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Modern Navigations: Indo-Trinidadian Girlhood and Gender-Differential Creolization

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Abstract

This article examines suburban, adolescent Indo-Trinidadian girls' engagement with gender-differential processes of modernization and creolization at the turn of the twentieth century. It argues that girls' experience of these processes should be understood in terms of their divergence, rather than their interlock. This divergence is a reflection of the globalized, Indian diasporic and locally racialized contexts within which processes of creolization and modernization are given meaning. Specifically, modernization's associations with white metropolitan femininities and being up-to-date with everything, cool, and liberal enable these girls to legitimately negotiate and navigate ethnic, gender, age and generational boundaries regarding their personal choice, femininity, sexuality and participation in national belonging. This does not mean that girls do not reproduce patriarchal expectations of Indo-Trinidadian girlhood. Rather, it explains how and why they both contest and reproduce these expectations, and their understandings of the opportunities and risks involved.

Drawing on questionnaire data gathered in 1999 among mainly 14–16 year old Indo-Trinidadian girls attending secondary school in North Trinidad, the article focuses on music, cinema and television, mainly of the US and India, in order to show how girls construct notions of appropriate modern Indo-Trinidadian girlhood through their

reception of popular culture. Overall, what emerges is that the navigations associated with modern Indo-Trinidadian girlhood are framed by notions of Indian female honour and (white) metropolitan reputation. This is an explicitly gendered frame and compares to that of Indian honour and creole reputation for adolescent Indo-Trinidadian males. The salience of this gendered framework among girls at the turn of the century provides a useful lens for thinking about shifts in Indo-Trinidadian young womanhood in the decade since, and for explaining the continued recasting of its terms across religion, geography and class as a means of expanding Indo-Trinidadian female generational power.