnival had a special place as an embodied, artistic representation of the pleasures, pains and protests of their lives in their islands of origin. As they found their place in the frequently un-loving Mother Country, re-uniting with their children or making new families in Britain, many of their children grew up within households in which the politics and art of carnival were central. Others, perhaps not deeply involved in the preparations, learned that the carnival summer Bank Holiday was a specially joyous, and specifically Caribbean, highlight of their year. These younger people today join with their parents and grandparents in the making of carnival.

But the analysis of carnival cannot be limited to mere description of its pleasures. This chapter offers an understanding of the carnivals in Leeds and London structured by the following themes: (1) The long history of the Trinidad Carnival being used as a vehicle for protest against the injustices of colonial subjugation have been transported into the UK Carnival tradition; the latter must be understood in the context of opposition to white British racism; (2) the occupation by carnival revellers of specific neighbourhoods of the major cities,
and the struggle, particularly in London, to maintain that public, mobile presence on the streets, is an essential component of the British Carnival tradition; the demand to occupy the streets takes particular force because carnival is an essentially embodied, performative art form; (3) because of these two phenomena, carnival has been one of the anvils on which new black British identifications have been forged. Over nearly 40 years in the UK, new concepts of black British identity, in which the creative and expressive arts are a central feature, have emerged. New subjects, formerly colonised, sometimes anti-colonial, and now post-colonial, have formed themselves throughout the post-war period of black settlement in the UK, and carnival has been an important instrument in this transformation.

The UK Carnival: the context of racism

Trinidadian/British poet, publisher and political activist John La Rose has pointed out that Caribbean migrants had already formed their artistic, political and social lives before they arrived in the UK: “We did not come alive in Britain” (Harris 1996: 240). One aspect of that history is the anti-colonial struggles for independence in the islands of the English speaking Caribbean (James 1985, Parry and Sherlock 1971, Richards 1989). Another is the experience of carnival. The earliest recollection of carnival for one of the authors of this chapter was as a child growing up in Trinidad, sitting on the bleachers of the Queen’s Park Savannah (Port of Spain) in scorching hot sun and seeing her fantasy come alive: the steel orchestra Silver Stars’ portrayal of *Gulliver’s Travels*. It was 1963. Right in front of her were all the children of Lilliput in glorious costumed splendor, exactly as she had imagined it from reading the book, surrounding the amazing, tied up and nailed down, giant sized Gulliver. The band was designed by Pat Chu Foon. To add to the delight, this was her first encounter with Steel Band in all its glory. The band that impressed her the most was Guinness Cavaliers. Lord Kitchener’s Kaiso of that year was “De road make to walk on carnival day,” but The Mighty Sparrow was also a serious contender with “Dan is de man in de van.” The sailor bands, all in white, with masqueraders numbering in the 1000’s — you had to duck the talcum powder! (Errol Hill (1972: 106-110) — provides a detailed description of the stage show at Trinidad’s first independence carnival of 1963. Not only did this leave a lifelong impression on her, it shaped her work as a creative artist in both Britain and the UK. In the mid-1970s she played a tee shirt mas of which her memories are just as vivid. She jumped up all over Notting Hill behind Miguel Barabas and his percussion crew, playing on the back of a pick-up truck.

Peter Minshall was designing for Notting Hill Carnival in those days, his famous “Hummingbird” costume taking shape at that time. On the road Ebony Steelband played a Peters and Lee hit “Don’t make me wait too long.” Ebony’s mas band that year was called “Colour my soul” and depicted all the national colours of the different Caribbean islands: Grenada, Trinidad, Jamaica. London Carnival would not have been the same if we did not all dance the night away in
one of the now late Charles Applewhite’s legendary carnival fetes. The latest calypso import from Trinidad that year was Shadow’s “Bassman” – bom bom pudi bom bom!

In a similar vein, the founders of the Leeds Carnival drew their inspiration from the childhood memories. Ian Charles joined his first mas camp – a Sailor Band – when he left his home in Arima to go to college in Port of Spain. Arthur France was “always fascinated by carnival” in his home island of St Kitts, despite the fact that his parents would not let him attend, because of the sometimes physical rivalry between the Steel Bands. “When I was a child I remember seeing Levi Jeffers and other men who are now in Leeds in a play called David and Goliath which they put on the road,” he recalls. Ian Charles always wanted to be in a troupe of robbers: “They would catch you on the corner and pull out their guns – you couldn’t get away until you paid them something!” (Interviews with Max Farrar, LWICC 1987: 24)

This chapter’s other author first encountered carnival in Leeds in the early 1970s. With none of the rich history of the Trinidad Carnival to inform him, shaped instead in England by a commitment to anti-racist politics, attending a carnival Queen Show at the Mecca Ballroom came as a cultural shock. These were early examples of carnival art in Leeds, produced by people from the small islands of St Kitts-Nevis, with help from West Indian students studying at Leeds University, but the costumes and the performance were so clearly superior to anything he had seen at an English fete that he immediately recognised them as magnificent examples of popular art. The program for that year lists seven Queen contestants, music of a type he had never dreamed he would hear (the Wilberforce Steel Band) and songs by Lord Silkie who had heard calypso in St Kitts, and was determined to continue the tradition in the somewhat colder climate of Leeds (Farrar 2001).

His abiding memory of that night is symptomatic of the troubled relationship between black and white in the UK: his rising desire to join the joyous, expressive spectacle of black culture, and his deep embarrassment as he and the other white people demonstrated how far they needed to travel to catch the spirit. A few days later, as the carnival procession gathered in the park opposite his house, he photographed the event for Chapeltown News, the local community newspaper. These are long shots – having few connections with the revellers, fearing rejection as an unwelcome, possibly racist, outsider, he pointed his camera and hoped for the best.1

His caution was well-founded. Racism by whites against black citizens, and the increasingly militant response, was the context in which black-white relationships were inevitably placed. By the 1970s, most of Britain’s black population had ten to twenty years’ experience of that hostility. Although social scientists disagreed on exact proportions of the white population who revealed “extremely prejudiced” attitudes in surveys in the 1950s, Anthony Richmond concluded that it was
around one-third of the population (Richmond 1961: 247). Searching for a place to rent, black British citizens found notices in the window reading “No coloureds” (see photo in Hiro 1991). It could get much worse. Wallace Collins described, on his first night in London in 1954, meeting “a big fellow with side-burns” lunging at him with a knife and shouting “You blacks, you niggers, why don’t you go back to the jungle” (Collins (1961) cited in Fryer 1984: 375). These big fellows, so-called Teddy Boys, aided and abetted by fascists, set off violent riots against black residents in Notting Hill in 1958 (Pilkington 1988, Fryer 1984: 378-80, Hiro 1992: 39-40). It is important to note that Sir Oswald Mosley, standing as the British Union of Fascists’ candidate for the Notting Hill area in the 1959 general election, was not able to stir up any further disorder, and received a derisory number of votes (Benewick 1972: 16).

Nevertheless, carnival was created in Britain as one of the responses by black settlers to the disenfranchisement, blatant racism, and victimization they experienced in the 1950s and 1960s. It should be understood as a very specific response – one which asserted the positive contribution that black people would make to the cultural life of Britain. Shortly after the Notting Hill “race” riots, Claudia Jones initiated the carnival tradition in the UK. Scholars differ in their accounts of the first carnival event, but the authoritative account is Marika Sherwood’s. Reproducing the souvenir brochure for the night, Sherwood explains that it took place at St Pancras Town Hall in central London on 30th January 1959, with a cabaret program directed by Edric Connor, choreography by Stanley Jack, with stage décor by Rhoda Mills and Charles Grant. Artists included Cleo Laine, The Southlanders, Boscoe Holder Troupe, Mike McKenzie Trio, The Mighty Terror, Pearl Prescod, Sepia Serendares, Fitroy Coleman, Corinne Skinner-Carter, Trinidad All Stars and Hi-Fi Steel Bands, West Indian Students Dance Band, and Rupert Nurse and his Orchestra (Sherwood 1999: 54-6). Jones, whose family had emigrated to the USA from Trinidad when she was nine, had been arrested and served with a deportation order in 1951 (which was appealed) because of her Communist Party activity. Trinidad was extremely reluctant to admit her, and she arrived in London in 1955 (Sherwood 1999: 22-6). Jones founded the West Indian Gazette, and its content included contributions from leading Caribbean novelists such as George Lamming and Andrew Salkey, as well as British and international news. Jones “had a distinct socialist and anti-imperialist perspective” (Alleyne 2002: 28), but she also had a particular perspective on the arts. In the 1959 brochure she wrote of the “event of Notting Hill and Nottingham” (both areas had experienced “race” riots in 1958) as the context for “our Caribbean Carnival,” arguing that if carnival had evoked the wholehearted response from the peoples from the Islands of the Caribbean in the new West Indies Federation, this is itself testament to the role of the arts in bringing people together for common aims, and to its fusing of the cultural, spiritual, as well as political and economic interests of West Indians in the UK and at home. (Jones, cited in Sherwood 1999: 157)
By 1962, the event at the Seymour Hall had attracted the Mighty Sparrow, one of the most politically acute of the Trinidadian calypsonians, and the West Indian Gazette organised another performance at the Manchester Free Trade Hall in the north of England (Sherwood 1999: 161). Jones died in 1964, but the tradition she had established was directly utilized in the first Notting Hill street fair which included a distinctive West Indian Carnival presence in 1966. Darcus Howe, writer, broadcaster and former editor of the radical monthly Race Today\(^3\) remembers “five hundred revellers and a makeshift steelband in a swift turnaround along Great Western road, Westbourne Park and thence onto Powis Square” (Howe, interview with Geraldine Connor).

The initiative for this event came from Rhaune Laslett, a woman of Native American and Russian descent who was president of the London Free School. She organised cultural events and a street procession with the aim of familiarising white and black people with each other’s customs, improving the image of Notting Hill, and generating warmth and happiness (Cohen 1993: 10-11).

By 1969, Mrs Lazlett’s fair had included: an Afro-Cuban Band, the London Irish Girl Pipers, Russ Henderson’s West Indian three-man band, the Asian Music Circle, the Gordon Bulgarians, a Turkish Cypriot band, the British Tzchekoslovak Friendship band, a New Orleans marching band, the Concord Multi-racial group and the Trinidad Folk Singers. But all had appeared “within an unmistakenly British – if not English – cultural framework” (Cohen 1993: 19).

It took some time for the Notting Hill Carnival to take on a completely Caribbean form, organised by British black people. From 1971 onwards, the conventions of the Trinidad Carnival, particularly the steel pan orchestra, were introduced, and leadership came from West Indians.\(^4\) One of the main movers of this turn was Lesley Palmer, a teacher and musician, born in Trinidad but raised in London, who went back to Trinidad to study its carnival, returning in 1973 to work on mobilising steel and mas bands (Cohen 1993: 26, Palmer 1986).

The context in which carnival was created in London and Leeds is political in the sense that making culture cannot be divorced from the social and political system in which that culture is located. Carnival is one of the various modes of action by which black settlers and their children changed the cultural life of Britain. Arthur France explains the political context very clearly: carnival was established in Leeds in 1967 as a means of taking the heat out of the racial strife of the day. France, one of the originators of the Leeds West Indian Carnival, was a leading member, with Calvin Beech and Gertrude Paul, of the United Caribbean Association (formed in 1964) in Leeds, which had already initiated a series of lobbies and demonstrations against racial discrimination in the city. Remembering carnival in his native St Kitts, France recognised the need to produce an event which would celebrate West Indian culture, as well as provide
time-off from the conflictual business of demanding equal rights in a resistant white society.  

The origin of the Leeds Carnival lies in a fête organised in 1966 at Kitson College (now Leeds College of Technology) by two students, Frankie Davis (from Trinidad) and Tony Lewis (from Jamaica). The British Soul band “Jimmy James and the Vagabonds” played, Marlene Samlal Singh organised a troupe of people dressed as Red Indians and Frankie Davis wore his costume on the bus from Roundhay Road to the town center. The party ended at the British Council’s International House, off North Street.

Arthur France, who still chairs the Leeds Carnival Committee, had first suggested starting a carnival in 1966. He approached the United Caribbean Association for backing, but it initially rejected the idea, and then set up a committee which did not deliver. To push his idea forward, France then selected another committee, which included Willie Robinson, Wally Thompson, Irwin and Rounica, Samlal Singh, Rose McAlister, Ken Thomas, Anson Shepherd, Calvin Beech and Vanta Paul. By 1967, the carnival preparations were underway. Ma Buck was centrally involved in the organising, and Ian Charles’ home in Manor Drive, Leeds 6, was turned into a mas camp in which three costumes were produced. A similar fate befall Samlal Singh’s home in Lunan Place, Leeds 8. The first Queen Show was held in the Jubilee Hall, on Savile Place, off Chapeltown Road, Leeds 7. The Sun Goddess – worn by Vicky Cielto, designed by Veronica Samalsingh, Tyrone Irwin, George Baboolal and Clive Watkins, took first prize. Betty Bertie designed and made a costume called The Snow Queen, and Wally Thompson made one called The Gondola. Willie Robinson made Cleopatra, a costume worn by Gloria Viechwech, while the fifth costume was called The Hawaiian Queen.

The Gay Carnival Steel Band, which later became the Boscoe Steel Band, including Roy Buchanan, Rex Watley, Curtland, Dabbo, Tuddy, Vince, Clark, Desmond and others, played steel pan music in the procession that year, joined by the Invaders, also from Leeds (led by Prentice), the St Christopher Steel Band from Birmingham, and another band from Manchester. Troupes on the road included the Cheyenne Indians (with Ian Charles as the Chief), the Fantasia Britannia troupe (lead by Vanta Paul), the Sailors (organised by Willie Robinson), and Veronica Samlalsingh and Anson Shepherd produced a children’s band. The procession wound its way from Potternewton Park to the Leeds Town Hall, where a crowd of about 1,000 people were entertained by a steel band competition judged by Junior Telford from London, who had brought the first Trinidadian steel band to Europe. That night, the Last Lap dance was held at the Leeds Town Hall. Telford took the news back to London, and the Leeds troupes were invited to attend the Notting Hill street fair.  

Leeds rests its claim to be the first West Indian Carnival in the UK on the fact that it was the first to be exclusively Caribbean in form, and the first to be run by a black British organisation.
Refusing the racial assumptions of imperial British culture, carnival has appropriated and reformulated European aesthetics, combining them with African traditions, and created a new cultural space as a tool for liberation. As Brian Alleyne points out that, despite differences in detail, the existing studies of the British Carnival all see the development of carnival in Britain in terms of a struggle by West Indians to make a public expression of a collective identity in the face of a structurally racist and hostile social reality in Britain. They have treated the carnival as one instance of the ongoing struggle of Black people to forge social and political space in Britain.

(Alleyne 2002: 67)

The embodied spatial practices of carnival

The established order in hierarchically-organized societies always perceives the gathering of crowds of the “lower orders” as a potential threat. The history of the Trinidad Carnival, from the time when the former slaves began to participate en-masse in festivities that had probably been reserved primarily for the master class, is a history of prohibitions and bans (Pearse 1956). From the first procession, Leeds Carnival organisers have always been careful in negotiating the route and the stewarding with the West Yorkshire Police Force, and Inspector Roy Exley’s helpful response to the Leeds committee’s approach is warmly commemorated in its 25th Anniversary brochure (LWICC 1992). Nevertheless, as Willie Robinson, a participant in the first Leeds Carnival recollects: “As a measure of the insecurity of the West Indian (sic) community in Leeds, some still believed that those taking part would be arrested on the day” (LWICC 1987: 8).

Early support from the local council for the Notting Hill Carnival evaporated in 1966, seemingly because the Free School was believed by councillors to be a subversive organisation – the Free School was at the heart of organising local black and white tenants against slum landlords (Cohen 1993: 13-14, citing Kensington News press reports from July 1966 onwards).

Notting Hill's Carnival subsequently obtained significant support from a variety of sources, but in 1976 it was the scene of major violent protest – described in the mass media as rioting – by young black men against the Metropolitan Police. 1,500 policemen were deployed that year, and used what some observers described as “highhanded and severe” methods in their dealings with the youth (Cohen 1993: 34). 325 policemen were hospitalised, and 60 people were arrested (Race Today September 1976: 170). This was the starting point for a concerted and long-running effort to remove the carnival from the streets of Notting Hill. The police and the council were faced with determined resistance from the Carnival Development Committee (CDC), chaired by Darcus Howe, whose arguments in various issues of Race Today were summarised in his
1978 pamphlet *The Road Make to Walk on Carnival Day*. The use of a title borrowed from Lord Kitchener’s calypso was one of several markers of the CDC’s solidarity with the working class pan and mas men and women who saw the history of carnival as one aspect of the emancipation struggle. Abner Cohen states that the intense argument between this tendency, and the rival Carnival and Arts Committee (CAC), with its moderate, middle-class black leadership, was finally resolved in favour of the CAC in 1981, when the Arts Council intervened to change the funding arrangements for the carnival (Cohen 1993: 45-51).

In a critical review of Cohen’s book, David Roussel-Milner, friend of Claudia Jones, a founder of the Martin Luther King Foundation, carnivalist and Arts Council worker until 1985 (Sherwood 1999: 14, and *passim*), argues that the CAC was formed in order to divide the Notting Hill Carnival movement, and that the Arts Council used the existence of two committees as an excuse to withdraw support. He strongly implies that there was a conspiracy between the police, the Arts Council and the local authorities “to take control of carnival” (Roussel-Milner 1996: 9).

When the CAC collapsed in 1988, the Carnival Enterprise Committee took over, chaired by barrister Claire Holder, and major changes were introduced to the organisation of carnival in Notting Hill. A new framework was imposed by the police, which included strict enforcement of an early end to the event; a 75 percent reduction in the numbers of sound systems allowed; prevention of dancing behind the mas bands; intensive video surveillance and interception of black youths; strict adherence by the procession to the agreed route. Perhaps most significant of all, the black youths who had formerly coalesced around sound systems were now completely separated from the mobile carnival procession (Cohen 1993: 65-70). Since then, Notting Hill Carnival has become a commercialised, highly respectable event. Having been subjected to “an overwhelming onslaught from different directions intended to force it out or confine it within a strait-jacket” (Cohen 1993: 9), it may appear now to be fully contained within the parameters laid down by the establishment.

To draw this conclusion would be to overlook the spatial politics of carnival, and the embodied performances that it enacts. Henri Lefebvre (1976: 31) argued that “[s]pace is permeated with social relations . . . shaped and moulded from historical and natural elements.” As we have seen, Notting Hill is just such a space. According to Darcus Howe: “We have captured the streets of Notting Hill and transformed it into an arena of cultural rebellion” (Cohen 1993: 111). The “we” here is significantly ambiguous; Howe probably refers primarily to black (Caribbean) people, but might well include all those white and other non-white residents who have supported carnival and other local struggles. Michael Keith refers to this area as a “symbolic location” and argues that Notting Hill, in the period 1975 to 1988, was “the spatial realization of a deeply rooted historical struggle” (Keith 1993: 123-9). In this perspective, the current ascendancy of a
group of black Britons described by their opponents as “yuppie capitalists,” “coconuts,” and “lackeys” (Cohen 1993: 68) might be regarded as one moment in the dialectic. That process took another turn in 2002 when Claire Holder, who at least grew up in Trinidad in dialogue with carnival, was deposed as Chief Executive of the Notting Hill Carnival Trust and replaced by Professor Chris Mullard. According to Darcus Howe, this was the result of a coup organised by Lee Jasper, the black British adviser to the Lord Mayor of London (Interview with Max Farrar, 8 June 2002). The Mayor’s interest in Carnival is well-known (Jasper 2001), but Mullard strongly denied this allegation, arguing that there was no pressure from the Lord Mayor’s office. His position as Chair of the Trust was short-term, with the objective of restoring democratic involvement of all parties engaged in the Notting Hill Carnival (Interview with Max Farrar, 27 September 2002; Mullard 2002).

If a fully democratic process was to emerge, the radical tendency within the London Carnival movement, exemplified by the Association for a People’s Carnival and the People’s War sound system (Alleyne 2001: 66-74) might well take control and restore ‘the working class tradition’ in the London Carnival. The formation of the Notting Hill International Carnival Committee, with its democratic constitution and membership composed of mas bands, steel bands, sound systems, calypsonians, participating music bands and Notting Hill tenants and residents association, indicated that such a process was in motion (La Rose 1990). Support for this proposition comes from the Leeds Carnival. Under the leadership of people dedicated to the earlier forms of carnival, who learned from the conflict in London, and who maintained firm opposition to hyper-commercialisation, Leeds Carnival has not only maintained a trouble-free procession throughout its long history, but has also nurtured designers, steel bands, Soca Sounds and mas bands with deep roots in the black communities of northern England. Stripping itself of political rhetoric, negotiating carefully with the police, securing the support of all the mas camps, with professional public relations provided by Susan Pitter, Leeds Carnival has finessed the politics of space. It has successfully varied its route, initially processing through Chapeltown and the city center, then basing itself only in Chapeltown, and (in 2002) agreeing to the city council’s request that it enter town center again, holding the Carnival Queen contest on a specially constructed cat-walk in the new Millennium Square outside the Civic Hall. It is likely that in future years the Bank Holiday Monday procession will enter the city center and hold a show in the Square. This development is a further indication of the British-Caribbean peoples in Leeds moving from the margin to the center (Julien and Mercer 1996).7

Another pointer to the complexity of the cultural politics of carnival lies in the special form of embodied performativity that it represents. Mikhail Bakhtin provided an analysis of Rabelais’s representation of the sixteenth century carnival in France which is relevant to an understanding of the London and Leeds West Indian Carnivals today. “[C]arnival is one of Bakhtin’s great
obsessions, because in his understanding of it, carnival, like the novel, is a means of displaying otherness: carnival makes familiar relations strange” (Holquist 1990: 89). One form of this display of “otherness” is the production of bodies which, by use of extraordinary costume and often bizarre cosmetics, radically transforms the body’s appearance. This is a new type of body, one which is often transgressive of conventional norms. Bakhtin produced a vision of what he called “the grotesque body”:

A body in the act of becoming. It is never finished, never completed: it is continually built, created, and builds and creates another body . . . Eating, drinking, defecation . . . copulation, pregnancy, dismemberment, swallowing up by another body . . . In all these events, the beginning of life and end of life are closely linked and interwoven.


Bakhtin’s concept of dialogism – that thoughts, words and existences take place only as dialogue with the other (Roberts 1994: 247) – applies to carnival because this is one of the sites in which the grotesque body is displayed. In carnival, all bodies are in dialogue. It would be surprising if all the excesses which Bakhtin described in the Rabelaisian, fictional carnivalesque world of the mid-sixteenth century had survived intact in the twenty-first century carnival in the UK (indeed, we would argue that this reduction of excess should be addressed by carnival in the UK today), Bakhtin’s general point about “grotesque bodies” remains highly relevant. In the Leeds Carnival of 2001 people played mas dressed in rags and smeared in cosmetics to represent mud, and Captain Wenham’s Masqueraders troupe (which was a major feature of the Leeds Carnival until very recently) were dressed in tatters and wore grotesque masks. Benji’s troupe once appeared as Pallbearers, carrying a body in a gorilla mask, playing dead. In 2001 Ruth Bundey appeared in an elephant’s mask (referencing the Hindu god Gamesh). The regular appearance in the Leeds Carnival of men who delight in dressing as women (Hebrew Rawlins and Michael Paul being the best examples) is another aspect of this playful transgressiveness.

In contemporary carnival in the UK, the “grotesque” is in dialogue with its opposite, “beauty,” and, perhaps in keeping with the postmodern obsession with the perfection of form according to increasingly globalised notions of what constitutes beauty, this form now predominates. It is important to note, however, that in both the Leeds and the London Carnivals, costumes are worn by people of all shapes and sizes, and aesthetic standards are mainly judged according to the artistry of the costume, rather than the beauty of the wearer. Holquist writes that these bodies, for Bakhtin, and we would argue for today’s carnival, “militate against monadism, the illusion of closed-off bodies or isolated psyches in bourgeois individualism, and the concept of a pristine, closed-off, static identity and truth wherever it may be found.” The Caribbean Carnival is thus one source of resistance to the “egotism of the West” that Bakhtin denounced (Holquist
1990: 90).

**New Black Subjectivities**

Around the middle of the twentieth century, when British citizens from the West Indies were beginning to settle in the UK, George Lamming wrote:

> It is the brevity of the West Indian's history and the fragmentary nature of the different cultures which have fused into something new; it is the absolute dependence on the values in that language of his coloniser which has given him a special relation to the word, colonialism. It is not merely a political definition; it is not merely the result of certain economic arrangements. It started as these, and grew somewhat deeper. Colonialism is at the very base and structure of the West Indian cultural awareness. His reluctance in asking for complete, political freedom . . . is due to the fear that he has never had to stand. A foreign or absent Mother has always cradled his judgement.


This was the ideological context in which the carnival movement in the UK was created. It is one which we would argue has almost, but not entirely, disappeared. Stuart Hall has analysed the change that became observable in the 1980s. He argued that, in an earlier period of cultural politics, when black people were “placed, positioned at the margins . . . blacks have typically been the objects, but rarely the subjects, of the practices of representation.”

Now, as a political struggle over representation itself emerged, there was “the recognition of the extraordinary diversity of subjective positions, social experiences and cultural identities which compose the category ‘black’; that is, the recognition that ‘black’ is essentially a politically and culturally *constructed* category, which cannot be grounded in a set of fixed trans-cultural or transcendental racial categories and which therefore has no guarantees in nature.” Thus it is no longer possible to hypothesize an “essential black subject.” Instead, we are “plunged headlong into the maelstrom of a continuously contingent, unguaranteed, political argument and debate, a critical politics, a politics of criticism” (Hall [1989],1996: 442-4).

The debate that raged around carnival in London was a critical moment in the representation of the conflicting subjective and political positions which are evident in black British culture today. The actual practice of carnival then reproduces a variety of subjectivities on the streets of UK cities. Thus in Leeds we see the truck hired over the past five years or so by the Pan African Cultural Group, wearing African clothes and playing African instruments, representing themselves quite clearly as Africans and Africanists, but not Afro-centric: they use Kwame Nkrumah’s socialist concept of Pan-Africanism, and some of the
members are white. The Godfather’s truck carries a precarious pile of speaker boxes, along with a crew of older men who may well be in suspenders and brassieres, blasting out Soca hits recently imported, usually from Trinidad. These men are emphatically Caribbeans, but their Bacchanalian followers, some of whom are their children, are equally emphatically black British, identifying with Soca as one of a variety of musical interests, which will include Soul, R & B, UK Garage, Hip Hop and Reggae.

While this wide variety of styles and identifications will be evident throughout the Notting Hill Carnival, in Leeds, with the Committee’s insistence on foregrounding the steel pan and Soca traditions, sound systems will be confined to the periphery of the carnival. The willingness of the young Leeds Carnival revellers to accept this limitation during the carnival period is one indication of the fluidity of the identifications that they make.

Thus, many of these new black subjects have moved beyond the essentialism of an earlier individualistic, tunnel-visioned consciousness toward a state of multi-consciousness or inter-culturalism. Consciously or subconsciously, they have moved toward the notion that cultural identities are actively constructed through particular communication processes, social practices and articulations within specific circumstances. In doing so, they have constructed a new cultural space and place. This new position insists upon cultural negotiation which involves a process of linking together several elements that may not necessarily have had any previous relation to each other. This articulation represents a movement between alternative conceptions of truth, a movement toward a many-stranded consciousness that moves beyond the limited definition of hybridisation as a mixing of only two strands.

Carnival plays a crucial part in blending the wide variety of identifications that are available in post-modern, or late-modern, Britain. Inherent within the aesthetic of carnival is the seamless fusion of arts practice and community engagement. In particular, carnival is now seen and often used as an effective creative tool for bringing disparate communities together in common celebration. It has repeatedly demonstrated the potential it offers for communication and unification across social, cultural and political boundaries, and more recently carnival has been seen as a model for artistic and social co-operation, integration and cohesion, ultimately offering a creative opportunity for social and political change. Despite the commonalities that can be drawn between the carnival activities of various British Caribbean communities, the nature and form of artistic expression is also characterised by a diversity that is reflective of the differences and complexities evidenced within particular areas of the Caribbean Diaspora. This cross-fertilisation of celebratory archetypes reflects influences from a variety of communities including Trinidadian, Barbadian, Dominican and Jamaican. In fact the Liverpool Carnival is a blend of cultural tradition from six Caribbean islands.
But the carnival tradition in the UK is more than simply a means of unifying people whose origins lie in the various islands of the Caribbean sea. Thus the Bradford Carnival has embraced contributions from Dominica and Barbados in the Caribbean, but also includes Asian and white English cultural forms. The Unity Day Carnival in Wolverhampton reflects Barbadian, white English and Asian influences. At Notting Hill, the Reggae of Jamaica is heard alongside the Soca and Steelband of Trinidad, the Samba of Brazil and the Jungle, Drum’n’bass and Garage of Britain.

In fact British Carnival practice has acquired its particular uniqueness and flavour precisely because it has embraced alternative immigrant communities – African, Asian, South American – all of whom have their own specific celebratory promenade traditions from which they can draw.

This diversity is also reflected in the increasingly common practice for the formal aspects and ideologies integral to Caribbean-style carnival to be borrowed, appropriated and integrated, to enhance, and transform British Carnival and British celebratory traditions. Having been witnessed first in the early Notting Hill street fairs, this transformation can be seen to great effect at the Barrow-in Furness and Luton Carnivals as well as the Fish Quay Festival in North Shields, Newcastle where there is a long and established tradition of carnival to build upon. A more understated approach has been taken at events such as High Wycombe, Reading and Dover Carnivals.

Tom Fleming (1998) has produced the most sustained analysis of carnival in the UK (in Leeds and in Bristol) which draws upon sociologies of space and identity, but our final example of the potential for carnival to formulate and express new identities and new cultural practices comes from Geraldine Connor’s work Carnival Messiah. This massive production, staged in 1999 and 2002 by the West Yorkshire Playhouse in Leeds, represents a unique fusion of the Caribbean Carnival with European opera. Geraldine Connor describes herself as a “New European” – “a living exponent of the meeting of Europe, Africa and Asia four centuries ago . . . I carry all that cultural baggage with me.” She writes: “Carnival Messiah drags Handel’s best-known work kicking and screaming into the new millennium . . . By superimposing traditional Western European musical and theatrical devices on the traditional Trinidad Carnival practice, an holistic, organic metamorphosis occurs . . . [it] creates a natural bridge of cross-fertilisation.” “Carnival Messiah subverts the ideology of homogenisation; instead, it celebrates difference and otherness . . . [which does not] equate to cultural separatism or imply a kind of cultural assimilation. It should instead explore issues of divergence and ‘otherness’ in terms of cultural parallels and divergences, cultural uniqueness and similarities” (Connor 2002). This model of identities forged in cultural and political practice takes us beyond the entrenched positions imposed by racism. “New European” might be a self-identity to be adopted by those of us in Europe who read the history of that continent as one of migration and cultural interchange, who recognise the implausibility of describing
Conclusion
This chapter has provided the bones of a history of carnival in London and in Leeds, and it has offered an interpretation of carnival practice. Accepting that carnival is an intensely subjective experience performed by people who cannot escape their cultural and political histories, and thus that there are many “truths” to be constructed around carnival, it has nevertheless argued that the tradition in the UK is best understood as a subtle, cultural/political response to white racism. Its subtlety lies in its production of an invisible politics, a politics which is normally non-confrontational. Carnival in the UK understands that the anti-human negativity of racism is effectively challenged by the embodied, human performance of art – an art which has been created “by the people, for the people,” which occupies and transforms public space. This is an art led by dark-skinned people, which demonstrates their centrality to the UK cities in which they have settled, and which includes all people of goodwill, whatever their pigmentation. As Geraldine Connor (2002) puts it: “This new cultural space then becomes a tool of liberation for all.”
This chapter arises from a paper presented by Geraldine Connor titled “Carnival as an instrument of post colonial liberation – In search of a liberative potential for the post-modern West Indian subject” at the World Conference on Carnival, Showcasing the Caribbean” in 1998. The overall argument in this chapter is similar to the one made at the conference, and whole paragraphs have been lifted from that speech. But, whereas the speech contained the lyric of carnival, this chapter has the drone of academe, providing another textual indicator of the problems and possibilities of hybridising cultures.

Anne Walmsley’s meticulously researched book on the Caribbean Arts Movement says that Jones “coordinated the first West Indian Carnival in Britain, at Porchester Hall, Bayswater” (Walmsley 1992: 21).

Howe is related to the late CLR James, and Race Today, published under Howe’s editorship in London from 1974 until 1982, is the most significant British exemplar of that eminent Trinidadian Marxist’s cultural politics (see Buhle,1988, Farred 1996).

Close readers may be puzzled by the shifting signifiers in this chapter. “West Indian” is used to reflect the language of the 1960s and early 1970s. In fact the Leeds Carnival insists to this day on calling itself the Leeds West Indian Carnival. In the 1980s, the term “African-Caribbean” began to replace “West Indian.” The authors of this chapter use the term “Caribbean” to reflect the importance of the other national heritages, apart from African, among people of Caribbean descent. Alternatively, we use “black British.” Unlike some writers we use the lower case for “black,” because we do not want to fetishize the colour of human skin. Because of the persistence of racism, these are intensely political categories and we recognise that there are several other terms which other authors prefer.

Arthur France made this point in a speech given to the conference of Black and Asian Studies Association (BASA) held in Leeds on 19th October 1996. The point has been followed in Max Farrar’s conversations with Arthur France, in which he confirms that this was his approach to the formation of Carnival in Leeds. BASA (formerly ASACHIB, Secretary: Marika Sherwood) has a Newsletter obtainable from the Institute of Commonwealth Studies, 28 Russell Square, London WC1B 5DS.

This account of the origins of Leeds Carnival is almost identical to the one in Farrar (2001). Arthur France recalls taking one of his early troupes to the Notting Hill Carnival on a very wet August Bank Holiday Monday. Both Palmer (1986) and Cohen (1993: 18) give 1968 as the year of the torrential rain. Palmer (1986) recalls “‘man’ from the north [Leeds] joining ‘man’ from Trinidad, and ‘man’ from the Grove . . .pulling the pan . . . the rain so steady.”

This account holds true in general, but the Leeds Carnival has not always been harmonious. Three people died at the Leeds Carnival in 1990. Two were deliberate murders. One was accidental – a ricochet from gunshot. None of the alleged perpetrators, or victims, were from Leeds (Farrar 2001). The Committee moved swiftly to change the arrangements made by sound systems, with full co-operation from the sound crews. The dissension that has occasionally taken place about the organisation of the Leeds Carnival has always been amicably resolved.

To get closer to the Leeds Carnival visit the web site “Celebrating 35 years of the Leeds West Indian Carnival,” developed by Pavilion in Leeds, at www.newmasmedia.co.uk. This contains photographs, music and interviews with carnival participants.

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Leeds
August 2002

About 6,600 words