



Global Circuits: Transnational Sexualities and Trinidad

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Global Circuits: Transnational Sexualities and Trinidad

In 1998, from January to March, I was in Trinidad for the entire length of the Carnival season. The purpose of my presence as an “ethnographer-tourist” in Trinidad was to evaluate the relationships between globalization, gender, and sexuality.¹ Specifically, my aim was to query how globalization could be defined in terms of gay and lesbian identities and what, in turn, was shaping gay and lesbian identities in Trinidad in the wake of contemporary processes of globalization. Certainly, palpable effects of globalization on gay and lesbian communities seemed to be surfacing in Trinidad at every moment.² Gay and lesbian activists were taking part in national, regional, and international networks even as the HIV/AIDS epidemic in the Caribbean had generated a tremendous amount of funding and research support from former colonizing countries in the last fifteen years, and the Internet had enabled global connections that were formerly impossible.³ An increasing number of gay and lesbian tourists, both “diasporic expatriates” and otherwise, were learning about gay and lesbian community meetings and fetes as well as gay-friendly Carnival masquerades specifically

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¹ I use the term *ethnographer-tourist* not to minimize or compromise my activities as an ethnographer and researcher but rather to highlight my overlapping positioning and participation in tourist circuits in Trinidad. Much has been written on the ethnographer as traveler. However, less has been discussed about how a hierarchical distinction between traveler and tourist serves to obscure the ways in which ethnographers are tourists in the field to varying degrees and are implicated in tourist economies.

² For details on the economic processes of contemporary globalization in the Caribbean, see Klak 1998.

³ The most prominent example of such globalized organizations, the Caribbean Epidemiology Centre (CAREC), is located in Port-of-Spain, Trinidad, and is funded by various Caribbean islands as well as the Dutch and British governments.

through new Web sites and e-mail lists created in 1998 for Trinidadian gays and lesbians.⁴ Furthermore, a tremendous amount of Internet activity, diasporic familial scatterings, and educational ventures had enabled a relatively small but privileged and prominent segment of the gay and lesbian community in Trinidad to experience what they called “gay life” not only in other parts of the Caribbean but also in Miami, New York, Toronto, and London. Finally, Carnival the world over was becoming increasingly coded and identified as a gay and lesbian affair, especially by the gay and lesbian tourist industry, and the case was no different in Trinidad.⁵

These developments suggested to me several overlapping and diverging circuits of globalization that illuminated certain conundrums intrinsic to the relationships between globalization and sexuality. What were the connections between local “indigenous” and globalized sexual identities? Were they distinct and separable, and, if so, how? Questions about nomenclature and the categorization of sexual identities were crucial, as local terms such as *buller*—a reclaimed derogatory term for men, its nearest equivalent being *faggot*—and the phrase “she goes with a woman” were circulating in tandem with the terms *gay*, *drag*, and, more recently, *lesbian* and *transsexual*. The circuits also highlighted that, at varied moments in different locations, different sexual namings were relevant and tenable, especially in terms of ethnic divisions between Africans and Indians in Trinidad. As a South Asian queer academic based in the United States, I located myself as part of these multiple circuits: complicit with the production of queer theory in the United States and often unable to resist this location as my reference point, yet still attempting to comprehend the specificities of sexual identities in Trinidad.

In order to elaborate the complexities of these circuits, I interviewed gay and lesbian activists who live in Trinidad as well as in other parts of

⁴ See the following Web sites: GayTrinidad site, at <<http://www.gaytrinidad.f2s.com>>; Caribbean Forum of Lesbians, All-Sexuals and Gays (C-FLAG), at <<http://www.geocities.com/cariflag>>; Trinipride On-line, at <<http://www.geocities.com/WestHollywood/Heights/1403/index.html>>; Artists Against Aids, at <<http://aaa.wow.net>>; Gay Enhancement Advocates of Trinidad and Tobago (GEATT), at <<http://www.fortunecity.com/village/foster/727>>. The e-mail lists include trinicontact@listbot.com. The GayTrinidad site is the most extensive, featuring news and events listings, an e-mail list, a guestbook, discussion postings, and a chatroom. For a detailed and fascinating study of the use of the Internet in Trinidad, see Miller and Slater 2000.

⁵ Keith Nurse notes that the globalization of Carnival also generates a tremendous amount of travel and work opportunities through an overseas Carnival circuit that spans the Caribbean, North America, and Europe and involves some of the largest gatherings in those locales (1999, 673).

the Caribbean and attended gay and lesbian fetes and theater productions. I spoke with participants in the urban Port-of-Spain gay and lesbian scene, including local residents, Trinidadians from other areas who traveled to the capital frequently to attend community events, and tourists. Most important, I attended a series of drag contests, concentrating on a production titled "Diva" performed every year in Trinidad's capital, Port-of-Spain, since 1992.⁶ While annual gay fetes during the holidays and Carnival had become routine, and public events for International AIDS Day and even gay pride had previously been staged in Trinidad, in 1998 "Diva" was still considered among the most-established and widely recognized public arena of gay and lesbian interaction. During this time, I was also following an emerging debate about gay and lesbian tourism that intersected with the preparations for "Diva." These were the layers of ethnographic inquiry that informed my sense of global circuits in Trinidad.

Circuit one: Tourism, globalization, and sexuality

In Trinidad in February 1998, a curious incident set off a series of conversations about the often tense relationships between the interests and effects of globalization and postcolonial gay and lesbian identities. After the Cayman Islands refused docking privileges to a so-called gay cruise originating in the United States, several other Caribbean governments expressed the intention of refusing entry to that same cruise ship and any that might follow. The local Caribbean media engaged in no editorial discussion or debate about the cruises but rather printed press releases from Reuters and other global wire services. Caribbean Cana-Reuters Press reported that in the Bahamas, a cruise with nine hundred gay and lesbian passengers, arranged by California-based Atlantis Events, Inc., had become a "test for the tourist-dependent Caribbean islands after the Cayman Islands refused the ship landing rights" in December (*Trinidad Express* 1998b, 29). Officials from the Cayman Islands, a British territory in the western Caribbean, said gay vacationers could not be counted on to "uphold standards of appropriate behavior" (*Trinidad Express* 1998b, 29). Islanders were appar-

⁶ This research is based on fieldwork conducted in Trinidad during intermittent trips from 1994 to 2000. The analysis herein is derived from participant-observation in the field as well as from more than thirty interviews with activists from Trinidad and other Caribbean countries, "Diva" performers, producers, and judges. I also distributed forty-seven audience response surveys after the "Diva" shows and organized post-"Diva" discussion roundtables.

ently offended ten years earlier when a gay tour landed and men were seen kissing and holding hands in the streets.⁷ A U.S.-based gay rights organization called on the British government to intervene. British Prime Minister Tony Blair did so and determined, in the case of the Cayman Islands (dubbed by *Out and About* the “Isle of Shame”), that codes outlawing gays and lesbians, many of which are a legacy of colonial legislation, breached the International Covenant of Human Rights and must be rescinded.⁸ United States officials followed suit, insisting that human rights had been violated.⁹

While the controversy focused predominantly on the Bahamas and the Cayman Islands, Trinidadian activists from the Caribbean Forum of Lesbians, All-Sexuals, and Gays (C-FLAG), the Gay Enhancement Advocates of Trinidad and Tobago (GEATT), and Artists Against Aids were outraged that gay and lesbian cruises could be denied docking privileges.¹⁰ Interestingly enough, no gay and lesbian cruises had yet ventured to Trinidad although it had one of the most active gay and lesbian movements in the Caribbean and the largest (and parent) Carnival in the Caribbean (Nurse

⁷ In the same article, Bahamian clergymen claimed it was the “power of prayer” that steered the ship away from the island, a decision that was claimed to have been made due to inclement weather. Clergy said the cancellation was due to “divine intervention” (*Trinidad Express* 1998b, 29).

⁸ The editors of *Out and About*, the leading gay and lesbian tourism newsletter, called for a travel boycott against the Cayman Islands, encouraging letter-writing campaigns to American Airlines, American Express (the “official card” of the Cayman Islands), and Norwegian Cruise Lines (the cruise line chartered by Atlantis Events, Inc.). “Our purpose is to send a message to the Cayman Islands that discrimination based on sexual orientation may still be legal in much of the world, but it is no longer acceptable in the tourism industry. The message will resonate throughout the Caribbean, for the Caymans are not alone in their homophobia, only in its unrepentant expression” (*Out and About* 1998a, 27).

⁹ This was not the first time that such conflicts occurred in the Caribbean. In April 1996, a cruise of eight hundred lesbians from the United States, Canada, England, Italy, and Australia, organized by Olivia Cruises and Resorts of California (a lesbian cruise company formed in 1990), for the first time “ventured to come down south.” Previous cruises had only visited northern Caribbean locations (*Mirror* 1996, 21). They did dock in the Cayman Islands without any problems. A representative of Olivia Cruises stated that the women on the cruise would patronize women-owned businesses during their daily tours of the islands, which would help to dispel “preconceived ideas about lesbians”: “The visit to these parts will help dispel such inaccurate information. . . . People will become aware that lesbians are normal, everyday people . . . many of whom are professionals.” Lesbians, she stated, traditionally spend quite a bit of money during their vacations “and this is a significant contribution to the local economy” (*Mirror* 1996, 21).

¹⁰ See “Isle of Shame” in *Out and About* 1998b for excerpts from the statement of welcome to gay and lesbian travelers eventually issued by the prime minister of the Bahamas, Hubert A. Ingraham. For contextualization of the tourist industry in the Bahamas, see Alexander 1997.

1999, 677).¹¹ One explanation for this, perhaps, is that in Trinidad tourism makes up only about 3 percent of the gross domestic product, most of which is generated during the Carnival period. (The beaches of Tobago are the other main attraction.) While the numbers vary widely, some estimate that at least one hundred thousand visitors come to Trinidad for Carnival every year (Mason 1998). This influx constitutes almost a 10 percent increase in the population and makes up about 25 percent of Carnival street participants. It is also estimated that nearly 40 percent of the tourists at Carnival are expatriates. Thus, the impact of tourism on Carnival, while growing, still appears to be minimal since the demands of expatriates are “less intrusive,” according to Peter Mason (125). He writes: “This phenomenon, plus the fact that most tourists still come from English-speaking parts of the world with fairly close links to Trinidad, has so far kept the demands of tourism to a manageable level” (125).

Interest in Trinidad as a gay and lesbian tourist site is growing, however, due to the growth of Carnival as a gay and lesbian tourist event, the increasing promotion of cruises and other forms of tourism by the Trinidadian government, and the overall expansion of the global gay and lesbian tourism market.¹² Highlighted in a “Carnival around the World” special

¹¹ Puerto Rico is the most commonly referenced Caribbean destination for European-American gay and lesbian travelers; other frequently mentioned islands include the U.S. Virgin Islands, St. Barts, Aruba, the British Virgin Islands, Curacao, the Dominican Republic, and Cuba. See MasterFiles of *Out and About*, at <<http://www.outandabout.com>>; also travel information on PlanetOut, at <<http://www.planetout.com>>, Gay.Com, at <<http://www.gay.com>>, and GayWired.com, at <<http://www.gaywired.com>>, among other sites. Regarding the “gay Caribbean,” the editors of *Out and About* write: “Homophobia is rarely a problem for gay visitors, since tourist dollars speak loudly and most gay men and women come here to escape city life, including its gay trappings” (1995, 1).

¹² While the marketing of Carnival in the gay and lesbian tourism industry is geared predominantly toward men, Carnival in Trinidad is increasingly seen as a “women’s spectacle.” Selwyn Ryan estimates that as many as ten times the number of women play *mas* (dress up in Carnival masquerade) as men, and that Carnival provides women with “an opportunity to free themselves up . . . it’s part of the whole liberation movement” (quoted in Mason 1998, 169). Consequently, the behavior of women during Carnival season is viewed as illicit, lewd, and offensive, becoming the subject of endless public and media debates about proper womanly conduct. One reading of same-sex eroticism at Carnival might point to the women who are “wining” (hipgrinding) up against each other, suggesting covert lesbian spaces. The visual effect produced by these spectacles is, on the one hand, sensual and suggestive and, on the other, remarked upon as lewd and crude behavior. The acts are never publicly qualified as lesbian, so the fluidity of definition makes invisibility possible in an otherwise highly visible space. Yet, those who are most invested in the matrix of same-sex desire may be least able to utilize and participate in these moments now precisely because of the increasing visibility of gay and lesbian identity. The most interesting thing about same-sex wining for women during Carnival is not, however, that lesbians can claim a space in Carnival for the expression of

issue, the editors of *Out and About* write that “Trinidad’s Carnival is the biggest gay event in the region” and claim “the gay community here is relatively uncloseted. . . . Gays play an important role in the social fabric of the country, especially in the arts and in Carnival. . . . The islands are at their gayest, figuratively and literally, during the weeks prior to Ash Wednesday” (1996, 147). While many diasporic Trinidadian gays and lesbians express reluctance about coming “back home” because of the dearth of gay life in Trinidad, *Out and About*, *Odysseus: The International Gay Travel Planner* (Angelo and Bain 1999), and *A Man’s Guide to the Caribbean 98/99* (Cordova 1998) all list party and dining spots and bars for gay, and mostly male, travelers to Trinidad. (*Damron Men’s Travel 2000* and *Damron Accommodations 1998* list spots in Jamaica and Tobago, but not Trinidad.)

Therefore, Trinidadian gay and lesbian activists had good reason to anticipate that the gay cruises would eventually become an issue in Trinidad as well.¹³ I watched in confusion, hopeful, on the one hand, that the former British colonies would tell Blair and the United States to mind their own business but aware, on the other, of my ambivalent solidarity with Caribbean activists.¹⁴ Some activists, attempting to generate support for the cruise ships through an appeal to the profit motive, did comment that “anti-gay protests could be costly to the tourist economies of the Caribbean, a favorite playground for affluent gays” (*Trinidad Express* 1998b, 29). However, most organizations decided against issuing an official response, fearing local exposure and backlash against individuals as well as nascent nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) that were just barely surviving.

same-sex sexuality but rather exactly the inverse — that nonlesbian-identified women have unregulated, though commented upon, access to same-sex eroticism.

¹³ Trinidad and Tobago has also recently taken a particular interest in promoting its cruise industry. The Port Authority of Trinidad and Tobago (PATNT) wrote in 1998 that it is “committed to making Trinidad and Tobago the cruise industry’s preferred destination in the Southern Caribbean” (see the PATNT Web site, at <<http://www.patnt.com>>). The Trinidad and Tobago Industrial Development Corporation (TIDCO) is developing Trinidad as an ecotourist destination, in particular focusing on a national wetlands park project in the Nariva Swamp (Sletto 1998). See also Fallon 1999 and Sengupta 1998 on bird watching and other tourism ventures.

¹⁴ Debates continued through the spring, preceded by prison riots in Jamaica over the distribution of condoms and continuing pressure from the British to liberalize antigay laws. Britain had previously abolished the death penalty in several British territories (Anguilla, the Cayman Islands, British Virgin Islands, Turks, Caicos, and Montserrat), “despite public support for capital punishment in the colonies and throughout the Caribbean.” In response to Britain’s insinuation that it would do the same with regard to laws on homosexuality, Anguilla’s chief minister Hubert Hughes stated: “We would like Britain to understand that even though we are dependent on British aid, we will definitely not compromise our principles when it comes to Christianity” (*Trinidad Express* 1998a, 30).

It seemed ironic to me that the United Kingdom and the United States advocated protection for cruise ships in the Caribbean while granting no such absolute rights for the passengers upon their return home. Even so, the official actions and statements of the two nations may well allow European-American cruise goers to leave the Caribbean with only a surface understanding of the complex homophobia of local governments, of local cultural assumptions about modes of sexual repression and liberation, and of the supposed internalized homophobia of local gays and lesbians rather than with any knowledge of the specific postcolonial struggles at issue in the region.

In the meantime, the debates stimulated by the arrival and presence of these ships produced complicated and ambivalent responses from local gay and lesbian populations who feared greater local backlash as a result of the increasing discussion and their more marked visibility. In this particular instance, globalization of gay and lesbian identities suggests the questionable political efficacy of identity politics, especially its reliance on strategies of "queer visibility." The political rhetoric of queer visibility has been mapped out at length by theorists such as Rosemary Hennessy (1994), Lauren Berlant and Elizabeth Freeman (1991), and José Muñoz (1997) and has been utilized as a foundational strategy in gay and lesbian activist projects in the West (and increasingly so in those projects with a global scope). On the one hand, the cruise lines appeal to global gay and lesbian identity politics in order to bring about international intervention so that they may dock. In the use of this strategy, the visibility of gay and lesbian cruise passengers occurs at the expense of gays and lesbians in the Caribbean, who may inhabit spaces of partial visibility or invisibility in relation to globalized configurations of gay and lesbian identity. Here, gay and lesbian populations are caught in an oppositional conflict between postcolonial and former colonizing governments and in a sense are used as examples or pawns in conflicts that may or may not be about sexuality.

The final irony here, of course, is the presence of a mainstream "globalizing" signifier of gay and lesbian identities, namely, a cruise ship with self-proclaimed (professional) gays and lesbians aboard whose presence can be justified not only in humanitarian or in human rights terms but also in economic terms as contributors to the local economy. A fairly narrow, and perhaps even conservative, segment of gay and lesbian tourists thus winds up triggering perhaps the most contentious political discussions on homosexuality in the Caribbean, in effect becoming a "radical" symbol of Caribbean gay and lesbian activism within a relatively short period of time. Distinctions drawn around mainstream, normative, or corporate homosexuality (Muñoz 1997, 98) cannot fully absorb the irony of how certain forms of

“corporate gayness” are fueling the supposedly radical agenda of liberationist human rights projects through gay and lesbian tourism.

Circuit two: Globalization, gender, sexuality, and drag in Trinidad

My attention, and that of many of my informants, flip-flopped back and forth between the debates about the cruise ships and the preparations for “Diva” (and Carnival).¹⁵ “Diva” started in 1992 as an “artistic production” for professional actors, a strategic approach used to circumvent the reluctance of theater owners to host the show, according to the producer, a Chinese-Trinidadian man in his fifties. Over the years it has become increasingly identified as a gay and lesbian community event, drawing growing numbers of amateur participants as well as expatriates and overseas visitors. Since 1998, it has been advertised on several Web sites created by and for gay and lesbian Trinidadians, and it appears only a matter of time before “Diva” will be listed in mainstream gay and lesbian tourism publications as a cruising spot for gay men. “Diva” illustrates another circuit of globalization, one that highlights different regimes of gay and lesbian identities and the attendant concerns of race, class, ethnicity, gender, sexuality, and national identity as they occur in Trinidad. Colonial histories of cross-dressing and transvestism compete with contemporary globalizing understandings of drag to create debates among producers as well as spectators about whether “Diva” is, or should be, a “gay show.”

Over the years, the performers have tended to be working-class Afro-Trinidadian men. The audience is usually largely middle class, surprisingly even in terms of gender, and racially very mixed. It also includes many diasporic expatriates who are home for Carnival as well as tourists and well-traveled Trinidadians. The show is not inexpensive by Trinidadian standards; in 1998 both evenings cost a total of 100 TT, the equivalent of US\$18. According to the organizers, who claim to know who is in and out of the “community,” the audience is always at least half straight. One organizer, an Afro-Trinidadian man, explained the audience composition to me like this:

What I found interesting was how many people, because, there are people there known to be heterosexual, how many people. . . . I don’t call them closet cases you know, but they’re not open about

¹⁵ While I focus in this chapter on “Diva,” there are several other notable spaces of drag performance in Trinidad. Two examples are those created by drag performer Juana La Cubana, a well-known figure in entertainment circles in Trinidad, and the stage production of “Mark, Maureen, and A Drag Queen” in October 1998.

their preference—how many people felt more comfortable to go because they could say, “Well they have other heterosexuals here” and therefore they would not immediately be lumped with the rest of the bullers.

The reviews of the contest for the past six years have followed nearly the same format, regardless of author and whether published in the *Trinidad Express* or the *Trinidad Guardian*, both mainstream daily newspapers. Focused on the comedic moments of the performance and dismissing much of the serious content of the scenes of death and the AIDS epidemic, sexual assault and gay bashing, and the hazards of sex work, the commentaries mostly ridicule the visual spectacle of drag. As with the advertisements, no mention of sexuality or gender is ever made. Explained the producer:

Last year when we were at the Central Bank, we got a review from someone that wrote from the news . . . *Showtime Magazine*. And she loved everything. She was surprised at the standard, she loved the acts, the lights, everything. But she started talking about the show as it being a gay show. And I had to write back, you know, and say, this is not a *gay* show. Because she had the conception that it was.

A newspaper reviewer who is considered part of the community also displayed ambivalence about characterizing “Diva” as a gay event:

But we don’t get a lot of reviews. . . . I was disappointed this year by a gay guy who wrote . . . he thought of it in the way that I’ve been trying to get away from—a bunch of gay guys running around, putting on a dress. Made a stupid remark like “leave your bitchiness at the door,” that nonsense.¹⁶

In 1998, ironically and yet appropriately enough, “Diva” was held in Queens Hall, a central and prominent theater in Port-of-Spain.¹⁷ The performances ranged from spectacularizing glamour, to comedic parodies, to tragic depictions of HIV/AIDS, poverty, and sex workers. Lip-syncing to

¹⁶ Any explicit reference to homosexuality in “Diva” is highly unusual; for one major exception, see Boodram 1997.

¹⁷ A film by Richard Fung, discussed in José Muñoz’s article on autoethnography, reminded me of this irony. Muñoz notes that in Fung’s film *My Mother’s Place* (1991) the scene that depicts the arrival of the British Queen signals that the “young Chinese Trinidadian’s identification with the Queen is extremely complicated” (1995, 83–84). In light of this, the “occupation” of Queens Hall through “Diva” represents intersections of racial and sexual defiance, suggesting connections between the former colonizing queen and the contemporary queens of “Diva.”

Diana Ross's "Ain't No Mountain High Enough," three performers in shiny yellow latex bodysuits, sporting huge feathered headdresses and sequined capes, echoed carnivalesque costumes and glamour.¹⁸ In several scenes, participants emphasized similar tropes of beauty and glamour, wearing heavily sequined ballgowns and cocktail dresses, such as in a James Bond *Goldfinger* skit and an Annie Lennox impersonation; Patti LaBelle was the figure most often impersonated. In contrast, the more dramatic performances dealing with social issues included a remake of Queen's "Bohemian Rhapsody," in which a "Diva" performer snatched his wig off and threw it to the audience while lip-syncing the words "Sometimes wish I'd never been born at all . . . nothing really matters to me." The dramatic performances also included somber depictions of a patient dying of AIDS in front of an AIDS quilt as well as scenes of domestic abuse and a sex worker being kicked around by her pimp.

While the judging still favors conventional glamour drag over pointed social commentary, the show has always been heavily dominated by references to the HIV/AIDS epidemic. "Diva" has been called the "carnival of death" by the producer since so many of the original contestants have since died of AIDS-related illnesses. The winner of last year's competition, a working-class Afro-Trinidadian man, explained that he entered as a "practical situation to make money" and called "Diva" "entertainment for the general public. It's not really a political or community event." But he described his own performance as being

about HIV. The piece that actually probably made me win—not probably, did—was a piece on AIDS. It was very profound . . . stark and frightening. I don't know if it was above their heads. It was a different space for me too, because for me, it was about the person with HIV having to go through all of this, making all of these decisions, dealing with religion, and dealing with . . . lots of different issues and having to make choices and deciding.

In 1998, the first show actually began with the emcee announcing the opening number as one that "celebrates the Dame Lorraine and tracks that historical event." On stage appeared three Afro-Trinidadian "women" dressed in brown army uniforms with stuffed breasts and behinds. In this slapstick parody of the American military, they pranced around and tap-danced to "Boogie Woogie Bugle Boy," waving their behinds as the stuffed

¹⁸ In a longer unpublished version of this article, I discuss Bakhtin (1968) and his conceptualization of the "carnivalesque" to shed more light on the genealogies of the costumes in these drag performances.

pillows nearly tumbled out. This was my first introduction to the Dame Lorraine, who is defined as “a traditional Carnival character who originally mocked French plantation wives. Formerly this character was played by cross-dressing men as well as women, but now it is primarily a female masquerade. The all-over floral print dress of this *mas* is augmented with a padded posterior and breasts, and sometimes a pregnant belly” (Martin 1998, 225). Errol Hill states that the Dame Lorraine is meant to mean “fashionable lady” and represents a common form of “mockery of their master’s dancing eccentricities [that] had been a common form of private entertainment among estate slaves” (1972, 40). The Dame Lorraine, a highly performative form of “colonial mimicry” of French Creole whiteness, became a part of carnival processions in 1884 (Bhabha 1984, 125–33).¹⁹ Though transvestite masqueraders were banned from Carnival in 1895, the Dame Lorraine remained a common figure until the beginning of World War II (Hill 1972, 108–9). Although the Dame Lorraine was a popular masquerade and frequently mentioned in the literature on Trinidad’s Carnival, there are surprisingly few references to cross-dressing and transvestism, and, furthermore, there is nothing documenting how transvestism emerged in relation to the character of the Dame Lorraine.

Since the show has never been advertised as a gay show or even a drag show—it has simply been announced as “Diva,” a performance guided primarily by a serious artistic and competitive agenda—the history of the Dame Lorraine in Carnival is key in accounting for its complexity. Explained one of the 1998 judges, an Afro-Trinidadian gay man:

I don’t even know if it is a strategy. I would imagine if you wanted to promote “Diva” you would want to promote it as good entertainment that harked to a long-standing tradition in Trinidad that is about female impersonation that *would claim* it is about the Dame Lorraine. They are lying, but it is all right, because of the difficulties taking any other angle would produce. It is still one of the best entertainments in town. And I surmise, since it is now in Queens Hall, that it is entering the mainstream. I feel that somehow drag shows

¹⁹ The configurations of whiteness in Trinidad are complex ones, which are both congruent and incongruent with our understandings of global white hegemonies. Whiteness in Trinidad refers to not only a tiny French white creole population but also to lighter-skinned and mixed-race Trinidadians and “Syrians.” Most of the “Syrians” in Trinidad emigrated from Lebanon and are, in the racial taxonomy in Trinidad, considered “white.” However, white North Americans and Europeans are often hailed as “the real white people” by white and nonwhite Trinidadians alike. See Brereton 1989.

will be more tolerated than faggot shows. If this is not made an issue, then it will *not* become an issue.

The Dame Lorraine can be seen as a covert figure of legitimization, one which functions as a marker of Carnival masquerading and, hence, of a national tradition of cross-dressing and female impersonation. It also mediates the distinctions between drag shows and “faggot” shows, despite that such a characterization would be “*lying*.” The producer explained this further:

We know what it is we . . . we know exactly what it is, but these things we do not project. What we do project, here we have a production, of a certain type, a unique one, built on a lot of lip-syncing, gender illusion, performance art, we say that, and that’s what it is. If people come in and say we know this is a gay show and a homosexuality cover . . . then the onus is on them to prove that.

This history of cross-dressing and drag in Trinidad’s Carnival is *characterized* primarily, but not exclusively, by the figure of the Dame Lorraine, and described by one of the Afro-Trinidadian “Diva” performers:²⁰

Dame Lorraine remains as an echo. It is seldom portrayed anymore in the road, and it has survived in theatrical presentations. Certainly it found a home in “Diva,” because it is what they legitimize the effort with. I would more want to refer to the transvestitism rather than the Dame Lorraine. To me the Dame Lorraine seems to be a *mas*, rather than an attempt to be a transvestite. Because it was not about being a woman, it was about being a ridiculously over-the-top female. No attempt at beauty would take place. But there were guys who you’d see in bras and panties, who would look like one and you realize that was their kick. You don’t see a lot of it anymore.

In making distinctions between the figure of the Dame Lorraine in Carnival and other forms of transvestism in *mas*, the Carnival procession, a range of masquerading emerges. Stated an Afro-Trinidadian male “Diva” judge:

²⁰ Hill comments briefly on the “Baby Doll” masquerade that was a regular part of European Carnivals and made an appearance in Trinidadian Carnival in the late 1800s and may well have been banned in 1895 as one of the “transvestite masqueraders” (1972, 108–9). The exportation of Carnival to diasporic locales such as London, New York, Toronto, and Notting Hill has and continues to influence significantly sexual and racial traditions of masquerading. See Mason 1998; Kasinitz 1992, 133–59; on Indian and Chinese participation in Carnival, see also Chang 1998 and Sankeralli 1998. More has been written on the transformations of diasporic carnivals in terms of blackness, national identities, class, and cultural configurations than on gender and sexuality.

The nightie was allowed because it was Carnival. So all of these alleged bisexuals would be tramping out in their girlfriend's lingerie, bold and brazen on the jouvert morning. That was *mas*. That was a "jouvert" thing to do. I thought it was quite significant to work out their fetish like that.

The availability of such gendered spaces in Carnival has all but died out given that now, as a "Diva" contestant explained, "One would be seen for what he is, a buller."

Despite the prominence of the Dame Lorraine and transvestism in Carnival, most of the seven drag performers I interviewed actually had little to say about the history of gendered roles in Carnival traditions or the overtly political performances and references to the AIDS epidemic. Rather, they all talked about contemporary "Divas," ranging from Barbara Streisand and Marilyn Monroe, who were parodied in the early shows, to Patti LaBelle, Tina Turner, and Toni Braxton. Said a working-class Afro-Trinidadian male who has performed in nearly every "Diva" show: "The first two years, the older actors involved were very aware of the female icons of the cinema . . . Marilyn Monroe, Marlene Dietrich. Now, because they are younger and also *blacker*, they tend to follow Patti LaBelle, Toni Braxton."²¹

Comments from early "Diva" participants suggest the applicability of the concept of "interior passing" where white women were portrayed to be ridiculed yet worshiped. These portrayals did not merely demonstrate a desire for whiteness but, rather, indicated the ways in which whiteness could never be attained.²² Another longtime "Diva" performer, also an Afro-Trinidadian male, explained:

In the early days, speaking to a friend who won one of the first competitions was the absence of recognizability. In that there were maybe two or three people who portrayed recognizable entities. In this case it was Judy Garland and Liza Minelli, another case was Marilyn Monroe. And that was an extraordinary manifestation because in this case

²¹ The impersonation of *white* Hollywood starlets has been criticized by bell hooks in the context of Jennie Livingston's film *Paris is Burning*. In her critique of this documentary, hooks claims that the representations of black drag queens in the film tells us mostly about the emulation of white femininity—how it is aspired to, glamorized, and idolized (1992, 147). In hooks's reading, the aspiration to black role models in drag performances would be seen as more enabling than the modeling of white figures portrayed in *Paris is Burning*, and yet such aspiring misses questions of cosmopolitanism and globalization that engender the proliferation of these African-American images in the first place.

²² José Muñoz defines "interior passing" as an act that attempts not so much to pass for a particular position but rather parodies the act of passing itself, becoming a "disidentification and tactical misrecognition of self" (1997, 90).

Marilyn Monroe was six foot three, and black as the ace of spades. But Marilyn. I thought *wow!* No black queen is in any way seriously trying to portray her.

While figures of white womanhood are prominent in earlier “Diva” shows but somewhat absent in more recent ones, competing definitions of black womanhood reflect the racialized distinctions prevalent in Trinidad between African-American, Afro-Trinidadian, as well as Indo-Trinidadian femininities (which I discuss later).²³ Performers also commented on the availability of images:

My friend and I would’ve gotten all these ideas from looking at Greta Garbo and Harlow and all these . . . in the ancient movies. By the time we got cable—those choices are not available in Trinidad. So when Tina Turner is viewed as an old-time Diva . . . and Tina Turner, well she just reached! You had a whole body of work before that. It has to do too with availability of material. When you’re going to be selecting you’re not going to be selecting Billie Holiday, you’re going to be selecting Whitney Houston. You’re not going to be selecting Edith Piaf. You’re going to select Patti LaBelle. What I think happened, is that our paradigm is beauty queen, not screen idol. It is the need for glamour not as portrayed by Hollywood, but as imagined through the magazines that you see and the queen’s gowns that you see, and the desire to be Miss Trinidad and Tobago more than anything else.²⁴

In this particular circuit, globalization entails the negotiation of contemporary understandings of drag performances, via the impersonation of white and black figures of diva, with a colonial figure of mimicry, the Dame Lorraine. One obvious effect of globalization is that such colonial mimicry has become foregrounded as an indicator of sexual transgression. It is pre-

²³ The only female-to-male impersonator in the 1998 show was a white Trinidadian woman. On the first night of the contest, she depicted Freddie Mercury, the lead singer of Queen, with charcoaled hair on her chest, armpits, and upper lip. While Freddie Mercury was born in Zanzibar and educated in Bombay, he is considered white in the racial schematic in Trinidad by virtue of his fair skin. In this riff on Mercury, set to the Queen song “Who Wants to Live Forever,” white manhood and the whiteness of the West are represented as diseased and tragic, yet simultaneously triumphant as the singer faces his death with dignity.

²⁴ Cable was introduced in Trinidad in the late 1980s, and its influence as a media form is vast. This comment also reflects the importance of pageants of all sorts in Trinidad, including beauty contests, Carnival kings and queens, and Indian cultural competitions. In May 1999 the Miss Universe contest was held in Trinidad and was considered such a significant event for Trinidad that there was discussion of postponing Carnival or canceling it altogether.

cisely these contesting genealogies of the performances in “Diva” that question whether the show is or is not a gay one. Furthermore, the significance of making this qualification becomes even clearer in the face of the globalization of gay and lesbian identities that demands, as with the cruise ships, a clearer articulation of an explicitly out gay identity.

Circuit three: When is drag not drag? Indo-Trinidadian sexualities and globalization

“Diva” is also an event where questions of racial performativity and Indian-African relations are highlighted. Trinidad’s decolonization in 1962 is ironic in that it left two groups of color of nearly equal proportion (Indians at 40.7 percent and Africans at 40.8 percent) pitted against each other as economic and cultural rivals. The impression of growing racial antagonisms has been termed the “War of Cultures” by the media. While Afro-Trinidadians have historically dominated the political arena and are culturally associated with the Caribbean, Indo-Trinidadians have recently emerged as powerful challengers to both the political and cultural space of the nation, signaled by the prominence of a growing Indian bourgeoisie with access to greater resources as well as the election of Basdeo Panday, the first Indian prime minister, in 1995.²⁵ As Daniel Miller (1994) notes, much scholarship on Trinidad reiterates the problematics of ethnicity and race as the main social cleavages fracturing Trinidadian nationalism. Currently, however, attention is being drawn to the globalization of Indian ethnicity occurring throughout the Caribbean through the dissemination of Hindi films and the increasing prominence of aspects of Indo-Trinidadian popular culture, such as chutney music (Niranjana 1999; see also Khan 1995). In this context, the categorization of who is and is not in drag is an important reflection of the relationships between African and Indian ethnicities.

²⁵ Alexander’s 1994 work on Trinidad demonstrates that the process of decolonization happens through the shoring up of heteronormativity through the promotion of the “new” and ever self-generating (i.e., proactive) nation that must prove itself to the colonial father in the face of destabilizing global trends. The Sexual Offenses Bill signed into law in Trinidad and Tobago in 1986 borrowed its definitions of morality from British legislation of 1954 (which antedated Trinidad’s decolonization in 1962) and actually recriminalized male homosexual sex, while lesbian sex became punishable for the first time under a new offense called “serious indecency” (Alexander 1991). Although homosexual acts are illegal, there have been no arrests. Alexander’s work outlines the process of reheterosexualizing the state and actually naming—and hence producing—a political constituency termed *lesbian*, but she does not look at the differential effect of this naming on subjects displaced across a number of social locations, race and ethnicity in particular. The state is inherently African in her analysis, producing heterosexuality as a racial as well as sexual norm.

Despite the increasing Indianization of Trinidad, however, “Diva” continues to be dominated by Afro-Trinidadians. Every year has seen an Indian act, and 1998 was no different. As the producer comments:

I’ve always had an East Indian act. Always had one. I nearly did not have one this year. I always wanted one, I like variety. The gay community in Trinidad has a lot of class and racial differences, and you would find the Chinese, whites, the lighter-skinned Trinis, would not be eager to participate in something like “Diva.” They would come and look at it.

About halfway through the first of these shows that I saw, the “Indian” act was announced, first, by the emcee’s comments on the problems he was having pronouncing the Indian names and, second, by the introductory notes of the distinctive Indian film music, which was quite different from the more contemporary “Top 40” pop tunes used in the rest of the acts. A pair of Indo-Trinidadians mimicked the motif of seduction so common in Hindi films. The male figure, dressed in an Indian *kurta* and pajama, pranced after his flighty, pouting partner, who was dressed in a bright pink top and long silk skirt, around trees and through fields. The female figure was barefoot, with long braided hair, an exposed belly, and gold earrings and wrist bangles. One could even imagine the rain so typical of Bollywood films. At the end of the scene, the male figure hoisted the female figure into his arms.

One of the Indo-Trinidadian performers, Sasha, described their first act like this:

The first one on “Diva” night was a sampling [from the] movie “Kamuchi” in which the girl was imagining . . . she saw a boy a few days before and she feels in love with him at first sight, you know these Indian pictures. She was singing this song, and she was imagining, while she was doing her homework and all that, she was imagining this is her knight in shining armor who will hopefully one day come and sweep her off her feet. While she was dancing . . . he was right there now checking her out, she realizes her dreams do come true and eventually they did get married.

On the second night, the Indian pair performed another song from a recent Hindi film. The flirtation and seduction involved a similar wiggling of hips and “wining,” interspersed with a few dance movements. This was the only coupling in any performance of “Diva” and the only performance of desire expressed through heterosexual partnering in the two shows as well.

Generally, throughout both acts, the audience was appreciative, but not

overly enthusiastic. An undercurrent of chattering increased as the performance continued, and the final applause was lukewarm. During the most comedic moments, the audience did hoot with laughter. These acts were part dance, part acting, part parody. Trinidadian audiences are familiar with Hindi films through regular screenings in theaters as well as the availability of Indian cable channels and Indian MTV; they are also exposed to a rich culture of dance and music made possible through contests held frequently in the south and central areas of Trinidad.²⁶

The question remains: Were the performances drag? The various answers to this question may illuminate the differences between the visibilities of race *and* sexuality versus the visibilities of race *or* sexuality. The differences between Afro-femininity and how it “gets dragged” versus the dragging of Indian femininity is striking.²⁷ In the audience response surveys that I conducted after the shows, many comments indicated that the Indian performers were regarded as closeted and thus not “really” in drag; rather, they were simply performing an “ethnic” dance. One Afro-Trinidadian male interviewee claimed: “This is an Indian drag queen who is inhibited by fears of people discovering who she really is.” An Indo-Trinidadian female judge, lamenting the dearth of Indo-Trinidadian performers, noted: “This is marked as ethnic dance, as Indian dance, while the African is not marked.” Another judge, an Afro-Trinidadian man, commented: “It’s just a dance. It’s a dance to me, to you. The judges don’t know what the movements mean. It’s not like a Hindi film — there are no subtitles.” During my questioning of audience members, I asked repeatedly whether the Indian dance, in the context of the “Diva” contest, was considered to be drag. “He was pretending to be a woman but he does Indian dance anyway,” said an Afro-Trinidadian female. “It’s an Indian dance because we can classify it like that — it’s easy to classify. It’s not drag though.”

The prevailing opinion was that “East Indian performers want to be judged solely *as East Indian dancers*.” One last observation by a mixed-race Afro-Trinidadian woman seemed to sum up a general sentiment: “Oh, I

²⁶ These include, e.g., Mastana Bahar, a televised Indian cultural contest that takes place in San Fernando. Several Indo-Trinidadian radio stations also operate in Trinidad.

²⁷ Kanhai has written on how the tensions of decolonization make African and Indian divides more difficult for women as “cultural containers.” Kanhai claims that the image of the oppressed Indian “coolie woman” associated with indentureship has led to a preponderance of work on violence against women in Indo-Trinidadian communities. About the “gender control” of Indian women during indentureship and afterwards, Kanhai writes: “Indeed the history of Indian presence in the Caribbean seems to be a chronicle of abusive male control within the community” (1995, 9). She notes how the feminist movement in Trinidad is complicit with, and responsible for, the perpetuation of images that inscribe a “tradition”/“modernity” dichotomy between African and Indian women.

just knew. I said, ‘Boy, these guys are brave.’ I knew they weren’t going to win. You could just tell some of those contestants were staring, thinking, ‘What are you doing here?’ An Indian contestant could never be a Diva.” A reviewer concurred in an article titled “Divas Come Out”: “Then brace! I thought I was at the Chutney Soca finals when I witnessed a typical scene from an Indian movie: a ‘girl’ (and I use the term loosely) in a red sari meets her knight in shining armor, plays games of fun, and realizes dreams sometimes do come true. A heckler in the audience bawled ‘Yeah, right’ (Farah 1998, 19–20).”²⁸

These varied reactions point to several connections between performances of drag and the moments of cultural, racial, and national strategies utilized in them. In relation to the highly visible use of Indian tradition, the signification of the Dame Lorraine as the national, and by default, African tradition is only momentarily or marginally acknowledged, if at all. The characterization of this performance as an Indian one erases Indo-Trinidadians in drag even as it simultaneously enables participation in a Trinidadian national space of drag. The connections between drag and the reterritorializing of national spaces are located when African traditions are hailed as national traditions, or inversely when national traditions are erased as African ones, as in the Dame Lorraine. When is the specter of tradition just barely referenced or not, and who is able to avoid that reference?

I met Sasha and Vik at the cast party after the second night of the “Diva” contest.²⁹ I congratulated them on their performance and introduced myself as a researcher working on gender and sexuality in Trinidad. They were standing at the side of the dance area at a party at “Bohemia,” a venue known for attracting “rough crowd” (a euphemism for working class and African). They were still in drag, or in costume, or neither, depending on one’s reading of their subject positionings. I asked if they would be interested in being interviewed for my project. They readily agreed, and I promised to call them after the weekend. Later, when I spoke to Vik on the phone, we arranged a meeting spot at the Grand Bazaar, a relatively new mall. The Grand Bazaar is located at the entrance to the freeway considered the gateway to the “South,” a demarcation commonly alluding to the rural, the Indian, the backward spaces of Trinidad from the vantage point of cosmopolitan Port-of-Spain.³⁰

²⁸ The very bright, colorful photo accompanying this article is of a “Diva” performer in a yellow sequined skin-tight bodysuit with huge, feathery wings attached.

²⁹ These are pseudonyms. Vikram calls himself “Vik” for short, and Sasha is a female version of a more masculine Indian name.

³⁰ In everyday usage, *South* appears to indicate nearly everywhere south of the capital, Port-of-Spain, which is in the northwestern part of the island. It also refers to the more

We sat in Pizza Hut. Sasha was still in drag. She/he had long painted nails, wore lipstick, and had pinned up his/her long dark hair into a high ponytail.³¹ Vik hovered over both of us, getting us drinks and winking at Sasha. We started by talking about the performance and how they felt about the rehearsals and the show. Both Vik and Sasha were excited about having had the opportunity to perform and had not felt marginalized by the African-dominated spaces of the show, saying that the audience really appreciated Indian dance. Sasha commented:

It's not really classical, it's more like a love story, modern film style. It had a lot of classical movements in it. To do when you're doing dancing you have to get the basic classical movements in it. But well, we couldn't do a classical dance anyway in "Diva," it wouldn't be appreciated as much as a film song. You have to relate to the crowd and the modern people now so we do something with all the origins of a real pure classical Indian dance with the new modern.

We spent hours talking about dance in general, about different types of Indian dance, and about the development of Vik's and Sasha's dance school, their business partnership, and the kinds of reactions their families and residential community had about their interest in an alternative career that was not conventional for Indo-Trinidadian men. They had established their dance school nearly six years earlier and had performed all over Trinidad at Indian weddings and community events as well as at Trinidadian cultural shows. They had also performed overseas in Guyana, New York, and Miami. The point is that, for the first two hours of the interview, we never once talked about drag, sexuality, homosexuality, gays, lesbians, or gendered roles. I hesitantly read my own assumptions of their sexual relationship through certain moments of affection between the two of them and their narration of a long history of living and working together. Having a partnership routed through material business arrangements is a common phenomenon for same-sex liaisons, especially in Indian circles in Trinidad, and may even be facilitated by the concept of arranged marriage that is seen purely as a familial and financial arrangement that benefits everyone. The one fleeting reference to anything remotely related to "Diva" as a space of gender illusion was made when Vikram commented about the

agricultural, canefield areas of Trinidad. Interestingly, San Fernando, the largest city located in the southwestern part of Trinidad, is emerging as a competitor to cosmopolitan Port-of-Spain. Miller 1994 also notes that the urban area of Chaguanas, located between San Fernando and Port-of-Spain and considered an "Indian" capital, is much more racially diverse than commonly perceived.

³¹ I use these double pronouns tentatively; the example will make clear why.

Port-of-Spain “community parties” being pleasant though somewhat alienating. My one entry into issues of sexuality, aside from the show, was the party that took place at Bohemia following the second and final night of the contest. When I asked what they thought of the cast party, Sasha responded by saying:

Yeah, what happened was we didn’t stay too long because I had to go dance in a wedding way down in Rio Claro and that was about one that we left and we reached about three and I had to get up wash and all that and get down to the wedding for nine o’clock in the morning. But I wish I could’ve stayed a bit longer and experienced what the party was like. I haven’t been to a party like that. So it would’ve been a nice experience.

Unlike with the other drag performers I interviewed, who were Afro-Trinidadian, I simply could not bring up the question of sexuality with Vikram and Sasha, largely because they did not appear gay to me in any *intelligible* way. That they were “closeted” is easy to assume here except that Vikram and Sasha exist in Chaguanas as “openly” as any gay couple ever could, in a somewhat accepted/tolerated/negotiated transgendered partnership. And given my struggles to respect their privacy and interpretation, on the one hand, and to frame the meaning of their relationship in terms I could comprehend, on the other, the impact of my own closeting of them is indeed hard to assess. I was also unable to gain any insight into what Sasha and Vik were thinking about me or if they read me as a lesbian; they asked me only about my family in the United States, my knowledge of Indian dance, and my connections to Indian musicians and performers overseas.

In fact, toward the end of our second hour together, Sasha and Vik started pressing what seemed to me at that time their real agenda—they wanted to know if I had any business contacts on the West Coast who could set them up with a show. In this moment, in which they indicated that their shows were quite successful in New York and Miami, they foregrounded the materiality of their bodies not only in relation to other bodies but also through an emphasis on institutional and economic constraints. They wanted to know what California was like. What may well have been most enabling for Sasha and Vik were the economic networks they mobilized and within which they moved. This is what I find so interesting, that Sasha and Vik had no investment whatsoever in the process of queer liberation. It is precisely their refusal of a politics around sexuality that was most striking; they appeared completely uninterested in the politicized project of gender bending that often occupies center stage in U.S.-based queer theory. Sasha and Vik, and arguably many of the other drag

contestants who yearn to be awarded the prize money at “Diva,” linked their sexual subjectivity to their work status.

I do not intend here to position reductively the wide range of different kinds of gender, racial, class, and national identifications in such examples. Rather, I want to suggest this: If it is visible, is it queer visibility in the ways queer liberation is defined in the United States? It may be in/visible, but is it in/visibility? Not every invisibility involves an assimilationist narrative. Sasha and Vik were more visible in “Diva” as ethnic Indian dancers than as drag performers, or, rather, invisible as gay. Yet they were more visible in their hometown of Chaguanas as a male/female couple than as a gay couple, or, rather, they were invisible as a gay couple. I will not go so far as to say that the possibilities of Vikram and Sasha as a couple, or of Sasha in drag or as transgendered, are completely invisible and accepted without repercussions by a largely Indian community in Central Trinidad. In fact, Sasha and Vik performed the very same acts in “Diva” that they performed for Indian weddings and other community functions in South and Central Trinidad. Given the history of female impersonation and cross-dressing in Indian dance as well as in contemporary Bollywood films, the framework of drag may well be irrelevant in these contexts.³² When I asked about the tradition of Indian cross-dressing in Indian dance and how it was received at these predominantly heterosexual functions, Sasha stated:

The culture here, what I know outside. . . . In Trinidad, a lot of people used to heckle me and they smirk *at* me. But now . . . I would say I'm very much well accepted. Because I'd be in Chaguanas and go around and they go, . . . “Hey Sasha, hey Sasha” and stuff like that. Every weekend we'd be performing, just Wednesday night we were performing for Trinidad and Tobago Carnival Show.

Vik added:

I do think maybe they do still have a few negative people, I'm not saying no. The majority of people widely accepted the fact that we do dance together. . . . And they do enjoy seeing boys dress up and dance, so we do the most popular ones, the most acceptable dances.

In this circuit, the globalization of Indian ethnicity via Hindi films and popular culture as well as diasporic cultural venues is in conversation with the moments of meaning about sexuality and race that are traversed in the

³² Due to space constraints here I can only mention this argument. Generally, I want to caution against a decontextualization of histories of female impersonation in Indian dance that often happens through a queer reading that privileges drag in these performances. See Hansen 1992 on female impersonation in Indian dance.

movement from the South to the North, from supposed subalternized rural Indian territory to cosmopolitan, urban African territory. Qualifying Sasha and Vik as a male/female couple is too reductive. Or, perhaps it is precisely this reductive reading that allows them a certain degree of gender fluidity. Similarly ineffectual is the “third gender” status often accorded to *hijras* in India and Native American berdaches.³³ Despite my lack of information or evidence about Sasha and Vik’s sexual orientations or their sexual relationship, what remains interesting here is the de/stabilizing of sex/gender binaries within kinship structures, community events, and global labor/work networks.³⁴

Globalization 2000: “Circuits of desire”

In closing, I want to return to the opening dilemma posed by the cruise ship with nine hundred gays and lesbians from the United States, its presence intertwined with the performances of “Diva,” the Dame Lorraine, and Sasha and Vik. The three overlapping yet distinct circuits of globalization that I have laid out above have one element in common: they are all part of my circuit: my gaze as a feminist ethnographer, a tourist, and a South Asian queer academic based in the United States. This circuit has altered significantly over the years of my research in Trinidad. When I first came to Trinidad in 1994, the few contacts that I made in the gay and lesbian community were located through word of mouth, primarily from Trinidadian friends in the United States. Information was always cautiously dispensed—“Give the best friend of my cousin’s neighbor a call. I don’t know if he’s ‘out’ or what—we’ve never talked about it—but I think he’s gay.” Now, fetes that were once invitation-only and known about strictly through word of mouth are advertised on the World Wide Web. It is also less problematic for me to write about specific places, events, and even people in Trinidad because they have all been “outed” by these Web sites as well as

³³ The *hijra* in South Asian queer diasporic contexts has become a figure of transgressive sexuality that largely effaces the often nontransgressive (though not “normal” either) status of *hijras* in India. The Native American concepts of berdache and two-spirit have also been applied to contemporary queer liberationist projects in a similar fashion. The figures can be used by diasporic communities in a historically essentialist way as evidence of homosexual traditions within the culture, but they are also used by more mainstreamed gay, lesbian, and queer organizing in similar ways but *without* the requisite attentiveness to issues of racism, immigration, and nationalism. On *hijras*, see the oft-cited anthropological work of Serena Nanda (1993) detailing *hijras* as an “alternative gender category.” For an excellent exploration of *hijras* and how they already “live *inside* the most pedestrian fantasies of what tends to be understood as central, normal, or home,” see Patel 1997.

³⁴ For more detailed studies about these relationships in different contexts, see Prieur 1998 on homosexuality in Mexico; and Kulick 1998 on “travestis” in Brazil.

by the gay and lesbian tourism industry. Friends who visit Trinidad no longer ask me to direct them to “the scene” because they no longer have to. There is no longer just one gay event of the night; while I was in Trinidad for Carnival 2000 a multitude of gay parties were taking place simultaneously. “Diva,” which did not take place in 1999 because the producer was ill, was taken over in 2000 by a new producer who attracted a new community of performers, stage workers, and judges. “Diva” now had competition; it was held on nights when several other gay events were also taking place.

All of these shifts have occurred in the last two or three years. In addition to completely altering the roles, methods, and writings of a feminist queer ethnographer like myself, what do these circuits say about the uneven and contradictory situations enabled by globalization in terms of gender and sexuality? Dennis Altman (1997) suggests that most approaches to theorizing globalization and gay and lesbian identities involve some kind of hybridization of “indigenous” and imported concepts of identity. Differences of opinion, then, just reflect how much emphasis one wants to put on the hybridized. Altman (1996) also posits a recourse to “indigenous sexualities” as a response and solution to Western globalization. Yukiko Hanawa (1994) offers a more productive concept of “circuits of desire,” noting that any recourse to origins through appeals to indigenous structures is already framed by colonial mythologies (1996). Martin Manalansan (1995) has untangled the often homogenizing tendencies of certain processes of globalization, such as the positing of Stonewall as a universal moment of liberatory social change. In her work on sexualities in Thailand, Rosalind Morris (1997) has argued that what could be designated a “gay diaspora” functions to malign significations of sexual practices among men. Furthermore, she claims that the concept of a gay diaspora may actually redefine such practices in ways that invite more policing of these very practices by the Thai state. Thus, the use of examples of gay and lesbian sexualities from postcolonial contexts in specific moments of queer liberationist agendas may well do anything but actually advance liberation for those it purports to describe.³⁵

While I want to insist on the refusal of an imported versus indigenous binary, mapping my own circuits of desire has been a difficult and confusing task. It is precisely upon the erasure of these circuits of globalization that my own desires, in the search for nameable and counternamable subjects, have often hinged. My problematic enthrallment with Sasha and

³⁵ For more recent work on the globalization of gay and lesbian identity, see the collection of essays in *Queer Diasporas* (Patton and Sanchez-Eppler 2000) as well as an especially astute article on queer Korean diaspora by Lee 1998.

Vikram may well reflect my desire to produce a “queerer than queer” counternarrative to the homogenizing impulses of metropole-produced queer theory. In retrospect, it is hard for me to say whether the “refusal of the subject” was indeed the denial of Sasha and Vik as the gay subjects that I could most easily identify, or actually my refusal to allow Sasha and Vik to be the (gay?) subjects that they are (Visweswaran 1994). If the latter is the case, then I, too, colluded with Afro-Trinidadian assessments that they were not in drag; I, too, viewed the specificity of Sasha’s and Vik’s lives through the lens of romanticized queerness, searching for some kind of sexual liminality that I could not name or see but still could somehow know. I have also, with ambivalence, used the terms *gay* and *lesbian* as well as *transgender* to describe people in Trinidad while I used the term *queer* for myself. I have done this in part because *queer* does not yet circulate as a descriptor in Trinidad. However, I am well aware that for some readers this may be seen as a “withholding” of sorts that reinscribes the centrality of queer theory (and myself as a queer theorist) that I have attempted to trouble here. For other readers, using the term generically would have been unforgivably neocolonialist. Though I have resisted offering definitions of these terms as a preface to this material since the argument made in this discussion renders such definitions counterproductive to my theoretical intent, I have recuperated namings at moments when there appears to be no linguistic escape. All namings are underpinned by tensions between identity positions around race, ethnicity, class, and gender in ways that mark subjects beyond genre and sexual signification. In the context of theorizing about globalization, these namings are often freighted with the difficulty of being untranslatable across social locations.

This article sets out to look at some specific moments of the globalization of gender and sexuality in the context of Trinidadian identities and the effects of globalization on sexuality. The larger project from which this work derives is also concerned with the development of gay and lesbian activism in Trinidad and its links to international organizing, the negotiation of transsexual and transgender identities in Trinidad, the likes of which have not quite emerged yet, and the practices of consumption, tourism, and cultural production that will continue to alter the ways that gay and lesbian sexualities are understood in Trinidad. Does globalization entail a predictable teleological march toward recognizably gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender, and queer identities? This is the question that I, and others, continue to explore.

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