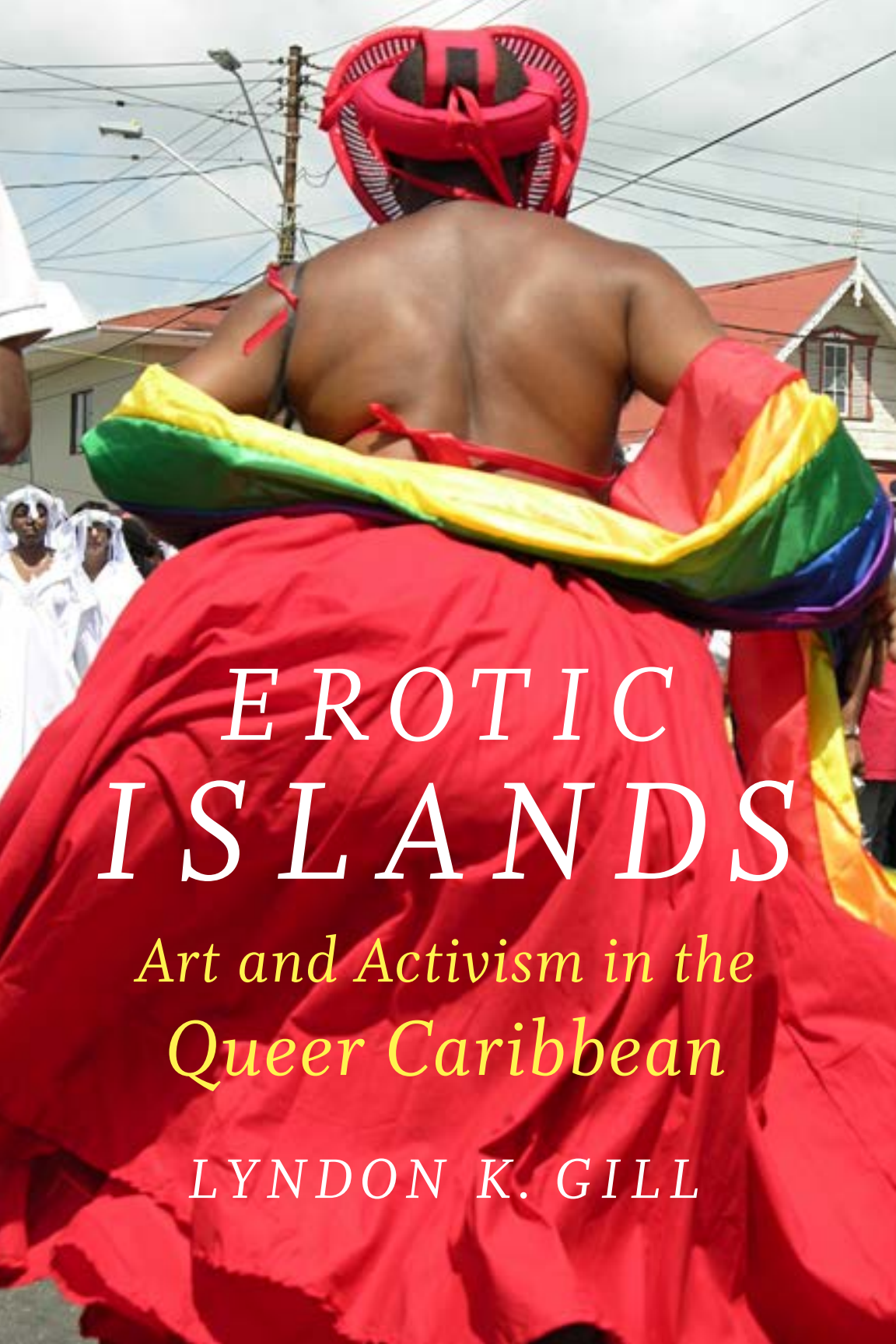


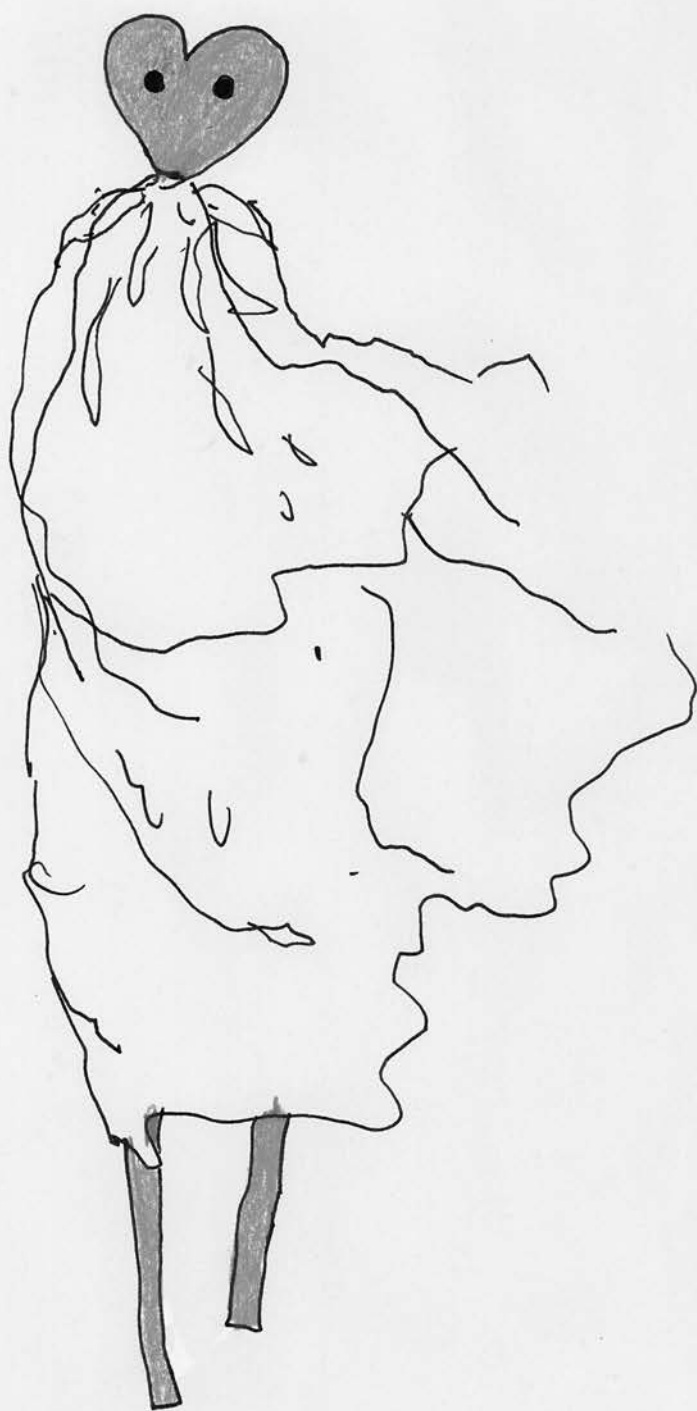


EROTIC ISLANDS

*Art and Activism in the
Queer Caribbean*

LYNDON K. GILL

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of the Callaloo Company Archive.

FOR MY ANCESTORS,
GIVEN AND CHOSEN

AND WITH PLENTY LOVE
AND RESPECT FOR

Merlyn, Donna, and Mary

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Ashé

A PORT OF ENTRY

Fetish and Folklore in a Yearning Region

Writing is an act of desire, as is reading. Why does someone enclose a set of apprehensions within a book? Why does someone else open that book if not because of the act of wanting to be wanted, to be understood, to be seen, to be loved? And desire is also an act of translation. . . . To write is to be involved in this act of translation, of succumbing or leaning into another body's idiom. . . . To desire then, to read and translate, may also be to envy, to want to become. To desire may also be to complicate.

DIONNE BRAND, *A Map to the Door of No Return*

The Antilles are a lucid dream. Their imagination predates the mid-fifteenth-century birth of the Genoese explorer credited with introducing them to Europe.

A phantom island that appears on Italian portolan charts of the Atlantic as early as 1424 and disappears after 1587, "Antilia" is a specter haunting the archipelago that arcs between the Atlantic Ocean and the Caribbean Sea. Medieval maps chart the fluctuating presence of Antilia as it moved throughout the Atlantic in the imagination of European cartographers,

expanding and contracting in size over time—a moving, breathing geological phenomenon. The Antilles then, from their first appearance, are invested with a fantasy that precedes them, a longing that quite literally names them.

A fetish of misplaced and mistaken desires across various geographies and intimacies, the Caribbean region itself—these affected Antilles—are a hundreds-of-years-old allegory for the frighteningly tangible effects of a complicated desire that both circumscribes the region and compels this book. The lauded Trinidadian-Canadian lesbian poet, novelist, and activist Dionne Brand—whose epigraph sets the tone for this opening—considers the literacy of desires that bring us to texts (be they manuscripts or perhaps cartographies).¹ Brand's imaginative curiosity about the terrain of desire in the act of reading/translating/writing provides a capacious entrepôt for the present engagement with the profound work of various desires on as well as within the fertile Caribbean imaginary. We begin here with a brief interrogation of the desires mapped onto the Caribbean as a necessary prelude to a deeper investigation of the cartography of desire within Caribbean cultural production and community building.

European efforts to map materially that which once lived wild in their imaginations was in no small part inspired by an anxious postlapsarian desire to return to paradise. Here the meaning of “paradise” is instructive especially because it remains one of the most persistent tropes used to define the Caribbean region. The word “paradise” is derived from the Avestan word *pairidaêza*; the literal meaning of this Eastern Old Iranian language compound word is “walled (enclosure)” from *pairi* (meaning “around”) and *diz* (meaning “to create or make”). Eventually used to describe primarily royal parks and menageries, which were often walled, the term first appears in Greek as a description of a park for animals and is most notably used in the Greek translation of the Hebrew Bible from the third to first century BCE (the Septuagint) to approximate the Hebrew word for “garden.”²

The Judeo-Christian Garden of Eden (literally a garden of “pleasure and delight”), the primary symbolic referent for the conceptualization of paradise in the Euro-American West, is described as a paradise as a result of this etymological ancestry. An idyllic enclosure for exotic flora and fauna, paradise quite literally contains a fantasy; it encloses a perverse fertility in the walled domain of private ownership. Thus, to call the Antilles paradise over and over again summons a zoological and botanical surrealism that is planted in the region long before the first Europeans set eyes upon the land itself.³ And so the Antilles remain, a *there* that is not ever there completely, but shifting

perpetually like an uneasy spirit between the material world and a fetishistic longing. Quite literally, these islands are called upon to stand in for that which is desired and immaterial (a disappeared Antilia, the elusive Indies), essentially that which they are not and yet still forced to become.

Trinidad and Tobago: A Caribbean Contact Zone

The unfulfilled fantasy (or wet dream?) of the Antilles exists always in precarious relation to the actual materiality of the region. Approaching this forced relationship from a different vantage point, the present analysis uses the firm grounding of site-specific artistry and activism as the principal coordinates by which to launch an ideological and semantic remapping of the very notion of erotic desire itself. The actual ground of this text is in fact an archipelago: the Republic of Trinidad and Tobago (T&T). The southernmost island nation of the Caribbean, T&T is only about seven miles northeast of Venezuela and just outside of the chain of islands known as the Lesser Antilles, though it is informally considered to be part of that chain. And yet, turning toward T&T does not necessarily mean turning away from the Caribbean as a whole.

Not only one of the most culturally complex nations of the Caribbean region, but also one of the primary sites of intra-Caribbean migration because of the strength of its economy—largely the result of being an economically and politically stable oil-producing nation in a sea of fickle tourism-dependent economies—T&T is here metaphorically representative of and quite literally composed of a pan-Caribbean cosmopolitanism. This old cosmopolitanism—created by pre-Columbian settlement routes, the layering of colonial histories, and contemporary migratory circuits—makes T&T a quintessential example of a very Caribbean cultural paradox in which unique singularity results from all manner of cultural contact, comingling, and creolization. Here too is a kind of desire and intimacy. The region, as the stalwart Caribbeanist anthropologist Michel-Rolph Trouillot reminds us, is nothing but contact perpetually drawing the past into the present: “Caribbean societies are inescapably heterogeneous . . . this heterogeneity is known to be, at least in part, the result of history. Caribbean societies are inescapably historical, in the sense that some of their distant past is not only known, but known to be different from their present, and yet relevant to both observers’ and natives’ understanding of that present” (Trouillot 1992, 21–22).

Caribbean history defies the West/non-West dichotomy that at one time was the guiding premise of anthropology; Caribbean “natives” were some

of the earliest postmodern subjects. In fact, it was, in large part, colonial exploration and exploitation in the Caribbean and Latin America that provided an “Other” against which modern European nationalism defined itself and provided the raw material for the industrial revolution, the harbinger of modern global capitalism (Anderson 1983).

In essence, what makes T&T particular is the persistence of regional cultural complexity within its borders. So, although the specificity of T&T as a geopolitical and cultural site is significant, that specificity does not allow one to dismiss the nation as a regional anomaly in large part because so many parts of the region—figuratively and quite literally—rub up against each other there. In this relatively young republic, a thickly layered cultural flesh is matched by an intimately layered temporality; in this geoconceptual site, approaching the contemporary requires traversing the past.⁴ So, the study that follows must be as interested in the historical genealogy of contemporary phenomenas as it is in the complexity of the modern moment. More precisely, if Trinidad and Tobago is the result of an intimate temporal quilting—characterized by a creative patchwork of past and present, legacy and innovation—then we must attend to the unfolding of time in the narratives about Trinbagonian artistry and activism that follow. Part of the reason, then, for attending so closely to the historical throughout this book is to make an explicit ideological and methodological statement against so frequently beginning and ending conversations about Caribbean life and work in the vanishing present.

Part of the work necessary for telling new kinds of Caribbean stories from the vantage point of T&T and other elaborate historical crossroads in the region involves creatively revisiting the past and perhaps even our relationship to time itself. Trinidadian lesbian transnational feminist theorist M. Jacqui Alexander’s meditation on the palimpsestic nature of time is instructive here for this remembering as remapping:⁵ “The idea of the ‘new’ structured through the ‘old’ scrambled, palimpsestic character of time, both jettisons the truncated distance of linear time and dislodges the impulse for incommensurability, which the ideology of distance creates. It thus rescrambles the ‘here and now’ and the ‘then and there’ to a ‘here and there’ and a ‘then and now’ and makes visible . . . the ideological traffic between and among formations that are otherwise positioned as dissimilar” (Alexander 2005, 190).

Alexander’s “here and there” and “then and now” provide points of entry for speaking about sites sedimented with layers upon layers of disparate cultural and historical narratives. These distinct time-and-place stories are

intricately intertwined in the Caribbean. Attending to the sensual flesh and the spiritual debts of postcoloniality as a political (im)materiality, this book's approach toward Trinbagonian history and culture makes an epistemological proposition. This proposed interpretive frame attends persistently and simultaneously to the political, sensual, and spiritual in the past/present of Trinbagonian artistry and activism. I introduce this political-sensual-spiritual—the combined master trope of this text—later in this preface briefly as the principal interpretive posture the book adopts for reading contemporary T&T through a historical lens. On these islands, as in the rest of the Caribbean region, the past and the present greedily consume each other.

Fantastic Anthropophagism: On Ravenous Metaphors

This mutual consumption across time brings to mind the ravenous trope of the Caribbean cannibal. If a fictive Antilia as paradise describes one tropic extreme—and here “tropic” signifies multiply as referent to the tropics, to the trope, and to a pivot point from which the word is derived—then the savage cannibal represents the other (as well as the Other) in the Caribbean region (Trouillot 2003). These two tropes are not mutually exclusive; in fact, the savage cannibal is thought to inhabit the Edenic paradise, wrapping purity and danger together in a perverse embrace (M. Douglas 1966). This ideological coupling, though contradictory, nevertheless persists into—both imported and homegrown—contemporary popular perceptions of the region. The Caribbean as “dangerous paradise” is most likely the result of overlaying the fantastical Antilia of the European imagination with nightmarishly exaggerated tales that returned with European explorers from the not so New World. The principal character in these grossly fictive tales of encounter and consumption was (and in a much more metaphorical sense continues to be) the cannibal.

It may have been the case that the peoples referred to as the “Caribs” actually did consume portions of human flesh as part of their war rituals in a symbolic gesture used to signify the ultimate defeat of the enemy and the incorporation of his strength into the body of the victor (Knight [1978] 1990, 22). However, there is little to no evidence to substantiate a claim that the entirety (or even the majority) of the Carib diet relied upon human flesh. The anthropophagist fantasies of the European explorers seem to have been allowed to run wild in the presentation of aboriginal peoples as blood-thirsty, flesh-eating monsters. It may even have been the case that Arawakan

descriptions of the Caribs' pursuit of them in order to "eat" them may have been a metaphorical reference to the well-documented forced incorporation of Arawakan women into Carib society, thus referencing the symbolic consumption of one cultural group by another (inevitably undermining presumed distinctions between these groups) (Knight [1978] 1990, 21). So, it is highly probable that this combination of symbolic methods of consumption, as ritual and as metaphor, may have lead to the misperception that the Caribs were indeed an anthropophagistic people.

Yet this perverse misinterpretation and its contingent exotic eroticism haunt the European in the Caribbean islands from the very moment of first contact. Transnational sociologist Mimi Sheller's thoroughly piquant *Consuming the Caribbean: From Arawaks to Zombies* exhumes the legacy of the spectral cannibal, which haunts the Caribbean region, as the guiding framework within which to read the figurative and literal exploitation of the region. Sheller proposes that as much historically as contemporarily, "Caribbean islands and Caribbean bodies have been made to work as sites for seeking pleasure, in the form of 'consumer cannibalism' of Caribbean 'difference'" (Sheller 2003, 145). Sheller transfigures the tropic (again in all three senses) cannibal by foregrounding it as metaphor for an exploitative political economy. She does not contest the symbolic presence of the cannibal in the region but rather responds to the ideological persistence of the figure with the disruptive inquiry, "Who was eating whom?" (Sheller 2003, 143). This question serves as a point of entry into a reconceptualization of the ways in which plantation economies and colonial capitalism in fact consumed the bodies, health, and lives of the indigenous peoples of the region as well as generations of enslaved and indentured laborers (Sheller 2003). This opportunistic capitalist consumption of Caribbean bodies provides the material and ideological legacy for the contemporary Caribbean tourist industry, which is the primary means through which the Euro-American West engages the Caribbean (Nixon 2015, 3–32, 89–125). The exotic fetishization of the Caribbean calls attention to the use to which Caribbean "difference" is put; here the familiar Other—as body and as location—is in essence consumed as an attractive commodity.⁶

Sheller identifies the ways in which this attraction is explicitly sexual, returning us to the previously mentioned paradisiacal fantasy of the Caribbean, but with one flagrant difference: "The new Eden is a perpetual garden in which sexuality can run rampant; rather than being expelled from the garden, humanity can indulge all the temptations of fertile nature and fertile

sex, without guilt” (Sheller 2003, 69). The Caribbean as a postlapsian sexual paradise is one of the primary global locations for both heterosexual and homosexual sex tourism (Brennan 2004; Kempadoo 2004; Alexander 2005; Padilla 2007; Nixon 2015). Sheller identifies the way in which this lush auto-poietic paradise serves metonymically for the wild, abundant, and available sexuality of Caribbean “natives.” Caribbean governments appeal directly to these tourist desires and vie competitively with each other to placate these fantasies of the region in order to maintain the substantial contribution that tourism makes to their gross national products. Returning to its etymological roots, “paradise” in the Caribbean has been summarily enclosed in all-inclusive resorts whose walled-in, well-manicured greenery, pristine private beaches (overflowing with imported white sand and eager dark sex workers), starched grinning servants, and round-the-clock security details have come to look more and more like elaborate menageries where the exotic animals are indeed the sun-hungry tourists themselves. While beyond the walls, the gates, and the barbed wire, the rest of the island most often remains off-limits precisely because it refuses to be “tamed.”

Skin Deep: The Soucouyant as Queer Mythos

Sheller reframes Caribbean cannibalism. She redeems the mistaken legacy of anthropophagy in the region by situating the Caribbean deep in the aching belly of (neo)colonial capitalism. Reframing is one way to tame this feral myth and its attendant fantasy of an innately bloodthirsty Caribbean savagery—a centuries-old expectation of the deadliest incivility, still flourishing today in the crime-anxious popular imagination within and beyond the region. Another approach is to reposition the cannibal within a specifically Caribbean mythic universe. For this repositioning then, I return to Trinidad and Tobago for a metaphysical presence: the soucouyant. A contested figure of Trinbagonian mythography, the soucouyant is a syncretic phenomenon that relocalizes the cannibal at the same time that it reveals the gendered and sexual implications of Caribbean mythography.⁷

Usually figured as an elderly sorceress living in solitude on the margins of a community, the soucouyant seems a mere feeble old woman during the day. But when night falls, she sheds her skin and takes to the sky. Placing her leathery husk in the spiced mouth of her kitchen mortar or in the womb of a silk-cotton tree, the soucouyant—now a ravenous burning flame—bursts into the balmy night. She leaves her berry-stain kiss on the tender neck or

inner thigh of her victims as they sleep, her calling card a collage of broken blood vessels below the skin surface. These nocturnal visits are commonplace for most Trinbagonians. “A soucouyant suck you, or what?” might be the playful retort to a fresh blood-bite blossom. This is a rhetorical question to be answered with a blush or a proudly mustered smile. When it comes to soucouyants, knowing glances and seductive grins are language enough. Man, woman, child—all can fall prey to this love *jumbie*, who slips through keyholes, floorboards, and seductively parted windows eager for the slightest *Cereus* breeze.⁸ She is the most fantastic of jumbies perhaps because she is known only in dreams. Her blood appetite sated, the sorceress returns to her skin before the coming dawn and spends her daylight hours dreaming of sweet bloods.

It is believed that to catch a soucouyant—if you had a mind to do such a frightful thing—there are at least two effective methods. The first is to find her skin and season its inside with coarse salt; the second requires fistfuls of rice scattered at a crossroads. According to folk wisdom, the salt prevents the soucouyant from returning to her skin, leaving her exposed to the withering daylight and vulnerable to the aggressions of her prey. Similarly, unable to pass the rice-strewn crossroads without stopping to pick up every individual grain, the soucouyant is left vulnerable to the merciless dawn. But there are always other solitary old women at the edges of unassuming villages; and among these, there will be one spirited enough to rub herself down with liver oil from a freshly interred corpse so she can slip her skin and explode aflame into the craving night. The soucouyant is reborn.⁹

Captured within the corpus of her myth is a long tradition of vampire folklore throughout Europe (usually with an anxious eye toward Eastern Europe), which is matched by similarly lengthy and fleshy traditions of blood-sucking apparitions traced back to Western Africa, the pre-Columbian Americas, and South (as well as island Southeast) Asia. One of the avatars of a characteristically Caribbean mythology, the soucouyant pierces the layers of the Trinbagonian cultural body, revealing cross-bleeding even in the mythic imaginary. Though the term “soucouyant” is believed to be derived from the terms *sukunyadyo* (male) and *sukunya* (female), both describing a cannibalistic witch, in a hybrid Fula/Soninke tongue, the spirit—like the islands that birthed her—contains much more than this naming can manage (Warner-Lewis 1991; Anatol 2000; F. Smith 2006).¹⁰

Rubbing the soucouyant up against the cannibal reveals not only how these figures ghost each other—if blood is a synecdoche for the body, con-

suming the blood is in essence consuming the body—but also reveals gender as the point at which the flesh gives way in this comparison. Much like the always presumedly male figure of the cannibal haunts the region, the always presumedly female figure of the soucouyant haunts Trinbagonian mythology; both of these jumbies—including the defiantly imagined female cannibal and male sukunyadyo—attest inadvertently to a sensuous homoeroticism imbedded in their narratives yet largely ignored. If the gendering of the soucouyant is imagined to persist even beneath her skin, then she cannot fly from a kind of queer intimacy as she places her ghostly lips upon her bisexed dreamers. This bisexual intimacy is often overshadowed by an understandably critical feminist reading of the soucouyant as a sexist mythos used to socially chastise—especially postmenopausal and thus postreproductive—Caribbean female sexual autonomy (Anatol 2000; F. Smith 2008).

Although I am in solidarity with the project of exposing how the soucouyant myth has been (and continues to be) used to constrain Caribbean female sexual agency, I am less concerned here with readings of the figure as metaphor for nonreproductive Caribbean women than I am with expanding the allegorical potential of the narrative. A figurative body through which to approach the sensual (bisexual intimacy), the spiritual (ritualized anthropophagy, as in Holy Communion), and the political (gender-based social discipline), the soucouyant recalls the tropic trinity I introduced earlier. By foregrounding this trinity, I am able to propose for the soucouyant a different kind of metaphorical significance for the region. If the Antilles are indeed an *oneiro-ecstasy* first dreamt up in Western Europe but now sustained by the shared slumbering consciousness of the Euro-American West and the postcolonial Caribbean, then I propose conceiving of the soucouyant as a queer symbol of that which persists outside of the manufactured dream sequence of Caribbean fantasy. The soucouyant flies outside of the fleshy margins of the lucid dreamer's surreality, a testament to the incompleteness of the dream. This flaming symbol shifts our attention from fetishistic dreams to the reality of a region.¹¹

The soucouyant is an instructive queer metaphor precisely because it resists the flights of fancy threatening to seduce us away from the intimate relationship between the dreamer and this fleshless spirit. The two are so sensuously intertwined that it is impossible to see one without a glance at the other. In fact, their separation is contested by ingestion, the blood-as-body of the dreamer clotting in the soucouyant's thirsty belly. Capturing the

full picture requires a perspective broad enough to see the lucid dream (the fantasy Caribbean), the enraptured dreamer (tourism's dream seekers), and the feasting queer (quotidian life in the region) simultaneously.

Concluding Notes on a New Beginning

This opening engagement introduces two central themes of the book: historical consciousness and erotic desire. We have laid a firm foundation for a careful attentiveness to how thoroughly the past haunts the present in the Caribbean. And we have begun to explore the expansiveness of a tropic trinity I use to redefine our relationship to the erotic. The political, the sensual, and the spiritual as abstract principles and as precise (meta)physical social systems are at once conceptual and experiential isles that this study reveals to be an interconnected archipelago; an archipelago whose "unity is submarine" (Brathwaite 1974, 64). Across this underwater mountain range, vast peaks break the surface and give the impression of distinction despite profound continuity just below the waves.

This archipelago as metaphor holds the islands of Trinidad and Tobago together as closely as it holds these island elements—the political-sensual-spiritual—that I propose give new geography to erotic desire. As my argument progresses, I will elaborate more on this new topography of the erotic; however, for now, it is sufficient to mark these constituent elements as traceable cues that will reappear often. The political-sensual-spiritual represents precisely the pivot points around which this study can be turned—a tropical analysis in the broadest etymological sense. And yet we must not lose sight of Trinbagonian particularity, the accrual of grounded experiences that exist in an intimate relationship with the Caribbean as lucid dream but are not wholly present in the fantasy. This is an entry point into those experiences and the vital lessons they hold for our thinking and our living. Open your eyes. Come see.

A Queer Cartography of Desire

Erotic Islands: Art and Activism in the Queer Caribbean is about the long history of sophisticated strategies same-sex-desiring Caribbean artists and activists have used to make social and cultural interventions. Homophobic exclusions are certainly as unavoidable in the Caribbean region as they are globally, but the present study is far more concerned with the means by which same-sex-desiring people *survive* by literally and figuratively clearing space for themselves in the public domain through artistic expression and community-building techniques.

How do queer Caribbeans claim fertile spaces for themselves in places that have long had a queer relationship to formal legal and moral dictates, in places where authority—colonial, postcolonial, neocolonial—has historically been and continues to be precarious and imperfect at best?¹ To what extent do overemphasizing exclusions prematurely blind us to various kinds of queer *embeddedness* seldom remarked upon in a scholarly literature racing to demonstrate and document systemic homophobia in the region?²

Informed by seventeen months of uninterrupted field research and nearly a decade of itinerant research trips around Trinidad's capital city, Port-of-Spain, and all along the Western tip of Tobago, this study contends that the survival strategies of lesbian and gay Caribbeans are at least as dynamic as the systems of structural and ideological oppression that have attempted to

marginalize nonnormative bodies and desires. Through foregrounding a queer presence in Carnival masquerade design, calypso musicianship, and HIV/AIDS prevention and care services—the artistic genres and the activist cause that hold pride of place in T&T’s national imaginary—*Erotic Islands* documents a grass-roots lesbian and gay artistry and activism that has long been culturally rooted.

This book positions specific works created by two of T&T’s most renowned and revered living artists as focal points for a historically attentive engagement with the genres over which they reign—calypso and Carnival. Wedded to this analysis of artistry is a local, regional, and internationally informed investigation of HIV/AIDS prevention and support services provided by and for same-sex-desiring communities in T&T. A reconceptualization of the erotic serves as the organizing hermeneutic that holds these various constitutive elements together and provides the conceptual backbone of this analysis. This redefinition of eros is profoundly inspired by the thought of Afro-Caribbean American lesbian feminist warrior poet Audre Lorde. In fact, following Lorde, I attend so closely to reworking the erotic because the book is to a significant extent also an ethnography of a new praxis of eros—of the thought-action possibilities the renewed concept opens.

And yet this new approach to the study of (same-sex) desire in a Caribbean context cannot ignore the fact that it inherits a nearly seventy-year academic history of investigating Trinbagonian gender and sexuality. The most widely circulated early academic studies of quotidian life in the anglophone Caribbean that integrated discussions of gender and sexuality date back to the 1930s and 1940s. These early ethnographic studies were the ambitious work of famed anthropologists Frances and Melville Herskovits (Herskovits and Herskovits 1934, 1936, 1937, and 1947). The Herskovitses’ Caribbean ethnographies actively contest the systematic pathologization of kinship structures and sexual behavior patterns in the region that American sociologists (most notably E. Franklin Frazier [Frazier 1932 and 1939]) had deemed the ontological inheritance in particular of Afro-Caribbean working-class communities as part of the legacy of slavery and the plantation system. Melville Herskovits made his best effort to valorize Caribbean—and African American—patterns of sexual interaction and familial organization through exploring their West African cultural heritage. A heritage that while distinct from a Euro-American behavior model was not ontologically rooted at all but rather taught, learned, contextual, and far from pathological.

In their monograph *Trinidad Village* (1947), one of the earliest ethnographies of the island, the Herskovitses briefly mention homosexuality among

working-class men and women in the northeastern Trinidadian village of Toco: “Homosexuality is considered a disgrace. The homosexual is an object of ridicule and abuse . . . among women, it is termed ‘making zanmi’ and there is much talk and ‘plenty song’ about such persons” (Herskovits and Herskovits 1947, 128). Perhaps the earliest ethnographic mention of homosexuality on the island, the Herskovitses’ frustratingly brief reference nevertheless marks a homosexual presence on the island as part of its early entrance into the ethnographic record. Though the homosexual—“object of ridicule and abuse”—remains commented upon but voiceless, the Herskovitses’ merely mentioning the persistent presence of male and female homosexuals in Trinidadian discourse performs a parallel task of introducing homosexuality into the scholarly discourse.

Importantly, the Herskovitses make explicit reference to female homosexuals. Indeed, they go so far as to introduce a very important linguistic particularity that deserves closer attention. A classic term with waning contemporary resonance, *za(n)mi* is believed to be a creolized form of the French *les amies* ([female] friends). This term marks a close friendship between women or men. While researching over the last fifteen years in T&T, I have heard primarily gay men in their mid to late thirties and older use the term to refer to their close gay male—perhaps somewhat effeminate—friends. I seldom hear younger gay men or lesbians use the term *zami* in casual conversation. However, upon asking about its usage explicitly during a lesbian group interview, the women insisted—as the Herskovitses note—that one “makes zami” (literally a descriptor of intimacy between women) so that the term describes “what you do, not who you are”; it defines here a behavior, not an identity. However, one woman admitted that the word had fallen out of usage, poetically explaining, “Words are like fruits. There are lots of fruits that are no longer with us. And there are lots of words that are no longer with us” (Las Cuevas 2008). Ironically, even the words used to describe fruits may in time ripen and rot. And yet, though present here in some region-specific semantic detail, same-sex desire amongst women or men is still abandoned by the Herskovitses to the margins of their study. Trinidadian homosexuality is one sexual behavior pattern that the Herskovitses make no attempt to contest with their West African cultural inheritance hypothesis.

And yet this early kinship and sexual behavior study is a critical beginning for a discussion of same-sex desirous communities in T&T in large part because of the role of social scientists—especially anthropologists—throughout the Caribbean region in defining the Caribbean sociocultural norm for family

structure and sexual behavior against the imposition of Euro-American moralizing models of sex-kin normality.³ Although in many other respects quite thorough, the Herskovitses' hasty treatment of homosexuality nevertheless maps queer presence as part of their topography of the conjoined territory of Trinidadian sex-gender-sexuality. As feminist sociologist Kamala Kempadoo has highlighted, studies such as *Trinidad Village* confirm the presence of same-sex relations in preindependence anglophone Caribbean territories such as Trinidad (Kempadoo 2004, 45). Thus, the present study inherits the Herskovitses' legacy as both a significant precedent that must be acknowledged and a pernicious haunt that must be exorcised. In the more than seven decades since the Herskovitses published *Trinidad Village*, a book-length scholarly study of same-sex-desiring communities in Trinidad and Tobago has yet to flesh out and contest the blanket dismissal that has for too long stood in as the final published word on Trinbagonian homosexuality—the final word until now.⁴

However, much more than a mere recuperative text, *Erotic Islands* marks a significant shift away from the emphasis on cultural disavowal, juridical exclusion, and unmediated violence in the scant more recent treatments of queer English-speaking Caribbeans. Certainly, it has been (and continues to be) necessary to mark exclusionary practices—at the local, national, and international levels—in the region, but the conversation about queerness in the Caribbean has become stuck in demonstrating ideological, structural, and individual (often violent) erasures and exclusions. Insisting on moving beyond this impasse in the analysis of Caribbean queerness is not intended as a subtle side step of homophobia as a vector of oppression, but rather as a refusal of homophobia as a stopping point in the conversation.⁵ In fact, it is by centering Audre Lorde and her attempt at expanding the erotic that we are able to shift the discourse on queer Caribbean experience toward a new conceptual horizon.

Precious Lorde: The Book of Eros

In what are perhaps the most conspicuous—and certainly the most concise—articulations of an emergent black queer diaspora studies and its correlative budding black queer diaspora theory, cultural studies scholar Rinaldo Walcott lends lead voice to a now distinctly resonant chorus of interest in Lorde's oeuvre among a generation of scholars determined to hold together black studies, queer studies, and diaspora studies (R. Walcott 2005,

2007).⁶ For Walcott, this return to Lorde is primarily about recognizing that conversations between black diasporic feminism and postcolonial feminism form the nexus at which black queer diaspora studies and its new register of black queer theorizing take shape (R. Walcott 2007, 36). Putting an even finer point on Walcott's assertion, the queer Caribbeanist literary theorist and feminist Omise'ke Tinsley continuously encourages my attention to the fact that one of the distinguishing features of an emergent queer Caribbean studies is its grounding in black (lesbian) feminist scholarship. This lineage is certainly one the present work proudly inherits while working hard to earn its place at the (kitchen) table.

A (black) queer theory unwilling to relinquish its engagement with feminist of color critique cannot avoid recognizing Lorde—though the recognition comes belatedly—as a queer theorist. Lorde is a theorist so queer in fact that two decades after her passing, academics have finally begun to brave the broadest and deepest implications of her thinking; Walcott ushers us in her direction: “I want to read Lorde as a queer theorist, a queer theorist for whom queer theory's disavowal of feminism and its white gay masculinity means that she is too difficult to digest in terms of its institutional claims and positioning” (R. Walcott 2007, 36). What might it mean to add “theorist” to the mantric litany of descriptors used to summon the warrior poet? In part, it may mean that the existing scholarship on queerness in the African diaspora comes one breath closer to recognizing some of the fruitful theoretical interventions cultivated from the soil of black queer diasporic experience and artistry. But what if this recognition of Lorde as a theorist—a black queer theorist of diasporic scope—just barely misses placing a fine enough point on the value of thinking deeply through the legacy Lorde has left us?

Inspired by philosopher Lewis Gordon's insistence that the abstract thought of critical reflection (the principal domain of the theorist) reaches toward philosophical inquiry in part on the shoulders of perennial questions (*What does it mean to exist? How is life meaningful? How do we know what we know?*) that echo through Lorde's oeuvre, I consider what it might mean to read Audre Lorde as a philosopher continuing in the tradition of august Caribbean thinkers such as Sylvia Wynter (L. Gordon 2008, 8). And even more precise still, I propose that we include Lorde's work—poetry, prose, fact, fiction, and all the supple spaces she delighted in between them—in a long pedigreed lineage of what Gordon calls “existential philosophies” and places apart from, but by no means subordinate to, the distinct ideological movement christened “existentialism” (L. Gordon 2000, 10). A prolific

thinker who may not have defined herself as an existentialist, but whose positions nonetheless have an existential dimension (among others, of course) premised on philosophical questions about embodied agency and situated experience, Lorde has bequeathed us a vast intellectual inheritance that I would not pretend to properly parse here in toto (L. Gordon 2000, 10–11, 16). However, as a means by which to frame the current inquiry, it is vital to foreground one theme in Lorde’s work that has garnered very eager attention in recent scholarship about African diasporic communities, queer sexualities, and composite subjectivities: the erotic.

Nowhere in Lorde’s oeuvre is her conceptualization of the erotic more explicit—though perhaps not the most transparent—than in the conference paper she first delivered in 1978, which would by 1984 be enshrined as “Uses of the Erotic: The Erotic as Power” in her now near-canonical collection of essays and speeches *Sister Outsider* (Lorde [1978] 1984, 53–59).⁷ These seductive and yet troublesome seven pages have been the most heavily cited and strategically deployed by the cadre of scholars deeply interested in using a Lorde-inspired erotics to think through quotidian experience and imaginative possibility in the African diaspora (Weir-Soley 2009; Tinsley 2010; Allen 2011; Sheller 2012; King 2014).⁸

Come Again: Rereading Lordean Erotics

Although the details of the context within which Lorde delivered her paper “Uses of the Erotic: The Erotic as Power” seldom find their way into even the most otherwise attentive discussions of the text, these details are crucial if we are to adequately meet any of the challenges the paper seems to pose to its broadest theoretical applicability. Delivered on August 25, 1978, as part of the Fourth Berkshire Conference on the History of Women hosted by Mount Holyoke College in western Massachusetts, Lorde’s “Uses of the Erotic” was intended for an audience primarily of women historians (exceedingly white and heterosexual), who had organized their own conferences in response to the isolation they had experienced within the exceedingly male American Historical Association (De Veaux 2004, 220).⁹ Amid significant protest and rallying about the exclusion of lesbian history from the Berkshire Conference’s main agenda, Lorde delivered what has since become her classic treatise on the importance of women scholars—lesbians like herself among them—resisting a dangerous urge to embrace a pseudoscientific objectivity sanitized of feeling, emotion and intuition (stereotypically “female afflic-

tions” then, perhaps, as now, in the academy and beyond it) in an attempt to contest sexist presumptions about the inadequacy of female scholars and the significant work they produce.¹⁰ And while these details of context and audience cannot explain all of what Lorde said that day—nor do they give us any clue as to why the irreverent poet uses the language she does for an audience of women historians—I propose that these bits of information do tell us something about why Lorde articulates the erotic as she does in the paper.

Lorde’s black lesbian feminist underpinnings are undeniable in her oeuvre, and one cannot (certainly should not) avoid the centrality of women’s struggles and especially the challenges faced by women of color in general and black women in particular to the vast majority of Lorde’s writings. So, I do not mean to undermine the ideological and political importance of Lorde foregrounding women in “Uses of the Erotic,” but I do want to better situate the seemingly singular emphasis on women and the erotic in the text. Remembering that Lorde is delivering a paper to a conference of women historians, honoring Simone de Beauvoir at a women’s liberal arts college perhaps begins to help us explain what might be misread as Lorde confining the erotic to the exclusive domain of women—or at least of the female within each of us—as seems evident (without contextual considerations) in the troublesome second sentence of the essay: “The erotic is a resource within each of us that lies in a deeply female and spiritual plane, firmly rooted in the power of our unexpressed and unrecognized feeling” (Lorde [1978] 1984, 53). This sentence is merely the beginning of Lorde’s return again and again to articulating the importance of the erotic for women exclusively. Even if one is willing to accept that Lorde’s “deeply female plane” may exist within men as well, scholars would be more comfortable perhaps with the notion that the erotic exists in a deeply *feminine* plane that men can also access within themselves. And this feminine erotic may have been Lorde’s implicit intention, but of course the text predates more recent gender theory on sex-gender distinctions, and there really is no way around Lorde addressing women directly about women exclusively with regard to relationships (sexual or otherwise) between women. So, most scholars who take up this essay either embrace what appears to be Lorde’s theorizing of the erotic as exclusively female or chalk that emphasis up to an essentialist failing on Lorde’s part and make use of her erotic while ignoring her gynocentrism.

While it may be the case that Lorde conceived of the erotic as the exclusive domain of women, I contend instead that we must read Lorde for the audience gathered and not presume that she would reject the proposition that

eros as a principle be allowed to retain the widest possible applicability—without losing its necessary attention to the ground of lived experience (of women, of men, of trans people, of heterosexuals, of queers, of people of color, etc.). Perhaps Lorde would disagree with my reading and insist on a politically and ideologically vital essentialist perspective on the erotic, but for the task at hand I require a broader eros that places Lorde among a long lineage of philosophers who have wrestled with the concept from early in the history of human thought throughout ancient Egypt and Greece. Most conspicuously, this lesbian poet philosopher's engagement with eros brings another to mind: Sappho—the classic lesbian poet-turned-philosopher by classicist and creative writer Anne Carson in her luxurious essay *Eros: The Bittersweet* (Carson 1986).¹¹ Carson's reading of Sappho (among others, most notably of Socrates' revelrous reasoning on Eros in *The Symposium* [Plato [385–370 BC] 2008] and our reimagining of the erotic through Lorde position us to recognize eros's sweet bitterness as a philosophical metaphor.

As an important orienting mechanism, Carson defines the Greek word “eros” as “want/lack/desire for what is missing” and then proceeds to unfold the concept's inherent pleasure-pain paradox primarily through Sappho's poetics (Carson 1986, 4, 10, 11). With individual romantic relationships as her primary referent, Carson describes eros as an ultimately unfulfillable desire; for her, it is the simultaneous delight (sweet) of reaching toward a love ideal and the pain (bitterness) of always falling short because one cannot have a thing and still want it in the same way (Carson 1986, 30, 62, 70, 171). Other fissures of desire open to replace the sated wish, and we rush to fulfill those new wants, whose satisfaction will surely birth others. In line with Carson's reading, I want to expand Sappho's bittersweet eros beyond solely romantic relationships toward a larger affective metaphor for other social dynamics within which the sweet bitterness of desire describes a relationship between lived reality and hoped-for ideals in various spheres of existence. I will discuss what it may mean to merge Carson and Lorde—mindful of the defining tensions that merging reveals—for our redefinition of eros shortly, but it suffices to recognize here that eros reveals realms of experience (like love/pleasure and hatred/pain) that seem disparate but are in fact linked. Those of us familiar with Lorde's oeuvre will recognize this bridging work as indicative of the warrior poet's philosophical impulse to connect (experiences, ideas, identity categories, people, places, and feelings, often through poetry's metaphors and similes) across difference through the rallying of artistry and the poetry of activism. Approaching Lorde's erotic as a philosophical principle

about which she is offering a theory positions us to more accurately read Lorde's definition of the erotic and focus our attention here on what Lorde might be trying to say about the principle of eros itself and how it may indeed save our lives.

Much scholarship on "Uses of the Erotic" has been hesitant to admit what appears quite clearly from even the most cursory reading of the essay. True to its etymological roots and to its historical usage, Lorde's essay of the erotic is far from an easy definitive statement. In fact, in it one recognizes Lorde herself trying to write through a still uncertain investigation of what it might be while struggling with the inadequacies of how it is popularly defined. In this struggle with the erotic we are able to witness in a single finished piece—perhaps more readily than in much of Lorde's other prose work—Lorde as existential philosopher *and* poet pushing her theorizing to uncertain extremes in an attempt to redefine an ancient principle. Nearly in the perfect center of the paper—at its heart, if you will—Lorde offers her clearest (though still not absolutely transparent) definition of what she means by the erotic:

It has become fashionable to separate the spiritual (psychic and emotional) from the political, to see them as contradictory or antithetical. . . . In the same way, we have attempted to separate the spiritual and the erotic, thereby reducing the spiritual to a world of flattened affect, a world of the ascetic who aspires to feel nothing. But nothing is farther from the truth. . . . The dichotomy between the spiritual and the political is also false, resulting from an incomplete attention to our erotic knowledge. For the bridge which connects them is formed by the erotic—the sensual—those physical, emotional, and psychic expressions of what is deepest and strongest and richest within each of us, being shared: the passion of love in its deepest meanings. (Lorde [1978] 1984, 56)

Even in her attempt to define erotic knowledge as that which defies false dichotomies between the political and the spiritual as well as between the spiritual and what Lorde eventually calls the sensual, one recognizes a slippage (a seeming redundancy) in which she struggles to decouple the sensual from the erotic.¹² This decoupling must not be misunderstood as Lorde's attempt to deny the sensuality of her new erotic, but rather to accommodate the political and the spiritual alongside sensuality in her new theoretical architecture. If "our erotic knowledge" requires that we attend to the political and spiritual alongside sensuality, intimacy, feeling, affection, empathy

and love, then the erotic as mere euphemism for sex or even sensuality cannot persist. It is in the moment when Lorde is forced to replace “the erotic” with “the sensual” that her reconceptualization of the erotic itself achieves its most potent coherence. If the sensual (“those physical, emotional, and psychic expressions of what is deepest and strongest and richest within each of us, being shared: the passion of love in its deepest meanings”) provides a bridge between the political and the spiritual, then “the erotic” constitutes the entire structure and ought not to be reduced to an easy symmetry with any of its composite elements.

Extending Lorde, I propose that the erotic must be reconceptualized as a perspectival trinity that holds together the political-sensual-spiritual at their most abstract; in other words, “the erotic” describes various formal and informal power hierarchies (the political), sexual as well as nonsexual intimacy (the sensual), and sacred metaphysics (the spiritual) simultaneously. And here, if we merge this logical expansion of Lorde’s erotic with Carson’s interpretive framing of eros as paradoxical desire, we can recognize the defining tensions governing this new tripartite conception of the erotic. The three constitutive elements of the erotic each represent a negotiation of the tension between an ideal vision and our lived reality. What if politics at its grassroots is a desire for more just power dynamics despite the seductive imbalance that present power dynamics foster? What if sensuality at its heart is a desire for the dissolution of the seemingly bounded self despite the epidemic of selfish individualism? What if spirituality at its core is a desire for a metasystem of accountability and a larger continuity of existence despite the persistence of tangible immediacy and the seeming finality of mortality?¹³

Then, political desire, sensual desire, and spiritual desire might provide the interconnected infrastructure that gives substance to a new erotic. Again, areas of experience that may seem disparate lend themselves—across a bridging desire—to the linking work that Lorde reveres in eros. These conceptual linkages provide a mirror for the personal connections (seldom easy, effortless, or safe) that are a vital resource in Lorde’s work. If connection in general proves an important governing principle for Lorde, then connection specifically between human beings—a deep sharing of pursuits (physical, emotional, intellectual)—“forms a bridge between the sharers which can be the basis for understanding much of what is not shared between them, and lessens the threat of their difference” (Lorde [1978] 1984, 56).¹⁴ Lorde reassures us that once in touch with the erotic—which can be achieved only through fostering deep connections with others across a range of political,

sensual, and spiritual desires—one is not only less willing to accept feelings of powerlessness, despair, and depression, but also more inclined to pursue structural changes in society (Lorde [1978] 1984, 58, 59).

I will return to the erotic as a community-building tool and as a motivation for social change (or at least arts-initiated ideological shifts) in the chapters that follow, but for now it is sufficient to recognize eros as a radiant prism through which to interpret the lesbian/gay artistry and grassroots activism presented in the chapters that follow. This use of eros as a lens, vital for surveying the elaborate topography of connections we share as political, sensual, and spiritual beings, is the principal theoretical and methodological proposition of this book. Through this erotic looking glass, an intertwined political-sensual-spiritual provides a strategic wellspring that lesbian and gay Trinbagonians use not simply to persist despite attempted marginalization but, more profoundly, to summon the courage to push back against homophobia with creativity and determination.

At the heart of eros as a renovated concept is the confidence that political, social, and cultural exclusions can (and must) be confronted through community building, through touch, and through faith. Politicized power hierarchies, sensual intimacy, and spiritual metaphysics present interrelated obstacles *and* opportunities that the lesbian and gay artists and activists at the center of this study must negotiate not only to survive cultural disavowals, juridical exclusions, and various forms of institutional and individual violence but also to clear a space for queer imagining and queer fellowship in their midst. And perhaps this strategy for how to remain undeterred in the face of oppression might prove instructive for other similar (or very different) communities in other contexts, communities of interlinked beings desperately searching for a path out of depression, despair, and self-effacement. The erotic may just be our way out.

A Matter of Method, or How to Write an Ethnography That Is Not One

As much a methodological proposition as it is an interpretive intervention, the erotic also provides a way in. What might it mean for scholars to work inspired by this broadened conceptualization of the erotic? How might this new eros shape our expanding cartography of the queer Caribbean? It is important methodologically to emphasize here again that this book has not been written in isolation. Conceptualized, researched, written, and revised

in the intellectual and actual company of a cadre of queer Caribbeanists, this text is touched by over a decade of countless interactions, conversations, upsets, revelations, distractions, coincidences, visions, hugs, and debates. Recognizing the presence of the political, the sensual, and the spiritual in the community of minds who continue to inspire, intrigue, frustrate, and preserve me is part of recognizing the methodological implications of the erotic.

However, even beyond the kinds of erotic interlinkages that one might be able to mark in acknowledgments or follow through citation practices, the erotic has been central to the methods by which I have gathered all of the data central to this book. My ideas, my perspective, my questions, and my very sense of self have been influenced not only by a community of black queer scholars but also by a community of diasporic black queer intellectuals, artists, and activists within and beyond the academy. Although the various ways in which my academic kin—the queer family that we are—show up in the work are archived in this text as in any other, I marry this archive of citations with another that explicitly documents the dynamic relationships I developed as part of same-sex desirous communities in Trinidad and Tobago. This sister archive is as vital a constitutive element of the book as the chapters surrounding it.

Based on excerpts from my field notebooks, *From Far Afield: A Queer Travelogue (Parts I–IV)* is a reflection segmented into four interludes placed between the chapters of this book. These interludes document my quotidian experiences in T&T over a period of a year and five months, from February 5, 2007, to July 22, 2008, and create a collage of this finite period of time, my relationship to that moment, and the various relationships in which I became entangled during that time. Beginning with prefield research trips during the summers of 2003, 2004, and 2005 ranging in length from two weeks to two months, my journeys to T&T culminated in a ten-month research trip from October 2007 to August 2008 under the auspices of a Fulbright fellowship, which extended a previous seven-month research trip undertaken in February 2007. My field notes over the course of this period map my time in T&T but also provide a partial cartography of my inner thought landscape. The erotic is unavoidable here again not only in explicit reflections hyperconscious of the interworkings of power hierarchies, sensual intimacy, and sacred metaphysics, but also as a frame within which to read the kinds of interactions and revelations—saturated with the political, sensual, and spiritual—that this travelogue documents across my own body of experiences.

As a queer Afro-Trinidadian, born in New York City and raised on the nostalgia of my immigrant mother and grandmother—who returned me to Nelson Street, Port-of-Spain enough to settle a little Trini English Creole under my tongue—I am also a subject of this inquiry. “Subject” here in two senses: the authoring subject and an implicit subject (for better or worse) of this study. *From Far Afield* is my negotiation of this subjectivity alongside the other same-sex-desiring Trinbagonians who populate this analysis. These are subjects with whom I share “an equally affect-saturated subjecthood” to this day (J. L. Jackson 2013, 243). From the vantage point of this shared affective landscape, this travelogue narrates two stories simultaneously: a trip into the field that is at once a journey “home,” and a return home that is at once an immersion in the unfamiliar familiarity of T&T.

Although these patches of narrative are stitched together chronologically, they still—for the most part—challenge any simple telling of the overarching tale they suggest. But they do tell a story just the same. Principally, I offer these interludes as—at least in part—an acceptance of anthropologist Deborah Thomas’s elegant and welcomed invitation to experiment with narrative voices as a means by which to methodologically dilate the boundaries of ethnographic work (D. Thomas 2011, 17). Together, these reflexive breaks expose my coming upon and coming to terms with the integration of the political-sensual-spiritual in the lives of lesbian and gay Trinbagonians while also demonstrating the not-always-flattering unfolding of erotic complexity in my quotidian negotiation of my own presence in the field. While not necessarily foregrounding the day to day in my chapters, I nonetheless summon elements of the quotidian on terms closely tied to my own imposing body in order to symbolically and quite literally frame the analysis.

It is by design that my chapters refuse the kinds of anecdotal displays perhaps most traditionally characteristic of ethnography. Deborah Thomas has noted that my ambivalence toward a more “traditional” ethnographic style is reassuringly far from singular:

[A disinclination toward ethnography is] part of a growing reconfiguration of anthropological research that is thinking through how one does ethnography in the present, and who one does it for. In other words, many scholars are moving beyond an earlier sense of ethnography as translation, indeed refusing the impulse completely, in order to instead demonstrate how particular sites and relations at multiple levels of scale can help us to clarify complex [and indeed proximate] theoretical and real-world

problems (without the voyeurism and presumed break between writer and audience that characterized much early anthropology, and that is still probably dominant today). (D. Thomas 2012)

I am accompanied then in offering here an ethnography that is not one in any traditional sense. Perhaps I offer here an ethnography that refuses—if you will. This study resists the tempting compulsion toward ethnographic totality encouraged in part by the etymological imperative of the term “ethnography” itself literally describing the “writing of (a) race/culture.” And instead, I experiment here with what it might mean to decouple classic ethnography from participant observation.

In large part, this would mean following anthropologist John L. Jackson Jr.’s definitional guidance to recognize ethnography as the “descriptive social science writings that attempt to capture groups’ cultural beliefs and practices” and set that genre of writing apart from the methodological practice of participant observation, which is the data collection process dependent on “methodological observations and face-to-face interactions over an extended period of time” (J. L. Jackson 2013, 207). If we can resist the presumptuous consumption of the latter by the former, then we are better positioned to respond to Jackson’s elegantly disciplining call in his *Thin Description: Ethnography and the Hebrew Israelites of Jerusalem* (2013) to embrace the fact that anthropologists’ most baroque ethnographic accounts reveal the complex workings of little beyond our own thick delusions of omniscience: “Ethnographic spaces become dense with the swelling, inflation, of resident anthropologists, and all the thicker, ironically, when they choose to shrink from view, omnisciently offstage, puppeteering things from far above the storyline. It is a thinness invested in an occulted version of anthropology, one that would pretend to see *everything* and, therefore, sometimes sees less than it could” (J. L. Jackson 2013, 14; emphasis in original). This particular telling resists ethnography as totalizing translation and embraces participant observation as a central method, requiring my presence in the field as vitally as its documentation requires my presence on the page, in the text—my body figuratively and literally on the line. What other kinds of scholarly writing might an anthropologist use to share research findings (including the various kinds of relationships “found” in the field)?¹⁵ This text is an experiment in answering that question, an attempt to “write up” on the experimental borderlands where ethnography begins to look like something

else entirely. Out here, there are no curtains; there is no offstage *per se*; we are at once puppet and puppeteer—but the show must go on.

The Cartography of This Body: A Chapter Outline

Three chapter pairs follow this one. Each pair is composed of an introductory historical chapter that provides a bit of context for the more specific engagement with artistry or activism that follows it. In each of the three pairs, I approach the idea of the erotic through a distinct sociocultural institution (Carnival, calypso and HIV/AIDS activism) and a particular aesthetic principle. Here the definition of the aesthetic returns to its etymological root to describe roughly “the art/science of sensory perception” in line with German philosopher Immanuel Kant’s insistence on the proper usage of the term.¹⁶ So, the aesthetic experiences brought to the fore in what follows are principally sensory experiences.

While it is nearly impossible to isolate our senses—and more often than not a kind of synesthesia confounds even our own presumably clear sense of our senses—I foreground certain sensorial points on the path toward recognizing a new expansive eroticism. Sight and the visual provide the sensory reference points for the first Carnival masquerade chapter pair, sound and vibration for the second calypso chapter pair, and touch and sensation for the final HIV/AIDS activism chapter pair. Taken together, this linked “sensoryscape” grounds the book as an aesthetic treatment in the truest sense of the term. This treatment in each of the chapter pairs returns us repeatedly to the concept of the erotic from various vantage points in an effort to map three related paths through queer sociocultural embeddedness to an identical goal: *eros* reimaged. Between these chapters, I have placed the reflective interludes I discussed previously. The first interlude follows this chapter.

Chapter 1, “Inheriting the Mask: A History of Parody in Trinidad’s Carnival,” provides a brief history of traditions of race and gender parody—as primarily sight-bound erotic endeavors—in Trinidad’s Carnival in order to set the stage for introducing Peter Minshall. The island’s over-two-hundred-year-old Carnival provides the primary palette for the over seventy-year-old white, gay, Caribbean Carnival masquerade designer. This chapter marks the place where Minshall enters Trinidad’s Carnival history, the erotic traditions of masking and performance that he inherits, and the legacy his oeuvre

of designs has left as part of the cultural heritage of the nation. Chapter 2, “Peter Minshall’s Sacred Heart and the Erotic Art of Play,” focuses in on the artist’s 2006 HIV/AIDS awareness masquerade band *The Sacred Heart* not only as an HIV/AIDS intervention but also as an eros-driven critique of the nation. As an interpretive frame, the erotic encourages a fuller recognition of the elements that have sustained both the artist and the nation’s admiration of him. A second interlude follows this chapter.

Chapter 3, “Echoes of an Utterance: A History of Gender Play in Calypso,” tells the brief history of gendered crossings and appropriations that have birthed a singularly Caribbean music genre. This history provides the melodic background for the introduction of Linda McCartha “Calypso Rose” Sandy-Lewis, a well over seventy-year-old black lesbian musical virtuoso and the very first female performer to rise to highest prominence in calypso music. Lewis clears a definitive space (again) for female calypsonians while guaranteeing her unique position as godmother of the genre. Chapter 4, “Calypso Rose’s ‘Palet’ and the Sweet Treat of Erotic Aurality,” gives the artist’s calypso “Palet” (1968) a close listen. A playfully bawdy tune laced with homoerotic double entendre in which Calypso Rose transforms herself into an ice lolly vendor, “Palet” documents female same-sex desire in calypso through the sung symbolism of the Caribbean lesbian phallus. This phallus functions simultaneously as a political, sensual, and spiritual fetish. A third interlude follows this chapter.

Chapter 5, “A Generation with AIDS: A History, A Critique,” offers a brief historical assessment of the HIV/AIDS pandemic—up through the end of the first decade of the twenty-first century—in order to address a few of the statistical and terminological inexactitudes plaguing international HIV/AIDS work. The chapter begins by mapping the state of HIV/AIDS globally, in the Caribbean region, and specifically in Trinidad and Tobago up to the end of my fieldwork period. This survey of the disease then shifts into a critique of the terms, discourses, and presumptions circulating around HIV/AIDS in order to provide an even more precise historical and ideological cartography of the pandemic locally, regionally, and internationally. Chapter 6, “Between Tongue and Teeth: The Friends For Life Chatroom as Erotic Intervention,” introduces the Trinidad-based nongovernmental organization (NGO) Friends For Life (FFL)—one of the only HIV/AIDS service provision organizations run principally by and for working-class gay men in the Caribbean region. This final chapter demonstrates the grassroots usefulness of various kinds of contiguous intimacies in FFL’s most resilient program, the

Community Chatroom Experience. This chapter broadens our perspective on the importance of touch for subtle successes in HIV/AIDS prevention and support work. The fourth and final interlude follows this chapter.

The concluding chapter, “Black Queer Diaspora and Erotic Potentiality,” reviews the cross-workings of the erotic in the work of Calypso Rose, Peter Minshall, and Friends For Life while proposing a methodological intervention that advocates for holding situated, speaking subjects at the center of an emergent black queer (diaspora) studies. This chapter provides not only a way to integrate the ones that come before it but also voices a hope for the relationship between anthropology and black queer studies that the project has instantiated all along. Ultimately, this study offers this proposition as well as the potential uses of the erotic—as a theoretical intervention that may extend even beyond this particular contextualization—to both the reader and the various disciplines across which it lies. Thus, this conclusion serves as a surveying tool indicating how far we have come, the ground beneath our feet, and the path ahead.

By insisting on a promiscuous multidisciplinary topography, *Erotic Islands* offers an intervention that is not simply relevant for anthropology, African diaspora studies, and queer studies, but rather indispensable for these increasingly interconnected fields. What follows is informed by and promises a contribution to the avant-garde work currently reshaping these scholarly fields.¹⁷ Most important, though, this book claims space as a key text within the nascent field of black queer diaspora studies. Informed by the scholarly and artistic work at the forefront of this new thought project, the present study further articulates and outlines the expanding terrain of the field. A future-looking intellectual enterprise that is nevertheless attentive to the long history of black (lesbian) feminist scholarship that cleared a path for its existence, black queer diaspora studies is the newest direction toward which fresh approaches to anthropology, African diaspora studies, and queer studies are pointing. *Erotic Islands* journeys across these proximate domains—its course set on their convergent horizon.

NOTES

PORT OF ENTRY

1. Dionne Brand's writing—in epigraphs such as this one—at one time served as a thematic barometer throughout this text. I had hoped to use the poetry and precision of her words not only to introduce the major concepts in each of the following chapters but also to entice those readers unfamiliar with her toward her compelling oeuvre. However, due to permissions complications, this excerpt from *A Map to the Door of No Return* (Brand 2001, 192–94) is one of few morsels of Brand that survive. Still, *Erotic Islands* echoes with her resonance. For all of the original epigraphs, please see my dissertation, *Transfiguring Trinidad and Tobago* (Gill 2010).
2. "Paradise," *OED Online* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017). <http://www.oed.com.ezproxy.lib.utexas.edu/view/Entry/137340?rskey=RSWiZx&result=1> (accessed August 23, 2017).
3. Angelique Nixon's *Resisting Paradise: Tourism, Diaspora, and Sexuality in Caribbean Culture* offers a dynamic engagement with the historical legacies, contemporary investments, and emergent contestations of this paradise fantasy, especially as currency within the Caribbean tourism industry (Nixon 2015).
4. T&T became an independent nation in 1962 and a full-fledged republic in 1976. Taken together, several important texts comprehensively recount Trinidad's colonial history, but definitive among them is Bridget Brereton's *A History of Modern Trinidad, 1783–1962*, which certainly has stood the test of time (De Suze 1966; D. Wood 1968; La Guerre and Bissessar [1974] 2005; Brereton 1981). The colonial history of

Tobago—which the British administratively linked with Trinidad in 1889—is not as extensively documented, but what this history lacks in quantity, it makes up for in quality (E. E. Williams [1942] 1993; Laurence 1995; Craig-James 2008).

5. The literary theorist Sarah Dillon's *The Palimpsest: Literature, Criticism, Theory* offers a rigorously comprehensive treatment of the palimpsest as ancient practice and metaphorical reading strategy that lays bare the concept and inspires its expansive symbolic usage (Dillon 2007).
6. Briefly, the fetish is intriguing for this analysis because of its anthropological origins as a spiritual stand-in adopted by psychoanalysis to describe a sexual displacement that often implicitly references power dynamics. Yet again we find ourselves in bed with the spiritual, sensual, and political as linked tropes.
7. The soucouyant figure is by no means limited to T&T folklore. Throughout the Caribbean region, similar figures appear carrying various names: *lazaroons* (Dominican Republic), "old hag" (Guyana/Jamaica/Bahamas), *gaje* or *duppy* women (Saint Lucia), *volant* (Haiti/Guadeloupe), and *azeman* (Surinam) (Anatol 2000, 45).
8. A "jumbie" is a (usually unwelcomed or malevolent) spirit in anglophone Caribbean parlance. Used throughout the region, the word "jumbie" (or *jumby* or *jumbi*) is believed to have been derived from the Kikongo word *zumbi*—from whence comes the New World word "zombie"—used to describe an inanimate (soulless) human body commanded by sorcery. However, a jumbie by contrast is most often a disembodied spirit, not a spiritless body ("jumby," *OED* Online [Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017]. <http://www.oed.com.ezproxy.lib.utexas.edu/view/Entry/102022?redirectedFrom=jumbie> [accessed August 23, 2017]).
9. This brief soucouyant tale feeds upon various sources; see Anatol 2000; F. Smith 2006; Parsons 1943; and "Trinidad & Tobago's Folklore and Legends," Triniview .com, <http://www.triniview.com/TnT/Soucouyant.htm>, and the *Oxford English Dictionary* ("soucouyant," *OED* Online [Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017]. <http://www.oed.com.ezproxy.lib.utexas.edu/view/Entry/242297?redirectedFrom=soucouyant> [accessed August 23, 2017]).
10. The Fula are a people primarily found in present-day Guinea but present throughout Western African. And the Soninke are a Mandé people who are thought to have founded the ancient empire of Ghana, which comprises neighboring regions of present-day Mauritania, Mali, and Senegal.
11. The literary theorist Omise'eke Tinsley proposes another flight path for the soucouyant, aligning her with the black femme (lesbian) whose fantastic presence outside certain frames of recognition is so closely watched in film theorist Kara Keeling's *The Witch's Flight* (Keeling 2007). Tinsley queries the black feminist methodological and theoretical innovations this flying femme might introduce (Tinsley 2015). Inspired in part by thinking through the soucouyant, the work that follows insists on experientially grounded theorizing and plays with writerly registers as the beginning of an answer to Tinsley's soaring question.

INTRODUCTION

1. It is often incorrectly presumed that homosexuality is officially illegal in the Republic of Trinidad and Tobago. In fact, T&T's Sexual Offences Act actually makes no mention of homosexuality per se but instead criminalizes "buggery" (defined as anal intercourse between two men or a man and a woman) and any kind of sex that does not involve sexual intercourse (thus nonpenetrative sex between women, but also oral sex, for instance) unless the partners involved are a married, consenting couple over the age of sixteen (T&T [1986] 2000, 7). For more on the legal and ideological implications of this act, see the work of M. Jacqui Alexander and Yasmin Tambiah (Alexander 1991, 1997; Tambiah 2009). T&T's Immigration Act is the only state-produced document that explicitly mentions "homosexuals." It prohibits entry into the country of persons—other than citizens or residents—who are homosexuals themselves, living on the earnings of homosexuals, or attempting to smuggle in homosexuals (T&T [1969] 1995, 11, 12). Thus, this prohibition in fact applies primarily to homosexual tourists, business people, and the occasional researcher. Nevertheless, these official restrictions have to date never been used to bring a criminal case against any same-sex-desiring person in Trinidad or Tobago. In 2012 however, gay Jamaican lawyer Maurice Tomlinson—on behalf of the advocacy NGO AIDS-Free World—did call significant attention to and begin the legal process of challenging the immigration prohibition with the granted permission of the Caribbean Court of Justice (T&T *Guardian* 2012; Neaves 2013; *JA Observer* 2014).
2. This embedded Caribbean queerness reaches beyond a mere assimilationist LGBT inclusion in civic life. In fact, it includes a *longue durée* resistance to various Euro-American activist models and norms around same-sex desire, gender nonconformity and queer community mobilization. And there is a growing body of scholarly work that finally brings careful attention to these remarkably Caribbean queer worlds (Wekker 2006; Tinsley 2010; Allen 2011; King 2014; Nixon 2015; Ellis 2015; Walcott 2016).
3. A composite secondary source history of the study of gender and sexuality in the anglophone Caribbean is best told through the work of Caribbean feminist scholars Christine Barrow (1996); Rhoda Reddock (2004); and Kamala Kempadoo (2004). For primary source materials on Caribbean kinship structures and sexual behavior patterns, see the classic work of Caribbean-born anthropologists Fernando Henriques ([1953] 1968a, [1959] 1960, [1962] 1965, 1968b, 1974); Edith Clarke (1957); and Michael G. Smith (1962a, 1962b, 1965). And on Caribbean masculinity and manhood in particular, see the canonical work of Caribbean anthropologists Peter J. Wilson (1969, 1973) and Barry Chevannes (2001).
4. This does not ignore the fact that some significant scholarly engagement with same-sex-desiring Trinbagonian communities does exist even if these select texts are unpublished, not focused on T&T exclusively, or not book-length, region-based treatments. Nevertheless, the work of M. Jacqui Alexander, Jasbir Puar, and Wesley

- Crichlow has certainly cleared a path for the current analysis (Alexander 1991, 2000, 2005; Puar 1999, 2001a, 2001b, 2002, 2009; Crichlow 2003, [2004] 2008).
5. Canadian anthropologist David Murray's *Flaming Souls: Homosexuality, Homophobia, and Social Change in Barbados*—the first book-length ethnographic study of same-sex-desiring communities in the anglophone Caribbean—at once instantiates and resists this exclusion-centered model (Murray 2012). And yet Murray unequivocally warns against the implicit judgment of a presumably hyperhomophobic Caribbean, especially in scholarship and in popular representations so widely circulated in Euro-America (Murray 2012, 5, 87).
 6. For a look at one of the beacons of this newest generation of scholars, see Alexis Pauline Gumbs. Her dissertation, "We Can Learn to Mother Ourselves: The Queer Survival of Black Feminism, 1968–1996," and her extensive community-building work beyond the academy (see www.summeroffourlorde.wordpress.com) are powerful and passionate indications of where a scholarly and personal commitment to the principles and poetics of Audre Lorde—alongside other queer black feminist visionaries such as June Jordan, Barbara Smith, and Alexis De Veaux—might take us (Gumbs 2010).
 7. Before being published in *Sister Outsider* in 1984, "Uses of the Erotic" was first published in pamphlet form by Out and Out Books, a feminist press based in Brooklyn, New York, in October 1978 (De Veaux 2004, 401).
 8. Among these texts, Mimi Sheller's magnum opus, *Citizenship from Below: Erotic Agency and Caribbean Freedom*, comes the closest to recognizing the sketches of a larger ideological architecture in Lorde's essay (Sheller 2012). Sheller points toward the distinct reorienting path that I propose we walk in order to understand the deepest implications of a Lordean erotic.
 9. In the singular and meticulous biography *Warrior Poet: A Biography of Audre Lorde*, Alexis De Veaux notes the importance of the essay for Lorde herself: "In retrospect, she [Lorde] felt that the passion and energy to return to work [the work of the poet, after Lorde's mastectomy as part of her struggle against cancer] came from having written 'The Uses of the Erotic.' [De Veaux cites an interview Lorde did with poet and friend Adrienne Rich:] 'The existence of that paper enabled me to pick up and go to Houston and California, it enabled me to start working again. I don't know when I'd have been able to write again, if I hadn't had those words'" (De Veaux 2004, 227).
 10. This particular Berkshire Conference commemorated the approaching thirtieth anniversary of famed French existential philosopher Simone de Beauvoir's bible of feminist theory *Le deuxième sexe* (*The Second Sex*; 1949).
 11. Carson's essay was published two years after Lorde's *Sister Outsider* collection and nearly a decade after the original "Uses of the Erotic" speech at Mt. Holyoke.
 12. Attentive readers will note that there is one dichotomy missing in Lorde's description: the political vs. the erotic (which Lorde later specifies as "the sensual").

Again, her audience may provide a clue to explain this omission. Perhaps for a group of female scholars not unfamiliar or altogether hostile to many of the theoretical interventions of feminism, recognizing the link between sensuality (the private) and politics (the public) was by the late 1970s a given. Certainly we still feel the force of the enlightened feminist mantra “the personal is political” as evidently as we feel the ideological and legislative forces pushing back against it with a bullheaded ferocity.

13. While resisting his universalist claims about the necessarily “discontinuous self” in his provocative text *L'érotisme* (*Eroticism*; 1957), it is still possible to agree with famed French philosopher Georges Bataille's insistence that erotic desire is principally a desire to reach beyond the self toward a kind of divine continuity that metaphorically kills the self—or, more precisely, releases the individualist ego (Bataille [1957] 1987, 13, 15, 17, 19, 24). For more on desire, divinity, and collective selfhood, see anthropologist Gloria Wekker's path-breaking monograph *The Politics of Passion: Women's Sexual Culture in the Afro-Surinamese Diaspora*—especially her chapter “Winti, an Afro-Surinamese Religion and the Multiplicitous Self” (Wekker 2006, 83–116).
14. Lewis Gordon identifies philosophical anthropology (and existential anthropology more specifically) as one of the busiest thought crossroads concerned with interrogating this phenomenon of human connection, a kind of interexistence (L. Gordon 2008, 13). Although Lorde's connectivity thesis predates the subdiscipline, her proposition echoes in the work of its founder, anthropologist Michael Jackson. In his *Minima Ethnographica: Intersubjectivity and the Anthropological Project*, Jackson arrives—through Claude Lévi-Strauss, Martin Heidegger, and Maurice Merleau-Ponty—at a conception of being as interconnected existence that reaches from the physical to the metaphysical (M. Jackson 1998, 9).
15. Jackson very soberly warns that an underappreciation—or textual suppression, I might add—of these substantive relationships forged in the field can lead to potential problems of epistemological and political import that ought to be taken seriously as analytical terrain for the discipline of anthropology (J. L. Jackson 2013, 240, 241).
16. My insistence on adding “art” to the classic definition of the aesthetic as the “science of sensory perception” finds powerful affinity with John Jackson's instructive reframing of anthropology itself as an “artscience,” borrowing the term from biomedical engineer David Edwards (J. L. Jackson 2013, 28). If the discipline creatively and necessarily confounds the distinction between art and science, then perhaps aesthetics as an art/science of perception provides its steady conceptual and methodological match.
17. Across anthropology, African diaspora studies and queer studies, there already exists a small library of texts in common, and many of these graciously manage to defy aggressive border patrolling among these fields (Murray 2002; Crichlow

2004; Ferguson 2004; Alexander 2005; Johnson and Henderson 2005; Stockton 2006; Wekker 2006; Holcomb 2007; Keeling 2007; Padilla 2007; Braziel 2008; Gaudio 2009; Vogel 2009; Weir-Soley 2009; Scott 2010; Tinsley 2010; Allen 2011; Decena 2011; F. Smith 2011; Holland 2012; Murray 2012; Richardson 2012; Sheller 2012; Bailey 2013; King 2014; McCune 2014; Snorton 2014; Woodard 2014; Nixon 2015).

INTERLUDE I. FROM FAR AFIELD

1. All the names in these interludes have been anonymized using the common names of Trinbagonian medicinal plants. Any similarities between the uses of the plant and the personality of the person to which it corresponds—though humorous—are purely coincidental. For the scientific names of the plants and their uses, see C. E. Seaforth et al., *A Guide to the Medicinal Plants of Trinidad and Tobago* (1983).

CHAPTER 1. INHERITING THE MASK

1. While Trinidad's Carnival is the focus of this chapter, there is a lesser-known Carnival celebrated annually in Tobago as well that some sources suggest began as late as 1946. See Trinidadian dramatist Anthony Hall and bandleader George Leacock's 1998 interview, which includes an excerpt from Tobago Museum curator Eddie Hernandez's unpublished 1996 paper "Carnival and Community in Tobago," for more focused though brief attention to Tobago's Carnival (Hall 1998).
2. A colloquial contraction of the word "masquerade," the word "mas" has come to mean much more in the common Trinbagonian parlance than its origin implies. Peter Minshall has long insisted upon the use of this word to refer collectively to the various performative elements—costume, kinetics, and scale, among others—of the Trinidadian Carnival. Minshall officially and lovingly embraces the title "mas man" as a way to legitimate what he believes is an indigenous Caribbean art form, whose recognition as art is his ultimate *cri de coeur* (Schechner and Riggio [1998] 2004: 121; Minshall 2015).
3. For Minshall, the mas (his art) is paramount. He is adamant about the fact that his whiteness and gayness must not get in the way of recognizing the integrity of his work. Inspired by his father, he trusts that history will recognize his integrity as a man and an artist so that posterity might get on with the business of attending to his lifetime of work (Minshall 2015).
4. "Carnival," *OED Online* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017). <http://www.oed.com.ezproxy.lib.utexas.edu/view/Entry/28104?redirectedFrom=carnival> (accessed August 23, 2017).
5. I do not pretend to offer a comprehensive history of Trinidad's Carnival in what follows. Even if such a daunting endeavor were necessary for the present analysis, John Cowley has already attempted it with meticulous detail in his *Carnival, Canboulay, and Calypso: Traditions in the Making* (Cowley 1996).