

Seeing Crises and Seizing their Potential: Sarah Feinstein's and Rubadiri Victor's Contributions to the International Symposium of Festival Culture 2022 (ISFC)

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The Third International Symposium on Festival Culture (ISFC) in 2022 continued the pursuit of fostering transnational, transcultural, and transdisciplinary dialogues. Individual sessions brought together academics, artists, and activists from different continents and backgrounds for a time of intense and in-depth conversations on festival cultures around the world. The spirit of the symposium was reinforced by Dr Sarah Feinstein from the School of Performance and Cultural Industries at the University of Leeds and the multi-media artist, cultural, and political activist Rubadiri Victor. These lectures rounded off the event, with Feinstein discussing the cosmopolitan potential of museum festivals, and Victor examining the origins, elements, and potential of the crises pervading Trinidad Carnival. Despite their different respective locations of England and Trinidad and Tobago, their different backgrounds—one academic and the other artistic—, as well as the different foci, these two presentations productively connected with and enriched each other.

In her talk, *Festival Fever: The Political Agency of Festival in Museums*, Feinstein focussed on the tension inherent in festival cultures—both regulatory and liberatory—in relation to existing power dynamics within museums, considering these factors through different analytical lenses of cosmopolitanism. Based on wide-ranging academic research along with more than two decades work with museums around the Washington DC Mall (including the Smithsonian) and the feminist arts collective District of Ladies, Feinstein opened by presenting the question, can the festival be a space and place of resistance in the museum context, or is it deemed to be one of co-option and consumption? She explored this question in relation to museums and festivals in the late eighteenth century, Washington DC's Smithsonian Folklife Festival since 1967, and the Worker Festival Museum, highlighting in particular the tensions between regulation and liberation.

Feinstein analysed the festivals with a focus on the specific power dynamics shaping these from within and without. More specifically, she viewed festivals through the lens of power, which the philosopher Michel Foucault described as not only coercive but also negotiated, procedural, and producing forms of resistance (Rouse 1994: 109). The World's Fair expositions and festivals in this regard were not only inextricably linked to the foundation of national museums, but also to indoctrinating industrial and colonial power. From a historical perspective, these festivals were particularly shaped by industrialisation in the late eighteenth century to the mid-twentieth century, cultural exchange from the late 1930s to the 1980s, and nation branding since the 1980s (Wong 2022).

Feinstein went on to explain that The World's Fair collections and ideologies became models for national museums. A focus on power reveals that the museums' morals were both subtle and overt, born from the contradictory impulses of

liberal democracy and domination. This is exemplified in the circumstance that the national museum collections are based on materials from these World's Fairs.

Considering the idea that forms of domination inspire their own forms of resistance, Feinstein asked whether the legacy of the World's Fairs would enable forms of agency, resisting the totalising pursuits of white supremacy. In the USA, World's Fairs also included a Women's Pavilion—which were used by suffragists to support their campaigns—and yet Feinstein suggests these pavilions also reproduced exclusionary practices based on class and race (Carby 1989: 4ff). The exclusion of African-Americans from the exposition's planning and organisation was met with further resistance, with the Haitian government therefore appointing the social reformer, abolitionist, and writer Frederick Douglass as co-commissioner and turning the Haitian Pavilion into a site for cultural activism (Asquith 2018: 538-539). Such strategies interrupted and subverted the ideology of white supremacy from within, at the very site of its unfolding.

The Smithsonian Folklife Festival, Feinstein's second example, was created specifically in response to cultural struggles as it sought to present cultures that have been marginalised and excluded from the programmes of national museums (N'Diaye, Cadaval and Kim 2016). Feinstein questioned whether this festival's structure was effective in its attempts, or whether it served as a new form of marginalisation and obfuscation. Did the museum festival really move beyond inclusion and egalitarian representation towards cultural and political recognition? Considering the influences of World's Fairs and counter-cultural movements, Feinstein argued that the Folklife Festival is a compelling example of aesthetic cosmopolitanism. In some respects, the festival turns to the local and grassroots elements by including cultural creativity as well as activism. It reproduces national ideologies even while doing so through a cosmopolitan lens.

Feinstein defined cosmopolitanism as the idea of global citizens entitled to equal respect and consideration. Within the concept of cultural cosmopolitanism, she identified three different forms: aesthetic, vernacular, and creole. Aesthetic cosmopolitanism is linked to optics, consumption, and co-option and, while it democratises representation, it fails to do so with power (Sassatelli 2011: 23ff). Vernacular cosmopolitanism, in contrast, considers the deviation of everyday experience as constitutive of globalisation (Bhabha 1996), but is not merely a deviation: it represents the agency of subaltern discourse. To move festivals towards effective structural changes, rather than simply representational ones, Feinstein argued that it is necessary to turn to the idea of creole cosmopolitanism as outlined by Françoise Vergès (Vergès 2003: 184). This creole cosmopolitanism decentres and disrupts imperial discourses of cultural authorities and pure identities, questioning dominant paradigms. In this way, Feinstein suggested, it becomes possible to analyse the different power dynamics permeating festival cultures, such as the World's Fair and the Smithsonian Folklife Festival.

The talk's title, "Festival Fever", echoed Jacques Derrida in order to highlight the agency of material archives which are, on the one hand, embedded in power structures, but on the other may also serve to disrupt through cultural signification (Derrida 1996: 28). The cultural materials of museums and festival culture in this sense are embedded in the remains of colonial structures and white supremacy, but also offer potential sources of ephemeral and temporary interruptions and resistance. In reference to this seemingly irresolvable tension, Feinstein asked again, how can the festival be a space and place of

resistance in the museum context? While she presented these considerations of both highly abstract theoretical considerations and local, practical experiences and concerns as open questions, her detailed analysis outlined a framework and tools needed to negotiate such tensions of ongoing and heterogeneous power dynamics pervading museum and festival cultures.

These tensions, frictions, and continuous challenges were also central to the second contribution by Rubadiri Victor, on *The Crisis, Crossroads, and Contemporary Innovation in the Trinidad Carnival*. Victor is a multi-media artist from Trinidad and Tobago, whose work spans more than twenty years in painting, theatre, music, film, photography, carnival arts and more. Building on his extensive cultural activism as founder of the *Artists' Coalition of Trinidad and Tobago*—as well as his role as storyteller of Trinidad and Tobago Carnival—he interwove the historical with the mythical, and the secular with the sacred, by focussing on “the state of the mas” within the onslaught of globalising capitalism, demographic transformation, and ongoing struggles to inherit the past. Victor’s perspective as an artist, cultural activist, and policy advocate offered a perspective that not only supplemented Feinstein’s historical-theoretical investigation, but also engaged her questions by presenting material that may constitute fertile soil for future answers.

Victor began by noting that Trinidad and Tobago Carnival substantially surpasses the country’s national borders. Since the twentieth century, it has inspired the creation of more than three-hundred carnivals around the globe, including some of the largest ones in the Western world: the Notting Hill Carnival in England and the Labour Day Carnival in Brooklyn, USA (see Nunley 1988). These carnivals, he emphasised, were not created by state functionaries or business investors, but through the tireless effort of Trinidadian and, more broadly, Caribbean people. Considering the transnational dissemination, popular support, and continuing creativity, he asked, what makes the festival this contagious? Victor suggested that the success builds on the unique meeting and mixing of “the festival tribes of the races of the world” in Trinidad and Tobago—which includes the Congo, Igbo and Yoruba from West Africa, Bengal and Behar from India, the Kalinago and Warao Indigenous societies—who turned today’s Trinidad into a festival site more than seven thousand years ago. Even the French arrived, he said, in a moment and state of extreme debauchery. Rebellious against the colonial forces, these societies crossed the imposed boundaries to congregate, celebrate, and create a new Trinbagonian identity.

Victor criticised the ways in which colonial and postcolonial elites had impacted Trinidad and Tobago Carnival. In the festival, he believed to find two currents: the first being the Mardi Gras that derives from European tradition as a pagan, exclusive event intended for exhibition, and the second being Canboulay – a multi-racial tradition, both secular and spiritual, driven by African music such as calypso, samba, and salsa among others. Victor suggested that, since the Canboulay Riots in the 1880s, the Mardi Gras current had been “fed,” while the Canboulay tradition had been “starved,” evident from the carnival’s subsequent history. The 1930s to 1950s are often considered the Golden Age of Trinidad’s intellectual and cultural scene, and are marked in history by the creation of tents, large bands, and calypso’s international successes (Green and Scher 2007: 5). Yet he believes that these important resources have been ignored by the independence generation and especially the political elite, which by the 1970s led to “the collapse of scale and the marginalisation of the roots.”

Victor identified the continuous process of migration as another important factor affecting Trinidad and Tobago Carnival. The artisan class residing largely in Port of Spain's Belmont was a driving creative force in the national carnival and was, in terms of wealth, second only to the ruling elite. The migration of a large number of skilled artisans subsequently drained the creative sector in Trinidad, while it strengthened the hundreds of Trinidad-styled carnivals abroad (Green and Scher 2007: 5). He noted that the political elite regulating the national carnival and the representatives judging its competitions were less trained in appreciating and appraising the artists' creativity, than to impose the aesthetic, cultural, and political norms deriving from the former colonial society. This, he suggested, could be seen in the frequent divergence between the carnival committee judgements' and the People's Choice Award, before the latter was discontinued due to this divergence.

These historical factors, Victor argued, had thrown the festival into a substantial crisis. He opposed the idea that the support for Trinidad and Tobago Carnival weakened the rest of the country's cultural sector, and instead suggested that carnival itself received hardly any support due to a lack of funding from the state, private, and financial sectors. In consequence, most of the bands had disappeared or become indebted, while a small number of very large bands catering to elites received substantial funding from the financial sector and business sponsors. Traditional masquerade furthermore saw less and less participation, a disappearance of skills, and a forgetting of characters. He argued that even in Trinidad-styled carnivals around the world, the Trinidadian diaspora was losing influence and control due to the decreasing creative and administrative competence "at the centre" in Trinidad and Tobago.

At the beginning of the twenty-first century, Trinidad and Tobago Carnival was in a state of crisis, yet since 2014, Victor observed a collective effort to innovate Trinidad and Tobago Carnival. "The word was on the streets," he said, "that we are on the brink of death." This inspired numerous measures, such as searching for elder practitioners to share their experiences, documenting and recording carnival practitioners and practices, and inspiring young people to revive traditional masquerade forms. Such interventions include Glen de Souza—also known as Dragon—who helped revive the Moko Jumbie tradition, Ashraph Richard Ramsaran who founded Cat in Bag Productions to combine traditional with African masquerade practices and comment critically on contemporary society, and Amanda T McIntyre, who brought the baby doll tradition to international attention (see Funk 2018; Trinidad Guardian 2014; Marshall 2021: 10ff). New sites were created, such as Robert Young's Independent Mas Speaks events at Granderson Lab, Rondell Benjamin's work in stick fighting and 3 Canal's Big Black Box, offering an important creative centre in the heart of Port of Spain.

In addition to these, Victor himself has, among other things, recorded traditional masquerade biographies, curated carnival exhibitions, and rescued historical sites from destruction. These processes have been furthered intellectually and practically by visionary theatre and performance experts such as Rawle Gibbons, Tony Hall, and Errol Hill (Regis 2017; Hall 2013; Hill 1974). Most of these people reviving the art forms are university-educated middle-class intellectuals as well as artists, and all these processes, Victor summarised, are at "the heart of resurrection." He thus described a seemingly paradoxical potential of innovation in traditional masquerade forms, emphasising that Trinidad and Tobago Carnival's historical location is at a crossroads. While the

practitioners, practices, and ideas seem to be disappearing, the resistance is being led by middle-class intellectuals and artists, with Victor warning that "they need to connect with the masses and they need enablers. And the masses, those working class, black, and brown people, who built these festivals, need access."

In the overall picture, he considered globalising forces not necessarily as detrimental, but as impacting carnival, just as carnival is impacting the world. These dynamics may in fact be useful, because they may offer opportunities to "export these resources back into the country to emancipate the Canboulay energies that are on the ground." He suggested that intellectuals and artists need to work both for and with the lower classes in order to resist the forms of control, regulation, and capitalisation imposed by bureaucracies and functionaries.

Although they described festivals in different regions, cultures, and with different goals, Sarah Feinstein and Rubadiri Victor both identified fundamental power dynamics that seek to control and commodify the events, while activists attempt to return agency to marginalised and disenfranchised communities. Both talks eloquently, elaborately, and inspiringly described ways of seeing crises in festival cultures and seizing their potential for intervention, reinforcing the symposium's goal of bringing together artists, activists, and academics to determine, discuss, and disseminate such possibilities.

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