‘We have been called Carnival People’: The Festive Culture of Trinidad and Tobago

Milla Cozart Riggio

We have been called Carnival people; we live the whole style.... We are about a million and a half, no more than that, making up this twin nation of Trinidad and Tobago. Carnival distinguishes us from anybody else I have met, anywhere in the world... [T]his Trinidad Carnival is unique. It is part of us, and, like a passport, we go with it everywhere (John Cupid, Stegassy Interview, 1998: 96).

The twin island Republic of Trinidad and Tobago is simultaneously one of the most industrialized Caribbean nations and the home to the region’s signature annual Carnival, the largest of Trinidad and Tobago’s many festivals. Currently the world’s leading exporter of ammonia, second leading exporter of methanol and the largest supplier of liquefied natural gas to the United States, Trinidad has a lifestyle, an economy, and a cultural diversity harvested from old world civilizations in Africa, Europe, and Asia – all keyed simultaneously to its industrial energy production and its rich festive calendar. A half dozen miles off the coast of Venezuela, this small island republic is partially defined by what it hovers between: urban and rural communities, a kaleidoscope of ethnicities and races, industrial development and multi-ethnic, multi-religious festive celebrations.

T&T (as the Republic is often known) is poised between the demands of work and play (Riggio, 2004). Central to this lifestyle is Carnival, which in the late nineteenth century evolved as an African Emancipation celebration masked within the French Catholic pre-Lenten Carnaval (‘farewell to the flesh’). Popularly dubbed ‘the greatest show on earth’ or, ironically, ‘the Mecca’ of carnival performances, Trinidad Carnival coexists with a wide range of ethnic, religious, and secular celebrations.

For 2015, the Trinidad and Tobago government authorized thirteen official holidays. Beginning with January 1, they include New Year’s Day; the Spiritual (Shouter) Baptist Liberation Day on March 30; Good Friday and Easter Monday, April 3 and 6; Indian Arrival Day, May 30; the feast of Corpus Christi, June 4; Labour Day, June 19; Eid-Al-Fitr, Saturday July 18; Emancipation Day, August 1; Independence Day, August 31; Republic Day, September 24; Divali, November 11; Christmas Day, December 25 and Boxing Day, December 26. Of these official holidays, one