

'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.¹ 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'² 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