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Orality and Memory in the Carnival of Cádiz, Spain: Identity, Urban Space, and Socio-Political Transgression

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Abstract

Cádiz is a city in the southernmost region of Andalucía (Spain) famous for its annual carnival in February—a time when Cádiz’ historical center undergoes a radical transformation. Each year various groups of friends, neighbors, and colleagues create costumes, lyrics, and music independently from officially programmed acts. These “illegal” street performers—or *carnavalescas callejeras*—create original comical acts based on recurrent themes and rhythms that come to life as they directly interact with thousands of people throughout all hours of the day and night. We use ethnographic data to examine the aesthetic, socio-political, economic, and symbolic dimensions of these massive street performances. *Carnavalescas callejeras* orally transmit social satires and ingenious political transgression based on sociocultural references that are very much anchored in local memory and identity. In this respect, we also reflect upon the significance of this massive performance as citizens autonomously transform urban spaces through their words and actions. As we argue, performers and carnival-goers partake in a singular ritual that contests social order, ridicules what is “politically correct,” and resists homogenizing cultural trends by affirming their identity.

Introduction

Thousands of people symbolically “take over” urban spaces during the Carnival of Cádiz, an event that takes place over the course of two days during the month of February. After three months of preparation, people in costumes perform original skits and parodies in parades, among other informal performances. Hundreds and thousands of people accompany these processions as they bring life into the streets, the plazas of shopping centers and the city’s most populated neighborhoods. Despite institutional regulations and pressures to commodify the Carnival of Cádiz for tourists, the event nevertheless remains a festive ritual that citizens play a leading role in (Fig. 1).

Based on ethnographic analysis, we contend that this socio-cultural expression embodies the symbolic appropriation of the city by broad sectors of its citizenry. Citizens invert social and political order by partaking in a deep, existential phenomenon of profound experiential significance that also strongly represents *gaditano* or *gaditana* identity (a Cádiz native and/or citizen).



Fig. 1. Official Poster for the Carnival of Cádiz (4-14 of February) entitled, *Al liquindoy (Coming Up!)* out for Cadiz, Spain, 2016. Image credit: Rafael Caballero.

Urban Culture, Cultural Policy and Intangible Cultural Heritage

The Carnival of Cádiz invites us to reflect on two interrelated ideas. On the one hand, the annual event may be observed as an expression of intangible cultural heritage. On the other hand, city inhabitants symbolically and transgressively appropriate Cádiz, transforming the city into a socially autonomous living space.

The concept of culture that we employ is based on the anthropological tradition. As defined by the Mexico City Declaration on Cultural Policies (UNESCO), culture is:

...the whole complex of distinctive spiritual, material, intellectual and emotional features that characterize a society or social group. It includes not only arts and letters, but also modes of life, the fundamental rights of the human being, value systems, traditions and beliefs.

We may regard the city to be dynamic, living and contradictory socio-cultural space beyond its mere physical-territorial and administrative delimitations. Whereas the physical city, as claimed by Jordi Borja as well as by J. Borja and M. Castells, is linked to the history, culture, memory, and identity of a community (Borja; Borja y Castells), Bohigas (2004) reminds us that we may regard the urban as a socio-political environment where citizenship is exercised (Bohigas). We hence identify cultural policies that promote and valorize local culture and analyze them against policies that privilege the Carnival of Cádiz as a commercialized activity; or rather, in the spirit of Jose Teixeira, we examine cultural goods that serve an eminently social function rather than the generation of products for the cultural market (Teixeira). Even if both dimensions can coexist, they do so through complex (often uneven) balances. Therefore, we focus specifically on the democratization of cultural and on citizens' political praxis.

Intangible cultural patrimony constitutes a set of expressions that signify history, memory, and collective identities that are received, recreated, and transmitted in a dialectical manner between tradition and innovation and among different generations, proposes Juan Agudo. Article 16 of the Law of Tangible Historical Patrimony of Andalusia holds a relatively ambiguous perspective that, in the character of Ethnological Studies, references: "forms of life, culture, activities, and modes of production" themselves (Historical Patrimony). From this normative framework, the Ethnological Patrimony of Andalusia also accommodates real estate, private property, and ethnological interest activities. UNESCO's definition of Intangible Cultural Patrimony alludes to the "uses, representations, expressions, knowledge, and techniques," and reflects collective identities, cultural diversity, and human creativity alongside culturally associated and socially recognized objects and spaces. Included among other manifestations of immaterial cultural patrimony are oral traditions, performing arts, social practices, rituals and festive events—all of which are inseparable in our case study (Convention for Safeguarding Intangible

Cultural Heritage).

The Carnival of Cádiz: Urban Socio-Cultural Expression and Cultural Patrimony

Cádiz's carnival is an urban socio-cultural expression that constitutes a patrimonial cultural good of Andalusia. It is also an activity of ethnological interest comprised by a number of significant spaces, places, and objects. Similar to the Convention for the Safeguarding of Intangible Cultural Patrimony cited above, the Carnival of Cádiz involves almost all expressions of cultural heritage, as much in immaterial manifestations include a set of instruments, objects, and artifacts intrinsic to its festivities.

In their book, *El Carnaval en el Atlas del Patrimonio Inmaterial*, Álvarez, Carrera, and Delgado regard the annual event to be one of the most important festivals in Andalusia due to its vital dimensions for local society. The authors further emphasize that manifestations of the carnival include many diverse ritualized expressions, gastronomic events, functions and, most prominent of them all, the *chirigotas* (carnival groups) and their repertoires of lyrics, musical and vocal compositions, and *tipos* (costumes). The rich and widespread social participation in these celebrations transform and enliven urban spaces (Álvarez, Carrera, and Delgado).

Carnival converts numerous enclaves of the city into places of ethnological interest. The street, in its broadest and most complex sense, can be understood as the cultural space inherent to the celebration whose symbolic meaning endures throughout the year.

The Street between Popular Transgression and Regulation

At end of the 19th century, historian Alberto Ramos Santana described spontaneous carnival groups created by men from popular classes. These groups would prepare music and lyrics parodying local themes, and social and political satire. Later, they would dress in distinctive costumes and recreate these performances in the streets. Eventually, conservative sectors of the population demanded that restrictions be placed on these performances. For instance, authorities would inspect the contents of the verses and, in the name of "good manners," local authorities explicitly prohibited activities such as throwing water from balconies, dressing in certain costumes, or ridiculing religion and other "good customs." An official chronicle from 1884 celebrates the elimination of "jokes" that "some low-class women shouted at passersby on the street" (Ramos 58).

At the beginning of the 20th century, the local bourgeoisie were divided between those who considered these groupings to be a folkloric expression and those who wanted to control their lyrics, costumes, and other forms of public expressions. The latter of these two sought "cultured" expressions over "obscene" public displays in the streets. However, as Ramos observes, "...practically all of the city—which we now consider the historical center—converted itself into a public stage" (Ramos 84). 19th century regulations did not eliminate street groupings that somehow persisted until the beginning of

the Spanish Civil War in 1936. Following the Civil War, the Franco Regime abolished the carnival in almost all of Spain. The carnival in Cádiz nevertheless continued clandestinely: carnival verses were practiced and remembered in private spaces. Through these practices clandestine groups of carnival aficionados maintained the tradition during and after the war—albeit under strict government control and avoiding the word “carnival.”

In 1950, the City Council institutionalized other local festivals. Groups and couplets were retained despite censorship and prohibition of most carnival uses. Eventually, the contest was recuperated and some costumes and dances acts were tolerated under the strict surveillance of the Regime. Towards the end of the 1960s, the festival was moved to the month of May. In the following years, however, there were appeals to return the carnival to the month of February—always sidestepping censorship and prohibitions. With the death of Franco in 1975 and the beginning of the Political Reform shortly thereafter, these reclamations grew to widespread public outcry.

The Recovery of the Street by the Public

In 1977, the festivals of May were celebrated as the “Carnival of Cádiz.” Without institutional preparations, there was an explosive recovery in the streets and plazas. A thorough reconstruction was initiated two years later by the first democratic City Council established after the dictatorship. The municipal delegate of festivals (1979-2003), José Mena, a communist metallurgist, promoted commissions for popular participation. The same year also witnessed the return of *carnavalescas callejeras*—satirical, comical street groups (*chirigotas* or groups that are called “illegal” due to the informality of their performances), (Fig. 2). These groups promoted a genuine “takeover” of urban space alongside thousands of people who followed them, as observed over the years by Jurado (in the 1980s), Cuadrado y Vázquez (in the 1990s), and Al-Jende, Guerrero y Manjavacas (in the 2000s) When reflecting on this era, Mena explains, “What I was looking for was... politics. The art of politics is that you retake the feeling, you elaborated upon it, and return it to the people,” (Mena, personal interview). And yet, as Mena insists, “But you do not invent anything... Do you understand me? And then, neighborhood-to-neighborhood... or rather, all the people participated... a marvelous thing!” (personal interview).



Fig. 2. An “illegal” *callejara* group sings face-to-face with the public, Carnival of Cadiz, Cadiz, Spain, 2014. Photo credit: Gonzalo Höhr.

Today, the Carnival has been completely restored and displays two effects that are also very much present in other Andalusian festivals: on the one hand, as Ramos notices, the institutionalization and regulation of such events enhance the control of political authorities (Ramos), and, on the other, as Moreno notices, festivals are increasingly commercialized touristic commodities (Moreno). Above and beyond these two effects, the event maintains and increases its character of local socio-cultural reaffirmation. The carnival is driven by crowds of people drawn together in the streets, where they gather to hear street performers sing couplets (Fig. 3).



Fig. 3. Amid thousands of people, small crowds form around groups of performers to hear couplets, Carnival of Cadiz, Cadiz, Spain, 2014. Photo credit: G. Höhr.

The proliferation of *carnavalescas callejeras* serves as an act of “local and parochial reaffirmation,” but also as a manifestation of resistance to the “daily and dominate modes of life constrained by a culturally homogenizing model of globalization” (Al-Jende, Guerrero and Manjavacas 151). The informal and exaggerated reproduction of couplets and parodies (many of which anonymous) on city streets and in plazas, each swarming with thousands of people who interact with and freely interpret their words, has become emblematic of the Carnival of Cádiz (Fig. 4).



Fig. 4. A young woman performs a surreal parody alone while addressing the crowd, Carnival of Cadiz, Cadiz, Spain, 2013. Photo credit: Javier Caravaca.

These playful and dramatic performances, in turn, reflect social time and represent cultural identity and convey conscious and unconscious collective imaginaries (Al-Jende, Guerrero and Manjavacas 151).

Exploring Socio-Cultural Imaginaries and Values

The master of Andalusian anthropologists, Isidoro Moreno, has made some methodological considerations for the study of festivals. Moreno’s considerations are significant to reflect upon. According to him, festivals are: “symbolic expressions of social life,” (70) and he further asserts that “their position within the socio-cultural system is not at a level of social structure but of the symbolization and ritualization of that position and of social order, as well as its corresponding values” (70).

Moreno proposes that we consider four fundamental dimensions of festivals: symbolic, socio-political, economic, and aesthetic. First, the symbolic dimension refers to explicit or deep meanings. Second, the socio-political refers to the preservation or opposition to both the society that celebrates it and its

groups. Third, the economic dimension relates to the “ceremonial expenses” or its role of restabilization (or not). Finally, the aesthetic dimension refers to the activation of concrete signifiers of sensory and emotional stimuli. The analysis of these dimensions in the entirety of festivals provides us with a vast amount of information on identifying elements, social roles or cultural meanings.

In the Carnival of Cádiz, the economic dimension is evident on various levels. In a city heavily impacted by deindustrialization and unemployment, the carnival brings substantial economic movement—both in ceremonial investments and, thanks to the influx of visitors, the circulation of capital. While this can be observed in small businesses of all kinds (especially in food and lodging establishments), the festival’s economic dimension is also reflected in the informal sale of drinks, food, and carnival objects, etc. And, in a very particular manner, expressions of community bonding and many other symbolic exchanges based on games of reciprocity. These exchanges occur outside market dynamics and expand beyond equations of value and price.

The aesthetic dimension displays the contradictions of the politico-institutional and public levels. On the one hand, the politico-institutional level applies to the city’s ornamentation with ephemeral and spectacular carnival-inspired motifs (gazebos, stages, lighting, carnival giants). On the other hand, the majority of participating citizens—“the people” on the streets, and in the plazas, bars and taverns—recreate motifs that radically defy the “normality” of daily life and its dominant social, cultural, and political norms. To dress oneself as “*mamarracho*” (a term very present in Andalusian Spanish, designating extravagant people or situations, informal or not respectable) or “to clown around” in the streets elevates ridicule and surrealism. Dressing *mamarracho* is recurrent on carnival streets, it as a creative aesthetic resource for expressing oneself (Fig. 5).



Fig. 5 An example of playing the *Mamarracho* or clowning around, Carnival of Cadiz, Cadiz, Spain, 2014. Photo credit: Gonzalo Höhr.

The socio-political dimension leads us to two conflicting ideas. First, the political-institutional organizes the festival as kind of a service provided to the public that is planned and managed by the local authorities. The authorities understand the carnival as a way to promote the city, as well as a terrain for municipal propaganda promoting local partisan interest. Conversely, satirical role reversals, cultural rupture and transgression, socio-professional de-hierarchization, and social satire or political critique reflect the diversity of popular logic—all of which readapt to the socio-historical context of “current day” issues.

Let’s look at an example. The popular verse, “*Hay gente que dice*” (“There are people who say”), originally performed by the band “*Los cruzados mágicos*” (The Magical Crosses) in 1987, addresses Andalusian identity on the basis of linguistic differentiation:

Hay gente que dice
There are people who say
que con nosotros los andaluces
That us, Andalusians,
No hay un gachó que pueda entenderse
Not a living soul can understand
Porque cuando hablamos
Because when we speak
no pronunciamos correctamente
Our pronunciation is not correct
y nos comemos todas las eses.
And we eat all the “s-es”
Y hay algo más
But there is something more
Que no sabrán
That they do not realize
Quienes defienden tal comentario
Those who make that claim
Y es que si seguimos
That if we continue
con este paro
in this manner
dentro de poco nos comeremo [“*comeremos*” lacking the letter “s”]
We will soon eat
el abecedario
The alphabet

Clearly, “*Hay gente que dice*” displays a humorous yet strong affirmation of Andalusian identity based on the Spanish dialect spoken in southern Spain as opposed to the dialects spoken in other regions (e.g. Valladolid, where they speak “clearer” or “proper” Spanish). As the lyrics echo throughout the streets, the carnival is experienced intensely—both individually and collectively. These experiences amass and produce a set of communicational expressions, values, and emotions, among other intangible manifestations, that could hardly go unnoticed in the reconfiguration of the

local imagination—especially producing a strong sense of *gaditano* or *gaditana* identity and ways of being. These considerations are reinforced by lyrics and carnival costumes that produce a repetitive and intertwined result: the chaotic narration of daily life, sexuality and sexism, localism and socio-political criticism.

Take, for instance, an excerpt of Romancero Callejero's 2007 carnival song, "El enfermo," where the surrealist atmosphere mixes with the profane:

"[...] *Seguid mi filosofía*
Follow my philosophy
Disfrutad del carnaval
Enjoy the carnival
Y a follar, que son dos días
And fucking—it's only two days.

The experience of Carnival and its constant local vindications are also both anchored in collective memory. They become directly or indirectly present in communication and other behaviors of daily life. Beyond the festival, for instance, there are recurrent allusions to neighbors, family, or work. While not free of contradiction, these allusions also reinforce strong popular sentiments firmly rooted in local socio-political history to the extent that, in many lyrics, "being from Cádiz" is expressed as a source of pride and authenticity.

Social reality is reconstructed from oral tradition and memory or through particular relations of individuals with memories of a festive context and therefore unusual. Life is reinterpreted in a world of orality—that is sung about and spoken of. Meaning is reconstituted with each interpretation wherein the sensory and body language are fundamental. One anonymous informant, who is a member of street *chirigotas* explained, "I tell you, in Cádiz there are people, lots of people, eh... how would I tell you? People live life as if it were a popular carnival song" (Anonymous, personal interview).

These feelings and connections adhere to local geographical, historical, and social factors. More specifically, the insularity of Cádiz and its maritime, naval, and port tradition stands in stark contrast to the rural traditions of Andalusia. The decline of overseas trade deeply impacted Cádiz followed by the weight of 19th century liberal thought, orcantonalism, and anarcho-syndicalist labor formations. In recent history, there has been widespread opposition to deindustrialization governed by political actors, perceived by *gaditanos* as outsiders, if not "public enemies." This sentiment is conveyed in an excerpt of Los Dedocratas's ironic political piece. "*Existen muchos detalles*" ("There are many details"), which speaks directly of Cádiz' contemporary history:

...La carretera a Huelva/sigue en el limbo de los deseos
The road to Huelva/remains in the limbo of desires
perdidas las aceras/frente a la fuerza de varios dedos.
Sidewalks lost/Against the force of diverse fingers
Muchas de las contratatas/Ahora se hayan muy decaídas
Many of the contracts/Are now found to be useless
No se construye una pata/en los astilleros ni pa las sillas.
No leg is built/In the shipyard nor built for chairs

El puerto está como nunca/Languidecido y entristecido
The port is like it never [has been]/Languishing and saddened
Con lo que a España le gusta/Y lo servicial que ha sido.
With what Spain likes/It has never served
Se publicó hasta en la prensa/El refranero que conoceréis:
The press even published it/You know the saying:
'Que la palabra del rey / Siempre palabra de ley',
The word of the king/Is always the word of the law
Una promesa cumplida/con muchas ganas como veréis.
A promise kept/With great desire as you will see

From plans to build a road from Cádiz to Huelva to the disappearance of work and a now obsolete commercial port, Los Dedocratas approach the socio-economic decadence of the city and its isolation from the rest of Spain. The lyrics end with the ironic mention of the king, Juan Carlos I, who had visited Cádiz a few months prior to the Carnival—his promises to find solutions to these problems were never kept. Such sentiments and factors feed back into and contribute to the production of a complex imaginary of detachment and disbelief towards “political correctness.” Simultaneously, the parochial exaltation of Cádiz and *gaditano*-ness is also relativist. The self-affirmation of *gaditano* identity could therefore be interpreted as key to local cultural resistance to the culturally homogenizing pressures of globalization.

Culture, People, and the Symbolic Appropriation of the Street

We conclude with the unifying theme of this work: the Carnival of Cadiz functions as the citizens’ symbolic act of appropriating the city. The cartography of social participation outlines a continuum that ventures from wide-open spaces into secluded squares and alleyways, among other remote places. Not all forms of social participation are predictable nor are they necessarily official in nature. They might not have any historical or monumental relevance—only their meaning to peoples’ everyday lives.

The search for groupings to revive popular verses and parodies also mark a landscape of a pronounced social mixture nuanced according to such variables as being native to Cádiz or not, as unaccompanied minors, or belonging to other age groups. Places are chosen with no apparent criteria other than chance. Hundreds of people pass and chat or joke around, eat and drink, and listen to and interact with groups. Other variables include the day of the week or hour, especially whether it is day or night, which determines the number of participants, the greater presence of one generation over another, and the collective euphoria of excessive consumption of alcohol (or other substances). The combination of some of these variables—especially time, place, age groups, and excesses—derived from autonomous and unforeseen contextual situations, provoke empathy and remembrance of identity. “What is spoken, sung, or told” overlaps with what is “done,” though some behaviors can range from recurring solemnity to deep feelings of hilarity, from the comical to the quasi-religious devotion. The people and the verses in the street revive the local and totemic.

The urban space is transformed into a consecrated place, so profane and even rude, but charged by emotional components similar to other socio-cultural Andalusian expressions associated with popular religion in certain natural landscapes (e.g. *romerías*—the celebration of pilgrimages and processions). During Cádiz' carnival, urban space is essentially an exaltation of the street—an autonomous, unbiased social space par excellence: like an imaginary utopia that is nourished, recreated, and cyclically revived through ritual.

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