



The University of the West Indies
St. Augustine Campus
Faculty of Humanities and Education
Caribbean Studies Project
HUMN 3099

Student name: Saegel Bascombe
Student ID no.: 816006712
Degree Program: BA Visual Arts (Special)
Supervisor: Dr. Jo-anne Tull

Title of Thesis:

The more things change the more they remain the same: A study of the Trinidad Contemporary Carnival Masquerade as a platform of agency.

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to express my sincerest gratitude to my thesis supervisor, Dr. Jo-anne Tull, who guided me throughout this process from beginning to end. I would also like to thank The University of the West Indies St. Augustine for allowing me the opportunity to do this research and for providing me with a good education. I wish to also show my gratitude to all my interviewees as without them this research would not have been possible. I would also like to pay special thanks to my parents, family and friends who have supported me throughout this process.

ABSTRACT

This thesis analyses the extent of which the contemporary Trinidad carnival masquerade can be seen as a platform of agency. Though the carnival procession belongs to Trinidad and Tobago, the masquerade that takes place in Port-of-Spain is what this thesis would be focused on as it is the country's most popular procession. The work assesses the importance of agency and agency through the performance and showcase of culture, the masquerade's location in the idea of popular culture, what constitutes the contemporary masquerade and if it offers the people involved a platform of agency. Through an in depth study of agency, popular culture and the theories of value as according to David Throsby, as well as interviews done with band owners, Sean Burkett and Dean Ackin, carnival researcher, Omari Ashby and masqueraders, the work establishes that the masquerade is, to a large extent, a platform of agency. This can be said because the masquerade allows the agent to shape aspects of the event itself, through the given power to initiate. Additionally, the masqueraders have a sense of agency through the ability to carry out intentional actions that are not usually in standing with societal norms, and a sense of shared agency through the unity felt during the festival. Much like any other form of popular culture, the masquerade is created for the people by the people and is successful in providing a platform for people to take action in order to fulfil their suppressed and repressed wants and desires.

Keywords: Agency, Popular Culture, Trinidad and Tobago, Contemporary Carnival Masquerade, Value

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INTRODUCTION

Background of Study

Agency is a word used to describe an action, thought or intervention that is done by a person or a people that is used to generate a particular outcome which would express their individual power (Cole). It is known that carnival, at the time of Canboulay, was a platform of agency for the slaves who used the festival as a symbol of defiance, and as a source of strength (“Cannes Brulees”). In the words of Emily Marshall, “the core of carnival is play with serious intent; the seemingly playful performances that carnival engenders continue to give voice to the desire to break free from the devastating effects of institutionalized racism, sexism, class prejudice and political corruption” (p. 17). But what say for the carnival of present day...can it be asserted that it is a platform of agency or is it simply just a shallow, vulgar affair? Or perhaps, is it that its agency is shown through its “shallow vulgarity”?

Purpose of Study

The main purpose of this study is to analyse the extent of which the contemporary Trinidad carnival masquerade is used as a platform of agency. Subsidiary to this main aim, the research would also contribute to the scholarly body of information on the contemporary masquerade, its relevance to the masquerader and its significance to society as a whole, as there seems to be little available on this particular topic. Additionally, agency, popular culture theory, the economics of popular culture, and the theory of values as it relates to the contemporary masquerade would be examined in order to give a conceptual context to the analysis. In doing so and through the field

research conducted, the study would also aim to determine whether the contemporary carnival is just a vulgar affair with no true substance or if this is simply a misconception.

Problematic

As a natural part of human behaviour we tend to look for an outlet from our troubles. For many, this outlet is carnival. However, it has been suggested that due to the fact that the masquerade in the contemporary context is predominantly supported by major commercial entities, from across the carnival scope, the performance and showcase of the masquerade seems no longer about agency but rather just a vulgar affair.

This idea of shallow vulgarity being at the core of the contemporary masquerade stems from a number of factors. One such factor is that the mas has evolved to be more about the body than about the mas itself (Marshall 16). The word carnival means ‘farewell to the flesh’ but it seems as though it is now all about the flesh (“History of Carnival”). This is highlighted through the growing popularity of ever increasingly revealing costumes and the fact that people of all ages can be seen running around the Savannah and participating in the Digicel burn out, going religiously to the gym and dieting, all to achieve their ideal “carnival body”, activities which, for most, cease come Ash Wednesday (“D’ Carnival burn”; Taylor)

Additionally, today’s carnival consists of costumes that are unaffordable to many. One reason why the price may seem “unreasonable for what you get” may be because apart from being skimpy, the costumes themselves are typically repetitive as opposed to narrative or innovative with the only link to a theme sometimes being the colours used in its materiality. According to Theodor Adorno, the culture industry can be compared to an “assembly line” producing factory like

products, thus emphasizing the fact that the arts of today cannot be separate from industry and commerce (Negus 37). Though he was speaking about the music industry, the same can be said about today's Carnival Masquerade. In essence, someone with plenty of money creates the same thing every year and tells us to buy the same thing, every year, for plenty of money.

Another thing that is sold to and expected from the present-day masquerader is the "Carnival Experience" (Tribe). A big truck, a drinks truck, a place to camp for lunch, and much more are offered to today's masquerader and seem to be as important if not more important than the mas itself and this wanting of a luxurious experience may account for some of the cost attached to the masquerade. The mas is also partially experienced virtually as many a Snapchat and an Instagram are graced with the pictures of the day's processions and many a masquerader can be seen smiling into or for a phone or camera to capture such images. Adding to the vanity of the affair is the makeup, spray tans and feathered backpacks, which are usually removed come lunch time, that the masqueraders spend thousands on all for the sake of that perfect photo, that 'look at me I'm perfect' moment, that perfect experience (Farrell 40). But still, there must be more to this thing that shuts down a capital of a country for two full days, this thing that people call the greatest show on earth, this procession, this performance.

Thesis Statement

The Trinidad, Port-of-Spain, Contemporary Masquerade can be seen as a platform of agency to a large extent as it provides a space where the suppressed and repressed wants and desires of those involved are met and fulfilled through the opportunities associated with the masquerade that allow for shared agency, self-preservation, intentional actions and the power to initiate.

Research Questions and Minor Research Questions

Major research question:

To what extent can the contemporary Trinidad carnival masquerade be seen as a platform of agency for its masquerader?

Minor research questions:

1. What is agency and why is it important?
2. What is considered agency through the performance and showcase of culture?
3. How does the Trinidad contemporary masquerade locate in the idea of popular culture?
4. What constitutes the contemporary masquerade?
5. Do the masqueraders, band owners and other people involved with the mas have agency through the contemporary masquerade and if yes in what way?
6. Can it be asserted that the contemporary Trinidad carnival masquerade is simply just a shallow, vulgar affair or is this a misconception?

Methodology

This is a cultural study and the methodical approaches to this research are the survey research approach and the qualitative research approach. The survey research approach was selected as data can be collected from a large sample population with ease and the information gathered would be easy to analyse and would aid in creating a strong hypothesis (DeFour 37-38). Collection would be done through the use of a series of question polls which would be conducted on Instagram. Instagram was the chosen platform due to the fact that it is easily accessible to the young crowd of masqueraders, it is not time consuming for the masqueraders and each

masquerader would not be able to see the answers of previous voters which would cause them to make more unbiased and honest decisions. One set back to this is that not everyone is on Instagram but fortunately, the number of masqueraders on this social media platform is enough to have a proper population sample.

The qualitative research approach would be conducted through a series of interviews done on band owners and Carnival enthusiasts. This method would be useful as the interviewee would be able to develop their thoughts and body language can be taken into consideration. Both closed and open questions would be asked as closed questions, while being easy to ask and are good for gathering facts, prevent the interviewee from expanding on how they truly feel. Open questions would combat this as they tend to produced more thoughtful answers. However, the downfall to that is reading through those answers would be time consuming hence a mixture of both would make the research more manageable. Additionally, the interviews would be structured interviews so that the information gathered would be logical and not diverge into too many tangents. This way, the data would be easier to analyse and the answers from the different interviewees can be compared. Though time consuming, the interviews would be recorded and then later transcribed as taking notes during the interview would be too distracting (Wisker 129-134). Notes however, would be taken on the person's body language throughout the interview.

Parameters

Though the masquerade belongs to the country of Trinidad and Tobago, the focus of this study is primarily on the masquerade procession that takes place in the capital of Trinidad, Port-of Spain, between the late 1980s and 2020, the year when 'beads and bikini' mas began to the 'beads

and bikinis' of the present day. These parameters were set because this is the most popular carnival procession in the Twin Island and it is the masquerade that is home to bands such as Tribe and Yuma which are the contemporary mas giants in Trinidad and Tobago.

Chapter Outline

This thesis would proceed as follows. Chapter 1, entitled *Discussions of the Literature*, would consist of a Literature Review focused on the topics of agency, popular culture and the theories of values. Chapter 2, entitled *Evolution of the Trinidad Carnival Masquerade*, would provide a further discussion on the Trinidad Carnival Masquerade and will also consists of a genealogy of how the contemporary masquerade came to be. Chapter 3, entitled *Case Study: Findings and Analysis*, would consist of a case study done on the 2020 Trinidad Carnival Masquerade and will show the data gathered from primary sources as well as an analysis of these findings.

Certainly, there must be more to this festival that affects us all as a nation whether we explicitly take part in it or not. The hope of this study is to show that the contemporary masquerade and all that goes into it is not just a shallow endeavour but rather a platform for self expression, rebellion and empowerment; a true embodiment of agency.

CHAPTER ONE: DISCUSSIONS OF THE LITERATURE

What is agency and why it is so important

Simply put, agency is the manifestation of thoughts and actions and an agent is someone who has the ability to think and act for his/herself (Cole; Schlosser). Hence, agency can be seen as an important type of self- preservation as it allows the agent to shape various aspects of his/her life (Cole; Emirbayer et al. 964). Agency comprises deliberation and judgment and according to the rational choice theory, purpose and goal seeking (Cole; Emirbayer et al. 963). All in all, agency is the carrying out of intentional actions and is typically against structure, society and inevitability (Schlosser; “Theories of Agency”). Some, however, may argue that agency cannot only be related to intentional actions as agency may also be spontaneous and carried out without reason or prior intent (Schlosser). Hence, reason and intent may influence the actions of an agent but agency stems from “the power to initiate” (Schlosser).

This idea of free action is not solely based on ones desires but on how effective the action is carried out (Watson 205-207). Individuals are shaped by social structure and social structure, through agency, is shaped by individuals (Cole). The latter is evident through reproduced norms, social relationships and social order (Cole). If a person is free, that is, if he is able to do or attain whatever he wants, he is able to both satisfy and eliminate a desire and the motivation to do so comes from the conditions that cause him to act (Watson 205, 211 - 215). Unfree action is when the value and motivational systems of an agent do not overlap, this occurs when an agent’s wants in is conflict with his/her practical judgments (Watson 215 - 220).

There are different types of agency with intentional agency being the most central (Schlosser). Other types include autonomous, free and epistemic agency as well as mental, shared,

collective and relational agency (Schlosser). Touching on a few, epistemic agency is expressed through an agent's ability to have control over their beliefs, shared agency is shown when two or more agents do an activity together and collective agency can be seen when two or more agents act as an organized group (Schlosser). Human agency is informed by the past and aimed towards the future but is unfortunately seen in some cases as "habitual, repetitive, and taken for granted" (Cole; Emirbayer et al. 963).

My research hopes to indicate whether or not Trinidad's contemporary masquerade gives its participants the power to initiate and the ability to carry out the resulting actions efficiently as well as if one is free or unfree through the provisions of the masquerade.

Agency and Popular Culture

Central to popular culture are culture and ideology (*Cultural Theory and Popular Culture* 2). Culture refers to the works, practices and activities of a group, person or time period (*Cultural Theory and Popular Culture* 2). Generally, it is a "process of intellectual, spiritual and aesthetic development" and cultural products can be used to investigate the past and present ways of a group, person or period (Cusic and Faulk 459; *Cultural Theory and Popular Culture* 1). According to cultural studies, culture is also one of the main points of division, within a capitalist society, along the lines of gender, ethnicity, class and generation (*Cultural Studies and the Study of Popular Culture* 4). On the other hand, ideology refers to "a systematic body of ideas articulated by a particular group of people" (*Cultural Theory and Popular Culture* 2). Mainly operating off of connotations, ideology's aim is to reproduce the social conditions and relations needed for the

continuation of the economic conditions and relations that allow capitalism to continue (*Cultural Theory and Popular Culture* 4-5).

But what is popular culture? Popular culture is simply culture that is popular (*Cultural Theory and Popular Culture* 6). Rooted in entertainment, popular culture is based on market rather than aesthetics (Cusic). Based on variety and spectacle, it is created by the people for the people as a sort of collective escape through the fulfilment of, sometimes suppressed and repressed, wants and desires (*Cultural Theory and Popular Culture* 9-10; Danesi 4, 7). Popular culture is a type of expressive culture where morals, traditions and pretensions are challenged, thus entertaining the masses with its realness (Danesi 1, 4, 30). What sets pop culture apart, is the fact that it contains a mixture of styles and forms which are reused and refashioned from elite culture and that it blurs the lines between recreation and art (Danesi 4, 30; Parker 155). Additionally, the term “youth culture” is sometimes used interchangeably with pop culture as its trends are typically created and initially endorsed by younger people and may or may not be later supported by the older generations (Danesi 4). Popular culture is also centered on emotion as these trends, once they have intrinsic appeal, are not discarded by the youth but are carried out into their adulthood causing the new trends to enter into the realm of cultural nostalgia and the cycle continues (Danesi 7, 27, 30).

Popular culture can become quite commercial as it is sometimes “mass produced for mass consumption” (*Cultural Theory and Popular Culture* 8). Distributors inform and consumers determine the most popular thing by buying a lot of it, thus trends shift when there’s a shift in taste (Cusic and Faulk 460, 462). This type of production may push popular culture into the realm of mass culture since popular culture is only considered “popular” when it resists (Parker 154). Though some types of popular culture may be considered ‘art’ or ‘elite’, most of popular culture becomes mass culture eventually (Cusic). Many see popular/mass culture as an inferior culture

suitable for those who cannot understand or appreciate ‘real culture’ otherwise known as high culture (*Cultural Theory and Popular Culture* 6, 8). This may be due to the fact that popular culture, because it can be predictive, is sometimes seen as uncreative (Danesi 4). Some also claim that low/folk culture is the only true form of culture as it is not associated with the pretentiousness of high culture (Danesi 4). On the other hand, some say that popular culture has blurred the line between high and low culture (Danesi 4). This is known as postmodernism culture (*Cultural Theory and Popular Culture* 13). Some view this as an end to elitism but others view it as “the victory of commerce over culture” (*Cultural Theory and Popular Culture* 13).

All in all, as John Storey quotes Maltby saying, “if it is the crime of popular culture that it has taken our dreams and packaged them and sold them back to us, it is also the achievement of popular culture that it has brought us more and more varied dreams than we could otherwise ever have known” (*Cultural Theory and Popular Culture* 9). Through the influence of the education system and selective tradition, people give meaning and value to various aspects of life and turn these aspects into popular culture (*Cultural Studies and the Study of Popular Culture* 6; *Cultural Theory and Popular Culture* 8).

This research hopes to determine if the contemporary masquerade falls under the umbrella of popular culture and if it has fallen into the realm of mass culture. Additionally, whether it is merely about passive consumption or if it is empowering, would be examined.

Relevance of Economic and Cultural Value According to David Throsby

According to David Throsby, value is a social construct and in both economics and culture, value can be seen as an expression of how much something is worth. Fundamentally, value is a

positive construct and has to do with the goodness or desirableness of a thing (Throsby 27). Economics originates and is motivated by value and culture uses value as an indication of how much a thing or experience is worth (Throsby 19). Throsby also argues that the two, economics and culture, can be linked together because of value.

When it comes to economic value, Throsby recalls Smith's idea of distinguishing between value in terms of a commodity, its ability to satisfy human desires and value in terms of exchange, what one would be willing to give up to gain something else. Furthering on the idea of value, Throsby goes on to speak about the Labour theories, formulated by Smith, Ricardo and Marx, which puts forth the idea that value was based on the amount of labour it took to create a good. This was also supported by Ruskin who related value to, "the life enhancing labour of the worker who made the commodity; the worker not only pleased himself by his efforts but also bestowed something of this goodness upon the user of the product" (21). Another idea touched on by Throsby is that of intrinsic or absolute value. This is a type of value that can be given to something without any exchange taking place (21). However, this idea of intrinsic value was later argued by Samuel Bailey who did not agree with the ability to measure the inherent value of commodities (Throsby 21). For today's economist, the theory of value is simply a theory of price, even though market prices, at most, can only provide for an imperfect indication of value (Throsby 22).

In the cultural realm, the value of a work lies in its intrinsic qualities such as how it looks and what cultural worth it has (Throsby 27). According to Throsby, cultural value can be assessed by something's aesthetic value, spiritual value, social value, that is, a sense of connection with others, historical value, that is, how it reflects the conditions of life at the time it was created, symbolic value and Authenticity value. How well consumed or participated in a cultural thing is, relates directly to its demand and the demand would influence the price of said thing as well as if

there would continue to be future consumption (Throsby 24). However, whether an individual recognizes the inherent cultural value of a thing or does not, the thing itself may still be valuable to the wider society as a part of the “cultural canon” (Throsby 32).

Though loved by many, some members of society think of carnival as a vulgar affair, too lewd to spectate far less participate in (Taylor). From expensive all- inclusive bands and outsourced costumes that overshadow traditional mas to the shift from political commentary to what seems to be mas solely for entertainment, there is a feeling of loss associated with contemporary mas (Farrell 7, 8). Whether or not that feeling is justified is what my study aims to clarify, what makes the contemporary carnival worth it? The study of contemporary carnival is fairly new and has not been looked at in great depth, hence, my thesis also aims to add to this body of scholarship (Farrell 12). Additionally, the traditional masquerade and contemporary masquerade are often pitted against and compared to one another but my hypothesis is that they may in fact be one in the same in terms of agency.

CHAPTER TWO: EVOLUTION OF THE TRINIDAD CARNIVAL MASQUERADE

During the 18th century, the whites and free coloureds held elaborate masquerade balls during the Christmas period that were set as a “farewell to the flesh” before the Catholic season of lent (see table. 1, “Mama Dis is Mas”; Taylor). The West African slaves as well as the free coloureds of this time also held their own masking festivities, called the jammette mas, centered around the burning of cane, masking and mimicry (“The Jammette Carnival”). Their festivity was known as Canboulay and after the emancipation of the slaves, Canboulay was known as a symbol of defiance and freedom (“Cannes Brulees”). Though it was contested strongly by the British Government, the festival found a permanent place in Trinidad culture and is celebrated, to this day, on the Monday and Tuesday before Lent (Taylor). Though some of the Canboulay traditions are still around, many are fading quickly and are being replaced by the “beads and bikini” mas of today (Taylor).

Table 1

Table Showing Genealogy of Trinidad's Carnival from 1700s – 1960s

Date	Event
1783-1833	The French Carnival was celebrated which consisted of masquerade balls, dinners, hunting parties and concerts. These festivities took place from Christmas to Ash Wednesday and were celebrated as a “farewell to the flesh” before the Lenten season (“History of Carnival”).
1830s	After the Emancipation Bill was passed, the African's began to take part in the Carnival activities (“Mama Dis is Mas”).
August 1 st	After Emancipation, the ex-slaves used Canboulay as a symbol of their freedom. They danced, masked themselves, stick fought and mocked the whites by re-enacting things from when they were enslaved. Canboulay lasted for about 10 years until it was moved to right before lent (“Cannes Brulees”). 1881 – Canboulay Riots occurred because Captain Arthur Baker tried to end the Canboulay (“History of Carnival”).
First 2 decades of the 20 th century	The Upper-class gradually re-entered into the festival. They had previously withdrawn from the celebrations for the latter half of the 19 th century and returned because carnival had somewhat been “purged”. However, it took them another 40 years till they re-joined the street procession (“Carnival”).
1943	During the early celebrations of Carnival, the festivities were held from the Sunday to the Tuesday before Ash Wednesday. After over 60 years of complaints from the Upper class, in 1943 Carnival was no longer celebrated on the Sunday. It was only celebrated on the Monday and Tuesday before Ash Wednesday (“History of Carnival”).
1948	Dimanche Gras replaced the Carnival Sunday night Canboulay procession. (“Carnival”).
1950s – 1960s	A rise in nationalism lead to the rise of the Carnival Development Committee (1957) which now managed the carnival celebrations (“Carnival”). The economic aspect of the festival became more evident causing businessmen to become more involved (“Carnival”). During the mid 1950s, the “Band of the Year” title was initiated (“Carnival”). 1957- George Baily made an appearance and changed carnival forever (“Carnival”). mid 1960s – Bands moved from historical themes to themes centered around fantasy as the masquerader population continued to increase (“Carnival”).

Often described as a tourist attraction and a unique cross – cultural product, today's carnival is patronized by many including locals, officials and foreigners (Marshall 12-13). The first part of “beads and bikini/ pretty mas” begins on Carnival Monday (Farrell 8). At around 11am, in costumes of their own creation, masqueraders take to the streets of Port – of – Spain to join with the band they are either assigned to or chose to crash (Taylor; Farrell 8). Come Tuesday, everyone is in full costume and the streets are painted with vibrant colours from feathers, sequins, glitter and more (Farrell 8). On both days, the bands tend to follow a specific route in which they pass the judging stations, with hopes of becoming the band of the year, the stage and a designated spot for lunch (“Carnival”). Essentially, the masqueraders chip and dance along to music trucks and drinks trucks as they follow the band and are given the space to “free up” due to the lack of codes of conduct (Farrell 8, 31, 34).

What is important to note is that though culture is normally used as a main point of division, Trinidad's carnival is a place where culture is used to connect. Not only do people from all walks of life with varying cultures all come together but carnival itself is comprised of things each belonging to separate cultures. Additionally, this carnival is very much a part of popular culture as it seeks to challenge norms proving it worthy to entertain the masses with its realness. Contemporary carnival is also quite popular as it is basically a refashioned version of tradition carnival, which at some point would've been the contemporary for that set of people. These people of the past would've bestowed intrinsic value on the mas of that time so perhaps that's why traditional mas is now viewed with that sense of cultural nostalgia, sometimes to contemporary carnival's disadvantage

CHAPTER THREE: CASE STUDY – FINDINGS AND ANALYSIS

The Contemporary Masquerade Through the Lens of Carnival Researchers

With an aim to get a deeper insight into the Trinidad Contemporary Masquerade, I spoke to Mr. Omari Ashby, who currently teaches at The University of the West Indies St. Augustine and is a researcher of the Trinidad Carnival for over fifteen years. Omari Ashby got into the contemporary masquerade not necessarily as a masquerader or a researcher but as a musician who was making music for, “the festival that powered it.” Ashby sees Trinidad Mas as one of the pillars of society. For him, Carnival is about getting into that Caribbean aesthetic, that Mas aesthetic that is unique to Trinidad but can be extended to the wider Caribbean. He says that what keeps him in the mas is the ritual aspect of it, the ritual of renewal, a resetting, a starting over point, and ritual of memory; in the words of Rawle Gibbons, “the idea of the carnival as recall, resistance, one of rebuilding and restitution.” With this statement alone, already we see carnival’s potential as a platform for agency through its ability to allow for a sense of self-preservation, but what say for the contemporary masquerade?

Ashby points out that we tend to view the contemporary masquerade sometimes as separate and apart from the traditional masquerade and though there are differences, he believes that the link is there, the foundation is there and that foundation goes to the very heart of revolution and rebellion, thus putting the contemporary masquerade on the same level as the one preceding it. He says that mas for us is our Haitian Revolution, it is our ultimate act of rebellion and revolution against all things that are oppressive and against a colonial order that we still fight against up to this day.

When asked about this sense of agency, Ashby related it to the ability to speak and act on one's behalf. He says that agency is "a doing word at its foundation" and in order to have agency one must be able to express, act upon and represent on behalf of oneself. Hence, he believes that Trinidad uses its masquerade in such a way as to get action and put action and agency towards whatever issues may plague us. Though we may look at the contemporary masquerade and think of it as only beads and feathers, it's more than that. For instance, the contemporary masquerade allows for agency through the representation of certain ideas that may have been lost such as what Lost Tribe did this year with Anansi, again, agency through self preservation. Ashby also believes that a lot of the agency centring Trinidad's contemporary carnival is seen in those very bands that we tend enjoy criticizing, the "beads and bikini bands". If we look at what these bands do in terms of representation, acceptance, and empowering especially women, we can see that there is a lot of body positivity and a lot of ownership of ones body, something that women battle a lot with in the contemporary sphere. With respect to women, Ashby says that through carnival, women reclaim what Raul Gibbons would refer to as a space in contention, and to a large extent a woman's body is an area of conflict. The ownership of a woman's body is always in contention, where men what to control what it should be, what it should look like and what it should do. Instead, masquerade bands offer a platform where women can reclaim themselves, their bodies and exercise ownership over it. This exact thing is what agency embodies. It is the carrying out of intentional actions in order to take hold of oneself, even though such actions may be against the norm and against inevitability.

The Contemporary Masquerade Through the Lens of Band Owners

To lean more about the masquerade, I also conducted interviews with a few heads of this festival. First I spoke with Mr. Sean Burkett, or Sean, as he prefers to be called as his father was

Mr. Burkett, who is currently one of two directors of the band called Yuma Vibe, a band which I have played with on two occasions and a band which I think encompasses a lot of what contemporary carnival is about. Next, I spoke with Mr. Dean Ackin, who has been the group CEO of Tribe for the last 15 years and who also is one of the four founders of Tribe. I found it important to speak to him as Tribe, started in 2005, is the first carnival band that provided an all inclusive experience for the masquerader, influencing other bands to follow in their footsteps, and now owns several other bands, such as Rogue, Lost Tribe, Bliss and Harts, two J'ouvert bands and also hosts a number of events.

Many times, the reason why we stay in a place is because of what got us into it in the first place. For Sean, he was “born into carnival”. With a father who was best friends with George Baily, Sean, seeing his parents involved in Carnival, also decided to get into it when he returned from university. At first he was just interested in events but later got into the carnival arena when he was invited into Yuma by Stephon Monteil. Post Monteil’s death, Burkett had to assume more responsibility as director, and has remained in this position to date. What has motivated Sean to stay in this position for 10 years and counting is the fact that he is able to, “master a family under the umbrella of giving people a chance.” This being a mandate echoes on an agency for unity, a wanting and an initiating of togetherness. Though Yuma stands for Young Upwardly Mobile Adults, Sean verifies that it is not a band that is just for the young people. He assures that it is not so much about an age group but rather about what the masquerader needs or wants. Hence, Yuma is for everyone and there is no wrong or right person in the band’s eyes. However, it can be said that the band did have the right idea in choosing that name as contemporary carnival is typically endorsed by the younger people; youth, popular culture.

For the heads at Yuma, the thought is always “how do we keep it current,” thus, there is much focus on analysing, accessing, breaking down and rebuilding. Pointing out that Carnival is about how you chose to express yourself, Sean believes that Carnival has modernized and so has the people who take part in it. He has noticed that, the carnival masquerader of today is someone who is body and health conscious and that the Soca of today is much faster than the calypso of the past. Hence, costumes are designed to allow for faster movement because it is important for band owners to listen to the masquerader as opposed to being stuck in tradition. Sean then goes on to say that even if one wants to pay homage to the traditional masquerade, like what is done in the band The Lost Tribe, one has to modernize that tradition. This consideration by the band owner shows the power the masqueraders have over and through the masquerade. They speak, and they are heard and things are put in place to meet their needs. Thus, through the masquerade, agency is allotted because the masqueraders are able to shape this area of their lives.

For Dean Ackin, getting into carnival was somewhat of an accident. For him, it started as just a hobby until he realized that it could become a career in 1999. Agency stems from a power to initiate and Ackin saw an opportunity to do just that. Through his passion for carnival, events and business, he saw that there was an opportunity to improve the carnival experience and create a new product: the first all inclusive band in Trinidad and Tobago, and he did just that. What prompted him was the understanding that you have to evolve if not you’ll get left behind. Additionally, all inclusive resorts were becoming very popular so he thought why not apply that to carnival.

For Ackin, “the best job to do is something that you really have a passion for” and Carnival allows for that passion as it provides a platform to be creative and innovative. Ackin also points out that the contemporary carnival is also important for suppliers as it is a form of lively hood.

Additionally, it is important for Trinidadians, as it is something that is engrained in a lot of us from early childhood and for masqueraders, as it is two days when they can feel extremely free and forget all their worries. On that note, Ackin believes that the contemporary masquerader is allotted agency through the masquerade because of the freedom of expression that it allows for. Through the ability to play a character, in a sense being somebody else, the masquerader is given the power to do things he/she would not normally do in a way, and with a confidence, that makes him/her feel good. This shows that the contemporary masquerade is valuable not just to the masquerader but to all those involved as it allows for various needs to be met in a variety of ways.

Ackin also notes that designers design based on what they want to portray or bring attention to and the designers have a hand in steering the masquerader's choice. With that being said, he points out that the modern masquerader is more daring in what they wear and how they express themselves and that since carnival mirrors society, the needs, wants and likes of today's masquerader are going to be reflected in today's carnival designs. In terms of costuming and the experience on the road, Tribe knows that different people like different things and hence, for example, Lost Tribe is catered to people who are interested in tradition, Bliss is the premium band and Harts is a family band. Additionally, the economic status of the masqueraders is also taken into account so different bands under the Tribe umbrella target different markets and offer different experiences each within a different price range. All in all, Tribe's mandate is to provide a great experience for the masquerader, hence they always try to improve at various levels. For instance, in 2020 they aimed to improve the distribution process so they invested in and built their own processing software to make the collection of costumes a better experience for the masquerader. Additionally, the experience on the road this year was made better through the improvement of the

cool zones and by including different types of misting systems. Hence, it is safe to say that for Tribe, the contemporary carnival's value is in its ability to satisfy human desires.

The Contemporary Masquerade Through the Lenses of the Masqueraders

To find out more about the Contemporary Trinidad Carnival Masquerade, I took to Instagram in order to collect some primary information from the masqueraders themselves. The masqueraders that took part in my questionnaire, which consisted of questions placed on my story, were between the ages of 16 – 45, were male and female and had played Mas at least once between the years of 2013 to 2020. Most played mas and continue to play mas because they see it as a part of their culture and some have played in order to take part in the experience. Others started off playing in a band but then graduated to making their own costumes with friends. Some have even been playing from very young ages because of involved parents and continue to play because of a love of performance, community and fun. One can gather from their responses that there is a need to carry on tradition and for a sense of belonging and the contemporary carnival fulfils these things.

Rooted in entertainment, much like popular culture, the contemporary masquerade is based on market rather than aesthetics. How something is marketed also has a lot to do with who takes part and when the masqueraders were asked about how Carnival is marketed they had a lot to say. For most the comment was they same, "They exclude." Many thought that the bigger bands did not market as though they were inclusive of all income brackets, body types and skin colours with their costumes usually modelled by thin, light skin women with long straight or curly hair and muscular men. The masqueraders found that carnival should be marketed for all as it is a festival for all. Additionally, the masqueraders thought that the costumes themselves are increasingly more focused on sex appeal. It's quite interesting that the masqueraders found that they had a right to express their views on how the procession is market, proving that the event is really for the people.

One particular comment that I found interesting was that of Celine Choo Wong Chee who focused on the costume designs as well as on the experiences that the bands advertise, highlighting that the bands seem to encourage individualism through their costumes. She says:

“I think Carnival bands market themselves through the design of the costumes and the overall roll of the band themselves from the amenities they offer on the road to fetes leading up to Carnival. The costumes are designed so the individual stands out. So a costume standing alone is a sight to behold where as, in the case with Peter Minshall, the individual costumes themselves are quite minimal, simple but effective design but when they come together as a collective the effect is paramount. However, in the case with Mas bands now where the individual costume is immaculate the collective effect of mass costumes feels jumbled and messy. This is not to frown on individualism because Traditional Mas characters are all different from each other and their individualism is celebrated but the community comes together to make the costumes together. However, when Mas is industrialized, when the costumes are not made by a community, and are made to stand out individually, one has to ask oneself what are the communal aspects of Mas that are left? Thus, in this regard I think they help perpetuate individualism.”

These concerns and points take the contemporary masquerade out of the realm of labour value and into that of value in terms of exchange, that is, what people are willing to give up in order to get something else. Carnival has also become quite commercial, almost as if commerce has over shadowed culture. As mas is no longer fabricated in local Camps with local makers,

costumes are now made outside as Carnival has now, in part, become about the money not just for the band owners but for the masquerades whose costumes can be a statement of how much they're willing to spend. Perhaps this opens up the floor to another type of agency, agency for money and to show that you have money.

Despite the exclusion, heightened sex appeal and ode to individualism, many masqueraders still chose to take part every year. In band launches, Mas Bands portray the idea of a slender, red skin young lady with curly or straight hair as the ideal wearer of their costumes but still, the majority of people gracing the roads come Carnival Monday and Tuesday do not fit into this bracket. Perhaps, therein lies one aspect of the rebellion of the contemporary masquerader, the agency of proclaiming "here I am, here is my body and I am proud of it".

The masqueraders chose which band to play with based on the average age group that plays with that band, which band most of their friends are playing with and which bands they can afford. Some also play with a different band each year to be able to have a different experience each time and others chose to play based on the amenities provided by the band, the quality of the costumes and what and how the band chooses to tell a story. For most, Yuma and Harts were the bands they would go to for a sense of community, Tribe for quality and Lost Tribe for how they told a story. The fact that through mas people are free to choose what they want and are able to satisfy desires is a testament to agency as well.

For many of the masqueraders, Trinidad's carnival is one of the most beautiful things to experience or witness, from preparation to crossing the Stage. They enjoy the creativity that goes into the festival, a creativity that also inspires them to be creative. Additionally, the communal aspect of carnival is one that stands out for many as it is a form of collective agency. People from all backgrounds of class and race coming together to celebrate a culture that is both rich and diverse

allow for the masqueraders have a higher appreciation of their roots, culture and fellow people. An increased sense of patriotism is also felt by the masqueraders at this time. A patriotism that is linked to the unity that comes along with celebrating with friends, family and strangers and sharing the common goal of letting go and having a good time.

For most if not all, Carnival Monday and Tuesday are about a transformation and a performance of self in a public space. On Carnival Monday, starting with J'ouvert, a sort of primal self is revealed through masking with mud, paint and masks. This revelation is facilitated not only by the costuming but also the music, dancing and alcohol. Carnival allows for a platform which enables the masqueraders to reveal a part of themselves not often shown. In public, most times we ought to be well mannered and conservative, but through masking they are able to let go of all inhibitions. On Tuesday, with “pretty mas” the masqueraders are also able to celebrate themselves and their bodies. They are able to enhance themselves, as facilitated by the costumes which reveal instead of conceal, and thus become heightened versions of themselves, versions of themselves that they feel proud of enough to flood social media with images. The masqueraders share the view that carnival is more than just beads and feathers, it is a time that allows for them to be free. A time when they can let go and have fun without fear of judgment while enveloped in an energy that is not felt anywhere else. An energy that can be compared to pure bliss and as one masquerader put it, “it’s just two out of 365 days a year, it being limited to such a short time frame makes it even more special.”

The Contemporary Masquerade Through the Lens of Me, the Onlooker



Figure 1

Image of Security

Source; Author, February 2020

During carnival, Bands are lined with ropes carried by hired security which only allow masqueraders who belong in the band into the area of the street that is outlined by their ropes (see figure. 1). This highlights that there is a want for security and exclusivity and a sense of agency in achieving exactly that.



Figure 2

Image of Unofficial Masquerader

Source; Author, February 2020

However, despite the securities best efforts, some outside masqueraders sometimes sneak into the band's ropes alluding to the spirit of carnival: freedom and defiance, an ability to break the rules...and get away with it (see figure.2).



Figure 3

Image of Masqueraders of Different Genders and Races Having a Good Time Together

Source; Author, February 2020

Also important to note is that the differences that keep us apart such as colour, shape, religion and gender, all seem to disappear for those two days that we look at the world through a sort of “Carnival lens”, a lens lined with unity and togetherness (see figure. 3). A sense of shared agency can not help but be felt at this time.



Figure 4

Image of Masquerading Sharing His Costume with an Onlooker

Source; Author, February 2020

Masqueraders even stop to adorn on lookers with parts of their costumes in a way as to almost invite them to share in the experience with them as though the mask and the mas is a permission slip to free oneself and join in the celebration of letting go and being oneself (see figure. 4).



Figure 5

Image of Masquerader Letting Go of Inhibitions

Source; Author, February 2020

Infected by the carnival spirt, people tend to let go of their inhibitions and do things they normally would not . For instance, one onlooker picked up a chair and ran and danced with it to the tune of Mr. Killa’s hit Soca song “Run Wid it” (see figure. 5). Much like in the spirit of popular culture, masqueraders and onlookers alike are able to collectively escape through the fulfilment of suppressed and repressed wants and desires.



Figure 6

Image of Masqueraders Taking Pictures of Themselves

Source; Author, February 2020



Figure 7

Image of Masqueraders Taking Pictures of Other Masqueraders

Source; Author, February 2020

Masqueraders also have a certain urgency to show that they are having a good time in costume. Hence they can often be seen taking pictures of themselves using the selfie camera to capture the moment, as well as of other masqueraders (see figure. 6 and figure. 7).



Figure 8

Image of Fannie Pack Addition to Costume

Source; Author, February 2020

Fannie packs included with the costume highlights the band's inclination to add to the overall experience for band members (see figure. 8). This addition to the costume would allow for masqueraders to have a place to put their belongings while they are on the road. For these two days it is really all about the masquerader and her experience.



Figure 9

Image of Costume Design Inclusive of Sun Hat

Source; Author, February 2020

Some costume designs are even made to shade the masquerader from the sun, a decision made to better the overall experience of the masquerader (see figure. 9).



Figure 10

Image of Masquerader in High Heels

Source; Author, February 2020

There also seems to be a sense of fashion over functionality as seen by masqueraders choosing to wear heels to the masquerade, highlighting the vanity connected to the masquerade (see figure. 10).



Figure 11

Image of Masqueraders with Hat and Mask

Source; Author, February 2020

The rice hat design by Tribe was both innovative and practical as it shielded the masquerader from some of the sun's rays (see figure. 11). Additionally, the masqueraders were given face mask which at the time are quite popular as people are more health conscious (see figure.11).



Figure 12

Image of Masquerader Parading with Fan

Source; Author, February 2020

Comfort is everything on the road as seen with masqueraders parading with fans held in hand (see figure. 12).



Figure 14

Image of Hart's Masquerader on Blanket

Source; Author, February 2020

Hearts even joined in on the luxury experience as seen by this masquerader lounging on a provided, complementary blanket (see figure. 14).



Figure 15

Image of Sign at Tribe's Rest Stop II

Source; Author, February 2020

In the vain of exclusivity, rest stops are also only accessible to registered masqueraders and staff (see figure. 15).



Figure 16

Image of Tribe's Food Sign

Source; Author, February 2020



Figure 17

Image of Lost Tribe's Drink Truck

Source; Author, February 2020



Figure 18

Image of Masqueraders Riding in Tray of Truck

Source; Author, February 2020

Additionally, bands like Tribe provide meals and drinks for their masqueraders, as well as the option to ride along with the band when their feet get tired (see figures. 16-18).



Figure 19

Image of Professional Picture of Masquerader Posted to Masquerader's Instagram

Source; Author, February 2020

During the masquerade photographers take shots of the masqueraders who then are quite eager to take these pics to social media platforms such as Instagram (see figure. 19).



Figure 20

Image of Masquerader Posted to Masquerader's Instagram

Source; Author, February 2020

Some masqueraders upload their pictures on the same day bringing the masquerade to the virtual world (see figure. 20).



Figure 21

Image of Masquerader, by Selfie Spot, Posted to Masquerader's Instagram

Source; Author, February 2020

There are even designated “selfie spots” which house props for masqueraders to take aesthetically pleasing pictures with/ by (see figure. 21).

As an on looker and a citizen, I am empowered through the ability to look at all of the mas for free and as though they belong to me. In other words, I am given a sense of pride because of what my people have created and how many people want to be a part of it. Additionally, I find a certain trill and power in storming a band I do not belong to and still feeling as though I am “in d thing”.

CONCLUSION

Agency is the carrying out of intentional actions normally against society, inevitability and structure. To a people, agency is extremely important because it provides a basis for them to shape their lives. To a large extent, The Trinidad Contemporary masquerade can be seen as a platform of agency through its roots in performance and showcase of culture. Though culture is normally a basis for division, the masquerade is one that is built on and celebrates many different cultures. This quality sets the tone for shared agency through the unity it allows for as well as agency through self-preservation and agency through the freedom of fulfilling otherwise hidden wants and desires not just for the masqueraders but for all who are involved, thus proving that it is much more than just a vulgar affair.

This two-day street procession of masked performers, onlookers, and those who make the experience a luxurious one, fits very much into the idea of popular culture. Despite its short comings of overly priced costumes, exclusivity in some cases and sometimes poor marketing, the festival is created for the people by the people. Its basis in entertainment, a focus on market over aesthetics and foundation in spectacle, provides an escape for its partakers who challenge societal morals and traditions in the festival.

With this said, it can be recommended that the contemporary carnival be given the same respect that is allotted to the traditional carnival as it too allows for a great sense of agency for the people it is catered towards. Further more, this study can be taken further by analysing why it is that the sense of freedom and unity that is felt at carnival is not felt throughout the year. Additionally, why mas bands chose to portray a certain type of masquerader in their marketing even though the festival is inclusive by nature can also be studied.

Though successful in proving my thesis, some limitations were encountered whilst conducting this body of research. One such limitation is that the time allotted did not allow for me to interview more people and bands in order to get more points of views so I had to resort to using just the bigger bands. Another is that due to the Corona Virus I was not able to conduct all of my interviews in person.

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APPENDIX A

Instagram Survey Questionnaire for Masqueraders

1. What do you think about the way carnival bands market themselves?
2. How long have you been playing mas? Why?
3. What band do you play with and why?
4. What do you get out of playing/ taking part in Trinidad's carnival?
5. What about carnival Monday and Tuesday makes it special?

Thank you 😊

APPENDIX B

Interview Questionnaire for Band Owners

Thesis topic: The more things change the more they remain the same: A study of the extent of which the Contemporary Trinidad Masquerade can be seen as a platform of agency.

QUESTIONS

1. Name?
2. What is your role in the Contemporary Trinidad Masquerade (CTM) and for how long?
3. What made you first get into the CTM?
4. What motivates you to continue to take part in this masquerade? **OR** What do you intend to get out of the CTM?
5. What is of importance in the CTM and why?
6. What does the word “agency”, in relation to action of a people, mean to you?
7. Does the CTM achieve this? In what way/ why not?
8. Why do you think mas has evolved to have a design centered around beads, bikinis and feathers?
9. Do you believe that bands offer masqueraders a platform for agency?
10. Does your band offer itself as a platform of agency? In what way?
11. Is there a predominant demographic that takes part in your band? Why might that be?
12. Is there anything different that your band has done this year, or plans to do in the future, to allow for more agency?

Thank you ☺

APPENDIX C

Interview Questionnaire for Researchers

Thesis topic: The more things change the more they remain the same: A study of the extent of which the Contemporary Trinidad Masquerade can be seen as a platform of agency.

QUESTIONS

1. Name?
2. What is your role in the Contemporary Trinidad Masquerade (CTM) and for how long?
3. What made you first get into the CTM?
4. What motivates you to continue to take part in this masquerade? **OR** What do you intend to get out of the CTM?
5. What is of importance in the CTM and why?
6. What does the word “agency”, in relation to action of a people, mean to you?
7. Does the CTM achieve this? In what way/ why not?
8. Why do you think mas has evolved to have a design centered around beads, bikinis and feathers?
9. Do you believe that bands offer masqueraders a platform for agency?

Thank you ☺