Caribbean Carnival Festivals in the time of Pandemics

Welcome speech delivered at the 2nd Annual International Symposium on Festival Culture (ISFC)

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First, welcome participants, academics and supporters of festival cultures to the second International Symposium on Festival Culture (ISFC). Events like this, organised by FCRE, allow discussions and exchanges between artists, academics and administrators, and provide opportunities to learn from each other's festivals through various artistic and financial models and practices. This is vitally important for the progress and development of festivals based on popular culture in this time of pandemics.

I come from the experience of the culture, art and struggle of the Caribbean Carnival and its global diaspora, including the Notting Hill Carnival. Founded over 300 years ago, these festivals can be traced back to before times of slavery in the Americas and the Caribbean, created by everyday people from marginalised and oppressed communities. These celebrations of popular culture have grown to become hugely attractive to a wide range of people across the world, through their rituals, art, music, masquerade, dance, song, inclusion and spectacle.

There is social significance in this festival art and, most importantly, they have the commitment of the everyday people—both trained and untrained—who produce the various artistic elements and organisation of the Caribbean Carnival festivals. In 2017, I gave a talk at the International Conference on Caribbean Carnival Cultures at Leeds Beckett University, where I outlined the culture of resistance developed in the Caribbean Carnival. An edited version is included in Caribbean Quarterly; A Journal of Caribbean culture Vol 65 No 4 Special Issue with other presentations from that conference, though this will not be discussed in this paper.

Festivals of popular culture have been stopped and banned due to the global Coronavirus pandemic. This began in 2020, continued throughout 2021, and 2022 is not looking hopeful. I want to briefly set out the major issues for popular festivals like the Caribbean Carnivals in the future, discussing both how the festivals have responded in the past, and how they propose to address this new phase going forward.

I suggest 4 issues which may have an impact on the future of festivals:
1) Health pandemics or epidemics
2) Climate Change Emergency
3) Social Justice movements
4) Cultural identity and artistic transformation

Health Pandemics or epidemics

The Coronavirus pandemic is not the first and will not be the last health risk that threatens popular festivals. In 1925, Trinidad suffered a major outbreak of rabies in livestock, which was then transmitted to humans via vampire bats. This was compounded by a local folk tale character: The Soucouyant, a flying blood sucker. Listen to kaiso "Soucouyant" by Lord Blakie [Youtube link https://youtu.be/yR576U0z]. Though this generated much concern in society—especially with regards to attending events—the Carnival turned fear into art, by producing huge dancing Vampire Bat or "Bat masquerade". More of that later.

In 1972 a Polio outbreak stopped Carnival in Trinidad, and it was postponed until May. This decision was very unpopular, and due to poor planning, the May Carnival was rained out and a complete disaster. Lord Kitchener made commentary in his Kaiso (Calypso) Rain-O-Rama popularly known as Mas in May [Youtube link https://youtu.be/4SfiFGsdzNE]. "Polio or no Polio. We want we mas".

The Bird Flu or Avian Influenza epidemic in Asia in 2005 threatened the production of "pretty mas" or "bikini and

beads mas" in Caribbean Carnivals. The feathers that dominate this type of mas could not be imported due to risk of infection, so Mas producers had to source producers had to source feathers from elsewhere, or creatively replace real bird feathers with artistic substitutes.

Festival organisers and creatives must use the time festivals are not happening due to the global pandemic to actively look at how to improve the festivals when they return. We must take advantage of enforced leisure. Remember, the steel pan was created by young, unemployed creative geniuses in Trinidad, when the Caribbean Carnival was banned for a few years during the war period. The newly created steel pan instrument emerged in Trinidad the day the Second World War ended.

In 2021, the banned Carnival communities in Trinidad, Brazil and other areas globally created a new way to experience the spirit of the Carnival: by organising a Backyard Jam themselves, at home. This was supported with the precise instructions and music from the Soca song and video produced by Farmer Nappy "Backyard Jam" [Youtube link https://youtu.be/HQyKZei0Urs]. In the banned Notting Hill Carnival 2020, individuals in full masquerade paraded solo around the carnival route. Others in masquerade engaged in the rituals of Carnival and visited all the significant sites in the Carnival area like Trini Hill, the Judging Point and Under the Bridge at Ladbroke Grove.

The Coronavirus pandemic has really challenged festival organisers. One solution has been "Virtual Carnival" online. For many people in the Caribbean Carnival community this has received a mixed reaction, and met with suspicion. Attendees interviewed on TV were seen protesting, "this is NOT Carnival. Carnival cannot be virtual!", though it is clear that big business sponsors and advertisers appear to be attracted to this format of culture. It would be interesting to see what academic demographic studies have seen about the impact and influence of the Virtual Carnival.

Despite the mixed reaction, the Virtual Carnival appears to be useful for communicating history and education and being acceptable for concerts and musical performances. It is clear festival organisers will continue to be creatively challenged, although it has certainly raised the question of cultural identity, purpose and origin. "What is the Caribbean Carnival? What culturally defines it?"

The Climate Change Emergency

The Climate Emergency is an ever-growing influencing factor on Carnival, and on all festivals, with businesses big and small needing to address and adapt to the crisis. Festivals of popular culture will have to respond to this in practical ways, and will need to influence their performers, audiences and spectators. Caribbean Carnivals, with their origins in the poor and dispossessed, have tended to be champions of recycling by using waste materials, transforming the material and creating something artistic and new, like masquerade and musical or percussion instruments.

Examples are the steel pan orchestras made from discarded 55-gallon oil drums, Tamboo Bamboo percussion bands created from different cut lengths of bamboo, scrapped cars to provide brake hubs for percussion "Iron" for "Iron Sections" making up the "Engine Rooms" of steel bands, old conch shells used as horn-type musical instruments, the cutting of short lengths of wood to make "toc toc" instruments and calabash gourds filled with seeds used as shakers. This sentiment is also evident in the masquerade: Crocus and flour bags were stripped and cut-up for mas across the Caribbean – a prime example being the Sensay mas in Dominica. Old plastic bags have been used by various Carnival designers as a material for making mas in Notting Hill and other carnivals, while cardboard and paper are used to make colourful, intricately decorated masquerade in the Junkanoo festival of the Bahamas. Natural products like grass and banana leaves have been used to make "Fig" and "Ju Ju Warrior" mas. These natural materials are cheap and recyclable and help to recreate the African mas traditions of Caribbean Carnivals globally.

On the other hand, the Trinidad business Carnival model that dominates festivals globally uses fossil fuels for its sound trucks and generators. There are many ways many ways this unsustainable use of energy can be reduced. One way is smaller less-polluting vehicles – for example, a Brazilian mas band in Notting Hill Carnival uses an electric tug to pull its Carnival floats and PA on the Carnival route, protecting their masqueraders and spectators. Another issue is that modern global mas production in the Caribbean Carnival rarely uses local materials. Costumes, headpieces and mas materials are imported from thousands of miles away in Asia, though

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it must be noted that authorities in Notting Hill Carnival have weaponised health and safety as a tool, and seemingly use it as a means of regulating and curtailing the Carnival. Festival organisers must employ their own qualified experts to counter this abuse.

Festival organisers can influence the crowds, stallholders and bars in popular Caribbean Carnivals to use recyclable biodegradable plastics for cups and utensils. Festivals can easily reduce their carbon footprint by monitoring and setting targets to reduce waste, particularly limiting their use of plastic.

Additionally, if festival organisers encourage and facilitate more acoustic music participation (such as steel orchestras, Afro Blocos and iron and rhythm sections) which don't require the need for generators or trailer trucks will not only have a positive environmental impact, but will also encourage more live music and diversity in our festivals. Finally, creative businesspeople employed by the festival can monetise the tremendous waste produced after the events end and produce a money stream for the festivals. This can diversify the festival's income streams, and will also take action in response to the Climate Change Emergency that affects all our futures.

Social Justice Movements

The clamour for democracy and accountability globally during the pandemic is not likely to abate. Black Lives Matter, Hong Kong, Myanmar, the Palestinians and Gaza, Uighurs, and justice for the victims of the Grenfell Tower Fire are social justice issues that will dominate our lives for a while.

Transparency, accountability and financial justice needs to be instilled in our popular festivals as well. Social Justice will be an aspect of many popular festivals and, in turn, so will the opposition to these movements from the authorities. The Caribbean Carnivals have engaged in social justice struggles for a long time. They constantly used the double entendre of the Kaiso songs and the themes of their masquerades to oppose and remind us of the horrors of slavery. This is in the form of Traditional mas or Ole mas, which I prefer to call Foundation Mas, as it exists and persists in the masquerade of Caribbean Carnivals to this day.

Masquerade such as Jab Jab, Jab Molassie, Moko

Jumbie, Midnight Robber and Dame Lorraine all come from the end of the slavery period. The Caribbean Carnival has regularly used anti-colonial and Black identity in its masquerade themes and portrayals like the “The Feast of Mansa Musa” and “Back to Africa” by bandleader George Bailey.

In 1983, bandleader and designer Peter Minshall produced the epic trilogy of consecutive mas themes, which questioned the inhumanity of technology and pollution versus nature in the “The River”, “Callaloo” and the “Golden Calabash”. Minshall introduced us to the revolutionary Man Crab individual mas, which represented the evils of technology and its attendant pollution. All of this is captured in Dalton Narine’s prize winning film, The Minshall Trilogy: Modern Fable as Street Theatre. In 1985 Minshall designed the individual masquerade “The Adoration of Hiroshima”, which was paraded in the Washington anti-nuclear march that commemorated the 40th anniversary of the atomic bombing of Hiroshima, Japan. Brazilian Carnivals in Rio and Salvador have also long used these social justice themes in their masquerade.

Further examples are the formation of Afro Bloco drumming bands in Salvador Bahia, which served as a response to anti-Black racism, appropriation and for instilling Black pride. The Notting Hill Carnival has also responded to the horrors and deaths of the Grenfell Tower Fire—the site of which is within the Carnival area—by marking the disaster with green mas, decorations and signs, as well as a unified solemn period of silence in the middle of the noisy Carnival event, as remembrance and a sign of respect.

Finally, 2017 saw the formation of Reclaim Our Carnival (ROC), following large public meetings within the Carnival community. They demanded accountability, transparency, democracy from the Royal Borough of Kensington and Chelsea (RBKC) and the Notting Hill Carnival organisers. Lack of unity in the Carnival movement would eventually not allow ROC to pursue these goals further, however this was a hugely important development for the local people of RBKC that supported the Notting Hill Carnival. They demanded improvements and developments at the Carnival, accountability from the organisers (Notting Hill Carnival Ltd.) and consultation with the local community. Recently, representatives from Residents For Carnival spoke directly to RBKC who are, at the time of writing, being consulted on their views. The struggle for social and financial justice at the Notting Hill Carnival continues.

Cultural identity and artistic transformation

Festivals globally—the Caribbean Carnivals in particular—have to define their cultural identity, or it will be defined by others. The commodification and appropriation of the Caribbean Carnival pose the economic question: “How can the Carnival’s creators and originators get a percentage of the money made at the festival, and how should that be divided?”. Part of this struggle will depend on the Caribbean Carnival doing its own validation of its cultural identity and self-definition of its art and form. The role of conferences and symposiums like this are invaluable in that process.

When John La Rose (Trinidad & Tobago), Kamau Brathwaite (Barbados) and Andrew Salkey (Jamaica) formed the Caribbean Artists Movement (CAM) in 1966 in London, this self-validation and definition of Caribbean Arts was exactly CAM’s purpose. There has also been the International Conference on Caribbean Carnival Cultures at Leeds Beckett University in 2017, and UWI’s University of the West Indies’ brilliant “Panchayat; The Mas(s) in We (Re)claiming de People’s Festival. A virtual research and arts symposium” this year in Trinidad. These events must be the standard for how we explore and validate festivals of Caribbean Carnival arts, creativity and cultural identity.

We must transform the Caribbean Carnival festivals culture, focusing and building on our Foundation mas, in particular, to improve affordable participation and creativity. Devonish and Baptiste’s said, “Peter Minshall takes the traditional worldview of an agrarian 18th century Trinidad and converts it into a late 20th Century discourse on industrial development, materialism, moral values and development.” That is the purpose and power of the Caribbean Carnival festival culture. What an incredible transformation of what is at the core of our art.

Remember the Vampire bat rabies scare? The Caribbean Carnival transformed that event into The Bat masquerade with the masquerader dancing and swooping like a bat with extended wings. This existing Foundation mas is further transformed into the towering, creative, individual kinetic mas that is so impressive in both the Caribbean Carnival and mas in the Americas. Let us go forward, transform and develop our festivals

during the pause that the pandemic imposes. Time to self-validate, define, develop and progress the art, embed our cultural identity and address the finances of our festivals. Crucial to this process is the demand for democracy, transparency, accountability, and financial justice. After the pandemic our festivals must come back improved and culturally renewed. Our festivals must come back with a bang!

Thank you.
This symposium is now formally open.
Let us exchange and learn.

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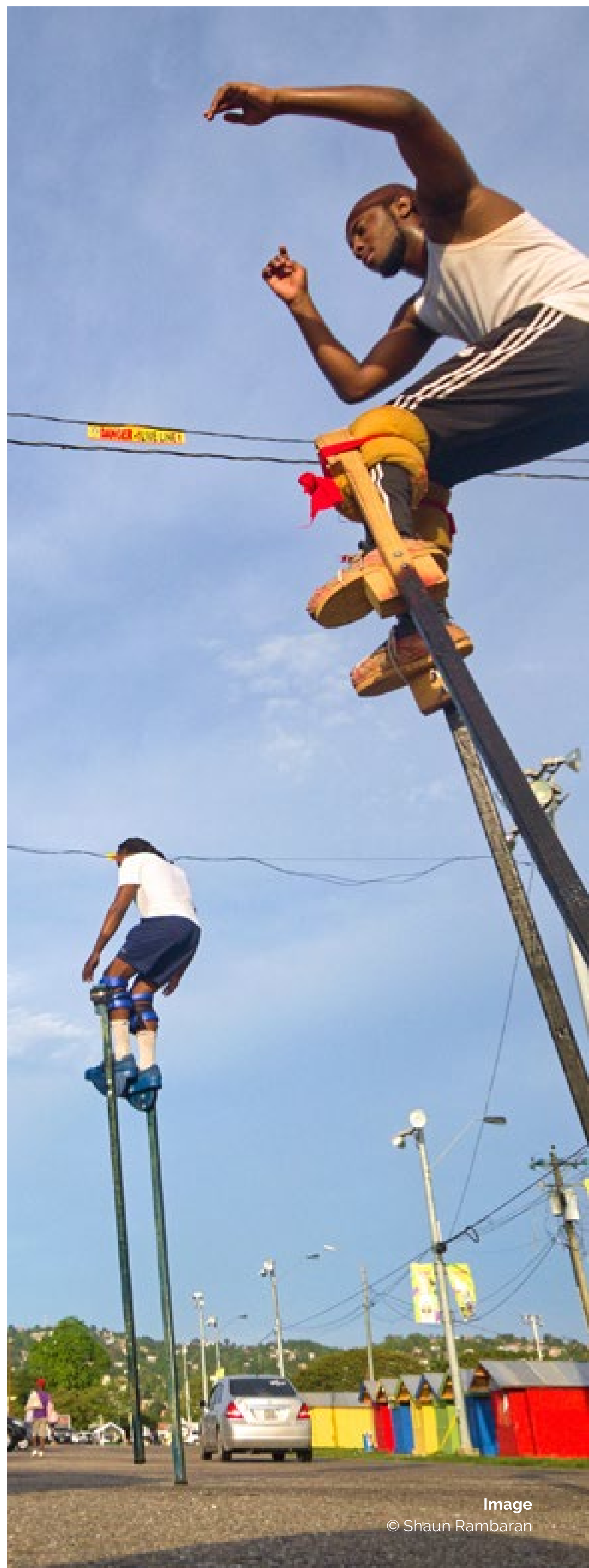

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