

CHAPTER 6



COMMUNITAS AND PRACTICE IN THE BALTIMORE RHYTHM FESTIVAL

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Victor Turner's classic analyses of the liminal phase in Ndembu rites of passage addressed action and meaning-making in contexts where participants shared common experiences, social structure, and symbolic and expressive traditions (Turner 1969). The complex entanglements of people bound by close social ties, and the build-up of tensions that tend to accompany such structured intimacy, provided the context for the emergence of *communitas*. The anti-structural genres of ritual in these settings invited *communitas* experience that reframes these embedded relationships, potentially renewing the bonds of existential recognition. What of *communitas* and liminality in settings where these conditions are not present? I will use a case study of an event that I have been involved with for over a quarter century, the Baltimore Rhythm Festival, to reflect on *communitas* and liminality in a contemporary urban context. Here, many participants do not know one another, and come to the event with selves, identities, and perspectives that are differentially shaped by their positioning within the social fields of the contemporary United States. It is fair to say, though, that many of them do experience some form of egalitarian *communitas* at the event, as their accounts and documentation of the event suggest.

Turner's later work widened the exploration of liminality beyond small-scale society to consider the phenomenon of liminality in modern post-industrial societies. He coined the term 'liminoid' to refer to events and performances that were organized in the characteristic tripartite sequence of rites of passage (van Gennep [1909] 2019) – separation, liminal period,

and reincorporation – but that were decoupled from their formal transformations of identity and status. These liminoid genres are profuse and varied, in performativity, media, purpose, degrees of flow and reflexivity, degrees and modes of participation, scale, prestige, and more, so much so that the term becomes imprecise. Despite this, the term is productive in linking modern expressive culture to the deep patterns and roots of symbolic enactment in ritual, and some of the symbolic attributes of liminality and the potential transformative experience of *communitas* can be found in liminoid social genres.

Festivals are calendrical events that van Gennep identified in traditional societies as having a temporal structure similar to rites of passage, but that mark a whole society's movement through the phases of the annual round of activities, and link such activities to natural cycles and religious value systems. These have endured and interact in a variety of ways with modern economic and cultural settings. In the contemporary United States and other countries, they have been joined by a range of annual festival events which are often secular and organized under the general umbrella of 'the arts' or civic and community cultural development. As one might expect, these cultural performances reflect the aesthetics, forms of social capital, modes of exchange, individualism, collective identity projects, and organization of work and leisure of their settings, and participation in them may reproduce these structures of practice and feeling (Errington 1987; Lavenda 1988; Small 1998; Gabbert 2011; Santino 2017). They are at once *ritualesque* and *carnavalesque* (Santino 2011), events that mobilize economic resources and that can reaffirm or change how people understand and experience themselves and their communities, whilst also being full of play. As such they can invite the semiotics of liminality, multimodal in media and genre, full of metaphor, subjunctive language and action, make believe, and humour. As cultural performances, they provide a mirror of the collective, and participation in them signals the affiliations and differential perspectives of attendees. As *carnavalesque*, they are always subject to transgression and contestation, but generally they affirm status quos while being opportunities to negotiate difference, and over time, through recurring recontextualizations, perform changing cultural values, meanings and relationships.

I come to a consideration of the Baltimore Rhythm Festival from a particular perspective, that of a public folklorist. For those unfamiliar with the term 'public folklore' (Baron and Spitzer 2007), it is used primarily in the United States to refer to work done in public settings, often by people working in government agencies or for non-profit organizations concerning the folklife and traditions of communities, and often working with organizations whose mission concerns the arts, heritage, humanities and, to some extent, education.

The work of public folklore embraces what Robert Cantwell (2001) describes as ‘folklore’s pathetic fallacy’, the affective valuing of cultural forms for qualities of beauty, ethical depth, creativity, spirituality, meaning, traditionality and integrity. Both blessing and curse, as so many things are, this positionality can occlude problematic aspects of culture, and foster uncritical romanticization and recontextualizations. It also opens up space for a political engagement with creative cultural action, as resistance and as new possibility. Resituated as cultural workers committed in fellowship with communities to both understanding, and design and action, public folklore provides a model for a decolonized praxis.

For me, the missing piece of this subdisciplinary charter was the existential dimension. Influenced by scholars such as Michael Jackson, Henry Glassie, Jeff Todd Titon, and my parents, I came to see that what mattered most to me in the rich worlds of cultural generation I have been fortunate to experience were the qualities of existential epiphany and ontological connection and balance they invited, qualities that I both witnessed in others and felt in myself. These qualities and others are part of the fruit of the performative and participatory genres, unlocked through the deep play with form and symbol that lies at the heart of embodied, mortal, erotic, gift-giving and receiving experience.

My work with the Rhythm Festival flowed from this budding sensibility, and in many ways nurtured it. What was valuable about working with artists in traditional genres in crafting this event was not their authenticity or traditionality, the usual markers of significance for celebrating such people and their forms, but the way they shaped a field of being that invited an experience that grounded interaction in existential qualities and relational connection. What made these genres valuable was not determined by conventionally and often external processes of certification and legitimation, but by the fruits of experience they fostered; and forms that did not meet the standards of authenticity were no less precious to me. In an era where much of the expressive culture we encounter has the annunciation and concealment of commodity fetishism as its core significance – something to buy, consume, and in some sense acquire – I was looking for something different. The logic of gifts in the sense that Lewis Hyde explores in his meditation on the arts and Mauss (Hyde 2007) was closer to the mark, it being the flow of relational exchange and participation that serves as the ground of being that widens and sustains the fullness of interconnected human experience.

The Baltimore Rhythm Festival was conceived on a rainy night in the winter of 1994. I was on my way home from the Wednesday night drum jams that at that time were held at the Resurgam Gallery, a small locally focused art gallery on South Charles Street in Baltimore’s Federal Hill. I was giving

a lift to another regular at these sessions, Darryl Morgan. For me, a relative newcomer to Baltimore, these jams were a great blessing. I had discovered this kind of music making when I was in college. In a zone between the more orthodox and formal study of particular percussion traditions and what would emerge in the following few years as a structured often commodified approach to guided drum circles, what I found at Resurgam felt familiar and sympatico. The crew that gathered there came from different backgrounds and experiences, and brought different vibes and styles into the space. For me, this was a comfortable space that was a kind of flow sweet spot between structure and incoherence, open to experiment and beginners but also rich in possibility through sustaining grooves serving as a foundation for meaningful rhythmic generativity. The magic of such gatherings usually depends on having enough people who are solid enough in the pocket, and comfortable with the basic vocabularies of complementary rhythmic layering developed in the musical and cultural spaces of Africa and its diasporas (though not limited to these contexts). The Resurgam sessions often really jammed with the participatory discrepancies, call and response, and apart playing/layering that such gatherings can be blessed with (Keil 1995). A big part of what made them so nice was Darryl. Born and raised in Cherry Hill in south Baltimore, Darryl was at that time an upholsterer by trade who occasionally did work for the furniture restoration shop next to the gallery. He was also a gifted musician with an open heart and a philosophically and spiritually nuanced and deep sensibility about life. Adding spice and complexity to jams with his favourite talking drum, Darryl's presence and musicality enriched the sessions, and I always enjoyed our conversations in the car when I gave him a ride home.

That night, Darryl and I were talking about the phrase that he was currently exploring, Peace through Music. We had that relaxed joy of having shared in some pretty sweet jams, and we were feeling generous and playful. Would it not be cool to have a festival that was dedicated to Peace through Music in Baltimore? Something that would be all about the jamming, about that feeling, that spirit that we loved so much? This seed took root with some of the folks at Resurgam and led to an event called the Baltimore International Rhythm Festival and a non-profit organization the Baltimore International Rhythm and Drumming Society, which everyone called by its acronym BIRDS. The BIRDS festival lasted from 1995 until 2007, when waning energy from John Millen, a core organizer who had first taken it on, finally led to it being discontinued. I watched its withering with some sadness from my position in the early 2000s as a program officer at the Maryland State Arts Council, a role that meant I had to step back from the festival due to conflict-of-interest policies, as the council was providing modest grant support to BIRDS.

In 2014, at a bit of a juncture point in my own life, I could not help but remember the festival. Repeatedly I had encountered people who had been part of the event who spoke movingly of its impact on them – decisions to live in the city, change jobs, testimonies of how no event had been so meaningful for them. I had recently stepped away from directing the Master of Arts program in Cultural Sustainability that I had launched at Goucher College where I teach, and was open to what was next. I got a phone call from Menes Yahudah, a local Baltimore native who has been playing drums since the age of two with his Afrocentric father at the Park Vibe, a drum gathering in the city's Druid Hill Park for the past fifty years. Menes and I had met through the festival and my work at the Arts Council; his mentor Baile McKnight had suggested to him that he call me as he too was looking for new beginnings. Over tea and a handshake, we decided to revive the festival.

The basic framework of the festival is quite straightforward and has carried over from the old BIRDS festival to its resurrection as the Baltimore Rhythm Festival. The event is a single day, a Saturday in September or October. Beginning around midday, we open with some form of prayer or spiritual blessing. Simultaneous workshops and community performances ensue. Alongside this, a space is designated for jamming, which will usually get rolling in the first hour or two. At the end of the day, the stage features more professional performers usually in a ticketed evening concert for this past year. We invite vendors to come, and it is a good place to buy African inspired clothing, jewellery, drums, and the like, along with food. We have had three different locations in the past five years, beginning at the old site at 2640, a church converted to a performance space, then moving to another church, and finally these past years we have been at the Baltimore Montessori Public Charter School. All of these spaces have been in the city, and in areas where the stark racialized geography of the city is blurred, spaces where both white and black Baltimore can feel welcome and comfortable.

Along with Menes and myself, Menes' wife Eboni Yahudah has been the other main organizer, joined by others who have helped for a year or two. A reliable core group of volunteers has supported us, and each year a changing cast of others, including some of my students and former students, have helped to set up and staff the event. Financially, we have relied primarily on crowd funding and individual support along with limited grant support from city, state and regional arts agencies and a couple of private philanthropies. We sell T-shirts and water, and also receive fees from our vendors. We have been leery of seeking corporate support, but recurrently wonder if it would be good to try to make the festival bigger and better funded. Most of the money we raise goes to artists and workshop teachers, although we rely on them to be willing to accept less than the full worth of the gifts they share. We are a fiscally sponsored program of an umbrella organization called Fu-

sion Partnerships, which allows us to apply for and receive grants, and which provide accounting and financial management services to us. We are all volunteer, and the compensation for the work is largely a matter of collective satisfaction. Darryl Morgan remains part of the festival, and we along with a few others are usually the last to leave.

My journey as a human being has been influenced by a concern that the transpositions into scholarship of cultural phenomena can be an implicit complicity with institutional status quos that pay lip service to the urgencies of social transformation and justice but replicate ontic hierarchies and the inequalities and ordering of knowledge and power that underlie them. The odd in-between space of folklore and its partnerships with cultural sustainers and creators can be a space for advocacy that works towards the emergence of new cultural possibilities and relationships grounded in different aesthetics and commitments. These interstitial roles and spaces require landing in the particularities of commitments and the labour of co-creation with a reciprocity that is both exhilarating and humbling.

In this sense, the Baltimore Rhythm Festival is part of the work I and my colleagues have been engaged with around the emergent discourse of cultural sustainability. This perspective on active scholarship explores the ethical and practical issues and strategies that arise from cultural work grounded in partnership and conscious effort to sustain cultural forms and the people who value them. Eclectic, transdisciplinary and multifaceted, my colleagues, students and I have tried to move beyond conventional anthropological applied work that presupposes positivist paradigms of social scientific method or facile cultural objectification. Renouncing the Archimedean vantage point, we insist on landing in reciprocal mutuality with local cultural actors and action, and always begin with ethnographic experience and relationship building to implicate ourselves into the projects and vulnerabilities of these real arenas of experience. We hope, though, to equip our students with facility to interact with and be effective in larger arenas of policy and institutions that exert control over the collective radical autonomy of generative meaningful cultural practice.

At this point, I want to reflect a bit on the existential fields that the festival persistently generates. I am not sure if the label *communitas* is apt for the relational modes that flower in the event – there are so many culturally inflected modes of collective experience that we humans conjure for ourselves that can be kludged into this category – but certainly, a desirable feeling seems to suffuse and connect most participants, at least part of the time. I am sure it has something to do with the cybernetic forcings of rhythmic sound. By framing this event as being a celebration of rhythm, we sought to identify a sturdy human essential that was unarguably a commonality at the very core of the human design. Symbolically, this importantly proposes a connective

field that both honours the specificities and elaborations of distinctive styles, genres and experiences, and invites participation in embodied and varied ways. Regardless of status or identity, rhythm, this generous mantle, was one's own and yet all of ours. In an urban American context, genuine frames for participation that span the stark divides of racialized cultural politics and the cynicisms of superficial multiculturalisms are hard to find. The generative logic of rhythm helps as an enabling condition for this festival, but the challenge of non-exploitive practice, shared agency, and critical reflexivity is constant and abidingly necessary in holding open the possibility of the existential capability the event affords. Still to be developed and incorporated in the design of the event, rhythm also suggests a promising re-entwining with broader ecological cyclicities and commonalities as a calendrical rite, and is, to my mind, a suitable response to the implications of the Anthropocene.

It 'involves the whole man in his relation to other whole men' (Turner 1995: 127). It is a space where an existential sweet spot is invited, between boredom and anxiety, bridging difference, safe yet subjunctive, abundant in giving, receiving, gratitude, recognition, generous in negative capability. It is a day when the structural divides and violence of my city Baltimore are at least figuratively healed for a moment. Starry eyed as I can be, I am not so naive to believe that this moment of collective joy has the centrality and dialectical weight to affect transformation of the structured dehumanizations of race, and our other stalled emancipations, let alone the triumphalist neo-social Darwinism of our dominant political economic ideologies. Marginal and rough, the festival shambles along, and claims little impact in our larger regimes. As Thomassen (2016) suggests, we are in a time characterized by permanent liminality and an unbridled but neutered proliferation of the liminoid, a category within which the festival probably lies. The high in our hierarchies soars ethically unbound from inversion and humbling (except in the grotesque affinities with our demagogues) on the logics of business value propositions, and we are all either nothing more than objects of data analysis, consumers, or often both. Yet, I do feel some cause for hope in such phenomena as the festival, and the collective labour and thought that shapes it. Perhaps the white-hot accelerations of our times might settle into something humane in the cracks in the system, and the "dancing in between" that my friend Joe Kennedy, a regular at the festival claims for himself will still have a place in a dialectic that is not an oscillating stasis, but an upward spiral of myriad possibilities for an emergent, capacitated, whole, collective aliveness.

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