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# Transnational carnivals: West Indian immigration to New York during the twentieth century

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**TRANSNATIONAL CARNIVALS:  
WEST INDIAN IMMIGRATION TO NEW YORK DURING THE TWENTIETH  
CENTURY**

by

Christopher A. Chalek

Accepted in Partial Completion  
of the Requirements for the Degree  
Master of Arts

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## MASTER'S THESIS

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**TRANSNATIONAL CARNIVALS:  
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CENTURY**

A Thesis  
Presented to  
The Faculty of  
Western Washington University

In Partial Fulfillment  
Of the Requirements for the Degree  
Master of Arts

by  
Christopher A. Chalek  
March 2011

## Abstract

During the latter-half of the twentieth century, large numbers of West Indians began immigrating to New York from throughout the Caribbean. These actors helped transplant and build upon a longstanding Carnival tradition that existed in the Caribbean. Imbued with a deep cultural significance because of its role during the Caribbean's colonial, emancipation, and independence periods, the Carnival tradition serves West Indian immigrants by providing a point of unification, challenging racial categories in the United States, and by drawing political and cultural attention to the growing number of West Indians settling in New York City.

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## Introduction

Each Labor Day over a million people gather together in Brooklyn New York for one of the biggest cultural festivals of the year.<sup>1</sup> The West Indian Labor Day Carnival Parade (WILDCP), considered the largest ethnic gathering in the United States, attracts upwards of three million participants and spectators. Modeled after Trinidad's pre-Lenten Carnival, the WILDCP brings together not only the huge numbers of Caribbean immigrants living in New York, but also West Indians and non West Indians alike from throughout the U.S. and abroad. The term West Indian generally refers to people of the English speaking Caribbean, an identity label that emerged during the second half of the twentieth century when large numbers of West Indians emigrated from the Caribbean primarily to the United States and Great Britain in search of better economic opportunities. The long and significant role of Carnival in Trinidad, as well as the burgeoning numbers of West Indians immigrating to the United States since 1965, endowed the festival with a growing vitality and cultural significance that makes it a centerpiece of West Indian culture in the United States. This thesis tracks the development of the WILDCP as a signifier of transnational spaces, from its colonial past in Trinidad to its modern incarnation in New York, bridging these two narratives enriching our understanding of festivals in both locales. It will show how the Trinidadian Carnival tradition, forged in the tensions of the island's colonial society, serves as a cultural tool for contemporary West Indians to assert a cultural identity in the U.S. to

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<sup>1</sup> While in Trinidad, Carnival still takes place in the week before Lent, the Brooklyn celebration surrounds the week of Labor Day for the sake of hospitable weather and to coincide with the federal holiday, though internally still adheres to a similar temporal structure as its forbearer.



help overcome the obstacles surrounding immigration. The WLDCP accomplishes this, not only through its scale and endurance, but also by deploying cultural symbols that highlight the richness of Caribbean culture and challenge assumptions about the perceived identity of West Indians as new, non-white, unassimilable immigrants.

Before it is possible to delve into the heart of the material, it is necessary to establish the meaning, and surrounding historiography of a few key concepts, mainly those of transnationalism, globalization, diaspora, and the historiography surrounding Carnival. While a great deal of scholarship exists surrounding West Indian identity, transnationalism and immigration, and Carnival studies, this thesis will shed light on the ways these topics intersect and build upon each other. No study escapes the influence of surrounding scholarship, and this work is no exception. The historiography surrounding transnationalism in particular steered the focus of the thesis to seek out how the process of identity construction for many contemporary groups, such as the West Indian diasporic identity, surfaces through projects and historical developments taking place both internal to and outside of national realms.

### **Transnationalism and West Indian Identity**

Transnationalism is a relatively new subject for academics, receiving increasing attention as nation-states continue binding together in webs of international politics and global capitalism- a process accelerated by technological innovation and increased migration. While nationalism continues to prove a powerful ideological tool and political trope, it increasingly fails to represent groups and cultural exchanges existing outside the

strict framework of Benedict Anderson's "imagined community."<sup>2</sup> By exploring transnational spaces, flows, and the identity construction of transnational groups, scholars gain much-needed insight into an expanding demographic of the world's population and how state sponsored notions of national identity depend on positioning in relation to groups operating outside of the sanctioned limited unit. The Caribbean offers an ideal point of departure for exploring transnationality because of its central role in western histories of globalization, immigration, and understandings of modernity and nationhood.<sup>3</sup>

Anthropologist Philip W. Scher defines a transnational group as one "in diaspora that imagines itself as a collectivity with a specific history and a body of quantifiable traits and characteristics in relation to a nation or nation-state."<sup>4</sup> Scher's definition situates transnationalism as an imaginative or subjective construction that can provide a useful category for analysis. M.P. Smith asserts that these transnational identities surface through an interaction of forces from above, in terms of global governance and economic activity, and from below through the everyday, grounded practices of individuals and groups.<sup>5</sup> Smith's assertion shaped this study by pointing out the importance of studying West Indian identity as the product of a multitude of forces that warrants examination from several perspectives and in multiple realms. In addressing these "everyday, grounded practices,"

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<sup>2</sup> Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origins and Spread of Nationalism*, rev. ed. (New York: Verso, 1991). Anderson sees the nation as an imagined community as a limited unit that exists in relation to other nation-states.

<sup>3</sup> Stuart Hall, "Caribbean Culture: Future Trends," *Caribbean Quarterly* 43 no. 1, 29 (1998). Hall demonstrates how the Caribbean is at the cusp of globalization and the modernization process, stating, "we were at the back end of globalisation, but we were also its leading edge. We started it. Modernity started here."

<sup>4</sup> Philip W. Scher, *Carnival and the Formation of a Caribbean Transnation*, (Gainesville, FL: University Press of Florida, 2003), 1.

<sup>5</sup> Luis Guarnizo, "The Emergence of a Transnational Social Formation and the Mirage of Return among Dominican Transmigrants," *Identities* 4, (1997), 281-322.

Peggy Levitt sees new forms of participation and representation that no longer require full membership or residence within a nation-state; a kind of “transnationalism from below.” Levitt tackles the elusiveness of “transnationalism from below” by applying the idea of a transnational community. These communities help mediate between “high” and “low” levels of transnationalism. By organizing into transnational communities, groups are more likely to gain recognition from above. Responses from the state or organizations on both ends of a transnational space help sustain dual loyalties and undercut nationalist projects for a unitary and totalizing loyalty and national identity.

Transnational communities and organizations offer immigrants ways to distribute their energy between sending and receiving countries by maintaining identities and ties to communities in both, helping construct social networks and institutions that facilitate additional and successful immigration. Additionally, transnational communities provide reminders to immigrants that the impact of immigration extends beyond the individual migrant to individuals and collectivities that remain behind, in forms of social, economic, and cultural remittance.<sup>6</sup> Levitt’s use of the transnational community is an important contribution to the field by offering scholars a way to bridge top-down and bottom-up perspectives. This work makes use of the transnational community, not only as a narrative bridge, but also to demonstrate how belonging to a transnational community helps overcome the costs of immigration, and how the West Indian transnational community is sustained and expressed through Carnival celebrations.

Examining not just political and economic characteristics, but cultural dimensions as well, demonstrates that transnationalism occurs multi-directionally, playing out on both

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<sup>6</sup> Peggy Levitt, *The Transnational Villagers*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001), 7.

macro levels in the forms of institutionalization and normalization, international politics and immigration policy, and on a micro level as an exchange between individuals as cultural creators and carriers. This study attempts to balance the economic, political and cultural aspects of the West Indian immigration against the backdrop of Carnival to explore these micro and macro level exchanges. Appreciating the role of individuals in sustaining these processes is an imperative step for a much fuller understanding of how individuals characterize themselves and shape larger systems. This perspective provides new ways of understanding the development of national ideologies and hierarchies that find definition against, in part, their transnational borders. This is apparent in the experience of West Indians in the U.S. in relation to immigration policy, international relations, gender and racial identities.

Nationalism persists as the dominant, legitimate political unit, now some two hundred years since its emergence. However, as global systems continue spreading, the borders of nations become evermore porous, elastic and contended. Previous explanations of this process such as dependency theory, and the subsequent emergence of world system theory, with their emphasis on the relationship between nations and their colonies, are giving way to modes of thinking that are “more complex, [with] less polar imagery of space-time, with a semi-periphery interposed between the centers and peripheries.”<sup>7</sup> More attention in contemporary scholarship is focusing on transnational movements of ideas and people in order to understand boundary-straddling groups and how these groups flush out the histories

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<sup>7</sup> M. Kearney, “The Local and the Global: The Anthropology of Globalization and Transnationalism,” *Annual Review of Anthropology*, Vol. 24 (1995), 550.

of nation-states. This is not surprising if, as Rachel Buff convincingly argues, nations gain definition at their transnational margins.<sup>8</sup>

Heidi Tinsman and Sandhya Shukla believe that challenging the analytical primacy of the nation, and thinking transnationally within the Americas demonstrates that many of the most important social formations in the region were profoundly non-national in character, such as: diverse indigenous populations, European colonization, African slavery, Enlightenment based revolutionary and state building projects, and Cold War politics.<sup>9</sup> By citing these developments, the authors dispute the nationalist origins of major ideological movements and the predominance they assign to specific nation-states; instead calling for historical inquiries that trace the subtle and fragmented transnational threads that lead to shared historical and ideological developments. Heeding Tinsman and Shukla's advice, this thesis examines West Indian immigration and the Carnival tradition from a transnational perspective while this is often in relation to nation-specific policies; it tracks the fragmented histories that led to their formation across multiple borders. Communal identities that do not adhere to any singular national history, such as West Indian, require the application of more inclusive terms the most prevalent of these terms in the Americas and an apt descriptor of the West Indian community is that of diaspora.

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<sup>8</sup> Rachel Buff, *Immigration and the Political Economy of Home: West Indian Brooklyn and American Indian Minneapolis, 1945-1992*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001), 16.

<sup>9</sup> Sandhya Shukla and Heidi Tinsman, "Introduction: Across Americas," in *Imagining Our Americas: Toward a Transnational Frame*, (Durham: Duke University Press, 2007), 6.

## Diaspora

The twentieth-century formation of a West Indian identity and the experiences of this group offer an ideal lens to view the transnational experience within the modern trans-Atlantic world. A long history of migration, both forced and voluntary, in the Caribbean helped form a culture that reflects the transnational and diasporic histories of the region. Diaspora, as a primary term of identification for transnational groups in the Americas, and as a fitting descriptor of West Indian identity warrants examination. This diasporic identity, Nancie Gonzalez sees as representing a “full cross section of community members who are dispersed to many diverse regions of the world yet who maintain a myth of their uniqueness and an interest in their homeland.”<sup>10</sup> This thesis makes use of Gonzalez’s work by demonstrating that Carnival, as an active cultural piece of the dispersed West Indian community, makes explicit this myth in order to bind together the diasporic group. Afro-Creole actors most often evoke diasporic identity in the Americas to situate a dispersed group under a common African ancestry diffused throughout the Americas due to European slavery. Joseph Roach extends this position, concluding that transnationalism in the Americas, should allow for a reimagining of the circum-Atlantic world that “insists on the centrality of the diasporic and genocidal histories of Africans in the Americas, North and South, in the creation the culture of modernity.”<sup>11</sup> This position emphasizes the cultural experience of a diasporic community in relation to racial identities codified into local hierarchies yet operating within a broader ideological movement occurring across borders.

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<sup>10</sup> Nancie L. Gonzalez, *Dollar, Dove and Eagle: One Hundred Years of Palestinian Migration to Honduras*, (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press), 1992.

<sup>11</sup> Joseph Roach, *Cities of the Dead: Circum-Atlantic Performance*, (New York: Columbia University Press, 1996), 4.

Historian C. Palmer contends that modern diasporic streams are almost always the product of racial oppression, and the communities formed by people of African descent share an emotional bond with their dispersed kin, and a history of racial oppression and struggle against it, and this bond serves as the basis of their relationship.<sup>12</sup> In this argument, Palmer highlights how African diasporic culture formed as a response to global forces and racialized policies born during European colonialism with legacies persisting into present day. Palmer's work steered this study by prompting an examination of the heterogeneous nature of Trinidad's colonial society, and how the period's racialized policies factored into the creation of immigration streams both historical and contemporary, and lent itself to the formation of West Indian identity. European colonialism broke up the colonized Americas into bounded territories, yet macro identities, such as Creolism, mestizaje, and Afro-Creole, transgressed these confines adopting a transnational emphasis. Percy C. Hintzen links this geographically de-centered diasporic imagination, a prominent feature in the American imagination, with a growing disjunction between location of residence and location of origin, producing and longing for the expectation of return.<sup>13</sup> Errol Hill suggests that an inability to return to their geographic homeland partially explains the richness of Afro-Creole culture.<sup>14</sup> While Hintzen and Hill's assertions appear applicable to Trinidad's colonial society, this paper attempts to demonstrate how this cultural tradition responded to

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<sup>12</sup> C. Palmer, "The African Diaspora," *Black Scholar* 30, (2000), 57-58.

<sup>13</sup> Percy C. Hintzen, "Globalisation and Diasporic Identity Among West Indians," in *Globalisation Diaspora and Caribbean Popular Culture*, eds. Christine G.T. Ho and Keith Nurse, (Kingston: Ian Randle Publishers, 2005), 3.

<sup>14</sup> Errol Hill, *The Trinidad Carnival: Mandate for National Theatre*, (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1972). The strength of Afro-Creole culture must not be divorced from its transnational origins or maintenance. The circum-Atlantic Afro-Creole culture serves in facilitating survival and resistance within the realm of global economics and politics and their racially oppressive manifestations from colonial to modern times.

modern global forces producing a similar “longing and expectation of return” for West Indians that finds expression through Carnival. Those modern global forces prompting immigration, whether they are cultural, economic or political, are often broadly categorized under the heading of globalization- a concept worthy of examination.

### **Globalization versus Transnationalism**

Globalization and its bearing on political, cultural and economic developments is largely responsible for the forging of modern immigration streams. M. Kearney contrasts transnationalism and globalization, writing that globalization,

“Implies a more abstract, less institutionalized, and less intentional processes occurring without reference to nations...and entails a shift from two-dimensional Euclidian space with its centers and peripheries and sharp boundaries, to a multidimensional global space with unbounded, often discontinuous and interpenetrating sub-spaces.”<sup>15</sup>

This nebulous of cultural flows, occurring outside the confines of the nation-state, helps bind together individuals, communities, organizations and diasporic groups, and proliferates cultural symbols, such as the WILDCP, which help substantiate the legitimacy of claims made by groups in diaspora. Christine G.T. Ho and Keith Nurse contend that globalization allows us to reconsider cultures as discrete localized social groupings and give adequate representation to “boundary-straddling cultural entities such as diasporas, but also to interrogate the relationship between cultural representation and structures of global power.”<sup>16</sup> Applying Ho and Nurse’s understanding of globalization to West Indians served

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<sup>15</sup> M. Kearney, “The Local and the Global: The Anthropology of Globalization and Transnationalism,” *Annual Review of the Anthropology*, 24, (1995), 549-550.

<sup>16</sup> Christine G.T. Ho and Nurse, Keith eds., *Globalisation Diaspora and Caribbean Popular Culture*, (Kingston: Ian Randle Publishers, 2005), ix.



to build an understanding the group, not only as a cultural entity, but also as a mode to investigate national and global systems. Additionally, Ho and Nurse's work prompted an examination of how Carnival forms responded to changing global power structures, what efforts are underway to protect those Carnival forms, and how they reflect immigration patterns.

Scholars, such as Don Robotham, highlight the importance of establishing a notion of transnationality and globalization that is applicable to the Americas in general and the Caribbean in particular.<sup>17</sup> Accounting for this, this thesis pays particular attention to how globalization in the hemisphere developed in relation to colonial formations and movements, African slavery, cultural commodification, regional power structures, U.S. imperialism, and hemispheric racial identities. Robotham sees the Caribbean as having experienced some of the deepest capitalist penetration in the last five hundred years, and whose very formation has been within the global framework, making it an ideal point to launch an investigation of global systems. Globalization in the region extended and reinforced already formed relationships rather than undermining or reversing relationships of property, culture, and power, explaining, at least in part, the counter-hegemonic nature of Caribbean popular culture.<sup>18</sup> Epitomized by Carnival, this counter-hegemonic tradition has generated a great deal of academic interest.

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<sup>17</sup>Don Robotham, "Transnationalism in the Caribbean: Formal and Informal," *American Ethnologist* vol. 25, No. 2, (May, 1998). Robotham argues that transnationality in Europe exists under unique historical conditions that can not be accurately applied to the process within the Americas. Because of the transnational origins of the modern nation-states throughout the Americas, Robotham's position seems poignant. Transnationality in the Americas must be understood as taking place within the sphere of American exceptionalism, and a multitude of hierarchies unique to the hemisphere.

<sup>18</sup> Don Robotham, "Transnationalism in the Caribbean: Formal and Informal," *American Ethnologist* vol. 25, No. 2, (May, 1998), 308.

## **Trinidadian Carnival and Transnational Origins**

Global-economic and political systems in the forms of the flow of peoples and cultures, both consensual and compulsory, were decisive in populating the Caribbean and building a diasporic identity in the region. Frank L. Mills writes, “There is perhaps no other region in the world where colonial peopling was largely through forced immigration or indenture, and where a continual and persistent diaspora is as marked as in the Caribbean.”<sup>19</sup> Mills argument points to the importance of bridging the histories of the Caribbean’s colonial history of immigration with its modern tradition of a diasporic identity. Confronting the history of this diaspora requires an understanding of Caribbean culture that allows for conflicting historical memories. Nascent Caribbean culture arose in response to global forces, and persists today in a dialectical exchange with modern global systems and the legacies of colonial racialized policies. Beginning with the initial encounter between Spain’s Columbus and Trinidad’s Amerindian population, the island’s colonial and post-colonial history is a continual succession of transnational encounters; these encounters produced conflicting memories that find representation and occasionally resolution in cultural forms.

Distinctions in the cultures transplanted by the various European societies, Spanish, French and English, are marked and well documented, but Africans brought with them an array of distinct cultural traditions that served in building community, maintaining autonomy, sustaining hope, and challenging the repressive systems that existed under

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<sup>19</sup> Frank L. Mills, “Determinants and Consequences of the Migration Culture of St. Kitts-Nevis,” in *When Borders Don’t Divide*, ed. Patricia R. Pessar, (New York: Center for Migration Studies, 1988), 59.

slavery. Hollis Liverpool's seminal work, *Rituals of Power and Rebellion: The Carnival Tradition in Trinidad and Tobago—1763-1962*, provides insight into the diverse composition of enslaved Africans brought to Trinidad, who used shared cultural practices as a point of unification to form a hybridized culture in response to their enslavement.<sup>20</sup> Liverpool's work is the premier study on Carnival in Trinidad from its foundation to the period of national independence. This thesis, while making use of the extensive research provided by Liverpool challenges his assertion of a singular view of Carnival as a tool for African resistance. Amalgamations of European and African cultures occurred, adapting and adopting certain practices from the other, leading to the formation of a hybrid culture, or as Joseph Roach describes "a new world was not discovered in the Caribbean, but one was truly invented there."<sup>21</sup> This "new world" required the invention of a culture that expressed the transnational nature of the region.

The impact of these transnational interactions is apparent in the cultural products of the islands, none more noticeably than Carnival. Roach contends that since the late seventeenth century local cultural productions "have been hybridized routinely by the hemispheric circulation of collectively created forms."<sup>22</sup> This hybrid culture is a site where ritual negotiation and reinvention of cultural identity and practice occurs among various

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<sup>20</sup> Hollis Liverpool, *Rituals of Power and Rebellion: The Carnival Tradition in Trinidad and Tobago—1763-1962*, (Chicago: Research Associates School Times Publications/Frontline Distribution Int'l Inc.), 9. Liverpool demonstrates that while the African's brought to Trinidad under the European slave trade demonstrates that while the African's brought to Trinidad under the European slave trade, cultural continuities existed between ethnic groups that played a crucial role in unifying these groups and helped forge a culture that responded to the harsh realities of forced immigration and slavery.

<sup>21</sup> Roach, *Cities of the Dead*, 4.

<sup>22</sup> Roach, *Cities of the Dead*, xii.

social groups and the state.<sup>23</sup> Homi K. Bhaba's writing on ambivalence explores the tension between the need to display a homogenous national culture in order to gain recognition, legitimacy and social stability, while maintaining and masking internal heterogeneity in order to establish and maintain hierarchies. This approach may help flesh out many of the intricacies of the Caribbean's counter-hegemonic culture, the varied historical memories of the region's diaspora, and the competing projects surrounding Carnival.<sup>24</sup>

Societal inequalities in the colonial Caribbean helped produce what Ho and Nurse describe as, "a counterculture and counternarrative that challenges hegemonic structures and ideologies, deploying aesthetic forms to contest inequality."<sup>25</sup> Identity contestation and representation is at the center of this counternarrative, and cannot be divorced from its globalized context. In the case of Trinidad, one's identity was largely defined in racial terms that were surfacing through newly formed global relationships among Europe, Africa and the Americas. Roach describes this identity contestation as a process of "surrogation," wherein vacancies in social relations and cultural cavities, real or perceived, allow actors to fill these openings with improvised narratives of authenticity, which can become completed myths of legitimacy of origin.<sup>26</sup> Carnival creates an opportunity to express these "improvised narrative of authenticity" providing a sense of authenticity to claims of surrogation by deploying cultural symbols representing alternative social orders and new understandings of identity. These myths are particularly useful in building and sustaining transnational identities and communities that do not fully benefit from state sponsorship

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<sup>23</sup> Ho and Nurse, *Globalisation, Diaspora and Caribbean Popular Culture*, xii.

<sup>24</sup> Homi K. Bhaba, *The Location of Culture*, (London: Routledge, 1994).

<sup>25</sup> Ho and Nurse, *Globalisation, Diaspora and Caribbean Popular Culture*, xiii.

<sup>26</sup> Roach, *Cities of the Dead*, 2,3.

and/or oftentimes suffer from an absence of recognition, such as immigrant communities and groups in diaspora.

Shohat and Stam argue that Caribbean culture employs an “aesthetic of resistance” that subverts hegemonic modes of representation acting in a counter-hegemonic tradition to geocultural constructions tied to notions of empire, nation, class, race, gender, sexuality, and ethnicity.<sup>27</sup> This counter-hegemonic culture serves as a major feature in the contemporary West Indian immigrant experience by providing a cultural tradition that helps tackle iniquities connected to the migrant experience, and aids in the transfer of established and newly acquired cultural values across borders. This study tests Shohat and Stam’s position against the backdrop of Carnival, finding their position at once convincing, though because of its tendency to homogenize Caribbean culture, ultimately too simplistic. The perpetual tension involved in the heterogeneous reality, and homogenous desire of cultural and national projects requires a complex understanding of Caribbean culture that aims to move beyond the binary construction of resistance versus incorporation that pervade cultural studies. The heterogeneity of the Caribbean’s diasporic culture meant that the meaning of Carnival varies between the competing historical memories assigned to it. Steven Stern offers an explanation of this memory struggle, “The lens of memory struggle invites us to move beyond rigid conceptual dichotomy between a top-down perspective oriented to elite engineering, and a bottom-up perspective that sees its obverse: suppression, punctuated by outbursts of protest.”<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>27</sup> Ella Shohat and Robert Stam, *Unthinking Eurocentrism: Multiculturalism and the Media*, (London: Routledge), 1994.

<sup>28</sup> Steven J. Stern, *Battling for Hearts and Minds: Memory Struggles in Pinchot’s Chile 1973-1988*, (Durham: Duke University Press, 2006), xx.

John Cowley, in trying to understand Carnival in colonial Trinidad, employed theories proposed by Arnold Van Gennep whose “rites of passage” model describes “the key ceremonial stages in the life of an individual or individuals.”<sup>29</sup> Van Gennep asserts that each rite is delineated into three phases: pre-liminal, liminal, and post-liminal. Pre-liminal refers to the past ceremonies that established a cultural tradition and through contextualization endows meaning to the active liminal state. Liminal refers to reaching the threshold of the ceremony whereby an actor exists within a distinct space, unbound by social norms. The post-liminal phase refers to ones aggregation into the new state where a new identity for both the individual and society can arise.<sup>30</sup> While aggregation into a new state does not necessarily manifest directly from these liminal moments, they do provide a momentary glimpse of a possible alternative to the existing social order. Van Gennep’s work shaped this work by offering a way to understand how Carnival provided a valuable tool and cultural tradition for Trinidad’s colonial and post-colonial society to assert new identities and social orders, enriching the tradition for contemporary West Indians immigrants. Carnival deals with notions of identity construction in a situation where normal means for construction are elusive, if not absent, as was the case in colonial Trinidad and for West Indian immigrants entering the United States.<sup>31</sup> Trinidad’s colonial populace, European and African alike, were subject to the same dilemma of establishing identity in a new society; both groups wielded Carnival to substantiate or challenge claims of identity and position. Understanding how

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<sup>29</sup> Arnold Van Gennep, *The Rites of Passage*, (London: Routledge, 1969); in John Cowley’s “Carnival in Trinidad: Symbolic Meaning—A Background to Calypso,” *Musical Traditions*, No. 4

<sup>30</sup> Ibid.

<sup>31</sup> Scher, *Carnival and the Formation of a Caribbean Transnation*, p. 1.

Europeans understood the Carnival tradition helps us to understand how that tradition took hold and evolved in its new setting.

Early Carnival revelers in Europe described the carnivalesque period as the world turned upside down, a description that holds equally true today. Much like its European predecessors, Trinidad's Carnival maintains "a similar inversion or role reversal process is noted where people use clothing and masks to make serious political protests without fully assuming the consequences and implications of their actions."<sup>32</sup> This vague descriptor, as the world turned upside down, is one of the few points of scholarly consensus. Scholars continue struggling to understand Carnival's variable meaning, which seems to escape all attempts at applying strict labels or solitary meaning. This elusiveness keeps participants and academics alike coming back year after year; it is in this nebulous of meaning that Carnival derives much of its power by undermining traditional methods for establishing and sustaining hegemony through the heterogeneous understanding and application of the festival. Ramon A. Gutierrez and Genevieve Fabre describe, "Carnival has to be understood as an unstable and precarious balance of compromise between contradictory forces and potentials, between consensus and conflict, control and spontaneity, compliance and subversion, cosmos and chaos."<sup>33</sup>

The first major scholar to take on the subject, Mikhail Bakhtin, described the carnivalesque as having the power to invert official values creating a space for an alternative utopia, in which anti-hierarchism, relativity of values, questioning of authority, openness, a

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<sup>32</sup> Liverpool, *Rituals of Power and Rebellion*, 478.

<sup>33</sup> Ramon A. Gutierrez and Genevieve Fabre, eds. *Feasts and Celebrations in North American Ethnic Communities*, (Albuquerque : University of New Mexico Press, 1995), 167.

world in which syncretism and a myriad of differing perspectives are permitted.<sup>34</sup> Victor Turner describes the process “which moves from structure to anti-structure and back again to transformed structure,” allowing new values and identities to arise.<sup>35</sup> Turner’s position offers an avenue to explore the ways West Indians utilized the convoluted Carnival tradition to navigate the U.S.’s cultural landscape and escape at least in part some of the more pernicious aspects. This anti-hierarchical, syncretic world is perfectly suited for transnational actors who defy strict codification and rely on alternative modes to assert a cultural identity. By opening a sanctioned space, both spatial and temporal, for identity contestation and construction, Carnival provides a unique opportunity to challenge or strengthen established hierarchies and reinforces or draws new lines of distinction.

Bakhtin sees this moment of inversion as a way for the disempowered to attempt the disruption of the social order.<sup>36</sup> This disruption of the social order is often viewed, not for its ability to bring about an alternative social order, but rather as a way to maintain the social order by allowing a momentary outlet for the release of stress, an interpretation dubbed the steam valve theory by Carnival theorists. Here, Bakhtin offers a way to avoid homogenizing Carnival or Caribbean culture as universally counter-hegemonic, and to understand how modes of resistance can also serve as modes of domination. In his book *Carnival*, Robert Antoni describes the journey of a Trinidadian immigrant living in the United States returning home to play mas. His protagonist’s assessment of the festival sheds light onto the sanctioned excesses and intended, though not necessarily realized, social application of

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<sup>34</sup> Mikhail Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, trans. Helene Iswolsky, (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1984).

<sup>35</sup> Remco van Capelleveen, “The “Caribbeanization” of New York City *West Indian Carnival in Brooklyn*” in *Feasts and Celebrations in North American Ethnic Communities*, (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1995).

<sup>36</sup> Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, 102.



Carnival as a kind of steam-valve. Antoni writes, “That was the thing about carnival... Licensed excess Freud called it, the tribal cure. At least, that was the way it was meant to work.”<sup>37</sup> The steam-valve theory, which suggests an illusion of change, paints the festival as ultimately repressive by serving hegemonic groups in maintaining control. Abner Cohen rightly identifies the ambivalence of Carnival’s political message, arguing that it contains “potential for political articulation, serving in some situations as ‘rituals of rebellion’ whose function is cathartic and is ultimately a mechanism helping in the maintenance of the social order, and in other situations as expressions of resistance, protest, and violence.”<sup>38</sup> From all of these interpretations it becomes clear that Carnival does not simply reflect politics, but in a very real sense, it is politics- an instance when new ideas concerning power relations may be articulated as a public drama.<sup>39</sup> This is beneficial to actors who do not always have access to traditional modes of political participation, such as slaves in colonial Trinidad and many contemporary West Indian immigrants to New York.

The argument that Carnival is a steam-valve mechanism authorized by the elite is not entirely wrong, but it is misleading, for often the results work counter to the goals of elites or the state.<sup>40</sup> Beyond expressing grievances of subordinate groups, parades can easily turn into protest marches. While celebrations relate to the society in which they are conceived, they are never fixed, and can rise or fall depending on ideological trends or cultural fashions, governments, public opinion and can be simultaneously a threat to, or a warrant of, the

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<sup>37</sup> Robert Antoni, *Carnival*, (New York : Black Cat, 2005), 109.

<sup>38</sup> Abner Cohen, *Masquerade Politics: Exploration in the Structure of Urban Cultural Movements*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993), 150.

<sup>39</sup> Philip Kasinitz, *Caribbean New York: Black Immigrants and the Politics of Race*, (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1992), 134.

<sup>40</sup> Liverpool, *Rituals of Power and Rebellion*, 485.

social order.<sup>41</sup> This ambiguity allows Carnival to function as a tool for adapting to new social systems or a weapon for struggling against them- a valuable asset for transnational actors. The emphasis on multi-culturalism and growing acceptance of pluralism within the U.S. during the latter part of the twentieth century, a topic addressed later in this work, strengthened Carnival's potential for West Indians by sanctioning, though often in a limited sense, a medium for voicing criticisms and asserting an ethnic identity that can aid in assimilation.

In order to understand the variegated and often-conflicting understandings of Carnival it is necessary to approach the subject from a range of perspectives. To do this, this thesis makes use of a wide range of primary and secondary sources not only to highlight the cultural and political importance of Carnival within the West Indian community, but also to grasp how outsiders understand the festival.

### **Source Material and Methodology**

Newspapers published by West Indians in the U.S., which not only proliferate the desired public image of Carnival, but also helps situate the parade within the web of surrounding events and political trends. Furthermore, the tracking of local publications, such as *The New York Amsterdam News*, highlights the carving out of an ethnic enclave by West Indians in New York and how this group views itself within the framework of the nation. These newspapers pay a great deal of attention to the presence of local and national

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<sup>41</sup> Gutierrez and Fabre, *Feasts and Celebrations in North American Ethnic Communities*, 1.

politicians at the WILDCEP, highlighting the potential of Carnival for generating political attention.

Interviewing West Indians living in the United States allowed me to make explicit the role Carnival played in shaping their immigration experience. These oral accounts proved invaluable in demonstrating the varied and often extremely personal ties and memories that actors carry of Carnival. In order to contextualize the personal and cultural experiences of West Indians within the history and politics of the United States, this study uses political speeches, census information, and federal legislation. The evolution of U.S. federal immigration policy over the last century served as a touchstone to situate the history of West Indian immigrants within the nation's history. To understand how West Indians gained entry into the U.S. and why they are commonly regarded as an immigrant success story, it is necessary to understand what the criteria for entry are, what language surrounded this process, and how success is measured. In order to avoid the trappings of a top-down perspective, a thorough examination of Carnival forms and inspired media served as a path to understanding the role of individual actors and Carnival in shaping the experience of the West Indian community in New York.

Carnival-inspired media, such as music, novels, documentaries, promotional material and Carnival costumes, provide substantial evidence for showing the strong relationship between transnational networks and the development of Carnival forms. Oftentimes these Carnavalesque cultural products did not merely allude to national or transnational politics or histories but commented on them directly. Robert Antoni's novel, *Carnival* provided an excellent literary source for exploring transnationality within Trinidad and New York's West Indian community. The central place of music within Trinidadian and Carnival culture,

as well the political tilt of the national musical style, calypso, provides an abundance of material to explore the West Indian community in New York and the politicized role of Carnival. Evolving Carnival art forms often represented changes of opinions or focus within the West Indian community, and stand as a cultural and political signifier recognizable to outsiders and imbued with special significance for West Indians. By making use of this array of primary sources, we gain a more complex understanding of the contended meaning of Carnival and its ability to permeate West Indian culture.

## **Structure**

This work begins with an investigation of the development of Carnival within Trinidad's colonial culture to its international proliferation to track the transnational background of the festival and to understand how the festival's relationship with the colonial social order created a tradition for contemporary West Indian immigrants to draw upon. During the colonial period, Carnival focused on distinctions within the islands' social order—specifically the racial partitions dividing the heterogeneous population into strict, though often transgressed, categories that denoted civil rights and social hierarchies. The festival's dynamic meaning allowed actors to wield it towards different and often competing ends. Carnival allows these contradictions to coexist in a liminal space that can allow for an easing of tensions and the possibility of a new social order, though this reimagining can be violent and socially disruptive. The development of the festival into the cultural centerpiece it is today paralleled the volatile history of the island, serving as an indicator of desired and achieved social change.

Tracking the colonial and post-colonial history of the island contextualizes the forces that served as an impetus for emigration during the latter half of the twentieth century and demonstrates why New York became the premier destination. World War II brought Trinidad into close contact with the United States and forced Trinidadians to operate between the two parallel, yet often competing, imperial projects of the United States and Great Britain. U.S. soldiers on the island introduced new cultural forms and social and economic relationships that undermined many British colonial norms and established new international relationships for the island. Enticed by the economic and social opportunities presented by this new order, coupled with growing resentment for their status as colonial subjects, many Trinidadians began to view the United States as an idyllic destination.

The second chapter of the thesis deals with the development of the Hart-Cellar Immigration Reform Act and how it promoted a new concept of racial identity, structured new discourses within the U.S. national community, created new hierarchies that privileged some immigrants over others, and contributed to the formation of a transnational West Indian identity. Many scholars see the Hart-Cellar Act as facilitating and expressing the U.S.'s move towards a multicultural society. Multiculturalism positioned the nation's various ethnic groups as unique political units operating within a cohesive national community, which tolerated if not encouraged ethnic distinction. Immigration policy over the last century has always been an expression of---and tool for---building, the civic and racial character of the nation. This civic identity centers on the belief in the U.S.'s universally recognizable liberal principles; however this civic character progressed in relation to the often conflicting long-held belief in the U.S. as a nation upheld by a white citizenry with the natural qualities necessary to maintain the nation's civic principles.

The U.S.'s brand of multiculturalism retains at its root a singular loyalty to the state and the national community, and the long-term hope of assimilation. This desired composition conflicts with the reality of transnational groups operating in multiple national realms simultaneously. West Indians immigrating in the latter half of the twentieth century capitalized on this development. By deploying cultural symbols and performances such as the WILDCP, West Indians play into this multicultural web asserting a public and politicized ethnic identity that validates political and social claims, while strengthening ties to their sending countries. The focus on identity contestation and the ability to propose an alternative social order within Trinidadian Carnival plays well in its new setting in New York. Carnival draws attention to distinctions between the African American and the West Indian communities, and in doing so challenges the homogeneity assigned to the Black community- allowing West Indians to call on politicians to meet specific community needs.

By examining the environment that West Indians entered into after 1965, we gain insight into transnational networks and the competing field of national projects. West Indians entering the country during this period experienced a major departure from their native society. The nascent nationalism of recently founded Caribbean nation-states, coupled with the large influx of immigrants from the various Caribbean nation-states, steered West Indians into forming an inclusive transnational identity that bound together the group under the cultural experience of immigration and allowed for maintaining loyalties in multiple national realms. The shock of the U.S.'s racial terrain encouraged many newly arriving immigrants from the Caribbean, accustomed to defining themselves under the Caribbean's more variegated racial spectrum, to adopt a West Indian identity to separate themselves from African-Americans and build solidarity among their community. Because the 1960s was the

period of entry for most West Indians, the political and social environment of the U.S. further complicated this process as the nation experienced rapid and often violent changes within its race and gender relations due to the civil rights, black power, and women's liberation movements resisting oppressive state policies. West Indian actors brought with them their own cultural traditions and memories during this volatile period and helped reshape categories of identity in the U.S. and through social and economic remittances rework Trinidad as well.

The third chapter focuses on how the WILDCP draws upon the historical traditions of its Trinidadian predecessor to provide West Indian immigrants a tool for asserting a transnational identity in order to escape the strict racial codification of the U.S.'s racial binary system, and assert an ethnic identity that plays into the multicultural discourse of the late twentieth century. The expanding scale and endurance of Carnival feeds into these discourses, demonstrating the political potential of harnessing the support of the West Indian community specifically and immigrant communities more generally. The WILDCP serves another key function for the West Indian community- the proliferation of Carnivals during the latter half of the twentieth century modeled after the Trinidadian festival helps draw attention to Caribbean culture and creates a yearlong industry that channels millions of dollars per year into the microstate. Due to the financial opportunities surrounding Carnival and the evolution of Carnival forms, as well as the spread of Carnival celebrations around the world, many actors and institutions are struggling to maintain and pass on those cultural traditions they value. This work attempts to contextualize the struggle of cultural preservation against the backdrop of West Indian identity construction, memory struggles, and global systems. Turning to Trinidad's colonial period, we gain insight into the formation

of competing historical memories surrounding the festival, and the ways that the island's colonial period factored into the development of Carnival forms and vice versa.



## **Chapter 1**

### **The Formation of Carnival: From Periphery to Metropole**

European colonialism brought to the Caribbean an array of cultures and peoples from around the world. The social order that arose in colonial Trinidad hierarchically arranged these immigrants based on European understandings of racial identities, which privileged Whiteness. The building of an agricultural economy reliant on the brutal system of African slavery endowed the role of racial distinctions and hierarchies with an increased social importance. Social categories and official policies, dictated by European powers and implemented by colonial authorities, created racial hierarchies that attempted to strip Afro-Trinidadians of economic freedoms, cultural legitimacy, and political rights. Because of the island's heterogeneous demography and the importance of racial identities, those cultural forms that were capable of transgressing racial lines proved the most potent and enduring cultural traditions. Carnival, by incorporating traditions from African and European cultures and through its ability to promote alternative identities and thereby a new social order, helped the nascent country in resolving potentially destructive problems and building overtime, a cohesive national community. From this colonial tradition, Carnival continued as the centerpiece of the islands' culture, playing a major role during the periods of emancipation, and national independence. During the latter-half of the twentieth century when Trinidad experienced widespread emigration to the United States, Carnival entered the modern global market as the most internationally recognizable symbol of Trinidad's culture.

Carnival's structure in Trinidad has remained fairly stable over the years, even as internal forms and meanings continue to evolve. Beginning the weekend before Lent, the modern Trinidad Carnival kicks off the weekend with a series of band and costume competitions, "Kiddie Carnivals," and private parties. Sunday night's private parties begin pouring into the streets in the early hours of Monday morning. Jouvay, as the most chaotic aspect of Carnival is a chaotic street party with many actors wearing small or no costumes, engaging in mud and paint fights, and consuming alcohol. Monday's activities are the most traditional of the Carnival week with parading of traditional Carnival forms, pan and calypso music, and competitions for the king and queen of Carnival. Tuesday showcases Carnival's modern forms, described as "pretty mas" or "skimpy mas", Tuesday will have huge numbers of women parading in bikinis, dancing after trucks loaded with speakers playing one of the year's popular Carnival marches from a wide range of musical genres popular in the Caribbean.

### **Imported Carnival Forms**

Trinidadian Carnival grew from an interaction of cultural traditions imported from Europe and Africa during the era of European colonialism. The fusion of these traditions reworked Carnival to address arising societal problems and represent the region's transnational culture. Though Africans did not hold a formal Carnival celebration before European colonialism, many African cultures held cultural traditions that mirrored, and were later incorporated as Carnival practices and symbols in Trinidad, such as masking, parading, call and response music, and a number of specific costumes. European Carnival began as a

festival coinciding with the coming of spring. Historian Edward Gibbon described *Livercalial*, the mad Carnival of Rome, as one where, “riotous youth who crowded the feast ran naked about the fields.”<sup>42</sup> With the addition of Christian holidays to the calendar, Carnival took on new meaning as a momentary release of tension and inhibitions before the Christian holiday Lent. Where Lent stood as a time of peace and sacrifice, Carnival contrasted with its glorification of gluttony, its indulgence of sexual desires and its tendencies towards excess and violence, both real and imagined. The sanctioning of normally prohibited behavior allowed for the challenging of social norms and regulated identities in an accepted medium. While this reimagining usually took place only symbolically, lending credence to the steam-valve theory, early European Carnivals sometimes served as an opportunity for very real attacks on normally protected figures or institutions, demonstrating the unstable nature of the festival.

Violent uprisings were possible in part because of the festival’s use of satire and humor to create a liminal space where identities blurred and social controls diminished. The use of symbols and satire, such as effigies and costuming, was a crucial component that allowed for attacking powerful actors or institutions without bearing full responsibility for one’s actions.<sup>43</sup> The symbolic violence of Carnival often laid the bedrock for or directly led to the outbreak of real violence. Hollis Liverpool writes, “The practice of comic laughter existing side by side with serious political cult forms and ceremonies offered a completely different, non-official and extra political aspect of the world, of man, and of human

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<sup>42</sup> Edward Gibbon, *The History of Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire, The History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, Vol. 4, (London: Methuen & Co. Ltd., 1986), 33.

<sup>43</sup> Liverpool, *Rituals of Power and Rebellion*, 86.

relations.”<sup>44</sup> Liverpool’s position points out the need to study the masked political messages embedded in Carnival performances, and how these social and political articulations serve Carnival revelers in engaging and reworking society and the state. By allowing revelers to violently challenge hierarchies, the state momentarily forfeits and decentralizes its power, often reluctantly, and its monopoly on the use of violence in hopes of alleviating social tensions.

While political critiques predominantly targeted normally protected local actors and institutions, as Europeans arrived in other parts of the world Carnival opened up as a space to comment on international issues and encountered foreign cultures, and to situate the participants’ identity within a larger framework of political and cultural identities. These moments allowed European colonial societies to address inconsistencies in their perception of foreign cultures and the realities of encounters, and reshape its self-image to resolve and naturalize newly formed societal relationships.<sup>45</sup> In colonial Trinidad, Europeans used Carnival to express their interpretation of the conquest and enslavement of Africans, and to establish and naturalize racial hierarchies. However, as was the case in other parts of the world, this tactic opened up Carnival as an outlet to question and subvert those very same racial identities and social hierarchies.

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<sup>44</sup> Liverpool, *Rituals of Power and Rebellion*, 85.

<sup>45</sup> Spanish Carnivals featured satirical reenactments of the Crusades, partially as a form of cultural propaganda, but also by engaging in the practice, Spaniards not only expressed political, racial, and cultural sentiments, but also situated their history within larger spheres on international histories and cultural interactions. The Spaniards carried the ritual to the Americas though altered to express the recent history of conquest, often times by forcing those they conquered to reenact their own “defeat”, a practice that Spaniards hoped would naturalize social relationships and express new hierarchies, though often these ceremonies carried subversive messages for other sects of society.

## **Carnival in Trinidad**

Carnival has been at the center of Trinidad's culture for nearly three hundred years, and while it maintains a core set of symbols and practices, it experienced four phases in its development, marked by changes in form and function. It is the ability to adapt to new historical developments that makes Carnival the useful cultural import that it is for contemporary West Indians migrants. The first phase in the development of Trinidad's Carnival culture took place during the island's colonial period and lasted until emancipation in 1834; major features include racially exclusionary participation, clandestine African resistance, and White elite control of sanctioned participation. Carnival during this stage largely took place in the private realms of White plantation houses, and communal slave "yards," demonstrating European fears about the potentially disruptive power of a public Carnival and the need to reinforce racial segregation, despite increased private intermingling of European and African cultural realms during holiday periods. The second phase, brought on by emancipation in 1834 and lasting until approximately the close of the nineteenth century witnessed an influx of Indian and Chinese immigrants filling labor cavities, and Afro-Trinidadian public participation and control, although contested, over the festival. The third phase, which began around the onset of the twentieth century and lasted until the close of World War II, was highly nationalistic and anti-imperialist in nature, and witnessed the birth of a racially inclusive outlook that helped solidify an awareness of a national culture unique to the island. World War II and the presence of U.S. sailors during the period provoked a heightened attention to international issues, increased cultural and economic exchange between the U.S. and Trinidad, and fueled anti-imperialist sentiment on the

islands. The most recent stage in the development of Trinidadian Carnival culture coincided with Trinidadian political independence. This phase is characterized by the participation and influence of a burgeoning self-aware transnational community, a global proliferation of Carnivals styled after Trinidad's festival, mounting fears that Trinidad is losing control and recognition for being the origins of Carnival, official moves to copyright and standardize the festival, the integration of modern technology, and a sharp rise in female public participation. While each of these phases is historically unique, each piece builds upon the traditions of the past and endows the festival with a cultural value that renders it a powerful cultural product for contemporary West Indians.

### **Carnival in Colonial Trinidad**

Colonial immigrants to Trinidad, both African and European, undoubtedly experienced a sense of shock and disorientation in their new surroundings. Colonial life ranged from challenging to brutal depending on one's position, and with the day's routine seldom varying, any respite was certainly anticipated year-round. It is not surprising that Europeans transplanted their holiday calendar to the island, to break the monotony and maintain a sense of cultural continuity, and while some Afro-Trinidadian slaves still labored during holidays, workloads were generally reduced and some luxuries allowed. Trinidad's White population held masquerades that scholars agree were in keeping with the Carnival tradition, but some scholars refute the idea that before emancipation African slaves celebrated and shaped Carnival. This is an imperative question to resolve, because by denying African contributions, scholars subsume Afro-Trinidadian culture under the rubric

of colonial policy and ignore the impact of cultural acculturation. Dr. Liverpool is one scholar who believes that Carnival in Trinidad exists in relation to African enslavement as a form of cultural resistance that aimed to check the imposition of Europeans values and customs on Africans.<sup>46</sup> Across the aisle, Shannon Dudley argues that Carnival derived from its European origins, and it was not until emancipation that Trinidad's Black population had the freedom to participate in Carnival in any meaningful way.<sup>47</sup> Though Liverpool goes too far by arguing that Carnival was solely a form of African cultural resistance, this paper is in keeping with those scholars who see Carnival as emerging from an interaction of European and African cultures throughout the pre and post-emancipation periods, while developing cultural significance unique to the island. The evidence of African contributions to Carnival appears throughout the colonial period. Additionally changes in European carnivalesque practices during Trinidad's slavery period speak to cultural acculturation between groups.<sup>48</sup>

Slaves faced with few options for conveying historical knowledge deployed cultural products, such as songs, stories, and folk art to transmit memory. These tactics are vital in the context of immigration, where normal means of transmitting memory and traditions are

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<sup>46</sup> Liverpool, *Rituals of Power and Rebellion*, xv.

<sup>47</sup> Shannon Dudley, *Carnival music in Trinidad: experiencing music, expressing culture*, New York : Oxford University Press, 2004

<sup>48</sup> As was the case of masking, certain musical forms linked together distinct African cultures brought together by European slavery, and served as a point of cultural unification, memory transmission, and as a subversive tool. African use of drumming and sung call and response, originally cacophonous to European ears, slowly found its way into plantation homes and melded together with European musical forms. The birthing of the national musical style- and official music of Carnival- of Calypso speaks to this cultural fusion, as African musical styles slowly found cultural legitimacy among the islands' white population, incorporating European instruments and progressively transmitting messages that related to a wider cross section of the island. Calypso, originally developed as an African only musical form, accompanying the stick-fighting dance Kalenda and originally served slave communities in transmitting memories, knowledge, and counter hegemonic ideas in an environment that prohibited traditional public forms of communicated ideas.

lost, and societal context is lacking.<sup>49</sup> In this way, nascent Carnival practices served Afro-Trinidadians in transmitting memory in a repressive system where normal means do not exist. Liverpool writes, “For Africans, traditions reflect human relations...responses to challenges of the unknown and the need for order.”<sup>50</sup> Carnival in Trinidad, even in its nascent form, created an outlet to express a new set, or absence of distinctions, which at this moment predominantly focused on issues of race. White groups aimed to maintain their hegemony in political, economic, and cultural realms by controlling the bodies of Africans, Trinidad’s public spaces, and acceptable behavior based on racial perceptions. The control of African bodies began with forced immigration and permeated throughout the day-to-day existence of slaves through the threat and use of violence and sexual assault, the regulation of food, and the fracturing of African families. Colonial authorities and White groups mandated and rigorously enforced what behavior was acceptable based on racial identities. A look into Carnival during the period demonstrates that cultural exchanges and reformations were a pervasive part of the nascent country that increasingly undermined these lines of separation.

The centrality of race to the island’s colonial culture prompted Carnival to retreat from public spaces in order to gestate in the privacy of plantation homes and slave yards. The redirection of satire and ridicule once publicly levied against elites tapered to the new surroundings, now targeting the local Black population. Masking practices centered on racial distinctions as European men and women employed “black face” in order to embody and mock the slave population and draw lines of racial distinction. The primary costumes of Europeans illustrate an ongoing struggle over racial identities and newly formed societal

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<sup>50</sup> Liverpool, *Rituals of Power and Rebellion*, 16.



relationships. European men often adopted the personality of the *Negres de jardin*, or field slave, while their female counterparts often embodied the *mulatresse*, or enslaved mistress.<sup>51</sup> One explanation for this comes from Homi Bhaba who writes that, “Mimicry is at once resemblance and menace.”<sup>52</sup> By taking on the persona of slaves, European slaveholders aimed to strip Africans of their identity and fix them with an alternative and subordinate identity in order to naturalize racial hierarchies. These tactics ultimately muddied the waters of racial distinction, as historian Joseph Roach demonstrates, these performances proposed possible candidates for succession, by raising the possibility of replacing the authors of the representations by those who they imagine into existence as their definitive opposites.<sup>53</sup> If this analysis is correct, then white plantation owners implicitly acknowledged and validated alternative societal visions, or at least unwittingly created a space for them to arise.

For African slaves, the practice of masking, originally associated with identity transformation, took on additional meaning as a point of cultural unification. Masking is a unifying tradition among the innumerable cultures of Sub-Saharan Africa, who made up the bulk of enslaved Africans brought to Trinidad. By serving as a point of cultural unity, masking contributed to the forging of an Afro-Creole identity that lent itself as a survival technique during slavery and as a medium to pass down cultural traditions and memories. Dr. Hollis Liverpool holds that the practice is associated with spirit transformations whereby the wearers cancel or obliterate their personality, changing into other human characters and spirits, so that they are no longer themselves.<sup>54</sup> By obliterating their personality, Africans

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<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*, 128.

<sup>52</sup> Homi K. Bhaba, *The Location of Culture*, (London: Routledge, 1994), 86.

<sup>53</sup> Roach, *Cities of the Dead*, 6.

<sup>54</sup> Liverpool, *Rituals of Power and Rebellion*, 61.

undermined the subordinated racial position thrust upon them opening the possibility for alternative identities, and thereby a new social order, to arise.

While Carnival is defined by a departure from the routine, in this case a departure of racially defined social and sexual roles, it is integrally tied up in the daily aspirations and expressions of the people and speaks to an alternative and often-dialectical identity. By transforming themselves into characterizations of Africans, Europeans expressed internal desires of socially unacceptable behavior, namely sexual promiscuity. Heightened sexuality during Carnival was prominent throughout the history of European celebrations, and by assigning a hyper-sexuality to Blacks, Europeans drew lines of distinction and created an outlet for them to naturalize sexual assault against slaves, and to act out frustrated sexual desires without moral condemnation from their European counterparts. The liminal space of Carnival not only allowed Europeans to embody and express ideas concerning Africans as their definitive opposites, but also allowed them to transgress the rules of social interaction and racial segregation, further exemplified by European observation and participation in African-slave cultural events.<sup>55</sup>

*Kalenda* is a Trinidadian mutation of an African custom wherein participants engaged, though largely ceremonially, in a stick-fighting dance. *Kalenda* served Afro-Trinidadian slaves in community building, the transmission of memories and traditions, and as a subdued expression of violent frustration. Allowance, observation, and participation in

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<sup>55</sup> Gutierrez and Fabre, *Feasts and Celebrations*, 166. Europeans placed on Africans a hyper-sexuality, an atunement with the body's lower half, a connection with nature, an inability to perform higher reasoning, a lack of self-control, and a perpetual state of barbarism. Fabre is one scholar who sees Carnival as an attraction that breaks down the daily routine and allows actors temporary release from the constraints of the social order, enabling relationships even among strangers as well as usually forbidden excesses. The opportunity to build relationships among "strangers" was a powerful tool in colonial Trinidad where social relationships were highly regulated.

African cultural events achieved multiple ends for Europeans. First, by sanctioning the practice, Europeans could assuage fears that the practice was uncontrolled and potentially dangerous. Second, Europeans demonstrated that their dominance permeated all aspects of a slave's life. Third, through participation Europeans felt connected to the unbounded freedom they ascribed to Africans. Finally, allowance served as a steam-valve by allowing Africans to dance as a way of quelling potentially rebellious spirits. The presence of slaveholders at these rituals during the Carnival season exemplifies Carnival's disruption of social norms, redefining of spatial significance, and subversion of social expectations. These tactics continued throughout the post-colonial period, representing a larger struggle over control of cultural and public realms. Even as slave holders sought to extend their power by sanctioning these rituals in hopes of stripping them of their potency, slaves transformed the meanings of cultural practices and engaged in unauthorized forms of subversion, many of which were later incorporated as popular components of the Trinidad's culture, made apparent by the evolution of Canboulay.

### **Carnival in Emancipation, Conflict with the State**

Canboulay, from the French *Cannes Brulles*, meaning burning cane, is a practice that began as an instrument of oppression but evolved into a counter hegemonic tool to challenge racial identities, symbolize new economic relations, and claim public space. Originally, the practice entailed the rounding up of slaves from neighboring farms to combat fire on sugar plantations. Chained together under a canopy of torchlight, and followed by the crack of a whip, slaves used the improvised fire squad for the opportunity to meet, reunite, and share

information and memories between farms and families. The horrors of slavery coupled with the effects of immigration, fractured and broke many African family networks, and so the opportunity to reunite and converse between divided families was a prized moment. In addition to providing the rare opportunity to interact with other slaves and family members, crop fires sabotaged the profits of plantation owners- undoubtedly a satisfying sight for many slaves.<sup>56</sup>

Following emancipation, Afro-Trinidadians reenacted the scene endowing it with new meaning. Trailed by a devil with a painted white face, undoubtedly a biting satire of their former white slave drivers and European use of “black face,” Canboulay became a way to remind Whites and Blacks alike of the former conditions of the island and changes in the island’s race relations, economic systems, and control of public spaces. By embodying the White plantation owner, former slaves confirmed the possibilities of succession and utilized the carnivalesque to challenge racial and social relationships. Engaging in subversive behavior through a medium appropriated from Europeans, Afro-Trinidadians demonstrated their understanding of Carnival as a potent political tool, and as a technique to engage in behavior originally deemed outside of their racial domain. After emancipation, Canboulay’s continual reference to the existence of African slavery became a site for Afro-Creole invention. Errol Hill argues that Canboulay during the post emancipation period symbolized a show of solidarity with other enslaved Africans, and a growing awareness and identification of belonging to the transnational Afro-Creole diaspora; a cornerstone of the modern West Indian identity.<sup>57</sup>

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<sup>56</sup> It is extremely plausible, and was often the allegation of plantation owners that slaves were responsible for setting crop fires.

Emancipation brought drastic changes to almost all aspects of Trinidadian society; Carnival at the center of the island's culture emerged from the private realm and became a public representation of changing power structures, and so the various sects of society vied for its control. Donald Hill stresses the importance of the bridge between the private and public realms and the importance of "yard and the road" in contemporary Carnival writing "the rural yard had been near the center of plantation life for slaves, while the yard in Black working-class neighborhoods were the focal points of urban social life. The road became where the Carnival forms developed in urban yards would compete."<sup>58</sup> The dominance of public spaces by White groups throughout the pre-emancipation period set the stage for an enduring and fierce struggle over who would control the public domain and whose culture would find public representation. These tensions generally intensify in moments leading up to or following changes in the social order, as was the case during colonial peopling, emancipation, national independence, and twentieth-century large-scale emigration where economic, class, and race relations and political identity underwent rapid change. Carnival, as the most public cultural display of the year became a signifier of that control, and so competing groups aimed to constitute and direct the festival. This historical tradition of contention works well for contemporary West Indian groups who utilize the festival in their host countries to claim public space, as well as garner political recognition.

Immediately following emancipation, both Whites and many formerly "free coloureds" boycotted the festival, blaming the influence of newly empowered former slaves

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<sup>58</sup> Rachel Buff. *Immigration and the Political Economy of Home: West Indian Brooklyn and American Indian Minneapolis, 1945-1992*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001), 32.

for having degenerated Carnival to a state of barbarism.<sup>59</sup> By abstaining from participation, Whites aimed to deprive the festival of its cultural and political legitimacy by stripping it of the respectability they believed their race bestowed onto the practice. Using the state to regulate or prohibit behavior deemed disruptive, elite interests passed a series of laws to “whiten” the festival by restricting the time, span, messages and costumes of Carnival. When read against the grain, it becomes clear that the government and elites rightly saw Carnival during the second half of the nineteenth century as a danger to the established order. The tumultuous period of Trinidad’s history worked out many of its tensions by allowing actors to express their outrage over the former conditions and current inequities of the island in a sanctioned, limited, and subdued form. This is, however, not to say that violence never broke out, as made apparent by the Canbouly riots. In 1833, the *Port-of-Spain Gazette* reported that the Africans of Carnival wore “masks to create disturbances,” an assessment that the late Andrew Carr sees as being at least partly true.<sup>60</sup> The disturbances that Whites criticized reflect larger fears concerning shifting power dynamics directly related to changes in racial hierarchies.

The struggle for control of the national culture and public space riddled Carnival throughout the nineteenth<sup>th</sup> century, a battle that wages on in contemporary Carnival culture. A look into some Carnival forms during the second half of the nineteenth century demonstrates how Carnival served as a symbol of social tensions. The most popular costumes of the period demonstrate a growing trend to criticize oppressive and exclusionary political and economic systems, such as White-dominated politics, Trinidad’s colonial

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<sup>59</sup> Liverpool, *Rituals of Power and Rebellion*, 222.

<sup>60</sup> Andrew Carr, Personal Communication, August. 1965. In Liverpool, *Rituals of Power and Rebellion*, 170.

status, racially directed police violence, restrictive voter's rights, and more broadly the concentration of political rights and wealth along racial lines. The devil costume, which remains a mainstay of Carnival costuming, required the costumer to cover themselves in molasses, an action that both emphasized their blackness and spoke to the malevolent history of sugar on the island. In addition, the costume echoed early Canboulay marches and mocked the hedonistic identity that Whites often assigned to Blacks. The co-opting of the *Negre Jardin* costume allowed Afro-Trinidadians to transgress Trinidad's racial terrain and begin constructing a new cultural memory where Blackness was not vilified and Whites no longer controlled the bodies of Africans, while mocking whites by pointing out the hypocrisy of White accusations of barbarism. Victor Turner asserts, "in a world where social distinctions were presumed to be rooted in the nature of things [racial identities], Carnival allowed people to play with that most radical of ideas: the possibility of a different social order."<sup>61</sup> In this imagined world, racial identity does not determine social or class standing, as useful a tool in its own time as it is for contemporary West Indian immigrants.

*Jammete*, derived from the French word *diametre*, meaning beneath the diameter of respectability or the underworld, became the term applied by elites to Trinidad's Carnival from the 1860s until the close of the century. The period was characterized by acts of violence and overt sexuality as Jammete men and women made sexual gestures and advances primarily directed at members of the upper class, and the police, who were seen as their representatives, to express resentment towards a corrupt system and to release stress

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<sup>61</sup> Victor Turner, "The Spirit of Celebration." In Frank Manning ed., *The Celebration of Society: Perspectives on Contemporary Cultural Performance*, (Bowling Green, Ohio: Bowling Green University Press, 1983), 103.

from struggling against racial injustice.<sup>62</sup> The actions of Jammete actors challenged hegemonic notions of respectability through overt displays of the hyper-sexuality that European stereotypes assigned to Blacks. In 1868 all aspects of Carnival deemed unsuitable by the upper class, including public violence and sexuality, Canboulay marches, and certain costumes were outlawed, though ultimately the law did little more than aggravate mounting racial tensions.

Fluctuations in the participation of Trinidad's White groups in Carnival throughout the second half of the nineteenth century reflected changes in social patterns as Afro-Creole, Chinese, and Indian actors took a more active role in the island's business, governance, and public life. White elite control, however dwindling, was able to retain a degree of control over the festival. Liverpool contends that by performing in Carnival, where all people were migrants, Europeans were trying to be impressive, seeking to affirm and naturalize the power of dominant elites, and conceal the dirty linen of their rule.<sup>63</sup> Liverpool's assertion may go a bit too far by characterizing European participation as nothing more than an oppressive act, and ignoring that by publicly highlighting their former economic and racial position, elite groups created a focal point for resistance.

James Scott asserts that public demonstrations expressing "relations of domination are, at the same time, relations of resistance," this argument highlights the ongoing process of social reformation taking place through the festival, as well as the unstable meaning of

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<sup>62</sup> Liverpool, *Rituals of Power and Rebellion*, 275-282.

<sup>63</sup> Susan Davis, *Parades and Power: Street Theatre in Nineteenth Century Philadelphia*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1986. Susan Davis' argument that nineteenth century military parades were modes of power, propaganda, and domination lends credence to this position, however it is important to view elites as a heterogeneous group who, utilizing the tools around them, competed equally against other sects of the island's populace.



Carnival when viewed through a cross-section of the island's population.<sup>64</sup> Scott's argument draws our attention back to the role of memory in determining how competing groups perceived and engaged the festival. Genevieve Fabre work on parades lends credence to this argument when she writes that parades "have a rich symbolic significance and offer a way of performing experience and of identifying 'sites of memory': events, moments, legendary or historical figures, [and] places and actions stored in the collective memory are thus called upon and endowed with symbolic significance."<sup>65</sup> This attention to memory sites makes Carnival a rich though highly contentious cultural artifact for engaging the social order through performances that draw on competing historical memories. Colonial authorities clung to the memory of Carnival as a mode to reinforce their control over the island, while popular groups challenged this memory by reasserting their understanding of the festival as a mode to challenge oppressive systems.

Throughout Trinidad's history, Carnival has been a site for confrontation between state authorities and Carnival players, and in 1881, tensions finally erupted in what later came to be known as the Canboulay riots.<sup>66</sup> Police Captain Baker, under the Governor's orders attempted to shut down the pre-Carnival Canboulay celebrations. With deep-seated fears that the oppression could signal a return to slavery, participants took to the streets armed with torches, rocks, and bottles, engaging in a series of scuffles with the police. The line between satirical and real violence vanished as Carnival revelers utilized the festival's liminal space to revoke the state's right to monopolize violence. The governor, Sir Sanford Freeling, faced with a pending race war, ordered the police to stand down in order to quell

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<sup>64</sup> James Scott, *Domination and the Arts of Resistance: Hidden Transcripts*. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1990), 45.

<sup>65</sup> Fabre, *Feasts and Celebrations*, 3.

<sup>66</sup> Kasinitz, *Immigration and the Political Economy of Home*, 31.

the mob. Standing before a crowd of Canboulay actors the Governor attempted to quell the mob's fears, "*I did not know you attached so much importance to your masquerade. I also wish to tell you how proud I am to be Governor of your island; I had a desire to come here and know you, that I could write and tell the Queen that no more loyal and peaceful subjects inhabit the other colonies like Trinidad.*"<sup>67</sup> The Governor's words draw attention to the self-imposed gap between colonial authorities and Trinidad's popular groups, as well as England's inability to recognize the cultural and political importance of Carnival. With the memory of the brutal 1791-1804 Haitian revolution still fresh in the minds of many European leaders, Britain dispatched a fleet of warships to the island though they would not arrive until the situation was resolved. Britain's response to the Canboulay riots spurred a heightened internal awareness of Trinidad's place within global and colonial networks, as well as awakening a more inclusive and independent national identity as made apparent by developments in Carnival during the early 20<sup>th</sup> century.

### **The Early 20<sup>th</sup> Century, Nascent Nationalism, Sanitization**

The resolution of the Canboulay riots marked an end to the worst of the island's racial tensions, and by the 1890s, Trinidad's white population was largely returning to the public sphere and participating in Carnival, though their numbers and influence had greatly diminished. Liverpool writes that by 1900 "all the racial groups were adjusting to each other's presence, each other's power, each other's way of acting and each other's

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<sup>67</sup> Sir Sanford Freeling, *New Era*, March 7, 1881. Italics are on author's emphasis.

masquerading pattern.”<sup>68</sup> Here Liverpool makes clear Carnival’s role as a component and indicator of Trinidad’s power relations. The rising tide of inclusion and tolerance coincided with the closing of *Jammete* and the ascension of Carnival as a representation of the national culture, shedding its focus on past racial tensions and incorporating a wider cross-section of the populace as an exposition of events and grievances that affected all peoples throughout the year. The divisive practice of Canboulay, as the opening ceremony of Carnival, gave way to the advent of *Jouvay*, from the French word *jour ouvert*, meaning *at dawn or day break* was a chaotic ceremony without strong reference to Trinidad’s colonial past and racial divisions. Made possible in part by changes in the island’s demography, and a growing recognition of a distinctly Trinidadian culture existing in relation to a larger web of cultural bodies, the focus of Carnival shifted. Philip Scher states, “Ultimately the gradual formulation of a sense of race pride as well as a sense of nationalist Creole identity combined in the image of Carnival.”<sup>69</sup> The tying of nationalism and a diasporic Creole identity demonstrates the hybridized world that many Trinidadians imagined themselves within and challenged localized notions of race; through Carnival these actors were able to explore these complexities and situate their identity in multiple realms while asserting a new racial identity.

Around the end of the nineteenth century, Trinidadian society underwent a major shift with the closing of White dominated politics and a gradual withdrawal from public and political spaces, in turn allowing for upward mobility for Chinese, Indian, and especially Afro-Trinidadians. In light of this “white flight,” the rise of a new middle class, comprised of people with a constellation of histories, helps contextualize developments in Carnival

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<sup>68</sup> Liverpool, *Rituals of Power and Rebellion*, 344.

<sup>69</sup> Scher, *Carnival and the Formation of the Trinidadian Transnation*, 41.

during the period. While the Trinidadian middle class acquired political clout and greater social mobility, it did not yet fully benefit from the wealth and hegemony they felt entitled to by virtue of their Britishness.<sup>70</sup> Capitalizing on their new economic and class standing and wishing to restyle the national culture in that image, the middle class aimed to reshape perceptions of Carnival and profit from its proliferation. The burgeoning middle class, increasingly active in the business of Carnival, withdrew their support from elite driven movements to regulate the festival, and instead sought to control, profit from, and nationalize Carnival.

The new middle-class, knowing that Carnival had traditionally been a site where complex class and ethnic relationships had been articulated, used the festival to express a new social order, one where race took a backseat to class standing.<sup>71</sup> These early moves by middle and upper class interests created a longstanding tradition to commodify the festival to meet both cultural and economic goals. Upper and middle class interests argued that because Carnival now advocated universal participation, any aspects that did not conform to their views of respectability should be shorn off, thereby sanitizing the festival and making it suitable to both represent the national culture and satisfy the international market.

Methods for sanitizing Carnival never took a monolithic approach, but instead adapted to ongoing developments. Movements surrounding the censorship and sanitization of Carnival continued to be hotly debated within the Carnival community. The beginning of the 1900s witnessed the introduction of competition and sponsorship to Carnival events-now a major part of Carnival culture. Many historians see this as a move by the middle and upper

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<sup>70</sup> Don Robotham, "Transnationalism in the Caribbean: Formal and Informal," *American Ethnologist* vol. 25, No. 2, (May, 1998), 313.

<sup>71</sup> Kasinitz, *Immigration and the Political Economy of Home*, 29.

classes to maintain control over Carnival.<sup>72</sup> These tactics became inextricably tied up in notions of race, gender and class, specifically which members of the community should be eligible to represent the national culture. By sponsoring events, patrons could restrict lower-class performers, choose what political messages could be expressed, what musical forms would proliferate, determine what qualified as beautiful, and in turn shape future Carnival forms. Sponsorship and competitions also sought to ensure that Carnival performers did not attack middle and upper class interests. The prohibition of pro-communist and anti-imperialist sentiments demonstrates some of the ways that sponsors aimed to control, though unsuccessfully, the political message of Carnival players. Additionally, regulations such as the creation of tent licensing, which often came with the caveat of prohibiting slander and indecent language, speaks to a growing trend to regulate the festival's political and cultural message to meet notions of respectability. It is telling that as the government began clamping down, though mostly unsuccessfully, on the political message of Carnival, they simultaneously saw through passing a law that made English the official language of Carnival. By mandating the language, authorities emphasized the Anglo history of the island to benefit from the cultural legitimacy and respectability they associated with British culture. Furthermore, as the language of both the United States and Britain the use of English allowed Carnival to reach audiences in both metropolitan centers. Government and business sponsored competitions, the standardization of English as the language of Carnival, and the conception of the Carnival Improvement Commission in 1935 all indicate a move by the

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<sup>72</sup> By offering prizes for best costumes and musical performances, sponsors increase the cost and time necessary for Carnival participation, and in doing so, weed out lower-class elements deemed undesirable.

middle and upper classes to extend their dominance over the island's culture in order to make Carnival a viable cultural commodity and representation of the national culture.<sup>73</sup>

### **Imperial Encounters**

Like many nationalist movements in the hemisphere, Trinidad's move towards national independence developed alongside an anti-colonial movement. This passive revolution took place on two fronts. On one side, patriots increasingly attacked the belief in British greatness and the interrelated notions of white supremacy and respectability, and on the other, engaged a developing nationalist patriotism. The Indian nationalist movement of the 1930s, helped awaken anti-colonial sentiments and a national consciousness in the Caribbean. All those groups previously shut out by the British, due to their race, class or legal status got involved in the movement, each with its own motives for national independence.<sup>74</sup> Even here, it is important to view Trinidad's move towards independence within the web of international politics and transnational exchanges. Nationalist sentiment intensified as Trinidad moved deeper into a web of global relationships, which finally crystallized during World War II as Trinidadian autonomy passed between imperial powers as nothing more than a military asset.

World War II ushered in sweeping changes to Trinidadian culture, and paved the way for national independence in 1965. In 1941, the United States, in the "bases-for-destroyers" deal constructed a naval base on the island in order to aid the British military and establish a greater presence in the region. While U.S. presence helped substantiate

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<sup>73</sup> Liverpool, *Rituals of Power and Rebellion*, 365-370.

<sup>74</sup> Robotham, "Transnationalism in the Caribbean: Formal and Informal," 310.

hemispheric hegemony, the mission lacked the domineering and comprehensive reformist missionary slant of other early-twentieth-century ventures in the region. The popular Calypsonian, Atilla the Hun, marked the arrival of President Roosevelt as the moment of transition for U.S.--Trinidadian relations,

*When Roosevelt came to the Land of the humming bird  
Shouts of welcome were heard, [x 2]  
His visit to the island is bound to be  
An epoch in local history  
Definitely marking the new era  
Between Trinidad and America.*<sup>75</sup>

Atilla's observation proved accurate. Not long after Roosevelt's visit, Trinidad achieved independence and the subsequent opening of U.S. borders to West Indians under the Hart-Cellar Immigration Reform Act signaled a new era in U.S. Trinidad relations. Historian Harvey R. Neptune draws attention to the colony's double-sided cultural politics during the "bases-for-destroyers" period, writing the "banalization of Britishness" and the invention of "Trinidadianess," took place against the backdrop of anti-colonial national-building, and struggles over labor, dress, culture, and sexuality.<sup>76</sup>

Trinidad's experience within the spheres of British and American imperial projects advances the need to recognize that colonialism and its countervailing historical force of nationalism are beset by tensions that exceed the domain of a single metropole and its peripheries, and so accounts of the building and breaking of empires must consider "overlapping, connecting, and colliding imperial formations."<sup>77</sup> These sorts of imperial projects often lead to the creation of transnational networks as actors navigate local and

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<sup>75</sup> Atilla the Hun, Roosevelt in Trinidad, Kaiso! Volume 2. Ethnic Cassettes KA2

<sup>76</sup> Harvey R. Neptune, *Caliban and the Yankee*, (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2007), 4.

<sup>77</sup> Harvey R. Neptune, *Caliban and the Yankee*, 6.

imperial political, economic and social systems. American statesman Frances Bernard expressed the tension between the U.S. and British imperial projects in racial terms. “It is the policy of England to Africanize the West Indies, it is our interest to Americanize them.” Bernard argued that the only hope for Trinidad was a rapid infusion of [white] American settlers to replace the emigrating or disappearing white planter families.<sup>78</sup> This rapid infusion of American settlers came in the forms of U.S. military and business ventures. The frequent coupling of Yankee servicemen and local Afro-Trinidadian women increasingly undermined Trinidad’s legacy of British racial hierarchies; though most often these relationships were kept clandestine, never garnering the legitimacy of public acknowledgement or marriage.<sup>79</sup> Under British Caribbean society, Whiteness was jealously guarded and white groups held a disavowing affective interest in nonwhite bodies as a decisive aspect of its guardianship. While American serviceman certainly maintained racial stereotypes they openly transgressed British social codes.<sup>80</sup>

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<sup>78</sup> Frances Bernard to Secretary of State, October 16, 1861, Consular Dispatches from Trinidad, West Indies, microfilm, T 148.

<sup>79</sup> For written accounts by soldiers of their romantic relationships with Afro-Trinidadians, see Harvey R. Neptune, *Caliban and the Yankees*, 164. These accounts display an acknowledgement of transgressing both Trinidadian and U.S. social norms, and express a fear of having their relationships follow them back to the U.S.

<sup>80</sup> Lloyd Braithwaite, “Social Stratification in Trinidad,” *Social and Economic Studies* 2, 1953, p. 95. Once again, Carnival found itself in confrontation with the state when British authorities outlawed the practice for the duration of the war, deeming it disrespectful. However, Carnival culture continued developing during the war years, including the development of one of the most recognizable Trinidadian cultural symbols. The emergence of pan music during this period speaks to Carnival’s ability to draw from all cultural avenues and address current social and political issues. Trinidadian actors transformed British and U.S. oil drums from the naval base into musical instruments, daring the foreign powers to outlaw their own creation. Pan music which later become a cultural commodity and signifier between the international community and the West Indies, symbolizes Carnival’s ability to challenge the social order.



American serviceman stationed on the island brought with them their own understandings of identity, and because of the preeminence of the U.S. and its image abroad, a kind of cultural authority. To quote a character in V.S. Naipaul's *Miguel Street*, Americans "know what is what."<sup>81</sup> This coupled with the fact that Americans arrived at a period in Trinidad's history which one commentator mocked the island for having "suddenly discovered culture."<sup>82</sup> American serviceman represented a metropolitan space known for its "modern achievements, as bosses, patrons, and occupiers these agents landed on the island with substantial currency."<sup>83</sup> The identity assigned to U.S. actors, as well as internally shifting demographics and social relationships, helped trigger rapid social and economic change. The Anglo plantocracy aimed to counter what they characterized as a "chronic state of carnival."<sup>84</sup> Ultimately, those attempts to restore the island to its previous mores and conditions proved futile. American servicemen undercut racial lines by intermixing and engaging in sexual relationships with Afro-Trinidadians, introducing new forms of dress, performing work normally relegated to Black groups, and upsetting racialized economic orders by offering higher pay to local black laborers.

The influence of U.S. servicemen and culture seemed to permeate all aspects of Trinidadian society, including the island's gender roles; fundamental to these gendered identities as made apparent during the colonial and post-emancipation periods are understandings of respectability. Notions of respectability which Wilson argues for Trinidadian women was linked to domestic duties, morality, and the ultimate success of

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<sup>81</sup> V.S. Naipul, *Miguel Street*, London: Penguin, 1959.

<sup>82</sup> R.D. Napier Raikes, "Culture," *Trinidad Guardian*, March 8, 1944.

<sup>83</sup> Neptune, *Caliban and the Yankees*, 8.

<sup>84</sup> Letter to the Editor "Drastic Measures to Control Hooliganism," *Port of Spain Gazette*, November 12, 1942.

colonial hegemony, diametrically opposed the reputation of men which emphasizes the public realm, loud and demonstrative talk, extramarital sex, and performing in competitions.<sup>85</sup> In the post-war period, these concepts evolved in discourses of sexuality and race, which adapted to the growing influence of the American culture that was reaching Trinidad through U.S. actors, newspapers, radio, and films. Like much of the world, Trinidadians became enthralled with Hollywood; by the time the U.S. government effectively ended West Indian immigration in 1924, the island's populace was increasingly encountering images of America without relying on emigrants' reports. American cinema contributed to the reworking of Trinidadian social relationships as well as perceptions of the U.S. that would figure into later immigration patterns.

From the introduction of U.S. cinema to Trinidad, colonial censors concerned themselves with policing the racial identities asserted by Hollywood. Inter-racial relations drew special condemnation from the censors; one account criticized "white men in a state of degradation amidst native surroundings," and "equivocal situations between men of one race and girls of another race."<sup>86</sup> The appearance of white women's sexuality and sex appeal before a largely "East Indian and Negro audiences," were seen as threatening the island's tenuous race relations as much as gender roles. Organized in 1946, the Carnival Queen competition demonstrates attempts by elite groups to control the boundaries of acceptable sexuality and limit what kinds of women would represent the national community both internally and abroad.

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<sup>85</sup> Scher, *Carnival and the Formation of a Caribbean Transnation*, 31.

<sup>86</sup> Thomas Doherty, *Pre-Code Hollywood: Sex, Immorality, and Insurrection in American Cinema, 1930-1934*, (New York: Columbia University Press), 1999.

It was not just Trinidad's culture that changed because of the growing interaction between the two nations, the consumption of foreign "exotic" cultures factored heavily into U.S. popular culture during the period. In the case of Trinidad, Carnival shows began springing up across the United States as servicemen returned from Trinidad, a process accelerated by avid Yankee endorsement and financial support.<sup>87</sup> The 1944 film *Land of the Calypso* produced and directed by two American filmmakers attached to the military forces attempted to show off the island's carnival. Conceived with an American audience in mind, the film strove for authenticity, featuring many of the period's most popular performers, in hopes of introducing the U.S. public to "true" Trinidadian culture. While some, such as patriot Alfred Mendes, hailed the film as showing a "completely proletarian cast" in a "completely indigenous" activity, others, such as critic Jean De Boissier, said the film was anything but "trini to the bone", titling his review "Canned Carnival" calling it inauthentic, and nothing more than a bastardization of Trinidadian "bacchanal" and American "burlesque."<sup>88</sup> As American popular audiences caught their first glimpse of Caribbean culture on film and over the radio, Trinidadians struggled to have their national identity and autonomy respected by those same foreign audiences.

The popularity of Caribbean culture in the U.S meant that cultural forms often targeted American audiences, a process some describe as "Americanization." It is important to note that this does not imply a loss of Trinidadian culture, but rather an ongoing dialogue between the two nations, which following World War II depicted the U.S. as an idyllic cultural and political crucible. As Trinidad shifted hands from one empire to another,

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<sup>87</sup> Neptune, *Caliban and the Yankees*, 137.

<sup>88</sup> Alfred Mendes, "Something Trinidadian on Stage," *Trinidad Guardian*, June 11, 1994. and Jean De Boissier, "Canned Carnival," *Callaloo*, August 1944, 4.

Trinidad's colonial order and notions of respectability came under fire by the U.S.'s liberal message. Nationalists feared that while the U.S. presence helped liberate colonial subjects from British conventions it also sponsored a popular alienation from Trinidad's indigenous values.<sup>89</sup> Yankees embodied a hyper-masculinity that threatened the decency of colonial society. While some patriots welcomed the unraveling of Anglo greatness, it accompanied a growing fear of the racial implications of a strong U.S. presence in the region. Rather than being concerned about the sullied nature of whiteness, the variously mixed population worried about the importation of a singularly brutal brand of U.S. race making.<sup>90</sup> This fear surrounds the memories of island's history of maintaining binary racial relationships, which seemed to still exist in the United States. Additionally, Trinidadians did not need to look far for examples of the importation of oppressive U.S. values in the region.

The various sects of Trinidad's citizenry held mixed opinions about the effects of the U.S.'s presence. While some groups saw the United States as a potentially liberating force, other groups blamed them for derailing the nation's social progress, arguing that White U.S. servicemen in the company of Afro-Trinidadians dramatically affected the island's tenuous race relations, condemning them as a contributing factor to mounting hooliganism. One letter to the Port of Spain editor read, "We women of Port of Spain have been suffering molestations for a long time in silence not only by the native element of the population, but by personnel of the various forces established here."<sup>91</sup> Most people blamed the twinning of American money and lower-class Trinidadian immorality. From the report in the *Port of Spain*, we see that many people still held the belief that lower-class, predominantly Black

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<sup>89</sup> Partha Chatterjee, *Nationalist Thought and the Colonial World: A Derivative Discourse?*. (London: Zed Books), 1986.

<sup>90</sup> Neptune, *Caliban and the Yankees*, 60.

<sup>91</sup> Letter to the editor, "Trinidad Guardian," *Trinidadian Guardian*, September 12, 1942.

actors, were not yet capable of embracing the freedoms associated with U.S. liberalism. The fact that this criticism came in the form of an inability to control sexual desires points to the association of racial and sexual identities on the island. The hyper-masculinity assigned to U.S. actors began to permeate Trinidad's culture, noticeably expressed by the rising popularity of Zoot suits. These suits signified a reflection of Anglo-centric precepts concerning fashion, and more profoundly of manhood. By embracing the style of African and Mexican Americans, the island's seminal "saga boys" posed daring affronts to British colonial conventions that demanded black masculinity to be defined by humility, discipline, and respectability.<sup>92</sup> Additionally, the adoption of both Zoot suits and the jitterbug dance expressed solidarity with other minority groups in the U.S. and a growing consciousness of shared commonalities.

Sung in by the ringing of pan drums, the conclusion of WWII set the stage for the latest chapter in Carnival culture. One popular Calypso song and the Carnival Roach March of 1956, "Jean and Dinah" by Mighty Sparrow speaks to the mixed emotions of Trinidadians upon the closing of the U.S. naval base.

Well the girls in town feeling bad, No more Yankees in Trinidad,  
They gonna close down the base for good, Them girls have to make out how they  
could,  
Brother is now they park up in town, In for a penny, and in for a pound,  
Believe me it's competition for so, Trouble in town when the price drop low.<sup>93</sup>

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<sup>92</sup> David Kutcha, "The Making of the Self-Made Man: Class, Clothing, and English Masculinity, 1688-1832," in *The Sex of Things*, ed. Victoria de Grazia, with Ellen Furlough (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996), 54-78.

<sup>93</sup> The Mighty Sparrow, "Jean and Dinah." <http://www.socafreak.com/mighty-sparrow-lyrics.html>.

Mighty Sparrow encapsulated the spirit of the time, drawing attention to the economic and social consequences of foreign involvement. The closing of the base meant the loss of foreign capital and a tempering of foreign involvement, and as Trinidad struggled to develop a stronger independent economy, the United States was undergoing a massive economic expansion that drew the attention of many Trinidadians.

## Chapter 2

### The Hart Cellar Act and Multiculturalism

#### West Indian Identity: Immigration and Cold War Pluralism

In reaction to modern global, national, and circum-Atlantic trends, recent migration patterns helped construct a modern Caribbean that historian Stuart Hall sees as being “twice diasporated,” as both a point of arrival and departure: a point of arrival because of European colonization and racialized slavery and the subsequent inflows of immigrants filling labor cavities created by emancipation predominantly comprised of Indians and Chinese; a point of departure because of the massive outflow of people seeking work following World War II, mostly heading to the North America and England.<sup>94</sup> Though West Indians have been immigrating to the U.S. throughout the twentieth century, the number and composition of immigrants from the Caribbean has changed dramatically since the 1960s.

The impact of the Hart-Cellar Immigration Reform Act to the United States in opening and shaping West Indian immigration is apparent in taking the West Indian population from 193,922 in 1960 to 675,108 by 1970. Over the next decade the numbers more than doubled, taking their total population to 1.25 million. Immigration from the Caribbean slowed between 1990 and 2000, though this period was the highest decade of immigration for the U.S. with over forty-four percent of foreign-born immigrants arriving

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<sup>94</sup> Stuart Hall, *Myths of Caribbean Identity*, (Coventry: University of Warwick, Center for Caribbean Studies, 1991), 22.

during this period.<sup>95</sup> In 2000, the number of West Indians (excluding Hispanic origin groups) living in the U.S. reached nearly two million, concentrated primarily in New York City. Because large numbers of West Indians arrived during the same period from an array of Caribbean nations, many of which only recently achieved national independence rendering migrant nationalism more pliable, it facilitated the construction of a transnational identity to bind West Indians together in their host country.

### **The Hart-Cellar Act and West Indian Migration**

In April of 1965 U.S. Senators Emanuel Cellar of New York, and Michigan Senator Philip Hart, better known as the “conscience of the Senate,” celebrated the passing of their co-authored Hart-Cellar Immigration Reform Act. The standing 1924 Johnson-Reed Act established a tradition of hierarchically arranging immigrants based on their country of origin and racial identity, with a preference for Western European nations, seen as providing the immigrants most capable of upholding the U.S.’s Anglo-racial and liberal-civic ideals. While the Hart-Cellar Act did make significant strides in undercutting institutionalized racism in U.S. immigration policy, the act continued the practice of basing the opportunity for incorporation on an immigrant’s racial identity and their assumed ability to assimilate. To understand how the Hart Cellar Act facilitated and shaped the experiences of West Indian immigrants to the U.S., it is important to establish the role of immigration policy as an indicator of hegemonic understandings of racial and national identity, the intended and unintended consequences of its passing, and its impact on understandings of civic and racial

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<sup>95</sup> U.S. Bureau of Census. *Demographic Trends in the 20<sup>th</sup> Century*. Prepared Franks Hobbs and Nicole Stoops, Bureau of Census. Washington D.C., 2001.



nationalism. This thesis argues that the Hart-Cellar Act created new discourses of pluralism and multiculturalism to express transforming ethno-racial demographics and hierarchies in order to meet the country's civil and economic needs, while striving to remain an Anglo-centric nation, supported by and defined in relation to regulated immigrant and minority populations. The meaning of multiculturalism never achieved a single meaning; nativists attacked it as insidious to the national culture and fracturing the nation into competing "special interest" groups, oftentimes saddling these groups with a pernicious consequence on the nation. These new discourses shaped the opportunity for immigration and the reception of immigrants upon their arrival. Donna Haraway points out, these "discourses are not only products, they have fundamental social effects. They are modes of power."<sup>96</sup>

Gary Gerstle provides an excellent depiction of the ideological trends that fed into the formation of twentieth century immigration policy. He asserts that America struggled to rectify discrepancies in its civic and racial national identity, a belief in America's universal principles as a democratic nation and America's foundation as an Anglo-nation respectively.<sup>97</sup> The meanings of these identities remained dynamic as well as subjective, developing alongside shifting demographics and political fluctuations. "Like race, nation and nationhood are socially constructed, their legal definitions and cultural meanings can

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<sup>96</sup> Donna Haraway, *Primate Visions: Race, Gender, and Nature in the World of Modern Science* (New York: Routledge, 1989), 289. John Dryzek's description of political discourses "A discourse is a shared means of making sense of the world embedded in language. Any discourse will always be grounded in assumptions This definition is particularly applicable to Gerstle's assertion of civic and racial nationalism, by arguing that there exists a socially constructed set of values that speaks to the nation's vision of itself, and those that exist outside of that unit.

<sup>97</sup> Gary Gerstle, *American Crucible: Race and Nation in the Twentieth Century*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001).

only be understood in the context of history.”<sup>98</sup> While Gerstle argues these ideas are not mutually exclusive, they are interdependent and through their inter-reliance highlight a growing inconsistency in the image of America as a homogenous unit both politically and racially and the reality of mounting heterogeneity.<sup>99</sup>

Deborah Schildkraut adds to Gerstle’s argument the idea of “incorporationism” as another noteworthy trend in establishing the national identity. Schildkraut views the U.S. as a nation of immigrants and while they are incorporated into social, economic, and political institutions, they retain some of their ethnic or cultural distinctiveness; this requires a degree of mutual respect for cultural pluralism.<sup>100</sup> Her assumption, if not completely a-historical, seems a far more relevant description of contemporary society, as articulated by the Hart-Cellar Act than when facing the U.S.’s long history of violent race relations. During the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries ethnic communities and immigrants in the U.S. usually privately maintained traditions and some cultural autonomy, however many groups aimed to conceal or reconfigure their public ethnic identity and recent immigrant status in order to avoid the discrimination so often directed at ethnic-immigrants. As President Woodrow Wilson once articulated, “Any man who carries a hyphen about him carries a

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<sup>98</sup> Eric Hobsbawm, *Nations and Nationalism since 1780: Programme, Myth and Reality* (Cambridge: 1992), 192.

<sup>99</sup> Gregory W. Streich & Akis Kalaitzidis “Race, Immigration, and National Identity in the U.S.”, Paper prepared for the International Studies Association Annual Convention, New York, February 2009. Streich and Kalaitzidis point out that there is a vibrant debate about the nature and content of national identity in the US. On one hand, many argue that American national identity is a race-neutral, liberal “creed” consisting of democratic ideals as well as equal rights and liberties for all citizens. On the other hand, some argue that American national identity contains “multiple traditions” in which the liberal, race-neutral creed exists but competes with other strands such as civic republicanism, ethno-racial nationalism.

<sup>100</sup> Deborah J. Schildkraut, “Defining American Identity in the Twenty-First Century: How Much ‘There’ is There?” *The Journal of Politics*, Vol. 69, 3, 2007, 598-601.

dagger that he is ready to plunge into the vitals of this Republic.”<sup>101</sup> President Wilson’s quote demonstrates the discriminatory environment that surrounded the Johnson-Reed Act, and the state’s call for a total loyalty that obliterates any ethnic or foreign identity, furthermore Wilson’s remarks show how the state viewed ethnicity as a potentially violent threat to the nation.

The 1965 Hart-Cellar Act is considered as ending the era of America’s discriminatory immigration policy. The act concluded the hierarchically arranged nation-based quota system and instead divided the world between the eastern and western hemispheres, signaling a reworking of the U.S.’s self-assigned geopolitical position, or as Ngai writes, “Immigration policy not only speaks to nation’s view of itself, it also signals its position in the world and its relationship with other nation-states.”<sup>102</sup> The eastern hemisphere received a quota of a hundred and seventy thousand people per year, with a twenty thousand-quota per country. The western hemisphere received a blanket of one hundred and twenty thousand with no national limit. Visas were issued on a first come first served basis, with priority given to immigrants with professional skills and in cases of family reunification. When signing the bill into law President Johnson said of the reform “It corrects a cruel and enduring wrong in the conduct of the American Nation...from this day forth those wishing to immigrate to America shall be admitted on the basis of their skills and their close relationship to those already here.”<sup>103</sup> While many people claim that the reform subverted discriminatory immigration policy, this was neither the intent nor ultimately the effect.

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<sup>101</sup> David Kennedy, *Over Here: The First World War and American Society*. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1980), 87.

<sup>102</sup> Ngai, *Impossible Subjects*, 9.

<sup>103</sup> Remarks at the Signing of the Immigration Bill, Liberty Island, New York,” Oct. 3, 1965, *Public Papers of the Presidents, Lyndon B. Johnson, 1965*, (Washington, D.C.: GPO, 1965), 1038.

Turning back to Johnson, we gain some insight into the intended effects of the bill, “This bill that we will sign today is not a revolutionary bill. It does not affect the lives of millions. It will not reshape the structure of our daily lives or really add importantly to either our wealth or our power.”<sup>104</sup> Policy makers hoped that family reunification and the preferencing of professionals was a way to strengthen already existing ties among the country’s white citizenry, and to draw from the upper, educated classes of foreign nations. Some groups certainly capitalized on the new legislation, mainly Asians and Africans, however the legislation also instated regulations on Mexican immigration where there previously had been none.

During the mid-1960s, the U.S. was fighting multiple battles both domestically and abroad; these conflicts reshaped the civil and racial character of the nation. The Women’s Liberation, Civil Rights, and Black Power movements drew constant attention to the disparity between the promise of American liberalism and the realities of living as a minority. The Cold War prompted the state to promote the image of a homogenous and united culture and caused sweeping disciplinary action against anyone seen as undermining that vision. These disciplinary measures are apparent by the violence directed at civil rights and anti-war activists, as well as the state’s investigation and persecution of U.S. citizens and immigrants under the Red Scare. These developments contextualize the motivation to promote a multicultural society, as articulated by the Hart-Cellar Act, and the need to view immigration policy within its historical and political context.

Impelled by the horrors of World War II and the struggle against Soviet communism,

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<sup>104</sup> Remarks at the Signing of the Immigration Bill, Liberty Island, New York,” Oct. 3, 1965, *Public Papers of the Presidents, Lyndon B. Johnson, 1965*, (Washington, D.C.: GPO, 1965), 1038.

U.S. legislators aimed to project a united front against an invisible foreign threat; in regards to immigration policy, this meant the creation of new immigrant categories. Ngai points out the power of language in determining the experiences of an immigrant(s), terms like-asylum, refugee, and illegal became imbued with political and cultural significance and determined who had the right to immigrate, it is important to note that race still factored heavily into these distinctions.<sup>105</sup> By categorizing immigrants by their hemispheric origins, the Hart-Cellar Act remapped the globe into distinct spheres of influence. By viewing the western hemisphere as a single political unit, the U.S. reasserted its claim of dominance in the region and ignored its role in prompting emigration from Latin America and the Caribbean. Admission through asylum and refugee status often rested on global and regional political arrangements, as preference was given to immigrants coming from communist countries, while largely ignoring the pleas of refugees from countries in Central and South America where U.S. involvement created large streams of emigration.<sup>106</sup>

Distinctions in immigration policy began representing and furthering the U.S.'s geopolitical interests. A liberal-pluralist nationalism emerged around the post war's domestic class and race relations and the political economy of the U.S. as an emerging superpower. This liberal nationalism conjoined a pluralist view of domestic group relations with a privileging of the U.S.'s economic and geopolitical standing.<sup>107</sup> Balancing these twin pillars, immigration policy aimed to meet the U.S.'s economic needs while safeguarding the

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<sup>105</sup> Leonard Dinnerstein and David M. Reimers, *Ethnic Americans*, 2nd ed. (New York: Harper & Row, 1982).

<sup>106</sup> Large numbers of refugees fled countries throughout Latin America due to political turmoil, which the United States played an integral role in fomenting, for example the Sandinista revolution in Nicaragua, which involved El Salvador and Guatemala, as well as the revolutions in Cuba during the 1960s and Chile in the 1970s.

<sup>107</sup> Ngai, *Impossible Subjects*, 230.

nation against unwanted immigration by drawing a line of distinction between immigrants deemed assimilable citizens and those dubbed a disposable workforce. Regardless of efforts made to relegate some immigrants to a temporary labor source, America's immigrant demographic has undergone a dramatic shift that transgressed official policies. Not only has there been a drastic rise in the number of people entering the country legally—up to five-hundred thousand per year—and countless more illegally, the demography and intent of immigrants since 1965 is much more heterogeneous. Immigrants entering the country are coming from a wider geographic pool, and are choosing to immigrate for a wider range of political, economic and cultural reasons, in turn reworking the U.S. in dramatic ways requiring new discourses and identity labels.

Multiculturalism, as the primary trope for proponents of ethnic pluralism, began to reshape the ways that Americans viewed this new heterogeneous immigrant population. Because immigration policy channeled in educated professionals, mostly from the middle and upper classes of their sending countries, legal immigration became a symbol of U.S. openness to and incorporation of, foreign cultures into a cohesive national community, in contrast with Soviet communism's repressive homogenizing nature. The classist inflection to immigration policy certainly contained racial connotations, but through discourses of multiculturalism and a color-blind society, these racial connotations are generally sublimated to *laissez faire* economics and the promise of upward economic mobility. Angelo Portes demonstrates that class and region become important in determining trends in immigration; not only are immigrants selected based on their professional and educational experience but are determined in part by their exposure to U.S. culture, which is much

higher in urban settings and amongst the middle and upper classes.<sup>108</sup>

Throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, racial categories invented by U.S. agencies created boundaries between old and new immigrants, defining some as assimilable, white, and potential citizens, while others faced exclusion and discrimination. Immigrant classifications such as, “legal,” “illegal” and “refugee,” determine the political rights and recognition an immigrant receives from the state and the national community. These labels exist within the U.S.’s multicultural movement of the late twentieth century which situates race in a larger web of relationships in relation to ethnic pluralism, constructing hierarchies based on cultural and behavioral markers such as education, wealth, religion, family arrangements, language and immigrant status.<sup>109</sup> Within this new color-blind society, Whites escape classification as an ethnic group, and are instead viewed as the natural dominant order, while other groups are seen as one among many competing political interests.<sup>110</sup> Sociologist Robert E. Park advances a theory that all ethnic groups encountering one another go through stages of antagonism, accommodation, and finally assimilation. From this argument, multiculturalism becomes “assimilationist, a strategy that recognized difference in order to efface it within the universality of liberal democratic politics.”<sup>111</sup> The structuring of the U.S. liberal democratic politics was carried out in relation to the multicultural movement of the late twentieth century played out in an oppositional relation to Soviet Communism.

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<sup>108</sup> Alejandro Portes and Rueben G. Rumbaut, *Immigrant America: A Portrait*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006), 12-13.

<sup>109</sup> George Priestly, “Ethnicity, Class, and Race in the United States: Prospects for African-American/Latino Alliances” *Latin American Perspectives* Issue 152, Vol. 34 No. 1, (Sage Publications Online, January 2007), 53-63.

<sup>110</sup> Ngai, *Impossible Subjects*, 231.

<sup>111</sup> Ngai, *Impossible Subjects*, 234.

## The Cold War

The Cold War's influence during the second half of the twentieth century is essential to grasp how transnational groups of the period experienced immigration to the United States. Facilitated by immigration reform developed under the specter of Cold War politics, West Indian immigration can provide an invaluable perspective for a deeper understanding of the period. As Nikhil Pal Singh writes "Anti-communism was the modus operandi for a political project in which racial animus and an imperial ambition remained paramount if sublated."<sup>112</sup> Doris Sommer believes that Cold War politicians viewed the assimilation of disparate cultures into a harmonious national identity as part of a foundational fiction that reconciles social inequalities by creating romantic fantasies of collective national identity.<sup>113</sup> The effects of the Cold War diminished aspects of pluralism, redefining it as a means for ethnic participation in politics as a legitimate interest in a political world of interest groups under the umbrella of a national identity. Horace Kallen argues that this cultural pluralism under the pretense of a homogenous national identity allowed ethnic groups to maintain cultural identities and avoid coercive Americanization.<sup>114</sup> West Indian cultural displays such as the WILDCP play into these discourses in order to retain a degree of autonomy that facilitates the creation of lasting transnational bonds while simultaneously participating in the national conversation.

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<sup>112</sup> Nikhil P. Singh, "Culture/Wars: Recoding Empire in an Age of Democracy," *American Quarterly* 50, No. 3 (September 1998). This speaks to Bhaba's argument of heterogeneity v.s. homogeneity on a national level.

<sup>113</sup> Doris Sommer, "Irresistible Romance: The Foundational Fictions of Latin America," In *Nation and Narration*, ed. Homi K. Bhabha, (New York: Routledge), 1990.

<sup>114</sup> Horace Kallen, "Democracy versus the Melting Pot," *The Nation* 100 (February 18 and 25, 1915), 190-194.



Nationalism in general and made apparent during the Cold War, figures into the creation of hierarchies between nation-states in which transnational migrants must, at least in part, define themselves. Immigration policy not only speaks to the nation's internal view of itself, it also signals its position in relation to other nation states. This means that foreign policy becomes invariably implicated in the formation of immigration policy. Upon arriving in the United States, immigrants are often viewed in light of the relationship between their country of origin and the United States. Since World War II, the Caribbean has been subject to U.S. economic and political policies as well increased cultural influence that renders Caribbean nations, at least in an imagined sense, subordinate and often times dependent. Because of this, immigrants from the region are often catalogued as subordinate and exploitable parts of a larger economic order, which has yet to reconcile the relationship between progress for itself and its parts. This order assumes a multinational character and transnational direction, of which immigration is a systematic expression.<sup>115</sup> West Indian immigration to the U.S. fits into this definition, both as a symbol of U.S imperialism in the region, and the ways in which West Indians struggle against this position by deploying cultural products, such as Carnival, to legitimize their national origins.

While this work focuses on the experience of West Indian immigration to the United States, the charge that the United States receives a disproportionate share of immigrants is misleading and supplants the idea of American exceptionalism for what is in actuality a permanent feature of interdependent economies in the hemisphere.<sup>116</sup> It is important to view migratory trends in light of international economic and political developments to explore

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<sup>115</sup> Bryce-Laporte, Roy Simon, "New York City and the New Caribbean Immigration: A Contextual Statement," *International Migration Review* 13, No. 2, (Summer, 1979), 225.

<sup>116</sup> Pessar, *When Borders Don't Divide*, 3.

how these trends shape categories of identification in both the host and receiving countries. These negotiations play out in both a top-down and bottom-up exchange, influenced by and influencing state policy, national identity, and international relations. Richard Thompson writes, “the dialectic between ethnicity and the state...must be seen, at root, as a struggle over institutional forms the new society will embrace.”<sup>117</sup> West Indians engage the state in multiple ways and challenge established understandings of national identity in order to maximize opportunities.

### **Caribbean Immigration and West Indian (Trans)nationalism, and Ethnicity**

The Caribbean’s history of geographic migration and transnational cultural continuity challenge official paradigms of citizenship and contribute to a reformation of national and racial identities. These formations do not create single ideas of citizenship or unitary subjects. Transnational migrants move into and create transnational spaces that have the potential to liberate nationals within the community who are able to escape in part the totalizing hegemony that a strong state may have within its borders. Migrant nationalism provides a counter force to state sanctioned nationalist understandings. Homi Bhaba’s position that immigrants are not external to the nation but, “the migrants, the minorities, the diasporic come to change the history of the nation,” demonstrates the role of immigrants in providing a mirror for the national community to view and reconsider itself.<sup>118</sup> West Indian migrants developed a form of migrant nationalism that is neither stable nor monolithic, nor a

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<sup>117</sup> Richard Thompson, *Theories of Ethnicity: A Critical Appraisal*, (New York: Greenwood Press), 1989.

<sup>118</sup> Homi K. Bhaba, *The Location of Culture*, (New York: Routledge, 1994), 169-170.

simple reproduction of the nationalist ideology of their homeland. Rather, it came about through interactions between official and unofficial outreaches from the nations of origin and reception, and the various political and affective needs of the people living in diaspora. Cristina Szanton Blanc writes, “Transmigrants simultaneously participate in nation-building in their home country and in the process of nation building in the U.S. ordinarily subsumed under the rubric of ethnicity.”<sup>119</sup> For immigrant groups, migrant nationalism is one of many elements that constitute ethnic identity. Homeland movements or states may call for or inspire support, but local needs shape the content and propel the activities of migrant nationalism.<sup>120</sup> By encouraging ethnic identity through the language of multiculturalism, the Hart-Cellar Act promotes a form of migrant nationalism that benefits immigrant communities by allowing a kind of dualistic nationalism that binds together an ethnic community under a broader identity, while allowing migrants to stay active in their country of origin. The WILDCP exemplifies this migrant nationalism by playing into the U.S.’s multicultural nationalism, calling on the state to meet specific needs, while sustaining ties to the country of origin.

Mae M. Ngai accurately demonstrates how immigration policy is “constitutive of American’s understandings of national membership and citizenship, drawing lines of inclusion and exclusion that articulate a desired composition—imagined if not necessarily realized—of the nation.”<sup>121</sup> At the core of this understanding is the myth of the American immigrant, which lends credence to the mythology of American exceptionalism that

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<sup>119</sup> Bach, Linda G., Nina Glick Schiller, and Cristina Szanton Blanc, *Nations Unbound: Transnational Projects, Postcolonial Predicaments, and Deterritorialized Nation-States*, (Langhorne: Gordon & Breach), 1994.

<sup>120</sup> Bryce-Laporte, “New York City and the New Caribbean Immigration,” 170-171.

<sup>121</sup> Mae M. Ngai, *Impossible Subjects: Illegal Aliens and the Making of Modern America*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press), 2004, 5.

mistakes the allure of becoming Americanized or shedding ties to their sending country as the driving force behind most immigrants' choice to migrate, when in reality, it is usually the search for better educational or labor opportunities. West Indian immigrant Dr. Paul Boise articulated this desire, "My intention was to come here do my thing, go to med school and then head back. I had no intention of staying."<sup>122</sup> Bonnie Honig argues that this immigrant myth highlights the national narrative of liberal consensual citizenship, allowing a disaffected citizenry to see its society as choice worthy through the eyes of an enchanted newcomer whose immigration reenacts liberalism's fictive foundation of an individual's act of un-coerced consent.<sup>123</sup> This allows for the idea that immigration proves the universality of the U.S.'s democratic principles without examining the role of U.S. world power and economic systems in shaping global structures and patterns of migration.

The international economy, as well as cultural and political networks, bring together localized versions of identity into a dialogue wherein race, class, gender, ethnicity and nation are powerful narratives told both within and beyond the borders of the nation.<sup>124</sup> Regional and international relations established under formal European colonial rule, and perpetuated under unofficial imperial rule, as is the case with the United States in the region, stimulated and nourished sustained paths of labor migration and the emergence of transnational ties. The pronounced outflow of immigrants from the region during the twentieth century required new categories of identity that allowed for the forging of communities abroad and the maintenance of pathways back to respective countries of origin.

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<sup>122</sup> Dr. Paul Boise, interview with author, Atlanta, GA., December 2009.

<sup>123</sup> Honig, Bonnie, *Democracy and the Foreigner*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001, 75.

<sup>124</sup> Buff, *Political Economy of Home*, 25.

This is apparent in the construction of a West Indian identity, capable of either superseding or highlighting national identity.

### **Social Networks and Cultural Continuity**

The building of a West Indian identity, beyond expressing complex national identity and loyalties, aids in maintaining cultural continuity throughout the immigration process. The scholarly focus on the continuities of cultural traditions among transnational groups throughout the migration experience is a recent development in the field. Previous concern with assimilation in migration studies gave way to contemporary works that examined the persistence and creation of differences.<sup>125</sup> Much of this literature examines how a lack of acculturation and structural assimilation within the immigrant community gives rise to social networks that help overcome the costs of immigration and minority status [and sustain existing loyalties].<sup>126</sup> When asked about how these social networks shaped his migration experience, Dr. Paul Boise responded, “That connection with other Caribbeans has kept me here, we still consist of a core group of friends, no matter how much time I spend with people from other cultures, it always ends up being the people from Trinidad that just seem to mesh.”<sup>127</sup> After these networks arise, they facilitate additional migration. Once underway, migration patterns spread through social networks of cross-border interpersonal ties connecting migrants, return migrants, and non-migrants through kinship, friendship, and attachment to common origins. These networks reduce the risks and costs of migration

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<sup>125</sup> Kearney, “The Local and the Global,” 554.

<sup>126</sup> Jimmy M. Sanders, “Ethnic Boundaries and Identity in Plural Societies,” *Annual Review of Sociology*, 28, (2002), 355.

<sup>127</sup> Dr. Paul Boise. Interview with author. Atlanta, GA., Dec., 2009.

because there is a group of “experts” in the receiving country who can aid new migrants in transitioning to their host country.

Caribbean migration culture refers to a way of life initially born in slavery, which after emancipation is acknowledged as successful, and for many, a strategy for defeating the social and economic pressures of unprivileged status.<sup>128</sup> Socialized in this tradition, successive generations of West Indians help to fashion and sustain a culture bound to transnational trends and cultural interactions. Pam Ramsherry, a West Indian immigrant who moved to New York, explained her personal experience of benefiting both culturally and economically from immigration, “Because my mom lived in New York I would go every summer, and then when I would go back home with all the fancy clothes and shoes that nobody ever saw because they came from New York, I was big dog on campus.”<sup>129</sup> Her comments make explicit how immigration to the United States and the country’s material culture are a marker of social success in Trinidad. These actors dramatize the growing sense that the borders of national cultures blur and nation specific policies become compromised within larger world systems because of the multitude of transnational arrangements and the flows under the status and culture that exists across nations.<sup>130</sup>

Once these processes and networks become sufficiently organized, the collective experience of the immigrant can give way to new ways of thinking of themselves as an ethnic group.<sup>131</sup> Ethnicity centers our attention on how a group defines itself, while it implies a group’s shared, real or mythological past, the central defining characteristic of

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<sup>128</sup> Mills, “Determinants and Consequences,” 59.

<sup>129</sup> Pam Ramsherry, Interview with Author, Atlanta, GA, Dec., 2009.

<sup>130</sup> Bryce-Laporte, “New York City and the New Caribbean Immigration,” 228.

<sup>131</sup> Levitt, *The Transnational Villagers*, 9,10.

ethnicity is the belief in their own existence as a group.<sup>132</sup> Stuart Hall believes this term “acknowledges the place of history, language and culture in the construction of subjectivity and identity.”<sup>133</sup> This is apparent in the formation of a West Indian identity and the culture developed to assert it. This definition of ethnicity restores a much-needed sense of the creative and subjective aspects of the process of group formation, but should not obscure central questions of power and inequality that race forces upon us.<sup>134</sup> Alejandro Portes points out that ethnicity has always been socially constructed, “forged in interactions between individual traits and contextual variables,” and so the permeability of these labels makes them tangible as well as transferrable.<sup>135</sup> The WILDPCP fits well into Portes’ description, highlighting the tangible nature of ethnicity by providing environmental context and an individual practice where West Indians can deploy ethnic symbols; transferrable because it draws attention to the fact that ethnicity is a discursive tool only loosely bound to racial identity or legal status.

Social networks and economic opportunity lead to the development of ethnic enclaves that while helping overcome the cost of immigration, often draws negative attention to large numbers of new immigrants, triggering a nativist backlash. Portes points out that immigrants with greater professional skills, like those singled out by the Hart-Cellar Act, tend to diffuse geographically and are less likely to attract negative attention, associating ethnicity with individual rather than collective identity. However, the economic and social gains available

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<sup>132</sup> Philip Kasinitz, *Caribbean New York: Black Immigrants and the Politics of Race*, (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1992), 4.

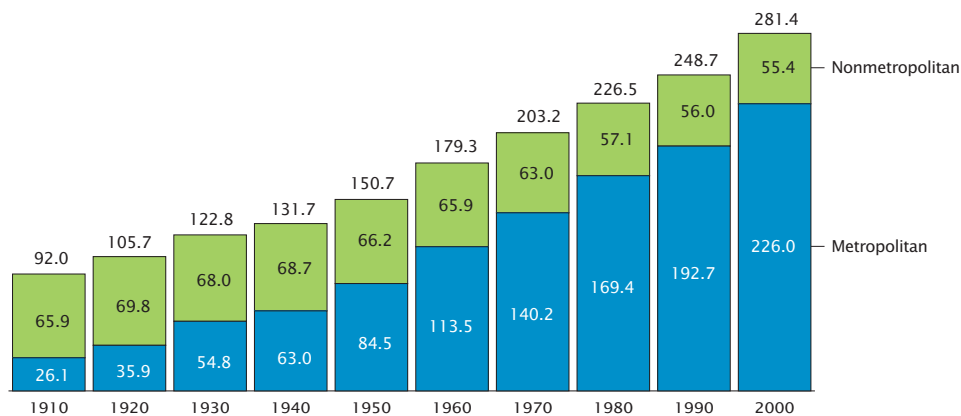
<sup>133</sup> Stuart Hall, “The New Ethnicities,” In *Ethnicity*, ed. John Hutchinson and Anthony D. Smith, (New York: Oxford University Press), 1996.

<sup>134</sup> Roger Sanjek, “Conceptualizing Caribbean Asians: Race, Acculturation and Creolization,” in Sanjek, *Caribbean Asians: Chinese, Indian, and Japanese Experiences*, (Asian American Center Working Papers, Queens College, Flushing, New York, 1990), 111.

<sup>135</sup> Portes, *Immigrant America*, 137.

to newly arriving immigrants into areas with a high density of immigrants in general, and their own ethnicity in particular, continue to draw immigrants into a select number of U.S. cities. New York, with its long history of immigration, and its geographical accessibility to Europe- and to a lesser extent the Caribbean- makes it an idyllic point of arrival. The historical tradition, political economy and culture of these urban centers in relation to immigration ease the transition for new arrivals, demonstrated by the enduring trend to settle in these areas, and the heightened sense and displays of ethnicity in these metropolises.<sup>136</sup>

Figure 1-14.  
**Total Population by Metropolitan Status: 1910 to 2000**  
 (Millions)



Source: U.S. Census Bureau, decennial census of population, 1910 to 2000.

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<sup>136</sup> James H. Johnson, Jr., Walter C. Farrell, Jr., Chandra Guinn, “Immigration Reform and the Browning of America: Tensions, Conflicts and Community Instability in Metropolitan Los Angeles,” *International Migration Review*, Vol. 31, No. 4, (Winter, 1997), pp. 1055-1095. For example, in 1980, forty percent of newly arriving immigrants settled in the greater Los Angeles and New York areas.

<sup>137</sup> U.S. Bureau of Census. *Demographic Trends in the 20<sup>th</sup> Century*. Prepared Franks Hobbs and Nicole Stoops, Bureau of Census. Washington D.C., 2001.



## **Building Social Networks in New York**

Beginning in the 1930s and rapidly accelerating since 1965, New York is the host and home to the highest concentration of West Indians in the world. Pam Ramsherry described, “Growing up in Trinidad, New York was always the place to go.” However the reality of immigration is seldom in line with the perceived myth, as Ramsherry went on to say, “then you get there and realize it’s not what its cut up to be.”<sup>138</sup> The 1965 Hart Cellar Act opened immigration to West Indians and within a decade following its passage more West Indians arrived than over the previous seventy years. By 1980 over fifty thousand West Indians of diverse class origins were entering the U.S. annually, with over half of these immigrants settling in New York State, and another seven percent in New Jersey, almost exclusively concentrated in New York City and Newark.<sup>139</sup> According to the 1990 census, over half a million West Indians lived in these city centers. This kind of regional and metropolitan concentration is in keeping with larger trends in immigration wherein nearly half of all foreign-born immigrants living in America reside in California or New York, and eight out of ten in just ten U.S. states.<sup>140</sup>

New York, with its long history of immigration, serves as an excellent setting for exploring the impact that immigrants have on urban centers specifically and the nation in general. Originally a major point of entry for Europeans entering the United States, New York’s immigrant demography is now one of the most heterogeneous in the world, with no

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<sup>138</sup> Pam Ramsherry, Interview with Author. Atlanta, GA., Dec., 2009.

<sup>139</sup> Kyle D. Crowder, “Residential Segregation of West Indians in the New York/New Jersey Metropolitan Area: The Roles of Race and Ethnicity.” *International Migration Review*, Vol. 33, No. 1, (Spring, 1999), 80.

<sup>140</sup> U.S. Bureau of Census. *Demographic Trends in the 20<sup>th</sup> Century*. Prepared Franks Hobbs and Nicole Stoops, Bureau of Census. Washington D.C., 2001.

group accounting for more than ten percent of newcomers.<sup>141</sup> In part because of this diverse makeup, immigrants must adopt new identities and strategies to assert and legitimize an ethnic identity in order to fit into the city's multicultural landscape. Transnational identities, ethno-centric businesses and institutions, dense residential concentration, and public displays of ethnicity such as the WILDCP, all work to establish and draw attention to ethnic distinctions.<sup>142</sup> The rise of community based, ethno-centric newspapers stands as an indicator for ethnic identification and a building block for ethnic enclaves. West Indian immigrants to New York understood this, as evidenced by their strong presence in the city's press field. During the 1930s, West Indians oversaw most of the press targeting Black audiences, including the *Boston Chronicle* and the leading weekly *The New York Amsterdam News*, though the influence of Caribbean ethnicity did not permeate the paper. In contrast, by the 1980s the *New York Carib News*, boasted a circulation of sixty four thousand, and the influence of the West Indian community appeared throughout the *New York Amsterdam News*.<sup>143</sup> These ethnic distinctions help West Indians escape many of the trappings of the U.S.'s racial environment.

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<sup>141</sup> Roger Waldinger, "Immigration and Urban Change" *Annual Review of Sociology*, Vol. 15 (1989), 211-232.

<sup>142</sup> The adoption of transnational or inclusive pan-ethnic identities are becoming much more common. The emergence of a West-Indian identity in the U.S., and to a lesser extent the use of an inclusive Latino or Asian identity serves heterogeneous, multi-national immigrant groups in building social networks and easing the cost of immigration.

<sup>143</sup> Philip Kasinitz, "The Minority Within: The New Black Immigrants," *New York Affairs*, no. 10, p.53.

## Traversing the Racial Terrain, Ethnic Distinctions

The shared identity taken up by West Indian immigrants is a reaction to the immigrant experience and U.S. racialized hierarchies. Percy Hintzen sees this identity not only as a confrontation and negotiation of the U.S.'s racialized terrain, but at its most basic level a forced response by West Indians to define themselves, collectively and individually, in relation to the African American community to which they are racially bound.<sup>144</sup> Entering the United States as new ethnics, West Indians compete for success and mobility, oftentimes, against native-born minorities whose access to economic mobility is delimited by race.<sup>145</sup> The view of West Indians as a successful immigrant story is rooted in their educational and occupational success in comparison to African-Americans. West Indians have maintained high levels of educational completion, especially in comparison to the African-American community. In 2000 over seventy percent of West Indians over the age of twenty-five held a high school diploma, while nearly twenty percent obtained a bachelor's degree or higher. African-Americans in general have not reached the same academic level; of the nearly twenty-million African-Americans over the age of twenty-five, seventy-two percent achieved a high school diploma, while only fourteen percent reached a bachelors or post-bachelor degree.<sup>146</sup>

An income differential between West Indians and African Americans furthers the assumption of West Indian success. Of the nearly twenty-four million African-Americans

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<sup>144</sup> Hintzen, "Globalisation and Diasporic Identity," 5.

<sup>145</sup> Buff, *Immigration and the Political Economy of Home*, 12,13.

<sup>146</sup> U.S. Bureau of Census, *Demographic Trends in the 20<sup>th</sup> Century*. Prepared Franks Hobbs and Nicole Stoops, Bureau of Census. Washington D.C., 2001. Whites maintained the highest levels of academic achievements with over eighty-four percent graduating with a high school diploma and over twenty-six percent gaining a Bachelor's degree or higher.

over the age of sixteen, nearly sixty-three percent are in the labor force, compared to seventy-two percent of corresponding West Indians. These socio-economic differences make more sense because of the relative advantage enjoyed by West Indians whose pool of resources may be further enhanced by higher levels of female labor force participation and a greater likelihood of multiple earners per households; for example in 1980 thirty-two percent of West Indian women worked as either nurses or nurses assistants.<sup>147</sup> While never meeting the median family or household or the annual per capita income of \$23,918 enjoyed by Whites, West Indians continue to surpass African-Americans in economic terms. The 1999 West Indian household income of \$38,646 per year favorably compares to African-Americans who on average bring in \$29,423 per household. The per capita income for West Indians is on average \$17,641 per year, surpassing African-Americans who on average bring in \$14,437 each year. Whites remain the most prosperous racial group in the U.S. with a median household income of nearly \$45,000 a year, and a per capita income of \$23,918 a year.<sup>148</sup> Some scholars, including Thomas Sowell, use West Indian economic success as evidence that it is culture rather than racism to explain native black poverty. He roots this argument in the differences between the slaves systems in the Caribbean and the United States; arguing Anglo-styled slavery helped develop a superior cultural ethos emphasizing economic progress through hard work and education.<sup>149</sup> Though West Indians do generally attain higher levels of educational success, the impact of racism cannot be

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<sup>147</sup> Kyle D. Crowder, "Residential Segregation of West Indians in the New York/New Jersey Metropolitan Area: The Roles of Race and Ethnicity." *International Migration Review*, Vol. 33, No. 1, (Spring, 1999), 79-81.

<sup>148</sup> U.S. Bureau of Census, *Demographic Trends in the 20<sup>th</sup> Century*. Prepared Franks Hobbs and Nicole Stoops, Bureau of Census. Washington D.C., 2001.

<sup>149</sup> Crowder, "Residential Segregation of West Indians in the New York/New Jersey Metropolitan Area," 79-81.

discounted as easily as Sowell supposes, and ignores other cultural factors such as West Indians' British accent, community support, and notions surrounding immigrants in determining economic success.

Home ownership is another example cited when arguing for the success of West Indian migrants. Just over forty-five percent of West Indians own their house, which is comparable to African-Americans, and well above other immigrant groups, but is still well below White home ownership which is close to seventy-one percent.<sup>150</sup> This is made possible in part through the existence of informal, ethnically based systems of capital pooling and rotating credit, providing the necessary capital for home purchase, and thereby increasing access to better-quality neighborhoods.<sup>151</sup> Not only does the sheer number of West Indian homeowners substantiate claims of success, but also the attainment of residential proximity to the white majority and access to more affluent neighborhoods is often considered an important aspect of social incorporation for racial and ethnic minority groups.<sup>152</sup> West Indians may escape the racial isolation suffered by African Americans because of the combination of their distinct ethnicity, socioeconomic experiences, social networking and unique mode of incorporation into the U.S. social system.<sup>153</sup>

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<sup>150</sup> U.S. Bureau of Census, *Demographic Trends in the 20<sup>th</sup> Century*. Prepared Franks Hobbs and Nicole Stoops, Bureau of Census. Washington D.C., 2001.

<sup>151</sup> Crowder, "Residential Segregation of West Indians in the New York/New Jersey Metropolitan Area," 79-81.

<sup>152</sup> *Ibid.*, 79-81.

<sup>153</sup> *Ibid.*, 83.

## West Indians and African Americans

West Indians often are ambivalent toward their African American counterparts, sometimes attaching themselves to the African American community to gain the benefits of solidarity and socio-political protections, and at other times drawing lines of separation to establish ethnic boundaries. West Indians accomplish this by establishing ethnic enclaves and by employing popular stereotypes of exoticism to locate themselves outside of U.S. racial categories, and to confirm and reinforce notions of foreignness. Generally viewed as part of the larger racial group within the U.S., and therefore having their problems overlooked or subsumed by larger racial problems and suffering the discrimination sometimes directed at Blacks, West Indians suffer multiple invisibilities and minoritization of status, because of commonalities of race, language, and mythological origin with native-born African Americans.<sup>154</sup> Faced with a kind of dual invisibility as a racial minority with immigrant status, West Indian immigrants deploy cultural symbols that draw ethnic lines in order to maximize their political and social opportunities. The creation of this new West Indian identity is a conscious strategy for adaptation that draws distinction between West Indians and larger fields of racial categorization. Describing encountering racism in the United States and the struggle to have official recognition of a West Indian identity distinct from African Americans, West Indian immigrant Pam Ramsherry recalls,

“I was like this doesn’t happen in Trinidad, we all have to remind ourselves that well, you’re not in Trinidad, nobody asked you to come here, you came here on your own, its not like somebody said pack up and come. For instance one thing we’re working on is that whole census thing, now we don’t have to put that we’re African American, now we can say that we’re from the West Indies, from the Caribbean...when you put ‘other’, or you’re black, because you say that I’m black that doesn’t make me black, and so what if my great

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<sup>154</sup> Bryce-Laporte, *New York city and the New Caribbean Immigration*, 223.

grandfather came from Africa, the fact remains that I'm from Trinidad, I'm not from Africa, he's from Africa, he should say he's from Africa, I'm a West Indian."<sup>155</sup>

Prominent binary racial categories of White and Black in the United States do not allow for the idea that Black people are in themselves a diverse group with differences that warrant examination, which exists as a major aspect of Caribbean racial hierarchies. By drawing ethnic lines, immigrants help to flush out these internal differences and challenge the homogenizing binary system. West Indians dramatize that while minority groups are becoming the numerical majority they are also becoming increasingly diverse.<sup>156</sup> Scher's assertion that transnationality is a process dependent on maintenance, and through this process a national and or ethnic identity that figures into the creation of a public life and a public image of a group fits into this conscious strategy of migrant groups.<sup>157</sup> This emphasis on maintenance and public performance demonstrates the necessity for these groups to actively assert a transnational identity, not only to maintain ties in multiple national realms, but also to gain recognition from the larger national community and draw lines of distinction. This politics of recognition becomes apparent during cultural celebrations and public displays of ethnic culture, wherein communities substantiate political claims through displays of cultural symbols that reinforce emblematic identities.

The emerging West Indian ethnic community that evolved in New York following the Caribbean's widespread emigration during the 1960s consisted of a growing number of community members who became conscious of their ethnic identification in relation to other

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<sup>155</sup> Pam Ramsherry, Interview with Author, Atlanta, GA., Dec., 2009.

<sup>156</sup> Kasinitz, "The Minority Within," 45.

<sup>157</sup> Philip W. Scher, *Carnival and the Formation of a Caribbean Transnation*, (Gainesville, FL: University Press of Florida. 2003), 6,7.

ethnic communities.<sup>158</sup> Glazer sees ethnic identities as often developing after arrival in the host country, suggesting that immigrants begin thinking of themselves in these terms after being labeled that way in the United States.<sup>159</sup> The concentration of West Indians in certain neighborhoods, the formation of ethnic institutions such as schools and fraternal organizations, and the WILDCP allow us to talk about the “Caribbeanization” of New York as a way of expressing the establishment and (re)enforcement of ethnic boundaries, the Caribbeanization of New York is spreading outward to “Manhattan hot spots” such as West Indian influenced restaurants, clubs and bars.<sup>160</sup> Jimmy M Sanders proposes a definition of ethnic boundaries as,

“patterns of social interaction that give rise to, and subsequently reinforce, in group members’ self identification and outsiders’ confirmation of group distinctions. Ethnic boundaries are therefore better understood as social mediums through which association transpires rather than as territorial demarcation.”<sup>161</sup>

Ethnic boundaries sometimes parallel territorial segregation and understandings of racial identity, potentially sharpening in-group members’ self-identification and out-group acknowledgement of intergroup distinctions. Race and the territorial concentrations do not necessarily define ethnic boundaries, but they can play a major role in the maintenance of these boundaries.<sup>162</sup> These lines are reinforced by the politics of recognition in an exchange relationship in which cultural displays serve to legitimize multiculturalists policy (while facilitating social administration in general) in return for which the displayer receives access

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<sup>158</sup> Martin Merger, “Ecological Factors in Formation of Ethnic Community,” Paper presented at the American Sociological Association meeting, New York, 30 August. My emphasis on “basis.”

<sup>159</sup> Nathan Glazer, and Daniel P. Moynihan, *Beyond the Melting Pot*, Cambridge: Massachusetts: MIT Press, 25.

<sup>160</sup> Kasinitz, “The Minority Within: The New Black Immigrants,” 44.

<sup>161</sup> Sanders, “Ethnic Boundaries and Identity,” 327.

<sup>162</sup> Sanders, “Ethnic Boundaries and Identity,” 328.



to goods and services.”<sup>163</sup> Under the umbrella of transnationality and multiculturalism, the maintenance of cultural traditions helps facilitate ongoing roles in the country of origin while building identity and substantiating claims for recognition made in the host country. The next chapter will focus on how the WILDACP fulfills this need, and its role in sustaining the modern West Indian identity.

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<sup>163</sup> Scher, *Carnival and the Formation of a Caribbean Transnation*, 13.

## Chapter 3

### The West Indian Labor Day Carnival Parade

The West Indian Labor Day Carnival Parade has a long history in New York City; Trinidadian immigrants transplanted the festival to New York during the early part of the twentieth century. While the parade originally served to unite the small community of Trinidadian immigrants, it now stands as a cultural marker for people from the entire Anglophone Caribbean and Haiti as well, deemphasizing the national origins of participants. The WILDCP serves as a display of ethnicity that challenges New York's social order by contesting the place of immigrants as a subordinate and ignorable part of the national community, and undermining racial categories by highlighting internal heterogeneity within the Black community. From its quiet inception, the WILDCP has grown into one of New York's most vibrant cultural traditions, binding together migrants from throughout the Caribbean under an inclusive West Indian identity. Anthropologist Donald Hill noted, "In New York the local villager has a new identity. He or she is not just an islander but a West Indian."<sup>164</sup> Carnival helps suppress the role of individuals and the divisions between nations of origin; it is the defining symbol, not only of New York's West Indian culture but also of the city's immigrant communities. Mayor Bloomberg expressed this sentiment in 2007 when he spoke at the WILDCP,

"Nothing showcases the energy and diversity of our Caribbean community like the West Indian-American Day Carnival Parade. The parade not only showcases the best of our Caribbean and West-Indian communities, but serves as a reminder that because of our immigrant communities, our city is thriving and our best days are yet to come."<sup>165</sup>

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<sup>164</sup> Kasinitz, "The Minority Within," p. 53

<sup>165</sup> New York Amsterdam News, August 27, 2007.

Bloomberg's statement speaks to the power of the WILDCP in drawing the state's attention to the needs of West Indians, and that by serving "as a reminder" the WILDCP is increasingly engaging outsiders to recognize the place of immigrants as a positive force in the city. The huge crowds that Mayor Bloomberg addressed, and the warm reception his words received, could hardly have been imagined by the first Trinidadian immigrants. Between 1900 and 1930, some ten thousand immigrants from the West Indies arrived in Harlem, New York, a neighborhood that increasingly developed a transnational flavor, as over a sixth of the population was foreign born.<sup>166</sup> Among these immigrants lay the seed from which New York's Carnival would emerge. Competition between West Indians and African-Americans, coupled with the period's hostility towards new immigrants, contributed to a downplaying of ethnicity among early West Indians immigrants. This is evidenced by the fact that early Carnival celebrations took place in the privacy of homes or rented spaces, recalling memories of Trinidad's colonial Carnival.

Historians Schiller and Blance view these early balls, with their mock coronations as allusions to Trinidad's British history, and evidence of Anglophilia, in opposition to the dominant racial categories of the U.S. that labeled incoming West Indians only as Black.<sup>167</sup> Transformations in the festival began to shape around demographic changes, as large numbers of West Indians flooded into New York creating a West Indian ethnic enclave that allowed for challenging this totalizing racial identity. The presence of U.S. soldiers in Trinidad during the period, and their effect on the islands' race relations, as well as the success of Caribbean culture within the U.S. mainstream may in part explain why West Indians chose to distinguish themselves from African-Americans. Between 1941 and 1959,

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<sup>166</sup> Scher, *Carnival and the Formation of a Caribbean Transnation*, 74.

<sup>167</sup> Buff, *Immigration and the Political Economy of Home*, 91.

over fifteen thousand immigrants arrived in New York from the West Indies helping push the festival out of the yard and into the road and the public eye.

It was not until 1947 that the project began to bring a *real* Trinidadian Carnival to New York. The brainchild of local Trinidadian community leader Jesse Waddel, the West Indian Labor Day Carnival Parade was Waddel's attempt to build harmony between Harlem's African-American and Afro-Caribbean population.<sup>168</sup> Waddel's dream immediately came up against major obstacles as a growing number of West Indians moving to New York chose to settle in Brooklyn instead of Harlem, siphoning off support for the festival and creating a residential enclave that aimed to separate West Indians from their African-American neighbors. West Indian immigrants began, and continue to expand on residential enclaves within larger black areas in New York, and there is evidence to suggest that these areas are of a somewhat higher quality than areas occupied by comparable concentrations of African Americans, and are partially responsible for sharpening ethnic identification.<sup>169</sup> Moves to sharpen ethnic identification suggest that West Indians understood the U.S.'s racial terrain, and employed time-tested strategies to challenge assumptions based on their race. The success of these first immigrants in maintaining cultural traditions and creating an ethnic enclave that helped overcome the costs of immigration and a subordinate racial position created a support network for the large number of West Indians entering the country beginning in the 1960s.

Beginning in 1961 roughly ten percent of Trinidad's population began moving northward to England and the United States, the majority of whom settled in Brooklyn, New

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<sup>168</sup> Scher, *Carnival and the Formation of a Caribbean Transnation*, 76.

<sup>169</sup> Crowder, "Residential Segregation of West Indians in New York/New Jersey Metropolitan Area," 79.

York. After Trinidad achieved political independence in 1965, and the passing of the Hart-Cellar Immigration Reform Act that same year, huge numbers of West Indians began migrating to New York, reworking the scale and form of the festival. The harmony that Waddel hoped to generate ultimately proved fruitless as violence broke out year after year between groups in Harlem. Waddel increasingly struggled to acquire the necessary permits to hold the festival and finally in 1964 under increasing pressure by West Indian Brooklyn residents stepped aside, allowing the parade to move to Brooklyn where it remains today as the largest, most visible and highly promoted Carnival in North America, with an even larger turnout than Carnival in Trinidad & Tobago.<sup>170</sup>

Brooklyn, as the secondary home of West Indian immigrants became the new home for the West Indian Labor Day parade under the head of Lionel “Rufus” Gorin in 1964. Gorin obtained the permit for the festival by assuring local politicians of a peaceful festival and an opportunity to build a political base among the growing West Indian population. Gorin’s strategy played on the development of multiculturalism during the period by embracing a West Indian politicized ethnic identity in order to gain political attention, while utilizing the festival’s political potential to make demands and challenge assumptions based on the majority of the group’s race and immigrant status. Hoping to facilitate logistical planning, gain legitimacy, preserve traditional elements of the festival and protect it from threats, both internal and external, Gorin formed the first North American Carnival organizational body, the United West Indian Day Development Association, which later evolved into the West Indian American Carnival Day Association

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<sup>170</sup> New York Amsterdam News, August 31-September 6, 2006.

(WIADCA).<sup>171</sup> The creation of the WIADCA echoed the formation of the National Carnival Commission (NCC) in Trinidad, which aimed to meet the needs of the developing Carnival industry and the international proliferation of Carnival celebrations. Gorin remained at the head of the organization until 1977 when he relinquished control because he felt that the association was, ironically enough, becoming nothing more than an excuse to rub elbows with local politicians.<sup>172</sup>

Gorin stepping down as the head of the WIADCA ignited a struggle for control of the festival. Some groups, backed by prominent businessmen, attempted to move the festival to Manhattan in hopes of gaining media coverage by promoting a sanitized version of the festival by highlighting fancy mas.<sup>173</sup> Those groups seeking to move the festival hoped to benefit from the same ethnic recognition that other ethnic groups (Irish, Italian) profited from through similar displays of ethnicity. This strategy, which makes apparent a politicized ethnicity, is in keeping within the multicultural movement of the latter part of the twentieth century, and demonstrates not only a recognition of the political potency of parades, but also an awareness among West Indians of their classification as an ethnicity competing for public and official recognition. The plan to move the WILDCA ultimately failed because the WIADCA stood as *the* legitimate Carnival organization in New York, and outsiders, hoping to see revelers in their “natural environment,” were not convinced of the authenticity of the fledgling Manhattan offshoot. The leadership of the WIADCA,

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<sup>171</sup> Scher, *Carnival and the Formation of a Caribbean Transnation*, 78.

<sup>172</sup> *Ibid.*, 81.

<sup>173</sup> *Ibid.*, 80. Fancy mas refers to the more traditional aspects of Carnival such as, Carnival King and Queen competitions, elaborate or historical costumes, and pan music. This is generally contrasted with skimpy mas which consists of costuming in bikinis, a wide variety of music from throughout the Caribbean played by DJs, and a de-emphasis of historical events and traditions.

previously fragmented by internal conflict, unified against competing projects. The WIADCA's budding reputation helped the WILDCP to expand dramatically throughout the last quarter of the twentieth century, and because of it, attained significant political power. As Scher remarks, "It was during the 1980s that Carnival's potential as both a signature ethnic display event and public forum for political action was realized."<sup>174</sup>

Politicians vying for West Indian support come to the East Parkway, the Carnival roadway in Brooklyn, often as the Grand Marshal of the parade. Those politicians seen as representing the interests of the West Indian community, such as New York Senator Hillary Rodham Clinton, capitalize on the seminal congregation of New York's largest minority group.<sup>175</sup> The Caribbean Update reported in 2004 "This being an election year, you can expect the parade route on the Eastern Parkway to be saturated with politicians in search of votes from the anticipated one-million-plus carnival-lovers and revelers."<sup>176</sup> Beyond serving as a venue for the West Indian community to call on politicians to meet their specific needs and politicians to rally support, the presence of politicians at the WILDCP reinforces the Carnival tradition by providing evidence for the success of the festival in aiding West Indian immigrants. However, as one reporter remarked, this tactic, now seen as a "vital path to political promise," is not always a positive experience for politicians.<sup>177</sup> Carnival has always been an event to criticize local leaders, and the WILDCP is no exception. Governor Rudi Giuliani's arrival was "booed and jeered by spectators who verbalized their dissent," which extended to any local leaders seen as supporting his office. One U.S. Virgin Islander

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<sup>174</sup> Scher, *Carnival and the Formation of a Caribbean Transnation*, 84.

<sup>175</sup> Clinton utilized the WILDCP to campaign during her run for Senator, similarly Jesse Jackson announced his bid for presidency at the WILDCP to the cheers of the crowds.

<sup>176</sup> *Caribbean Update*. August. 19-25, 2004.

<sup>177</sup> *New York Amsterdam News*. Septembert. 7-13, 2000.

expressed disapproval at the presence of local leaders at Giuliani's side. "They apparently got intimidated and followed these two officials."<sup>178</sup>

Governor Giuliani's presence at the WILDCP came to symbolize the tension between the West Indian community and the New York government during the 1990s, or as the *New York Amsterdam News* reported, "Is New York City trying to mug the West Indian American Day carnival parade? Although the Big Apple has umpteen parades, the only one the Giuliani works seem to trying to nibble on is the 30-year-old one that will have 120,000 marchers and an audience of three million."<sup>179</sup> This report points to an awareness among West Indians that their identity, existing within a larger web of ethnic minorities, is being singled out by the New York government. Under Governor Giuliani, the police presence surrounding Carnival expanded, and many revelers felt that he was unfairly targeting the West Indian community because of their categorization as a racial minority. When asked why she thought the Governor's office was taking this position, Pam Ramsherry responded, "I do think it was because [it was] black people having a good time, regardless of us enjoying our culture."<sup>180</sup> Ramsherry's response makes clear that while the WILDCP aims to situate West Indian identity in ethnic and cultural terms, she believes that oftentimes the state continues to classify them by racial identities, an identity which ultimately proves harmful to West Indians. Struggles with state authorities have surrounded Carnival since its colonial beginnings; fortunately, the cultural memories and products associated with the festival make it a ready tool for West Indians to engage in a similar struggle in New York, one that has been largely successful.

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<sup>178</sup> *Caribbean Update*. August. 19-25, 2004.

<sup>179</sup> *New York Amsterdam News*. September. 2, 1995.

<sup>180</sup> Pam Ramsherry, Interview with author. Atlanta, GA., Dec., 2009.



## Jouvay Erupts

Sunday night, in the early hours of the morning, the first Carnival sounds begin pumping out of “yards” and into Brooklyn’s streets. This carrying of the yard into the road, the private into the public, marks a total reversal of roles and signals the beginning of *Jouvay* and the onset of Carnival’s liminal phase. *Jouvay* is the least regimented phase of Carnival, defined by total abandon and excess. Sunday night is for some, the last true bastion of authentic Carnival, even as it continues to elude tradition. Dr. Paul Boise recounts, “Jouvay is my favorite part...you don’t have to worry about getting in a costume, you go and have a good time, its chaotic, there is mud, tar all that stuff, the paint- its simple, you go there and have a good time.”<sup>181</sup> It is because Jouvay escapes even the relaxed confines of Carnival that makes it so appealing for some, for during those last few hours before Monday morning Carnival players are concerned solely with their own enjoyment. Growing number of revelers arrive in the streets covered in mud, and various viscous body paints, many of whom come with a sparkle in their eye and a bottle in their hand. Those caught spectating in the street quickly find themselves pulled in to participate and baptized into the Carnival spirit with a thick coating of paint or mud. Antoni’s *Carnival* describes a *Jouvay* costume,

“Which amounted to nothing more than a pair of stubby horns glued onto a plastic hair band, and a bent wire tail attached to a Velcro belt. The costume was just an excuse to play in a group. In each of the brown paper sacks was a slip that said *INCLUDES ALL THE MUD YOU CAN WEAR* and a flattened link-sausage of six Red Devil brand condoms.”<sup>182</sup>

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<sup>181</sup> Dr. Paul Boise. Interview with author. Atlanta, GA., Dec., 2009.

<sup>182</sup> Antoni, *Carnival*, 114.

Most of those in the streets will spend their night drinking, liming, and whining, a seductive dance that Carnival theorist Dan Crowley described as a vertical expression of a horizontal desire.<sup>183</sup> The emphasis on bodily excesses and the attention to sexuality, though largely symbolic, permeates throughout the night's activities, harkening back to Carnival's *diametre* period, where the world has turned upside down and the urges of the *lower body* are permitted. *Jouvay*'s drastic departure from the rules and customs of daily life is perhaps the clearest articulation of Carnival's steam valve potential. The disorganized nature of *Jouvay* dramatizes a larger decentralization of power occurring during Carnival. The seemingly chaotic nature of *Jouvay* raises concern among state authorities, and just as colonial authorities worried about late night Canboulay celebrations, New York authorities have increasingly monitored and regulated *Jouvay*, characterizing Sunday night as socially disruptive and potentially dangerous; however it may be *Jouvay*'s elusiveness to politicians that raises their scorn rather than the night's activities. Over the last few decades, New York's police have increasingly attempted to shut down neighborhood *Jouvay* parties though their actions have done little more than provoke animosity among the West Indian community.

In 1994 as tensions mounted between Carnival planners and the New York government, the state's presence and regulation of the event began to curtail participation. This struggle mirrors the tension between Gerstle's twin crucibles of the nation's civic and racial character, and demonstrates that even under the "modern" multicultural ethos race continues to factor heavily in the relationship between ethnic groups and the state. The September 10<sup>th</sup> *New York Amsterdam News* reported "Many people, especially African-

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<sup>183</sup> Peter Mason, *Bacchanal!: The Carnival Culture of Trinidad* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1998), 107.

Caribbeans, were apparently intimidated and elected to pass up the 27<sup>th</sup> annual celebration. Some of them feared conflict with the police, while others said the cops might not have allowed them to display their cultural heritage through dance and island movements.”<sup>184</sup>

Fears that police threaten the “cultural heritage” of West Indians speak to a larger struggle to have West Indian cultural identity respected by state officials. Philip Scher rightly identifies that the preservation of culture is often invoked whenever Carnival is threatened, put another way- a loss of Carnival is a loss of heritage, speaking to a view of the Carnival tradition as *the* paramount representation of West Indian culture regardless of where it is taking place.<sup>185</sup>

For West Indians, this struggle brings back memories of colonial authorities; fortunately, Carnival offers a cultural tradition to draw upon for effectively challenging overreaching state apparatuses. While some worry about the effects of a heavy police presence, others see the success of Carnival as potentially stripping the festival of its *traditional* forms and significance.

### **Old Mas and Cultural Preservation**

The contemporary WILDCP maintains many of the political and social messages Carnival has always expressed, however there are some marked differences from its historical predecessors. The participation of actors from around the world, the budding international industry and media surrounding the festival, the incorporation of technology, and the participation of actors in multiple Carnival celebrations are all recent developments. These international systems and actors exemplify the transnational aspects of contemporary

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<sup>184</sup> New York Amsterdam, Vol. 85 No. 37 Saturday 10, 1994.

<sup>185</sup> Scher, *Carnival and the Formation of a Caribbean Transnation*, 152.

Carnival culture and are central to remittances across national borders, shaping national systems and the experiences and perception of West Indian immigrants in New York.

The proliferation and success of Carnival celebrations in the modern market has helped unbind Carnival from its limited temporal boundaries. Preparations for the upcoming year's Carnival begin promptly on the heels of Lent and consume actors in a year-round, highly lucrative, global industry. Working on Carnival requires vigilance, dedication, and sleeplessness, but the nights are full of food, drinks, reminiscing, and laughter.<sup>186</sup> Pam Ramsherry described, "I've helped make costumes- hard work...grueling hours."<sup>187</sup> Professionals, devoting themselves to the business of Carnival, whether selling costumes, developing floats, or working as pan or calypso band leaders, labor year-round on Carnival products both for their own projects and for the Carnival market. Pam Ramsherry went on to describe, "It's a yearly thing and they can make enough money in those two days to carry them through to the next year depending on how successful they are."<sup>188</sup> These industries sharpen ethnic identification by popularizing distinct cultural products that serve as an identity marker, and by acting as an economic incentive for maintaining transnational ties, ethnic identities, and cultural traditions.

Monday's Carnival adheres to the image that most tourists envision when they think of the Trinidadian parade. The image promoted by organizing bodies and many Trinidadians harkens back to previous debates about whose culture will be showcased as the national culture and for whom is this representation intended. Dr. Paul Boise remarks, "Everybody who comes to Carnival thinks of mas of Monday, and its nice, that's what we show the

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<sup>186</sup> Scher, *Carnival and the Formation of a Caribbean Transnation*, 100.

<sup>187</sup> Pam Ramsherry, Interview with author. Atlanta, GA., Dec., 2009.

<sup>188</sup> Pam Ramsherry, Interview with author. Atlanta, GA., Dec., 2009.

world.”<sup>189</sup> Dr. Boise’s comment shows the success and support for projects that promote the image of old mas to an “outside” global audience. For many Trinidadians living abroad old mas *is* Carnival; not only is it the Carnival they remember from their childhood, it is the Carnival they want to pass down to the future generations. During the Carnival season, children’s costume contests and parades take place; these “Kiddie Carnivals” embrace and reward “traditional” Carnival forms, suggesting that these are the memories and cultural forms most often passed down through the generations, with both official and unofficial support. These forms draw attention to the dual identities that many West Indians residing in the U.S. imagine themselves to possess; by highlighting those forms that developed outside their host country’s cultural realm, West Indians make a claim for cultural continuity and recognition. Extending this point further, West Indian American attorney and Carnival reveler, Colin Moore, hoped that, “the festival moved away from the concept of being a mere celebration of culture or a mere mass party. We should include school children with marching bands and youth groups who are part of the American experience.”<sup>190</sup>

The pageantry of Monday is not just for “Trinis,” but perhaps more importantly it is for the tourists, many of who will only take part in Monday’s activities, and will do so predominantly as spectators and customers of local vendors. Many Trinidadians wish to project this traditional image of Carnival to foreign audiences because it generates the most business, and draws attention from audiences and politicians to West Indian cultural distinctiveness, and more importantly, because it holds true to their memory of Carnival. Dr. Paul Boise expressed this sentiment during an interview, “I think tourists should go to old

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<sup>189</sup> Dr. Paul Boise. Interview with author. Atlanta, GA., Dec., 2009.

<sup>190</sup> NY Amsterdam Vol. 85, no. 37, September 10, 1994.

mas, and go and experience a *real* Carnival.”<sup>191</sup> The belief that old mas is *real* Carnival is in part a product of official moves to promote a certain image and memory of Carnival in contrast to other contemporary trends in Carnival culture, namely skimpy mas.

While West Indians benefit in many ways from the proliferation and success of Carnival abroad, there is a mounting fear within Trinidad’s Carnival culture that Trinidad will fail to benefit culturally or economically from the spread of offshoot festivals, and that people will fail to recognize its Trinidadian origins. Many actors, while happy that Carnival retains its inclusive base, make demands for national and ethnic recognition of Carnival’s origins.<sup>192</sup> Pam Ramsherry expresses the ambivalence that many Trinidadians feel about the subject, “Hell yeah, we are bias like that, no, its Trinidad Carnival, I don’t care what anybody say, anybody can play, come hell or high water, but it’s Trinidad Carnival.”<sup>193</sup> However, all Carnival participants do not share these ideas, and as one participant stated, “The organizers have to open up the festival so that it doesn’t have the flavor of being a Trinidad-controlled celebration, it should be a genuine Caribbean carnival in which all nationalities play a meaningful role.”<sup>194</sup>

This, and similar calls for emphasizing the transnational nature of the WILDCP, coupled with the growing number of Carnival celebrations, prompted Trinidad’s National Carnival Commission [NCC] to construct a plan to identify “traditional” Carnival forms and protect them. In order for Trinidad to benefit from the proliferation of Carnival celebrations around the world, and to establish an industry to employ Trinidadians working within the

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<sup>191</sup> Dr. Paul Boise, Interview with author. Atlanta, GA., Dec., 2009. My emphasis.

<sup>192</sup> This claim is one for recognition that while Carnival did not develop in Trinidad, it is Trinidadian cultural forms that are proliferating as symbols of Carnival.

<sup>193</sup> Pam Ramsherry Interview with author. Atlanta, GA., Dec., 2009.

<sup>194</sup> New York Amsterdam News, September. 10, 1994.

Carnival industry and establish rights over Carnival products that might benefit both financially and symbolically from the use of “its” culture, the NCC worked hand-in-hand with the government to extend forms of protection.<sup>195</sup> Dr. Paul Boise spoke about the potential threats of having Carnival enter the global economy, “You’re talking about keeping people employed, but there’s some people just profiting and it seems like disparity because what I heard, and this is all hearsay, that a lot of costumes are being made abroad. They have a deal with, for example the Chinese, and they go get made abroad cheaply and they come back.”<sup>196</sup> Dr. Boise’s fear, while possibly unfounded, represents a widespread fear of losing Carnival culture and the surrounding community to global economic circuits.

Efforts like those taken by the NCC are part of larger narratives of nationalist cultural preservation movements, which in part help substantiate claims made by groups in diaspora, such as the West Indian community in New York. In order to make a call for a nationalist preservation of heritage, there first must be an interested historical narrative of both the formation and evolution of cultural forms and by doing so, the narrative excludes both an understanding of the historical participation of some groups and their contemporary role in the ongoing development of cultural forms. Theoretical statements regarding the nature of Carnival based on contemporary experiences take into account only that which is categorized as traditional, a myopic approach that ultimately undercuts the goal of presenting a scholarly assessment of the Carnival experience that is most relevant to the majority of contemporary masqueraders.

According to Carols Jon, former chairman of the NCC, the NCC and academics “are helping to preserve and transmit invaluable Carnival traditions which have been in danger of

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<sup>195</sup> Scher, “Copyright Heritage,” 463.

<sup>196</sup> Dr. Paul Boise, Interview with author. Atlanta, GA., Dec., 2009.

extinction.”<sup>197</sup> However, both the state and scholars concern themselves almost exclusively with the preservation of “old” traditional Carnival. Furthermore, the fact that scholars themselves exclude alternative narratives, or that state organizations make use of existing scholarship and scholarly research to legitimize specific political agendas, implicates researchers in nation building.<sup>198</sup> The ensuing debate surrounding cultural preservation of those forms most valued by the state highlight how these acts of protection often serve to exclude significant portions of the population, in this instance, most notably women, by asserting a certain national cultural identity endowed with historical meaning that privileges cultural forms associated with masculinity.

Preserving traditional elements of Carnival is understandably a major concern for many Trinidadians, organizational bodies, and the Trinidadian state all of which benefit from Carnival as a source of cultural and national recognition and financial revenue. Organizations, academics and governmental policies focused on the preservation of traditional forms contribute to an ongoing debate about whose Carnival is, and is not, being preserved. “Preservation and its adversary, cultural appropriation, are fundamentally about representation and control, and these concepts imply a hierarchical relationship between the state and local organizations, on the one hand, and a larger political and legal world, on the other.”<sup>199</sup> Cultural preservation movements take on new importance for groups operating abroad where maintaining cultural continuity can prove difficult and the memories attached to cultural traditions can take on additional importance. It is part of the Carnival tradition to “lame” about the loss of *real* Carnival. Just as actors in Trinidad once felt that the festival

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<sup>197</sup> Scher, “Copyright Heritage” 454, 455.

<sup>198</sup> Scher, “Copyright Heritage,” 456.

<sup>199</sup> Scher, “Copyright Heritage,” 456.



was being co-opted by the middle and upper classes; excluding the lower classes, as the price of participation increased, many contemporary players remain concerned about the effects of the rising costs of Carnival. However, the cause of rising costs and the benefits that come with a more expensive festival keeps the debate alive. Dr. Boise expresses how the influence of current economic trends is shaping Carnival. “I think historically what used to happen, when my parents were going to Carnival is it was affordable it was not a rich or white thing or black thing, it was none of that. What used to happen is everybody plays.”<sup>200</sup> Dr. Boise’s “memory” of his parents’ Carnival reflects changes that have affected Carnival in his lifetime, though concern for a growing exclusiveness is a longstanding fear among Carnival players. This sense of loss of cultural heritage into the abyss of international economic and cultural systems is a cry heard across multiple national communities, and highlights the correlation between cultural and economic consumption. Mikol Siegel contextualizes this position by asserting that the relationship of cultural and economic exchange intertwine to the point of being indistinguishable.<sup>201</sup> While tourism helps support the Carnival industry, and the cultural recognition Trinidad gains through tourists, the increased demand of affluent foreigners on the industry is at least in part responsible for the rising costs associated with Carnival. When asked about the rising costs of Carnival, Pam Ramsherry recounted,

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<sup>200</sup> Dr. Paul Boise, Interview with author. Atlanta, GA., Dec., 2009.

<sup>201</sup> Mikol Siegel, *Uneven Encounters: Making Race and Nation in Brazil and the United States*, (Durham: University of Duke Press, 2009), 236. Siegel sees the consumption of ‘exotic’ cultures as a central component, in the case of the United States, to the construction of a consumer culture in the United States in building an imagined homogenous national identity. Cultural consumption relies on the premise that a homogenous culture is available for exchange. This example demonstrates how power relationships, existing in economic exchanges are expressed in cultural terms.

“When I went 2 years ago, I didn’t play because it was too expensive for the costumes and to be part of the group. I didn’t feel like that’s the spirit, its not the true spirit of Carnival. Looking and seeing what was going on, there was certain local bands where the prices are reasonable, and then these more flashier bands, full of people who live here in the States or live in England or live wherever and who’ve saved up all year or thinking about doing it for a few years and then they go and spend all this money. The true local people like my friends who are still living in Trinidad, they’re not playing mas anymore.”<sup>202</sup>

The cost of playing in some bands is now reaching upwards of a thousand dollars for the two-day party. When asked why someone would be willing to spend so much to play in a band, Ramsherry highlighted the convenience and security provided by one of the more expensive groups. “Today, they provide food all day, they provide drinks all day, and they even have mobile bathrooms...and they have security, for one person playing they have three security guards...so nobody that doesn’t have a [wrist] band can get in. I love it, I love it because it’s safe.”<sup>203</sup> The attention to security is partially a result of increased female participation coupled with the sexual license and excesses of Carnival.

### **Skimpy Mas and Modernity**

Tuesday’s skimpy, or pretty, mas highlights the “modern” aspects of Carnival: the most notable differences between Tuesday and Monday’s, the incorporation of DJs and a wider variety of musical styles, a depreciated focus on Trinidadian cultural history, and most notably the takeover of Carnival by female dancers. Robert Antoni describes a typical Tuesday scene, “People wining in the dusty drag in front of the stalls. Girls in platform shoes and skin-tight jeans and chopped-off, frayed T-shirts.”<sup>204</sup> Skimpy mas will see huge

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<sup>202</sup> Dr. Paul Boise, Interview with author. Atlanta, GA., Dec., 2009.

<sup>203</sup> Pam Ramsherry, Interview with author. Atlanta, GA., Dec., 2009.

<sup>204</sup> Antoni, *Carnival*, 179.

groups of women “chipping,” a stepping dance that allows for the slow travel required by the crowded streets, behind a truck loaded with speakers and a DJ playing one of the year’s featured tracks. Antoni’s *Carnival* describes one scene and draws attention to the “scandalous” nature of contemporary mas, “I ran into Poison, the band famous for all the wild young-girls. Their *scandalous* bikini-mas.”<sup>205</sup> These female actors embody a recent major shift in the composition of Carnival players. Coinciding with the rise of the West Indian transnational community, the emergence of skimpy mas has been attributed to influence of U.S. culture. When asked about the effects of U.S. culture on Trinidadian culture, Pam Ramsherry responded, “It’s reflected in Carnival, if you look at the costumes of today compared to the costumes of yesteryears you can definitely see the changes, now its all pretty mas, what we call pretty mas like with the bikinis.”<sup>206</sup> For some, this “wine and jam” Carnival, is unpatriotic, potentially culturally pernicious, and certainly morally suspect.

Critics of skimpy mas characterize pretty mas as nothing more than middle-class brown skinned girls playing themselves, going against the tradition of identity contestation. Proponents for recognizing skimpy mas as a legitimate aspect of Carnival, argue that these female actors are now the heart of mas, challenging the commodification of “traditional” Carnival as part of the national culture, even as they open Carnival to new commercial opportunities. The male-dominated NCC currently focuses its preservation efforts on earlier Carnival forms at the expense of their contemporary female-dominated counterparts.<sup>207</sup> By excluding these aspects of Carnival from receiving cultural legitimization, the NCC silences a huge portion of Trinidad’s population privileging masculine roles. Local concerns about

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<sup>205</sup> Antoni, *Carnival*, 174.

<sup>206</sup> Pam Ramsherry. Interview with author. Atlanta, GA., Dec., 2009.

<sup>207</sup> Scher, “Copyright Heritage,” 473.

the preservation of Carnival are tied to local interests of power and serve to exclude women from authorized narratives of national culture. Pamela de France points out that the majority of traditional characters the NCC and Trinidadian government choose to preserve, and thereby validate, are those cultural forms that are male dominated and mostly arose during the 1930s, 40s, and 50's when primarily Afro-Trinidadian working-class males took to the streets.<sup>208</sup> Characters deemed unsavory and unmarketable, and those forms associated with skimpy mas are generally not included in NCC preservation projects; speaking to a growing trend of tailoring Carnival to foreign audiences who may be fearful of lower class or sexually illicit images. Many of the organizational bodies surrounding Carnival fear that the new trend of skimpy mas could hinder the Carnival industry. However, others within the Carnival community, the NCC, tourism industry, and government are well aware that many tourists come to the festival to see these scantily clad women.

Notions of respectability have long been a part of Carnival culture, the ambiguity that Carnival allows for identity construction enables players to transgress or obliterate normal gender roles and revel in behavior normally restricted. Respectability within the sphere of Carnival culture now operates simultaneously in national and international realms where local identities interact and transform. Dr. Boise believes that representations of gender in Trinidad's Carnival are shaping around the influence of U.S. culture. "I've never been to Mardi Gras, but I've seen pictures. That's a different scene than Trinidad Carnival, the things that happen in Mardi Gras are happening in Trinidad Carnival but they're happening behind closed doors, people are not out in the street exposing themselves, and

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<sup>208</sup> Scher, "Copyright Heritage," 472.

that kind of thing, but Trinidad Carnival, I'm seeing its becoming a little more raucous."<sup>209</sup>

Images of skimpy mas disseminating around the world as the face of Trinidad are raising concerns from both organizations and individuals who fear that the images, lacking context, misrepresent Trinidadian culture. Pam Ramsherry explains, "It's transitioned, now it's a lot of g-strings, which Trinidad people are a lot more conservative than people think or realize...but its just for those two days."<sup>210</sup> As Pam Ramsherry makes clear, to understand the products and images of Carnival, one must first understand their historical traditions. The debate over which traditions will define the festival, and whose tastes the image of Carnival will taper to, remains a mystery. Pam Ramsherry, who helps organize a West Indian Carnival in Atlanta, Georgia, points out the necessity of preserving the tradition of Carnival adaptability.

"Yeah it's evolved from what it used to be. If you were to look back at the kinds of costumes that we had years ago, it is a lot of different than what they are [today]. People say mas isn't what it used to be, mas isn't mas, so we don't want to play in that mas. And we still have the one or two people making old costumes, really nice costumes, but people don't want to play, they want to play pretty mas. But again with everything whatever you're involved in it must evolve, so you have to be able to adapt and go with that."<sup>211</sup>

This adaptability is what allowed Carnival to grow into the modern phenomenon it is today, and is responsible for the conflicting memories surrounding the festival that allows it to transgress any single purpose and remain a potent cultural product for West Indians. Scholars of the subject need to respect the variable and contentious nature of the festival.

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<sup>209</sup> Dr. Paul Boise, Interview with author. Atlanta, GA., Dec. 2009.

<sup>210</sup> Pam Ramsherry, Interview with author. Atlanta, GA., Dec., 2009.

<sup>211</sup> Pam Ramsherry, Interview with author. Atlanta, GA., Dec., 2009.

## **Epilogue**

### **The Return Home**

Immigration remains a hot topic in U.S. society and politics, the huge number of immigrants coming to the United States each year will undoubtedly continue to draw attention from policy makers and scholars seeking to understand how these groups fit into the national conversation. The “success story” of West Indians in New York can provide a useful case study; the WILDCP as the cultural centerpiece and as the community’s most public and politicized display is an integral piece of this story. The multitude and magnitude of Carnival celebrations continues to expand today, and so it is likely that it will continue to draw the attention of scholars. Carnival helped assuage societal tensions during Trinidad’s colonial and independence periods, and this tradition went on to serve contemporary West Indian transnationals to the U.S. in overcoming the hardships posed by emigration. Through an assertion of an ethnic identity West Indians escape some of the pitfalls of their host country. Up to this point, this paper focused on the ways that West Indian immigrants to the United States adapt to and shape the nation. However, it is important to note that transnationality is an ongoing process; it shapes not just the host society and migratory actors, but has a major effect on the country of origin. The effect these returning immigrants have on their country of origin largely rests on their memories, both lived and imagined, and their newly adopted values. This cultural backflow, sometimes seen as a desired effect of the immigration, and other points as culturally deleterious warrants further examination in future scholarship.

Brought on in part by an inability to achieve full social membership, caused by blocked mobility and racism, many West Indian migrants remain active in their native country, by nurturing dual identities through voluntary associations, social ties, and active involvement in the politics and culture of their homes.<sup>212</sup> Trinidad's Carnival, as the social event of the year, draws huge numbers of Trinidadians living around the world back to the island. The influx of West Indians during Carnival highlights the transnational nature of the island, and the role of the festival in binding together the diasporic community. Carnival offers a cyclical opportunity for transnational actors to wear the mask of their native country, and participate in the culture and community of the island, and at the end of the week, hang up the costume and return home. The protagonist in Robert Antoni's novel *Carnival* describes his trip from New York, "It was the only time I did return home. Not because I loved Carnival more than anything which I did...but it was those few days of carnival each year that enabled me to keep my other life, my past, where it belonged: in place behind me."<sup>213</sup> Here Antoni makes explicit the role of Carnival in transmitting memories and expressing the West Indian transnational community.

Returning home, permanently or temporarily takes on particular meanings for immigrants. New understandings brought on by their transnational experience need reconciling against a sense of nostalgia that longs for a return to their homeland, often expressed in terms of a return to a more traditional historical moment. This sense of nostalgia can be contentious if, as is often the case, it is discordant with the realities of their return or in conflict with their newly adopted values. Dr. Paul Boise described this discrepancy, "When you leave a country you have to remember that you leave a time stamp

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<sup>212</sup> Scher, "Immigration and the Political Economy of Home," 82.

<sup>213</sup> Antoni, *Carnival*, 67.

but you forget that the culture continues to grow and grow and weave and what you think was so called Trinidadian doesn't necessarily apply eighteen years down the line."<sup>214</sup> Future scholars would do well to pay particular attention to the ways that immigrants leave these "time stamps," and how they shape both their experiences abroad and upon their return home. The "time stamp" Dr. Boise references is an expression of the historical memories associated with immigration, and how those memories are not always in keeping with the reality of our experiences.

On the other side of the coin is an internal fear within the country of origin that returning immigrants may strip the culture of its traditional values as they transplant new ideas that potentially threaten the national culture or standing notions of identity. Pam Ramsherry expressed this fear. "Definitely we're very westernized, to my regret, I don't think we need to be as Westernized as we are, because we're becoming so westernized we're forgetting our own culture."<sup>215</sup> The legitimacy of the nation as a political unit rests, in part, on having a corresponding national culture to which it is bound, leading to the institutionalization and protection of national cultural forms. Projects for cultural preservation, such as those being conducted by the NCC, need to fully examine the role they play in nation-building and what effect they have on community members; again here, scholars can play an integral role in shaping how these projects will be carried out. The effects of cultural preservation projects, global capitalism and increased cultural exchange will continue to shape local cultural forms, understanding how these relationships present new opportunities and challenges for immigrants is a task awaiting future scholars.

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<sup>214</sup> Dr. Paul Boise, Interview with author. Atlanta, GA., Dec., 2009.

<sup>215</sup> Pam Ramsherry, Interview with author. Atlanta, GA., Dec., 2009.



Peggy Levitt highlights the amount of scholarly attention given to global cultural flows of macro level institutions spread throughout international political and economic systems. This approach, she contends, often ignores the role of ordinary people, at the local level, as cultural creators and carriers, sending back values and practices encountered during the immigrant experience adding these social remittances to their personal understanding in turn shaping the national culture.<sup>216</sup> Levitt's comment is as poignant as it is illuminating. Studies of transnationalism and the immigrant experience must be directed from both macro and micro perspectives in order to see how top down and bottom up forces simultaneously shape the transnational experience and redefine our understanding of national and world systems and categories of identification. While these micro level exchanges prove more difficult to track, future scholars examining transnational groups would benefit from taking Levitt's advice by seeking out how individuals maintain ties in multiple realms. An examination of cultural practices and symbols has the possibility to combine these two approaches and resituate immigration beyond its simplistic understanding as a uni-directional process.

By approaching transnationality as a dynamic process taking place in multiple locales and societal levels concurrently, we can better understand how transnational actors utilize a de-centered identity and origin myth to maximize opportunity and shape national understandings in both countries of origin and arrival. These ideas will only continue to grow in their importance as more people choose the path of immigration. Nation-states, organizational bodies, and the world's citizens must confront these trends and reconfigure their understandings of identity and membership. Nationalism derives its power by its fixed

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<sup>216</sup> Levitt, *The Transnational Village*, 55.

and limited borders, both real and conceptual, through a divisive process of inclusion and exclusion; transnationality challenges the monolithic stature of the nation by washing over its limited borders and paying respect to the complex reality of a truly *modern* world.

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## Appendix

### Terms

*Canbouly*- from the French *Cannes Broules*, or burning cane, was a practice that entailed gathering together Trinidadian slaves to fight plantation fires. Following emancipation the practice was co-opted by former slaves and served as an opening ceremony for Carnival until the close of the nineteenth century.

*chipping*- a stepping dance that entails a slow footed shuffle that allows Carnival actors to make their way slowly down the packed Carnival street.

*Jammete*- derived from the French word *diametre*, meaning beneath the diameter of respectability or the underworld, became the term applied by elites to Trinidad's Carnival from the 1860s until the close of the century.

*Jouvay*- from the French word *jour ouvert*, meaning at dawn or day break is the modern opening ceremony to Trinidad's and offshoot festivals, taking the place of *Canbouly* marches, *Jouvay* is without strong reference to Trinidad's colonial past and racial divisions.

*Kalenda*- is a Trinidadian mutation of an African custom wherein participants engaged, though largely ceremonially, in a stick-fighting dance.

*lime*- a colloquial term for loose conversation or complaining. "Liming" will most often be used in reference to loose conversation surrounding recent developments in Carnival culture, or within the West Indian community.

*mas*- a colloquial term for Carnival. One can be described as "playing mas," meaning to parade in Carnival.

*old mas*- refers to traditional Carnival forms, these products are generally emphasized on Monday of Carnival week.

*skimpy mas* or *pretty mas*- a term applied to contemporary Carnival forms because of the presence of large numbers of women in bikinis parading, emphasized of Tuesday of Carnival week.

*Trini*- a colloquial term to refer to people from Trinidad.

## Notes on Interviews

For the sake of privacy, both interviewees' names were altered. Interviews were conducted informally in hopes of allowing the conversation to organically flush out the personal experiences that these actors held of Carnival, and what led to their decision to immigrate to the United States. Dr. Boise and Pam Ramsherry were both interviewed in Atlanta, Georgia in the same period of time and had very different backgrounds and opinions with Carnival. While I approached these interviews with only a few fixed questions both conversations followed similar formats. To provide some insight into the results, the following questions were asked during the interviews.

Are people in Trinidad interested in American culture? Do you think it's reflected in Carnival culture? How do you feel about that development?

When did you move to the United States? What prompted that decision? Did you plan on staying or were you planning on returning to Trinidad?

How do the Carnivals in the United States differ from Trinidad's Carnival?

Is there a strong influence on making money during Carnival?

How has the crowd changed since you played mas as a child? Do you think that is a product of increased tourism?

Has increased tourism diminished the Carnival tradition in your eyes?

Do you attribute racism to the strong police presence at New York's WILDCEP?

What kind of cultural shock did you experience when first coming to the United States?

Do you still consider it a Trinidadian festival even when playing in the United States with people from throughout the Caribbean?

What aspects of Carnival do you most enjoy? What aspects should tourists experience?

What parts of Carnival are the most authentic?

What do you think about skimpy mas? What about the introduction of disc jockeys and recorded music instead of live pan and calypso?

Is maintaining the Trinidadian origins of Carnival important to you?

How often do you return to Trinidad? Do you keep up with news in Trinidad, read Trinidadian newspapers etc...?

