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Big Pride, Little Pride, and the Cunning of (In)Visibility in the Southern Caribbean

The Case of Trinidad and Tobago Pride #PrideTT

ABSTRACT

This essay explores the history, politics, and practice of global-style Pride in Trinidad and Tobago. It distinguishes between “Big” and “Little” forms of Pride and emphasizes that Pride did not emerge with the advent of a parade and day of high-profile visibility in 2018 after a successful High Court challenge to remove homophobic anti-sodomy and related laws in this twin-island postcolonial Republic, but developed over decades of organizing and intervention in lower-profile and more inwardly community-oriented ways, setting the foundation for the new institutional form and full-scale public orientation of #PrideTT. Once conjured, Trinbagonian Big Pride was paradoxically successful vis-à-vis the nation at large, yet also beset by tension, conflict, and schism within. I show how the pattern and structure of this dissension and debate embody wider global currents in the geopolitics of late modern sexuality as well as reflect local parameters and vicissitudes that make the politics of visibility and representation tricky business and far from an unalloyed good. #PrideTT is symptomatic of the changing and contested global political economy of queer visibility and sexual citizenship dramatized by being played in local keys and rhythms, thereby undermining the assumption that Pride is progress.

Keywords: Caribbean, Pride, LGBT, visibility politics, sexual citizenship

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#PrideTT

WHAT DOES IT mean to celebrate Pride in a place like the twin-island Republic of Trinidad and Tobago (TT), an ethnically and religiously diverse twin-island postcolonial petrostate of 1.4 million people, host to growing numbers of Venezuelan refugees in addition to migrants from other CARICOM states such as Guyana, Jamaica, and Grenada? Some are queer and trans folks seeking better lives for themselves in TT, a privileged crossroads within the Caribbean vis-à-vis the world system. However, a growing number of Trinbagonians have also been seeking asylum abroad in the Global North (McNeal 2019; McNeal & Brennan 2021). Yet TT does not accord with Western homonationalist stereotypes of Global Southern states. Neither straightforwardly homophobic, nor homophobic, TT is somewhere in-between (McNeal 2020). What does Pride represent and who does it speak to and for in such a context? What kinds of social change does it manifest as well as bring about? And what are the pros and cons of visibility in small-island spaces where everyone knows everyone else's business, thereby raising the stakes on the everyday negotiation of privacy and therefore freedom?

#PrideTT – the observance of global-style Pride with full media coverage – surfaced in 2018 and seemed to come out of nowhere for the nation (see Figures 1, 2 & 3). Yet what I refer to here as Big Pride grew out of decades of community building, organizing, advocacy, intervention, and solidarity: Little Pride. Let me be clear that in calling “little” what came before the recent high-profile Pride, I am in no way belittling it; on the contrary, I consider these precursors to be profoundly prideful in their own many ways. They made possible what has recently emerged. However, earlier forms of “Little Pride” were primarily intra-community affairs, more inwardly directed towards mobilizing community and forging solidarity for queer folks in their everyday struggles for coherence and livability in a postcolonial heteronationalist nation. Numerous streams and modalities of Little Pride laid the groundwork for what catalyzed after the to-many surprising High Court judgment in favor of *Jason Jones v. the Government of the Republic of Trinidad and Tobago* challenging the criminalization of consensual sodomy – referred to as



Figure 1. PrideTT's first logo, designed by young local queer graphic designer Stefan Rampersad, syncretizing the international symbolism of the multi-colored queer rainbow with the national-flag-based red-white-and-black-colored hummingbird, after which the island was said to have been named by Indigenous Amerindians and that has become a popular totemic branding icon of the nation. (Reproduced with permission from Stefan Rampersad.)



Figure 2. 2018 Pride Arts Festival TT marching down Tragate Road in Port-of-Spain. (Publicly available #PrideTT social media content reproduced with permission.)



Figure 3. 2018 Pride Arts Festival TT revelers working their Rainbow Flags out on the road in the capital city. (Publicly available #PrideTT social media content reproduced with permission.)

“buggery” throughout the British Commonwealth sphere – and related homosex in 2018 (McNeal 2023). These precursors were big in spirit and significance, but I do not characterize them as “Big” Pride here in order to analytically parse changing scales, institutional forms, and political discourse within the Trinbagonian movement for queer and trans lives.

The story of Big Pride in Trinbago is profound and moving, yet riven with conflict, contradiction, and paradox. I map dissension and debate within local activist circles in the observance of Big Pride, conflicts and friction that are both symptomatic of the geopolitics of homophobia and homonationalism and deeply complicated by local dynamics. Clarifying the tactics and tensions of #PrideTT helps us better understand the cultural politics of queer visibility and sexual citizenship in this Anglophone Caribbean postcolonial nation-state and beyond. #PrideTT’s plotline compels reevaluation of Pride as progress.¹

Conjuring Big Pride

Big Pride was conjured at lightning speed after the 2018 High Court decision decriminalizing consensual sodomy and other forms of same-sex intimacy, making TT the second Anglophone Caribbean nation to shed its inherited legacy of British-imposed sexual offenses law that was in fact twice expanded in the postcolonial era. The case was filed by London-resident, mixed-race, binational UK-TT citizen Jason Jones and heard in the High Court of Justice on 30 January 2018 (for which I was present in the courtroom). Then Justice Devindra Rampersad ruled in a landmark 12 April 2018 judgment that Sections 13 and 16 of the Sexual Offences Act (SOA) are “unconstitutional, illegal, null, void, invalid, and are of no effect to the extent that these laws criminalize any acts constituting consensual sexual conduct between adults” (174.1. p. 54, *JJ v. AGTT*). However, the state appealed the decision – if only to mollify conservative constituencies of the current ruling party. And since the ultimate court of jurisdiction for TT remains the Privy Council in London, appealing the case all the way up enables the People’s National Movement government to save face on this “family values” issue. In the meantime, Trinbago’s anti-homo laws cannot be enforced

as the situation lingers in legal limbo (see McNeal 2023, forthcoming).

Rampersad’s decision came as a double surprise not only in ruling on behalf of Jones, but also as such a trenchantly reasoned piece of jurisprudence.² The LGBT community was elated, holding an exuberant rally on the steps of the Hall of Justice just after the judgment was handed down. Friends reported seeing less open folks rejoicing publicly along with more out community stalwarts. A small group of Evangelicals under the banner of “TTCause,” who had held a series of several-hundred-person-strong marches against decriminalizing sodomy in the months between the hearing and the decision (see Figure 4), demonstrated at



Figure 4. Kennedy Everett Maraj, Stephanie Leitch, Cherisse Berkeley, and the late Colin Robinson holding a Rainbow Flag in the midst of a couple hundred people gathered for TTCause’s demonstration against the decriminalization of sodomy in February 2018, just after the case had been heard in the High Court on 30 January. (Photograph with permission by Johannah Rae Reyes.)

the corner of Woodford Square, expressing their disappointment from across the street from the Hall of Justice, and an even smaller group from the Jamaat al Muslimeen – a Black Islamist sect that staged a coup against the government in 1990 – also showed up voicing discontent, a few of whom aggressed against several queerfolk. But this small initial

backlash quickly subsided and the LGBT community won the day. That night a celebration was held at the lesbian-owned bar Euphoria, where everyone sang Lady Gaga's "Born This Way" alongside local calypso classics, and Jones was brought up to speechify. The vibe was joyous and electric. I was in Houston teaching, but was able to join via livestream as well as follow all the pix and videos circulating online.

It was in the immediate aftermath of Rampersad's ruling that activists and organizers met to take stock of the welcome new situation in which longtime lesbian advocate and Women's Caucus cofounder Sharon Mottley suggested they have a Pride parade to keep the momentum moving forward, something she had long fantasized about her country having after years of being proud elsewhere by participating in New York City Pride. Others concurred and that was the moment when then-34-year-old Rudolph Hanamji became a Pride organizer. With background in business strategy and communications, Hanamji jumped up and facilitated initial conversation about planning even though he had had no prior experience or intentions whatsoever: "LGBT advocacy was the furthest thing from my mind" (personal communication, Oct 2021). Thus, the portal for Big Pride opened that day and there was no time to lose since they had less than three months to conjure the entire thing into being in time for global Pride's summertime schedule.

Though many contributed in various ways to organizing Big Pride's first year in TT, it was Hanamji, Joshua Ryan Min Lee, and Kennedy Everett Maraj who became the backbone of the operation. Min Lee is a young local influencer who first emerged as a critical interlocutor online in social media regarding LGBT and other issues, then launched a national petition urging the government to change its ways, and was an early collaborator with the Silver Lining Foundation (SLF) – a pro-LGBT anti-bullying youth organization. Maraj entered the scene through his work as chief administrative officer for the SLF since 2015 along with the org's 2012 founder and executive director, Jeremy Steffan Edwards (see McNeal 2020 on SLF). Each Pride effort over its years of evolution has been assisted by an ever-changing and often-conflicted roster of people and groups, as we shall see. It must also be noted that

considerable effort had been made behind the scenes during the period between the hearing and the decision by individuals and groups such as CAISO – TT’s most prominent LGBT advocacy organization, on which more below – organizing public information campaigns and counter-demonstrations to TTCause in order to bolster support and solidarity in preparation for whatever Rampersad’s ruling would prove to be that upcoming fateful day in April, also thereby fostering momentum heading into the day of the decision and in a sense paving the way for the emergence of Big Pride. CAISO also helped take care of and deal with members of the community who were inadvertently outed by attending the rally celebrating on the day of Justice Rampersad’s decision, some of whom lost their jobs or were put out of homes by parents or homophobic landlords, and so forth.

Each year has had its own hashtagged theme. Most programming was documented and archived online up to and through the pandemic, hence for the first four years of its as-of-2023 six-year existence. 2021 is the last year for which any events or festivities were recorded and uploaded to the website, although photos and video from 2022 and 2023 did circulate on social media. PrideTT’s home page identifies itself as

the nationally recognised organising committee for T&T’s annual LGBTQI+ Pride celebrations, the Caribbean’s most diverse Pride! As a registered, non-profit organisation, we are comprised of volunteers, stakeholders and partners – all dedicated to the mission of bringing communities together to celebrate the lives and contribution of LGBTQI+ Trinbagonians.

The bottom of the main webpage continues: “PrideTT builds on the decades of efforts of many individuals and groups who ensure our community’s light shines in T&T—the rainbow nation. Together, we’ve achieved numerous milestones.”

The late Bishop Desmond Tutu visited TT in 1987, dubbing it the “Rainbow Nation” for being such a convivially intermixed multiracial society. “Rainbow” here symbolizes harmony in diversity. And indeed,

Trinbago is known throughout the Caribbean for its polyethnic diversity and intercultural complexity. Now queer and trans citizens are re-rainbowing this rainbow nation (see Figs. 5 & 6). TT may be – as the national anthem puts it – where “every creed and race find an equal place,” but like many modern nation-states, has yet to fully come to terms with its gender and sexual diversity. Growing numbers of individuals, activists, and organizations work hard to hold government and society to account in the struggle for equity, freedom, and justice for queer and trans Trinbagonians. Thus, the political symbolism of the rainbow cuts both ways, such as when PrideTT claims to be the Caribbean’s “most diverse” Pride, raising the stakes of “diversity.” Its accomplishments over the years include hundreds of events, thousands of people involved in in-person engagements, and perhaps an equivalent number reached online. Though some Little Pride events had been held in the past during the internationally-recognized Pride Month of June (see Fig. 12, for example), July is now officially Pride Month in Trinbago, struggling to find its place within the vibrant annual national liturgical cycle.

#United4Love was the theme for Big Pride in 2018. That first year unfurled under the moniker TT Pride Arts Festival, borrowing the name of an IamOneTT event that had been taking place for a few years preceding. The parade happened on Saturday 28 July 2018, preceded by a month teeming with events ranging from a multi-sited twin-island national Rainbow Flag-Raising ceremony (see Figure 7) to a coalition-building forum to a workshop on the Caribbean Court of Justice case regarding cross-dressing in Guyana to an inter-denominational discussion about sexuality and faith to a high-profile concert featuring local queer talent, plus much more. The elaborate sequence of programming was not only intended to serve the intersectional interests of the local community (see Figure 8 for Week 1’s schedule), but also designed to gradually break down and alleviate any fear or trepidation some might harbor about being out and proud in this new modality. A question of “change management,” per Hanamji.

A fair was held in Nelson Mandela Park in Port-of-Spain on parade day, hosting vendors alongside booths for local organizations,



Figure 5. “Make Trinidad The Rainbow Country It Suppose to Be!” (Publicly available #PrideTT social media content reproduced with permission.)



Figure 6. Flag waving and working à la Carnival- and Steelband-style. (Publicly available #PrideTT social media content reproduced with permission.)



Figure 7. Flag raising over Port-of-Spain. (Publicly available #PrideTT social media content reproduced with permission.)

<p>PRIDE FLAG RAISING FRIDAY 22 JUNE 10:30 - 10:50 A.M. 6:00 LOCATIONS: ANCHETTE TRUSS FOR: BOPARC 21 CANNARY HILL ANGELOLO VASHTIA ROAD CENTRA WAGAR ROAD NE 251 TOWNSEND / CAR TOWNSEND HILL (SIGNAL HILL TRUSS)</p>	<p>MOVIE NIGHT YES!!! SUNDAY 24 JUNE 15:00 PM - 7:30 PM IN PARTNERSHIP WITH THE NEW FILM PROGRAM AND CAMPBELL</p> <p>GAMES NIGHT STUDIO LOUNGE SUNDAY 24 JUNE 8:00 PM</p>
<p>EATING OUT RESTAURANT WEEK MONDAY TO WEDNESDAY 12:00 - 1:00 PM SPONSOR: NEW ORGANIC BLOOD</p>	<p>GENERATION G.A.P. CELEBRATE 15th ANNIVERSARY 25 JUNE 11:00 PM - 10:00 PM PANEL DISCUSSION WITH RAINBOW CHOCOLATE (KAYLA) FIRST FRODO AND ANGELOLO VASHTIA (KAYLA) FIRST FRODO AND ANGELOLO VASHTIA (KAYLA) FIRST FRODO AND ANGELOLO VASHTIA (KAYLA) FIRST FRODO AND ANGELOLO VASHTIA (KAYLA) FIRST FRODO AND</p>
<p>TRANS CASE TRANS CASE AT CCI COMMISSIONER OF JUSTICE THURSDAY 28 JUNE 10:00 AM - 11:00 AM</p> <p>TRANS TOWN HALL CITY HALL THURSDAY 28 JUNE 10:00 PM - 8:00 PM</p>	<p>WORKSHOP SILENCE NO MORE 20 JUNE 10:00 PM - 8:00 PM UNDERSTANDING BORN UNDER SOCIAL IDENTITY AND SEX HEALING: A SEX POSITIVE APPROACH TO HEALING FACILITATOR: MANUELA VESON</p>
<p>HERE GALA COCKTAIL FUNDRAISER AND FESTIVAL LAUNCH THE HEALTHY LIVING CANNARY HILL (FRIDAY 22 JUNE 10:30 PM - 10:00 PM) CONTRIBUTION \$20.00 (KAYLA) FIRST FRODO AND ANGELOLO VASHTIA (KAYLA) FIRST FRODO AND</p>	<p>SEX HEALING 20 JUNE 10:00 PM - 8:00 PM A SEX POSITIVE APPROACH TO HEALING FACILITATOR: MANUELA VESON</p> <p>SH#E RIGHT! 20 JUNE 10:00 PM - 8:00 PM SEX AND REPRODUCTION AMONG LESBIANS IN SEXUAL WOMEN AND TRANSGENDER WOMEN IN TRINIDAD AND TOBAGO FACILITATOR: MANUELA VESON</p>
<p>PRIDE MEMORIAL SUBMIT NAMES & PHOTOS OF THOSE LOST ONE BLACK BOX (LAWRENCE) FIRST FRODO AND ANGELOLO VASHTIA (KAYLA) FIRST FRODO AND</p>	<p>pride ARTS FESTIVAL PERFORMANCE & CULTURE</p>

Figure 8. Year 1, Week 1 Schedule. (Publicly available #PrideTT social media content reproduced with permission.)

community and commercial interests, and the AIDS Memorial Gallery for which Friends For Life has been the longtime custodian (see Gill 2018, Ch. 6 on FFL). Around 300 people marched that first year, with several hundred more attending the bazaar, turnouts with which organizers were pleased. A stage in the park featured speakers and performers from the endlessly talented members of the local community. Complete with police chaperonage, everything came off smoothly and without any problems, allaying any fears of backlash or violence. Yet the location held painfully poignant significance given that it was the site of the murder of Sasha Fierce – a Tobagonian transwoman – the year before. Big Pride day began with a family event welcoming friends and allies, setting an inclusive tone for the day's proceedings. The parade launched from the park, processed through a high-profile sector of the capital city, and returned for on-location festivities. As Chairman Hanamji put it on a morning talk show after the first Big Pride:

When I stood on the street and saw this mass of people coming, and I thought about – I'm getting emotional now – but when I think about all the persons that we've lost over the years because of homophobia and prejudice and how many people cannot live a full life... To see this manifest in my home country – *I don't have to fly out to enjoy and be proud of my orientation any more, I can stay right here* – so that really touched me, and I saw people also feeling that, and it was just overwhelming.⁷³ (emphasis added)

I followed TTPride 2018 online with Trinbagonian asylee friends in the Netherlands and danced with them on AHF Europe's Pride Boat for Amsterdam Pride that year.

In its second year, in 2019, newly officially minted *PrideTT* chose the hashtag #EquALL:

In 2018, we 'united for love' to make history and create our new future! Thousands came together across many divides and placed a positive spotlight on the LGBTQIA community in T&T and its contribution to

national development. PrideTT set a new standard for Pride celebrations globally! While this achievement is one to be proud of, for our more vulnerable community members like our Trans-family and others, it is still ‘pride and hide’ as they struggle with inequitable protection for and access to human rights – suffering daily abuse and violence. Yet, we must never forget that they were the originators of LGBTQIA Pride. We must love, protect and give back to them. Therefore we have joined with the world in commemorating the 50th Anniversary of the Stonewall riots – which sparked the first ‘Gay Pride’ celebrations – led bravely by Marsha P. Johnson & Sylvia Rivera. Our 2019 theme #EQUALL reminds us that there can be no true pride until ALL can celebrate their truth EQUITABLY! Let us focus on that which unites us and continue to build a new paradigm of #equALL freedoms! Celebrate your PRIDE TT 2019!

That year launched with a trans community flag-raising and new events such as a Drag King show, a film festival, an art show, a livestreamed Trans Power panel, gaymes nite, sports day, a livestreamed feminist comedian show, and more. Generation Gap also launched in 2019, bringing together some important “older heads” to reflect upon queerness over the years and across generations (see Figure 9), subsequently becoming a mainstay of PrideTT. The big day unfolded incident-free again and was considered a resounding success, with an estimated 500 people participating. The festival garnered its first diplomatic representation from the British High Commission, Canadian High Commission, US Embassy, and UNHCR that year, as well as cameos by Port-of-Spain Mayor Raymond Tim Kee and former Parliamentarian Stephen Cadiz. I was in Trinidad that year and ended up pushing my ex’s friend’s baby stroller with her one-year-old at the back of the parade, with people making jokes about me playing “real daddy” in addition to my more usual gaydaddyhood (see Figure 10).

PrideTT 2020 – the first year online due to the COVID-19 pandemic – was every bit as busy during its expanded five-week Pride “Month” from late June through July. Its theme was #EmpoweredByOurPride: “taking pride to the next level for #Pride20/2.o.” New events included



Figure 9. Generation Gap, Year 1. From left to right: Faye Ferdinandus, the late Brandy Rodriguez, Cyrus Sylvester, Meiling, the late Raymond Choo Kong, Jacqueline Fields, Rudolph Hanamji. (Publicly available #PrideTT social media content reproduced with permission.)

legal rights workshops, a queer women’s literature session, a dance performance, series of queer town halls, roundtable on Black queer fem activism, trans career development workshop, anti-bullying rally, and more. The roster of orgs and activists dividing up the labor continued to expand, with Xoë Sazzle – from TT Transgender Coalition – joining as a new co-chair. PrideTT 2020 commenced in front of Parliament with an “Empowerment Manifesto” demanding legislation facilitating LGBT rights and protections as citizens of Trinbago be enacted. This was the only in-person event, with public health protocols observed (see Figure 11). The effort to adapt quickly to the pandemic was momentous and PrideTT reinvented itself online impressively. As Hanamji put it, “There was no way in hell a year was going to pass without Pride being in the newspapers!” (personal communication, Oct. 2021)



Figure 10. The author in 2019. (Friend of author photograph used with permission.)

For a second year in a row online – its fourth in existence – PrideTT continued to thrive in 2021 with an intersectionally-varied schedule of programming. The theme #PowHer was geared toward raising solidar-



Figure 11. Outspoken trans activist, the late Brandy Rodriguez – who died of health complications in October 2021 exacerbated by transphobia within the health system – here behind the “Trans Women Are Women” sign, next to Xoë Sazzle carrying the Trans Pride Flag, during the 2020 Empowerment Manifesto Launch in front of Parliament. (Reproduced publicly available #PrideTT social media with permission.)

ity with women across the queer, trans, and hetero communities. The region struggles with heteropatriarchal discontents and gender-based violence – including within the LGBTQI+ spectrum – hence organizers wanted to raise the profile of these issues both inside and outside the community. PrideTT 2021 commemorated the heartbreaking recent cases of fatal violence concerning young ciswomen Andrea Bharatt and Ashanti Riley as well as the murder of Marc Anthony Singh, a queer Guyanese migrant and local drag performer known as Maria Venus Raj.

The community was also still reeling from the recent murders of local queer theater icons Raymond Choo Kong and Gregory Singh (which have never been solved to this day, akin with most homicides of LGBTQ citizens – see photo including Choo Kong in Fig. 9). The schedule also offered new items such as hosting a Trans Women Caribbean Summit, panels on being parents of queer kids as well as on being queer parents, a workshop on queer migration, and an English class for Venezuelan migrant and refugee members of the LGBTQ community. PrideTT partnered with the American Chamber of Commerce and sponsored a community-based vaccination drive – “VacciNade” – at the Ministry of Health on the day when the parade and fair would have otherwise been held. Pride Month closed on 1 August with a livestreamed memorial ceremony for Sasha Fierce. Like the year before, I avidly followed #PrideTT online in Houston, where I was stuck during the pandemic.

#PrideTT’s fifth year in existence, 2022 was also its first year “post”-pandemic, so there was much anticipation and excitement for an in-person rebirth. However on-site involvement in the parade and fair that year, estimated at 350 people, was smaller than its previous year in-person – back in 2019 before the pandemic, with approximately 500 people – therefore 2022 was also demographically closer to its inaugural manifestation in 2018 (with 300 attendees). The pandemic seems to have taken a toll in this regard. Attendance was also affected by the parade being rescheduled somewhat last-minute to 21 August, due to a scheduling conflict with police services on the original date of 24 July, on which the Cricket Premier League matches happening in Port-of-Spain took precedence. Yet organizers were nonetheless pleased with the turnout under the circumstances. The structure was also modified by holding a reduced-size fair at the popular nightspot formerly in operation as Paprika, but more recently London 868 under new management (868 is TT’s telephone area code). The parade launched from and returned to this venue located in a gentrified commercial neighborhood in Port-of-Spain. The formerly annual Pride concert organized by Josh Ryan was held again at the high-profile Queen’s Hall venue and was a smashing success. A three-day LGBT mini film festival was also held with spon-



Figure 12. Friends For Life's Pride Memorial Photo Gallery commemorating those lost to HIV/AIDS over the years on display at Bohemia in June 2000. (Photograph with permission by Cyrus Sylvester.)

sorship from the EU Delegation and the Canadian High Commission.⁴

There were less events scheduled than in previous years and some of them never actually happened. Everything was in-person except for two online events: one for Venezuelan refugees on being Latinx, LGBTQIA+ and a migrant in TT; the other a livestream conversation with aspiring political contender Philip Edward Alexander about queer issues and national politics. A major new offering in 2022 was PrideTT's Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion Conference, held on 17 May in conjunction with the International Day Against Homo, Bi, and Trans Phobia (IDAHOBIT), which brought together corporate actors and sponsors operating in TT – both local and international – to raise visibility about LGBT issues in the workplace and reframe the dominant discussion. This effort built upon the welcome 2021 development

in which ScotiaBankTT announced inclusion of same-sex partner benefits for employee health insurance plans, adding to its already existing anti-LGBT-discrimination policy. The theme for PrideTT 2022 was #rejuveNATION, which not only signified coming out of the pandemic, but also that year's sixtieth anniversary of Trinidad and Tobago's independence in 1962.

With #ONEPRIDE! as its theme, PrideTT's 2023 showing was smaller than the year before, with approximately 200 people marching in the parade on 30 July. This may be explained partly due to fear among folks in response to the vigorous recent wave of American-culture-war-style anti-LGBT sentiment and protest operating under the rubric "Strike Back." But the again reshuffled PrideTT organizing committee also did not begin planning until May, was disorganized and low on funds, announced more on the schedule than actually came to fruition, and struggled with conflict within yet again. One of the best-attended events was Drag Bingo in partnership with the TT Bingo Society which drew 75 enthusiasts from its ranks – some of whom admitted to being transphobic – as compared with only 5 participants from the LGBT community. The sip-and-paint event had 3 attendees. And Generation Gap had a low turnout as compared with years before. On the day of the parade there was supposed to be an elaborate rainbow-flag formation throughout, but flags were ordered late and arrived after the fact. Originally two sound-trucks were scheduled to bookend the road march with a choreographed frontline, but lack of planning and funding meant only one truck and a haphazard contingent at the head of the parade. And since the parade day was headquartered again at London 868 instead of within the context of a fair in Nelson Mandela Park, there was a passerby across the street who cussed out the initial speechifying launching the beginning of the march. Moreover, because funds were low, the parade after-party required an entrance fee, which some grumbled about.

It is worth noting that, over the six-year period of #PrideTT's operation, no parade has ever been characterized by organizations carrying signs identifying themselves and there has also never been any high-

profile local celebrities or “A”-level gays in attendance. In 2019, the idea was floated to raise funds to fly Jason Jones in as Grand Marshal for that year’s event, but that effort fell through due to dissension behind the scenes. And interestingly, as well as unsurprisingly, in the midst of its fluctuations in size and shape over the years, #PrideTT has consistently looked as much like a Trinbagonian-style Carnival band as a global-style Pride parade.

Behind the scenes of Big Pride

The fact that Big Pride’s inaugural manifestation borrowed the name of the already existent Pride Arts Festival TT its first year reminds us that the discourse of Pride did not spring forth *ex nihilo* in 2018. Big Pride may be unique in terms of institutional scale and public orientation, but was certainly not Trinidad’s first expression of Pride. Indeed, TT has seen decades of various modalities and streams of what I call Little Pride, each of which is important on its own as well as synergistically in relation with each other. These earlier forms of mobilization and solidarity are profoundly prideful in their own ways, laying the groundwork for what has transpired more recently. This history, going back to the 1980s, includes underground queer organizing, HIV/AIDS response and advocacy by the LGBT community and allies, visibility in the arts, everyday queer and trans resilience, private parties and downlow venues, the rise of drag performance, being “proud elsewhere” while traveling or studying abroad, and the growth of explicit LGBT organizing, activism and advocacy in the early twenty-first century (McNeal forthcoming), whose interventions have explicitly invoked “Pride” at times (see Figures 12 & 13). Yet no organization before 2018 undertook any efforts on the scale of an outwardly-facing parade and national day of visibility.

That Big Pride has been so successful vis-à-vis the nation at large, yet inwardly beset with conflict and dissension, is deeply poignant for everyone. And while some of the issues stem from personality dynamics and interpersonal conflicts – made especially intense and awkward in a small-island state where everyone knows and cannot avoid each other – we must also see these heated wranglings and political negotiations

as symptomatic of larger processes of late-modern geopolitical transformation and queer globalization situated in an economically dependent postcolonial Caribbean nation-state. Interrogating the behind-the-scenes discontents of PrideTT is important for grappling with the promise and pitfalls of Pride.

Controversy first broke out in the course of conjuring the inaugural Big Pride, testing working relations between Hanamji and others early



*Figure 13. SLF's 2017 #LitWithPride campaign.
(Social media content reproduced with permission from the
Silver Lining Foundation.)*

on. Longtime queer event organizer Fabrice François resuscitated an earlier party his org, D Sistahood, used to host called “Lesbian Pride” in conjunction with PrideTT in 2018. In a Facebook post, however, he made a quip about the event being for “biological women” only, which met with consternation among some advocates for being transphobic. Yet François held his ground and his clientele rallied behind him, saying that gay men already dominate and that most of the “transwomen” who come to the party are really cross-dressing gay men anyway, so “why can’t lesbians have their own thing for once?” Nonetheless several activists collaborating with PrideTT moved to denounce François and officially disavow the party. Hanamji compromised by making a general pro-trans statement, but did not call out François publicly, leaving critics disgruntled for his having capitulated to cishnormativity. The fact that it was queer women of color who spearheaded the critique and felt sidelined by Hanamji’s action was further salt in the wound. These are some of the very same women who had been laboring all along behind-the-scenes to make Pride happen.

Indeed, there was some dissension from the get-go regarding Hanamji – a privileged, light-skinned, cisgender, professional, Indo-Trinidadian gay man – in the lead. Yet people rallied and Pride 2018 came off successfully. The narrative about him having spontaneously risen to the occasion to take the lead of Big Pride covered over deeper politics and negotiations at work. Not long after the Lesbian Pride scandal, tensions flared again at the post-mortem meeting regarding the parade. Several took aim at Hanamji, as well as the politics of Pride more generally: the organizing committee lacked transparency and accountability; they shouldn’t mimic the Global North; the perspectives of women were marginalized; one event was transphobic. The consensus from that difficult negotiation was that PrideTT’s organizing committee should operate with oversight from a board of representatives from local NGOs. Yet the rest of the year was radio silence. People were tired and nerves frazzled.

Then, at the turn of 2019, Hanamji held a meeting at his house with a new crop of folks. When news of this got back to those who’d col-

laborated the year before, they were miffed at more cavalier “leadership” on the part of the chairman. Indeed, Hanamji had reshuffled the deck of the committee and kept pushing onward. NGO representation on the board dwindled down to a single person representing all relevant NGOs. Then things roiled again in April, on the one-year anniversary of the Jones case, when some friction emerged regarding the employment of Jones in the public commentary on the occasion. CAISO and AJD emphasized Justice Rampersad – as he is clearly a judicial hero – in their social media content explicating facts about the case; Jones was there, but not depicted as singularly heroic. But this rattled Hanamji. He lambasted those whom he saw as sidelining Jones from the public narrative about his own case. So, things fell apart again and some individuals and organizations began hiving off for good.

Yet those committed to Big Pride no matter the sacrifice still pulled it off in 2019. The late trans activist Brandy Rodriguez got involved – bringing TT Transgender Coalition into the fold – along with veteran lesbian advocate Faye Ferdinandus on the executive board. PrideTT expanded and embellished. The reprise *Divva* show that year was a major success, partly and poignantly due to public mourning over the recent murder of gay theatre icon Raymond Choo Kong, the very originator of *Divva* more than twenty years before (see image of him in Fig. 9). That year CAISO and feminist organization Womantra distanced themselves from PrideTT in response to what they saw as Hanamji’s transphobia, alleged sexism, and authoritarian style, yet they nonetheless still organized and held some of their own lateral events in support of Pride. Ironically, the only protestor at the parade that year was someone from within the LGBT community itself.

2020 saw the advent of Coronachaos on the global stage, presenting radically new challenges. And tensions flared yet again when Hanamji launched a #QueerVotesMatter hashtag in the midst of an election year, which some felt disrespected the #BlackLivesMatter movement. Then Hanamji’s mother went on a Facebook rant against the “shameless” behavior of one of TT’s most popular female soca artists – Patrice Roberts – which when he tried to defend his mother online, garnered

Hanamji even more public criticism. Roberts is Afro-Trinbagonian, whereas the Hanamjis are of South Asian descent. Thus, he was not only transphobic and sexist, but also racist, according to the outcry. That was the year IamOneTT, the Silver Lining Foundation, and Friends For Life peeled away from PrideTT.

In early 2021, yet another round of scandal broke out within activist circles, when the head of one of the relevant organizations was accused by two previous lovers of past domestic abuse in the midst of massive national angst concerning a spate of local femicides – an especially concerning allegation that also raised questions about transparency and accountability. Thus, in a further ironic twist, continued support for the group (yet not necessarily the individual in question) by some critical of PrideTT in the past was seen as hypocritical by some PrideTT organizers still feeling the sting of critique in the aftermath of Pride 2018. Yet PrideTT 2021 unfurled smoothly online again vis-à-vis society at large without any outward sign of behind-the-scenes conflict.

Regrouping “after” the pandemic in 2022 met with an effort to produce a strategic combination of online, in-person, and hybrid events, but the online programming mostly fell by the wayside and less than half of the originally scheduled in-person events came to pass due to post-pandemic challenges of coming back out, as well as new roiling conflict within the organizing committee. New conflict emerged around the effort to put out a fifth-anniversary commemorative magazine, which fell through due to intransigence at the top despite the 120-page manuscript having been produced by creative consultant Yannick Gibson. I myself conducted interviews with and curated photo galleries for Jason Jones and transgender Trinbagonian asylee Amsterdam model, Giselle Devereaux Iman, as well as a timeline of TT LGBT “Little Pride” history that was to appear as the magazine’s centerfold. Yet a major clash surfaced regarding financial transparency and accountability at the top, with one committee member resigning in protest and everyone else scrambling to deal with the situation. Then Hanamji made a unilateral executive decision by ousting the rest of the existing board and replacing them with other new members, including his own boyfriend.

That same coup-installed committee is the one that struggled to come together, organize, and pull off #PrideTT in 2023, whose parade almost had to be canceled at the last minute since requests for permission from the City of Port-of-Spain and the police were made late and almost did not come through in time. Again, there was considerable dissension within the secretariat, but this was invisible to the community at large. Living legend Eswick Padmore, founder of Friends For Life – TT’s first openly gay HIV-support group (see Gill 2018, Ch. 6) – in the late-1990s, was to be given a queer icon award, but debate and disorganization within the secretariat led to no award being given at all, with Padmore trailing at the back of the parade on the prosthetic leg he received several years before due to struggle with diabetes.

Anatomy of a Caribbean Pride

“Pride” was not invented in 2018. What emerged at that time was a spectacular new institutional form, to be sure, but Big Pride is not “Pride,” per se. However, it does manifest novel forms of confidence and collective identity formation in line with dominant global sociopolitical formations privileging outness and visibility.

The experience of PrideTT embodies the coexistence of multiple positions vis-à-vis complex issues, thus host to dilemma and debate, as well as conflicts and tensions. Take for example the controversy over the Lesbian Pride party touted as being for ciswomen only. Perspectives differed on whether the party was transphobic, but it is nonetheless true that gay men so often dominate, and that lesbians deserve their own space for community. Or consider the #QueerVotesMatter issue. While it’s true that queer votes do matter and the effort to raise consciousness about LGBT issues is important, appropriating the #BlackLivesMatter hashtag – as many have already done in various ways, both acceptable and unacceptable to the Movement for Black Lives – is a complicated political move.

This fraught nexus of logistical challenges, interpersonal tensions, local realities, inevitable conflicts, and legitimate debates is not only exacerbated by the brutal actualities of sexism, racism, classism, and

transphobia, but also complicated by the politics of glocality, by which I mean the recursive intertwining and blurry overlap of the local and global. For example, the proud-elsewhere dynamic also incubates local change and transformation as well. Indeed, the global has been localized in multifarious ways and these dynamics get recognized and mis-recognized in differential ways that further complicate the unfolding plotline. Ironically, for example, some of those who most espouse the local and not mimicking the global North are also the very same folks engaging in the most overt forms of call-out politics that seem more Northern than Southern. Indeed, what counts as “local” and “global,” and the ways claims and counter-claims are pursued, quickly become murky in this hall of mirrors, against the backdrop of the Caribbean already having been ground zero for modernity since the beginning of the project itself (Trouillot 2003). And while the critique of dominant Northern models is essential, there is also the counterproductive problem of overcorrecting in light of this criticism, such as some organizations privileging Justice Rampersad over Jones in their social media informatics on the one-year anniversary of the successful case in 2019. Yet in 2023, PrideTT in turn itself censored *any* mention of Jones in the social media content they put out on the fifth anniversary of the 12 April 2018 Jones case judgment that catalyzed Big Pride in the first place, doing exactly what they criticized others for several years earlier.

And last but certainly not least is the essential point that the majority of LGBT Trinbagonians do not in fact participate in PrideTT, even when they approve of it from afar. And they do not do so *not* necessarily because of homophobia stifling their sexuality or identity, although there are those in society for whom this is the case. They are not hiding away in some tropical closet. On the contrary, what the dominant Western homonationalist paradigm does not understand is the ways privacy and discretion in small-island societies offer space for certain kinds of freedom precisely *because* they operate beneath the public gaze: what I call freedom otherwise (McNeal forthcoming). If everyone knows everyone else and many end up sleeping with one another

over time since the pool of people to choose from is small-within-small, having your personal business out in the open often makes life even more complicated in a claustrophobic fishbowl. Operating under the radar is a rational strategy; it isn't being on the downlow. The vicissitudes of Big Pride in TT are conditioned and undermined by the realities of pursuing freedom otherwise more generally, reminding us of the privileged political economy of visibility and sexual citizenship overall.

Hanamji has both participated in and been interpellated by the larger discursive and political fields. In this sense, his leadership – both its virtues and its vices – may be seen as symptomatic of larger geopolitical interests, winds, and forces. Hanamji has been a somewhat willing sacrificial victim-hero for those who aspire to visibility politics premised upon an epistemology of the closet (Sedgwick 1990). To his credit, Hanamji has been listening and learning. All things considered, PrideTT is alive, if not kicking. Yet the trajectory of PrideTT evinces friction and faultlines symptomatic of the late-modern globalist international state system more generally. The global geopolitics of homophobia and homonationalism play out in Trinidad in local keys and rhythms. #PrideTT must be seen within a glocal – local + global – hall of mirrors.

Meanwhile, all of this turmoil and dissension is a discouraging turn-off for many queer and trans Trinbagonians struggling to get by on an everyday basis, more or less knowledgeable of the politics of sexual citizenship among advocates vis-à-vis the state, yet not especially invested in the project of outness that Big Pride represents. Some conclude Trinidad is either not ready for, or should not even be playing the Global-Northern-tilted politics of visibility in the first place. That's privileged people's business. Some of PrideTT's organizers had in fact initially proposed #ComeOut as the theme for its inaugural year in 2018, but in response to some push-back, that hashtag was discarded in light of the political-economic realities of queer and trans inequality and subordination locally. There are so many pieces in this dynamic puzzle. Big Pride is but the tip of an iceberg, spectacularly visible while obscuring so much below the surface.

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NOTES

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2. See http://webopac.ttlawcourts.org/LibraryJud/Judgments/HC/rampersad/2017/cv_17_00720DD12apr2018.pdf.
3. “CNMG Good Morning T&T Report on TTPride 2018” (7 August 2018): https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2Jhb8_OkwWo.
4. I was asked by the PrideTT Secretariat to speak at the one film sponsored by the US Embassy, *The Lavender Scare*, a 2017 documentary narrating the story of Frank Kameny's fight against the US Government's McCarthyist Red-Scare-era witch-hunt against homosexuals working for the government in the 1950s. It is a compelling story about an amazing, brave, important figure during dark times; however it is also framed as the singular heroic David-and-Goliath story of a cisgender gay white American man, then zooms over decades of critical LGBTQUS history – including Stonewall – to the contemporary period, ending on a triumphalist note of progress. To the consternation of the American Embassy representatives present, I dissected the ideological structure of the documentary's plotline, pointed out that *on that very day* the US Supreme Court had just struck down the landmark 1973 *Roe v. Wade* case ensuring abortion rights, and reminded everyone of the election of Trump along with the spate of accelerating anti-trans and anti-queer politics in the country as a counterpoint to the global Northern homonationalist morality tale the film proffers.