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## Carnival

Carnival is generally conceived as a period when the world is turned upside down, and merry-makers in masks and fancy dress challenge everyday norms through displays of unrepressed eroticism, gluttony and incisive social criticism. Music, often with a strong rhythmic feel and satirical lyrics, has frequently accompanied the activities of revelers. While carnivalesque behavior is common to many cultures, carnival proper is associated with the Christian world, denoting a festival that begins sometime after Christmas and generally concludes at midnight before Ash Wednesday, when the excesses of carnival give way to the fasting of Lent. Carnival's links to the Christian calendar are evident in the debate over the etymology of the term, the dominant view being that it derives from the Latin *carnem levare* ('to put away or remove meat'). In many parts of Europe, local terms for the day preceding Lent emerged, such as Shrovetide in the British Isles, Mardi Gras (lit. 'Fat Tuesday') in France and *Fastnacht* in Germany, among others.

Although carnival drew on a diversity of local pagan festivals, it is widely held that the main ancestor of the European medieval carnival was the Roman Saturnalia, the festival of Saturn, which was characterized by lasciviousness and social inversions. The transgressions of medieval carnivals are documented in Rabelais' *Gargantua and Pantagruel* (1534), which inspired Bakhtin (1984) to portray carnival as a sphere for experiencing human equality. The communal and festive nature of carnival represents a cyclical moment in which, through laughter and 'grotesque realism,' expressed through the ambivalent and transformational use of costumes and masks, social hierarchies are temporarily eliminated. Con- {p. 167} trasting the free speech employed during carnival with the euphemisms of daily interactions, Bakhtin argued that carnival's uninhibited speech permitted people to express their true views, giving it a revolutionary impact.

This view contrasts with the more pervasive 'safety-valve theory,' in which carnival is seen as periodically dispelling social tensions before they reach the point of eruption. While, down the ages, those in power have recognized the usefulness of designating ritual spaces for people to speak their mind and act out their fantasies, it is also true that carnivalesque excesses have frequently been the target of repression, particularly when they have threatened to break out of the ritual framework. Carnival, therefore, might best be viewed as a complex site of contestation and manipulation, transgression and control, in which the terms of negotiation hinge on the specificities of distinct historical circumstances.

As the medieval period came to a close, for example, people in positions of authority began investing heavily in attempts to curtail the licentiousness and violence of carnival. In some places, carnival came under the patronage of powerful families, and the free-for-all ethos of carnival gave way to spectacle, involving pageantry and lavish masks and floats. With the rise of the middle classes, rationalist ideas became dominant, and the popularity of carnival declined, surviving only in a few isolated pockets, such as Venice and Andalusia.

As carnival declined in Europe, it began to flourish in the Americas, particularly in places where a strong roman catholic heritage coexisted with large low-income populations. By the early nineteenth century, spontaneous popular street festivals were common to many regions, much to the disfavor of local official, who frequently employed heavy-handed tactics to repress them. With the emergence of nationalist sentiments in the early twentieth century, however, attitudes changed, and officials began hailing their carnivals as symbols of national identity. The enthusiasm of the participants and the syncretism of carnival aesthetics were viewed as indicators of the felicitous integration of diverse cultural and racial groups achieved in their nations. Once it became an object of state interest, carnival was subjected to bureaucratic control, typically focused on staged competitions to promote cultural patriotism, as well as to serve the tourist industry.

In Rio de Janeiro, for example, carnival was embraced by the state in 1935, leading to a significant domestication of the city's carnival celebrations. Around the turn of the century, informal mobile dance associations called *ranchos* or *blocos* had become common. They were made up of blacks, mulattoes and unskilled white laborers, who danced down the streets to the rhythm of percussion instruments, singing responsorially to the short improvised verses of a leader. Their musical style became known as samba, and in 1928 an association named 'Deixa Falar' was formed, which called itself a 'samba school,' a term soon adopted by other associations. Under state patronage, an official competition between samba schools, with cash prizes, was instituted. To participate in Rio's official celebrations, the schools were expected to present costumes, floats and songs that glorified the nation, its natural beauty and its heroes, starting a trend toward increasingly lavish displays. At the end of the twentieth century, the samba schools in Rio were organized into a federation with a top league of 14 official schools, each with its own history rooted in one of the city's 'shantytown' communities. The *baterias* (percussion groups) have become the trademark of the schools, recognizable by their use of certain instruments, rhythmic patterns and breaks. Each year, new sambas are composed to provide the theme (*enrêdo*) to be enacted by each school, and intense anticipation precedes the final announcement of the winning school.

Samba school processions have become widespread throughout Brazil, due mainly to the extensive media coverage given to the carnival parades (*desfiles*) in Rio de Janeiro. More recently, however, the carnivals of the northeast, particularly the Bahian carnivals, have gained in popularity, attracting tourists year-round. Northeastern carnivals are marked by *trios elétricos*; while the name refers to the electric guitar-based instrumental groups that initiated the tradition, contemporary *trios elétricos* are large flat-top trucks carrying a band and a large amount of sound equipment. Often, thousands of people follow their favorite ensemble, dancing to the band's performance of 'axé music'. It was also in the northeast that the *blocos afro* first emerged in the mid-1970s. With a rhythmic accompaniment based almost exclusively on drums, these associations draw on pan-African styles, especially reggae, marking a growing sense of ethnic identity and solidarity among black Brazilians.

In the Caribbean, masquerades, or *mas* parades, and unique styles of music have developed to accompany carnival celebrations. The largest and best-known Caribbean carnival takes place in Trinidad and Tobago, where a carnival atmosphere begins to take hold soon after Christmas. Across the island, tents for calypso performances are erected, and the best-known calypsonians release their recordings, in which they chronicle the year's main scandals and events; steel-pan bands begin rehearsing, drawing their melodies primarily from the calypso repertoire; and the *mas* bands prepare their costumes and floats.

The festivities culminate just before Lent, with a five-day ritual pageant in the historic capital city of Port-of-Spain, coordinated by the Carnival Development Committee (CDC): on Friday, the King and Queen contests are held, in which prizes are awarded to the best costumes; the Saturday *Panorama* is a competition among the year's best steel-pan bands; on *Dimanche Gras*, the 'Calypso King' is elected, a title that has been held by prominent calypsonians such as Lord Executor, Attila the Hun and Mighty Sparrow; the *J'Ouvert*, which takes place on Monday, is marked by the *mas* bands competitions; and on Tuesday, the Parade of the Bands occurs, and members of these groups continue 'wining' (or partying) well into the early hours of Ash Wednesday. In recent years, a modern dance-oriented calypso known as *soca* has come to dominate the street festivities. It is blasted out through sound systems on trucks, and threatens to displace the steel bands.

Elements of the Trinidadian carnival, especially the calypso, have been adopted by several neighboring islands, such as Grenada, Carriacou, Dominica and St. Lucia. Steel pans have become popular in Jamaica. In other parts of the Caribbean, distinct traditions mark the festivity. In Haiti, for example, carnival is celebrated to the sound of *rara* bands, in which ditties containing veiled critiques are accompanied by interlocking melodies produced on bamboo trumpets (*vaksin*).

In the United States, the most visible carnival in the United States are the Mardi Gras in New Orleans. While the central areas of the city are dominated by lavish parades, in black neighborhoods associations or "tribes" of Mardi Gras Indians take to the streets, donning headdresses and face paint, and singing and dancing to the accompaniment of a standard repertoire.

More recently, the carnivals of the Americas have begun to have a transnational impact. Diasporic Caribbean communities have become the primary agents in the dissemination of carnival, hosting major celebrations in London, New York, Toronto and Caracas. For these communities, carnival has become a symbol of ethnic identity, and it is used in their struggles against discrimination and oppression in the host society. Carnival associations that call themselves samba bands have become popular in Western Europe and Australia (particularly Sydney). These groups, however, are made up almost exclusively of local aficionados, who have adapted the Brazilian prototype to their own local experience.

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