# *Claiming Caribbean space: re-enacting carnival in Melbourne, Australia*

# **CLAIMING CARIBBEAN SPACE:** RE-ENACTING CARNIVAL IN MELBOURNE, AUSTRALIA

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**Resumo**

Este artigo pesquisa as possibilidades de considerar o carnaval de Melbourne, Australia, espaço de recriação caribenho, focalizando a participação da comunidade caribenha de Victoria na Parada Anual Moomba. Cada ano a comunidade caribenha participa em Moomba, embora é somente uma entrada no desfile mais que uma comunidade empoderada das ruas de Melbourne cuja finalidade fosse a de colocar o mundo ao avesso. O artigo contextualiza a entrada da comunidade caribenha na história da parada Moomba e a política multiculturalista australiana.

**Palavras-Chave**: Carnaval, Parada Moomba, recriação caribenha

**Resumen**

Este artículo investiga las posibilidades de considerar el carnaval de Melbourne, Australia, espacio de recreación caribeño, atendiendo a la entrada de la comunidad caribeña de Victoria en la Parada anual Moomba. Cada año la comunidad del Caribe participa en Moomba, pero es sólo una entrada en el desfile en lugar de una comunidad que se apodera de las calles de Melbourne con el fin de 'poner el mundo al revés'. El artículo contextualiza la entrada de la comunidad caribeña en la historia de la parada Moomba y la política multiculturalist australiana.

**Palabras claves**: Carnaval, Parada Moomba, recreación caribeña

**Abstract**

This article investigates the possibilities of taking Caribbean space and re-creating Carnival in Melbourne, Australia, by looking at the Caribbean community of Victoria's entry in the annual Moomba Parade. Each year the Caribbean community enters Moomba but is only one entry in the parade rather than a community that takes over the streets of Melbourne in order to 'turn the world upside down'. The article will contextualise the Caribbean community's carnival

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entry in the history of the Moomba parade and in Australia's policies on multiculturalism.

**Keywords**: Carnival, Moomba Parade, cultural re-creation

Carole Boyce Davies, in her book *Caribbean Spaces: Escapes from Twilight Zones*, mentions the Caribbean community in Victoria, Australia as an example of the reach of Caribbean spaces throughout the world. Boyce Davies writes: 'In Australia a Caribbean community that calls itself CaribOz organizes cultural festivals that include mini-Carnivals and steelbands and food' (BOYCE DAVIES, 2013, p. 38). Since Boyce Davies first visited Australia in 2007, CaribOz (which, at that time, had its main branch in Sydney) has changed its name to CaribVic to both reflect its connection to the state of Victoria and to become a Caribbean community organization in its own right. The community, which has been in existence since the 1960s, has grown in size over the decades and now includes a number of British people of Caribbean descent as well as those who have emigrated directly from the Caribbean region. The members are almost exclusively from the Commonwealth Caribbean, although a few are from the French and Dutch-speaking territories. The community also includes the second and third generations of these families. Although the Caribbean community in Victoria remains one of the smallest communities in Australian society (the 2011 Australian Bureau of Statistics records 803 people who were born in the Caribbean living in Victoria), it has since the 1970s attempted to claim Caribbean space, to "take space" to use Boyce Davies expression, and to be recognized by the wider society. It did this, initially, through participation in Melbourne's Moomba parade, a parade and festival which began as a Labour Day march but became in the 1970s a celebration of multiculturalism. Nevertheless, claiming Caribbean space is bound up with the politics of location as well as the history of the community itself and these two factors have shaped the way in which CaribVic re-creates carnival in the Moomba parade. In this article, I will position CaribVic's Carnival entry in the history of the Moomba parade as well as the broader discourses of multiculturalism in the Australian context.

## Melbourne, Home of Moomba

Melbourne's Moomba parade began as a Labour Day parade (originally called the Eight-Hour Day march) in the mid-19$^{th}$ century when workers won the right to an eight-hour day (BELLAMY, CHISHOLM and ERICKSEN, 2006, p. 5). In 1955, local government and business leaders changed the name of the parade to Moomba to reflect social and political shifts in Melbourne which resulted in the decline of the Labour Day parade and its rebirth in the 1950s as a depoliticized festival of community and business interests. The city of

Melbourne, capital of the state of Victoria, was at this time a very conservative city, divided by religious affiliation. It was also overwhelmingly Anglo/Celtic, although it was gradually Europeanized by the waves of mainly Italian and Greek immigration following World War 2. It had/has an Aboriginal population, the Wurundgeri people of the Kulin nation, but their numbers have been greatly reduced due to massacres and diseases brought with the first European invasion in the beginning of the 19th century. In the 1950s, Australia still had the shameful White Australia Policy, first ratified in 1901, which discriminated against non-White immigrants. The state of Victoria, though, was known as the place where unfair conditions for miners on the goldfields had been challenged in the 1850s through the events that led to the Eureka Stockade, an armed rebellion against the authorities, which gave rise to a strong union movement, united under a flag displaying the Southern Cross.

In post-War Victoria, according to Stephen Alomes, in one of the only published essays to critically analyse the Moomba parade, the decline of the Labour Day parade was connected to the increasing suburbanization of Melbourne and to the rise of 'a new era of capitalism' (ALOMES, 1985, p. 15). Local business leaders, most notably the owners of stores such as Myer and Coles, now multi-million dollar businesses, saw the potential of the parade as a means to draw Melburnians back into the central business district and, at the same time, to shop at their stores (BELLAMY et al, 2006, p. 4). The Labour Day parade was re-named Moomba in 1955 and was initially organized by the City of Melbourne council and the business owners mentioned above. The parade took advantage of the rise of television to promote itself to suburban Melburnians as a day out in the city, a day of fun in a festive atmosphere. Hence Melbourne's "city fathers" agreed to adopt the name Moomba for the festival which was offered to them by Bill Onus, president of the Australian Aborigines League and a unionist, who claimed it meant 'Let's get together and have fun'.

Since the 1950s, the name Moomba has been discovered to mean 'up your bum' in local Aboriginal languages and is said to have been a joke on the predominantly white organizers of the festival. While some people believe that this story is an urban myth, Lin Onus, son of Bill Onus, 'countered the implication of Aboriginal inauthenticity by claiming his father suggested the word knowingly as an intervention against the confidence and dominance of white society' (BELLAMY et al, 2006, p. 10). More recently, Aboriginal activist and academic Gary Foley is quoted as saying "Moom means arse, it's as simple as that' (qtd by DUBECKI, 2008). Moreover, Bruce Moore, in his essay on Australian English and Indigenous voices, questions the naivety of those who thought that 'Let's get together and have fun' could be 'expressed in two syllables' (MOORE, 2001, p.135). Nevertheless, the organizers have kept the name which, ironically, gives the parade and festival 'a touch of colour', to quote Piers Kelly (2011), and a hint of the politics that the day now lacks.

The popularity of the Moomba parade since 1955 reflected, according to Alomes,

'new cultural self-confidence and nationalism' (ALOMES, 1985, p. 8), particularly after the White Australia Policy was abolished in 1973. In a history of the Moomba festival published by The City of Melbourne Council, the parades since the 1950s are described as increasingly multicultural:

> In early festivals post-war migrants typically displayed their ethnicity through traditional costume and performance, and in the mid-1960s, with a turn towards a more arts-oriented program, Aboriginal, Jewish, Italian and Latvian arts featured prominently. Multiculturalism has been widely accepted since the early 1990s, and from this period particularly cultural diversity has been well represented in Moomba. In accordance with Council's City Plan objectives, this unique community festival is a celebration of identity, culture and place. (BELLAMY et al, 2006, p. 8)

Although Australia declared itself multicultural in 1973, this was not properly reflected on the streets of Melbourne until the 1980s and beyond. As I will demonstrate below, the Caribbean community in Melbourne in the 1960s and 1970s was extremely small and reflected, to some extent, the criteria of the White Australia policy. Further, I will argue in this article that the increasingly multicultural focus of Moomba since the 1970s still conforms to the requirements and conservatism of the dominant group in Australian society and this has had an impact on the extent to which CaribVic can "take space" in the Moomba parade.

## Re-Creating Carnival in the Moomba Parade

The Caribbean community has been in existence in Melbourne and wider Victoria since the 1960s. The community was comprised initially of white and light-skinned West Indians, mainly from Trinidad and Tobago, Jamaica, Guyana, and Barbados. This situation changed, to some extent, after the end of the White Australia Policy in 1973 when more African-Caribbean people started to migrate to Australia, usually as a second act of migration from the United Kingdom (SMITH, 2014, p.15). In 1975, the opportunity to enter Moomba was offered to the Caribbean community when Walton's, an Australian department store, sponsored the Trinidadian steelpan band Amral's Cavaliers to tour to Melbourne and participate in the parade. Although not exclusively for Trinidadians, they dominated the group that joined the parade in support of Amral's Cavaliers, 'jumping up in simple costumes' (CARIBVIC, 2014), and this set the tone for future Caribbean community entries. The Moomba parades in the 1970s, and the Caribbean community entry, was still largely a white space which reflected Australia's immigration and integrationist policies at that time. Nevertheless, participation in the 1975 parade led to the formation of a steelpan band – Caribbean Steel Rhythm band - which went on to perform on local television and at other events, both public and private;

yet another example of the way in which Caribbean people have attempted to "take space" in Australian society (Melbourne Immigration Museum).

In the 1990s, the Caribbean community, under the name Melbourne Masqueraders, again submitted an application to re-create carnival in the Moomba Parade, particularly after Roger Phillips, a Trinidadian and passionate player of Mas, had migrated to Melbourne and joined the community. Phillips (2014), in an interview published in the book *Adding Pimento: Caribbean Migration to Victoria, Australia*, recalls attending the Moomba parade as a spectator and thinking 'we can do something better':

> I approached the authorities and they warmed to the idea of having "Moomba goes carnival". It was something new to Australia… Our theme was the Barrier Reef. The next day, *The Age* had a spread which said that the best thing about the Moomba parade was the Melbourne Masqueraders (SMITH, MONTAGUE and THOMAS, 2014, p. 103).

Pat Thomas, another Trinidadian who migrated to Melbourne in the late 1960s, said in an interview in *Adding Pimento*:

> We participated in Moomba for five consecutive years as the Melbourne Masqueraders in Trinidad style: big, bright, colourful costumes. We won awards from the Melbourne City council, but there was still no real recognition of the Caribbean region among the wider Australian community (SMITH, MONTAGUE and THOMAS, 2014, p.51)

The lack of recognition on the part of the wider Australian society can be attributed, in some ways, to the size of the Caribbean community. Caribbean people do not reside in one particular suburb of Melbourne nor do they have a designated house for their activities and, moreover, they come from different parts of the region. While the Caribbean community's lack of recognition has been of concern to some of its members (a situation that has changed since 2009/2010 with an exhibition in Melbourne Immigration Museum followed by the publication of a community book), this paper is concerned with the opportunity to claim Caribbean space and, by extension create a Black space, in a society that has been described by Ghassan Hage as a White multiculturalism.

## White Multiculturalism and the Purpose of the Moomba Parade

In his book, *White Nation Fantasy: fantasies of white supremacy in a multicultural society*, Hage argues that multiculturalism in Australia is described in dominant discourses as

'enriching' Australian society, which he interprets as providing diverse cultural experiences for the dominant white group. Hage refers to this as the management of an 'economy of otherness', which is 'a system of producing and regulating the value of otherness to maximize the homely feeling (the taste of the homemade stew) of the white Australians positioned at its centre' ((HAGE,1998, p. 128). The Moomba parade can be read through this lens. The parade itself is a sanitized "display" of community groups – 'wearing traditional dress and singing and dancing', to quote journalist Andrew Jefferson from the conservative newspaper *The Herald Sun* - who march through the streets of Melbourne according to a script produced by local government which fulfills their notion of how multiculturalism should look – contained and regulated. Quentin Stevens, in his book *The Ludic City: exploring the potential of public spaces*, writes,

> these official processions… carefully regulate the roles and locations available to the general public; little is left to chance. They lack an element of freedom… their chief aim is to reproduce a certain image of community… (STEVENS,2007, p. 96)

In the case of Moomba, the parade, which has been criticized as long ago as the 1980s for being 'artificial, lacking life and vitality, despite its mammoth size and large crowds' (ALOMES, 1985, p. 9), is designed to emphasise the social cohesion of the city of Melbourne and wider Victoria.

In 2014 CaribVic entered Moomba after a significant break from the event, inspired by their collaboration with Pans On Fire, a local steelpan band that started after a bush fire devastated the rural town of Marysville, located an hour from Melbourne. Pans On Fire has been a form of catharsis for residents of the town as many of them lost their homes (and some, their neighbours and loved ones) in the blaze. In the 2014 Moomba parade, Pans on Fire steelpan band were on the back of two trucks and were followed by members of the Caribbean community, called in media coverage the CaribVic dancers, dressed in modern Trinidad carnival style costumes – "bikinis, beads and feathers" (Copeland, 2010). Rita Seethaler, the founder of Pans on Fire, described the experience as 'getting as close to the original culture as we can ever get' (PANS ON FIRE MOOMBA 2014, www.youtube.com). Without the accompaniment of Pans On Fire, CaribVic entered Moomba again in 2015, 2016 and 2017, each time with more and more participants and each time asserting itself through the involvement of more African and Indo-Caribbean people as claiming a black space in Moomba. However, the CaribVic carnival entry in 2016 was preceded in the parade by a Latin Dance group and followed by a sports car - a bit like Kit from the popular 80s television show Nightrider – which clearly demonstrates that CaribVic's attempt to "take space" is dependent on a position allocated to it by event organisers.

Although the word 'carnival' is used in some of the promotional materials for the

Moomba parade and festival, both by The City of Melbourne Council and CaribVic, the original reasons for Carnival (in Europe and the Americas) are completely at odds with the purpose and performance of Moomba. Alomes makes the point that in the Australian context, first and foremost, the subversive aspects of carnival were 'less important'.

> The psychic release offered by masks, satire and the right to take liberties and to give abuse in small European towns was less necessary in the more open, socially mobile and less formal society of Australian cities. The inversion whereby the poor took on the roles of the rich for a day was culturally, if not always economically, inappropriate in a pioneering and modern society which was often skeptical of elaborate ritual in manners and ostentation in dress. In a society which also only tolerated craziness when associated with alcohol and/or sport the Latin cultural temperament which makes complete craziness acceptable at the carnival in Rio de Janeiro was also absent (ALOMES, 1985, p. 4)

While I accept Alomes's general point I think it is necessary to comment further on the socio-political differences between Australia and countries, such as Brazil, in which carnival holds enormous significance. In Australia, Aboriginal people were impacted so greatly by European invasion that their numbers were severely reduced, to the point where they now comprise approximately 3% of the Australian population. Further, although many people were originally brought to Australia as convicts, their descendants have assumed the position of the dominant group in the society and generally hold a lot of decision-making power. In other words, although Australia is founded on violent colonialism it was not built on a system of slavery reliant on forced labour, although Aboriginal and South Sea Islander people were treated like slaves when they were employed on large rural properties and/or on sugar plantations (See DAVIS, 2015). It has, since quite early in its colonial history, been a predominantly white settler colony. Therefore, the conditions that produced carnival are very different to those that shaped the formation of Australian society. Moreover, Australia has over the last one hundred years become so orderly that expressions of the 'craziness' to which Alomes refers are heavily policed by the authorities[1].

The policing of the parade and the reduction of public risk have increased since the Caribbean community first entered the parade in 1975. Stevens notes that the authorities have invented a carnivalesque character who acts as a marshal, segregating the crowd from the performance. This character, a puppet-like businessman with a mobile phone mounted on a bulldozer, although introducing an element of fun into the practice of crowd control, serves to ensure that the Moomba parade is purely 'passive consumption' rather than an example of what Bakhtin describes as the 'behavioural excesses' of carnival (STEVENS, 2007, pp. 133-134). An example of the way in which Moomba polices against any breach of its rules is

1 Gerard Aching makes the point that Caribbean carnivals have a history of being policed by the authorities. '[A]midst the annual revelry in which different classes and sectors of Caribbean societies simultaneously took to the streets, the festivities also became events through which colonial authorities exercised, measured, and reaffirmed their power employing exhibited techniques of crowd control' (2002, p. 4).

reflected in another story told by Roger Phillips in his interview for *Adding Pimento*:

> I remember the second time around the organisers of Moomba were so impressed that they said we could 'roam' around the city after the parade. We had the music on a truck and we went up and down the city streets in our costumes. At one stage, I looked back down Swanston St and the trams were backed up as far as the eye could see. We had blocked the trams. It was banned after that. (SMITH, MONTAGUE and THOMAS, 2014, p. 103)

Although the Caribbean community has attempted to "take space", their attempts have been thwarted by the authorities. However, the Caribbean community in Australia is not as politicized as other diasporic Caribbean communities in countries such as Canada and the UK because the founding members have not had to fight the same type of racism, experienced by those who emigrated to the Northern hemisphere, or urgently assert their right to "take space", which resulted, for example, in the Notting Hill Carnival in London. Notting Hill 'developed as an 'affirmation of Black culture in Britain which draws on a shared cultural heritage and says "We are here to stay"' (SHERINGHAM, 2015, p. 90). The difference between the Caribbean community in London and the one in Melbourne, aside from sheer size, is that the class/colour positioning of some the founding members of the community in Victoria, particularly those who emigrated directly from the Caribbean to Australia in the 1960s and 1970s, saw them welcomed by Australian Immigration authorities and settle in relatively easily (SMITH, 2014, p. 15).

The Caribbean community's carnival entry, although it carries huge significance for some of those who participate, is shaped by the restrictions placed upon it. As I mentioned previously, the CaribVic entry in the Moomba parade has become more visibly a Black space with the increasing number of African and Indo-Caribbean people participating in the event. One cannot help but wonder about the way in which the white gaze views those who participate, particularly as the Caribbean is seen as a "exotic" location in the minds of many Australians. Boyce Davies also remarks on Carnival in diasporic spaces where cultural traditions are completely out of context and are possibly read as such by those viewing. She writes:

> although Carnivals are sites for "taking space", Caribbean women's bodies are sexualized both in home and diasporic contexts. In the latter context, the movement out of the original cultural and geographic locations with their histories renders a displacement into large urban cities around the world where we are now under a variety of uninformed gazes (DAVIES, 2013, p. 4)

An example of the mis-reading of CaribVic's carnival entry occurred during the television coverage of the 2016 parade when the Channel 7 commentator said: 'Just put on a costume and have a dance. That's what it's all about' (CHANNEL 7, 2016). This type of

commentary completely misunderstands and overlooks the political underpinnings of Carnival which Keith Nurse points out 'is born out of the struggle of marginalized peoples to shape a cultural identity through resistance, liberation and catharsis' (NURSE, 1999, p. 662).

Extending Boyce Davies remarks, quoted above, I would argue that Caribbean men's bodies, particularly in the Australian context, are also interpreted through the 'uninformed' gaze of a predominantly white audience, one which has a history of either exoticizing or demonizing black masculinities. For example, in a meta-theatrical moment at the 2016 Moomba Parade, it was reported in the news that a riot had occurred in Federation Square in which 200 youths, allegedly members of the Apex gang, had used chairs as weapons and had stolen wallets and mobile phones (BROOKS and PALIN, 2016). The reporting on the so-called riot immediately honed in on particular racial groups – African, Middle Eastern and Pacific Islanders - who tend to be negatively racialized in the Australian media and in dominant discourses (See FRANKLIN, 2016). These reports show the less than 'harmonious' side of Australian multiculturalism when those who dare to cause disturbances or breach the boundaries set for it are racially targeted by the dominant group, even if they are not the culprits (See CHINGAIPE, 2016). The Victorian State government, led by Premier Daniel Andrews, tried to steer the discourse away from a focus on race which was, ironically, undermining the image of Victoria it was trying to create through the Moomba parade and festival. Various critics of multiculturalism in the Australian context point out that problems with multiculturalism are raised annually, generally by conservatives, particularly in the wake of events such as "the Moomba riots", a discourse Hage refers to as the 'rituals of white empowerment' (qtd by PARDY & LEE, 2011, p. 304). 'In Australia the ritualistic dimensions of the debate point to the repeated reproduction of the centrality of Whiteness or Europeanness to the multicultural nation' (PARDY & LEE, 2011, p. 304).

Aside from Moomba, the Caribbean community has also claimed Caribbean space in other locations, such as the first Australian Steelpan Festival, held in Marysville, Victoria, in 2013. Unlike the Moomba parade, the Caribbean community had an input into the planning and scheduling of events for the festival, in conjunction with Pans on Fire, the Marysville Steelpan Band. The Festival, held over three days in May in a small town in the Victorian countryside, brought together steelpan bands from around the world as well as members of the Caribbean and wider Australian communities. In addition to a steelpan competition, the event included a carnival night with local and international steelpan players, a number of whom were from the Caribbean, and local Ska and Reggae musicians. This was truly a festive atmosphere in which 'play' was encouraged and carnival masqueraders, including Old Mas characters, mingled and interacted with the rest of the revelers. The event was not set up as a parade so there was no distinction between audience and performers, except for those performing music on the stage, and even the contract between musicians and the crowd was broken down by the end of the night. Mark Loquan, a Trinidadian judge of the Steelpan

competition, wrote in his review of the event:

> Later in the evening the community center was electrified by an authentic Carnival fete including traditional mas (Jab Jab, Sailor, and Midnight Robber) and masqueraders as tropical birds… The event touched a nerve in all the Trinibagonians and indeed West Indians present, whether they were in Australia for many years or had just arrived, far beyond the Trini flags being waved or the food and drinks and music (LOQUAN, 2013)

On the Sunday, there was a goat race and another carnival parade which united the community of Marysville as well as those participating. This event was not about "displaying" multiculturalism but could be described as closer to an "everyday multiculturalism", defined by Wise and Velayutham as 'a grounded approach to looking at the everyday practice and lived experience of diversity in specific situations and spaces of encounter' (2009, p.3), in which cultural practices are part of everyday life rather than a social script designed by those in power to reinforce (and often falsely) a sense of multicultural harmony.

**Caribbean Carnival entry – a Contested Domain**

Although it appears to unite the community, and is a celebration of Caribbean people living in Australia, the Caribbean entry in Moomba is a contested domain. The re-enactment of Carnival within the confines of the Moomba parade and at the Steelpan festival are in the tradition of Trinidad carnival and do not reflect the multitude of carnival traditions found throughout the Caribbean region and hence the multiculturalism within the community that exists in Victoria. Within the context of the Caribbean carnival entry, there has only been one occasion that has been documented in which a carnival tradition from a Caribbean nation other than Trinidad and Tobago has been represented: the 2014 carnival entry included the Dominican carnival character Sensay (PAT, 2014). Garth Green contends that

> carnivals and variously named "ethnic festivals" that English-speaking Caribbean immigrants bring to major cities in North America and Great Britain have developed in part as a way to organize their own communities and in part to assert their ethnic identity in their new homelands (GREEN, 2005, p. 299)

Whilst the assertion of 'ethnic identity' is important, the problem in Australia is that it is done under the guise of the broad term 'Caribbean' which elides national and cultural differences. While this may be common within community groups in which one nation dominates, it gives rise to contestation as one country's version of the Caribbean – not to mention, their version of what is *authentically* Caribbean – stands in for the whole.

## Conclusion

Participation in Moomba, despite its limitations, has drawn attention to the existence of a Caribbean community in Victoria. One could argue that "taking space" in this parade was a strategic move for the community as it was exposed to the dominant group in a state-sanctioned expression of multiculturalism and therefore has made itself a prospective candidate for state government grants to support its activities, some of which it has already been successful in obtaining. The importance of "taking space", according to many of the founding members of the community, has been about passing on Caribbean cultural traditions to their children and grandchildren and fostering pride in their cultural heritage. Increasingly, as I have argued, the Caribbean community's entry in Moomba has created a Black space, unusual in what is still a predominantly white society, which gives rise to greater discussions about multi-racialism in Australia, not simply multiculturalism.

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