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Chutney to Queer and Back: Trinidad 1995–1998

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Abstract

In December 1995, I arrived for the very first time in Port-of-Spain, Trinidad, to study chutney music—a fusion of Hindi religious folks songs and calypso and soca rhythms. From what I had been reading, the emergence of chutney music in the 1980s and '90s reflected the growing cultural impact of East Indians (or Indo-Trinidadians as I will also refer to them) as well as their desire for national belonging even as it claimed particular Indian cultural difference at its core. Basdeo Panday, the first Indo-Trinidadian Prime Minister, had just been elected, and it was also the 150th anniversary commemorating Indian arrival in Trinidad. Over the next month, and again for several months in the summer of 1996, I conducted interviews with any chutney musician who would meet with me—Chris Garcia, Ramraji Prabhoo, Rikki Jai, as well as with industry insiders such as the producers of the Indian cultural competition *Mastana Bahar*, radio station owners, music store managers, and chutney music promoters. I went to chutney performances all over southern Trinidad—Chaguanas, San Fernando, and many smaller towns in between—as well as the occasional event in Port-of-Spain.

Introduction

As it turned out, chutney music inadvertently became a “cover” (and ironically, a closet as well) for my socializing in gay and lesbian circles and what eventually became my dissertation project. On this first day in Trinidad, along with listening to chutney music for the very first time, I had also called on the uncle of a Trinidadian acquaintance who lives in San Francisco. My acquaintance had said to me: “I think he might be like us, but I am not sure, so don't say anything to him, but see what happens.” I proceeded with great caution. During these initial visits, I found myself traversing back and forth between areas in the south of Trinidad to attend chutney performances, competitions, and carnival events, only afterwards to rush back north to attend gay and lesbian community parties and gatherings. I experienced a huge discrepancy in what it meant to be Indian in Trinidad against the grain of what gay and lesbian lives were like in Port-of-Spain. I moved through the demands of these different spaces very confusedly, often unsure as to whether to reveal details about where next I was headed—not just to the predominantly heterosexual Indo-Trinidadians I met, but also to the predominantly Afro-Trinidadian gays and lesbians I started to befriend. Finally, after a year of research visits, I abandoned my study of chutney. Deflated by the relegation of chutney to a highly defensive form of cultural nationalist politics and its flagging cross-over potential, I also could no longer effectively sustain these transversal movements across divergent and dichotomous terrains.

Out in the field?

By this point I had had regular contact with folks in the “gay and lesbian community” as it was then hailed, and had amassed carefully sought knowledge of events, organizations, hangouts, and people over the past year—information that now could be instantly googled or binged. I decided to trace and document the emergence of a gay and lesbian movement in Trinidad, one linked to international, regional, diasporic, and sub-national formations and agendas. The only publication to result from this work, “Global Circuits” (2001) was informed by numerous field research trips spanning from December 1995 to October 1998, during which period I interviewed more than three dozen gay and lesbian activists, HIV/AIDS educators, epidemiologists, feminist organizers, and gay and lesbian business owners, performers, and artists. I met current and prior members of the Gay Enhancement Association of Trinidad and Tobago (GEATT), the Alliance for Prevention Trinidad and Tobago (APTT), the Caribbean Feminist Regional Association (CAFRA), the Caribbean Forum for Lesbians, All-sexuals, and Gays (C-FLAG), CAREC, and LAMBDA. I also cavorted and spoke with dozens more folks who hung out at the Pelican, Sidewalks, Peter Minshall's mas, Godfrey Sealy's house, and other more subterranean haunts, places that are now well-known and easily locatable as gay venues via the Internet, but at the time were only traceable through connections and word-of-mouth. Throughout the duration of my research, I constantly navigated polar opposite reactions to my project: those who considered homophobia to be rampantly active and debilitating in Trinidad and those who had never given their gay, lesbian, or bisexual desires a second thought and challenged the relevance of my project. Some insisted that the work could become an important document in the gay and lesbian struggles of the region; others worried about the backlash of visibility that discourses on homosexuality and the visibility of this work might engender, by now a familiar conundrum amongst

LGBTQ organizers in the global south (see Joseph Massad 2007; Tara Atluri's discussion of Massad, this volume); still others steadfastly claimed being gay was "no big deal" and regarded my interest as the product of Euro-American queer theory that attempted to correct its racial and geographical biases by discovering queer theories' Others. I thus became wary about the framing, circulation, and publication of my work, realizing that I was indeed participating in positing Trinidad as a specific actor in the spectrum of global gay identities, mapping Trinidad's "coming out," if you will, of a modernist sort that I would otherwise theoretically argue against. Yet this "coming out" formed the very epistemological ground that I stood on and produced toward and against.

At that time, "queer" was not a word that had much currency, either intellectual or colloquial, neither in Trinidad nor in the Caribbean more broadly. The Foucauldian "act-to-identity" telos was a primary frame through which the globalization of sexual identity was being comprehended. Originally a paradigm informing literary criticism, where a reconciliation of the non-concurrency of acts and identities could happen through textual reading, it became in ethnographies and empirical research a developmentalist temporal narrative re-accorded valence through uneven geographical and spatial circuits. Within historical periodization sexual "acts" marked the pre-modern (and indeed the act-to-identity split reflected nothing less than a designation of primitivism in global gay discourses such as those derived from Dennis Altman's work), while in queer transnational work, these same "indigenous" acts or acts without identities were increasingly signaled as anti-identity, queer, postmodern. In other words, there was now an "act-to-identity-to-anti-identity" telos with which to contend, all in an effort to disrupt the queer as western imperialism versus queer as liberation binary.

All of which is to say, Trinidad did not reveal itself to be the counterexample I had hoped to mobilize against the whiteness of queer theory nor the "global imperialist script" that Gloria Wekker problematizes (interview, this volume). Trinidad was almost always deemed "the best place" to be "out" in the Caribbean, while those who could afford it traveled to Miami to be "really out." Activist organizations were fully embedded in normative neoliberal gay and lesbian human rights discourses which insisted on modernist visibility in order to grieve on behalf of Other subjects, yet simultaneously required the oppression of these very subjects of visibility. As one long-time organizer said to me, "All we have are North American models for organizing, and that's all we've ever had. It can't be a problem." And of course hierarchies of race, class, and gender were rife in gay and lesbian spaces. The majority of organizers with whom I spoke identified as Afro-Trinidadian or Trinidadian, and the majority understood Indo-Trinidadians, especially Indo-Trinidadian women, to be "more oppressed," "backwards," "homophobic," "repressed," and deeply entangled in the demands of rigid kinship structures. Fears of a contaminating (homo)sexuality stemmed less from "the west" or from "whiteness" or "Americanization," and rather more vehemently from the racial conflicts between Indo- and Afro-Trinidadians. And yet, it also seemed the case that those Indians who participated in the Port-of-Spain networks were required to identify as Trinidadian over and above Indo-Trinidadian—a commitment to national identity that was implicitly African or creole was constitutive of the scene. Class tensions were rife, and predictably delineated the lines of political strategy, sometimes more so than racial

divides.

But Trinidad turned out to be something else far more complicated than a counterexample: it challenged singular conceptions of modernity from within Western modernity itself, and deconstructed the binaries of the local/global, imported/indigenous, making these very terms untenable as analytic frames. Here was a very concise example of how the “local” is always already saturated by the colonial archive—any recourse to the indigenous is inevitably framed by the epistemic violence of colonialism, a trenchant transnational feminist intervention that Gayatri Spivak articulates in “Can the Subaltern Speak?” (1984). Theorists of transnationalism have noted that the fundamental paradox of rapid and increased economic globalization is that as the nation-state is destabilized and its national boundaries rendered economically porous, it must reassert hegemonies of its imagined cohesiveness and geographic boundaries in social terms. M. Jacqui Alexander, one of the few theorists who have examined this process in terms of sexuality, avers that “the effects of political economic international processes provoke a legitimation crisis for the state. It then moves to restore its legitimacy by recouping heterosexuality through legislation” (1994, 9). The process of decolonization happens through the shoring up of heteronormativity through the promotion of the “new” and ever self-generating (procreative) nation that must “prove” itself to the colonial father in the face of destabilizing global trends. Stuart Hall, however, reminded us some time ago that the nation mobilizes to recoup itself not only through sameness, but within and through neoliberal capitalist manipulations and accommodations of “difference” (1991, 29).

Thus, as I argue in *Terrorist Assemblages* (2007), while it is crucial to examine how, as Alexander notes, the nation “disallows the queer body” (1994, 5), it may well be necessary to ask which nation and which queer bodies, and to interrogate how nations not only sanction but induce certain queer subjectivities over others. Resituating discourses of the nation in order to complicate a repressive versus productive binary foregrounds how “sexual political subjects” (Hanawa 1994, vii) use, appropriate, rely on, and are even produced through (and by), rather than simply oppose, discourses of the nation. Any terms of sexual citizenship, hetero and homo, are racialized, gendered, and class-inflected as well. My work in Trinidad, then, formed the genesis of homonationalism as an idea, one I later theorized in *Terrorist Assemblages*. For it became clear to me that while Trinidadian organizers were navigating a complex constellation of act-to-identity positionings on the global scene, this act-to-identity split was also being used to relegate and demote—pathologize, even—Indo-Trinidadian sexualities. As Andil Gosine (this volume) notes, the emergent field of Caribbean sexuality studies claims a visibility that may well be contingent upon “leav[ing] completely unconsidered the experience of Indo-Caribbean people and indentureship.”

The identity categories of “Afro-Trinidadian” and “Indo-Trinidadian” are obviously at odds with a racial ideology attached to creolization and an all-inclusive Trinidadian nationalism (one that often reveals itself to be covertly and sometimes overtly African, yet at other times indicating an upper class-inflected cosmopolitan hybridity). Yet these categories are mobilized frequently on behalf of their constituencies in order to render notions of cultural difference as empirical reality. (See for example Shalini Puri [1995]

and Aisha Khan [1995] on the uneasy co-existence of discourses of racial authenticity/purity and national unity). Given the never-ending debates about which population is greater, Indo- or Afro-, the representational elision of Indo-Trinidadians cannot be dismissed as a minoritized rights-based grievance. If the national image (indeed, the overall image of the Caribbean) still understood itself as inherently African, any right-based claims made vis-a-vis the state on behalf of homosexuals understood those homosexual subjects also to be African.

For example, in her reading of the Sexual Offenses Bill signed into law in Trinidad and Tobago in 1986, Alexander demonstrates that morality functions to align certain sexual acts with homosexuality as well as with “bad” heterosexuality and the perversions of buggery, incest, prostitution. The bill “...represents the first time that the coercive arm of the postcolonial state had confronted the legacy of its colonial trauma...” (1991, 135). Through this act, which borrowed its definitions of morality from British legislation of 1954, “homosexual sex was recriminalized, and lesbian sex became punishable [for the first time] under a new offense called ‘serious indecency’ if ‘committed on or towards a person sixteen years of age or more.’” (1991, 136).

Yasmin Tambiah’s important re-reading of Alexander’s work challenges her claim that “legislators felt prompted ‘to ensnare and to specifically control lesbian sex.’” But more crucially, Tambiah argues that a temporary cease-fire among racial factions in the service of promoting a nationalist masculinity informed the process of crafting this legislation. She writes, “antagonisms rooted in ethno-racial or religious differences appeared to either have been suspended or mutually accommodated when it came to curtailing women’s sexual autonomy and integrity, and to re-inscribing normative sexuality.” Alexander notes that “a range of ‘native’ sexualities were constructed (black/Indian/indigenous), and all colonized sexualities were essentially subordinated sexualities” (199, 11). But clearly, “all colonized sexualities” are not colonized the same. Even while underscoring that the legislation is built on postcolonial ideologies of ruling black nationalist masculinity, Alexander unwittingly naturalizes the state as African in her analysis, stopping short of acknowledging the differential effect of this naming of homosexuality on bodies displaced across a number of social locations, in particular, those of race and ethnicity.

Thus, the heteronormativity of the Trinidadian state is not only an apparatus that regulates sexual norms, but one that also reproduces racial norms. One reason (among many) for this “Africanization” of state-created identities might be attributed, as Selwyn Ryan argues, to the disenfranchisement that East Indian populations experienced in relation to the struggle for decolonization from the British (1995, 9). East Indians surmised that their social and economic positioning was more secure—certainly more predictable—under colonial rule than under what would inherently be African rule in a decolonized Trinidad. These populations therefore could not and/or did not participate in decolonization movements with the same verve as Africans did, given that they did not feel equally interpellated by the possibility of a sovereign state. What impact does this uneven spectrum of state interpellation have on postcolonial conceptualizations of heterosexuality as well as homosexuality?

To further complicate matters, Indo-Trinidadians are not only “improperly” national, they are also “improperly” diasporic. Indo-Trinidadians defy conventional diasporic mappings by suggesting Indianness without India—despite the circulation of Indian musical stars, movies, textiles, and Return-to-Roots tours—historically linked to a diasporic triad with Suriname and Guyana, yet producing diasporic populations that are not always welcomed by South Asian communities in the U.S., Canada, and Britain. Tejaswini Niranjana writes that East Indians embody an “illegitimate modernity” because they, along with other indentured Indian populations, had not “passed through, been formed by, the story of the (Indian) nation in the making.” (1999, 232). Further, she writes that “the African” came to represent the first contact with the West that Indian indentured labor encountered: “Exposure to western ways, therefore, came to the Indian through interaction with the Afro-Caribbean rather than through contact with the European.” (1999, 237). Thus East Indians are twice the “disavowed double”—neither measuring up to standards of Trinidadian-ness nor of diasporic Indianness.

Methodological conundrums

Is this domination of Afro-Trinidadian representation and homosexual subject formation the same, or even similar to, the homonationalism I mapped out in *Terrorist Assemblages*, which takes the U.S. as its primary site of interrogation? Certainly not. But the connections between self-proclaimed gay and lesbian identities and non-normative racially pathologized sexualities that may or may not be articulated through same-sex desire seem to be pivotal and necessary ones to make. Wondering about the relative absence of Indo-Trinidadian lesbians on the one hand and the long history of anxieties about disruptive East Indian female sexualities during indentureship, I realized I needed to return to the sites of chutney to examine the kinds of spaces Indian women were navigating through this musical form. The “lewd” public display of women wining “out of control” on stage or in the audience in these shows led to chutney music being criticized by classical musicians as “low grade,” with discourses about corrupt sexuality being reflective of anxieties about Indian women’s bodies during indentureship and their proximity to blackness. As Tara Atluri writes (this volume), Michelle Mohabeer’s re-projection of the Middle Passages between India and Guyana rearticulates this sexual pathologization of Indo-Caribbean women as sites for potential sexual transgression: “forced migration might have ironically created the potential for sexual dissidence.” This linkage—between non-normative sexualized racialization of Indo-Trinidadians (whether queer or not) and the study of queer subject formation that reasserts divisions between Afro and Indo bodies—goes beyond the reach of a traditional gay and lesbian ethnography (scholarship which tends to centralize “published declarations of sexual identity” [Jacobs 1996,288] and contributes to a modernist hegemony of “out” identity, privileging a homosexual nativist discourse about gay and lesbian anthropologists who are often assumed to be “studying their own”). It is, perhaps, the beginnings of what one might call a queer ethnography.

Why is a distinction between gay and lesbian ethnography and queer ethnography necessary? Some of the concerns I flagged earlier about “outings” of various kinds and complicity with globalizing identities and counter-identities might seem trivial or pedestrian now in light of the proliferation of modes of contact, the voluminous traffic of

information, the explosion of research on Caribbean sexualities in the last decade, and institutional interventions such as the International Resource Network (IRN) launched by the Center for Lesbian and Gay Studies (CLAGS). Yet the epistemological conundrums they initially highlighted remain constitutive paradoxes of knowledge production, and perhaps even more significantly as alliances of power and privilege run horizontally across national and regional boundaries (what Paola Bacchetta calls networks of “transnational queerness” and what others have called a “class” of transnational activists). As Foucault argues in his critique of the “repressive hypothesis,” the “taboo” subject of (homo) sexuality has numerous registers of expression; its silences and its visibilities are neither even nor totalizing. However it is an investment in a/the repressive model of sexuality that gives others the “speaker’s benefit.” In the *History of Sexuality*, Foucault notes the importance of situating who “gets” to talk about sexuality, why, and how, arguing against a dichotomy between silence and speech:

“Silence itself—the things one declines to say, or is forbidden to name, the discretion that is required between different speakers—is less the absolute limit of discourse, the other side from which it is separated by a strict boundary, than an element that functions alongside the things said, with them and in relation to them within over-all strategies. There is no binary division to be made between what one says and what one does not say; we must try to determine the different ways of not saying such things, how those who can and cannot speak of them are distributed, which type of discourse is authorized, or which form of discretion is required in either case.” (1978, 27)

In noting that the “right to speak about sex” becomes intertwined with the “honor of a political cause” (1978, 6), Foucault is in relative alignment with Spivak’s claim that the Western intellectual re-inaugurates himself as the sovereign subject through, not against, the accounting of the Other (just a tad ironic given Spivak’s critique of him). The speaker’s benefit accrued by the ethnographer of sexuality through perpetuating a regime of confession and articulation as the sign of a subject liberated from silence is endlessly complicit. The (typically white gay male) researcher writing an ethnography of sexuality is a speaker on behalf of (queer) sexual liberation, even as his or her project may purport to problematize such universalisms. The queer ethnographer is in an awkward position, part and parcel of, and beneficiary of, a global network among a confusedly marked and ambiguously bordered transnational community of gays and lesbians, inhabiting the “outness” she seeks to complicate, claim, or refuse for other subjects.

Thus a queer ethnography, along with taking up critical practices of feminist, self-reflexive, and experimental ethnography, (Visweswaran, 1994) shatters the disciplinary policing of what constitutes a “proper ethnography.” More crucially, queer ethnographies can resist the assignment of discourse to the silenced subject(s), while simultaneously tracing the epistemological conditions of possibility for a/the/any speaking subject to emerge. It might also decenter the fixation on sexual identificatory taxonomies and sexual object choice, focusing instead on reading practices as the basis of its queerness. In other words, at precisely the moment at which one could easily read toward

the obviousness of object-choice as a distinction, one must read away from it, and situate queerness elsewhere. Such a practice entails microanalyses of signification, sexuality as an affective force, and desire as assemblages of bodies, temporalities, energies, and becomings. Finally, given the prolific contemporary emergence of “queer area studies” and “queer regional studies,” of which Caribbean sexuality studies is one example, queer ethnographies also have the potential to disrupt the normative disciplinary production of yet another modernist knowledge formation.

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